

OU PRIMES NEW GENERATION OF LAY LEADERS

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

The Me Generation seems to be living up to its name. A recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* described the struggle nonprofit organizations are facing in their attempt to lure a new generation of lay leaders. These organizations can't understand why so many bright young professionals are not interested in getting involved in altruistic causes. Representatives of the twenty-something generation claim that stodgy organizations are simply not open to new ideas. Apparently, these young people haven't checked out the Orthodox Union's groundbreaking, anything-but-stodgy Young Leadership Cabinet (YLC).

With the goal of priming young professionals to assume the organization's future lay leadership, the OU designed a training program featuring dynamic workshops, lectures and ample opportunities for YLC members to get hands-on experience in *klal* work. Less than a year in existence, the program boasts twenty-two members, all of whom are in their twenties and are committed to learning the ropes of effective lay leadership. Lawyers, physicians and financial analysts, these talented young men and women view *klal* work as a lifetime endeavor and know that this is the time to get started.

"This is the challenge every organization faces today—the lack of young leaders," says Rabbi Steve Burg, national director of NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth). "The OU has

identified how to overcome that challenge and has succeeded in setting the future in motion for the next twenty to thirty years."

An Effective Entry for Young Leaders

The idea to prepare young people for effective lay leadership dawned on Charles Harary, a twenty-eight-year-old law associate and a former NCSY advisor. Harary introduced the plan to OU Executive Vice President Rabbi Dr. Tzvi

something, it pays to listen," says Shlomo Koymman, twenty-five, a third-year Yale medical student. "He's one of those individuals who *really* wants to make a difference. He takes the initiative and runs with it. When he came to me with the idea of having this vehicle to make an impact, with the OU behind us, training and supporting us, it sounded like a phenomenal opportunity."

The idea also appealed to Jordan



YLC members in front of the Old Executive Office Building during the annual OU Leadership Mission to Washington in April. From left, David Gerstley, Corey Tarzik, OU Executive Vice President Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, Charles Harary, Elisheva Diamond and Ari Fuchs.

Hersh Weinreb and OU President Steve Savitsky and received an immediate green light.

Harary began reaching out to young professionals, soliciting interest in the YLC. He found the project an easy sell.

"When Charlie Harary tells you

Hiller, twenty-seven, also a law associate. "He [Charles] was looking for people who are passionate about changing things," says Hiller. "I said, 'Count me in.'"

Becoming an *Askan 101*

Together with Rabbi Weinreb and

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Mr. Savitsky, Rabbi Daniel Schonbuch, the director of the YLC, created a game plan to get the YLC off and running. They organized six professional leadership development workshops featuring a series of prominent speakers. The first of the series, which ran in the fall, focused on the qualities of effective leadership and was led by Moshe Bane, who is a partner at a large law firm, a senior vice president of the OU and chairman of the OU's Institute for Public Affairs.

Since its first gathering the YLC has met almost every month to discuss topics including international and domestic Jewish issues, balancing financial success and spiritual achievement and the challenges and responsibilities of leadership. At a recent dinner held at Manhattan's Levana restaurant, members of the YLC and their spouses were addressed by Rabbi Steven Weil, *rav* of Beth Jacob Congregation in Beverly Hills and national vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America. Rabbi Weinreb and Mr. Savitsky joined the young couples as they gleaned valuable insight into the intricate workings of *klal* service. "When you pick a project, realize that the project is your child," said Rabbi Weil. "You are in it for the long term. It's a relationship you never abandon."

"There were no schools for building *askanim* [communal leaders]," says Harary. "We want to create an address where one can become a successful *askan*." The OU has become that address, one in which these future leaders feel more and more at home.

On-the-Job Training

The OU promptly gave YLC members a venue in which to put these essential lessons to work. Every OU department has a commission, that is, a group of lay leaders who oversee the work and progress of that department. Each OU commission has one, two or three YLC members directly involved with a project. Aside from offering his services to the lay board of *Jewish Action*, the OU's quarterly magazine,

Koyfman is in the process of developing the Small Communities Data Network, a web site that will promote budding Orthodox Jewish communities around the country. "This site will be tremendously useful for people interested in finding out about Orthodox communities around the country, as well as for the communities which need a forum to advertise themselves," says Koyfman.

YLC members frequently conduct their own online meetings via the YLC discussion board, exchanging ideas on salient issues affecting the community, including the yeshiva day school tuition crisis, teen substance abuse and

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solutions for affordable housing.

Having established a strong New York contingent, the YLC seeks to expand its membership to include young professionals from other regions. Its one Midwest member, Shaya Stern, twenty-six, an accountant in Cleveland, attends the workshops via conference call. He may not be the lone YLC out-of-towner for long. Through the organizing efforts of Neima Chasky, YLC member and analyst for Goldman Sachs, the program plans on holding its first National Founding Conference Shabbaton in the near future, with the goal of getting more young people involved in the OU's *klal* work.

Chasky recently acted as a liaison between Goldman Sachs and Yachad, the OU program for the developmentally disabled. In its desire to "give back" to the community, the company involves itself with various charities and gives employees the opportunity to spend a day doing community work. "I thought a day of interactive sports would be a perfect opportunity to con-

nect the Goldman Sachs staff and the Yachad members," says Chasky. "It was a huge success." The relaxing outing acquainted the company with the OU's vital work in an enjoyable and meaningful way.

Last winter, the YLC launched its first OU group initiative called Project Areivim, offering YLC members the opportunity to spend Shabbat in a small Jewish community in North America, sharing words of Torah and *chizuk*. Uri Schneider, a YLC member active in the Community and Synagogue Services Commission, recently participated in the first Areivim *Shabbaton* in Albany, New York.

"The Shabbat was a great opportunity to appreciate the beauty of a smaller community and to meet the wonderful people that make up the Congregation Beth Abraham Jacob *kehillah*," says Schneider. "I believe we succeeded in deepening the shul's relationship with the OU, and I've gained a clearer sense of how we can effectively advocate for and strengthen this community."

Mr. Savitsky, a seasoned community activist and once a budding young *askan* himself, knows young people bring fresh energy and inspiration. "The future of any organization depends upon its new leadership. I view the YLC as an exciting opportunity to bring a group of dedicated young professionals on board."

The fledgling lay leaders share that excitement. "I see two parties that need each other," says Harary. "The lay leaders want to get involved in helping the *klal*, and the OU needs committed *ba'alei batim*. The larger the army, the more that can be achieved," says Harary. He emphasizes that young people are more than eager to get involved in the community and share their ideas, but until now, they were hard pressed to find a place of entry. "The YLC has given us a doorway into the OU. There are big issues facing Klal Yisrael, and we need the talents, contributions and hearts of the next generation." 