



JEWISH COMMENTARY

‘I Am Cyrus’

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DURING WORLD WAR I, Lieutenant Harry Truman was assigned to run the regimental canteen at an Army training camp in Oklahoma. To make it a financial success, Harry took on a partner, Sergeant Edward Jacobson. For Truman, his biographer David McCullough notes, Jacobson's Jewishness was a plus. "I have a Jew in charge of the canteen by the name of Jacobson and he is a crackerjack," he wrote his wife Bess. After six months, business was extraordinarily successful, and some of the other officers began teasing Harry, referring to him as a "lucky Jew" and "Trumanheimer." McCullough reports that to this Truman replied: "I guess I should be very proud of my Jewish ability." After the war, Truman and Jacobson went into the haberdashery business together. It failed, but they remained lifelong friends.

Three decades later, Truman was entering the third year of his unexpected presidency. The United Nations had approved the partition of Palestine into independent states, but the American delegation, under the direction of Secretary of State George Marshall, sought to revert back to a UN trusteeship for the region. Truman revered Marshall more than any other man alive and, feeling that many Zionist leaders had been disrespectful to him, refused to meet with any Jewish representatives. That included Chaim Weizmann, the great scientist and leading international

figurehead of the cause of Jewish statehood. Eddie Jacobson, the only Jew with walk-in privileges to the White House, was asked to plead on Weizmann's behalf. He was allowed entry to the Oval Office on the express condition that he not bring up Palestine.

Jacobson, of course, immediately brought up Palestine. Truman, McCullough recounts, complained bitterly of the abuse he had experienced, of how "disrespectful and mean" certain Jewish leaders had been to him. Jacobson, in return, sadly reflected that "my dear friend, the President of the United States, was at that moment as close to being an anti-Semite as a man could possibly be." Then, pointing to Truman's statuette of Andrew Jackson, Jacobson took a different tack:

"Harry, all your life you have had a hero...I too have a hero, a man I never met, but who is, I think, the greatest Jew who ever lived....I am talking about Chaim Weizmann....He traveled thousands of miles just to see you and plead the cause of my people. Now you refuse to see him just because you are insulted by some of our American Jewish leaders, even though you know that Weizmann had absolutely nothing to do with these insults and would be the last man to be party to them. It doesn't sound like you, Harry, because I thought you could take this stuff they have been handing out."

As Abba Eban later wrote, the comparison between Weizmann and Andrew Jackson was unimaginably far-fetched. And it worked. Tru-

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man began drumming his fingers on the desk. He wheeled around in his chair and with his back to Jacobson sat looking out the window into the garden. For what to Jacobson seemed “like centuries,” neither of them said anything. Then, swinging about and looking Jacobson in the eye, Truman said what Jacobson later described as the most endearing words he had ever heard: “You win, you baldheaded son-of-a-bitch. I will see him.”

Weizmann was secretly ushered into the White House, and support for partition was sustained. On May 14, Truman overrode Marshall in recognizing the Jewish state.

Later that month, Weizmann, now the president of Israel, returned to Washington and gave Truman a small Torah scroll. Truman took it and said, “Thanks: I’ve always wanted one of these!” Upon retiring from the presidency, Truman spoke to a Jewish audience in New York, and was introduced by Eddie Jacobson as the man who helped bring the state of Israel into existence. “What do you mean, helped?” Truman interjected. “I am Cyrus! I am Cyrus!”

THE FRIENDSHIP of Truman and Jacobson is often cited as one of the many miraculous details in the story of Israel’s birth, as indeed it is. Yet often overlooked is the significance of Truman’s seemingly casual ejaculation to Jacobson: *I am Cyrus*. Cyrus was the Persian emperor who allowed Ezra and the Judean exiles in Babylon to return to the Holy Land and begin to build anew after the destruction of the first Temple. But he is more than that; he is the most celebrated non-Jew in the Hebrew Bible. Consider this: Cyrus is the only non-Jew accorded the appellation *Messiah*, or God’s anointed, by the prophets, reflecting the providential role in history that he has been chosen to play:

Thus said the LORD to Cyrus, His anointed one— Whose right hand He has grasped, Treading down nations before him, Ungirding the loins of kings, Opening doors before him And letting no gate stay shut: I will march before you And level the hills that loom up; I will shatter doors of bronze And cut down iron bars. I will give you treasures concealed in the dark And secret hoards— So that you may know that it is I the LORD, The God of Israel, who call you by name. For the sake of My servant Jacob, Israel My chosen one, I call you by name.

