

A New Way of Thinking at the OU

By Stephen J. Savitsky



TIn my travels to Orthodox Union synagogues and communities, I am frequently asked how the OU develops ideas for its programs and policies. Since I have taken on the role of president of the OU, I have made it a priority to meet with the OU senior professional staff almost weekly to discuss all aspects of the organization's operations and plans and to determine how we should respond to the needs of the Jewish community at any given point in time.

Over the years, the OU has developed a plethora of innovative and exciting initiatives that cover a broad range of needs such as our diverse programs to draw assimilated youth to Torah-true Judaism, our social and educational events for the developmentally disabled in the community, our singles events, our popular online *shiurim*, our wildly successful parenting programs and our

well-attended *kasbrut* seminars, to name a few. But designing a successful program is always a challenge; it requires having a finger permanently placed on the pulse of Jewish life. It requires knowing what is happening on the local level—in local synagogues. In other words, in *your* shul. Although we are in constant contact with the religious and lay leadership of the hundreds of OU shuls, it is not always possible to know what is going on in every single one of them.

Some months ago, we at the OU underwent a shift in our thinking: We decided to increasingly ask shuls to identify their own needs, while relying on our own creativity and experience. After all, who can better understand the desires and aspirations of a community than the community itself?

Consequently, last spring we announced the Orthodox Union Programming Initiative Awards, a program in which the OU empowered member synagogues by challenging them to come up with creative, out-of-the-box ideas to reinvigorate and energize their communities. The OU offered grants totaling \$100,000—with a maximum of \$20,000 per shul—to five synagogues throughout North America for innovative programs and initiatives designed to “strengthen local synagogue and communal life.”

A committee was appointed to develop the program and judge the entries. Committee members included OU Chairman of the Board Harvey Blitz; Senior Vice President Emanuel J. Adler; National Associate Vice President

Alan Rothman; Neima Chasky, a member of the Young Leadership Cabinet; Dr. Seymour Adler, executive committee member of the OU Board of Directors; Rabbi Dr. Leonard Matanky, rabbi of OU congregation KINS in Chicago, associate superintendent of Associated Talmud Torahs of Chicago and dean of Ida Crown Jewish Academy; Executive Vice President Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb; National Executive Director Rabbi Moshe Krupka; Director of Community Services and Special Projects Frank Buchweitz; Director of Synagogue Services Rabbi Mayer Waxman and myself. In evaluating the proposals, we asked the following: Will the program be based on synagogue and communal life? Will the results impact positively on synagogue membership and the community? Can the project be easily replicated by other synagogues?

We were gratified to receive sixty-two entries from OU shuls all over North America with creative ideas in areas such as youth education, leadership development, fundraising, social service and many others. Through reading and discussing the proposals, committee members developed a clearer picture of the needs of the various Orthodox Jewish communities throughout North America.

This past December, the OU announced the winning synagogues during a special broadcast on OURadio, and at the same time we called the winning synagogues. Since not every winner requested the maximum \$20,000 award, we were able to award six grants, rather than five. The winning programs



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National Kehillat Hakodesh Award

come from large and small communities and from large and small synagogues, and range from political action to education, from intergenerational contact to the recruitment of new families. Following the grant announcement, I was gratified to learn that the experience of putting together a proposal had generated a greater sense of unity among synagogue members, even in synagogues that did not win.

The winning synagogues, in alphabetical order, and their programs are as follows:

Beth Israel Synagogue, Omaha, Nebraska: Since early educational opportunities are sorely lacking in the Omaha Jewish community, the **Parents Are Teachers** program aims at giving parents the resources to most effectively jumpstart their young children's Jewish education. The program will give parents a home-based curriculum that includes a three-year cycle of lessons and projects for Shabbat and the holidays, among other topics.

Congregation Rodfei Sholom, San Antonio, Texas: Two programs: 1. In response to consistently uneven reporting about the Arab-Israeli conflict, the **Israel Public Action Committee** will work to expose anti-Israel propaganda and encourage action and advo-

cacy on Israel's behalf. 2. For observant and less-observant members, **Soul Words**, a ten-week program that aims at helping congregants deepen their *tefillah*, will explore the significance of Hebrew words and phrases in the *siddur*.

Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, Bronx, New York: Opening up a vital line of communication between our community's senior citizens and our youth, **The Legacy Project—Intergenerational Dialogue** will encourage Holocaust survivors to share their experiences with teenagers.

Kesher Israel Synagogue, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: An innovative project to recruit prospective new Orthodox families to the Harrisburg Jewish community, **The Harrisburg Time Share** will launch five recreational incentive packages for families considering relocating. The offers will give families the chance to experience the Harrisburg community's warmth and hospitality and visit the town's attractions.

Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York, New York: Providing expert training in Jewish communal service, **The Jewish Lay Leadership MBA**, modeled on the traditional MBA degree, is a yearlong course that will result in moti-

vated and energized lay leaders for the Jewish world.

Pacific Jewish Center, Venice, California: The **Venice Torah Arts Festival** will serve as a stimulating summer venue for tourists who visit the area and will draw more Jews into shul.

What is the next step? Over the next year, grant recipients will provide updates on the progress of their programs. Additionally, we are planning teleconferences in which the winning shuls will make presentations to communities far and wide. An important session to spotlight the winning programs will take place at our biennial national convention in Jerusalem next Thanksgiving. As we prepare our budget for the fiscal year beginning July 2006, we expect to renew the grant program to provide opportunities for other shuls to earn grants.

The success of this program and the enthusiasm with which it was greeted have encouraged us to continue in this path. This new approach, initiated in our Community and Synagogue Services Department, will be implemented in all OU divisions and programs including NCSY, Yachad and others. From now on, you can expect us to turn to you for your ideas, your creativity and your suggestions. **JA**

Shelly Miller, *Alav Hashalom*

The Orthodox Union mourns the sudden and tragic passing of our colleague, Rabbi Sheldon Miller, director of the OU ParnossahWorks program. In the brief time he was with us, Shelly was instrumental in steering more than 200 individuals towards new employment through this very successful program in which the OU partners with FECS, Federation Employment and Guidance Services Inc.

OU Executive Vice President Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb expressed it well: "Shelly exemplified all that is treasured in a friend—warmth, humor, empathy, *menschlichkeit*, wisdom. He was successful at the most sacred of all charitable tasks, finding employment and providing encouragement, succor and hope for those in need of our help."

Shelly's love for his family was palpable. His office walls were covered with photos of his twin grandsons; his face lit up when he spoke about them. Shelly's warm smile, quick wit and love of Torah were a source of strength to all of us, and he is truly missed. We extend our most heartfelt sympathies to the Miller family.

