

# THE Jewish Home

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Family Newspaper

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CHEZKY LEVOVITZ

# Reflecting on the Last Few Years

TJH Speaks with Mr. Allen Fagin, Outgoing EVP at the OU

By Susan Schwamm



**M**r. Fagin, you have been the Executive Vice President at the Orthodox Union for more than six years. Tell me how you became involved in working for the klal.

I practiced law for close to 40 years. At the end of my legal career, I was the chairman of our law firm, which was equivalent of being a chief executive of the firm. It was a very, very large law firm, one of the largest in the world. When I retired at the end of 2013, my intentions were to devote whatever additional years G-d would give me to communal endeavor and work for the klal. As I announced my retirement from my law firm, the OU was then in the midst of a search for an executive vice president. The committee approached me and asked if I would consider taking the position. It's not what I had thought about before retiring. I actually thought I would simply retire, but it was an opportunity to do as a professional what I had hoped to be able to do as a layperson. I took the offer very, very seriously – I had many hours of conversation with my wife about it – and ultimately agreed to take it. I told the board at that point that I would only hold the position until the following fiscal year – for a little less than 18 months.

**So 18 months turned into more than six years.**

The time has flown since then.

**Were you involved with the community or your community before you took on the position?**

I had been involved with the OU for decades in a whole variety of capacities. I was a board member; I was an officer; I had been the head

of the activity that we were engaged in.

**Talking about realizations, what were the biggest surprises that you met after moving into the new position?**

There were two things that I learned very, very quickly on the job. One was the enormity of the OU operations – how many different ways we were involved in providing programs and services to our synagogue

of the staff and knew many of them quite well, but when I arrived as EVP, I got exposed to the quality and dedication of a huge number of people who constitute our staff. We have close to 1,000 employees. And they are just outstanding professionals, with enormous amounts of creativity and skill and equally enormous amounts of dedication to being servants of the klal.

Most of our employees, obviously, are employed in the United States. And they're employed all across the United States. NCSY, for example, runs a program called JSU, the Jewish Student Union, for public school students. We're in over 200 clubs in public schools all across the United States, in scores of cities across the United States. Depending on the time the club is held, it could be an after-school program or a program held during lunchtime – it differs from school to school. There are thousands of public school children involved in JSU. They're spread out across the U.S. and Canada. But it's not just here. NCSY has chapters in Argentina and in Chile. There's a very active chapter in Israel. It's relatively new – a few years old – but it's growing by leaps and bounds, catering primarily to an Anglo population in Israel. It's actually a fascinating program. Think of a family that's made aliyah with teenage children who have never had the opportunity to sort of integrate fully as kids into Israeli society, and now they find themselves in Israel as

**“No organization that's worth its salt or takes its responsibilities to the Klal as importantly as we do can afford to stagnate”**

of the commission that had responsibility for our collegiate program. I had been the head of our commission that had responsibility for our youth program, NCSY. So I had been pretty active with the OU for decades, and a number of other organizations as well.

I thought I knew the OU pretty well. But when I took the job with the OU as EVP, even though I was an active and involved lay leader, I realized that I didn't know a fraction

network and to our communities. As I said, I had been exposed to some. But until you're sort of in the midst of it, you just don't have a sense of the size and scope and quality of our programming. So that hit me very, very quickly – that even as an active lay leader I knew a lot of the basics but had no sense at all of how large and far-flung the operations and programs and services are at the OU.

I also had been introduced in a lay capacity to a number of members



At a rally for school safety in front of New York City Hall



Speaking at the Women's Initiative Summit



With OU President Moishe Bane at the OU's annual Torah New York event in Citi Field Stadium

a teen, and it's very, very difficult for them. And so NCSY is their bridge. It's their connection, really, to fully integrate into Israeli society.

Yachad is also international. It has a large chapter in Israel. And of course, OU Kosher is operating in probably 80 countries around the world, in countries, in cities that not only have you and I never heard of but can't spell. It's unbelievable mesiras nefesh to have OU mashgichim supervising a million products and ingredients literally in every corner of the globe.

