

An Unorthodox Rabbi on Capitol Hill: The Legacy of Rabbi Baruch Rabinowitz

By Rafael Medoff

Long before there was such a thing as AIPAC or the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs (IPA), long before the term "Jewish lobby" had entered the American political lexicon, a young Orthodox rabbi was lobbying on Capitol Hill to rescue Jews from the Holocaust and establish a Jewish state. Rabbi Baruch Rabinowitz, who passed away in Jerusalem this past December at the age of eighty-nine, was an unrecognized pioneer of the lobbying activity

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in Washington that is today a staple of American Jewish political life.

Born in Brooklyn in 1914, Rabinowitz was the son of the "Brownsviller Rebbe," Rabbi Samuel A. Rabinowitz, a sixth-generation direct descendant of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism. Raised in Canada and Bayonne, New Jersey, Baruch traveled to Jerusalem in 1932 to study under Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, the first chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, from whom he received rabbinical ordination.

During those years, Rabinowitz became a follower of Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, founder of the militant Revisionist Zionist movement (the forerunner of today's Likud Party). Shortly after the Nazis rose to power in Germany in 1933, Rabinowitz and a group of his fellow activists climbed atop the German Consulate in Jerusalem and tore down its swastika flag. The charred remains of the flag

are today on display at the Jabotinsky Museum in Tel Aviv.

After his return to the United States in 1934, Rabinowitz continued his studies part time at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS)—which is today Yeshiva University's affiliated rabbinical school—while assuming an active role in the American wing of the Jabotinsky movement. When Palestinian Arab rioting erupted anew in 1936, the Revisionist leadership sent him on a speaking tour to raise funds for the Irgun Zvai Leumi, the underground militia established by Revisionists to combat Arab violence.

In 1938, Rabinowitz began a promising new career in the rabbinate as spiritual leader of Congregation B'nai Abraham in Hagerstown, Maryland. But less than two years later, his life was shattered when his wife, Harriet, was killed by a reckless driver. Three months after that came another traumatic loss—the sudden death of his revered leader, Jabotinsky.

"I had just begun to come back into the stream of the living," Rabinowitz later recalled. "I had just begun to think in terms of the world around me and the problems of my people rather than my own tragedy."

Instead of allowing his grief to break him, Rabinowitz resolved to devote his life to furthering the ideals of Jewish pride, self-defense and the forthright political action for which Jabotinsky stood. He resigned from B'nai Abraham in late 1940 and moved to New York to work full-time for the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine, a Revisionist faction involved in promoting *Aliyah Bet*—immigration from Europe to Palestine in defiance of the British White Paper restrictions.

Among Rabinowitz's close colleagues in the *Aliyah Bet* campaign was Rabbi Louis I. Newman of Temple Rodeph Shalom in New York City, one of the few Reform rabbis who supported Jabotinsky. Despite their theological differences, the Orthodox son of the Brownsviller Rebbe and the Upper West Side disciple of Stephen Wise worked side by side and developed a deep personal admiration for one another.

From New York to Washington

The group for which Rabinowitz worked in New York was led by a dynamic Jabotinskyite emissary from Jerusalem named Hillel Kook. The nephew of Rabinowitz's revered teacher, Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Hillel adopted the pseudonym "Peter Bergson" in America to shield his family from any embarrassing publicity.

Bergson arrived in the United States in the spring of 1940, and under his leadership the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine was transformed into the Committee for a Jewish Army, which campaigned for the creation of a Jewish armed force to fight alongside the Allies against the Nazis. The British rejected the proposal because of Arab opposition, and because they feared the Jews would eventually use

such military force to help bring about the creation of a Jewish state.

Bergson realized early on that to influence London, he had to go through Washington. With England desperate for US aid in its war with Germany, the British government would have difficulty resisting a plan endorsed by the Americans. Bergson needed someone full-time in the nation's capital to press the case for a Jewish army. He turned to Rabinowitz, whose plea of "I've never met a congressman in my life—I wouldn't know how to begin," fell on deaf ears. Although Rabinowitz was a novice in the political world, he was an experienced public speaker and possessed good interpersonal skills.

Earlier attempts at Jewish lobbying in Washington had never taken hold. During the late 1930s, the mainstream American Zionist movement briefly operated a Capitol Hill office led by Isadore Breslau, but that lobbying effort soon fell victim to budget cuts and divisions among Zionist leaders over the propriety of pressing Jewish issues in Washington. Likewise, in

1940 the Revisionist Zionists had sent one of their representatives, Benjamin Akzin (who later became the dean of the Hebrew University law faculty), to meet with members of Congress on occasion, but they did not have the resources to sustain the effort. Now Rabinowitz would try to succeed where his predecessors had failed.

