

The Valleys

Elephant in the Valley

Republican candidates move back toward tradition

By Wendy J. Madnick

Used to be that every once in a blue moon, a rare Republican, who happened to be Jewish, would decide to run for office in the heavily Democratic San Fernando Valley, only to be soundly defeated at the polls.

This year, Jewish Republicans hope to change all that with three candidates: Robert M. Levy, who is running against Congressman Brad Sherman (D-Sherman Oaks); Connie Friedman, who is up against Jewish Democrat Lloyd Levine for former Assemblyman Robert Hertzberg's old seat in the 40th District, which covers most of the San Fernando Valley, and **newcomer Michael J. Wissot, who will compete against Assemblywoman Fran Pavley in the 41st District, which is located partially in Ventura County.**

Pavley originally won the seat in 2000 in a race against another Jewish Republican, Jayne Shapiro. What was interesting about Shapiro was that she was progressive on social issues and once said she would be a Democrat, but for the fact that she was a fiscal conservative. The new crop of Republicans is decidedly more traditional in their outlook, citing the interference of big government in people's personal lives as the main reason behind their party affiliation.

"I believe where government is small and doesn't interfere with people, then people are more free to practice their religion as they see fit," said Levy, 49, an attorney in private practice in West Hills. "As a Jew, it is important for me to see to it that I have the freedom to practice my religion as I want, without undue government interference."

Friedman, 60, a consultant who runs a human resources outsourcing business, voiced similar views.

"If you look at the values of Judaism and those of the Republican Party, they are very much in line," she said. "Republicans are very devoted to family issues; they think people should take personal responsibility for their actions, which is also a part of Judaism."

Friedman said she believes that more Jews would be Republican if there was more emphasis on concrete areas of government and less on controversial topics such as abortion and gay rights.

"I don't think choosing to be a Democrat or a Republican should be based on social issues," she said. "Whether someone has an abortion or is in a homosexual relationship is a personal issue. To me, the issues that should be political are the economy, education and the things that make up our state's infrastructure, like roads and electricity. If everyone can choose to have an abortion

but our roads are bad and our educational system sucks, what difference will it make? Social issues should be personal, not political."

Levy attributes the continuing association of the vast majority of American Jews with the Democratic Party as a leftover tradition steeped in the patriotic fervor of World War II.

"It was a good idea to vote for Franklin Roosevelt, but Franklin Roosevelt isn't around anymore," he joked. "The needs of America are different now, and I think most of the feelings and values of the Jewish people can be found, oddly enough, in both parties. Nowadays whether people are registered Republican or Democrat, they vote for the people, not the party."

He said one significant reason he has been a longtime member of the Republican Party is its ongoing support for Israel.

"The various Republican presidents and the Republican leadership have been much more friendly to the cause of Israel and to the need for Israel to exist than has the Democrat leadership," said Levy. "As disgraced as a president he was, Richard Nixon helped save the state of Israel during the latter part of his presidency by supporting Golda Meir. And look at President Bush and what he is doing for Israel. President Bush basically believes Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority are terrorists and that Israel has the right to retaliate against terrorism."

For Wissot, 27, creator and managing general partner of dentistry.com, an online referral service for dentists nationwide, choosing the Republican Party was a natural outgrowth of what he was taught at his family's shul, Temple Adat Elohim in Thousand Oaks.

"I grew up understanding the Torah as talking about being grateful but never being satisfied," he said. "That was something that had a profound effect on me throughout my Jewish education, and I strived to always be grateful for having a wonderful family and all these opportunities around me, but not to be satisfied with the status quo, to find ways to give back to the community. What I found in the Republican Party is that we should be thankful for where we have arrived, but we should not forget the future, we should not forget about giving back and tikkun olam. This is the party that is preparing for the future."

Although skepticism remains alive and a Republican's chance of winning a Valley seat are slim, supporters contend there's never been a better time to run.

"Until recently, Jewish Republicans were not taken very seriously," said Richard Sherman, a clinical psychologist who serves on the endorsements committee for the Republican Jewish Coalition in Los Angeles (RJCLA). "But there's a reason why our organization has grown so quickly. To me, Jewish Republicans are more tolerant and more open-minded than Jewish Democrats. You come to our meetings and we're talking about issues and questioning things. The Jewish Democrats are rank and file; they don't even think, they just follow."

The RJCLA has endorsed Levy, Wissot and Friedman, who serves on the organization's national governing board, as well as that of RJCLA.

"I really admire these people for having the courage to run," Sherman said. "The Valley used to be seen as Democrat, but I don't know if it's so Democrat-leaning anymore. A lot can happen between now and November. I'm struck by the idea that even a few months ago, people talking about the Valley becoming a separate city said there was no way it could happen, but now it is looking like more of a reality. So you never know."