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Capturing the Ethnic Vote

By **Michael Weisskopf**

July 2, 1978

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Burch shook a few dozen hands and socialized in the narrow hotel reception room before taking his seat at the black tie Israeli bond dinner. When several hundred guests kicked off the banquet with a singing of the Israeli national anthem, the Catholic attorney general from Baltimore mouthed the Hebrew words.

Making a good impression at the recent bond dinner in Baltimore County was important for Burch and several other candidates who attended. The long guest list included prominent business and political leaders of Maryland's Jewish community, a small ethnic group with tremendous influence in statewide elections.

Maryland Jews represent less than 4 percent of the state's population but contribute about half of the large gifts of \$1,000 or more in Democratic campaigns, election finance reports show. The number of big gifts from Jews was much higher when Marvin Mandel, the state's first Jewish governor, ran for re-election in 1974.

Jews often vote at twice the rate of the population, according to an analysis of recent elections. Four of the top five voting districts in Maryland - located in Montgomery County and the Baltimore area - have heavy concentrations of Jewish voters. In some precincts, 80 percent of registered voters voted.

Two heavily Jewish legislative districts in the Baltimore area together account for 8 percent of the statewide vote in a Democratic primary, outpolling every political subdivision in Maryland, except for the entire city of Baltimore and Montgomery, Prince George's and Baltimore counties.

"I don't think you can carry the state without carrying the Jewish vote," observed Baltimore County Executive Theodore G. Venetoulis, who is running for governor. "It's a major factor in any campaign. Jewish people are active in volunteering their time and volunteering their money. They're trained to give."

So potent is the Jewish vote in Maryland that it has taken on mythical properties. Many political strategists believe the Baltimore County district centering on heavily Jewish Pikesville produces more votes than all of Prince George's County. In fact, Prince George's outvotes the Pikesville district by three times.

Even those politicians with an accurate appraisal of Jewish support consider it crucial and cultivate it with vigor. Candidates write speeches aimed at Jewish audiences, spend large blocks of campaign time in Jewish communities and take great pains to emphasize their commitment to Israeli's defense.

Senate President Steny H. Hoyer, who is running for lieutenant governor on Acting Gov. Blair Lee III's ticket, began preparing for a statewide race last fall with a tour of Israel. When he returned, his

supporters set up a series of speaking engagements before Jewish groups where Hoyer described his experience.

Hoyer also took some coaching from one of his Jewish aides, Bruce Bereano, who encouraged the candidate to remind audiences of his Danish origins (Danes helped Jews in World War II), gave him books on Judaism, trained him to carry a yarmulka in his car, taught him some Yiddish and exposed him to lox and bagels.

When the Jewish High Holy Days arrived, Hoyer bought an ad in Baltimore's Jewish Times offering "good wishers for the New Year" and sent out Jewish greeting cards. At the recent session of the General Assembly, he sponsored resolutions condemning Soviet oppression of Jews and congratulating Israel for its 30th birthday.

"Nobody had to tell Steny the political aspects of (Jewish support) in terms of raising money and getting votes," Bereano recalled. "He just knew Jews were very active in politics, that they contribute to campaigns and that Jewish areas had the highest turnout in the state. It's just a political reality in Maryland."

Venetoulis, who also toured Israel, held a special salute to the Jewish state on its 30th anniversary. After several speeches from a podium decorated with an Israeli flag, he had a piece of Jerusalem stone implanted in the county courthouse plaza. The stone was inscribed, "Shalom to the People of Baltimore County."

Among Venetoulis' most active volunteers is Rabbi David Ben-Ami, who calls himself "a political rabbi-at-large." He escorts the candidate to Jewish affairs, introducing him as "a supporter of Israel without reservation." According to Ben-Ami, "Jews think the candidate is more accessible if he knows a rabbi."

The extraordinary attention focused on Jewish voters in Maryland seems out of proportion to their numerical strength. Even though the state boasts one of the largest Jewish populations in the nation, its 164,000 Jewish citizens represent just 3.9 percent of Maryland's 4.1 million people.

Yet Maryland Jews rank among the best educated, most affluent residents of the state and compensate for their small number by liberal campaign spending and diligent voting habits.

In this, Maryland follows the pattern of other states with large Jewish constituencies, but unlike other states, where Jews play behind-the-scenes political role but rarely run for office, Maryland has a long tradition of electing Jewish officials.

Mandel was elected by landside margins in 1970 and 1974. State Comptroller Louis L. Goldstein, a Jew, has won four terms. More Jews have been elected to the U.S. Congress from Maryland than from 47 other states and one of the nation's first Jewish U.S. senators, Isidor Rayner, was elected in Maryland in 1905.

