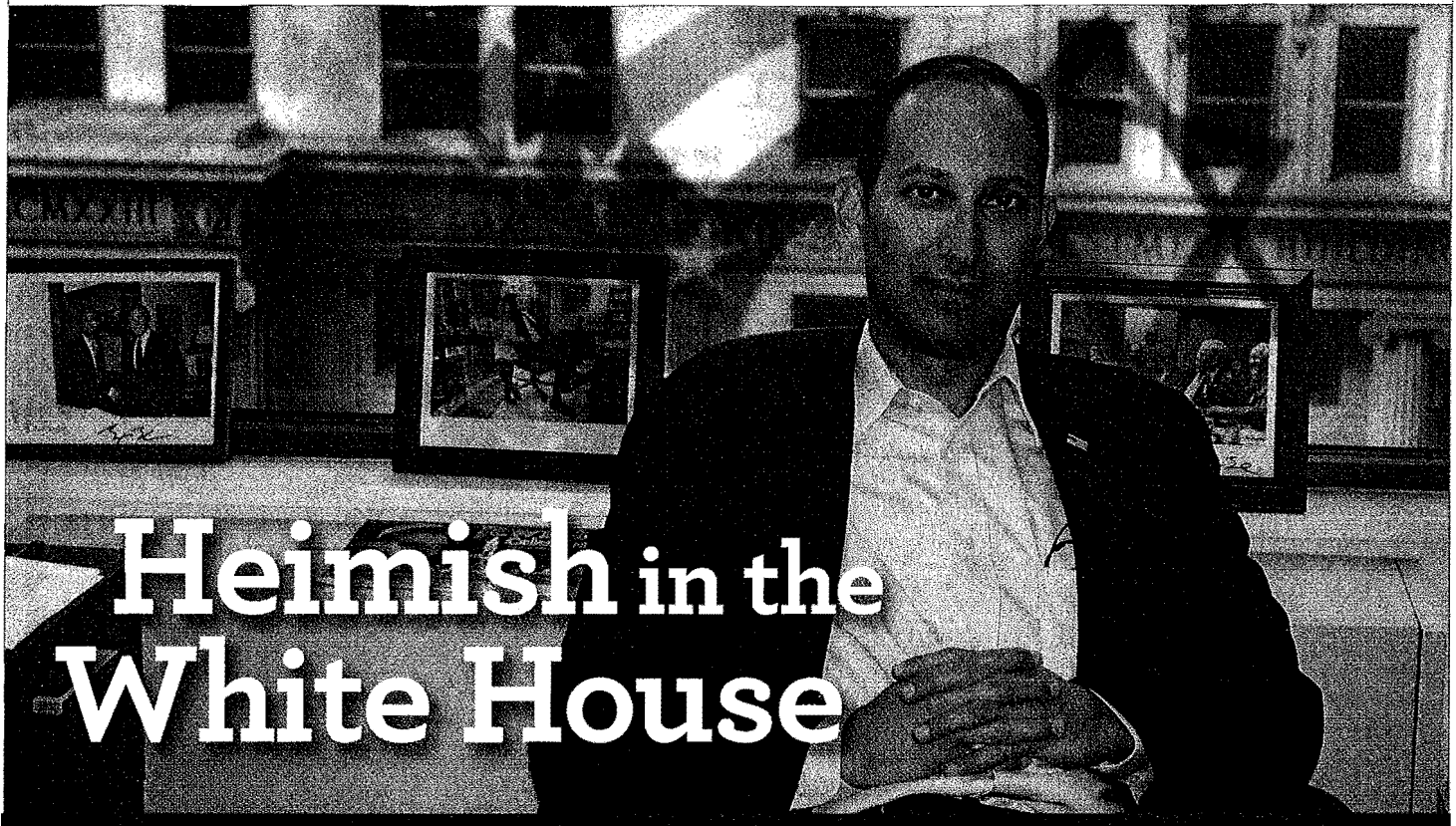


LEADERS ON THE HILL

Part II of our series on a new crop of young American Orthodox political leaders— all under forty-five—who are working to improve American life and society.



Heimish in the White House

At a rabbinical convention in 2003, the star speaker was Tevi Troy. Addressing the conference, he described his experience as an Orthodox Jew working in the highest levels of government in Washington, DC. He began his career, he said, on the staff of former Senator John Ashcroft (R-MO). One day he approached the chief of staff to request a day off for Shavuot.

“Never heard of it,” his supervisor balked.

“It celebrates the anniversary of the Jewish people receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai.”

“Oh, Pentecost! Why didn’t you say so?”

Yaakov D. Homnick is an author of books and articles on Jewish subjects in Hebrew and English, and recently released a CD of original Jewish music. He writes a weekly column on religion, politics and culture in the American Spectator.

