



What do we think of when we think about our presidents? The courage of George Washington crossing the Delaware? The resolute command of Abraham Lincoln? The once insuperable embarrassment of George W. Bush choking on a pretzel? We might also consider their Yiddishkeit.

Our 46 Heads of State (Grover Cleveland is counted twice) all had interactions with the Jewish community – positive and negative, historic and bizarre. I have taken the liberty of compiling a few of their Jewish legacies below, from Washington’s embrace of a congregation in Rhode Island to Biden’s Jewish in-laws, and rating their Jewish bona fides.

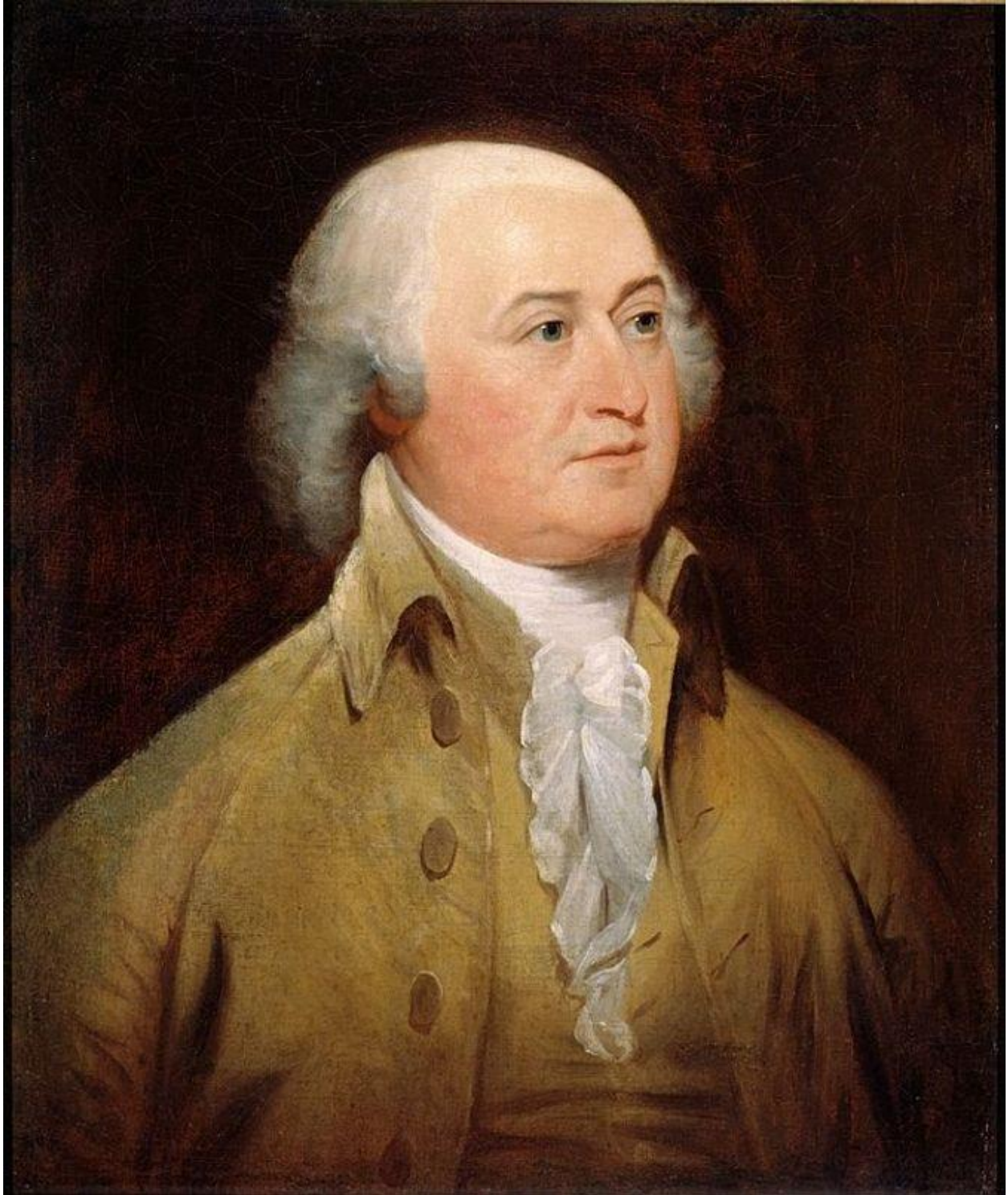
I hope you will read them and recall the promise of America to the Jewish people and also that time Nixon was caught on tape saying Jews have an “obnoxious personality.”

