

The AJOP Convention: *Kiruv* Professionals Face Their Challenges Together

By Jonathan Rosenblum

The annual AJOP convention held in Baltimore January 10-11 under the direction of Rabbi Yitzchok Lowenbraun was a rare and memorable event.

Rabbi Asher Weiss delivered a keynote address by video from Yerushalayim. He pointed out that in Europe — and even in postwar Williamsburg, where he grew up — a *baal teshuvah* was so rare as to be a real curiosity, and a *ger tzedek* was even rarer. Today, however, 60 years after the greatest tragedy in the history of the Jewish people since the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, we find a thirst for the word of Hashem of which the *nevi'im* spoke (Rashi, *Yeshayah* 41:17). And in such a period, every Jew should feel that he is a soldier on the battlefield, for opportunities to connect with one's fellow Jews are everywhere.

Rabbi Weiss drew on the Sforno's commentary on *Tehillim* to emphasize the great responsibility we all have to engage in *kiruv*. The Sforno emphasizes that the *kibbutz galuyos* precedes the *Geulah*, and therefore one who is not involved in *kiruv* is in effect delaying the *Geulah*. The time for the ingathering of the exiled, said Rav Weiss, is running out as intermarriage depletes the ranks of the Jewish people. Somehow we have to find a way to reach every single Jewish boy and girl.

Rabbi Weiss concluded by expressing his amazement at the way people today pursue every *segulah*, yet ignore the greatest one. When one teaches Torah to the son of an ignorant Jew, even if *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* has decreed a *gezeirah* upon him, it is canceled (*Bava Metziyah* 88a).

The Obstacle Course of Contemporary *Kiruv*

The AJOP convention faced problems in the *kiruv* movement frankly. Time, everyone agreed, is running out. A Pew Foundation study found that only 3,000,000 Americans identify themselves as Jewish by religion. Rabbi Avraham Edelstein pointed out that on college campuses, over 50 percent of those identifying themselves as Jewish have only one Jewish parent.

Lack of funding, caused in part by the economic downturn, was discussed at length. At a time when Christian and messianic groups are pouring tens of millions of dollars into ensnaring gullible Jewish youth, the wells of money for *kiruv* have dried up. If a young Jewish man or woman curious about Judaism seeks answers on the Internet, he or she is more likely than not to go to a non-kosher site.

Rabbi Yitzchok Berkowitz, who answered questions by interactive videoconferencing from Yerushalayim, addressed



Rabbi Dovid Cohen and Rabbi Mordechai Twerski

some of the challenges faced by *kiruv* professionals in the field — a small peer group, often poor schools, and constant financial struggles, but above all the battle to maintain one's idealism. His main piece of advice: "Above all, make sure not to lose touch with your image of a Yid and of the Torah." Don't create a community based around various halachic leniencies, he advised. It is better for the *kiruv* professional and the *baal teshuvah* to admit candidly that the latter is not yet ready to accept certain aspects of halachic observance than to lower halachic standards to meet his level.

When dealing with a *baal teshuvah* who is confronting self-control issues, Rabbi Berkowitz counseled, simply emphasizing the restrictions is doomed to failure. The approach must be positive. In place of self-indulgence in physical pleasure, the *baal teshuvah* must experience the greater joy of giving to another to build a relationship. Observing the laws of *lashon hara* doesn't mean just keeping one's mouth closed, but rising above pettiness. Similarly, *tznius* must be taught not as a set of don'ts, but as an expression of a deeper sense of self-respect.

Rabbi Berkowitz enjoined participants to maintain their stature — or to build their stature if necessary. He reminded them that one cannot effectively convey what one does not exemplify; one cannot promote the joy of Torah study if one does not have a daily learning *sefer* that is taken seriously. A prospective *baal teshuvah* must view the *mekarev* as a person on a different level of integrity if the latter is to be effective.

