

## JFK AND THE JEWS

## LAWRENCE FUCHS



The John F. Kennedy Library

Rochester, NY, 1958: JFK at the 10th anniversary celebration of the State of Israel.

One day in 1956, Theodore Sorenson, then Senator John Kennedy's assistant, telephoned to ask whether I might help develop some background materials and speeches for the Senator on subjects of special interest to Jews. Kennedy was in a Boston hospital at the time, recovering from a back injury, and he had read an article of mine in *The American Political Science Review* entitled "American Jews and the Presidential Vote." It was that article that prompted him to have Sorenson call me. And thus began my relationship with Mr. Kennedy—which, I hasten to add, was quite limited: I was not his special confidant, nor did I play an important role in his administration. Indeed, during his presidency, I saw him only once (in the summer of 1961) and then only briefly before I left to become Director of the Peace Corps in the Philippines.

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Sorenson's call led me to prepare two speech drafts for the young senator. The first was on ethnic loyalties and foreign policy, and it included a Justice Brandeis-like statement on the compatibility of Zionism with Americanism; the second was on immigration, written for delivery to the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress. But most of our contacts during 1957 and 1958 were not about Jewish questions specifically. In February 1957, Kennedy, as Chairman of a special Senate subcommittee, asked me to serve as a member of an advisory committee of scholars to recommend the selection of five deceased senators who had attained the highest distinction as statesmen. And in late 1957 and early 1958 I sent Kennedy several letters on various subjects, including a long letter on May 9, 1958, outlining various options with respect to stopping nuclear weapons testing in the atmosphere. Giving me high grades for managing "to put the case dispassionately," Kennedy promised to follow the lead of Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.) on matters of disarmament.

The word "dispassionately" meant a great deal to the Senator. It also meant a great deal to the Jews. At that point, Kennedy's candidacy for the presidency was not received with enthusiasm by most Jews, in part because of his apparent lack of passion

on the great issues of special concern to Jews: Israel, civil rights, peace and disarmament, and social welfare. This apparent absence of deep feeling on what Jews perceived as issues of social justice was troublesome to many of them; it was only later that his wit and his intellectual curiosity would come to offset his evident dispassion. (I felt the sting of his mocking humor in April 1958, when he learned of an award I had received from the Social Science Research Council to travel to Hawaii to study ethnic factors in politics there. Kennedy, a skeptic of popes and even more of professors, wrote, "I can well imagine how enthused you are about your trip to Hawaii—for purposes of study, of course.") But could someone with so laid back, so sardonic a manner, *really* care about the great issues? Where was the passion of a Wilson, of a Franklin Roosevelt? No litmus test was needed to test the commitment of a Hubert Humphrey or an Adlai Stevenson. But of Kennedy, the Jews felt constrained to ask repeatedly such questions as where he had been when Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisc.) went on a rampage against liberals and intellectuals—many of them Jews.

Jews were not alone in their doubts regarding Kennedy's liberalism, even though his voting record on all the major issues had become more consistently liberal as the years passed. In 1957 and 1958, liberal journalists



Circa 1937: Father and son

were quite generally reserved or even hostile in their attitude towards Kennedy. One of the problems, of course, was that Adlai Stevenson had become a darling of intellectuals generally and perhaps of Jews especially. Stevenson had not only his mastery of the English language going for him; his feelings about the great issues had all been made known during the course of his two campaigns against Eisenhower, and he also had the unflinching support of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, a major heroine among Jews by virtue of her strong liberalism at home and her devotion to Israel.

Nor did Stevenson have a father to explain.

Joseph P. Kennedy's record as ambassador to England, of which liberal commentators often wrote and spoke, had made him a minor villain in Jewish history. As ambassador, he counselled Roosevelt and others to be cautious in their resistance to Hitler. His alleged anti-Semitism is well-chronicled in Richard Whalen's biography, *The Founding Father*. Whalen notes that in June 1938, the elder Kennedy discussed the Jewish question with the German ambassador in London, who reported that Kennedy said he understood the German policy towards the Jews completely, that "it was not so much the fact that we wanted to get rid of the Jews that was so harmful to us but rather the loud clamor with which we accompa-



Tel Aviv, 1951: David Ben-Gurion with Franklin Roosevelt, Jr., and JFK.

nied this purpose." In another dispatch, Kennedy is reported to have mentioned that "very strong anti-Semitic tendencies existed in the United States and that a large portion of the population had an understanding of the German attitude towards the Jews."

