Antisemitism in an Age of Nationalism (1840–1878)

On the evening of February 5, 1840, a monk known as Father Thomas and his servant, Ibrahim Amara, disappeared without a trace in Damascus, Syria. Within weeks, Christians in the city were accusing Jews of murdering the two men. Newspapers around the world carried the story. In March, the editor of a Paris newspaper proclaimed, “Rightly or wrongly, the Jews . . . have the terrifying and inconceivable reputation of sacrificing a Christian on their Passover and distributing the blood to their coreligionists in the region.” “And all of this is happening in 1840,” wrote the editor of another paper, horrified at the idea of ritual murder in his own time.
How did a disappearance become a possible murder and then a “ritual murder”? Why were people who lived thousands of miles from Damascus so interested in the story? How do Jews or any other people combat a lie about “terrifying and inconceivable” crimes—particularly when such a lie erupts at a time when most people like to think of themselves as modern, even “enlightened”?

Many people in the 1800s believed that they had cast off the prejudices of earlier times. Indeed, some devoted their lives to undoing the great injustices of earlier, less enlightened eras. One western European nation after another granted Jews their rights as citizens. In 1861, Russia freed its serfs; four years later, the United States abolished slavery; and in 1876, reluctantly and under great pressure, the Ottoman Empire granted non-Muslims civic equality (which was, however, later revoked).

And yet despite such progress, discrimination and persecution persisted throughout the 1800s. Instead of turning to reason and science to challenge old myths and misinformation, many people used reason and science to justify their prejudices. In the early 1800s, Frederick Douglass, an African American who fought slavery, explained:

*It is the province of prejudice to blind; and scientific writers, not less than others, write to please, as well as to instruct, and even unconsciously . . . sometimes sacrifice what is true to what is popular. Fashion is not confined to dress; but extends to philosophy as well—and it is fashionable now in our land to exaggerate the differences between the [African American] and the European.*

It was also fashionable to exaggerate differences between the Jew and the European. When the disappearance of Father Thomas and his servant led to charges of ritual murder against prominent Jews in Damascus, a number of educated people in Europe and the Middle East readily believed the accusation—not because they saw Jews as a threat to Christianity or Islam but because they saw Jews as a separate and dangerous “race.” Their responses reveal much about the way individuals and groups adapt the myths and stereotypes of earlier times to current events. The Damascus affair also reveals the impact of nationalism and racism on antisemitism.

**MURDER IN DAMASCUS?**

In 1840, about 100,000 people lived in Damascus, the capital of Syria. To Europeans, its crowded markets and narrow streets gave it an air of
remoteness and mystery. To people in the Middle East and North Africa, it was a center of trade where camel caravans stopped on their way to Baghdad in the east or Beirut to the north. Although Damascus was mainly a Muslim city, it was also home to about 12,000 Christians of various denominations and about 5,000 Jews. Each group lived in its own quarter, but people of all faiths mingled in the markets, and some knew one another socially as well. Both Christians and Jews had a long history in the city, dating back more than 18 centuries.

In 1840, the Ottoman Empire was not as powerful as it had been in earlier times; Syria, for example, was under Egyptian rule, even though it was officially part of the Ottoman Empire. In 1831, Muhammad Ali, the viceroy of Egypt, had driven the Ottomans out of Syria and made his adopted son, Sherif Pasha, governor-general. But that victory did not end the dispute over the territory.

That dispute between Egypt and the Ottoman Empire attracted attention in several European nations whose leaders were eager to expand their economic and political influence in the region. Throughout the 1800s, these nations competed for colonies, markets, and influence. France, which had occupied Algeria since 1830, hoped to gain additional territory in North Africa and the Middle East; its leaders supported Egypt and Muhammad Ali. Therefore Austria and Britain backed the Ottoman sultan as a way of preventing French expansion.

To make things more confusing, a few people in Syria in 1840 were not under the protection of the Ottomans or the Egyptians. Among them was Father Thomas. Even though he had lived in Damascus for more than 30 years, he and other Catholic missionaries in the region were under French protection. As European influence in the Middle East increased, France and other European nations had placed a number of people in Syria under their protection. The sultan had recognized their right to do so in various treaties; so had Muhammad Ali. Like Father Thomas, most of these people had been born in Europe but now lived in the region; a few had been born in Syria but had business dealings with various European nations.

