



# AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA **MISSION TO ALBANY**

TUESDAY, MARCH 8, 2016



# THE AGUDATH ISRAEL ALBANY AGENDA 2016



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*Executive Vice President*



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*Chairman,  
Board of Trustees*



## AGUDATH ISRAEL'S OFFICE OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS

Agudath Israel of America is a 93-year-old, national, Orthodox Jewish organization, headquartered in New York, with a Washington office and affiliated chapters across the United States. Agudath Israel sponsors numerous projects and programs that service the community in a wide variety of settings. Through its Office of Government Affairs, Agudath Israel advocates before federal, state and local bodies on behalf of Orthodox Jewry and its growing network of educational, religious and charitable institutions. As New York is home to the largest concentration of Orthodox Jews anywhere in the world outside the State of Israel, Agudath Israel has, over the years, placed special emphasis on advocacy in the Empire State.

Agudath Israel has played a major role in the development and enactment of numerous laws that protect the civil and religious rights of Orthodox Jewish New Yorkers in many settings, including universities, workplaces and hospitals.



## ADVOCACY ON BEHALF OF NEW YORK'S ORTHODOX JEWISH SCHOOLS

Perhaps the single greatest focus of Agudath Israel's advocacy efforts in New York has been education – protecting and advancing the interests of the growing network of elementary and secondary Orthodox Jewish schools across New York and the constituencies they serve. There are approximately 395 such yeshivos and day schools, with a broad array of affiliations: Hasidic, Lithuanian, Modern Orthodox, Ashkenazi and Sephardi. Collectively they enroll approximately 143,000 students – over a third of the total nonpublic school enrollment in the state.

Agudath Israel's service to these schools includes high-level advocacy with legislative bodies and education departments that results in millions of dollars of grants and services; a dedicated division, Project LEARN, that advocates for children with special education needs; and the Education Affairs Division, which generates a steady stream of newsletters and hands-on workshops and webinars that provide essential information on government laws, rules, regulations and programs vital to the operation of yeshivos across the state, and is available to assist and respond to schools' questions on an individual basis.

Executive staff of Agudath Israel are acknowledged leaders of the broader nonpublic school community in New York. Most notably, Agudath Israel's executive vice president co-chairs the

New York State Coalition for Independent and Religious Schools, chairs the Committee of New York City Religious and Independent School Officials and is a member of the New York State Commissioner of Education's Nonpublic School Advisory Council.

Agudath Israel's long track record of advocacy and service on behalf of Orthodox Jewish schools reflects its recognition that these schools are the very lifeblood of the community, and that their wellbeing is the key to Jewish continuity and growth. Yet, the high cost of yeshiva education places tremendous strain on parents who choose such schools, and threatens the long-term viability of these schools. Accordingly, Agudath Israel's top legislative priority for 2016 is the enactment of the Education Tax Credit.



## EDUCATION TAX CREDIT

The Education Tax Credit (ETC) would provide a substantial state tax credit – and thus a powerful incentive – for contributions to public schools and to scholarship organizations that provide scholarships for needy students attending private schools. Similar programs in other states, such as Pennsylvania and Arizona, have proven extremely successful in motivating private giving to scholarship organizations. The time has come to enact a tax credit. Public schools will benefit, nonpublic schools will benefit, and most of all, needy families will benefit by having access to significant scholarship funding for their children's tuition.



## INCREASE SAFETY EQUIPMENT FUNDING FOR NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS

We request that the Legislature increase the appropriation for safety equipment funding for nonpublic schools to \$75 per child, for a total of \$31 million. During the last three legislative sessions, the Governor and Legislature appropriated \$4.5 million for the nonpublic school safety equipment program. This is the figure that the Governor included in his executive budget as well. With the enrollment of nonpublic school students at approximately 413,000, this appropriation translates into less than \$10 per child.

