

Bukharian Jewish Congress Lunches on Capitol Hill

By Chava Rivka Yelloz

Two hundred and seventeen years ago, George Washington wrote these words to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island: ... "May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the Father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us

all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy."

On Wednesday morning, October 18th, Avraham Nektalov, who founded Shaarei Rachamim Bukharian Sephardic Congregation of Los Angeles, together with his fellow members of the Bukharian Jewish Congress of the United States from New York, presided over by his uncle, Boris Kandov and Rabbi Itzhak Yehoshua, Chief Rabbi of the Bukharian Jews of America, arrived at the United

States Capitol in Washington, D.C. He came to attend a formal luncheon celebration honoring the Bukharian Congress's Worldwide president, philanthropist Lev Leviev, that was held in the U.S. Capitol's elegant Mansfield Room.

Since the first American president's declaration to the Jewish people, generations upon generation of immigrants have landed on American shores to share its prosperity, and to enjoy its liberty and religious freedom. Mr. Nektalov described how his once isolated brethren, whose roots go back to *anshei Bavel*, and who traveled the Silk Road to Central Asia, lived under Islamic rule and then were governed by the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. During this long journey, these Jews held on to their precious Torah and rich traditions, which are very distinctive among the Jewish people. Now, more than 75,000 Bukharian Jews are deeply rooted in these United States — and can be counted as exemplary citizens and Jewish American role models. It is precisely for this reason that they were seated for lunch on Capitol Hill, enjoying a glatt kosher catered lunch and being bestowed with 'Chazak U'Baruchs' and *Mazel Tovs* from Senators, Congressmen and Ambassadors.

This historic occasion began with event coordinator Ezra

Friedlander at the podium, inviting Senior Senator Arlen Specter (Republican of Pennsylvania) to give the opening remarks. Mr. Specter told the assembled audience that the Mansfield Room had hosted Presidents Reagan, Clinton and Bush, and now was hosting the Bukharian Jews. He told the attendees of his family's immigration to the United States from the Ukraine and Russia prior to World War I, and of their eventual settlement in Kansas, where he was born.

Once the gathering was underway, Chief Bukharian Rabbi Yehoshua gave an awe-inspiring invocation, noting the fact that 3,745 years ago, Avraham Avinu set forth on a journey — a campaign to bring to the world kindness, mercy and charity — *chessed*; this is the primary reason for the founding of the Bukharian Jewish Congress.

Following the Rabbi, Senior Senator Wayne Allard (Republican of Colorado) offered his greetings. Next on the agenda was Senator Ron Wyden (Democrat of Oregon), who was proud to announce that the Senate now houses a "*minyan plus one*." Senator Wyden shared the fact that his parents were Holocaust survivors. Since he belonged to the first generation that was raised in the United States, he could attest to the fact that America has a tradition of

actualizing opportunities that were merely dreams to his parents and grandparents.

Arkansas' Junior Senator Mark Pryor (Democrat) was the next to speak. He declared that "Jews play a central role in G-d's plan for human history." Afterwards, a Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to Ilya Aronov, in absentia, and was received by his son Robert. Mr. Aronov was not able to attend due to health issues. His son thanked President Boris Kandov, Lev Leviev, Rabbi Yehoshua and the Senate for their support of the Bukharian community.

Following Mr. Pryor, Senator Hillary Clinton's special assistant, Kyla Pollack, read Mrs. Clinton's address, containing good wishes and congratulations to the Bukharian community for its accomplishments and milestones. Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Kamilov, was next on the agenda. He spoke of the shared values created over the centuries between the Uzbeks and the Bukharian Jews. Mr. Kamilov thanked the Jewish people for their great contributions to society and for their continued strong relationship with his country, describing this bond as a "people to people tie" that he believed was more stable than any political contact.

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Boro Park Residents Concerned About Construction Plan

By Yochanon Donn and Reuven Fenton

City Councilman Simcha Felder was kind enough to take out time, on Sunday, to discuss with Boro Park residents his stand regarding a controversial proposed building project.

"What was in my heart from the beginning hasn't changed," he said at the meeting Sunday in Bais Yaakov D'Gur in Boro Park. "I would like to try to bring housing to the community, but only housing that will be acceptable to you."

