

The March of the Rabbis

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“Clear the way for those rabbis!” That was the first, and probably last, time the Station Master at Washington, D.C.’s Union Station shouted those words. The crowd before him was unlike any that had ever been seen in the central train station of the nation’s capitol. The date was October 6, 1943 and more than four hundred rabbis had come to plead for U.S. government action to save Jews from Hitler.

Most of the rabbis were from the New York area, but others came from Philadelphia and Baltimore, some from as far away as Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus, and Pittsburgh. The fact that October 6 was just three days before Yom Kippur made their participation especially difficult, but it also added to the drama and urgency of the occasion.

THINK ABOUT IT:
Why did they schedule the march to take place so close to Yom Kippur, even though that might make it harder for some rabbis to attend? What point were they trying to make?

The rabbis, many of them wearing long black coats and black hats, marched solemnly from Union Station to the cluster of buildings known as the Capitol. They were met on the steps of the Capitol by Vice President Henry Wallace and a number of prominent Members of Congress. There two of the leaders of the march read aloud the group’s petition to the president, in Hebrew and English.

“Children, infants, and elderly men and women, are crying to us, ‘Help!’,” they read. “Millions have already fallen dead, sentenced to fire and sword, and tens of thousands have died of starvation ... And we, how can we stand up to pray on the holy day of Yom

Kippur, knowing that we haven’t fulfilled our responsibility? So we have come, brokenhearted, on the eve of our holiest day, to ask you, our honorable President Franklin Roosevelt ... to form a special agency to rescue the remainder of the Jewish nation in Europe.”

The protesters proceeded to the Lincoln Memorial, where they offered prayers for the welfare of the president, America’s soldiers abroad, and the Jews in Hitler Europe, and then sang the national anthem.

Then they marched to the gates of the White House, where they had expected a small delegation would be granted a meeting with President Roosevelt. Instead, to their surprise and disappointment, they were met by presidential secretary Marvin McIntyre who told them the president was unavailable “because of the pressure of other business.” In

fact, the president had nothing on his schedule that afternoon, but had been urged to avoid the rabbis by two of his Jewish advisors, who were embarrassed by the protesters and feared the march might provoke antisemitism. Roosevelt decided to leave the White House through a rear exit.

THINK ABOUT IT: If you were an adviser to the president, would you have recommended that he meet with the protesters?

The president did not want to be bothered with appeals to rescue Jews from Hitler. Roosevelt knew that most Americans were opposed to letting in more refugees, and was worried how the issue might affect his upcoming campaign for re-election. The president claimed there was nothing that could



be done for the Jews until after America and its allies defeated Germany in the war. But Jewish leaders knew that if they waited until after the war, there might be no Jews left in Europe to save.

If President Roosevelt thought he could avoid this controversy by avoiding the rabbis, he was mistaken. The next day's newspapers told the story. "Rabbis Report 'Cold Welcome' at the White House," declared the headline of a report in the *Washington Times-Herald*. A columnist for one Jewish newspaper angrily asked: "Would a similar delegation of 500 Catholic priests have been thus treated?" The editors of another Jewish newspaper, *Forverts (Forward)*, reported that the episode had affected the president's previously-high level of support in the Jewish community: "In open comment it is voiced that Roosevelt has betrayed the Jews."

THINK ABOUT IT: Would the president have responded differently to a march by 500 Catholic priests or Protestant clergymen? If so, why?

The rabbis who marched that day included some of the most prominent rabbinical figures in the American Jewish community, such as Eliezer Silver and Israel Rosenberg, co-presidents of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, Solomon Friedman, president of the Union of Grand Rabbis, and Bernard Dov Leventhal, a leader of the Orthodox rabbinate nationwide, who was known as the chief rabbi of Philadelphia. There were also some younger rabbis who would soon become quite prominent, such as Moshe Feinstein, who would later come to be regarded as the leading authority in America on matters of Jewish religious law, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, soon to emerge as the most prominent theologian in Conservative Judaism.

The march of the rabbis was sponsored by the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, a group established by Peter Bergson, a

young Zionist activist from Jerusalem. Although new to America, Bergson understood that in the American political system, dramatic tactics were sometimes needed to attract attention and promote a cause. He organized a dramatic pageant called "We Will Never Die," to publicize the plight of Europe's Jews. He also sponsored hundreds of full-page newspaper advertisements urging the United States government to rescue the refugees. The rabbinical march, coming on the heels of the pageant and the newspaper ads, was designed to attract public attention and, especially, to help launch a major new initiative in Congress on the rescue issue.

The immediate impact of the march of the rabbis was that it speeded up the introduction, in Congress, of a resolution that the Bergson group had initiated, calling for the creation of a federal government agency to rescue refugees.

The Roosevelt administration objected to the resolution, but when it became clear that Congress was ready to pass it anyway, President Roosevelt announced the creation of the agency that the resolution demanded—the War Refugee Board. During the final fifteen months of World War II, the Board played a major role in the rescue of more than 200,000 Jews from Hitler. (Among other things, the War Refugee Board sponsored the work of rescue hero Raoul Wallenberg.)

When the rabbis set out for the White House on that chilly October afternoon, they had no way of knowing if their effort would have any impact. When they recited their Yom Kippur prayers three days later, all they knew was that they had fulfilled their Jewish obligation—to try. But as the months passed and the successes of the War Refugee Board became known, they could feel proud that they had played a role in making it possible.

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