Soon after Father Thomas disappeared, the monks notified the Count de Ratti-Menton, the French consul in Syria. Three weeks later, Ratti-Menton sent a report to his superiors that emphasized the victim’s connections to France:

*An appalling drama has just stained the city of Damascus in blood.*

*The fact that the principal victim had direct ties to the [French]*
consulate; that he occupied a position that was both public and
consecrated; that those who played the primary role in this scene
of murder enjoy a [high] social position; and above all, that their
actions were inspired by an anti-human idea, all conjoin to justify
the length and detail of what I am about to report.

On the afternoon of the 5th of this month, Father Thomas, a . . .
missionary and chaplain of the French Capuchin monastery at
Damascus, left in the direction of the Jewish quarter in order to put up
a notice on the door of one of the synagogues about an auction for the
benefit of a poor European family. He was due on the following day,
the 6th, to have dinner with the other members of the religious orders
at Dr. Massari’s where he failed to appear. His absence was rendered
the more unusual by the fact that he was not at the monastery at
the usual time for the celebration of the mass and also by the simul-
taneous disappearance of his only domestic servant. However, this
could initially be explained by the supposition that Father Thomas
had gone to one of the neighboring villages in order to vaccinate some
of the children there.

Informed of what had happened, I went to the monastery where the
street was full of Christians from all the different sects who were
shouting that Father Thomas had been slain by the Jews.³

On Friday, February 7, Ratti-Menton reported the disappearance to
the Egyptian governor-general, Sherif Pasha, and asked his permission to
lead police in a search of the Jewish quarter, which was believed to be the
last place the two men had been seen. As a result of that search, Ratti-
Menton brought a barber named Solomon Halek to the French consulate
for questioning. Halek was singled out because the notice Father Thomas
had taken to the Jewish quarter hung on a wall near his shop. Still, after
three days of interrogation, the barber continued to insist that he knew
nothing. Describing Halek’s refusal to talk as “obstinate silence,” Ratti-
Menton claimed that he had no choice but to turn the man over to Sherif
Pasha.

The French consul knew exactly what would happen next. Even
though France and other western European nations had outlawed torture
as a “barbarous practice”—one that too often resulted in false admissions
of guilt—torture was routine in the Ottoman Empire. After beatings so
brutal that he was unable to sit, Halek “confessed.” He told the authorities
that Thomas had been brought to the home of a Jewish businessman. There, several Jews, including a rabbi, had bound the monk and then slit his throat. The account continued:

[The Jews] collected the blood in a large silver bowl, because it was to serve for their [Passover] holiday. They stripped the dead friar of his vestments . . . took his body to another room, cut it to pieces, and crushed its bones with an iron grinder. They put everything into a big coffee sack and threw it into a ditch. Then they poured the blood into bottles, which they gave to the rabbi.4

This was the same “blood libel” that had been used against Jews throughout Europe and the Middle East for more than 600 years (see Chapter 5).

Sherif Pasha and Ratti-Menton kept written records of their dealings with every witness and every suspect. They quoted the barber as saying, “Go to the important people in the quarter and they will settle everything.”5 As a result, seven of the richest and most respected Jews in the city were arrested. They too “confessed” after torture so brutal that two of them died. The authorities then searched for evidence but found nothing. Rather than reconsider the theories about the supposed crime, Sherif Pasha took hostages—60 boys ranging in age from 5 to 11—in the hope that their frightened parents would “talk.”

Ratti-Menton claimed that at first he had been skeptical that “the Jews” “employ human blood in the celebration of their religious mysteries,” but with “the mounting evidence,” he overcame his doubts (see Chapter 5). What was that evidence? Essentially, it consisted of little more than a few forced confessions and the discovery of a handful of possibly human bones in a sewer in the Jewish quarter.

Early in the investigation, a young Jew named Isaac Yavo reluctantly told the chief rabbi of Damascus that he had seen Father Thomas and his servant in another part of the city on the night of February 5. He had even spoken to them. Knowing that the authorities firmly believed that the Jews they had in custody were guilty of murder, the rabbi tried to make sure that Yavo would be safe if he testified. Ratti-Menton assured the rabbi that no honest witness had anything to fear. As a result, Yavo agreed to tell his story.