In the autumn of 1941, Rabinowitz began his work on Capitol Hill. "Day after day I visited members of Congress of both Houses," he recalled. "I saw an average of six congressmen a day, five days a week." His first and closest ally in Washington was an Irish-American congressman from New York, Andrew Somers, whose hostility to the British drew him to support Zionism. Rabinowitz worked out of Somers' office and used his connection with the congressman to cultivate ties with numerous other members of Congress. He built relations on both sides of the aisle, although Republicans were often more receptive to Rabinowitz's appeals, while many Democrats hesitated to defy the Roosevelt administration's line on Palestine or refugees. The tireless young



Above: A Bergson Group advertisement that appeared in the Chicago Sun on Monday, November 29, 1943. Right: Baruch Rabinowitz addressing a meeting in Washington, DC, circa 1943. Photo courtesy of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies

The Search For Baruch Rabinowitz

Unique among Jewish organizations, the Bergson group voluntarily dissolved shortly after the creation of the State of Israel. It had been conceived strictly as a vehicle for confronting an emergency; after the Holocaust and the establishment of the Jewish State, it was no longer needed. It left behind no alumni association and held no reunions of former members, thus making it difficult for historians to find them. Some Bergson activists stayed in touch with each other over the years, but others did not. Rabbi Baruch Rabinowitz was one of the latter.

When I sought to contact him for my research on the Bergson group, I found that none of the surviving activists from the group knew where he lived, and none of the major Jewish archival institutions could find a clue—in part because, unbeknownst to me, he had shortened his name to “Robbins” and was living in quiet retirement in a small town in Israel. The diligent efforts of Maryland podiatrist Gerald Falke, a longtime member of Congregation B’nai Abraham, eventually led to contact with Rabinowitz’s sister in Brooklyn, and then to Rabinowitz himself. He kindly consented to a series of interviews and shared with me his unpublished 225-page autobiography, an invaluable source of information about his lobbying days.

Fortunately, I made contact with Rabinowitz in time for his work to receive its first public recognition, in the form of a panel about him in a 1997 exhibit by the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland on *The People of Maryland and the Land of Israel*.

Baruch Rabinowitz, age eleven, in the summer of 1925 (right), with his sister, Sylvia (left) and an unidentified friend. Photo courtesy of Sharon Rabinowitz Ettkin

rabbi frequently burned the midnight oil while ghostwriting pro-Zionist speeches for sympathetic congressmen.

The Jewish army idea was later taken up by mainstream American Jewish organizations, which lobbied Allied officials behind the scenes while the Bergson activists kept up the pressure in the media and on Capitol Hill. Eventually the British agreed to establish the Jewish Brigade, which fought with distinction against the Germans in the spring of 1945. Many of its veterans took part in the postwar smuggling of Holocaust survivors to Eretz Yisrael, and then put their military training to use in Israel’s 1948 War of Independence.

Lobbying to Save Lives

In 1943, after reports of the Nazi genocide were confirmed by the Allies, Bergson established a new organization, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe. Rabinowitz went door to door on

Leventhal (regarded as the chief rabbi of Philadelphia). Also among the marchers were many young rabbis who would later become prominent such as Rabbis Moshe Feinstein, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Israel Miller and some whose children would become famous, such as Naftali Carlebach (father of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach), Charles Kahane (father of Rabbi Meir Kahane) and Isaac Lewin (father of Nathan Lewin).

The ads and rallies, followed by the dramatic march of the rabbis, set the stage for the Bergson group’s crowning achievement: a November 1943 congressional resolution urging the Roosevelt administration to establish a government agency to rescue Jews from the Holocaust. As the resolution was gaining steam in December, 1943, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. and his senior aides were uncovering a series of secret steps taken by the State Department to obstruct opportunities for rescuing Jews and to block the transmission of Holocaust-related information to the United States.

Morgenthau decided to bring the issue to the president. With the threat of congressional action looming in the background, Morgenthau warned President Roosevelt that the State Department’s actions would ignite an embarrassing public scandal—just ten months before the presidential election. He convinced Roosevelt to pre-empt the rescue resolution by establishing a War Refugee Board (WRB) to rescue European Jews from the Nazis.

