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**Exclusive Book Excerpt:**

## **A Case for Courage Truman and the birth of Israel**

*By Michael Beschloss*

As the Wednesday afternoon sun slanted through the tall windows of the Oval Office, Gen. George Marshall, Harry Truman's secretary of State and the architect of victory in World War II, took a chair beside the president's. Sitting in front of the president's desk, befitting his more junior position, was Truman's White House counsel, Clark Clifford. On Friday, May 14, 1948, at midnight, two days from now, the British would withdraw from Palestine. The United Nations had resolved to divide the region into one Jewish state and one Arab state, with ancient, holy Jerusalem as an international city. Despite the U.N. plan, five Arab armies were ready to kill the fledgling Jewish state.

Clifford implored Truman to recognize the new nation as soon as it was declared. If the U.S. granted legitimacy, so would its allies, allowing the Jewish state to survive. But Marshall advised Truman to keep his distance, warning that the Jews could never stave off Arab legions who far outnumbered them. If they came "running to us for help," the U.S. would have to say no. In what Clifford called "a righteous Goddamned Baptist tone," Marshall said, "If you follow Clifford's advice ... I would vote against you." Shaken to be condemned by the national hero he called "the great one of the age," Truman later warned Clifford, "I can't afford to lose General Marshall!"

Truman's ultimate decision about a Jewish state—one of the most significant foreign-policy decisions in U.S. history—emerged from a storm of cross-pressures and motives. He was besieged by Zionists, anti-Zionists, Democratic politicians eager to court the Jewish vote in an election year and diplomats afraid to rile the Arabs. He felt compassion for the Holocaust survivors still in European camps and reverence for Biblical history. But he feared as well that the new state might require defense by U.S. troops and dreaded that respected leaders like Marshall would accuse him of warping American diplomacy to his own cheap political needs. Truman also had to rise above his own lingering small-town parlor anti-Semitism. Even as president, he privately said malicious things about American Jews to his wife, his friends and his diary that were unworthy of the towering leader he had become.

In April 1945, as Harry Truman became president and Allied soldiers liberated the death camps of Europe, Americans were learning about the terrible reach of the Holocaust. For many American Jews, the Holocaust showed that they must never again depend on the kindness of strangers: only a Jewish state could protect their people from another Hitler. They feared that the small-town Missouri Baptist in the White House could not possibly understand their predicament. They did not know that Truman had grown up knowing Jews or that he had studied their history since boyhood.

For two years in Independence, a Jewish family called the Viners lived next door to Truman's family. As Sarah Viner much later recalled, her brother Abe was "very close friends" with the future president: "Harry was always over at our house ... I think this was his first contact with Jewish people." On the Sabbath, when observant Jews could not do household chores, Harry served as the Viners' "Shabbos goy."

While a 16-year-old student at Independence High School, young Truman was assigned to write about Shylock, Shakespeare's Jewish villain in "The Merchant of Venice," in an essay discovered in 2000. Given vast potential for indulging in anti-Semitism when writing of Shylock, Truman viewed the Jewish people with unexpected sympathy: "We cannot blame Shylock for getting money as a means for revenge upon those who persecuted him. He was not a miser, and if one of his own nation had been in trouble, he would have helped him as quickly as a Christian would help a Christian ... I never saw Jew, Christian or any other man who, if he had the chance, wouldn't take revenge." Truman went on to insist that no one "except the Hebrews" had "ruled" the world, then "when they fell," remained "a distinct people." He wrote that after 2,000 years, the Jews were "a nation apart from nations ... persecuted for their religion," still "waiting for a leader" to gather their "scattered people."

In the wake of the holocaust, many American Jewish leaders blamed themselves for not having demanded that their government do more to stop it. Believing now that the survival of the European detainees and their entire people was at stake, they cast off the polite deference that leaders now derided as "court Jews" had once used around Franklin Roosevelt. In July 1946, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver pounded on Truman's desk and bellowed at him about an Anglo-American committee report that let Holocaust survivors into Palestine, but not with U.S. military support to protect them.

