

A conversation with Agudah's Rabbi Avi Schnall about the struggles and grind of Jewish diplomacy in Lakewood and across the Garden State

# TURNING OUR GEARS IN TRENTON

BY CHAIM SALLER



As a child, young Avi Schnall recalls sitting near his grandfather at the Agudah convention and listening in to the snippets of conversation that were passed across the table.

His grandfather, Agudah Vice President Mr. Eliezer “Loitchy” Glueck, would be engrossed, deep in conversation with Rabbi Moshe Sherer and Rabbi Shmuel Lefkowitz. They would *shmooze*, plan, and strategize, not paying much attention to the little boy at their side. But the little boy saw and heard everything, drinking in the sounds and sights of *klal* work in its rawest form.

Those late nights many years ago planted a seed deep within the young impressionable boy.

“I never understood why, of all his grandchildren, my *zaide* brought me,” Rabbi Schnall ponders. “But looking back, Hashem was already turning the keys for me to eventually step into the field.”

Now, Rabbi Schnall dedicates himself to the *klal* full-time, serving as the New Jersey Regional Director for Agudath Israel of America, and a member – and the recently appointed chairman – of the New Jersey Department of Education Nonpublic-School Committee.

Rabbi Schnall sat down with the *Yated* to share a glimpse behind the scenes. He talks of the burning topics of the hour, the victories we have come to take for granted, and the battles that remain to be fought.

## Kiruv: An Arena for training

Rabbi Schnall grew up as a typical Brooklyn boy, learning at Yeshiva Torah Temimah, Mesivta of Baltimore, the Philadelphia Yeshiva, and then Rav Dovid Soloveitchik’s *ye-*

*shiva* in Yerushalayim. After returning from Eretz Yisroel, he learned at Yeshiva Gedolah of South Jersey for a year before joining Bais Medrash Govoah for the next five years. He then served as a night *seder rebbi* at Bais Medrash Zichron Meir for two years. He spent his summers in Oorah’s camp, The Zone, starting out as a division head and eventually becoming the head counselor. He also headed their *Motzei Shabbos* Chill Zone program for a year, overseeing all 36 locations across the

thing – I may be working on different fronts, but it is all to help the same *Klal Yisroel*.”

His years in camp have also taught him how to thrive in pressurized situations and have given him the confidence to speak in public.

“Nothing is scarier than getting up and speaking in front of 600 kids. After doing that, testifying in front of government committees is a breeze,” he jokes.

After working for two years as a *rebbe*,

Rabbi Schnall went to the interview, unsure if he was fit for the position.

“I told them that I knew Menashe Miller, who was then mayor, and I had heard of Governor Chris Christie. But I had no clue who was in between the two.”

They gave him the job anyhow, trusting in his ability to pick up the necessary training along the way.

“They threw me into the water. *Boruch Hashem*, it is four years later and I’m still swimming.”

## The Ropes of Diplomacy

Rabbi Schnall quickly learned that there were all sorts of politicians in Trenton, each with a different understanding and a different level of sympathy to our way of life.

There are some politicians who have the predisposition of affection to Jewish people.

“The state senator who covers Jackson is Senator Samuel Thompson,” Rabbi Schnall relates. “He has been an advocate of Jewish causes long before *frum* people started moving to Jackson. In fact, he once testified on a bill against the BDS [Boycott Israel Movement], and he stated that he is passionate about it because he is named after a Jew, Samuel, who was a good friend of his father. There are others, too, who seem to just have an affinity for Jewish people.”

On the flip side, however, there are a slew of politicians who staunchly oppose many Jewish values.

“Some have very liberal outlooks on certain issues. They do not believe there is justification for private schools, and they often do not agree with our outlook of life.”

As the political climate varies from district to district, innovation is often the key to



(R-L) MR. LOITCHY GLUECK, RABBI MOSHER SHERER AND RABBI ABISH BRODT.

country.

Rabbi Schnall credits his years working at Oorah for giving him the skills needed to navigate the intricate fields of diplomacy.

“*Kiruv* is all about helping others,” he explains. “When you work in Oorah, you become sensitive to other people’s needs. Working for Agudah is essentially the same

the offer was presented to take the position with Agudath Israel.

“Rabbi Raphael Zucker, who is the chairman of the Agudah in New Jersey, knew me from Oorah and offered me the position. Amazingly, he had no idea that my grandfather was Mr. Glueck, but he thought I would be good for the job.”



getting through to politicians.

"If a politician doesn't have any Jews living in his district, he is hardly inclined to vote for a bill to benefit the *frum* community," he explains. "After all, it is his job to take care of his constituents and no one else."

So the task at hand is to somehow get them on board. There are 120 legislators in Trenton, and different ones respond to different methods.