#### *George Washington*

G-Dubs started things strong with community outreach, writing a [famous letter](#) to the Hebrew Congregation at Newport, R.I., avowing that the U.S. would give “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” Other presidents have been far less unequivocal, and his pledge that Jews were full citizens of the new country – a year before France emancipated its Jews – was historic.

***Jewish rating: Shabbos goy***

## John Adams



By Wikimedia Commons

John Adams was played by Paul Giamatti, who might as well be Jewish.

Adams, fluent in Hebrew, was a philosemite, [once railing against Voltaire's portrayals](#) of Jews and insisting that Jews “are the most glorious nation that ever inhabited this Earth. The Romans and their Empire were but a Bauble in comparison of the Jews.” Adams also corresponded with the writer and diplomat Mordecai Manuel Noah . It's in a letter to Noah that Adams became the first American president to support a Jewish state. “I really wish the Jews again in Judea an independent nation,” Adams wrote to Noah in an 1819 letter. Which is cool until you realize the next sentence hoped that, once Jews had the autonomy that came with a country, they “would soon wear away some of the asperities and peculiarities of their character & possibly in time become liberal Unitarian Christians.”

***Jewish rating: Comes to the bris but toasts his bagel***

*Thomas Jefferson*

Jefferson was also pen pals with Noah, [writing him](#) to say that the suffering of the Jews was proof of the “universal spirit of religious intolerance” and that the laws of the U.S. have “applied the only antidote of this vice.” He then agreed with Noah that his “sect” must pay attention to education and make its members good at science to “exhibit them as equal objects of respect and favor.” Elsewhere, Jefferson quibbled with the Bible's supernatural features and called the God of Moses “cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust.” That said, as early as 1776, he introduced legislation to make Jews and other non-Protestants Virginia citizens. His magnanimity, obviously, did not extend to Black people.

***Jewish rating: Knows just enough Hebrew to quibble with God's word***

*James Madison*

Once again, a president slides into Noah's DMs — in this case, on the occasion of the 1818 consecration of Shearith Israel in New York (Noah delivered the discourse). “I observe with pleasure the view you give of the spirit in which your Sect partake of the blessings offered by our Govt. and Laws,” Madison wrote. He doesn't appear to have said much more about Jews, though his eponymous high school in Brooklyn has produced such

notable Jews as Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Carole King, Bernie Sanders, Chuck Schumer and my dad.

***Jewish rating: Says “Shabbat Shalom” on a Tuesday***

*James Monroe*

Oops. Monroe, then serving as Madison’s Secretary of State, [recalled Noah from his position as consul in Tunis](#). The given reason was that his Jewishness had become known to the Ottomans. Noah felt burned and betrayed in what was, let’s be real, a pretty clear-cut case of religious discrimination. The real rationale for his recall, as David B. Green wrote in Haaretz, was that Noah paid too much to get pirates on the Barbary Coast to release American hostages. Though Monroe was the one who reached out in his capacity as secretary, and who heard Noah’s complaints once he was president, it was really Madison’s call.

***Jewish rating: Mayonnaise on pastrami***

*John Quincy Adams*

John Quincy picked up where his dad left off, advocating the “rebuilding of Judea as an independent nation” in a letter to (who else) Mordecai Manuel Noah. John Quincy’s proto-Zionism was distinct from that of his father, a Jerusalem Post article offers, being [steeped in the younger Adams’](#) deep familiarity with the Bible.

***Jewish rating: Always drops a coin in the JNF box***

*Andrew Jackson*

Researcher [Daniel Gullotta](#) found that influential Jewish writer Isaac Harby was a Jackson stan for reasons that were... troubling and had to do with owning people. Harby does not seem alone in his support of Jackson. I think we can all agree, though, that there’s not much to admire in the man. Possibly the best thing he did vis-a-vis Jews was inspire a [musical](#) by composer Michael Friedman.

***Jewish rating: Walked out of “Yentl”***

### *Martin Van Buren*

In 1840, Jews in Damascus were blamed for the murder of a monk, leading to the torture and displacement of Jews, including children. American Jews petitioned Van Buren, who, through his secretary of state, [wrote to the American Minister in Turkey](#) with orders to “prevent and mitigate these horrors.” The letter avowed that American institutions “place on the same footing, the worshipers of God, of every faith and form, acknowledging no distinction between the Mahomedan, the Jew and the Christian.” Van Buren, who inspired [a gang in “Seinfeld,”](#) also wrote [letters to Mordecai Manuel Noah](#) because of course he did.

***Jewish rating: Invited to the break fast***

### *William Henry Harrison*

Harrison wasn't president long enough to do much in office for Jews (winter inauguration + no coat = pneumonia).