Cyrus is even given the last word in all of Hebrew scripture. The book of Chronicles concludes:

And in the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled, the LORD roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing, as follows: “Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and has charged me with building Him a House in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any one of you of all His people, the LORD his God be with him and let him go up.”



February 10, 1960: Former President Harry S. Truman (left) and Rabbi Samuel S. Mayerberg (right) hold the Torah on exhibit at the Truman Library, while Rabbi Mayerberg points to scripture.

Thus the most sacred text of the Jewish faith ends with the words of a non-Jew urging the return to the Land of Israel. Truman likening himself to the ancient king of Persia should inspire us to reflect on the what role the Bible in general, and Cyrus in particular, played in this story. Rightly understood, it tells us a great deal about Truman, about America, and Jewish history itself.

First: While Jacobson’s friendship indeed played a role in American support for the birth of Israel, the source of Truman’s truest motivations lie in what he

said sincerely about the Torah scroll he received—"I always wanted one of these!"—and the three small words that he uttered to his old friend Eddie: "I am Cyrus."

Truman's aide Clark Clifford noted that "his own reading of ancient history and the Bible made him a supporter of the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, even when others who were sympathetic to the plight of the Jews were talking of sending them to places like Brazil." Truman, then, reflects an American penchant as old as the republic itself: seeing the stories of the Hebrew Bible replayed in the story of the United States. Benjamin Franklin's proposal for the seal was Israel at the splitting of the sea, and George Washington's 1790 letter to the Jews of Savannah makes the theological connection between the Bible and America explicit:

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation—still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.

We welcome you, Washington says, not only as Americans, but as Jews; and we see reflections of your story in our story. Several years later, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow visited Newport, Rhode Island, and stood in the cemetery that held the graves of the Jews Washington once visited. There he pondered the Sephardic names he saw and reflected on the resilience of the Jewish people. The source of their endurance, he argues, was their connection of the biblical past to their people's future:

For in the background figures vague and vast
Of patriarchs and of prophets rose sublime,
And all the great traditions of the Past
They saw reflected in the coming time.

Longfellow poetically describes what history means for Jews but captures as well how American statesmen and citizens saw the Bible reflected in their own age.

The American affinity for Israel must be understood in this way, beautifully expressed by George W. Bush, speaking in the Knesset on Israel's 60th anniversary. Bush spoke of Truman and then immediately added:

The alliance between our governments is unbreakable, yet the source of our friendship runs deeper than any treaty. It is grounded in the shared spirit of our people, the bonds of the Book, the ties of the soul. When William Bradford stepped off the *Mayflower* in 1620, he quoted the words of Jeremiah: "Come let us declare in Zion the word of God." The founders of my country saw a new promised land and bestowed upon their towns names like Bethlehem and New Canaan. And in time, many Americans became passionate advocates for a Jewish state.

With this in mind, let us return to Truman's phrase "I am Cyrus." By saying this, Truman was likening America not to biblical Israel but to ancient Persia; and unlike Franklin or Washington, he was drawing inspiration not from Moses, but from Cyrus. Fascinatingly, in an interview about Israel later in life with Merle Miller, Truman made mention of Persia in describing his love for the Bible:

It wasn't just the Biblical part about Palestine that interested me. The whole history of that area of the world is just about the most complicated and most interesting of any area anywhere, and I have always made a very careful study of it. There has always been trouble there, always been wars from the time of Darius the Great and Rameses on, and the pity of it is that the whole area is just waiting to be developed....What has happened is only the beginning of what could happen, because potentially that is the richest area in the world.

Let us put ourselves in Truman's place. He had seen America in a few years go from an isolated nation across the Atlantic to the most supreme power on earth. In his own presidency, he had dropped an atomic bomb on Japan, reorganized Europe under the Marshall Plan, and stood as the bulwark for the free world against the Soviets. America had begun as a story akin to biblical Israel: a tiny nation, unimportant in the eyes of most of civilization. That is not, under his presidency, what America became.

