

# Commentary

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## The Sanity of John Fetterman

Jewish Commentary

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**L**ET US PONDER THE STRANGE SIMILARITIES LINKING THE STRIKING STORIES of Warder Cresson and John Fetterman. Ostensibly these two individuals, whose lives are separated by more than a century, have nothing to do with each other. Yet both embody, in their own way, archetypal American tales, in that they reflect the bonds between this country and the Jewish people and the way these bonds have endured despite the efforts of some to undo them.

Warder Cresson's 19th-century tale has already been told in these pages ("The Forgotten Proto-Zionist," December 2019). The first person appointed American consul to Jerusalem, he was born a Quaker and proceeded as an adult to join the Shakers, an ecstatic form of Christianity. He then embraced Mormonism, then adopted the teachings of Seventh-day Adventists and then the teachings of the frontier Restorationist movement. After embracing these four different denominations—all of which had been created in America within decades of each other—Cresson set sail for the Middle East, ultimately returning from Jerusalem an Orthodox Jew, predicting a Jewish return to the Holy Land.

It was at this point that the woman he had married before his departure had him declared legally insane, utilizing the declaration to seize control of Cresson's property. The application of lunacy to Cresson seemed solely based on his conversion to Judaism; in contrast to his many other previous conversions, it was only a love for the Jewish people that was considered crazy. Cresson, in turn, sued, instigating a multiyear trial in which he had to litigate his sanity,

ultimately establishing, in his attorney's words, that "the only charge left with which to accuse my client is that he became a Jew." He emerged from his battle victorious and returned to Jerusalem, establishing as a legal principle that concern for the Jewish presence in the Holy Land does not mean that one has lost his mind.

I thought of the Cresson case when *New York* magazine issued its recent article that ominously proclaimed: "John Fetterman insists he is in good health. But staffers past and present say they no longer recognize the man they knew." The implication, of course, is that the senator, a stroke victim who struggled with depression, has lost control of his faculties. A brief study of the piece reveals that even as Fetterman seems far healthier than he was when he ran for office, there is one new feature of his public life that alarms those who once embraced him: his support for Israel since October 7. Fetterman's former chief of staff gives the game away in his own quoted comment: "Part of the tragedy here is that this is a man who could be leading Democrats out of the wilderness. But I also think he's struggling in a way that shouldn't be hidden from the public." Is Fetterman well enough to lead, or isn't he? Like Warder Cresson's wife, Fetterman's disgruntled former staffer seems to assume that a concern for the Jews in the Middle East means he is no longer fit to serve as a Democratic senator.

The *New York* article was followed by a Politico piece informing us that "few fellow Democrats have rushed to Fetterman's defense after an explosive article in *New York* magazine reported that current and former staffers are seriously concerned about his mental and physical health." There is, of course, an obvious explanation for this, and it tells us more about Fetterman's fellow Democrats than about him. Meanwhile, as I type, a new hit piece on Fetterman has just dropped—a report issued by Axios noting that Fetterman has missed votes on the floor. The article runs under the hysterical headline "Fetterman Doubts Explode into Capitol Hill Firestorm." To paraphrase Cresson's attorney, the only charge left with which to accuse the senator is that he cares about murdered Jews.

Yet there are millions of people who are utterly unperturbed by Fetterman's embrace of Israel and his present political persona. This multitude happens to be...the Pennsylvanians who elected him in the first place. The senator continues to enjoy high poll numbers among his own constituents; apparently, if Fetterman is crazy, then they don't want their senators to be sane. It is not the denizens of Pennsylvania who are bothered by Fetterman's support for Israel, but rather the media—a media that assured us that President Biden was fine when he clearly was not and that now inform us that one of the few public figures speaking with moral clarity about the Middle East has lost his mind.

Warder Cresson and John Fetterman represent uniquely American stories, both highlighting the special history of the relationship between this country and the Jews. Cresson's religious journey reflected how the 19th century featured the founding of new forms of faith in America and the freedom felt by Americans to openly embrace them. The Second Great Awakening's explosion in religious devotion drove many of the events of the decades to come, including the rise of the abolition movement, as well as a heightened American interest in the Middle East and an embrace of the Jewish return to the Holy Land.

Meanwhile, Fetterman's own political journey on Israel has become part and parcel of a new chapter in American Jewish history. In May 2024, he received an honorary doctorate from Yeshiva University, and then, strikingly, he joined Yeshiva's rabbis and students on stage in a dance, as a Jewish song celebrating Judaism played over the loudspeakers. At *National Review*, Natan Ehrenreich, a Yeshiva alumnus, described how the commencement ceremony embodied an "Only in America" moment and how the political leaders who have stood with Israel—such as Fetterman and Speaker of the House Mike Johnson—reflected the uniqueness of the United States.



Fetterman gave a fantastic speech with several memorable moments. But even more remarkable was his joining Yeshiva's students to dance to the song "Geshmak to Be a Yid," which literally means "delicious to be a Jew," though "delicious" doesn't really capture the essence of the Yiddish term *geshmak* — it's used to refer to something fun or pleasurable but nonetheless profoundly meaningful....

Yes, there is antisemitism in America. Yes, it is worrying. Yes, it must be addressed to secure the future of American Jewry. But Mike Johnson and John Fetterman remind us of a fact that has forever been true and remains so: America is exceptional. For Jews, one can even say it's *geshmak*.

It is just this that Fetterman's critics cannot stand about America. That is why, ironically, Fetterman's choice to stand with the Jewish people is driving them crazy.

*Photo: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images*

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