

Strengthening Relationships and Advocating for the Community: Agudath Israel Promotes Legislative Agenda in Albany

“Attending Agudah’s Albany Day was an eye-opener for me,” said Mrs. Tsivia Yanofsky, School Principal of Manhattan High School for Girls, a first-time attendee of Agudath Israel’s annual Albany Day last Wednesday. “It was empowering for me to see how even laypeople’s presence can impact policy that is so crucial for Klal Yisroel. Observing the legislators take our concerns seriously was a clear indication for me that Agudah’s strenuous efforts on behalf of the Klal are extremely advantageous and impactful.”

Agudath Israel’s Albany Day is an annual pilgrimage to Albany of over 50 lay leaders, constituents, and activists. New York State is the home of the largest concentration of Jews in the United States, so the laws that come out of Albany directly affect a large portion of the Orthodox population in the United States. Organized by Rabbi Yeruchim Silber, Agudah’s Director of New York Government Relations, Albany Day is a way for the Agudah to connect with legislators and their staffs, and relating their constituents’ concerns.

The power shift in Albany after the last election, with the Democratic Party taking the majority of the State Senate, also brought in a number of new incoming senators and assemblymembers. The Agudah, known for its long history of working for the Klal with members of both parties, took this opportunity to get to know some of the incoming legislators

and to introduce them to members of their legislative districts.









Agudath Israel of America Albany Day 2019



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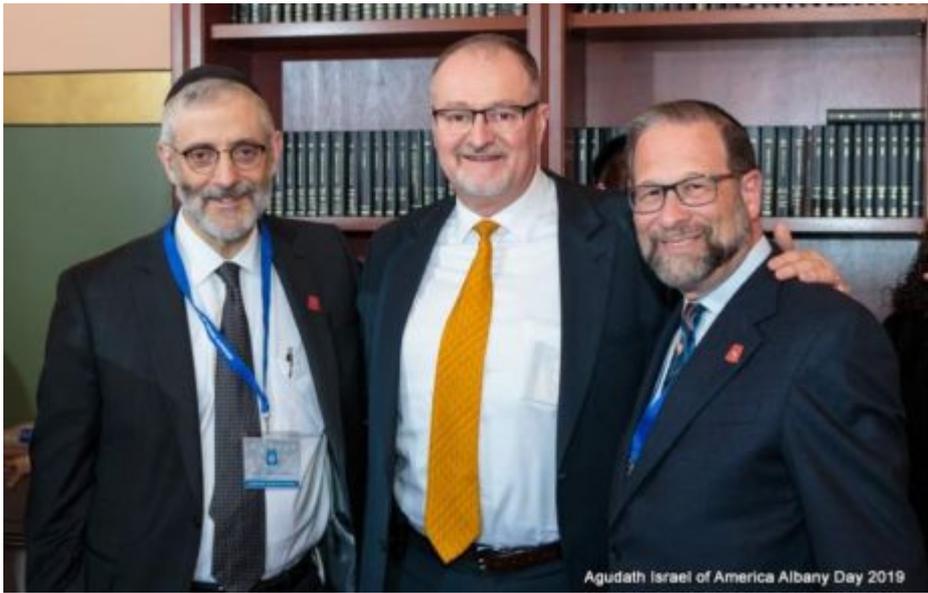
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Legislative Agenda

Albany Day is structured around a set of priorities that the Agudah's government affairs personnel put together based on the needs of the Klal. These legislative issues are the ones that the Agudah asks lawmakers in Albany to consider when formulating new laws and updating old ones.

Top Priority: Yeshivos and Bais Yaakovs

Agudah's top legislative priority for 2019 is maintaining the integrity of our schools against excessive governmental oversight and interference.

The Orthodox community has come together to combat the State Education Department's new "Substantial Equivalency Guidelines." Agudath Israel's message to Dan Fuller, Assistant Secretary for Education, and other education officials, was unequivocal: The process by which these guidelines came about was unacceptable, ignoring community input and established legislative norms. The guidelines themselves threaten our thriving *mosdos*, and are both draconian and illogical. "The sense of outrage that permeates the entire non-public school community about the guidelines is great," said Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, Executive Vice President of Agudath Israel. "There need to be changes made."

Mrs. Yanofsky, addressing Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, Deputy Majority Leader Michael Gianaris, as well as Senators Shelly Mayer and Toby Ann Stavisky, spoke as principal of Manhattan High School for Girls. She argued passionately in favor of the traditional dual curriculum, explaining how the skills learned in Yeshivos and Bais Yaakovs transcend book learning – though there's plenty of that too – and include self-discipline, critical thinking, and textual analysis skills. The education in these life skills produce students who are ready to become engaged citizens and responsible adults.

Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, responding to Mrs. Yanofsky's points, committed to giving due consideration to the education issue. Saying that she was looking forward to a great relationship going forward, she told the assembled delegates that she would have an open door for the Agudah.

A number of other legislators also addressed the substantial equivalency issue. Assistant Assembly Speaker Felix Ortiz, as well as Assembly Members Rodneyse Bichotte, Michael Blake, Simcha Eichenstein, Joseph Lentol, Stacey Pheffer Amato, Helene Weinstein, and David Weprin all offered support for the Agudah in this issue. Assistant Deputy Secretary of Education Jamie Frank also noted that the Governor's office would be

pleased to discuss substantial equivalency further with Agudah representatives.

Funding Issues

Mandated services are state requirements which are fulfilled by schools at the state's demand. State law is very clear that these services must be reimbursed by the state. The Governor's proposed state budget, said Avrohom Weinstock, Agudah's Chief of Staff, does not include money to pay non-public schools for some of these services, which include collecting and maintaining immunization records for each of their students, and past reimbursement for CAP, or the Comprehensive Attendance Program, a state mandate to monitor student attendance.

Special needs students struggle with many unique challenges. A new obstacle they face is obtaining transportation within 50 miles from their home as required by law, which is being denied by some districts. In all these issues, the Agudah urged legislators and staffers to provide the necessary funding to maintain the service levels our children need.

Anti-Semitism

Clarkstown. Airmont. Chestnut Ridge. Nanuet. These growing Jewish communities are just a few in which the Orthodox population has faced institutionalized anti-Semitism, in the guise of hostile zoning laws. The Agudah has been involved in numerous, successful, legal actions which invoked the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA). A similar state law, which would address discriminatory zoning laws on the state level, would make it easier for religious institutions to combat land use restrictions that were made for anti-Semitic reasons.

Many legislators took the time to note that anti-Semitism concerns them too. Senator Peter Harckham and Assemblymen David Buchwald and Jeffrey Dinowitz all spoke to that point,

and Assemblyman Charles Lavine noted that as Jews, it is extraordinarily important that we stand together in these troubling times.

Anti-Semitism also manifests itself in terror – as in the recent horrific shooting in a Pittsburgh synagogue – and speaks to the need for security funding for our schools, shuls and camps. Agudah’s representatives asked the legislature to match the level of funding – \$150 per child – offered by neighboring New Jersey. Currently, the state gives approximately \$37 per child for security – a very appreciated step in the right direction, but not good enough.

Speaking to the need for security, Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes noted the respect that all peoples must have for each other, and added her willingness to be helpful in regards to working towards adequate funding.

Agudah delegates also had the opportunity to meet with Deputy Secretary for Public Safety Richard White and Homeland Security and Emergency Services Executive Deputy Commissioner Terry O’Leary. Discussing security concerns, security funding, and the grant application process, the officials promised that their respective offices would work closely with our community and listen to our concerns.

End of Life Issues

The sanctity of human life is a classic Jewish ideal, and Rabbi Shmuel Lefkowitz, President of Agudah’s Chayim Aruchim division, spoke strongly against a bill that would legalize physician-assisted suicide. “Many doctors steer patients to palliative care without disclosing other treatment plans,” said Rabbi Lefkowitz in his presentation to Dr. Howard Zucker, Commissioner of Health, and other health leaders. “Doctors need to offer options to patients and their families.”

Reaching Out and Strengthening Relationships

Other legislators who joined the Agudah delegation at various points during the day included Senators David Carlucci, Simcha Felder, Andrew Gounardes, and Anna Kaplan. Assembly Members Peter Abbate, Brian Barnwell, Robert Carroll, Steven Cymbrowitz, Richard Gottfried, Aileen Gunther, Ron Kim, Nicole Malliotakis, Dan Quart, Daniel Rosenthal, and Al Taylor met with the delegates as well. The delegation was also joined by Michael Snow, Director of Jewish Affairs for Governor Cuomo, and Jim Cultrara, Director of Education for the New York State Catholic Conference.

Askanus: Its Own Reward

Judaism has its own prayer for those who act on behalf of the public. *V'chol mi she'oskim b'tzorchei tzibbur b'emunah...* Albany Day is one of those selfless days where members of the Klal extend themselves on behalf of the Klal, under the banner of the Agudah. Many of the legislators who met with Agudah's delegates repeated the same point: It is important for your community that you come up here to Albany. From Rabbi Shlomo Gertzulin's touching and meaningful invocation on the Senate floor, to the clearly *frum* garb of the attendees, being in Albany sends a powerful message to our legislators.

Mr. Sol Werdiger, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Agudah, explained, "When members of the community come to Albany our elected officials see the people behind the issues and understand them better. Past Albany Days have directly impacted legislation that concerns the *frum* community and we are grateful to all those who joined us on Wednesday."