1 ‘Barbarism and Bigotry’: Philosemitism from the Damascus Affair of 1840 to the Moroccan Crisis of 1859

In 1840 there were probably about 4,250,000 Jews in the world. About 80 per cent – roughly 2,975,000 – lived in Eastern Europe, where nearly all spoke Yiddish, the vernacular language of the Ashkenazi Jews of the Russian Pale of Settlement, Austria-Hungary and elsewhere. Probably around 5 per cent – roughly 700,000 – lived in the Afro-Asian world, chiefly Arabic and Ladino-speaking Sephardi Jews, while the remaining 15 per cent lived in Western Europe, the Americas and Oceania. During the nineteenth century there was a remarkable population explosion among Europe’s Jews. The world’s Jewish population increased from 2,500,000 in 1800 to 7,750,000 in 1880, and to 10.5 million in 1900. Nearly all of this expansion occurred among the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe. Sephardi Jewry in the Afro-Asian world hardly increased at all. As a result, Jews resident in the Near East and North Africa declined from 40 per cent of the world’s Jewish population in 1800 to only 8 per cent in 1880, with Jews resident in Europe increasing from 59 per cent to 89 per cent in the same period.

The disabilities suffered by Jews also differed from place to place. As a general rule, the further east one went, the greater the legal disabilities of Jews, and the further west one went, the fewer. By 1840, a greater or lesser degree of political equality had come to Jews in most European countries with the exception of Russia. Full civil rights had been granted to Jews in France in 1791. In Russia, the Jews had been granted a measure of civil rights, but full emancipation would not come until 1871 and the establishment of the German Empire. In Czarist Russia, the ‘prison of nations’, Jews (with a handful of exceptions) were compelled to live in the provinces of Russian Poland, Lithuania, Byelorussia, the Ukraine, Bessarabia and
the Black Sea region, known collectively as the ‘Pale of Settlement’. They also suffered from other forms of discrimination and oppression, including the liability of Jewish boys to be kidnapped and conscripted into the Czarist army for the extraordinary period of 25 years. (On the other hand, Czarist Russia did not interfere with the practice of the Jewish religion or unduly with Jewish education.) In the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere in the Moslem world, Jews (and Christians) were considered to be ‘protected subjects’ (dhimmis) provided they paid a special tax, the jizya. Jews were, however, discriminated against in a number of other ways, and remained outside the Islamic power structure. In practice, the treatment of Jews varied greatly with local traditions and the attitudes of local rulers. The middle and later nineteenth century saw a gradual easing of overt discrimination against Jews (the jizya was abolished in the Ottoman Empire in 1855, for instance) until the rise of modern Arab nationalism and hostility to Zionism at the end of the century.

The English-speaking world was different. No overt laws of any kind against Jews existed in Britain after their readmission by Cromwell in 1656. In the 1660s Parliament debated, and rejected, a proposal to enact a special tax on Jews, similar to that which existed elsewhere in Europe. No attempts to enact specifically antisemitic legislation were ever again made in Britain. What discrimination existed in Britain was of a different kind, the inability of practising Jews to take the Anglican (or, after 1828, Christian) oaths necessary to hold some positions. The most famous such oath was that required to be taken by all newly elected members of Parliament. Until 1828, MPs were to testify their allegiance to the Anglican creed and, between 1828 and 1858, were required to swear an oath ‘on the true faith of a Christian’. The efforts to change this oath (to ‘so help me God’) constituted the ‘struggle for political emancipation’ in Britain, finally won by practising Jews in 1858. Ironically, in 1858 Britain’s Chancellor of the Exchequer was a converted Jew, Benjamin Disraeli.

In the United States (and other ‘pioneer’ societies such as the Australian colonies) discrimination based on religion was forbidden by law. The American Bill of Rights, enacted in 1790, specifically forbade ‘the establishment of a religion’. While some states established Protestantism as their official religion into the early nineteenth century, in practice there was no legal discrimination against Jews on religious grounds in the United States. There was, however, a measure of social and economic discrimination, much discussed by recent historians – although, as this work will show, there was also a