



#### RAFAEL HOFFMAN

The 11th biannual Midwest Convention of Agudath Israel of America set out to address the challenge of keeping *Yiddishkeit* vibrant and central to the existence of every Jew, under the banner of its theme, “*Vchai bahem, Thrive.*”

That general subject was combined with a more local feeling that runs deep through each Midwest convention, a recognition and celebration of the continuous growth of Torah life in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and many other smaller communities that dot Middle America.

The fact that the gathering itself took place at all was a relief to many, after it was cancelled last year due to the COVID pandemic. At the opening of Thursday night’s session, Rabbi Shlomo Soroka, Agudath Israel of Illinois’ director of government affairs, offered “gratitude for being able to gather physically.” It was a thought expressed by many of the speakers, especially Chicago *askanim* involved in plan-

ning the event, who put in countless hours not knowing whether this convention, too, would have to be cancelled at the last minute.

At the first of four separate sessions billed as keynotes on Thursday night, Harav Lipa Geldwerth, *Mara d’Asra* of Khal Kol Torah and *Maggid Shiur* at Yeshivas Torah Temimah, both in Flatbush, spoke of the centrality of *limud haTorah* as the life-source of the Jewish people.

He related that in 1940, as Nazi Commander General Erwin Rommel’s troops threatened to enter Eretz Yisrael, the Ponevezer Rav, Harav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, *zt”l*, submitted his plans for the famed yeshivah he would ultimately build in Bnei Brak. Many people asked incredulously why he would dedicate himself to such an endeavor when occupation by German forces seemed an imminent and terrifying possibility for the *yishuv*.

“He told them, because *Klal Yisrael* cannot exist for even one day without a yeshivah,” said Rav Geldwerth.



Harav Elya Brudny

Friday morning, a session dedicated to advising those seeking to infuse their *avodas Hashem* with greater passion was addressed by

Harav Zev Cohen, *Mara d’Asra* of Chicago’s Khal Adas Yeshurun and *Rosh Kollel* of the city’s Choshen Mishpat *kollel*, who spoke about his



own love for *limud hamussar*.

Regrettably, he said, the *mussar* that is most alive in the present era is not one that moves people towards self-improvement.

"Today people do give *mussar*, to other people about other people," said Rav Cohen.

Rav Cohen encouraged an idea that he has long advocated — to revive the concept of *mussar vaadim*, small groups of like-minded individuals who agree to work together on *cheshbon hanefesh* and the improvement of certain *middos*. He proudly related that such *vaadim* exist in several communities around the country and expressed a hope that more would grow.

Harav Mordechai Kalatsky, *Mara d'Asra* of Congregation Knesseth Israel of Minneapolis, attempted to present a key to more inspired *Yiddishkeit*, borrowing a present-day strategy from the business world.

"Ninety-nine percent of businesses design their model by answering the questions, 'what, how, why.' But there are one percent that are 'why, how, what' companies," he said explaining that the latter are organizations guided by their mission, viewing strategy and products as steps to follow that vision.

Relating the message to Judaism, Rav Kalatsky said that many businesses are successful with the first model and, *l'havdil*, a Jew who keeps Torah and *mitzvos* and later thinks about their hashkafic goals will accrue untold reward. However, he said, in order to "be connected and inspired," it is far more rewarding to try to become a "why person," and to let the deep meaning of each act in *avodas Hashem* give life to the performance of Torah and *mitzvos*.

Between *Kabbalas Shabbos* and *Maariv*, Harav Malkiel Kotler, *shlita*, Rosh Yeshivas Beth Medrash Govohah, Lakewood, expounded on the

*Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* that defines the way of Torah as a minimalistic life marked by eating "bread with salt, water in measure, and sleeping on the ground," upon which Rashi comments that the intention of the *Mishnah* is to say that one should continue to study Torah even if he only has the most minimal of physical provisions.

"The *limud* is to tell a person what the focus of his life has to be," said the *Rosh Yeshivah*. "A person can't have a *taanug* and a focus on *gashmiyus* and *ruchniyus* together."

