

If I am not for myself...

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Abraham J. Multer — An Intimate of Presidents

Justice Abraham J. Multer, a native born New Yorker and son of immigrant parents (he was one of eight children), acquired his zeal for justice and his deeply rooted Jewish values from his impoverished environment, enriched by his parents' memories of Jewish cultural life in ghettos of the world. And indeed, Multer's boyhood years were those of laborious struggle and tribulation reminiscent of the period of child labor and the sweatshop. Before he was 13 years old he worked 72 hours a week for all of \$3. He sold candy and popcorn and worked at other odd jobs.

A fascinating insight into Multer's boyhood years which molded his character as he grew into manhood is contained in a profile on him published in the February, 1972, issue of *Veritas*, the Alumni Association Journal of the Brooklyn Law School. It reads in part:

"He was able to go through high school only because he had a job in the school lunchroom during his two hour study period, receiving his lunch and 20¢ a day, which paid his carfare. In nice weather he walked halfway in each direction and saved a dime. He says the two hour trip in each direction was responsible for his learning his lessons. It gave him that much more time to do his studying. Many a night he studied by the light of a penny candle when the quarter was not available for the gas meter. If he and his brother did not comb the beach for driftwood (they lived in Coney Island) there was no fire in the kitchen stove the next day.

From high school he enrolled in evening classes at the Brooklyn division of C.C.N.Y. and worked daytime in a Wall Street bank. When the bank manager advised him that there was no future in banking for a Jew, he decided to study law. A lawyer

friend of his father tried to discourage him by saying a Jew would have a hard time in the legal profession.

Undaunted, he enrolled in Brooklyn Law School and sought a job in a law office. The first Law Journal ad he answered brought a response inviting him to call for an interview if he were not Jewish. An employment agency did better for him and he went to work for a prominent law firm none of whose members or employees were Jewish. The managing partner, Henry C. Turner, became the first chairman of the State Commission against discrimination.

Abe must have performed rather well because he was earning \$25.00 a week before admission to the bar when most law clerks were getting \$3.00 to \$5.00 a week."

As the facts of his career unfold, I came to realize that what he has done for America and for the Jewish people merit inscription in the chronicles of America and the American Jewish community.

As I entered Judge Multer's spacious Chambers in the Brooklyn Supreme Court building I was struck by the large framed photographs of great American presidents lining the walls with inscriptions of personal expressions of affection by each of them, together with countless citations and plaques presented him by national and international organizations in every field of public endeavors.

Justice Multer's half century of public service, including twenty years of service in the U.S. House of Representatives, was singularly distinctive by the fact that he has known on an intimate basis (not too many American Jews can truly say that) every President of the United States and of the State of Israel since 1948, every Prime Minister and every Secretary of State and Minister of Foreign Affairs of both countries.

Cognizant of this fact, I elicited through questions the following revealing episodes reflecting insights into the fundamental attitudes towards Israel of Presidents Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson and their common characteristic: a firm rejection of anti-Israel pressures from Arabists in the State Department. Multer disclosed, for example, that when he called President Truman's attention to one of the arguments constantly used by the State Department in oppos-

ing support of the Jewish State on the ground that it would be a communist dominated country, President Truman's typical staccato reply was: "Don't waste any time talking about communism in Israel, because no true Jew can be a communist."

In a similar vein, President Johnson showed unshaken firmness in his friendship for Israel by overriding the advice of the State Department. Multer cited one instance when he steered through the House of Representatives the passage of an important bill dealing with U.S. policy in the Middle East on the promise by the State Department to send him a letter in support of Israel. "When I did not receive this letter I went to Lyndon Johnson who was then Majority Leader in the Senate and told him about it. Johnson was so incensed by the breach of faith of the State Department that he stopped the bill from being called up in the Senate. Upon receiving an inquiry from the State Department regarding the bill, Johnson lashed out at them for breaking their word. Only after I advised Senator Johnson that I finally received the promised letter from the State Department did he call up the bill," Justice Multer said.

Worthy of historical note are also significant episodes in Multer's relationship with President John F. Kennedy who, like Truman and Johnson, demonstrated his resolve to resist the persistent efforts of the State Department Arabists to alienate the United States from Israel. Multer relates how when John F. Kennedy ran for the Senate the first time, he went to Boston at his own expense to campaign for his candidacy. Multer felt that this was the most effective way to refute rumors spread by Kennedy's opponents that he was antisemitic. Multer felt that this was an utterly false charge. "I shall always cherish the experience when, during my vacationing in the Bahamas after the election of Kennedy and before his inauguration, I received a summons from the President-elect to visit him at Palm Beach to discuss the Israeli situation.

"In the course of my meeting with him, President Kennedy indicated to me in unmistakable terms that if it is the last thing he does he will make sure that it will be his foreign policy that will be implemented and not that of the Arabists in Washington," Justice Multer related.

When I asked Multer what he considered the most memora-

ble event in his Washington career in which he was directly involved, Multer, after a pause, told me:

"There were two significant events affecting Judaism and Jewish relations — both in the U.S. Congress. Until I came to the House of Representatives in 1948, Jewish holidays were never recognized in the transaction of official business. Joseph Martin was then Speaker of the House and Sam Rayburn, Minority Leader. The first Jewish holiday after my arrival prompted me to inform Speaker Martin it would be inconvenient for Jewish members to attend. Martin consulted with Rayburn and John McCormack, then Minority Whip. They asked me for a calendar of Jewish holidays with the result that during all the years I served there, no Roll Call was taken on a Jewish holiday — with one exception. That was on Rosh Hashana, on September 27, 1965, when the first Home Rule Bill for Washington, D.C. since the Civil War was slated for a vote and the presence of every liberal member was vital to ensure its passage."

What subsequently transpired was full of drama and suspense as Multer continued:

"I contacted Rabbi Samuel Belkin in behalf of the Orthodox, Rabbi Nelson Glueck in behalf of the Reform and Rabbi Louis Finkelstein in behalf of the Conservative movement to obtain their consensus ruling on the matter of attendance. Their verdict was that under the circumstances it was permissible to have every Jewish member on the floor provided no writing took place and that the vote was cast orally. Moreover, in order not to miss services we arranged a service in the Capitol to be concluded by noon when the House officially met. The Christian chaplains attended the services and everyone in attendance wore talleisim and donned yarmulkes. The services were conducted by a local Rabbi. A Holy Ark with a *Sefer Torah* had been brought in. This was the first sectarian service ever held in the Capitol and none ever since."

Justice Multer voiced to me the following about the United Nations: "The United Nations has missed its functions and unless it changes in time it will fall apart, sharing the same fate as that of the League of Nations. When the United Nations denies the rights of any of its member nations, the entire body

forfeits respect. When the United Nations arrogates to itself the exclusive rights of a tyrannical majority and requires all to think alike, then the United Nations loses its justification for existence and should be disbanded," Multer said forcefully.

As one surveys Judge Multer's career in the judiciary, from the time he served as Counsel to many City, State and Legislative Committees, as Special Assistant to the New York State Attorney General, as Counsel to the Mayor of New York City, as Judge Advocate in the U.S. Coast Guard (he served in the U.S. Navy during World War II) and his 20 years of service in the U.S. Congress where he sponsored much important legislation and discharged many presidential assignments on the international scene, and coupled with his role as a fighter for the cause of Israel and his active participation in all major facets of American Jewish life — one begins to grasp the deep religiosity and sense of traditional Jewish values that permeated his life's work.