That same month, the two Democratic senators from New York and a pro-Zionist ex-diplomat, James McDonald, came to complain about the report. His back up, Truman told them he thought it was "marvelous." McDonald warned the president he was "scrapping" the Jewish cause in Palestine and would "go down in history as anathema." Truman erupted: "You cannot satisfy the Jews anyway ... They are not interested in the United States. They are interested in Palestine and the Jews ... The Jews aren't going to write the history of the United States—or my history!" Tactlessly, McDonald noted that FDR had understood the "imponderables" of the issue. "I am not Roosevelt!" cried Truman. "I am not from New York. I am from the Middle West. I must do what I think is right."

Truman had always been hypersensitive to any efforts to bulldoze him—and he was determined to show that it couldn't be done. With an eternal chip on his shoulder against the arrogant and powerful, Truman thus bridled at the intense, well-financed Zionist apparatus. He complained to Eleanor Roosevelt that "Jews are like all underdogs. When they get on top, they are just as intolerant and cruel as the people were to them when they were underneath." He banned Zionist leaders from the Oval Office. In a passage of his diary discovered in 2003, Truman wrote, "The Jews have no sense of proportion, nor do they have any judgment on world affairs ... The Jews, I find, are very, very selfish."

Truman consulted his wife, Bess, almost every night about the issues he was dealing with. She was unlikely to have urged him to support a Jewish homeland. After Truman left office, the talk-show host David Susskind spent some time in Independence to interview the ex-president for a TV series. Susskind asked Truman why he never asked

him inside his home. By Susskind's account, Truman replied, "You're a Jew, David, and no Jew has ever been in the house. Bess runs it, and there's never been a Jew inside the house in her or her mother's lifetime." (As late as 1957, long after his cardinal role in creating a Jewish homeland, Truman would still write to Bess that New York City was "the U.S. capital of Israel.")

Anxious about their exclusion, Jewish leaders searched for some new way to reach the president. A Kansas City attorney named A. J. Granoff got a call from a national official of the Jewish fraternal organization B'nai B'rith: "Do you know a man by the name of Jacobstein ... who is supposed to be a very close friend of President Truman?" "You mean Eddie Jacobson," said Granoff. "Sure, I ought to! I'm his friend and lawyer."

In 1917, the genial, quiet Private Jacobson clerked in an Army canteen at Camp Doniphan, Oklahoma, under Lieutenant Harry Truman. Truman wrote his girlfriend, Bess Wallace, back in Independence, that he had a "Jew clerk" running his canteen and that Jacobson was "a crackerjack." After fighting the Germans in France, the two friends opened a men's store in Kansas City, with Harry as salesman-bookkeeper, Eddie as buyer and many old Battery D pals as customers. Then came the postwar depression. "I lost all I had and all I could borrow," said Truman. "Our creditors drove Eddie into bankruptcy, but I became a public official, and they couldn't do that to me."

The friendship survived. During senator Truman's visits to Kansas City, the ex-partners drank bourbon, played poker, told off-color stories and joked about "losing our asses in that store." But the friendship did not include their wives and families. Jacobson's wife, Bluma, recalled that Bess Truman's Wallace relatives were "aristocracy in those parts" and that "the Trumans couldn't afford to have Jews at their house."

In the summer of 1947, Jacobson sat down at Kansas City's Hotel Muehlebach with Granoff and Frank Goldman, the national president of B'nai B'rith. He told them he would never ask Truman for a personal favor, but would "always be glad" to discuss with him "my suffering people across the seas." He had endless faith in Harry's "kindly heart." Granoff said the problem was getting more Jewish refugees into Palestine. Eddie said, "Harry Truman will do what's right if he knows all the facts ... But I'm no Zionist, so first I need the facts from you."

Arriving in Washington, Eddie called the president's appointments secretary, Matt Connelly, who gibed, "What the hell are you doing here without his permission?" When Jacobson and Granoff were ushered into the Oval Office, Truman said, "Sit down, you bastards!" As Eddie recalled, after Truman signed dollar bills for their children and asked about business in Kansas City, he and the president talked "takhles"—a Yiddish term that means "with serious purpose."

Making their case for a Jewish homeland, Granoff and Jacobson insisted they would never ask Truman to act against America's best interests. "You guys wouldn't get to the front gate if I thought any differently," said Truman. "You bastards are the only ones that never tried to embarrass me in any way."