The titles of some of the main sessions provided a taste of the searching self-examination that characterized the convention: "Losing as Many as We Gain: What's Really Happening to *Baalei Teshuvah* and Their Children, and Is This Our Issue?"; "*Kiruv Kerovim* and *Kiruv Rechokim*: An Honest Assessment of the Future of the

Klal and the Future of *Kiruv*"; "Celebrating Our Past, Shaping the Future: It's a Totally Different World. Are We Ready?"

The speakers addressed these questions thoughtfully and realistically.

Kiruv Kerovim on the Agenda

Though the majority of the 40 different sessions were about *kiruv rechokim*, the self-examination at the AJOP convention was not confined to the *kiruv* movement. A major theme of the convention was *kiruv kerovim* and the role that

of our own young?"

Gateways lecturer Rabbi Mordechai Becher spoke of the large number of communications he receives from older *frum* Jews or veteran *baalei teshuvah* who suddenly find themselves beset by their own religious doubts. In the heart of the most religious neighborhoods, he finds himself confronted by those in completely *frum* dress who can quote verbatim from the leading *apikur-sim* of our time.

The thrust of many of the speakers was that the lack of a strong foundation in *emunah* comes back later in life to haunt many of those who failed to internalize it while young.

In light of these challenges, a consensus emerged that the community has to place new emphasis on the teaching of *emunah* and on new educational approaches in general.

Hamodia columnist Rabbi Zecharya Greenwald related that he went to Hagaon Harav Shach, *zt"l*, over 20 years ago seeking written approbation for a school in which teenage boys would learn Torah in the morning and vocational subjects in the afternoon. Rav Shach replied that he could not answer immediately and would have to investigate the matter. When Rav Shach learned that so many children from Torah families were leaving the fold that it was possible for a

tion for girls was not necessary in former times, when people lived in stable communities and the tradition was passed down from parent to child. But today, when neither families nor communities are stable, and especially when young women do learn secular subjects, Torah education for women is not only permissible but necessary.

Rabbi Berkowitz quoted *Poskim* who say that in a triage situation where two patients need immediate treatment or lifesaving equipment and there is only one doctor and one machine, the general rule is that the closer one is treated first. By analogy, it might be argued that *kiruv kerovim* takes precedence over *kiruv rechokim*.

Numerous speakers returned to this theme. Beyond the specific ideas that participants at the AJOP convention take home, the convention provides the *chizuk* of connecting with hundreds of others involved in the same *avodas hakodesh* who live in far-flung communities but often face similar struggles.

Rabbi Aharon Gruman of Lakewood's Torah Links shared the excitement of one recent program. He told the story of 25 carefully vetted participants in various college learning programs — 17 of whom are not yet *shomer Shabbos* — who were brought to Lakewood for a week of intense learning. They



L-R: Rabbi Menachem Deutsch, *Rosh Kollel*, Atlanta; Rabbi Dovid Spetner, *Rosh Kollel*, Cincinnati; and Reb Yosef Davis.

kiruv professionals might play in that effort.

Two main sessions addressed our failure as a community to imbue many of our young with a living, pulsing connection to the fundamental principles of Jewish belief.

Rabbi Y.Y. Rubenstein asked piercingly, "If we pronounce Zionism a failure because of the million former Israelis living in the United States, and the various heterodox streams a disaster because they cannot hold their youth, what are we going to say about the loss of so many

teenager to disappear into the dropout subculture for months at a time without being heard from, he realized that new approaches were needed, and he gave Rabbi Greenwald approval for a new framework for those boys who were incapable of sitting and learning a full day.

In a similar vein, Rabbi Becher quoted the Chofetz Chaim's response (*Lekutei Halachos* on *Sotah* 20a-b) to the formation of Bais Yaakov schools. The Chofetz Chaim wrote that formal Torah educa-

learned in the major yeshiva *batei medrash* from early morning to 9 p.m. Almost every one of the students complained when the learning ended at night and looked for additional *chavrusos* to keep going until much later.

Rabbi Gruman concluded that the greatest untapped *kiruv* resource is the *frum* community itself, and that exposure to the vibrance of the Torah-learning community, exemplified by Lakewood, is among the most potentially life-changing experiences we can offer.