

## Spotlight / By Devorah Klein

'Torah Is the *Ikar*'

Rabbi Zev Cohen: 25 Years of Torah Leadership in Chicago and Beyond

On Sunday, May 5, Congregation Adas Yeshurun will hold its annual dinner, honoring Rabbi and Mrs. Zev Cohen for their dedication to Adas Yeshurun and the Chicago community.

During the past 25 years, under the leadership of Rabbi Cohen and his devoted Rebbetzin Michal, Adas Yeshurun has become a pillar in the Chicago community. Twenty-five years ago, the founding members never dreamed what Yeshurun would accomplish. Today the shul is thriving, with a large membership, numerous daily *minyanim*, and a variety of *shiurim* for men and women every day of the week.

The shul has an open-door policy and hosts community initiatives, gatherings, and *shiurim* that benefit the entire city. Rabbi and Rebbetzin Cohen have made themselves available to help meet the needs of individuals and the community at large. With drive and dedication, they have exerted themselves to infuse everyone they meet with a love of *Yiddishkeit*, helping to bring them closer to Hashem.

## From Crown Heights to Lakewood

Rabbi Zev Cohen was born in Crown Heights, New York. His father, Rabbi Shraga Feivel Cohen, was a close *talmid* of Harav Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman, *zt"l*.

Rabbi Cohen's maternal grandfather, Reb Yuzpah Mael, arrived in the United States in 1904 and settled in Millis, Massachusetts, where he established a chicken farm. He subsequently became one of the first chassidim of the first Bostoner Rebbe, *zt"l*, Harav Pinchos Dovid Horowitz, when he came to America in 1914. His son, Reb Yaakov Tzvi Mael, established a cattle farm in Millis, and Rabbi Zev Cohen has many fond memories of spending summer vacations on the farm, milking 80 cows a day and caring for his own pony.

"Many of my experiences on the farm were very relevant to *Gemara* learning later on," remarks Rabbi Cohen. "When I was in yeshiva, we were learning *Bava Kama* and discussing the concept of a cow being gored by an ox. Many of the *talmidim* did not understand how this was relevant until I came in and announced that my uncle had been gored by an ox. *Baruch Hashem*, my uncle was okay, but this highlighted the relevance of these *halachos* for my classmates."

In 1965, when Rabbi Cohen was 11 years old, the family moved

Rabbi Cohen delivering a *shiur* at Adas Yeshurun.

Rabbi Cohen with Harav Yitzchok Feigelstock.

from Crown Heights to Brookline, Massachusetts. Two years later, with great *mestrus nefesh*, they sent their young son to learn in the newly established Mesivta of Long Beach, under Harav Yitzchok Feigelstock, *shlita*. The young Rabbi Cohen became a close *talmid* of Harav Feigelstock, who was a *talmid muvhak* of Harav Aharon Kotler, *zt"l*.

"I owe him my life," Rabbi Cohen asserts. "Every major decision that I ever made was done with the guidance of the *Rosh Yeshiva*. There are no words to describe the effect that he has had on my life and my entire family."

After learning in Long Beach for seven years, Rabbi Cohen went to learn in Bais Medrash Govoha, where he developed close relationships with Harav Shneur Kotler, *zt"l*, and Harav Nosson Wachtfogel, *zt"l*. "They had an incredible impact on my life," relates Rabbi Cohen. "They were a link to Harav Yeruchom Levovitz, *zt"l*, a link to Kelm, to Harav Boruch Ber Leibowitz, *zt"l*, and to Harav Isser Zalman Meltzer, *zt"l*. They were the only *rebbeim* I had who had really learned in prewar Europe."

At that time, a rotation of *bachurim* was set up to drive Harav Shneur and Harav Wachtfogel to New York whenever they had to go. Rabbi Cohen promised the *gabbai* that whenever the *Rosh Yeshiva* and the *Mashgiach* were going to visit Harav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, he would make sure to be available to drive. In this manner, Rabbi Cohen was *zocheh* to witness the incredible interactions of these

Rabbi Cohen bentching *lulav* and *esrog*.

*Gedolim*. "I watched the tremendous awe and *bitul* that Harav Wachtfogel had before Harav Moshe. I also witnessed the magnitude of Harav Wachtfogel's efforts to help other Yidden in their time of need, even when it meant giving up his own *kavod*."

Once, while driving through the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Rabbi Cohen lost his way and stopped to ask for directions. Finally, he said to the *Mashgiach*, "We are on the *richtege derech* (the right way)." Ever the *baal mussar*, Harav Wachtfogel exclaimed with great passion, "For 40 years, I have been trying to go on the *richtege derech*!"

## The Move to Chicago

In 1979, Rabbi Cohen married Michal Stolper, the daughter of Rabbi and Mrs. Pinchas Stolper. Rabbi Stolper served for many years as the executive vice president of the Orthodox Union and was the founder of NCSY.