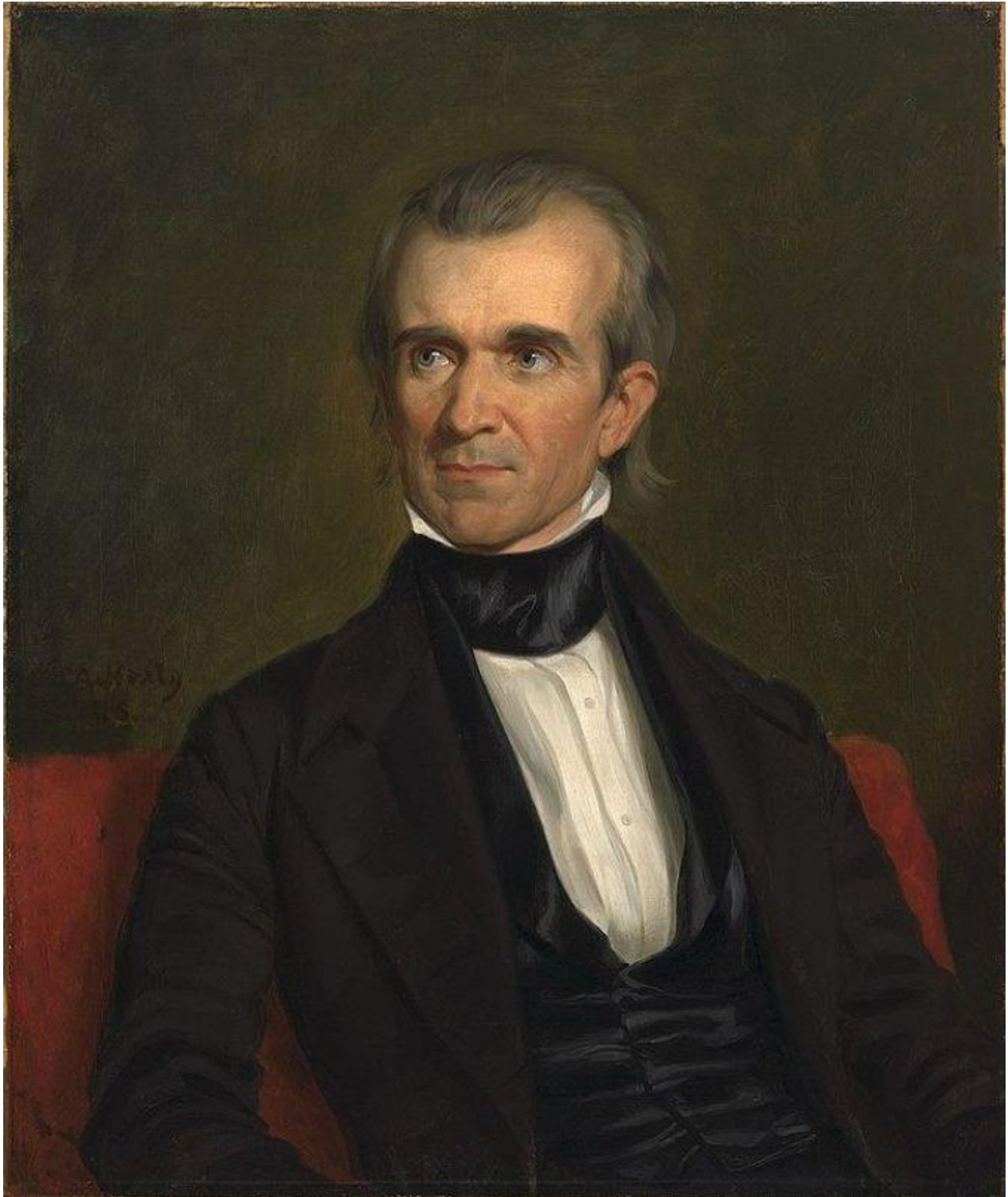
***Jewish rating: Orders a BLT at Canter's***

### *John Tyler*

Tyler appointed Warder Cresson, a Quaker turned Jew (Michael Boaz Israel ben Abraham), as the first consul to Jerusalem in 1844. Cresson was influenced by the writings of one Mordecai Manuel Noah. At least one contemporary rabbi thinks Tyler's presidency was a nightmare, and even gave a [lecture on it](#).

***Jewish rating: Once waved at Jerry Lewis***

**James K. Polk**



“Having done all this, he sought no second term” - They Might Be Giants

They Might Be Giants has a [song about James K. Polk](#). The former art director of the Forward was part of the band. Good enough for us.

***Jewish rating: Has “Fiddler on the Roof” on vinyl — but who doesn’t?***

*Zachary Taylor*

Mordecai Manuel Noah somehow survives Taylor, who dies a year into office after eating an unreasonable amount of cherries and milk.

