

# INTRODUCTION

Sol Bloom (1870-1949) saved the life of the Gerrer Rebbe. He introduced the Ferris Wheel to the world. He helped draft the founding charter of the United Nations. He put George Washington's visage on the quarter. He successfully combatted a movement that would have introduced an eight-day week into the calendar.

Bloom sat in Congress for 26 years and wielded more power during the Holocaust than any other Jew in America's legislative body.<sup>1</sup> He chaired the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee and thus manned the gates through which all crucial foreign policy bills passed. Lend-Lease – legislation by which President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent arms to England to fight the Nazis – first had to clear Bloom's committee. So did a 1943 resolution calling for the creation of a government commission to save Europe's endangered Jews. And so did a 1944 resolution favoring the establishment of a Jewish state.

Before the late 1960s, prominent American Jews generally tried to keep their Jewishness under wraps. Bloom didn't. A *mezuzah* graced the door of his congressional office and a large picture of a Yom Kippur service hung inside it. "Sol Bloom is what many in public life today are not. He's mighty proud that he's a Jew!" declared the author of a 1939 profile on the congressman.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after Bloom's passing, one non-Jewish colleague recalled that Bloom "was a Jew, and he was not afraid of being a Jew, or ashamed of it, or sensitive about it."<sup>3</sup> Bloom actually once spoke about Jewish affairs so confidently at a congressional hearing that another colleague responded by jokingly calling him "Rabbi Bloom."<sup>4</sup> Bloom also apparently made a point of not smoking at Friday night social events despite the attention this practice drew to himself.<sup>5</sup>

Bloom's unabashed Jewishness is also evident in his autobiography. He proudly testifies, for example, to reciting the ritual blessings over wine and bread every Sabbath – he even reproduces the text of these blessings in the book – and describes some of Judaism's kosher laws to his readers without a hint self-consciousness (e.g., “No true orthodox Jew would ever...eat meat from a plate on which any food containing milk or butter had *at any time* been served”). He also openly acknowledges that the Democratic Party asked him to run for Congress in 1922 because he was an “amiable and solvent Jew.”<sup>6</sup> And then there's this story:

A number of years ago a group of Protestant and Catholic clergymen came to my office in Washington to consult with me...about a practical means for “solving the Jewish problem.”

“Gentlemen, I know of no Jewish problem,” I responded. “I must ask you to elaborate.”

They elaborated.

“What you refer to is not the Jewish problem,” I told them, “but the *non-Jewish problem*.”

The clergymen now asked me to explain.

“I mean that the problem we are discussing was created by people who are not Jews. Thus, it is a non-Jewish problem. We Jews do not discriminate against the Catholics and the various Protestant denominations; we Jews do not teach our children to be intolerant of your children; we Jews do not build ghettos. And so it seems to me that those who have made the ‘problem’ are the only ones who can solve it.”<sup>7</sup>

Bloom showed similar gumption on another occasion; a 1932 magazine profile on Bloom reports the following from his tenure as co-director of the George Washington Bicentennial Commission:

Descendants of three American presidents were gathered in Bloom's office not long ago looking over the portraits of the first President, and discussing Bicentennial plans

with the associate director. The conversation of the three after a while diverted itself to their illustrious forbears.

“I suppose, Mr. Bloom,” said one of the group, with the superiority of tone of a proprietary family, “you must get bored hearing us talk about our ancestors.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Sol. “How about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?”<sup>8</sup>

In short, Bloom was a proud Jew. But you would never know that from the scholarly literature on the Holocaust. In this literature, Bloom is depicted, almost without fail, as a timid, insecure Jew par excellence. One Holocaust historian writes that Bloom “had a reputation among Jews and non-Jews as fearful of rocking the State Department boat.” Another claims that Bloom was “widely regarded as a cat’s-paw for [Assistant Secretary of State] Breckinridge Long.” A third writes that Bloom was “more interested in personal recognition within executive and State Department circles than in championing Jewish causes.”<sup>9</sup>

