

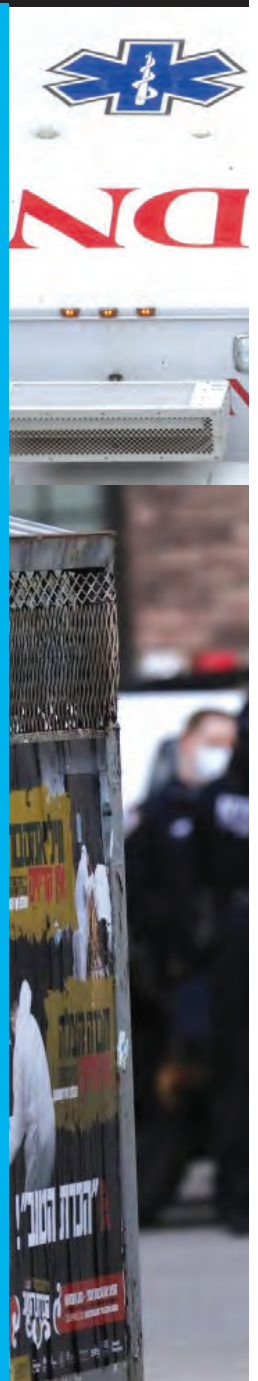
INTERVIEWS

by RAFAEL HOFFMAN

EYES OF THE FLOCK

The COVID pandemic made 5780 a year like no other and presented challenges foreign to most people in the present generation.

In an effort to offer Torah-based perspectives on the crisis and how it should come to bear on this coming Rosh Hashanah and beyond, *Hamodia* held conversations with three prominent Rabbanim and *marbitzei Torah*, **Harav Aaron Lopiansky, Harav Pinchos Wind, and Harav Shlomo Cynamon**, who shared their thoughts.







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HARAV PINCHOS WIND

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What does the Rav feel is the most important lesson to take out of the events of the past year?

Harav Lopianky: “Who am I as an individual?” That is a question that this experience should force us to ask ourselves. We’re used to *davening* and learning under the broad umbrella of a *tzibbur*, and looking at everyone around us, and following along. We have become used to thinking that our *Yiddishkeit* is healthy and robust.

But — especially in the darkest times of this pandemic — when we’re all on our own, a lot of us saw that our *Yiddishkeit* might not be what we thought it was. One therefore should honestly examine, “How much of my *avodas Hashem* came up lacking when there was no *tzibbur* around me?”

So too, we as a *tzibbur* need to think about the fact that as strong as we appear to be, it does not take much to shake us. And we as *mechanchim* need to ask, “Are we building *talmidim* strong enough to have what it takes to stand on their own when they have to?”

Particularly in Eretz Yisrael we’ve heard too many stories of *bachurim* who have been out of yeshivah going off the *derech*. It raises the question of what is lacking in the *chinuch* we are giving them, if this is the result.

Harav Wind: The simple facts demonstrated the *Ribbono shel Olam*’s total control over the world. Not only did the world turn over in a minute, but we saw how His *hashgachah pratis* made the virus affect people’s lives differently in each place. In Eretz Yisrael, there were people who were literally going hungry. Here, the government gave more funding to food stamps to cover the increased need, and it even gave people cash. Hashem took one virus, spread it out over the world and showed how it could play out differently according to His *ratzon*.

The health situation showed it too. There were neighborhoods where there were so many *levayos*, *R”l*. There were so many people in the hospital and Rabbanim were inundated with the most horrible *she’eilos*.

The Belzer neighborhood here in Lakewood is a few hundred families that all live in townhouses relatively close to one another. It’s basically a self-contained community with *batei medrash*, schools, a *kollel*, a grocery, and so on. And the community is mostly younger and middle-aged people.

Everybody here had the virus and had it at the same time. Like most places, we didn’t know to be careful around Purim and it seems everybody caught it then or a few days after. Everybody was lying in bed for the same two weeks, and then a week before Pesach everybody, *baruch Hashem*, got up and life became *freilich* again.

