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The New Yet Familiar Face of Secular Zionism

A Wake Up Call

— Rabbi Avi Shafran

April Pesach 5763

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A New Yet Familiar Face



Shinui's Roots and Why They Matter

The stunning ascendance of Shinui, the anti-religious Israeli political party, now the third largest in the Knesset and the Likud party's partner in Israel's new governing coalition, should do more than alarm us. It should make us think.

Some observers not well disposed to Chareidim have suggested that the victim be blamed: Were Chareidim more integrated into Israeli society, they say, more interactive with their non-observant fellow citizens, were they only to dress and live their lives "less differently," or to show a willingness to exchange full-time Torah study for army service and lucrative professions, they would surely earn others' good will instead of the opposite.

Rabbi Shafran serves as Agudath Israel of America's Director of Public Affairs and as the American director of Am Echad, the Agudath Israel-inspired educational outreach effort and media resource.

And of course, they add, the Chareidi refusal to accept the notion of multiple-"Judaisms," and Chareidi determination to preserve what spirit of *Shabbos* and *kedushas Yisroel* is currently fostered by the State, don't help either.

There is surely room for greater Chareidi outreach to non-religious Israelis (though reports indicate that there is more today than ever), and for more effective *hasbara* explaining Chareidi beliefs and positions (though here, too, there seems to be a good deal already). But laying the blame for animus against Chareidim at their own doorstep is little different from holding all Jews responsible for their "reputation" among much of humanity as overly clannish or haughty or liberal or conservative – not to mention poisoners of wells, killers of children, drinkers of blood and plotters of world domination.

No, hatred, simply put, happens; it isn't always earned. Recognizing its roots, though, can often be instructive, as it may be here.

OF ISMS AND SCHISMS

Surprising at the time to many of us who came of age in the vicinity of 1967, when Israel stunningly defeated the array of Arab armies determined to destroy her, were the denunciations by Torah leaders of earlier times of "Zionism," the philosophy that culminated in a Jewish State¹. Granted, nationalistic aspirations were a far cry from a collective Jewish return to Torah and *avodas Hashem*. "*Artza alinu*," we well understood, was a far cry from

¹ Some members of our parents' generation may have also been taken aback by similar ideological reservations in view of the euphoria surrounding Israel's survival in the face of the Arab invasion in 1948.

“*na’aseh v’nishma*.” But wasn’t a Jewish movement aimed at bringing Jews together in their ancestral land, the land promised us by *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, at least a step in the right direction?

There were those, of course, who in fact saw it precisely that way, and still do. They call themselves Religious Zionists and choose to view the Zionist endeavor as a fulfillment not of Theodore Herzl’s dream, but of the prophecies of the *Nevi’im*.

That has not, though, been the approach of the majority of *Gedolim*, either before or after 1948. Though they were “Zionists” par excellence – praying constantly and fervently “*V’shechezna einenu b’shuv’cha l’Tziyon b’rachamim*” – they saw the contemporary movement that had adopted the name “*Tziyon*” as something less than salubrious for the Jewish people.

The perspective was well articulated by the Kamenetzer Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Reuven Grozovsky (later *Rosh HaYeshiva* at Torah Vodaath), Chairman of the American *Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah* in the post-World War II years. He wrote (loosely translated):

[In secular Zionism, the *Gedolim*] saw a deeper radicalism than that of Reform, in the [Zionist] declaration that the Jews are not a nation of Torah but rather a people of nationalistic aspiration. They misrepresented all the links in the chain of our mesora throughout history as nationalistic symbols, and they culled from the Torah and its *mitzvos* and holidays only what they could distort and present as nationalistic celebrations and customs; they uprooted them entirely from their essential roots in the Creator of the universe.”

(BA’AYOS HAZ’MAN)

What Rabbi Grozovsky sought to explain was that the Zionist philosophy’s essence is the desire to define the Jewish mission as the establishment of a Jewish state like other states. He and the other *Gedolim* at the helm of Agudath Israel, as well as many other *Gedolei Yisroel*, firmly rejected that redefinition. That rejection is, in fact, a direct corollary of viewing Torah as the soul of the Jewish nation.

ALTERED STATE

Even enthralled as so many of us were by the events of 1967, by the *Nissim g’luyim* (open miracles) with which *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* favored *Klal Yisroel* in *Eretz Yisroel* through the medium of the modern state Jews had created, those of us who studied Rabbi Grozovsky’s words seriously and pondered them well knew that, despite all the wonders we had witnessed, including the capture of the *Kosel Ma’aravi*, he had accurately described the troubling essence of the movement that had midwived Israel.

But Rabbi Grozovsky also made clear that he did not consider the movement *qua* movement and the *de facto* state to be equivalent. Even in his time, he saw the relationship between secular Zionism and State of Israel as a complex one. Though the former was clearly the engine of the latter, he averred, the Torah attitude toward a here-and-now “Jewish State,” even one not based on Torah, is less simple and straightforward than its position toward a clearly anti-Torah philosophy:

The State, however, is a reality, as is the Jewish community within it, and our goal now is not to argue about whether to say *Hallel* [on the anniversary of its founding] or *Selichos*, or whether it represents the first glimmering of the ultimate redemption or only the birthpangs of *Moshiach* and a new *golus*. Firstly, it makes little practical difference; what is the point of arguing about the hidden divine plan? And secondly, why bring about a war of words when the opposition [to our position] is so great, because the [Jewish] heart so desires to see in this [establishment of Israel] the beginning of Jewish salvation, and that is the stance of so many?