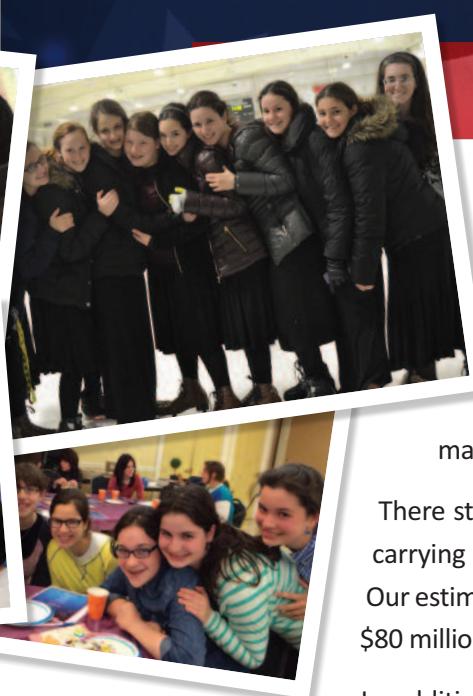
In the wake of recent developments in the Middle East, Europe, and here in the United States, it is imperative that we make our schools more secure to protect our precious children. We have, unfortunately, witnessed all too many tragedies in schools over the past few years, and faith-based schools are particularly at risk.

Our schools and open playgrounds present soft targets to malfeasors. The \$31 million figure will provide a more meaningful measure of target-hardening, and parity to the per pupil figure allocated to nonpublic schools by neighboring states for this purpose. We do not need a long memory to recognize that the Empire State, as the financial capital of the world, offers unparalleled appeal and opportunity for terror in the minds of those that seek only maximum harm and notoriety.

These funds will be used for any equipment or initiatives that impact the health, safety and security of nonpublic school students, including but not limited to: video security surveillance systems, installation of or improvements to mechanisms designed to prevent entry into the building or classrooms, access control systems to allow for remote locking and unlocking of all building access doors, security assessments, alarm services, etc.

We need to provide New York State's schools with a greater measure of safety and security for all of its students, including those who attend nonpublic schools.





## PRIOR YEARS' MANDATED SERVICES AND CAP DEBT

Nonpublic schools are statutorily entitled to reimbursement for their actual costs in carrying out certain state mandates, including compliance with the Comprehensive Attendance Program (CAP). We thank the Legislature and the Governor for the \$250 million appropriation enacted in June 2015 for the previously underfunded CAP program. This appropriation went a long way toward retiring the state's debt to the nonpublic schools for complying with the mandates of the Comprehensive Attendance Program.

There still remains, however, a debt to the nonpublic schools for the costs they incurred in carrying out the CAP mandates in previous years, for which they still await reimbursement. Our estimates indicate that the overall debt was over \$330 million, so there remains more than \$80 million in unreimbursed CAP costs.

In addition, we urge you to provide \$69 million to fully cover current year costs for CAP reimbursement.

## BRING REIMBURSEMENT FOR IMMUNIZATION RECORDKEEPING CURRENT

We respectfully request that the state bring current reimbursement to nonpublic schools under the mandated services program for the actual costs they incur in complying with the immunization mandate. According to detailed estimates arrived at by polling 63 schools across NYC, Buffalo and Rochester, nonpublic schools are currently incurring \$7.7 million of unreimbursed mandated services to comply. A \$7.7 million increase to the proposed mandated services appropriation, bringing the total appropriation to \$111,914 million, would address this reimbursement shortfall.

The current statute (Chapter 903 of the Laws of 1984) requires reimbursement of actual costs to nonpublic schools in the cities of New York, Buffalo and Rochester to comply with the state's immunization, verification and reporting program. Yet, the reimbursement is capped at 60 cents per student, the same number since its inception more than 30 years ago. This number has remained unchanged, despite the obvious rise in staff salaries and an array of qualitative and quantitative changes to the vaccination requirements, since 1984. School officials today are required to ascertain whether new pupils and those already enrolled in the school have received the adequate doses of a growing list of vaccinations required pursuant to Public Health Law 2164, and to check the intervals between doses of vaccinations, and follow up if a dose was not given at the appropriate time. In addition, schools must now record and report this information for every student to the city/state Health Departments on an annual basis, in contrast to the summary reporting system of the past. The immunization requirement is the only mandate under the mandated services aid program which does not reimburse schools for their actual costs, as required by the underlying statute.

We ask that the sixty cent cap be removed and that the reimbursement be brought current, so that nonpublic schools can be reimbursed for their actual costs in complying with this mandate.



