

Candidate Grant and the Jews

JOAKIM ISAACS

A CONVENIENT SCAPEGOAT

The great rebellion which rocked the nation in the years 1860 to 1865 brought to the surface much of the latent anti-Semitism which had lain dormant since the founding of the United States. Many Jews who had come to these shores seeking religious asylum and liberty felt secure in the knowledge that the scourge of anti-Semitism would never follow them here. The Civil War and its aftermath provided a rude awakening, and caused many Jews to reassess both their Judaism and their Americanism.

Jews, like the rest of their fellow Americans, were at the time divided on the issue of whether one owed primary allegiance to one's state or to the nation as a whole. Many families were divided in their loyalties during the war. Jews, also, like the rest of their fellow countrymen, were involved in military and political affairs, and many, too, followed the economic pursuits stimulated by the war situation. Fortunes are always made in wartime through equipping armies and through other related financial transactions. A large number of Jews who had come to the United States since the 1600's had been merchants, and they were naturally attracted, as were many Gentiles, to the profits that could be made. The way to fortune seemed to lie in buying cotton in the South and selling it in return for Northern gold. The South was short of money, the North was short of cotton, and all that was needed was the trader to bring the parties together. Such trade, however, was frowned upon by the Government, which was trying to starve the South physically and financially. The trader, therefore, had to be prepared

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to share a quarter of the profits illicitly with army officials in order to get the necessary permit and military assistance required for the operation.

While subordinate army officers might be bribed, the commanding officers were under constant pressure from the Government in Washington to eliminate this trade. Official documents are filled with reports of the activities of cotton speculators. It seems that, in almost every combat area, both civilians and military personnel were involved in the trade. A Union army gun boat crew was alleged to have netted \$100,000,000 during the war, and President Abraham Lincoln expressed concern that the army was so busy with cotton speculating that, as a consequence, the war effort was suffering.¹ In such wide-scale operations, the Jews obviously played but a small role, and yet the Jewish trader provided a convenient scapegoat for commanding officers. Because the Jews were a recognizable group and their successes had aroused the envy of the other traders, what better way was there to satisfy the Government at Washington, and at the same time to placate the powerful interests involved in the smuggling, than to outlaw the Jewish traders?

THE LAND OF CANAAN

Of the many military orders that were aimed at Jewish traders, one gained greater notoriety than all the rest. This was Ulysses S. Grant's Order No. 11, issued at Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862. The order declared:

The Jews, as a class violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department and also department orders, are hereby expelled from the [military] department within twenty-four hours from the receipt of this order.

Post commanders will see that all of this class of people be furnished passes and required to leave, and any one returning after such notification will be arrested and held in confinement until an opportunity occurs of sending them out as prisoners, unless furnished with permit from headquarters.

¹ *Congressional Globe*, 38 Cong., 2nd Session, p. 1351; Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1951), p. 122.

No passes will be given these people to visit headquarters for the purpose of making personal application for trade permits.

By order of Maj.-Gen. U. S. Grant.

Jno. A. Rawlins,
Assistant Adjutant-General.²

This order was one of several on the subject issued by General Grant; it followed Order No. 2 of Colonel John V. Dubois, which had been written a week before and countermanded by Grant. Dubois' order had stated:

On account of the scarcity of provisions, all cotton-speculators, Jews, and other vagrants having no honest means of support, except trading upon the miseries of their country, and in general all persons from the North, not connected with the Army, who have no permission from the General Commanding to remain in this town, will leave in twenty-four hours or they will be sent to duty in the trenches.³

This order went comparatively unnoticed by the Jewish community. In response to Grant's Order No. 11, however, there was an immediate outcry from the Jewish community in the war zone. A Kentuckian, Ceasar Kaskel, one of the signers of a letter of protest to President Lincoln, personally went to Washington to speak with the President. Lincoln listened to Kaskel's plea, and replied, "And so the Children of Israel were driven from the happy land of Canaan." Kaskel failed to understand, or adroitly pretended not to grasp, the sarcasm implicit in Lincoln's reference to the cotton-rich territory beyond the Union lines as "the land of Canaan." Kaskel replied, "Yes, and that is why we have come unto Father Abraham's bosom asking protection."⁴ Lincoln promised to grant the protection, and carried out his pledge by having General Henry W. Halleck telegraph General Grant. Halleck told Grant: "The President has no objection to your expelling traitors and Jew peddlers, which,

² Robert Scott, *The War of The Rebellion, A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. XVII, Part II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), p. 424.