***Jewish rating: I mean, he drank a lot of milk***

*Millard Fillmore*

Fillmore, who looked suspiciously like Alec Baldwin, objected to a clause discriminating against Jews from a treaty with Switzerland, [writing Congress](#). “It is quite certain that neither by law, nor by treaty, nor by any other official proceeding is it competent for the Government of the United States to establish any distinction between its citizens founded on differences in religious beliefs.” In what became known as L’Affaire Swiss, a number of prominent Jews mobilized against the terms of the treaty. Mordecai Manuel Noah died the same year the treaty landed on Fillmore’s desk.

***Jewish rating: Loses points for taking the Know-Nothing nomination***

## Franklin Pierce



By Wikimedia Commons

Pierce signed “An Act for the Benefit of the Hebrew Congregation in the city of Washington,” and was included in the synagogue’s charter. He was also an anti-abolitionist who signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, leading to Bleeding Kansas and, eventually, the Civil War. That part of his record wasn’t so great.



Handsome and tragic, Franklin Pierce was the [first president to appear on the charter of a synagogue](#) after he signed the 1857 Acts of Congress allowing for the incorporation of the Washington Hebrew Congregation. His namesake college [does not have a Hillel](#).

***Jewish rating: Gets a Hanukkah card (that complains about Bleeding Kansas)***

*James Buchanan*

Buchanan did not like Jews. The feeling's mutual for writer Robert Strauss, author of ["Worst. President. Ever."](#)

***Jewish rating: 8 Gibsons***

*Abraham Lincoln*

Some speculate that Honest Abe was himself a Jew, based on his name (Lincoln was a town in England with a historically sizeable Jewish population) and a possibly apocryphal confession to a rabbi. Historian Jonathan Sarna has written extensively about Lincoln's unique friendship and alliance with Jews. Lincoln allowed rabbis to serve as military chaplains and appointed Jews to important positions, and even, Sarna [argues](#), went so far as to be more inclusive in his language by not referring to America as a "Christian nation."

***Jewish rating: [Sandek](#) status***

*Andrew Johnson*

Johnson, regularly ranked among the worst presidents, once referred to Jews as the ["tribe that parted the garments of our Savior."](#) He was referring specifically to infamous Confederate Judah P. Benjamin, but still.

***Jewish rating: 9 Gibsons***

*Ulysses S. Grant*

There are really two Grants, the general who [expelled Jews from his war zone](#), and the one who did teshuva for that wrong. As president, Grant made

many historic appointments in an effort to redress the pain he'd caused Jews. He was the first sitting president to attend synagogue. He wasn't a great Commander in Chief, but as [Sarna's book about him shows](#), his administration was a conscientious ally when it came to Members of the Tribe. Grant was the first president to appoint an ambassador – Benjamin Peixotto – explicitly to help combat antisemitism in 1870. And yet here we are [waiting on Deborah E. Lipstadt](#).

***Jewish rating: After the making amends, given a board position at the Wiesenthal Center***

*Rutherford B. Hayes*

Hayes moved the date of his inauguration back from Sunday, [not wanting to be sworn in on the Sabbath](#). He so valued the Sabbath, he made sure civil service employees could not be penalized for observing it. Also, during his days as a general, Hayes participated in a [Seder with Jewish soldiers](#) under his command. "I doubt whether the spirits of our forefathers, had they been looking down on us, standing there with our arms by our sides ready for an attack, faithful to our God and our cause, would have imagined themselves amongst mortals, enacting this commemoration of the scene that transpired in Egypt," Hayes wrote in a letter home.

***Jewish rating: Invited up to the bimah***

*James A. Garfield*

Garfield appointed a Jewish ambassador, Simon Wolf, to Cairo, [noting his satisfaction at](#) "having a descendant of a people who had been enslaved by the Egyptians as a representative to that country from a great free land." Garfield was shot the next day.

***Jewish rating: More Jewish than the cat, less Jewish than John and Andrew***

*Chester A. Arthur*

In 1882, Arthur appealed to Russia to curb the "proscription which the Hebrew race in that country has lately suffered." And when the Russian Empire intended to refuse visas to Jews as part of a treaty, he had his secretary of state [complain to the American minister in St. Petersburg](#).