At issue is an empty lot on 19th Avenue and 50th Street. Private developers have submitted plans to erect a twelve story complex consisting of a 250-car garage, commercial space, and 179 housing units, behind the Shoprite supermarket. The lot has become a flashpoint between developers seeking to make use of a valuable piece of real estate and residents seeking to protect the area.

Residents in the area are extremely concerned about the project. They are convinced the proposed construction will alter the character of the neighborhood, and create an unsafe environment. It will also greatly com-

plicate traffic and sanitation in the area. The project will do little to alleviate the housing crisis in Boro Park, as the plans call for many one and two bedroom apartments, instead of the three, four, and five bedroom apartments so many families in the community are desperately seeking. It is also highly improbable that Boro Park residents who are mostly *shomer Shabbos* will want to live on the upper floors of a twelve story building.

The developers, who need a zoning variance for the project, arranged for a public hearing at Community Board 12. Residents were given very little notice about the hearing, and, consequently, very little time to prepare opposing arguments. Still, the community rallied to the cause. Some 250 residents, including several *rabbonim*, attended the hearing. *Rabbonim* in the area signed a *Kol Koreh*, voicing their protest and attesting to the physical and spiritual danger such a project would create.

At the Community Board meeting, neighbors vehemently opposed the plan.

"Who is going to buy an apartment on the eighth or tenth floor?" one local resident asked.

"Right now, the area is quiet and safe. What will be when other people start moving in?"

Community Board members voted unanimously against the project.

At the Community Board meeting, Mr. Felder told Boro Park residents he was in favor of the construction plan. The residents were unhappy with this announcement. At the second meeting, in Bais Yaakov D'Gur, Mr. Felder said that he would no longer negotiate with the developer directly, and that a committee of community activists would do so instead.

At the meeting Sunday, Rabbi Mayer Weinberger, Executive Director of Yeshiva Chasan Sofer, rallied the crowd of 125, by decrying the traffic and safety problems that would stem from the project.

"We have to stand together to get a project that [we need and want]," Rabbi Weinberger said. Yeshiva Chasan Sofer has a yeshiva and mesivta across the street from the lot in question.

There was some confusion after the meeting, when a number of participants thought Mr. Felder was retracting his support for the building complex alto-



R. FENTON

City Councilman Simcha Felder addresses the crowd at Bais Yaakov D'Gur Monday night.

gether. The councilman spoke with a *Hamodia* reporter on the phone Monday to clarify. He explained that he still wanted to see housing developed on the lot. However, due to the strong and vocal opposition to the plan, it would be best for a committee of neighborhood activists to work out building arrangements and

deal with the developers on its own.

City Councilman Felder reiterated that he wouldn't let the structure go up until the community was satisfied with the plans, and that the committee would have access to attorneys at the City Council during its negotiating process with the developer.

Bukharian Jewish

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After more resounding applause, Mr. Jeremy Issacharoff, Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Israel in Washington, was introduced. The ambassador spoke of his Bukharian identity and his family's settlement in Yerushalayim's *Shchonat HaBukharim*. He spoke of their philanthropy and his son's bar mitzvah in Yerushalayim's Bukharian synagogue. Jeremy's kinship and affection for the presence of the Bukharian Jewish Congress in the room was evident as he congratulated the honorees for their vitally important community work.

At this time, Senator Joe Lieberman entered the room and was warmly greeted by Rabbi Yehoshua, Boris Kandov and Avraham Nektalov. Senator Frank Lautenberg (Democrat of New Jersey) introduced his friend, Senator Lieberman. In addition to sharing with the audience the fact that the two refer to each other by their Jewish names, Feivel and Yossel, it is also worthwhile noting that in 1990, Senator Lautenberg authored a law that permitted Jews who were headed to the United States to enter the country without proof of harassment — which allowed an oppressed 330,000 Jews into America.

Senator Lautenberg, Congressman Anthony Weiner and Boris Kandov presented Boris Natanov, Vice President of the Bukharian Jewish Congress, with an appreciation plaque. Mr. Weiner then introduced Senator Lieberman, who spoke to the group with great warmth and familiarity.

