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'I think it's Israel': How Orthodox Jews became Republicans

BY BEN SALES AND LAURA E. ADKINS FEBRUARY 3, 2020 6:37 PM



Supporters of Donald Trump hold signs in Hebrew and English as the president speaks at the Republican Jewish Coalition's annual leadership meeting in Las Vegas, April 6, 2019. (Saul Loeb / AFP via Getty Images)

NEW YORK ([JTA](#)) — Like most of his Orthodox friends, Richard Goldberg was raised a Democrat.

But by 2000, Goldberg had affixed a Republican congressional campaign bumper sticker to the maroon Lincoln Town Car he drove to his Orthodox Jewish high school in Chicago. Spurred by concerns about President Bill Clinton's Israeli-Palestinian peace process, disgust with the Monica Lewinsky scandal and a desire to emulate his older brother, Goldberg had decided to become a Republican.

Though he was not yet old enough to vote, Goldberg knew he was unusual. He remembers walking into Chicago's largest Judaica store, Rosenblum's, to see stacks of yarmulkes adorned with the Democratic presidential campaign logo — including the name of Joe Lieberman, the Orthodox Jewish senator who had been selected as Al Gore's running mate.

"The owner of the bookstore was pushing me to get a Gore-Lieberman yarmulke," Goldberg told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. "I said, 'These are very nice. Do you have them in Bush-Cheney?' He didn't even know how to respond."

Twenty years later, Rosenblum's says it isn't selling any campaign yarmulkes due to a policy of not offering political merchandise of any kind. But elsewhere, kippahs emblazoned with logos supporting President Donald Trump, a Republican, are readily available. The Orthodox world has caught up with Goldberg, who worked for years as a GOP political operative.

“I’ve never seen anything like it as far as support in the Orthodox community,” Goldberg said about Trump.

Regarding the president’s policies toward Israel, Goldberg said, “If your worldview is such that these things are unbelievable accomplishments and things that you’ve waited your whole life to see happen, this president is a dream come true.”

Multiple surveys reflect Goldberg’s experience. The vast majority of American Jews vote for Democrats, but a slim majority of Orthodox Jews voted for Trump in 2016.

Given the small numbers of Orthodox Jews and their concentration in mostly blue states, their votes are unlikely to have a major effect on the 2020 presidential election.

“If you take a look at most communities, how the Orthodox are going to vote ... is irrelevant,” said Ira Sheskin, a professor of geography at the University of Miami and a respected Jewish pollster.

But regardless of its small size, the shift in Orthodox politics is notable. In a country where most Jewish voters for president have opted for Democratic candidates, how did the most traditional segment of American Jewry — and often its most visibly Jewish — become Republican?

Good polling data on the Orthodox vote are hard to come by. But more than a dozen interviews with Orthodox leaders and experts on Jewish politics, plus a thorough review of the available data, reveal two main reasons why it changed.

Beginning in the 1980s, the Republican Party became the party of the Moral Majority, a prominent American political organization that centered on conservative social issues like support for school prayer and opposition to abortion. Decades ago, that was insufficient in and of itself to sway most Orthodox Jews. But in recent years, the Democratic Party has moved leftward on other social issues, alienating many Orthodox voters.

Most critically, however, the national Republican Party began to move in lockstep with Israel’s government, bringing Orthodox voters with them. As the Democrats, in turn, have become increasingly critical of Israel, a majority of Orthodox Jews have started to feel more comfortable voting for Republican presidential candidates.

“I think it’s Israel,” said Mark Trencher, the founder of Nishma Research, a polling firm that has studied Orthodox political views. “Yes, there are other issues around school choice, around the economy doing well, but really Israel is so predominant. I think that’s what drives this.”

As evangelical Christians first moved right, Orthodox Jews remained on the left

Up through 2000, experts said Orthodox Jews tended to vote in presidential elections much like the rest of the Jewish community — reliably for Democrats.

The Jewish-Democratic alliance crescendoed with enthusiasm for Franklin D. Roosevelt and held strong through the rest of the 20th century, as Jews joined blacks in their fight for civil rights, continued to participate in labor unions and disproportionately supported a wide range of liberal causes like progressive economic policy, reproductive rights and gun control.

The nascent Jewish state enjoyed strong support from Democratic politicians and organized labor, but experts said more than Israel considerations were at play. Even as they assimilated and climbed the American socioeconomic ladder, Jews continued to identify with their roots as an immigrant community.

While statistics on specifically Orthodox voting from that time are hard to come by, Binyamin Rose, an editor at Mishpacha magazine, an Orthodox publication, remembers a very pro-Democratic atmosphere when he was growing up Orthodox in the 1960s.

“If an Orthodox Jew were to vote Republican in those days, they would have been considered on par with having converted to Christianity,” he told JTA.

In continuing to support Democratic presidential candidates, Orthodox Jews were becoming increasingly divergent from religious Protestant voters.

The first evangelical Christian president, Jimmy Carter, elected in 1976, was also one of the most liberal. But four years later, in the 1980 election, the late Rev. Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority coalesced around Ronald Reagan, launching evangelical voters as a political force that remains a major Republican voting bloc to this day.

