

(Left to right)
Rep. Clay Higgins
(R-LA) with Rabbi
Yaakov Menken
and Rabbi Pesach
Lerner of the CJV

Taking the Gloves Off

After a year and a half of fighting for Jewish values in the public sphere, the Coalition for Jewish Values is surveying the battlefield

By Yossi Krausz

Who speaks for the Jews? Open any Israeli newspaper, including the most left-wing, and you'll find that amidst the pronouncements of secular movers and shakers are numerous comments from religious Jews, some of them members of the governing coalition, whose opinions are based on the Torah and the guidance of *gedolim*. While there is plenty of anti-religious rhetoric in the Israeli media, no one can claim ignorance of the Torah perspective on issues or what *frum* Jews believe.

Rabbi Lerner with
Rabbi Yoel Schoenfeld
(right)

Contrast that to the United States, where you would need to use a microscope to find an authentic Jewish voice in any paper of record across the country. And while there are *frum* organizations that do put out statements and express opinions, they are often constrained in what they can say because of their core missions. Not everything can be expressed when there are greater *askanus* implications for the Jewish community at stake—which is precisely why a new Jewish organization was founded around 18 months ago to fill that void.

The stated purpose of the Coalition for



“WHEN THE REFORM MOVEMENT CLAIMS TO SPEAK FOR ALL OF AMERICAN JEWRY, WE HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO SPEAK UP AND UNDO THAT IMPRESSION.”

Jewish Values (CJV), led by a presidium of six *chareidi* and Modern Orthodox rabbis, is to familiarize Americans with authentic Torah beliefs and views. Since its inception, the group has been quite vocal in presenting the opinions of the *frum* community. Critics might even say that in some cases its statements have been too aggressive, controversial or even abrasive.

Back when the CJV was formed I spoke with Rabbi Pesach Lerner, its president, about the aims of the new organization. Now that it has been in existence for a while I went back to him and Rabbi Yaakov Menken, its managing director, to find out what the CJV has accomplished and what the landscape of discourse in the American media is like for those who wish to defend real Jewish values.

The Need

“**Y**ou can’t have the head of the Reform movement educating people about Jewish values,” Rabbi Lerner tells me.

This idea was the impetus that brought these six rabbis together—Rabbis Lerner and Menken, along with Rabbi Yoel Schoenfeld, Rabbi Avrohom Gordimer, Rabbi Dov Fischer and Rabbi Steven Pruzansky—for the purpose of creating the CJV. The organization emerged from their frustration at seeing only Reform, Conservative or secular Jewish leaders being quoted in news stories. And even in the rare instances when an “Orthodox viewpoint” was sought, it was usually obtained

from “Open Orthodox” rabbis.

As Rabbi Lerner notes tongue in cheek, it wasn’t as if the members of CJV’s board didn’t have anything else to occupy their time. As executive vice president emeritus of the National Council of Young Israel, Rabbi Lerner remains an *askan* on Israel and other issues. Rabbi Yoel Schoenfeld, CJV’s vice president, is the rabbi of the Young Israel of Kew Gardens Hills and a member of the executive committee of the Rabbinical Council of America. Rabbi Avrohom Gordimer, chairman of the CJV’s Rabbinic Circle, is a rabbinic coordinator at OU Kosher and a widely published author on Jewish issues. Rabbi Dov Fischer, western regional vice president of CJV, is an adjunct professor of law at two law schools and serves as the rabbi of Young Israel of Orange County, California. Rabbi Steven Pruzansky is the rabbi of Congregation Bnai Yeshurun in Teaneck, New Jersey. And Rabbi Menken is the cofounder and editor of the online journal *Cross-Currents* and the creator of numerous Jewish outreach resources.

But they all got involved anyway because they believed that the void that existed was creating a *chillul Hashem*.



Rabbi Steven Pruzansky

binic Circle enables the CJV to amplify its voice. “We are probably the largest *frum* public policy group around,” Rabbi Lerner tells me.