Before retiring at night, Truman donned a green eyeshade and put his hawklike nose in a history book. He had "tried to increase my knowledge all my life by reading and reading and reading"—especially biography and history, insisting, "There's nothing new in human nature ... The only thing new in the world is the history you don't know." As a

nearsighted boy in Independence, Harry devoured a gold-trimmed, four-volume history called "Great Men and Famous Women—from Nebuchadnezzar to Sarah Bernhardt." From the tales he read, he always remembered Cyrus the Great, the Persian king of the sixth century B.C., who enabled the Jewish people to leave their exile and go back to Palestine.

In October 1947, Jacobson implored the president to back a U.N. committee's proposal for Jewish and Arab states in Palestine. He wrote, "Harry, my people need help and I am appealing on you to help them." Loy Henderson, assistant secretary of State, warned that if the U.S. had anything to do with founding a Jewish state, it would jeopardize oil supplies in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and the "whole Arab world" would become the "enemy" of the United States.

The president endorsed Palestine's partition, but warned that the U.S. would not give money to a Jewish state, and that it lacked deployable forces to defend it from the Arab armies. Furious that Truman had overruled him, Henderson tried to whittle down the territory allotted for the Jews. He argued that the town of Jaffa was "essentially Arab" and that Arab herdsman required the Negev desert for "seasonal grazing." But after making it into the Oval Office, Chaim Weizmann, chief of the World Zionist Organization, unfolded maps and persuaded Truman that losing the Negev would undermine a Jewish state by blocking vital access to the Red Sea.

In late November 1947, at the U.N.'s temporary quarters in a converted skating rink at Flushing Meadows, Queens, Palestine's partition came up for a vote by the General Assembly. Arguing that U.S. prestige would suffer if allies like the Philippines and Haiti were seen voting against it, Clark Clifford persuaded Truman to let his aides lobby for partition. As Clifford recalled, "I kept the ramrod up the State Department's butt."

In January 1948, Truman's secretary of Defense, James Forrestal, told him that enforcing partition might require as many as 160,000 American ground troops. Loy Henderson proposed that since partition could not be imposed without a military commitment that Truman would not make, the U.N. should govern Palestine as a trustee when Britain withdrew in May. Horrified that Truman seemed to be wavering on a Jewish state, Chaim Weizmann rushed to New York, hoping to see the president. But Truman told his aides he had seen enough Zionists: "The Jews are so emotional, and the Arabs are so difficult to talk with that it is almost impossible to get anything done." B'nai B'rith's Frank Goldman called Eddie Jacobson in Kansas City. The president was "washing his hands" of Palestine: "You must help us, Eddie."

Jacobson wired Truman, "I have asked very little in the way of favors during all our years of friendship, but I am begging you to see Dr. Weizmann as soon as possible." Tired of what he called Zionist "badgering," the president wired Eddie that the Palestine problem was probably "not solvable." Refusing to give up, Jacobson flew to Washington in hopes of changing his mind, and when Matt Connelly let Jacobson into the Oval Office, Connelly warned him not to mention Palestine. Truman told his friend, "Eddie, I know what you are here for, and the answer is no."

Surprised at his own "nerve," Jacobson asked the president to reconsider, which touched off an explosion. Truman bellowed that the "Eastern Jews" had "slandered and libeled" him since the moment he became president. He didn't want to discuss "Palestine or the Jews or the Arabs or the British." Let the United Nations handle it. Tears rolled

down Eddie's face. He felt "shocked" and "crushed" that his "dear friend" was "as close to being an anti-Semite as a man could possibly be."

Jacobson's eye caught a replica of the courthouse statue in Jackson County, Missouri, that Truman had worked so hard to build. Improvising, he said, "Harry, all your life, you have had a hero. You are probably the best-read man in America on the life of Andrew Jackson." He recalled Truman sitting in a corner of their failed store, "reading books and papers and pamphlets" on Old Hickory. "Well, Harry, I too have a hero—a man I never met, but who is, I think, the greatest Jew who ever lived ... Chaim Weizmann. He is a very sick man ... but he traveled thousands of miles just to see you ... Now you refuse to see him just because you are insulted by some of our American Jewish leaders—even though you know that Weizmann had absolutely nothing to do with these insults ... It doesn't sound like you, Harry ... I thought you could take this stuff they have been handing out."

