

B'YACHAD

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"A Blessing for Our Children"

A review of the Alumni Reunion Dinner and North American visit

by Rabbi Mendel Weinbach

There is a beautiful custom in Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem which took on a new form at the Ohr Somayach Alumni Reunion Dinner this past summer. On Yom Kippur evening, right after Kol Nidrei, one of the heads of Ohr Somayach stands before a Beis Midrash packed with students and visitors, many of them experiencing the first real Yom Kippur in their lives. He reminds them that it is a treasured Jewish custom for parents to bless their children with spiritual and material success on the threshold of this holy day. Since their parents are not here to give them this blessing, it is we who assume the role of surrogate parents and offer this blessing in their place - "Yesimcha Elokim..."

Looking at the hundreds of faces of former students gathered in the hall of Yeshiva Toras Emes Kaminetz in Brooklyn, I thought of how many of them received that very blessing from me on Yom Kippur in Jerusalem. I pointed out that only two weeks earlier, on Erev Rosh Chodesh Sivan, the famous prayer of the Shalah Hakadosh was said by Jews throughout Eretz Israel and the world. This is a tefilah for the spiritual and material success of children which so beautifully parallels the bracha of Yom Kippur.

As I now said this tefilah on behalf of all the parents of all our past and present talmidim, I was overcome with emotion. After all, so many of these "children" in the audience had earlier proudly showed me the photographs of their own children and excitedly related the thrill of celebrating the Bar Mitzvah and even weddings of our "grandchildren."

This wonderful sense of family set the tone for the reunion. It was echoed in the charming introduction by

M.C. Shmuel Rothman and reached a climax of responsible loyalty in the very moving words of Shmuel Dov Vogel who came all the way from Montreal to be with us.

The rest is history. The warm reunion of friends who had not seen each other for years, the enthusiastic dancing, the exciting picture-taking with disposable cameras provided for every table - all of these are etched in the memories of those who participated in this unforgettable event.

Rabbi Nota Schiller, who had been scheduled to participate in the reunion, was compelled to remain in Jerusalem on urgent business, and the hope was expressed to see him at the next reunion.

Special thanks for the success of the affair is due to Dinner Committee Chairman Daniel Spekman and the members of his committee who made countless phone calls to alumni.

The Reunion Dinner was certainly the highlight of my visit to North America but by no means the only

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feature. Preceding it was a Shabbos in Monsey where I enjoyed the extraordinary hospitality of Shmuel Rothman and his family. It was a special Shabbos which included a couple of talks in the new Beis Midrash of Ohr Somayach Monsey, and get-togethers with alumni at the Rothman home.

After Monsey and the dinner it was back to Brooklyn, where I stayed at the home of Dovid Silberman together with Rabbi Moshe Pindrus, who really deserves the major credit for putting together the reunion and arranging my entire itinerary. Both at the Silberman home and in the Ohr Somayach office in Manhattan, I had the opportunity of meeting on an individual basis with a number of alumni who had scheduled appointments. Such meetings took place with alumni and their wives in every city that I visited.

Chicago was the first stop on the tour beyond the East and there I was the guest of Ohr Somayach's representative in the area, alumnus Yehuda Albin. The stay in Chicago consisted of a talk on "Jews - An Endangered Species?" before a group of businessmen and professionals who learn on an individual basis with Yehuda, private meetings with some of his study partners and a guest appearance at the annual dinner of Yeshiva Migdal Torah. This organization, headed by Rabbi Avraham Alter and Rabbi Aaron Levitansky, works very closely with Ohr Somayach and its alumni returning to Chicago, and the dinner afforded an opportunity to meet many of them.

From Chicago I went to Cleveland where I was the guest of our representatives, Steve Abrams and alumnus Moshe Efros. I had the opportunity of addressing two groups of people who study with our reps and to meet with a group of alumni in the home of Bobby Schottenstein.

Shabbos in Toronto, like the one before in Monsey, was a special treat. The exceptional hospitality of the director of the Ohr Somayach Center in Thornhill, alumnus Avram Rothman, and his family combined with an exciting schedule of public talks at the Center to provide an outstanding opportunity to touch base with so many Ohr Somayach alumni and supporters. The climax was a Melave Malke Alumni Reunion in the home of alumnus Yaakov Kaplan.

Just as I finished some remarks at the weekly Sunday breakfast learning session headed by Rabbi Eliezer Breitowitz, I was taken to the airport by alumnus Yehuda Moldofsky for the flight to Miami. The highlight of the visit to "Ohr Somayach South Florida," which is directed by alumnus Shmuel Kalos, whose family hosted me, and alumnus Yaakov Zier, was a public talk on

"Breaching the Walls" to a large audience at the fashionable Dadeland Marriott Resort.

The last stop before returning to New York was Detroit where I was the guest of Ohr Somayach Detroit director alumnus Yechiel Krohner. The highlight of this visit was a lunch and learn talk for a large gathering of supporters, who participate in our local learning program at the Fisher Jewish Federation Building, on the topic "Creating a Positive Jewish Family." This was preceded by a breakfast meeting with the officers and executive committee of O.S. Detroit.

Back in New York, where I had already had an opportunity to meet individual learning sessions with some of the supporters, who regularly learn with alumni Pinchas Kasnett and Jay Margolis, I climaxed my visit to North America with a lunch and learn talk for an impressive group of such supporters hosted by Mr. Leonard Rosen, a senior partner of the prestigious law firm of Wachtel, Lipton, Rosen and Katz in the company board room. Mr. Rosen and his wife Phyllis will be the guests of honor at the Ohr Somayach International Jewish Heritage Dinner on November 12, 1996 at the Plaza Hotel.

Looking back at the activities of these crowded two weeks I can offer the following conclusions:

We can be tremendously proud of our alumni in every community in North America who are making a Kiddush Hashem through the personal example of their families and their loyalty to what they received at Ohr Somayach.

- Our representatives in the various communities which I visited, and in others which lack of time compelled me to schedule for a future visit, are doing important historic work in introducing leadership people to Jewish learning and to an appreciation of Ohr Somayach.

- More and more leading people in the business and professional communities are demonstrating an active interest in learning Torah, and many of our alumni have proven themselves exceptionally talented as learning partners, capable of bringing them closer to Torah Judaism and interesting them in encouraging the historic efforts of Ohr Somayach to build another generation of alumni like those I met and blessed in New York.

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