Every few weeks or so Rabbi Daniel Lapin finds a reason to fly east from his home in Mercer Island, Wash., near Seattle, and spend a few days here. He might be leading a Bible study on the Hill, having dinner with his "close friend" House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, breakfast with Karl Rove. Last year he came for a private Shabbat dinner with President Bush. "The president
recognizes my enthusiasm for his faith," says the rabbi.

Usually on these trips Lapin stays with Jack Abramoff, a lobbyist who is an old friend of the Lapin family and one of a small elite who share Lapin's very particular niche in Washington: a practicing Orthodox Jew who is a renegade among the city's Jewish establishment but moves comfortably among conservative Christians.

Abramoff is under investigation for allegedly defrauding his Indian casino-owning clients and for allegedly breaking lobbying laws. In a stack of e-mails released this week by the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, several scandal sidekicks made unexpected cameos. Among them were Daniel Lapin and his younger brother David, rabbis from South Africa who are heirs to a 200-year-old rabbinical dynasty and very updated ambitions.

Washington has a long history of pastors to the powerful, fallen and otherwise: Billy Graham, Jesse Jackson, Bill Clinton's J. Philip Wogaman. With a city increasingly dominated by the religious conservatives who appreciate Lapin, he can now be described as Republican Washington's Official Rabbi, and to some it's an improvement.
"When you're talking to a pastor he could be inspired by God, etc., but he may not have the scholarship," says Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (Calif.), one of several Republicans who refer to Lapin affectionately as "my rabbi." "When you're talking to Rabbi Lapin you know you're getting an expert, someone who's the equivalent of a PhD at a major university."

Lapin is in many ways an evangelical Christian's stereotype of a rabbi: He wears a rabbi's beard, from ear to ear, but trims it to a dignified length. He speaks in a posh South African accent, which adds to his authority. In his speeches and on his radio show he takes the Torah at its word and quotes extensively from it.

For evangelicals who are used to reading about Jews as God's chosen people, he solves an essential mystery: "A lot of people are surprised when they leave church and encounter essentially Dershowitz Judaism, Jews who are liberal . . .," says conservative activist Grover Norquist, who is also a friend. "Lapin is the opposite of that."

For conservatives searching for biblical foundations for their political positions, Lapin is validation from the original source. His specialty is finding support in the Torah for what turns out to be the current Republican platform: lower taxes, decreased regulation, pro-traditional family policies.

"The principles of the Republican Party and the convictions of our president more closely parallel the moral vision of the God of Abraham than those of anyone else," Lapin said at the dinner with Bush, hosted by Ralph Reed.

Lately he's joined the crusade against what conservatives call "activist judges": "It's like the verse in Jeremiah where God says, I will be your king and I will be your lawgiver and I will be your judge. Therein lies the core. The founders enshrined three branches of government . . . and I find unusual this seizure of power by judges that rightly belongs to the people."

Daniel Lapin is standing over by the drinks table in an upstairs room of the Manhattan Jewish Center on the Upper West Side. This is a Jewish singles event ("Cool Crowd, Great Food"), and all around him bankers, lawyers and doctors in their thirties are sitting at little round tables, chatting and drinking Miller Lite and Canada Dry. One of Lapin's seven children, 22-year-old Rena, organized the event, and she is buzzing around, too, smiling, greeting her friends, bringing out trays of fresh sushi.

Lapin is known as a fluid, captivating speaker -- he's coached members of Congress in speaking -- and right now he looks like he's in a trance, summoning energy to address the crowd of about 50. He wears a navy suit instead of the black suit and black felt hat favored by some Orthodox rabbis because "you don't have to watch a lot of John Wayne movies to know the good guys don't wear black hats."

Lapin's subject this day is "Jewish guilt": more specifically, "Why the Torah discourages guilt about sex and money," and much of it is drawn from one of his books. It may sound "anti-Semitic," he says, but there must be a reason why Jews are disproportionately represented on the Forbes 400 list, and he concludes that the best explanation is that "Jewish success is embedded in the Torah system. We don't believe it to be an evil process."
"Does God want people to be rich?" he asks. "Yes!" he says, and explains how God "wants us to be obsessively preoccupied by one another's needs," a habit that the commerce relationship fosters. "Wealth is a consequence of doing the right thing," he says, "and this is one of the secrets of Jewish success."