The French questioned Yavo for three days and then turned him over to Sherif Pasha for “further interrogation.” Pasha later issued a statement explaining what happened next. It was summarized in this report to the French government:
As the place where this young man stated that he had seen the monk is situated in the west of the town while the Jewish quarter is in the east, he [Sherif Pasha] realized that [Yavo] was therefore lying; he asked [the young man] whether he had not been coached by anybody, but he denied it. He was then flogged; he confessed nothing and was taken to the prison where he died.⁶

Yavo’s death was a turning point for many Jews in Damascus. They now understood that the authorities were interested only in “evidence” that would “prove” Jews had committed a ritual murder. Several events over the next few weeks confirmed that conclusion. The authorities quickly arrested five more men—this time for the murder of Father Thomas’s servant. Once again, the men charged were among the most prominent Jews in the city, including the chief rabbi. These new prisoners were also subjected to torture; one man died, bringing the death toll to four. But this time two men—the chief rabbi and Moses Salonicli, a merchant—refused to confess to crimes they had not committed.

Charges of ritual murder against Jews were not unusual in the Middle East. Throughout the early nineteenth century, Christians in the Ottoman Empire had accused Jews of ritual murder—in Aleppo in 1810, Beirut in 1824, Antioch in 1826, Hama in 1829, Tripoli in 1834, and Jerusalem in 1838, to name a few. The Ottoman authorities had not punished Jews in any of these cases.

This time was different, because the libelous accusation had the backing of not only the French consul but also nearly every European and American diplomat in the region. The American vice-consul stationed in Beirut claimed in a letter to the U.S. secretary of state that “a most barbarous secret for a long time suspected in the Jewish nation . . . at last came to light in the city of Damascus, that of serving themselves of Christian blood in their unleavened bread at Easter, a secret which in these 1840 years must have made many unfortunate victims.”⁷

Casper Merlato, the Austrian consul, warned Jews under his protection that “the secret guarded by the Jewish nation would serve no purpose and would only prove prejudicial to the innocent.” He also congratulated Sherif Pasha on the “zeal and vigor” with which he was conducting the case.⁸

Why were Europeans so certain Jews were responsible? Were they blinded by old stereotypes and myths? Were they motivated by economic and social competition between Christians and Jews in a city where both were vulnerable minorities? Or were they taking advantage of a local
dispute in order to advance their national interests? There are no clear answers. We only know that they were united in their thinking until one European had second thoughts.

Within days of declaring his support for Sherif Pasha, the Austrian consul challenged the entire investigation. Merlato reconsidered his stand in March, soon after the authorities accused more Jews of murdering Father Thomas's servant. Among them was Isaac Picciotto, a young Jewish merchant under Austria's protection. As soon as Picciotto was named a suspect, Merlato told the French consul and Sherif Pasha that he would be tried under Austrian law.

Without waiting for a reply, Merlato and his staff began questioning Picciotto, and they quickly discovered that he had a solid alibi. On the evening of February 5, Picciotto and his wife had attended a party in the Christian quarter. The host, an employee of the British East India Company, confirmed the alibi. Other people also recalled seeing Picciotto and his wife that evening. Yet in spite of this strong alibi, Ratti-Menton and Sherif Pasha continued to insist that Picciotto was guilty.

After much negotiation, Merlato allowed Ratti-Menton and Sherif Pasha to question Picciotto. But unlike the other prisoners, Picciotto never faced his interrogators alone. He was always accompanied by an Austrian official, who was there solely to ensure that he was not mistreated. The consul was making it clear to everyone involved in the case that Austria would do everything possible to protect Picciotto's rights.

Like Ratti-Menton, Merlato reported the interrogations to his superior, Anton von Laurin, the Austrian consul-general in Alexandria, Egypt. He emphasized that the case against the prisoners was based entirely on forced confessions. There was no evidence to support the idea that the two men were dead, let alone murder victims. Merlato asked von Laurin to transfer the case to Egypt "to prevent not only a subject of our empire, but any European whosoever, from being handed over . . . to the horrors of this infamous judicial inquisition."

Von Laurin was one of the few diplomats in the Middle East who did not believe that Jews engaged in ritual murder. When Merlato changed his mind about the case, von Laurin supported the consul's new stand. He also asked Muhammad Ali to intervene. To add weight to the request, he persuaded other European diplomats in Alexandria to support the call for a new investigation. Only the French refused.

The increasingly uncompromising stand taken by the Austrian diplomats placed Sherif Pasha in a difficult situation. The only way he could get a confession from Picciotto was to use torture. But to do so in defiance
of a powerful European nation would be dangerous to him and to his father, Muhammad Ali. At a time when European rulers were competing for colonies, many were willing to use any excuse to attack a weaker country. So even though Sherif Pasha bombarded Merlato with complaints, he made no effort to torture Picciotto or take him into his own custody. At the same time, Sherif Pasha slowed the pace of the interrogations and released the children he had been holding hostage. It was becoming clear to him that the fate of his prisoners would be decided in Egypt, not Syria.

