

“Belief and Conduct”: Lily Montagu’s Jewish Socialism and Liberal Judaism

This is Lily Montagu [image]. In summaries of her considerable lifetime accomplishments she is variously described as a social worker, a writer, a spiritual leader, and as the founder and driving force behind the Liberal Jewish movement in England. Born into a wealthy, Orthodox Jewish family, she moved beyond this upbringing to pursue all means possible to organise female labour and to reinvigorate what she called ‘the tenets of a living Judaism.’ Here she recalls a conversation had with her father when she was a young woman:

‘My imagination was kindled, and I, aged about sixteen, determined to live and work in the East End. Nothing else would satisfy me. When I spoke of these dreams to my father, he said very gently but with such personal conviction that I could not help being impressed: “That’s nonsense! You can do what you like from your own home. A Jewish girl does not leave home unless there is something wrong with her. If she does not marry, she waits till she is forty before leaving her family.”’¹

Montagu exceeded these expectations in a number of ways, and with lasting impact. In 1893, when barely out of her teens, she founded the West Central Jewish Club, a social, educational, and religious organization for Jewish girls and working women. Six years later, in 1899, she wrote an article called ‘The Spiritual Possibilities of Judaism Today’ which galvanized the fledgling Liberal Judaism movement, and in 1902 she co-founded the Jewish Religious Union, an association of Orthodox, Reform, and Liberal Jews that sought to revitalise the religious life of Anglo-Jewry. Once this organisation outgrew its early controversies and became dedicated to the advancement of Liberal Judaism alone, Montague helped to establish Liberal Jewish synagogues throughout Britain, often serving as their Chair or President. Twenty-four years

¹ Lily Montagu, *My Club and I: The Story of the West Central Jewish Club* (London: Herbert Joseph Ltd, 1943), p. 16.

later, she had gone so far beyond the scope of her family home as to help found and become eventual President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Between 1926 and 1959 she oversaw the establishment of new congregations in Europe, South America, Israel, South Africa, and Australia.² She was in addition a magistrate in the London juvenile courts, an indication that her call to social action was as strong as that to the renewal of a ‘religion of feeling.’ Montagu remained unmarried, was virtually disinherited by her father for her rejection of Jewish orthodoxy, and overcame considerable shyness and self-doubt to become a lay minister, preach sermons in English and German, publish prolifically across a range of genres, and marshal an international agenda for the formation of a wholly new religious organization. She did not, in other words, abide by her father’s advice that ‘[a] Jewish girl does not leave home unless there is something wrong with her.’

Montagu’s iconoclastic impact and prolific output give rise to a number of questions regarding her originality, but also present possibilities for locating her life and work within several intersecting contexts. Her highly inclusive conception of religious and social communities is founded on a model of Judaism based on feeling, placing her in both a broader rabbinic theological tradition and also in a more contemporary nineteenth-century history of Anglo-Jewish women writers’ intervention into Jewish thought via secular literary forms such as the novel. Her philanthropic activities on behalf of working women in the East End may naturally be considered alongside other campaigning social reformers such as Beatrice Webb, Margaret Harkness, and others. Here, however, I aim to review Montagu’s activities during the 1890s to trace the political, theological, and intellectual currents linking the emergence of international Jewish labour unions to the rise of Liberal Judaism, and furthermore to consider

² Umansky, Ellen M., ‘Lily Montagu,’ *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 20 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on August 24, 2016) <<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/montagu-lily>>.

the role of gender in mediating the complex relationship between these rapidly expanding political and religious movements.

