

The Birth of the Jewish Lobby

A Reminiscence

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Recently there has been considerable comment in the media, some of it critical in tone, about the Jewish Lobby in Washington and the political clout that it wields on behalf of Israel, especially in congressional quarters. The media have become fond of the term. It was the favorite whipping boy of the ex-senator from Arkansas, J. William Fulbright. Recently the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General George Brown, permitted himself an astonishingly choleric outburst (for which he was ever so gently chided by President Gerald R. Ford), in which he gave expression to the usual stereotypical remarks about the Jewish-controlled press and banks (*sic*), which, according to his version, are constantly exerting pressure upon government officials on behalf of Israel.

It happens that I was in at the beginning of this so-called Jewish Lobby, and in fact was the first lobbyist. So it occurred to me that a few recollections of my experience might be of some historic interest. Of course, groups of all sizes, descriptions, and resources engaged in special pleading have long been a part of the Washington scene. They range from powerful business, labor, medical, and similar organizations to representatives of almost every religious denomination, including ethnic and minority lobbies who support or oppose legislation and policies which they deem to be favorable

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or otherwise, either to their domestic interests or to the concerns of the countries of their national origin.

We have just had an illustration of such activity during the Cyprus conflict on the part of Americans of Greek and Turkish origin. Virtually all foreign governments, in addition to their embassies, employ paid, registered lobbyists. While occasionally subject to abuse and perhaps even to corruption, this is a built-in feature of American democracy, a system of pressures and counterpressures which plays a significant role in shaping both domestic and foreign policy. It is a system of checks and balances which has been generally effective, and which we might say has become indispensable to the proper functioning of the American system of government. Few thinking Americans would quarrel with it as long as it does not militate against our own national interest and security. That a Jewish Lobby should have developed in the nation's capital and attempt to achieve policies and aid programs favorable to Israel's survival and development is not at all surprising. That it is as all-powerful as its critics have charged is seriously open to question. If it did not have the support of a large, even a majority segment of American public opinion, whatever influence it might command would quickly vanish. That it possesses inexhaustible financial resources, as these same critics have implied, is easily refuted by the miniscule size of its staff and by the constant appeals addressed to American Jews for money with which to support the operation.

But back to my personal account, which begins in the early 40's in the midst of the Second World War. On May 17, 1939, the British Government issued the MacDonal White Paper, which had the effect of virtually excluding Jewish immigration from Palestine. This was in direct violation of its own commitments in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and of the terms of the League of Nations Mandate which designated Britain as the Mandatory power, which were designed to create a Jewish national home in Palestine. Meanwhile, the Holocaust was taking an increasing toll of Jewish victims, and there was virtually nowhere else than Palestine for the prospective condemned to go. An Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs had been formed in the United States as an umbrella organization for all Zionist groups, to try to take at least some measures to meet the crisis. Lacking strong leadership, however, its efforts were disorganized and ineffectual.

Unsung Heroes of the Struggle

Meanwhile, the Biltmore Zionist program of 1942 had been adopted, calling for the establishment after the war of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine. That aim then was endorsed almost unanimously in 1943 by the American Jewish Conference, an assembly of representatives of Jewish communities and organizations, after a heated debate and an impassioned address by Dr. Abba Hillel Silver, of Cleveland, then rapidly emerging as the popular leader of American Zionism. Abstaining from support were only the delegates of the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Labor Committee. They did so on the basis of their previous non-Zionist posture. These groups have since changed their position, and have since made valuable contributions to the cause of Israel.

In the meantime, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Organization, and his advisers had decided that political activity and public education had to be strengthened in the United States, convinced as they had now become that the United States was destined to play a decisive role in the post-war settlements. They were also aware of the fact that during the war Zionist activity could be more freely and effectively carried on in this country than elsewhere. So the Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs was reorganized and renamed the American Zionist Emergency Council. Dr. Silver was called to its co-chairmanship along with Dr. Stephen S. Wise, as well as to the chairmanship of its all-important, policy-making executive committee. Henry Montor, later head of the United Jewish Appeal, was made executive director. Because of disagreements on policy with Dr. Silver, his tenure was to be short-lived. Arthur Lourie, later Israel's ambassador to Great Britain, was appointed political secretary. The staff was augmented by the addition of Harry Shapiro, of the United Palestine Appeal, who ultimately succeeded Montor, and by Isaiah L. Kenen and Harold Manson, who were put in charge of the public relations department. Dr. Benjamin Akzin was appointed research expert. Abe Tuvim (father of the late actress Judy Holliday) was named liaison representative to Labor and Christian church groups, and the well-known writer Marvin Lowenthal was asked to serve as a kind of literary editor and contact man with American intellectuals and academics.