And so, Bloom did little to save Jews during World War II, claim Holocaust historians. David Wyman, for example, in his famous work *The Abandonment of the Jews*, has this to say about Bloom:

Sol Bloom, despite his influential position in Congress, attempted next to nothing for the Jews of Europe. True, he arranged for several individual Jewish refugees to enter the United States. And he assisted the Orthodox rescue agency, Vaad Hahatzala, in some small ways. But when possibilities for major action arose, he consistently allied himself with the State Department. He seemed most of all concerned to use his post as chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee to win the esteem of the State Department elite. Three decades later, [Rep. Emanuel] Celler concluded that “Sol Bloom did a great deal of harm because of his attitude. He was a mere sycophant of the State Department.”<sup>10</sup>

These assessments of Bloom are untenable. Not only do they

contradict what we know about Bloom's character, they also render incomprehensible the solid reputation Bloom enjoyed among his contemporaries. No fewer than 17 different Jewish organizations honored Bloom by placing "In Memoriam" notices in *The New York Times* when he died on March 7, 1949.<sup>11</sup> (In contrast, not a *single* Jewish organization placed a death notice in the *Times* following the passing of Bloom's most prominent Jewish colleagues, Rep. Samuel Dickstein and Emanuel Celler.) One major American Jewish organization, Agudath Israel, even held a dinner in Bloom's honor in 1947. Surely, these organizations wouldn't have feted Bloom in this manner if he had turned his back on his co-religionists during the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup>

And yet, Bloom's Holocaust record is clearly mixed. He saved, as we shall see, many individual Jews whose relatives or friends approached him for assistance, but he never challenged the Roosevelt administration's restrictive immigration policy that barred so many Jews from escaping Europe. He also failed to advance bold rescue plans for Europe's endangered Jews at a critical 1943 conference on refugees in Bermuda and obstructed a congressional resolution later that year that called for the creation of a government commission to save these Jews.

But if Bloom wasn't a timid or insecure Jew, what explains his behavior during the Holocaust? And what explains the behavior of so



many American Jews in the 1940s who seemingly did little to save their relatives being slaughtered by the Nazis in Europe? Why didn't they pressure President Roosevelt to come to their brethren's rescue?

The answer to these questions is multifaceted, but a large part of it boils down to patriotism: The Jews of this era loved America and felt indebted to it for permitting them to emigrate from Europe and giving

Rep. Sol Bloom (1870-1949)

them a fresh chance at life, free of persecution. Many modern-day critics assume these Jews were too scared to publicly castigate the Roosevelt administration, but it's more likely they believed it wrong to do so.<sup>13</sup> The United States, after all, was at war. American soldiers were dying in the battlefields of Europe. How could they attack their commander-in-chief at such a moment? How could they place their interests above those of the country?

These questions likely lurked in Bloom's mind as well. Additionally, as a sitting member of Congress and chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, he presumably regarded it as his primary duty to help Roosevelt confront the Nazi threat. That explains why from 1939-1941 he braved a wave of anti-Semitic hostility and isolationism to ensure passage of key legislation in Congress to keep Hitler from conquering Europe and ultimately threatening America. At the same time, however, he didn't challenge America's popular restrictive immigration policy as doing so, in his view, would've undermined Roosevelt's efforts to unite the country for war. Bloom's allegiance to the administration's aims also explains why he largely adhered to the onerous restrictions placed upon him by the State Department at the Bermuda Conference. It explains further why he hindered an effort by activist Peter Bergson – whom the administration regarded as a thorn in its side – to quickly secure a congressional resolution calling on Roosevelt to create a government rescue commission. This same factor was at play in early 1944 when Bloom disappointed Zionist leaders who sought a congressional expression of approval for the establishment of a Jewish state as the administration feared that such an expression would harm the war effort.

