

Convention 2015 Concludes with Candid Discussion of “Off the Derech” Phenomenon

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What Can We Do About the “OTD” Phenomenon?

The highlight of the Sunday program – and, for many, the highlight of the convention – came at the closing keynote session. While not new, particularly for Agudah conventions, the topic of the off the derech phenomenon is always gripping. It is painful and real, and unfortunately shows no signs of subsiding. Every year brings new challenges, and new discussions are necessary. The packed hall, and the thousands who followed this discussion electronically, bore live testimony to that.

“OTD”: Why Is It Happening and What Can We Do About It? was moderated by Rabbi Avi Shafran, Director of Public Affairs at Agudath Israel of America. Rabbi Shafran opened the session discussing the importance of empathizing with the pain and confusion of teens and adults at risk, or those who have already *R”l* veered. “They are all our children,” Rabbi Shafran exclaimed, “and have no less a claim to our goodwill than anyone else.”

[For optimal viewing experience, hover over and click the magnifying glass in the lower right corner of the picture.]

The first presenter, Rabbi Dr. Yitzchok Lob Psy.D, a private practice psychologist in Chicago, opened up about the pain that he and his parents, Holocaust survivors, endured when his lone sister abandoned *yiddishkeit*

decades ago. Dr. Lob explained that contrary to even his own assumptions up until several years ago, it is not necessarily children who suffered significant trauma who leave the fold. There are many possible reasons, “sometimes a slow disconnect, sometimes an explosion.”

Just as there is no uniform cause, there is no uniform antidote. Dr. Lob stressed the importance of *tefillah* for good children – as emphasized by many *gedolim* – as well as the need for parents, *mechanchim* and *rabbanim* to offer even challenging children unconditional love and support. “Whether it is with a hug, or the right look, they must always feel like we are ‘holding’ them,” Dr. Lob implored.

Answering the Questions

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, senior lecturer at Gateways, noted author, and history professor at Yeshiva University, mused how even mainstream adult members of our community are wary to sign their names on an innocuous letter to the editor. The fear of saying the wrong thing, or asking the wrong question, is certainly a lot stronger amongst insecure youth wondering about some fundamental tenet of our *emunah*. Rabbi Becher cited the dictum of his *rebbe*, HaRav Moshe Schapira, that it is incumbent upon us to fortify the tree of *emunah* amongst our families. “It doesn’t get transmitted by osmosis anymore,” he warned.

Like other speakers before him, Rabbi Becher stressed that there are a variety of reasons that can “break the camel’s back” and drive a child away from his or her roots. In addition to enhancing the teaching of *emunah*, and answering questions, Rabbi Becher advised of the importance of promoting the truth and beauty of Torah, instead of harping with a dismissive attitude towards all that we don’t promote. Children often grow up and feel that something they were taught isn’t exactly so, and then are skeptical about everything else they were taught. “An attitude of *bitul* can come back to bite,” he said.

Root Prevention

Rabbi Moshe Tuvia Lieff, Rav of Agudas Yisroel Bais Binyomin, delivered the

final address on this topic, hitting on a broad array of vital notes. He noted that the contemporary culture and its potent *nisayonos* make it far more difficult for today's children to remain *ehrllich* than it was in previous years. We must recognize their challenges, as well as their "heroism" when they prevail.

Citing the words of his *rebbe*, HaRav Shmuel Berenbaum *zt"l*, Rabbi Lief stressed the importance of recognizing that unique contemporary challenges require different weapons than the battles of yesteryear. "We can't just insulate our children; we must inculcate a pride in being Jewish," Rabbi Lief exclaimed. "They should feel like princes, and that going against the Torah is below their dignity."

Rabbi Lief also stressed the importance of recognizing that living the values of Torah is more important than the mere knowledge of Torah, or the test score of a child. Even a child who doesn't excel in learning and/or *hasmada* can still appreciate living Torah values, and do good deeds on behalf of Hashem and his fellow *yid*. For parents, Rabbi Lief advised, it is particularly important to constantly show children that it is they - and the time they need - that are more precious than the parents' business or leisurely endeavors. If a child struggles in *yiddishkeit*, it is important for parents to validate their thoughts and feelings, even when the ultimate goal is to get them to overcome them.

The audience - in the room and around the world - listened intently, and gathered lots of food for thought. Ultimately, beyond our *hishtadlus*, the fate of our children is in the hands of Hashem. Before concluding his address - and the 93rd annual Agudah convention - Rabbi Lief recited a simple *tefillah* at the podium: "*V'heishiv lev avos al banim, v'lev banim al avosam.*"

An Array of Sessions Wrap Up the Agudah Convention

Before Sunday's keynote session began, there were several special early morning programs: a Daf Yomi *shiur*; an Agudah Women of America breakfast; a film presentation on the life and legacy of HaRav Nosson Tzvi Finkel *zt"l*; and a Yarchei Kallah on the *halachos* of websites and drone

delivery on Shabbos by Rabbi Avrohom Lefkowitz, Rav of Kollel Bnei Torah of Lakewood.

In addition, attendees participated in four concurrent sessions, once again featuring leading community figures tackling pertinent topics. Rabbi A.D. Motzen, National Director of State Relations for Agudath Israel of America, led a captivating discussion on the growing political force of the Orthodox community. He was flanked by Aron Wieder, Majority Leader of the Rockland County Legislature; Village of Lawrence Trustee Michael Fragin; and Chaskel Bennett, member of Agudath Israel of America's Board of Trustees.

Rabbi Bentzion Klatzko, North American College Outreach Education Director, Olami, and founder of Shabbat.com, tackled a core challenge for individuals aspiring to lead: "I want to change the world but don't know where to turn." A special session for women focusing on improving relationships was hosted by Rabbi Eytan Feiner, Rav of Congregation Kneseth Israel of Far Rockaway and his wife, Rebbetzin Aviva Feiner, Rebbetzin of the *shul* and Menacheles of Machon Basya Rochel Seminary.

Many would agree that Sunday morning at the 93rd annual Agudath Israel of America convention was the grand finale of a powerful, intriguing convention – one whose impact is sure to be felt throughout the coming year and beyond.

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