If, for America, the Hebrew Bible's story is replayed in various ways in American history, then it needed a different model in Truman's time; not of a small nation but of a superpower, but still biblically inspired, still playing a role in God's providential plan. What better model was there for America than the one played by the man who is

given the last word in Hebrew scripture?

Truman's reference, then, was deliberate; and to religious Jews who see both the stories of Israel and America as profoundly providential tales, the Hebrew Bible's concluding with a non-Jew proclaiming the Jewish return to Zion may be a sign of things to come.

Today, the American affinity for the story of the Hebrew Bible, woven into the political DNA of the United States, is still present—reflected first and foremost in the phenomenon of Christian Zionism. Cyrus's story hints at an extraordinary occurrence unparalleled in Jewish history: the existence of millions of Gentiles who are Zionists, Americans whose attachment to Hebraic texts is the foundation of their love for the Jewish state.

Yet the very same verse that brings the Bible to a close also implicitly contains a warning. The American founders, and many of their successors, were dramatically affected by the Tanakh, but there is no guarantee that America will remain this way. Here Cyrus's story offers a cautionary example.

The Book of Ezra reports that though Cyrus proclaimed the Jewish return, the rebuilding of the Temple was then halted by those who bribed members of Cyrus's court and lied about the Jews' motivations. This was the first movement against the Jewish right to Jerusalem, and it existed in Cyrus's empire, 2,500 years ago. The message is clear for our time: A world power that is moved by the story of biblical Israel can also become unmoored from the values of biblical Israel. The Cyrus whose words close out the Tanakh is, perhaps, a hint to a future where millions of Gentiles would revere the Hebrew bible and the land of Israel; but it can also be seen as a reminder that countries whose leaders were once inspired by the word of God can cease to be so.

IN THE AMERICA of today, where so many remain bound to the Bible, and so many have forgotten it completely, there is much to celebrate and much cause for concern. Here, too, the story of Truman and the Bible speaks to us. The photograph of Weizmann presenting a Torah to Truman is famous, but the larger story of the scroll is mostly unknown.

When Weizmann arrived in America, he had asked Dr. Louis Finkelstein, the chancellor of the Jew-

ish Theological Seminary, and therefore the overseer of New York's Jewish Museum, if he could select a menorah from the collection to give the president as a gift. Finkelstein told him that the menorahs were all bequests and were therefore unavailable; he gave a small family Torah to Weizmann instead. This was, apparently, inspired by a biblical exhortation for a Jewish monarch to carry a Torah scroll with him at all times.

After Truman left the presidency, Dr. Finkelstein decided he would like to have the scroll on display at the Jewish Museum. As described by the seminary's former president, Bernard Mandelbaum, Finkelstein told Truman of the multitudes of visitors who would see the Torah on Fifth Avenue. Truman responded that in *his* library in Independence, Missouri, he anticipated even *more* visitors. Finkelstein then tried another tack. "You know, Mr. President," he reported, "a scroll is written on parchment, and if you don't roll it from time to time, it can deteriorate." Truman, Mandelbaum reports, pointed his finger at Finkelstein and exclaimed: "Dr. Finkelstein, you are not getting it back!"

Strikingly, on the website of the Truman Library today, one will see pictures of a rabbi visiting Truman's library with the express purpose of scrolling the Torah, with Truman selecting the particular passage. We see as well, in another photograph, Truman with the rabbi, each grasping the Torah's handles, holding the Torah aloft together.

For those who see history through the lens of the Bible, there is a profound symbolism to this. We Jews, throughout the year, scroll through the Torah and read it in its entirety. Each story in it is precious, each part has significance; and throughout American history, different portions of the Hebrew Bible have served as a polestar to the United States. At times it is the tale of the Exodus that spoke to America, as it did to the Founders; at times it is that of Ezra and Cyrus that will suddenly inspire, as it did for Truman. All this is for the good, as long as America, like Truman in those pictures, continues to hold on to the Torah, and allows it to form its worldview.

The question we face is whether the Hebrew Bible will continue to speak to America, or whether, as in suddenly secular Europe, it will amputate that aspect of its identity entirely from itself. 📖➡️