

# Rabbi Korff

## Sorts It Out

9/14/76 9/14?  
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It's the ingratitude, he says, over and over, the ingratitude and the inequity that are "literally driving me out of my mind." And don't misunderstand, he says, again and again, when he speaks of no longer being able to go home, of the insults and humiliations and severed friendships, he's not seeking sympathy.

"I want to again caution you," he says, in those measured tones, with that heavy accent, "I don't want any sympathy. I don't want any headlines. There will always be those who will say, 'Well, he's naive, he's a fool, he shouldn't have gotten into it.' I do not regret, not the slightest, what I have done. I think that at least every one is entitled to one defender."

Rabbi Baruch Korff's is one of the last of the Watergate stories. He insists his case differs markedly—

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**RABBI, From A1**  
Rabbi Baruch Korff did not serve Richard M. Nixon. He was not involved in the government, he sought no position, he has gained nothing but opprobrium from his experience. As he says, he didn't seek out Nixon when the President was on Mt. Everest. Korff came to him when Nixon fell to the ground, and then tried to pick up the pieces.

Korff was an outspoken Nixon supporter during the 1974 House impeachment hearings. He founded the National Citizens Committee for Fairness to the Presidency and was a trustee of a group raising funds for Nixon's legal defenses after Nixon resigned in August, 1974.

Whether he is another in the long line of Watergate victims, or is now paying a just price for his involvement in a wrong cause, are not at issue here. Korff knows his story is more complicated than that. It has to do with his own perceptions of reality, with his religion, his rationalizations, perhaps his own self-interest.

He's not even sure, he says, why he's talking about his experience at all. Especially now, when he's trying to phase out his efforts for Nixon, now when he's ill and disressed about what has happened. Talking about it eases his burden, he says. "call it therapy."

Naivete, yes, he will concede that. Egotism, yes, he has his full share. "Even if you concede my ego trip, I doubt very much whether my ego is that strong to endure what I have endured." But a lack of reality, an undue innocence, no, that was not the way it was.

And Korff never believed that Nixon was without sin. "Matter of fact, it was never really picked up by the media people, but at the very outset I said a good saint would make a bad President, a good President would make a bad saint."

It's more personal. It's knowing that many other Jews think of him, at the age of 62, as a *shande*, that Yiddish pejorative for a shame, a reflection on them all. There was a time, three years ago, when an old friend warned him about embarking on a public cause of leading citizens in support of Nixon. "Did he want to be remembered as someone who helped victims of Nazism or as Nixon's rabbi?" his friend asked.

Rabbi Korff chose his course. He did not know then where it would lead. That's what he's trying to sort out now.

"You come to a point where you feel, well, you want to go home again," he says. "I was invited to a temple in a neighboring community, purely on parochial matters, and somebody posted, blown up, an item from a newspaper linking me with Elizabeth Ray. Two people who were shunned at the Republican convention—Rabbi Korff and Elizabeth Ray. Your good rabbin-ate, your life's effort.

"By and large, it's difficult, very difficult to go home again. It manifests itself in many ways. Contempt.

Isolation. Perhaps one remark, and this was by a woman, will suffice.

"She said: 'You know, people say, why is it you are so strong for Richard Nixon? It's probably because you're just as guilty. You've committed a lot of crimes. You must be a criminal to defend a so-called criminal.' I said the reverse is true because the criminal would fear drawing attention to himself."

When he says he can't go home again to his friends and neighbors in Rehoboth, Mass., he means more than geography. And more than the incidents that have occurred—the dead cat thrown in the driveway, the obscene calls, the threats.

"Of course I can go home, whether my neighbor talks to my wife or doesn't," he says. "It is the entire atmosphere. It's thick. I don't want to border on the paranoid. There were a few instances that bothered me.

"I want my child to look up to her father. We went to Martha's Vineyard for a few days and she watched television. Someone said that Richard Nixon was a crook and a thief. And Zamira said, 'How come, Abba'—she called me Abba, which in Hebrew is 'father'—'how come, Abba, if he is a crook, you are friends with him?'"

An elderly man there had been studying the Talmud with him once a week; then he canceled the lessons. The man's wife explains: "When you lie down with dogs you get up with fleas." Korff is rabbi emeritus of his congregation. All her life a young lady who had been taught by him had said: "Rabbi, you will fly in and marry me, no matter where." Now she's getting married.

"Gently, her father comes over and says, 'You know, there is the fear that instead of focusing on the bride and bridegroom people will focus on you because of your notoriety. So I got the message, but the young lady wouldn't hear of it.' Then he learns that the bridegroom's parents "do not want a rabbi who is so corrupt as

to defend Richard Nixon."

Korff takes his daughter, Zamira, age 9, to lunch at a Washington restaurant before her school year is to begin. A man comes over to their table.

"You're Rabbi Korff, aren't you?" Korff smiles, and the man says: "You're a disgrace to Judaism, you're a disgrace to Jews."

