

The Moses Standard of Jewish Leadership

Person of the Year or Person of the Week? Lessons from a modern-day Moses.

Person of the Year

You know, every year *Time* magazine picks a “Person of the Year.” But for us Jews, we don’t need a whole year—we’ve got a *Person of the Week*! Every week, as we read a new Torah portion, a different figure takes center stage.

And if we had to choose a “Person of the Week” for this week, it would undoubtedly be Moshe Rabbeinu. He’s not just the main figure of this week’s parsha—he’s the central figure of the entire Book of Shemos.

What’s fascinating is that throughout Jewish history, other great leaders have risen who also carried the name Moshe. In many ways, they followed in Moshe Rabbeinu’s footsteps, guiding the Jewish people and shaping the course of our destiny.

One such leader was the Rambam, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon—better known as Maimonides. His tombstone famously reads: “*From Moshe to Moshe, there arose none like Moshe.*” Why? Because in his time, the Rambam led the Jewish people just as Moshe Rabbeinu had in his time.

And, like Moshe, he left behind a Torah for us. The Rambam’s

Mishneh Torah is a masterpiece—a brilliant, organized compendium that encompasses the entire Torah, designed to guide Jews in every aspect of life. In essence, it's a continuation of Moshe's teachings.

Which brings us back to this week's Torah portion...

The “Moshe”s of the World

In *Parshas Beshalach*, we see something remarkable about Moshe Rabbeinu—before he even gave the Jewish people the Ten Commandments, he was busy taking care of their basic needs. He made sure they had water, provided them with *manna*, and even arranged for meat. Only after their physical well-being was secured did he give them the Torah.

The Rebbe explains that this wasn't incidental—it was part of Moshe's role as a shepherd. A true leader doesn't only focus on the spiritual; he first ensures that his people's physical needs are met (Toras Menachem Vol. 36, pg. 4).

This same quality was seen in great Jewish leaders throughout history who also carried the name Moshe. They weren't just spiritual guides—they were protectors, providers, and advocates for the physical well-being of the Jewish people.

One such leader was Sir Moses Montefiore, a British philanthropist whom the Previous Rebbe called “*the famous tzadik who rescued the Jews*” (Igros Kodesh Vol. I, pg. 528).

Montefiore was born in Italy in 1784 to a Sephardic Jewish family, but he grew up in London, where he became one of the few Jewish brokers on the London Stock Exchange. He later

married the daughter of Britain's wealthiest Jewish family and expanded into insurance, trade, and industry, becoming extraordinarily successful.

With his wealth, he could have lived comfortably and focused on his business empire. But instead, he dedicated himself to the Jewish people. He began as a leader of London's Jewish community, then took on responsibility for all British Jews. But what made him unique was that he didn't stop there—he became the first Jewish activist who saw *all* Jews, no matter where they lived, as his personal responsibility. If Jews were suffering anywhere in the world, Montefiore didn't just voice concern—he took action.

Although he and his wife were not blessed with children, they saw the Jewish people as their family. In 1827, despite the dangers of travel at the time, Montefiore visited the Holy Land. He didn't just offer financial aid—he worked to improve the economy, helping both the deeply religious *Old Yishuv* in Jerusalem and Jews who were less observant. To him, every Jew was family.

Montefiore's first visit to the Holy Land changed him. While he hadn't been particularly observant in his younger years, from that moment on, he fully embraced Torah and mitzvos and became meticulous in his observance.

But his impact went far beyond Israel. Montefiore played a critical role in aiding Jewish communities across the world.

The Damascus Blood Libel

The infamous *blood libel*—the false accusation that Jews use non-Jewish blood to bake *matzah* for Pesach—originated nearly 1,000 years ago in Christian Europe. Throughout the Middle Ages and even into the 20th century, this horrific lie spread across Christian countries, leading to brutal persecutions, expulsions, and massacres. Of course, aside from being a complete fabrication, it defies the Torah's strict prohibition against consuming blood.

But in 1840, this ancient slander resurfaced—not in Europe, but in the Arab world, in Damascus, Syria.

It all began when a Christian priest and his Arab assistant went missing. Almost immediately, French Christians living in Damascus pointed fingers at the Jewish community, accusing them of ritual murder. They turned to the Syrian ruler—a man already deeply hostile toward Jews—who eagerly embraced the accusation.

Authorities quickly arrested a Jewish scribe and subjected him to horrific torture until he “confessed” to the crime. Under immense pain and pressure, he implicated seven of the city's Jewish leaders, who were swiftly arrested, with some sentenced to death.

In their desperation, the Jews of Damascus turned to Sir Moses Montefiore, who wasted no time. He traveled straight to Egypt, where he sought an audience with Mohammed Ali—the ruler of Egypt, who also controlled Damascus at the time.

Now, Mohammed Ali was no friend of the Jews, but Montefiore wasn't just any man—he was a powerful figure in British society, knighted by the Queen and respected across Europe. Britain, at the time, was a global superpower, and Montefiore's influence carried weight. After their meeting, Mohammed Ali did something unheard of: he ordered the immediate release of all the imprisoned Jews, putting an end to what could have been another tragic chapter in Jewish history.

