



Photos: Gary Koenig

A Conversation with the New Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

A widely respected scholar and orator, Rabbi Weinreb is also a psychotherapist who has campaigned to place social issues, such as domestic violence, on the agenda of the Orthodox community. Prior to joining the OU, Rabbi Weinreb served as the spiritual leader of Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Baltimore, which grew from 160 families to more than 400 under his leadership. Rabbi Weinreb received his semichah from the Rabbi Jacob Joseph Yeshivah in New York, and his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Maryland. Rabbi Weinreb was appointed executive vice president of the OU in September and officially assumes that role in January 2002.

Rabbi Weinreb was interviewed by Jewish Action editor Nechama Carmel.

I'd like to extend a welcome but you are already familiar to readers of Jewish Action.

Well, having been a guest in the house is not quite the same as being one of the hosts. But I have been made to feel welcome and for that I am very grateful.

What are your primary objectives for the OU as an organization?

I think the OU has to undergo a three-stage reevaluation process. Firstly, I would like the organization to take a serious look at its mission and purpose. Essentially, I think it's important for the organization to determine what it is trying to accomplish. It's obvious that the OU needs to respond

to different things at this phase in history; the challenges of today are different than the challenges were 5 years ago, 10 years ago, and certainly 30 and 40 years ago. The second stage involves defining more clearly who the members of our constituency are, and understanding their specific needs and concerns. Finally, once we have a clear sense of our purpose as well as a solid understanding of our constituency's needs, we can make decisions about improvements in programming.

Do you have any plans to broaden the OU constituency?

The common perception is that the OU services a specific segment of the Modern Orthodox community. I would like to see that notion readdressed. I envision broadening our constituency, both to the left and to

the right. The OU logo is not just the “U” within the “O,” but includes the words *Torah u’ Mitzvot*. Many people don’t notice that. Ultimately, I envision that any Jewish person who is interested in enhancing his or her observance and understanding of Torah will find that the OU helps to address their needs.

The past year and a half has been a difficult one for the OU and its image; do you see that changing in the near future?

I think that by choosing someone with my background, the OU is sending a strong message of change. I would like to see the OU proactively involved in a number of causes that will show that we are marching in a different direction to a different drummer. In fact, I recently participated in a program on sexual abuse, along with Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky and Dr. David Pelcovitz. The program, which was under the auspices of OHEL and the Task Force for Children and Families at Risk, dealt openly with the issue of sexual abuse in our community. I would like to see the OU take a leadership role in raising awareness about this particular problem as well as other mental health problems afflicting our community. Because of my background in psychology and, more so, because of my experience in *rabbanut*, I am aware of numerous problems prevalent in our community such as the rising divorce rate, all kinds of abuse including drugs and alcohol, teenage dropouts, and the problems of *shid-duchim*. In an article I once wrote for *Tradition*, I noted how all too often we focus on our successes, which leads to a sense of complacency and triumphalism. This also results in our ignoring what I called the “underside of the Orthodox Jewish community.” It is this “underside” that the OU needs to address. The most appropriate way for us to address these issues is through

education and prevention rather than therapy and cure. Additionally, I think we should support those organizations that help individuals secure remediation.

What do you think can be done to help the different segments of the Jewish community learn to appreciate each other better and thereby achieve a greater level of cooperation?

From the very beginning of our history—from *mechinat Yosef*, in fact—the bridge of Jewish unity began to shake.

Today, the bridge is still shaking.

In order to strengthen the bridge, the most important element is the



person-to-person aspect—that is, being a mensch and relating to people with tolerance and mutual respect. Secondly, one requires a real conviction that he is not promoting Jewish unity because it is politically correct or because it makes for good publicity, but rather because the Torah truly desires that the Jewish people be unified. While not everybody in *Am Yisrael* is *shomer Torah u’Mitzvot* or understands *Torah u’Mitzvot* the same way, nevertheless

the Torah asks that we recognize that we are all members of one family.

What role do you see the OU playing with regard to Israel, especially in light of the current political situation?