“Part of contrasting [the secular Jewish opinions] and creating a *kiddush Hashem* by espousing Torah values involves letting *rabbanim* know when there’s an opportunity to add their voice,” Rabbi Menken adds.

The group has also done direct political outreach on Capitol Hill. And according to Rabbi Menken, many politicians actively welcome the organization’s input.

“We often get calls from legislative aides on Capitol Hill,” Rabbi Lerner tells me. “They’ll say, ‘We have this [liberal Jewish] group accusing us going against Jewish values. Could you come down and enlighten us?’ So we’ll go and explain to them what Jewish tradition and values really are. For some congressmen and senators, it’s beneficial to know that they’re not crossing the line. We’ve also written letters for them to use to help others know what real Jewish values are.”

The CJV has also facilitated discussions between the Jewish community and those aspiring to hold political office. In July, for example, the CJV held a meeting between the Jewish community of Queens and Chele Farley, the Republican challenger to Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York.

Sometimes the CJV will focus very narrowly on a specific incident, seeking a practical response. When a professor who was on the faculty of two American universities was caught on video berating a Chabad rabbi for putting *tefillin* on a man in Ben Gurion Airport, the CJV fired off letters to the universities demanding that they take notice of their employee’s actions. The professor’s prior history of bad behavior was publicly exposed. “We

Amplification and Advice

Like many others in the media, I’ve been receiving press releases from the CJV at a regular clip over the organization’s lifespan. They were often striking and sometimes strident, but I only knew the group as a producer of press releases. While that aspect is an important part of what they do, the rabbis quickly disabused me of the notion that it’s the *only* thing they do.

For example, the 1,000 or so members of the group’s Rabbinic Circle receive a weekly newsletter containing articles about political and public affairs issues that are relevant to the Jewish community. It also provides links to CJV public statements, members’ op-eds, statements of other Jewish organizations like the Agudah and OU and other items of interest, often accompanied by a short commentary. “Everyone in the Rabbinic Circle has to be vetted,” Rabbi Lerner clarifies. “We don’t invite everyone. Someone has to know the person.”

The newsletter is intended to help drive a larger communal discussion—facilitated in the main through *shul* rabbis—of the important issues of the week. The Rab-

ENTERING OUR 7TH YEAR!






Servicing 1000+ Satisfied Students



MELAMED ACADEMY

The Online Yeshiva Day School
Presents

QUALITY CHINUCH SOLUTIONS

-  **ONLINE YESHIVA DAY SCHOOL**
NJ State Registered School.
Torah Studies, General Studies. LOW Tuition
-  **COLLEGE DEGREE PROGRAM**
Accredited BA/BS Degree. Lowest Price. Torah Credits. Completely Kosher. Remedial Prep.
-  **YESHIVA SCHOOL SERVICES**
Online Courses for General Studies, AP, Regents Prep. Remedial Room. Credit Recovery. Kosher Computer Room.
-  **HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION**
Credit Recovery. Early Graduation. Early High School Credits for 7th & 8th Grade.
-  **KOSHER CHROMEBOOK LAPTOPS**
Tested and Approved by TAG. Built-in Protection. No Monthly Fees.

WHY CHOOSE MELAMED ACADEMY?

- Higher Chinuch Standard
- Academic Excellence
- Customized Levels
- Affordable Tuition
- Kosher Computers
- Accommodation for Special Needs
- Best Success Rate of ANY Online School

CONTACT MELAMED ACADEMY

732.228.8800

Solutions@MelamedAcademy.com
See More at MelamedAcademy.com

(Left to right) Rabbi Aryeh Scheinberg and Rabbi Avrohom Scheinberg of San Antonio, Rabbi Lerner, and Rep. Louie Gohmert (R-TX)



put her on notice,” says Rabbi Lerner.

While the organization generally involves itself in American issues, it has also had reason to consider issues abroad.

“We’ve been called upon by certain sectors of the Jewish community in Great Britain asking for help with regard to education reform,” Rabbi Lerner says. “We were able to put them in touch with some of our non-Jewish friends in America, who put them in touch with non-Jewish friends in England.”

And of course, there are the many issues concerning Israel.