(IBID)

Rabbi Grozovsky goes on to explain that while some religious Jews consider it just as wrong to acknowledge or interact with the Jewish State as it is to acknowledge the legitimacy of secular Zionist philosophy, others – and “the majority of

talmidei chachamim agree with this approach” – assess the situation differently. They “make a distinction between a state and a movement” based on the fact that by living under a government, one is, willy nilly, part of its citizenry, and to pretend otherwise and not participate in its affairs would only squander the rights afforded its citizens to advance their interests. Quite the contrary, to forfeit those rights would only give others poorly disposed to religious concerns increased power to do as they wish.

There are indeed Chareidim who shun all recognition of the Jewish State and refuse on principle to even vote in its elections (though they are not to be confused with the astonishingly misguided souls who give aid and comfort to the murderers of Jews – and who are condemned by even the aforementioned camp). But the majority of *Gedolim*, including those at the helm of Agudath Israel, have always maintained that it is incumbent on Torah-faithful Jews to deal with the state in good faith as citizens, to vote in elections and form political parties to advance the religious community’s interests.

What is more, the State has to some degree accommodated religious concerns, beginning with David Ben-Gurion’s pre-State agreement with Agudath Israel pledging the nascent government’s respect for Shabbos, *kashrus*, the Torah’s requirements regarding personal status issues, and religious education, to other elements – including deferment of full-time Torah-students from military service – collectively known as the “Status Quo Agreement.”

Rabbi Aryeh Schechter

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Over the years, however, many features of the Status Quo have been whittled down, especially in the areas of *Shabbos*, *Kashrus* and personal identity. And religious elements that were once part of the fabric of Israeli life have been downgraded, if not jettisoned entirely, by the State’s legislature and judiciary. Alongside the deterioration, and not unrelated, many Israelis’ commitment to the Land (sourced as it is in the Jew’s spiritual bond with *Kedushas Ha’aretz*) has waned as well. And, of late, the anti-theological-to-Torah philosophy of “Let us be like all the nations” has loudly asserted itself. The success of Shinui should be a wake-up call to all who are *chareidim lid’var Hashem*.

Tommy Lapid, Shinui’s founder and leader, in other words, is neither new nor an anomaly. While his party may not even have existed a mere few years ago, it should be very familiar.

It is simply the true face of secular Zionism – without the pragmatic spirit of accommodation that characterized most of his predecessors.

Which is why Mr. Lapid’s open and declared goal is to put an end to the role that Torah concerns, standards and leaders play in the working of the State... that there be a state like any other on the holy soil of *Eretz Yisroel*. His philosophy is that Jewishness in the contemporary world is a nationalistic concept, not a religious one. And so he is threatened by Torah. He sees it, rightfully, as an obstacle before his plan, one he must uproot to persevere.

AXIS OF K’FIRA

To further his goals and gain strength, Mr. Lapid is not beyond cynically making use of “religious” alliances, like one with the American-grown contemporary Reform and Conservative movements, in their concerted effort to have Israel recognize the alternate “Judaisms” they offer. That campaign has itself deleteriously dovetailed with yet another manifestation of

secular Zionism: an activist Israeli High Court under the leadership of Aharon Barak, he of the “enlightened and progressive values.” Lawsuits brought by the Reform movement to chip away at the religious status quo were welcomed and happily co-opted by Justice Barak and company, and have been cheered on by Shinui’s supporters. Only one Judaism – the authentic one – is their enemy.

Those court decisions probably should have been alarm clock enough for the Chareidi community to awaken to the realization that the old anti-Torah secular Zionism was taking on added vigor. Indeed, observers like Yonoson Rosenblum, while they may not have put things in precisely those terms, tried mightily to turn up the alarm’s volume. For that matter, honest secular intellectuals, too, like Professor Ruth Gavison, tried to arouse the Israeli public, and especially its observant citizens, about the unprecedented power the Israeli judiciary had arrogated to itself. Anyone who may have pushed the snooze button, though, should by now have been jolted awake by the mocking voice of Tommy Lapid.

SAVING ISRAEL

Amid the maelstrom of recent years’ vicious Arab attacks against Jews in Israel, all Jewish hearts have been filled with anguish, and with fear for the safety of our brothers and sisters in *Eretz Yisroel*. And all of us have been filled no less with determination to do all we can to assist our fellow Jews, and to see that Israel is supported – financially, politically, and in the media. That is, of course, precisely what we should be doing.

Israel and her citizens are facing the greatest threat they have faced in decades. They are confronted by a lying, conniving and cruel enemy, one whose leaders have proven cynical and untrustworthy. We must, as a result, work to fight the rampant misrepresentation of Israel in the press, and to advance her interests through interaction with our elected representatives.

But at the same time, we who truly

affirm Torah's primacy know that the ultimate merit for her redemption must be spiritual. Thus, ironically, to save Israel, we must oppose Zionism (in the word's political "*ni'thyeh k'chol ha'goyim*" sense). We who consider ourselves *ma'aminim b'nei ma'aminim* must counter Shinui's efforts at every turn. And we would do well to get our own *hashkafa* houses in order as well, remembering that, in the end, we are still Agudath Israel, not a movement or party that sees *Klal Yisroel* through a nationalistic lens.

The philosophies of such groups begin from a demonstrably different point than ours. By their lights, Israel is the ultimate solution to anti-Semitism, it alone can serve as the ultimate refuge of Jews, and represents the fulfillment of 2000 years of Jewish *tefillos*.

To us, things are just not that simple.

To them, our long and bitter *galus* was seen to have ended in 1948. To us, it did not. And it should be clear as day from the events of recent years that, unfortunately, we were right.