³ *Chicago Tribune*, December 18, 1862.

⁴ Isaac Markens, "Lincoln and the Jews," in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society [PAJHS]*, XVII (1909), 118.

I suppose, was the object of your order, but, as it is in terms [which] proscribed an entire religious class, some of whom are fighting in our ranks, the President deemed it necessary to revoke it."⁵ A St. Louis delegation went to the President to thank him for ordering the revocation and reportedly was shown a letter written by General Grant to Lincoln which the President found amusing. In the alleged letter, Grant said:

Mr. President, As you have directed me, I will rescind the order; but I wish you to understand that these people are the descendants of those who crucified the Saviour and from the specimens I have here, the race has not improved.⁶

Except for a censure move in Congress against Order No. 11 which failed to pass and scattered remarks in the press, this ended the controversy over Order No. 11 for the duration of the war.

GENERAL GRANT AND "THE HEBREW RACE"

The whole issue was revived in 1868, when the Republican Party nominated General Grant for President. Now, for the first time since the founding of the United States, the idea of a Jewish vote and the question of a Presidential candidate's alleged anti-Semitism became a central political issue. The Jewish community at the time was not organized as it is today. The age of the Anti-Defamation League was in the future, and the B'nai B'rith, the only large Jewish organization, busied itself with internecine quarrels over whether meetings should be opened with a prayer and whether Gentiles should be admitted to membership. The B'nai B'rith kept completely aloof from the political question.

In fact, the stimulus for arousing Jewish protest did not come primarily from Jewish groups, but rather from the Democratic press. The Democrats, badly shaken by the loss of the Southern wing of the party during the war and stung by Republican accusations that they had opposed the war effort and were traitors to their country,

⁵ Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 530.

⁶ *Chicago Times*, September 18, 1868. This is a direct quote from the *Jewish Sentinel*, of St. Louis.

now faced an uphill struggle which pitted the most popular Union general against New York Governor Horatio Seymour. In seeking all the support they could get and searching for issues to employ in the campaign, the Democrats naturally looked to Grant's Order No. 11 and the 300,000 Jewish votes.⁷ The *New York Herald*, a leading Democratic journal, pointed out that attracting Jewish support might help the campaign in two ways. "This thing is at least certain, that against General Grant every influence of money and votes that can be controlled by the Hebrew race in the United States will be put forth with acrimonious activity; and their power is by no means to be despised. . . ."⁸ The *Herald* felt that the "Hebrews" would not forgive General Grant, especially since he had singled them out and had used the word "Jew," which the paper felt had offensive connotations, instead of the more genteel appellation of "Hebrew" or "Israelite."⁹

The *Herald* was only one of many Democratic papers that sought to arouse the "Jewish vote." The *Atlanta Constitution* pointed to the great pertinacity with which the Jews clung to their "nationality," and the paper was sure that Grant would get few Jewish votes.¹⁰ At the same time as the Democratic papers sought to inflame the Jewish vote by appeals to their religious loyalty, they attempted to explain just why Grant was an anti-Semite. The *New York World* spoke of Grant's order "as the brutal order which expelled hundreds of inoffensive Jewish citizens who were peacefully attending to their own affairs miles away from the scene of conflict," and called upon Jews and all Americans to countermand Grant, just as Lincoln had countermanded Order No. 11.¹¹

The *La Crosse (Wisconsin) Daily Democrat*, in a front-page article, alleged that a cotton speculator, seeking from General Grant a permit to trade behind the Union lines, had offered Grant one-quarter of the profits. Grant had refused, insisting that he wanted

⁷ *Jewish Chronicle* (London), June 19, 1868.

⁸ *New York Herald*, as quoted in *Jewish Chronicle* (London), January 28, 1868.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Atlanta Constitution*, June 24, 1868.

