

Cholent At A US Political Convention

**Shabbos at CPAC Brings Out the
Warmth in Jewish Conservatives**


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*Zman joined the
CPAC convention to
bring our readers an
exclusive report about
a new Jewish group
that featured very
prominently in this
year's convention.*

- Y. Lefkowitz

Friday night, Parshas Yisro.

A large suite of the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, DC, has been converted into an impromptu *beis medrash*. No less than 60 Jews have gathered here to celebrate *Shabbos*. The chazzan begins *Lechu Neranina* in a somewhat restrained tone while the crowd waits to see how the *Shabbos* atmosphere will develop – if it will develop. After all, it is a totally new experience to celebrate *Shabbos* in such surroundings.

By the time they reach *Lecha Dodi*, however, the restraint vanishes. Everyone has broken out in joyful harmony to the upbeat tune. The strains of the song carry far, drawing plenty of curious guests who share the largest hotel in America's capital district.

These are guests who have gathered from across the country for the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the annual political convention of the nation's conservative movement, and this display of Jewish spirituality is completely unexpected for most of them.

The gathering is in the middle of *Lecha Dodi* when all of a sudden screams and shouts reach them from the street, interrupting their song. A wild and unruly mob marches up the hill to the hotel, carrying placards. Several members of the crowd carry flashlights and direct the mass to the building's main entrance. In an instant the happy *Shabbos* atmosphere completely dissipates.

The demonstrators shout, "Right Wing CPAC—Go Away!"

Not satisfied with letting their voices be heard, the crowd marches into the hotel lobby intending to storm the hotel complex and "occupy" it. They are looking to incite a direct confrontation with the thousands of conservative activists gathered there. A few days before *Shabbos* it was already reported that the "Occupy" movement planned to demonstrate on Friday, the day Republican presidential candidates were scheduled to speak at the convention. Throughout the day the police had been more or less successful

in maintaining order and keeping out the would-be occupiers from the hotel. With the arrival of evening, however, the mob has broken through.

We watch in shock as the angry "occupiers" invade the hotel in such numbers that the police cannot stop them. Fortunately, hotel management has been forewarned that a riot might break out and a contingent of private security guards in riot gear, responding quickly, are able to turn the crowd back. Eventually, massive police reinforcement arrives and within two hours security has regained control of the situation. Nobody is hurt in the incident, but a number of the rioters had to be handcuffed and were driven away in paddy wagons.

Jacob, a young Jewish student, just shrugs his shoulders as he says out loud, half seriously, "I don't understand what they want here. They have their own president in the White House, the man they elected in the belief that he would bring change and hope to America. They should be happy. We should be the ones who are embittered and storming the gates of the Democratic Party headquarters. But just look, wonder of wonders, we gather for a peaceful political gathering and they're the ones who are creating a ruckus. It's an upside-down world."

The First *Shabbos* at a Political Convention

Since at least the 1960s, secular Jews who grew up with little or no knowledge of Judaism typically filled the spiritual vacuum with liberal, left-wing politics. The Jewish people are basically a religious people, Rabbi Berel Wein likes to point out. They always have to have a religion. If they don't have Judaism then they need a substitute. Whether the "religion" is liberalism, socialism, communism, nationalism or the "religion" of atheism, there must be a cause. Otherwise, there is an emptiness that gnaws at the Jewish soul and gives it no rest, says Rabbi Wein.

In pre-war Europe, Jews who broke with



CPAC convention.

Judaism made the most fervent communists or the most ardent nationalists (until Hitler, Jews "out-Germaned the Germans"). In secularized post-war America, the typical Jew did not fill the vacuum with Judaism; instead, he took this gnawing emptiness, found partial meaning in politics, mixed it with at best a truncated understanding of Judaism and projected the best of it onto the liberal agenda. It was not Judaism, but to the secular Jew it was everything Jewish – so much so that to challenge his liberalism was to challenge his Judaism, in his mind.

Nevertheless, today, as that agenda has grown more radical, a new generation of American Jewish youth find themselves questioning their beliefs. Many American colleges and universities, which have long served as hotbeds of liberalism, have in the past few years become increasingly more radical in their liberal views, which have come to include virulent anti-Semitism and Arab-like anti-Israel views. This has pushed a steady stream of assimilated Jewish students to reexamine their Jewish identities, some even returning full force to their long lost religious roots. Often, the



Y. Lefkowitz on the media balcony at the CPAC convention.

first step on the path of that return is a reexamination of one's political beliefs.

If this stream becomes a gushing torrent, one can think back to that *Shabbos* in early February 2012 as a milestone. A *Shabbos* at CPAC? Astonishing! For the first time in American history a political convention hosted a full *Shabbos* for its Jewish participants. This included *tefillos*, Torah reading, *shiurim*, *zemiros* and a full