At this juncture I came into the picture. Dr. Silver asked me

(*drafted* me would be more accurate) to take a year's leave of absence from my Toledo congregation, which generously consented, to take charge of the office of the Emergency Council which was to be opened in Washington and which would have to become the focus of our activities. Immediately after the Holy Days of 1943, my family remaining behind, I left for New York, where I spent some weeks familiarizing myself with the projected plans and procedures of the Council. I was also to undertake a project which would prove to be indispensable to the effective functioning of our work. This was the organization of local Emergency Committees, which under our direction would carry on various local activities, such as contacts with the press and other media as well as with civic clubs and churches. They were also authorized to coordinate the public relations activities of the various Zionist districts and of the local branches of other Zionist groups such as the Poale Zion, Hadassah, and Mizrahi. Most important, it was impressed upon them that they must keep in constant contact with their representatives and senators. They were advised to meet with them frequently on their home grounds where they are particularly sensitive to public opinion, and to keep them constantly informed of Zionist views and aims. The leadership and personnel of these committees were selected, as far as possible, not only because they were themselves active and informed Zionists, but also because they were men and women of recognized status in their several locales.

I spent some six or seven weeks in New York, making contact by phone and mail with prominent Zionists throughout the country. As a result we were able to organize some one hundred and fifty active and enthusiastic local committees, whose task it was to mobilize Jewish opinion and action in their communities, to meet regularly with their congressmen and with influential non-Jews in civic and religious circles, and to see to it, as far as possible, that reports and editorials in the local news media were favorable to Zionist objectives. During the year of my tenure we convened two conferences, one in Cleveland and the other in Washington, for the purpose of briefing delegates of these local committees. One cannot praise too highly the eagerness and readiness with which Jews responded to our calls for action and the truly amazing results which they achieved in winning support for the cause. They are among the unsung heroes of the struggle for the founding of Israel.

Leo Was a Fast Learner

The tragic news of the Holocaust as well as the indignation aroused by the British White Paper of 1939 and the sense of betrayal which it engendered found American Jews only too eager to do anything they could to assist their fellow Jews. They proved on the whole to be utterly loyal to that historic tradition of Jewish interdependence, which has, of course, been one of the basic reasons for our survival as a people. At a moment's notice and at their own expense they would send delegations to Washington to confer with their representatives and senators. They organized telegram and mail campaigns among both Jews and non-Jews. If we wanted to make a point with a certain congressman, a call from me to our committee in his home district would produce, within a few days, hundreds and sometimes thousands of communications from his constituents. Knowing something of the effectiveness of our work, a public relations man in Washington once asked me about the size of our staff. He was incredulous when I told him how small it was. One must also acknowledge with gratitude the large measure of sympathy and support we were able to muster among a substantially large segment of American non-Jews.

Early in November, 1943, I went to Washington to establish the office there. It being wartime, space was virtually unattainable, but I finally arranged to house myself and my staff at the national headquarters of the Zionist Organization of America. Office help was scarce and had to be imported at considerable expense from New York, some even from my own congregation in Toledo. In order to provide entree for me to members of Congress and other government quarters where I expected to do business, we engaged the services of the late Leo Sack, a retired Scripps-Howard Washington correspondent, who had also served through appointment by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as United States ambassador to Costa Rica. Leo knew and had access to virtually everybody of importance in Washington. Many congressmen were beholden to him for past favors, and he had numerous personal friends among them. He was thus able, with little or no difficulty, to make appointments for me and usually accompanied me on my daily rounds on Capitol Hill. Leo was a real "character." Born in Tupelo, Mississippi—the home of the notoriously anti-Jewish Congressman John E. Rankin with whom he was nevertheless on the best of

terms—he spoke with a thick Southern brogue which obviously was no disadvantage. Rabbi Silver nicknamed him the “Goy from Tupelo.” He had received no Jewish education, did not understand a word of Hebrew or Yiddish, and certainly knew nothing about Zionism until he came to work for us. We had to educate him as we went along, but he was a fast learner. I have never known a more patriotic or zealous Jew. He certainly deserves this tribute, which I am fairly certain will not be paid him elsewhere.