¹¹ *New York World*, July 18, 1868.

a greater share of the profits. The Jew then offered Grant a one-eighth share, which Grant accepted. When Grant got his share, an adjutant expressed surprise that the amount was so small and, when told about the deal which Grant had made, he explained to Grant that one-eighth was less than one-quarter. As the story continues, it was then that Grant became a confirmed anti-Semite.¹² This story in varying detail was given wide circulation in the Democratic press.

WHO DROVE THE HEBREWS FROM HIS CAMP?

Not content with this jocular explanation alone, the Democrats revived the case of *Grant v. Mack Brothers* in attempting to give Grant's anti-Semitism a more substantial base and to link the general with the illegal cotton trade. The story of this law suit began in December, 1862. Jesse Grant, the general's father, like his Jewish fellow citizens, saw opportunity knocking on his door in the form of cotton trading. While Jesse Grant lacked what many Jews had in the way of capital, he did have a son in a position to be of great help to him; so he began a two-pronged attack. First, he wrote his son soliciting his aid, and at the same time he negotiated a deal with the Mack Brothers, a firm of Cincinnati Jews. According to the terms, Jesse Grant was to receive a quarter of the profits for using his influence with his son to secure cotton permits.

Jesse Grant's plan was foiled because of total lack of cooperation from his son. Letters to Jesse's son, as well as a personal trip to the front, all failed to budge General Grant from his uncooperative position.¹³ Jesse Grant then turned around and attempted to place the blame for the failure of the enterprise on the Mack Brothers, who had since withdrawn from the agreement. Jesse sued the Mack Brothers in the Cincinnati Superior Court for breach of contract. The case was argued before Judges George Hoadly and Bellamy Storer, who dismissed the case on the grounds that, if Jesse Grant

¹² *La Crosse Daily Democrat*, June 12, 1868; Brick Pomeroy, the editor of this newspaper, was a severe critic of President Lincoln, and his newspaper specialized in vilification and slander of the President, the war, and the Republican Party.

¹³ William Best Hesseltine, *Ulysses S. Grant, Politician* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1935), pp. 30-31.

had used his privileged position with his son to get a permit, then such an agreement was illegal and could not be enforced in the court; on the other hand, if Jesse Grant had asked for a permit legally, then the contract was void, for Jesse's role would not have sufficed to warrant payments. Either way the court refused to enforce the contract.¹⁴

While the case attracted little press attention when it was decided, it was revived and "played up" in the Democratic press in 1868. The Democratic press sought to prove that, since Order No. 11 had followed closely on the heels of the Grant-Mack Brothers disagreement, the Order's real aim had been to bar Jewish traders like the Mack Brothers from trading directly, without barring their capital from being employed in the trade by Gentiles like Jesse Grant.¹⁵ Despite protests from the Macks, who were all leading Republicans and argued that the facts were entirely different, the press continued its attack. The following poem is typical:

Who drove the Hebrews from his Camp,
 Into the Alligator swamp
 Where everything was dark and damp?
 Ulysses
 Who wrothy at those faithless Jews
 Who kept "pa's" share of Cotton dues,
 All further permits did refuse?
 Ulysses
 Who licensed chaps that would divide
 With father Jesse, Argus-eyed,
 Who claimed the hair and eke the hide?
 Ulysses.¹⁶

The attempt by the Democratic press to arouse Jewish voters deeply concerned at least one Republican journalist, Joseph Medill, who said in a letter to Elihu Benjamin Washburne, one of Grant's campaign managers in Washington:

I want to write to you on several subjects, and will put them all in one letter. First, what can be done in regard to that general order of General

¹⁴ *La Crosse Daily Democrat*, July 18, 1868.

¹⁵ *New York World*, August 10, 1868.

¹⁶ *La Crosse Daily Democrat*, August 19, 1868.

Grant issued in 1862 expelling "all Jews as a class" from his department? We have in this city [Chicago] at least six hundred Republican Jews headed by General Edward S. Solomon [Salomon]. . . . The General has written to Grant but has received no answer.

It would only be necessary for General Grant to write a letter to Solomon or some other influential Jew saying that he has no prejudice against Jews, that he is in favor of full toleration of all religious opinions; that his subsequent experience in the army convinced him that other classes of men were just as likely to violate army regulations in relation to trading with the enemy, as Jews.

