


Who Speaks for the Jews?

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Who gains and who loses in the era of the instant askan? Four experts offer their assessments and their recommendations for fixing the problems



The equation for askanus used to be simple — activists were appointed by the community to represent their views, advocate for their interests, and be their voice. The powers that be, in turn, knew whom they were dealing with.

Now those simple arrangements have frayed, boundaries have become blurred, and unified interests have given way to competing objectives, with self-appointed community spokesmen working at cross purposes. That chaos has been exacerbated by social media. Adversaries outside the community have recognized the discord and seek to exploit it.

A panel of four experts offer their assessments of the environment and their recommendations for fixing the problems

David G. Greenfield

is the CEO of the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty. He served on the New York City Council from 2010 to 2017, and is the founding director and counsel of Teach NYS, a nonprofit advocating for private schools in New York state.

Rabbi Moshe Aron Hoffman

is a spokesman for Mosdos Satmar, under the leadership of Rebbe Aharon Teitelbaum, and is a veteran liaison to the Hungarian government.

Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender

is the founder and president of Achiezer, a nonprofit organization started in 2008 that provides both community-wide and individualized services ranging from medical, financial, and emotional support to disaster relief.

Rabbi Yitz Frank

is the executive director of Agudath Israel of Ohio. He lives in the Cleveland area and serves on numerous community and institutional boards.

It was an all-time low.

Last month, a hachnassas sefer Torah ceremony — the most beautiful of events — turned ugly. A veteran askan, the usual liaison, turned to the police for help, as he so often had, asking them to close off a few roads for the procession. But the police, still unsure about COVID protocols, refused and made a counter-offer for a smaller ceremony.

The askan explained some of the sensitivities involved and asked them to reconsider. After all, they knew him. He'd come around to their holiday parties over the years and brought them large trays of latkes. He'd arranged communal sreifas chometz, and, after a horrible anti-Semitic attack in a neighboring community, he'd accompanied the police chief to a meeting with rabbanim.

He was the guy, right?

But then things got confusing.

The next day, a few men came into the local police station to tell the receptionist that in fact, Mr. Ploni did not represent the Orthodox community, not at all.

Someone found the email address for the precinct, and waves of messages came in making it clear that the liaison had never been appointed, anointed, or even asked to help.

The well-meaning receptionist passed these messages on to the officer in charge of public relations, who forced the liaison to insist that no, he really was the guy, he'd always been the guy, this was a misunderstanding.

It was, perhaps, but it also wasn't.

It was bound to happen, especially since, as in New York right now, there are different candidates earning equally passionate support from leaders of different Jewish groups — bound by need and worry, but not by shared approach.

And if there's confusion in our own camp, how is it viewed by the elected officials, police departments, and hospital administrators sitting across the table?

Two weeks ago, Yossi Gestetner of OJPAC (Orthodox Jewish Political Action Council), hosted an appreciation event. It was attended by the A-list of frum askanim, liaisons, elected officials, and public activists, the room a buzz of back-slapping, happy selfies, and animated conversation.

I waited patiently in line at the buffet, and, doing that awkward thing where you're carrying two different plates and also a glass of soda, I took a seat at a random table and promptly ruined the conversation they were having by popping out the question.

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People stopped in mid-bite, and even those seated furthest from me pulled their chairs closer to the table. A community organizer, known for the ease with which he could deliver thousands of votes, a point man sought after by politicians, narrowed his eyes and looked around, to make sure there were no cameras.

Over the next few minutes, the opinions flew.

"It's the era of rugelach politics," someone said. "Any guy ready to invest 20 bucks in a platter of baked goods can take it to the police department and appoint himself liaison. It's anarchy."

Others disagreed with that harsh assessment, but conceded that we are much less effective than we could be: We have squandered the power we hold to wield real influence, and the politicians see that.

"They are laughing," one of my table-mates, an insightful and experienced askan, informs us.

He pushes away the plate of sushi in front of him, as if to indicate his seriousness. "I don't need things to go back to the way they were, but I do wish that every activist would make a cheshbon if what they're doing is really helpful, to see the bigger picture, to speak with others."

This gets nods from all around the table.

We have a consensus about something.

