

Proud to Be an OU Member

By Stephen J. Savitsky



As I travel around the country in my new position as OU president, I attend events—such as the West Coast Torah Convention in Los Angeles last December—and visit synagogues on a regular basis. This is perhaps the best part of my job, as it gives me the opportunity to bring the message of the OU to our many communities, and to meet with you, our OU members, in your shuls and homes.

Wherever I go I ask the same question, namely, “Are you a proud member of the OU?” Not, “Are you a member?”, but, “Are you a proud member?”

People are proud graduates of their alma maters; they are proud members of their shuls; they are proud residents of their communities. Being an OU member is not enough. I want our members to be proud of the OU as well.

One of my leading near-term goals is to have people look at me incredulously when I ask this question, as if they were saying, “Of course we are proud members. Look at what the OU does for us individually and for the entire Jewish world. Where would the Jewish world be without the OU?”

In order to achieve that goal, however, there is work to be done. I am reminded of the verse from Lecha Dodi, with which we welcome the Shabbat—*Sof ma’aseh bemachshavah techillah*—that Shabbat was last in deed, but first in God’s thought; that all His preliminary actions led to the creation of Shabbat; all of Creation was built on the pinnacle of Shabbat.

Likewise, many of the actions I will take as president will be for the ultimate goal of creating proud OU members.

I will emphasize pride in membership in two ways—individually and collectively.

Individually, every member should be aware of the various personal rewards of membership: a subscription to the OU’s thought-provoking and beautifully written magazine, *Jewish Action*, which explores key issues in contemporary Orthodox life; a quality quarterly newsletter for members, now in the planning stage, to provide up-to-date information on all new activities; a special “for members only” section of the OU web site, featuring *shiurim*, discussions of current events (particularly regarding Israel), dialogues with newsmakers and surveys to gauge members’ feelings about

certain issues; *kashrut* updates; priority placement in OU activities, such as OU conventions, NCSY summer programs and special educational events and discounts at the new “ShopOU” online store, featuring *sefarim* and other Judaica, among its many items.

Then, there are the collective benefits, the OU activities that go beyond individual rewards, and extend to the entire Jewish people. As an OU member, you should be proud of the actions the OU takes on behalf of Klal Yisrael. These include:

- Working hard through our Institute for Public Affairs (IPA) to obtain homeland security funding to protect our shuls, vouchers to help ease the tuition crisis and legislation supportive of religious rights. Headquartered both in Washington, DC, and New York, the IPA deals with domestic and international issues. The IPA is also going to play more of a role on the local and state levels.

- Providing social and educational resources for developmentally disabled and hearing-impaired young men and women through the Yachad and Our Way programs. With *Shabbatonim*, Birthright Israel trips, job training and other programs, we improve the quality of life for participants, while providing a respite for their families.

- Confronting assimilation among Jewish youth and strengthening the Torah values of already observant teens through our extraordinarily successful youth movement, NCSY (National

Conference of Synagogue Youth). Recently, the OU created the Jewish Student Union (JSU) to reach out to public high school students who have little or no contact with Jewish life.

- Setting the standard in *kashrut*. Kosher-observant Jews across the spectrum implicitly trust the OU, by far the world’s largest kosher-certifying agency.
- Uniting the largest network of Orthodox synagogues in North America into a cohesive unit for the benefit of each shul, through our Department of Community and Synagogue Services.
- Strengthening the Jewish family. Since family is at the heart of Orthodox life, our Positive Jewish Parenting and Positive Jewish Marriage programs help fortify Jewish life by giving people skills to become better spouses and parents.
- Confronting substance abuse and other serious problems that unfortunately are proliferating among our young people. Spearheading a community-wide effort to combat these ills, OU professionals met with sixty-five pulpit rabbis and educators in late December to begin formulating “Safe Homes, Safe Shuls, Safe Schools,” an action plan to address these problems.
- Serving as an Orthodox anchor on campus. Our Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC), currently at nine major universities across the United States, helps students meet the social and philosophical challenges they face during their college years.

- Helping small Jewish communities grow. Because these communities lack the resources of larger centers of Orthodox life, we are planning a Small Communities Conference at which we will determine ways in which we can assist small community growth.
- Fighting for Israel in public forums, and in our meetings with political leaders in the United States, Israel and around the world.
- Providing outreach programs for secular Israeli teenagers as well as learning opportunities for Israelis across the spectrum. The Seymour J. Abrams OU Jerusalem World Center (the Israel Center) has an array of programs including Makom Balev, which offers spiritual nourishment to 2,000 elementary and junior high school students from secular, traditional and religious homes, and Zula, which takes young people in Jerusalem off the streets on Saturday nights.
- Restoring hundreds of Ukrainian Jews to their heritage. The Joseph K. Miller Torah Center in Kharkov, Ukraine, which includes a school, a summer camp and ongoing holiday programs, brings *Yiddishkeit* to the region, and encourages *aliyah* among the Jewish population.

When you realize all that the OU is doing, aren’t you proud to be an OU member? My job, therefore, is to educate you, our members, by providing as much information as possible about OU activities. I am hoping that in the near future, when I ask, “Are you proud to be an OU member?” the answer will be obvious. As I continue my travels, emphasizing the range of OU activities for the benefit of the Jewish community, I look forward to spreading the word and to hearing your proud response. **JA**