# How the Damascus Affair Created Modern Jewish Solidarity



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On a crisp February day in 1840, Father Thomas, an Italian Capuchin friar who had lived in Damascus for over 30 years, disappeared after posting a notice in the Jewish quarter. His Muslim servant, Ibrahim Amara, vanished with him. What followed would spiral into one of history's most notorious blood libels—a medieval accusation reborn in the modern era, igniting terror throughout Jewish communities and eventually mobilizing an unprecedented international Jewish response.

The Damascus Affair would transcend local prejudice to become a diplomatic crisis entangling the great powers—France, Britain, Austria, and the Ottoman Empire—and would forever change how Jews advocated for their persecuted brethren across borders.

**A Perfect Storm**

Damascus in 1840 existed at a precarious political crossroads. The city had fallen under Egyptian control when Muhammad Ali, ruler of Egypt and ally of France, seized Syria from the Ottoman Sultan. This reshuffling of power created a volatile environment where ancient prejudices could easily reignite.

The French consul in Damascus, Count Ratti-Menton, proved eager to pursue the most sinister theory when Father Thomas vanished: that Jews had murdered him to use his blood for Passover rituals. Despite the absurdity of this claim—Jewish law explicitly forbids the consumption of blood—Christian communities in Damascus immediately embraced the accusation. Even the French Prime Minister Adolphe Thiers remarked to James Rothschild: "If Jews in the Middle Ages indeed committed ritual murder, as seems likely, why wouldn't the benighted Jews of Damascus do the same in our time?"

**Confession Through Torture**

The investigation quickly descended into a nightmarish inquisition. The first suspect, a Jewish barber named Solomon Halek, was arrested because Father Thomas had allegedly posted his notice near Halek's shop. What followed revealed the darkest capabilities of human cruelty.

The methods of torture employed were reminiscent of medieval inquisitions. The accused endured flogging and submersion in cold water. They were subjected to a crushing "head machine" and had their sensitive body parts bound. Some were forced to stand for days without rest, while others were dragged by their ears until they bled. These brutal techniques were systematically applied until the victims broke down and confessed to crimes they hadn't committed. Under such unbearable conditions, it's no wonder that eventually many of the accused felt they had no choice but to confess to the fabricated charges.

Under this unbearable suffering, Halek "confessed" and implicated seven Jewish notables, including the wealthy merchant David Harari and his brothers, and two rabbis—Moses Abulafia and Moses Salonikli. One by one, they too were arrested and tortured.

Rabbi Moses Abulafia, subjected to particularly severe torment, eventually broke. Denied sleep for three consecutive days, twice dragged by a rope tied to sensitive body parts, and repeatedly flogged on the soles of his feet, he converted to Islam on March 2 and changed his testimony. He now claimed he had delivered Father Thomas's blood to the Chief Rabbi of Damascus, Jacob Antebi, thus implicating the community's spiritual leader.

The fabrication of evidence continued. When authorities claimed to have found bone fragments in a sewer in the Jewish quarter, they declared them to be Thomas's remains—despite their being too small to be human bones. In a final cruel twist, investigators seized 63 Jewish children between ages three and 10, threatening to kill them if their mothers didn't reveal the truth about the ritual murders.

**The World Responds**

As news of the Damascus torture chambers spread across the Mediterranean and Europe, Jewish communities trembled. From Alexandria to Constantinople, from Jerusalem to Rhodes (where a similar blood libel erupted simultaneously), ancient fears resurfaced. European Jewish communities had witnessed significant progress toward emancipation—would medieval superstitions now reverse these gains?

What distinguished the Damascus Affair from previous blood libels was the unprecedented international Jewish response it generated. For the first time, Jews from different countries coordinated efforts to defend their co-religionists, bridging geographic, cultural, and even ideological divides.

In Western Europe, prominent Jewish leaders mounted a vigorous response. Adolphe Crémieux, a renowned French lawyer and statesman, published powerful letters in French newspapers challenging the blood libel. His words burned with moral outrage:

Can it be that in 1840 the same abominable calumny born of the contemptible prejudices of the Christian Middle Ages is not rejected with disgust but rather repeated again and again? Is it conceivable that believing Jews would be portrayed as people who feast, during Passover, on the blood of Christians whom they murder with their own hands according to their religious commandments? Is it not incredibly irresponsible to spread such inflammatory myths in France, among our population, among the masses whose education is still so limited?