Deep in thought, Truman drummed his desktop, then swiveled in his chair to gaze at the South Grounds, turning green with spring. For what seemed "like centuries," Eddie held his breath. Then the president spun back around and uttered the most "endearing" words Jacobson had ever heard him speak: "You win, you bald-headed son-of-a-bitch! I will see him."

On Thursday, March 18, after dark, Chaim Weizmann was slipped into the Oval Office. The president could never pronounce Weizmann's first name, so he called him "Cham." Truman pledged to "press forward with partition." Worried about leaks, he did not even tell his secretary of State about Weizmann's visit.

The next day, Truman's U.N. ambassador, Warren Austin, seemed to reverse U.S. policy when he told the Security Council that since peaceful partition into Jewish and Arab states seemed impossible, the United States now believed that the U.N. should rule Palestine as the world's trustee. Informed that Austin had just trampled the president's private promise to Weizmann, Eddie Jacobson couldn't believe it: "I was as dazed as a man could be." Feeling "physically sick," he collapsed into bed for two days.

Unfolding his Saturday morning newspapers, Truman was incensed to read about his administration's "badly bungled" somersault on partition. "This morning I find that the State Dept. has reversed my Palestine policy," Truman told his diary. "The first I know about it is what I see in the papers! Isn't that hell? I'm now in the position of a liar and a double-crosser. I've never felt so in my life." Truman inveighed against the "people on the 3rd and 4th levels of the State Dept. who have always wanted to cut my throat." The president called in Clark Clifford: "How could this have happened? I assured Chaim Weizmann I would stick to it. He must think I am a s--t-ass ... My God, how can I ever face Weizmann again?"

Recovering in Kansas City from what he called "Black Friday," Eddie Jacobson took a call from Chaim Weizmann, who told him not to "feel badly." Privately, Weizmann had been reassured that the president hadn't known of Ambassador Austin's speech in advance and that his commitment to partition still stood. Weizmann told Eddie he was now "the most important single man in the world. You have a job to do, so keep the White House doors open." Jacobson felt "encouraged" to "go on with the work which Fate put on my shoulders."

In April 1948, he eluded reporters by entering the White House through the East Gate, "something I had never done before." Briefed in advance by Weizmann, he informed Truman that a Jewish state would be declared as soon as the British left Palestine. It was "vital" for the U.S. to recognize it. As Eddie recalled, Truman "agreed with a whole heart," saying that "Henderson or a thousand Hendersons won't stop me." But he asked his friend not to mention this private pledge to anyone else.

By then, Truman had decided that the "striped-pants boys" at the State Department who put Jews "in the same category as Chinamen and Negroes" were trying to "put it over on me about Palestine." He wrote his brother he would now "do what I think is right and let them all go to hell."

On Friday, May 14, 1948, in Tel Aviv, the Jews were poised to declare their new nation at 6:00 p.m., Washington time. Truman and Clifford expected the new state to be called "Judea."

At 4 o'clock, Marshall's deputy, Robert Lovett, informed Clifford that the secretary of State would not publicly oppose recognition. Marshall had decided that he should not quit "when the man who has the Constitutional authority to make a decision makes one." Clifford told Lovett, "God, that's good news!"

In a heavily guarded art museum in Tel Aviv, David Ben-Gurion declared that after 20 centuries of wandering, there was now "a Jewish state in Palestine, to be called Israel." At 6:11 p.m. in the White House, Truman signed a document recognizing the Jewish state's "de facto authority," and scrawled the word "Approved." Thinking of Weizmann, he said, "The old doctor will believe me now!" Marshall kept his promised public silence about Truman's decision, but he never spoke to Clark Clifford again.

Chosen as first president of Israel, Chaim Weizmann invited Jacobson to New York, where the good doctor asked him to be "temporary spokesman for the baby state." Eddie wrote, "What a thrill that was! The Lord is sure good to me when He gives me these honors." Eddie flew to New York. When his airport limousine approached the Waldorf, he saw a huge crowd staring up at the new blue and white Star of David flag, flying "beside the stars and stripes of my own country." He wrote, "That was the payoff!" As Jacobson later recalled, "I stood on the sidewalk like a fool, and cried and cried and cried."