## ***Jewish rating: Honorary judge at the Latke-Hamantash Debate***

*Grover Cleveland*

When Austria-Hungary refused Cleveland's pick for ambassador, A.M. Kiely, because he was married to a Jew, Cleveland refused to appoint a replacement for a year. We love to see that kind of righteous pettiness. Cleveland vetoed a limit on non-Christian immigrants and after his two non-consecutive terms, [publicly spoke out against](#) the "wholesale murder" of the Kishinev Pogrom. He was not Jewish, but [Grover from "Sesame Street" appears to be.](#)

## ***Jewish rating: Membership at the 92nd Street Y***

*Benjamin Harrison*

The grandson of that guy who refused to wear a coat sent a commission to investigate pogroms in Czarist Russia. "By the revival of antisemitic laws, long in abeyance, great numbers of those unfortunate people have been constrained to abandon their homes and leave the Empire by reason of the impossibility of finding subsistence within the pale to which it is sought to confine them," Harrison [said](#). He went on to credit the "Hebrew" for his industry, but said he feared immigration as "the sudden transfer of such a multitude under conditions that tend to strip them of their small accumulations and to depress their energies and courage is neither good for them nor for us." I don't know, I think we've done pretty well in America, thank you very much.

## ***Jewish rating: His accountant is Jewish***

*William McKinley*

McKinley was there when they laid the cornerstone for Sixth & I. He was assassinated well before he could attend NPR podcast tapings there.

## ***Jewish rating: Once tried kugel***

*Theodore Roosevelt*

TR loved tough Jews. The immigrant Jew "of fine bodily power" he encountered in New York City, the Jewish rough riders that accompanied him to Cuba and the "Maccabee-type" that worked under him as police

commissioner (he later had some of those Jewish cops guard a notorious antisemitic preacher to make him seem “ridiculous”). As Seth Rogovoy noted [in these pages](#), Roosevelt was the first president to appoint a Jew to a cabinet position – Secretary of Commerce and Labor Oscar Solomon Straus – and likely the first to have two menorahs in his home. Roosevelt was also a Zionist and supporter of immigration, opposing attempts to label Jews a separate race on their passports.

***Jewish rating: Snacks on matzah***

## William Taft



By Wikimedia Commons

In his letter about Brandeis, Taft did that whole good “intelligent Jews” and “bad Jews” thing. He was particularly appalled by Brandeis’ “wearing a hat in the Synagogue” to court Jewish support.

It sucks when a letter you wrote vilifying a [legendary jurist’s ability to do his](#)

[job](#) based on his “extreme Judaism” becomes an auction item. But if I were William Howard Taft, and the next bit of trivia people know about me is those times I got stuck in the White House bathtub, I just might take the antisemitic letter.

### ***Jewish rating: 8.5 Gibsons***

*Woodrow Wilson*

Wilson was the target of Taft’s letter for his appointment of Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court. Wilson was a champion of Jews and Zionism. But he was also really, really racist against Black people. [Jonathan Sarna summed up his peculiar place in history](#) in the Forward, writing that his example can “remind us that good people can do very bad things — and vice versa.”

### **Jewish rating: Comes to your Seder; asked to leave when he recommends [“Birth of a Nation”](#)**

*Warren G. Harding*

Harding was a hero to Zionists for his signing of the [Lodge-Fish Resolution](#), advocating for a Jewish home in Mandatory Palestine. When Harding died in 1923, Jews of all stripes mourned his sudden passing during his first term, with the [Jewish Telegraph Agency noting](#) how his “thoughtful act in sending on the occasion of last Rosh Ha-Shannah [sic] a special greeting to Jews is also still fresh in the memory of American Jewry.”

### ***Jewish rating: Always says Chag Sameach***

*Calvin Coolidge*

The famously laconic Coolidge did give a rather lengthy speech at the laying of the cornerstone of a Jewish community center. But it was a moment he was less prolix that deserves attention. As [Der Tog](#) reported in June 18, 1927, Coolidge sent a cable of congratulations to Clarence Chamberlin and Charles A. Levine for landing in Germany and beating Lindbergh’s transatlantic record. Only actually, he did not congratulate Levine (who, to be fair, was just the passenger). The person who wrote the editorial sensed antisemitism, noting how previous administrations “considered it an act of political tact to occasionally honor a great Jewish feat.” Either, the editorial argues, it was an economy of dollars and cents (66 cents to be precise) from a known scrimper

or the “coincidence that the pioneer is named Levine” that led to this oversight.

### ***Jewish rating: Calls kippot “funny hats”***

*Herbert Hoover*

A much-maligned president, Hoover nonetheless made the cause of the Jewish State a plank of the Republican platform, supported legislation to admit German Jewish children into the country in 1939 and, [according to Rafael Medoff](#), urged his successor, FDR, to do more to help Jewish refugees. There was more to his legacy than Hoovervilles.

### ***Jewish rating: Has money in Israel bonds***

*Franklin Delano Roosevelt*

Every so often, Roosevelt’s brand of Harvard-educated, patrician antisemitism [resurfaces](#). He also could have done much, much, much more to help Jews leave Europe and in fact [turned thousands of Jews away](#). But he had a number of Jews in his orbit and kept the favor of much of American Jewry through the Depression and the War. “Jews still loved FDR,” [said “FDR and the Jews” co-author Allan Lichtman](#). “But they understood his limitations; they understood he was not perfect. But they also understood how much better he was for the Jews than any political alternative in the United States or, for that matter, anywhere in the world.”

