



**VAAD HARABANIM**  
THE RABBINICAL COUNCIL  
of GREATER WASHINGTON

# THE JOURNAL

TISHREI 5783 · SEPTEMBER 2022 · VOLUME 10.2

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***Wishing you a Kesiva v'Chasima Tova!***





Rabbi Yosef Singer  
Cong. Young Israel Ezras Israel  
President

VAAD HARABANIM  
THE RABBINICAL COUNCIL  
of GREATER WASHINGTON

Rabbi Moshe Walter  
Woodside Synagogue Ahavas Torah  
Executive Director

Elul 5782

Dearest Friends,

The Yomim Noraim are rapidly approaching. We are reminded of the Gemara (Shabbos 127b) which states:

הַדָּן חֲבִירוֹ לְכַף זְכוּת — דָּנִין אוֹתוֹ לְזְכוּת.  
*One who judges his friend favorably is judged favorably [in Heaven].*

You may recall that I wrote about this topic one year ago. It is, however, one that bears repeating. Another Tisha B'Av has come and gone — and the Beis HaMikdash is still in ruins. This would suggest that we still suffer from *sinas chinam* (groundless hatred).

Judging people favorably is a very good way to begin to address this issue. In so doing, as the Gemara suggests, we will merit a favorable *din* (judgment). In addition, we will provide our newly coronated King with a unified kingdom and a beautiful palace in which to dwell.

My goal in this letter is to cultivate an appreciation for and a positive attitude toward our leaders: be they Rabbis, teachers, shul presidents, committee chairpersons, or just someone who is trying to motivate us to do something that may be difficult for us — even parents and spouses.

In *Devarim* (1:12), Moshe Rabbeinu provides a compelling rationale for instituting a sophisticated court system comprised of “leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, leaders of tens, and officers of your tribes”:

אֵיכָה אֶשָּׂא לְבַדִּי טַרְחֶכֶם וּמִשְׁאָכֶם וְרִיבֵכֶם.  
*How can I alone carry your toil, your burdens, and your quarrels?*

In so doing, Moshe identifies three essential responsibilities of rabbinic leadership. According to the Ramban, *torchachem* (your toil) refers to Moshe teaching Klal Yisroel Torah; *umasa'achem*, (your burdens) to Moshe interceding with the Ribono Shel Olam on their behalf; and *rivchem* (your quarrels) to Moshe resolving interpersonal conflicts.

Rashi, however, cites a *Sifrei* which interprets “carrying your burdens” as having to deal with Klal Yisroel’s *apikorsim* (heretics), who would ascribe the most unflattering and ulterior motives to all of Moshe’s actions. “If Moshe would leave his home early, they would whisper that he was having

Rabbi Dovid Rosenbaum  
Young Israel Shomrai Emunah  
Vice President

Rabbi Michael Frank  
Kehillas Ohr HaTorah.  
Treasurer

Rabbi Brahm Weinberg  
Kemp Mill Synagogue  
Secretary

13217 New Hampshire Avenue, Suite 10142, Silver Spring, MD 20914

Phone: 301---770---0078

Fax 301---770---1117

JOURNAL OF THE VAAD HARABANIM OF GREATER WASHINGTON: TISHREI 2022



Rabbi Yosef Singer  
 Cong. Young Israel Ezras Israel  
 President

VAAD HARABANIM  
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Rabbi Moshe Walter  
 Woodside Synagogue Ahavas Torah  
 Executive Director

trouble with his family. If he would leave his home late, they would assume he was sitting, devising schemes, and thinking thoughts against others.”

While the aforementioned examples apply to Moshe Rabbeinu and may appear to be farfetched, they actually apply to leaders of every stripe and are, sadly, not farfetched at all. I have witnessed many occasions on which individuals who were acting with the purest of motives — with genuine *yiras Shamayim*, devotion to Torah, and dedication to community — were assumed to be motivated by a desire for power or glory.

The Rambam in *Sefer Hamitzvos* (Mitzvah 177) writes that “every person is **commanded** to judge his *chaver* favorably and to limit the interpretation of his actions and words for the good.” In his commentary on *Pirkei Avos*, the Rambam discusses the following Mishnah (1:6):

עֲשֵׂה לָךְ רַב, וּקְנֵה לָךְ חֵבֵר, וְהוֹי דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת.  
*Make for yourself a Rav, acquire for yourself a chaver,  
 and judge all people favorably.*

Here, the Rambam explains: “When dealing with an unknown person and associated actions, *derech chasidus* — **the way of piety** — compels one to judge said person favorably.”

Which is it, according to the Rambam? Is judging people favorably a commandment — which we all must obey — or is it an act of piety — which is the province of the spiritually elevated?

The Chofetz Chaim, in his *pesicha* (introduction) to the *sefer* for which he is named, answers this question. When dealing with someone we know to be conscientious in his *avodas hakodesh* but who occasionally stumbles (an “*adam beinoni*”), we are commanded by the Torah to judge him and his actions favorably — even if it is a “stretch.” Such a person is a *chaver*, and the Gemara accordingly instructs us (Shavuos 30a):

הוֹי דָן אֶת חֵבֵרְךָ לְכַף זְכוּת.  
*You shall judge your fellow favorably.*

In contrast, when dealing with someone with whom we are unfamiliar (“*kol adam*”), judging him favorably falls into the realm of *midos tovos* or *chasidus* (piety).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rav Avraham Yaakov Hakohen Pam, *Atarah La'Melech*, Chapter B'Tzedek Tishpot Amisecho.

Rabbi Dovid Rosenbaum  
 Young Israel Shomrai Emunah  
 Vice President

Rabbi Michael Frank  
 Kehillas Ohr HaTorah.  
 Treasurer

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Woodside Synagogue Ahavas Torah  
Executive Director

---

How does one stay motivated to continue to do the work of the *klal*, to be involved in an organization, or to help an individual when one feels that his or her efforts are not properly appreciated? In my humble opinion, *b'derech hateva* (in this natural world), no matter how “well adjusted” an individual may be, this is not a sustainable situation. It is only when one ventures into the world that is *l'ma'alah min ha'teva* — the elevated world that Moshe Rabbeinu revealed to us — that this level of giving becomes possible.

The *Tomer Devorah* teaches that, in order to fulfill the mitzvah of *V'Halachta B'drachav* (walking in the ways of Hashem) properly, one must do more than visiting the sick, comforting the mourner, or gladdening the hearts of a *chosson* and *kallah*. Rather, just as Hashem endures the insults and neglect of human beings and, nevertheless, maintains His life-sustaining connection to them, so must one who has been wronged by another person not withhold good from that person. My simple understanding of this directive suggests that one may find strength to continue to serve the *tzibur* and give to others — even when one feels hurt or underappreciated — by walking in Hashem's ways, cleaving to Him, and having a strong spiritual awareness that, *by serving others, we are serving Him*.

I would like to express my profound thanks to Rabbi Walter for producing yet another outstanding volume of the Vaad Journal, to the contributors to this volume, and to the wonderful leaders across our community. May we be *zoche* to judge them favorably and strengthen them — and, in so doing, merit a favorable judgment for ourselves and for our families.

Best wishes for a *Shana Tova u'Mesuka*.

With love and respect,

Rabbi Yosef Singer  
President, Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington

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## **Letter from the Director**

### **Partner with Hashem: Smile**

Dear Community Member,

Allow me to share an anecdote which has helped shape my approach to *Chodesh Elul* and the *Yamim Noraim* season.

A student once approached Rabbi Avigdor Miller, the well-known Rav and Mashgiach of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin (1908–2001), and asked him for advice on how he could be inscribed in the Book of Life. Rabbi Miller responded with one word: “Smile.” The student, thinking that he must have misheard Rabbi Miller’s response, asked once again how he could be inscribed in the Book of Life. Rabbi Miller gave the same one-word response, “Smile,” and explained as follows: Imagine someone owns a store. At the end of each year, he takes inventory and decides what changes must be made for the upcoming year: more advertising, new products, staffing changes, and so on. Before finalizing his plans, the store owner consults with his manager, who states emphatically that “there is one employee you must retain — you know, the employee who always has a smile on his face. His attitude and demeanor give our customers a good feeling. You need him! He is critical to the success of the business; he makes clients feel good and they, in turn, enjoy shopping here.”

Similarly, at the end of each year Hashem takes inventory of His world to make determinations for the year ahead. If someone always has a smile on his or her face, recognizing the good from which they benefit and advertising that *simchah* by bringing joy to others — he or she has positioned themselves as an indispensable asset to the world, and Hashem will take that into consideration when making a determination for the year ahead. Hashem’s world is a wonderful place, and He wants everyone to know that. If we partner with Hashem by smiling, by being happy and thankful, we assist Him in revealing the wonders and beauty of His world. Hashem needs us here to continue as His partners in advertising just that.

