

An Interview With Rabbi Yisroel Meir Rubinfeld

In advance of the European Chinuch Convention, taking place in November in Amsterdam, *Hamodia* spoke to steering committee member and Convention Chairman, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Rubinfeld, Executive School Consultant for Torah Umesorah in New York, and a veteran of many Torah Umesorah Conventions in North America.

Hamodia: Rabbi Rubinfeld, thank you for sharing your time to speak to us. Could you tell us about the North American Torah Umesorah conventions please?

Rabbi Y.M. Rubinfeld: The conventions have evolved over the last six or seven decades. They were originally intended mainly for school leadership — principals, *menahalim* or *menahalos*, but over the last 30 years or so, they have expanded their audience and are also for teachers and *rebbe'im*. The convention provides a unique mix of professional development, some of which is very practical; *chizuk*; networking opportunities and much more. One of the special features at the Torah Umesorah convention is the presence of *Gedolei Yisrael*, who are accessible for those few days in a way which they might not be during the rest of the year. They answer questions and provide personal advice and *chizuk*.

The networking is also unique — the North American convention attracts as many as 1,600 participants, mainly from North America but also from the United Kingdom, Mexico, South America, South Africa and Australia. This means that teachers, *rebbe'im* and principals can talk shop, exchange ideas and receive *chizuk* from a huge range of people who are all passionate about the same thing — *chinuch*.

The weekend is an amazing experience — it is very intense, with participants moving from one session to another, and often being spoilt for choice which to attend. The programme is packed and the atmosphere is full of excitement. I've been to many conventions and I still find each one fascinating and inspiring.

Hamodia: It sounds wonderful. How did the idea of a European Chinuch Convention come about? Who is organising it? And how did you become involved? It's a long way from New York to Amsterdam!

RYMR: One of the things I do for Torah Umesorah is consultation with teachers and principals, staff development and teacher training. At a Torah Umesorah convention a couple of years ago, I was talking to Rabbi Yitzchok Uri Dunner,

of the Cheider Amsterdam, about the needs of his school. He felt that they would benefit from some help in various areas. I explained that Torah Umesorah policy is to be invited to the school by the principal. Following Rabbi Dunner's return to Amsterdam, the principal called me and we discussed the specific needs of the school and how I could help. I did some very productive work with the school and the staff and during one of my visits to Amsterdam, I met Reb Baruch van de Kamp, a local philanthropist, who expressed an interest in getting *mechanchim* from different European countries together. We managed to set up a meeting with a number of international *mechanchim* and one of the topics discussed was how to take this project further. Having considered various models, we came to the conclusion that a weekend convention, on the Torah Umesorah model, would be a good idea.

At a meeting with the Vaad Roshei Yeshivah of Torah Umesorah, the European Chinuch Convention was discussed. The *Roshei Yeshivah* encouraged the concept and were supportive of Torah Umesorah guiding the coordinators of this convention. They also suggested that Torah Umesorah send some of its *Roshei Yeshivah* to participate.

At a subsequent meeting of the same group, we formed a committee and began discussing concrete plans. The Manchester Torah Umesorah centre was happy to participate, and our committee members include Rabbi Yitzchok Uri Dunner from Amsterdam, Rabbi Yitzchok Weitz from London, Rabbi Schie Sanger from Switzerland, Rabbi Jakob Shafferman from Antwerp and Rebbetzin Dara Goldschmidt from Moscow, as well as Mrs Gitty Goldblatt and Mrs Gena Levenberg from the Torah Umesorah Teachers Centre in Manchester.

This convention is a new idea in Europe and it has generated a lot of excitement and enthusiasm, as well as a lot of questions!

Hamodia: Maybe you could answer some of those questions for our readers. For example, how will a school benefit from sending only one or two teachers or *melamidim* to the convention, when the whole staff would like to go?

RYMR: Each school is different and we wouldn't like to do anything to squash the excitement. Let me just say that in North America, it is very unusual for all the teachers from a school to attend a

convention. Apart from anything else, the school can't spare its entire staff! Each school is different though, and there are schools that close for a few days and send the whole staff. I understand that at least one school is having its half-term across the weekend of the convention so that all the teachers can attend.

But most schools send one or two representatives, generally different ones each time, who then share what they have gained from the convention with their colleagues on their return. Some schools ask their staff to present at a meeting, while others formalise it into a booklet.