Israel

In theory, as an American organization, the CJV doesn’t get involved in Israeli politics. “But when the Reform movement claims to speak for all of American Jewry, whether it’s about the Kosel or Israeli legislative issues, we have an obligation to speak up and undo the impression that they represent the entire Jewish community.”

Rabbi Lerner bemoans the fact that unlike the Reform movement, the American *frum* community has unfortunately been lax in its outreach to Israeli opinion makers. “The Reform movement has a lobbying office in the Knesset. How often do we go to the Knesset—once every few years? They’re winning because they’re there all the time.”

Changing minds can sometimes entail explaining the *frum* world in depth. “A reporter from a major investigative TV show in Israel got in touch with me. In the course of our conversation she mentioned that Reform Jews comprised the biggest and most active American Jewish demographic. I said, ‘Wait a second—that

just isn’t true. Their replacement rate is 1.2 children and a dog, so they’re not even replacing themselves. A typical *frum* family has six or eight or ten children. The typical Reform synagogue is closed in the summertime and isn’t even open during the week unless it’s for a bar mitzvah.’ The reporter was shocked.”

(Rabbi Menken pointed out, separately, that it is almost certain that there are now more Orthodox synagogues and more Orthodox rabbis in the US than those of all other groups combined.)

“Then I told her, ‘I live in Far Rockaway. There are thousands of Jewish families living within a 15-minute radius. There

‘WAIT A SECOND— THAT JUST ISN’T TRUE. REFORM JEWS REPLACEMENT RATE IS 1.2 CHILDREN AND A DOG, SO THEY’RE NOT EVEN REPLACING THEMSELVES.

are dozens of Orthodox synagogues to choose from and every few years they start a new one. By contrast, there is only one Reform temple.”

Rabbi Lerner arranged for the woman to be given a tour of Far Rockaway and the Five Towns to show her the schools and day camps, restaurants and stores, and in general, the vibrancy of *frum* life. “And

I could take you to any one of America's major cities and you'd see the same thing," he told her. The reporter left with the realization that the Reform Movement wasn't the force in America that she thought it was. "We should be inviting members of the media into our communities," Rabbi Lerner says.

Non-Jewish Allies

And it's not only conservative-minded politicians who are happy to see a Jewish group being forthright about traditional Jewish values. Evangelical groups have also been enthusiastic, as many of the principles they stand for are in sync with ours.

"The head of one such organization told me that he's often criticized for advocating for Jews and Israel, when 'the Jews' are working against their core issues," says Rabbi Menken. "This just goes to show you the *chillul Hashem* being caused by left-wing, liberal Jews, but it also underscores the need for an organization like ours. The whole idea is that there should be a Jewish voice in favor of Jewish values. This is something that is welcomed in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles."

"When the American Embassy was moved to Jerusalem, the Evangelicals were very involved," Rabbi Lerner notes. "But they're still wondering where the Orthodox Jews are. 'Why are we doing this?' they want to know. 'They should be the ones doing it.' They need to know that we're there for them and appreciate when they do things for Jews.

"For example, there was a church in California that was having a pro-Israel

NO SHORTCUTS,
No Disappointments...



fine art photography &
cinematography

Visit our new
Monsey Location
managed exclusively
by Perele Itzkowitz

MENDELMEYERS *Studios*

Brooklyn. 5622 18 Avenue
Monsey. Town Square Mall 59 Route 59 Picadilly Photo Suite 157
718.232.8466 | 845.667.9282 | 201.862.0288
www.mendelmeyers.com | www.instagram.com/mendelmeyers

Rabbi Lerner with Rabbi of the Western Wall Rabbi Shmuel Rabinovitch (left)

event—and guess who came and messed it up? A group of left-wing Jews. The congregation wasn't sophisticated enough to understand the nuances or differences between Jews. To them, these were just Jews who had interrupted them and threw things around. Within hours, we were the first Jewish group to issue a statement thanking them for supporting Israel and condemning what these people had done.”

The Political Spectrum

Many of the CJV's public statements clearly align with the positions of the Republican Party. Rabbi Menken explains that that's perfectly understandable.