He addressed the Bukharim as descendants of Babylonian Jews

who underwent severe hardships, living under conditions that kept them isolated from the mainstream of the Jewish world, and then navigating countless obstacles as they underwent their difficult journey of immigration. With heartfelt sentiment, Senator Lieberman said, "*Am Yisrael Chai — Bukharian Jews Chai!*" He received a grand ovation. He related a poignant story about a former Soviet Jew who was sought by the authorities. A government agent knocked on his door and asked, "Does Yakov Yakobovitch live here?" The man who answered the door said, "No." The agent looked into his file and saw the man's photo and retorted, "I see here that *you indeed* are Yakov Yakobovitch — why are you denying your identity?" Yakobovitch answered, "You call this living?" Joe Lieberman continued to speak of, "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." He expounded on the Bukharian Jewish immigrants' hard work ethic and their contribution to American society. He invited *chazzan* Ezro Malakov on stage and thanked him for the collection of seven CDs that he had just received from him. In a booming voice, Ezro burst into song, offering a "live" sample of his talent — yet again another first on Capitol Hill!

At this juncture, he praised honoree, Lev Leviev, who was presented with an International Humanitarian Award for his great contributions, guidance and leadership in the founding of organizations and institutions that have resulted in the restoration of Jewish life, culture and religious education in the former Soviet Union. Mr. Leviev's philanthropic hand reaches farther — into Israel and all over the United States. Mr. Lieberman remarked that, "There *may* be a man more generous (than Lev



PHOTO COURTESY BUKHARIAN TIMES STAFF

Front Row L to R : Sen. Arlen Specter speaks candidly with Chief Rabbi of the Bukharian Jews of America, Rabbi Itzhak Yehoshua in ceremonial joma robe while Senator Joe Lieberman engages in conversation with Bukharian Congress President and luncheon chair Boris Kandov as Congressman Anthony Wiener observes. Back row: Avraham Nektalov, V.P.-BJC-Western Region (standing between Rabbi Yehoshua and Mr. Lieberman) with prominent members of the BJC including editor of the Bukharian Times, Refael Nektalov (to the right of Boris Kandov.) Ezra Friedlander, event coordinator at the podium.

Leviev) — but I don't know his name."

Closing remarks were made by Senator Robert Menendez (Democrat of New Jersey), who said that he considered this day to be a commemoration of the journey of the Bukharian Jewish Community. He extolled them for their mighty resolve, fighting against enormous odds that he proclaimed were a powerful testament to their great strength. The New Jersey Senator added that he stalwartly believes in U.S. support of Israel, as it is tantamount to America's national security, since Israel stands as the only true democracy and a major ally of the United States in a region that is dominated by autocratic Arab states.

Senator Menendez granted the National Leadership Award to Boris Kandov, president and founder of the Bukharian Jewish Congress of the United States and Canada. Boris accepted his

plaque and offered an inspirational acceptance speech: "Today is a historic day for the Bukharian Jews... once I could only imagine the White House in Washington... but today, I stand at this podium in the United States Capitol..." Boris continued by saying that many of his people share his story and share his destiny.

Congresswoman Yvette Clarke, the newest member of the New York delegation, from Brooklyn's 11th District followed. As a second generation American of Jamaican, West Indian descent, she expounded on how important it is to "...reach out to your neighbors..." adding that this was what this day was all about — paying homage to ancestors, and perpetuating their legacy. In a clear Hebrew accent, Ms. Clarke concluded by saying *mazel tov* to the honorees and to the Bukharian Jewish community at large.

Although the luncheon pro-

gram was complete, additional speakers rose to the podium. Publisher Rafael Nektalov gave an inspiring talk on the Bukharian Jewish community's assimilation into American life and its ability to hold onto its unique identity through adherence to tradition, religious education and observance.

Mr. Aron Aronov, who has been involved with the New York Association for New Immigrants (NYANA) and whose love for America reaches back more than 40 years, — spoke of his meeting with Richard Nixon in 1967.

As the Bukharian Jews left the Mansfield Room, they spoke amongst themselves about the great *nachas* they derived from this monumental day in Bukharian Jewish American history. The accolades continued on the bus ride home, as many of the members took the microphone and hailed the day as one of the most unforgettable of their lives.