

FEATURE

The GOP Elephant **AND THE JEWISH QUEST**

by Rafael Hoffman

*Whether navigating
the courts of kings
and emperors or
the halls of power in
Western democracies,
determining where
the Jewish People's
best interests lie has
never been an easy
or clear-cut task.*

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Caitlin O'Hara/Getty Images
President Donald Trump speaks at a Make America Great Again campaign rally on October 19 in Prescott, Arizona.

While the diplomacy angle of such efforts is the domain of professional lobbyists, activists and the like, especially in a democracy, voting patterns, party registration and financial support speak loudly to how the community sees its needs best served.

For decades, much if not most of the Orthodox community has found itself in a well-known bind. Its staunch conservatism, particularly on social issues, has put its sympathies largely in line with the Republican Party. Yet the vast majority of American Jews inhabit New York, New Jersey, Illinois and California, states that have long had a liberal leaning and which over the past decade have become “deep blue,” with their elected officials embracing ever more progressive policy positions.

This phenomenon has long posed a series of conundrums as the Jewish community tries to juggle its faith-driven political beliefs with fighting for protection of its needs in a political milieu that espouses much that is anathema to Torah Judaism.

This tightrope walk elicited occasional controversies and strategy disagreements, and often put the popular voice of swaths of the community at odds with the preferences of those charged with advocating for its needs. But for the most part the balancing act has emerged into a somewhat accepted and manageable paradox of

political reality.

Then Donald Trump was elected President.

While a series of polls focused on the Orthodox community, each with their own limitations, have shown varying degrees of support for Trump, all confirm that that support is exceedingly high. A conversation in most corners of the Torah world would do more to confirm this than any statistic. It is not as if the Orthodox world has not been enamored with a sitting President before. George W. Bush’s strong support for Israeli security and set of convictions in keeping with his evangelical Christian beliefs created a warm bond between his administration and traditionalist Jews. But the Trump presidency has undoubtedly taken the depth and breadth of this support to a new level.

As in any community, some appreciate the President’s forthrightness and outsider approach, while others are perturbed by his spotty past, rough treatment of opponents and what often seems like a loose relationship with facts and expert data. Either way, it is difficult for too many in the community to argue that the administration’s emphasis on protections for religious liberty, favorable stance on school choice and strong support of the State of Israel do not line up with the policy priorities of Orthodox Jewry.

These points, plus window dressing such as



AP Photo/ Evan Vucci
President Donald Trump welcomes Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to the White House, Monday, Jan. 27,, in Washington.



AP Photo/Alex Brandon

L-R: Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, President Donald Trump, Bahrain Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan stand on the Blue Room Balcony during the Abraham Accords signing ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House, Sept. 15.

prominently-placed observant Jews in the White House and a rapidly growing sentiment that the Democratic Party is synonymous with promotion of immorality, lawlessness and policies seen as a threat to Israel's security, have done a great deal to solidify Orthodox loyalty to the President and his party.

In addition to support at the polls, the community's enchantment with the administration has also translated into two high-ticket fundraisers, one in Manhattan and another in Deal, New Jersey, that were attended by the President himself.

At the same time, the Trump presidency has upped the ante on the aforementioned conundrum. Many local and state leaders in states where most Orthodox Jews live are not only on the opposite side of the ideological fence from the President, but sworn members of the "resistance" to his presidency who have tried through laws, policy moves and court actions to stand in the way of his agendas. The phenomenon seemingly leaves Orthodox Jews in a potentially precarious political spot.

The outlier status this gives Orthodox Jews in the areas they inhabit has not gone unnoticed and has been actively amplified by media. One academic journal piece put it colorfully in an article titled, "'Borough Park Was a Red State': Trump and the Haredi Vote."

Several of New York City's left-leaning publications, as well as some of the secular Jewish press,

ran articles spotlighting the community's support, tacitly throwing it into a narrative which, even after President Trump's victory, continued to portray his supporters as a cultish anomaly, grouping Orthodox Jews with Kentucky coal miners and other grizzled inhabitants of "Trump country."