As the case was winding down in Damascus, however, it took on new urgency elsewhere. As the story spread through the Middle East, anger against Jews grew in many other cities. A Jew in Beirut wrote in March, “[W]e can hardly leave our homes. Everybody, great and small alike, attacks us and forces their way into our houses. We are utterly abased.”

Tensions were also high in Alexandria, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and the island of Rhodes.

Indeed, Christians in Rhodes had charged Jews with another ritual murder at around the same time. On February 17, a young Greek Orthodox boy had failed to return home from an errand. The next day his mother appealed to the authorities for help. When the boy was still missing after a few days, the European consuls put pressure on the local government to solve the case. The agitation increased when news of the Damascus affair reached Rhodes.

THE POWER OF PUBLICITY

In the 1840s, news traveled slowly—the first telegraph line was not built until 1844, and the telephone was not invented until the 1870s. Using the fastest transportation available, it took about 20 days for a letter from Syria to reach Paris or Vienna. As a result, most Europeans were unaware of the events unfolding in Damascus until early March when a steady stream of letters arrived from a variety of sources. Frantic Jews in the Middle East wrote to relatives, friends, and anyone who could possibly help. Letters also came from European diplomats, businessmen, missionaries, and travelers.

Anton von Laurin, the Austrian consul-general in Alexandria, sent one of those letters to James Rothschild, a member of one of the richest and most influential Jewish families in the 1800s. James’s father, Mayer Rothschild, had made his fortune buying and selling antique coins and medals in the Frankfurt ghetto in what is now Germany. Later he branched out into money lending and investment banking. In time, his sons joined
the business. Each set up a branch in a major European city: Amschel, the oldest, remained in Frankfurt, Nathan settled in London, Solomon in Vienna, James in Paris, and Karl in Naples. During the Napoleonic wars, the brothers had increased the family’s wealth by lending money to governments and transporting gold and other precious metals across enemy lines for the British, Prussian, and Austrian armies.

The letter von Laurin sent to James Rothschild detailed everything he knew about the Damascus affair. It was not the only letter Rothschild and his brothers received. Jews in Istanbul and Jerusalem, Christian missionaries, heads of Jewish charities in Syria, and many others also pleaded with the brothers to intervene. In 1840, there was nowhere else to turn for help.

Although many people believed that the Rothschild family had enormous power, the brothers were acutely aware of the limits of their influence. Antisemitism affected all Jews, including the very rich. For example, the emperor of Austria made Solomon Rothschild an honorary citizen and awarded him the title of baron in recognition of his contributions to the empire. Yet, as a Jew, Solomon could only be an “honorary citizen,” not a real one. He and his family lived in a hotel, because no Jew—not even one with the title of baron—could buy a house in Vienna. That right was reserved for Christians.

A few days after sending his first letter to James Rothschild, Anton von Laurin sent a second letter, informing Rothschild that the situation was getting worse and urging that he go to the newspapers with the story, because they would “raise a cry of horror.”

Von Laurin had no way of knowing that the story was already headline news in Europe. And most of the early newspaper accounts supported the French consul and Sherif Pasha. These papers spoke of the “barbarity of the Jews,” denounced the “horror of the crime,” and expressed outrage at “human sacrifices.” Why were European editors so certain that “the Jews” were guilty of such terrible crimes? No newspaper in the 1840s had a single reporter in any foreign country. The press got its information from Europeans in the area—in this case, in Damascus and nearby cities.

Some Jews responded to the sensational stories with indignant letters to the editor. One of those letters was written at the request of James Rothschild, based on information from von Laurin and others in the region. The author was Adolphe Crémieux, the vice president of the Central Consistory of French Jews (see Chapter 9). His letter changed the way the Damascus affair was treated in the French press.
Crémieux claimed that he spoke, “in the name of your Jewish fellow-
citizens whom your report has shocked; in the name of all the Jews
throughout the world who will protest en masse; and in the name of the
Damascus Jews over whom at this very moment the sword of death may
be poised.” He began by questioning the assumptions made by the
authorities in Damascus. Why would a few wealthy Jews plotting a hor-
rendous crime have let a stranger—Solomon Halek, the barber—in on
their scheme? How likely was it that murderers eager to escape detection
would dispose of “the bones” of their victim near their own homes? And
finally, why would Jews be collecting blood for Passover two months early?

