

# Nixon Defender

## Today, the Rabbi Is Persecuted

By Haynes Johnson  
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**I**T'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."

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**R**ABBI BARUCH KORFF'S is one of the last of the Watergate stories. He insists his case differs markedly — he did not serve Richard 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 Mr. Nixon when the President was on Mt. Everest. Korff came to him when Mr. Nixon fell to the ground, and then tried to pick up the pieces.

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 Mr. Nixon, now when he's ill and distressed 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 Mr. Nixon was without sin. "Matter of fact, it was never really picked up by the media people, but at the very outside I said a good saint would make a bad president, a good president would make a bad saint."

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**I**T'S MORE personal. It's knowing that many other Jews think of him, at the age of 62, as a shande, that Yiddish perjorative 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 the citizens in support of Mr. Nixon. Did he want to be remembered as someone who helped victims of Naziism or as Mr. Nixon's rabbi? his friends asked.

"You come to a point where you feel, well, you want to go home again," he says. "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."

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**W**HEN 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.

"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 in Rehoboth had been studying the Talmud with him once a week; then he canceled the lessons. The man's wife says "When you lie down with dogs you get up with fleas."

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**SUCH EXPERIENCE** are now, he says, taking their toll. "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 Mr. Nixon.

When Watergate engulfed Mr.



**Rabbi Baruch Korff — troubled by double standards of piety**

Nixon, "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."

"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?"

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 Mr. Nixon had done so much, that case "of all those bigwigs who benefitted from Richard Nixon. Ingratitude. It all came back to ingratitude."