Recent surveys have shown that across the United States, increased attendance at religious services correlates with higher support for Trump, and the evangelical Christian establishment has lined up almost exclusively behind right-wing Republican candidates.

But the Republican religious revival did not extend to Orthodox Jews at first. For one, the religious right melded in opposing abortion rights as a crucial goal — an issue that is central to modern evangelical politics but is far more nuanced in Orthodox society.

“The issues of the ’80s are dramatically different than the issues in 2020,” said Abba Cohen, who has served as the Washington director of the haredi Agudath Israel of America for 30 years. “There wasn’t the same kind of tension back in the ’80s.”

At the same time, Republican leaders were struggling to win over Jews with their approach to Israel.

In the early 1990s, Jews felt that Reagan’s successor, President George H.W. Bush, was too tough on Israel, particularly with his administration’s opposition to settlements and push for negotiations with the Palestinians. Reportedly in response to Jewish objections, Bush’s secretary of state, James Baker, was quoted as saying “F— the Jews. they didn’t vote for us anyway.”

It became a self-fulfilling prophecy. In 1992, Bush won just 11% of the overall Jewish vote. Despite the growing social liberalism of the Democratic Party, Cohen says that most Orthodox voters stuck with Clinton because of his policies toward Israel.

Cohen recalls that a Bush staffer called him in 1992 and asked why more Orthodox Jews didn’t support the president’s re-election. After all, Bush was aligned with them on topics like religious freedom and school choice. Cohen explained that for the Orthodox, Israel was the core issue.

“We care about the moral issues of the day, and those are all very important issues and we recognize that the president shares some of our views on those issues,” Cohen said he told the staffer. “But you have to understand that any prospective president [who] is going to cause anxiety in the community over the issue of Israel is just not going to get our vote.”

Clinton also won over Orthodox Jews by consulting with them frequently and supporting their religious freedom, Cohen said. Clinton opposed same-sex marriage, supported certain kinds of federal funding for religious schools and in 1993 signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which prohibits the government from “substantially burdening a person’s exercise of religion.”

“One of the most successful runs the Orthodox community had was during the Clinton years with regard to programs and schools,” Cohen said. “We were very much welcome in the White House. We were part of policy meetings and events.”

Gore's selection of Lieberman, a Shabbat-observant, kosher-keeping Democrat who spoke out about moral values, was a historic moment for American Jews, particularly the Orthodox.

"You had Joe Lieberman on the Democratic ticket, and Al Gore also had a strong, solid pro-Israel record," said Nathan Diament, executive director of the Orthodox Union Advocacy Center in Washington. "And George W. Bush was viewed with some suspicion because of the connection to James Baker and his father's administration."

In 2000, the year that Lieberman ran with Gore, just 25% of Orthodox Jews identified as Republican, according to Sheskin.

George W. Bush draws Orthodox support

But a shift began early in Bush's first term. By late 2001, Israel was deep in the throes of the second intifada, struggling to break a wave of deadly suicide bombings. The intifada also signaled the failure of the Oslo peace process that Clinton had championed.

That year, when the 9/11 attacks happened in the United States and George W. Bush declared a war on terror, many pro-Israel Jews saw it as a recognition of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's fight against Palestinian terror, Goldberg said.

Bush voiced support for Israeli actions to stem terror. Over the next few years, he would deliver a few other key items on Israel's wish list: He told the Israeli government that certain West Bank settlement blocs could remain part of the country under a future peace agreement; he cut off relations with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat; and he opposed Iran's nuclear program.

"You see a decisive move against terror throughout the world and a doctrine laid down by President Bush that the terror committed against America is no different than the terror committed against Israel," Goldberg said. "In those moments and the months and years to come, the strong security alignment between the Bush administration and the Sharon administration turns a lot of heads in the Orthodox Jewish community."

The Bush White House capitalized on its inroads among Jewish voters. Vice President Dick Cheney headlined a fundraiser with kosher food for Orthodox Jews in 2002. And in the 2004 election campaign, Bush's team made a particular point of reaching out to Orthodox voters.

That year, Bush's share of the vote soared in several heavily Orthodox areas, according to an Orthodox Union analysis of election results. In a heavily Orthodox district of Brooklyn covering the neighborhoods of Borough Park and Midwood, his percentage nearly doubled from 34% in 2000 to 66% in 2004 — and the voting levels for Republicans have remained near that level ever since. In Lakewood, New Jersey, it rose from 46% to 67%. In Beachwood, Ohio, a mostly Jewish suburb of Cleveland with a large Orthodox population, it increased from 20% to 35%.

Obama and Trump accelerate the trend

President Barack Obama spent his eight years in office clashing with Israel's right-wing prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, on issues like West Bank settlements and Israeli-Palestinian peace. Their fiercest battle was over the Iran nuclear agreement, which Obama spearheaded and Netanyahu loathed and campaigned against.