This is one of those moments in history when "Washington for Sale" is an overused headline. In addition to the Senate investigation, Abramoff is also under investigation by the Justice Department for charging lavish golfing trips for DeLay on his credit card. (It is illegal for a lobbyist to pay for a lawmaker's travel.) Several members of Congress are under investigation for illegally accepting perks from corporations they oversee. Greed for money and power are the sins of the moment in Washington, and the people under suspicion are many of Lapin's close political friends: Abramoff, DeLay, Reed and, distantly, Norquist. But Lapin dismisses it all as an accounting error.

"You can't just make money and then as an afterthought think of ethics as a cost item, something that cuts back profits," he says after his speech. "The right way is the best way."

Lapin's first taste of ministering to the powerful came in Venice Beach in the '80s, when, newly arrived from South Africa, he ran the Pacific Jewish Center with conservative radio host and movie critic Michael Medved. The center was a curious place; it was housed in a synagogue on the boardwalk that had lapsed in membership. Lapin and Medved targeted young Jewish strays, people looking to rediscover their roots. Young people would roller-skate in, and Lapin would invite them over for Shabbat dinner; eventually some Hollywood stars discovered the charismatic Lapin.

Dustin Hoffman and Richard Dreyfuss came. Elliott Gould was a regular, and the shul held a fundraising banquet in his honor, with Pia Zadora and Burgess Meredith and all of his friends, recalls Meyer Denn, a synagogue leader. Lapin wound up tutoring Barbra Streisand's son for his bar mitzvah and consulting on "Yentl," her movie about an Orthodox Jewish girl. At some point Armand Hammer joined, and when he was 85, the shul offered to hold a banquet in his honor, which they billed as his bar mitzvah. He died the night before the planned banquet, so they changed it into a celebration of his life.

Around 1990, Abramoff flew in to meet Lapin and Medved. Abramoff had been living in South Africa filming his B-list Cold War thriller "Red Scorpion," starring Dolph Lundgren. A convert to Orthodox Judaism, Abramoff had bought a house next door to the Lapins to attend younger brother David Lapin's Torah study center. Abramoff wanted publicity for his movie, so David Lapin suggested he look up his brother and Medved, Orthodox Jews who knew Hollywood types.

David and Abramoff are spiritually closer. "My brother was very influential in Jack's odyssey of practicing Judaism," says Daniel. Abramoff and Daniel, on the other hand, were a much more natural match. Daniel was then only dabbling in politics -- he'd preached in favor of Ronald Reagan. But in a few years he and Abramoff would move in the same direction as practicing Orthodox Jews who found a home among conservative Christians in Washington.

Some Jews are prominent neoconservatives -- Paul Wolfowitz, Bill Kristol -- but their relationship with the evangelical wing of the Republican Party is somewhat rocky and often distant. Orthodox Jews are socially conservative but until recently have shied away from participating much in American politics.
That left Abramoff and Lapin to fill the vacuum. Neither fit in well with the Jewish establishment. For instance, Abramoff didn't like any of the Jewish schools in the Washington area, so he started his own. Lapin developed a habit of defending the Christian Coalition at the expense of more liberal Jewish leaders. They became close enough that Abramoff credits Lapin with introducing him to DeLay, the relationship that became Abramoff's most valuable and is now at the center of the lobbying scandal.

When Abramoff was nervous about being accepted to the tony old Cosmos Club in Washington, he turned to Lapin for help. Would it be possible, Abramoff asked in an e-mail released by Senate investigators this week, for Abramoff to claim that he'd received an award from Lapin's group, Toward Tradition, something like "Scholar of Talmudic Studies," he suggests, or "Distinguished Biblical Scholar Award."

"Yes," Lapin answered, "I just need to know what needs to be produced. . . letters? Plaques? Neither?" And then they signed off in the traditional Jewish greeting -- "Good Shabbos."

"From my side it was tongue-in-cheek," Lapin says, adding that he never produced the award.

Lapin became popular in conservative Christian circles in 1999, after he published "America's Real War," a polemic along the lines of Pat Buchanan's famous culture wars speech at the 1992 Republican convention.

"We are really two separate nations," he writes, one side supporting and the other opposing "Judeo-Christian morality playing a role in American public life." He then took on every issue dear to the Christian right -- atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair, pornographer Larry Flynt, the gay rights movement -- and added liberal Jews as a target.

To Lapin, the great constitutional debates about religion in public life are beneath consideration.

"I've always thought it was a quaint notion, the separation of religion and politics," he says, echoing a main point of his book. "It's preposterous. Politics is nothing other than the practical application of your most deeply held moral and spiritual values."

Lapin was invited by some senators to teach Bible classes on the Hill. He gave sessions to members of Congress explaining the biblical roots of conservative policies. In one session on "Joseph and Taxation," he explained that in ancient societies taxes never rose above 20 percent.