This defining distinction should be evident by the questions we ask of our *Gedolim* – from whom we seek guidance on myriad personal and communal issues. Others tend to assume certain stances regarding the Middle East, even though important and delicate *she'eilos* of *bein Yisroel le'amim* – not to mention *piku'ach nefesh* – are at issue, without

apparent concern for any such guidance. We are different. And if Israel's (or the Likud party's) positions are automatically our own, there is something dreadfully wrong.

LA DIFFERENCE

Anti-Semitism, it has been observed, often increases when Jews drift from the recognition of their fundamental "apartness" from other nations. When assimilation is idealized, in other words, the world sometimes reminds us against our will that we are indeed different. Rampant Hellenization of Jews in the ancient Greek world, for one example, was followed by *Apion*, the earliest work that historians call "anti-Semitic." Post-Enlightenment French and German Jewry, for another, sought to swallow Western European culture whole, to become one with a citizenry that subsequently set new benchmarks in hatred of Jews.

It may be taking that concept too far to apply it to intra-Jewish hatred, but could there be an analogous calculus in the realm of the hatred for Chareidim we have come to witness of late? Could it be, in other words, that we have become fuzzy about some important ideological distinctions of our own, and – in a metaphysical sort of cause-and-effect dynamic – brought about their hostility towards us?

It might be an uncomfortable thought, in these times of threats and terror aimed at "Zionists" (read "Jews," of course, ironically), but it would perhaps be a great *zechus* for Israel and *Klal Yisroel* were we who affirm the supremacy of Torah to reinforce our commitment to our guiding principle: All problems that confront us – personal, communal, and national – can, and must, be resolved in accordance with Torah-based guidance.

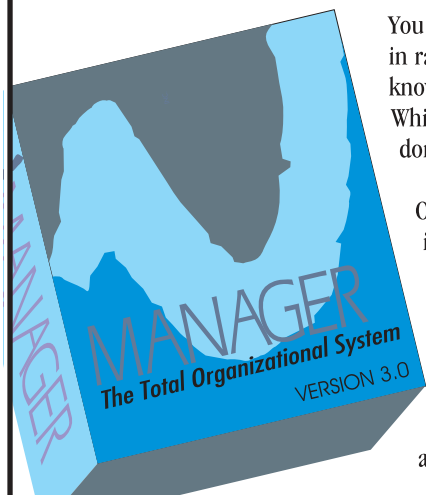
And we can expect the elected representatives who serve the Torah community in a Knesset ruled by overtly hostile ideologues to also guide themselves by the wisdom of our Torah leaders. While they may feel severely limited by the secular thrust of the current ruling coalition, they can bear in mind Rabbi Reuvain Grozovsky's directive in *Ba'ayos Hazman*:

At the very least, we must use our power of representation in the Knesset to speak up for righteousness and challenge the destructive forces of *resha* (iniquity)."

(IBID)

May the *zechus* of articulating our principles and living by them, in this season of *ge'ula*, stand us in good stead, and allow us to witness with our own eyes the true glimmering – and fruition – of the ultimate redemption. ■

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State Policing of Kashrus

Necessary Protection or a Gratuitous Involvement?

THE SUPREME COURT'S REFUSAL TO HEAR

For nearly 113 years, consumers of kosher foods in New York State were protected by laws against abuses by unscrupulous purveyors. The laws go back to the days when so-called kosher butchers were selling horsemeat as kosher provisions. The proliferation of kosher butcher stores (some 2300 in the 1930's, mostly run by proprietors who presented themselves as kosher butchers) only exacerbated the problem of widespread abuse. Many of these stores were often facetiously referred to by *Kashrus* observing Jews as “*Bosor Bosor*” (meat¹-meat) rather than “*Bosor Kosher*” (kosher meat – in some instances the signs were actually misspelled), further supporting the need for state intervention to protect unsuspecting consumers.

In February 2003, the United States Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal on the May 21st decision of the United States Second Circuit Court of Appeals rendering New York State's century-plus-old kosher food laws unconstitutional. The decision in effect upheld the lower court decision, which objected to the state's definition of *kashrus* as being “in accordance with Orthodox Hebrew requirements.” The immediate impact was to invalidate most of New York's *kashrus* laws (save for several Kosher for Passover provisions), eliminated the need for the continued existence of the Kosher Law Enforcement Bureau of the New York

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State Department of Agriculture and Markets, and effectively put the State's Advisory Board on Kashrus out of commission.

The implications of the actions of the nation's highest court go well beyond the borders of New York. Nineteen other states have similar laws on the books, all of which can presumably be challenged and vacated. Two jurisdictions, Baltimore County and the State of New Jersey, already were forced to change the laws after successful challenges. Both subsequently adopted the alternate,



but less-than-ideal, “disclosure model,” which merely requires an establishment to post the identity of the certification, but does not substantially protect consumers against misrepresentation or fraud. In fact, disclosure offers the least protection for those who need it most. Scrupulous observers of *kashrus* are usually well versed in the differences between various *hechsheirim*, and recognize the names of the *rabbanim* who certify *kashrus*. Even they need protection, but not nearly as much as the innocent, oft-uneducated consumer who wishes to buy kosher.

¹ When written in Hebrew, the appearance of these two words is almost identical: בשר כשר

A MATTER OF CONSUMER PROTECTION

There is good reason why the New York *kashrus* laws were not challenged in over a century. They were never viewed in a religious context, as the court ultimately opined, but as a means of consumer protection, much like Truth in Labeling and Truth in Advertising serve to safeguard unsuspecting consumers from buying products with false claims. The laws never forced anyone to eat foods that they did not want. That is why when the New Jersey laws were challenged, Conservative groups joined the Orthodox in supporting the continuation of the kosher food laws. What harm would be done if kosher was defined according to the strictest definition? Who would suffer (, as judicial review often seeks to determine)?

