

The Myth of Ben Franklin's Antisemitism

by [Shai Afsai](#) (February 2025)



Benjamin Franklin (David Martin, 1767)

The myth that American founding father Benjamin Franklin (January 17, 1706 – April 17, 1790) was an antisemite first emerged about 90 years ago—about 145 years after his passing—with the publication of a fraudulent and, since then, repeatedly discredited antisemitic text commonly known as the “Franklin Prophecy.”

On February 3, 1934, William Dudley Pelley, the occultist head of the pro-Nazi Silver Legion of America and publisher and editor of the fascist *Liberation*, ran an article titled “Did Benjamin Franklin Say this about the Hebrews?” It contained a supposed excerpt from the previously unknown diary of Charles Coatesworth Pinckney, South Carolina’s delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

As presented by Pelley, the “Private Diary of Charles Pinckney” or “Charles Pinckney’s Diary” recorded a lengthy diatribe delivered by Franklin against Jews during the Convention, with Franklin describing them as “a great danger for the United States of America” and as “vampires,” and with his calling for the Constitution to bar and expel them from the country, lest in the future they adversely change its form of government.

By August 1934, Pelley’s “Franklin Prophecy” was already being republished in Nazi Germany. Nazi leaders and sympathizers helped disseminate the fraud in German, French, and English, and in Germany, Switzerland, and the United States.

In September 1934, the “Franklin Prophecy” reached American historian Charles A. Beard, best known for his 1913 work *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. Beard began searching for an older source for the “Franklin Prophecy” —in the process consulting with other scholars such as John Franklin Jameson, who was chief of the

Library of Congress Manuscript Division.

Six months later, in March of 1935, Beard's conclusions were published in *The Jewish Frontier*, which then reprinted his essay as a pamphlet titled *Charles Beard Exposes Anti-Semitic Forgery about Benjamin Franklin*. Summing up the results of his investigations, Beard wrote:

All these searches have produced negative results. I cannot find a single original source that gives the slightest justification for believing that the "Prophecy" is anything more than a bare-faced forgery. Not a word have I discovered in Franklin's letters and papers expressing any such sentiments against the Jews as ascribed to him by the Nazis—American and German. His well-known liberality in matters of religious opinions would, in fact, have precluded the kind of utterances put in his mouth by this palpable forgery.

Henry Butler Allen, director of the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, also weighed in on the fanciful Pinckney diary, stating: "Historians and librarians have not been able to find it or any record of it having existed."

Beard, Allen, and several other scholars' responses were collected into the pamphlet *Benjamin Franklin Vindicated: An Exposure of the Franklin "Prophecy" by American Scholars*, issued jointly in 1938 by the International Benjamin Franklin Society, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the Jewish Labor Committee.

A more recent discussion of the emergence and debunking of the "Franklin Prophecy" is found in Nian-Sheng Huang's *Benjamin Franklin in American Thought and Culture, 1790-1990*, published in 1994 by the American Philosophical Society. Huang showed

the “Franklin Prophecy” to be an extreme case of exploiting, vulgarizing, and distorting Franklin’s legacy.

Given the ease with which the “Franklin Prophecy” has spread, and its staying power among antisemites and anti-Zionists, there is no doubt that bigots world-wide have succeeded in misusing the American founding father’s good name and fame for their abhorrent purposes.

Throughout his life Franklin saw a positive societal role for faith and public worship, and generally advocated religious tolerance and inclusivity. In his autobiography, he professed a life-long interest in projects “serviceable to People in all Religions.” Despite Franklin’s “well-known liberality in matters of religious opinions,” on a few occasions he did use offensive language about Jews in his private correspondence, though this language does not come close to the antisemitic vitriol he ostensibly publicly uttered in the “Prophecy.” Franklin, who also owned slaves and featured slaves for sale in his newspaper prior to becoming an abolitionist, was not always free of prejudice.

In much of today’s popular culture, there often seems to be room only for saints or villains. Franklin was neither. He was a complex person whose ideas and actions evolved as he confronted new situations, as he matured, and as he grew older. Later in life, Franklin became an anti-slavery activist, and he accepted the ceremonial presidency of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1787.

In 1788, after synagogue construction and difficult economic conditions plunged Philadelphia’s Congregation Mikveh Israel into debt, its members turned to their neighbors, “worthy fellow Citizens of every religious Denomination,” for assistance. Franklin, who had never been hostile to Jews, led by example in the city and donated five pounds to help ensure the continued presence of Philadelphia’s oldest formal Jewish congregation.

As was fitting for a man who toiled to be “serviceable to People in all Religions,” when Franklin passed away two years later, the press reported that his funeral procession in Philadelphia was led by “All the Clergy of the city, including the Ministers of the Hebrew congregation.”

Remarkably, [Franklin eventually influenced Jewish literature, thought, and practice](#). This occurred primarily (though not only) through his posthumously published autobiography, which reached the prominent Eastern European *maskil* (proponent of the Jewish Enlightenment) Rabbi Menaḥem Mendel Lefin of Satanów. In 1808, Rabbi Lefin anonymously published *Sefer Heshbon Ha-nefesh* (Book of Spiritual Accounting), which introduced Franklin’s autobiographical strategy for character-improvement to Hebrew-reading Jewish audiences.

This book, with its Franklin-based method, became accepted and valued among *mussar* (applied Jewish spiritual, emotional, and moral guidance) enthusiasts, made its way into *yeshivot*, and is still being republished and studied today. An English translation of the first portion of the book was published in 1995, increasing its accessibility. Rabbi Lefin so seamlessly appropriated Franklin’s method (see [Nancy Sinkoff’s](#) writing on this) into the Jewish textual tradition that many of those who have encountered and read *Heshbon Ha-nefesh* over the past two hundred plus years have been [unaware of, or at least quite confused about](#), its connection to the American founding father. Almost every single one of the many published editions, including the 1995 English translation, omits mention of the book’s connection to Franklin.

In 2024, journalist Nick Hardinges published an online [article](#) at *Snopes* (“The definitive Internet reference source for researching urban legends, folklore, myths, rumors, and misinformation”) in which he fact-checked the claim that Franklin urged an audience in 1787 to exclude Jews from the United States in the Constitution. I was pleased to see that Hardinges made use of and referenced articles of mine at

[JewThink](#) and [Atlanta Jewish Connector](#) on the subject. He rated the claim about Franklin “Unfounded,” meaning there is no demonstrable evidence to support it. He did not go so far as calling the claim “False,” a *Snopes* rating indicating that the primary elements of a claim are demonstrably false—though I think this more accurately describes the “Franklin Prophecy,” which was never heard of prior to 1934, and for which no known original source exists.

In any case, the “Franklin Prophecy” shows no signs of going away. It remains too useful for those who want to hate.

[Table of Contents](#)

Shai Afsai’s articles, short stories, poems, book reviews, and photographs have been published in *Anthropology Today*, *Haaretz*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *Journal of the American Revolution*, *New English Review*, *The Providence Journal*, *Reading Religion*, *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, and *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*. See more [here](#).

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