I got a *she’eilah* from someone from a different community

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who was making a *bris*. He asked if even though it was *Sefirah*, could he play music to be *mechazek* people at the *simchah*? I didn't even understand the question at first, because the situation was already so much better here.

We still see it now. In Eretz Yisrael, a lot of *mosdos* have had to close. Here, *baruch Hashem*, we have been able to be open for a few months already.

Hashem judges each person on *banei*, *chayei*, *u'mezonei* (children, life, and livelihood). We saw that He made an exact *chesbon* where we would suffer more from *chayei*, more from *banei*, and more from *mezonei*.

Harav Cynamon: In my *kehillah*, I saw a tremendous feeling of using this as a time to reestablish our priorities. Learning to appreciate your home and family out of the bustle of our regular everyday lives.

People spent time *davening* and learning with their children at home. I emphasized the importance of using the time to focus on our children and listening to their *divrei Torah*. I gave my *mispalellim* an idea to let one of their children give a *drashah* at home during the times that the Rav usually speaks in shul. I told them to sing *Lechah Dodi* with their kids and to bring as much *ruach* into their *davening* as they could.

It was an opportunity to hear our children learn-

ing and to listen in on them with their *Rebbeim* and *Moros*. As hard as it was, it was a tremendous *kiddush Hashem* to see *bachurim* learning at home, trying to keep up with their *sedarim*.

Another aspect of life that I think we came to appreciate more is how much it means to be together with our *chaveirim* and to learn Torah together.

In *Hodu*, which we say Erev Shabbos, after it lists the four salvations that we are required to give extra thanks to Hashem for, the *passuk* says, "*mi chacham v'yishmor ela, v'yisbonneni chasdei Hashem* — who is the wise man who can guard this, and contemplate the kindness of Hashem?" Harav Mendel of Vorka, *zy"l*, explained that the *passuk* is giving advice to avoid falling into future dangers in the first place, focus on the kindness the *Ribbono shel Olam* does for you. If we think into the mundane and appreciate it, then perhaps Hashem will have less of a reason to send such shocking wake-up calls.

As a *marbitz Torah*, what were the most significant challenges the Rav dealt with?

Harav Lopiansky: Really, it was a more pointed version of the general problem I just mentioned.

Specifically when it comes to unstructured

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learning there is a serious issue. When a *bachur* learns in a yeshivah, everyone is involved in the same *sugya* and that automatically creates a structure for him. The *Maggid Shiur* sets the agenda and indicates what to look at. Without that, many times, a *bachur* is left with a question, “What do I learn?”

When you walk into the *beis medrash* and everybody is involved in learning, you get caught up in that energy, and therefore the average *bachur* doesn’t feel the push to make specific goals for himself. But, when you are on your own, being able to set goals and [create] structure is critical.

Another area that came up lacking was in *mus-sar* and *yiras Shamayim*. Our *bachurim*, and maybe too many adults, are dependent on speakers to inspire them. In a normal situation, there are *mus-sar shmuessen* to do that. But the primary vehicle for *chizuk* of Harav Yisrael Salanter, *zt”l*, was not the *shmuess*, but rather people thoughtfully contemplating a *mussar sefer*. Now, it seems that the vast majority of people no longer have the ability to pick up a *sefer* and to be inspired by it.

The only way to address this is to learn how to make a serious *mussar seder* for oneself, and to learn to let a *sefer* talk to you. To make a *cheshbon hanefesh* and to talk to yourself and address your shortcomings.

The *mussar* movement was founded in a time of crisis when there was a desperate need to check a downslide in *Yiddishkeit*. *Baruch Hashem*, for some time, *Klal Yisrael* has been in a stable and healthy situation, and maybe yeshivos did not feel it was necessary to emphasize real *limud hamussar*. But it’s a critical piece in *avodas Hashem*, and this year only served to emphasize it.

Harav Wind: The truth is that our setup here

relieved a lot of the problems that other communities had. The porches in front of our houses are way more than six feet apart, but the rows of houses are close enough to easily make *minyanim*. Everybody saw the same people they see in shul and *davened* the same *nusach* they’re used

to; there wasn’t one *minhag* that we had to give in on.

