

by **RAFAEL HOFFMAN**

A VOICE



RABBI YOEL SCHONFELD is in the midst of a unique career change. He spent decades serving as Mara d'Asra of the Young Israel of Kew Garden Hills in Queens, New York, a position he occupied for nearly all of his tenure alongside his renowned father, Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld, z"l, during the latter's semi-retirement. Rabbi Schonfeld recently announced his intention to retire from his post at the shul and has already taken up a position as president of the Coalition for Jewish Values (CJV). In 2017, Rabbi Schonfeld was part of a group involved in founding the organization dedicated to expressing positions of the Orthodox community on the American political scene.

Some have welcomed its outspoken and forceful statements on moral issues, antisemitism, and Israel-related matters. To the extent the mainstream media have taken notice of CJV, however, they have largely derided it as a right-wing partisan stage.

Rabbi Schonfeld spoke to Hamodia about CJV and about his views on Jewish communal life.

American Orthodox Jewry already has well established advocacy organizations, chiefly the Agudah and the OU. As such, how do you see the niche or purpose of the CJV?

We were created to fill a gap. Yes, obviously there are very well-established Orthodox organizations, but they often hesitate to come out and take positions on issues of values, or even that relate to antisemitism and Israel, out of concern that doing so will endanger the political connections that they have.

Now, the Agudah and OU have reasons why they operate this way. Their mission is to lobby for legislation and policy which makes them very conscious of how taking a stand that might be unpopular in some circles will impact their effectiveness.

Still, the result is that there was no group that represents Torah values which was taking positions on many of the important issues of the day. At the same time, Reform and Conservative groups and others in the liberal Jewish camp have no problem expressing their progressive opinions which are often antithetical to the Torah and sometimes endanger Jewish life, but those are the positions that are picked up by the media as the "Jewish" view.

Our niche is to fill that gap. We are a group that is passionate about Torah values. We are not lobbyists, so we have a much freer hand in the public statements we make, allowing CJV to be an outspoken voice for our values.

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CJV panel with former presidential advisor Jason Greenblatt (R).



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Traditionally, Orthodox advocacy groups have steered clear of issues that did not have a direct effect on the community. CJV, however, does get involved in some of these topics, such as the present debate over the future of Roe v. Wade. Do you feel this approach needs to be taken in order to counter statements from liberal Jewish groups that distort Jewish positions, or do you feel it has an inherent value?

I think that on a lot of these issues, we would be far less outspoken if other groups weren't in the public square taking a position and claiming that's what Jews believe. But, once you have rallies like the recent one in Washington of Jewish groups who are against overturning Roe, that demands clarification on what Judaism actually believes on the subject. It's not just groups that are officially aligned as liberal that were at this rally. The ADL was front and center. What's the ADL doing there? Their job is to protect Jews, but their presence,

like the presence of others who are viewed as representing Jewish interests, confuses the Torah's position.

That's why our voice is needed especially on moral issues like these, where the Torah does have a clear position, and it's one contrary to what is being presented.

Jewish advocacy has typically avoided being seen as partisan. While not officially aligned with the Republican Party, CJV is unmistakably right-leaning. Why were you less concerned with being associated with one side of America's political spectrum?

This is who we are. It's not that we're partisan, but Torah values tend to align with where the American right is today, especially when it comes to conflicts over the social mores. We are not interested in being branded as partisan. In fact, we look for opportunities to endorse moves or statements that Democrats make to show that we are not just in the ring for Republicans. The fact is, though, that the opportunity does not come up all that often.

On the occasion that the mainstream media cov-

ers our statements, they often try to marginalize us by tagging us as "the Coalition for Jewish Values, a right-wing organization." Its puts us in a corner. But, when they quote Eric Joffe or some other Reform or Conservative spokesman, they don't label them as "left-wing," which they undeniably are. They get to speak for the Jewish People without being pigeonholed into a political corner.

While many key public policy issues of concern to the Jewish community lined up with the Trump administration, many feel that the community got swept up in his "cult of personality" as well as a larger right-wing culture of partisan loyalism. Do you see this as a challenge and, to the extent that you do, do you feel it is important that CJV be cautious in this area?

We do agree with a lot of what Donald Trump said and did politically. But, we never embraced him as a person because, as Torah Jews, it's important to realize that he has a lot of flaws which run contrary to everything we stand for.

The gatherings we get invited to are mostly held by conservative or Republican groups, but, if we would get invited to Democrat gatherings, we would be happy to attend and make our voices heard there as well.

There are areas where the overwhelming majority of the Orthodox community is on the same page as American conservatives, areas such as moral and religious liberty issues, school choice, and security of Jews in the State of Israel. But there are others like immigration, gun control, and social welfare entitlements where there is a diversity of views within the community. How does CJV approach matters like these where many might support the conservative position, but it is not accurate to say that a group can speak on behalf of the community as a whole about them?

I think that we try to avoid being outspoken about these types of issues. To take gun control as an exam-

ple, I think to the extent that we would say anything about it, our position would be to say that while gun laws are important, the real focus should be on the criminal using the gun. That's something that the left tries to take out of these discussions; it's all blamed on guns, which is not an approach that makes us safer.

While other Orthodox organizations have supported gun control and that's the politically correct thing to do, I don't think you can say that the Torah has a position on it and as such neither does CJV.

Why is CJV framed as a Rabbinic organization rather than as an Orthodox political group?

The simple answer is because it was started by a group of Rabbis, namely Avrohom Gordimer, Steven Pruzansky, Pesach Lerner, Yaakov Menken, and me. Since then, actually, our board of lay leaders, which is a group of conservative-thinking businessmen, has grown a good deal. They don't make decisions, but they are very helpful in monitoring the issues and we discuss a lot of topics with them.