Something to this effect would mollify the Jews and give us a good many thousand votes. The Jews of Cincinnati and St. Louis are numerous enough to defeat our ticket in both cities, and they are strong enough to hurt us in Chicago also, as they include many of our most active Republicans. That they are deeply grieved by [the] General's order is undoubted. The Copperheads [The Northern Democrats] are making a handle of the matter in all parts of the country and we shall lose large numbers of Jew votes among them besides converting them into very active bitter opponents. . . .¹⁷

The majority of the Republican press, however, remained silent, secure in the knowledge that Grant's popularity would bring him victory despite Democratic attacks. An Indiana newspaper, however, angry at all the appeals to the Jewish vote in the Democratic press, editorialized as follows:

The Jews are all Democrats anyhow. We never heard of a Jewish soldier, during the War, on either side. They did not care an itinerant tinker's cuss how the War terminated. Their object was to make money out of it. They formed mainly the myriad of army vultures that preyed constantly and mercilessly on the poor, half-naked, hungry soldiers. For every Republican Jew that, by the sort of reasoning of the *Courier* (Democratic) and other similar journals, are to be induced to vote against Grant, a dozen decent, honest Christian White men will vote for him.¹⁸

¹⁷ Medill to Washburne, June 16, 1868 (Washburne Mss., Library of Congress).

¹⁸ Quoted, with no further identification, in the *La Crosse Daily Democrat*, June 26, 1868.

JEWS OR CITIZENS

Editorials in the Democratic press and attacks like the above in Republican papers all combined to place the Jews in a dilemma. How were they to treat Grant's candidacy? Should they declare that a person's religion and his Americanism were separate and vote for Grant, if they were Republicans, or should they react, and vote, as Jews? The Jewish community was divided as to the best method to approach the situation.

Isaac M. Wise, a Reform Jewish leader and the editor of *The Israelite*, felt that a Jew always had to react as a Jew. Wise began his attacks on Grant months before Grant received the nomination. As early as February, 1868, he declared:

Worse than General Grant none in this nineteenth century in civilized countries has abused and outraged the Jew If there are any among us who lick the feet that kick them about and like dogs, run after him who has whipped them, if there are persons small enough to receive indecencies and outrages without resentment . . . we hope their number is small!¹⁹

When Grant was nominated, Wise accelerated his attacks. He could not understand the argument that one could be an American in politics and a Jew in religion and never mix the two.

We have been trying quite seriously to make of our humble self two Isaac M. Wises. The one who is a citizen of the State of Ohio, and the other who is a Jew, but we failed and we failed decidedly. . . . The duties and wishes of the Jew as such being in no wise in conflict with those of the citizen, we being both the Jew and the citizen to the public forum and to the synagogue, before our God and our Country.²⁰

Other Jews disagreed with Wise. A letter, signed "Julius" and published in *The Cincinnati Commercial*, declared:

What does Dr. Wise care what becomes of the country? Whether we are making a living or not? He has a salary fixed during his life. . . . But how can we as Israelites seek to place in power a set of men who have been trying with all their might to destroy the Government our only refuge? . . .

¹⁹ *The Israelite*, February 28, 1868.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, June 26, 1868.

I think when we go to the polls next November our religious feeling ought to be entirely banished from our mind. . . .²¹

Samuel M. Isaacs, in his paper *The Jewish Messenger*, also attacked the Wise position and argued that Jews should refrain from forming Jewish protest groups. He favored action through existing political organizations. In an indirect reference to Wise, Isaacs declared that "Israelites are too intelligent and too self-asserting to be driven, or led by their ministers, especially in matters that have no connection with religion."²² Isaacs feared the consequences of political parties using the Jewish religion for their own purposes and questioned strongly the sincerity of the sudden solicitude for Jewish rights exhibited by the Democratic press.²³