I am very troubled by what seems to me to be an insufficient appreciation of what *Eretz Yisrael* and *Medinat Yisrael* mean religiously and spiritually to the Jewish people. Beginning with the *pesukim* in the Chumash, following through *Chazal*, *rishonim*, *achronim*, early *chassidim* and *talmidei HaGra*, *ahavat Eretz Yisrael* is a very important theme in Jewish life. Yet, despite its importance in our tradition, it is not sufficiently appreciated by Orthodox Jews. Moreover, while some of our schools are very effective in teaching the value of *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel), they completely disregard the value of *Medinat Yisrael* (the State of Israel). One way of changing this is through adult education and insisting that our schools stress the religious importance of living in Israel, as well as the political history of the State of Israel. In terms of the current crises, I believe there has to be education on the history of Religious Zionism, and on the legitimacy of the Religious Zionist viewpoint. These are areas which we have failed to teach adequately to young and old alike. Many people who are very knowledgeable and very observant simply don’t understand the legitimacy of Israel’s position in the current political arena or how to argue for the legitimacy of Jews living wherever they want to in Israel. Of course, the most important thing is to encourage *aliyah* and, at the very least, to reengage people in visiting *Eretz Yisrael*. One of the ways the OU encourages visiting Israel is, of course, through our numerous missions, but we have to have more, and encourage even more people to visit.

What do you see are some of the effects of September 11th upon the spiritual state of the Jewish community?

September 11th has had a tremendous impact on us spiritually, politically and practically. In terms of the spiritual impact, American Jews have lost the sense of “*Ani amarti beshalvi bal emot leolam*” (I had said in my serenity, “I will never falter.” Psalms 30). We have always said, “It can’t happen here in America. This is the place to be; there is little risk. It’s safe, it’s secure.” Suddenly, there’s a deep sense of uncertainty; nothing is certain. Not our existence. Not our safety. There is clearly a loss of complacency and a deep sense of anxiety among us all. As an organization, the OU can help people channel that anxiety positively in various directions. Action helps alleviate anxiety. One positive direction would be to reevaluate the role of *Eretz Yisrael* in our lives and to encourage people to seriously consider making *aliyah*. Another way we can channel people’s anxiety is by having them reevaluate the role of *tefillah* in their lives. I believe that most *shul* rabbis probably experienced the same thing I did this past Rosh Hashanah: people were much more serious about their *davening*. Their *kavanah* was more intense; their *Amidot* ran a little longer. Certain phrases in the *tefillah* were particularly poignant this year—*mi yichyeh, mi yamut, mi bamayim, mi ba’aish*. When prayer becomes so very real, it has a transformative effect; it changes us for the better.

This leads me to my next question: Do you feel there is a general lack of spirituality in our religious practice? And, if so, what can be done to change this?

Obviously, we all have room to improve in our spirituality. But there is a baseline of spirituality that we often fail to appreciate. The very fact that someone buys kosher or is a member

of a *shul* is a sign of spirituality. It’s important, however, to take these initial steps and build upon them.

I would suggest that the contemporary Jewish person who wants to intensify his or her religious experience should concentrate on two areas: spirituality and character. Spirituality is not communicating with other worlds; rather, it’s having a sense of meaning and purpose in one’s religious behavior. It is developing a genuine *simchah shel mitzvah* (joy in performing a *mitzvah*) and an emotional understanding of “what am I doing and why am I doing it?”—the exact opposite of *mitzvot anashim melumadah* (performing



mitzvot by rote). One of the failures of the traditional yeshivah system is the extreme emphasis on Gemara, which for many individuals does not lead to a sense of spirituality. In order to inspire and uplift all students, the yeshivot should also stress the study of *musar*, *chassidut*, Navi, Tehillim, Jewish poetry, and *beieur tefillah* (the meaning of the prayers). We have to find a wide range of avenues to allow people to access the Torah’s spirituality. This can only happen if we stress the entire scope of what Judaism has to offer, whether that means *neginah* (music); *legima*,

that is, living together in a society; friendship—which is a big stimulator of spirituality—as well as visits to *tzaddikim* and even *kivrei* (graves of) *tzaddikim*. All of these are possible paths to a more spiritual life.

But along with spirituality, there is the need to build character. By character, I mean having a coherent set of principles by which one lives life with integrity both in relation to his fellow man and in relation to the workplace. One who has developed his character serves as a genuine *kid-dush Hashem* so that people really do say about him, *ashrei yeladuto* (praised be the one who gave birth to him). People need to come to appreciate Judaism by becoming impressed with the behavior of Jews.

Speaking of the spiritual struggles many of us face, what about those experienced by students on the college campuses who are, for the most part, isolated from vibrant Jewish communities?

The college campus is an area that’s begging for an Orthodox presence. It’s an area that I see the OU getting more involved in. In working on the college campuses, there are two populations that we need to cater to. Firstly, there are a lot of Orthodox students on campuses who need *chizuk* and require our help in finding kosher food, finding an address where they can congregare with other Orthodox kids, etc. Then there are those students who are Jewish by birth but are unaffiliated. Here our role would be to bring these kids closer to their heritage and show them a face of Orthodox Judaism that they can at least respect, if not adopt. But a strong OU presence on the campus would also address another problem: most college campuses are hotbeds of anti-Israel sentiment. To the extent that we can be active in campus life, we can hopefully offer alternatives and harness some of that energy towards a pro-Israel rather than an anti-Israel stance. In fact, we will begin to develop leaders, because

these students are our future leaders.