This is a large area of inquiry, and the links between liberal religion, socialism, and gender have been opened up by several recent scholars, including Rebecca Styler in *Literary Theology by Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* and Seth Koven in *The Matchgirl and the Heiress*, who have explored the idea of a women's theology in which the idea of a God of love is applied to social problems. For me this work on Lily Montagu arises at the start of a new research project on the relationship between Jewish socialism and trade unions and the rise of Liberal Judaism at the *fin de siècle*. Montagu worked at the crossroads of these movements and was instrumental in pressing for systemic social reform, as well as in bringing reforms to Jewish practice. Just as she insisted on addressing the material conditions of those attending the West Central Jewish Girls' Club, Montague asserted that 'association' and the 'demands of work' be foregrounded in '[restoring] to Judaism its glory' in a way which is 'acceptable to emancipated minds.'³ In one of the most significant moves early in the life of the Club, she held Sabbath services in the afternoon, rather than the morning, so that those working a half-day on Saturdays could attend after work. Now viewed as a revolutionary moment in Jewish theological liberalism, it marks the first occasion in modern times that Halacha, the Jewish law, was bent to fit the needs of working girls and women.

If, though, as Koven claims, 'shelves groan from the weight of books' about philanthropic women motivated by religion, why another one about Lily Montagu?⁴ In many ways, her experience parallels that of other Christian, unmarried, childless, female social workers and philanthropists, particularly in blending a concern for labour conditions with an

³ Lily Montague, 'The Spiritual Possibilities of Judaism Today,' *Jewish Quarterly Review* (1899), pp. 216-31.

⁴ Seth Koven, *The Matchgirl and the Heiress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 10.

idea of ‘natural religion’. While the scope of Montagu’s accomplishments is global and lives on to this day, she cannot be said to have originated a new theology, and even her biographer Ellen Umansky concludes (perhaps unfairly) that ‘[we] find in the writings of Lily Montagu [an] understanding of religion as inner piety, based on familiarity with contemporary literature and philosophy and an almost complete ignorance of traditional Jewish texts.’⁵ When Koven asserts that ‘Christianity [...] animated and inspired Left politics in Britain,’ we might ask whether Montagu’s Left politics are animated by the same or a similar religious formulation, given Anglo-Jewry’s borrowing from Protestant culture, or indeed whether there is a distinctly Jewish approach that can be included in a discourse of religion and labour politics in the 1890s. In other words, does Montagu’s Socialism derive from Judaism, or is she a Socialist fishing, in a sense, in Judaism for an inspiring framework of belief to animate social action? Her father Samuel Montagu, later first Baron Swaythling, was a firm supporter of trade unionism and served in Parliament as the Liberal MP for Whitechapel from 1885 to 1900. He also barely spoke to his daughter after 1909 due to her apparent rejection of Orthodox Judaism and prohibited in his will the use of his money for Liberal Jewish causes. To better understand Montagu’s break with family and tradition, and to open to investigation of her politics and religion, I will look here to her memoir *My Club and I: The Story of the West Central Jewish Club* (1943). This book provides a detailed account of the mission which was the very inception of her efforts in this direction. Although the West Central Jewish Club was the earliest of her projects, the years spent establishing it during the 1890s mark the testing ground for Montagu’s political and religious ideas along with her prodigious organizational strategies. By attending closely to the text and her voice we can perhaps counter her critics who say she knew little of

⁵ Ellen M Umansky, *Lily Montague and the Advancement of Liberal Judaism: From Vision to Vocation* (New York and Toronto: The Edward Mellon Press, 1983), p. 9.

Judaism and answer the question whether her religion has its roots in her socialism, or vice versa.

Montagu took the steps that would lead to the founding of this Club against the backdrop of well-known fear and anger regarding Jews and labour at the nexus of sweated industries such as tailoring and the production of ready-made clothing. Reinforcing this was the Jack the Ripper murders beginning in 1888, which cemented the association of Jews with criminality in Whitechapel. David Englander reports that policing was reinforced in the area ‘in order to prevent the outbreak of a full-scale pogrom,’ so great was the association in that heated moment of Jews in the East End with contagion, violence, and an attack on Englishness.⁶ Industrial unrest in the period led to the formation of the Women’s Trade Union Association in 1889, to organise female workers and ensure, in particular, employers’ adherence to the 1874 Factory Act, which raised the minimum working age to nine, and limited the working day for women and children to 10 hours in the textile industry. This Association became the Women’s Industrial Council, an umbrella organization that included governance of what came to be called the National Organization of Girls’ Clubs, ‘an associated group whose primary aim had been to educate young female workers about the Factory Acts, and to use girls’ clubs as a basis for industrial organisation.’⁷ Lily Montagu’s Club for Jewish working women eventually allied with the National Organization of Girls’ Clubs and she herself became its President. However, her motivation in forming the Club in 1893 was not to defend the Jews from outside threats, nor was it conceived as a divertingly charitable undertaking for wealthy women with time on their hands. Simply put, it was ‘aimed at keeping Judaism alive in our young people.’⁸

⁶ Ibid, p. 43.

