

Haiti, Israel, and the Jews

Mordechai Arbell

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The majority of the Israeli population and media followed with admiration and approval the work of the Israeli contingent sent to Haiti to help the victims of the disastrous earthquake that struck in mid-January 2010. The efforts to extricate people buried alive under the debris of crumbled buildings, and the efforts of those in the Israeli field hospital, saving lives of the wounded, were lauded worldwide—even by many who have not always demonstrated empathy or even understanding for Israel.

The spotlight on Haiti gives us cause to investigate the relations between the impoverished half of the island of Hispaniola (called Haiti) and its Jews, and its relations with the State of Israel.

A French Colony

In the second half of the seventeenth century, France gained control of the western part of the island of Hispaniola (or Saint-Domingue or Haiti). The French occupation was based on the treaty of Ryswick in 1697, when Spain officially ceded this half of the island to France. French buccaneers already had a foothold there, and French planters had begun to settle there even before the treaty was signed. Individual Jews who had left Dutch Brazil in 1654 reached Haiti and, using their expertise in growing sugar cane, either worked on French plantations as specialists or had small plantations of their own. Their relatively small number, scattered in all parts of this “half-island,” was never sufficient for the formation of a congregation. The *Code Noir* [Black Code] of 1685 signed by Louis IV of France, ordering the expulsion of the Jews from the French islands, forced most of them out of Haiti. Those that remained, joined later on by Spanish-Portuguese Jews from Bordeaux and Bayonne, were people who were able to obtain explicit permission to live in Haiti, called *lettres patentes*, in particular those representing large companies in which France had an interest.

One of those firms that had offices in Haiti—mainly in Cap Haitien, Saint Louis, Fonds-de-L'Isle à Vaches and Leogan—was the Gradis Company, which was owned by David Gradis, a supplier to the French colonies. A prominent Jewish family was that of Mendès-France from Bordeaux, with houses all over the half-island. One of its descendants, Pierre Mendès-France, was premier of France from June 18, 1954–February 23, 1955. The Jewish population continued to increase and in the mid-eighteenth century it was estimated at more than 200 families.

Aside from Jews from France, there was also a settlement of Dutch Jews from Curaçao in Cap Haitien, where they had a religious leader (Dr. Isaac Cardoso), a *mohel* [ritual circumciser] and a cemetery. Another Jewish community existed in Jeremie, a port surrounded by plantations, where the Jews specialized in sugar, coffee, cacao, indigo and retail trade.

Jewish life was generally uneventful, except during the governorship of Jean Baptiste Henri Hector, comte d'Estaing, who decreed that the Jews must finance public projects such as roads, inns, batteries, ships, fountains, etc. The minister of the marine in Paris put an end to this decree, noting that “the Jews, although from a different religion, are free men, very useful to the state and to the colony for their attachment to culture and their proficiency in commerce, and if they are treated with rigor, they can take their fortunes and their capacity elsewhere.”¹

It is interesting to note that on April 2, 1765, a petition was circulated by 152 French merchants to expel the Jews of Cap Haitien, citing the Black Code. In 1779, the king replied to d'Estaing: “His majesty is willing to allow those Jews who are established in Saint-Domingue [Haiti] not to be troubled for their creed, so long as they abstain from all public exercise of their religion.”²

The Jews, spread out all over the country as they were, could not form a real congregation. Jewish marriages, however, were performed and Jewish holidays observed, especially in Cap Haitien. There was no real discrimination in day-to-day life. Dr. Michel Lopez de Pas was nominated *medecin du roi* [king's physician] in 1714 and a member of the Superior Council of the colony in 1723.³ Other Jews were nominated as judges in tribunals and for other public functions. The town of Moron, with 12,000 inhabitants, forty kilometers from Jeremie, was undoubtedly founded by a Jew from Curaçao, Simon Isaac Henriquez Moron, who had settled in Jeremie and had purchased land and owned property there. Indeed, according to local legends, the town was actually founded by a rabbi.⁴

The French had a flourishing colony in Haiti, called *la perle des Antilles* [the pearl of the Caribbean]. It is understood by documents from the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries that it was the most successful French colony in the New World, exporting sugar and other tropical products. From 1713–87, about 2,000–3,000 French colonists settled in Haiti.⁵