Throughout Rosh Hashanah and the Yamim Noraim season, in shul or at home, when walking or working, take time to pause, smile, and say: “I see you, Hashem. You are the Master of the Universe, the King of all Kings, and You are directing my life every step of the way. You have given me so much; I take nothing for granted and never will.” Smile this Rosh Hashanah and appreciate all the gifts you have in your life. Share that smile with the world; it is contagious.

We hope you enjoy this edition of the Vaad Journal, complete with uplifting *Divrei Torah* and articles of communal interest, which we hope will make your *Yamim Noraim* season more meaningful.

*Shana Tova!*

Rabbi Moshe Walter

## Koheles and Simcha: An Oxymoron?

Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz

Rav, Kehillas Ohr Somayach

Senior Lecturer, Yeshivas Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

Rabbi Emeritus, Woodside Synagogue-Ahavas Torah

*Sukkos* is called *z'man simchaseinu* — the time of our happiness. It seems strange, then, that we should read *Koheles*, that most pessimistic of *megillos*, on this holiday. *Koheles* was so controversial that Chazal argued whether to include it in *Tanach*. Although it ultimately made the cut, it seems to include many ideas that are heretical.

*Koheles* opens with these words (1:2):

הֵבֶל הֵבָלִים אָמַר קְהֵלֶת, הֵבֶל הֵבָלִים הַכֹּל הֵבֶל.  
*Futility of futilites, said Koheles, futility of futilities, all is futile.*

There are seven repetitions of the word *hevel* in *Koheles* (the plural form, *havalim*, counts as two). Some say this refers to the futility of all seven days of the week — including Shabbos. Others say it refers to the seven ages of man: at age one, he sits on the throne like a king; at two to three, he sits in mud like a pig; at ten, he jumps like a goat; before his marriage, he is like a horse; after marriage, he is like a mule in a harness; once he has children, he is like a dog, barking for more to feed them. Finally, in old age, he is like an orangutan, wrinkled and stooped. Not a very happy picture of human existence!

Even the answers *Koheles* offers to life's travails, standing alone, appear not to be Torah responses. They are threefold. First, life is hard, so take all you can get — in other words, hedonistic greed. Second, apathy or stoicism: nothing ultimately matters, so why feel anything at all? Finally, suffering: as one confronts the tragedies and injustices of life, one is overwhelmed with sadness and despair. Throughout the book, Shlomo HaMelech zigzags and vacillates between these various options, trying to deal with a world that makes no rational sense.

Although *Koheles* ends with the seemingly meaningful words,

...אֶת הָאֱלֹקִים יִרָא וְאֶת מִצְוֹתָיו שָׁמֹר...  
...fear G-d and keep His Mitzvos... (12:13)

these were put in by the final editor (probably Chizkiyahu HaMelech) to end the book on a note of piety. The real final words of Shlomo HaMelech are the same as the opening ones,

הַבֵּל הַבָּלִים אָמַר הַקּוֹהֵלֶת הַכֹּל הַבֵּל.  
*Futility of futiites, said Koheles, all is futile. (12:8)*

One could say *Koheles'* original ending is slightly more optimistic than its opening — because it uses the word *hevel* fewer times — but not much.

*Koheles* also contradicts itself. At one point, it states that it would be better to be dead than alive, better not to have been born rather than born. Yet elsewhere it asks who doesn't fear the day of death — and even seems to question the World to Come, asking who knows if human souls don't go the way of animal souls. It is important to note that these statements do not encapsulate Shlomo's HaMelech's true philosophy; rather, he is grappling with questions, engaging in debate with himself as he considers a number of positions and possibilities, many of which will in fact be rejected.

If all this is so, why did Chazal choose to include *Koheles* in the canon? Shlomo HaMelech wrote three major works — *Shir HaShirim*, in the ardor of his youth; *Mishlei*, in the prudent responsibility of his middle age; and *Koheles*, in the dark sadness at the end of life. What is the unique contribution of *Koheles*? What final message does Shlomo HaMelech intend to impart?

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893) writes in *Ha'amek Davar* (Bamidbar 29:12) that *Sefer Koheles* was a sermon Shlomo HaMelech gave to the nations of the world who were gathered in Jerusalem during the Sukkos holiday. Our sages tell us that the 70 bulls offered in the *Beis HaMikdash* during the seven days of *Sukkos* were an atonement for the 70 nations. At one point, nations even knew which day their particular offering would be brought and sent ambassadors to be present at that momentous event. Shlomo HaMelech took the opportunity on the occasion of their attendance to deliver a “*mussar schmooze*” of universal application. Although we have a *mesorah* (tradition) that *Koheles ben David* is Shlomo HaMelech, the word *koheles* literally refers to ‘one who gathers.’ Shlomo HaMelech spoke to those gathered of the futility of life and worldly pursuits to counteract the arrogance prompted by the time of year — the ingathering of the harvest.

Another way to look at Shlomo HaMelech's words is to examine the word *hevel* — usually translated as “futile.” It literally comes from the word for breath, and refers to the fleeting, ephemeral nature of human life. From this perspective, Shlomo HaMelech is not saying life is futile — he is demonstrating how precious it is, because it is so short.

Just a few days before *Sukkos*, we read *Sefer Yonah*. Yonah is on a storm-tossed ship and the sailors have determined that he is the cause of their danger. He tells them:

שְׂאוּנִי וְהִטִּילֵנִי אֶל הַיָּם...  
*Lift me up and throw me into the sea... (1:12)*

Why does Yonah say, 'lift me up?' R. Yehudah Leib Chasman, *zt"l*, the great *mashgiach* of Chevron Yeshiva, relates that Yonah told them to lift him up because it would give him one more second of life. This is how precious life is.

On each day of creation, Hashem saw what He made and said it was good. On the sixth day, He called his creation "very good." Why? Chazal say this is because He created death on that day, and that made it very good — because it made each moment of life precious. It is death which makes us understand the preciousness of life, realize the urgency of each moment, and feel the imperative to do whatever good we can — because no one really knows how much time they have. Cherish your life, your *mitzvos*, and your relationships — savor them, love them, grab on to them with passion and enthusiasm. *Carpe diem*: Seize the day!

The nature of *hevel* — fleeting life — makes us treasure the moments all the more. David HaMelech declares in *Tehillim*:

שֵׁשׁ אָנֹכִי עַל אִמְרֹתֶיךָ כְּמוֹצֵא שְׂלָל רַב.

*I rejoice in Your words as one who found a great treasure. (119:162)*

Rabbi Akiva Eiger (1761–1837) explains this *pasuk* with a *mashal* (parable). Imagine a person is allowed 24 hours on a desert island filled with jewels. In those hours, he can gather as many as he can. The joy of that time is great, but it is also bittersweet because he knows that, no matter how many jewels he collects, he will have to leave some behind. In this life, we have the joy of being able to perform so many *mitzvos* and learn so much Torah — but there will be the inevitable sadness of the roads not taken and the opportunities not pursued. *Koheles* reminds us not to leave any unfinished business behind.

An opposite *mashal* is given by the Dubner Maggid (Rabbi Yaakov Kranz, 1741–1804), who describes a poor man who finds himself on an island filled with jewels. At first he begins collecting them, overjoyed; after a while, the people of the island tell him that, since jewels are in such abundance there, they consider them worthless. On that island, onions are considered riches. The man begins digging for onions and eventually amasses a great store of them. A rich man, he sails home, only to find that he had been so taken with collecting onions, he forgot to bring home anything of real value — i.e., jewels.

This world is a treasure house of unlimited opportunity, containing jewels in the form of *mitzvos* and Torah learning. We can never collect as much as is available to us, but each moment is precious. In his final moments of life, the Vilna Gaon (whose *yahrtzeit* is during *Sukkos*) clutched his *tzitzis* and cried. In this life, he said, one can buy the opportunity to do a *mitzvah* for a few coins. In the next life, despite all its wonders, that opportunity is lost.

The *simcha* of *Sukkos* and the message of *Koheles*, then, is not the lesson of simple happy endings. Life is difficult and painful; it is also a world filled with opportunity and wonder. The joy of appreciating the opportunities and possibilities — the joy of being in the treasure house — is the joy of both *Sukkos* and *Koheles*.



There is a final point worthy of mention. At the lowest point of *Koheles*, Shlomo HaMelech tells us:

טוֹבִים הַשְּׁנַיִם, מִן הָאֶחָד...כִּי אִם יִפְּלוּ הָאֶחָד יִקְּיֵם אֶת חֵבְרוֹ;  
וְאִילוּ הָאֶחָד שָׁיְפוּל וַיֵּאֵן שְׁנֵי לְהִקְיָמוֹ.

