

INTERVIEWS

by *Rafael Hoffman*

EYES of the FLOCK

5781

It was a year that brought many unique challenges. The COVID pandemic continued to impact many aspects of life, America was rocked by tumultuous elections and post-election fallout, and *Klal Yisrael* suffered a string of tragedies.

In an effort to offer Torah-based perspectives on some events of the past year, *Hamodia* held conversations with three prominent Rabbanim and *marbitzei Torah*, HARAV AARON LOPIANSKY, HARAV USHER ECKSTEIN and HARAV SHLOMO CYNAMON, who shared their thoughts.

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Looking back on the past year,

one cannot help but realize that it was marked by a great deal of pain and shock for Klal Yisrael. While COVID had nowhere near the effect as in the previous year, still many Yidden were seriously sick and some were niftar, R"l. Meron, Karlin, and Surfside were all mass tragedies that struck the hearts of Klal Yisrael. A plane crash in Ukraine took the lives of three bachurim. Recently, a yeshivah bachur murdered in Denver was added to the painful list. Standing at the end of the year, how does the Rav feel it is appropriate for a Yid to look back at these events?

Harav Lopianky: For the believing Jew, events that are as difficult as these should help underline the tremendous good that we are recipients of every day.

For instance, even if there has been a rise in antisemitic incidents in some places, almost all of us still take it for granted that we can walk down the streets, and no one threatens us. That certainly was not the reality that most Jews lived with for centuries.

While mourning the holy neshamos lost in Meron, we should also take note that so many people have flocked there for decades as well as to other places similar and nothing like this ever happened. We should appreciate the constant nissim that it takes to sustain our regular lives.

When we witness, R"l, a person with a serious case of COVID and how difficult it is for him to breathe, it should be an awakening to understand that we took our lungs for granted, and to cultivate a renewed appreciation for the act of breathing.

I think the focus should be to use these events to bring out hakaras hatov for things we did not properly appreciate before.

Harav Eckstein: Erev Rosh Hashanah, after Minchah as the sun sets on the last day of the year, we say a piyut with the refrain "tichlah shanah v'kililoseah," that the year and its curses should end. That's our way of saying "thank you" to Hashem? Every year a person has challenges and frustrations, but we had parnassah and health. We had simchos and good times; why focus on the bad?

Even in some of the bad things there were silver linings. It's true that many people suffered from COVID, but it also ended up helping some people's parnassah. Many of the mosdos received funding that they otherwise would not have



David Cohen/Flash90
At the sheloshim for the 45 korbanos in Meron, whose pictures appear in the poster.

had.

It's human nature to allow for bad events to make us forget the good. Our task is to counter that and to have hakaras hatov for all we received. Our role is to stand in shul on Erev Rosh Hashanah and to feel fortunate to be one of the survivors of a year with tragedies, and to thank Hashem.

One way of understanding why we say "tichlah shanah v'kililoseah" is that it's a tefilah that our perspective should change. We should stop seeing the klalah in our lives and when the piyut closes and says "tochel shana u'birchoseah," that the year and its blessings should commence, we are asking that in the coming year, Hashem should help us to focus on the brachos.

Harav Cynamon: Even when we have good times, often anxiety about what the future might bring stands in the way of our simchah. This is even more so today when we are bombarded with news, and a lot of it is bad news. Now, there is bad news, but it's created a nisayon for people to have simchah even when things are good.

Reb Mendel of Vorka, zy"l, explained the passuk, "v'so-machta b'chagecha, v'hayisa ach somayach," to mean that if a person is b'simchah on his personal chag, when things are good for him, that will plant simchah in him for other times as well.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of tragedies and when we hear about them, we have to feel a fellow Yid's pain and empathize with him. At the same time, tragedies should remind us to be happy with the good that we have.

It's not for me to parse why these events happened, but it's clear that Hashem is sending us messages. Perhaps if we do a better job of appreciating Hashem's chessed, He will not have to send such jarring messages in the first

place.

One thing we can do is to live with chiyus. Dovid Hamelech in Tehillim gives three descriptions of a righteous person, "chofetz chaim," he desire life, "ohev yamim," he loves the very fact that he is living, and "liros tov," he sees the good.

There are hard times, and they should bring a person to teshuvah, but part of that is to appreciate what we have and to use it.