It kept a sense of normal life going and it kept people together in a way that made it much easier to deal with the situation.

There were times that some of the non-Jewish neighbors heard us singing on a Friday night and called the police. But when the police came, they looked around and saw that everyone was singing from their own porch and said, “It’s so nice what you’re doing here; just keep it up.”

Every day I sent out a two-minute message to everyone in the *kehillah* with *chizuk* and spoke about one aspect of *emunah*. Every Shabbos I usually say something about *emunah*, but during this crisis, with all Rabbanim it became clear that we had an opportunity to help people use *emunah* to deal with the challenges they were going through and to make it more real.

Harav Cynamon: Harav Simchah Bunim of Peshischa, *zy”a*, was once sitting at the *tisch* of his Rebbe, the Yid Hakadosh, *zy”a*, and all of a sudden, he felt like he lost all of his sense of logic and reason. He couldn’t figure out what two plus two was. The Yid Hakadosh came to him and told him the *passuk* at the end of *Koheles*, “*sof dvar, hakol nishma, es Ha’Elokim yirah* — at the end, all is understood, you should fear Hashem.” However much a person can understand, it all has to start with *yiras Hashem* and with an acceptance that there will always be more that is unknowable.

We were used to thinking that we had our lives under control. We trusted that our sources of *par-nassah* would keep up and that we knew what we should do to protect ourselves, our families, and our parents. A lot of this anxiety is still here. The world is in a very insecure place right now, and that leaves a

lot of people unsure of how their *parnassah* is going to look in the future. There is plenty of concern about the ongoing health risks also.

Our *kehillah* is very much based on learning *b'chaburah*. During the difficult weeks of the outbreak, we used Zoom and kept it going as much as we could. The feeling that our lives are rooted in *limud haTorah*, as a group, was a major source of strength and stability that helped us weather the storm.

There is a wide range of opinions on the proper level of precaution that individuals and communities should take regarding the ongoing threat of the pandemic. What is the Rav's view on the matter?

Harav Lopiansky: A crisis like this brought out the shortcomings of so much of *Klal Yisrael* not being part of strong *kehillos*. In New York, every Rav or Rebbe did something different and so individuals basically got the message that they could do whatever they want.

During the earlier stages of the pandemic, someone called me from Baltimore who was upset with some of the rules the Rabbanim there had set. He wanted to organize *minyanim* and things like that. I told him, "I am not a doctor, and can't speak [about] the medical issues. But what I can say is that Baltimore is a place that is blessed to have a real *kehillah*, and anyone who breaks one of their *takanos* is a *poresh min hatzibbur*, which is much worse than missing a *minyan*."

Communities like Baltimore and similar sized communities have been able to handle this quite effectively. I think it highlighted how important it is to have *manhigim* who have clear lines of communication with experts, not only the random *askan*; and for clear guidance to be given; and for a *tzibbur* to obey. That does not mean that every *manhig* will come up with the same conclusions, but within each community there will be a sense of order in the decision-making process, and adherence to the *takanos*.

Another point that I do find somewhat troublesome is that it seems a lot of people's approach to this, especially more recently, is very shortsighted. As *frum Yidden*, we believe in a lot of things that we don't see with our eyes and that may take a long time to materialize, but that we accept as realities, such as *s'char v'onesh*, *Olam Haba*, etc. It seems that a big part of why many people have become careless is because the virus is invisible, and consequences take a while to happen. It can take a few weeks to get sick and months to have a real outbreak or to start having *levayos, R"l*. If the furthest that people can think is, "Well, me and a lot of other people went to a *chasunah* last night and nothing happened," what does that say about our depth

TRUE

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CONCERNING OUR GENERATION'S CHALLENGE: THE BATTLE AGAINST TECHNOLOGY

VOLUME

54

THEY'RE LOOKING!

A simple ride on a city bus crystallized my thoughts, giving me the clarity I had been seeking. There I was, sitting near the window and minding my own business, when I heard that distinctive cellphone ringtone that signaled an incoming call.

I looked around, curious. Who would entertain us with their private conversation aired for the public, at no cost to the audience?