Following the *Leil Shabbos seudah*, Harav Elya Brudny, *Rosh Yeshivas Mir*, Flatbush, and Harav Yosef Elefant, *Maggid Shiur*, Yeshivas Mir, Yerushalayim, participated in a question-and-answer session moderated by Rabbi Avi Schnell, director of the Agudah's New Jersey division. The session addressed several sensitive topics, including the *shidduch* crisis and the pros and cons of sending *bachurim* to learn in Eretz Yisrael.

In response to a question as to why in times of tragedy Rabbanim often turn first to call for improvements in levels of *tznius*, Rav Brudny said that it was a simple reaction based on the *pasuk* that states that *ervah* chases the *Shechinah's* presence and protection away from *Klal Yisrael*. He emphasized, however, that the need for improvements in this area is not limited to women's dress, but also to the way that both men and women speak, behave, and the material they expose themselves to.

The convention's keynote session on Motzoei Shabbos, which was also attended by many from the Chicago community who were not present over Shabbos, remained focused on the theme of defining what it means to live an authentic Torah life.

Rav Brudny urged peo-

*Continued on page 8*

## 'The Good life'

Harav Aharon Dovid Goldberg



One of many compelling *drashos* that followed the theme of filling a Jew's life with authentic *chiyus* was given by Harav Aharon Dovid Goldberg, *Rosh Yeshivas Telshe*, Wycliffe, Cleveland.

With conviction and clarity, the *Rosh Yeshivah* used his address, given during the *nusach Sephard minyan's* Shabbos *davening*, to impart that, despite the outside world's fraudulent use of the term "the good life," the only real permutation of such a term is a life filled with passion and dedication to Torah and *avodah*.

One of many points used to illustrate the life-giving force of Torah began as a question.

"The *Shechinah* descended on Har Sinai and there, Hashem spoke to *Klal Yisrael*, yet Har Sinai has no *kedushah* whatsoever. Why?" asked the *Rosh Yeshivah*. "Har HaBayis' *kedushah* is rooted in *Akeidas Yitzchok*, something which is part of history. But *Mattan Torah* is not an event that happened once thousands of years ago. *Kol gadol v'lo yasaf*, a voice that goes on and does not stop. *Mattan Torah* is constant and goes on whenever a Yid learns Torah... The Nefesh Hachaim says that when a Jew learns Torah, Hashem, *k'vayachol*, sits across from him and says the words he is learning with him."

Rav Goldberg used a statement of Harav Elazar Shach, *zt"l*, to demonstrate the vibrancy of each individual's *limud haTorah*. Rav Shach delivered his *shiur* on Tuesdays, and it was well-known that on Monday he could not be interrupted, as he was totally immersed in preparing the *shiur*. This practice continued well into Rav Shach's advanced years, after he had been *marbitz Torah* for over six decades. Some-

one once asked the aged *Gadol* why he does not say over *chiddushim* from *shurim* that he has said in the past, rather than investing so much time and energy into *sugyas* he has already expounded upon many times.

"Why not ask why I don't just say over from the Ketzos and the Nesivos and Rav Akiva Eiger? Their Torah is much better than mine," responded Rav Shach. "The only right I have to say my *chiddushei Torah* is that it's a *Toras chaim*, but to do that, I have to delve into the *sugya* as if I never learned it before and have something which is new."

Elaborating on a theme that ran through much of the convention, the *Rosh Yeshivah* spoke of both the challenge and infinite reward of infusing daily routines of Torah and *mitzvos* with passion and energy. He said that even though the late Brisker *Rosh Yeshivah*, Harav Berel Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, almost exclusively repeated *shurim* from his great father, the Brisker Rav, *zt"l*, when delivering these *chiddushim*, he was transported to another world.

The point was demonstrated by an incident Rav Goldberg recalled from his own time studying under Rav Berel, when the clock in the room stopped around the appointed time for the *shiur* to end, but it took close to 45 minutes for him to realize and finish speaking, despite the late hour.

Rav Goldberg emphasized that striving for higher levels in *avodas Hashem* is not limited to Torah, drawing on the example of his own father's scrupulous honesty in financial matters.

