

# THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

## Opinion

### What's best for Americans is best for American Jews



#### Your Turn

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Guest columnist

President Donald Trump's recent assertion that Jewish Americans who continued to vote for Democratic candidates were "very disloyal to Israel and to the Jewish people" provoked a harsh backlash from a wide array of American Jewish organizations as well as many political commentators and office holders.

The critics rightfully denounced the president's startling declaration that "loyal" American Jews would be compelled to vote only for Republicans (and, of course, only for Mr. Trump) because the GOP (read Mr. Trump) has proven itself to be the political party that supports Israel and, by extension, Jews. The Democratic Party, Mr. Trump charged, has members who "hate Israel and all Jewish people."

Critics correctly noted that Mr. Trump's incendiary rhetoric serves only to reinforce an age-old canard that casts the Jew in the role of a feckless citizen who cares little about the nation and who seeks only to promote some self-centered interest. Even though an organized Jewish community has been a continuous presence on the North American continent from 1654 to the present day, Mr. Trump's comments will unquestionably appeal to those who are already inclined to believe that Jews think first and foremost about themselves.

It is interesting to note that the first time Jews debated whether they should vote for a presidential candidate because he was or was not "pro-Jewish" occurred during the election of 1868, when the Republican nominee Ulysses S. Grant squared off against Democrat Horatio Seymour. General Grant bore the mantle of Abraham Lincoln's party, and Jews adored Lincoln as the heroic preserver of their constitutional rights.

It was Lincoln who appointed the first Jew to serve as a military chaplain despite those who opposed authorizing Jews to serve as religious leaders in an army of largely Christian soldiers. It was Lincoln who skillfully side-stepped appeals placed before him by evangelical activists who sought to amend the Constitution so that America would unquestionably be known as a Christian nation. And it was Lincoln who revoked an order issued by Grant on Dec. 17, 1862, wherein the famous general summarily expelled "the Jews, as a class" from the military department he oversaw.

This odious order constituted the only time in all of American history that Jews were banished from U.S. territory. Fortunately, as soon as the order came to Lincoln's attention, he demanded that it be revoked.

Grant's candidacy in 1868 generated a remarkable and heated debate among the Jews of America. Should they vote for the candi-

date who carried on the policies of their beloved President Lincoln, even if that party was led by a man who six years earlier had banished them from his department, or should they vote instead for the Democratic candidate, Seymour, whose party promised a departure from the political legacy of their martyred hero, Abraham Lincoln?

Not surprisingly, some Jews flatly refused to vote for Grant. They insisted the general was a bigot and anti-Jewish. Cincinnati's renowned rabbi, Isaac M. Wise, urged the readers of his newspaper, *The Israelite*, to vote for anyone but Grant: "If there are any among us who lick the feet that kick them about and like dogs, run after him who has whipped them, if there are persons small enough to receive indecencies and outrages without resentment . . . we hope their number is small!"

Yet many other Jews disagreed with Wise. Perhaps the most extreme such statement came from a Jew living in Missouri who proudly declared: "I do not ask what pleases the Israelites. I consult the welfare of the country. If that party in whose hands I believe the welfare of the country . . . were to place a Haman at the helm of state, and if the opposite party, whose nonexistence I believe would be better for humanity and my country were to place Messiah at their head, make Moses the Chief Justice, and call the Patriarchs to the Cabinet, I should say, Prosper under Haman, my fatherland, and here you have my vote, even if all the Jew in me mourns."

Grant won the presidency in 1868. We have no way of knowing if most Jews voted for him or Seymour. We do know, however, that much to the surprise of those who were convinced that General Grant was a bigot, President Grant proved himself to be a true friend and supporter of America Jewry. He appointed Jews to his administration; he donated his own money to support the erection of a synagogue in Washington D.C.; and became the first president in American history to personally attend the dedication of an American synagogue.

From that time on, American Jews have always debated the political issues of the day as Americans and as Jews. Three hundred and sixty-five years of Jewish communal life in the New World has proven time and again that the majority of American Jews remain stubbornly convinced that what is best for all Americans is best for the American Jew, and what is good for the American Jew is good for America.

As a Charlestonian Jew named Isaac Harby famously put it in a letter he wrote to James Monroe in 1816: "We Jews are 'a portion of the people!'" Politicians like Mr. Trump who fail to appreciate this conviction are unlikely to earn very much support from America's Jewish citizenry.

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