*Two are better than one...For if they fall, one will pick up the other;  
if one is alone and falls, who will help him stand? (4:9–10)*

It is through the meaningful relationships we forge with one another that we find the strength to persevere. The connections we make with others ultimately presage the connection we make with G-d. This is also one of the messages of *Koheles*, and indeed of *Sukkos*, the holiday of unity, as exemplified by the Four Species. In the fullness of those relationships, we can find joy even in moments of challenge. That is the *simcha* of this period.

# Never Stop Speaking

Rabbi Moshe Hauer  
Executive Vice President, Orthodox Union  
Rabbi Emeritus, Congregation Bnai Jacob Shaarei Zion, Baltimore

A number of years ago, I traveled to Atlanta to speak commemorating the *yahrzeit* of an old friend, Moishe Esral, who passed away very suddenly in his fifties. What was most striking about the experience was the clarity I received from his still-grieving family, from the first call asking me to speak through every part of the event itself. They were absolutely clear what the evening was going to be about; it was the same thing it had been about each of the previous years, when they'd had the sad opportunity to commemorate his *yahrzeit*. This was going to be an evening about integrity.

Why? Because it was a value that he held dear in his personal life, in his business dealings, and with his community. He stood for it — and they knew that he stood for it — to the point that there was no question. A night in his memory would be a night where he would continue to speak, to share the message that he shared in his life: Live a life of integrity.

How can we have that level of clarity? How can we craft a message that we will continue to communicate after we have left this world?

My mother once shared with me a Chassidic thought on *Parshas VaYeilech*:

...וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר...  
*And Moshe went and he spoke... (Devarim 31:1)*

Even when Moshe went — even when he left this world — he continued to speak to us, as his message continued to resonate. My mother was applying this thought to my late father: His messages, his words, and what he lived for continue to speak to us even though he has gone.

Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of our creation. It is the day on which G-d said,

...נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם...  
*...let us make man... (Bereishis 1:26)*

The Zohar explains (Vol. 1:13b) that “us” was an invitation to man — the very man being created — to join in the act of creation. G-d was telling us, “I will create the ingredients, the raw materials, but you must finish the job. I will draw the basic portrait, but you must add the glow to the cheeks and the color to the eyes.”

Our Sages considered the ultimate element within man to be the power of speech, termed the *רוח מְמַלְלָא*. G-d gave us the power of speech during our lifetime. When we follow the mandate of *נַעֲשֶׂה אֲדָם* — when we live our lives as we should and complete His creation — we grant ourselves the power of speech *beyond* our lifetime. We continue to speak; our life's message continues to be heard long after we are gone.

When my father passed away, I was not shocked. He was not in his fifties; I was in *my* fifties. My father was over 89 years old, a Holocaust survivor, and had been in very poor health for several years. We were not foolish or naïve. We knew the day would come and, sure enough, it did.

I miss my father very much. We spoke on the phone every day and I miss that. I think of him: how he would react to this or that event or experience that he would have or that I would report to him. I miss how his eyes would light up when we came to see him and I miss watching him sit and sing *zemiros* or share Torah.

But I am not devastated. In fact, every day I think about him; I feel and hear him. He is still speaking to our family because he made so clear what he stood for.

As observant Jews, we went through an amazing process called *shiva*. During that week, we sat in mourning, on the ground with our shoes off, and we spent the week — as *shiva* is meant to be spent — focusing on who our father really was and distilling the messages that he gave us in life so that we would continue to hear and share them after he passed away.

Our first moments of *shiva* gave us one of those messages. Our uncle *z"l*, my father's younger brother, joined us at the *shiva* house right after the funeral. While his own poor health precluded him from spending the full week with us, he did want to at least start the *shiva* with us before continuing to his home in Bnei Brak for the balance. We, of course, wanted to hear what he could share about our father and their early life together — and he told us things that we never knew.

He told us about when they were in Mohilev, the area of Ukraine (Transnistria) to which my father and his family had been banished during the Holocaust. My father — then a *yeshiva bochor*, a young religious student with glasses — was singled out to be tormented by the commandant of the labor camp. He made my father haul logs that were bigger than he was. When they were digging footings for a bridge, the hole became filled with water and they had to form a bucket brigade to empty the water and dump it elsewhere. The officer had my father stand last in the line and told the person before him to dump the water on my father.

All of us were shocked. Our father had never told us anything about this. Sure, he told us about the years spent in Mohilev, but he described it as something like a ghetto. The stories he shared were about his study sessions with Rav Yosef Shtern *zt"l*, where they would learn an extra page of Talmud to make up for the lack of food for supper. He told us about the great rabbis who were his roommates in the cramped space in which they lived, and about the excitement of the

time the *Rebbe* of *Seret* appeared on a *Motzei Shabbos* while they were reciting *Kiddush Levanah* for the month of *Nissan*.

Inspiring memories he shared. The misery he hid.

This brought out to us one of our father's messages, an idea reflected in the last line we inscribed on his *matzeivah*:

אֵד טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל יְמֵי חַיַּי...  
Surely goodness and kindness  
shall pursue me all the days of my life... (Tehillim 23:6)

At his own 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, my father explained that he chose this verse as his mantra in life because he was born on א'כ"א אלול, the 21st (= כ"א) of Elul. He was very positive, seeing all the good that he had in his life.

Yes, the good. This man who lost his mother at ten years old; who was exiled with his family to a miserable labor camp at 14; who survived the Holocaust but had to leave his father and siblings to avoid being drafted into the Romanian army at 19; who came to a new country and a new language, essentially walked himself down to the *chuppah*, and worked hard until he found a proper career position. This man felt that only goodness and kindness pursued him all the days of his life — until he left this world on א'כ"א. That was one of his enduring messages: Be positive, be happy, and see the good in life.

The Netziv (*Devarim* 25:9) offers a fascinating explanation of the unusual ritual of *chalitzah*, the removal of the shoe of the surviving brother who refuses to marry his deceased brother's childless widow in fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *yibum*. The Netziv explains that the shoe represents the physical body of the person (as we find that Hashem instructs Moshe to remove his shoes — to step out of his physical existence — when encountering G-d at the burning bush). The *mitzvah* that this man was presented with was the opportunity to step out of himself and do something to perpetuate the life of his deceased brother. By marrying his deceased brother's wife — not as his own, but for the sake of his brother — he would be carrying forward the spirit and life of his brother, continuing his presence in the world.

We do the same thing when we mourn: we take off our shoes. Evidently, this is the time for us to step out of ourselves and to realize that it is now our task to consciously do that which we have been unconsciously doing every day of our lives: to continue to share the messages of our parents. We step out of our own selves to be them, to be their continuity.

There is a fascinating halachic irony. As we all know, the mourner returns from the funeral to eat a hard-boiled egg. One of the basic reasons for this is the symbolism of the oval egg, which has no opening or "mouth." So, too, a mourner is silent, closed-mouthed. Yet, the *halachah* states that, when visiting a mourner, the visitor should be silent until the mourner speaks

first. Isn't it the mourner who is supposed to be closed-mouthed? Why should it fall to him to be the conversation starter?

Perhaps this custom expresses the following: We spend all our life talking, using that power of speech that G-d gave us. But now that our parent is gone, we must stop talking. No, not stop for the week or even for the day — but for long enough that, when we start speaking again, it will be with the realization that “from here on, these are not my words. I stepped out of my shoes, I stepped out of myself, and I stepped out of my voice. I am now speaking *שְׁל מֵת*, I am carrying forth the power of speech of my parent, who will live on through my words.”  
*שְׁפָתוֹתַי דּוֹבְבוֹת בְּקִבְרִי — his lips move in the grave* (Sanhedrin 90b).

The Talmud Bavli (*Taanis* 11a) teaches that, after a person is gone from this world, the walls of his house tell the story of his life — *כִּי אָבֹן מְקִיר תִּזְעַק*. As we go about life, we come to realize that we grant everything around us the power of speech; we make everything around us reflect our values and our message, tell our story. Sitting *shiva* brings that home as well: the enduring messages of our loved one are embedded in their environment.

Our father's house was filled with *sefarim* (Torah texts). He had *sefarim* everywhere, with bent corners and pen marks and notes stuffed in them. To him, learning was the *shira*, the song, of Torah. He did not study Torah just because it was an obligation; it was his love. He studied it all the time. He studied it as a child in Chassidic *yeshivos* in Europe, as a teenager in the labor camp, as a rabbi in adulthood, and as a retiree in Yerushalayim. And he especially sought out and found the inspiration that would come from the words of the Torah.

His enduring message is reflected in the verse my mother *תלחט"א* had inscribed as the first line on our father's *Matzeivah*:

*מָה אֶהְבֶּתִי תוֹרָתְךָ : כָּל הַיּוֹם הִיא שִׁחֲתִי .*  
*How I love your Torah; I discuss it all day. (Tehillim 119:97)*

*Koheles* (7:2) taught that is good to go to a house of mourning, as the living take what they see there to heart. The living come, they see the walls of the house and the environment that the person created; they hear (hopefully) good things, such as the discussion of what aspect of this person — the deceased — is going to live on. They then take this to heart: “What will be said about me? Have I crafted the message — am I *living* the message — that will continue to speak for me long after I am gone?”

