Review Article: "The Jews Should Keep Quiet: FDR, R. Stephen Wise, and the Holocaust

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Rafael Medoff, *The Jews Should Keep Quiet: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019)

Reviewed by Dr. Peter Schotten

For almost ninety years, there has existed something of a love affair between American Jewry and Franklin Roosevelt. Many Jews reflectively have regarded Roosevelt as their friend and protector--as the President who overcame a worldwide depression while later helping vanquish Hitler's world-wide genocidal ambitions. In the academic world, however, the verdict has not been so clear. Ever since the 1984 publication of David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews*, Roosevelt's special status among Jews has undergone serious challenge. Wyman believed that Roosevelt was largely indifferent to the fate of persecuted European Jews. Passing up numerous opportunities to mitigate the effects of Hitler's genocide, inaction and indifference were Roosevelt's responses. Nor, according to Wyman, did America's Jewish leadership do enough to save the lives of European Jews. In particular, Reform Rabbi Stephen Wise, the most prominent American Jewish Zionist leader of his day, failed notably. The source of Wise's failure, argued Wyman, was his misplaced trust in Franklin Roosevelt.

Rafael Medoff chairs the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies and, not surprisingly, dedicates his book to Wyman, his late friend, literary collaborator and teacher. Medoff endorses Wyman's scholarship but ups the ante. It was not mere political calculation or indifference that motivated Roosevelt but also anti-Semitism. Despite Roosevelt's failings, Wise constantly supported Roosevelt, prizing his access to the President. Roosevelt took for granted Wise's constant loyalty and played the Rabbi. Medoff presents a history of Roosevelt's deceptions and Wise's self-deception. It is not a pretty picture.

Medoff describes Roosevelt’s dealings with Wise on Jewish matters of concern to be manipulative, dishonest and expedient. But more importantly is Medoff's description of Wise's effectiveness and character. It constitutes the most important aspect of his scholarship. Charmed by Roosevelt's commitment to progressive causes, Rabbi Wise (who helped found the ACLU, was a board member of the NAACP and was active in women's suffrage, labor and disarmament causes), found Roosevelt

politically admirable. Throughout Roosevelt's Presidency, Wise generally refrained from public criticism of Roosevelt and sought to prevent other Jewish leaders from voicing criticism of the President. He sought no alliances with Republicans, putting his entire faith in Roosevelt. He prized his access to the White House and often later, in private conservations, would exaggerate his influence on the President. All the time, Wise wanted to fit into the assimilated mainstream of secular American life and he wanted other Jews to do so as well. Too often, he opposed calling excessive attention to his peoples' distinctiveness or to their unique suffering, a political failing according to Medoff. Nor did he like having his leadership challenged. His private letters to and about critics--even his public pronouncements--could be nasty and self- serving. Often, it seemed that Wise was far too concerned with maintaining his power and authority within the numerous Jewish organizations he headed or in which he participated.

Here is one striking example. By September, 1942, Wise had received confirmation of his worst fears regarding the ongoing and intended genocide against European Jews. His private correspondence spoke of his utter distress and sleepless nights. Medoff writes that although he does not doubt the Rabbi's sincerity, "one would have expected him to set aside the more mundane matters on his usually daily schedule to focus on the pressing life-and-death situations in Hitler-occupied Europe." "Yet," continues Medoff,, "Wise's activities in September indicate that he did not separate himself from his usual business." This self-indulgent organizational mania was evident even late in his life when he was battling a variety of serious health issues. Even then, Wise was reluctant to let go.

Medoff's book is the sober work of a serious historian. His use of source material is excellent and, for the most part, his observations are considered and judicious. His scholarship reinforces the unsustainability of the widespread unqualified popular Jewish adulation of both President Roosevelt and Rabbi Wise. It fortifies the new scholarly consensus: that there was more President Roosevelt could have done for the Jews with relatively modest effort. He could have quietly worked to increase the number of Jewish refugees admitted into the United States, even under existing quotas. He could have countered the endemic anti-Semitism so deeply entrenched in the State Department. He could have led far more effectively in educating public opinion about the Nazi's specifically anti-Jewish genocide. Such an effort may not have made a difference but it would have been the right thing to do. Regarding Rabbi Wise, Medoff causes us to understand the complexity of motivations and temptations that often influence important individuals and compromise those who intend good in public life. As to the question of whether the more vigorous, less administration-friendly political tactics favored by Wise's rivals' (and Medoff) would have ultimately proven more effective in influencing American policy--indeed if any pro-Jewish advocacy strategy would have made much difference --remains a matter of conjecture.