### ***Jewish rating: Reuben sandwich, extra cheese***

*Harry S. Truman*

Truman recognized Israel only 11 minutes after David Ben-Gurion announced its independence. He also [complained about American Zionists](#) and, in his diary, called Jews “selfish,” wanting “special treatment” when they’re victims and that when they’re in power “neither Hitler nor Stalin have anything on them for cruelty and mistreatment of the underdog.” Not a good look. But Truman (who allegedly called himself Cyrus for his support of the Jewish State) did act decisively, [demanding the British government to allow refugees into Palestine](#). It should also count for something that Truman, like his longtime Jewish friend Eddie Jacobson, was in the *shmatte* business.

### ***Jewish rating: Cyrus the Mediocre***

*Dwight D. Eisenhower*

Eisenhower liberated the camps, ordering his men to collect testimony and capture everything they could of the Nazis' genocidal project on film. He also requested journalists and members of Congress be flown out to bear witness. During the Suez Crisis, he didn't make many fans in Israel or, for that matter, among many American Jews – but then, not everyone could like Ike.

***Jewish rating: Will argue for hours about Israeli politics with your Uncle Izzy***

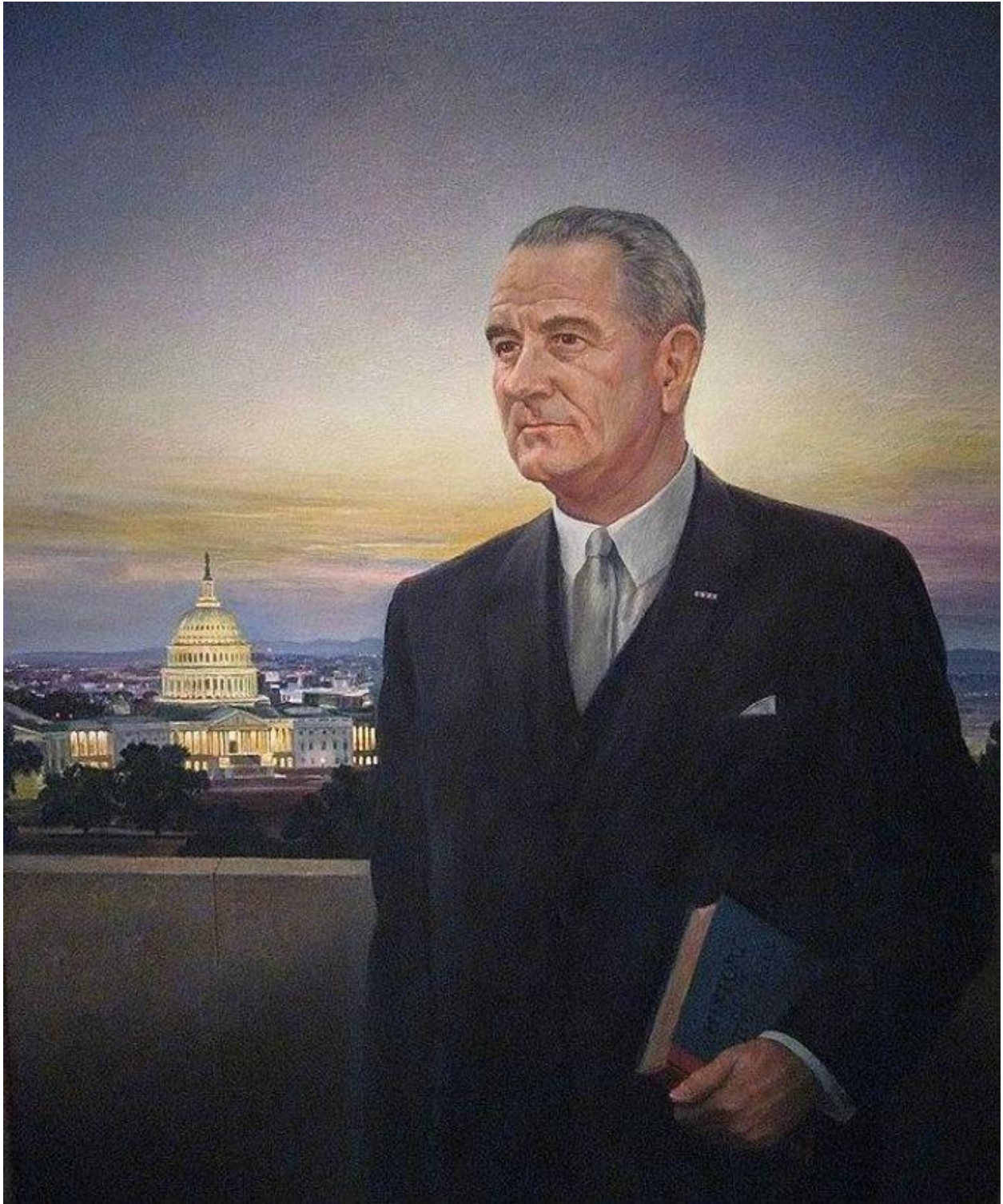
*John F. Kennedy*

When people said JFK was too young to run for president, he said that he [was six years older than Theodore Herzl was when he wrote "The Jewish State."](#) JFK had a few Jews in his cabinet, more as friends and of course enjoyed that most Anglican of Jewish-penned musicals, "Camelot." Plus, in a pinch, he [once saved Pesach by allowing the import of wheat flour from Israel.](#) A friend of the Jews... his dad is another matter.

***Jewish rating: The Schlossbergs would have loved him***



*Lyndon B. Johnson*



By Public domain/Wikimedia C...

Lyndon Baines Johnson is said to have [rescued Jewish refugees](#) while a congressman.

As a congressman, Johnson appears to have [helped Jews flee Europe to the port of Galveston, Texas](#). As president, he was a staunch supporter of Israel. As played by Woody Harrelson, he was directed by Rob Reiner. (Robert Caro is still at work on the next book of LBJ's biography.)

***Jewish rating: Asks about all the Yiddish words for penis***

*Richard Nixon*

"The Jews are born spies" - RMN. When Henry Kissinger is your best Jewish friend, that says it all.