"If the politician has Jewish constituents, our job is to engage the constituents. It may take a widespread voting drive, getting them to speak up, or we set up meetings with the politician. Sometimes it takes some political contributions. Whatever the case, we will harness the power of the public."

When there is not a significant number of Jewish constituents, creating coalitions often works wonders.

"There are many other communities that share our interests. There are Catholic schools, Muslim schools, and other private schools. We team up with them and leverage our common interests to get more legislators attentive to our causes."

### Chairman of the State's Nonpublic School Committee

Rabbi Schnall served on the New Jersey Department of Education's Nonpublic School Committee for the last four years, and was nominated to be its chairman last week. He attributes Agudah's close relationship to *mosdos* as the catalyst for his promotion.

"There are approximately 150,000 private school children in New Jersey, with close to a third of them being *yeshiva* students. We are very in tune to their concerns and needs, and other communities often turn to us for advice on how to deal with issues. On broader issues as well, Agudah serves as a beacon to other private school communities. When the recent tax laws were being formed, an extensive memo written by an Agudah attorney was passed around by CAPE to all the Catholic schools. They respect Agudah and they look to us for direction."

As chairman, he presides over the meetings, and he creates the agenda for the meetings as well.

"Until now, when we wanted something discussed, it was up to the chairman's discretion whether or not to put it on the agenda. Now, I can raise any topic we think is important."

The Committee is made up of approximately two dozen representatives from a slew of different private schools. There are representatives of Muslims, Christians, Catholics, Lutherans, among others. There are also members of the State's Department of Education, as well as a few representatives from local school districts. While the members of the committee are not legally government workers, the committee is a government entity, and the meetings take place in the Department of Education headquarters. The board forms the laws and policies of the State of New Jersey that regard private schools. While most policies must garner approval of the legislature, there are certain fields that the Committee has sole authority on.

"There used to be a policy that certain special education services that were provided by the state could only be given during break times. This forced many struggling children to have to give up their much-needed lunchtime or recess. We were able to change that and allow the services to be provided during class time as well, thus saving many children a lot of anguish. We didn't need approval from the legislature or the governor for this. We were able to do it ourselves."

This change greatly impacted many local families.

"I later got an email from a mother whom I did not know, thanking me profusely for changing her daughter's life. It is stories like this that make this job so rewarding."

(L-R) RABBI SCHNALL, RABBI ASHER LEDERER, SENATE PRESIDENT STEVE SWEENEY, AND COMMITTEEMAN MEIR LICHTENSTEIN.

## HOW TWO PHONE CALLS SAVED BUSING FOR LAKEWOOD

Two years ago, there was a crisis regarding busing in Lakewood. 10,000 kids were set to lose funding for busing. When cutting down the bus routes, roughly an additional 8,000 children would probably have lost busing as well due to the increased cost of running a smaller bus network.

Agudath Israel pulled out all the stops to try to fix the potentially catastrophic cuts. Through a series of connections, they drafted a bill that would save busing for all of Lakewood's children. The task at hand was to convince enough legislators to sign the bill, a daunting task when the bill was to benefit Lakewood alone.

After much diplomacy, they finally believed that the bill stood a chance on the State Senate floor. The bill was put on the agenda, and Rabbi Schnall showed up in Trenton, flanked by Committeeman Meir Lichtenstein and a representative of BMG, both of whom were also heavily involved in the predicament.

"We walked into the building and we were informed that the bill would be pulled from the agenda," Rabbi Schnall recalls. "We were devastated, but they told us that we were still two votes short of the majority."

Not being one to take defeat lightly, Rabbi Schnall racked his brain to try to come up with a plan.

"I suddenly remembered that there was a *frum Yid* who lived in Edison with children living in Lakewood, and who had a close relationship with his senator: I immediately called him. 'You should know that your children in Lakewood are set to lose busing next year,' I told him, 'but if you call Senator Diegnan and tell him that his constituents want this bill passed, we have a chance to save it.'"

He promised to call his senator, and Rabbi Schnall hung up, hopeful that the bill was now just one vote short of garnering approval.

"After hanging up, it struck me that while working in Oorah, I had come in contact with Rabbi Benjamin Yudin from Fair Lawn, New Jersey, whose grandson was a staff member in Oorah. I recalled once talking to Senator Gordon, and he had mentioned that he was good friends with Rabbi Yudin. I called Oorah's office, and they quickly supplied me with Rabbi Yudin's cell number."

Rabbi Schnall dialed Rabbi Yudin's phone number and made him aware of the pending threat to Lakewood's busing – a problem that was set to affect Rabbi Yudin's own grandchildren. Rabbi Yudin promised to do what he could to help and hung up to call Senator Gordon.

"I was watching from the balcony as Senator Gordon suddenly reached into his pocket and took out his phone, answering it and talking for a few minutes. He then hung up and subsequently changed his vote to approve the bill."