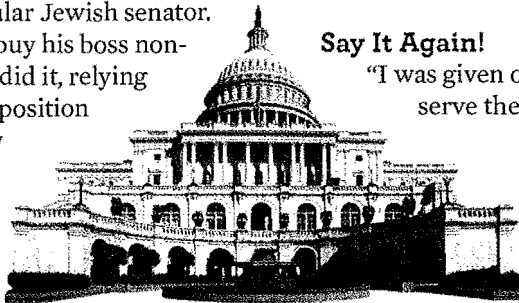
Troy dramatized the advantage of working for devout non-Jews by contrasting this episode with the story of an Orthodox young man who was an aide to a secular Jewish senator. When asked to buy his boss non-kosher food, he did it, relying on the halachic position that he was only facilitating that which could be easily accessed without his

help. But when his boss asked for a sandwich on Passover, the aide had to refuse, since it is prohibited to benefit from *chametz*. The outraged senator terminated his employment.

At the time Troy gave me his card, but somehow our paths never overlapped again until I located him at the Hudson Institute in DC recently. We got a chance to catch up on his adventures these last few years.

Say It Again!

“I was given opportunities to serve the country which has been the most welcoming in history to the Jewish people, and I have been honored



to perform that service," says Troy, who has been employed by Republican senators and presidents for more than a decade. "I was very fortunate in working under superiors who were profoundly committed to religion. They always respected and facilitated my mitzvah observance, making every accommodation."

Ashcroft was his first boss, arguably an easier entry point because Troy became the second Orthodox Jew on staff. Always easier to follow a blazed trail. Ashcroft was not only an Evangelical, he was a member of a fairly small denomination which often experiences derision from among Christian ranks. Troy felt this made Ashcroft more sensitive to the religious needs of the Jews in his office.

Later, Troy had the opportunity to publicly reciprocate the loyalty he had received from his employer. When Ashcroft was nominated to be the first attorney general in the administration of President George W. Bush, he met resistance from secular Jewish groups including the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the National Council of Jewish Women, who were afraid that "his religious views would have an impact on his role as attorney general."

Troy countered with an article in the *New Republic* entitled "My Boss, The Fanatic." He wrote: "Ashcroft, as his detractors suggest, is a religious fanatic, because his religion dictates that he cannot smoke, gamble, drink, curse or dance. But it may be precisely because he is scorned as a fanatic that he has been so tolerant of my own religious practices . . ."

When Ashcroft joined the Bush administration as attorney general, Troy went to work first for Elaine Chao, then the secretary of labor, and subsequently in the White House as President Bush's liaison to the Jewish community. The president told him that he wanted the liaison office to do more than arrange meetings with the same leaders of Jewish organizations whose names are always in the newspapers. Bush wanted to encounter lay people, community people, what he described as "grassroots."

Before one such gathering, Troy briefed the president about an elderly Jewish woman who had spent many years in Orthodox education who would be attending. The president knew not to shake her hand, and he treated her with utmost deference. But when he delivered remarks about the military situation in Afghanistan, he got a little carried away and used a vulgar word to describe the terrorists. Suddenly he caught himself.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am," he said, glancing in her direction.

"Say it again!" she retorted, and the audience burst into laughter.

Chanukah at the White House

With Troy in charge, the White House Chanukah dinner turned into a major event. "Whichever list we had, it was always the wrong list," Troy jests. Rabbis and lay leaders kept calling to wangle invitations for themselves or colleagues. At one point, Karl Rove, chief adviser to President Bush, exclaimed: "The Chanukah dinner is the hottest ticket in Washington!"

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Initially, that dinner followed the pattern of diplomatic events with Israeli heads of state, where the kosher appetizers were on one buffet table and the non-kosher on another. The non-Jewish participants ate the food prepared by White House while the kosher fare was imported from a local caterer. One year, during Bush's first term, an Orthodox guest accidentally ate from the wrong table!

When First Lady Laura Bush got wind of the fiasco, she vowed it never happen again. Henceforth the Chanukah dinner would feature only strictly kosher food prepared on the premises. Soon a team of Chassidic Jews with beards and tzitzit were zapping the White House ovens with blowtorches while the Secret Service fidgeted edgily in the background. This was the Era of Bush: a glatt chicken in every pot and two minivans in every garage.

To make the dinner more hospitable for the devout, Troy instituted a minyan for Maariv in the Red Room. The White House ushers knew to keep the room off-limits to others that night. The only problem with the Jewish crowd, Troy chuckles, was the reluctance to depart. Generally, when events are scheduled, say, from 6:00 to 8:00 P.M., folks start filing to the door before the cuckoo's first caw and clear the threshold by the eighth. Not so our Chanukah revelers; their oil kept burning. The clock struck 8:00, and no one showed a sign of budging.