Kennedy himself later repudiated the views attributed to him, calling them "complete poppycock" and asserting that he could recall no such conversation. Yet he had done little to help the 32-nation Intergovernmental Refugee Committee that had been set up in London in 1938, commenting there that rescuing Jews was a matter of money. Without volunteering to spend or raise any, he commented sarcastically, "Now we will see how sorry the world is for them." Indeed, as late as 1940 Kennedy was making the rounds of his old haunts in Hollywood, trying to persuade Jewish moviemakers not to protest against the Germans, as Jews, lest that simply make the situation worse.

The Joe McCarthy issue, which was even more critical to Jews than the Joe Kennedy issue, turned out not to be entirely separate from it. McCarthy was a good friend of Ambassador Kennedy. In an interview in 1961, the elder Kennedy said, "I liked Joe McCarthy, I always liked him. I would see him when I went down to Washington and when he was visiting in Palm Beach he would come around to

my house for a drink. I invited him to Cape Cod." Those Jews who felt that the influence of the father on the son might be considerable could point to the widely repeated story of how the elder Kennedy forced Jack and his campaign advisors to withdraw a planned advertisement attacking McCarthy. According to Bostonian Gardner Jackson, as quoted by Whalen, the elder Kennedy shouted against the ad in a campaign planning session, "You and your sheeny friends are trying to ruin my son's career."

Evidently the words "sheeny" and "kike" came easily to Joe Kennedy's tongue. He never dropped the street language of his youth, and perhaps his experiences in Hollywood where he worked for years as a producer sharpened his boyhood hostility towards Jews. At a July 4th party in Hyannisport in 1976, I sat next to Mrs. Rose Kennedy at a clambake where, in the course of the conversation, she told me how proud she was of Joe's record in Hollywood, though people had warned them that "the Jews would eat him up alive."

The elder Kennedy's anti-Semitism may have been exaggerated over the years, since the antennae of Jews are out to pick up anti-Semitism even when it doesn't exist, as a half-dozen good jokes attest. But stories about his father's alleged anti-Semitism undoubtedly hurt Jack Kennedy in his campaign for the Senate against



1950s: Eleanor Roosevelt and JFK

Henry Cabot Lodge in 1952. Senator Lodge had a good record on immigration, civil liberties and other matters of concern to Jews, and he already had many Jewish friends in Massachusetts. Jack Kennedy had only a few. Among these was Lewis Weinstein, a lawyer with a strong interest in public housing and Jewish questions. When Kennedy was running for the House of Representatives in 1948, Weinstein brought together seven or eight Jews to meet with the candidate for lunch and to discuss Zionism. After giving Kennedy a great deal of material to read, Weinstein persuaded Kennedy to make a speech to the New England Zionist convention on May 14, 1947. There the young Irish Catholic called for the free entry of refugees to Palestine and for the creation of a Jewish nation in the area. (His support for the Jewish nation never wavered thereafter.) Still, Kennedy recognized that he was at a disadvantage in running against Lodge, and so he put together a small group, led by Jackson J. Holtz, recently returned from the Korean War and President of the Jewish War Veterans of America. Holtz (who had congressional ambitions of his own) served as Chairman of the Friends of John F. Kennedy for U.S. Senator Committee, and, together with attorney Phil David Fine, assembled 300 Jews for a private dinner at the Boston Club where Kennedy told of his 1951 visit to Israel and urged the assembled

to vote for him and *not* for his father for the Senate.

