



**Meet Congressional
Majority Leader Eric Cantor**

The Highest Elected Jew In US History

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No other Jew has reached as high a political office in the history of the United States of America. Congressman Eric Cantor, who represents the 7th Congressional District of Virginia in the US House of Representatives, is not merely the only Jewish Republican in Congress, but a staunch champion of conservative values. After a series of delays, last minute cancellations and fresh appointments, Zman met the House Majority Leader at his Capitol office. We spoke to him about his past career and his hopes and plans for the future.

The US Capitol building, perched on Capitol Hill in Washington DC, is one of the most accessible national legislature buildings anywhere in the world. Of course, security throughout Capitol Hill is high, particularly since the September 11 attacks. Still, many visitors to Washington are surprised at how easy it can be for civilians to reach their elected representatives in Congress.

Capitol Hill is virtually a city in its own right. Aside from the imposing and historic Capitol building—comprising the chambers of the Senate and House, the famous rotunda and other offices—there are another 8 large buildings with auxiliary offices that serve Congress. There is even an extensive underground tunnel for elected officials to reach their destination, either on foot or on special trains.

Civilians are permitted to walk through some of the large complex, literally rubbing shoulders with America's top legislators. It is possible to walk right up to a senator for a friendly chat—or to confront him about a vote he cast that you take issue with. And, if you are lucky, you can record the entire event on camera. (This fact forces congressmen to remain on guard and maintain an easygoing disposition at all times. If they lose their calm

for even a second, the incident may soon be replayed before the entire nation. And that could spell doom for a political career.)

But there are areas of the Capitol building where civilians are restricted entry unless a pre-set audience or special permit has been arranged. To reach House Majority Leader Eric Cantor we first had to go through the standard security procedures, including passing through a metal detector and having our baggage searched. We also needed a special visitor's pass and had to identify ourselves repeatedly to each of the Capitol policemen who stopped us.

This was the culmination of months of effort to obtain an audience with Cantor, including numerous appointments that were delayed at the last minute and eventually cancelled entirely. Obviously, someone in Mr. Cantor's position is going to be busy and subject to the whim of a schedule that is largely decided by outside factors. In the end, though, we succeeded in obtaining the long sought-after appointment through the intervention of the respected activist, Moshe Aryeh Vizel. Considering how much effort we had gone through to reach this point, we certainly weren't going to let security procedures dampen our spirits.



Capitol Hill with its complex of the Capitol and related buildings, the US Supreme Court and the Library of Congress.

Even when we stood outside the door of the majority leader's posh office, his aides offered no promise that we would be ushered inside. Eventually, though, one of Cantor's top aides arrived and apologized that due to an ongoing discussion in the House, Mr. Cantor needed to remain in close proximity to the House chamber. Instead of meeting us in his private office on the third floor of the Capitol building, we were led to another office that he uses, this one right outside the chamber of the House of Representatives.

Now we found ourselves waiting outside his smaller office as the clock ticked away. Every few minutes the congressman's jittery assistant promised us that it wouldn't be much longer. Finally, the majority leader himself appeared, surrounded by an entourage of bodyguards and his closest aides and advisors.

As majority leader of the House, Mr. Cantor plays a virtually unmatched political role in Congress. In the House of Representatives, he is second only to the Speaker of the House. Since the speaker officially acts in a bipartisan capacity—despite his having been elected by the majority party—it is the majority leader that sets the tone for all congressmen of his party in the House. His every word must be carefully weighed, more so than other congressmen.

To avoid the possibility of a reporter extracting a statement from the majority leader that could be used against him or the Republican Party, Cantor is followed by a small staff that includes two press secretaries to advise him as he speaks. When we placed our voice recorder on the desk in front of the majority leader, it soon had company. An aide placed a second recorder right next to ours. Apparently, there were two purposes in mind: to discourage us from putting words into the congressman's mouth and to be able to disprove them if that would be attempted.

In fact, of the many interviews we held over the years, this was by far the most formal. Every word was considered carefully and the congressman's staff members stood over us to make sure there were no



The special subway that carries senators and congressmen from one building on Capitol Hill to another.

surprises. They also made sure that not one minute of the majority leader's time was wasted.

Cantor's Jewish Side

Cantor is hardly your typical Jewish politician. Unlike most Jewish legislators (including the celebrated former Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman or even former Republican Senator Norm Coleman), Cantor grew up in a Republican, conservative-minded family.

Bear in mind, of course, that the average Jewish politician in America has little real Torah knowledge and is incapable of reading a *Chumash* or *Siddur*. For many of them, their religion is liberalism, even in its extreme forms. A good number are critical of the Torah-observant community and its ideals. Some are outright hostile.

Many of Eric Cantor's core values, on the other hand, intersect with traditional Jewish ones and he openly professes a deep respect for the Orthodox lifestyle. Even his opponents know that he practices eating kosher when in Washington—at one meeting with Democratic Minority Leader Steny Hoyer, Hoyer brought Cantor a kosher egg sandwich to enjoy. Similarly, at his home in Richmond, Cantor's mother-in-law maintains strict control of everything that enters his kitchen. When he is home for *Shabbos*, he *davens* at a local Orthodox shul, Knesses Beis Yisrael.