The phenomenon was painted in stark colors by coverage of some of the unruliness that occurred in Boro Park regarding the increased COVID restrictions put in place over Sukkos after New York Governor Andrew Cuomo blamed a robocall from the Trump campaign for inciting protests. More than two weeks after the recording was outed as a prank, the *New York Times* ran a headline, "Inspired by Trump, Hasidic Backlash Grows Over Virus Rules."

Michael Fragin, deputy mayor of the Town of Lawrence, New York, and a senior advisor to the state's GOP chairman, thought that while politics as usual might have kept the community's conservative stance from hurting it locally, he feared that more recent news coverage might show that shifting.

"By and large, politicians that try to punish constituencies do so at their own peril," he said. "But I do think that some of the rhetoric of some in New York has contributed to the 'othering' of the Orthodox community, and there's an element of anti-Trumpism mixed into that, a sense that we might [as well] just ignore this community because they'll never vote for us anyway."



RONEN ZVULUN/AFP via Getty Images

Betting on the Wrong Horse?

Despite what may seem like a precarious political position, those who serve as voices for the Orthodox community in the halls of government say that while elected officials are certainly aware of these sympathies, they have not seen it bear ill effects.

“I think [the Governor and Legislature] expect us to support Trump,” said Rabbi Avi Schnall, director of Agudath Israel of America’s New Jersey division. “From our community’s perspective, Trump is doing an incredible job, and the Democrats in office understand that a President who’s been a big supporter of Israel and who brokered a peace deal, who supports school choice and so on, is going to get our support.”

Gary Schear, the New Jersey Assembly’s only Orthodox member, has represented Passaic as a Democrat since 2006. With a view from the other side of the desk, he said that in his extensive workings within the legislature’s majority caucus, he saw few effects of the community’s support for the President on his colleagues’ receptive-



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ness to its needs.

“Holding fundraisers with prominent Yidden giving money to the Trump campaign definitely catches people’s attention. Does that have consequences? Yes, but are they as draconian as you might think they would be? No,” he said. “It could be because in blue states, our community can vote straight Trump and it will make no difference anyway, and so they just look at it as a statement on moving the embassy [to Yerushalayim] or on [Trump’s recognizing] the Golan Heights or a long list of things he did which are to his credit, and I say that as a loyal Democrat. What effects it will have in the future is hard to say. Most polls show Biden winning the election. Does that mean Democrats will tell the Jewish community, ‘Don’t come to us when you need something’? I certainly hope not.”

Many on the political left have been critical of Jews and other religious groups that have rallied behind President Trump, citing his checkered moral past. Mr. Schear said that it was a sentiment that he feels frustrates many Orthodox Jews as well.

“There’s tremendous disappointment among many *frum* Jews that there are so many of us supporting Trump so enthusiastically with all the recognition and knowledge of some of the things he has said or purportedly done that are way beyond what any Orthodox Jew would view as acceptable,” he said.

While on a local or state level, issues with a direct impact on the lives of Orthodox Jews are often of the sort that can remain above politics — even in 2020 — one might think that advocacy on Capitol Hill might present far more of a challenge. With the sole excep-

tion of longtime Republican Congressman Chris Smith, whose district includes Lakewood, New Jersey, all other members of the House and Senate representing heavily Orthodox areas in New York, New Jersey, California and Illinois are Democrats.

Rabbi Abba Cohen has served as the representative of the Agudath Israel of America in Washington for over 30 years, decades that saw the community's preference for the GOP solidify. While there are no shortage of Republicans to work with on the Hill, those who represent substantial swaths of the community by nature must remain allies.

Rabbi Cohen said that Trump support and a conservative leaning in general can be an obstacle, but not an insurmountable one.

"No one closes the door on you because your community votes a certain way," he said. "It could create a barrier or a colder relationship at first, but that makes it all the more important to build a real relationship and to make sure they have an understanding of the complexities of the community. Even if the community didn't back the candidate that won, in my experience I won't say that it doesn't affect perceptions, but elected officials still have to represent the public. I've never seen an elected official say, 'I know you're coming to me about your schools, but I don't care, because you voted for the other candidate.'"

Keeping the Balance

While community advocates painted a rosy picture, which fortunately for Orthodox Jews is out of sync with what much media coverage might suggest about its broad support for President Trump, they warn that making calls on strictly partisan lines at the local level is far more fraught.