“I vaguely recall seeing a claim in a popular Orthodox journal that 91.5% of the Orthodox community is satisfied with

“IT'S A SHAME THAT IN SO MANY AMERICAN MINDS, JEWISH VALUES ARE IN CONFLICT WITH THE ONES THAT MADE THIS COUNTRY A MEDINAH SHEL CHESED.”

Trump's performance,” he says with a smile, referencing *Ami Magazine's* recent poll. “In America, if you claim to support traditional values, you're automatically pegged as a conservative. But the Democratic Party of 60 years ago was very different. All sorts of things that we believe in make people



assume we're politically conservative. But in reality, being *frum* doesn't make us one thing or the other. We're not the ones who changed; it's the Democrats who moved to the left. I am quite certain Joe Lieberman could never find a home in the Democratic Party if he were just starting his career right now.”

As Rabbi Lerner stresses, the CJV's outreach is strictly non-partisan. “We only get involved in issues, not politics.”

Of course, this apolitical approach doesn't mean not engaging with politicians, as demonstrated by the recent meeting in Queens with Chele Farley. “The Republican National Committee reached out to us and asked us to host an event for rabbis,” he explains. “They wanted to introduce the woman who's running against Kirsten Gillibrand, and we said fine. We made no bones about

being apolitical, even at the meeting. If the Democrats asked us to hold a similar event we would also say yes.”

To illustrate this approach, Rabbi Menken tells me that right now the CJV is supporting bipartisan legislation concerning the Iraqi Jewish archives, initiated in part by Senator Chuck Schumer and Senator Pat Toomey. “If Senator Schumer supports something that is congruent with our values, we're happy to support him. And by the way, if the Trump State Department has plans to give the archives back to the Iraqis, then we'll criticize them.”

Making the Message

Being apolitical also doesn't mean that the individual CJV board members don't take political stands. Several of the six rabbis write regular columns for various media outlets, and while they identify themselves as CJV board members, their columns don't carry the organization's imprimatur and may not reflect the same style the CJV would use. Still, the organization sometimes publicizes them.

For example, Rabbi Fischer has a regu-



Learn Torah & Prepare for
an Excellent Career In

CyberSecurity

- ✔ Bochurim & Yungerleit
- ✔ **World Class Training**
- ✔ Internships
- ✔ Financial Aid
- ✔ **4 Year College Degree
In 2 Years**
- ✔ Job Placement
- ✔ **High Starting Salaries
60K - 80K**

**Do Your Hishtadlus,
Call
Now!**

1-844-447-4823

For more information
visit our website:

www.yeshivaofnewark.org



**Trump advisor
Sebastian Gorka with
Rabbi Menken**

comments are *oisgehalten* according to his own *posek*.”

The organization’s original mission statement, however, was examined and edited by Rav Aharon Feldman, the *rosh yeshiva* of Ner Yisroel, who also gave the CJV a *brachah*. “There were some very great people involved in charting our course,” Rabbi Menken says.

The next question I ask has to do with a recent controversial statement that was released comparing the anti-Israel activists at UCLA who disrupted the meeting of a pro-Israel student group to Nazi stormtroopers. Entitled “UCLA Disrupters Follow Pattern of Nazi SA, Says Rabbinic Group,” the release pointed to the language used by the students, noting that “one of the chants called for ethnic cleansing and a return to a ‘war of extermination and momentous massacre’ initiated by the Arab League against Israel at its formation.” “It’s really simple to avoid be compared to Nazis,” Rabbi Menken says. “All you have to do is not act like them.”

This kind of comparison isn’t one we’d likely see from other mainstream Jewish groups, and the CJV did receive some flak for making the comparison. Rabbi Lerner admits that the organization does use harsh language on occasion if it deems it appropriate. “Our goal was to get the political middle to say, ‘Maybe these people really have to stop,’ and that message was picked up by the media. The idea is to get people to stop and think, ‘Hey, maybe we’d better take a second look.’”

