

Agudath Israel Election Day Legislative Breakfast Speaks of the Power to Make a Difference

JUDITH DINOWITZ

On Tuesday, November 3, an avid audience of Jewish community activists and legislators attended Agudath Israel's Annual Election Season Legislative Breakfast, held at Alliance Bernstein Global Wealth Management in Midtown Manhattan. In the relaxed atmosphere overlooking the fall foliage of Central Park, they absorbed information on current legislation and connected with others working to better the Jewish community in New York.

The message that they have the power to make a difference, repeated by many speakers, strengthened their resolve to collaborate on a better educational system, to protect religious rights, and to further school choice. As New York Senator Marty Golden asserted, "There is power in this room. We can, have, and will make a difference going forward. Wherever we are, when the Jewish community stands strong, we'll win."

Mr. Jeffrey Wiesenfeld, principal with Alliance Bernstein Global Wealth Management and host of the breakfast, welcomed participants and thanked Agudath Israel and the Friedlander Group for sponsoring the event.

Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, Agudath Israel's executive vice president, enumerated Agudath Israel's multi-faceted work in advocacy across many areas, working with elected officials in Washington D.C. and in local regions across the United States. He said that the breakfast, which has become an annual event, affords activists and legislative leaders an informal, professional meeting ground.

"It allows them to forge stronger ties as they advocate on behalf of the community," he said. "This is crucial." In the past, it has featured up-and-coming legislators and policy-makers who then went on to become even more well-known, such as Loretta Lynch, Attorney General of the United States, who addressed the Legislative Breakfast in 2012 while in her capacity as U.S. Attorney of Brooklyn.

Rabbi Zwiebel thanked the elected officials who were present: State Senator Jack Martins, Assembly-members Steve Cymbrowitz, Richard Gottfried, Helene Weinstein and David Weprin as well as City Councilmen Rory Lancman and Mark Levine.

Mr. Joseph B. Stamm, breakfast co-chair and CEO of MedReview, introduced Senator Michael Gianaris, the first Greek American to be elected to office in New York City, and the author of such bills as the Clean Energy Act, the Energy Security Bill and the Airline Bill of Rights law.

Senator Gianaris, who is Greek Orthodox, painted a strong link between Greeks and Jews. He men-



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L-R: Leon Goldenberg, Ezra Friedlander, Jeffrey S. Wiesenfeld, Peter Rebenwurz, Shlomo Werdiger, Dr. Tevi Troy, Joseph B. Stamm, Congressman Todd Rokita, Rabbi David Zwiebel, NY State Senate Deputy Majority Conference Leader Michael Gianaris, Abe Biderman, Chaskel Bennett, Menachem Lubinsky, Rabbi A.D. Motzen.



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L-R: Rabbi A.D. Motzen, Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel and Indiana Congressman Todd Rokita.



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NY Senator Mike Gianaris, speaking.



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Dr. Tevi D. Troy

tioned a story where a local priest refused to give the Nazis the names of the Jewish people in his town and urged the Jews to hide in the woods,



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NY Senator Marty Golden

providing them with food.

With intolerance on the rise, notably in the Middle East but here in the United States as well, Senator Gia-

naris spoke strongly of the need to fight any form of prejudice. In closing, he announced that he would be introducing legislation in New York prohibiting the state from investing in, or doing business with, any company that participates in the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement. This spurred an enthusiastic round of applause.

Congressman Todd Rokita from Indiana was the keynote speaker. He delivered greetings from the new Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan of Wisconsin. He touched on House Resolution 5, the bill that reauthorizes and reforms the "No Child Left Behind" law by removing some of the provisions that were not working. He said that the bill puts the power to decide standards back in the hands of school principals and that the local community, not the Department of Education, should decide what defines success.

Congressman Rokita issued a call for action. "Get out of your comfort zone," he said. "Talk to those who haven't heard of school choice. Only then can we move the ball down the field."

Prominent community activist and Breakfast Co-Chair Peter Rebenwurz introduced Dr. Tevi Troy, president of the American Health Policy Institute and former deputy secretary of Health and Human Services. Dr. Troy presented an enlightening historical retrospective on the American Jewish involvement in national politics.

Following Dr. Troy, Senator Marty Golden added his endorsement of the power of the audience to effect change. He urged the audience to stand firm in the fight for the Education Tax Credit. "With the power of the people, between Brooklyn and Buffalo, we will get it. We cannot walk away from the table without it."

When asked about Senator Golden's statement, Rabbi A.D. Motzen, national director of state relations at Agudath Israel of America, responded, "School choice legislation has passed in other states when there's a strong commitment from legislators and advocates to do what's best for the kids."

The morning would not have been complete without the poignant closing remarks of Mr. Chaskel Bennett, member of Agudath Israel's Board of Trustees. He told a moving story of a man from Crown Heights, Brooklyn, who had survived an icy-cold train ride to Auschwitz because he kept an old man warm all night long. In the morning, the two men were the only ones on the train who had survived the freezing night.

The lesson, Mr. Bennett said, is that when we help each other, we can help our communities and the world.