⁷ Jean Spence, ‘Working for Jewish Girls: Lily Montagu, Girls’ Clubs and Industrial Reform 1890-1914,’ *Women’s History Review* 13.3 (2004): 491-509.

⁸ Montague, *My Club and I*, p. 19.

When we turn to her memoir of this period, the first thing that may strike us is that much of how Montagu presents her work is highly reminiscent of Christian socialist organisations about which we already know, which set themselves up against mid-Victorian patronage, to live among those they wish to serve. This is a kind of exercise in shelving moralisation and boosting fellowship by entering into the lives of the poor. Montagu insists, for example, on an empathetic understanding of the lives of young working Jews who made up the greater numbers of the Jewish community in London and whose social and economic experience was far from her own milieu. She cautions that

[a] club worker must enter on her career in the learning spirit. She must not attempt to foist her standards on the girls among whom she intends to work. She must study their standards, and exchange their points of view theirs.⁹

She is quick to sniff out and exclude any hint of condescension from patrons or teachers, and goes, as we shall see, to extraordinary lengths to first account for the girls' laxity in observing religious obligations, and then to accommodate them. Jean Spence further notes that Montagu's objective for the Club moves beyond 'refinement' or 'improvement' to encompass systemic social reform via understanding and implementing labour laws and providing training to workers.¹⁰

Here, however, is where we may work to shed light on the question of Montagu's Jewishness and her Socialism. She seems in one sense to be cookie-cutter late Victorian socialist, most of whom were liberal or agnostic Protestants. But there is of course more context than that. Her project is not simply one of hanging out, as it were, with poor people, it's about hanging out with poor *Jewish* people, which raises other questions. The issue of working on the Sabbath is, for example, a crucial nexus of concerns regarding Jewish civil liberties and the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Spence, p. 495.

assertion of minority religious rights, the interpretation of Holy Law (honouring the Sabbath is after all the fifth commandment), and sheer economic necessity. As noted earlier, she created a service on Saturday afternoons in full knowledge that those who attended would have worked a half-day shift that morning. In fact, the Club itself grew out of the offering of Sabbath afternoon classes which drew large numbers of female attendees from across London. When Montagu began holding actual services at the Club's rooms in Dean Street, this was a radical move in being led by and for women, in openly acknowledging that a 'living Judaism' meant a reinterpretation of religious law to suit contemporary economic pressures, and in aiming to create meaningful ritual for those without training in Hebrew or classical rabbinic texts. In other words, Montagu set out to make Sabbath observance convenient, compelling and not boring, and she did this for women.

Unsurprisingly, she encountered considerable criticism, from collaborators who felt that Sabbath-breakers should be denied Club membership to those, like her father, who viewed these innovations as tantamount to heresy. Montagu countered these challenges on both economic and theological grounds and, in so doing, worked out a position that became the animating voice of Liberal Judaism. In the chapter called 'Religion in the Club', she meets head-on 'the economic pressure of the age which made strict Sabbath observance impossible for those who wished to live independent lives,' as well as disinclination caused by exhaustion, the allure of time spent with family, day-tripping, shopping, and even the admission that 'London weather is seldom the right weather for synagogue attendance.'¹¹ Crucially, Montagu never once decries the indifference of a younger generation, but looks instead to its causes. Their parents, she reasons, are recent immigrants who view their Judaism negatively as 'not Christianity' due the persecution and pogroms they experienced in the lands which they fled. What's more, she says, 'I believed then, as ever afterwards, strongly in the power of worship

¹¹ Montagu, 'My Club and I', p. 41, 47.

and was convinced that the habit of not attending services was rooted in the boredom which a traditional service evoked.¹² Interest is restored at Dean Street by conducting services in English, the introduction of choral singing and organ music, the seating of men and women together, a separate children's address, and revision of liturgy so that 'only such prayers were used which had a meaning for modern Jews and Jewesses in the actual circumstances of their lives. The sermons treated of vital subjects.'¹³ These innovations were carried over to the West Central Jewish Liberal Congregation, the new synagogue of Liberal Judaism, when it opened in 1928.

