

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 275 12 Sivan 5753 / 1 June 1993

QUIET DIPLOMAT: MAX FISHER

Marshall Breger

From a Small Town in Ohio / The Six-Day War and the Reconstituted Jewish Agency / A Zionist "Shtadlan" / Resupplying Israel During the Yom Kippur War / An Address for Republican Jews / Fundraising and Campaign Finance Reform / Access, Influence, and Staying Power

From a Small Town in Ohio

[Editor's Note: This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* reviews Peter Golden's book *Quiet Diplomat: A Biography of Max Fisher* (Cornwall Books, 1992).]

There is no doubt that Max Fisher has made a difference — to Zionism, to the State of Israel, and to the Republican party. Over his lifetime, Fisher made the Republican party a place where Jews are well-accepted, made Israel the major focus of American Jewish philanthropy, and changed the Zionist movement.

Some will find it anomalous that a man of humble origins should have a profound influence on the Republican party, and that a man with little formal Jewish education should have such tremendous impact on Israel, the Zionist movement, and the Jewish community. However, Fisher's background as the son of a shopkeeper in a small Ohio town, which had only five Jewish families, helped shape the personal attributes and attitudes that

would enable him to have such a profound effect on such a variety of institutions and communities.

Max Fisher was raised in New Salem, Ohio, which like many small Ohio towns in the 1920s had an active Ku Klux Klan chapter. While his Jewish background was scant, he had a strong sense of Jewish identity. As a teenager his mother sent him twenty-two miles by trolley to take live chickens for *shechting* to the nearest kosher butcher in Youngstown. During his childhood, moreover, Fisher had to live with overt anti-Semitism. He was denied membership in the local YMCA and was continually called "Rabbi," perhaps half-jokingly, by his classmates.

After graduating from Ohio State in 1930, which he entered on a football scholarship (and where he was introduced to organized Jewish life, becoming president of the local Hillel), Fisher found himself in the oil refining business. Even though he had no background in chemical engineering, through practical experience and some night

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor.
13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, 92107, Israel; Tel. 02-619281, Fax 972-2-619112. © Copyright. All rights reserved.
ISSN: 0334-4096.

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

courses in petrochemistry at the University of Michigan he mastered the technical aspects of the business of supervising the construction of a refinery. Through hard work, necessary luck, and keen business insights, Fisher built a successful refining company which enabled him to become one of the wealthiest men in America.

Even when he was struggling financially, Fisher was generous in his contributions to charities. When he became wealthy, Fisher applied his indefatigable determination to charitable fundraising, primarily for Jewish causes. Fisher's fundraising talents were quickly noticed by a variety of Jewish institutions and he soon was heading numerous charity drives. In December 1964, Fisher was elected General Chairman of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA). Again, Fisher may have found himself an outsider since previously the general chairmanship of the UJA had been the exclusive domain of German Jewish immigrants. Fisher was one of the first Jewish leaders of Eastern European extraction to hold that office.

However, if Fisher was an outsider to the elite world of Jewish charity, he was not a newcomer. Unlike many "big givers," Fisher had not erupted on the nation's philanthropic scene by virtue of family connections or checkbook philanthropy. As with his start in the oil business, Fisher was a "hands-on" giver, beginning on the bottom rung of the ladder of Jewish philanthropy, through activity in the local Detroit Federation. His background in local fundraising helped him cement the relationship between the UJA, which raised funds for Israel, and the local Jewish charitable federations that raised funds primarily for local Jewish institutions. Indeed, in 1965, while he served as Chairman of the UJA, he was elected Vice President of the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF), the umbrella organization for the local federations. In 1969, in a symbolic articulation of Fisher's concern for unity, while President of the UJA he was elected President of the CJF. As Abraham Karp has written, Fisher's philanthropic career "represented the final consolidation of the Jewish community into a unified entity."