Still, despite his election to the Senate, his strong liberal voting record there and the fact that his campaign for the vice-presidency in 1956 had been powerfully supported by Senator Abraham Ribicoff (D-Conn.), the long shadow of his father haunted him every time he sought Jewish support in 1958, as he prepared to run for the presidency. Mrs. Roosevelt's outspoken skepticism regarding Kennedy's liberal commitments and her ardent advocacy of Adlai Stevenson made it particularly difficult for Kennedy with Jewish voters. Kennedy thought it a kind of McCarthyism that he was stigmatized by the view of his father; it rankled him to see lifelong liberals convicting him not on the basis of evidence but on the basis of what he regarded as deeply held prejudice. In the summer of 1958, knowing that the support of both Blacks and Jews was important, sensing that the two groups were somehow linked and realizing that he was supported by neither, he asked Lewis Weinstein to get Kivie Kaplan, an active board member of the NAACP, to try to persuade Roy Wilkins, the NAACP's Director, to call off what Kennedy viewed as a "personal and political vendetta directed at me by the national staff of that organization." The "vendetta," Kennedy felt, was the result of his Senate vote—cast at the recommen-

dation of Harvard Professor Paul Freund—in favor of jury trials for civil rights violators being tried for criminal contempt. Kennedy held that to be a vote for civil liberties; the NAACP saw it as a vote against civil rights. In any case, that vote aside, Kennedy's record, he believed, was as good as anyone's.

Kennedy wanted liberal support. He wanted liberals to believe, as he later asserted to me, "that the only way Adlai Stevenson will get into the White House will be when I am president and invite him there." He wanted Jews and other liberals in the Democratic Party to believe that he was the best and most electable liberal alternative to Stuart Symington, Lyndon Johnson and other conservative Democrats.

Those were some of the things on Kennedy's mind when I met him in Hawaii in the early spring of 1959. He had come to Honolulu to look for pre-convention support. By this time, based on a widely reported speech I had made to the Boston University Citizenship Project a year earlier and on an article I had written for the Jesuit magazine *America*—in which I had argued that Kennedy's religion would result in a net gain for the Democrats in the presidential election—he knew that I was sympathetic to his candidacy.

We met in his room at the magnifi-



September 22, 1960: JFK with Adlai Stevenson

cently posh Royal Hawaiian Hotel on Waikiki beach. We walked the beach for a bit, and then returned to his room to talk. He complained about the New York liberals and intellectuals who remained faithful to what he saw as the fantasy candidacy of Governor Stevenson. He urged me to tell friends that he would appoint Stevenson Secretary of State if he were elected, provided that Stevenson came on board the Kennedy campaign early. Talking excitedly, rapid-fire, he excoriated what he called "the prejudices of liberals." They are prejudiced against Catholics, he said. They think Catholics will either take orders from the Pope or from a big city political machine. "Who do they think I am, Carmine DeSapio?" he expostulated, referring to the New York City political leader. He wanted to know whether Jimmy Wechsler, editor of the *New York Post*, and columnist Max Lerner of the same paper would be for him.

When I replied that I thought they would start by being for Stevenson, Kennedy expressed his irritation. "What's the matter with them? Why are they so biased? My record as a liberal is as good as that of Stevenson or anyone else running for office." Mrs. Roosevelt was a problem, he thought. She still clung to the fantasy that Stevenson could become president, and, more important so far as Kennedy was concerned, she didn't like him because of a fight she'd had with his fa-

ther 20 years before.

I disagreed. I had become friendly with Mrs. Roosevelt—she was then on the Brandeis University Board of Trustees, as well as on the faculty, and I had taught a course with her—and I had a different view. Although I realized that she had had strong disagreements with Joe Kennedy, Cardinal Spellman and other leading Catholic figures on various issues, I thought the main problem was simply that she adored Stevenson. Kennedy insisted that Mrs. Roosevelt was prejudiced; I demurred, and we left it at that.

The mention of Mrs. Roosevelt's alleged anti-Catholicism triggered a discussion about Kennedy's father. I recall Kennedy saying, "My father is to the right of Herbert Hoover; you can predict just what his position will be on any issue." But he vigorously maintained that he did not agree with his father who, coming from a different generation, looked at things differently. He told me that he had recently resisted pressure from his father by voting against President Eisenhower's nomination of Lewis Strauss to be Secretary of Commerce. Although he recognized that the president is normally entitled to a great deal of leeway in naming his Cabinet, Kennedy believed that Strauss had performed miserably on the Atomic Energy Commission. A supreme ironist, Kennedy took pleasure in pointing out to me that although his fa-



September 25, 1961: Meeting with Golda Meir at UN

ther was supposed to be an anti-Semite, he had repeatedly called Jack to urge his support for Strauss, an old friend and a Jew, but that he, the Senator, had resisted his father, whom, he hastened to add, he loved very much.

