Spiritual Strength and Political Muscle
Rabbi Levi Shemtov discusses influence and Yiddishkeit on Capitol Hill

BY ESTHER ENGELSON
“JEWISH POWER” is a complicated term. There is this notion that when the two words are used together, it’s essentially an anti-Semitic slur. To some, the very idea of Jewish power invokes lurid stereotypes of influential Jewish bankers and greedy, controlling Jews who are clearly to blame for the world’s economic woes.

This idea is best illustrated by the Jewish community’s irate reaction to a controversial comment made by President George Bush in 1991. Israel had asked the United States to guarantee $10 billion in loans to build settlements for an influx of Soviet Jewish immigrants, a request that Bush intended to deny.

At a press conference, President Bush announced he was delaying action on the loan guarantees for four months and appealed to the American people for support against the “powerful political forces undermining his policies,” as Congress appeared to be approving the loan without the president’s endorsement.

The president went on to say, “I heard today there were something like a thousand lobbyists on the Hill working the other side of the question.”

This remark invoked the wrath of even the most assimilated Jews because it was reminiscent of the biased perception that there exists a powerful conglomerate of Jews conspiring to manipulate the world, while the rest of humankind stands helplessly by. So strong was the protest over this comment that Bush was never completely able to overcome the perception that he perpetuated the anti-Semitic myth of the evils of Jewish power.

Accordingly, David Biale wrote in his study *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, “Even to remark on the relative political power of the American Jewish community — whether of the Israel lobby in Washington or of Jewish influence in domestic affairs — arouses fear in some quarters of giving ammunition to the anti-Semites.”

Is ‘Jewish Power’ a Negative Term?

“Jewish power” does not necessarily have to be infused with a negative stereotypical meaning. The negative connotation inherent in the phrase, in and of itself, is a means of manipulating Jews into silence, especially considering that every group in the world — from manufacturers to foreign countries — is allowed to influence governments and officials. Yet somehow, the idea of Jews utilizing their own power seems wrong. Jewish organizations throughout the United States have been able to quash this
perception. Agudath Israel, American Friends of Lubavitch (AFL), and the Orthodox Union (OU) show the Jewish community that it has an obligation to be vocal about its opinions. These organizations ensure that the Jewish voice is heard by gaining access to those in places of power, whether in government, business or the media. In this way, Jews can effect change and proudly implement “Jewish power.”

A Good Name in Washington: Rabbi Levi Shemtov

In an effort to ascertain the extent of Jewish power today, Hamodia spoke to Rabbi Levi Shemtov, executive vice president of the AFL and a Chabad shaliach. Rabbi Shemtov’s father, Rabbi Abraham Shemtov, the current chairman of Agudath Chasidei Chabad, is noted for being the first shaliach to Washington, D.C., sent by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, zy”a. Like his father, Rabbi Levi Shemtov came to Washington as a shaliach and the leader of the AFL. In these roles, he brings Yiddishkeit to the area; only here some of his clients just happen to be noted and powerful individuals.

Rabbi Shemtov recalls, “The Rebbe sent my father to Washington to direct the efforts of Lubavitch in the area. It got to the point where he was spending a lot of time in D.C., and it became too [big a job] to be done part time. … [And when] I moved to D.C., I discovered there was no real Jewish outreach operation on Capitol Hill.

“One of the people who helped me start the Capitol Jewish Forum [a group organized to reach out to Jewish legislators] turned out to be a pretty famous person — Ari Fleischer, the former White House press secretary for President George W. Bush. … We started with about a dozen people and now have a network of about four to five hundred members.”

Rabbi Shemtov is well known in the halls of Congress, and Sue Fishkoff, author of The Rebbe’s Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch, writes: “It’s not enough that Chabad’s man in D.C. knows the name and phone number of just about every congressman, senator and foreign ambassador in the nation’s capital — he also knows their legislative assistants, their secretaries and the people who clean their offices. … He lunches with prime ministers and navigates political jungles with firm good humor.”

Officials and staff members from all walks of life affirm that Rabbi Shemtov is exceptionally well liked and that he has amazing rapport with a wide range of political leaders.