“There are so many references to the Nazis and the Holocaust that a lot of people are reluctant to even mention them, lest they be seen as exaggerations,” says Rabbi Menken. “But in our case we were specifically referring to their tactics of disruption

lar column in the conservative publication *The American Spectator* that is overtly political (fiercely pro-Trump) and often uses caustic language that wouldn’t be appropriate in a press release from the CJV. While those columns are his alone, the CJV does generally feature them in its newsletter to the Rabbinic Circle, under the heading “CJV News, Op-Eds & Coverage.” There is also an op-ed page on the organization’s website that clearly states that the opinions expressed are solely those of individual board members.

Rabbi Lerner points out that it’s useful both for the organization and its members to cross-promote themselves, and that most members usually approve the inclusion of these articles. But only those that are issued on official CJV stationery actually reflect the organization’s opinion.

But with rabbis representing the wide spectrum of Orthodoxy, how does the organization arrive at a consensus? The rule, he explains, is that at least five board members must agree to a statement. “We don’t have an official rabbinic oversight board. The understanding is that everyone has an *achrayus* to make sure that our

BORDEAUX
STEAK & WINE HOUSE

Where Taste Meets Elegance

“ALL SORTS OF THINGS THAT WE BELIEVE IN MAKE PEOPLE ASSUME WE’RE POLITICALLY CONSERVATIVE. BUT IN REALITY, BEING FRUM DOESN’T MAKE US ONE THING OR THE OTHER.”

being used toward the same end, and we will leave it to others to explain why the comparison wasn’t accurate. Straightforward is very different from being forceful or aggressive. We aren’t interested in picking a fight or pushing people’s buttons. We are merely stating the truth as we see it.

“Someone once told me a great story. Apparently, Natan Sharansky and Yosef Mendelevitch were once in Vienna staging a demonstration for the release of Soviet Jewry. When Mendelevitch went and handcuffed himself to the embassy, which of course meant that the police would come and haul him off to jail, Sharansky is said to have remarked, ‘I need Mendelevitch. He makes me look like a moderate.’”

In other words, while other *frum* groups can’t take a stand on every issue for various reasons, the CJV can fill that role.

Measuring Success

So how is the CJV doing? In one respect, it has been fighting an uphill battle. The media are used to getting their views on Jewish issues from the non-Orthodox camp, regardless of accuracy. The CJV is still relatively new, and in the current media climate that is strongly anti-Trump, an organization that often approves of the president’s actions may face bias.

As an example, Rabbi Menken points to an article in *The Forward* claiming that it was Trump’s election that spurred the creation of the CJV, which is simply factually

incorrect. But it indicates the viewpoint of many left-wing outlets.

“We are still in the process of learning the ropes, finding our place and identifying our allies. We’re also trying to get the

word out about what we do and why we are here. We have actually had a surprising amount of success in the short time we’ve been in existence.

“Last summer we were featured in an article by The Associated Press that was read on the air by Michael Savage. That was a one-off, as they say, but brand awareness is built over time. But it’s already come to a point where most Jewish media organizations know who we are. The fact that we’ve appeared in *The Jewish Week*, *The Forward* and Jewish News Syndicate articles shows that people are starting to realize that there’s a strong opinion here that has to be respected.”

Rabbi Menken noted that unlike other public policy organizations, which may have narrow focuses that aren’t publicly popular, the CJV can also organize grassroots campaigns. “The people who we are mobilizing are people who share our opinions on a broad range of topics. We are, in that way, trying to reflect common opinion and mobilize common opinion.”

It is the organization’s hope that the *frum* community will become increasingly involved in public policy issues, noting that engagement starts with registering to vote and actually going to the ballot box, something that many have been lax about. But activism and engagement can go well beyond that, and the CJV hopes to help facilitate that and also gain strength from it.

“We are six people making waves in a good way,” Rabbi Lerner says. “That means that we can all do more.” ●

Showcase Your Event In Our
Luxurious Private Dining Space

www.bordeauxnyc.com | 718-942-4040
1922 Coney Island Avenue Brooklyn NY 11230

Complimentary Valet Parking