One scene remains unforgettably etched in my memory. Silver, Sack, and I were in the office of Congressman Sol Bloom of New York, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. We badly needed his support for a resolution which had been introduced in both Houses and to which I shall refer in greater detail later. Bloom was excessively pleased with himself for having, as a Jew, attained the eminence of the Foreign Affairs Committee chairmanship. He was therefore notoriously obsequious to the bidding of the State Department, whose Near Eastern policy at the time was greatly influenced by the views of the British Colonial Office and by Loy Henderson and the other Arabists in the department. Bloom had obviously been reached. He remained deaf to all of our arguments, even expressing skepticism about the extent of the Holocaust, and was therefore oblivious to the opportunity of saving thousands of Jewish lives by keeping open the doors of immigration to Palestine. His information, which had been officially provided and which he did not question, did not jibe with our gloomy prognosis of the number of Jews already dead or on their way to the gas chambers. Suddenly, to the astonishment of Silver and myself, Leo threw himself on his knees and begged Bloom for even a small token, some indication that there was a pittance of Jewish feeling in a remote corner of his heart. Real tears were streaming from the eyes of this supposedly tough and often profane newspaperman. But they had no perceptible effect on Bloom.

I must not overlook the voluntary and valuable service of the other member of my lobbying staff, a veteran Zionist from Boston, the lawyer Elihu Stone, who spent parts of a number of weeks with me in Washington giving me the benefit of his political knowledge and shrewdness and his close friendship with Congressman John W. McCormack of Massachusetts, who in later years would become Speaker of the House.

Our Ace in the Hole

My staff and I conceived our assignment, under the general guidance of the policies which would be agreed upon by the Executive Committee of the American Zionist Emergency Council and under the leadership of Dr. Silver, to be the following: a) to inform and educate congressmen and other government officials and such other persons outside of government—reporters, editors, former government officials—who might be able to exert some influence on American policy, about the urgency of the Jewish situation in Europe as well as about the justice and legality of the Zionist cause; b) to develop as much opposition as we could in the same quarters to the British White Paper; c) and finally to focus our efforts either on the introduction and passage through Congress of a resolution expressing opposition to the British White Paper, or to go the whole way and try to put the Congress on record as favoring the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine after the war.

Such a resolution would, of course, not be binding on the Executive Department, but it would be a tremendous propaganda victory for our cause. The decision as to which course to follow would have to be taken by the Emergency Council. Incidentally, I commuted each week between Washington and New York to attend and to report to meetings of the executive on the results of my interviews, and to provide its members with my appraisal of the Washington climate, favorable or otherwise. In January, 1944, after my colleagues and I had taken numerous soundings which seemed propitious, the executive committee directed me to take the latter, the riskier, but if we succeeded the far more advantageous course of attempting to secure passage of the commonwealth resolution. We knew that this was the objective which the majority of American Zionists—perhaps of American Jews generally, and certainly of our local committees—wanted us to pursue. They were both shocked and saddened by the catastrophe in Europe and were certainly fired to a high pitch of enthusiasm by the prospect of finally achieving the millennial Jewish hope of national redemption. It seemed now or never.

Before proceeding with the account of the fate of the commonwealth resolution, which is in effect the story of my year in Washington and of the birth of the Jewish Lobby, a word may be in

order about the daily procedural routine which I followed. I would spend every morning on Capitol Hill with Leo Sack, who had previously made the appointments, meeting with senators and representatives. Elihu Stone would accompany us on visits to New England congressmen, many of whom he knew personally. We concentrated on the leadership of the two Houses and on congressmen whom we knew to be influential or key personalities by virtue of their seniority, committee chairmanships, or the weight they were known to carry with the Administration.