Rav Elchonon Wasserman HY"D wrote many *sefarim*, and all of them were called *קובץ*, a *collection of*: collections of *שיעורים*, lectures; of *הערות*, notes; of *מאמרים*, essays. I read once (I do not recall where) that he did this because he felt that what he was writing was not his own — but the collected insights of those who had taught and guided him.

I feel the same way. I am not a clone of my father; we are very different in many ways. But the more time that goes by, especially through *shiva* and during the past few years, the more I realize that the things that I say and teach are really the collected values and insights — the strength and passion — that I was privileged to receive from him. It is not my voice, it is his.

All of us need to find that eternal voice within ourselves. We must consider how we will perpetuate the lasting messages of those who brought us into this world and formulate our own lasting messages. We should find that voice and those messages and carry them forward, loud and clear.

That is a task before us during the *Yamim Noraim*. This is when we stand and pray to be granted another year of life. But we must not only seek a year, not even 120 years. We must go for the gold. We must take off our shoes, step out of our physical, temporal selves, and say to ourselves: What can I do to make myself eternal? What can I do so that my voice and message will live on?

That is what each of us must do: Step out of our shoes and into eternity.

## Agudath Israel in Washington: After 30+ Years, Some Reflections

Rabbi Abba Cohen

Vice President for Government Affairs, Washington Director and Counsel,  
Agudath Israel of America

Close to thirty-five years ago, Agudath Israel of America became the first Orthodox Jewish organization to establish an office in Washington. Our rabbinic and lay leadership felt the political culture and sophistication of the Orthodox community had made the time ripe to upgrade the level of our work and open a government liaison office in the nation's capital.

It is now many years later and Agudath Israel's Washington Office remains firmly planted in the federal city and its halls of government. Our executive, legislative and judicial activity, complemented by the later opening of offices by the Orthodox Union and American Friends of Lubavitch, has resulted in Orthodox advocacy that is both effective and highly regarded. We are at the table and we are making our mark.

The Washington achievements of Agudath Israel and its partners could *Baruch Hashem* fill many pages. What I offer here instead are the thoughts of an Orthodox Jewish advocate whose honor it has been to head Agudath Israel's Washington Office for over three decades through numerous presidencies and congresses, through scores of legislative and public policy initiatives.

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Agudath Israel's most immediate mission in Washington is to help shape legislation and public policy that are beneficial to, and protect the interests of, the Jewish community as a whole — and the Orthodox community in particular — at home and abroad.

But the most vital part of our mission in government affairs, as in all areas of life, is the imperative of *kiddush Hashem*. Not only does this encompass our words and actions, character and comportment, but also the positions we take on legislation and public policy.

American Jews are profoundly fortunate to live in this *medina shel chesed* (benevolent country), which offers its citizens unprecedented freedoms and security. We are obligated to observe its laws, contribute to its welfare and, in our synagogues, pray for its peace. And like all Americans in this democratic republic, we are invited to be part of its legislative and electoral processes to seek the wellbeing of our communities and families.

In Agudath Israel's advocacy, this *hakaras hatov* (gratitude) and the *kavod hamalchus* (respect for the government) that stems from it, have always been guiding principles. While we all enjoy

freedom of speech, there are those inside and outside the Jewish community who have allowed policy differences to spill over into vicious and degrading ad hominem attacks and the vilest of rhetoric. The level of anger and hostility has grown dramatically in recent years from all corners of the political spectrum. Orthodox Jews, too, sometimes find ourselves on opposite sides on controversial issues with members of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. But, as our *mesorah* teaches, our response must always be dignified, respectful, and temperate.

This is also true of the education and outreach we conduct on an ongoing basis. It is integral to our work that we transmit to our government leaders an understanding of Torah values and the needs of our community — who we are and the ideals for which we stand. This exercise is necessary if we are going to effectively advocate for the community and if we are going to develop the relationships so critically important to our work. But it must always be done with sensitivity and humility.

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A critical aspect of our *kiddush Hashem* mission in Washington is to comment on and help steer the nation's social and moral discourse. It is no secret that in America today there is both the sense, and the reality, that many traditional values are under threat. It is neither our intention nor our desire to force our religious views on other Americans or to make the United States Code an English version of the *Shulchan Aruch*.

But Jews do, indeed, have a responsibility towards the tenor and tone of the society in which we live — that its values and actions embody ethics, morality, and kindness; that they eschew hate, discrimination, and violence. On a more direct community level, Orthodox Jews also cannot realistically insulate themselves from the surrounding society and, therefore, have a strong stake in the atmosphere and influences that affect their lives and the lives of their children.

It is entirely appropriate that we bring Jewish perspectives to national discussion and debate. American law is informed by many sources from many quarters, including religious viewpoints from diverse communities. Indeed, it is intended to be so. Rather than being offensive to constitutional principles, faith communities have the right, and the obligation, to be an integral part of the national discourse.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of our role in advocacy emanates from our allegiance to *kavod haTorah*. It is a tragic fact in contemporary Jewish life that many Jewish organizations have grasped onto perspectives that do not conform to our *mesorah* and, in many instances, are the main proponents of these views. When Jewish organizations, purporting to represent Jewish law and values, speak out and falsify our Torah's teachings on such issues as abortion, gender, and sexuality, a dreadful *chilul Hashem* has been perpetrated and the honor of the Torah must be restored by setting the record straight.



To ensure that the formulation of Orthodox advocacy remains true to our values, we turn to our Torah leadership. Throughout Jewish history, *gedolei Yisrael* have constituted an integral and indispensable force in how Jewish communities relate to governmental authority. Indeed, whatever the era and country, our *einei ha'eidah* (literally, *the eyes of the nation*) have acted as policymakers, advocates, spokesmen — even members of royal courts and legislatures — to guide their brethren through the prism of Torah and plead for their welfare before temporal power and authority. With challenges to, and opportunities for, Orthodox Jewry coming from so many quarters, the same is surely true today. There has perhaps never been a time in the modern era when turning to our *gedolim* for guidance has been so critical.

The community itself also has an important role to play, as the *da'as hakahal* (the perspective of the community) is vital to this process. Our sages have always taken into account the sensitivities of the community, as well as the advice of experts across various disciplines, to garner the information and input they need to make these Torah-directed decisions. The need for this, too, is great and will surely continue.

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The conduct of Orthodox advocacy and its fealty to Torah and Torah leaders is central to us, but its effects are meaningfully felt on Capitol Hill as well. Some in our own community have asked me whether our adherence to Orthodox Judaism actually hurts us in this rapidly changing world. In my experience, I have found the opposite to be true — indeed, our values and religious practices have gained us much respect in the halls of government.

This is not to suggest that everyone agrees with, or even likes, what we stand for. And it does not mean our legislative agenda does not have its opponents. But, even in the rarified atmosphere of the political world, there is still an appreciation by many for a community that holds on sincerely and tightly to their religious beliefs; for views and lifestyles that are seen as being steeped in ancient law, customs, and faith; and for positions that do not flip-flop in society's prevailing winds.

Orthodox engagement also conveys an important message to those in the halls of power — that the Jewish community is not monolithic. To some, it was an eye-opening realization. For decades, Jewish political and legal advocacy rested in the hands of groups of basically one mind. There was little difference within the larger Jewish establishment on issues related to church-state relations, religious freedom, civil rights, etc., and the positions of the community were uniform and predictable.

Many lawmakers and religious groups, however, welcome a voice that they see as authentically Jewish but one that offers a different perspective on issues of the day. In this way, we are a valuable asset to members on both sides of the aisle and of different political persuasions.

I offer a final thought on partisanship and personalities. Each member of our community has the right to look at the issues and the candidates and decide for himself or herself whom and what to endorse. Each voter has a right to decide whether his or her values are reflected in a particular political party or ideology and opt to be aligned with that party or ideology.

But, in my experience, it is a mistake to promote the idea that the Orthodox community, in general, can neatly be associated with personalities, parties or ideologies. We are not Democrats or Republicans, Conservatives or Liberals. Rather, we are guided by a Torah philosophy that often may, and does, cut across these lines.

Partisanship hurts us in tangible ways. Political and party labels are often used to denigrate or dismiss communities from public policy conversations. Once pigeonholed, perceptions of objectivity — and, consequently, credibility — are also lost.

Partisanship has electoral consequences as well. Except for small geographical pockets, the power of the Orthodox community does not stem from its numbers. Rather, the voting booth power it enjoys is seen in the fact that it is viewed as a 'swing vote' that looks at individual candidates and positions, and is not necessarily beholden to party. As a swing vote, the community can help change outcomes, especially in elections projected to be won by a small margin, and in that way may wield more strength than its numbers might otherwise indicate.