"They were fascinated by that," he recalls, "to learn that this was not an accident, that the tax rate was designed by the great architect in the sky."

Lapin became a keynote speaker at conferences for the Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council.

"It was phenomenal," recalls Eli Piepsz, who traveled with him at the time. "The crowds loved him. People would come up and say, 'It's amazing to finally meet someone of the original faith who is true to his faith.' "

"The '700 Club' is one of my big all-time favorites," Lapin said in beginning an interview last year with Pat Robertson, and then proceeded to call other prominent Jewish leaders, particularly Abraham Foxman of the...
Anti-Defamation League, "breathtakingly arrogant" for calling Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" anti-Semitic.

Lapin took that spat one step further in an essay that ran in the Orthodox paper the Jewish Press in January. He complained that Jewish leaders criticized Gibson but ignored Jews such as Howard Stern and the producers of "Meet the Fockers" who were "debasing the culture." He then quoted a section of "Mein Kampf" in which Hitler denounces the "horrible trash" produced by Jewish entertainers in Weimar Germany. Hitler was an "evil megalomaniac," Lapin writes, but what he was saying was "obvious and inescapable."

"With all due respect, the good people don't know the difference between one rabbi and another," Foxman says about the Christian leaders. "They see a beard and they know he's super-kosher, so they think he's mainstream Jewry. But he's so conservative he's off the wall. He's on the fringes of the Jewish community."

Younger brother David stayed out of politics but not away from his connections with Abramoff.

In the '90s David Lapin moved from Johannesburg to Los Angeles to start Strategic Business Ethics, a management consulting company that bills him as the guru able to reconcile "clashing worlds: ancient Kabbalistic wisdom and modern business solutions." Early on Abramoff gave him a lot of financial support. He put David Lapin on the payroll of the Capital Athletic Fund, which he had set up ostensibly to teach leadership skills through sports to city youth. Abramoff is accused of using the money for his pet causes. In the e-mails, he suggests finding a way to "utilize" Lapin to "research their mission (sportsmanship)."

Abramoff also gave him a no-bid $1.2 million contract to work in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Abramoff was the Marianas' lobbyist charged with preventing the U.S. government from regulating labor and immigration laws in the territory after some members of Congress considered it a haven for sweatshops and proposed laws to improve conditions.

David Lapin says he drafted legislation that would overhaul local labor laws and make federal regulation unnecessary; he also held workshops with the Department of Labor to institute a "standard of ethics. It was an enormous process," he says, that took 19 months.

But Pam Brown, then attorney general for the Marianas, does not recall the ethics briefings. She says that Lapin billed the government for long stays in his suite at a lavish hotel but that her staff actually drafted the legislation and briefed Lapin on it. "The bill never passed and the law in question remains substantially unchanged," she wrote in an e-mail.

Two years ago, Abramoff persuaded David Lapin to help him open a new Jewish school in Maryland, the Eshkol Academy. Abramoff was unhappy with the local yeshivas and wanted to start a new one for his own children. He made Lapin the dean because they shared an "educational philosophy," says Lapin. He was paid $20,000 a month, according to the e-mails, again through the Capital Athletic Fund.

But he was there only about once a month and never moved to the area, recalls Robert Whitehill, a Hebrew teacher who is suing Abramoff for three months' pay. "He would come for a day and pontificate about something and leave. He was an absentee dean." The school closed after about two years.
After he left Venice Beach, Daniel Lapin moved to Seattle -- "yachting is my religion, Judaism is my life," he says. From there he founded Toward Tradition, a group "working to advance our nation toward the traditional Judeo-Christian values." Abramoff is on the board, gave $10,000 to the group and helps deliver senators to its conferences, says Medved, who lives near Lapin in Seattle.

In an earlier set of e-mails, Abramoff calls his Indian clients "morons" and "monkeys." For that, Daniel Lapin found the language to criticize his old friend, calling his insults "horrible, awful." But he stops short of saying what Medved does, that as an Orthodox Jew Abramoff "disgraced the Torah." Instead, he edges more toward pastoral forgiveness.

"Abramoff created an extremely effective ideological machine, and I think that bothered many people on the moderate side," says Lapin. "Nobody claims Abramoff did anything different than anyone else. He's a friend of mine and I've seen him do many, many wonderful and decent things. My argument is that a human being is a very complicated amalgam. We've all done things we're not proud of."

Then he said of Abramoff the same thing he's said about DeLay, and some of his other friends, in what must be his favorite metaphor:

"I think the world of him," he said. "He's not a choirboy. But I wouldn't want to have beer with a choirboy."

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