**Most people associate the OU with kosher food. How do you get the word out about your other programs?**

It's such a good question. If you ask me what was the only frustration that I found in the job, that would be it. So many people who know NCSY may not recognize that NCSY is an OU program. So many people who know Yachad may not realize that Yachad is an OU program. So many young people who go on our Birthright program called Israel Free Spirit – we're a major Birthright provider – don't know that Israel Free Spirit is an OU program. Thousands of young men and women on campuses across the United States and now in Israel who participate in JLIC don't necessarily realize that JLIC is an OU program. And so on, down the line of so many of our programs. We concentrate so much on providing the service to

our shuls and our communities that sometimes we forget to try to make clear that these are OU activities. So it can be frustrating sometimes. But I think we're doing a little better in making the community aware that all of these programs and services are united under a single umbrella of service.

**Tell us about some new programs that have been implemented under your helm.**

We've had some really wonderful programs. There are some that, like NCSY and Yachad, JLIC, have been around for some time. But we started several new initiatives that we're all very proud of. One is the Women's Initiative that brings significant learning and leadership opportunities to women across our communities. That started just a few years ago and has had really wonderful success.

We began what we call the OU Center for Communal Research. This is very new program, but it's one that's going to have enormous impact both on the OU and its programs but more generally throughout the community. It's really designed to allow us to focus on making decisions based on real data and real objective information. These are social scientists with extraordinary credentials who are allowing us to understand our community, not just by anecdote, not just by hearing the schmooze at kiddush, but by engaging in sophisticated social science research so that

we understand the issues facing the community and can therefore tailor our programs, tailor our policy determinations, to what we learn from sophisticated surveys and data gathering with respect to our communities. That is something that we think is going to be enormously important to us out into the future.

We also started a wonderful program that we call the Impact Accelerator. The idea was to harness the talent and the energy of young entrepreneurial folks within the community who had a great idea for a program or a service and were trying to get it off the ground. We select about six such organizations each year – we're now in the second cohort of that program – and we provide some financial backing. We also provide a whole range of training opportunities for them so that they can learn the ropes and learn how to grow their organizations and to get them off the ground. There are so many creative and talented people out there looking for an opportunity to contribute to Klal Yisrael with fantastic new ideas and great new programs – they just need to get them off the ground. And we see our mission as helping them to do exactly that.

No organization, I think, that's worth its salt or takes its responsibilities to the Klal as importantly as we do can afford to stagnate. There's always another need. There's always something more to do. We're always trying to evolve and grow and develop

as an organization.

**Due to the coronavirus, has the kashrus part of the OU faced any challenges going into certain countries or certifying different products?**

Yes. The challenge has not been so much in terms of the certification itself, but the methodology that's being utilized. There are plants where we can't get into.

It's fascinating how OU Kosher has really pivoted its operations so that they haven't missed a beat and have been employing technology and virtual visits to certain plants and manufacturing facilities. Now that travel restrictions are beginning to ease, things are going to go back to normal, and we obviously look forward to being able to resume in a traditional way. But in the interim, technology has been a savior.

**Around how many kashrus supervisors do you have working for the OU around the world?**

There are around 200 rabbinic coordinators and rabbinic field representatives. The number is closer to around 500, though, when you include all the mashgichim and shochtim at slaughterhouses, restaurants, factories etc. around the world.

**Wow. That's a lot of people. And they're so dedicated to what they do.**

The mesiras nefesh is just extraor-

dinary. I remember a trip I took once going to a vineyard where the harvesting season came out in the early part of the fall. They were telling me about their OU mashgiach who came and set up a sukkah and made Sukkos there because the company couldn't miss that piece of the season. I've met mashgichim who literally bring with them a suitcase full of food because they're going to be traveling to the most remote locations of China or India or places that are just extraordinarily difficult to get to. It's remarkable mesiras nefesh.

***That's unbelievable and so admirable. Let's talk about the Teach NYS part of the OU. That's a relatively new division that was started around six years ago.***

The Teach Coalition, which includes Teach NYS, also includes Teach operations in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Florida, and California. The Teach Coalition covers states in which roughly 90% of students who are attending yeshivas and day schools reside. We've concentrated our efforts on where the kids are. It's been one of the great success stories, I think, of almost any aspect of OU programming.