No doubt, some will cling to the theory that American Jews were just too timid to protest the government's behavior during the Holocaust. I believe this assessment mistaken. But even if it isn't, it clearly doesn't explain Bloom behavior. For Bloom was not a "sick-souled, scared and tied-in-knots Jew."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, he was uniquely *uninhibited* about his Jewishness for a man of his era. In fact, his personality was almost the antithesis of inhibited and timid. If a historian were to look solely at Bloom's Holocaust activities, he could be excused for thinking him an insecure, timid Jew eager to do the bidding of the State Department. But judging a person's deeds out of context is neither prudent nor fair. So

before we examine Bloom's behavior during the Holocaust, we must first survey the first six decades of his life – an exercise that will demonstrate that timidity is not a viable explanation for Bloom's war-time conduct. Once that is established, we will explore a more likely explanation: Bloom's sense of duty as a prominent American congressman.

# FOOTNOTES

## Introduction (pages 1-8)

<sup>1</sup> Between five and eight Jews sat in Congress at any given time between 1939-1945.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur T. Weil, "The Stone the Builders Rejected," *The American Hebrew*, July 7, 1939, pg. 18. See also "Sol Bloom, Great American" *The Sioux City Journal*, March 9, 1949, pg. 6: "He was a Jew and extremely proud of it."

<sup>3</sup> *Memorial Services Held in the House of Representatives of the United States, Together with Remarks Presented in Eulogy of Sol Bloom, Late a Representative from New York, Proceedings in the House* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1950), 79. In 1926, Bloom proposed building a grand "model synagogue" in Washington, DC, and 20 years later advocated erecting a Jewish museum in the nation's capital. Jews who prefer keeping a low profile tend not to champion such projects. See "National Synagogue Proposed by Bloom," *The New York Times*, January 26, 1926, pg. 5, and the June 13, 1944 letter from Sholem Asch to Bloom in Sol Bloom Papers, New York Public Library, Box 61.

<sup>4</sup> *The Jewish National Home in Palestine: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Seventy-Eighth Congress, Second Session, on H. Res. 418 and H. Res. 419* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1944), 229.

<sup>5</sup> David Wyman and Rafael Medoff, *A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 149-150. Activist Peter Bergson recalled, "[Bloom] told me...that all the ambassadors knew he was a Jew and that he didn't smoke on the Sabbath. He said...to him the most important part of a meal was not what you ate, but the cigar afterwards." Interview with Peter Bergson, p. 56HK, personal collection of Rafael Medoff. See also the remarks of Rabbi Goldstein in *Memorial Services*, 62.

<sup>6</sup> Sol Bloom, *The Autobiography of Sol Bloom* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1948), 53 and 200.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 302-303.

<sup>8</sup> Oliver McKee, Jr., "Super-Salesman of Patriotism," *Outlook and Independent*, February 3, 1932, p. 158

<sup>9</sup> Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 140; Monty Noam Penkower,

*The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1983), 108; and Lucy S. Dawidowicz, "American Jews and the Holocaust," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 18, 1982, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 202. See also *ibid.*, 317, and *Race Against Death*, 144-145.

<sup>11</sup> In their respective tributes, the Hebrew Convalescent Home called Bloom a "great man," Agudath Israel Youth Council of America hailed Bloom's "historic efforts for persecuted people," and the American Jewish Congress tagged Bloom as a "great leader of Jewry."

<sup>12</sup> The honor paid Bloom by Agudath Israel can perhaps be cynically dismissed as an attempt to strengthen ties with a powerful congressman, but why would 17 Jewish organizations honor him *after he died* if he had failed his people at the hour of their greatest need?

<sup>13</sup> Of course, even if they had wanted to, it's not clear that American Jewry could have successfully pressured Roosevelt to save their brethren. According to historian Henry Feingold, "American Jewry simply did not possess the power to change foreign policy priorities during hostilities." *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 221. See also *ibid.*, 223 and 231, and *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945* (New York: Waldon, 1970), 302, and "Did American Jewry Do Enough During the Holocaust?" The B.G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 4: "So much of the judgment of those anxious to indict [American Jewry] is based on reading our comparative effectiveness today back into the history of that tragic period where it does not belong."

<sup>14</sup> This phrase comes from Rabbi Milton Steinberg (1903-1950). Qtd. in Laurel Leff, *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 325.