Although Roosevelt intended the WRB as little more than an election-year gesture, and although it was underfunded and understaffed, the WRB helped save some 200,000 Jews during the final fifteen months of the war. One of the WRB’s most notable accomplishments was its role in facilitating and financing the life-saving activities in Budapest of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. Among those Wallenberg saved were future US Congressman Tom Lantos (D-CA), then fifteen years old, and Lantos’s future wife, Annette.

Support from Hollywood and Broadway

Bergson had a penchant for creating new committees to confront each new crisis, and Rabinowitz had no trouble making the necessary transitions. At war’s end, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe converted itself into the American League for a Free Palestine, and shifted the focus of its lobbying to the struggle for Jewish statehood. Rabinowitz’s work on Capitol Hill now aimed to intensify the congressional pressure on the British to pull out of Palestine.

Shocked by the realization of the full extent of the Holocaust and moved by the plight of hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors languishing in European Displaced Persons camps, large numbers of prominent Americans, including entertainers and other VIPs, lent their support to the American League for a Free Palestine.

Orthodox rabbis do not usually mingle with Hollywood and Broadway stars, but Rabinowitz increasingly found himself rubbing shoulders with the celebrities of the day. Dispatched to California on a fundraising mission in 1946 by the American League for a Free Palestine, he solicited contributions from entertainers Danny Thomas, Jimmy Durante and Frank Sinatra, among others. Rabinowitz later described Sinatra as “especially enthusiastic and helpful,” and recalled an incident in which he and Sinatra were sitting in a bar, and another customer made a derogatory remark about Jews. “Frank turned around and punched him out.”

Rabinowitz also recruited former boxing champion Barney Ross. The Ross connection proved especially fortuitous when a group of St. Louis Jewish gangsters, associated with the reputed mobster Mickey Cohen, offered to hold a fundraising event for the League on condition that Rabinowitz produce the Jewish boxer as

their keynote speaker. He did so, and the gathering raised over \$100,000. Cohen himself organized a fundraiser at Slapsie Maxie’s nightclub in Hollywood. As Hecht described it, the audience consisted of “a thousand bookies, ex-prize fighters, gamblers, jockeys, touts and all sorts of lawless and semi-lawless characters—and their womenfolk.” An estimated \$200,000 was raised that night.

A long list of celebrities backed Bergson’s work both during and after the Holocaust. When, in 1943, the Bergson group staged *We Will Never Die*, a Hecht-authored pageant that roused public awareness of the Holocaust, such famous actors as Edward G. Robinson, Stella Adler, Sylvia Sydney and Paul Muni volunteered for the cast. A *Show of Shows*, held in Madison Square Garden

in 1944 to raise funds for Bergson’s Holocaust rescue work, featured skits and comedy routines by Bob Hope, Gracie Fields, Jimmy Durante, Ethel Merman, Zero Mostel, Molly Picon and others. Milton Berle served as master of ceremonies. Musical numbers were performed by Paul Robeson, Perry Como, the Andrews Sisters, the Xavier Cugat Band and the Count Basie Band, among others.

The American League for a Free Palestine enjoyed similar support from Hollywood and Broadway. Vincent Price chaired its 1947 dinner in Los Angeles. Harpo Marx, Carl Reiner, Leonard Bernstein and Canada Lee endorsed the League’s work. Marlon Brando spoke at its rallies around the country. But perhaps Rabinowitz’s biggest coup in the recruitment of VIPs was his success in persuading Colonel James



Left: A Bergson Group advertisement that appeared in The New York Times on Tuesday, May 4, 1943. Above: Baruch Rabinowitz (right), his brother David (left) and their father, Rabbi Samuel A. Rabinowitz (the Brownsviller Rebbe), who is holding the sefer Torah, in Brooklyn, 1938. Photo courtesy of Sharon Rabinowitz Ettkin

Roosevelt, son of the late president, to serve as chair of the League's West Coast Division.

Finding Support South of the Border

On one occasion, the Bergson group sent Rabinowitz to Mexico, together with Congressman Somers and Stella Adler, who, in addition to her work as an actress and as a renowned acting coach, was a central activist in the Bergson group. The ostensible purpose of the mission was to set up a south-of-the-border branch of the American League for a Free Palestine. But while Somers and Adler were addressing rallies and giving interviews to the local media, Rabinowitz slipped away for secret talks with Mexican government officials to seek weapons for the Jewish revolt against the British.

Rabinowitz was also sent to the Dominican Republic, where he brokered a deal with President Rafael

Memorial Fund

The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies (www.WymanInstitute.org) has established the *Baruch Rabinowitz Memorial Fund* to encourage research into the Holocaust rescue activity of Rabinowitz and his colleagues. The Wyman Institute holds the *Baruch Rabinowitz Papers*, a collection of memoirs and documents pertaining to his work.