When I first started supervising what was then Teach NYS, and which has since morphed into the Teach Coalition, we tried to do two things. One was to lay out a very basic strategy and philosophy that we would seek to communicate to elected officials in each of the states where we were operating. It was a philosophy based on – to use New York as an example – two fundamental propositions.

The first was the fundamental unfairness of a system in which roughly 15% of students in the State of New York did not attend public school but where only about 1% of state education funding was going to non-public schools. That disparity was so blatant, was so large, as to really shock the conscience. For instance, you're a Lawrence resident – I don't know if you're District 14 or 15 – but parents in Lawrence are paying enormously high property taxes, most of which are going to support the public school system. But at the same time that

they're paying taxes to support the public school system, they're getting back virtually nothing from the state in respect of their own children that they have chosen, quite appropriately, to educate in the way that they deem to be the most suitable for their own children. So that disparity itself was something that we felt we needed to highlight.

The second thing that we concentrated on explaining was that, in this terribly unfair process, the state was saving enormous amounts of money. Our research indicated that the state was spending somewhere in the vicinity of \$20,000 per child to educate a student in the State of New York. Now, multiply that by the hun-

table. But it's still not enough. We're not going to be satisfied until we've reached a point where schools are going to be in a position to seriously roll back the amount of tuition that they're charging because they're getting their fair share of state and local assistance.

We've also created a mechanism within our advocacy group, within the Teach Coalition, that we call the government maximization project. It's one thing to advocate for funding from state and local government. But then there's a whole other job to be done in educating schools about what's available to them and how they can go about accessing the funds that have now been allocated. We have a whole unit that spends its time working with schools and school administrators to be sure that they completely understand everything that they're entitled to. We help them with their application processes and so on so they can be able to access the funds that we've fought so hard to be able to bring to the table.

Since then, we've expanded it to a number of states. The results have been extraordinary. Probably in the last six years, if we look across the Teach Coalition, at all of the different types of funding that we've been able to bring to the table for yeshivot and day schools, that number is probably

table. But it's still not enough. We're not going to be satisfied until we've reached a point where schools are going to be in a position to seriously roll back the amount of tuition that they're charging because they're getting their fair share of state and local assistance.

So, we've got both sides of that equation covered. I hope that now that this foundation has been created that, over time, we're going to see more and more funds being allocated to provide some relief to parents who are under this crushing burden of ever-escalating tuition costs.

***With schools, hopefully, reopening in the fall there will undoubtedly be costs associated with reopening under coronavirus regulations. Do you think that's something that the state or federal government would pay for with regards to those regulations?***

Certainly we're going to be pushing in that direction once it gets to be a little clearer what states are going to mandate. Part of the difficulty now is that schools are doing scenario planning with multiple scenarios. They don't know what they're going to be facing just two months from now. Nobody knows. We don't know if the numbers will drop precipitously, and it'll be possible to open school essentially without social distancing. We don't know whether the numbers are going to spike up yet again, and it'll be

***“If we look across the Teach Coalition, at all of the different types of funding that we've been able to bring to the table for yeshivot and day schools, that number is probably somewhere slightly higher than a billion dollars.”***

dreds of thousands of kids who were not attending public schools, and you start to get to a huge number that the state was saving by being relieved of this burden by property tax paying parents and not having to spend this money on educating those kids. You put those two things together, and I think you have some very potent arguments to make.

The other part we needed to focus on was to approach the advocacy process in the most professional way that we could think of. What I said to our advocacy group was that the OU needed to approach this issue – which is the most important economic issue facing Orthodox parents anywhere – in the same way that any major company or any major interest group would approach an issue that

somewhere slightly higher than a billion dollars.

***A billion dollars – that's astounding.***

That includes funding for STEM education, funding for technology, funding for per capita mandated services, funding for transportation, for nursing services, and, most importantly and most recently, enormous amounts of funding for security, for school security, both hard and soft, for personnel costs to hire security guards and for the ability to harden the security facilities that schools and shuls have like cameras, gates, windows, and so on.