## OFFICE OF NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS

In 1979, in recognition of the essential role played by the state's nonpublic schools within New York's overall education landscape, the State Education Department created the office of Assistant Commissioner for Nonpublic Schools. Despite the fact that this office played an essential role in coordinating state services for the nonpublic sector, its status was eventually downgraded considerably. Today, not only is there no Assistant Commissioner for Nonpublic Schools, there is no office whatsoever within SED devoted to nonpublic schools issues.

The 413,000 children who attend nonpublic schools in New York State represent approximately 13.5% of all schoolchildren statewide. With the plethora of issues on the table related to nonpublic schools, and with the new mandate under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to appoint an ombudsman to ensure that nonpublic schools are receiving their equitable share of federal programs, we believe the time has come to reinstate a robust Office of Nonpublic Schools within SED, headed by a high level Department official who will serve as the key liaison between the Department and the state's nonpublic school community. We respectfully ask you to include in the budget \$1 million for the establishment of such an office.

## EAST RAMAPO SCHOOL DISTRICT

The state-appointed monitors of the East Ramapo Central School District issued a report on December 14, 2015. While the report acknowledges the fact that East Ramapo School Board President Yehuda Weissmandl had worked closely and collaboratively with the monitors and both sides were making progress to address the District's challenges, the report went on to make a number of recommendations that represent an unjustified overreach.

Among the report's recommendations are the following:

- The appointment of a monitor who would have veto power over Board decisions;
- One of the seats on the East Ramapo School Board in each election cycle be reserved exclusively for "parents of children attending public schools selected in a local process by other public school parents;" and
- That an "independent election monitor" be brought in to ensure the integrity of the election process.

These recommendations are unwarranted and unprecedented. If put in place, they would undermine the authority of the Board and dilute the voting power of the citizens of East Ramapo. We urge the legislature to oppose any efforts to enact legislation embodying these recommendations.

The report acknowledges that the district receives insufficient funding, due to the unique demographic profile of the District, with nonpublic school students outnumbering their public school counterparts by nearly 3 to 1. We once again ask the Legislature to allocate sufficient funding to the district which will allow the district to adequately serve the needs of all its schoolchildren, both public and nonpublic.



## PRESERVING THE INDEPENDENCE OF NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS

Bills A8612 & S6291 seek to enforce the “equivalency of instruction” requirement upon nonpublic schools through a series of highly prescriptive mandates that would severely compromise the ability of religious and independent schools to fashion their own courses of study. The bill would further give the State Education Department unfettered authority to enforce those mandates, including the authority to withhold financial aid from schools that would otherwise be entitled to such aid, and even the authority to close the schools.

Agudath Israel respectfully opposes this bill. We believe that this bill represents a great threat to the independence of the nonpublic school sector, and an unwarranted infringement upon religious liberty.

Clearly, all children who attend religious and independent schools should receive a general education sufficient to equip them to become productive members of society. But there must be a generous allocation of space for religious and independent schools to design educational programs that reflect their unique worldview and educational priorities. This bill would narrow that space considerably, in an effort to ensure “equivalency of instruction” between the public and nonpublic sectors. New York has a rich tradition of educational diversity, which would be severely undermined were this bill to become law.



## PROTECTING PATIENT'S RELIGIOUS RIGHTS AND END OF LIFE CARE

Agudath Israel is strongly opposed to any bill that grants doctors the power to administer medication to a potentially vulnerable, terminally-ill patient to take her own life. The classical Jewish tradition teaches that all human life is sacred, and we believe that laws that undermine the sanctity of human life send a message that is profoundly dangerous for all of society.



It is another principle of Jewish law and ethics that a doctor's role is to provide healing, not to hasten death. Doctors who assist in the commission of suicide, even when motivated by the most humane of concerns, exceed the bounds of their own Hippocratic mandate and undermine public confidence in the medical profession. Agudath Israel views with considerable alarm the transformation of the physician's calling envisioned by the bill in question, which would enable doctors to provide suicide medication to patients.