The Audience with Tsar Nikolai

During that era, a significant portion of the Jewish population lived under the harsh rule of the Russian Tsars. Life for Jews in Russia was anything but easy—government-sanctioned pogroms, oppressive laws, and relentless persecution were all part of daily reality.

In 1846, Tsar Nicholas I issued a devastating decree: Jews were to be expelled from the eastern regions of the Russian Empire. Desperate to stop this, Sir Moses Montefiore traveled to Russia and personally met with the Tsar, pleading the case of his fellow Jews.

But this time, his influence wasn't enough. The Tsar refused to budge, and despite Montefiore's best efforts, the Jews were expelled.

The Jewish Child Kidnapped by the Church

In 1858, a Jewish family in Bologna, Italy, faced an unimaginable nightmare. Their two-year-old son fell seriously ill, and unbeknownst to them, their Christian maid secretly immersed him in a church ritual pool, believing it would heal him.

The child recovered—but years later, when he was six, Vatican security forces stormed the family’s home and kidnapped him. Their justification? Since he had been baptized—even without his parents’ knowledge or consent—he was now considered a Christian and therefore “property of the Church.”

The shocking case spread across Europe, sparking outrage and even protests from several governments. Sir Moses Montefiore, always ready to fight for his fellow Jews, traveled to Rome and used every ounce of his influence to demand the child’s return. But the Church refused to back down. Despite global pressure, the boy was never reunited with his family and tragically grew up to become a missionary.

Montefiore’s dedication to the Jewish people wasn’t limited to political advocacy—he was also deeply committed to supporting Jewish life in the Holy Land. He visited Israel an incredible seven times, personally funding projects that helped sustain the Jewish communities of Jerusalem, Chevron, Tzfat, and Tiberias. In 1831, he even renovated and expanded the structure above Kever Rachel, ensuring it remained a place of Jewish prayer.

Traveling to Israel in those days was no small feat—pirates, bandits, and disease made every journey treacherous. And yet, Montefiore didn’t hesitate, even when he made his final trip at the age of 91. For a man of such advanced age, the journey was life-threatening, but his love for the Holy Land outweighed any personal risk.

After his beloved wife passed away, he honored her in a deeply personal way—he built a mausoleum over her grave modeled

after Kever Rachel. Just days later, he was laid to rest beside her.

In His Memory

Today, Sir Moses Montefiore's name lives on across the world. Streets, hospitals, and institutions bear his name in recognition of his extraordinary legacy. In New York, the renowned Montefiore Hospital carries his name, as does a respected senior home in Cleveland.

But for Lubavitcher Chassidim, Montefiore's greatest connection isn't through a hospital or a street—it's the *Montefiore Cemetery* in Queens, New York, where the last two Lubavitcher Rebbes are laid to rest.

Montefiore's life of tireless devotion even became the subject of an Israeli song, which beautifully captures his unwavering sense of mission. According to the lyrics, when Montefiore turned 80, angels came to summon him to heaven. His response? *"Sorry, gentlemen, but I'm too busy. My fellow Jews are suffering—there are pogroms in Russia, and they need my help. If not me, then who?"*

A decade later, when he was 90, the angels returned: *"Now it's time—you're being called to the heavens."* But Montefiore still refused. *"How can I go? The Jews of Damascus are being falsely accused in a blood libel. Someone needs to go to the pasha and demand justice! If no one else will stand up, then who if not me?"*

Even at 100, he still wasn't ready to go. *"I've spent millions of*

liras and francs helping Jews, but it will never be enough.” But the angels weren’t done with him yet. “There’s still work to do—Kever Rachel needs an expansion. And who if not you will make it happen?”

Montefiore passed away at the remarkable age of 101. He left no biological children, but his name remains known to every Jewish child. As the Previous Rebbe wrote (*Igros Kodesh* Vol. VI, pg. 558), *“The name of the tzadik, Sir Moses Montefiore, of righteous memory, remains engraved in eternal praise.”*

Yud Shevat

This week, we mark *Yud Shevat*—the *yahrzeit* of the Previous Rebbe, and the day, exactly one year later, when the Rebbe formally accepted the leadership.

The Chabad Rebbes, like Moshe Rabbeinu, embodied a rare kind of leadership—one that cared not only for the spiritual needs of the Jewish people but also for their physical well-being. They followed in the footsteps of Moshe Rabbeinu himself, and of great leaders like Sir Moses Montefiore, who understood that a true shepherd looks after every aspect of his flock’s needs.

So this *Shabbos*, my friends, let’s take inspiration from these *Moshes* of our history. Let’s strive—each in our own way—to be a little more like them.

Not all of us can change the world on a grand scale. But if we can’t help *globally*, let’s help *nationally*. If not nationally, then *locally*. And if even that feels out of reach—let’s simply help the person next to us.

Because we all know someone who could use a little extra support. A kind word, a thoughtful gesture, an act of generosity—these things matter. And when we take the time to lift each other up, we create a ripple effect of goodness, one that has the power to reach far beyond what we can see.

Good Shabbos!