
Dorothy De Rothschild: A Tribute

Jonathan Sacks

Mrs. Dorothy de Rothschild, a woman involved in many spheres of Zionism died on 9 December 1988. As requested in her will, Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks delivered the address at her funeral on the following Monday in which he paid tribute to this remarkable person who was loved and admired by a host of friends and colleagues. We feel that it is most appropriate to print the eulogy as a tribute to her memory.

There are some lives that are such that in their passing, we sense the passing of a generation. The Mishnah put it more strongly still. *Mishmet R. Akiva batel kavod ha-Torah*. When R. Akiva died, the glory of the Torah ended. The Mishnah at the end of *Sotah* suggests that there are some virtues that have their historic hour, and we sense that they will never come again in quite that form. With the passing of Dorothy de Rothschild one of the most momentous generations of two thousand years of Jewish history has come to an end, the generation that dreamt the dream of *eretz* and *medinat Yisrael*, and having dreamt it, convinced the world that it was no dream.

It takes a vast stretch of historical imagination to realise that today, in 1988, forty years into the state of Israel, we pay tribute to a woman who helped lay the foundations of the state more than thirty years before that. Dorothy Pinto, born in 1895, had married at the age of seventeen James Armand de Rothschild, son of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, the man known to Israel simply as *Ha-Nadiv* the benefactor. And it was in 1914, while James was serving in the French Army, that Dorothy began to take on his work as friend and collaborator of Chaim Weitzman. She was only nineteen at the time, and Weitzman can have been excused his initial reaction, that Dorothy was "interested, ready to help, but utterly innocent of any knowledge of the subject". She quickly proved him wrong. With extraordinary speed she mastered the political complexities of the Zionist movement. She liaised between the Rothschilds in France and Weitzman in England. She became Weitzman's trusted friend. In the words of one historian, she "combined charm intelligence and more than a hint of steely resolution in just the right mixture to coax commitment from the equivocal, enthusiasm from the lukewarm and sympathy from the indifferent". And from those efforts, the Balfour Declaration came.

The book of Proverbs ends with a sublime hymn of praise to *eshet chayil*, the woman of virtue, or as we should properly translate it, the woman of moral strength. That adjective Dorothy de Rothschild earned many times over. *Batach bah lev ba'aalah veshalal lo yechsar*. The heart of her husband trusts in her and he shall have no lack of gain. She worked hard as the wife an MP when James represented Ely; all the more so because of his ill health for many years. She was an alderman of Buckinghamshire, and sat as a magistrate for almost forty years. She was active, too, in many Jewish causes in this country: the Anglo-Israel Association, the Stepney Jewish Clubs, and above all, as President of the Jewish Blind Society. During the Second World War, she and James rescued twenty-nine Jewish boys from Frankfurt. They brought them up in

Waddesdon Manor and followed their subsequent careers. They became known as the "Cedar Boys" after the house in which they had stayed.

Dorothy shared James' love of Waddesdon, their magnificent country estate, and when, after James' death in 1957, it was bequeathed to the National Trust, she supervised the massive cataloguing of its contents, eleven volumes of which have appeared so far. She shared her husband's love of Israel.

The work they did together, through the Rothschild Trust, continuing the traditions of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, was vast. It would take a book to describe it, and indeed that great historian Simon Schama, has written it. But it was after James' death, a little over thirty years ago, that Dorothy emerged as a personality in her own right, as an *eshet chayil*, a woman of moral strength. One project above all she carried out James' last wish, the sponsoring of the new Knesset building for Israel's parliament. After James died, Dorothy wrote to Ben Gurion, enclosing a letter from her late husband, outlining the project. Ben Gurion replied, "I was moved to the depths by both letters, their lofty quality and the nobility of soul of their writers".

Dorothy maintained the Rothschild involvement with Israeli academic life, especially the Hebrew University, and helped create, in 1976, Israel's Everyman University, now *Ha-Universitah Ha-petuchah*, the Open University, where some twelve thousand students are enrolled. The Foundation sponsored educational television, libraries, the Jerusalem Music Centre and the Rothschild Prize for Research. *Kol kevudah bat melekh penimah*, "the glory of the king's daughter is within the palace". With that phrase Jewish tradition described the essential modesty of the woman of worth, as one who does good to the many without seeking the praises of the many. Dorothy de Rothschild embodied that virtue to perfection, firm but self-effacing, never seeking publicity. And when, in 1982, Dorothy was awarded the Freedom of the City of Jerusalem, the President of Israel described her as Israel's unknown benefactress.

But there was one other project which engaged her last years, and which sadly she did not live to see completed, the sponsoring of a new building for Israel's Supreme Court. She saw it as the essential corollary of the Knesset, because she wished to have provided the home of the two qualities she saw as linked and indivisible: democracy and justice. *Tzion be-mishpat tipadeh vehshavehah bi-tzadakah*. Zion, as Isaiah said, will be redeemed through justice and those who return to her, through righteousness.

What then shall we say about this remarkable woman, who lived so long, ninety-three years, who saw so much,

and did so much good in so many fields? Let the words of an old and distinguished friend, Sir Isaiah Berlin, sum up her personality.

“What was remarkable about her”, he writes, “was the extent and depth of the love and admiration by which she was surrounded on the part of virtually everyone who had known her, or even met her. She combined an unsullied innocence, purity of heart, the sweetest of natures and, indeed a saintliness of character, with overwhelming charm, great dignity, a very lively sense

of humour, pleasure in the oddities of life, an unconquerable vitality and a kind of eternal youth and an eager responsiveness to all that passed — which lasted to her dying day.”

Thus Sir Isaiah in tribute to a unique life. And thus the book of Proverbs, in the verse which history will surely see as her epitaph. *Rabat banot asu chayil*, many daughters have done worthily, *ve-at alit al kulanah*, but you excelled them all. *Zekher tzadeket livrachah*. May her memory be a blessing. ■