

The Orthodox Union and Its Challenges

Interview with Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

- The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (UOJCA), or Orthodox Union (OU), was founded in 1898. Currently the organization has approximately seven hundred American and Canadian synagogues as its constituents.
- In the public Jewish eye, the OU is chiefly known for its prominent role in supervising kashrut (dietary laws). It is, however, a very diverse organization with a total budget of many millions of dollars. It caters primarily to its members in the Jewish community worldwide.
- Among the OU's activities are consultative services to member synagogues; strengthening of small communities; political advocacy, mainly for governmental assistance at all levels for education and religious rights; providing Jewish religious and social experiences to handicapped young people; outreach in public schools; and services to Orthodox youth on campus. The OU's National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY) program serves many thousands of Orthodox and non-Orthodox teens annually. The OU operates centers in Israel and in Kharkov, Ukraine, with extensive programming in both.

"The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (UOJCA), or Orthodox Union (OU), was founded in 1898. It was intended to give Orthodoxy a voice to combat the Reform and Conservative movements, to undertake political advocacy, and to advance the cause of making kosher food available. Nowadays the organization has approximately seven hundred American and Canadian synagogues as its constituents."

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb holds a PhD in psychology. He became executive vice-president of the OU on 1 January 2002 and is on the Executive Committee of the Rabbinical Council of America.

In the public Jewish eye, the OU is chiefly known for its prominent role in supervising kashrut (dietary laws). Rabbi Weinreb says: "In the past five years or so our supervision has also become increasingly acceptable to the ultra-Orthodox. Not so long ago in the worlds of the Lithuanian yeshivas (Talmud schools) and the Hasidim, it was considered Modern Orthodox—that is, not so reliable. The prime reason for the change is that the OU has a mix of halachic (Jewish law), technical, marketing, and commercial expertise. We now assist the personnel from many other major kashrut-supervising organizations.

"A second reason is that others have to rely on us because there are so many ingredients used in food that have to be investigated. Almost every product contains flavorings and preservatives and nobody can investigate all these anew. The OU sign is thus considered the standard bearer by Jews who wish to keep kosher. Many Muslims who observe their dietary rules also check on our website which products are under supervision. Our marketing information shows that many non-Jewish consumers, for various reasons, are interested in buying products with OU approval.

"I once received a mishloach manot (gift) from President George W. Bush for the Purim holiday. Joshua Bolten, who is now the White House chief of staff, gave it to me and said it had the presidential seal on it. So I said, 'It has my seal on it too.' He looked at me as if I was stark raving mad. I said, 'By Jewish law, it has to have approved ingredients, and it will also have the OUD.' He asked, 'OU is Orthodox Union, but what does the D stand for?' I assured him that it did not stand for Democrat, but for dairy."

A Very Diverse Organization

"It is ironic that because of the great success of our kashrut supervision many outsiders, who are unfamiliar with what we do, think it is almost our sole activity. In fact, we are a very diverse organization with a total budget of many millions of dollars. Income from supervision provides most of our budget, with the remainder coming from fundraising and dues from synagogues.

"Our prime purpose is to serve our constituents, the synagogues. Yet service to them has greatly changed. In the days of my grandfather all the large synagogues, the so-called 'cathedrals' with their great cantors, were populated by Jews who did not keep Shabbat. Many would come on Shabbat very early so that at 9 o'clock they could go off to work.

"Nowadays Orthodox synagogues are hardly threatened by other movements. There is no battle anymore. Everyone caters to his own needs. Some Conservative synagogues have even decided to become Orthodox. There was a small breakaway from the Conservative movement when it started to ordain women. Its decision at the end of 2006 to ordain gay rabbis may lead to similar breakaways.

"In some Jewish neighborhoods with Conservative synagogues at their center, most members have moved away. For a certain period of time many would drive there on Shabbat, but in the long run they ceased seeing it as their neighborhood synagogue. What remained was a beautiful building in the middle of a predominantly Orthodox area. Often the building was sold to an Orthodox synagogue, or the community moved rightward and changed its affiliation."