His affection for his father was a point he drove home sharply. I recall his looking at me and asking, "Don't you love your father?" When I answered, "Yes, of course," he followed up with the query, "Well, you don't agree with him on every issue, do you?" Again, I had to agree with him. Whereupon he exclaimed, "Then why can't people understand that I can disagree strongly with my father and still love him?"

His point was well made, but it did not go down well with everyone. Mrs. Roosevelt and many other liberals, including a disproportionately large number of Jews, still clung to the hope that Stevenson would try for a third time. But Stevenson was unwilling to commit himself, and, inevitably, liberals began to defect to Kennedy. I found myself in the thick of many discussions on Stevenson vs. Kennedy in the fall of 1959, back at Brandeis, where I was co-teaching a course with Mrs. Roosevelt. She knew of my preference but resisted my enthusiasm for "your young man," as she repeatedly referred to Kennedy. She truly believed that Stevenson could become a great president and she was willing to think of Kennedy



February 23, 1961: Goldberg (second from right) and the President meet with labor leaders

only as vice-president. Later, Kennedy would have me serve as one of several intermediaries between himself and Mrs. Roosevelt in an effort at least to neutralize her opposition to him.

As the convention drew near, and despite Mrs. Roosevelt's continuing opposition, the defection of liberals from Stevenson—who had not yet declared himself a candidate—spread. My pro-Kennedy letters to liberals, mainly Jews, and speeches to largely Jewish audiences were beginning to elicit a positive response. (Prominent Jews, such as Ribicoff and Arthur Goldberg, then a labor lawyer, had far more extensive involvements in the Kennedy campaign than I.) Kennedy made all the right noises in speeches about Israel, immigration and separation of Church and State. Still, the responses in primaries where Stevenson's name had been entered showed that the former governor of Illinois had remained a clear favorite among Jewish voters. In Oak Park, Illinois, for example, Stevenson outpolled Kennedy among Jewish voters 76 percent to 17 percent—while Catholic voters were giving Kennedy a 64–27 margin. (In 1956, despite the landslide for Eisenhower, the Jews had voted 75 percent for Stevenson.)

But come convention time, Stevenson did not prevail, despite a last-minute effort (orchestrated in part by Mrs. Roosevelt). And in the election

itself, although Kennedy won by only one-fifth of one percent of the national vote, he received 80 percent of the Jewish vote—a higher degree of support than was given Kennedy by Irish Catholic voters.

One poll of presidential preferences by religion (in California) showed that Kennedy received 38 percent of the Protestant vote, 73 percent of the Catholic vote—and 91 percent of the Jewish vote. The 1960 vote for Kennedy by the Jews of Oak Park was actually higher than the 1956 vote for Stevenson had been.

These results could be explained in part by the widespread dislike of Nixon among Jews. It owed, as well, to the fact that Kennedy had proved his liberal credentials during the course of the campaign.

The Kennedy administration, short as it was, seems to have been particularly attractive to Jews. One reason was surely Kennedy's intellectual curiosity, a characteristic that brought him into increasing contact with Jews as he focused on the problem of forming a government. His approach to problem-solving was to search out the best minds on any given subject, to find the experts. That search frequently led him to Jews—to Arthur Goldberg on questions of organized labor, to Jerome Weisner on science and on arms control, to Abba Schwartz on immigration.



Myer Feldman

In due course, many Jews were appointed to top positions in the new administration. Schwartz became head of the Bureau of Security in Consular Affairs at the State Department, where Kennedy urged him to overturn restrictionist policies and to permit more people to visit the United States regardless of ideological considerations. Abe Chayes was named State Department Counselor; Myer Feldman, a Special Assistant, watched Middle Eastern affairs; Jerome Weisner was appointed Science Advisor, from which position he supervised disarmament issues; Lee White, first a special counselor on legislative matters, later took on civil rights; Richard Goodwin, speech writer and Special Assistant, was Kennedy's man on Latin American affairs, even before he was appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in that area. Carl Kaysen, Walt and Eugene Rostow and Adam Yarmolinsky all had important jobs in the areas of defense and foreign policy.