The Six-Day War and the Reconstituted Jewish Agency

Fisher's tenure as head of the major Jewish philanthropic organization came at a critical time for the State of Israel. In 1967, the Six-Day War broke out and Israel was in desperate need of resources. Fisher responded with great energy and UJA fundraising increased dramatically. But perhaps as important as

the dollars he raised during that period of need was Fisher's contribution to the institutionalization of Israel as the central cause of Jewish philanthropy.

Fisher recognized that the Six-Day War had energized the American Jewish community. However, he was concerned that the wealthy Americans who had opened up their wallets to Israel in an unprecedented manner would eventually grow weary of contributing and fundraising for a cause in which they had no say in the use of the funds. Fisher thus negotiated a formal institutional role for the fundraising leadership of diaspora Jewry within the Jewish Agency, which had previously been the sole province of the World Zionist Organization. Under the newly reconstituted Jewish Agency, 50 percent of the Board of Governors of the organization were secured for diaspora fundraisers. The "Caesarea Process" which he developed, and by force of will sustained, became the charter for a new Zionist politics.

This change in the structure of the Jewish Agency did not come easily. Many in the Zionist community reacted to the idea of non-Zionist officers as if it was heresy. To their mind the non-Zionists were merely "checkbook" Jews with little concern for, and few ties with, the Jewish people or the Jewish state. In addition, the Israeli political parties customarily used the Jewish Agency payroll as a patronage dumping ground and were reluctant to have their turf invaded. Nonetheless, Fisher endured the emotional and somewhat acrimonious debate to secure a leading role for the fundraisers and thus help sustain the intensity of their interest and commitment to the Jewish state. Indeed, the extent to which the distinctions between "fundraisers" and Zionists seems anachronistic to our contemporary ear is itself telling proof of how successful Fisher's efforts were.

A Zionist "Shtadlan"

It is a matter of more than sociological interest that the leading Jewish Republican is a man whose own Jewish background was scanty at best, with little Jewish education or training. Indeed, he was not *bar mitzvah* until he was 76. He knew little of Jewish history and ritual. Yet as Fisher's history makes clear, he was always a proud Jew. In the mid-1960s his company, Marathon Oil, held large concessions in Libya, as did other Jewish-owned companies such as Occidental and Amara-Hess. After Libyan leader Khadafi began to play the "oil card," Fisher chose to step down from the chairmanship of the company he helped build rather than curtail his pro-Israel activities.

Indeed, it is in his attitude toward Israel that Fisher differed so markedly from many of the American Jewish *shtadlanim* that preceded him. Louis Marshall, the undisputed Jewish leader of the progressive era, was never friendly to Zionism. Joseph Proskauer, Truman's leading Jewish advisor, was in fact opposed to a Jewish state as was the organization he led, the American Jewish Committee. Other *shtadlanim*, whether Zionists or not, were connected only tangentially with the rank and file of the community.

An incident that took place during Fisher's tenure as Chairman of the UJA led to Fisher's historical role of Jewish advisor to Republican presidents. In 1965, the UJA had decided to honor three military leaders — one each from Britain, France, and the United States — who played a pivotal role in liberating the survivors of the Holocaust. Former President Eisenhower was selected to be the American honoree, and Fisher was assigned the task of inviting the former Allied commander. Fisher traveled to Eisenhower's Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, farm to personally extend the invitation. During the conversation that ensued, Eisenhower confided to Fisher that he had made a mistake when he pressured Israel to withdraw from the Sinai in 1956. At the end of that conversation, Eisenhower told Fisher: "If I'd had a Jewish advisor working for me, I doubt that I would have handled the situation the same way. I would not have forced the Israelis back." Eisenhower's statement struck Fisher with the impact of an epiphany and clarified the course of his political career. Fisher came to see the role of presidential confidant as his life's ambition.

Richard Nixon had a great deal of respect for Max Fisher. Fisher had not only raised a great deal of money for Nixon's campaign, but Nixon admired Fisher's serious, hard-working demeanor. It is clear that Fisher could have been in the Nixon Cabinet had he so wished. However, Fisher understood that to take a position in the administration was to take "the king's shilling" and be in the presidents's debt. Fisher, however, wanted to make sure that the accounts tilted in his favor so that he could better exercise influence at critical moments for the Jewish community.

