

President's Message

Partnership and Trust

By Mandell I. Ganchrow, M.D.



As we are now in the season of *teshuvah*, the theme of *chesbon hanefesh*[introspection] abounds throughout the Jewish world. It would certainly be wonderful if each one of us could say, "I have gone through the past year of my life without erring in action or judgment, whether through commission or omission." But this is not the manner in which God created us as human beings. Humans err, and we need to do *teshuvah*.

Certainly, an organization, as much as any individual, comes under the same mandate. There is no large organization that has not at some time experienced shame from errant individuals under its banner. The Board of Directors of the Orthodox Union is now faced with just such a severe problem. Difficult, almost incomprehensible allegations have been made. And we are trying to deal with them in a responsible and forthright manner.

Our first priority is to try to ascertain the facts — not from newspaper

articles or rumors, but by asking a commission, comprised of prominent individuals representing both the public and the Board, to investigate the allegations. To ensure that this is done in its most professional manner, this NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) Special Commission has retained Debevoise & Plimpton, one of the nation's preeminent law firms, as legal counsel. The team is headed by Bruce E. Yannett, a litigator and former assistant United States attorney specializing in internal investigations who served on the original team of lawyers appointed to investigate the Iran/Contra matter.

When prominent individuals agree to serve on a commission to investigate problems within the community, we rely on their knowledge of the community as well as their reputations. Toward that end, we have turned to ten outstanding individuals to serve on the NCSY Special Commission. According to the OU's constitution, it is the Board of Directors that has oversight responsibility, which is why the Commission represents both the Board and the community.

The Commission has a difficult job, but I believe they can and will accomplish the thorough investigation we ask of them. The men and women who are volunteering their time, energy and expertise to serve all have impeccable qualifications. They are respected for their honesty and integrity. And they have our gratitude. Their findings will be presented to the Orthodox Union's Executive Board and a summary will be made public. We ask for your patience in allowing the Commission time to do a thorough job.

In the interim, we have instituted a new, vigorous anti-harassment code

throughout NCSY, and the NCSY staff will be receiving sensitivity training. We are also developing immediate plans to work with parents at the synagogue and regional levels to integrate them into the decision-making and oversight areas. And as part of our long-term plan, we are discussing the hiring of a full-time ombudsman/psychologist who will help develop a system whereby a confidential network is set in place to protect the privacy of people who may come forward with complaints.

But even as we are facing these issues head on, we are also asking the public not to judge the Orthodox Union's 102-year history based on only this episode. The Orthodox Union is much more than that which is reflected in recent headlines. The OU is over 1,000+ young people attending our NCSY summer programs, even as you read this. It is the 47 collegians who are spending this summer as OU interns on Capitol Hill. It is the 1,000 developmentally disabled people who look to us each day for inclusion into Jewish society. It is the 1,000 deaf or hard of hearing individuals who need the OU to help them connect with their Jewish roots. It is www.ou.org, the source of information for the Torah observant community. And it is more than 250,000 kosher certified products that enable each of us to eat kosher almost anywhere in the world.

All of this work is administered by some 1,000 talented, dedicated and ethical employees worldwide, supported by hundreds of committed lay leaders who devote their talent, time and energy to the betterment of the community.


When the Commission completes its investigation, it will deliver its recommendations to the OU Executive Board. No matter how tough those recommendations are, I am confident that they will lead to measures that will help us forge a stronger Orthodox Union, one that is more responsive to the community's needs.

As children, we are taught the difference between right and wrong. But as much as we would wish it otherwise, we live in a world with human frailties and flaws. It is a sad truth that there will

always be individuals who will act unethically and who will push the limits of their authority. That is human nature.

The same is true of organizations. Every organization and profession, whether religious or secular, government or private — even while holding itself to the highest standards — may suffer from the actions of the individuals who are associated with it. And sometimes those in authority may fail the test of leadership by not acting decisively when confronted with the evidence of the improper actions of trusted colleagues.

However, the true test of an organization's mettle is what it does when it learns of improper conduct by any of its employees. Does it deny the charges? Does it cover up its faults? Or does it act responsibly to investigate the matter and not rush to judge or condemn, while ensuring that the charges are brought out into the sunlight and that both redress and preventive measures are instituted? The latter is the course we have set for ourselves.

The Orthodox Union is an organization that depends on the public trust. For the moment, that trust has been tarnished. But friends and partners don't abandon one another during times of need; they strengthen one another. We are asking that you not abandon that partnership. In return, we promise that we will do whatever is necessary to regain your trust. Jewish tradition and moral imperative demand no less. 

As we go to press, the Orthodox Union mourns the passing of Saul Bernstein, ז"ל, who was the resourceful and tireless administrator of the Union during the challenging post-World War II era. In addition, Mr. Bernstein served with devotion for 25 years as the editor of *Orthodox Jewish Life*, the UOJCA's publication which preceded *Jewish Action*. A distinguished author, his most recently published work was *The Orthodox Union Story: A Centenary Portrayal*. Saul Bernstein's altruism, insight and integrity will be sorely missed.