Still more important and, of course, more visible, were the two Jews who served in Kennedy's Cabinet—Arthur Goldberg at Labor and Abe Ribicoff at Health, Education and Welfare. This was the first time in American history that two Jews served in the Cabinet. And both men—especially Goldberg—were strongly identified with Jewish affairs, although the fact of their Jewishness



Wide World

The John F. Kennedy Library



December 1, 1960: JFK announces his first Cabinet appointment, Abraham Ribicoff. HEW; February 1961: JFK and Secretary of Labor Goldberg

seems to have had little bearing on their appointment. Theodore Sorenson informs us, in his chronicle of the Kennedy presidency, that he felt impelled to draw the President's attention to the fact that Mike Feldman, Dick Goodwin and Lee White, all slated to work on the White House staff, were all of Jewish background—to which Kennedy's response was, "So what? They tell me that this is the first Cabinet with two Jews, too. All I care about is whether they can handle it." In fact, though Goldberg's Jewishness may have had something to do with his appointment to replace Felix Frankfurter on the Supreme Court, neither Sorenson nor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the President's two major biographers, take notice of it. And in recent conversations I had with both Sorenson and Feldman, both maintained that religious affiliation simply was not an issue in Kennedy's selection of personnel.

Kennedy was unequivocally pro-Israel. His convictions may have suited his political interests, but Schlesinger writes that "Kennedy believed strongly in America's moral commitment to Israel's security." Feldman told me recently that the President's pro-Israel convictions were based on a hard-headed assessment of American interests. Nonetheless, when Kennedy asked Feldman to become the White House point man on Middle

Eastern affairs, Feldman quickly replied that he had an emotional bias in favor of Israel, and Kennedy replied, "Well, so do I. That's why I want you on the job." Then he added, "But remember, I want all points of view fairly and forcefully represented."

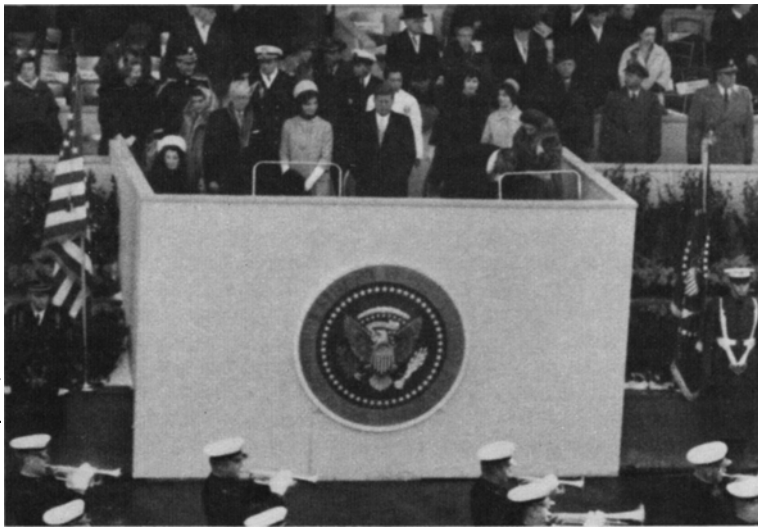
In fact, Arab positions were strongly represented in Kennedy's White House by Robert Komer of the National Security Council and, on the Hawk missile sale issue, by McGeorge Bundy, the President's National Security Advisor. But on the Hawk issue, the President agreed with Feldman that the U.S. should accede to Israel's request, and thus became the first President to approve the introduction of so advanced a weapons system into the Middle East. According to Feldman, Kennedy believed that Israel's possession of the Hawk would stabilize the area for a while—which it did—and made the decision despite the fact that the Arab governments could be expected to be sharply critical of it. Once the decision was taken, Kennedy invited 21 Jews to the White House—this was on September 13, 1962—for what Lewis Weinstein describes as a "detailed account" of Middle Eastern geopolitics. Weinstein writes that the President described the need of the United States for Israel as a strong ally, praised Israel for its freedom and its sense of justice, and then, after announcing that the government would provide Israel sophisticated weapons

for the first time, was given "an outburst of applause and a spontaneous cheering standing ovation."

