

REFLECTIONS ON THE SIYUM

A Grand Experience: Attending the *Siyum HaShas*

I am often asked about my personal path towards observance. When did it begin and what circumstances inspired it? Where do I see myself on the Orthodox spectrum? With *ahavat Yisrael* in mind, I feel as comfortable at a Drisha lecture filled with Orthodox feminists as I have at a Kuf Alef Kislev celebration in the heart of Williamsburg where Satmar chassidim commemorate their late Rebbe's liberation from a Nazi death camp.

Since moving to Kew Gardens Hills in January, I have committed to growing in my observance by attending shul daily and attending a *shiur* whenever possible. With so many opportunities to learn Torah in my neighborhood, there are simply no excuses. In those early days, my close friend Yitzi Borenstein introduced me to the *Talmud Bavli*, a page with a paragraph of Aramaic wrapped in commentaries by Rashi, with the *Mesorah*, cross-references and notes from the *Tosafot* generation of medieval commentators. Feeling overwhelmed by the text, I politely deferred, focusing at the time on my professional and personal goals.

A couple of months later, tickets for the *Siyum HaShas* were being sold at Kehilas Ishei Yisrael, a congregation of mostly singles and young couples. My friend Josh Goldsmith encouraged me. "You don't need to be a *Shas Yid* to attend. Go and get inspired." I bought the ticket not knowing when I would begin formal learning, how much I would be able to cover, or even the importance of the Oral Law.

I sought a non-judgmental learning setting and found it this past Shavuot at the home of Brooklyn couple Rena and Mark Goldstein. With their three sons, Sam, Ben and Josh, we studied Tractate *Middot* overnight in the basement of Young Israel of Flatbush, returning for lunch to honor Rav Papa and his ten sons, who always threw a banquet upon the completion of a tractate. In all likelihood I am the first person in my family in at least four generations to complete a tractate, and the lunch served by the Goldsteins was as much a tribute to *Mattan Torah* as to my historic moment.

In Woodmere there is a resident who personifies *ahavat Yisrael* through his philanthropy, volunteering and lecturing before thousands of people. And while Charlie Harary's upbringing had more observance than mine, he also wondered about the importance of the Oral Law. Harary spoke to a group of mostly Russian-speaking *baalei teshuvah* at the Meadowlands Crowne Plaza ahead of the *Siyum*.

"Why does it have to be complicated? I finally got the answer I loved in law school," Harary said. Harary did not expect his education to be a thorough review of case law. "I wanted to see laws, but I was getting case after case, page after page and reading the testimony from the losing team. So I went to the dean."

David W. Leebron, his dean at Columbia Law School, informed Charlie that anyone could purchase a book of laws and quote them, but a law school's purpose is to apply the statutes to specific situations. "Like a robot you can try to apply it. You're paying us to understand the greatest minds of all time, how cases were lost on a point, how the law evolved, the principles behind the law and how to bring the law to the next phase," Leebron told Harary, who then understood that the Talmud works in a sim-

ilar fashion, with centuries of commentaries and specific examples that tested the application of Biblical laws.

Harary said that the vagueness of many Biblical laws was intentional and G-d wants the Jewish people to debate and struggle over their meaning rather than robotically follow them. "Talk about it and struggle over it," he said. "It was lively and real."

In the roughly 1,400 years between the codification of the Talmud and the historic 1923 Agudath Israel convention, the Oral Law was studied by only a few dedicated scholars, without a set schedule. That was when Rabbi Meir Shapiro, a relatively young member of the Agudah's Council of Torah Sages and head of the Yeshivah Chachmei Lublin, proposed a ritualized study cycle for the Talmud: *Daf Yomi* — a page a day. In total, 2,711 pages in a 7½-year cycle. The Chofetz Chaim, the Gerrer Rebbe and Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, *zt"l*, who were the leading European Torah scholars at the time, received the idea enthusiastically.

Since the Holocaust, each *Siyum* has grown in attendance and venue, with the MetLife Stadium at the Meadowlands counting a sold-out crowd of 92,000 that included a wide spectrum of Orthodox Jews, including a women's section at the top. All around the Meadowlands traffic was choked, even by New Jersey standards. The \$1.6 billion arena, still widely called Giants Stadium or Meadowlands by many, opened in 2010 and, in contrast to the traffic jams, has a very spacious feel, with every seat providing a sense of closeness to the field and an unexpected cleanliness. It felt very ironic to host a Torah convention in an arena better known for [football teams and rock stars].

The event was a mix of masterfully produced tribute videos and speeches by leading Rabbinic figures. Alongside a tribute to Rabbi Shapiro was one for Jerome Schottenstein, namesake of the 73-volume Artscroll Talmud Bavli that has enabled readers who do not possess a command of Aramaic or Hebrew to learn in English.

Not having a command of Yiddish, I struggled to comprehend Agudah chair Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, and Rabbi Aryeh Malkiel Kotler, who spoke at length before concluding the last passages of Tractate *Niddah*. As thousands dialed the phone number for a live translation of the speeches, I paused to appreciate the event, knowing that as I grow in my study of Torah law, I can always find myself on the same page as nearly 100,000 fellow Jews. No matter what type of hat or *kipah* we wear, we can always catch up to the *Daf* and find ourselves in the company of great scholars and commoners alike, examining historical insights on the Torah and, with enough perspective, adding in our own two cents.

Switching to English, Rabbi Perlow used analogies to describe *Daf Yomi*. "Learning Torah is nutrition for the Jewish soul. The world does not understand us. When all the empires of the past have perished, the Torah will not be forgotten," Rabbi Perlow said. "It is the secret ingredient, the only ingredient that makes Jewish continuity possible."

