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80790 - בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציורו						

A nationalist love story

It's all about the Benjamins – Franklin and Herzl



By GIL TROY

Congresswoman Ilhan Omar's recent antisemitic tweet introduced the tragically unhip to a new turn of phrase – from 1997. Back then, Puff Daddy rapped “It's all about the Benjamins” – meaning piles of cash, because Benjamin Franklin's face appears on America's \$100 bill.

On February 11, Glenn Greenwald tweeted “It's stunning how much time US political leaders spend defending a foreign nation even if it means attacking free speech rights of Americans.”

Omar responded “it's all about the Benjamins,” obnoxiously suggesting Jews buy America's friendship. But Omar stumbled onto something. The American-Israel relationship is all about the Benjamins, reflecting the shared values of “the first American,” Benjamin Franklin, and modern Zionism's founder, Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl, Theodor Herzl's Hebrew name.

Both iconic figures are caricatured endlessly. Franklin's jowly oval face, rock-star, shoulder-length hair, and wire-rim sunglasses are instantly recognizable; so, too,

are Herzl's piercing eyes and bushy black beard. How can an American who lived from 1706 to 1790 and a European who lived from 1860 to 1904 explain a 21st-century alliance between two countries? Therein lies these Benjamins' enlightening, hard-working, liberal nationalist power.

Both were intellectuals who harmonized dreaming with building, idealism with pragmatism. Scientist, inventor, printer, wiseacre, Benjamin Franklin was America's philosopher king. He believed in thrift – “A penny saved is a penny earned.” He revered hard work – “Well done is better than well said.” He believed in leaving the world better than how we found it – “Instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle.”

Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl's resumé as poet, playwright, journalist and lawyer sounds dreamier – and he proclaimed: “If you will it, it is no dream.”

But Herzl also embraced Franklin's vision of constructive pragmatism. “A people can be helped only by its own efforts, and if it cannot help itself, it cannot be helped,” he taught. “We Zionists want to rouse the people to self-help.” And, Herzl preached, “What we want is to make it possible for our unfortunate people to live a life of industry, for it is by steady work alone that we hope

for our physical and moral rehabilitation.”

Beyond taking self-determination quite literally, believing in self-help that helps others, too, Franklin and Herzl fought for freedom, yearned for justice, and wanted a nation that would do the world a world of good.

“They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety,” Franklin the revolutionary advised. And emphasizing that true justice applies to everyone, enhances everyone, and must be pursued by everyone, he said: “Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.”

This world-improving dynamic drove Herzl's nationalism, too. “It's true that we aspire to our ancient land,” he said, starting with our needs, our identity. “But what we want in that ancient land is a new blossoming of the Jewish spirit.” And from Zion would come forth that new spirit, benefiting humanity. “Those of us who are today prepared to hazard our lives for the cause would regret having raised a finger,” he warned, “if we were able to organize only a new social system and not a more righteous one.”

Both Benjamins had great faith in that

dirty word these days – “nationalism” – trusting their respective nations in particular.

Franklin's 1754 cartoon of a snake sliced into segments – colony by colony – probably represented the first time an American-British colonist drew an image imagining colonial unity. The man who later said “We must indeed all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately,” first wrote, under that drawing, “JOIN OR DIE.”

Similarly, 150 years later, addressing a people scattered worldwide, not just along America's East Coast, Herzl said: “Zionism has already brought about something remarkable, heretofore regarded as impossible: a close union between the ultramodern and the ultraconservative Jews.... A union of this kind is possible only on a national basis.”

This is not an exercise in cherry-picking selective quotes that might fit together – their ideas flow naturally together, one of many illustrations of the natural fit linking Americanism with Zionism, Americans with Israelis, the US with Israel. True, shared interests help, too. No other country backs Israel as America does, and Israel watches America's back. Following Franklin Roosevelt's high standard, “Judge me by the enemies I make,” the Iranian mullahocracy's obsessive attacks on “Big Satan” and “Little Satan” honor America and Israel.

Ultimately, it's all about the Benjamins: Thanks to shared values, not just shared interest. A certain brand of transformational, aspirational nationalism, a catalytic identity, a zeal to be useful, constructive, free and redemptive drive America and Israel more than most democracies, thereby driving them together, too.

The other Benjamins – money – lack the power such bonding ideas and defining values enjoy. No lobby could ever manufacture the overlapping images, dreams and ideals that link America with Israel, while making the two peoples so close, too.

That little Israel cheers America is not surprising. But that capitalist America – with its eye on oil – sticks by Israel; that media-driven America, despite constant campaigns to delegitimize Israel, resists such lies; and that Christian America, transcending centuries of Western antisemitism, supports the Jewish state say much about Israel's value and even more about American values. As Franklin taught: while “a friend in need is a friend indeed,” there is “no better relation than a prudent and faithful friend.”

Lobby-libelers be damned. How lucky Israel and America each are to have each other.

The writer is the author of The Zionist Ideas, an update and expansion of Arthur Hertzberg's classic anthology, The Zionist Idea, published by the Jewish Publication Society. A distinguished scholar of North American history at McGill University, he is the author of 10 books on American history, including The Age of Clinton: America in the 1990s.



A woman walks near a statue of Benjamin Franklin on Capitol Hill in Washington last month. (Joshua Roberts/Reuters)