Resupplying Israel During the Yom Kippur War

The history books will clearly record that Fisher did exercise influence at very critical moments. During the Yom Kippur War, when Israel was indeed in desperate need of a resupply of arms from the United States, Fisher was in constant touch with Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz. Fisher quickly arranged a meet-

ing with the president. On the fourth day of the war, Fisher and a delegation of leaders of Jewish organizations met with Nixon, who was already consumed by Watergate and the scandal involving his vice-president, who would resign the next day. At that meeting, Fisher told him: "I've worked hard for you and I never asked anything for myself. But I'm asking you now. Please send the Israelis what they need. You can't let them be destroyed." Nixon assured him at that meeting that Israel would get everything it needed.

It is a matter of record that Nixon followed through on this commitment. It is also a matter of history that there was serious opposition in the Nixon administration to Israel's resupply. James Schlesinger, then Secretary of Defense, opposed the resupply and conjured up trumped-up legalities to slow down the effort. While Henry Kissinger, then Secretary of State, supported a resupply, he proposed a limited effort only, using only three C-5A transport planes. Nixon overrode both and ordered the use of all available C-5As, and became personally involved in the implementation of his orders. By the seventh day of the war American aircraft, loaded with military supplies, were landing in Israel. Alexander Haig is quoted as saying: "Nixon drove it down Schlesinger's throat."

It is clear that Nixon had considerations other than his relationship with Fisher in ordering the resupply of Israel. Nixon later made it clear that he had to counter the massive Soviet airlift that was taking place and that he was not going to allow a Soviet airlift to Israel's enemies to lead to an Israeli defeat. However, would he have so vigorously pursued his policy and ridden herd on the bureaucracy had Fisher not been there? That is a question that the Israelis are grateful did not have to be answered.

Fisher would repeat his personal intervention in 1975. When the Ford administration announced a so-called "reassessment" of the American-Israeli relationship, Fisher used his influence with the president to diffuse the tense situation. Similarly, he used his access to Presidents Reagan and Bush to twice promote the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry. He also created the "no-name group" to liaise between the Bush administration and the Jewish community to facilitate American support for Soviet Jewish emigration.

An Address for Republican Jews

Max Fisher's access to Republican presidents became so well accepted that it changed the role of the Jewish community in both parties. Before Max Fisher, there were few Jews in the Republican party. Fisher's

activities and the policies of Republican presidents with whom he worked changed all that. Pre-Fisher, Jewish outreach was a once every four years affair. In 1985, after having set up a series of Jews for Nixon, Jews for Ford, and Jews for Reagan committees, Fisher institutionalized the Republican Jewish effort through the creation of the National Jewish Coalition. The Coalition soon became the "official" address for Republican party and Republican White House liaison with Republican Jews. Indeed, after watching how the Coalition operated, Democratic Jews in 1990 set up an analogous group, the National Democratic Jewish Council, to focus on Jewish concerns in the Democratic party. As one would expect, the 11 to 20 percent of the Jewish vote for George Bush in 1992 had an adverse impact on NJC's fortunes. Nonetheless, it remains the *poste restante* for Jewish concerns in the Republican party.

The Democrats, of course, had a different reason to listen to Jewish concerns — they had a "Jewish base." Indeed, it is no reduction in our esteem for Harry Truman to acknowledge that Clark Clifford's 1948 reelection strategy for the then-beleaguered Truman was premised on his (and not Thomas Dewey or Henry Wallace) winning New York. Democratic politicians grew up, one might say, with a *yarmulka* in their pocket. Their relations with Jews and the Jewish community were both sensitive and intimate. As but one example, Arthur Krim, then a national leader of the UJA, was a guest in the White House itself on June 6, 1967, and was able to speak almost immediately to President Johnson on Israel's behalf.