Hamodia: What about headteachers and *menahalim*? Will they benefit from the convention?

RYMR: Certainly — in fact, there will be special sessions for headteachers, *menahalim* and *menahalos*, covering topics such as staff training and working with teachers. At the Torah Umesorah convention there is an extra day added exclusively for *menahalim* and *menahalos*.

During the workshop time-slots, we will be running concurrent sessions, aimed at teachers in different sorts of schools or people with different interests. The main language of the convention will be English, but there will be some sessions, particularly during these time-slots, in Hebrew and Yiddish, to enable everyone to feel comfortable and gain the maximum benefit. Some sessions will be for both men and women and some sessions will be presented by women, for women only.

We have an outstanding group of presenters joining us, including Rabbi Noach Orlowek, Rebbetzin Ruthy Assaf, Rabbi Dr. Herschel Fried, Rabbi Shmuel Yaakov Klein, Rabbi Yoel Kramer and Mrs. Rochel Zimmerman.

The convention will be graced by the presence of senior *Roshei Yeshivah* and members of the Torah Umesorah Vaad Roshei Yeshivah. Harav Malkiel Kotler, *shlita*, Harav Shmuel Kamenetzky, *shlita*, and Harav Yaakov Bender, *shlita*, have all graciously agreed to join us. They will be answering questions during one session and will participate at other points during the programme. I've seen before the impact of having such tremendous Torah personalities at the convention — it provides incredible *chizuk* to the *mechanchim*.

The convention in general will create, *iy"H*, a level of *achdus* among the *mechanchim* that has not previously been seen in Europe.

Hamodia: Are spouses welcome? Why might they want to come to the convention?

RYMR: Spouses are very welcome! The convention runs over Shabbos and, personally, I feel that couple should always be together for Shabbos, whenever possible. Based on previous experience, the atmosphere is so electric that even for someone who isn't involved in formal *chinuch*, it is a very positive experience. And most spouses are educating their own children and can learn from the sessions, too.

It's also a tremendous *chizuk* for spouses. The idealism of the participants can be felt in the air! Often, working in *chinuch* is not financially rewarding, to put it mildly. For husbands or wives to come and hear how their spouses are heroes, and how they themselves are to be admired for supporting them, is hugely beneficial.

Shabbos is very special. There is



Rabbi Yisroel Meir Rubinfeld at a Torah Umesorah Training Seminar.

tremendous *kavod Shamayim* and the *achdus* between Litvish, *chassidish*, Ashkenazim, Sefardim when *Kabbalas Shabbos* arrives has to be seen to be believed. We hope to have a leading *baal tefillah* with us who will lead the *davening* and *zemiros* and help to create a special *ruach* over Shabbos.

Hamodia: Can you tell us something about the networking?

RYMR: Networking is one of the key benefits of the convention. There are significant informal networking opportunities — between sessions, at mealtimes and more, and we have scheduled in Torah Umesorah's famous networking breakfast. Tables are set up, labelled with a type of teacher — for example, First Grade Boys, or 8th Grade Girls. Everyone sits at the relevant table and is then able to share the challenges and best practice tips for that particular class. When people find themselves sitting with other people from different schools, in different countries, doing the same job, the conversation is riveting. It's hard to move on at the end of breakfast to the next session.

Hamodia: A final question: Having worked with people from several different countries on this project, have you found that there is a difference in attitude between Americans and Europeans?

RYMR: I don't think they are so different. Perhaps Europeans are a little more direct than Americans!

The committee is a tremendous group of dedicated educators who have worked together very well. Every country has its own culture and the committee members have brought their own cultures and ideas to the table.

In my work I travel a lot to different schools in different cities. Each school has its own culture, and it's part of my job to put my finger on its pulse and work with it, figuring out the unique culture. It's the same thing here — this has been another example of picking up different cultures and working with them to create an outstanding result.

Hamodia: Rabbi Rubinfeld, thank you so much! We wish you much *hatzlachah* with the convention and look forward to hearing all about it.



Partial view of the Steering Committee at a recent meeting in Amsterdam. L-R: Mr Moshe Davis, Rabbi Jakob Shafferman, Rabbi Yitzchok Uri Dunner, Rabbi Schie Sanger, Rabbi Yitzchok Weitz, Mr Boruch van de Kamp, Mr Jehoeda Schachter