

Dining with two statesmen

By A. James Rudin

Gov. Alf Landon's recent death at the age of one hundred reminded me of a luncheon I attended in the early fall of 1963 at a restaurant in Kansas City's Union Station. I was then a rabbi at Congregation B'nai Jehudah and I had been asked to deliver an invocation.

The guest speaker was a Department of Agriculture official from Washington whose theme was the problem of global hunger and the shortage of fertilizers. I always dreaded such community functions, and the Union Station luncheon sounded boring.

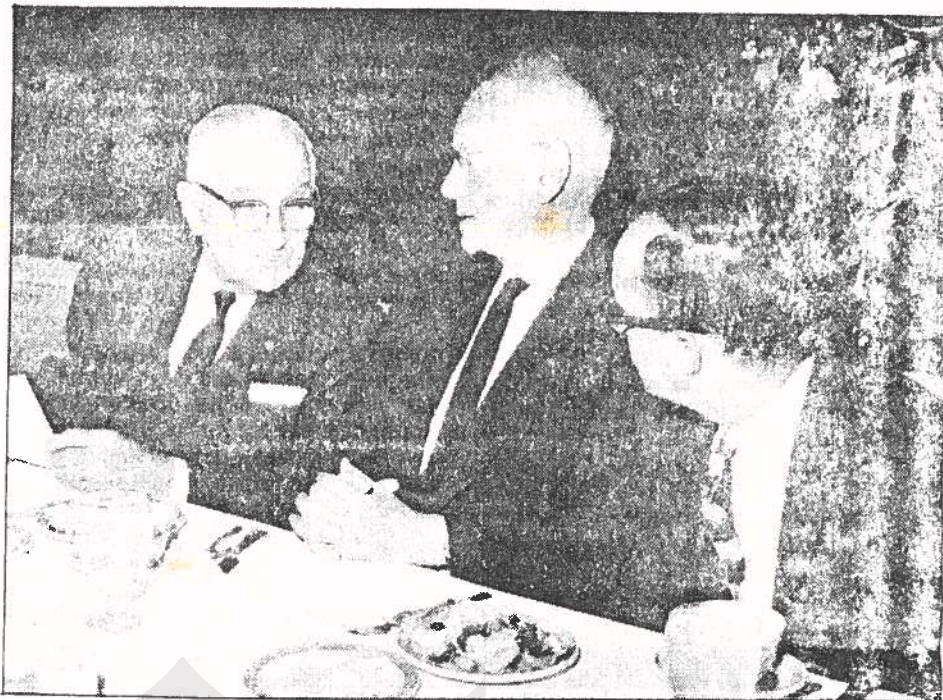
But to my great pleasure and surprise I was seated next to Landon and former President Harry Truman. Fortunately, the length of the luncheon left me with plenty of time to talk with those two leaders. At the time Landon was "only" 76 years old and Truman, at 79, was at the top of his well-advertised form: feisty, candid and engaging.

Both men were most gracious to me. Landon wanted to know how old I was, and when I told him I was only a toddler when he ran for the presidency in 1936, he smiled and asked who my parents voted for in that year. I mumbled the three famous initials, "FDR", and Landon said, "Don't be embarrassed, young man, most everyone in the country voted for him, too."

I quickly attempted to rectify the awkward moment by telling the governor that I was friendly with Joseph Cohen, a long-time member of B'nai Jehudah. In 1936 Joe had been an ardent supporter of the Landon campaign, and the governor brightened at the mention of his name.

Landon asked where I had gone to rabbinical school. When I answered, "New York City," he told me how much he admired New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, and how he hoped "Rocky" would run against President Kennedy in 1964.

Rabbi A. James Rudin is the American Jewish Committee's National Interreligious Affairs Director. He was a rabbi at Congregation B'nai Jehudah from 1962 to 1964.



Harry Truman and Alf Landon enlivened a 1963 luncheon for A. James Rudin, who was then a rabbi in Kansas City.

Of course, we talked about the 1936 and the 1948 campaigns. The governor complimented Truman on the victory he had achieved over an earlier New York State governor, Thomas Dewey.

Landon's eyes twinkled behind his wire-frame glasses when he said: "Well, at least I had it easy. I only carried two states against Roosevelt, but Dewey might have won in 1948. But unlike Tom, I don't lie awake at night wondering what I might have done, or what I should have done, or what I might have tried in my campaign. I bet Dewey still doesn't sleep too well."

Truman laughed, then praised Landon as a "gallant campaigner." For a few minutes the compliments went back and forth like the proverbial tennis ball between the Kansas Republican and the Missouri Democrat.

I effectively ended the game by mentioning President Eisenhower. Landon was very positive about Ike, who, he reminded me, "was a Kansas boy raised in Abilene." President Truman, unsurprisingly, was not enamored of his successor and said so in unmistakable language.