Equally important, the Jewish community is known for its substantial financial support for Democratic party causes, usually in several multiples of the labor movement's Political Action Committee (COPE) support for the Democrats. The critical importance of this financial resource base to the Democratic party cannot be gainsaid. It has been suggested that up to 40 percent of the political money available to Democrats comes from Jewish sources. Should that monetary support dry up, any Democratic candidate would have to reassess his strategy. Indeed, Fisher worked to dry up traditional Jewish financial support for Hubert Humphrey in 1968, forcing Humphrey to spend much of that campaign's final moments raising cash rather than seeking votes.

Fundraising and Campaign Finance Reform

In the 1968 and 1972 presidential races, Fisher raised over \$11 million for Nixon. After the enactment of the 1974 amendments to the Federal Election Cam-

paign Act, which limited individual contributions to candidates to \$1,000 per election, Fisher, adopting the techniques of UJA fundraising, continued to produce prodigious amounts for the Republican party. Unlike so much other campaign money, the funds that Fisher raised never came with explicit *quid pro quos*, but rather there was just a quiet suggestion that they were credit in the bank to be drawn on should the Jewish community's vital needs so warrant.

Indeed, the drive to curb political action committees (PACs) has caused considerable turmoil within established Jewish organizations. Normally they would be found in the forefront of such a "politically correct" effort. Nonetheless, because of a belief that Jewish "power" would be adversely affected by legal inhibitions on Jewish political fundraising, they have largely held off from supporting limits on PAC contributions.

That concern may indeed be well-placed. Political candidates always received substantial Jewish money from their home states, but more and more since the late 1970s, members of Congress, and particularly U.S. Senators, have looked to the Jewish community countrywide for financial support. Where once the Jewish community opposed selected "bad guys" like Paul Findley or Charles Percy and supported designated "good guys" like Doc Long of Maryland, now just about every member of Congress wants and seeks support from the Jewish community. As the executive director of New York's Jewish Community Relations Council has pointed out, "I used to have to schedule for one Congressman a month; now there are weeks when I have almost one a day coming to visit." One danger the community faces is that the demand for fiscal support may well have outrun the community's present capacity to produce. Jewish philanthropists are used to making tax-deductible contributions. It requires an education process to accustom "big givers" to respond financially with non-deductible campaign finance dollars.

Access, Influence, and Staying Power

Max Fisher asserted the Jewish position as powerfully and successfully as it has ever been done. Still, he (and other Jewish leaders) were criticized as being as much interested in *access* as in *influence*. There is some truth in this critique. However, as Fisher has often pointed out, if one does not have access, one will not even have a chance for influence. Fisher's motto was "live to fight another day." He understood the lonely ridge on which he walked. If he were seen by the White House as simply representing Jewish interests

he would be categorized as just another interest group lobbyist, albeit one with a large pocketbook. For his particular method to work, the powers that be must understand that he was pursuing Jewish interests because it was in the administration's interest to do so as well. Put another way, the White House had to know that if Max Fisher told them they could not do what they were planning without jeopardizing their political and moral status in the Jewish community, this was not just another *shrei of gevalt* but it was time to really think again.

Thus, while he asserted Jewish interests vigorously, Fisher strove to never antagonize unnecessarily. He always tried to keep the lines of communication open. At the same time, Fisher recognized another truth of leadership: one cannot be a leader if no one is following.

At times this approach caused consternation. Should Fisher have thrown down the gauntlet after the Reagan Plan surfaced in 1982? Should he have drawn a line in 1981 over F-15s to Saudi Arabia, or after President Bush's infamous September 1991 attack on the Jewish lobby? Only history will tell. One danger is that one leaves the White House with an inaccurate assessment of Jewish community attitudes. It seems apparent, for example, that George Bush in 1991-92 did not understand the deep-seated unhappiness with his policies in the Jewish community, believing them to be largely fueled by American supporters of the Likud government.