In late May, President Weizmann came to Washington, feeling like a "happy man" with a "light heart." Crowds sang the Israeli anthem "Hatikvah." In the White House Rose Garden, Weizmann gave the president a Torah. "Thanks," said Truman. "I've always wanted one of these!"

The presidential campaign of September 1948 found Truman running well behind Thomas Dewey, with Henry Wallace and Strom Thurmond siphoning normally Democratic votes from the left and the right. Clifford had expected that if the president recognized Israel, Jewish donors would pony up for his campaign. But Truman had warned him that by fall, the Jews would say "we've done nothing for them recently." They would be "off and on" him "sixteen times by then."

When Truman won his surprise election victory in November 1948, he lost New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Michigan, all abundant with Jewish voters. Much of the

blame went to Wallace, who complained that Truman wasn't sufficiently pro-Israel. After his victory, Truman wrote Chaim Weizmann that his "elation" on being reelected must resemble Weizmann's when the Jews had proclaimed their state. The man who had once castigated what he called Jewish "underdogs" for being "intolerant" and "cruel" now told Weizmann that he and Israel were clearly both underdogs: "We had both been abandoned by the so-called realistic experts on our supposedly forlorn lost causes. Yet we both kept pressing for what we were sure was right—and we were both proven to be right."

In the end, Truman recognized Israel for many different reasons. The Jews' display of military strength in Palestine had convinced him that U.S. troops would not be needed to defend them. He feared that letting the Russians recognize Israel first would give them a foothold in Palestine. Truman was also motivated by sheer politics. With a tough campaign ahead, he felt that if he did not recognize Israel, the backers of a Jewish state would make his life a living hell. For the hard-bitten Marshall, who operated from cold facts on the ground, Israel was chiefly a potential burden for an overstretched U.S. military. But Truman realized helping to found a Jewish state was a historic act that might qualify him for some future edition of "Great Men and Famous Women."

His favorite psalm had always been, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion." By recognizing Israel, Truman knew he would be forever damned by people who did not want the Jews to have their own state—or who did not want it in Palestine. But as Truman always told himself, the ultimate test of any presidential decision was "not whether it's popular at the time, but whether it's right ... If it's right, make it, and let the popular part take care of itself."

In 1949, wearing a lucky hat inscribed by Truman, Eddie Jacobson made a pilgrimage to Israel, where he was feted by President Weizmann and Prime Minister Ben-Gurion. A Kansas City rabbi told reporters that Jacobson should be president of Israel. Truman wrote his old friend that Israel "couldn't nominate a better man, but I sincerely hope you won't take it." Jacobson explained that it was just "a silly dream of a very emotional rabbi." He was "too proud of my American citizenship to trade it for any office in the world."

When Truman retired in 1953, Eddie wanted to be escort for the ex-president's first visit to the nation whose birth they had both midwived: "I sincerely hope my dream comes true." But in 1955, Eddie died of a massive heart attack. As a daughter remembered, when Truman called on the mourning family, he "put his head in his hands and started to sob," exclaiming, "I've lost my brother!"

In 1965, an Eddie Jacobson Auditorium was built in Tel Aviv. Truman hoped "at long last" to "make my journey" to Israel, but a bruising fall in the shower had made him old almost overnight. Instead he wrote a tribute to "my great and irreplaceable friend," saying that Eddie's name "should be forever enshrined in the history of the Jewish people." Interviewed by an Israeli reporter in Independence, Truman said, "Now remind me, how did Eddie use to say 'congratulations' in Hebrew—Mazel something? ... Yeah, tov. Mazel tov!"

Truman once said that "a weeping man is an abomination." But with his reverence for the Bible and ancient history, Truman was profoundly moved to know he had helped regather the Jews in the Holy Land. Told that an Israeli village had been renamed "Kfar

Truman," the stricken president had to cover his face with a handkerchief. Soon the president was proudly comparing himself to the ancient Persian king who had enabled the Jews to return to Zion. During a visit to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York just after Truman left office, Eddie Jacobson introduced his old friend by saying, "This is the man who helped to create the state of Israel." The ex-president brought Eddie up short: "What do you mean 'helped create'? I am Cyrus! I am Cyrus!"

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