Last year, there was concern that many of the compromises on technology that the pandemic brought would become permanent fixtures. Did the Rav see this as a reality, and if so what is his outlook on the matter?

Harav Lopianky: I think it brought home and sharpened what technology can and can't do for us.

Many people at some point had to switch gears and in many cases that meant using a device or program that they would not have done otherwise or that they would not have brought into their homes, ideally.

It should be the case every year when we approach Rosh Hashanah, to take time to make a cheshbon hanefesh of what we do and don't need in our lives. On this issue, it might take on a different face for many people. Just like when someone is sick, R"l, there are things that he might have to do which he normally would not consider, and in that situation it is permissible or even a mitzvah for him, but once he is healed, he has to reconsider whether these are still things he should be doing.

At the same time it showed us ways to use technology to help people from becoming isolated, whether they were quarantined at home or in a hospital that had barred visitors. People who otherwise could have suffered tremendous challenges to their *parnassah* were able to find ways to work remotely. Besides the challenges that technology presents, the pandemic showed us some of the good reasons that Hashem created these things.

It also sharpened the limitations of technology. With so much changing, some people think it is a forgone conclusion that more and more of our lives will become digitized. I think that people saw that a school over Zoom is not a school. Technology cannot replace a classroom with a *rebbe* or a *chavrusa* that you sit across from. It can't replace the warmth or effectiveness of real interaction between people even for social interactions.

It helped us put technology in the box where it always should have been. It can be a help in certain situations, but it's not a replacement for Torah or communal life.

Harav Eckstein: I don't think that it was a major issue in the Chassidische *kehillos*. In Belz and in most large Chassidische *kehillos* there is a monitoring agency in place that oversees technology issues. Everybody that registers children in the *mosdos* has to register their devices with the agency which makes sure they are appropriately filtered.

In Belz our attitude is that internet is not a forbidden thing. It's something that is a necessary part of people's lives, but that has serious dangers and that needs a tremendous *shmirah*.

In terms of the pandemic's effects, there was never a Zoom *cheder*. For the period of time the *mosdos* were

closed, everything was done by telephone.

I don't think that COVID made a big change in our *tzibbur*. To the extent that it did, the effect was on individuals who had to adjust to working from home, but those people asked *she'eilos* and got answers from the agency and from Rabbanim as to how it should be handled.

I don't see that it left a permanent mark.
Harav Cynamon: The fact that we need to be diligent about technology and to have as much *shmirah* as possible goes without saying. If the pandemic moved people to make certain compromises, each individual needs to examine whether they are still necessary and, if so, to look honestly if anything can be done to guard him from the pitfalls.

At the same time, I think the pandemic opened up an underutilized avenue for *harbotzas haTorah*. Venues like Agudah's virtual Yarchei Kallahs or Torah Anytime *shiturim* brought thousands more to listen to *divrei Torah* that were not accessible to them before.

Now, like with every good thing, the *yetzer hara* tries to grab on to it and drag it in the wrong direction, and a person should not be naïve about the dangers potentially involved.

Another important point is that even when it comes to Torah, there is no replacement for learning in person. During the lockdown our shul's *chaburahs* continued learning over Zoom, but when the situation got better, I pushed my *mispallelim* very strongly to come back to the *beis medrash* to learn with their *chavusos*. It's good to have options that allow Torah to go on without an interruption, but Zoom cannot replicate the *siyata diShamaya*, or sense of *kedushah*, or even the lively exchange of ideas that sitting in a *beis medrash* brings.

Over the past year there were several events that dealt blows to the confidence and respect in "experts" and authority in the world at large mostly related to various aspects of the COVID pandemic and health guidelines. For the Jewish community, clashes over COVID protocols especially in New York sharpened this issue. Does the Rav fear that however unrelated in reality, this attitude could cause a deterioration of reverence for authority in general, even rabbinic authority?

Harav Lopiansky: I think that aside from whatever breakdown people observed in the world at large, *machlokes* among our own leaders over how to properly deal with

the pandemic left a good deal of damage in some communities. Even when there are valid reasons behind each side's position and the *machlokes* is valid, it takes a toll on how the average Jew looks at authority.

But, I think the real problem stems from not understanding what Torah authority is based on in the first place.