Following the Supreme Court action, at least one Conservative leader saw a PR opportunity to drag *kashrus* into the religious battle arena. While most Orthodox Jewish organizations praised efforts by Governor George Pataki and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver to move swiftly to introduce new legislation protecting kosher consumers, the Conservative spokesman instead cried foul, according to *The New York Times*: “I think that if the law will only be protecting the Orthodox community, the law will essentially exclude the larger segment of Jews,” said Rabbi Jerome M. Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the association of Conservative congregations in North America. Exclude? Will Conservative Jews be denied the right to eat whatever or wherever they like and prefer? Is any discrimination intended or *de facto* exist?

Rabbi Epstein was motivated in part by the fact that the challenge to the New York State laws came from butchers in Commack, N.Y., whose certification was provided by the local Conservative rabbi and whose "kosher" meat were repeatedly not *kashered* properly, thus violating state law, according to State *kashrus* inspectors. Brian and Jeffrey Yarmeisch of Commack Service Kosher Meats were tagged with fines exceeding \$11,000 for failing to salt and soak the meats they sold. To deal with the fines, they triggered an ill-fated, decade-long, legal battle to destroy the *kashrus* laws as well as their own business. They were apparently willing to throw out the baby with the bath water.

Nathan Lewin, the noted Washington constitutional authority, who represented Orthodox groups in the appeal before the Supreme Court, said Orthodox standards have been used by the State because all other Jews accept them, whereas Orthodox Jews do not necessarily honor the *kashrus* standards of Judaism's other branches. Most Conservative Jews do not eat kosher on a regular basis, and when they do, they accept the broad standards in the marketplace. Many of the Conservative Jews that my marketing firm interviewed found it to be a non-issue, and in general viewed the higher kosher standard as necessary and "an accommodation" to those who seek the highest standards in *kashrus*. After all, many of them frequently accommodate friends, relatives and business associates who adhere to kosher requirements, and who certainly would not be satisfied with the Commack butchers' model of *kashrus*.

The kosher laws were also not an issue for Reform Jews, since most of them are totally indifferent to *kashrus* in any case, with the notable exception of Pesach, when most American Jews respect some restrictions. According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Study (Council of Jewish Federations), 92% of American Jews participate in at least one *seder* (as opposed to less than 70% who fast on Yom Kippur). They tend to walk up and down special Pesach aisles in supermarkets all over the country and purchase traditional Pesach items, many with Jewish sounding names. Even they,

when shopping for Pesach, expect the food to be kosher, period.

RELIGIOUS COERCION OR MEETING AN EXPANDING NEED?

Other critics of the kosher food laws raised the Israeli-style argument of religious coercion, even intimating that the support by elected officials like New York's Governor Pataki was politically motivated. They wondered why Jews after 3000

years suddenly need government protection of *kashrus*. The Jews, of all people, survived over the centuries because of their ability to adhere to the Torah. What has changed? they wondered.

For the pious *akerres habayis* (homemaker) living in pre-War Europe, there certainly was no necessity for outside intervention to assure that the products consumed in her home were kosher. Most, if not all, of the food that the family ate was prepared at home. Even chickens were purchased

Simcha Guidelines

THE VORT

- The Vort celebration is to be discontinued. The *L'chaim* (held at the time that the engagement is announced) should also not turn into a Vort.

THE WEDDING

- Only 400 invited guests may be seated at the *chassuna seuda*.
- The *kabbolas panim* smorgasbord should be limited to basic cakes, fruit platters, a modest buffet, and the caterer's standard chicken or meat hot dishes.

- The menu for the *seuda* is limited to 3 courses followed by a regular dessert.
- No Viennese table and no bar.

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live in the marketplace, to be slaughtered by the village *shochet*. All of the other preparations, including the soaking and salting of meats, was done by the women of the house.

But then the industrialized mass production entered the field of food preparation. Most kosher foods were no longer prepared at home, but instead were bought, first in local delis and small mom-and-pop grocery stores, and then in larger supermarkets. Technology further enhanced the ability of manufacturers to produce foods that could be stored for long periods of time in freezers or instantly heated in a microwave oven. Expanded automobile and airline travel meant that Jews were frequently away from home when they ate, and had to rely on certified kosher products wherever they were.

Today, the scope of the kosher food industry is staggering. Of approximately \$500 billion that the US sells in ingredients and food products, more than 2/3 is certified kosher. Industrial plants all over the world, including more than 500 in China, produce kosher ingredients so that they can sell their products to the large American food manufacturers, most of whom manufacture \$150 billion of certified kosher foods (out of \$500 billion). Kosher consumers can choose from more than 75,000 packaged goods that have some

kind of *hashgacha* (supervision). More than 18,000 of the nation's 30,000 supermarkets have some form of kosher food section, a growing number in major Jewish markets even have a *mashgiach temidi* (full-time supervisor) and sell raw meats and bakery items, all with an eye towards keeping the kosher consumer in the store.

THE KOSHER CONSUMER: NOT ONLY "A NARROW GROUP"

The fortune of *kashrus*-minded consumers further improved in recent years with the remarkable acceptance of kosher by many non-Jews, including Muslims, people with lactose intolerance, vegetarians, and many ordinary Americans who either like certain kosher items (like deli and pickles) or believe that kosher foods are better and healthier. A report by the respected Mintel Organization (which each year authors some 600 consumer reports all over the world) in March 2003 reveals that 28% of Americans of all backgrounds said that they buy kosher at some point during the year with the knowledge that they are buying a kosher product. In the same report, IRI (an agency that gathers and interprets supermarket scanner data) relates that many mainstream food products with kosher certification grew by 15% over

the past 5 years, as opposed to similar products without a *hechsher*.