I saw you reaching into your pocketbook. You looked to be me approximately my age, late twenties or early thirties, and I felt a shudder racing up and down my spine.

Don't! Don't take out your Smartphone! I can't see this now!

The words blazed across my mind; my heart – but of course, I couldn't say them aloud. Instead, I watched in horrified fascination as you took out...a simple flip-phone and nonchalantly checked the screen.

Thank you! You just saved my life!

Sounds mighty dramatic for a simple telephone call on the city bus, but there is nothing exaggerated in this account. I am a recovering addict. I've been addicted to technology – and my Smartphone in particular – to a degree which is hard to describe, let alone get others to understand.

I was bound to it, checking obsessively for incoming texts and messages. I was glued to it, neglecting everyone and everything in favor of my flickering, glimmering device.

A series of events, and the timely inspiration I gleaned from the SmartVoice columns, set me on the right path. It was a struggle. Not just a struggle, but a soul-wrenching and nail-scraping battle every minute of

every day, until I could finally declare myself Smartphone-free.

At first I felt empty. Numb. There was a big hole in that place where my devices used to be. Slowly, ever so slowly, I rediscovered the beauty and depth of real life. My family. My children. My role as a wife and mother.

It didn't happen overnight, but the changes crept in and made themselves comfortable.

I thought I was done. I had paid my dues to the technology fiend and after much sweat and toil, I had broken free. But the first person I met with a Smartphone in her hands set me back several steps.

I tried talking to myself, whispering, "It's fine. She's allowed to have one. She got a heter. You can't. It ruins your life."

But it hurt. I felt my resolve slipping. When I sat on that bus I was lucky to see you – I'm sorry, I don't know your name or anything about you – but I saw you talking on a flip-phone and it gave me such a tremendous burst of energy and validation.

I saw that there are others, 'normal people' so to speak, who don't use Smartphones. There are others who stay away from the dizzying technology trap. If they could do it...so can I.

Yes, you granted me the gift of clarity. You showed me how much every one of us affects others. If you're using a Smartphone – regardless of the filters and everything else you tacked on – there are young people watching. They don't know what you asked your Rav. They don't know what's on it and what's not.

They see that Smartphone and they think...if he/she can, why can't I?

Believe me. I'm living that reality every day. If you're not doing it for yourself, then please...do it for me.

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of thinking? In the weeks that sirens were blaring day and night, everyone lay holed up, but as soon as it subsided it was a free-for-all. Where's our thinking that there might be more than what I see today and terrible consequences tomorrow? Shouldn't that be our core mindset?

Harav Wind: Every Rebbe and every *kehillah* has their own approach to *avodas Hashem*. This is no different, and the approach of our Rebbe, the Belzer Rav, *shlita*, was that without Torah and *tefillah* the world can't go on. He said that if anyone is sick they have to take care of themselves and that we should not fight against the laws or the police. But, within that, he encouraged us to do whatever we could to keep Torah and *tefillah* going. The message was that if you can have a class of 10 kids together, so do that, find a way to make it work.

It was not only a *ruchniyus* consideration; it's also a health concern. The *nefesh* gets battered when people don't see each other and their whole social life is cut off. The Rebbe gave out a letter about the importance of remaining *b'simchah* and part of that was not allowing ourselves to become totally isolated.

That was our approach, but as in all things, each *manhig* has his approach and no one of them is right for every *kehillah*.

Harav Cynamon: There is a term that the *Sforno* uses: "*shluchei behalah* — messengers of confusion and anxiousness." In our generation, the *shluchei behalah* are the media and technology that bombard a person with messages that prevent him from thinking calmly and rationally. In this crisis, it's created an unhealthy emotional situation where the virus took over our lives and we can't help but think and talk about it.

That is not to say that this has not been a very serious crisis and that we do not have to take precautions, but there has to be a sense of *yishuv hadaas* and balance. We have to listen to Rabbanim and to doctors, but not to let it take over our whole life.