Trujillo who was then under criticism in the US for his harsh domestic policies. Rabinowitz agreed to praise the Trujillo administration in his meetings with congressmen, in exchange for false passports to help Irgun fighters escape from a British detention camp in Eritrea, East Africa. Four future Israeli leaders owed their freedom to Rabinowitz's efforts: Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Justice Minister Shmuel Tamir, Finance Minister Yaacov Meridor and Deputy Speaker

of the Knesset Arieh Ben-Eliezer.

Breaking Down Barriers


During his years on Capitol Hill, Rabinowitz also played a role in an important civil rights battle. The incident centered around *A Flag is Born*, a Hecht play about elderly Holocaust survivors who encounter a young Zionist on his way to the Holy Land to fight for Jewish statehood. Paul Muni and Celia Adler starred alongside twenty-two-year-old Marlon Brando, a protégé of Stella Adler. Brando recalled in his memoirs how his character's lines criticizing American Jewish apathy during the Holocaust "sent chills through the audience," and at some performances, "Jewish girls got out of their seats and screamed and cried from the aisles in sadness."

After a successful ten-week run on Broadway—during which the *London Evening Standard* denounced it as "the most virulent anti-British play ever staged in the United States"—*Flag* was supposed to be staged at the National

Theater in Washington, DC. But Hecht and thirty-two other playwrights had just announced they would not permit their works to be performed there because the National barred African-American theatergoers. The Washington performance was rescheduled for Baltimore's Maryland Theater, and Rabinowitz organized a group of eighteen US senators to travel to Baltimore for the event.

But on the eve of the performance, the NAACP alerted the Bergson group that the Maryland Theater, while not barring African-Americans, restricted them to the balcony. Using the NAACP's threat to picket as leverage, Rabinowitz and his colleagues successfully pressured the theater management to rescind the seating discrimination. Twelve African-Americans attended the opening night performance of *A Flag Is Born* and sat where they chose. Exuberant NAACP leaders hailed the "tradition-shattering victory" won by the alliance of Black and Zionist activists against theater discrimination. That triumph was subsequently used by Baltimore civil rights activists to help bring about the desegregation of other theaters in the city.

of Capitol Hill or hobnob with Hollywood stars or other public figures. Yet there was Rabinowitz writing speeches for Congressmen, meeting with the president of the Dominican Republic, talking up the Irgun at Frank Sinatra's pool, rubbing shoulders with gangsters at Slapsie Maxie's and working with African-American leaders to smash racial barriers in Baltimore.

For young Orthodox Jews today, none of this may seem extraordinary. After all, Orthodox organizations now have full-time lobbyists in Washington; more than a few Orthodox rabbis have left their pulpits to pursue careers in the public arena; several prominent Orthodox rabbis have developed well-publicized friendships with Hollywood stars, and an Orthodox rabbi in New York is the head of an organization devoted to strengthening Black-Jewish relations. What is remarkable is that Rabinowitz did all of these things—and he did them sixty years ago, helping to pave the way for the future of political activism by American Orthodox Jews. 

The OU in Washington

In 1986, the OU established the Institute for Public Affairs (IPA) to protect the interests and promote the values of the American Orthodox Jewish community. Working with members of Congress and the executive branch, the IPA addresses issues ranging from religious freedom, to Israel's security, to education-funding policies.

The IPA files legal briefs in federal and state courts, meets regularly with the diplomatic corps and conveys the OU's views in broadcast and print media outlets. The IPA pursues its goals through educating our community's grass roots about legislation or government initiatives that the OU endorses, as well as protesting initiatives antithetical to Jewish interests through constituent missions to Washington and the IPA's Collegiate Congressional Internship Program. OU senior leadership is often invited to the White House, whether for publicly announced meetings with the president or to participate in off-the-record briefings and dialogues with the president's chief aides.

IPA activities are regularly covered by the Anglo-Jewish media and by major general media outlets such as C-Span, FOX, CNN, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

Some of the IPA's recent accomplishments include:

- Facilitating the receipt of more than \$1 million in federal disaster relief funds by the earthquake-damaged Seattle Hebrew Academy through intercession with President Bush, who reversed the unfair policy of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which had denied such funds to religious institutions;
- Securing the introduction of the federal Workplace Religious Freedom Act in the United States Senate with a record twenty-one cosponsors—thereby positioning this legislation for action in 2004;
- Playing a major role in the passage of the Syria Accountability Act in both the House and the Senate.