Two Sides of a Coin

"The majority of the U.S. population of Orthodox Jews are children. It is estimated that the average Orthodox family has about 3.5 children, whereas the average family size of all Jews in the States with the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox included is around 1.7, which is not even at replacement level. In ten or twenty years, the percentage of American Jews who are Orthodox will have substantially increased. Although the Orthodox today constitute an estimated 10 percent of American Jewry, they comprise many more of its regular synagogue-goers and a large percentage of its under-eighteen population, and very few of them intermarry.

"Yet there are problems in an area that can best be defined as community mental health. The American Orthodox marriage is not what it used to be, with the divorce rate having risen substantially. Troubled marriages are on the increase.

"There is now in the Upper West Side of Manhattan a culture of Jews living as singles. They are affiliated Orthodox and pose a tremendous problem. Some say, 'Everyone chooses his lifestyle. Where's the problem, rabbi? I choose single. I'm wearing a kippa, I keep Shabbat.' I think, however, that the norm of the Jewish family is even a stronger one than keeping Shabbat or eating kosher."

Rabbi Weinreb confronts the problems of assimilation elsewhere in the Jewish community: "The wife of one of my predecessors at the OU comes from a sizable town called Rock Island, IL. It once had a very large, active Jewish population. The children of all her Jewish friends from school have married non-Jews. The remaining Orthodox rabbi told her: 'I do not know of any Jewish person in town who has married a Jew.'"

Rabbi Weinreb comments: "Assimilation and cultural renaissance are two sides of the same coin of American Jewish life. All the wordy arguments about what direction American Jewry is going in are largely a matter of which side of the coin one is looking at."

Split-Offs From Synagogues

Weinreb observes that Orthodox synagogues currently often have other problems. "One important phenomenon is what has been called the 'shtieblization' of American Orthodoxy. People split off from

synagogues with hundreds of families. These synagogues are the central addresses of a community, with one or more rabbis, a chazzan (cantor), a weekly sermon, and so on. This classic model is losing popularity among part of the Orthodox. A number of them prefer to go to a shtiebl—a small, intimate synagogue.

"Sometimes a Hasidic rabbi may start such a shtiebl. On other occasions a group of very like-minded people seek a certain intensity and spirituality and break away from a community. In such cases, before that happens, the synagogue often consults with us. One solution, which was applied for instance by the Baltimore community of which I was the rabbi for many years, Congregation Shomrei Emunah, was to have a number of different services in various parts of the building. If the OU is approached on such issues, we send an expert to consult with the various groups to see what the options are and whether we can keep the synagogue community together.

"The decline of voluntarism has an important impact on our member synagogues. In the past, these used to exist mainly on the backs of volunteers. People, primarily women, would volunteer to raise funds, do the maintenance, and run the synagogue's kitchen. Nowadays, with the larger number of women in the workforce, how to encourage voluntarism has become a major issue. If one has to replace volunteers with paid personnel, the budgetary impact is major.

"We offer consultative services to the synagogues on these matters. We also have a speakers' bureau. We have various services, even technical ones, such as helping synagogues in a certain region to buy insurance or even fuel jointly. We may help them find employees, not necessarily rabbis, but including clerical and administrative staff."

Helping Small Communities

Rabbi Weinreb mentions yet another problem the OU faces: the decline of small Orthodox communities as their members move to larger cities. "Orthodox Jews are increasingly concentrating in New York, Baltimore, Miami, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The number of Jews in towns such as Harrisburg, PA, Milwaukee, WI, and Charleston, SC, is decreasing. There comes a point at which an Orthodox synagogue or community is no longer viable. With twenty to thirty Orthodox families one can maintain a synagogue service, but not a kosher butcher or baker.

"We are making a major effort to reverse or slow that trend. Living in a small town at a lesser cost holds many benefits for young Orthodox families who are starting out in life and need job opportunities and housing. For instance, in Milwaukee, the city's University of Wisconsin campus is within walking distance of the synagogue. The city also has three training hospitals and various hi-tech companies are located there. It is easier to find employment there than in New York.

