

# Raising the bar

A very exciting and impressive undertaking is now on the horizon which promises to raise the level of chinuch in Jewish schools across Europe. The European Chinuch Convention, with guidance from Torah Umesorah, USA, is due to take place in Amsterdam. You may have seen the advertisement for the event and wondered what this was all about.

Rabbi Yitzchok Weitz – the London representative of the Steering Committee – has been briefing Nechama Gold about this innovative initiative

**Whose brainchild is this convention?**

Amsterdam has one Chareidi school, called the Cheder. Rabbi Yitzchok Uri Dunner, a son of Dayan Ahron Dovid Dunner of London, is a rebbe in the high school there and is also involved in many activities for the children. Several years ago Dayan Dunner was invited to speak at the Torah Umesorah Convention in America and Rabbi Yitzchok Uri accompanied his father to the convention to glean ideas for himself. He was amazed to see how much can be done to improve the chinuch in Amsterdam and he made contact with Rabbi Yisroel Meir Rubinfeld, Torah Umesorah's executive school consultant, who agreed to become a consultant for the Amsterdam Cheder. He started flying in to Amsterdam every few months to provide training for teachers, improve the planning and strategy of the school and more. Mr Boruch van de Kamp, an affluent member of the Amsterdam community and a parent in the school, realised that there were so many schools in Europe that could benefit from all this expertise and he came up with the idea of bringing the concept of the Torah Umesorah Convention to Europe. He also generously offered to

help with financing as well as planning.

**Who is in charge of the planning?**

We have an international steering committee that comprises Rabbi Yisroel Meir Rubinfeld from Torah Umesorah in America, Rabbi Yitzchok Uri Dunner of Amsterdam; Rabbi Schie Sanger, menahel of the girl's school in Zurich; Rabbi Yaakov Shafferman, head of the Hebrew department of the Yesodey Hatorah Beis Yaakov school in Antwerp; Rebbetzin Dara Goldschmidt from Moscow, representative of the Shema Yisroel school network in Eastern Europe; Mrs G Levenberg and Mrs G Goldblatt from the Torah Umesorah Teachers Centre in Manchester and myself.

**Are you trying to replicate the model of the Torah Umesorah convention in America?**

Absolutely. Torah Umesorah USA have just had their 62<sup>nd</sup> Annual convention, and the depth and breadth of their experience is legendary. We are extremely fortunate and privileged to be having the support and guidance from senior Torah Umesorah Rabbonim such as Rabbi Rubinfeld. We are essentially transplanting a Torah Umesorah-type convention into Europe. We will be



graced with the presence of the Torah Umesorah Roshei Yeshiva and many long-standing Torah Umesorah presenters. We'll even be hosting R' Abish Brodt to add to the ruach on Shabbos as has become the minhag in Torah Umesorah. However, we are also forever mindful that Europeans have a very different mentality from Americans, so we cannot completely base ourselves on their model when planning the programme and the arrangements.

**What do you consider the main challenge of such an event?**

I think the language issue is foremost. Whereas in America, everything is conducted in English, here this isn't feasible. We want everyone to find this convention useful and gain the maximum from it and therefore we have had to bring speakers who speak different languages. We have boiled down the convention to three languages: Hebrew, English and Yiddish.

**What are the aims of the convention?**

Firstly, to bring *chizuk* from Gedolei Yisroel to the many mechanchim and mechanchos and give *chashivus* to those who are involved in *avodas hakodesh* of being *mechanech* the future generations of Klal

Yisroel. We will be privileged to be joined by members of the Vaad Roshei Yeshiva of Torah Umesorah - Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky, Rav Malkiel Kotler, Rav Yaakov Bender, and European Rabbonim Dayan Ahron Dovid Dunner, Rav Ahron Schiff and Rav Gershon Miller who will give tremendous *chizuk* to the participants.

Another other important objective relates to professional development opportunities. There will be workshops covering a huge variety of topics geared for various audiences, like primary school rebbes, menahalim, menahalos etc. To name just a few topics: active learning, teaching kriyoh, dealing with adolescence, building a keshar with your talmid, instilling a love of Gemoro within your talmidim. The list is endless.

**How much can a teacher or rebbe learn from an hour-long workshop?**

One of the misconceptions that people have is that they are going to become professionals from attending a workshop. This is obviously not so. Let's say a teacher has difficulties with behaviour management. There is no way he/she will become an expert from attending a workshop. However, the workshop will broaden

horizons, help teachers liaise and share ideas and techniques with other educators, and facilitate the possibility of contacting the presenter who as an expert in the field might be available to mentor or offer training in the school. The aim of the convention is to make schools and teachers aware of the many special people who have developed experience or techniques and programmes that are highly effective and that can be accessible to them as well. This networking and sharing of resources is the most tangible gain of a chinuch convention.