"The bill went on to pass both houses of the legislature – by the minimum number of votes needed. Governor Christie then signed it into law, and the potential disaster was averted."



### Jackson, Mahwah, and Beyond

Rabbi Schnall's position entails his defending religious liberties in "frontier" communities, where Jews are often met with resistance when trying to build *shuls*, *yeshivos*, and *eiruvim*.

"A *Yid* needs to be able to live and practice religion without laws being made to impede him," he asserts. "We cannot have a community without *shuls* and *yeshivos*."

As confronting local governments comes with its own set of risks, Rabbi Schnall consulted with *rabbonim* before taking up the cause.

"We knew that fighting for *eiruvim* may breed some additional anti-Semitism. However, the *rabbonim* advised that the right thing for us to do would be to go ahead with it."

He points out that Jews had moved into neighborhoods peacefully, and suddenly ordinances started being passed, unprovoked.

"We didn't create anti-Semitism. The sentiment definitely existed before, as it fueled the forming of the original legislation."

### Consulting Daas Torah

Dilemmas are common in any field of work, but even more so when their outcome can impact hundreds or thousands of people.

"As is the policy of the Agudah, all questions are directed to the Moetzes Gedolei Hatorah," Rabbi Schnall notes. "On local issues, we generally ask Rav Malkiel Kotler. Often, he chooses to give us his opinion, but on some matters, he opts to consult with other members of the Moetzes for their opinion as well. On some occasions, he has waited for a Moetzes meeting in order to bring up the issue before the entire Moetzes."

He adds that when the matter at hand involves a community outside of Lakewood, local *rabbonim* are consulted as well.

"Interestingly, I distinctly remember my grandfather discussing the *rabbonim's* opinions with Rabbi Scherer at the Agudah conventions. They would talk about what Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock *shlit"a* holds, what Rav Elya Svei *zt"l* held. 'If Rav Elya doesn't hold of it, you will never get him to acquiesce, and you can forget about the whole plan.' I recall them saying. It really ingrained in me the concept of following the words of *gedolim* faithfully."

### A Rewarding Job

Although this job calls for never-ending work and effort, the payoff makes it all worth it.

"The real fulfillment doesn't come from major victories and big headlines. The greatest feeling comes from being able to touch the lives of so many individuals."

Rabbi Schnall expounds.

"Busing is something that affects so many people. I know of individuals who could not get regular 9-5 jobs, because they had to drive their children to school every morning. It is not just about getting grants. It is about changing the lives of real people. Regarding grants as well, if *yeshivos* will not be able to secure funding, that money will eventually come out of the pocket of the parents. These things trickle down to real help for real people."

"There were a number of senior communities who were making issues with building *sukkos*. We reached out to Attorney Larry Loigman, who took on the cause pro bono and eventually got them to change the bylaws."

"People come over to me and tell me that they moved into certain senior communities only after we solved the *sukkah* issue. It's real help for real people," he reiterates.

### Touching Lives

He reminisces about specific incidents when he was able to make a difference for individuals.

There were three women who were taking a course at Rutgers University, commuting each day from Cliffwood, where their husbands were in *kollel*. One Friday, their professor informed them that he expected them to stay until the end



of the class that week or they would lose credit for the class and thus fail the course. The women were distraught. If they would stay until the end of the class, they would not make it back home in time for *Shabbos*, but if they left early, the entire semester would be fornaught.

Unsure of what to do, one of the women texted her mother, who immediately called Rabbi Yair Hoffman. Rabbi Hoffman contacted Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zweibel, who called Rabbi Schnall. Rabbi Schnall was in touch with Assemblyman Gary Schaer, who promised to call the office of the university's president.

"I don't know what exactly transpired, but what I do know is that 25 minutes after I hung up the phone, a note was brought into the classroom at Rutgers and the entire class was dismissed – at 2:00 in the afternoon."

He shares another story.

A *frum* Lakewood mother was a teacher in a nearby school district. She had a long-standing arrangement that allowed her to leave early on Fridays, and she would make up the hours during the week.

At one point, a new superintendent was hired. The superintendent informed her that she can no longer be considered a full-time employee if she leaves early on Friday. She abruptly lost all her benefits and got a drastic cut in her paycheck. The change affected her personal finances to a point where her husband was considering leaving *kollel* and getting a job.

Someone suggested to her that she contact Agudah. Rabbi Schnall immediately spoke to an education lawyer, and the lawyer drafted a letter to the superintendent. As a result of the letter, the superintendent reinstated the prior arrangement, and she began once again to get benefits and full pay.

He shares one more story.

Last *Shmittah*, there were three farmers from Eretz Yisroel who were supposed to come to America to speak at the Agudah convention. For some reason, their visas to enter the US were not issued on time, and they were to be barred from entering the country.