But is Medoff's more radical critique of the failure of Jewish leadership and Presidential leadership correct? Perhaps; but this most important question is not so easily settled. Admittedly, Roosevelt could have done more. But Roosevelt himself, and Jewish defenders like Lucy Dawidowicz, have argued that, in the largest sense preserving Jewish lives was dependent on winning World War II. That was what mattered most. Of course, it was not predestined that the allies would emerge victorious from that conflict. To the contrary, at the time that the news of Hitler's final solution was filtering to the West in late 1942, the War's outcome was in doubt. Yes, the fate of most all of Europe's Jews was likely pre-ordained. Nonetheless, a successful conclusion to the War would end Hitler's malignant menace forever, saving some Jewish lives in Europe and worldwide. In that sense Roosevelt's war management mattered, to all free peoples generally and to Jews in particular. Furthermore, a skillful waging of the War saved Jewish lives in other ways that are often overlooked, perhaps even at the time by Roosevelt. As Breitman and Lichtman point out in their indispensible *FDR and the Jews*, Roosevelt's shipment of A-20 bombers and Sherman tanks helped the British defeat Rommel's armies at the decisive second battle of El Alamein. Admittedly, Roosevelt's main purpose was to join the Brits in safeguarding the Suez Canal. But by stopping Nazi domination of the Middle East and North Africa, Roosevelt also defeated stillborn a plan that had been hatched by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and Adolf Hitler (among others) to extend the Holocaust beyond Europe. That numerous Jewish lives were

saved is certain. How many they were remains undetermined.

Before the War, dealing with an isolationist Congress that favored neutrality proved challenging for Roosevelt. Even more daunting was the later task of waging War. It brought multiple problems that had to be surmounted on a daily basis. Although Medoff effectively discusses the bureaucracy and personalities surrounding Roosevelt as he dealt with Jewish concerns during World War II (and earlier during the depression), one does not always get a sense of the larger picture. Larger contextual questions of strategy, economics, maintaining supplies and alliances and broader issues of international relations during the War are largely ignored. One does not have a sense of the many competing international and national trade-offs and pressures that constantly faced Roosevelt during this time of extreme and extended stress. Rather, Medoff's book is focused narrowly on the relationship between the Jews and the Roosevelt Administration, almost always to the exclusion of all other considerations. In that dynamic, Jewish concerns were of course everything to Jews. Yet given Roosevelt's larger political and strategic concerns, Jewish concerns simply did not loom large. On those occasions when President Roosevelt sat across the room from Rabbi Wise, and disagreed about what should or could be done, these two men simply prioritized their political and moral obligations differently. Whatever feelings existed or did not exist in Roosevelt's heart, each was differently situated, empowered by different constituents, seeking to achieve different, but sometimes overlapping, goals

There is another vexing problem when it comes to evaluating this book's thesis. Just as it was difficult to determine if Roosevelt possessed anti-Semitic sentiments (as Medoff suggests), so it is difficult to evaluate many of Roosevelt's actions or inactions at this time. It is not only that the President lived in a world of many, often competing demands which made it difficult for others to understand why he acted as he did. It is also that Roosevelt's actions or inactions usually admitted more than one plausible explanation. Over time, the historical record regarding Roosevelt has become much clearer. But Roosevelt has not. He remains an enigma. As Dawidowicz writes succinctly "he left scarcely any record of his feelings and ideas." Interpreting Roosevelt is a scholarly art, and yet it frequently it is an art that yields disputable results.

Medoff's case against Roosevelt (and by implication against Wise) looks at the President (and his administration's) political actions and policies. Medoff's topical analysis examines Roosevelt's interaction with Jewish leaders, specifically his action (or inaction) regarding Jewish immigration, Roosevelt's efforts (or lack of effort) regarding possible Jewish worldwide resettlement, the St. Louis incident, the possibility of bombing Auschwitz and the railroad tracks leading to it, and Roosevelt's post-war thoughts regarding the creation of an eventual Jewish homeland. Except for his effort to win the War, no one overarching perspective or point of view defines or unites Roosevelt's response to these concerns. There are numerous reason why. Roosevelt remained ever the pragmatist. He spoke differently to different people. Both nationally and internationally, political considerations mattered. Thus, his language was often calculated and prudent. Additionally, he also trafficked in political generalizations. Often he was inscrutable.