***Jewish rating: 10/10 Nixons***

*Gerald Ford*

Ford [supported Soviet Jewry](#) which certainly rehabilitated the last name Ford for Jews, but perhaps not so much as Harrison did.

***Jewish rating: Wishes you a "Happy Tisha B'Av"***

*Jimmy Carter*

Some Jews think that Jimmy Carter, that nice old man who CNN called the "[Rock and Roll President](#)," is an [antisemite](#) for writing a book called "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid." That and for calling the settlements in the West Bank an impediment to peace while president – a position that today seems pretty commonsensical. Carter offered an [Al Het](#) for harm he may have caused the Jewish community. His peace deal with Sadat and Begin is probably his greatest achievement.

***Jewish rating: [Friends with Bob Dylan](#) (during his evangelical period)***

*Ronald Reagan*

"Bedtime for Bonzo" is a 1951 American comedy film directed by Fred de Cordova, a Sephardic Jew, and featuring Ronald Reagan as a psychology professor named Peter Boyd who is hoping to educate a young chimpanzee.

One day Ronald Reagan would become a Republican president and be a stalwart supporter of Israel.

***Jewish rating: Passed on the script for “Gipper’s Yom Kippur”***

*George H.W. Bush*

Bush Sr. angered pro-Israel lobbyists for not doing enough to help Israel accept Jews from the former USSR. (His “one lonely guy” remark, about battling these activists, was read by some as an antisemitic dog whistle about Jewish control.) But, as Ron Kampeas writes, as Reagan’s vice president, Bush [worked behind the scenes](#) to help Jews escape the Soviet Union, Ethiopia and Syria.

***Jewish rating: Looked at his watch during a bat mitzvah candle-lighting***

*Bill Clinton*

Our first Boomer president recently used the word “kishkes,” wore a [Hebrew campaign](#) button and once [recommended a book by Peter Beinart](#). While one high-profile Jewish interaction as a president resulted in his impeachment, another led to the the Rose Garden handshake of Rabin and Arafat. Regrettably, Clinton a particularly pop culture-attuned president watched the Mel Gibson films “Braveheart” and “The Patriot” [twice while in office](#) (though this was before we knew so much about Mel Gibson). But he also watched the Wes Craven non-horror movie “Music of the Heart” twice, and that was written by my dad’s Jewish ex-girlfriend.