The truth is that if an Orthodox organization takes public policy positions, that has to be coming from a halachic standpoint and it would not be appropriate to have *baalei battim* making those calls. These are decisions based on *halachah* and *Torah hashkafah* which is something Rabbanim should be the ones to determine.

One of CVJ's stated focuses is antisemitism. A quick review of CJV's recent press releases include condemnations of the Museum of Jewish Heritage's cancellation of Governor DeSantis, and Rep. Talib's "*nakba*" comments. Absent is comment on the recent shooting in Buffalo and the antisemitic statements in the shooter's manifesto which included mentions of Lakewood, Toms River, and Bloomingburg. This is only one example, but in general, it seems that CJV is far more focused on antisemitism from the left.

What is the rubric the CJV uses in deciding when and when not to make a public

statement on antisemitic acts or rhetoric?

I put out a question to other members about the Buffalo shooting and did not get strong responses. In the end our social media channel endorsed the Agudah's statement about it.

This shooting was obviously horrific as was the more recent one in Texas, but I think the reason why we did not comment on it directly is that it's not really a question of Torah values. Every decent human being should condemn it, but CJV is not here to just jump on the bandwagon and add our voice to the chorus to say, "Yeah, that's terrible." I don't think that commenting on everything that pops up that is worthy of condemnation has much value.

Also, I think our focus is on the left, because those are the statements the mainstream media does not cover. When right-wing antisemitism comes to the fore, it's all over the news. But even so, we have spoken out against people on the right, like Margorie Taylor Greene, who made antisemitic statements.

If you're asking what our rubric is, I think it's antisemitism that comes from officials and institutions. If someone in a position of influence makes antisemitic remarks, we would condemn them no matter where they are coming from politically. But the fact is that on that level you hear very little antisemitism on the right. There might very well be antisemitic conservatives out there, but almost all the rhetoric comes from the fringes, not from officials.

It's not our job to condemn the nutjob who paints a swastika or even who beats up a Jew in the street. That's the ADL's job, even though they're not doing much about it either.

A good deal of CJV's press releases call out the ADL for what you present as its flawed positions related to antisemitism. While the organization has taken a decidedly left-aligned ideological turn, it is still the most robust organization focusing on threats to Jews and has been helpful in confronting some local threats. What is gained by calling them out rather than letting them take care of the part of the picture they focus on, one-sided though it might be?

The Anti-Defamation League, by definition, is supposed to battle antisemitism, wherever it comes from.

But that's not what Jonathan Greenblatt, who was a member of the Obama administration, has done in his leadership at ADL.

Yes, when something egregious happens they will put out a statement and offer a reward for the culprit's arrest. When progressives from the "squad" say something outrageous, they'll sometimes put out a little statement, but they're not battling against it.

What is even more frustrating is they then spend political capital on issues that are not their business altogether like *Roe v. Wade*, as we mentioned before, and immigration. These are just issues that have nothing to do with protecting Jews, but that they sign onto because they're part of the left's agenda.

CJV has been around for about four years now and is still in a growth period. What do you see as its goal; where would you like to take it during your presidency?

I would like this organization to be more influential. Our numbers have grown exponentially. But I'd like the media to take us more seriously. It will take time. Right now, Fox News and Newsmax call us for comment, but CNN and the rest of the liberal media world won't pay attention to us.

It's not easy in today's world in general. I remember when *The New York Times* used to send a reporter down to RCA conventions to wait for the smoke in the room to clear and report on what Orthodox Rabbis had established as their position on the issues of the day. Now, no one is reporting on what we, or other religious groups for that matter, are making statements about.

In general, organizations whose positions get wide coverage either represent a large constituency, are lobby groups, or think tanks. Do you feel CJV needs to develop another element to achieve the level of prominence that you would like to achieve?

Whether in the future it will be important to make studies and produce data, I'm not sure. Our mission is to give a voice where there is no voice now.

I look forward to having increased membership and influence. To being more recognized by the mainstream media as a force to be reckoned with. But I don't look forward to the day when we have fancy offices in Manhattan and 100 employees. That's not where I want to go with this.



You have recently come to the end of a long career in the *rabbanus* and you grew up in a home where the pulpit was very central. In your political persona, you are very forceful in taking positions. Is this something that you feel is important for Rabbanim to do as well, in their *kehillos* and communities?

I do. I think what some Rabbanim might lack in charisma, they are able to make up for in sincerity and in letting their *mispallelim* know what they think and that they are willing to stand behind it without agendas getting in the way.

I also think that Rabbanim should be able to work together to guide their communities. We most recently saw how this played out in different communities during the COVID pandemic. There were many towns where everybody more or less did what they wanted, but I felt that the model of what things should look like was Baltimore. The point isn't whether the exact guidelines or level of precautions were right or wrong, it's that the community's Rabbanim were able to get together, agree on policy,

and by and large their *kehillah* listened.

It's the way that it really should be everywhere, but unfortunately in most places in America we're far away from that happening.

What changed the most in the nature of *rabbanus* during your years in the field, or even looking back to your father's career in the pulpit?

The Rabbinate has changed radically. Ask most people who is the Rabbi at one of the large shuls in Manhattan and they won't be able to tell you. Thirty years ago, these pulpits were filled by major figures and everybody knew their names. What's changed? The Rabbinate used to be made up of outspoken people who were great orators who wrote articles and held institutional positions. But that style of Rabbi went out with *chazzanus*.

Mostly, I think it's a change for the better. Those types of figures commanded more respect than today's Rabbanim, but they had less influence on their congregants' lives. Today's Rabbanim in almost all sectors of the *klal* have less fanfare about them and maybe less prestige, but they are really focused on helping their *kehillah*. ■