If you put that all together, it's been an enormous amount of money that we've been able to bring to the



Rabbi Moshe Hauer of Baltimore and Rabbi Dr. Josh Joseph of Lawrence will be taking over for Mr. Fagin at the OU

impossible to open schools at all on a face-to-face basis.

They have to make decisions about whether they're going to retrofit premises, install partitions, whether they're going to run classes on a socially distanced basis – in which case the class size is going to be much, much smaller than it's been, which is going to mean additional space and additional classrooms; some of them may need to rent additional space and classrooms. They have to figure out how many teachers they're going to need, if the class size is going to be substantially smaller, if they're going to stagger schedules. All of these things are completely up in the air.

I just had a conversation this morning, literally two hours ago, with a principal of one of the larger schools in the tri-state area. They're planning for three or four different scenarios, each of them requiring a whole different approach. You've got schools that provide bus transportation that are now going to have to figure out how they're going to be able to socially distance kids on buses and how many additional buses they're going to need.

This is a situation where not only are parents distraught about what the future may bring in the fall, but schools are equally distraught. It's all part and parcel of this enormous uncertainty that we're all facing.

***You initially were supposed to be at the OU in this position for just 18 months. It ballooned into six years. Reflecting back,***

***what are the things that you're most proud of – the accomplishments or the strides that the OU has made under your vision?***

I'll tick off a couple. One is the enormous, really explosive, growth that the OU has seen in every aspect of our functions over the last several years. We've been able to multiply the programs and services that we provide to our shul network and to our communities. That's been enormously gratifying.

In that process of enormous growth, it was tremendously important for us to really professionalize our operations so that everything that we were doing we were doing as carefully and efficiently and professionally as we could. We brought to the organization a whole range of management structure that any large organization really needs to rely on to be sure that it's operating appropriately.

We changed our budgeting process. We changed our strategic planning processes that really had not, by and large, been an important part of the OU culture; now every one of our departments engages in both short-term and long-term strategic planning, looking at every aspect of their operations, every one of their programs, to determine whether they remain optimal and whether they need to be changed in any particular way. We put into place a rigorous program of program and service evaluation to be sure we were looking carefully at everything we were doing and where improvements needed to be made. We redesigned our finance department.

We redesigned our institutional advancement department, which handles all of our fundraising.

We're now embarking on a major project to redo our entire IT infrastructure. That'll probably take us several years to work through, but we'll then have a state-of-the-art IT capability. We've changed our communications function, our public relations function.

I think now we're on a very, very solid and secure platform to continue growth into the future.

***What or who would you say are your greatest influences in life?***

The greatest influence on my life has been my wife. My most important sounding board in probably everything that I do is my wife, who is an extraordinary human being, an extraordinary sounding board, and a competent professional in her own right. I would put her at the very top of my list.

In terms of influence and being *oseik b'tzarchei tzibbur*, I think I would point to my father-in-law, *a"h*. There are so many important lessons that I learned from him, the most important of which was that there was not a moment that he wasn't thinking about the institution that he had responsibility for. He would wake up in the morning worrying about the yeshiva; he would go to bed at night worrying about the yeshiva. He couldn't tolerate the notion that the rabbeim and moros wouldn't get paid on time. If he had to go out and stand on the street corner with a pushka to

ensure that they got paid on time, he would do that. He was, together with his wife, incredible servants of the klal with a zeal and a dedication that was really unparalleled. My wife and I grew up watching that.

***Now that you're really going to retire – I know six years ago you were set to retire as well – but now that you're really going to retire, is there anything on the horizon that you're looking forward to?***

Well, if you had asked me a couple of months ago, I would have said that we were looking forward to be able to do some traveling that we really had not had a chance to do, between practicing law for 40 years and its pressures and being at the helm of the OU for the last six years. The pandemic has put a little bit of a crimp in those plans. But we hope that they'll be short-lived, and we'll have an opportunity to spend much more time with our children, our grandchildren, and – please G-d – shortly with a first great-grandchild.

***How many children do you have?***

We have two sons and their wives. And we have, *ka"h*, 13 grandchildren. They're the love of my life. We're very much looking forward to be able to spend far more time with them than I've had the opportunity to do.

I'm also hopeful that I will continue to be of service to Klal Yisrael with whatever talents I may be able to offer. 