Power vs. Influence

Because Rabbi Shemtov has such a vast network, his finger is on the pulse of the state of Jewish power today. Rabbi
Shemtov notes that there is a difference between power and influence. "Power means you're strong; influence means people listen to you. Now, if you ask me if there is Orthodox power, you have some senior people in government who are Orthodox, such as Jacob Lew, who was deputy secretary of state for management and resources and who has now become the director of the Office of Management and Budget. That is pretty powerful.

"House Majority Leader Eric Cantor is a powerful figure who keenly understands the Orthodox Jewish perspective. While he tends to describe himself as observant rather than Orthodox, he belongs to an Orthodox shul, and it is well known that he does not eat treif. He studies Torah regularly, he often visits the Capitol Jewish Forum, attends Jewish events on Capitol Hill, and he has strong ties to the Orthodox Jewish community."

Rabbi Shemtov recalls that when Cantor was elected congressman, he told him in his Virginian drawl, "I am here to search and present the emes." Rabbi Shemtov notes that this is truly a noble effort for a public servant.

"Senator Joe Lieberman [of Connecticut] is another Orthodox leader who is powerful, because at the end of the day he has sometimes been the sixty-eighth vote. Senator Lieberman could have sunk a lot of Obama's initiatives if he really wanted to. Matter of fact, he held up health care for a while, singlehandedly." (Before this article went to print, Lieberman announced his intention to resign next year.)

As for influence, when Rabbi Shemtov speaks, people listen. This is because people believe he is refreshing and appealing, after all, in a city governed by the rough-and-tumble of politics, sincerity and honesty go a long way.

On this topic, Newt Gingrich, a former speaker of the House of Representatives, said, "If you're in our business and you're approached every day by dozens of high-paid lobbyists ... and then someone walks up to you with integrity and authenticity ... and doesn't ask you to help them increase their profit margins but instead says, 'For the good of the world, this is something noble and idealistic that should be recognized,' then you'll find it a positive thing."

Rabbi Shemtov explains, "It's unbelievable how you can get through to someone on Capitol Hill when you don't just want something from them. They become infinitely more receptive to what you have to say. If you're trying to deliver a message but not necessarily to ask for something, then they're more interested. Because if you want to tell them what to do, there are so many others trying to tell them what to do and it's just a cacophony.

Mean in the visitors’ atrium at the Capitol.
— and they sometimes just tune it out because they have to do what they’re going to do anyhow.”

Interestingly, even David Saperstein, an activist for the Reform movement, has been quoted as saying that Congress still respects representatives of religion and that in Rabbi Shemtov’s case, it certainly helps that he has a kippah and beard as it fits the image of what a religious person should look like.

**Our Friends in Government**

Do Orthodox individuals in positions of power necessarily come to the aid of the observant Jewish community?

Rabbi Shemtov says they do. “Joe Lieberman has supported many Jewish causes and has made a kiddush Hashem for many, many years. As for someone like Jacob Lew, he will understand some complex issues more easily than someone to whom it has to be explained. He understands where Orthodox Jews are coming from, more than someone else who might even be Jewish, because he actually lives it.

“For example, we had an issue a couple years back where people were having lulavim confiscated at airports. At the time, a top lawyer at the Department of Homeland Security named Baruch Weiss also happened to be a frum Jew. He was able to easily explain to the relevant people what the problem was and had the situation [resolved]. In response, the DHS sent around notices with diagrams and an explanation of what a lulav is.”

When asked to name extraordinary leaders who support Jews unconditionally, Rabbi Shemtov immediately chose former president George W. Bush: “I definitely found President Bush to be extraordinarily receptive to me as an individual and to Orthodox Jews in particular.”

Rabbi Shemtov also credited Vice President Joe Biden with being “one of the most decent people to hold high office. I say this not from his public speeches, but from watching him for years on the Amtrak train between Washington and Wilmington. He made the transition from the big VIP, [where] they are holding the train for him for an extra minute or two, to the ‘everyman,’ walking up and down the aisles and kibbitzing with the Amtrak staff and with simple folks.”

**Strength in Numbers**

In discussing his own political muscle, Rabbi Shemtov explains, “I am not powerful as much as I have a lot of power behind me, so I do not project my own power per se. I project the power of thousands of my colleagues and supporters, which, when combined, is very potent. Indeed, this is what the Rebbe wanted from his shelichim — to bring the Torah’s message of hope, light and truth to the broadest arena possible. This becomes more attainable when we are unified and complement each other.”

