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BALTIMORE JEWISH TIMES

February 18, 2011

**PRESIDENTIAL MEMORIES:
LINCOLN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE JEWS
*REMEMBERED ON PRESIDENT'S DAY.***

Kenneth Lasson

Ever since George Washington, U.S. presidents have made inclusive gestures toward Jewish-American citizens and soldiers, but only Abraham Lincoln, whose 211th birthday we celebrated last week, ever officially intervened on their behalf. He did it twice within the span of two years. During his political career Lincoln had many Jewish associates, advisers and supporters.

One of his earliest and closest friends was Abraham Jonas, a state legislator from Kentucky and later an Illinois lawyer. He and Lincoln shared a distaste for bigots. Mr. Lincoln had been particularly upset by a state legislator whom he considered a "stupid, classic anti-Semite," a member of the "Know-Nothing Party"- which was wont to make nasty remarks about Catholics, Negroes and Jews. In 1860 Lincoln wrote a letter to Jonas expressing his anger at racists, bigots and anti-Semites.

Such efforts won him warm support from large numbers of American Jews who, by the election year of 1860, numbered close to 200,000 out of a total American population of 31.5 million. Jonas was instrumental in pushing Lincoln's nomination to the presidency.

Lincoln is known to have met many Jews during his campaign for the presidency and after he was elected, among them at least four rabbis. One of his closest friends and confidants was Isachar Zacharie, an obscure British-born physician.

The President came to regard Zacharie as a trusted adviser and (according to one newspaper of the time)" perhaps the most favored family visitor at the White House." During a five-month period in 1863, he conducted highly secret negotiations for Lincoln and his cabinet on proposals for a negotiated peace with the Confederacy. Lincoln personally arranged for safe passage for Zacharie to Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, where he conferred with Judah P. Benjamin, the Jewish Secretary of State for the Confederacy, and other leading Confederate officials.

Lincoln's official overtures and actions on behalf of the Jews came more than a half-century after George Washington had sent a letter to the elders of the synagogue in Newport, R.I. in 1790, in which he famously declared that "the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support." He went on to wish that "the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the goodwill of the other Inhabitants." Lesser early elected figures also demonstrated felicity toward Jews and confronted discrimination against them. One of the most notable was Thomas Kennedy, a member of the Maryland House of Delegates from 1815 to 1825, who spent his entire legislative career pushing a bill to secure full civil liberties for

the Jews of Maryland.

A similar test oath at the federal level was proposed by the Northern Congress after the Civil War broke out in 1861-to require every military chaplain to be “a regularly ordained minister of some Christian denomination.” In July of 1862, Congress adopted Lincoln’s proposed amendments to allow “the appointment of brigade chaplains of the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish religions.” Shortly thereafter Lincoln appointed the Rev. Jacob Frankel of Philadelphia’s Rodeph Shalom Congregation as the nation’s first Jewish military chaplain.

Over a century later, Israel Drazin, a native Baltimorean, became the first Jewish Chaplain General of the United States.

In 1862, Lincoln was called upon to intervene in what The New York Times of that era characterized as “one of the deepest sensations” of the Civil War.

Union General Ulysses S. Grant had been infuriated by what he perceived as a black market in Southern cotton, which he thought was being run” mostly by Jews and other unprincipled traders.” On December 17, 1862, Grant issued” General Order No.11,” which declared that: The Jews, as a class violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department and also department orders, are hereby expelled from the department within 24 hours from the receipt of this order. The “department” to which Grant was referring took in large swaths of Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee. The order went into immediate effect and Jewish families were forced out of their homes in Paducah, Kentucky, Holly Springs and Oxford, Miss.

A group of merchants from Paducah refused to be cowed, however, and immediately sent a telegram to President Lincoln, decrying the order as “the grossest violation of the Constitution and our rights as good citizens under it [which] would place us. as outlaws before the world.” It did not take long for the President to study General Order No. 11, before he instructed his General in-Chief, Henry Halleck, to cancel the orders.

Some 10, 000 Jews fought in the Civil War- 3,000 for the Confederacy and 7,000 for the Union; there were at least nine Jewish generals and 21 Jewish colonels.

Grant formally revoked his order on January 17, 1863.

Grant himself was elected president in 1868. Eight years later he was honored by the Adas Israel Congregation in Washington. He did not mention Order No.11 in his memoirs.

Whether Abraham Lincoln was a religious man has been widely debated, but there is little doubt among historians and biographers that he did not believe in the divinity of Jesus.

It is virtually certain that Lincoln believed in a Supreme Being, which he called at various times Necessity, Fate or God.

Lincoln was a man of many parts. Most know him as someone between the folksy Honest Abe and the Great Emancipator, a consummate politician, an iconic peacemaker.

It was his way with the spoken word that has etched him into the American soul and psyche. He had always been fascinated by both the promise and problems of self-government.

After the fall of Fort Sumter in 1861, he said that the issues between North and South involved something beyond just the future of the United States.

“It presents to the whole family of man, the question whether a constitutional republic, or a democracy- a government of that people, by the same people- can, or cannot, maintain its

territorial integrity, against its own domestic foes.” By the time Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg, on Nov.19, 1863, the same political thoughts had evolved into philosophical rhetoric and jotted down to a few magnificent words: “that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

No doubt Lincoln was aware that one of the heroes at the Battle of Gettysburg was a Jewish general, Edward Salomon, who led his troops in repulsing Pickett’s Charge.

Two months after the Emancipation Proclamation-issued Jan.1, 1863, just days before he revoked Grant’s anti-Jewish Order No.11- Lincoln met with Henry Wentworth Monk, a Christian Zionist from Canada, who expressed hope that Jews who were suffering oppression in Russia and Turkey be emancipated “by restoring them to their national home in Palestine.” In the only known opinion Lincoln ever uttered about his Jewish compatriots, he echoed that sentiment as “a noble dream and one shared by many Americans.” Shortly after 10 p.m. on April 15, 1865, the fifth day of Passover that year, Lincoln was assassinated. The next day black draperies hung in synagogues around the country; Yom Kippur hymns were substituted for holiday melodies.

The Jewish Record of New York compared Lincoln’s passing, before he could see the fruits of his labors, with Moses’ death on Mount Pisgah in sight of the Promised Land.

Rabbi Max Lilienthal of Cincinnati, echoing David’s lament over Abner, said simply,” A great man has fallen in Israel.”

Kenneth Lasson is a frequent contributor.

BOX:

Exhibition Jewish Life in Mr. Lincoln’s City is an original exhibition depicting Jewish life during the Civil War in Washington and Alexandria. Mounted as part of national celebrations of Lincoln’s bicentennial in 2009, the collection of images and objects is on display at the Lillian & Albert Small Jewish Museum, 701 Third St., N.W. (corner of G St.), Washington, D.C.

Books The origins and aftermath of General Grant’s Order No. 11 can be found in a 1909 book entitled “Abraham Lincoln and the Jews,” self-published by Isaac Markens. It was recently digitized and published by Google Books.

More recent sources include Steven Aftergood’s “Abraham Lincoln and the Jews” (2007), Tina Levitan’s “First Facts in American Jewish History” (2007), Arnold Fine’s “Abraham Lincoln and the Jews” (2001). Abraham Lincoln should also be remembered on this President’s Day as a strong friend of Jewish America prior to his presidency and during his administration. PHOTO AKG-IMAGES/NEWSCOM.