Two years later, the Cohens moved to Chicago, where they

Rabbi Cohen delivering a *shiur* at Adas Yeshurun.

were among the founding members of the Chicago Community Kollel. Six years later, Rabbi Cohen became a *rebbe* in the Skokie Yeshiva, where he had a profound influence on many *bachurim*, many of whom consider him their *rebbe* some 30 years later.

Shortly thereafter, Rabbi Cohen became the Rav of Congregation Adas Yeshurun Anshe Kanesses Israel, retaining his position as *rebbe*, and later *mashgiach*, at the Skokie Yeshiva.

As *mashgiach*, Rabbi Cohen became well known for his impassioned *mussar shmuesen*, which left an indelible impression on the *bachurim*. In one of his most famous *shmuesen*, he described the *s'char* one receives for every word of Torah he learns and for every second he spends learning, and he calculated how much *s'char* one must earn for a few hours of learning *Gemara*. "Compare that to the millions of dollars that athletes earn for every second they play ball. Even that cannot come close to the boundless *s'char* one gets for learning Torah!" he thundered.

In 1999, Rabbi Cohen came to a crossroads and realized that he could not continue to maintain both positions with complete dedication. After consulting with Harav Feigelstock, he became the full-time Rav of Adas Yeshurun.

## Adas Yeshurun: A Thriving Kehillah

Under Rabbi Cohen's leadership Adas Yeshurun has become one of the major *kehillos* in the Chicago community, one that is always buzzing with activity. The shul is open from 5:30 a.m. until 12:00 midnight, with people learning there all day. There are 11 *minyanim* a day and close to 100 *shiurim* throughout the week on a wide variety of topics, making learning accessible to all.

"Our motto is, Torah is the *ikar*," says Rabbi Cohen. "I constantly stress *limud haTorah* as the catalyst for people to grow in their *avodas Hashem*."

One of the highlights of the year in Adas Yeshurun is Simchas Torah. During the sixth *hakafah* the many children of the *kehillah* gather in front of the *bimah* and Rabbi Cohen leads them in the spirited singing of "*Amar Rabi Akiva, ashreichim Yisrael*." Then, with Rabbi Cohen in the lead, the children break out in a rousing cheer: "Torah is the *ikar*, Torah is the *ikar*..."

Following this wonderful display of *kvod haTorah*, which draws participants from the entire neighborhood, small souvenirs imprinted with "Torah is the *ikar*," created by the Rebbetzin, are distributed.

This is just one example of how Rabbi Cohen creates an exuberant atmosphere of constant striving for higher levels of Torah learning, creating new and innovative programs to promote his goals.

## A Wide Range of Programs

In the Daf Hashavua program, more than 50 participants complete one *daf* of *Shas* each week. This is in addition to the three daily *Daf Yomi shiurim* in the shul. Rabbi Cohen calls the program "*gevuldig*" and is very enthusiastic about the inspiration and energy it creates in the *kehillah*.

On May 5, the morning of the dinner, the members of both the *Daf Yomi shiurim* and the Daf Hashavua program will be completing the first 270 *blatt* — one-tenth — of *Shas*. On that morning, the shul will host a *siyum* and *shiur* in honor of the two groups' achievement.

In "Let's Learn to Daven," Rabbi Cohen teaches his *kehillah* the meaning of the *tefillas*. After several years, they are finishing *Pesukei d'Zimrah*. "I always felt shortchanged," Rabbi Cohen says. "I had never really learned the meaning of the *tefillas* and how to *biur daven*. When I became the Rav, someone asked me to give a *shiur* on *siddur*, yet I had never heard a *shiur* on the *siddur*. We began the *shiur*, which focuses on *biur tefillah* with some *halachos*, and it has had a serious impact on the shul."

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Cohen runs a forum called "She'eilah of the Week." He chooses one *she'eilah* that he received during the week and analyzes it, presenting answers and explaining how he arrived at a *psak*.

Rabbi Cohen emphasizes the value of every minute of learning. Eleven years ago, he started a 10-minute *shiur* in *Nach* before the daily *Shacharis minyan*. Two years ago, the group completed the entire *Nach* and has now begun learning it a second time. Rabbi Cohen also delivers a brief *shiur* between the daily *Minchah-Maariv minyan*. In 25 years, the members have completed all of *Mishnayos, Avos d'Rav Nassan, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, and *maseches Sofrim*.

"I love doing these things," comments Rabbi Cohen. "It shows that if you stick to something, you can have major accomplishments in short amounts of time."

The Erika Neter Mayer Women's Learning Division offers programs for women and girls. There are various *shiurim* throughout the week, a Rosh Chodesh mother-daughter *seudah*, a summer lecture series, and *yemei iyun*. Many of these *shiurim* are given by leading personalities, including Rebbetzin Cohen. She has initiated a number of programs, including teaching the art of baking challah.

The Yeshiva Program is designed for boys who have returned from Eretz Yisrael and are seeking a framework to continue their learning while attending college. More than 100 boys have attended the program, and it has had an incredible impact on them as they move into the next phase of their lives.