The conversation that follows is an attempt to continue that discussion with some of those blessed with experience and insight in the public arena: Rabbi Moshe Aron Hoffman of Satmar, David Greenfield of the Met Council, Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender of Achiezer, and Rabbi Yitz Frank of Agudath Israel in Ohio.

It seems like it's harder to isolate a single voice for Orthodox Jewry, with different groups claiming to represent the wider community, often with different interests. Was it always this way, or have things changed? And if it reflects a change, is there a solution?

Rabbi Hoffman:

It used to be that there were fewer congregations and groups, so the smaller kehillos relied on the wisdom of the larger ones, which had infrastructure in place to deal with the city and state elected officials. They trusted that the decisions being made were in the best interests of the wider community, and not just any one kehillah.

There was a sense that politics was serious business, and a respect for the fact that it takes experience to get all the nuances and know that what seems obvious isn't always the wisest course of action.

Baruch Hashem, the community has grown, but with that growth has come a desire for independence — smaller kehillos, younger people, everyone feels they know what's best, and we're weakening our greatest koach, the power of a united vote.

David Greenfield:

As the frum community has become more diverse, it is understandable that each community wants its own voice. Simply put, there is no single spokesperson for the entire frum community anymore.

Rabbi Bender:

I don't think this is anything new. At least as long as I've been on the scene, there have been so many channels and paths, so many different facets to the community. In recent years, people have found relevance via social media — a single click can lead to thousands of views, so there are even more activist voices than before.

Is there a solution? Yes, of course there is. Less sarcasm, less pessimism, less negativity about how klal life works. Rather than sit and complain, get involved. It's okay that we have different paths if we all have one goal, and we aim to serve Klal Yisrael, not ourselves.

Rabbi Frank

At a local level, there are very effective organizations and askanim that are both knowledgeable of and helpful to their communities, that assist in building coalitions on broader state and federal issues, and, frankly, whom I rely on to help accomplish broader objectives.

But there is no doubt that the more we work together, the more impactful we are. To the extent this is a change, the solution is difficult, but also simply stated. Let's get on the same page and focus on the key issues.

The mixed messages and confusion of the last year have led a very respected rosh yeshivah to remark, “Once, askanim were those who tried to ‘poyel’ by the goyim on behalf of the Yidden. Now, it seems that an askan is one who persuades the Yidden on behalf of the goyim.” What are your thoughts on this comment?

David Greenfield:

Harsh and only somewhat fair. There are two kinds of askanim — those who shill for politicians because they want money or access, and then there are those who genuinely do shtadlanus, regardless of the “politics.” It’s certainly difficult to distinguish between the two — with some obvious exceptions.

Rabbi Frank:

That is an insightful comment, but it does not encompass all of the nuances. The job of an askan is to be a responsible representative of Klal Yisrael. The dynamic cuts both ways. It is critical to express the view of the community. It is also crucial to communicate the opinions of elected officials to the community, even if we don’t agree with those views, and may in fact be advocating changing them.

Rabbi Hoffman:

To be honest, it’s unfortunate, but the politicians know precisely how it works by us, and they’re using this anarchy to their advantage too. The askanim of the last generation worked solely for the community, while today we have “paid askanim,” who appear to endorse the candidate best for the tzibbur, when really there might be personal financial interests involved, and it has nothing to do with the community. In some cases, they are actually paid by the campaigns, so of course this isn’t askanus. And this has led to a general breakdown in trust.

Rabbi Bender:

This is a very strong point. The job of a liaison is to liaise on behalf of his community. It’s not an easy job, and you’re there to deliver. Not to get the photo op. Not to make nice and smile. It’s easy to get lost in the game, and to always want to be on the side of whoever is in power, but that’s wrong.

You don’t represent the police force or hospital, you represent your community. And once you know that, you can work to make sure the police or elected official is being respected and heard in a way that works for both sides. Don’t get too cozy. It’s very easy to slip, so you need a constant gut check to make sure you’re still staying true to the mission.

Does the cause make the askan, or do askanim look for causes? Is a true askan equally passionate about every cause, or is it legitimate to invest more in those that resonate on a personal level?