One of Max Fisher's great strengths is that he is in no way a summer soldier. He stayed with his issues in good times and bad, building up over time a depth of knowledge and a network of personal relationships that allow him to accumulate and exercise influence. His deep-seated ties with Secretary of State George Shultz came not from the Reagan years, but from their

close contacts twenty years earlier when Shultz headed the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) during the Nixon presidency. Fisher's intense Republican party ties came less from his formal "honorary" positions in the 1980s than from his day-to-day work in party building in Michigan and throughout the country. Fisher did the grassroots work of politics even as he supped at the White House. This kind of relationship was one he could draw upon in times of political need. Put simply, Max has staying power not simply because of his wealth, but because he is a hands-on activist on the issues that concern him.

While Golden's telling of Fisher's life is warm and sympathetic, it is not hagiographic exercise. He underscores the "underside" of Fisher's public service with the tremendous toll on his family life engendered by his commitment to Jewish and civic affairs. (The trials of his daughter Mary Fisher — made know to the world at last summer's Republican convention — makes Golden's recounting of Fisher's earlier balancing of public and private responsibilities while his children grew up even more poignant.) Golden's biography reminds us that individuals can matter in history. In an age where historians give primary importance to social and economic conditions, this simple truth is a lesson of which contemporary historians need, through biographies such as Golden's, to be continually reminded.

* * *

Marshall Breger was special assistant to President Reagan and his liaison with the Jewish community. He was subsequently Chairman of the Administrative Conference of the United States and Solicitor of Labor. He is now senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation, Washington D.C.

★ ★ ★ THE JERUSALEM CENTER PROUDLY ANNOUNCES ★ ★ ★
THE PUBLICATION OF

Major Knesset Debates, 1948–1981 (6 volumes)

Edited by Netanel Lorch

Follow the history of contemporary Israel through the living words of its founders. In six volumes totalling 2,516 pages, the major debates held in the Israeli Knesset and in the legislative bodies immediately preceding it — the People's Council and the Provisional Council of State — are presented for the first time in English.

All the major events in Israel's history and the people who participated in their shaping are found here. The subject matter has been chosen for its long-term relevance and includes political questions, fundamental constitutional issues, and problems concerning the relationship between the Jewish diaspora and the State of Israel.

Dr. Lorch has written a short introduction relating to the circumstances under which each debate took place, as well as an introduction to each Knesset outlining its composition, and a general introduction to the Israeli Knesset, its history, structure, procedure, and the manner of its election. A glossary of political parties and personalities is also included.

"The debates of the Knesset have never been made available to the non-Hebrew reader. Dr. Lorch's work fills that vacuum. Endowed with personal experience and scholarly attributes he has prepared a representative selection of debates, culled from over 100,000 pages...maintaining throughout a high level of both readability and scholarship. His book should be regarded as indispensable to anyone who wishes to understand the currents of thought and action which have agitated the political life of Israel and the surrounding world."
— *Abba Eban*

Contents: Vol. 1 — The Knesset: Israel's Parliament, People's Council and Provisional Council of State (1948–1949); Vol. 2 — Constituent Assembly/First Knesset (1949–1951); Vol. 3 — Second Knesset (1951–1955), Third Knesset (1955–1959); Vol. 4 — Fourth Knesset (1959–1961), Fifth Knesset (1961–1965), Sixth Knesset (1965–1969); Vol. 5 — Seventh Knesset (1969–1973), Eighth Knesset (1974–1977); Vol. 6 — Ninth Knesset (1977–1981), Glossary of Political Parties and Personalities, Index.

Co-published with University Press of America, December 1992.

Netanel Lorch, one of Israel's most prominent military historians, served as Secretary General of the Knesset from 1972 to 1983, following a distinguished career in both the Israel Defense Forces and the diplomatic corps. He is a former President of the International Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments.

● A complete JCPA Publications Catalogue is available upon request, offering an extensive selection of the literature of Jewish public affairs.