#### Growing In Avodas Hashem

Rabbi Cohen's philosophy is that every Yid, no matter where he is in life, must keep growing in his *avodas Hashem*. "It does not say anywhere in *Shulchan Aruch* that a person should stop growing when he or she leaves yeshiva or seminary. A person must constantly be searching for ways to *shteig*."

To help his *kehillah* members meet this goal, Rabbi Cohen has created MAP - "Make a Plan," with GPS, "Growth and Personal *Shteiging*," as their guide. "I encourage people to do what they can to continue *shteiging* despite the responsibilities of parenting and *parnassah*," he says.

How is this accomplished? *Kehillah* members are strongly encouraged to make time in their day or week to attend one or more of the many learning programs offered by the shul. In addition, Rabbi Cohen directs a popular *mussar vaad* for *baalei batim* on Thursday evenings. *Vaad* members work on various *kabbalos*, and Rabbi Cohen delivers *divrei chizuk* with the same passionate enthusiasm that inspired the *bachurim* in Skokie Yeshiva.

Yakov Weil, a member of Adas Yeshurun, commented, "Rabbi Cohen is an incredible person and has unbelievable energy. Our shul consists of all types, and we all get along because of Rabbi Cohen; he is the glue that keeps us all together."

Rabbi Mordechai Millunchick, director of development for Adas Yeshurun, testified, "Rabbi Cohen cares about other people. Not a day goes by that he does not call a sick person in the hospital, someone who is homebound, or just someone who needs *chizuk*."

Rabbi and Rebbetzin Cohen also serve as role models for how a Yid should live, exemplifying the best principles of *shalom bayis* and *chituch habanim*. They were *zocheh* to raise four wonderful children, who are now married and raising their own families, while involved in *limud* and *harbotzas haTorah* in Lakewood and Chicago.

#### Choshen Mishpat Kollel

Fourteen years ago, after entering full-time *rabbanus* at Adas Yeshurun, Rabbi

Cohen set out to establish the Choshen Mishpat Kollel to increase awareness of business *halachah* in the Chicago community.

The *kollel*, which is closely affiliated with Harav Chaim Kohn and the Business Halacha Institute in New York, has 18 *yungeleit* who spend their mornings engrossed in intense learning of *Choshen Mishpat* with Rabbi Cohen. In the afternoons, the *yungeleit* are involved in other aspects of the community; some are Rabbanim, some work in *chessed* organizations, and others serve as *rebbeim* in local yeshivos. The *kollel* also runs a hotline that takes *she'eilos* from all over Chicago and beyond, and is involved in producing a weekly newsletter in conjunction with the Business Halacha Institute.

During a recent Choshen Mishpat Awareness Week, *yungeleit* spoke on *Choshen Mishpat* in venues around the community, including the day schools. "The entire community was buzzing about *Choshen Mishpat*," recalls Rabbi Henoch Plotnik.

#### A Rav for the Entire Community

Rabbi Cohen has been very involved in the Chicago community on a wide scale and is active in many projects for the betterment of *Yiddishkeit* in Chicagoland and beyond. Rebbetzin Cohen is also a very beloved figure among the women of Chicago. A social worker by profession, she delivers a popular parenting class and many other *shiurim* for the women and girls of Chicago. She has also taught *kallos* for 20 years and is now in charge of the educational activities of Daughters of Israel, which coordinates these classes.

Under the guidance and encouragement of Harav Yitzchok Feigelstock, Rabbi Cohen was instrumental in building the West Rogers Park *eruv* about 20 years ago. His weekly *vaadim* for *mechanchim* are extremely popular. He has also established a special *beis din* to handle sensitive community issues necessary to protect our children. This is one of the very few *batei din* in the country that deals exclusively with these issues.

A few years ago, at the behest of Harav Avrohom Chaim Levin, *shlita*, *Rosh Yeshiva* of Telshe Chicago, Rabbi Cohen was active in establishing the Midwest Council of Agudah Rabbanim, which enables 20 Rabbanim from about 20 Midwest cities to work together for the betterment of their *kehillos*.

Rabbi Yehiel Kalish, Agudath Israel's national director of government affairs and a former Chicago resident, described Rabbi Cohen's impact on the Jewish community.

"Rabbi Cohen is a real *mevakesh*—and he has not stopped learning a full morning *seider* since he was in ninth grade! It is not possible to describe the impact that Rabbi Cohen has had on the Chicago community and beyond. He has a tremendous influence on people. People call him with *she'eilos* from all over, and he answers in a very personal way. He is a *baal eitzah* with whom one can share everything that is going on in his life. Personally, I feel very close to him, and he is always concerned about how things are in my family—but he is like that with so many people."

Rabbi Henoch Plotnik, Rav of Congregation Bais Tefila, has known Rabbi Cohen since they were young boys growing up in Boston. "Rabbi Cohen has the pulse of the American *baal habayis* and knows how to give over *mesikas haTorah* and *geshmak* in *tefillah*. He has taken a lead role in the community and addresses problems that others don't want to address. He accomplishes so much because he loves people and can relate to them all, and in return, they respond with love and follow his example in *avodas Hashem*."



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