"We asked ourselves how we can help such people. One of our approaches involves a program that subsidizes a couple moving to such a town to the extent that they can make the down payment on a house. We are now developing another program that asks young people to move to a far-flung community for three to five years as part of their service to the Jewish world. In this way we want to encourage young doctors, lawyers, computer specialists, and scientists so that they can satisfy their nascent careers, live in an interesting place, and also serve the Jewish people. Thereafter they may stay or may move to a larger city.

"Synagogue members in small communities often have the ability to assist newcomers in finding employment. They can also be helpful in integrating them into the community and giving them active roles in synagogues."

Advocacy

"The disappearance of the smaller communities is for many reasons not good for the Jews. One reason is that in terms of voter patterns and influencing the federal government and Congress, coming only from

the big cities does not make a good impression. We have missions that go to Washington. If these include representatives from states such as Maine, Kansas, and Iowa, we present ourselves very differently, even if they come from small communities.

"For more than ten years the OU has had an advocacy presence in Washington: the Institute for Public Affairs headed by Nathan Diament, a well-respected Harvard Law School graduate. At the institute we also have fellows who finished law school or have an MA in political science and want a year's experience on the Hill. Our first fellow who came to us two years ago was recently hired by Kansas senator Sam Brownback to head his office staff.

"For us political advocacy is mainly important in two broad areas. One concerns federal help for private education. We want support for day schools. Here our interests mainly parallel those of the Catholic Church. The mainstream Protestants, who are largely liberals, favor the separation of church and state and thus oppose private education. The Evangelicals do not specifically care about this issue because the communities in which they live by and large control the local public schools.

"Other Orthodox organizations often have problems in partnering with the Catholic Church. We follow Rabbi Soloveitchik's principle of distinguishing between the 'inner' and the 'outer' sphere. On 'inner' matters, which mean theology, we don't cooperate with other religions, and also not with the Reform or Conservative. On social and political issues, we can have full cooperation. The reality is that we often have better cooperation with the Catholic Church than with the Reform movement. That is the case, for instance, on an issue like abortion. On stem cell research that is not the case because all Jewish streams are in favor of encouraging it."

Protecting Religious Rights

"The second major advocacy issue for us concerns the protection of religious rights. On this issue our interests often coincide with those of Muslims. Such rights include staying home on religious holidays and wearing religious dress in the public square. We have made major inroads into guaranteeing religious freedom in the workplace, and continue to pursue specific legislation on this matter.

"In the United States, unlike in some European countries, shechita (ritual slaughter) is not under serious pressure at the government level. The U.S. government is much more interested in satisfying cattle and chicken farmers than animal rights organizations. Even PETA, an extremist animal rights group, is not pressing for shechita to be outlawed. They want us to be as sensitive as possible to how animals are treated. We are in regular contact with them on this matter and have reached certain basic understandings. These contacts are necessary in case issues arise. Recently PETA led a nationwide outcry against the slaughtering process in a large kosher slaughterhouse. We reacted immediately and corrected certain procedures that indeed were not essential components of kosher slaughter."

Weinreb adds that the OU is trying to extend its political advocacy to state capitals. It has a presence now in Albany, NY, Trenton, NJ, and Annapolis, MD.

Youth Programs

"Our largest financial outlay concerns youth programs. Their emphasis is on dealing with those who are assimilated. Our youth organization, the National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY), has developed culture clubs in over 150 public schools across the United States. These are open to Jewish kids in such schools. This was a major constitutional battle—our opponents claimed it was interference of the church in the state—that the various Jewish organizations won.

"Our youth program reaches thirty thousand youngsters. Some attend for an hour at lunch, some for Shabbat, and some for other activities. In these clubs we will, for instance, bring in kosher pizza pies at lunchtime. Jewish kids come and are exposed to Judaism, and made aware that to be a Jew is something

to be proud of. We spread Jewish music and culture. This outreach endeavor does not aim to make them Orthodox. These clubs are part of our Jewish Student Union and are distinct from our NCSY programs.