Both men were interested to learn that I had served as an Air Force chaplain in Japan and Korea from 1960 to 1962, and they asked about my impressions of the Far East. Truman grew very grave and said, "Of course, Japan's the one country I can never visit." He didn't have to

elaborate. Both Landon and I knew why the land of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were "off limits" to the former president.

When the luncheon speaker mercifully finished his monotonous presentation, Truman was asked to say a "few words" about global hunger. The audience suddenly grew attentive, and Harry Truman told his listeners that one of the best ways to end world famine was through the "generous use of manure throughout the world. And Washington can certainly provide a lot of manure for the world's farmers." Each time Truman used the word "manure", the audience howled in delight.

While Truman was speaking, Landon turned to me and whispered, "Rabbi, I am sure Tom Dewey could never speak like that. Maybe that's why he lost."

Today they are all gone . . . Harry Truman, John Kennedy, Dwight Eisenhower, Nelson Rockefeller, Thomas Dewey, Joseph Cohen, and now Alf Landon. The world little noted nor long remembered the luncheon at Kansas City's Union Station. But I will always remember it, and the picture of a young rabbi talking with two American giants occupies a prominent place in my office.

I sometimes like to think that if I had been old enough to vote in 1936, I might have cast my ballot for Alf Landon. Who knows?

May 31, 1963

Governor Alfred M. Landon
Topeka, Kansas

Dear Governor Landon:

I enjoyed being with you at the Freedom From Hunger luncheon last Tuesday at the Red Door Restaurant.

It was a wonderful experience to speak with you and to gain a first hand "lesson" in Contemporary American History.

May God bless you with many more years of health and continued participation in humanity's quest for peace.

I look forward to meeting you again soon.

Cordially yours,

Rabbi A. James Rudin

AJR:rl

ALF M. LANDON
TOPEKA

June 4, 1963

Rabbi A. James Rudin
The Temple
Congregation E'nai Jehudah
712 East 69th Street
Kansas City 31, Missouri

My dear Rabbi Rudin:

Thank you for your warm and friendly letter of
May 31. I wish we had had a better opportunity for
a visit.

Don't forget, if you're ever in Topeka, to let me
know ahead of time so that we can set up lunch or
dinner if it fits your schedule - or at least another
good talk.

With highest personal regards
and best wishes -

Alf M. Landon

AML:j

May 31, 1963

President Harry S. Truman
Truman Library
24 Highway at Delaware
Independence, Missouri

Dear Mr. President:

I enjoyed being with you at the Freedom
From Hunger luncheon last Tuesday at the Red
Door Restaurant.

It was a wonderful experience to speak
with you and to gain a first hand "lesson" in
Contemporary American History.

May God bless you with many more years
of health and continued participation in
humanity's quest for peace.

I look forward to meeting you again soon.

Cordially yours,

Rabbi A. James Rudin

AJR:rl

HARRY S. TRUMAN
INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

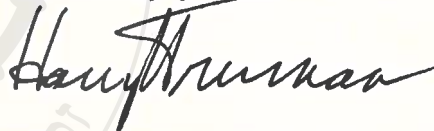
June 6, 1963

Dear Rabbi Rudin:

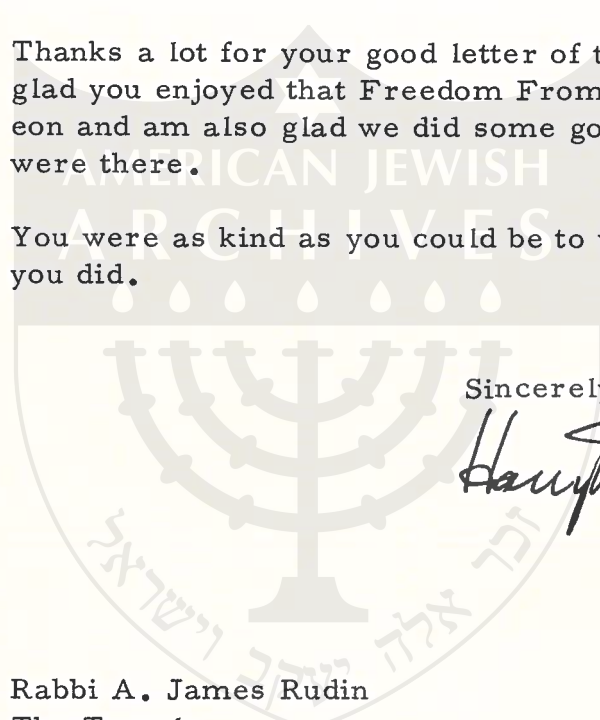
Thanks a lot for your good letter of the 31st. I am glad you enjoyed that Freedom From Hunger luncheon and am also glad we did some good while we were there.

You were as kind as you could be to write me as you did.

Sincerely yours,



Harry Truman



Rabbi A. James Rudin
The Temple
Congregation B'nai Jehudah
712 East 69th Street
Kansas City 31, Missouri