Since we are speaking of influencing the future leaders of the Jewish community, who were the people who had the greatest influence on you?

My mother, may she live until 120, had a very important influence on me. She was born in this country and went to public school. Yet, she remained a *shomeret mitzvot* in every way and raised her family *frum*. This, to her, is her greatest life achievement and the tenacity and conviction with which she accomplished this is something which is a part of me.

Another major influence on me is my wife, Chavie, and her tradition. A wonderful person in her own right whom I've shared my life with for 36 years now, Chavie has the same values, ambitions and visions that I have.

Chavie also comes from a very special tradition. Her grandfather was the Modzitzer Rebbe [Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub], the one who composed thousands of *niggunim* (melodies). Indeed, I wrote an article about him for *Jewish Action* on the occasion of his 50th *yahrzeit* several years ago.* Being exposed to my wife's family put me in touch with one of the leaders of *chassidim* as well as *chassidut* and its emphasis on *neginah* and spirituality. Consequently, *neginah* is something I turn to constantly, in moments of *simchah* and in moments of sorrow, in moments of optimism and moments of pessimism.

What about teachers who had an influence on you?

My parents sent me to Toras Emes in Boro Park, where Rabbi Elias Schwartz, may he be well—the principal of Toras Emes in those days—had a foundational influence upon me. Subsequently, I went to the Rabbi Jacob Joseph Yeshiva (RJJ) where I was exposed to a number of important people, including Rabbi Dr. Hillel Weiss who was the first

one to introduce me to the Hirschian philosophy of *Torah im Derech Eretz*.

At RJJ, I was also exposed to a number of *rebbeim* who followed the Lithuanian tradition—people who were just 15 years away from Kaminitz and Mir, and 10 years away from Shanghai. These individuals were able to bridge for me that very glorious tradition of *lamdut* (critical analysis), *musar* and *amkutb* Torah (depth in learning Torah) and instill within me a true appreciation of the value of *talmud* (the study of) Torah.

Later on, while I was going to yeshivah and, at the same time, taking courses at Brooklyn College, I was searching for models who could help me put together



the ideas I was learning in a classic *Litvische* (Lithuanian style) yeshivah with those I was exposed to in college. Through reading and learning, I became familiar with Rav Meir Shapiro, the Lubliner Rav, who remains someone whom I often close my eyes and communicate with. Later on, in my early 20's, I became familiar with the writings and teachings of Rav Kook, and continue to study them to this day. I find his teachings to be extremely meaningful both in terms of the centrality of *Eretz Yisrael* and because I feel he is one of the few people—Jewish or non-Jewish, religious or secular—who really understands the soul of the modern questing person.

In terms of actual *rebbeim*, the first person who I really felt was my *rebbe* was a man named Rav Shmuel Dovid Warshavshik who taught me at RJJ. He was my *rebbe* when I was 18, and at a transitional time in my life. He guided me throughout many of my major life decisions and I remained close to him *ad yom moto* (until his death). I must also mention the influence of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik. While I never studied at Yeshiva University, I did attend many of the Rav's *shiurim*, and to this day, draw a lot of inspiration from his teachings and writings.

How do you feel about leaving your congregation?

I became the *rav* of Congregation Shomrei Emunah 13 years ago. It was a terrific match, an excellent *shidduch*; aside from Chavie, the best I have had to date. Therefore, leaving my congregation is difficult for me. Yet, in a very real sense, I hope to duplicate my achievements at Shomrei Emunah in my new position here. We were able to have a very diverse constituency which learned Torah on many levels. Our *davening* achieved unexpected heights of decorum, dignity and spirituality. We felt unified. And we were able to truly connect to Jews outside of the Orthodox circle. Hopefully, I can bring some of these achievements to a much broader audience.

You know, one of my young grandchildren tried to comfort me because he had heard that I was sad about leaving Shomrei Emunah. "Don't worry *Zeide*," he told me. "Before you had one *shul*; now, you'll have one hundred!" Well, I suppose it's really many hundreds, and seen from that perspective, the job ahead is very daunting. But I believe I was able to achieve a lot at Shomrei Emunah because I had hundreds of partners. So if I had hundreds there, I am going to need thousands here. **JA**

Note:

* See "My Songs Come From an Overflowing Heart," Spring 1998, 58-61.