The Rothschild family, with their unparalleled financial and political influence, approached European governments demanding intervention. In London, Sir Moses Montefiore—a revered Jewish philanthropist who had already established himself as a defender of persecuted Jews—led diplomatic efforts, declaring that "the lives of thousands of our people hang in the balance."

Crémieux concluded his impassioned appeal with a powerful call to solidarity: “Christian Frenchmen,” he proclaimed, “we are your brothers, citizens equal in all respects. You have given the world the most noble example of true tolerance … Let the press rise up, with the fervor that is the secret of its glory, and dedicate itself to the sacred mission of fighting for civilization and truth! This is the noble role worthy of it!”

This mobilization eventually reached America, where Jewish communities faced a profound dilemma: how to balance their identities as American patriots with their concern for fellow Jews in distant lands. Isaac Leeser, a prominent American Jewish leader, eloquently addressed this tension:

As citizens, we belong to the country in which we live, but as believers in one God … We welcome the Jew as a brother, whether he lives in an arid region or in the polar zone … Why should the case of Jews be different from that of the Greeks?

American Jews in New York and five other cities ultimately held protest meetings, marking the first time they had engaged in organized international advocacy for Jews abroad.

**A Transformative Moment**

The Damascus Affair marked a watershed in modern Jewish history. Behind the immediate crisis lay profound questions about Jewish identity in the modern world. J. Ben Lévi captured this evolution in an insightful essay published in October 1840, describing the dramatic transformation of French Jewish society across three generations:

The grandfather believes; the father doubts; the son denies. The grandfather prays in Hebrew; the father reads prayers in French; the son doesn’t pray at all. The grandfather observes all holidays; the father is content with Yom Kippur; the son observes no holidays. The grandfather remained Jewish; the father became an Israelite; the son is simply a deist … if not an atheist.

Yet despite these divisions, the Damascus crisis had united Jews across the spectrum of observance and assimilation. As one observer noted: “The Damascus Affair has done more to regenerate the Jewish nation than all that has been written in its favor in the past century.”

**Triumph and Legacy**

After months of diplomatic pressure and international outcry, Muhammad Ali finally ordered the release of the surviving prisoners in August 1840. Sir Moses Montefiore and Adolphe Crémieux traveled to Alexandria to negotiate directly with Muhammad Ali, securing not only the prisoners' freedom but also a decree from the Ottoman Sultan formally denouncing the blood libel.

When the nine surviving Jewish prisoners emerged from their dungeon, they bore physical and psychological scars that would never fully heal. Yet their suffering had not been in vain.

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So much has changed, yet so much of it seems so familiar. The crisis demonstrated that despite progress toward emancipation in Western Europe, ancient prejudices remained potent. But it also revealed that Jews could effectively organize across borders and leverage diplomatic channels to protect vulnerable communities—a capability that would prove crucial in the tumultuous century ahead. The Damascus Affair had galvanized a new era of Jewish international solidarity, establishing patterns of advocacy that would serve as models for generations to come. It established that geographic distance and cultural differences between Jewish communities do not diminish responsibility toward one another. The Ashkenazi banker in London, the assimilated lawyer in Paris, and the traditional merchant in New York all recognized their stake in the fate of Sephardic Jews in Syria—a recognition that transcends time and continues to unite diverse Jewish communities in moments of crisis today.

The Damascus Affair marked one of the first strategic Jewish engagements with mass media to combat antisemitism. To this day, media and the digital landscape are a major battlefield. False narratives must be contested publicly, not just denied privately. The dual loyalty accusation, implied but not yet fully formed in the 1840s, would later become explicit during the Dreyfus Affair and remains a persistent antisemitic trope. Even the description of three generations of Jews—from the devout grandfather to the assimilating grandson—resonates with contemporary Jewish identity struggles.

Most poignantly, the Damascus blood libel targeted the very heart of Passover itself. The accusations against the Jews centered specifically on Passover rituals. The very holiday that commemorates Jewish liberation became the pretext for new persecution. The Haggadah's timeless message reminds us to remain vigilant, as the Damascus Jews discovered that enlightenment values offered no guarantee against ancient prejudices.

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וְהִיא שֶׁעָמְדָה לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ, שֶׁלֹּא אֶחָד בִּלְבָד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, אֶלָּא שֶׁבְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מַצִּילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם

“And it is this [covenant] that has stood for our ancestors and for us, for not just one enemy has risen against us to destroy us, but in every generation, they rise against us to destroy us. And the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand.”