

Our Response to the Economic Tsunami



We are witnessing a tsunami in the economic world the likes of which America has not witnessed in decades. It appears that there are no safe havens and that just when we think we've hit rock bottom, a new dimension of the crisis unfolds, hurtling us further downward.

I know of no Jewish organization that is today untouched by this severe economic downturn. The economic challenges facing Jewish organizations and institutions across the country are enormous.

The Orthodox Union (OU), like other Jewish organizations, relies on the generous support of donors and benefactors; we have, therefore, taken crucial steps to ensure our financial viability. We have embarked on a painful but necessary process to guarantee that the OU remains the dynamic force that it is. Additionally, the Executive Committee has decided to cancel this year's annual dinner, reasoning that it would be a mistake to place an additional burden on our loyal friends and supporters. We expect to resume the dinner in 2010.

Yet even while we deal with our internal financial issues, we feel it is our responsibility to address the needs of the greater Jewish community. I recently read a meaningful *devar Torah* in Rabbi Emanuel Feldman's fascinating book *Biblical Questions, Spiritual Journeys*. When Yosef was a prisoner in Egypt, he faced great hardships. After spending many long years in prison, he was joined by two new inmates—the baker and the butler. One day, the two inmates seemed very depressed. While most other prisoners, consumed by their own pain and misery, might have chosen to ignore these two unhappy-looking souls, Yosef, expressing genuine concern about their psychological needs, felt compelled to ask, “*Madua penaichem ra-im hayom? Why do you appear downcast today?*”

Affairs (IPA), the Pepa and Rabbi Joseph Karasick Department of Synagogue Services, the Heshe & Harriet Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC) and the Seymour J. Abrams Orthodox Union Jerusalem World Center, to name a few. But our mission is to try and address the ever-changing needs of *all* of Klal Yisrael. Thus, as the economic crisis deepens, affecting Jewish communities, schools and families in practically every city and every neighborhood, we feel compelled to ask our Jewish brethren: “*Madua penaichem ra-im hayom? Why do you appear downcast today?*” We are genuinely concerned about the economic distress faced by Jews throughout the country.

So what are we doing to assist our fellow Jews during these times of eco-

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They answer, describing their dreams. He interprets the dreams—and the rest is history. Imagine if Yosef had not bothered to ask the question: His rise to power as Pharaoh's second-in-command and the ensuing exile and redemption of the Jewish people would not have occurred.

At the OU, we could easily say that with today's grim economic situation, we should focus solely on sustaining and strengthening our own programs and departments, such as NCSY, Yachad/NJCD, the Institute for Public

economic distress? First, the highly successful OU Job Board, under the direction of Srulie Rosner, has redoubled its efforts to find gainful employment for those who are out of work. *Baruch Hashem*, this has paid off; in less than two years, the Job Board has enabled more than 1,100 people to find jobs. Aside from offering job listings on our web site (www.ou.org/jobs), the Job Board also provides seminars on resume writing, interviewing skills and other topics of importance to jobs seekers. These seminars are webcast

and then archived on our web site, making them available to a broad audience. Drawing upon our experience and success in helping the unemployed in the United States, we also hosted our first-ever Israel Job & Aliyah Fair for English-speaking *olim* and potential *olim* at the OU's recent Convention in Jerusalem. Held over three consecutive evenings at the Ramada Jerusalem hotel, the event attracted more than 2,000 people.

Second, we launched a major new national initiative to confront joblessness and economic distress. Developed by



At an OU summit on the economic crisis, Rabbi Saul Zucker, director of the OU's Department of Day School and Educational Services, presents practical strategies for reducing costs to representatives of day schools and *yeshivot* from across the country.

the OU's Department of Community Services, under the leadership of Director Frank Buchweitz and in conjunction with the Job Board, "Project CHESED" is a fourteen-point plan that empowers communities to respond to the growing economic crisis. Through Project CHESED, an acronym for "Community Help in Education, Social Services, Employment/Empowerment and Development," the OU is encouraging communities to undertake various self-help projects, including:

- Organizing rabbinical and lay committees in each community devoted exclusively to the economic problem;
- Offering workshops and seminars on topics relating to the crisis;
- Gathering information about available jobs from local employers and community members and listing them on a web site, and
- Reaching out to community members to provide counseling and moral support to families.

The Job Board, along with the Department of Community Services, is eager to help communities set up these projects. In addition, workshops on sensitive matters that deal with mortgages and foreclosure, credit crises management and home budgeting will be available for broadcast from the OU offices via video link-up.

Finally, we are also addressing the needs of the nearly 600 day schools and *yeshivot* across the country. To help these institutions cope with budgetary crises, this past January the OU's new Department of Day School and Educational Services organized a summit meeting on the

economic situation. Held at OU headquarters in Manhattan, it brought together forty representatives from day schools and *yeshivot* in the New York metropolitan area from across the Orthodox spectrum, to brainstorm budget strategies (an additional forty representatives from schools across the country were in virtual attendance online). During the meeting, Rabbi Saul Zucker, director of the OU's new department, presented a number of practical, effective strategies for reducing costs and raising revenues that day schools can implement immediately. Other speakers included Mark Bane, a bankruptcy attorney and chairman of the OU Board of Governors; Rabbi Joshua Elkin, executive director of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education; Rabbi Dr. Martin A. Schloss, director of Day School Education at the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York and Howie Beigelman, deputy director of the OU's IPA. In addition, the OU is in the process of researching various nationwide initiatives designed to ensure the financial viability of our day schools.

I am extremely proud of the variety of programs we are developing to confront the economic crisis head-on. We hope and pray that HaKadosh Baruch Hu will provide us with the guidance and wisdom we need to deal with this challenge and that the great *achdut* we now find among the Jewish people is rewarded by an end to this financial plague. Until then, the OU will take all possible steps to work with communities to limit their pain and distress, and to help all of Klal Yisrael look forward to the day when Hashem grants us economic security and prosperity. ■

Rabbi David B. Hollander, z"l

As we went to press, we learned of the passing of Rabbi David B. Hollander, one of the participants of the *Jewish Action* roundtable discussion on American Orthodoxy, held in January 2008. A former president of the RCA who later came to see himself as the conscience of Modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Hollander served as rabbi of the Hebrew Alliance of Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, New York, for the past twenty-eight years. Prior to that, he served as rabbi of the Mt. Eden Jewish Center and at Congregation Bnai Jeshurun, both of which were in the Bronx, New York. A columnist for the *Jewish Press*, Rabbi Hollander, the longest-serving pulpit rabbi in America, was a vigorous and articulate spokesman for Orthodoxy. In 2008, the OU honored Rabbi Hollander with the Lifetime Rabbinic Achievement Award for his remarkable contribution to the strengthening of American Jewish life. We, along with the rest of Klal Yisrael, mourn the passing of this legendary pulpit rabbi and passionate advocate for *Yiddishkeit*.

