

A Vision for the Future

By Stephen J. Savitsky



As I conclude my first term as president of the Orthodox Union and, with God's help, look forward to my next two years, it is an obvious time to reflect on the past and to plan for the future. I was extremely fortunate that my administration began back in 2004 with the most successful OU convention ever. In an unprecedented move, I had proposed that the convention be held in Israel during the time of the intifada. The Diaspora Jewish community responded enthusiastically, with the result that our 2004 convention was oversold.

I remember taking a taxi in Jerusalem before the convention. The driver was curious—he wanted to know which US organization had brought nearly 1,000 people to Israel when so many were staying away. I told him it was the OU and that I was going to be installed as the new president. He turned around, blew me a kiss and explained that the convention gave a lot

of people *chizuk* (strength) and that he was grateful to the OU for being there.

The electricity and inspiration from that convention, shared by both lay leadership and staff, have served as the impetus over these last two years to bring the OU to higher levels of achievement.

I spend one day each week at OU headquarters in Manhattan, and they are by far my most exhilarating days. The OU's mission is *chesed*. Each time a crisis arises in the Jewish world, we at the OU make it a priority to respond efficiently and effectively. During the past two years, we've unfortunately faced several major crises that have impacted the Jewish world—the evacuation of 10,000 Jews from Gush Katif; the relocation of 10,000 Jews from New Orleans due to Hurricane Katrina and the displacement of one million Jews in northern Israel due to last summer's war with Hezbollah. Our varied responses to each of these catastrophes were the proudest moments of my administration.

During the past two years, I've visited many shuls and attended many *Shabbatonim*, yet each time I do so, it feels as if the experience is entirely new. On one particularly unforgettable weekend I spent in an out-of-town community, an NCSY advisor spent an entire day chauffeuring me around. I asked him why he was willing to give up a whole day to drive me around. He explained that his sister had become religious through NCSY, and that he in turn had joined NCSY and become religious as well. Ultimately, his parents became observant and ended up influ-

encing his aunts, uncles and cousins. The young man admitted that his grandparents heard I was coming to town and they wanted to give me a message: They wanted to thank me for giving them Jewish grandchildren.

When I became president, I compiled a list of many goals I wanted to accomplish. Realistically, I've only accomplished around 10 to 20 percent of them. But I think we've made great strides. In all this, I've had the great privilege of working on a daily basis with Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, our executive vice president. An individual of great scholarship and integrity, Rabbi Weinreb has been my faithful advisor and has guided me wisely in dealing with the complex issues that we encounter—almost daily—at the OU.

There is still so much to be accomplished. Assimilation and intermarriage are threatening the very survival of the Jewish people. With the world's population growing but the Jewish population remaining static, I fear that a diminished population will lead to diminished influence and clout in the Diaspora. We've got to find a way to turn this around; looking ahead, this will be a major priority.

The Orthodox community is overwhelmed by the financial burden of yeshivah tuition. We've launched an initiative to find ways to alleviate this enormous burden, and going forward, we will continue to make this a priority. Another focus will be campus work. When I visit college campuses around the country, I witness the extraordinary work of our Heshe and Harriet Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC) program, which not only reaches young men and women who are products of the yeshivah system, but also caters to those who are only now learning about the beauty and richness of Jewish life. The University of Massachusetts Amherst just joined JLIC

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this fall, bringing the program to a total of thirteen campuses across the United States, from New Haven to Los Angeles. Additionally, Johns Hopkins has signed up to begin next fall.

What we have accomplished during the past two years using all forms of media—be it the Internet, online radio or our publications—is immeasurable. Hundreds of thousands of people log on to our web site, www.ou.org, and its companion, www.ouradio.org, each day to find everything from candle lighting times to recipes; from *kashrut* information to my radio show, “Around the Dining Room Table,” which features in-depth conversations with some of the most exciting personalities in the contemporary Jewish world. And the very magazine you are reading, *Jewish Action*, has reached even greater heights of excellence both in regard to content as well as graphic appeal. We will continue to pour resources into media with the goal of reaching even more people worldwide.

One of our latest initiatives

involves *kashrut* education. OU Kashrut, the world’s most respected name in kosher supervision, is reaching out to teach students and consumers about the complexities of *kashrut* in the modern world, thanks to the support of the Henriette and Gustave Jacobs Chair in Kashrut Education and the Harry H. Beren Foundation.

Additionally, we must continue to provide services to those smaller Jewish communities that find themselves isolated. We will work to develop programs that will not only serve these communities but will help them grow.

Among the great challenges ahead, Israel looms large. We have made a commitment to embark upon a major *kiruv* initiative there. With our remarkably successful track record in North America, we must now use our outreach expertise to present traditional Judaism to Israelis, many of whom have never even stepped foot into a shul. Our first returns in this area are very promising.

Exciting times lie ahead. While we may not accomplish all of our goals, it

won’t be for lack of trying.

When I attempt to clarify the mission of the OU to myself, I cannot help but think back to the Yachad family *Shabbaton* at which I was unexpectedly asked to speak. It was almost the end of a beautiful Shabbat, at *Seudah Shelishit*. As I stood at the podium and looked around the large room, I saw hundreds of Yachad members, their parents and siblings, sitting all together, and suddenly I realized that this was exactly the OU’s mission statement: No Jew will be left behind, the phrase made popular by singer Avraham Fried. We will deal with every Jew in every situation, whether in a small Jewish community or a large one; whether in Israel, North America, the Ukraine or elsewhere in the Diaspora. We will continue to strive to meet our new goals and objectives as well as those that have defined the OU over the last century. I pray that with God’s help, the next two years will be as fruitful as the preceding ones. **JA**

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