

# Agudath Israel of America Inaugural Legislative Breakfast

By M. Lowinger

Imagine virtually all the *askanim*, advocates and activists of our community all joined together in one room. Imagine them gathered for the singular purpose of serving the people of our community as best they can. Now imagine that dozens of legislative and political officials are spending the morning together with them working towards a common goal. If that sounds like a historic and unprecedented event, it was. Thus did Agudath Israel host its Inaugural Legislative Breakfast at the Broad Street Ballroom in New York City.

The breakfast, which was sponsored by Maimonides Medical Center, Health Plus and Metropolitan Jewish Health System, and was coordinated by The Friedlander Group in conjunction with Yeruchim Silber & Associates, was indeed a watershed event — both from the perspective of the tireless *askanim* who represent the community's needs as well as the government representatives who expressed their solidarity with Agudah's mission. It was a poignant demonstration of commitment, camaraderie and continuity. The massive representation of prominent elected officials who made it their business to attend offers ample testimony to the extensive role that Agudath Israel plays in public affairs. Despite their varied backgrounds, all were united in their dedication to serve the community's needs.

The program was chaired by prominent community *askan* Chaskel Bennett. Opening remarks were delivered by Jonathan Zalisky of Health Plus, one of the event's sponsors. "In this room," said Mr. Bennett, "one can see a broad representation of the Orthodox community. We are a diverse group, passionate and energetic. We all care deeply about our community and there is power in our unity."

Mr. Bennett pointed out that the word *agudah* implies unity, and said, "We are a coalition of like-minded people committed to serving and strengthening the Jewish community." He also disclosed Agudah's "best kept secret," its activism and support of thousands of needy New Yorkers through job placement, youth services, school busing programs and senior services, to name just a few. "These vital programs couldn't happen without our partners in government," he said.

Specifically, Mr. Bennett spoke about Southern Brooklyn Community Organization's (SBCO) commitment to easing the community's housing crisis and especially the recent decision by the City Council to approve the Culver El housing project. Rabbi Aloni Russek, a recent beneficiary of SBCO's assistance, told his story. When he had difficulty paying his mortgage, he called SBCO. With the help of that organization, said Rabbi Russik, "We were approved for a loan modification." He concluded, "I thank Hashem for sending SBCO our



Mr. Chaskel Bennett, Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, Rabbi Gedaliah Weinberger, Senator Charles Schumer, Joseph Zelmanowitz, Mr. Leon Goldenberg.

way."

Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, Executive Vice President of Agudath Israel of America, thanked the many committed individuals who attended the breakfast. "I'm so grateful," he said, "to every one of you for standing with us."

State Senator Carl Kruger spoke about both the opportunities and the challenges that are inherent in public service.

Several members of the New York City Council addressed the gathered guests. Councilman Brad Lander, who represents portions of Boro Park and Kensington, pointed out that the Culver El project had just been approved after a five year struggle, and he thanked everyone for their wonderful leadership. Councilman Lew Fidler commended Agudath Israel for its ongoing advocacy in supporting Priority 7 vouchers.

State Assemblyman Rory Lancman, Assembly member Alec Brook-Krasny of Queens, and Councilmember Margaret Chin of Lower Manhattan praised Agudah for its commitment to social services.

Agudath Israel's Fresh Start Program assists women who need to return to the workplace by teaching them skills to enable them to succeed. Mrs. Chaya Sora Stark told the crowd she was referred to Fresh Start, where she joined a computer class. "I was so nervous," she said, "but patience, love and caring helped me believe in myself."

Queens State Senator Toby Ann Stavisky told the assemblage, "I chair the committee on Higher Education. When we return, we will hopefully pass the TAP bill. It's the right thing to do.

Congressman Jerold Nadler emphasized the importance of *gemilus chassadim*. "In Europe," he said, "we had the *kehillah*. In this country, it's replaced by organizations like Agudah and by government." He said that "the need for *gemilus chassadim* is greater than ever."

State Senator Marty Golden and Assemblyman Dov Hikind marveled at the "unbelievable generosity and giving" of this community, claiming, "Nothing compares to it."

Rabbi Mayer Weinberger, Administrator of Yeshiva Chasan Sofer, gave the yeshiva's perspective on social services. He pointed out that "yeshivos contribute

about one billion dollars to New York's economy." He recommended that it's time to "become creative in finding solutions," for the thousands of children in New York's yeshiva system and added, "There is only one phone number to call — Agudath Israel."