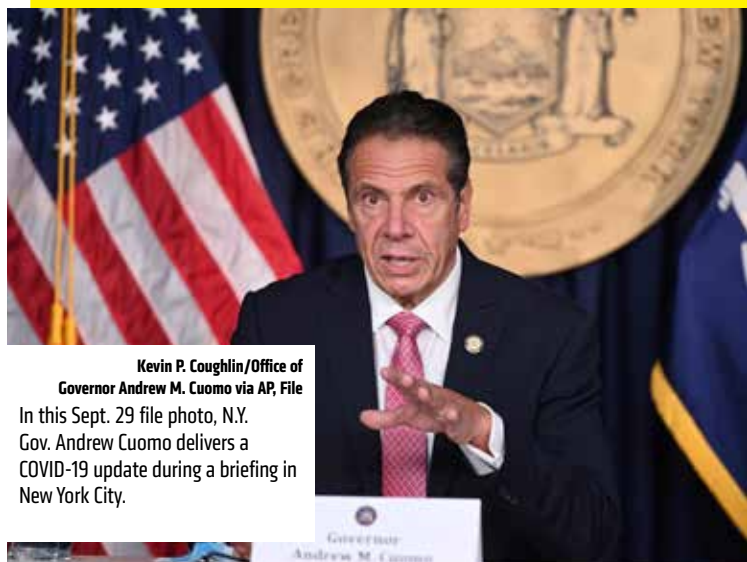
Rabbi Schnall pointed to several acts of strong support the Lakewood community received from New Jersey's Democratic Governor Phil Murphy. He specifically cited the Governor's strong action against anti-Semitism that led to the infamous Rise Up Ocean County organization being kicked off of its social media platform, as well as the state's present moves giving the community a great deal of latitude in navigating containment of its COVID outbreak while keeping its institutions up and running.

"What we do have to worry about is the effects this has on the local level," said Rabbi Schnall. "Governor Murphy might be a progressive Democrat, but he's been wonderful for our community. If Jews don't come out and vote for him or other Democrats who stuck their necks out, that's a question mark to them."

Around the Lakewood community from which Rabbi Schnall is based, he argued that evidence abounds as to why Jews should avoid the label of "loyal Republicans," pointing to the all-GOP leadership of Jackson Township, which has been repeatedly involved in efforts to block the Orthodox community's growth there. In truth, such efforts could be labeled bipartisan, as several Democrats who unsuccessfully ran for seats in the township and some who won them in nearby Toms River did so with campaigns that



FILE: Rabbi Avi Schnall (R) with N.J. Governor Phil Murphy



Kevin P. Coughlin/Office of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo via AP, File
In this Sept. 29 file photo, N.Y. Gov. Andrew Cuomo delivers a COVID-19 update during a briefing in New York City.



William Farrington-Pool/Getty Images
NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio speaks during a video press conference on the city's response to the coronavirus outbreak held at City Hall on March 19 in New York City.

were widely seen as exploiting animus against the local Jewish community.

“Trump can be doing amazing things for us, but he’s created a lot of partisanship, and it’s important for us not to fall into that trap,” said Rabbi Schnall. “We have to look at what local politicians have done, good and bad, and to realize not every Republican is a *tzaddik* and not every Democrat is a *rasha*.”

Mr. Schear concurred with Rabbi Schnall’s premise that support for President Trump does little to the Orthodox community’s standing in state politics, with the cautionary note that “it does not translate down-ticket.”

He added, however, that he felt the community’s outspoken support for the administration could create roadblocks to some of the coalition building that has helped it in the past.

“The divisiveness in the county is more than ever before and Trump has fanned those flames if not lit the match,” he said. “We’re a minority within a minority, and in the past we have tried to align ourselves with other minority communities on cer-

tain issues out of a recognition that we live in the same spaces and it’s mutually beneficial for us to work together against racism and anti-Semitism. It does make it harder for us to do some of that outreach than it was before.”

Ezra Friedlander, who leads a private New York-based lobbying firm and has long been involved in local, state and federal politics, is a familiar name to those who have

followed discussions about where the Orthodox community is best politically positioned. He has become well-known for promoting an argument that, irrespective of ideology or how they actually vote, Jews in blue states are best served by registering Democratic.

