

COVER STORY

IN depth profiles ON THE WHO'S WHO

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Kosher Sex! Kosher Jesus! Kosher *Congress*? Rabbi Shmuley Boteach®

By Aliza Davidovitch

In his tiny Smart car, one can point to Rabbi Shmuley Boteach at 5' 6" and truly say, "Size doesn't matter." As he revs up his mission in life, he sounds like a Hummer and roars like a warrior. *Newsweek* has called him "the most famous rabbi in America" and what others have called him may not be fit for print. But what is most likable about him is that he doesn't care who likes him. He takes on the establishment at a personal price and his forthrightness fuels up his ever-growing bandwagon. To the fanatical religious right, the MIB who alienate Jews and display aggressive religious intolerance, Boteach says: "A black coat will never redeem a dark heart and a long beard is poor compensation for a shriveled soul." And then to Hollywood which wanted to give the famous rabbi a Samson-like makeover to enhance his marketability, Boteach says: "The moment I let TV determine who I am, then I have lost my identity. I'm in this business to impact on the culture, not to have the culture impact on me."

This author of 27 books, radio host and TV personality, defender of Judaism and the Jewish State of Israel straddles two worlds with great delicacy: the secular & the religious.

*"I'm proud to be a religious Jew and show my Jewish identity.
The Pope also wears a skullcap and I don't see it ruining his career."*

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Boteach was Michael Jackson's best friend and an emissary of the great Lubavitcher Rabbi Menachem Schneerson. He debates with Playboy bunnies and agnostics and finds himself in venues some might say aren't fitting for a rabbi. Boteach will have none of that. "Are we going to have Jewish values only in synagogues and in books, or are we going to have them in the lives we live?" he asks those detractors. "Where should culture and young people learn about sex, from Hugh Hefner or from a rabbi?" He answers those questions by how he spends his days, bringing Jewish values to any room he enters. And there are very few rooms he is afraid to go in. As *Ethics of Our Fathers* teaches, the Torah was brought down to the people so that its values should be applied to everyday life here on earth and NOT sequestered under black hats in yeshiva hallways.

"Where should culture and young people learn about sex, from Hugh Hefner or from a rabbi?"

And so Boteach has boldly gone where few rabbis dare to go, and says things most would fear to say. The two *verboten* words in orthodox households which he has deemed "kosher" in his controversial books are sex and Jesus. He discusses sex and erotica openly without ever betraying Jewish values. He sheds light on myths—no, Jews do not have sex through a sheet. (They couldn't even if they wanted to as the KKK has raided their linen closets to make those fancy outfits they wear.) And then there is the name "Jesus," the unmentionable one, because according to Judaism it is prohibited to articulate the name of other gods. But in Boteach's book, he aims to share the Jewishness of Jesus so that a theological bridge can exist between the two disparate faith communities. Echoing Glenn Beck, the rabbi says, "Christian support for Israel should be based not on end-of-days theology or a desire to bring back Christ but on simple, unadulterated love for the Jewish people, just as we Jews must reciprocate with love for our Christian brothers and sisters who stand by the Jewish state through thick and thin."



And though he aims to coalesce two faiths founded on the principle of loving your neighbor as yourself, there are some neighbors who are just not lovable. One such neighbor was Colonel Moammar Gaddafi. As a resident of Englewood, New Jersey, Boteach took his fight to city



hall and to the airwaves to stop Gaddafi from pitching a tent at the Libyan Embassy in his town. Unlike many who sit on what they believe in, Boteach always stands up for it.

And so he has now set his sights way beyond the local city hall to fight for the future of America. His eyes are now cast upon the nation's capital. Boteach, with the campaign slogan "The Values Voice," is running for Congress for New Jersey's ninth district. "America is not experiencing a crisis of leadership so much as a crisis of values," Boteach says.

Can this man make Congress "kosher" too and circumscribe corruption in a House whose approval rating has reached an all-time low of 12 percent this past August?

Boteach's chances of winning were augmented by another Englewood drama that also pitted neighbor against neighbor. Due to redistricting in New Jersey, two Democratic incumbents found themselves challenging each other in a suspenseful primary, Congressman Steven Rothman, a pro-Israel candidate who was backed by President Obama vs. Bill Pascrell, a pro-Palestinian candidate who was backed by President Bill Clinton. Rothman, an eight-term congressman, lost. This November, the rabbi, who is a staunch supporter of the Jewish Homeland and who says **Obama cannot be trusted on Israel**, will now be running against Rep. Pascrell. Pascrell was a signatory to the Gaza-54 letter—a letter to President Obama signed by 54 Democratic congressmen which asked him to pressure Israel into easing its blockade of the Gaza Strip, **a portal through which terrorists often make their way into Israel**.

The letter was the initiative of Congressmen Jim McDermott from Washington and Keith Ellison from Minnesota, the first American Muslim in Congress. Many hope Boteach will be the first rabbi there. One of those supporters is none other than Sheldon Adelson, the billionaire casino tycoon and his wife, Dr. Miriam Adelson, who gave a half a million dollars to a super PAC supporting the rabbi's run.



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If most people in the world were like you, what type of world would we be living in?



I'm very passionate and try to be insightful about human nature. I also try to live a value based life. Most of my actions are guided by love: I love my Jewish identity; I love being Jewish, and I love this country. I love fixing relationships and I love counseling people. The other aspects of me are that I'm impatient and driven, and I wrestle to find meaning in everything. I scrutinize too much. I take things too seriously. Add it all up and that's the kind of world we'd be living in.



What was your biggest challenge in life?



My parents' divorce and not having my father in my life growing up. I'm also very hard on myself and judge myself stringently. So another big challenge was to accept what I deem as my own shortcomings and to forgive myself.