These new realities completely tear asunder the argument that legislation protecting kosher consumers is for "a narrow group of Orthodox Jews that observe kosher," as opponents have charged. It isn't practical to suggest that self-policing replace government intervention. Nor is the failure to protect kosher consumers consistent with American standards for consumer protection in the marketplace. A good example is organically grown foods. The United States Department of Agriculture last October established standards for organic foods, and created a Certified Organic standard. The law requires that the organic foods are indeed made of nearly 100% organic ingredients. A recent attempt by a legislator to relax standards for his meat-producing region was forcefully thwarted by other legislators, the media and the Bush administration.

The organics precedent means that the government sought to assure consumers that when they buy organic products, they are not watered down or compromised in any way. Why should a consumer of kosher, irrespective of who that might be, be subject to a different standard, especially since kosher is far more prevalent on supermarket shelves than organics?

THE OBSERVANT JEW'S BENEFITS

It is indeed disturbing that some Torah-observant Jews are also dismissing the need for the legislation, arguing that we as a community should self-police *kashrus*, as if this were possible or even preferable. With 9200 plants in the US manufacturing kosher products, it is highly unlikely that self-policing would be even remotely effective. Rabbi Luzer Weiss, who heads the *kashrus* enforcement arm of New York State's Department of Agriculture and Markets, offers a convincing resume of abuses that make his office so essential. His nine *kashrus* inspectors continue to deal with regular fraud and abuse of *kashrus* at every level – retail, wholesale, and foodservice. In one

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case, a kosher caterer was found relabeling non-kosher cheese as kosher. In another instance, a meat restaurant used dairy salad dressing. And then there was the "kosher hotel" found using non-kosher parts of chickens. In 2002, state inspectors conducted more than 8,000 inspections, with thousands of citations and numerous prosecutions.

While it may be impossible to pinpoint every instance of *kashrus* abuse, one thing is certain: without the arm of the law threatening fines and prosecution, the major deterrent will have been lost. In addition to the state, *kashrus* agencies deal with a regular dose of the fraudulent use of their symbols – as many as 1,000 cases a year. While many are innocent mistakes, there are many that would not cease and desist without the threat of prosecution hanging over them.

The scope of the market in both geographic and demographic terms makes it an impossibility to establish some universally accepted consumer union that would monitor kosher standards. As we saw from the lawsuit, there would never

be unanimity in any case, and not all consumers are educated enough to make a judgment on their own. Without any enforcement capabilities, the chances are that even a respectable self-policing structure would be doomed to failure.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Where do we go from here? In the very least, we will need creative approaches to craft a State bill that protects kosher consumers, has teeth, and of course passes the Constitutional test. We already know that a disclosure law is a cosmetic remedy for a serious problem, but it may be the only recourse that would be agreed upon by diverse elements and have the ability to withstand the court test. It is unfortunate that the best protection, at least for New Yorkers, no longer exists. Optimally, the disclosure model will be enhanced to the point that consumers will be able to be better watchdogs.

This may also be the moment to strive for a national bill, much like the

organic lobby managed to do. Kosher is by far a larger category than organic, or any other specialty – or ethnic food, for that matter. A third of all foods on supermarket shelves are certified kosher, are available in supermarkets throughout the Union, and are used by a cross section of Americans. (Chaim David Zwiebel, Director of Government and Public Affairs of Agudath Israel of America, is a strong advocate for just such a measure.)

In the very least, a national bill would mandate disclosure of what standard is used to determine kosher status without the need for the state to define it. A national bill would assure that the growing body of national food companies would not be able to skirt the disclosure requirement in most states. Kosher is no longer a New York phenomenon, although it is the state with nearly half of all kosher ethnic sales, and thus remains the hub for kosher.

For America to simply ignore the needs of kosher consumers is just not kosher. ■

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SPARKS OF TORAH IN A DARK WORLD

The world is replete with vivid color. The deep red of a rose, the bright blue of the sky, and the radiant yellow of a sunflower. But for the blind there are no colors, there is no light. How then is it possible for the "light of Torah" to shine upon their otherwise dark world? Just a few months ago, I merited seeing how the light of Torah penetrates all barriers.

A young man was sitting in front of a computer no larger than a *Mishnayos*. He told the computer "*Chumash*," and the computer started saying the first verse of the Torah. He then commanded "*Rashi*," the computer began reciting the *Rashi* on that verse. "English," and, yes, the computer began translating the *Rashi*. "Next *Parsha*." "Next *Aliya*." "Previous *Perek*." "Where am I?" "Read Faster." "Read Slower." "Stop Talking." Whatever the user said, the computer responded faithfully. I thought I was dreaming. For the thousands of visual-

Rabbi Birnbaum, an educator in Lakewood, NJ, and a regular columnist for *Hamodia*, is a frequent contributor to these pages. For products or services described in this article, contact CSB: Computer Sciences for The Blind and Visually Impaired, 2132 84th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11214, (718) 234-6476

A Speaking Text for the Visually Impaired

ly impaired in our midst, it is indeed a dream come true.

The Chofetz Chaim once remarked that the technological advances of his times were for the purpose of increasing Torah study and *avodas Hashem*. Without a doubt, the inventing of the computer and its associated technology has achieved one of its primary purposes in helping bring Torah to people who cannot read with their eyes. Indeed, a shining light has burst into the dark world of the blind with the founding of a truly unique organization called Computer Sciences for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CSB), "*Meor Eynayim*," founded in 1997 by Rabbi Nachum Lehman.