One year, the ahems were echoing and the hints were dropping, yet nary an eyelash twitched. The last busboy was leaving for the last bus, but the Jews were still heeding Ec-

clerics: "If the spirit of the ruler asserts itself over you, do not leave your place . . ." Exasperated, Chief of Staff Josh Bolten, himself a Jew, exclaimed: "It is time to have the honor guard unsheathe their ceremonial swords!" Troy jumped in to restore the mood by telling the old joke that

address a Jewish group came between speeches by Rove and Bolten. He told the crowd: "Now I know how Minchah feels on Yom Kippur between Mussaf and Neilah . . ."

Troy's four children were born while he worked for Bush, each receiving a personal letter from the president to commemorate the birth. His kids never saw him during waking hours between one Shabbat and the next. He left before they arose and returned after they went to sleep. As for his wife, Kami, Troy declares that were she not Jewish, she would be a candidate for sainthood. The couple lives in Silver Spring, Maryland and belongs to the Kemp Mill Synagogue, an OU-member shul.

In the last year of the second Bush term, Troy served as deputy secretary in the Department of Health and Human Services under Secretary Michael Leavitt.

Soon a team of Chassidic Jews with beards and *tzitzit* were zapping the White House ovens with blowtorches while the Secret Service fidgeted edgily in the background.

Former President George W. Bush meets with Tevi Troy and family in the Oval Office. Pictured are Troy, his wife, Kami, and children: Noah (in Kami's arms), Rina, Ezra, and Ruth (not visible here). Photos courtesy of the White House Photo Office



Gentiles leave but don't say goodbye while Jews say goodbye but don't leave. Rove loved that and adopted it into his repertoire of repartee.

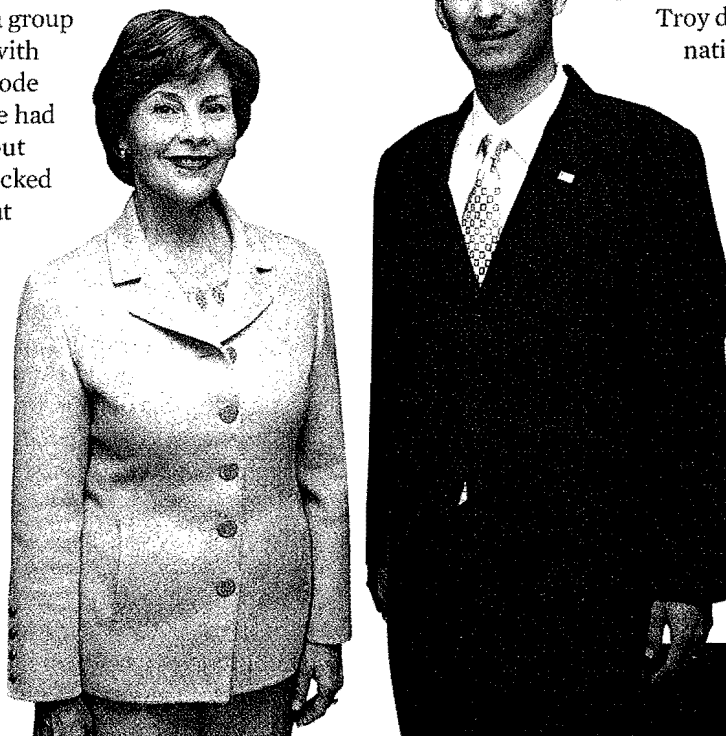
Another incident reflected on the eccentric cultural flavor of the Orthodox Jew. The president often was more efficient with his time than his scheduler anticipated, so visitors were asked to be standing by an hour before their appointed time. Once a group of rabbis were to have a session with the president, but when Bush strode in forty-five minutes early, no one had arrived yet. Troy ran frantically out into the street, where he was shocked to see all the conferees huddled at the corner of Seventeenth and Pennsylvania, earnestly playing Jewish geography.

All in all, says Nathan Diament, director of the OU's Institute for Public Affairs (IPA) in DC, when Troy was working for Bush, "We had a member of our community literally steps from the Oval Office, and we could be certain our concerns were being heard in the White House." Diament captures the *heimish* feel by recalling one occasion when Troy's turn to

There he sent word to all senators that his Friday meetings must end an hour before sundown. At that time, his non-Jewish assistant would hustle him out the door. While he raced home in the car, official business was being transacted on his cell phone until he pulled up at the garage door.

Troy did not head back to his native Queens, New York, after Michelle Obama hung the new drapes. He stayed in Washington at the Hudson Institute, doing whatever it is people do in think tanks during the lean years. Does that mean that if a Republican sends Obama to an early shower in 2012, Troy is ready to return to active duty?

Hey, is the chief rabbi Jewish? ■



Tevi Troy and Former First Lady Laura Bush