Multiple illustrations of this pattern of persistent elusiveness exist. Examining one proves useful and illustrates the frequent tentativeness of rendering conclusive historical pronouncements regarding Roosevelt's thoughts and actions. On February 14, 1945 an exhausted Franklin Roosevelt made time to meet in Egypt with Saudi Arabia's King Saud's aboard the cruiser USS Quincy. The President had just returned from Yalta. He was not well; in two months he would be dead. But that day, with the War

winding down, he wanted to discuss the future of the Middle East and also wished to create space for a greater Jewish presence there. To do that, he would have to persuade Saud. Roosevelt had received numerous warnings that the King was intransigent on the matter and not open to accommodation. Still he went. Why? The most likely explanation supplied by Radosh and Radosh (in *A Safe Haven: Harry Truman and the Founding of Israel)*. According to them, "FDR still believed that his charm and commitment to negotiation could work and that he would be able to make a breakthrough that would be acceptable to all sides." But the talks went nowhere as Saud's hostility to an enhanced Jewish Mideast presence proved to be intractable and fanatical. Roosevelt assured Saud that there would be future consultations and assured him that he would not advantage the Jews at the expense of the Arab interests. Subsequently, on March 1, in an address to Congress. Roosevelt ad-libbed that "I learned more about the whole of Arabia--the Muslims--the Jewish problem--by talking to Bin Saud for five minutes than I could have learned in the exchange of two or three dozen letters."

What did Roosevelt mean? Naturally, Jewish leaders were outraged, interpreting his remark to constitute a change in policy and an explicit endorsement of the Arab Middle East perspective. More likely, as has been widely pointed out, the remarks reflected that Roosevelt now felt that a mutually acceptable Palestine solution, however desirable, was impossible. He now believed that any such attempt probably would end badly because Arab hostility to Jewish aspirations was unalterable and therefore was likely to produce even more Jewish deaths, perhaps even another Jewish genocide.

The ambiguity of interpretation that surrounded Roosevelt's language to Congress (and to King Saud for that matter) grew out of Roosevelt's elusiveness and partially from the fact that in the midst of wartime Roosevelt had not enunciated, and perhaps had yet not formulated, a clear vision of a post Holocaust Middle East. It is not surprising that Roosevelt may have had no carefully formulated, specific view of this matter. Throughout his presidency, Roosevelt tended to react *ad hoc* to issues involving the Jews. Breitman and Liebtman (in *FDR and the Jews*) argue that FDR's relationship to the Jews was ambiguous and ever changing. Medoff offers a different explanation. FDR did not much care for Jews and consistently desired that they would keep quiet and leave him alone. This was the Roosevelt Rabbi Wise seldom saw. Too often Wise was charmed and seduced by his access and direct encounters with the charismatic President. Also, Medoff argues that Wise often rejected bolder pro-Jewish strategies and overlooked political alternatives while focusing all his considerable efforts on the President. As provocative as Medoff's criticisms are, questions linger. Was there really a critical mass in the Republican Party that would have made any difference? Would going around Roosevelt have proven more productive in advancing Jewish goals? How much influence could any Jewish presence, exercising any strategy, truly have wielded? Inquiring minds continue to wonder.

Perhaps that is the point. Rafael Medoff has provided a thorough, well documented interpretation of the Roosevelt-Wise relationship. Read the book. But if you want to understand the many nuances in the interaction between FDR and organized Jewish interests during this historical period, at a minimum, also read the comprehensive and well-balanced *FDR and the Jews* by Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman. Should you have even more time, also take a look at two essays by Lucy Dawidowicz that paint President Roosevelt and Rabbi Wise in a more favorable light. Although a bit dated, her essays "Could America have Rescued Europe's Jews?" and "Indicting American Jews" still have bite and saliency. They appear as chapters 10 and 11 in Neal Kozodoy's edited volume of her essays, *What is the Use of Jewish History*? All of these works shed considerable light on this important and troubling intersection of American and Jewish history. Together, they provide a rich legacy of education as well as a continuing source for further reflection.