Even though Orthodox Jews have friends in office, Rabbi Shemtov emphasizes that the large network of shelichim enables American Jewry to
connect to powerful individuals in government who would otherwise be completely inaccessible.

Rabbi Shemtov describes this vast network of shelichim and its effectiveness.

“We have shelichim in forty-seven states and in at least 310 districts. . . . People sometimes view the world of shelichim as three thousand people, but it’s not only three thousand people, it’s three thousand interconnected networks. So we can place a call from a constituent to almost any member of Congress. Not necessarily from a financial supporter, but from a constituent. That goes a long way.

“Most shelichim have good connections with their senators, congressmen and governors, who represent the most remote places in the United States. For example, when Sarah Palin, a Republican, burst onto the scene, she had already known about Jewish issues and Chabad specifically from Rabbi Yosef Greenberg in Alaska.

Rabbi Shemtov notes that Rabbi Greenberg is far from partisan. After all, he is also a close friend of Senator Mark Begich, Alaska’s new Democratic senator, who used to be the mayor of Anchorage. Because Sen. Begich already knew the shaliach, Rabbi Shemtov was able to introduce himself to the senator, and that facilitated a close connection.

Rabbi Shemtov explains that this is the way he can help Jews all over the country and around the world. “I help Jews of all types in many matters,” he says. “For example, one issue affecting the frum community which I was involved in was the policy in the recent health-care bill allowing those under the age of twenty-six to stay on their parents’ [insurance] policies. This is something that affects thousands of kollel yungeleit and others who simply cannot afford health insurance right after they get married. I explained to many of these congressmen that in our community, people tend to marry younger than usual and study for several years after they’re married. They start to build families quite quickly, and it is overwhelmingly difficult for them to have the added burden of health insurance. There were some members [of Congress] who were fighting for this policy and made it happen.”

Not only are shelichim a vast network that comes to the aid of Jews all over the world, but they are also, in essence, a large, extended family. It is well known that Rabbi Shemtov did all he could to help Rabbi Gavriel and Rivkah Holzberg, Hy”d, the Chabad shelichim who were murdered in Mumbai. It was difficult for Rabbi Shemtov to speak about it but after much prodding, he recounted that “terrible day in 2008” when he received an “urgent call that gunshots were heard in the vicinity of the Chabad house.

“I immediately got on the phone with the Indian Ambassador to the United States, and he confirmed that there was a problem. I called the shaliach on his cell phone and the terrorist picked up. He first spoke in English, and then he said he can only speak in Urdu. It happened to be that at the time I had met a ger who knew Urdu, and I summoned him to speak to the terrorist. I tried calling every half hour and in the background I could hear a woman screaming for help.”

Rabbi Shemtov noted that a reporter
from London reconstructed a minute-by-minute account of what transpired in the final moments at the Chabad house. In that account, the reporter disclosed that Rabbi Shemtov's phone call had distracted the terrorist and it was during that phone conversation that the toddler Moshe Holzberg ran out of the apartment, thereby saving his life.

**Working With Agudah and the OU**

As for his work with other frum activist organizations, Rabbi Shemtov says, “We work together with numerous Jewish organizations, including Agudath Israel and the Orthodox Union. Working together sometimes means joining your colleague and reinforcing him; other times it means watching your colleague do something and letting him do it on his own.

“There are times when we all work together. When the yeshivos were threatened a couple years ago with something and letting him do it on his own.

“Sometimes we don’t see eye to eye on issues affecting today’s Jewish women. Finally, to honor the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the genius behind the shlichus initiative, in 1995 Rabbi Shemtov organized the effort to have the Rebbe awarded a Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award in the United States. What was so unique about this recognition was that it had never before been bestowed upon a spiritual leader for his life’s work.

**True Gratification**

At the end of the day, what matters most to Rabbi Shemtov is “knowing that somebody is keeping Shabbos for the first time or putting on tefillin, or [when someone] e-mails me that he wore his yarmulke all the way home because he was so proud to be [Jewish] after our Purim party on the Hill.”

“Those are the starts and markers in the journey of Yiddishkeit, and they matter even more than one might think,” he says. “But the joy you have in interacting with famous or influential people is ultimately finite. But the joy you get from knowing you helped someone else build their Yiddishkeit is infinite.”