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Election Reflection

Roundtable on Voting, Parties, and Politics

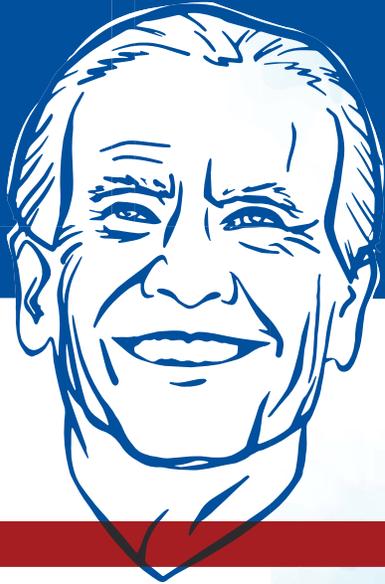
PENINA NUSSBAUM

The 2020 general election is expected to be one of the most consequential in the history of the United States. Policy platforms of the two major parties have become more polarized than ever. The presidential and vice presidential candidates elicit strong feelings on both sides of the aisle, with many voters staunchly supportive or vehemently opposed. The integrity of the vote itself is in doubt, with more voters expected to vote than ever, but not in person on Election Day. The media constantly bombards its viewers with revelations or attacks on candidates' character or business dealings and casts doubt on their physical or mental abilities to serve as the leader of the free world.

But much more is on the ballot than only the highest seats in the land. Many state and local offices are also up for election, the results of which will directly impact our daily lives. Amid the confluence of challenges that face our country, how can we best make the decisions about whom to trust to lead us toward a brighter future?

“Lev melachim v’sarim b’Yad Hashem—The hearts of kings and officials are in the Hands of Hashem” We know Who truly holds the power, yet at the same time, we are enjoined to do our *hishtadlus*. We look for insights from respected members of the *frum* community who work diligently among political circles to represent and advocate for our unique needs and values. Their insider experiences can teach us valuable lessons about the power of our votes, the political system, and the interactions between the *frum* community and politicians.

JOE BIDEN



Can you describe the feeling in DC heading toward the upcoming historic election?

AC: There is a feeling of great uncertainty, perhaps even fear, on both sides of the aisle. There is a sense that the election is up for grabs, that the polls can't be relied upon, and that significant change might be seen in both the White House and the Capitol. It is the classic "fear of the unknown." Compounding this feeling is the fact that many things depend on the election and that its outcome will result in dramatic changes. That has raised the stakes and the level of anxiety associated with the election.

Accusations on both sides that, whatever the outcome, the election will be contested and left up in the air also contribute to the sense that what is seen as the national election "trauma" will not be resolved, depriving the nation of a sense of future relief.

Every election year is unique. There are exceptions, but election-year politics and lawmaking intersect and create a very complicated picture. Which bills come to the House and Senate floors or are proposed by the White House are usually determined by their "election value." Major partisan or controversial pieces of legislation are not easy to get through, and no one wants to give a victory to the other side, which may translate into votes. At the same time, no Congress wants to be called a "Do-Nothing Congress." Each party wants to cater to its base and, at the same time, block the other side.

EF: Every election is historic. This one is definitely very contentious. Everyone is hoping that their candidate will win. Both sides are very passionate about



Rabbi Abba Cohen is the director of the Washington, DC, branch of Agudath Israel of America. He advocates on behalf of American Jewry on issues of religious liberties, security for Israel, and funding for educational institutions, among other causes.

Having been raised in a home that emphasized both *limmud haTorah* and being *osek b'tzorchei tzibbur*, Rabbi Cohen prepared himself for a life and career that encompass both values. He believes that *klal* work nowadays requires a delicate balance, never allowing Torah values to be misrepresented or diluted, which is the ultimate *chillul Hashem*.



Rabbi Avi Schnall is the director of the New Jersey branch of Agudath Israel of America. He is well known in Lakewood for advocating for and achieving increased funding for security and technology, fighting for religious freedom and accommodations, and communicating with the state government about our community's needs.

As a young boy, Rabbi Schnall, together with his grandfather Loychi Glueck, attended the Agudath Conventions, where they sat together for many years with the legendary Rabbi Moshe Sherer, a close friend and confidante of Mr. Glueck. He credits his grandfather and Rabbi Sherer as his inspiration for entering a career of service for the *klal*.



