

## Rav Ahron Lopiansky

**MY RAV, HAGAON RAV ZELIG EPSTIEN**, once remarked to me, "What a remarkable world that we live in. So many people are concerned with Hashem's well-being, yet so few are concerned with *people's* well-being."

Although I am not in kiruv professionally, I have taught for many years at Aish Hatorah, host many wonderful *mekarvim* in our area who use our yeshiva as a "charging" station, and have much personal contact with many in the field. I would like to outline some of the issues related to the well-being of *mekarvim* that I have encountered in my personal experience, having been consulted about them in different variations over the years.

I have read all the submissions to the kiruv issue of *Klal Perspectives*, which shed much light on the "state of kiruv," but none on the "state of the mekarvim." I have also attended meetings of high powered *gvirim* (donors) and *askanim* (activists) at which "kiruv pieces" were moved around on the board with the alacrity of a chess master seeking that perfect move that will win the tournament. Spreadsheets were unfolded and decisions were reached. The only problem with this scene is that the "pieces" are not plastic pawns, but rather real human beings, *bnei Torah* and idealists, at the most fragile juncture of their lives: within the first few years of their marriage, with several young children.

In some ways, there is an obvious, common denominator between kiruv professionals and all *klei kodesh*: low pay, uncertain future, incredible expectations. But there are challenges facing kiruv professionals that are more difficult than a day school rebbi, for example, and I have yet to hear the voice of the one who cares.

Here are some of those challenges:

- A day school is seen as an absolute need for a community, and can expect to survive as long as there are frum families. Not so a kiruv enterprise, which often depends on a few primary donors. When the interest of one of these donors flags or he becomes excited by another

idea or there is economic hardship, substantial funding may suddenly vanish overnight.

- The job of a rebbi is portable. A good rebbi in Scranton will be a good rebbi in Minneapolis or in Phoenix. Kiruv, however, is very individualized, and success in one venue does not have that strong a correlation with success in another.
- A rebbi becomes a natural member of a community. If he loses his job, or has a special hardship, members of the community will usually feel a moral obligation to help. Not so the kiruv professional who often has little connection with the local community.
- As a rebbi gets older, his enthusiasm and energy may mellow, but he is seen as having gained wisdom, *chashivus* (importance) and experience, all prized in the world of education. In kiruv, youth, charisma and enthusiasm are the almost universal criteria for success (naturally, with some notable exceptions).
- A rebbi commands respect in the community. While it is difficult to deposit this "*kavod*" in the bank, somehow, it does provide a badly needed emotional compensation. On the other hand, kiruv personnel come in two versions: (a) the famous superstar, or (b) just a "kiruv rebbi," the term kiruv being seen as a significant qualifier of the title "rabbi."

There is another area in which I have sometimes been involved, which seems to have its own set of challenges in the world of kiruv, and that is "intra-organizational relationships." In every social structure there is bound to be friction between various members of that organization, but the challenges of kiruv organizations pose unique difficulties. Let us consider some of these:

- The hierarchy of a school, and the obligations and privileges of each rung on that ladder, are fairly constant. There is a "norm" of sorts, to refer to. Nothing like that exists in the kiruv world. Thus, when a successful [or unsuccessful] *mekarev* takes on an assistant, there are usually two very divergent perspectives on the assistant's role. The assistant may see himself as a full partner to the enterprise, while the mentor may view him as an apprentice (or, perhaps, a serf). In short order, each one feels that the other is exploiting him.

- The affairs of a school are public, and if teachers haven't been paid there is public knowledge and pressure to rectify the situation. If the leadership of a kiruv center is not paying its employees properly, there is no public knowledge, and consequently no public pressure to right the situation.
- If there are problems in a school, the local *Rav* or *rabbonim* will feel the mandate and responsibility to see that justice is served. Kiruv centers tend to work out of the community framework, and the local *Rav* may feel no inclination or obligation to get involved.

Even kiruv centers that are affiliated with large organizations tend to gloss over these issues. The pressure to perform and to raise stupendous amounts of cash often relegates personnel problems to the back burner, or better said... to the freezer. The head of a center may be a difficult and controlling person; he may renege on promises and agreements; he may be inept, and yet those can be perceived as relatively minor issues back home, as the "*lshem shamayim*" outweighs all else.

So let us remember that if our community encourages our most idealistic and vulnerable young people to sacrifice for Klal Yisroel, inspiring them to "save the world", we must recognize that every *yachid* (individual), too, is an entire world – including these *mekarvim*. It is our responsibility to see to it that they have the safety net they need for their private concerns, honest advice to guide their personal lives, and an available structure through which they can address any possible wrongs they may face.

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