Revolution and Independence

With the success of French domination in Haiti, the number of African slaves rose rapidly and eventually reached hundreds of thousands.⁶ The draconian methods of the French masters brought unrest and culminated in the great slave revolution led by François-Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture in 1794. In 1804, after bloody battles, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Toussaint L'Ouverture's successor, proclaimed himself emperor. Haiti became the first independent nation in Latin America and the first slave state in the world. Until recently, Haiti did not even possess a copy of its own declaration of independence. In the spring of 2010, a Canadian graduate student doing research at the British National Archives unearthed the first known government-issued version of Haiti's declaration of independence, which proclaimed, "We must live independent or die." Haitian society, still struggling to recover from the devastating earthquake, was electrified by this discovery.⁷

The 1804 revolution precipitated a panicky exodus of French settlers, and those who remained were massacred by the former slaves who now ruled the country. The slave rebellion did not cause a panicky departure of Jews, however, and part of the Jewish population actually remained in the country.

The Haitian slave revolution was soon robbed of its fruits—the international community was not only very slow to recognize the newly born black slave state, it also imposed heavy reparations to be paid for the destroyed colonial infrastructure and plantations. Moreover, the hero of the revolution, Dessalines, now called "Emperor Jacques," was murdered in 1806 by officers of the *affranchis*—the mulatto urban middle class.

Gradually the black African rebels fell under the rule of the mulattos and quadroons [people with one mulatto parent and one white one], who controlled the government and the army and treated the black majority no less harshly than did their French predecessors. Different mulatto groups battled each other. Presidents were unseated and sometimes murdered. In this chaotic situation, the treasury was plundered, and roads and buildings and any infrastructure that existed fell into disrepair. To introduce some semblance of order, but also to ensure the payment of reparations, US marines occupied the country from 1915–34. Once again, the whites ruled over the black population. When the marines left Haiti, the mulatto ruling class, well educated and wealthy, returned to power—and to its corrupt practices.

A unique Haitian phenomenon was the sizeable community of emancipated slaves, called *affranchi*, who, during the French rule, had become city dwellers. In part, these were well-educated people who eventually constituted the Haitian middle class, and, after the liberation of Haiti, the ruling elite. Some Jews intermarried with them. When, while serving as non-resident Israeli ambassador to Haiti, I met some of those families, they knew of their Jewish origins and even had documents to prove it. An example is the Decastro family, who are descendants of Joseph Henriquez de Castro and Rachel Felicite Mendès-France, who married at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Joseph's sister, Abigail Henriques de Castro, married Mardoche Mendès-France.⁸

In November 1984, Dr. William Hodges and Miss Jennifer Hamilton discovered a Jewish cemetery in Cap Haitien, in which only three gravestones remained intact. The years written on the gravestones 1789, 1790, and 1791, respectively, indicated that the burials had taken place at the start of the Haitian revolution. Dr. Hodges, one of the most respected Haitian historians and founder of the De Guahaba historical museum in Limbé, explains that the tombstones were preserved "due to the special admiration the Haitian revolutionary slaves had for the Jews, [who were] also victims of blind discrimination."⁹ Such thought is common among Haitians from all classes and parties, and this may explain in part the positive attitude of Haiti to Israel, which one assumes was reinforced by the presence of Israelis after the earthquake.

Many Jewish enterprises were ruined by the Haitian revolution, and commerce ground to a halt. Although the majority of Jews left, we still find births and deaths of Jews registered in Haiti as late as 1850. The majority of the members of the Masonic Lodge in Port-au-Prince in 1847 were Jewish.¹⁰

During the nineteenth century, a small number of Jews from Eastern Europe arrived in Haiti but rapidly assimilated with the local population. The Jewish presence was resuscitated with the arrival in 1890 of about 300 Jewish families from Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, who were chiefly involved in the textile business. In 1937, Haiti issued visas to refugees from Germany and Austria, and more than 100 Jews from Germany found sanctuary there from the encroaching Nazi menace.