On the issue of ritual murder, Crémieux pointed out that Jewish law
does not permit Jews to eat eggs that have a blood spot. How likely was
it, he asked, that such a religion would allow the use of blood to make
 unleavened bread?

Although the letter did not stop talk of ritual murder, it did change the
tone of the newspaper stories. One paper backed off, declaring, “We had
not intended to be understood as guaranteeing the truth of this accusa-
tion.” In other words, that paper and others like it had printed whatever
information they received without questioning its truth or its logic.

The Rothschilds and other Jewish leaders also met privately with
heads of government and religious leaders. Their success varied. The
Austrian and British governments were eager to help, mainly because
it was in their interest to do so. Both saw the affair as an opportunity
to embarrass France. Some Jews tried to persuade Pope Gregory XVI to
speak out, but he chose to remain silent and banned all public discussion
of the affair in Rome. When asked for permission to reprint statements
made by earlier popes condemning Christians who accused Jews of ritual
murder (see Chapter 5), the pope refused.

Adolphe Thiers, the French prime minister, was also silent. In an
effort to force him to speak, Benoît Fould, the only Jew in the Chamber of
Deputies, gave a speech on June 2 in which he charged:

The disappearance of the [monk] became an occasion for deliberate
religious persecution. The consul of France incites to torture: at a
time when the French nation offers an example not only of equality
before the law, but of religious equality, it is a Frenchman who insti-
gates exceptional [police] measures, who has recourse to torture, who
upholds arbitrary measures [and] the executioners of the Pasha.
In response, Thiers declared, “The more [Ratti-Menton and his colleagues] are attacked by foreign agents, the firmer will be my support for them, above all when they are attacked by the interested parties [such as Britain and Austria].” The deputies applauded.

Nevertheless, as people around the world followed the debate, public opinion began to shift. On July 8, at a meeting in London, Christian clergymen and members of Britain’s Parliament joined others in England in protesting the tortures and the charges of ritual murder. Similar rallies took place in Paris, New York City, and Philadelphia. U.S. President Martin Van Buren sent letters to the U.S. consul in Alexandria and the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, asking them to help Jews in Damascus. American diplomats throughout the region, including the vice-consul in Beirut, quickly adjusted their stand on the case.

MISSION TO THE MIDDLE EAST

By early summer, Jewish leaders in Paris and London were planning a trip to Egypt to try to resolve the crisis. Adolphe Crémieux and Moses

Blood Libels (1800–1914)

The false claim that Jews murdered Christians for “their blood” did not end with the Enlightenment. It continued throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.
Montefiore, the president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, headed the mission. Montefiore was an Orthodox Jew whose activism was rooted in his religious beliefs. Crémieux was a secular Jew—one who is not observant but who identifies with Jews as a people. His activism grew out of his strong commitment to the values of the French Revolution—liberté, égalité, and fraternité (liberty, equality, and fraternity, or brotherhood).

The two men left for Egypt on July 18, 1840, after learning that the viceroy of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, was going to open a new investigation into the Damascus affair. Crémieux and Montefiore hoped that he would give them permission to question witnesses and collect evidence in support of the defendants. By the time they reached Alexandria, however, the situation had changed dramatically: The French consul-general had persuaded Muhammad Ali to abandon the idea of reopening the case.

To further complicate the situation, Egypt was now on the brink of a war with the Ottoman Empire and its four European allies—Austria, Britain, Russia, and Prussia. Just a few days after Crémieux and Montefiore reached Alexandria, the five governments gave Muhammad Ali an ultimatum: give up Syria and other conquered territories within 30 days or risk a war.

Although this ultimatum had nothing to do with the Damascus affair, it made it more difficult for Crémieux and Montefiore to meet with Muhammad Ali. As a result, they decided to alter their strategy. Instead of insisting on a new investigation, they urged Muhammad Ali to free the prisoners and issue a royal decree declaring the accusation that Jews commit ritual murder is false and slanderous.

Until August 26, Muhammad Ali refused to take action. That day, he learned that the British had sunk several Egyptian supply ships in the Mediterranean Sea and were preparing to land on the beaches of Lebanon. The British were aiding the Ottomans, and the two were willing to use any means to get the Egyptians out of Syria—including attacks on unarmed ships and innocent civilians. Muhammad Ali was now convinced that unless he acted quickly, he could lose everything, including Egypt. On August 28, he gave up his claim to Syria without consulting his ally, France. The French were also not consulted about a second concession—this time, one regarding the outcome of the Damascus affair. How that decision came about sounds incredible, but it appears to be a true story.