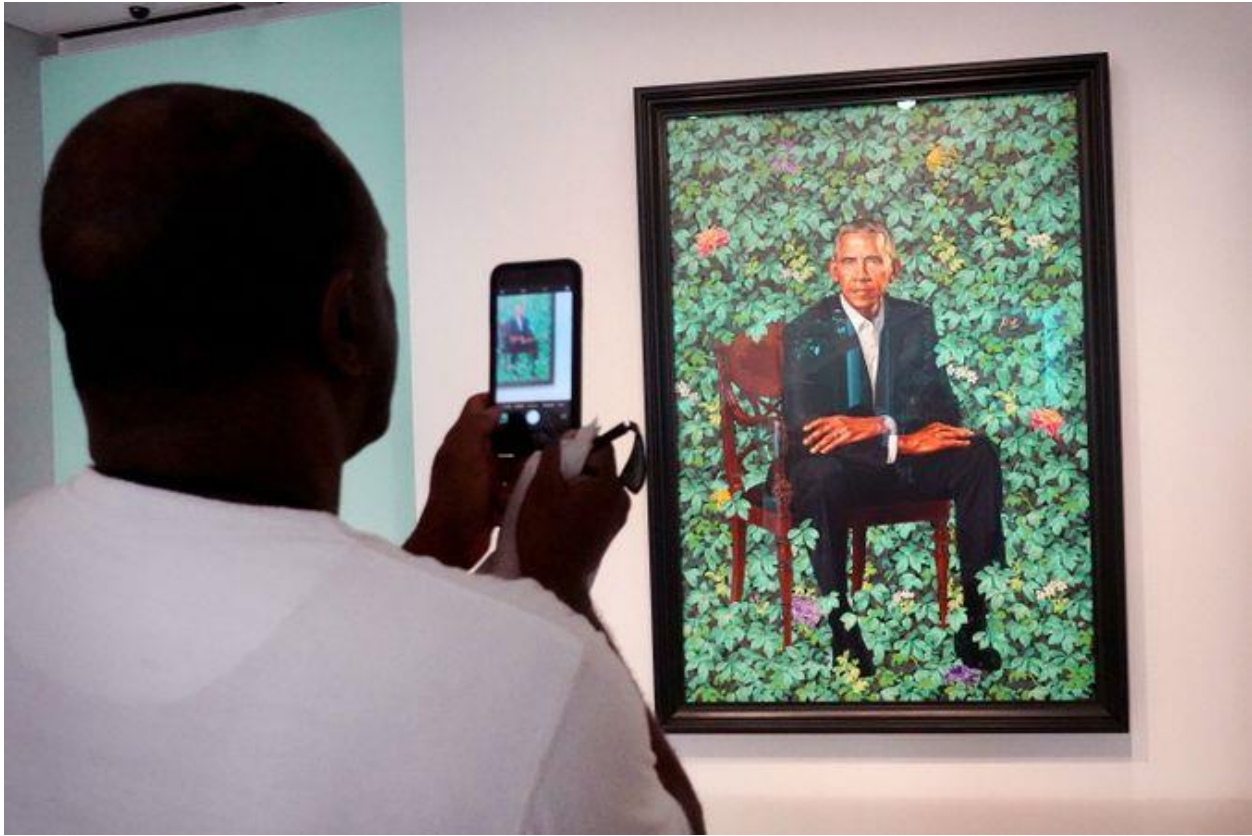
***Jewish rating: Has played “Yerushalayim Shel Zahav” on sax***

*George W. Bush*

Bush Jr. surrounded himself with Jewish advisors and won a lot of Republican Jewish fans for his hardline support of Israel. Bush was the first president to [light a menorah in the White House residence](#). Bush was also [scheduled to speak at a Jews for Jesus event in 2013](#). Maybe he should stick to [painting](#).

***Jewish rating: Owns a Texas Rangers kippah***

## *Barack Obama*



By Getty/Scott Olson

According to [one of his speechwriters](#), Obama didn't handle the "ch" in "chag sameach" too well. But, he still had an affinity with the Jewish people.

It's no secret that Obama had his share of disagreements with Benjamin Netanyahu, but that's a quite narrow way to view his Yiddishkeit. Obama was the first president to host a White House Seder. He spoke about [Tikkun Olam](#) in his addresses to the Jewish community. He also [appears](#) to like [deli](#), and the fiction of [Ben Lerner](#).

### ***Jewish rating: Has hid an afikomen***

#### *Donald Trump*

First president to have a Jewish daughter. First president to suggest Neo-Nazis were "very fine people" on national television and sign the Yad Vashem guest book "so amazing and will never forget." Credit where it's due, the Abraham Accords and the move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem were very big deals. Will it be what most American Jews remember him for? I doubt it.

## ***Jewish rating: Ketchup on the Kushner brisket***

*Joe Biden*

Biden has an [exhausting number of Jewish in-laws](#) and cabinet members. He loves to tell that story about [meeting Golda Meir](#). Since assuming office, he hasn't been quite as eager to talk with Israeli PMs, waiting almost a [full month to give a ring to then-PM Benjamin Netanyahu](#). Putting off that call may have angered some, but, I would contend, it's the most Jewish thing Biden's done so far.

***Jewish rating: “I was with Golda Meir — and she had this guy named Rabin — and she had a bevy of maps....”***