David Greenfield:

I've always taken the view, based on guidance from daas Torah, that you should work on things you believe in. Otherwise, you won't be good at them. That's why, as CEO of Met Council, I now spend most of my time fighting on behalf of those who are financially struggling in our community. It speaks to me, and, sadly, no one is really focused on the challenges of the neediest in our community.

Rabbi Bender:

My personal opinion is that there is no match for passion, and our greatest activists are those who have come from a place of personal challenge — they went through something, and then became determined to grow and become stronger from it. They decided to champion that issue for others, decided to fix that issue for others, to take what they had learned and build with it. When the cause or organization has grown out of a real life experience, it runs on passion and in my opinion there is no parallel to that.

Rabbi Frank:

The best askanim are passionate for Klal Yisrael and often care about many different issues. As they say, if you need something done, ask a busy person. But nobody can be successful at everything. Responsible leaders know how and when to engage others who may be more effective at addressing a particular issue.

There is a rise of “activists” in the non-Jewish world — people who feel fiery, excited, or agitated about a cause, and feel that they have a duty to be vocal about it, and gather digital support for it (or sometimes, rarely, actual physical support). How is this trend connected, if at all, to the rise of multiple self-appointed askanim speaking their truth (or interests) to power? If anyone can represent himself as a spokesman of the community, how can the “real” spokespeople clarify who is legit?

Rabbi Bender:

I'm not sure what a self-appointed askan is. To me, every activist needs a rebbi, rav, or mentor behind him. That's the only way to have any real credibility. Torah is what gives relevance, and no one person is big enough to decide he's relevant on his own. It's got to come from a place of Torah — a chassidic court, a yeshivah, a shul — and then you get to be their shaliach, if you're fortunate.

Rabbi Frank:

It's a real dynamic, reflective of social media and its impact on journalism. The underlying principles remain: If you're accountable to the klal, you'll be successful. If not, over time, you'll be a joke. No one can sustain success without being responsible and true to their cause.

David Greenfield:

I actually welcome activists. Yes, they're imperfect, but I'd rather thousands of "active" Jews than thousands of lazy ones.

Rabbi Hoffman:

It's a real issue, and the rise of social media has made it possible for anyone to weigh in, and to some degree, have influence. For the authentic, community-minded askan, it's never been harder.

Whom do our askanim report to, if anyone? Who sets priorities? What are the measurables in this area, what constitutes success? What kind of accountability exists and/or should exist?

Rabbi Frank:

Great question. At Agudah it is clearly defined. We set objectives and are accountable to our board, our rabbanim, and the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah. It is my greatest pride that we don't make decisions on our own. Agudah has a network of regional directors, communal leaders around the country, and a highly respected staff of professionals. Making sure you are doing things right, and relying on collective expertise on the front end, is also a form of accountability.

We also receive feedback and suggestions from thousands of people in different communities every year. We always evaluate suggestions and criticism, and do our best to develop the right approach. The feedback and needs of individuals and individual communities are a huge part of our approach and agenda.

Rabbi Bender:

My answer to this question reflects my answer to the last one too. A person needs a rebbi or mentor to keep him grounded and focused. I've certainly made mistakes, but I try to be accountable and consult regularly with my rebbi or my rav, knowing that without them, there will be more mistakes, and with them, far fewer.

Rabbi Hoffman:

Genuine askanim who represent their kehillas report to the roshei kahal, and ultimately, to the rebbe or rosh yeshivah who leads them. Self-serving askanim, who are the opposite, report to themselves and serve their own interests.

David Greenfield:

This is a funny question, because the same could be asked of the major Jewish news media. Regardless, I think it depends. In my case, I was accountable to voters [on the City Council], and now to a board of directors as CEO of the largest tzedakah in America. So it's very clear who my direct boss is.

I think that we're all responsive to rabbanim. We each have our own daas Torah — hopefully. I'm certainly weary of "askanim" who do their own thing and consult with no one. I find they don't work well with the other askanim and tend not to accomplish much beyond boosting their own PR.

How important is public perception and approval of an askan's activities?

David Greenfield:

You need public support around your work to be impactful. Nobody will take you seriously if you are opposing the community and claiming to represent them at the same time. There are some very obvious examples of this in the last few years.