"And Zamira, her eyes filled up and she says, 'No.' Now that kind of ridicule, bordering on animalism, reveals the shortcomings of those who perpetrate such injustice against the victim."

Such experiences are now, he says, taking their toll. "There are so many incidents. It's very difficult and it's embarrassing for me to go into them. It's like holding a lion by the tail. It's a malady, it's a malaise. I've counseled enough people, literally in the thousands, and there isn't a family without its skeletons. This double standard of piety or morality pains me more than the acts of discrimination against me."

Korff knows full well, of course,

that none of this would have happened had he not so fervently and publicly associated himself with Nixon. His view of Nixon is complicated. By his account, he had not been an original supporter.

In 1960, he voted for John F. Kennedy with his heart. In 1964, he voted for Lyndon B. Johnson with his heart. In 1968, he voted for Hubert H. Humphrey with his heart. "But in 1972, I voted for Richard Nixon with my head," he said.

He explains: "I voted for him because I liked what he did in foreign and domestic affairs. I liked his plan, which was defeated by Congress, about unearned income. That was masterful. You could expect it from Norman Thomas, yet it was defeated. I liked his revenue sharing. I liked the fact that he acted boldly, and he did."

He also liked Nixon's efforts on behalf of Israel, on assisting Jewish refugees to leave Russia, on detente. When Watergate engulfed Nixon, Korff found his views had changed over the years. "I felt that this man was a victim not only of the incident that catapulted him into controversy, but he was victim from the beginning." He meant, he said, "The hate, the controversy that Nixon engendered, it percolated and simmered and stayed there."

Korff was one who felt that censure of Nixon by Congress would be sufficient. He feared the upheaval the impeachment would bring, the precedent it would set, the damage to the presidency. Thus, at least, his view.

"I also felt the inequity, the inequity that's literally driving me out of my mind. I asked myself, had it been Kennedy what would have happened? I asked myself again: Well, now, we are judged by our peers, a rabbi among rabbis, a journalist among journalists, a doctor among doctors. Why not a President among Presidents? Why should a predecessor be judged differently than his successor? Having been a fugitive from



injustice, a refugee from persecution, inequity to me was abominable. I never said he was sinless."

He understood, he says, "There was something artificial about Richard Nixon, as if he had to act instead of releasing his emotions, as if he was fearful to release his emotions, to display them for all to see, a distrust of his fellow man."

But there was, he insists, the inequity—that double standard of judgment, "one in church and one in the street." And, he also insists, the ingratitude—that American public for which Nixon had done so much, that case "of all those bigwigs who benefited from Richard Nixon. Ingratitude. It all came back to ingratitude."

A conversation with Rabbi Korff is filled with Biblical references, citations of Solomon, references to Genesis and the nature of man, right and wrong, good and evil, life and death. He does not, however, introduce

another familiar Old Testament theme—punishment.

Here is the question, Rabbi. Many people have said that Richard Nixon living in opulent exile at his California estate, pardoned, pensioned for life, has escaped judgment and punishment. Is that not true?

Korff is most emotional on this point.

"It's not fair to so conclude. I saw him close up and I don't think there is a punishment more severe short of beheading him could have been visited upon him. I think his punishment was actually the death of a thousand cuts. And I saw him close, particularly immediately after his resignation and on many occasions since.

"I don't think you could have visited any more punishment short of execution. Even execution would not equate with his punishment. It would either make him martyr to some or a culprit to others. I think people have a distorted conception of punishment. When you are on Mt. Everest and you fall by the time you reach the ground you are pulverized. And how can they equate themselves with him?

"The President breaks the law every day in terms of the layman, of you and me. This is what I mean by relating to reality. Did he escape punishment? Those who say so totally avoid the reality. I mean, that man wished death. And he almost achieved his wish. He wished that, and it was that wish that almost came true.

"If people do not realize that he was at the lowest ebb of his existence, and I observed it. He wanted to die. So how can I take such reasoning? Vulturing, that's what it is.

"As for living in opulence, he wants to keep up a facade because of ego, etcetera. I know his wife's illness now will run into a fortune. And it will keep up, it will go on."

Rabbi Korff appears to realize that, properly or not, he and Richard Nixon are linked together inseparably. As for himself, he presumes he will continue to "be hurt on more than one occasion."

"You can't develop an asbestos skin," he says. "If you're sensitive to other people then you're sensitive to yourself. And I am hypersensitive, perhaps too sensitive.

"The verdict is in so far as Richard Nixon is concerned. History may have to have another word. . . . But considering, I do think the punishment exceeded the crime. The country was alert, the Congress was aware—and to see Congress judging him, Congress permeated with indecencies and obscenities. I mean, a reprimand would have been punishment enough.

"Is it only in the church where you can get absolution? Why can't we get absolution in our hearts? Why must we have a geographical location to get absolution? Why can't we make our homes miniature temples or churches—the dining room table an altar, the library an ark? Why must we separate the holy from the so-to-speak daily living? Why can't we spiritualize the secular?

"Perhaps I am a sentimentalist."