One such was the late President Harry S. Truman, then senator from Missouri and chairman of a special committee investigating war contracts. Mr. Truman received us cordially, but noncommittally, informing us that he would not support the proposed resolution before consulting with the chief of staff, General George Marshall. Had we recognized it, as perhaps we should have, this was a clear signal of the danger which lay ahead, that the resolution might be tabled or perhaps even defeated. Lyndon B. Johnson, then a fledgling congressman from Texas, also made it clear that although he was personally favorably inclined, he would take his orders from President Roosevelt, who throughout the course of these events proved an elusive friend and, as we now know, not very faithful to his publicly expressed Zionist sympathies. However, we found most of those we interviewed quite supportive, particularly when it was pointed out to them—and many were uninformed on this point—that Britain had pledged herself in the Balfour Declaration to the establishment of a Jewish homeland and had, at least partly on the basis of that promise, received the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine. This was our ace in the hole and our most promising vote getter and it was also the basis of what proved to be our ill-founded optimism. I sensed some sardonically amusing subsurface reactions on the part of one or two congressmen whom I prefer to leave nameless and who gave me the distinct impression that they would not be unfavorably disposed to the idea of having all Jews settle in Palestine.

Blackshirts and Boots

I regret to report, in passing, that one of my most troublesome problems was posed by a group of Jews, who ironically enough

were working for the same objective as I was. Circulating around the halls of Congress and other official quarters was a personable young man with the *nom de guerre* of Peter Bergson, who, with a group of his colleagues, represented the military arm of the Revisionist Zionist movement, the Irgun Z'vai Leumi. Bergson was related to the saintly and scholarly chief rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi Abraham I. Kook. I learned that, having overstayed his visitor's visa, he was in the country illegally. Some discreet inquiries suggested that he was being sheltered from deportation by a highly placed personage, there being good reason to believe that this was Eleanor Roosevelt. I could have solved my problem by reporting him to the Immigration Service, but this I would not do to a fellow Jew whether I agreed with his politics or not. I must say that Peter and his cohorts proved to be pesky nuisances, even more so than the anti-Zionist American Council for Judaism whose chief representatives, Elmer Berger and Lessing J. Rosenwald, were frequently to be seen in Washington in congressional offices and other government quarters. I observed them on at least one occasion and much to my disgust conferring with Arab representatives.

Back to Bergson! He and his friends would tell congressmen and others not to pay any attention to the Zionists who did not really represent the Jews of Palestine. They, the Irgunists, claimed to be the real spokesmen for the Jewish independence movement in Palestine. *They* were the genuine freedom fighters. They operated in this country through a number of front organizations, such as the Hebrew Committee for National Liberation and the Committee for a Jewish Army. They had enlisted in the leadership of these organizations some prominent congressmen, notably Senator Guy Mark Gillette of Iowa, as well as a number of writers like Ben Hecht, who hitherto had been notably absent from public Jewish activity. The Bergson boys finally overshot their mark by staging, in the spring of 1944, a cheaply melodramatic "happening," the opening of a "Hebrew embassy." To mark the event, they called a press conference, covered for me by our young and brilliant public relations director, Harold Manson. The report he brought me that afternoon would have been almost unbelievably funny, had it not been so tragically absurd. After a round of refreshments for the reporters, there was a flourish of trumpets, doors were thrown open, Bergson and his companions marched to the platform in

the center of the room dressed—believe it or not—in blackshirts and boots and proceeded to proclaim the Hebrew State. That was virtually the last we heard of the Hebrew Liberation Movement.

To resume the account. As previously indicated, I reported to the Emergency Executive my highly favorable reception by the overwhelming majority of congressmen, who seemed completely sympathetic to the plight of European Jewry, as well as to the hope of establishing a Jewish national entity in Palestine after the war. They seemed to be indignant with our British allies for issuing the White Paper and thus in effect breaking their own promise in the Balfour Declaration and abusing the trust vested in them by the mandate. I was therefore quite certain that the time was ripe for introducing a bipartisan resolution putting Congress on record as favoring the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth. The executive directed me to proceed to lay the groundwork for such a resolution. In the House I obtained the co-sponsorship of Representatives James A. Wright of Pennsylvania and Ranulf Compton of Connecticut. In the Senate, it was the Taft-Wagner Resolution. Robert F. Wagner of New York, whose son was later to become mayor of that city and whose large Jewish constituency made it natural for him to be favorably disposed to the Zionist cause, was only too happy to append his name to the resolution.