The Ran and Ramban, and many other *Rishonim*, when they discuss *beis din hagadol*, do not start by saying that they will be right and arrive at the *emes* 100% of the time. They do add that there will be a *ruach Hashem* that helps to guide them, but that is not their main point.

What they focus on is that if there is a clear line of authority and *beis din hagadol's* decisions are accepted, then there will continue to be one Torah for all of *Klal Yisrael*. If not, there will be a million Torahs, authority disintegrates, and you will have nothing.

This attitude transfers to different areas. A person is a fool to think that a doctor or the scientific world knows everything. It takes time to gather data, to analyze it, and to draw sophisticated conclusions which develop and can change over time. It can take quite a while for a big picture to emerge.

The difference between having that healthy and reasonable skepticism to everybody deciding on their own what is right is worlds apart. It's the difference between a *tzibbur* taking the facts it sees and establishing some reasonable approach versus *hefkerus*. It's not a matter of whether they came up with the best possible approach or not, it's a matter of living with *gedarim* that make you part of a *tzibbur* or living as an individual.

Imagine if there would be no police force and everybody carried a gun to defend themselves. It would be a disaster for society. Everyone going and making their own *shittos* is just one step before that.

You don't have to be talking about a large community, it applies to every shul. The *manhigim* of a shul have a responsibility to make decisions and once they do, as long as it is in the realm of what is permissible *al pi Torah*, following that line is much better than everyone deciding what to do on their own.

Authority does not have to be right 100% of the time to have legitimacy, but living with acceptance of authority is 100 times better than the disaster of every man for himself.

Harav Eckstein: It's 1000% true that the attitudes of the non-Jewish world have an effect on us. One of the *tefilos* that we say in *Hoshanos* uses the term "*kvisha b'golah*," that *Klal Yisrael* is immersed in the *galus*. The *halachah* is that immersion or pickling infuses the submerged food with the taste of the fluid it is



Eli Wohl
Yeshiva students
in Boro Park.

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CONCERNING OUR GENERATION'S CHALLENGE: THE BATTLE AGAINST TECHNOLOGY

THE BIG-SMALL BOX

I am the director of the pre-school division in a local summer day-camp and I am constantly on the lookout for creative activities to entertain our campers.

One of the special activities I planned was a mock-up of a grocery-shopping experience. I planned to set up an array of small food items on display. Our little shoppers would have the opportunity to 'purchase' several items, and then put them into a small delivery box which would be delivered directly to their classrooms.

The most complicated – and arguably the most important – detail to arrange was the small box I envisioned. I wanted to get a box that looked like the grocery boxes that our campers were familiar with, but it needed to be small enough to fit our needs. I tried contacting local suppliers but nothing they offered was even remotely suitable.

I knew that online I would have a large selection to choose from, but I firmly told myself, time and time again, that I wasn't going that route. I never shopped online and I wasn't going to give in because of some small boxes. Hashem would certainly help me.

I was sitting at the dining-room table in my home one afternoon and I noticed a catalogue lying forgotten on the table. Throughout the summer, I constantly receive catalogs for supplies I use in day-camp, but this was completely unfamiliar. I had never heard of this company and I certainly never requested their catalog.

It was a thick catalog and I curiously flipped open the cov-

er. It may sound unbelievable, but right there on the first page I saw an assortment of boxes in every size and color. There were tiny boxes the size of a button, and huge boxes big enough to house a refrigerator. I couldn't believe it!

"Who does this catalog belong to?!" I wondered, turning it over to see if there were any postal markings. It didn't take more than a minute to ascertain that the catalog was addressed to my neighbor whose name is remarkably similar to mine.

After telling her about the unexpected – and blessed – mix-up, she graciously told me to keep it as long as I need it. With glee and a tremendous dose of gratitude to Hashem, I chose the perfect boxes for my little pre-school shoppers. I called the company and eagerly placed the order. While I waited patiently for it to be processed, I reveled in the tremendous *siyata dishmaya* I had merited.

Those little boxes delivered a tremendous message!

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A traveler seen at the Ben Gurion International Airport on June 23.

immersed in; it's a *maschal* to our situation in exile.

