



A Great Benefactor

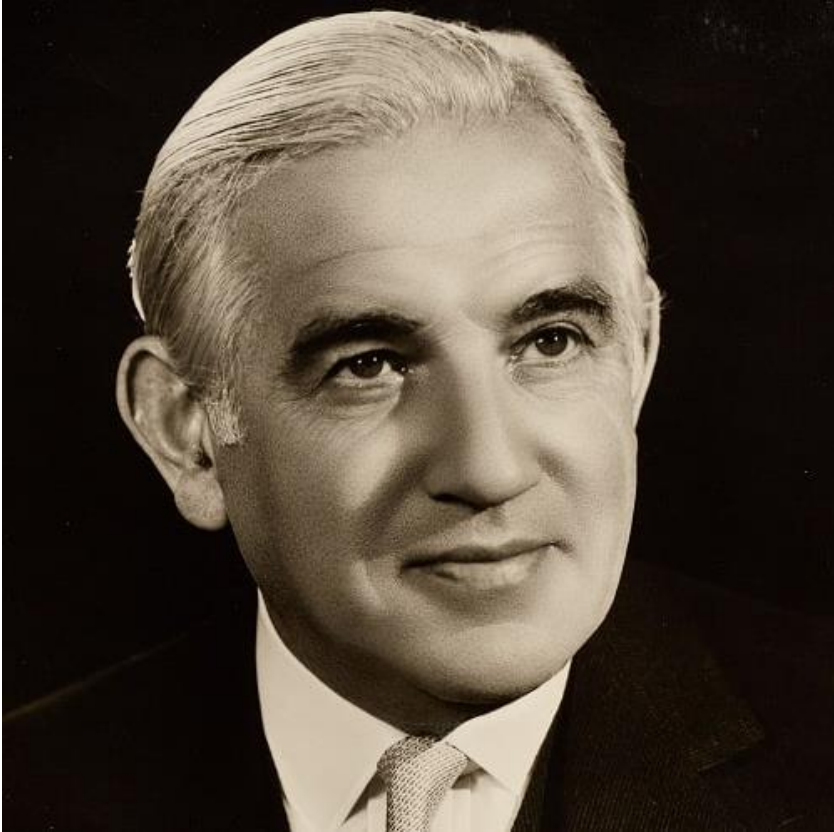
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A Great Benefactor

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IT IS, no doubt, a truism, but an important one, that one of the most reliable indices of the health of an organised human society is the extent to which public spirit is at work within it.

A corollary of this is the social value which attaches to public spirit, both in theory and in practice. This is something very different from the kind of fanatical unity or aggressive nationalism, or exultant submission to a centralised authority, that has marked the end of a liberal outlook and individual freedom (or aborted their birth) in many countries yesterday and today. The difference scarcely needs stressing, especially in Israel. On the one hand, the sacrifice of personal liberties, differences of temperament, styles of life on the altar of a uniform society, to a tightly organised collective

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life – justified only by great common danger, or some exceptionally urgent task – Sparta at best. And, on the other hand, a society which is animated by the desire to allow the gifts and potentialities of individuals to develop as freely and generously as is practicable, and the variety of temperaments to spill over in all kinds of imaginative ways, a society anxious to knock down as many walls as possible between individuals or groups, and educate men to be approachable, open and, above all, unafraid of one another.

The good society is one where the desire to open as many paths for its members, to remove obstacles, promote free cooperation of common interests in shared enterprises, is more characteristic than anxiety for self-preservation and self-insulation; in which there is enough mutual confidence not to make it necessary to protect one's rights by a jealous and frightened erection of defensive barriers, whereby one class keeps out another, one group warns another off, one individual hugs what he has, or even hides it, for fear of losing it to another.

In this sense, public spirit, and the enforced or even enthusiastic unity of a militarised or despotic community are at diametrically opposite ends to one another. And the most attractive societies, on which historians like to linger, are these 'open' communities, humane, tolerant, optimistic, and with an inner vitality, and a loose kind of solidarity and widespread faith in the unlimited possibilities of a satisfactory common and individual life. Everyone knows the hours in the history of mankind which are idealised in this way. Athens after the defeat of the Persians, the kingdom of Solomon, or Judaea under Ezra and Jeremiah, Elizabethan England, or France after the fall of the Bastille and before the Terror, Italy in the first flush of the Risorgimento, Russia in 1917. There is a vast sense of liberation after one set of prison walls has been destroyed and before another set has been erected. What is most characteristic of such periods is the increase in vitality and public spirit. In fortunate situations, this continues even in the course of day-to-day activities and not solely in moments of great but shortlived exhilaration. The reverse is equally true.

