

Esteemed Officials Celebrate Shema Kolainu-Hear Our Voices at Annual Legislative Breakfast

JULIE AHN

Gathered on a brisk, cloudy morning at the Princeton Club of New York, a distinguished crowd — including elected officials and foreign dignitaries — gathered to celebrate the achievements and the continuing growth of Shema Kolainu - Hear Our Voices, a school for children with autism.

The Masters of Ceremonies at the breakfast were Mr. Menachem Lubinsky and Mr. Kalman Yeger. The annual legislative event was coordinated by The Friedlander Group.

Shema-Kolainu-Hear Our Voices was founded in 1998 by Dr. Joshua Weinstein, who very strongly wanted to address the growing need in the New York area's education system for programs that effectively fulfill the learning and emotional needs of children with autism. Today, Shema Kolainu is a community-based educational and therapeutic network that serves over 1,000 children.

Dr. Joshua Weinstein opened the breakfast with remarks of deep gratitude for the families and the communities that have committed to Shema Kolainu. He then proudly stated: "Shema Kolainu next year will be 20 years old. It started with three kids, and we now service over a thousand children." Beaming with pride, he continued, "Shema Kolainu has become a model school... We want to let legislators know that we appreciate and are grateful for their commitment."

Public Advocate Letitia James, second-highest-ranking elected official in New York City, took the podium with much enthusiasm from the crowd. "Shema Kolainu is a school that works hard every single day to improve the lives of children with autism in New York, but more importantly is an organization that at its heart only sees children, and recognizes at its core that G-d doesn't make mistakes, and we should celebrate all children," she poignantly remarked. "I thank you for all that you are doing. This is truly a *mitzvah* to this highest degree."

Shema Kolainu-Hear Our Voices proudly presented its City Leadership Award to New York City Councilmembers Brad Lander and Mark Levine for their unwavering leadership and advocacy ensuring that the New York City Council continues to allocate funding for the Autism



Shmuel Lenchevsky

L-R: Mr. Ezra Friedlander, Dr. Joshua Weinstein, Mr. Menachem Lubinsky, Mr. Milton Weinstock, Mr. Kalman Yeger introducing NYC Council member Mr. Mark Levine.

Awareness Initiative. The Initiative was spearheaded by then Councilmember and now Assembly member David Weprin and expanded by former Councilmember Mark Weprin, who attended the breakfast. Councilmembers David Greenfield, Vincent Gentile, Senator Gustavo Rivera participated as well.

Councilmember Brad Lander explained, "This organization is so grounded not just in helping kids, but also in seeing the divine spark and the humanity in all our kids."

After accepting his award, Councilmember Mark Levine stated: "I had the pleasure of visiting Shema Kolainu, and it was an experience that made an enormous impression on me... You have set an example for New York City. It is a source of real pride for me that it is out of the Jewish community that this organization has emerged, a reflection of the best of Jewish values."

New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer took the stage next: "When you think that 1 in 68 kids will have autism, you see the need is so great, and yet the funding gets smaller. But you have really leveled the playing field," he said. Mr. Stringer then introduced Jennie Berger, who received the Hakaras Hatov Award.

Honoree Jennie Berger, community liaison to Council



Shmuel Lenchevsky

L-R: NYS Assembly member Mr. David Weprin; NYC Council member Mr. David Greenfield; Mr. Ezra Friedlander; Mr. Kalman Yeger; NYC Council member Mr. Brad Lander; Dr. Joshua Weinstein; Bangladeshi Ambassador to the U.N. Mr. H.E. Masud Bin Momen; Mr. Milton Weinstock; Mr. Menachem Lubinsky.

Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, explained: "It is so incredibly important that we lift up everyone's voices, and be advocates for those who need their voices to be heard."

Councilmember Brad Lander presented International Champion Award to Saima Wazed Hossain, daughter of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who is Chairperson of the Bangladesh National Advisory Committee for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders, recently chosen as WHO's regional champion for autism in South Asia. The award was accepted by Bangladeshi Ambassador to the U.N., H.E. Masud Bin Momen. "Bangladesh looks forward to working with Shema Kolainu in the days to come," he stated.

Shema Kolainu-Hear Our Voices has become an invaluable and instrumental organization in the autism community of New York City, as they have tirelessly fought to raise awareness of autism and to provide quality education for every child. The enthusiasm, fervor, and commitment felt during the breakfast truly exemplify the success and the vigor of Shema Kolainu.

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Destruction and Renewal Via Ozer Dalim

YITZCHOK NATHANSON

The seven Slomanskys (a pseudonym) lived a rather frugal but contented life in a small apartment in Beit Shemesh. Mr. Yosef Slomansky taught *cheder* in the morning and attended a *kollel* in the afternoon. Mrs. Rivka Slomansky was a *ganenet* (kindergarten teacher) in the morning and a housewife and mother to her five children. Three boys were in *cheder* and the older girl was in school. Only the baby was at home all day.

However, everything changed on that fateful early afternoon. Mrs. Slomansky was washing dishes as the baby played in her playpen. Suddenly the room filled with thick black smoke and flames leapt out from the bedrooms. Rivka grabbed her child and ran into the hall screaming, "Eish, Eish!" As smoke filled the hall, neighbors came rushing down the stairwell with their children.

Stunned residents and concerned onlookers gathered in front of the building, watching as smoke and flames poured from the windows of the Slomansky bedrooms. Soon, the wail of sirens could be heard approaching. Two fire engines and a police car raced up to the building. "Back, back! Away from the building," commanded the policemen. The firemen quickly uncoiled a hose from their truck and connected it to a

nearby fireplug. Others set ladders against the building and climbed up to break all of the windows, venting the smoke.

Quickly, the hose was pulled into the burning apartment and the fire was extinguished. Firemen used their tools to pull mattresses off of beds and break the free-standing closets. Fortunately, since Israeli buildings are constructed of stone, the fire was confined to the Slomanskys' apartment.

Reb Yosef was called at *cheder* and left his class with the assistant principal. He soon arrived home and was relieved to see that no one was injured. Neighbors and families living on the block gathered around the Slomanskys offering to take the baby and the older children when they returned from *cheder*. The couple spent the next two days as the guests of friends. However, the situation, while a credit to the *hachnasas orchim* of the neighbors, was untenable. Luckily, Reb Yosef heard that a nearby family was in the States for a few months. He arranged to rent their apartment for a month.

The fire had started in the parents' bedroom and spread to the children's room. The firemen did a thorough job of extinguishing the fire, drowning everything in torrents of water. They also broke apart all the furniture in the two rooms. The fire burned all the clothing in

the closets and the chests of drawers. All the walls were stained with soot and water damage was everywhere.

Reb Yosef contacted a painter, requesting a bid for restoring his apartment. The painter came, inspected, and explained that the water damage was extensive and the entire apartment had to be repainted, plus repairs were needed to some walls and ceilings. The couple made lists of a minimal amount of necessary furniture and clothing. These, plus the rental and other expenses, totaled a staggering sum.

In desperation, Reb Yosef turned to where so many others in Israel go when financial or medical crises occur. He visited the local Ozer Dalim *gabbai* for an interest-free *gemach* loan.

The volunteer *gabbai* was a member of the same *kollel* as Yosef. His wife had contributed children's clothing for the family. He listened to their loan request and consented to accepting the signatures of the couple's parents as *arevrim* (co-signatories) on the loan.

The Slomansky family endured the period of absence from their apartment, made the necessary purchases to return to their normal life and slowly repaid their loan. Another family has been rescued from crisis by American Jews, whose generous largess has fueled Ozer Dalim's Chesed activities, since 1982.