IT STARTED IN A KOLLEL

It all started several years ago in a small *kollel*. Reb Yitzchok M., a *talmid chacham* and pillar of the *kollel*, was stricken with an incurable eye disease. Day after day, month after month, his eyesight deteriorated. Despite the doctors' best efforts, Reb Yitzchok eventually suffered a complete loss of vision. Reb

Yitzchok heroically overcame the logistical hurdles, as he learned to deal with his

blindness. Fortunate to possess a sharp mind, he retained his learning partners while continuing to be an integral and inspirational part of the *kollel*.

Despite Reb Yitzchok's efforts, though, his level of learning was compromised due to the nature of Torah study and his disability. Although his *chavrusos* would read the *Gemora*, *Rashi* and *Tosafos* aloud, there was no independence and no second chance to review difficult passages. Anybody who has been involved in Torah study knows that it entails much more than recitation of text. The scholar must be able to interpret the nuances of the text and contemplate the meaning of each and every word. Such study requires constant and independent review, an ability Reb Yitzchok was not afforded. Even tapes and telephone *shiurim*, which helped immeasurably, were still no substitute for the text-based learning that allows for contemplation and digestion of the written word of a *sefer*. When limited by the material presented by another person, or on a tape, the interactive factor

Photo: Rabbi Raymond Beyda recording Pirkei Avot for CSB

so integral to successful learning, is lost.

It seemed that the *Hashgacha elyona*, Divine Providence, saw Reb Yitzchok as the appropriate emissary to trigger what can be called, without exaggeration, the beginning of a technological revolution for the visually challenged.

Reb Yitzchok asked one of his *chavrusos*, Reb Nachum Lehman, if he could help and help he did. With his knowledge of computer programming, he spent many months researching the technologies available to the blind community, but was unable to find a workable solution for Reb Yitzchok. Reb Nachum came to the unavoidable conclusion that custom-made software would be necessary to allow Reb Yitzchok to learn freely and naturally. With the help of two professional programmers and several volunteer readers, Reb Nachum commenced the seemingly insurmountable task of giving those unable to read with their eyes, the ability to read with their ears! Through indexed computer recordings of the *Gemora*, *Rashi*, *Tosafos*, several *Rishonim* (early commentators) and *Acharonim* (later commentators), along with custom-made MP3 software, Reb Yitzchok was given the ability to once again learn independently. With the press of a key on the keyboard, Reb Yitzchok could simply access any part of the *Gemora*. He could choose to have it read faster or slower. He could go backwards or forwards, repeat words, or press a button for *Rashi*, *Tosafos*, or one of the many other commentaries that were recorded for him by his peers. Reb Yitzchok was like a fish back in water, as he tackled the *Gemora* with gusto for the first time since he had been struck by blindness.

AN EXPANDING INTEREST GROUP

This small, in-house project was just the beginning. Word of this innovation spread quickly and Reb Nachum received several requests to install the system for other visually impaired individuals. At the time, the system was not portable and required hours of work to install on new computer systems. That is when Reb Nachum realized that there was a gen-

eral need for accessible Torah literature, not only for the blind, nor only for scholars like Reb Yitzchok, but also for the many others who could not read conventional texts.

To assess the necessity of the program for the wider public, Reb Nachum ran a small ad in one of the weekly *Chareidi* newspapers. From that single ad, he received more than 70 telephone calls! Besides calls from the visually impaired and learning-disabled, calls come from elderly people whose vision had deteriorated, and parents of young children who were unable to read due to visual or learning disabilities.

He approached *Gedolei Yisroel* for guidance, and was persuaded to expand his program to cater to Jews from all walks of life and all levels of learning. Rabbi Avraham Pam, זצ"ל wrote the following emotional words: "This organization is of utmost importance, and it is impossible to estimate the tremendous *chesed* of it. Praised be those who merit to be a part of this wonderful *mitzva*. A great amount of reward awaits them in This World and in the World to Come."

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS

As new requests continued to pour in, volunteer readers were recruited for more advanced scholars who needed large quantities of material, and teachers were enlisted for material being recorded for children. In some venues, entire networks of volunteers were assembled to provide for the recording needs of an individual.

One such area was Baltimore, Maryland, where the *Rosh HaYeshiva* of Ner Yisroel, Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Kulefsky זצ"ל, was legally blind and was saying a daily *shiur* for his *talmidim*! Reb Nachum had received a telephone call from a member of the Baltimore Kollel detailing the *Rosh Yeshiva's* situation, and the need for the CSB system. After meeting with Rabbi Kulefsky and demonstrating the system to him, the *Rosh Yeshiva* was noticeably excited and began listing *sefarim* he needed for the coming semester: "*Gemora*, *Rashi*, *Tosafos*, *Rosh*, *Rashba*, *Pnei Yehoshua*, and of course Rabbi Akiva Eiger." A room in the Yeshiva was set aside where a computer system was installed for *bachurim* and *Kollel Yungeleit* to record throughout the day for their beloved *Rosh Yeshiva*. A second computer was placed in the *Rosh Yeshiva's* office for him to use the material.

Reb Nachum recalls that one of the saddest moments in his life was when Rabbi Kulefsky personally asked him for

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Ramban and Ohr Hachaim on the entire *Chumash*, a tremendous task. He had to explain to the *Rosh Yeshiva* that it was beyond the means of the organization at the time, but אִי־הָיָה, one day, it would be done for him. A few weeks later, Reb Nachum learned that the *Rosh Yeshiva* had left this world, and that he would never have the opportunity to fulfill his commitment to him.