"We often find an abysmal ignorance about Judaism among these children. Once I visited a school in the Miami area and our adviser—who is specially trained for that position—asked: 'Who was the first Jew?' Jesus got the most votes, as history started when he was born. A couple of the better educated said Moses, while the correct answer is of course Abraham. That is the extent of ignorance we have to face.

"These children initially come for the pizza. The adviser walks in and says: 'Who is Jewish and wants pizza?' They follow him into a room and he hands out the pizza. He then asks: 'Are you all Jewish?' They all say yes. According to Jewish law, many are not because their father is Jewish but their mother is not. They still sincerely believe that they are Jews.

"Behind this program is the hope that some kids will develop a greater interest. We find that many children are very anti-Israeli. They have been very much brainwashed by an extremely anti-Israeli educational establishment. We need a component of Israel advocacy. I have to stress that these children are not synagogue members, as nowadays there are few Orthodox families who do not send their children to Jewish day schools.

"As the aim of the program is not to make people Orthodox, we freely employ in it non-Orthodox people, including rabbis. We receive funding for it and sometimes even staffing from the Jewish federations."

Other Youth Programs

"The next largest program is called Yachad, the National Jewish Council on Disabilities. Its goal is to provide Jewish social experiences to handicapped youngsters. We bring them together, for instance, for Shabbat or Chanuka parties. At the OU General Convention in [Jerusalem](#) in 2006, at the Thanksgiving dinner, a commentary on the weekly reading was given by a Down Syndrome woman, who did it according to her ability.

"Our philosophy here is to bring disabled people—as much as possible—into the Jewish mainstream. In this we again serve a much broader sector than our synagogue members. Included are youngsters who are ultra-Orthodox or not Orthodox at all. It is a place for these children to have peers and peer relationships as well as summer-camp experiences. We also bring them to Israel for the summer.

"A third important program is the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC). At thirteen universities we have married couples who are our JLIC educators. They live on or near the campus. Their home is open on Shabbat for meals. They conduct courses. They do counseling. Here the target audience is Orthodox students and not outreach. This program operates at Yale, Cornell, Penn, Princeton, the University of Florida at Gainesville, and others.

"Despite the growth of yeshivas such as Yeshiva University, Touro College, and so on, an increasing percentage of students who have graduated from Modern Orthodox high schools go to secular campuses. At the beginning of their career a degree from Yale will give them greater chances than one from Yeshiva University. These are often youngsters who have already spent one or two years in Israel. The college campus nowadays is a great threat to Judaism, partly because of the prevailing spirit there and partly because of the anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism. It leads to a high attrition rate among students."

Weinreb stresses that the JLIC does not compete on campus with bodies such as Hillel. "We work closely with them and they are very supportive of us. Hillel, however, defines itself as transdenominational while we cater to our community."

Policy toward Israeli Matters

On Israel, Rabbi Weinreb says: "We have had a decades-old policy that we are a Diaspora organization and we have no right to intervene in the democratic processes of the state of Israel. This is especially so on strategic and military matters. We did not comment on the disengagement from [Gaza](#) even though we were under intense pressure from many synagogues.

"We decided to bring the issue up at the General Convention in Jerusalem. We had delegates there from about 125 synagogues across the United States and Canada. The issue was hotly debated for four hours. Finally we came out with a resolution: 'Under exceptional circumstances, the executive vice-president and the (lay) president are empowered to come out publicly with a statement criticizing the policy of the state of Israel, after consultation with the Executive Committee.'"

Weinreb mentions that one of the OU resolutions is to encourage aliyah (emigration to Israel). "This is no longer something you can take for granted in the American Orthodox Jewish community. Many of our people say it means a brain drain to send our best and brightest to Israel. Those who leave the United States for Israel include many young couples, highly educated both Jewishly and secularly. So the question arises as to where our new rabbis and day-school teachers are going to come from."

Interviewed by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb became executive vice-president of the Orthodox Union on 1 January 2002. He is on the Executive Committee of the Rabbinical Council of America. He advises and serves on the board of various other organizations and educational institutions. He received his rabbinic ordination from the Rabbi Jacob Joseph Yeshiva. He has an MA in psychology from the New School for Social Research and received his PhD from the University of Maryland.