Societies decline when public spirit begins to ebb, when wealth accumulates and men decay, when individuals and classes jealously protect their own frontiers against all comers, and there is an absence of public generosity, suspicion of motives, a nervous retreat by men each into his own private citadel, away from the common

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world – when each, seeking to save himself from some real or imaginary danger from others, sinks others in the effort to keep afloat himself, and all flounder from lack of mutual support. This is usually called a crisis of confidence, or a crisis of faith. If one judges societies by this criterion, those societies and those classes will be found wanting which have lost the public spirit which once gave them life and value.

So the state, which once liberated men from the narrow world of feudal divisions, guilds, local interests, re-enslaves them when it becomes obsessed by its own institutional framework, and grows intolerant and despotic. Kings or merchants who in the common fight against medieval institutions were generous and public-spirited and rose to heroism and martyrdom, turn into mean and reactionary oppressors when their main purpose is solely to protect their gains.

I need not labour this point. In England, a section of the aristocracy was a liberating and progressive force when it engaged in services to the community, endowed education, charities, engaged in public enterprises. It began to decay when it conceived its own existence and self-perpetuation as ends in themselves, giving it a claim to unique importance, a special position, a special degree of recognition by others. This rise and fall occurred in France before and after the great Revolution. It hap[19]pened in Italy, England, Spain at different moments of their history. Vitality was infused into British society by new men, by manufacturers, industrialists, merchants, who succeeded the nobility as patrons of the arts and learning, founded institutions dedicated to the diminution of human suffering, associations for the maintenance of standards of public health, welfare and the abolition of various forms of injustice and cruelty, to the development of social services and education. The vast development of voluntary associations for such purposes duly became a source of pride to English society.

In our own day, this is to some considerable extent done by the newest men of all – the great self-made captains of industry, trade, men endowed with powerful imaginations and a productive and organising capacity which dominates the business life of business nations. Some of the most celebrated among them have concentrated solely on the increase of their own wealth and power, and have had no conscience or regard for the common good. Others have acted differently, and have displayed concern with social ends; and have given time, energy, resources to the common interest, not

merely [20] from a sense of duty to their fellow men, or from love of efficiency and order, or out of ambition or love of fame or self-protection. They have done this from public-spirited motives: love of justice, desire to enhance life, to make the world larger; at times out of sheer vitality and exuberant feeling, which took the form of warm interest in their fellow men and a desire to provide them with opportunities which they have successfully laboured to create for themselves. Among the most prominent of these, I say with pride and pleasure, especially in the British Isles, have been Jews.

A prince among them is a man of organising genius, Sir Isaac Wolfson. His name is a byword for energy, generosity, warmth of spirit, love of life, delight in his own and others' acts of creation. Mr Harold Macmillan was reported recently, when asked by (I believe) a journalist in the United States, what should be the role of Britain – whether she should conceive herself as being a source of enlightenment to the world after her power had gone, or as Scandinavia, famed for high standards of social welfare, justice, civil and political liberties – to have replied that it was not to Greece, nor to Northern Europe than England should look, but rather to Israel. Boldness, enterprise, imagination, energy – that was what England today needed. This sentiment was not widely reported in Mr Macmillan's own country, but it remains true that it is these qualities that bring fame and admiration to Israel and to Sir Isaac among men.

The phenomenon of a brave and successful struggle against great odds lifts human hearts. It is not the business genius of Sir Isaac Wolfson that I want to stress, great and astonishing as it is, but the fact that he has stood up; stood up and not surrendered; stood up for himself, his family, his friends, his creed, his ideas, his ideals, his brothers everywhere; stood up as a Briton and as a Jew. He is a man whom all recognise to be compounded of vitality, courage, enthusiasm, humanity and a kind of practical imagination and judgement, but, above all, a fearless desire not to sit still, not to be passive, but to move, create, go forward. In short, he is a natural leader, a man who blasts open avenues for others to walk.

The word 'leader' has become unjustly discredited in our time by the use made of it by political fanatics and tyrannical dictators, men dedicated to the sacrifice of millions of other human beings to revolting and inhuman fantasies. Nevertheless, it is an honourable word. Democracies need their own kind of leadership and can seldom advance without the initiative of men of unusual moral and

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mental endowment. Some say that it is the challenge of impersonal factors and the character of the society that they generate that causes men to advance. Others say that it is the appearance of men who stand head and shoulders above their fellows that makes their societies move. Both factors seem to me to operate in any society where there is appetite for life, and no crippling fear of decision and action. In all societies which have not lost the taste for life, where there is enough sense of common aims, enough desire, not only to survive, but to go forward, such men tend to appear.

This is true of the entire stretch of human history, from Moses to Joshua, from Pericles to Cromwell, to the leaders of democracies today. This is no less true in the sphere of industry and commerce, of culture, education, social service, than in the sphere of politics or of war. At a time when public spirit began to run low in Britain some years before the last war, when the aristocracy no longer performed – when it lost the sense of its historic role of patronage and paternalism (which, whatever may be thought of such a social order, did in its day advance the arts and learning and did alleviate some forms of distress and poverty: not enough, but more than socially indignant historians sometimes convey), when the state felt menaced by foreign enemies and the character of its appointed leaders seemed insufficient to hold out a realistic prospect of a better life, when social welfare and cultural activities were deserted by their official champions – other men came to take their place.