What personal trait do you have that could have worked against your becoming successful?



I like to do lots of things at once, and I'm interested in many different areas. Some people are still trying to figure out who I am. They question whether I am a relationship expert, a rabbi, a social commentator, a TV host or an author? But the unyielding answer is that I am a rabbi and everything I do stems from that and the values of my faith. Rabbis help people in their relationships and with their lives; rabbis try and bring values to life, to culture, even to politics, and to elevate all they come in contact with.



You have lots of chutzpah — is it befitting for a rabbi to possess that trait?



I don't think I have a lot of confidence or chutzpah at all. People who have real confidence you just don't read about. People who seek the spotlight do so out of a sense of brokenness. But those people who do have brokenness and seek the spotlight have to do so for the public good and use it for redemptive purposes. The reason I am so good at counseling and helping people is because I too am not perfect. The great Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, said, "If you see a fault in yourself, try and fix it in the world and it will begin to heal you as well." You don't wait around to be perfect in order to help others. Imperfect people can contribute to the world's perfection.



What title would best capture the story of your life?



"The Blessing in Struggle."



You seem to make a lot of people mad. Are those battles worth it?



I don't seek to be controversial or make people mad. I seek to be me and I seek to be authentic. You have to find your place in this world. It is always worth fighting for what you believe in. Do I believe that there is a kosher side to Jesus that both the Christians and the Jews lost? Yes, I do. So yes, it was worth my while and all the battles that ensued because I believe it. I don't care if people attack my ideas because those are my ideas, but when they start attacking me personally and impugn my integrity simply because they disagree with a book I wrote, that hurts because I believe that reputation matters. It also hurts because I regard myself as an ambassador for my Judaism and as such I am scrupulously cognizant of my actions and behavior. But the truth is, when people attack you personally it really undermines their own values and decency.

ON THE ISSUES:



This congressional aspirant believes that unemployment will not go down while government is suffocating industry with burdensome regulations and crippling tax obligations. "It is not only hurting our economy," Boteach says, "it is hurting our dignity." He is adamant about government getting out of the way and giving small business room to grow and opportunity room to breathe.

He also believes in school vouchers and in empowering parents by giving them the choice as to where to send their children to school.

As a rabbi who counseled thousands of couples, he aims to strengthen the family unit and believes in making family counseling tax deductible. He is as adamant about bringing down the 50% divorce rate just as he is to bring down the unemployment rate and national deficit.

And when he speaks to healthcare and how it is evolving under Obama's administrations, he speaks with firsthand knowledge. "I lived in England for several years and I watched the quality of care decrease under nationalized medicine," he says with great disappointment. "We cannot follow the failed model of other nations by putting our health in the hands of government bureaucrats. If national healthcare is implemented here, the quality of healthcare will go down, and the costs will skyrocket."

And much in line with conservative thinking he'd take an ax to tax. "Americans pay far too much of the money that they earn by the sweat of their brows to government programs that do nothing but make us wards of the state," he strongly feels. "Government disempowers people by taking their hard-earned money and dictating how it should be spent." The situation is especially acute in New Jersey, which is among the highest taxed states in the country.

He also believes in the United States of America's exceptionalism and that Old Glory should still stand as the role model for freedom, democracy and human rights and maintains that strict policies should be enacted to ensure that rogue nations engaging in terrorism, genocide, and tyranny are held accountable. [CLICK TO SUBSCRIBE](#)





Should a rabbi really be debating a Playboy bunny?



I spoke to a Jewish woman who put her bat mitzvah pictures in *Playboy* and took off her clothes for money. I seek to address values in the real world. I don't see the point of only preaching and teaching the converted. There is a whole big world out there that is mired in moral decay and it is them I seek to reach. For example, I loved and cared about Michael Jackson and tried to save his life. I was careful not to be seduced by that life and I criticized his extravagant behaviors. Every human being has dignity and value, and it is our job to help others uphold that value and to caution them about placing their dignity in deficit. It's a free country, people can do what they please, but sometimes words of wisdom can really save them.



Our world seems very polarized today. Why do you think that is?



In Jewish teaching we learn that such polarization has always existed and is necessary. Maimonides said people are natural extremists; the first Lubavitcher Rebbe said that a bird needs two wings to fly, and those wings can't be on the same side of the body or the bird would just flop around. The reason we are so torn today is because we don't realize how we need the other side to be who we are. I can only be who I am because there is another side that creates equilibrium. If there wasn't the Left in Israel, I'd have to step up and question if everyone's rights are being met (which I do believe they are). In America, the same is true. I want to bring more respectful discourse into politics; we can disagree without being disagreeable. Like a bird, or a plane, this country needs two wings to fly, and if we continue trying to clip each other's wings, we are headed for a crash landing. *(And as the rabbi talks about the wings, we realize that a big beautiful butterfly has entered his office and is gracefully eavesdropping on the interview. The rabbi said it has never happened before.)*



If you could ask President Obama one question, what would you ask him?



Why don't you hate evil? Why do you think you can change evil people who slaughter innocents?



What recent news headline has shocked you most?



When it comes to people's foibles and personal failures, I'm never shocked; people are fallible. But what really shocked me most was when President Obama, in his only major address on the Arab Spring, had the opportunity to focus on the movement and encourage all Arabs to demand their freedom. **Instead, he decided to attach Israel and the 1967 lines** to the issue. It really shocked me because here is the President of the United States seeing the greatest lust for freedom since WWII—Arabs having been under dictatorships for more than 50 years—and he couldn't even promote it without diluting it by bringing up the 1967 borders.

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When asked what most people would be surprised to know about him, Rabbi Boteach said that he is short. However, after an intense interview and following his career for almost two decades, I can comfortably end this article with a preposition and say that he is what giants are made of!

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