In 1957, Dr. François Duvalier, a pure black Haitian, seized power in a military coup and became president. Later, he declared himself president for life. The blacks were finally independent, but Haiti had been transformed from the "pearl of the Caribbean" to the poorest country on the American continent, and one of the poorest in the world.

Duvalier initiated an African-oriented way of thinking, and reinforced the “Voodoo” faith, which is based on “Black Magic” and African gods. He himself was president by day but a Voodoo priest, “Papa Doc,” by night. Duvalier’s corrupt rule was also despotic, and the opposition was terrorized by the semi-official group of goons called the “Tonton Macoute.” Nevertheless, Duvalier became very popular and much of the black population believed that he would bring a better future. Notably, some two-thirds of the population believed in Voodoo.

Haiti and Israel

Papa Doc died in 1971 and was succeeded by his very young son, Jean-Claude Duvalier. “Baby Doc” replaced his father’s advisers with a cadre of young, well-educated Haitians. He released political prisoners languishing in jail and disbanded the Tonton Macoute. After becoming president, he appealed for Israeli advice. “As long as my family name is Duvalier,” he told me, “the Americans and Europeans do not believe in me. I hope Israel will understand the plight of my country as a nation that has returned and rebuilt its own country.”¹¹

It is difficult to understand the special attitude Haitians had and continue to have toward Jews and the Jewish state. However, the Haitians’ historical perspective, in particular, their sense of being cut off from their roots, enables us to better understand this phenomenon. For example, in 1972, during my service in Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I accompanied four Haitian government ministers—the ministers of presidency, foreign affairs, finance and agriculture—on a visit to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. After that visit, one of the ministers remarked, “The Jews were chased to the Diaspora, but even after 2,000 years, they still knew where to return—to their old homeland. We were taken by force and dispersed, but we do not know to where to return. We admire your return.”¹²

In 1982, during a visit to the Dominican Republic, in a village on the seashore, I attended a performance of local folklore. To my surprise, everything was French-oriented, including the costumes and dances. It was explained to me that in Haiti in the late nineteenth century, there was a rumor circulating that there were ships sailing from the Dominican Republic to Africa. Thousands of Haitians trekked to the Dominican Republic in order to return to Africa. There were no ships. The would-be emigrants were stranded in the Dominican Republic, and their descendents remain there until the present.

It is understandable that the Voodoo faith, which hearkens to the African gods, is so very popular in Haiti because Haitians still look to Africa as their holy land.

While the Haitians often think of America in terms of slavery and poverty, they admire Israel and the Jews' return to their ancient homeland.

Israeli cooperation with Haiti began in 1971, with the arrival of two Israeli agricultural experts—one from a kibbutz and one from a moshav. They were assigned to the region of Ba Bouen and given the mission of teaching the inhabitants of its five villages to grow vegetables. In three years, the region flourished, not only growing vegetables but also exporting them. When I accompanied the ministers of agriculture and finance on a visit to that area, all the villagers came out to greet us. Addressing them, the finance minister said, "I have seen a wonder. You have done the unbelievable. Tell me what more you want, and it will be done." The elder of the five villages said, "We want two things. One: we do not want to be rich among poor; we want our neighbors to receive the same advice from Israel as we received. Two: we want to shout three times '*vive l'Israël*' [long live Israel]." The ministers shouted, "We will shout with you," and the whole valley reverberated with the cries of "*vive l'Israël, vive l'Israël, vive l'Israël.*"¹⁵ It was an unforgettable moment.

Later on, the Israeli company Tahal initiated the repair of the old irrigation network built by the French in the arid high plateau of Haiti. Israeli specialists built an edible oil plant, convincing the Haitians that instead of exporting peanuts and importing expensive edible oil, they could produce it themselves. Other Israeli experts convinced the Haitians that instead of exporting mangos to the US in order to make mango extract for ice cream flavoring, they could manufacture the extract themselves. These projects contributed to Haitians' self-esteem and improved Haiti's skewed balance of payments.

In 1986, Jean-Claude Duvalier, who had become unpopular, in part due to the corrupt practices of the mulatto woman he had married, was exiled. He was succeeded by Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who knew Hebrew. Beginning in 1990, a series of coups took place and Haiti descended into chaos. Consequently, Israeli aid efforts diminished.

