



School Choice: The Battle

Zman's Round Table Discussion With Agudath Israel's School Choice Activists

- Yitzchok Wagschal
- Moshe Holender



Moshe Holender and Yitzchok Wagschal of Zman meet in Agudath Israel of America's Manhattan office with (L-R) Rabbi Yehiel Kalish, Vice President for Development and State Relations; Nechemiah Hoch, member of the Lefkowitz Leadership Initiative; Rabbi Shai Markowitz, Director of the LLI; and Rabbi Yosef Rapaport, Director of Communications.

How would your life be different if your tuition was reduced by up to \$6,000 per child next year? How could that relieve or eliminate the *parnassah* struggle of thousands of Jewish families?

For many parents in New York, this may become a reality within the near future. In fact, right now there is a large coalition of

organizations and legislators working to enact a groundbreaking program which will enable parents and philanthropists to take a tax credit and apply it toward private school tuition.

For well over a decade, Agudath Israel of America has been a vital component in the struggle for school choice all around the

country. Despite representing a relatively small percentage of the population, the Agudah has had a disproportionate influence on both state legislatures and non-Jewish school choice advocacy groups in its quest to benefit Jewish families.

In anticipation of the annual Agudath Israel convention this month, *Zman* sought out Rabbi Yehiel Kalish, Agudath Israel's Vice President for Development and State Relations, to discuss the exciting developments happening in the arena of school choice—both in New York and across the country. For the past 12 years, Rabbi Kalish has been a passionate and tireless advocate for school choice at the national, state and local levels. In meeting with him, we found his fresh enthusiasm for this issue most striking, as if he had just gotten involved with this project weeks—instead of years—ago!

As Rabbi Kalish made quite clear, legislative changes cannot happen with the involvement of just one person or a small group. Therefore, to round out our coverage of this crucial issue to our community, we also spoke with Rabbi A. D. Motzen, Agudath Israel's National Director of State Relations; New York State Assemblyman Michael Cusick (D-Staten Island), who is the main sponsor of New York's education tax credit; New York State Assemblyman Phil Goldfeder (D-Far Rockaway), a strong supporter of the bill; and Ms. Leslie Hiner, Esq., Vice President of Programs & State Relations for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

Public Schooling in America

Close to two thousand years ago, the *Kohen Gadol*, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Gamla, instituted universal public education in *Eretz Yisrael*. Each town was mandated to have a teacher of Torah. Since then, the Torah education of every Jewish child has been considered the sacred duty of every Jewish community throughout the world.

In America, however, government-funded public schools have a much shorter history. Schools had existed in urban centers since



Torah Day School of Atlanta students standing on the steps of the Georgia Capitol with Rabbi Motzen and Senator Jason Carter, following a school choice rally (photo credit: D. Kapenstein).

the founding of the United States in 1776, and then gradually expanded in scope throughout the 19th century. It was not until 1909, however, that a system of federally funded public schools meant to educate every American child was established. Later, the burden of funding public education was largely shifted to the states, which formulated educational standards and decided how much tax money should be allotted for each school. Roughly, 90% of public school budgets are funded by a combination of state and local taxes and only about 10% by the federal government.

Milton Friedman, born in Brooklyn in 1912 to immigrant Jewish merchants, eventually became perhaps the most influential economist of the 20th century. In 1955, when he was teaching economic policy at the University of Chicago, Friedman was asked to analyze the way in which education is funded in the US.

"He was quite appalled at what he discovered," Ms. Hiner of the Friedman Foundation told *Zman*. "When he looked at our model of

funding, he discovered that it was based on a socialist system instead of a free-market model. Given the fact that education funding took up half of the states' budgets, he was really quite beside himself trying to figure out how this could possibly be successful. He came to the conclusion that if we continued funding education in this way (which we still do today), the result would be mediocrity. Sadly, he was right about that."

That year, Dr. Friedman published a seminal article entitled, "The Role of Government in Education," in which he proposed a system of school vouchers. Ideally, the school voucher system would allow all parents to direct the state's education funding allotted for their child to whatever school they chose—whether public or private. It would be a totally open free-market system.

According to Rabbi Kalish, "I believe that the Milton Friedman argument is the most appropriate argument for the implementation of school choice. We should create free markets of education, allowing the parents to choose what is most appropriate for their child. This is the classic voucher system: Give the parents the \$10,000 or so per year that the government claims is necessary to educate the child, and let the parents determine how it is to be used. Legal precedent has clearly established that the Friedman model is constitutional, even if the money is used at a religious institution. Such a system would help all parents, regardless of income or zip code."

Opponents argue that taking away funding from the public schools will harm the education of the remaining students. Private schools will pick and choose only the best students, each competing with the other, and the public schools will be left only with the below-average students, who will then fail because of the low-achieving environment.

"If that really happened," stated Rabbi Kalish emphatically, "then we would be justified in closing down the public schools! Failure to attract good students indicates a failure of the entire system. But in reality, this will not happen; rather, school choice



Rabbi Kalish meeting with Rav Elyashiv zt'l.



Rabbi Yehiel Kalish speaking at Agudath Israel of America's annual convention.



Rabbi Motzen with former Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels at a school choice rally at the Statehouse.