Rabbi Schnall has a longstanding relationship with Senator Cory Booker's office, and he called them and asked if they would be able to intercede on behalf of the farmers.

There were tons of logistics that had to work out. The American embassy is only open certain days of the week, and the time



AGUDAH REPRESENTATIVES WITH CONGRESSMAN CHRIS SMITH.



RABBI SCHNALL SPEAKING TO MEMBERS OF THE MOETZES GEDOLEI HATORAH.



WITH RAV MEIR STERN.



WITH RAV YERUCHEM OLSHIN.



WITH GOVERNOR PHIL MURPHY.

zone difference only made things harder. Time was ticking and they were at risk of missing their flight.

"With a tremendous dose of *seyata diShmaya*, Senator Booker's office managed to get through to the official in charge of issuing the visas just as she was about to leave her office," he recalls. "With just minutes until the office was set to close, she issued the visas, and they were able to board the plane to America."

The farmers indeed spoke at the Agudah convention, and they subsequently appeared at a massive rally the next Sunday in Bais Faiga.

"I later told Senator Booker, 'You'll never know how many poor children in Israel will have food to eat because of your help here in America.'"

### Lakewood of Today

Rabbi Schnall shares his perspective on

the cultural landscape of Lakewood today.

"Some people seem to constantly complain about Lakewood," he asserts. "I cannot address the changes in Lakewood from thirty

topsies, which is a terrible *bizayon hameis*. In Lakewood, these issues are taken care of so well, so quickly, much faster than in other *frum* communities. We have *shuls* wherever you need. There is an abundance of kosher food. We have the LRRC, Chemed, Chai Lifeline, Hatzolah, and so many other organizations. We have the biggest *yeshiva* in the world. Kids can generally walk around even at night without fear. There is no place like this, and the proof lies in the number of people who choose to settle here.

"There is a lot of noise," he says with a smile, "but you have to look beyond the noise."

### The Road Ahead

"After every step we take, we realize that there are two more that must be taken," Rabbi Schnall says in closing. "There is so far we must still go in New Jersey in regard to special education, otherservices, and various other gaps that exist. If we don't fill those gaps, people will fall in, with great repercussions."

Agudah is growing. They have a new office and have hired new staff members. Yet Rabbi Schnall looks to the *tzibbur* to help out as well.

"No one person can do everything, and anyone who can contribute of their time and energy can help make life better for *frum Yidden* across the state," he concludes. "We may never finish our work, but we will keep working at it until *Moshiach* arrives."

**"THERE IS A LOT OF NOISE...BUT YOU HAVE TO LOOK BEYOND THE NOISE."**

or even twenty years ago. I have only lived in Lakewood for 11 years. But I chose to live here, as did everyone else who lives in Lakewood. If Lakewood has so many issues, why would so many people flock to Lakewood?

"We hear a lot of noise. But we must realize that complaints are heard much louder than compliments. No city is perfect, and Lakewood is no different. But Lakewood has so, so many positive aspects that you will not find in any other city."

He points out a number of upsides.

"There is a worldwide problem with au-

### Community Briefs

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on Tuesday, *Rosh Chodesh Sivan*, May 15. The *shiur*, which took place at the home of R' Yaakov Schwartz on Ashley Avenue, featured *divrei hisorerus* from Rav Avigdor Kitevits, *R"m* at Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin.

### Parlor Meeting for Links and Shlomie's Club

This past Thursday, May 10, a parlor meeting was held in Lakewood to benefit Links and Shlomie's Club, an organization offering support and guidance to *yesomim*

and *yesomos* in the community.

The event took place at the home of Mr. Yitzzy Weinfeld on Lanes Mill Road. The guest speaker was Rabbi Shmuel Kohn, co-founder and director of Links.

### Night Out for Women

This past Sunday, *Erev Rosh Chodesh Sivan*/May 13, the Ladies Auxiliary of Yeshiva Karlin Stolof Lakewood presented A Night Out for Women at Lake Terrace Hall. The guest speaker was Mrs. Miriam Swerdlov, who spoke on the topic of "Parenting with *Simcha*." The emcee was Mrs. Perry Leiser.

The event featured a Chinese auction, a cheesecake bar, a presentation by a sand artist from Eretz Yisroel, and more.

## LOOKING FOR A SHIDDUCH?

"I saw your organization publicized in many *frum* magazines and newspapers and I was skeptical. However, I was 22 and dating for almost 3 years. So I decided that I had nothing to lose. I contacted your organization, and 32 days into the first 40 day cycle I met my husband. I continued the cycle throughout our dating period and engagement our *Baruch Hashem* it all went so smoothly. I just wanted to express my admiration and appreciation for your wonderful work."

— H.V.  
Brooklyn, NY

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