Finally, political representation is often bifurcated, with one party holding power on the federal level and the other dominating state and local governments. In this scenario, working with both parties is essential.

Maintaining bipartisan relationships is to our advantage, and that is true even when a representative or senator might hold views that diverge from many of our own. There might be areas where cooperation proves to be futile but we can often identify areas of agreement in which we can find common ground and work together. If partisanship stands in the way of seeking mutual interests, we are only shortchanging our community.

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There is a well-known story about Agudath Israel's late esteemed leader, Rabbi Moshe Sherer, z"l, and HaRav Yitzchak Hutner, z"l, Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin and a member of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah. Rabbi Sherer had been despondent over the striking down of an effort he had been tirelessly spearheading which would have been of great assistance to yeshiva education and the Orthodox community.

Hearing that this was causing Rabbi Sherer much anguish, Rav Hutner wrote a note to Rabbi Sherer reminding him that, in our *mesorah*, advocacy — *shtadlanus* — is not about winning or losing; our obligation is not necessarily to succeed in our endeavors. Instead, our responsibility is to try, to make the best effort we can, and to remember that the rest is in *Hakadosh Baruch Hu's* hands.

Indeed, that is what we must do. We are all *shtadlanim* and we should give it our best effort — educating our elected officials, mobilizing our community, encouraging voting and political engagement — and that is not merely the only thing we can do, it is the best thing we can do. We should never lose sight of the fact that “success” is not what is expected of us and does not ultimately rest in our hands. But we must try.

Let us join together and advocate for our Torah, for our people, and for our families and let us find favor with the *Mamlich Melachim V’Lo HaMelucha*.

*For more information about Agudath Israel of America’s Washington Office and its efforts, please visit [aqudah.org/washington-dc](http://aqudah.org/washington-dc).*

## Serving Hashem; Serving America

Dov S. Zakheim

Throughout my career, I never had any problems with Shabbat, Yom Tov, or any other matter relating to my Orthodox practices. That observation applies to my years at the Congressional Budget Office, where I first worked for the U.S. government, through my time in the Reagan Administration and, years later, that of the George W. Bush Administration. On the contrary, I found that my colleagues — notably my non-Jewish colleagues — were willing to make special provisions for me, especially when it came to Shabbat. In fact, even when I was an advisor to then-Governor Bush, Condoleezza Rice, leader of our foreign and national security policy team (the so-called “Vulcans”) made every effort to accommodate my Shabbat needs when we had a series of weekend meetings at Stanford where she was then provost.

The issue of Shabbat also arose when I met with Donald Rumsfeld at the Four Seasons Hotel within days of President-elect Bush’s late-December announcement that he was nominating Rumsfeld to be Secretary of Defense. After Don offered me the job as Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), having told me that “the budget is policy,” I felt that I had to be open with him about Shabbat. I informed him that I did not work on Friday nights and Saturdays. He said that was no problem. At that point I felt slightly guilty and added, “But I do work if life is in danger.” He responded, “In that case, in the DoD life is always in danger.” I told him, “I don’t mean routine meetings.” He accepted that.

Indeed, during my tenure from 2001–2004, I would delegate my principal deputy to attend meetings that were held on Saturdays. I only worked on Shabbat and Yom Tov in the aftermath of 9/11, when our forces were initially deployed to Afghanistan. In fact, I recall that on Shemini Atzeret (which that year fell on October 9, two days after the start of Operation Enduring Freedom), I managed to realize three “firsts”: It was the first time I had ever worked on Yom Tov; it was the first time I had ever been driven in a car on Yom Tov; and it was the first time I was driven directly from the Pentagon to *shul* (Kemp Mill Synagogue) to be in time for Mincha!

During those early days of the war in Afghanistan, I often found myself working on Friday nights. After all, I had to ensure that our forces — who, as we all know, comprise all races and religions — had available funds to speed whatever materiel they needed to the field. It was indeed a matter of *pikuach nefesh*. Nevertheless, I found it to be an “out of body” experience and I never felt comfortable doing what I knew I needed to do. Indeed, although my staff — all of whom were not Jewish — knew the “rule” that life-threatening emergencies overrode Shabbat laws, they were deeply concerned that I was missing Friday night services. They would urge me to hurry up and finish my work so that I could get home quickly.

On the other hand, the only time when I was pushed to work late on Erev Shabbat was when I was still a relatively junior official, working for a Jewish assistant secretary. One Friday

afternoon in the early winter, as I was about to leave the office, he told me, "I'll give you a dispensation to work late." I replied, "Only G-d gives dispensations, and He hasn't given me one."

I had little difficulty with issues such as travel on Shabbat. I simply worked my flights around that day. With respect to other requirements related to my religious practice, I would tell the military to treat me as they did Senator Joseph Lieberman, who was a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and therefore made many overseas trips to military facilities. I never had any challenges in that regard.

Throughout my government career, I never encountered any degree of anti-Semitism. In fact, I can only recall one instance where a two-star general made an off-hand remark that might have been interpreted as demeaning Jewish practice. On the other hand, when the Pentagon organized my swearing-in ceremony, in the presence of not only Secretary Rumsfeld and other senior government officials but also foreign ambassadors from numerous countries, Rabbi Jack Bieler, then the *mara d'asra* of KMS, privileged the audience with his remarks. I should add that when my father *zt"l* was *niftar* in 2002, I was able to assemble a *minyan* for *kaddish* in my office. A number of the people attending told me that this was the first time they had attended a *minyan* since their bar mitzvah decades earlier.

When I did find myself (and my young children) harassed, sadly it was by my fellow Jews. This took place in the mid-1980s, when I led the Defense Department's effort to analyze the costs of Israel's Lavi fighter aircraft project, concluding that the costs outweighed the benefits of expending U.S. dollars for its completion. What most pro-Israel American Jews did not realize was that not only Defense Minister Yitzchak Rabin, but also Air Force Chief of Staff Avihu Bin Nun as well as IDF Deputy Chief of Staff Dan Shomron (who then rose to be IDF Chief of Staff), opposed the project.

On the other hand, I asked for, and received, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's approval to work with the Israeli Navy on developing and funding their plans for a new, more capable submarine called the Dolphin, as well as for building a new class of corvettes (small but powerful surface ships) called the Sa'ar Five. This effort proved very successful; both programs were funded. The submarine is now the backbone of Israel's deterrent force, especially against Iran.

Moreover, the funds that Israel saved from not proceeding with the Lavi not only covered the costs of the submarine and the surface ships, but also those of the Merkava tank, which has proved itself in numerous Israeli land force operations. The funds that were saved also helped launch Israel's missile defense program — which I first suggested to Defense Minister Rabin in 1987 and which led to the development of the Arrow anti-missile system — as well as Israel's satellite program. Israel was also able to acquire an upgraded version of the F-16 fighter jet, which my team of experts had concluded was far more capable as a multi-role (air-to-air and

air-to-ground) system than the Lavi aircraft would have been. None of this would have been possible if the Lavi project had gone ahead, given the level of American foreign military financing for Israel at that time.

Like Senator Lieberman, I was not the only, nor the most senior Orthodox Jew to hold a top government position. Others have included Jack Lew, who successively served as Deputy Secretary of State, President Obama's Chief of Staff, and Secretary of the Treasury; Tevi Troy, who served as Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services in the George W. Bush Administration; and of course, Jared Kushner, Assistant to President Trump. Where I differed from them was that, in addition to my sub-cabinet office which made me the equivalent of a Minister of State or Deputy Minister in other countries, I also had received *semicha*. That made me the first Diaspora Jew to be a *musmach* and an official government minister (as opposed to the many "court Jews" who never were permitted to be formal government officials) in half a millennium, if not longer.

Perhaps because of that rather unusual combination, I looked to my long-standing role model, Nehemiah ben Hachaliah, for both moral and halachic inspiration. Nehemiah was more than just a cupbearer to the king. Ancient Near Eastern records indicate that cupbearers were powerful courtiers, which may be the reason Persian Emperor Artaxerxes agreed to his request to lead a military unit to Jerusalem. Nehemiah proceeded to rebuild the city's walls; organize its defenses; promote economic reform; promulgate the first-ever national constitution; together with Ezra, lead a major ceremonial procession; advocate for the use of Hebrew in households; and institute new *halachot* that ever since have been normative. As a prototype of what in contemporary terms is a "modern Orthodox" Jew, he was an inspiration.

Subsequent to my departure from government, I drew upon my experience, as well as Shabbat lectures that I had given between Mincha and Ma'ariv at KMS, to publish a biography of Nehemiah, entitled *Nehemiah: Statesman and Sage* (Maggid, 2016) and an article providing halachic perspectives for officials serving in or dealing with the United States government (<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/practicing-jews-serving-national-security-community-dr-dov-zakheim>). The former has become a popular volume in *Tanach* study groups; the latter has proved useful for others who wish to blend their government service with commitment to *halacha*.