It is a source of immense pride to us all that among the new men of generous spirit, the most imaginative donors, men with the acutest sense of civic responsibility, so many large-hearted Jews should have appeared, men and women who supported charitable, educational and cultural activities on a greater scale than most of those members of older families and more dominant races whose fortunes enabled them to do as much and perhaps even more. No better or more patriotic citizens arose in England than these children of recent immigrants, who gave when they could with a generous hand to every cause which evoked their loyalty, local, national and international, Christian and Jewish, at many times and in many places.

In this noble band, Sir Isaac Wolfson occupies a splendid place. These men did not need to learn from any outside source what charity, education, culture, learning meant – this they owed to the heritage of their **[21]** fathers, the generations of their ancestors, to

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whom life was not conceivable without these attributes. Being men of integral nature, they did not so much as ask themselves whether loyalty to the country of their birth and domicile could conceivably be incompatible with loyalty to their own past, their own religious, cultural, national traditions, or to the land in which, finally, these traditions had a new birth, in which all that they had been taught to believe and worship during long generations, through a wonderful conjunction of circumstances and the unexhausted faith and vigour of their people, re-acquired those natural forms which the accidents of history and the cruelty of men had destroyed or distorted since the days of Vespasian and Titus.

Men who are whole, and look at the world without trembling, and are not constantly attempting to conform to rules and standards in which they do not fully believe, or to do so merely because others, for whom they feel little moral respect, expect them to do so – these men act and live as they do because it seem to them right, natural, worthy to do so. Simon Marks suffered as deeply when England acted in ways which seemed to him foolish, immoral, mistaken, as when his fellow Jews seemed to him to stray, wherever they might be. He was a passionate British patriot, a wholehearted, fervid, passionately committed Zionist, and when England and the Jews of Palestine came into collision, he was hurt both as an Englishman and a Jew.

When Sir Isaac Wolfson gives, he gives with both hands – with his British hand and his Jewish hand, and since his conduct is spontaneous and natural, and comes from a full, unbroken, fearless, forward-looking nature, he does not ask himself, and no one else has ever asked, how exactly his loyalties are distributed. Scotland is his native land and the Jews of Israel are his brothers, and he has been a faithful, pious, grateful son, and a generous, imaginative, warm-hearted brother. Men no less prosperous live in England today, but not one of these has yet created a foundation to which they have given so munificently and so wisely. The Wolfson Foundation is one of the greatest assets of public life in Britain today.

In Israel (as those who live in it know far better than I) the mention of his name stirs confidence, pride, admiration, gratitude. In England, schools, universities, hospitals, cultural and scientific institutions, monuments to the Jewish religion all are recipients of his amazing generosity, and the honours which he has received, both

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from universities and from the state, are tokens of the respect that today attaches to his name. Here I must no longer conceal an interest: I declare it with great pride and pleasure.

Oxford University, at which I have worked now for forty years, is a particular beneficiary of the Wolfson Foundation. The College over which I have the honour to preside will, I feel sure, carry the Founder's name to remote generations. It has not been given to many men to be able to do so much for so many. My point is that Sir Isaac has seized this opportunity with both hands, when others, in a position not dissimilar, merely meditate about its possibilities. While these others wonder whether to open the doors of mercy or of justice, Sir Isaac has walked these paths holding his head high, and rightly so.

The courage, optimism and genius with which he has built up his business characterise his good works also. He is not screened off by agents and intermediaries from the men and institutions which he helps. Because he gives what he gives from a warm heart, his gifts warm the hearts of others. His interest in the life, habits, outlook, prospects, details of every activity of other human beings is irresistible. This alone communicates vitality to all that he does, and causes his works to succeed and to stimulate generous impulses in others, and so promote a moral climate in which barriers between human beings, Christians and Jews, Englishmen and Israelis, academics and businessmen, young and old, all kinds and conditions of men – tend to diminish, and a happier, more equal world ensues.

To be able to praise a man as he deserves, to salute characteristics which one truly admires, to offer sincere tribute, is one of the greatest pleasures known to human beings. I am delighted to have been given this opportunity. Apart from his great public virtues, Sir Isaac Wolfson is a man of marvellous gaiety, wit and charm. The English, the Jews – the world – are tremendous gainers by his presence among them. No society which generates men at once so penetrating and so beneficent, who understand the world in which they live, above all its scientific and technological potentialities, and are ready to do so much to direct them to the improvement of men's lives, can be described as a world in decline.

I should like to end by saluting an excellent family man, to pay tribute to Lady Wolfson, to whose goodness, wisdom and devotion Sir Isaac has himself so often testified; and to his son, Leonard,

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whose remarkable gifts I have learned to know, and admire, and whom I am exceedingly proud and glad to call a friend.

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