Obviously, Kennedy was not oblivious to the value of Jewish political support. Pursuing a policy of dialogue with Middle Eastern Arab leaders, Kennedy wanted to invite Egyptian dictator Nasser to the United States in an attempt to wean him away from militancy, but he put off the invitation because he knew that Jewish voters would be angry. Withal, Feldman reports that the fact that his recommendations regarding the Middle East were never overruled by Kennedy was a matter of presidential conviction rather than ethnic politics.

The issue of the persecution of Soviet Jewry surfaced in the last months of Kennedy's administration, and he made an oblique reference to it in his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 22, 1963, when he reminded his audience that human rights "are not respected when a Buddhist priest is driven from his pagoda, or when a synagogue is shut down." According to Weinstein, Kennedy also instructed Averell Harriman to raise with Khrushchev the question of Soviet treatment of the Jews, and particularly of their right to emigrate.

Two months later, Kennedy was dead. Perhaps no group mourned his loss more than the Jews. Obviously,



January 20, 1961: The Kennedy family, viewing the inaugural parade.

the Jewish community had been aware of the relatively large number of Jews who had been appointed to high positions. Moreover, Kennedy was by then responsible for the Peace Corps, the Test Ban Treaty, civil rights legislation, the Alliance for Progress, Food for Peace and diverse social welfare initiatives fulfilled later, under Johnson, and these, together with his continuing support for Israel, drew Jews closer to Kennedy virtually with each passing month of his administration.

Yet the grief of Jews following the death of the President was based on something more than support for his programs, his appointment of Jews or his style. It undoubtedly had much to do with Kennedy's approach to religion in the United States.

There were three aspects to that approach that especially drew the Jews to Kennedy. First, the President was an insistent advocate of the separation of Church and State, and took a particularly narrow view of the propriety of aid to parochial schools. Second, Jews were impressed with the way Kennedy handled the issue of his own Catholicism both during the campaign and in the course of his administration. He made no apologies whatever for being a Catholic, and he went on to overcome the oldest and most pervasive bigotry in American history. In so doing, he virtually removed the religious issue for Jews in American politics, and it may well be more than

a coincidence that the numbers of Jews elected to the House of Representatives and the Senate has risen sharply since Kennedy, with Jews in the Senate now from such unlikely places as New Hampshire, Minnesota and Nebraska, among others.

Finally, Kennedy's approach to religion and religious interrelationships was consistent with the views of most Jews. Cardinal Cushing quoted the President as saying, "We must esteem other religious faiths." Kennedy told the students and faculty of Boston College in April 1963 that the importance of Pope John XXIII was that "we are learning to talk the language of progress and peace across the barriers of sect and creed." About a month after the Pope's death, Kennedy told the Irish Parliament, "The supreme reality of our time is our indivisibility as children of God and our common vulnerability on this planet. . . . We must remember that there are no permanent enemies." In praising the encyclical *Pacem in terris*, Kennedy told a Catholic audience that the great encyclical was not uniquely Catholic and that it "closely matches notable expressions of convictions and aspirations . . . of other faiths."

Kennedy had emerged, by the time of his death, as a man who cared deeply about peace and about social justice, and this was bound to appeal to Jews. Still an intellectual, he could no longer be thought of as a detached



March 12, 1963: Theodore Sorenson with JFK

intellect, as a person who lacked passion and consistent convictions on the great issues of our time. In a speech to the Protestant Council of New York just a few weeks before he died, Kennedy reminded his audience that most human beings are neither white nor Christian—but that all of them share the desire to survive in dignity.

The youthful president—the son of a father feared and disliked by many Jews—had now won the Jews over so completely that it is likely that had he run against Barry Goldwater in 1964, he would have matched the more than 90 percent of the Jewish vote that Franklin Roosevelt had won 20 years earlier. He had won the Jews over—as he did Mrs. Roosevelt—with words, gestures, actions and ideas. And, ironically—something the ironist in him would have appreciated—Jews had come to see in him a man who cared deeply about justice and compassion, about, that is, *tz'dakah* and *chesed*, a witty but serious man of *tachlis*, of purpose, who understood that the point of governing, as the point of living, is "to do justice and to love mercy." ★