CSB has since completed its first professionally distributed product: the recording of the entire *Metsudah Chumash* with *Rashi* and their linear trans-

lations. This project alone involved hundreds of hours of recording, reviewing and editing, and took over four years to complete. It was sponsored by several generous donors and is distributed free of charge to needy users. It can be installed on any standard computer.

SOME OF THE ENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSES

One blind woman who is a special educator to both sighted and blind children writes:

"One of the subjects that I teach is Chumash. The Metzudah Chumash has been an extremely valuable tool that allows me to better comprehend the Chumash as well as teach it to my students. This Chumash will especially benefit my students who have trouble decoding written text and will enable them to process it and understand it."

The *menahel* of a yeshiva reports:

"Two boys in the Yeshiva benefit from your Chumash for the blind and dyslexic that are available in CD format through your office. Our weekly Parsha tests on Chumash and Rashi, a simple task for most, is an arduous one for these boys. This program greatly simplifies the test preparation process for them."

Here is a letter from a father:

"My daughter has recently been considered legally blind. The day I received your 'talking Chumash' CD, my daughter was overjoyed. Not only did it enlighten her greatly, but it also motivated her to learn and study Chumash and Rashi with much more enthusiasm. Though she still needs help with other subjects, her difficulties in Chumash have basically been solved, B"H. May Hashem give you much success in helping others who reach out to you."

It is worth noting that the father who wrote the above letter is blind himself and also benefits from other recordings available from CSB.

Soon after the first version of the *Chumash* was released, there were several requests from physically disabled users who could not operate a keyboard. That's when Reb Nachum integrated voice recognition system so that anyone, no matter the disability, could learn *Chumash* by simply speaking to their computer. (Personally, I found it remarkable to witness the system in action.)

Next is *Pirkei Avos* with English translation, a full English commentary, and the Hebrew commentaries of the *Rav, Rashi, Ramban* and *Rabbeinu Yona*. CSB hopes to begin distributing this great work within the next few months.

Numerous *Gemora, Mishnayos*, and *halacha* works are already available

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through the years of volunteer work done for the project across the country. These texts are available to all users upon request. Currently, the CSB library contains over 40 chapters of *Mishna Berura* including the *Biur Halacha* and *Shaar Hatzion*, a compilation of 250 hours of recording.

ADDING THE VISUAL COMPONENT

CSB is in the process of creating a visual component, whereby the words corresponding to the audio recitation appear on the screen. This will be extremely beneficial to the partially disabled and will be therapeutic for those with language, reading and visual disorders. In addition, many children with dyslexia will be immeasurably empowered by being able to hear the words while simultaneously viewing them on the screen.

In addition, CSB has begun the development of several children's games that will be integrated into the *Chumash* software, as well as into addi-

tional texts to be released. They are working closely with teachers and parents of visually impaired children to create a fun, effective learning experience which will help them overcome their disability and excel in their studies. CSB is also working to expand the library with professional recordings of basic Jewish texts such as *Tehillim*, *Nach*, and *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, all with translations and commentaries.

Another important issue being addressed is the issue of pronunciation. The Ashkenazic, Sephardic and Chassidic communities each pronounce words differently. This is especially relevant when learning with small children who may be confused by the different pronunciations. At this point, most of the material available is in the Ashkenazic pronunciation. Rabbi Raymond Beyda, the popular Sephardi Torah lecturer, has agreed to spearhead and actually compose the Sephardic library himself. Material in Chassidic

pronunciation is available on a limited basis and will be expanded in the future.

The users of the current programs and texts range in age from 7 to 90 and reside in such diverse locations as New York, California, Australia, England, Israel, and many places in between.

The stories that come back to Computer Sciences for the Blind make their efforts worthwhile. Here is a letter from a father of four who tragically lost his eyesight:

"I would like to thank you for creating the Metsudah Chumash talking program. I find it easy to operate. Because of this program, I can now do Chumash homework together with my four children. Their consequence of my vision loss is now much less. I already feel that it is creating new bonds between my children and myself. May the One Above pay you back for your beautiful project, caring and kindness. I really thank you for making a difference and for changing the dark into light."

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The Cousins Connection



The noise dances. The wooden floor shakes in reply. Smells of stuffed cabbage and a burnt-out candle embrace, as the kids' Purim snappers hit the same beat of pop, pop, pop. A gentle, frail-looking pirate, her patch slipping down her face to reveal her tears, cries because a snow-white-bearded Mordechai trampled her as he pushed his way to *Zeidy* to get his Purim dollar.

Surrounded by sisters-in-law I usually love to talk to, I now stand silently, for I cannot compete with soldiers' guns blasting, unsynchronized singing of "Purim, Purim Lonu" and kids shouting, intoxicated with sweets in the spirit of the holiday. I stand and smile and drink in the glorious scene.

Forcefully, demanding, the lonesome Purim nights of my childhood come into focus. With my sister married and my brothers drawn to their yeshiva's revelry, my parents and I spent those nights in the company of mismatched *mishlo'ach manos* packages. Our neighbors' *hutzkening* amplified the quiet in our apartment, a lonely island near jubilant seas of *simcha*.

The night of Purim symbolizes for me the void I felt as a child and the richness I am filled with now. For family – extended family – is the lifeblood of The Purim *Seuda!* And an extended family is what I was desperately lacking when

Mrs. Kviat, a mother of four, teaches English and Creative Writing in a Brooklyn girls' high school.

I grew up. Hitler *yemach shemo* robbed me of the most priceless treasures of childhood. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins stolen from me.

