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Courting Jewish Voters, Weiner Faces a Challenge

By JOSEPH BERGER

Boruch Benenfeld still remembers Representative [Anthony D. Weiner](#) speaking at his daughter's yeshiva graduation.

That was before Mr. Weiner acknowledged sending sexually explicit images and messages to women he knew only online, before he resigned from Congress in disgrace and before he announced, two years later, that he would seek redemption as a candidate for mayor of New York. Still, to Mr. Benenfeld, a 47-year-old Orthodox Jew, none of that matters.

"I don't feel that's going to affect his being mayor," Mr. Benenfeld, a clothing store manager, said as he stopped in at Sweet Choice, a kosher ice cream shop in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish enclave of Midwood, Brooklyn. "He got over it. He got therapy. His wife forgave him. We've moved on, just as we did with President Bill Clinton. I don't judge a person by his personal life."

As Mr. Weiner vies with a field of current and former officeholders to win the Democratic nomination for mayor, he is making an aggressive play for votes in the Jewish community, with an intense focus on the ultra-Orthodox community. He is the only Jewish candidate; he represented several heavily Jewish communities on the City Council and in Congress; and he has over the years staked out staunchly pro-Israel positions.

But ultra-Orthodox Jews espouse a strict code of moral behavior, particularly regarding interactions between men and women — some frown on even casual conversations between unrelated men and women — posing a challenge for Mr. Weiner.

"The scandal made him someone I cannot trust," said Rabbi Yaakov Klein, 50, a teacher at Yeshiva Ohr Yitzchok in Midwood, as he shopped at Pomegranate, a kosher specialty foods emporium. "His integrity is lacking. If you're trusting him with public matters, you want his personal life to be beyond reproach."

Mr. Weiner has other liabilities in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish world. Yaakov Kornreich, a journalist for Jewish publications who is associated with the Midwood-based "yeshivish" or "black hat" community, said it will be hard for many Orthodox Jewish voters to forgive Mr. Weiner for marrying a non-Jew. Mr. Weiner's wife, Huma Abedin, a longtime personal aide to Hillary Clinton, is Muslim,

though Mr. Kornreich said that her particular belief is not as much an issue as the fact that she is not Jewish.

“There’s a feeling that he betrayed the Orthodox community, its values and standards, by marrying out of the faith,” he said. “He literally crossed a red line that is enforced in this community.”

(Mr. Weiner, asked about the potential interfaith marriage issue, said his marriage is “between me and my wife and my God.”)

Ezra Friedlander, a Hasid who is a public affairs consultant and is supporting Christine C. Quinn for mayor, pointed to a greater problem than morality in the way many Orthodox Jews perceive the Twitter episode: his posts raise questions about his judgment. “Everyone understands that men have these weaknesses, but Anthony Weiner tweeting inappropriate pictures is more like what college kids do than a serious candidate for mayor,” he said.

Orthodox Jews make up 40 percent of the city’s 1.1 million Jews, according to the latest population survey by the UJA-Federation of New York, and the Ultra-Orthodox are coveted by candidates because they tend to vote — they are among the last communities that tend to vote in blocs, following the guidance of communal leaders.

On the campaign trail, Mr. Weiner has sided with the ultra-Orthodox community against Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s effort to regulate the practice of circumcisions that involve oral suction to clean the wound, which health authorities say has led infants to contract, and on occasion die from, herpes. He has spoken sympathetically about Jonathan Jay Pollard, an American convicted of spying for Israel, and the Rubashkin family, which has faced a variety of legal problems connected with its kosher meat businesses. And he has dropped Yiddish phrases, like “kishkes,” meaning guts, into his talks to Jewish audiences.

A recent poll by Quinnipiac University found a narrow majority of Jewish voters said they had an unfavorable view of Mr. Weiner, and Jewish voters were slightly more likely than the overall electorate to view Mr. Weiner unfavorably. The poll did not break down the Jewish community by observance level.

Some Hasidic leaders say that Mr. Weiner, as a secular Jew, benefits because the ultra-Orthodox community already assumes that many non-Orthodox Jews are engaged in behaviors they view as sexually immoral. Many aspects of the non-Orthodox world — mixed-gender dancing, same-sex relationships, revealing clothing, content on the Internet — are met with disapproval, and in that context, Mr. Weiner’s behavior might be less shocking. Furthermore, said Yosef Rapaport, a Hasidic journalist, Mr. Weiner’s behavior is not dwelt upon, because it “would not be a subject of discussion at the family table — it’s taboo.”

In an interview, Mr. Weiner, who had his bar mitzvah at a Reform temple on Eastern Parkway, took note of his long record of helping Orthodox Jewish constituents, having arranged extra trash pickups before **Passover** and Homeland Security grants for yeshivas and synagogues. He said now he was “reintroducing myself to the community” and believes that the scandal will only form part of his image.

“Hopefully they’ll include it in the full continuum of what they know about me,” he said.

Many of the candidates are courting ultra-Orthodox Jews. William C. Thompson Jr., in particular, has a long history of work with the community, and has reached out repeatedly during his campaign.

But Mr. Weiner appears to be making progress. He is often welcomed warmly in Jewish settings. And he recently met with the grand rabbi of Munkacs, Moshe Leib Rabinovich, who bestowed legitimacy if not quite an imprimatur by stating, according to a Hasid who was there, that Mr. Weiner had a record of helping the community. (Mr. Weiner once aided the Munkacs sect by getting the State Department to help secure Jewish grave sites in the town of Munkacz, Ukraine.)

“The fact that the Munkacser Rebbe was willing to sit down with him meant he was being treated as a serious candidate,” said Assemblyman Dov Hikind, who represents the Borough Park neighborhood in Brooklyn that is the city’s largest Hasidic enclave. Mr. Hikind, who has not endorsed a mayoral candidate, said many Orthodox Jews admire Mr. Weiner as a fighter who was able to pick himself up and “get out of the mud” when his political career seemed unsalvageable.

“To underestimate Weiner is to make a huge mistake,” Mr. Hikind said.

In the communities he represented as a city and federal lawmaker, he was viewed as attentive to local concerns. “When he was involved in the neighborhood, he was very good,” said Ephraim Nierenberg, 50, a real estate manager. “He helped every constituent out.”

But still, in Borough Park, residents seemed divided over what to make of Mr. Weiner.

“He committed something pretty horrendous, for a person who is supposed to be a role model,” said Dolly Rabinovich, an Orthodox Jew, though not Hasidic, who was watching a movie about Israel at a senior center at the Boro Park Y.

Frieda Emer, an Orthodox Jew accompanying her mother to the center, was more forgiving.

“We’re all human,” she said. “We have to look aside human failings and see what he can achieve. What he did was harmless. It wasn’t like it was embezzlement. Let’s forgive the guy.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 19, 2013

Because of an editing error, an article on Monday about Anthony D. Weiner’s efforts to court Jewish voters misidentified the subset that makes up 40 percent of the city’s Jews; it is the Orthodox, not the ultra-Orthodox. The article also at one point referred incorrectly to Mr. Weiner’s level of political representation. He has held office in city government, not state.