"He paid income tax on the money my sisters made babysitting, that's what it means to be *medakdek* in *mamonos*," he said.

Towards the close of his remarks, the *Rosh Yeshivah* spoke about the lives of his brother, Harav Yehudah Goldberg, *zt"l*, a *Maggid Shiur* at Yeshiva of Telshe Alumni in Riverdale, and Harav Yankel Cohen, *zt"l*, who served as a *Maggid Shiur* and *Mashgiach* in Telshe, Wycliffe, who were both *niftar* in the past year. He held them both up as illustrations of lives that took little from this world, but were rich with the sense of fulfillment only attainable by lives defined by joy and enthusiasm for Torah and *avodas Hashem*.

"You want to know what a *gutte leiben* (good life) is; that's a *gutte leiben*."



Harav Shmuel Dishon



Dayan Ahron Dovid Dunner



Rabbi Shlomo Soroka



Harav Yisroel Reisman

## ‘It’s What You Make of It’

Harav Yisroel Reisman

During the Thursday night keynote session, Harav Yisroel Reisman, Rosh Yeshivas Torah Vodaath and *Mara d’Asra*, Khal Agudas Yisrael of Madison, implored listeners to step back from their lives and reassess their sense of mission.

He began by relating a comment made by his own *Rebbi*, Harav Avrohom Pam, *zt”l*, in response to a question he had posed about why a *chassan* does not make a *brachah* of *She-hecheyanu* under the *chuppah*. He answered, “Because marriage is what you make of it.”

“He wasn’t just speaking about marriage,” said Rav Reisman. “Rav Pam was talking about every experience in life.”

“About half the calls I get are not *she’eilos*. A lot of them are from people who are going through a hard time or who just got a difficult *besurah*,” he said. “I tell them, ‘Deal with it in a way that you can look back on it with pride and say I handled

this well.’”

Rav Reisman noted that the previous generation of Jews who came to America was charged with a mission of rebuilding a world of *Yahadus* that had been destroyed. That sense of mission drove them to build strong, *ehrlliche* homes, shuls, *mosdos* of *chinuch* and *chessed* and all the infrastructure of Torah Jewry that exists today.

He continued by asking if the present generation that inherited their work was guided by the same sense of mission in the challenges they face.

“Do we want to look back at our generation and see the extreme consumption? Is that something we’ll be proud of? Do we have to have a *dor* in which everything has to be the latest? What’s the *tachlis*?” he asked. “The previous *dor* gave us a lot to build on; we have to feel an *achrayus* to raise the ante.”

*Continued from page 7*

ple to disconnect themselves from the superficial world of news and social media and consider what their true essence should be.

“Should *Klal Yisrael* be thriving on rumors and innuendo? That’s the polar opposite of what *Klal Yisrael* is,” he said. “We need to think about who we are. What we are.

What is our essence?”

Harav Shmuel Fuerst, who serves as *Dayan* for the Agudah of Illinois, praised the growth and efforts of Chicago’s *mosdos haTorah*. He added that with success comes many challenges, but only ones Hashem assesses that the generation is up to. Rav Fuerst exhorted

*Continued on page 12*



Harav Lipa Geldwerth



Harav Shmuel Fuerst



Rabbi Yaakov Robinson

## Defining Sanity

One of the most strikingly titled sessions of the convention, but one that left little mystery as to its message, took place on Friday morning under the heading, “Staying Sane in an Insane World.”

Rabbi Moshe Davis, acting executive vice president of Agudath Israel of Illinois, opened the session by painting some of the background of the increasing gap between the norms of the outside world and the ideals of *Klal Yisrael*, setting the stage for the speakers who followed him to address the question, “How do you decide what is sane and insane?”

Harav Shimon Alster, Rosh Yeshivas Cliftwood, New Jersey, and *Mara d’Asra*, Bais Medrash Torah U’Tefilah of Flatbush, turned the question back on listeners, asking them to consider their responsibility to remain true to their mission amid a world of distractions and trends from within the Orthodox world itself.

The *Gemara* famously relates that when Rabbeinu Hakadosh was preparing to leave this world, he blessed his *talmidim* that their fear of Heaven should be as real to them as their fear of their fellow man. Rav Alster said that the concept of this consciousness of others observing our actions goes beyond a fear of being caught in a shameful act.

