

New York City Council Members Attend Agudath Israel Roundtable Conference

SHIMMY BLUM

The day began early at Agudath Israel of America's headquarters in Lower Manhattan, with an onsite Shachris *minyan* attended by key members of the organization's leadership and activist base. By 8:00, the seats at the long rectangular table in the main conference room were filled with dozens of activists, educators and other attendees - eager to engage members of the New York City Council about issues of concern to the grassroots of the Big Apple's diverse Orthodox communities.

As the morning progressed, City Council members came in one by one, and took seats amidst the crowd. By the time the discussion was well underway, a diverse group of Council members were active participants: Chaim Deutsch (Midwood); Inez Dickens (Harlem); Ben Kallos (Upper East Side); Rory Lancman (Queens); Brad Lander (Park Slope/BP); Stephen Levin (Williamsburg); Mark Levine (Upper Manhattan); Carlos Menchaca (Sunset Park/BP); Ydannis Rodriguez (Washington Heights); Helen Rosenthal (Upper West Side); and Mark Weprin (Queens).

Crossing geographic and ethnic boundaries, over 20% of the Council sat patiently and listened intently to the issues raised by those seated near them. More than pleasantries and platitudes, the Council members engaged fellow roundtable members in intense, detailed discussion of the issues - many of them asked follow up questions and diligently took notes throughout. At times, the environment at the event arranged by Ezra Friedlander, CEO of The Friedlander Group, seemed more like a committee hearing in the Council chamber several blocks down.

"One day, in the not so distant future, we will *iy"H* be able to say that the seeds for important accomplishments were planted here this morning," remarked Agudath Israel's executive vice president, Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, as he surveyed the scene.

Hearing the Voices

Working in a city as large, diverse and complex as New York, it can be easy for elected officials to view the workings of the government through the lenses of politics and the letter of the law. The conference afforded those affected by laws and bureaucracy to present a human voice and live face to the officials with influence over the policies.

Rabbi Shmuel Lefkowitz, Agudath Israel's vice president for community services, introduced the agenda related to special-education as one that entails no additional cost to city government - "I'm all for it," quipped Councilman Lancman - and contended that parents of Orthodox children in need of special education services are being "harassed and oppressed" by government bureaucracy.

Mrs. Leah Steinberg, Agudath Israel's director of special education affairs; Richard Altabe, headmaster of Yeshiva Shaare Torah and chairman of Agudath Israel's special education advisory board; and Mrs. Rivka Moseson, parent of a 20 year old son with special education needs, detailed the myriad complications that parents face on a steady basis. They include



the need for parents who do not find a public school program suitable for their child to apply anew each year for approval to participate in a suitable nonpublic school program. The process for approval is lengthy, painful and costly. City government employs approximately 30 attorneys specifically tasked with fighting these redundant cases, money that could be much better spent on the costs of educating these children.

"I'd need to call the Board of Education weekly, begging and pleading for services they had already deemed necessary," said Mrs. Moseson. "The employees are under such stress; they know everything they approve will be taken apart."

Balancing the Checkbook

The difficulties that Orthodox breadwinners face when it comes to supporting their large families and paying tuition in a famously costly city were brought to life as well. Shimshon Sheinfil, a *yungerman* in full *chassidish* garb, stood up to relate his personal journey from *kollel yungerman* struggling to meet his growing family's rising expenses to his current career. Mr. Sheinfil - a graduate of Agudath Israel's Cope Institute - is currently an accountant for HASC, on track to pass the intense CPA exams and receive a Bachelor's degree in business with a concentration in accounting. Leon Goldenberg and Rabbi Daniel Baumann, chairman and director of Cope Education Services, respectively, expounded upon the necessity for the government to support community based, culturally sensitive career and job training programs for those who would not attend conventional university programs. Mr. Goldenberg noted Cope's placement rate of over 90%, and the fact that many of its graduates proceed to earn comfortable six digit salaries. "I'm a practicing accountant and this is an investment that can't be beat," said Rabbi Baumann.

Agudath Israel's assistant controller David Thaler then introduced himself as another successful Cope alumnus, and spoke about how Agudath Israel's in-demand "English as a Second Language" classes helps immigrants of all backgrounds learn

to read and write English - and improve their future earning potential.

Rabbi Lefkowitz and Rabbi Yeruchim Silber of the Boro Park Jewish Community Council noted the difficulties that nonpublic schools have in attaining government funding for capital investment in education. Isaac Sofer, government relations representative for Educational In-

Councilman Lander, a staunch ally of Mayor Bill de Blasio and one of the Council's most influential members, called the discussion "a beautiful start" and assured attendees that "there is a lot of understanding...a lot of friends" in the Council.

Mr. Lander particularly expounded upon the affordable housing issue and the need for the Orthodox community and its real estate developers to figure prominently in the Mayor's plan to secure 200,000 affordable housing units in the city. "This is the last generation of Council members that will need to work to make Culver El a reality," he vowed, refer-

ring to the ambitious Boro Park affordable housing project of the Southern Brooklyn Community Organization (SBCO), a division of Agudath Israel.

Each council member then delivered their own remarks, discussing everything from personal background, relationship with area Jewish communities and their priorities regarding the crucial agenda points that were raised.

Mr. Chaskel Bennett, a member of Agudath Israel's board of trustees, chaired the discussion. He observed how the vividness and open communication at the conference bridged the disparate cultures and ideologies of the Council members, and enabled them to appreciate that the needs of the Orthodox community mesh seamlessly with what they believe is needed by all of New York's diverse citizens.

Councilman Deutsch, chairman of the newly created subcommittee on nonpublic school education, echoed those sentiments. "We can all be on different committees, but when it comes to education, we are all on the same committee."

Or, in the words of Councilman Menchaca, the chamber's first Mexican-American: "The progressive agenda is your agenda...so much of what I learn about the energy and vibrancy in the city is faith based, and I look forward to working with the people in this room."

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