Since then, the Republican alliance with Netanyahu has grown even closer. Trump has fulfilled one Israeli wish after another — recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, cutting funding to Palestinians, pulling out of the Iran deal, recognizing Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and more. Netanyahu, in turn, has featured Trump prominently in his own campaign ads.

“President Obama, under his leadership, the Democratic Party became not as favorable toward Israel, and under President Trump the Republican Party has become much more favorable toward Israel,” said Farley Weiss, president of the National Council of Young Israel, an Orthodox synagogue association whose leadership has supported Trump. “Republicans have never been more supportive of Israel. Democrats have never been less supportive of Israel.”

A 2019 survey from Gallup suggests that conservative Republicans are increasingly most sympathetic to Israel, while liberal Democrats increasingly sympathize more with the Palestinian cause.

To Orthodox Jews, that’s a big deal. According to Nishma Research, a survey organization focusing on the Orthodox world, 31% of haredi respondents and 18% of Modern Orthodox respondents said that a candidate’s “views on Israel will essentially determine their vote.” An additional 45% of both groups said that a candidate’s views on Israel were “very important.”

By contrast, only a quarter of American Jews as a whole say Israel is one of their top three concerns when voting, according to a 2015 survey by the American Jewish Committee.

Another important shift took place as the Republican Party was cementing itself as staunchly pro-Israel: The burgeoning fight over LGBTQ rights — and especially same-sex marriage — became the burning social issue of the new millennium.

The decades-long evangelical Christian fight to overturn the Roe v. Wade decision on abortion had failed to galvanize Orthodox voters. But unlike abortion, which is permitted in some cases under rabbinic law, Orthodox Jews believe that the Torah strictly forbids same-sex marriage. When Democrats started backing marriage equality, Republicans found another opportunity to court Orthodox Jews, and in 2015, when the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, the only major American Jewish groups to object were Orthodox.

“The norms are pretty clear,” said Roberta Rosenthal Kwall, a law professor at DePaul University and the author of “Remix Judaism.” “Supporting [liberal social issues] or making those a part of your agenda, if anything, that’s going to push Orthodox voters away.”

An alliance — and a possible split — in the Orthodox world

Orthodox Jewry’s Republican shift reached a tipping point in 2016. That year, 18% of American Jews voted for Donald Trump, according to an American Jewish Committee survey. But the same survey found that Trump won 54% of the Orthodox vote.

A survey by Nishma Research, released this week early and exclusively to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, reported a similar statistic — but concluded that haredi Jews, who make up about two-thirds of Orthodox Jews in America, drove the shift. Nearly three-quarters of haredi Jews voted Republican, the survey found.

Ami Magazine, a publication that primarily serves haredi readers, published a survey in December of “close to 1,000 Orthodox Jewish respondents from at least 12 different states” and found that while only 40% of respondents were registered as Republicans, 89% “approve of the job Donald Trump is doing as president.”

In contrast, Nishma found, only about a third of Modern Orthodox respondents said they voted for Trump.

There are reasons to suspect that the survey may have overstated the split. But Kwall said she was unsurprised by the finding that Modern Orthodox Jews, who frequently live, work and study alongside non-Jews, are less politically conservative than haredi Jews.

“You’re not necessarily living in your little shtetl, and that’s going to flow over into how you’re feeling about the elections and how you’re feeling about Trump,” she said.

Demographic trends suggest that any split in the Orthodox community is unlikely to reverse the rightward trend in its voting. Haredim, who tend to have large families, make up an increasing share of Orthodox Jewry.

Ultimately, the Republican Party’s support for Israel, conservative social policy and religious liberty might lead Orthodox Jews to overlook Trump’s foibles, Rabbi Avi Shafran, Agudath Israel’s director of public affairs, wrote in an email to JTA.

“While there are some Orthodox Jews who embrace President Trump as a hero, many more appreciate things he’s done that express their values and hopes but at the same time disapprove of his ‘style’ and things he has said and tweeted,” Shafran wrote. “They may still support him, but their support stems from his policies, not his persona. They are voting their interests, not donning MAGA hats.”

And unlike their more liberal counterparts, Orthodox Jews aren’t concerned about Trump’s response to rising anti-Semitism. Seventy-three percent of American Jews overall disapprove of Trump’s handling of anti-Semitism, according to the AJC. But overall, Orthodox Jews see Trump as an ally in the fight against hate.

Ami Magazine found that more than 90% of its respondents trusted Trump on anti-Semitism over Democratic leaders.

“The part where this doesn’t all add up is that it comes along with an emboldening of the extreme right,” Shana Friedman, the managing editor at Mishpacha, wrote in an email to JTA. But the average Orthodox voter, she added, may not “consider some KKK types in South Carolina to be the same threat as the progressives fighting for changes right there in their cities, or just figures it’s still a better option.”

Kwall says that ultimately, to Orthodox Jews, it is Trump’s policies that matter, not his rhetoric.

“Whereas liberal Jews will often say ‘listen to his tropes,’” Kwall said, “the people on the right say ‘look at what he’s done.’”