In analyzing the reasons for Haiti's dire situation, and why lethargy, passivity, and lack of initiative seem to have gripped the country, we can conclude that Haitians are still under the influence of a post-slavery mentality. In many countries in which slavery existed, emancipated slaves were able to eventually join free society and this repressive system was consigned to the history books. In Haiti, 95 percent of the population is descended from slaves. There was no helping hand to guide them to freedom, and there was no free society except the *affranchi* mulattos, who are also descended from slaves.

Many family names were given by the French. For example, *Petit Homme* [small man], *Jolie Coeur* [nice heart], Brutus (if the slave owner gave Roman names to his slaves). There was no effort made to change those names. After Haiti achieved independence, the rest of the world boycotted the new black nation. Even France did not help its former French-speaking colony. Haiti was abandoned. An old Haitian friend told me recently, "*Haiti n'est pas un état, c'est un endroit* [Haiti is not a state; it is a place]."

He was mistaken. Haiti needs to be advised; it needs guidance, and the disastrous earthquake that hit this poor and unfortunate nation may eventually induce the developed world to finally reach out to Haiti and help ameliorate its plight.

Haiti voted for the creation of a Jewish state on November 29, 1947. Throughout the 1950s, '60s and '70s, Haiti maintained very friendly relations with Israel. However, in the '80s and '90s, it voted in the UN with the majority of the Latin American group, which had distanced itself from Israel.

Israeli ambassadors to the UN also served as non-resident ambassadors to Haiti. Later, however, Israeli ambassadors in Panama represented Israel. A resident embassy was established in 1975, but after five years it was closed for budgetary reasons and once again, Israel is represented by non-resident ambassadors. Today, Israel's ambassador in the Dominican Republic is accredited to Haiti. Israel is also represented by its energetic honorary consul in Port-au-Prince, Gilbert Bigio, who greatly facilitated Israel's aid efforts during the January 2010 earthquake.

For the average Haitian, Israel represents hope, and the fact that hope can be realized. Therefore, it is not surprising that after the earthquake, reporters observed a crowd near a church shouting, "We do not want missionaries; we want Israelis." Haitians are a proud people, very conscious of their past and their ancestry. Assistance to Haiti must be conveyed with respect and without condescension. In this endeavor, Israel and the Jewish people have played an important role and will continue to do so.

Notes

- ¹ Archives Nationales de France (colonies) Ministère de la Marine—Correspondance générale, Saint-Domingue, 1765.
- ² Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Lois et constitutions de colonies françaises d'Amérique Sous le Vent*, (Paris, 1787), Vol. IV, p. 859.
- ³ Zvi Loker, *Jews in the Caribbean* (Jerusalem, 1991), p. 218.
- ⁴ Zvi Loker, "un Juif Portugais fondateur de Moron," *Conjonction, Revue Franco-Haïtienne*, (Port-au-Prince), No. 139, October 1978, pp. 87–88.

- ⁵ Mordechai Arbell, *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean* (Jerusalem, 2002), p. 299.
- ⁶ Historians dispute the exact numbers.
- ⁷ Damien Cave, "Declaration of Haiti's freedom is unearthed," *International Herald Tribune*, April 2, 2010.
- ⁸ L'Aurore St. Juste, "Ancêtres de Pierre Mendès-France originaires d'Haïti," *Créations Haïtiano-Françaises*, July 12–13, 1971.
- ⁹ William H. Hodges, *Les Juifs du Cap—évidence d'une communauté Juive à Cap François (Haïtienne)* (Limbé, Haiti, 1984).
- ¹⁰ Archives Israélites, Paris, 1847, pp. 861–863.
- ¹¹ Conversation in 1972 after presenting my credentials as Israeli ambassador to Haiti, the first ambassador he received.
- ¹² Fritz Cinéas, Presidency Minister, during his visit with three other ministers to Israel, 1972.
- ¹³ Personal experience, 1974.

The Jewish Factor in the Relations between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union 1933–1941

Yosef Govrin

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ISBN 978 0 85303 768 2 cloth
£40.00



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