**Is there any guarantee that you can offer in this direction?**

Well, as a menahel of a school I can tell you that just by co-ordinating this convention my school has already benefitted tremendously from the contacts that have been made. In the preparation for this convention our steering committee have discovered a huge amount of talent in different areas, like teaching Gemoro, kria, behaviour management, teaching chumash etc. Many of these experienced educators are right here on our front doorstep and we hope to help schools tap into these valuable resources in the future.



Rav Yitzchok Weitz

To further facilitate this kind of networking the programme includes special networking sessions. This will give participants an opportunity to engage with like-minded educators in their specific field. By simply discussing common challenges and unique solutions schools will have the opportunity to learn from each other – and more importantly, hopefully begin cultivating lifelong connections.

From my experience I have seen that schools are mostly more than happy to share their expertise and resources. It doesn't really make sense from a logical point of view, because some schools could be considered competitors, but this is the beauty of a Torah kehilla, the aim is *lehagdil Torah uleha'adira*.

#### What criteria did you apply in selecting the presenters?

We have invited several world-known experts who have taken part in Torah Umesorah conventions in the USA. Additionally, since we have started planning the EU Chinuch convention, the committee has organised a minimum of twice weekly web meetings that can run for many hours. When you discuss the various topics you want to cover, there is always one representative who will remember hearing or knowing about someone in his city or country who has a program on a certain topic. We are also being approached all the time by

members of the kehillah who are coming forward with names of people who could be of help.

A very exciting part of this project is that we are discovering a huge amount of untapped talent in Europe. We have been underestimating ourselves! We hope that this convention will reveal the potential that is to be found so close to home. It is really important to build up resources in Europe, especially since the time difference and the distance between the continents makes it impractical for us to rely on the help of American experts.

#### Tell us then about who and how many will be joining?

We were overwhelmed by the reaction from the community. We had expected scepticism and reluctance to this new idea, but we see that people are thirsty. We now have close to 500 participants joining from Amsterdam, Antwerp, Basel, Berlin, Gateshead, Gibraltar, London, Manchester, Moscow, Odessa, Paris, Strasbourg, Vienna and Zurich and there is a waiting list of almost two hundred people.

As things stand now, from an incomplete list of over 150 schools across Europe, we have over 80 schools participating with the potential to have an impact on 30,000 children.

#### Are you also reaching out to the Chassidish community?

Yes, indeed at the Torah Umesorah Conventions in America, more and more Chassidim have been joining in recent years. This is what we want to create here as well. We have reached out to the Chassidish community and there will be quite a few *shtreimlech* visible at the convention. I myself am a *Chassidish yingerman* with *strokkes* and *veise zokken* and I am one of the organisers. Of course the

more insular a school or cheder is, the harder it is to reach out to them and since it is the first time we are doing this, we haven't managed to get all the right contacts for many of the Chassidish schools in time for this convention, but we have already started making more connections for the future.

It is also important to mention that the *klei kodesh* across Europe are very serious *bnei Torah* and *machmirim* in halocho and we are making sure that the standards of *kashrus* and *tzenius* are very high. This involves a lot of complicated logistics and as a matter of fact, for the Shabbos meals we are preparing four separate eating areas: One for men only, another for women only, a third will be for couples and another with family seating. We want everyone to feel comfortable. The wider the audience, the wider the networking, which in turn brings benefit to more people.

#### Who is catering the weekend?

Dresner Catering from Antwerp which is under the kashrus supervision from the Machzikei Hadass in Antwerp.

People should realise that logistics are huge. Besides the kashrus aspect, there is so much more involved in making a conference centre suitable for our use.

#### Can you expand on the organisational aspect?

Firstly, the hotel has thirteen floors. An expert from Israel, with the supervision of Rabbonim, has been consulted in an attempt to convert the lifts for use on Shabbos by those who are less mobile. Unfortunately, this has not been possible. On the convention floor, all the toilets work electronically so we are removing all the electronics and making them manual. There are many additional arrangements that have to be made which is causing a big headache for the hotel management. We

are really trying to provide the best both *beruchniyus* and *begashmiyus*, but we ask people to be understanding. Furthermore, there is the security aspect of having such a large, high profile gathering of Jewish people. We have no choice but to make participants aware of this. We have been strongly advised that every person wears an identity tag, which might not be so well received with the *heimishe olam*, but we have no choice.

I want to add that the conference centre is located very near Amsterdam's Schiphol International airport making it very accessible by plane from all over Europe. Amsterdam by plane is closer to Manchester and London than they are to each other by car or train.

**We wish you hatzolocho rabboh and may this event bring a Kiddush Hashem!**

*Rabbi Weitz is Menahel of Beis Yaakov Primary School in Golders Green and member of the EU Chinuch Convention steering committee.*



Steering Committee meeting in Amsterdam L-R: Mr Moshe Davis, Rabbi Yakov Shaffer, Rabbi Yitzchok Uri Dunner, Rabbi Schie Sanger, Rabbi Yitzchok Weitz, Mr Boruch van de Kamp, Mr Jehoeda Schachter