Rabbi Bender:

A rebbi of mine once told me, "The more vocal you are, the more successful you are, the more you accomplish, the faster the bullets will fly." My close friend Charlie Harary once told me that "a speech that everyone loved isn't a good speech" — a successful speech means that people cared, reacted, even disagreed. I don't expect wall-to-wall accolades, but there does need to be basic approval from a large part of the clientele you aim to serve.

Rabbi Frank:

It is very important. We do need public support to accomplish our objectives. And it is critical for politicians to understand the needs and desires of the community. No politician will take action without understanding the will of the people.

This is one of the reasons that it is so important for communities to vote. When a local organization like Achiezer hosts events with elected officials, showing up really matters. Being an active and engaged member of the community and joining an organization like Agudah as a member really does make a difference.

There is a truism that one cannot hold true responsibility for a task unless he also holds authority. Can self-appointed askanim defy that axiom?

David Greenfield:

The only place that self-appointed askanim can be successful is on social media. We have a saying, "Twitter is not real life." It's true. You can be very "important" online and not have real power. Then again, if you combine the power of social media with askanus, that can be very powerful.

During the peak of COVID, when the mayor made unfortunate remarks about the community, I criticized him on Twitter and received an immediate call that I think helped pave the way back to a helpful place for him and the community. That's one of many examples of how relationships and legitimacy matter as much as social media. Together, however, it's a powerful force.

Rabbi Frank:

The short answer is no. Integrity is just as important and effective as authority. In our world, it is unusual to have one without the other.

How do today's askanim juggle between short-term and long-term goals and interests? How broad and far-reaching are their calculations and relationship-building?

Rabbi Frank:

My work at Agudah incorporates a decades-long perspective and short-term objectives. If you don't focus on both, you'll never achieve your goals. Finding strategic partners and building trusted relationships are core components of effective advocacy. It is possible to work with other groups and elected officials on one issue but be diametrically opposed on others.

David Greenfield:

I'm a contrarian in this regard. I spend most of my time on long-term goals. I find that's what is most impactful — making large, long-term changes. After all, we've been fighting about some of the same issues for decades. That should not be the case. I think the constant need for some to be relevant, and speak up on every issue under the sun, takes us off what needs to be a more strategic course for the community's very complex and evolving needs.

Rabbi Hoffman:

The credo of a responsible askan is hakaras hatov, which means that even if our candidate doesn't seem poised to win, we will endorse him or her anyway because of what he or she has done in the past. Politicians ultimately respect a system like that, and even the victor, whom we didn't endorse, won't hold it against us.

The message that the Jewish vote has to be earned rather than bought resonates.

So you can lose an election — a short-term loss — but gain respect in the long term.

Rabbi Bender:

Others are more involved with politicians and policy, but we work with hospitals often, and some situations are pikuach nefesh. In those cases, we're very focused on the moment. Other times we try to see a bigger picture, and make the calculation. Activism is always a juggling act between knowing when to act and when to sit tight.

What kind of alliances should we be building? Are there any politicians or activists out there who should be taboo, when it comes to building bridges? (Marjorie Taylor Greene? AOC?)

David Greenfield:

I would caution those who think it's wise to make friends with politicians who are our genuine enemies. In my experience, those new "friends" make demands that require compromises that may undercut the entire purpose of why you became an askan in the first place.

Rabbi Hoffman:

Heimishe askanim generally stay out of national politics, and are involved more on the city and state level, where we feel the most impact. That's why you'll rarely hear comment from a responsible askan about national politics.

There have been many local politicians who campaigned on a platform against the Jewish community, and even some have even been hostile to any cause relating to the Jewish community. But wise askanim have a responsibility to find common ground with them. Generally, they can understand that ideological differences aren't personal, and we are able to work together for common good. There are many politicians who started out hostile and ended up being very helpful, becoming great friends of the Jewish community.

Rabbi Bender:

Again, those in the political arena likely have a different perspective, but to me, those who work against our community are not our friends. It goes a step further, even — we have politicians who are openly anti-police, and to me, that's not someone I can work with. We do support police because we need them, we rely on them and they are there for us.

I think there should be some lines that are not crossed in that area.

Rabbi Frank:

We must work with all people. And we must always understand the imperatives of our elected officials. Only rarely should someone be universally "blacklisted."

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