Montagu did not originate these modern interventions, and in testing them out at the West Central Jewish Club she is acting in part on the influence on her mentor, the 'aristocratic, Liberal Jewish academic Claude Montefiore.'¹⁴ Montefiore was himself a student of German Reform Judaism, which spread throughout Western Europe and America from the 1820s onward. As Michael Meyer argues in his global history of Jewish Reform, however, reform in England was 'something other than simply an extension of the German Reform movement. It was more a response to the specific circumstances of Anglo-Jewry than to the ideology of a Geiger or Holdheim.'¹⁵ In Montagu's Club work, then, we see an integration of ideas from Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment, with thoroughly local initiatives for social work and organization of labour. So it is that she arrives at this formulation:

It was all important that we should ask all those under our influence to discover God's word, and try to live in accordance with it in their working lives. If they lived truly by His word, they could worship Him all day long, whatever they were doing, and not only

¹² Ibid., p. 45.

¹³ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁴ Daniel R. Langton, 'Piety, Tradition and Community in the Thought of Lily Montagu: An Anglo-Liberal Jewish Theology of Relation', *Women in Judaism* 7.2 (2010).

¹⁵ Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 177.

at Sabbath services. Moreover, they could hallow any every day through prayer, and could use for worship and part of the recognised Sabbath which was at their disposal.¹⁶ Religion here is personal, sacred time can animate the working day, and Halacha – Jewish law – may be revisited to accommodate the new needs of each generation. In 1899, six years into the life of the Club, Montague writes ‘The present is the right hour, and England is the fit place for the initiation of this movement, which may return Judaism to its glory.’¹⁷ She is referring to Liberal Judaism, the organisation which she went on to found and work for for the rest of her life.

Returning, then, to the question of her Jewishness and her socialism, we may note that practices trialled and explored in the Club become the animating ideas for a wholly new and, to some extent, uniquely English religious movement. In that sense Montagu’s socialism and her girls’ club are more a crucible than a facsimile. Her credentials as a participant in a Protestant, Socialist milieu are unimpeachable: she wrote a rhyme with Clementina Black on the Factory Act so that working women could better learn and recall their rights, and with Beatrice Webb formed the Industrial Law Association in connection with the Women’s Industrial Council.¹⁸ Her aim in ameliorating inequality and improving the status of women is not theirs, however. She writes:

There is everything to fear for the future of Judaism, until it can be accepted by the most enlightened among us. Better to have died in the Ghetto than to have outlived the possibilities of our religion. But surely there is no need for despair seeing that a broader and more beautiful worship, which will grow in intensity, as the needs of a more developed civilization become greater, can even now be dimly foreshadowed. (230)

¹⁶ Montagu, *My Club and I*, p. 42.

¹⁷ Montague, ‘The Spiritual Possibilities of Judaism Today,’ p. 181.

¹⁸ Montagu, *My Club and I*, p. 64-5.

Reinvigoration of Judaism as ethical monotheism must adapt from within the impoverished isolation of the ghetto, and then destroy the very ghetto itself, so that all its proponents can live equally in the rational light of the modern world as in the sacred light of true belief. Work in the ghetto and work towards inspiring faith are indivisible. She urges her readers: 'Judaism is strong enough and wide enough to inspire [our brothers and sisters] and their children for ever; let us ask them to make progressive demands upon it,' and although she failed to persuade her father at least of these progressive demands, she created instead a wholly modern iteration of an ancient faith by seeking solidarity for the common good.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Montague, 'The Spiritual Possibilities of Judaism Today,' p. 181.