Robert A. Taft, our home senator from Ohio, whom Rabbi Silver was anxious to enlist as the Republican sponsor, required much more persuasion. When I first interviewed Mr. Republican, as he was known, he confessed his total ignorance of the problem. As an outstanding lawyer, he was particularly interested in the legality of the Jewish claim to a homeland in Palestine. He wanted to be satisfied on this phase of the problem and requested me to provide him with the appropriate documents. After studying them for some days, he gave his consent and thereafter became a valuable and knowledgeable supporter of Zionism. In the light of Taft's standing as a Republican leader and his general reputation in Congress, I was confident that half the battle had then been won. (Parenthetically, I was of some assistance to him, when he made his later run for reelection to the Senate, by helping to refute a canard spread by his political enemies that he personally entertained some anti-Semitic sentiments.) The resolutions were introduced into both Houses of Congress at the end of January, 1944. I

had been overly optimistic about the chances of their passage at that particular session of Congress.

Military Expertise

It seems that the executive branch of the government, acting upon the advice of the military, was strongly opposed. What I did not know was that the military planners were considering, as one of their options, a thrust into Festung Europa through the Balkans. They feared that if Congress were to go on record for a Jewish Palestine, it would provoke an Arab uprising in their rear. So General George C. Marshall, the chief of staff, came to the Hill and urgently requested a tabling or postponement of the resolution for security reasons. It was reported that he bolstered his opposition with a humanitarian argument, predicting that if there were a large-scale Arab uprising, the inevitable result would be a wholesale slaughter of the Jewish population. So much for military expertise! President Roosevelt also adopted a kind of canny technique, of which we now know he was such a master. Not wishing to antagonize Jewish voters or to appear faithless to his various Zionist commitments, he persuaded his good friend Stephen S. Wise and other Democratic faithfuls to appear before the Senate committee and ask for a withdrawal of the commonwealth resolution on patriotic grounds, assuring them that after an Allied victory he would support their cause. That is not how King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia understood it when the two later met.

I shall never forget that day. Rabbi Silver and I paced the hall outside the committee chamber where the meeting was taking place. I had never seen him so pale or so furiously agitated. He could not believe that Jewish and especially Zionist leaders would engage in what to him was an act of betrayal. Of course, the committee had no choice but to accede to the wishes of the executive, especially since they were bolstered by prominent Zionist spokesmen.

We were determined, however, that the struggle would go on. We laid the groundwork for later congressional action by obtaining statements endorsing the commonwealth program in the platforms of the nominating conventions of the Republican and Democratic parties which were to meet later that summer. We also held a very

well-attended national gathering in Washington of Christian supporters of the Zionist cause under the auspices of the American Christian Palestine Committee. The Wagner-Taft and Wright-Compton Resolutions, temporarily tabled, did finally pass the Senate on December 17, 1945, and the House on December 19, 1945, by voice vote. In June, 1944, I had completed my tour of duty and returned to my congregation, very happy, although the year had been a rich, enlightening and exciting experience for me, to resume my status as an amateur Zionist worker. I was succeeded as head of the Washington office by Benjamin Akzin and he in turn by Kenen, who until his recent retirement has done an extremely effective job. After the establishment of Israel, it was no longer possible for us to function as a tax-deductible organization, and the setup was ultimately reorganized as the American Emergency Committee for Israel Affairs. Kenen was by law required to register as a paid lobbyist for a foreign government.

That, sketchily, is the story of the birth of the Jewish Lobby. The Jewish Lobby—if that is the proper name for it—is far from being as powerful as the Arabs and some American critics would like to portray it, certainly not in comparison with the Oil Lobby. But it has succeeded in building a substantial base of support for Israel in American public opinion.

LOAN EXHIBITS

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