There is an old *vort* that is told of a man who complained to the Rav that his house was too small. The Rav told him to take his sheep and cows into the house and then later to take them out. In the end, the man realized how roomy his home was. Try to say this story in our world. Right after the Rav tells the fellow to take the cow into his house, it stops, because no one would listen to such advice. The fact that the story was able to develop, even as a parable, shows that level of respect and submission that Jews once had to Rabbanim.

If you go back to the root of the question, our own regard for medical expertise was challenged, but that has to be looked at in context. There is a story recorded in one of Harav Yitzchok Zilberstein's *sefarim* that a man from Eretz Yisrael traveled to Belgium to have a heart transplant. While he was waiting, he started feeling gradually better and for no apparent reason was soon able to do activities that he had not been able to before. He asked the doctor if he still needed to go through with the transplant. The doctor examined him and said that he still needed the surgery. The question eventually came to Rav Elyashiv, *zt"l*, who said that while *halachah* demands of us to listen to what a doctor says, this doctor must first explain why the man is indeed feeling better. If he cannot do that, then he is obviously missing important information and his advice need not be heeded.

The Torah's obligation to listen to medical advice does not change. But regarding COVID there were so many times that it became clear that there were facts that did not line up with what the medical world was saying that it was more than legitimate to question their advice.

COVID will have a lot of after-effects, but I don't think that losing respect for Rabbanim will be one of them.

I think one thing that does challenge the proper attitude towards Rabbanim is when there is confusion between questions that are appropriate for a Rav and ones that really need to be asked to *Gedolei Yisrael*. A *kehillah* interviews Rabbanim and hires one. Who hires *Gedolei Yisrael*? The answer is that *Klal Yisrael* chooses them organically, not through any

official process. *Klal Yisrael* knows who its *Gedolim* are and has tremendous respect for their authority. When the lines between *Rabbanim* and *Gedolim* get blurred is when this respect runs into challenges.

Harav Cynamon: One of the things that I see as a major impediment to raising happy and well-adjusted children is too much cynicism and sarcasm in the home.

This is true on the micro sense as well. When you send a child to school and constantly questioning the *hanhalah's* decisions and *Rebbi's* expertise, that gives a child an insecurity that could follow him for his whole life. He gets a sense that the world is unsafe and that he has to suspect everyone. Of course, you should be an involved parent and look out for your child's needs, but the child has to pick up a trust in the *mosad* and in his *Rebbeim*.

Now, when it comes to the world at large, we can't believe everything we hear and we know that there are a lot of ulterior motives at play. But, it's our job to do what we can to give our children a sense of security.

Our homes have to be safe havens and we and our children have to know that the fundamentals of our lives, *Torah umitzvos*, *daas Torah*, and *hashkafas haTorah* are strong and that they are the secure anchors in our lives.

It's a very big *nisayon*. The world has become very blunt and argumentative, which permeates our lives as well. We don't have to be feeble and certainly not naïve, but we do have to create boundaries as to what is untouchable in our lives.

The past year saw a very tumultuous election made more so by its aftermath. American society's polarization has not abated. A pandemic continued and other events continued to shake the world's foundations. Antisemitism continues to pose an increased threat. What should a Jew take from living through times of tumult when the nation he lives in seems to be on shakier footing than it has been in recent memory?

Harav Lopiansky: Some people are quick to look at the situation and become apocalyptic and decide that the world is coming to an end. There are serious issues out there, but I do not think the situation is as desperate as some might make it out to be.

The real understanding this should bring us to is to see that it was never firm to start with.

It's important for us as Jews to remember that we are living in a country that belongs to another society. We are given accommodations in that society, but we need to understand it that way.

It's like someone who stays at another person's house as

a guest. The host might be very nice and do everything he can to make the guest comfortable, but the person remains a guest. *Klal Yisrael* has to remember that we are guests in America; it's not for us to re-arrange the furniture. We have to internalize that, and we have to act like guests in terms of how we interact with the society around us.

We are not here permanently. We are different and we want to remain different. I think some of this turbulence is a gentle reminder of that.

Harav Eckstein: The truth is that many of us put too much trust in the U.S. government in the first place. People were convinced that if Trump loses that it would be the end of the world. But, he lost and our lives went on.