Muhammad Ali had called his two private physicians—both Christians, one French and the other Italian—to the palace early on the morning of August 28 to remove a painful boil from his buttocks. As they lanced the boil, one of the doctors remarked that the viceroy would need
all his strength to deal with the political threats he was facing, and surely
the voice of six million Jews raised in his favor would be of great impor-
tance. (At the time, it was widely believed that there were six million Jews
in the world.) To the surprise of the two men, Muhammad Ali agreed,
saying that he would free the Jewish prisoners immediately. The tactic
used by the two doctors had worked partly because Muhammad Ali, like
many other people, agreed with their exaggerated view of “Jewish power.”

As soon as the physicians finished their work, they told Crémieux
the news. Over the next few days, Crémieux and Montefiore tried once
again to persuade the viceroy to issue a decree declaring that Jews do not
engage in ritual murder. Muhammad Ali turned them down, saying that
even though he did not believe that Jews killed Christians for their blood,
he had no interest in issuing a public statement.

Montefiore was determined to get a decree—if not from the viceroy
of Egypt, then from the sultan of the Ottoman Empire. So he stopped in
Istanbul before heading home. The sultan, who had already dismissed
charges of ritual murder against Jews in Rhodes, agreed. He announced
that after examining Jewish beliefs and religious books, he had concluded
that accusations of ritual murder made against Jews were “pure slander.”

OUTCOMES AND LEGACIES

On September 6, news of the viceroy’s decision reached Damascus. The
next day, Merlato, the Austrian consul, sent a letter to Crémieux:

Yesterday was the happiest day of my life. All the prisoners . . . were
set at liberty and sent to their homes. . . . The joyful liberated men
before returning . . . to their enraptured families proceeded to the
[synagogue] where in unison with an immense multitude they . . .
prayed for peace and every blessing upon Muhammad Ali and all
their other powerful benefactors.14

Jews around the world also rejoiced. They greeted Montefiore and
Crémieux as heroes wherever they traveled. Jews were proud of them-
selves as well. Never before had so many Jews in so many countries worked
together to shape public opinion on an issue. Many also took pride in the
fact that a large number of Christians had actively supported the Jews of
Damascus, and a few, like Merlato and von Laurin, had shown courage in
their defense of Jews.
But not everyone was pleased with the outcome. Thiers, France’s prime minister, along with many French citizens, continued to support Ratti-Menton. *Univers*, a conservative Catholic newspaper, proclaimed that “Judaism has reappeared as a power, as a nationality . . . and, as such, it has held all of Christianity in check.” After asking “Who can now say how far their aspirations will extend?” the editors turned their attention to the Rothschild family. “On [King] David’s throne, once it is restored, there will sit that financial dynasty which all Europe recognizes and to which all of Europe submits; its inauguration will surely provide a scene . . . most worthy of the [corrupt] century in which we are living.”

These French writers attributed great power to Jews in general, and to the Rothschilds in particular, at a time when Jews were powerless almost everywhere. As the twentieth-century philosopher Hannah Arendt noted,

> Where . . . was there better proof . . . than in this one family, the Rothschilds, nationals of five different countries, prominent everywhere, in close cooperation with at least three different governments (French, Austrian, British) . . . ? No propaganda could have created a symbol more effective for political purposes than the reality itself.

In other words, the power of a few wealthy and prominent Jews was seen as proof of the power of all Jews even though that power did not really exist.

**THE LIMITS OF PUBLICITY’S POWER**

During the Damascus affair, Jews discovered the power of publicity in fighting prejudice and discrimination. They were successful in shaping public opinion in part because many people in the early 1800s shared their belief in universal human rights. They were also successful because modern rulers—even dictators like Muhammad Ali—could not afford to completely ignore public opinion at home or abroad. In 1858, however, an incident in what is now Italy revealed that public opinion does not always prevail.

Early on the morning of June 24, papal guards in Bologna came to the home of a Jewish couple, Salomone David Mortara and his wife, and demanded their six-year-old son Edgardo. To the parents’ horror, the guards had a written order, signed by Father Pier Gaetano Feletti, a local priest, to take the child. At the time, Italy was divided into territories, some of which were ruled by other countries and some by the pope. Bologna was located in a papal state.