My government service placed me in a position to argue on behalf of fellow Jews wherever they might be. I was able to support the organization *Asra Kadisha* (The Committee for the Preservation of Gravesites) when it sought to protect cemeteries in locales such as Cairo. Because of my access to senior leaders, I assisted those visiting the grave of Rav Nachman of Bratslav who were having difficulties with the local population of Uman. And I am proud to have been part of the team that rescued Jewish materials, including important *seforim*, from Iraq, conveying them to America by military air.

There is no reason why one cannot simultaneously serve Hashem, one's country, and the Jewish people. It was my *zechut* to do all three.

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*Dov S. Zakheim was Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Planning and Resources) from 1985–1987. He was Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), Chief DoD Financial Officer from 2001–2004 and civilian coordinator for Afghanistan from 2002–2004. He holds a B.A. from Columbia University, a doctorate from Oxford University, and semicha from HaGaon Harav Shmuel Walkin.*

# The State of Jewish Outreach in the Capital City...and Beyond

Rabbi Ari Koretzky  
Executive Director, MEOR Maryland

The Greater Washington region is graced with a broad range of fine organizations offering informal or extracurricular Jewish education to every demographic and observance level. Young children, teenagers, young professionals, families at varying stages, and seniors all benefit from dedicated professionals seeking to impart knowledge and passion to their constituents.

While outlining the heroic efforts of all of these organizations would exceed our space limitations, I would like to highlight the myriad offerings targeting one demographic slice — the university population — given my own personal investment in that space.

The National Capital Region houses an array of outstanding public and private universities, including the University of Maryland, College Park; George Washington University; American University; Georgetown University; George Mason University; and others. Collectively, more than 12,000 Jewish students attend these schools.

That said, most readers likely are aware of the frightening state of Jewish literacy and affiliation in our current society. Inter-marriage rates outside the Orthodox community stand at over 70%. According to the 2013 and 2020 reports by the Pew Research Center, 79% of our Jewish brothers and sisters attend synagogue less than two times per year, with the majority never attending at all. Today, the largest “denomination” of Jewish affiliation is “unaffiliated” (the so-called “nones”).

Compounding matters, the college years — a time of limited structure and responsibility — have always represented a nadir in young people’s religious affiliation; the number of students eschewing religion altogether has accelerated dramatically in the last several decades (CIRP Freshman Survey).

However, precisely because students are: away from home, often for the first time; exploring multiple facets of their identities during a transitional period; blessed with a great deal of discretionary time; and unburdened by the lifelong responsibilities of work and family, they can not only be reached, but profoundly inspired, if suitably engaged.

Multiple organizations and initiatives expend significant resources and creativity to attract, educate, and empower this cohort of young men and women, in particular the vast majority who did not merit a primary day school or yeshiva education.

The organization that I operate, MEOR Maryland, is part of a collaborative of Jewish outreach outfits positioned at leading universities, largely (though not exclusively) on the East Coast. In turn, we are affiliated with a (larger) umbrella enterprise known as Olami, which operates in



over twenty countries around the world. Our focus is (almost) exclusively on students who have not grown up with extensive religious education — though, of course, a wide range of varying backgrounds can fit into that description, and exceptions are inevitable.

At MEOR, we focus primarily on Jewish education — literacy and inspirational content. But, in our dynamic, multi-sensory world, “education” can (and must) unfold at a Shabbos table, on a trek through the Golan, or on the blood-soaked streets of Eastern Europe, as much as in a classroom or seminar setting. We seek to blend more formal modalities (speakers, discussions, and one-on-one “*chavrusa*” study) with the experiential education of *Shabbatonim*, immersive trips, and other such forums.

Locally, MEOR operates at the University of Maryland and George Washington University, while also servicing some individuals at American and Georgetown Universities. Our Maryland branch operates out of a single-family house in College Park’s “Old Towne” neighborhood, with imminent plans to build a beautiful new facility on that existing property. MEOR’s GW division, meanwhile, will shortly be shifting operations to the brand new “J Station,” a recently renovated private event space abutting Foggy Bottom. This center headquarters Mesorah DC, Rabbi Zvi Teitelbaum’s organization for area young professionals.

At the risk of “burying the lead,” most people associate Jewish life on campus with Hillel — and with good reason. At nearly 100 years old — its germination began in 1923 — Hillel is by far the longest-standing organization in the campus sector, serving over 550 schools globally.

Hillel is certainly not defined narrowly as an Orthodox “outreach” organization; it is, by charter and in function, a pluralistic institution, tasked with satisfying the broadest range of Jewish needs at any given school. Given the unique demographics of the University of Maryland, for example, this mandates a full complement of kosher dining, classes, and prayer services for students of Orthodox persuasion. Nevertheless, Maryland Hillel certainly aims to create a broad and inviting atmosphere for *all* Jewish students, and some programming explicitly attracts those outside the bounds of weekly or daily involvement.

Birthright Israel is perhaps the most salient example. Maryland Hillel recently brought 300 (!) students to the Holy Land for this 10-day, life-changing excursion; dozens are remaining in the country for a summer-long internship program through Onward Israel.

Hillel also runs the Jewish Life Fellowship (JLF), a semester-long educational program, and hosts dozens of cultural, spiritual, and Israel-related programs throughout the year.

Maryland Hillel, led by Silver Spring native Rabbi Ari Israel, is poised to break ground on a stunning, state-of-the-art facility at the nexus of the campus and Rte. 1, College Park’s main commercial artery. It is projected to become one of the signature Hillel buildings in the country, a fitting home to an extraordinarily vibrant community and suite of programming.

Some ten miles southwest, George Washington Hillel recently inaugurated an attractive new Hillel Center, a project in which Kemp Mill residents and philanthropists Manette and Louis Mayberg were intimately involved. While I am less familiar with this specific operation — and less still with parallel ones at other area schools — Hillel’s footprint remains extensive and its programming continues to evolve to meet the needs of contemporary college students.

Obviously, wherever Jewish life does or could flourish, Chabad is present to play a major role. Chabad on Campus was founded in 1969, with UCLA boasting the first Chabad House serving a university population. Estimates place the current number of such operations at 258 nationwide.

Chabad *shluchim* (emissaries), in whatever domain, demonstrate unrivaled commitment, warmth, and passion in their calling. The local professionals who staff the area’s campuses embody this admirable set of qualities.

Today, Rabbi Eli Backman is the longest-serving member of the Jewish clergy at the University of Maryland. He regularly hosts large crowds for Shabbos meals; offers an array of classes at locations all around campus, as well as in fraternity houses; and provides holiday services — blowing *shofar*, reading *megillah*, shaking *lulav* and *esrog* — with enormous dedication and love. As is the case with all *shluchim*, Rabbi Backman lives with his wonderful family “on location” — in a Chabad House adjacent to campus — offering an omnipresent address for students with any Jewish need. All the other major universities in Maryland, DC, and Northern Virginia are graced with a Chabad presence as well.

Observers frequently inquire about the distinctions between these various organizations or implicitly question the need for myriad approaches. The truth really is the opposite! A friend at Hillel once quipped to me that we could establish ten organizations at Maryland alone and *still* not reach every Jewish student; there is so, so much work to do.

Of course, while the clientele served by these organizations invariably overlap, each group does attract many different students — a function of varying approaches, programming, points of emphasis, and staff personalities. And yes, occasionally, some healthy, respectful competition can introduce a capitalist spirit to this nonprofit arena, engendering greater creativity and diligence among these seasoned professionals.

Still, with enhanced funding and, in particular, with greater manpower, all these institutions could reach more students and deepen the experience for those already involved. Our fabulous students — and, indeed, the Jewish future itself — deserve nothing less.

## Interview with Rabbi Sholem Fishbane: Contemporary Kashrus in America, from National Hechsherim to Local Vaadim

*Rabbi Moshe Walter and Mindy Tolchinsky recently spoke with Rabbi Sholem Fishbane, Kashrus Administrator of the Chicago Rabbinical Council (CRC) and Executive Director of the Association of Kashrus Organizations (AKO) regarding issues related to kashrus and hashgacha organizations.*

**In addition to your role as Kashrus Administrator for the CRC, you serve as Executive Director of the Association of Kashrus Organizations (AKO). Please describe AKO and why it was created.**

AKO was founded in 1985 as ACKO, the Association of Community Kashrus Organizations, to address the *kashrus* issues facing local *Vaadei HaKashrus* (*kashrus* certifying agencies) across the world. It soon became clear that the participation of the larger, national *kashrus* agencies was necessary to properly confront these challenges. The organization rebranded as the Association of Kashrus Organizations to unite different agencies under one umbrella in order to raise and maintain the highest standards of *kashrus*. AKO is a forum in which member agencies can create unified guidelines for mutually accepted *kashrus* standards, address emergency *kashrus* situations, and discuss issues that arise across the *kashrus* industry.