The Jewish voters were thus faced with conflicting advice, and the letters which filled the columns of the Jewish press and the regular press reflected this anxiety. One group agreed with Wise and insisted that Jews could not vote for Grant. They felt that Grant's Order had given an insight into his mind and showed that the nineteenth-century spirit of liberalism had totally escaped him. Therefore, as a man of the past he was unfit to rule a great and liberal nation. Others favored excusing Grant because of the difficult circumstances facing him at the time the Order was given; they called for the "Yom Kippur" spirit of forgiveness to permeate the air. Still another group took the position that, regardless of what Grant had done against the Jews, the Republicans should be supported as the party of Lincoln and human freedom. Perhaps the most extreme statement of this position was a letter written by a Jew to the *Illinois Staatszeitung* and reprinted on the front page of the *Missouri Democrat*:

I am a Jew, when Saturday, the seventh day, comes; I am one on my holidays; in the selection and treatment of my food; it was always written on my doorposts; it is always to be spoken in my prayers; and it always is to be seen in my reverence for my Bible, that I am a Jew. . . . But it is

²¹ *Cincinnati Commercial*, August 26, 1868.

²² *Jewish Messenger*, June 1, 1868.

²³ *Ibid.*, July 3, 1868.

different when I . . . take a ballot in order to exercise my rights as a citizen. Then I am not a Jew, but I feel and vote as a citizen of the republic, I do not ask what pleases the Israelites. I consult the welfare of the country. If that party in whose hands I believe the welfare of the country, so far as the advancement of human rights was concerned, was the safest, were to place a Haman at the helm of state, and if the opposite party, whose non-existence I believe would be better for humanity and my country, were to place Messiah at their head, make Moses the Chief Justice, and call the Patriarchs to the Cabinet, I should say, "Prosper under Haman, my fatherland, and here you have my vote, even if all the Jew in me mourns."²⁴

I DO NOT SUSTAIN THAT ORDER

Some Jews felt that the situation called for action, not words. Mass meetings were held by Jewish groups in many states. The one given the most publicity in the press was held in Memphis, Tennessee. Speeches were given urging that the only position Grant deserved to be elevated to was the one occupied by Haman in the last moments of his career.²⁵ Naturally, these mass meetings were denounced by the Republican press as well as by those Jewish newspapers which felt that direct political action was not in the best interest of the Jewish people. Commenting on the Memphis meeting, one Republican paper declared:

We have had a big meeting of Jews here, to denounce General Grant for the order issued in his absence by his Adjutant excluding Jew traders from the army lines. Nearly every Jew that figured in this meeting was, it is notorious here, a contraband dealer, who grew rich during the war by trading to both sides. The order was wrong because it was aimed at a whole sect, but a more unmitigated set of scoundrels than the Jew traders who were engaged in running goods through the army lines, it would be hard to find anywhere. The idea of such men, whose lives were disgraceful to their religion and race, meeting to denounce General Grant because his subordinate issued an order [so the paper claimed] which reflected on all Jews, and which General Grant almost immediately annulled, is absurd.²⁶

²⁴ *Missouri Democrat*, July 30, 1868, as reprinted from the *Illinois Staatszeitung*, July 18, 1868.

²⁵ *Washington National Intelligencer*, July 25, 1868.

²⁶ *Cincinnati Commercial*, July 28, 1868.

Throughout the campaign a group of leading Republican Jews hoped that the whole issue could be avoided by a strong statement on the part of General Grant. One of the most active Jews in the campaign, Simon Wolf, interceded through one of Grant's advisors, Adam Badeau, to get a statement from the general. Grant answered through Badeau that he felt no animosity toward Jews, but had merely been trying to eliminate the evils of speculation.²⁷ This statement satisfied Simon Wolf, but did not quiet the agitation in the press. Finally, Grant, probably stung by the invectives in the press, answered with a forthright statement a letter of Adolph Moses forwarded by Grant's friend, I. N. Morris. Grant declared that he had received hundreds of letters about Order No. 11 and, although he had followed his usual practice of not answering them, in deference to Mr. Morris, he was replying to Mr. Moses:

I do not pretend to sustain the order.

At the time of its publication, I was incensed by a reprimand received from Washington for permitting acts which Jews within my lines were engaged in. There were many other persons within my lines equally bad with the worst of them, but the difference was that the Jews could pass with impunity from one army to the other, and gold, in violation of orders, was being smuggled through the lines, at least so it was reported. The order was issued and sent without any reflection and without thinking of the Jews as a sect or race to themselves, but simply as persons who had successfully (I say successfully instead of persistently, because there were plenty of others within my lines who envied their success) violated an order, which greatly inured to the help of the rebels.