Sergey Kadinsky

Sergey Kadinsky is a former assistant editor of *The Jewish Star* and an adjunct professor of history at Touro College. He lives in Queens.

Reflections on Citi Field and MetLife

The two great gatherings of our people in Citi Field (40,000 plus, accepting Rabbinic guidance on internet use and filtering) and at the MetLife Stadium (for the *Siyum* of the *Daf Hayomi*, celebrating 7½ years of Talmud study) were both unique and complementary.

Just a few months ago, the 40,000-seat Citi Field in Queens seemed too large for us to fill, especially on such short notice; but, assisted by over 10,000 Satmar chassidim, that number was surpassed and the Arthur Ashe Stadium had to be opened for those who wanted to attend the *Asifah*.

Many thought that the *Asifah*, so close in time to the *Siyum HaShas*, would dampen the commitment to the *Siyum HaShas*, at that point still far from filled. Then, the 93,000 mark of MetLife was surpassed and preparations went on to include some additional 40,000 Jews who watched the *Siyum HaShas* in various locations across the U.S.A. Truly massive numbers!

For me, the two venues will always be intertwined, and I think that I can see partly why the Divine plan was for both gatherings to take place during the same time period. They were as different from each other as night and day, and yet they actually complemented each other. What many missed seeing at the *Asifah* they found at the *Siyum* of *Daf Hayomi*, and vice versa.

Some of us needed the power of the *Asifah*, absolutely awesome in its passion. Rabbanim from the U.S., Canada and Israel, speaking largely in Yiddish, the *mama lashon* of so many, unabashedly tackled the *yetzer hara* head on. You could feel the intensity in the air. *No*, we will not accept that the non-Jewish world sets the stage for our lives. Jews are different and our Rabbinic leaders will tell us how to proceed. They will help us if we are ready to listen.

However, many could not follow the

Yiddish at the *Asifah* or they felt that the message was too strong, and so Rabbanim in communities across the world gave over the message slowly and exactly in their respective communities: The internet does not run our world; *daas Torah* does.

The *Daf Hayomi Siyum HaShas* was altogether different. Because the entire Torah world, embracing every facet and nuance, every stripe and head covering, had to be included in one night — no local make-up programs this time, the program had to speak to every type of observant Jew — every one. That made the program long and varied. It could not be helped. The goal was *simchas ha'orah*, participating in the *siyum* of tens of thousands who learned so much for so long, and so this is how it had to be.

Whether you were a nine-year-old boy who read the children's booklet that was distributed, or you were an 11-year-old who had learned *Mishnayos* for the *Siyum*, you were included. If you were a recent *baal* or *baalas teshuvah* or you were still on the way, the program would reach you too. If you were engaged for 7½ years in *Daf Yomi* learning or you were in a yeshivah or in a *kollel*, you also felt part of the program; so, too, did the women and girls feel that this massive program was directed to them.

Okay, we all have a story of how we got to the *Siyum* and back... and how late, but, we were there. The world counted us, and, for once in 7½ years, we were not the "smallest of all peoples," but, in the eyes of everyone in this world (including our brothers who are not yet Torah-observant), we were giants, most fortunate to be the children of Hashem.

Rabbi Yosef Wikler
Editor, KASHRUS Magazine
Brooklyn, N.Y.

What the *Siyum HaShas* Meant to Me

It was my great honor to attend the *Siyum HaShas* — my first — with over 90,000 other Jews at MetLife Stadium on Wednesday night.

The *Siyum HaShas* was an extraordinary celebration of deep Jewish devotion to learning, in which every person can engage in study. I was inspired by the teachings of the great Rabbanim, and by the idea that today — after a late night — we simply turn the page and begin anew.

It was a great expression of *Klal Yisrael*, with Ashkenazi and Sephardi, Chassidic and yeshivish, Jews of all types celebrating together. It was impossible not to be awestruck by the devotional spirit of nearly 100,000 Jews praying, dancing, and learning together.

There was a moving video that paid tribute to the history of the *Siyum*, from the time of the birth of Agudath Israel in Poland, and through the Holocaust, as Jews held onto the tradition of Talmudic study through the greatest evil of all times. This was made especially poignant by the *Masmidei Hasiyum*, representatives of 16,000 young scholars who devoted themselves not only to the *Daf*, but to the memory of children killed in the Holocaust whose chance to study Torah was so brutally stolen.

The *Siyum HaShas* was also — like the Olympics — an enormous tribute to the logistics, security, and preparation of so many people (many of whom I am proud to call my constituents). Not only Agudath Israel and the Rabbis and staff who prepared the program (congratulations to Boro Park's Elly Kleinman, who served as chair of the *siyum's* organizing committee), but also Abe Friedman, Bernie Gips of Hatzolah, Yanky Mayer of Misaskim, the Shomrim, and especially Rabbi Shlomo Gertzulin and his staff at the Agudath Israel of America who have been working for a year to get ready. They built up partnerships with MetLife Stadium, which was transformed into perhaps the world's largest shul ever, and with the New Jersey State Police, the FBI, and others who provided extensive security and personnel to make sure the event was safe and smooth. I won't forget the devotion to study, the preparation, or the deep and timeless spirit of *Klal Yisrael* that filled up MetLife Stadium. I look forward to spending more time studying the *daf* in the next 7.5 years and, *b'ezras Hashem*, celebrating the 13th *Siyum* together.

Councilmember Brad Lander
represents NYC Council District 39 and
represents parts of Boro Park