I was asked to oversee AKO in 2003. This was shortly after I had attended one of my first AKO meetings, at which there were only six participants. After I took over, we created an Executive Board with representatives of the major national *kashrus* agencies and a rotating seat for representatives of the local *Vaadei HaKashrus*. *Baruch Hashem*, there are now approximately 110 members; our last convention had 190 participants!

**How does AKO work to achieve its goals?**

While Executive Board members vote on potential AKO members, the real backbone of AKO consists of its subcommittees. These committees assemble the best experts in various areas of *kashrus* — including, for example, ingredients, minimum *kashrus* standards, *yoshon*, Pesach, transportation, liquor, and camp *kashrus*. The subcommittees research and examine issues across their subject area, arrive at a consensus, and bring their recommendations to the Executive Board for a vote — which then becomes the policy of all AKO member organizations.

For example, the Ingredients Committee — our most active subcommittee — consists of experts in the realms of chemistry and engineering, along with people well-versed in world markets and manufacturing, to determine which ingredients do not require a *hechsher*. This is an ever-changing list, due to movements in world markets and modifications in processing and manufacturing.

Another subcommittee, the Minimum Standards Committee, recommends the *kashrus* standards that must be upheld by AKO member agencies. Potential AKO members must certify and demonstrate that they adhere to these minimum standards in order to be considered for membership.

Together, the AKO committee members, board members, and member agencies work to establish, uphold, and advance the standards of *kashrus* across our communities.

**How does the role of the local *Vaad HaKashrus* differ from that of a national *hashgacha* organization, in your view?**

The role of the local *vaad* is to ensure the *kashrus* of the community and its local kosher establishments. In contrast, the job of the national *hashgacha* organization is to understand and invest time and money to research world markets and chemistry to ensure the *kashrus* and availability of kosher products. It is important that each of these groups understand the nature of their role in order to coexist for the benefit of the kosher consumer.

**What's the value and importance of a local *Vaad HaKashrus*?**

A local *vaad*, whose *rabbonim* dictate *kashrus* protocols and policy, is the gold standard for *kashrus*. The local rabbinate understands the community, its establishments, and constituency better than any outside *hashgacha* agency and can best assess the *kashrus* needs and rules appropriate for the city. These Rabbis are invested in the success of their congregations and the city, and are best suited and equipped to manage the kosher program, in the same way that they run the local *Beis Din* and lead other core communal organizations. Moreover — and arguably most importantly — a local *Vaad HaKashrus* establishes uniformity, with a single standard that can be relied upon and accepted by all segments of a community.

**What are the benefits of membership in AKO to local *Vaadei HaKashrus*?**

It is beneficial for a local *Vaad HaKashrus* to be part of a national *kashrus* alliance that sets guidelines and protocols for its member agencies. In this manner, the local *vaad* can assure vendors and consumers that the protocols and regulations that it is maintaining are the “industry standard” for *kashrus* agencies across the U.S. and the world.

AKO members are protected by AKO rules and can access a mediation board that works to mediate disputes between member agencies. For example, if one *hashgacha* agency removes its certification from a specific vendor or establishment, another member agency will not move to certify that same vendor or establishment until it communicates with the original agency to determine if there have been *kashrus* violations or if there are fees due that first agency. Disputes in these areas are brought to the mediation board for mutual resolution.

AKO’s conventions are primarily focused on the local *vaadim*, who are able to discuss issues and concerns both with one another and with the national *hashgacha* agencies. It is at these conventions that local *vaadim* are able to reach understandings with the national *hashgacha*

agencies wherein, for example, the certification of an industry located in the *vaad's* geographical area becomes the sole purview of the local *vaad*.

**Many consumers have the impression that the various national *kashrus* organizations simply compete with one another. Do national *kashrus* organizations actually work together?**

The national *kashrus* agencies do, in fact, compete strongly with one another for market share, to certify specific products and vendors, etc. However, they also work together in a cooperative environment. While there undoubtedly was communication between these organizations before the advent of AKO, there has been great progress in the realm of cooperation and mutual respect due to their participation in AKO. When you sit regularly across the table from the leader of another *kashrus* agency, you learn that he is coming from a position of *emes* — of truth — with the shared motivation of increasing and advancing *kashrus* observance. This mutual understanding, that the goal of all the participants is to raise the level of *kashrus* across our communities, makes cooperation and compromise more possible.

That is the beauty of AKO: that it's made up of member organizations populated by *rabbonim* who truly care about their kosher-observant consumers. They are answering a life calling.

I like to quote Rav Elya Brudny, who declared at an AKO convention that, much like our armed services are composed of different forces — the Air Force, the Army, the Navy, etc. — so too the *Ribono Shel Olam's* Army is composed of *Chinuch*, *Rabbanus*, and *Kashrus*. All these parts are devoted to bringing people closer to *HKB"H*, and one part will not work without the others. Without *kashrus*, it just doesn't work. We are very proud to have those who have that outlook as AKO members.

**What do you think is the most important advancement in the realm of *kashrus* today?**

The greatest achievement is, without a doubt, the people who are choosing to enter the field of *kashrus* today. Many years ago, the field of *kashrus* was populated by nice, *frum* people with little educational background and even less motivation. Today's *kashrus* professionals are highly qualified, motivated, and sincere, and possess a love of both science and *kashrus*. These professionals are devoted to their work and certainly enhance the observance of *kashrus* across our communities.

**What challenges do you see in the field of *kashrus* today?**

There is no question that hiring and maintaining adequate *mashgichim* (*kashrus* supervisors) is a very difficult challenge facing local *Vaadei HaKashrus* today. This is partly due to the general upheaval in the workplace due to the Covid pandemic, which has resulted in a lack of people interested in taking these positions.

Local *Vaadei HaKashrus* need to work to increase the attractiveness of these positions, by raising salaries, identifying *mashgichim* with enhanced titles, and contracting with vendors to

ensure that *mashgichim* are not assigned menial tasks. *Mashgichim* should feel pride in their work and should be able to adequately support their families.

### **What advancements or challenges do you see on the horizon for *kashrus* agencies?**

The main issue that I perceive is the need for *kashrus* education. I think that our achievements may have begun to hurt us. We have done such an excellent job of bringing kosher products to our customers that our consumers have stopped “thinking kosher.” It is beginning to backfire on us. The consumer is not taking responsibility for his/her individual *kashrus* decisions and just assumes that others have assumed that responsibility.

For example, a customer enters a liquor store owned by a Jew. The store offers both kosher and non-kosher products. The store owner assumes that the customer has done his “due diligence” and has researched the products that are kosher; the consumer, on the other hand, assumes that because the store owner is Jewish the entire product selection is kosher.

We need to pause and start *kashrus* awareness education for the faithful. To that end, AKO has created the Kashrus Awareness Project to bring this issue to the forefront of the minds of kosher consumers. (To learn more about the Kashrus Awareness Project, please visit [kashrusawareness.com](http://kashrusawareness.com).)

As part of our *kashrus* awareness initiatives, AKO has begun a free service to summer camps, in which we offer to come in before the start of the camp season to educate them in the maintenance of a kosher camp kitchen. While the products being ordered are under kosher supervision, there may be gaps in the *kashrus* knowledge base of those actually running the kitchen.

Another area that *kashrus* agencies will need to address is home businesses offering prepared foods to their customers. This field has grown exponentially as a result of the pandemic, during which time many people have started home businesses. These enterprises present a whole new realm of issues that will need to be examined and resolved.

### **What would you like the average kosher consumer to understand about *kashrus* supervision?**

If the average consumer would take the time to follow one of us for a day or two, the words “politics” and “competition” would vanish from their *kashrus* vocabulary. These concepts would be replaced by true respect and admiration for what we do. The people who work in *kashrus* today are genuinely motivated to utilize the unique *kochos* (talents) endowed to them by *HKB”H* to advance the observance of *kashrus* in our communities.

# Vegetable Checking for Today's Kosher Consumer

Rabbi Dovid Stern  
Rabbinic Coordinator, Capitol K and Star-K

Awareness of insect infestation in fruits and vegetables, and the need to check for it, has slowly grown in the consciousness of the kosher-observant public over the past decade.

Pre-checked produce of all kinds now populates the shelves of kosher supermarkets, while kashrus agencies field countless questions from confused consumers regarding how to prepare their favorite vegetable.

This renewed interest, however, has brought with it inevitable questions: What changed? Why did I never hear of this when I was growing up? Is this a new *chumrah* (stringency)? I looked at my lettuce and didn't see anything: Is that good enough? This article will attempt to address these and other common questions.

