



Good Shabbes...

This week marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of President Theodore Roosevelt. Widely regarded as one of the greatest presidents in American history (with a bust on Mt. Rushmore as proof), Roosevelt was a bestselling author; historian; naval strategist; conservationist (as well as a renowned hunter); war hero; New York state governor and assemblyman; New York city police commissioner; vice president of the United States; assistant secretary of the Navy; rancher; athlete; the first American to win the Nobel Peace Prize (in 1906); and the inspiration for the most popular stuffed animal in the world (yes, the “Teddy Bear”). All this, and even more, he was a great friend to the Jewish people.

As police commissioner in NYC, Roosevelt exhibited evidence of the shrewd political tactician he would become in addition to being a friend of the Jewish people. When asked by the Jewish community in NYC to ban rallies featuring an anti-Semitic German preacher, Hermann Ahlwardt, Roosevelt said, “I told them that I could not - that the right of free speech must be maintained unless he incited them to riot.” But Roosevelt wrote that, “On thinking it over, however, it occurred to me that there was one way in which I could undo most of the mischief he was trying to do.” So, Roosevelt assigned several dozen Jewish police officers to protect Ahlwardt “thus making him ridiculous.”

Roosevelt was the first president to appoint a Jew to a Cabinet position. He named Oscar Solomon Straus (who later on became president of the American Jewish Historical Society) as secretary of the commerce and labor, a position that also placed him in charge of the United States Bureau of Immigration.

As president, Roosevelt issued a strong letter of rebuke to the Russian czar in 1903 after the murder of 49 Jews in the Kishinev pogrom. Pogroms like Kishinev prompted waves of Jewish immigration to the United States from Eastern Europe and Russia, a situation not welcome by everyone. Roosevelt, however, resisted efforts to stem the tide. He also opposed labeling Jews as a separate race on their passports, saying, “I should no more have a man entered on a passport as a Hebrew than as an Episcopalian, or a Baptist, or a Roman Catholic.”

After winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906 (for his role in the mediation of the Russo-Japanese War) he contributed a portion of his prize money to the National Jewish Welfare board. In 1918, shortly after the Balfour Declaration, which favored establishing a national home for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, Roosevelt wrote, “It seems to me that it is entirely proper to start a Zionist state around Jerusalem,” suggesting that peace would happen only if Jews were given Palestine.

As to what remains something of a mystery to this day, Roosevelt kept two menorahs at Sagamore Hill (his 95 acre estate on Long Island).

On this 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death (at the age of 60) let us remember a great American, a great president, and a great friend of the Jewish people. May his memory be for blessing.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Bob Silvers