No weddings to go to. No cousins to visit and sleep over at. No aunts to ask their opinion on a new dress. I was a lonely, "cousinless" child. True, I had two brothers and a sister. But they were all older than I and in a different category. We did have family on my mother's side, but it was small and they lived miles and oceans away. But I had plenty of empty moments to dream. I would dream of meeting one of my father's four sisters – taken for dead all these years, but actually alive and pining for my father. I had the reunion figured out to the last detail. *We found our aunt!* I would shout for all the world to hear. (*And would you believe it? I was now related to my favorite teacher. Why not throw that in too while I was dreaming?*)

I would sit at the window and watch girls I knew from school walk down the block to visit their grandmother who lived on the corner. I envied them for their relationship, especially when I noticed the cousin bond cut across ages. Three girls in my elementary class were first cousins to each other. How lucky they were with their built-in friendship. They would squabble perhaps, every now and then, but there would always be a happy ending. There had to be. Their loyalty was blood thick. Their social life was secure.... I remember how stunned I was when a classmate of mine

nonchalantly commented, "I think that girl is my second cousin, but I am not sure."

Then I would yearn for my future family. I had strong intentions of holding onto every niece and nephew of mine with a tight-hold grip. I was not going to relinquish any part of my family. This comment brought with it a nightmare. That night I blurted out to my brother: *Moshe Chezky, can you imagine? My grandchild and your grandchild will be second cousins, and won't even know each other!* I was horrorstricken by the thought. To a terribly lonesome and cousinless child, this thought was devastating.

At my *vort*, the room swarming with my *chassan's* nine siblings, spouses, children, and four aunts and uncles. My mother announced, "Esther Malka Hindy, you always begged me for a big family. Well, you finally got what you always wanted."

After I got married, I cherished every aunt and uncle (relishing the taste of their titles of "Uncle" and "Tante" rolling off my tongue) and wanted to know the name of every cousin. As the years moved on, however, I was heartbroken when I discovered the pitfalls of a large family – children did not know their great aunts and great uncles, much less that their second cousins even existed. This family needed a wake-up call, and I understood that need, felt that need.

So I was the one to sound the alarm.

The idea: A Cousins Convention. Who was invited? The granddaughters of my mother-in-law and those of her sisters. About 40 girls ranging in age from 7 to 12 walked into my house, their faces a mixture of anticipation and "Why in the world did I get myself into this?" But then the program started. They learned each other's names, played fun games and sang, learning a theme song about how cousins are worth a MYLLION – the MYLL standing for the names of the shared great-grandparents: Moshe Yehuda and Leah Lieberman. "Gathered at the Cousins Convention, to pay special attention, that you are my extension," their voices blended. And then they listened, wide-eyed, as *Tante* Rachie, a great-aunt and master storyteller, wove the rich (and almost soon-to-be forgotten) past into the present. The "once upon a time" brought to life *Zeidy* Moshe Yehuda and *Bubby* Leah – practically every child in the room had siblings carrying their names. The children were transported back in time, enthralled by the stories of when their grandmother (the other children's great aunts) was a little girl. What fun to listen to *Tante* Esther argue with *Tante* Shirley over who it was that jumped out of the car on the way to the doctor to have their tonsils taken out. How thrilling to hear how *Tante* Miru, an infant at the time and sleeping on a pillow, was almost aired out the window by the cleaning help.

And then some solemn moments, when *Tante* Debora ערה, the oldest of the five sisters, is remembered: especially her

selflessness in leaving school to sew neckties to help her father (*Zeidy* Moshe Yehuda) pay his choking debts.

The cousins left on *Motza'ei Shabbos* clutching their family directories (which also listed birthdays to encourage them to call each other on their birthdays) and carrying the knowledge that they belong to a greater whole – a group called Family.

Motza'ei Shabbos and all of Sunday the phone rang continuously. My first cousins (mothers of the children who had attended) were delighted to tell me how their daughters came home brimming with excitement and bursting with family lore. Each little girl became the heroine of the hour as she repeated the family stories she was privileged to hear at the Convention.

After the next year's convention, the girls over 13 were clamoring for a convention for their age group. (The boys put in their request too; we're still waiting for someone to volunteer to take care of that one.) The Lieberman Cousins Convention was now entering a new dimension. It was no longer just a *Shabbos* afternoon affair, but a *Shabbaton*. The teenagers were placed at a cousin's house with all the cousins their age. Hesitantly and bashful, they walked into their hosts' house on *Erev Shabbos*, from Flatbush, Monsey, Lakewood, and Boro Park, wondering how strangers could act close like cousins should.

After *licht bentchen* all the girls gathered at my place for a program. We *davened*, then played a game in which the cousins were placed into groups at ran-

dom so that they could get acquainted by interacting with each other. The hush that accompanied the cousins as they had somberly walked into my house was gone. The hearty *Gut Shabboses* and thank you's on their way out were clear evidence that the warming-up process was in full swing. And when it was time for bed, those eleven girls – my daughter's age, staying at my house – who had stood awkwardly around the living room a mere few hours ago, shy and tongue-tied, could not stop talking. On *Shabbos* morning, they refused to tell me what time they finally had closed their eyes (and mouths) to go to sleep.

The highlight of the Convention *Shabbos* was the afternoon get-together. Each age group was assigned a different aunt to pick up and escort to the *Shalosh Seudos* gathering where we ate, sang, and were regaled by *Tante* Rachie's stories (and the other great aunts' comments). When *Shabbos* was over, the picture-taking sessions began. The great-aunts sat in the center – our guests of honor – flanked by 30 teenage Lieberman great-grandchildren.

I stood at the side watching, heart bursting with happiness, relishing the moment of this family portrait. But not for long, for soon I was summoned to join the picture. For *Baruch Hashem*, I too am part of this extended family. ■

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