

The Myth of The Jewish President

Jonathan D. Sarna (Shma, 10/98, October 3, 1980)

In America, even a Jew can be president. That, at least, has been the claim for two long centuries. It hasn't yet happened, nor does anyone look for it to happen in 1980. Still, the myth of the Jewish president remains pervasive. Manhattan Borough President Andrew Stein talks of being the first Jew in the White House. A novel about "President Levine" has sold well. Jews of all kinds continue to hope and pray. "Though he may tarry, still they await him." Jews have an abiding faith sustained by inexhaustible patience. When it comes to waiting, they are truly the world's most practiced people.

The myth of the Jewish president reaches far back in American Jewish history. Always it has existed independently - without any relationship whatsoever to political realities. In 1807, for example, Myer Moses assured an audience at the Charleston Hebrew Orphan Asylum that "any among us may rise to the first offices in our country should we have talents and popularity to lead us to those places of honor and emolument." He even cherished the fond hope that from among the Jewish orphans there might spring a Washington or a Jefferson. His hope, however, was illusory. In fact, American Jews of his day could not boast of so much as a single Jew in high elective office - not even in New York City where Jews formed over two percent of the population.

Today, there are a number of Jews in high elective office. But not a single one is a serious presidential candidate, nor has one ever been. Several display ample qualifications, and not a few are fired with appropriate ambitions. Hints from party regulars, however, usually suffice to puncture presidential dreams before they even begin to inflate. And if they don't work, graphic pieces of hate mail generally do. Still, Jews continue to talk about a Jewish president as if his coming were a foregone conclusion. They do so for a simple reason: to perpetuate a comforting myth.

The Roots of a Dream

The Jewish president symbolizes to American Jews their equality and supposedly unlimited potential. "America is different" the myth cries out; here Jews can aspire to anything at all. The highest office in the land - the seat of power - is open to them. Their reach is limited only by their grasp.

To Jews, therefore, the myth of the Jewish president is a pledge of allegiance. It is the Jewish equivalent of "liberty and justice for all." To question the myth even to point out that it represents an ideal rather than a reality - is to court disloyalty and all it portends. So Jews profess their unshakeable belief. In the American Jewish creed, the fourteenth article of faith reads: "I believe with perfect faith that in America a Jew can be elected president of the United States."

Many non-Jews share this article of Jewish faith, but, as is so often the case, they disagree over how to interpret it. They see the possibility of there being a Jewish

president as an absurd but logical extreme, a necessity born of church-state separation. Liberty of conscience, they say, demands freedom of religion. Freedom of religion can only exist if people of any creed - even Jews, deists and atheists - can be elected president of the United States. The lesson they learn from this is that Christians must be eternally vigilant. Where once the state stood guard against the election of an "unbeliever," now the responsibility ties squarely on the shoulders of individual voters. Without due caution, the unimaginable "even" - the election of a non-Christian president - might actually come to pass.

The Gentile use of the Jewish Hope

Occasionally, liberal Protestants strike up the Jewish president theme in seeming approval: "In this country ... a Jew [can] be the first magistrate, the President of these United States ... provided his morality, his wisdom, and his active talents pronounced him the best. "

Examined closely, however, these references usually appear in the context of Jewish rights. If a Jew can be president, the argument proclaims, he surely deserves equal status at all other levels. How can individuals persecute a people who might produce a future occupant of the White House?

Once full equality is achieved, however, many non-Jews shift responsibility for political achievement to the Jews themselves. They use the myth of the Jewish president to clear their own consciences of any blame for Jews' continuing absence from the list of American chief executives. They proudly point out that any deserving Jew can have his name on the ballot. Then, they say with a shrug, majority rules. With a smug smile of self-satisfaction, people who themselves would never vote for a Jew can thus insist that Jews have an equal shot at the White House. The myth of the Jewish president, by confusing legal equality and social equality, provides the prejudiced with a powerful polemical shield.

Was not the Catholic Barrier Broken?

In recent times, talk of a Jewish president has quickened. "Before this century bows out," Stanley Chyet has written, "American Jewry will produce a President of the United States." Chyet continues: "He will be nominated by his party almost entirely on the basis of his vote-getting power. Once elected, he will not be likely to take more than a perfunctory interest, if that, in Jewish affairs. Most Jewish voters would, nevertheless, cast their ballots for him -- even during his second campaign -- since the prestige of having a Jew in the White House will be too compelling to resist. "

Others lay great stress on the fact that a Catholic served in the White House. If the country could elect a President Kennedy, they exclaim, can the days of a President Cohen be far behind?

In fact, there are great differences between a Catholic presidential candidate and a Jewish one. In spite of America's deplorable heritage of anti-Catholicism, its Catholic population now boasts of almost fifty million people. The Jewish population, by contrast, numbers less than six million. This difference, translated into votes, is more than sufficient to elect someone president. Furthermore, a Catholic still believes in the divinity of Jesus, even if he disagrees with Protestants about everything else. A Jew can make no such claims. He therefore has a much harder time gathering good Christian votes.

Still, America may, someday, elect a Jewish president. In times of crisis, people who formerly had no chance even of being nominated can sometimes win the presidency hands down. Prophecy is thus too dangerous a game for an historian to play without hedging his bets. Whatever the case regarding elections however, there can be no doubt that the myth of the Jewish president will long endure. It helps Jews and Christians coexist in a nation where, both assume, that anything and everything is possible. It reinforces deeply held beliefs of American exceptionalism. It bridges the gap between Jewish hopes and American realities. It is far too useful a myth to be abandoned.