This year's crop of gubernatorial candidates features one Jew, Baltimore City Council President Walter S. Orlinsky. Stephen H. Sachs, who is running for attorney general, is Jewish. So are the campaign managers for Burch and Venetoulis. Maryland's most prominent political ad agency, now working for Lee, is owned by a Jew.

"Jews play a larger role in Maryland politics than (in) other states," observed Rabbi Ben-Ami, who has worked in several state and national campaigns. "The Maryland Jewish community is old-line, they're very well established, they're part and parcel (of the community). Jews are looked up to as a successful ethnic group."

Most explanations of the intense political involvement of Jews in Maryland and elsewhere begin with a reminder of Jewish history. After centuries of government persecution in various countries, American Jews have seized on politics as a type of insurance policy, a way to help insulate themselves from dictators.

"It's a historical reflex," explained Leon Rubenstein, who was elected to Maryland's House of Delegates in 1939 with the first wave of Jewish legislators from Baltimore, "when you have a history of oppression, you want people in power who will be good to you. You want to be assured of leaders who will not hurt you."

The Jews of Maryland are scattered throughout the state, although they are heavily concentrated in two large urban centers. Nine of every 10 Jews in the state live in Montgomery County and the long, narrow corridor stretching from the northwest section of Baltimore to Owings Mills in North-west Baltimore County.

In those strongholds of Maryland Jewry, the political impact of Jews on local elections is enormous. In Montgomery County, where Jews represent one-tenth of the population, one of every four voters is Jewish. "You can win or lose an election in this county in the Jewish precincts of Silver Spring," a local politician said.

If there is a Jewish capital of Maryland, it lies within the large wedge of communities fanning out from Northwest Baltimore and centering on Pikesville. The heavy concentration of synagogues, kosher food stores, delicatessans, Jewish community centers, schools and charities leaves little doubt that this is the Jewish heart land.

Politics has long been a staple of life for the 92,000 Jews who make their home in the area. Synagogue brotherhoods have a revolving series of political speakers. Delicatessans buzz with talk of the gubernatorial election. The two kosher caterers have trouble keeping up with the demand of political fund-raisers.

"The shoptalk is constantly politics," said state Sen. Melvin A. Steinberg, who represents the Pikesville district. "Jews feel politics is part of their daily lives." On election day, Steinberg said, he assembles a large group of volunteers to work at the precincts and rewards them with corned beef sandwiches.

Jewish life in Montgomery County is less visibly ethnic than in Baltimore, but no less political, especially in the lower and central Silver Spring area known to politicians as "the fertile crescent" because of the high voter turnout. Jews play leadership roles in local political clubs and often square off in county elections.

One of the first stops for many candidates campaigning in Montgomery is the study of Rabbi Herel Kranz of Silver Spring Jewish Center, who actively supports politicians by praising them in letters to his congregation and ads in the Jewish Week newspaper, raising campaign funds and lining up speaking engagements before Jewish groups.

Kranz, who supports Orlinsky in this year's gubernatorial race, takes a practical view of his political role. "You live in a world of reality," he explained, "and politicians help shape that reality. If you help a candidate, he obviously remembers it. When the Jewish people need help, he'll respond."

Jews have not always been at the center of political life in Maryland. In fact, until 1825, Jews could not hold public office in the state. It took 8 years for a Scottish-born legislator from Washington County by the name of Thomas Kennedy to win full rights for Jews.

In the 1930s, then Gov. Harry W. Nice wanted to appoint a second judge to the Baltimore bench. But Jewish leaders, concerned about an antisemitic backlash, pleaded with Nice not to make the appointment for fear it would jeopardize the reelection prospects of the sitting judge, whose term expired that year. Today, a third of Baltimore's judges are Jewish.

The Jewish vote first became a political factor in the 1930s when James H. (Jack) Pollack, a former prize fighter, began organizing Baltimore Jews as they began their migration from the east side to the west end of town. Pollack set up political clubs, fielded election day workers and bargained votes for patronage.

It took Theodore R. McKeldin, a Baltimore Republican, to first appreciate the strength of the Jewish vote. By surrounding himself with Jewish advisers, regularly attending synagogues and raising funds for Israel, he had solid Jewish backing when he was elected Baltimore mayor in 1943 and 1963 and Maryland governor in 1950 and 1954.

In 1970, 11 years after McKeldin left the Annapolis State House and 145 years after Jews won their full rights as citizens, Maryland elected its first Jewish governor, Marvin Mandel, the son of a cloth cutter from Northwest Baltimore, who began his political career, as most Jews his age, working in the Pollack organization.

Mandel, who was suspended from office last October after his conviction on political corruption charges, said he felt a small degree of antisemitism at first, especially from the upper crust Baltimore WASP society, whose members monopolized certain state business until Mandel became governor and spread it out.

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