Mr. Ezra Friedlander is CEO of The Friedlander Group, which lobbies and advocates for various causes of concern to the Jewish community. For two decades he has walked the streets and halls of Washington, DC, cultivating relationships, educating, and gaining the trust of members of Congress who then pass legislation that is in our best interests.

Three days before Yom Kippur of 1943, 400 *rabbanim* assembled in Washington, DC, pleading with President Roosevelt to intercede on behalf of their Jewish brethren in Europe. Their efforts were, unfortunately, futile. Nevertheless, Friedlander was inspired by that event to dedicate his life to effective government relations for the sake of Klal Yisrael.

Note: All interviewees insisted on neither endorsing nor criticizing any candidate.

why theirs or the other should or should not win. In lobbying, we advocate for our client; we do not actively promote or disparage any candidate. We try to read what will happen if each party wins so we can prepare accordingly.

What benefit is there of from votes for Trump in historically Democratic states such as New York and New Jersey if Biden is likely to win them anyway?

AC: Terms and labels like “Democrat” and “Republican” or “liberal” and “conservative” do not neatly fit the Orthodox community, and it is not helpful to look at our political activity within that prism. Our views and interests transcend these lines. We have to vote on the basis of our values and well-being, both in federal and local elections.

There is no such thing as a “wasted” vote, even in our Electoral College system. Even if it doesn’t translate into a “win,” it is very effective in conveying to elected officials what is important to us, our needs, and how we look to them to govern our jurisdictions. This is a critical message and must be conveyed regardless of who wins or whether a vote contributes to a win. Whichever candidate our values and well-being lead us to vote for, one’s vote is a significant contribution, even if the state goes the other way.

Not voting because you think your vote doesn’t count is a big mistake. People still care about, and look at, the popular vote, and that makes a difference to elected officials and political parties in consequential ways.

AS: There is a benefit to every vote. In every campaign, whether for president, for senator, or for another role, they look at the num-



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bers. Officials make decisions according to their supporters. When they see support from communities, even if they did not win the state but they saw that the community came out in their favor, they feel they can work with them. Even in blue states they look at the communities—such as the Orthodox voters in Florida or California—and they see who stands behind their agenda. It makes a difference.

For either candidate, if no one in a community votes for them, they will know they are not their base. The campaigns have very sophisticated technology to break down the numbers. They do research and pinpoint each township’s demographics. Lakewood has many different districts, and they can see who lives on each block. If, for example, the population has many young children, it will be concerned with childcare and school

funding. They know who is voting and why they’re voting.

Practically, all politics are local. The average Lakewooder is more affected by township committees and assemblymen/women than the president. Local votes may be even more important than presidential; they have a big impact on our streetlights, our property taxes, etc.

Voters need to look at the whole slate on the ballot, not just one person on it. We need to look at each candidate and not just the letter after their name. Neglecting to do so can be a blemish on our community.

When Jeff Van Drew switched parties it was concerning, and reinforced why one should vote for the person and not the party.

EF: We need to vote strategically. Every election has different circumstances that impact to whom

we'll give our vote. New Jersey is a blue state, but every vote is still important for congressional and local elections. Politically, nothing is more important for a community than to be represented at the polling booth. Collective votes count. They send a strong message that the community is active and organized. The way the community votes has implications. The parties notice who votes and how.

There is anger at the system; people think, "My vote doesn't count, it won't change anything." But it's like plumbing—no one wants to talk about it, but no one wants the problems. We all need it to work in our favor. Elected officials will only respect and take you seriously if you vote. It's doing *yourself* a favor. For those who don't vote, it's as if they don't see you, you don't count.

What if it is difficult to choose a candidate?

EF: Again, like with plumbing, sometimes you have to hold your nose. Don't tell me you don't have time to vote and why it won't help anyway. Even if you have to hold your nose, just do it.

Everyone needs to do less talking and be more proactive. Go to shul to *daven*, not talk politics. Rav Moshe Feinstein said that voting is incumbent upon everyone in America out of *hakaros hatov*.

Think strategically. Long-term, how will my community benefit?

Our values do not align with either party. Our values come from the Torah. Both parties are amena-



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ble to them in different ways. I work closely with both parties in bipartisan lobbying. Our community needs both parties, and needs to maintain working relationships with people in both parties. Each issue is case-by-case. Politics is complicated, not black and white. The question is how to achieve one's objective.

We thrive when we have interactions with both parties. We have to maintain bridges; we have no choice. The *frum* community is not large enough to determine a national or even state election; maybe it can impact a township level.