Eating insects is a severe Torah prohibition. The Torah states (*Vayikra* 11:41):

וְכָל הַשֶּׁרֶץ הַשָּׂרֵץ עַל הָאָרֶץ שֶׁקָּץ הוּא, לֹא יֵאָכֵל.

*And all teeming things that teem on the ground  
are an abomination, they shall not be eaten.*<sup>1</sup>

By eating a single bug, one can transgress as many as six distinct prohibitions.<sup>2</sup> Halacha mandates that produce that is commonly infested needs to be checked before eating.<sup>3</sup> An entire chapter in *Shulchan Aruch* is devoted to this topic.<sup>4</sup>

This prohibition is not limited to large, easy-to-find bugs. Even insects that are very small and can only be seen by holding the vegetables over a light are forbidden.<sup>5</sup> The act of checking can also be slow and painstaking; the *poskim* even discuss whom we can trust to expend the effort necessary to check properly.<sup>6</sup> For many hundreds of years, *poskim* have recommended not to eat specific items that were, in their times, heavily infested.<sup>7</sup> This is not a new *chumrah*. So what changed?

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<sup>1</sup> See also 11:42-44.

<sup>2</sup> *Makkos* 16b, *Rambam Hilchos Maachalos Asuros* 2:23.

<sup>3</sup> What is considered common and how that is determined is beyond the scope of this article. In practice, most leafy greens and herbs fall into this category.

<sup>4</sup> *Siman* 84.

<sup>5</sup> *Aruch HaShulchan Y"D* 38:36, *Chochmas Adam* 38:7-8.

<sup>6</sup> See *Shach Y"D* 84:35.

<sup>7</sup> See *Pri Megadim M"Z Y"D* 84:11, *Chochmas Adam* 38:16.

Until modern times, checking fruit and vegetables for insects was a staple of every kosher kitchen. Each Jewish homemaker, along with inspecting her chickens and salting her meat, would check her fresh produce for insect infestation. In the mid-twentieth century, the use of powerful commercial pesticides such as DDT became widespread. This effectively eliminated insect infestation, rendering vegetable checking obsolete. Checking for insects became a lost art.

With the rise of the environmental movement and the move away from DDT and other toxic (but highly effective) pesticides, bugs began to make a comeback. More recently, the rise in popularity of organic produce, which uses little or no pesticides, has created a boon for insect populations, which spills over into non-organic fields as well. These and other factors have led to ever increasing levels of infestation in many popular vegetables. Modern Jewry has therefore needed to relearn an ancient skill.

Trying to check vegetables visually for the first time, without any prior training or experience, can be very challenging. Vegetable bugs, while visible, are very small and often blend in with the surrounding environment. Without familiarity with what to look for, they are very easy to miss.

Checking for infestation in today's modern world — even for one with experience in this regard — has become more difficult. Produce shelves now offer a wide variety of leafy greens and herbs of various shapes, many of which contain layers and folds in which insects may hide. Careful inspection of all surfaces is a slow and painstaking task. We live in a fast-paced world in which many people have neither the time nor the desire to devote the effort and concentration necessary to proper inspection. This is why pre-checked produce has become such a popular product. For many consumers, checking their own vegetables seems daunting: an unfamiliar and difficult task with high spiritual stakes in which they are afraid to get involved.

It does not have to be this way. A new method for checking vegetables, developed in *Eretz Yisrael*, has become increasingly popular in America as well. It is known as the *Shmatte Bedikah*, or the thrip cloth<sup>8</sup> method. This a water-based method in which the vegetables are not checked directly. Instead, they are washed very well in a basin to remove any insects that may be there, that water is then strained through a cloth (the eponymous *shmatte*), and that cloth is checked for insects. If no insects are found, the vegetables are ready to eat. This has become the standard method for many of the large kashrus agencies, and has proven to be effective, efficient, and reliable.

This method has many benefits over traditional checking. First, the actual checking is minimal. All your vegetables can be checked at the same time by inspecting a single piece of cloth. This makes it much easier to be careful and thorough, thus reducing the risk of errors. The insects

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<sup>8</sup> Although any 300-micron mesh cloth may be used as the *shmatte*, a thrip cloth is the most popular kind. It is a material designed to keep bugs out of greenhouses. It is very easy to use and may be washed and reused many times.



are also much easier to find. The cloth is white and flat, without any folds or cracks, so bugs have nowhere to hide. This process is easier to learn, more likely to be done right, and more practical for our busy lifestyle.

In the world of commercial vegetable checking, the benefits of the *Shmatte Bedikah* are even more pronounced. Inspecting a few heads of lettuce for a family meal is difficult enough; inspecting 40 heads, consisting of hundreds of individual leaves, for a wedding or catering event is an entirely different story. To check each leaf individually would require hours of intense concentration. In such a setting, the ability to check large quantities with a single cloth is invaluable. It not only saves time and money, it is a much more accurate and reliable check.

This is why the Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington uses the *Shmatte Bedikah* exclusively in all facilities under our supervision. All our *mashgichim* are individually trained and tested to ensure that they can perform the procedure properly and are proficient in locating and identifying bugs.

Insect infestation in vegetables is a serious issue, but it does not have to be a frightening one. With a little bit of training and practice, most people can safely prepare their own produce with confidence.

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## Basic Guide to Vegetable Checking

The best way to learn thrip cloth insect checking (i.e., the *Shmatte Bedikah*) is through personal training from an expert. While this method of insect checking is fairly simple, it can be performed incorrectly. Having live expert training can help ensure that you master the necessary nuances.

For those who do not have easy access to a professional *mashgiach*, online resources are available. Many kashrus organizations have how-to guides and video tutorials on insect checking for a variety of vegetables. Here are some helpful links:

Kashruth Council of Canada (COR) How-To Videos:

[cor.ca/consumers/how-to-videos](http://cor.ca/consumers/how-to-videos)

Star-K: Thrip Cloth/Shmatte Bedikah Tutorial:

[star-k.org/articles/articles/insect-checking/1851/thrip-cloth-method](http://star-k.org/articles/articles/insect-checking/1851/thrip-cloth-method)

For a more in-depth treatment of the topic, please view the OU/YU Seminar - Practicum on Bedikas Tolaim: <https://oukosher.org/educational-videos/ask-ou-yu-seminar-04-whats-bugging-you-a-practicum-on-bedikas-tolaim>

There are two points I would like to emphasize to anyone learning on their own:

First, make sure to wash the vegetables very well. The *Shmatte Bedikah*, as mentioned above, is a water-based check — the vegetables are washed in a bucket and the water is checked, not the vegetables themselves. This method only works if the vegetables are washed well enough to ensure that any insects that might be on the produce will come off. Otherwise, you are only checking water, not vegetables. A good rule of thumb (one that I teach *mashgichim*) is to wash in such a way that *all the water and all the vegetables are moving all the time*. This will ensure that all the pieces are washed properly.

Second, one needs to develop an eye for bugs. Vegetable insects are small and can look like a leaf or a piece of dirt to the untrained eye. Once one is accustomed to them, they can be spotted even by people with average eyesight. This requires practice and patience. I also strongly recommend using a jeweler's loupe or other magnification device. This makes it much easier to correctly identify the small specs on the cloth, especially for beginners.

Loupes, light boxes and cloths may be purchased from the Star-K using the following link: [star-k.org/articles/articles/insect-checking/4044/checking-equipment-prices](http://star-k.org/articles/articles/insect-checking/4044/checking-equipment-prices)

One may also order supplies by emailing the Star-K at: [info@star-k.org](mailto:info@star-k.org).

To access the Star-K's interactive chart for General Produce Checking, please visit: [star-k.org/checking](http://star-k.org/checking).



**VAAD HARABANIM**  
THE RABBINICAL COUNCIL  
*of* GREATER WASHINGTON



**Vaad Harabanim of Greater Washington**  
**The Rabbinical Council of Greater Washington**

Rabbi Yosef Singer, *President*

Rabbi Moshe Walter, *Director*

**[www.capitolk.org](http://www.capitolk.org)**

301-770-0078

13217 New Hampshire Ave.

Suite #10142

Silver Spring, MD 20914

The Vaad Harabanim of Greater Washington is an organization of Orthodox rabbis that provides the Greater Washington Jewish community with critical services such as *kashrus* supervision, a *beis din* for the administration of Jewish divorce, a *beis din* for arbitration of financial disputes, and a *beis din* for conversion. In addition, the Vaad, also known as the Rabbinical Council, acts as a rabbinic resource, and supports vital communal service organizations, such as the *Chevrah Kadisha*, *Bikur Cholim*, *Yad Yehuda* and the *Mikvah Emunah* Society. Members of the Vaad Harabanim are dedicated to serving the broader Jewish community in whatever way possible and appreciate the opportunity to do so.