“What will the public opinion be?” he said, was a thought that guides too many of people’s actions. “There are phrases like ‘be realistic’ ‘it is what it is’; what they do is take the lukewarm water [of their standards of *Yiddishkeit*] and cool it off more and more until that becomes the norm.”

Rav Alster decried the high standards of materialism and focus on food trends set by today’s Jewish publications, as well as the banner of “*lichvod Shabbos*” that is often applied to justify what he cast as unnecessary decadence.

Despite a mix of diverse challenges to true Torah living, Rav Alster said that parents remain the most important ingredient in setting the tone in their home.

“We run to the Rebbe, the

*Gadol*, the *Mekubal*, or whoever, but it’s your *achrayus*,” he said. “We send to the best yeshivos, *daven* in the best shul, but what do we talk about at our Shabbos table? ... If we say *divrei Torah* and sing *zemiros* to be *yotzei*, then our children will learn that *Yiddishkeit* is just about being *yotzei*, doing the minimum... In your own home, every one of us has to be the *Gadol*.”

Harav Yosef Elefant, *Maggid Shiur* in Yeshivas Mir Yerushalayim, returned the topic to the rapid deterioration of the moral character of the world at large, saying that society had reached a stage marked by ideologies built to defend licentiousness and a rush towards self-destruction.

Social media use, Rav Elefant said, was one of the most glaring features of the present era.

“Social media is detachment from any *shibud* (obligation),” he said. “You don’t need to give your name, your time or to take any responsibility.”

Rav Elefant said that the essence of *Klal Yisrael* has always been to be a nation that remains apart from the rest of the world, pointing to the well-known *Midrash* that says that Jews in *Mitzrayim* retained their Jewish clothing, names and language.

“It wasn’t a *segulah*,” he said. “If you are influenced by the outside influences, then that becomes your essence... [Keeping these unique features] is what made them a people and gave them an individual identity that allowed them to go out of *Mitzrayim*.”

“The Maharal says that the suffering of *Klal Yisrael* is because we are *Olam Haba* people and this world is not our place; that’s a message we need to address at our Shabbos tables.”

Rav Elefant emphasized that such a message is fundamentally the duty of parents to teach, and not professionals.

“There’s a growing trend of parents abdicating the role of teaching the basics of *Yiddishkeit* to *mechanchim*, but this is a job yeshivos can’t do ... The only place to ingrain the truth of what is real and what is important in this world is in the home.”



Harav Zev Cohen



Harav Shmuel Yehudah Levin

*Continued from page 8*

ed the crowd to take pride in the beauty of Torah homes and life and to use that positive energy to detach themselves from the attractions and influences of the outside world. He also called out girls' seminaries in Eretz Yisrael for charging what he characterized as unfairly high prices and called on the Chicago community to found its own seminary that would charge \$15,000 per year, saying that should they suc-

ceed, other communities would be bound to follow.

Harav Shmuel Yehudah Levin began his address by emotionally recounting the great pride that his father, Harav Avrohom Chaim Levin, *zt"l*, took in Midwest Agudah conventions as events that highlighted the maturity of the region's growth in Torah life and of its branches of Agudas Yisroel, causes he had dedicated his life to.

"The *brachah* we have here come

from us continuing the *mesorah* of the generations that came before us," he said.

The session also included a video tribute to Rabbi Yitzchok Ehrman, who served for many years as CEO of Agudah of Illinois and has taken up a new position as Agudah's national chief operating officer in the organization's New York office.

The Motzoei Shabbos session was closed by the convention's

guest speaker, Dayan Aharon Dovid Dunner, *shlita*, *Rosh Av Beis Din*, Kedassiah, London, who said that the challenges of the last two years have given people opportunities for growth and self-reflection that need to be grabbed.

"A time comes to readjust one's life. From time to time we have to ask 'Am I what I should be?'" he said. "In life there are chances that if you don't take advantage of them, they will not come again."



Rabbi Yitzchak Ehrman



Rabbi Henschel Plotnik