Mr. Leon Goldenberg, member of Agudah's Board of Trustees, introduced Public Advocate Bill DeBlasio, who said, "All of us in public life care about the community." He pointed out, "We're going to have to focus again on Priority 7 vouchers," and expressed satisfaction in the efforts that continue to bear fruit, including "the great victory with the Culver El project." City Comptroller John Liu called this morning's event "amazing" and pledged to "continue to apply the same principles as we have been to make this organization as successful as it continues to be."

Rabbi Gedaliah Weinberger, Chairman of the Board of Agudath Israel, introduced Congressman Anthony Weiner, who offered his continued support, saying, "We go to bat for you." Rabbi Shmuel Lefkowitz, Vice President of Community Affairs for Agudah, introduced Speaker of the Assembly Sheldon Silver, who introduced Assemblywoman Helene Weinstein, Assemblyman Steven Cymbrowitz, Queens Assemblyman David Weprin, Bronx Democratic Party Chairman, Assemblyman Carl Heastie and Brooklyn Assemblyman Felix Ortiz, praising them for their support of Agudath Israel and then recognized Shiya and Shimon Oestreicher for their devoted efforts and hard work on behalf of the community.

Also in attendance was Manhattan Boro President Scott Stringer. Councilmember Mathieu Eugene, Councilman Stephen Levin, Council member Gale Brewer, and Councilmember Jumaane Williams all pledged to continue working with Agudath Israel of America.

Attorney Joseph Zelmanowitz, of the noted firm Stahl and Zelmanowitz, introduced New York's Senator Charles Schumer, who was the event's keynote speaker. He called Mr. Schumer "a tireless advocate." In his address, Mr. Schumer strolled down memory lane, remembering that when he was first elected in 1975, he discussed the future of



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Crowd at breakfast: Assembly Member Felix Ortiz, Councilmember Jumanee Williams, Board of Trustees member Alfred Schonberger, Jonathan Zalisky of Health Plus, Councilmember Lew Fidler, Assembly Members Alec Brook-Krasny and Dov Hikind, District Leader Mark Davidovics, Board of Trustees member Mr. Elly Kleinman, Congressman Jerold Nadler, Assemblyman Steve Cymbrowitz, State Senator Martin Golden. Not seen: Bronx Dem. Chairman, Assemblyman Carl Hasty.



Mr. Yussi Rieder, Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, Mr. Chaskel Bennett, Mr. Abe Biderman, Rabbi Shmuel Lefkowitz, Mr. Leon Goldenberg

the community with Rabbi Moshe Sherer. "If you keep the yeshivos strong," Rabbi Sherer had told him, "the neighborhood will grow."

Mr. Schumer focused on the big picture, explaining the government's response to recent attempts by Al Qaida to send explosives in packages to synagogues in the United States. "They were intercepted," he said, "because our intelligence is far better today than it was years ago."

Mr. Schumer said, "The reason we don't have peace in the Middle East is because the majority of Israel's enemies don't believe there should be a Jewish state," and emphasized the importance of the ties between Israel and the United States.

Mr. Schumer commended Agudah for its "amazing job in helping the poor in our community," and pledged to help Agudah with its multi-faceted programs.

"I am now an elected official for 36 years," he said, "and, G-d willing, my relationship with Agudah will continue to be strong and productive."

Mr. Eric Herskovitz is a young member of the community who is trying to make ends meet. After his business was affected by the economic downturn, he reached out to PCS, Agudah's Job Development program, for help. "They were able to place me," he said, "in a real estate development firm as an Asset Manager."

Mrs. Barbara Perlman Levine

spoke on behalf of all seniors who are serviced by Agudath Israel. "A Senior Center is life affirming," she said. "The social contact and mental stimulation are so important." She cautioned the elected officials to remember seniors: "We are still alive. We are aware. We are taxpayers who vote and we are very aware of how precious that is." Rabbi Aron Heineman, who is Director of Senior Services for Agudah, expressed concern that until now, senior services were considered sacred, but no, they are in danger of being decreased, like everything else.

Thus did over two dozen elected officials, leaders of Agudath Israel, activists, and community members address the assembled guests on Sunday morning. Each one came with his or her personal message, and yet every one of them shared the same hopes and dreams, the same unified goal. Difficult times may lie ahead, but the power to succeed lies in a united mission.

The needs of our community are vast and varied. Busing for yeshiva students, housing for the needy, social programs for seniors, job training for women, and career opportunities for the unemployed — these are just a few of the vital programs that our community relies on. Working together with elected officials will ensure that those services continue to make a difference to young and old throughout the New York area.