Baruch Hashem, our communities are thriving, so it's easy to forget that we're in *galus*. We lost the mindset of how we should conduct ourselves, especially with external relations. A *galus Yid* conducts himself differently; a non-Jew is not in *galus*. We must express ourselves politely, not denigrate others. People will judge other Jews by what we do or say. We cannot say certain things even if they are true. It's not easy. I live in Boro Park and it seems like the whole world is Jewish. It can be intimidating when I am the only identifiably *frum* Yid at a meeting. I am careful about maintaining relationships, and I get criticized for it.

How concerned are you about mail-in ballots and the potential for a contested election?

AS: There is always a risk, always room for error. People need to have faith in the government or nothing

will ever get done. We use the mail system for lots of vital information; we can't suddenly blast the whole system as unreliable, or we'll always doubt and make conspiracy theories. There are concerns because the ballots are so visible. What we can do is vote; the worst thing is not to vote, because then you are guaranteed that your vote is not counted.

EF: I don't believe it will be close, and I am not concerned that it will be contested. There will always be people who try to take advantage of an election. In states where it will be very close, both sides will carefully scrutinize the polls.

How important is it for the frum community that the Supreme Court vacancy be filled by a conservative?

AC: I reiterate that Orthodox interests and values overlap labels and terms. On some matters we are conservative, and on some, liberal, so whichever way the justice is, we will likely "win" on some issues and "lose" on others.

Once on the court, justices may defy labels. In recent years especially, justices have not necessarily or consistently adhered to their assumed judicial philosophy. This should really come as no surprise. Supreme Court nominees and justices must interpret the law as written, without preconception or political agendas.

It is very important that there be no "religious test" regarding nominees to the Supreme Court. The



American judiciary is based on the principle that we not look at race, gender, religion, etc. in selecting our judges and that they are fully capable of hearing and ruling on a case objectively and without bias. Unfortunately, of late, there have been undercurrents of sentiment that persons of a particular religion or religious viewpoint should be disqualified from judicial or public office because of their religious beliefs. As Jews and as Americans, we cannot abide this offensive and destructive attitude.

I say all this without belittling one bit the importance of the Supreme Court and its rulings to our nation and to our community. For many, the key factor in the 2016 election was the future composition of the Supreme Court and the effect that filling vacancies would have on the legal landscape *for generations to come*. It has clearly become an essential component in this year's election, as well. The world in which our children and grandchildren will live will be greatly shaped by the Supreme Court.

Many from Jews rely on Democrat-supported social welfare benefits. Should they continue voting Democrat for their personal well-being, or vote Republican to help elect those with conservative values?

AC: This question clearly demonstrates that our community's interests cannot be pigeon-holed into one party or political philosophy. How to weigh those values and benefits individually and against each other is a matter of personal choice, which hopefully will be informed by guidance from rabbinic or community lead-

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ership. Each person, family, and community must make this assessment for itself. That balance might change over time as issues wax and wane. Weighing societal issues against those such as the financial challenges facing our *yeshivos*, *tzedakah* organizations, and families or the security of our brothers and sisters in Eretz Yisrael are the decisions that each of us and our communities need to grapple with before every election. There is no quick and easy answer to that question. It is everyone's responsibility to do the homework and become informed about the candidates and the issues, how they affect one's life, and how to evaluate their importance in making electoral decisions.

AS: We are not a party community. We have people on both sides who are very good for us, and people on both sides who are very *not* good for us. For example, Governor Murphy (who is a Democrat) is doing a great job for us in general and has been extremely helpful in combating anti-Semitism, protecting our health, and securing record-high funding for our schools. Mayor Ray Coles is a Democrat, and you can't get a better mayor than him. Toms River has many Democrats who are terrific people. In contrast, the whole township council of Jackson is Republican, and they have been opposing building *yeshivos*, shuls, and *eruvim*.

Senator Bob Menendez (a Democrat) has been a friend of our community forever. When he was

the mayor of Union City, he was supportive and helpful to Chassidim who wanted to build an *eruv*. He was the first Democratic senator to oppose Obama and the Iran Deal. He was subsequently under investigation for years because he challenged Obama, yet he never relented on his decisions. Still, less than half of Lakewood voted for his reelection; more than half voted for his opponent who had no prior experience and no track record. At Menendez's victory party, he approached me and said, "Rabbi, we have to educate people on what's important." I was embarrassed.

Senator Cory Booker (a Democrat) has been very helpful in a

