

Mr. Turner Goes To Washington

The Congressional Election that Stunned the Country

By Elliot Resnick
Jewish Press Staff Reporter

What happened? Why did an overwhelmingly Democratic district elect a Republican as its representative to Congress for the first time since 1920? That's the question many have been asking since Bob Turner's 54-46 percent upset victory over David Weprin in last Tuesday's special election for New York's 9th Congressional District seat, left vacant when Anthony Weiner resigned three months ago.

According to Weprin, the answer boils down to one factor: President Obama's unpopularity. "I think the problem was that he's the president and people are frustrated, and it's just natural to take it out on the top guy – or the top guy's party," Weprin told the New York Post over the weekend. Political consultant Hank Sheinkopf agrees. "This was clearly about President Obama. David Weprin was just running through traffic."



Bob Turner celebrates his victory.

Many other political observers, however, believe Weprin should blame himself rather than the president. As an Orthodox Jew in a district whose electorate is roughly one-third Jewish and one-ninth Orthodox, Weprin initially seemed well-positioned to win the Jewish vote. Democrats Anthony Weiner and Chuck Schumer, the district's previous representatives to Congress, had both won it handily and consistently. Weprin's public support of gay marriage, however, angered many Orthodox Jews, sending them to the Turner camp. "This election was a plebiscite in the Orthodox community on gay marriage," said Dr. David Luchins, head of Touro College's political science department and senior adviser to the late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan for 20 years.

Interestingly, Weprin's Orthodox credentials seem to have worked against him. "Had the candidate been a non-Jew, no one would have cared [about gay marriage]," Luchins said, pointing to the overwhelming Orthodox backing in the past of such pro-gay marriage candidates as Andrew Cuomo and Michael Bloomberg.

For many Orthodox Jews, it wasn't so much Weprin's support of gay marriage that irked them, but rather his public declaration in the New York State Assembly that he supported it as an Orthodox Jew. "I am an observant Jew," Weprin said on the Assembly floor. "I was married by an Orthodox rabbi in an Orthodox Jewish ceremony. ... My religion is very important to me personally, but this is not a religious issue. ... I feel very strongly that this is a civil rights issue. We're talking about civil marriage here. The time has come, and I recommend everyone to vote for this bill, and I will proudly vote for this bill."

"I think [the Orthodox Jewish vote against Weprin] was an act of revenge," said Ezra Friedlander, whose public affairs company, The Friedlander Group, represented Weprin's campaign. "It was clearly because of his vote. That was the defining issue for the Orthodox Jewish community."

It certainly was critical to Weprin's Democratic colleague in the Assembly, Dov Hikind, who crossed party lines and campaigned for Turner. "From the very beginning," Hikind said, "I told

David Weprin when he came to see me that I could never support him based on that issue alone. A lot of people support gay marriage in Albany, and that's their business, but when you get up on the floor of the Assembly and say that you're an Orthodox Jew to give the impression that it's okay – it's a big difference."

Luchins said he knows of at least one large Orthodox day school that called students' parents, telling them that voting for Weprin "is against *da'as Torah*." In addition, he said, "rabbis from the pulpit were telling people they're going to hell if they don't vote for Turner."

Indeed, a week before the election, a letter signed by 40 rabbis, including Yeshiva of Philadelphia's Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky and Torah Vodaath's Rabbi Yisroel Belsky, circulated around the Jewish community, which declared it forbidden "to vote for, campaign for, publicly honor, fund or otherwise support the campaign of NY Assemblyman David Weprin."

Although opposition to gay marriage motivated large segments of the Orthodox Jewish community to vote for Turner, for other Jews, Israel's security was paramount. "People were concerned about Israel. They want to make sure Israel is protected," said Jonathan Schenker, who served as political director of Turner's campaign. Indeed, Schenker stressed that Turner never made gay marriage part of his campaign, even if others may have.

Israel was also one of the main reasons former New York City mayor Ed Koch, a Democrat, supported Turner.

"Electing Bob Turner on Tuesday will send a huge message to President Obama that we're not happy with how he's dealing with Israel," Koch said in a phone message to voters before the election. In comments to The Jewish Press, Koch said he hopes the election results will inspire the president to reexamine his Israel policy. "If he changes his mind and restores the relationship [with Israel], will I support him and campaign for him? Yes."

Hikind said this race was a particularly good opportunity to "send a message" to Obama since it occurred in a non-election season. "People really took advantage of that opportunity that they won't have again. The next time, if there's a race in this district, there's going to be hundreds of other races [around the country]. No one is going to focus on one particular district."

Ezra Friedlander said that considering all the factors – concern about gay marriage and Israel, plus general discontent with Obama and the state of the economy – Weprin's defeat is understandable. "He flew into a perfect storm."

Yeshiva University Professor of Jewish History Jeffrey Gurock cited some of the same factors in analyzing the race, stating that although it may be surprising for a New York Jewish candidate to lose the Jewish vote, it is not unprecedented. "Back in 1912, Oscar Straus ran for governor of New York against William Sulzer, a gentile, and the establishment American Jewish Committee people supported Sulzer because they felt he would be better for Jews." More recently, he said, chassidim in Williamsburg strongly backed John Rooney, an Irish Catholic, over Allard Lowenstein, a Jew, in a 1972 Democratic congressional primary because of his support for a variety of Jewish causes. "It just

reinforces how important specific Jewish issues are for particular Jewish groups," Gurock said.

Does this election portend anything about the future? Political consultant Hank Sheinkopf is skeptical. "There are some people, if you gave them a choice between arctic or not voting Democrat, they would definitely take the poison," he said.

In a blog post, The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg wrote, "Obama wins 70 percent (at least) of the Jewish vote next year. They might vote for Perry in Crown Heights, and they may vote for Romney in Forest Hills, but as for the rest of the Jewish community, I'm not picturing either Republican making huge inroads."

Hikind was a bit more sanguine. "It's not a question of whether the Democrats will get a majority of the Jewish vote. I can tell you right now they will. But if the Republican gets 40 percent of the Jewish vote, that could make the difference in the election."

Luchins said the Jewish vote is still up in the air and he castigated Florida Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz, chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee, who dismissed the Jewish vote for Turner as an anomaly due to the large percentage of Orthodox Jews among them.

"If the Democratic Party is going to write off the Orthodox Jewish community, which has been the mainstay for Democrats from Patrick Moynihan to Chuck Schumer and so many other Democratic victories, guess what? It will be a self-fulfilling prophecy." Orthodox Jews, he said, often vote Democratic, even in presidential elections. In 2008, Senator John McCain won the Orthodox vote in heavy Orthodox areas in Brooklyn by a margin of two to one, he said, but only received half the Orthodox vote in Ohio and Florida. "What counts more?" Luchins asked, "Florida and Ohio or Boro Park?"

More locally, it remains unclear how Democrats will fare in the future. Sheinkopf believes that by electing Turner, New York Jews demonstrated that they were "tired of being treated like doormats with their votes being taken for granted. ... There's a large segment of the Jewish community who are not going to blindly follow the Democratic Party anymore."

Will Orthodox Jews continue to treat gay marriage as a decisive issue in future races? Friedlander hopes not. "We're a minority within a minority within a minority. Once we bring our religious beliefs into a political campaign, others have and will emulate that, and then it becomes a very slippery slope. Ultimately it will prove dangerous to us as American Jews."



David Weprin thanks supporters the morning after the election.

Controversial anti-gay activist Rabbi Yehuda Levin disagrees, arguing that God's name will be disgraced if Orthodox Jews revert to voting for pro-gay marriage candidates. "We can't go backward now. We have to stand up for Godly values no matter who the candidate is."