“In deep blue states, the primary is the election, and you can only vote if you are registered with the party,” he said. “Those that are not friends of our community are very happy to see us registering as Republicans because it renders our voice irrelevant. Our communities are not big enough to determine a national election, but in the city, we can make a real impact on a local primary.”

Mr. Friedlander stressed that



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AP Photo/John Minchillo
Boys speak with NYPD officers,
Oct. 7, in Boro Park, Brooklyn.



AP Photo/Mark Lennihan
Voters mark their ballots, Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2016, in Boro Park.

he felt it was “important for people to vote their conscience” and said that he was not advocating against voting for Republicans in national elections.

“The hatred against Trump [in New York political leadership] is extreme, but you can’t tell people not to vote for Trump because it will interfere with local relationships,” he said. “It could be there are members of the legislature who would write us off for supporting Trump. The potential is certainly there, but I haven’t seen any evidence of it ... What does concern me is the community becoming more ideological, disregarding the importance of playing politics and voting strategically. There’s a certain *galus* mindset that a lot of people forgot, that the people who can best represent you might not necessarily be in sync with our values.”

‘We Do Have to Stand for Something’

In coffee room banter and even among some of those who have been involved in advocacy and government, such wide flexibility is not always seen as ideal.

“I think voters should vote their interests,” said Mr. Fragin. “There seems to be a feeling that we should be ashamed to vote for what’s good for them as opposed to every other American. But doing that just makes you a less effective voter. Officials want to get reelected, and they do that by catering to their community.”

Mr. Fragin noted that Orthodox Jews tend to remain attached to the areas they live in for long periods of time, while others are more transient, moving for job or housing opportunities. This phenomenon makes it a good investment for local politicians to be attentive to the community’s political preferences, even if they are out of step with others living in the district.

“We’re very rooted,” he said. “It’s something a smart politician should notice, and even if they don’t like our politics, we can send a message that they should find a way to become more sympathetic to them if they want to represent us.”

Mr. Fragin cautioned that no matter who is the victor of a race, Orthodox engagement with the incumbent is essential, and if done effectively can often bear strong working relationships, irrespective of whether the community supported their run.

Jeff Ballabon, who has advised multiple GOP campaigns including President Trump’s, argued that admitting the ideological affinity the Orthodox community shares with the Trump administration and the GOP in general is ultimately the most effective way for its true voice to be heard.

“We have to stand for Jewish survival, not merely physically, but as a Torah community. A community that doesn’t have clarity about its priorities, sells itself cheaply, and becomes overly dependent on any political party, will destroy itself. Those who advocate what they mistakenly call ‘pragmatism’ and

scoff at standing for Jewish principles, societal morality, and religious rights have led us to the point of utter political powerlessness while the culture around us decays and becomes hostile to our survival physically and spiritually,” he said.

Mr. Ballabon stressed that he was not advocating that the Orthodox community should become “partisan” and spoke of a need to call out political anti-Semitism wherever it exists, including among certain Republican elected officials in Rockland County, New York. However, he said that for years the community’s needs have been far more aligned with the GOP and such behavior is “the rare exception rather than the rule.”

“It’s all *biydei Shamayim*, but in the natural course of things, a *frum* community that stands strongly behind those who stand with us — like President Trump — and demonstrates unabashedly that we will stop supporting a party that mainstreams anti-Semites and threatens our religious and personal freedoms — like Democrats today — is one that possesses actual political power,” he said.

Rabbi Cohen repeated the mantra of most in the official advocacy line that the community’s interests are not well served by being pigeonholed into voting for a particular party or ideology. However, he stressed the importance of the community using its vote to make its priorities and values heard. Rabbi Cohen added that those in a position to raise funds or arrange special engagement events for candidates they favor only amplifies this and dismissed being overconcerned about the perception.

“I don’t accept the notion that we have to vote for a particular candidate because we’re worried about how it will play out on the local level. We have to cast a vote based on values and let the chips fall where they may,” he said. “Whoever’s in power needs to know what our values are. Whether our candidate of choice wins or loses or whether our vote is pleasing or not to local or federal officials shouldn’t get in the way of that.” ■