Give Mr. Moses assurance that I have no prejudice against sect or race, but want each individual to be judged by his own merit. Order No. 11 does not sustain this statement, I admit, but then I do not sustain that order. It never would have been issued if it had not been telegraphed the moment it were penned, and without reflection.²⁸

Grant's statement as to his motives in issuing Order No. 11 accords with the explanation which he gave the War Department

²⁷ Joseph Lebowich, "General Ulysses S. Grant and the Jews," in *PAJHS*, XVII (1909), 71.

²⁸ *The Israelite*, November 27, 1868.

the day after the order was issued.²⁹ This explanation, however, was not known, and the letter to Moses, written in mid-September, came too late to influence the campaign in any way.

While it is impossible to know how many Jews voted against Grant because of Order No. 11, the evidence from letters to the press is that most Jews supported the candidate of the party of their choice and rationalized their choice accordingly, although undoubtedly Grant did lose some Jewish votes as the result of Order No. 11.

WITHOUT FURTHER COMMENT

Isaac M. Wise and those that followed his lead found themselves in an awkward position when Grant was elected. They feared that they had created animosity toward the Jews in the heart of the man who was now the Chief Executive. Wise, through an editorial in *The Israelite*, beat an ignominious retreat and, seizing on the Grant-Moses correspondence, declared it now clear that Grant was not an anti-Semite and had merely been misled by the sinister cotton speculators' lobby.³⁰

Grant himself, once he became President, proved a friend of the Jews and appointed many to posts at home and abroad. He sided with the Jews in the controversy raised by Harry Bergh of the A. S. P. C. A. over the alleged cruelty practiced by Jews in the slaughtering of animals.³¹ Grant refused in his later career to discuss Order No. 11 and failed to mention it in his memoirs. An inquiry made to Grant's son, Frederick D. Grant, about the omission elicited the reply that his father had wanted to let the controversy die without further comment.³²

²⁹ Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 421.

³⁰ *The Israelite*, November 27, 1868.

³¹ According to a legend in my family, Grant was moved by my grandfather's book (Aaron Z. Friedman's *Tub Taam, or Vindication of the Israelitish Way of Killing Animals*, translated from the Hebrew by Laemmlein Buttenwieser [New York, 1876]) to eat only ritually slaughtered meat in the latter part of his life.

³² Isaac Markens, in *PAJHS*, XVII, 122.

Thus, despite the circumstantial evidence against Grant, it would seem that he was a product of his time — filled with the common images of the Jew as a Christ-killer, usurer, and shrewd businessman. This stereotyped picture probably made Grant easily susceptible to the belief that the chief offenders in the cotton trade were the Jews and that, through the deviousness of their character, they were able to succeed to a greater degree than the more “righteous” Gentiles. As is common with many who have a fixed prejudice against a group, Grant nevertheless had close friendships with individual Jews. His appointment of Jews like Edward S. Salomon and David Eckstein to diplomatic posts abroad and his offer of the post of Secretary of the Treasury to Joseph Seligman, as well as his close friendship with Simon Wolf, all bear out this fact.³³ Thus, considering the many individual Jews whose services, ability, and friendship he valued, it is not surprising that Grant denied that he was an anti-Semite, even though he had written Order No. 11.

With the end of Grant’s Presidency, the question of just how the American Jewish community should react to political anti-Semitism ceased to be a problem until, under the impetus of pogroms abroad, America’s Jews were finally forced to find a common ground of unity with which to develop effective organs of protest. Because these groups were organized to combat foreign anti-Semitism, they assumed a bipartisan political structure. It was not until 1892 that the political parties again became cognizant of the Jewish vote, but this time both party platforms agreed in censuring the Russian Czar for his treatment of the Jews.

The controversy over partisan political activity by American Jews in defense of their interests was thus resolved, and American Jewry avoided the attendant dangers of allowing itself to become a monolithic political group readily available for use as a political football by opposing parties.

³³ Bertram W. Korn, p. 146.