It says in the *Siddur* just before *korbanos*, "*Ata Hu ad sh'lo nivrah haolam, Ata Hu m'shnivrah haolam*," that Hashem ruled before there was ever a world and He rules it in the same manner now that there is a world. From Hashem's perspective, so to speak, there was no difference between when there was nothing in what we know as the world and when there were billions of people living in it.

A Yid needs to review that fact and when political changes occur they should remind us that it is not this one or that one who is really in charge, it's the *Ribbono shel Olam*. If a person lives with real *emunah*, political turbulence shouldn't bother him that much.

Harav Cynamon: All of it makes us feel more vulnerable, but a Yid has to know that his *parnassah* and his *shmirah* and his *gezunt* come from the *Eibershter*.

We have to have *bitachon*, but at a time when our *bitachon* is challenged, it's not enough just to say "*der Eibershter vet helfen*," which for many of us is a way of covering for our worries and doubts.

The Ohr Hachayim Hakadosh comments that when *Klal Yisrael* was at the Yam Suf, Hashem told them "*mah titzak alei*," why are you crying to me? He explains that in a time of such danger, words are not enough, the situation demands an action which demonstrates our *bitachon*.

The situation the world is in is not in our hands. But we have to look for ways to do more. To give more *tzedakah*, to do more *chesed*, to learn more Torah and in that *zechus*, *ehrliche Yidden* should have an extra *shmirah*.

I once met an old Russian Yid before Pesach and he told me, "I was in Siberia. When Pesach came, we had nothing and we were freezing, but we felt *cheirus*." A Yid has the ability to draw on his own *ruchniyusdig* strengths and block out the situation he is in to feel *Torahdig* emotions.

It's a hard thing to do in a world that bombards us with what to think, but we have to do our part. There is nothing wrong with knowing what is going on in the world and to an extent we should, but the need to know everything at warp speed creates an anxiety and eats away at our *bitachon*.

The world is what it is, but a Yid's home base has to be his learning and his *davening*, his family, and his good

chaverim.

Could the Rav share a thought of chizuk for Rosh Hashanah?

Harav Lopiansky: I think the last year or two should reinforce our sense of really not knowing what the future holds.

It should help us to approach Rosh Hashanah with a feeling that we stand in *din* before *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. On the one hand it is difficult to come into Rosh Hashanah with so much uncertainty, but at the same time it might make it easier to relate to the fact that it is a day when the world hangs in the balance. That is a reality every Rosh Hashanah, but it might have been harder to relate to in years where we felt everything was going well.

There is a certain *nechamah* [in the fact] that we can approach Rosh Hashanah with an emotional connection to what *Yom Hadin* is in reality.

Harav Eckstein: This year is *Shemittah*. When *Shemittah* comes there is a lot of focus on the farmers in Eretz Yisrael who put their farms on hold and sit and learn. But *Shemittah* was given to *Klal Yisrael*, not only to a few farmers.

The message of *Shemittah* is to distance yourself from the attitude that you are the one responsible for your success. There were businessmen who closed their businesses and took off a year during *Shemittah*. Most people can't do that, but what everyone can do is to dedicate a few minutes every day to remind himself that his security in life is not his bank account or his home, but that the *Ribbono shel Olam* is his only real security.

In that *zechus*, hopefully, we should merit that Moshich should come by Motzoei Shviis.

Harav Cynamon: Harav Nosson Wachtfogel, *zt"l*, said that a statement of the Rambam regarding the *shofar*, "*uri yeshanim m'shinashcham*," wake up from your slumber, should give a Yid *chizuk*. It doesn't say to wake up the dead. The *shofar* is a wakeup call that shows we have potential and that Hashem believes in our ability to change.

Every Yid comes from a good source and is *ehrlich* inside. The *shofar* is there to help us focus on what our lives are about. There is a *vort* that the *tekiah* represents the *tzaddik* and the *teruah* is the Yid whose *avodah* is not as perfect, but Hashem listens to both sounds. It's a message that no matter where a Yid stands, Hashem wants to hear his *tefillos*. I was once walking with Harav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, *shlita*, when an old friend of his greeted him and asked how he was doing. The *Rosh Yeshivah's* response was, "Today is good, tomorrow will be even better."

Hakadosh Baruch Hu is a *kol yachol*; there is nothing beyond His ability. On Rosh Hashanah let's *daven* for a year that is better than we could have ever imagined. ■