I've told my *mispallelim* and the *bachurim* in yeshivah the same thing: "Your job is to protect yourself *ad she'yado magaas* — as far as the hand reaches," but we have to know that there's

the *Yad Hashem*. You shouldn't be ignorant either and ignore that you have an obligation to do what you can, that's not what *bitachon* is. But, when a person realizes that what he is doing is only *hishtadlus* and that the rest is not up to him, it relieves a lot of the anxiety that plagues people in this situation.

How should the unique events of the past year affect a person's Rosh Hashanah?

Harav Lopiansky: We should learn not to take what we think we have for granted. If a person is young and healthy, with money in the bank, he has a hard time feeling that everything is dependent on the will of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. But so much has been shaken so quickly and so much evaporated overnight. New York real estate and nursing homes are two fields that bring a lot of *parnassah* to Yidden and, consequently, the yeshivos are dependent on them. Now, the economic future of both are very up in the air. So much of what we thought of as standing so strong is all of a sudden wobbling on chicken's feet.

We had looked around at the world around us and thought that it would take World War III to undo it, but it barely took anything.

If we contemplate how fragile our life and well-being is, we should have a different Rosh Hashanah.

Harav Wind: The problem, so to speak, that many people usually have on Rosh Hashanah is that everything is going smoothly in their lives. They have *parnassah*, a family, and good health. This year we learned that things can happen to shake up our lives in ways that we would never expect. We always



officially believed it, but now we see with our eyes that it's possible, it's real.

And while we hope that the worst is behind us, everyone knows that it's still here. We get reminders about the virus itself making people sick and we know that the situation of the world still affects what we can and can't do. Usually almost all of us go to the Rebbe for Rosh Hashanah, this year we will all be here. We understand that there is plenty to *daven* for, much more than in other years.

This past Shabbos, I gave a *mashal* of a group of brothers sitting together, each one busy doing something different. Suddenly, someone comes from behind and gives one of them a smack on the back. The one who got hit gets all shaken up and turns around with an angry face. Then, he sees that it was his father and starts to smile, but he asks, "Tatte, why me?" The father says, you're built a little more broadly, you can take a *klap*. "OK," says the son, "but if you want to let us know that you're here, next time you can give one of us a tickle."

We all got a *klap* this year but we turned around and saw it was from our Tatte, which makes it easier to handle. We still want to remember that the Tatte is there, but this year we could see big *yeshuos*, people could get a big *shefa* of *par-nassah*; we *daven* that Hashem should send the same message with a tickle.

Harav Cynamon: This year, the first day of Rosh Hashanah falls out on Shabbos and we don't blow *shofar*.

The *Avnei Nezer* said that *Chazal* never really did away with the *mitzvah* of *shofar* on Shabbos. We know that when someone wants to do a *mitzvah* and he can't because something beyond his control prevented him, it is still as if he performed that *mitzvah*. The same is true here. *Chazal* turned every Jew into an *oness*, someone who through no fault of his own cannot blow *shofar*. The result is that our desire to do the *mitzvah* accomplishes the same thing as the *mitzvah* itself.

This year, we were all put in that situation. We wanted to go to shul and to yeshivah and, with that yearning, Hashem gave us all credit. Having a Rosh Hashanah that falls on Shabbos seems an appropriate way to cap off this period of

time. Now, we have to work to put into perfected practice that which we were yearning for.

Now that it's easier for us to be together, we have to work on seeing the good in other Yidden. We have to show ourselves and our children how much we love the *beis medrash* and learning with *chaveirim*. When we come home from shul we have to say how beautiful the *davening* was, when we come home from a *seder* or a *shiur* we have to say how *geshmak* it was.

The *passuk* says "*mi ha'ish hachofetz chaim ohev yamim liros tov netzor leshoncha mei'ra* — who is the man who desires life, who loves days of seeing good should guard his tongue from evil." The Kotzker Rebbe, *zy"a*, said that the *passuk* is giving a formula. The key to guarding yourself from speaking *lashon hara* is to see good in others, and the key to seeing good in others is to be an *ohev yamim*, to live with vigor and enthusiasm.

May we all continue to grow and to have a year of *nachas*, *brachos*, *yeshuos* and *refuos*. ■

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