The bill under consideration reflects a dangerous trend away from the recognition of life's inherent sanctity and presents a stark challenge to our nation's social morals. Furthermore, the potential abuses of legalizing suicide have been well catalogued by a host of legal and medical observers, including the New York State Task Force on Life and the Law. We concur with the Task Force's observation that "as a society, we have better ways to give people greater control and relief from suffering than by making it easier for patients to commit suicide or to obtain a lethal injection."

We urge the New York State Legislature to reject any bill that legalizes suicide.

## INFERTILITY FUNDING



For each of the past 13 years, New York State has generously allocated funding to enable infertile couples to receive treatments that have helped them realize their life dream of having children. This is particularly meaningful in family-oriented communities such as the Orthodox Jewish constituency represented by Agudath Israel. However, the funding levels for this program have been declining; what began more than a decade ago as a \$10 million allocation dwindled last year to \$1.9 million. We urge the Governor and legislator to reverse that downward trend, and to significantly increase funding for this vital program in this year's budget.



## FUNDING FOR EMPLOYMENT TRAINING AND PLACEMENT

Employment training and placement is a particularly high priority social service need in the Orthodox Jewish community, where many of our most talented and responsible young men have spent their young years through early adulthood in the non-traditional learning environment of a yeshiva. Our own experience has shown that

when given proper training in a culturally sensitive fashion, these men go on to become highly productive breadwinners. Critical to the success of such training and placement initiatives is state funding, and we seek budgetary support in this important area.



## SPECIAL EDUCATION

The number of Jewish students attending special education schools or needing special education services in mainstream schools across the state continues to increase. At the same time, science based supports as well as educational programs that have helped many with special needs become productive citizens have increased as well. We are hopeful that with state support for the right specialized programs and services, more students with special needs will move out of the special education system into the regularly developing population.



# AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA

**AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA** is a 93-year-old national organization which represents Orthodox Jewish communities throughout the United States. Agudath Israel advocates on behalf of Jewish schools, social service and health care needs, religious liberty and an array of other pertinent issues. It also sponsors numerous programs that service the broader Jewish community.

In 2012, Agudath Israel sponsored the Siyum HaShas, which brought together 90,000 Jews to MetLife stadium while an additional 50,000 tuned in via broadcast in 120 locations worldwide.

The Siyum Hashas celebrates the completion of a 7.5 year, worldwide, Talmud study program.



AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA



TWELFTH SIYUM HASHAS

תשי"ג טבת י"ז תשרי טז תשעג

The **OFFICE OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS** and its staff of attorneys works to safeguard religious and civil rights of observant Jews through a variety of channels including a full-time Agudath Israel Washington Office.

- 10 State Offices
- Active government advocacy in more than 20 states
- Representation in 34 States

The **EDUCATION AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT** at Agudath Israel of America advocates on behalf of Orthodox Jewish schools. Through a series of workshops, webinars, seminars and newsletters, the division helps Jewish schools navigate the maze of applicable laws, regulations and governments sponsored programs. The organization serves as a liaison between the schools and the local, state and federal governments.

- Represents the interests of more than 750 elementary and secondary schools nationwide under the umbrella of the National Society for Hebrew Day Schools, including approximately 395 yeshivos located in New York State.
- Advocates on behalf of nearly 250,000 students nationwide, including approximately 143,000 students enrolled in New York State schools.
- Sent out a total of 88 informational memos to yeshiva principals and administrators in New York City and 42 memos across the state in the 2014-2015 school year.
- Arranges workshops and webinars relating to government regulations that pertain to nonpublic schools, as well as government programs for which they are eligible to apply
- Responds to numerous daily calls from principals and administrators, answering questions on a wide range of issues.



**PROJECT LEARN**, the special education division of Agudath Israel of America, advocates on behalf of children with special needs and assists parents who are dealing with the full range of the special education needs of their children. Project LEARN is also involved in special education legislation, activism, and advocacy.



Agudath Israel's **LEGAL SUPPORT SERVICES LLC** is a network of lawyers who volunteer their time and skills to assist with individual cases that meet the organization's criteria. These include custody battles between spouses of different levels of religious observance, immigration related problems, Sabbath and holiday observance issues, and zoning issues which affect Jewish institutions.

The **CONSTITUENT SERVICES DEPARTMENT** assisted 6,000 callers last year with a myriad of social services issues.

Agudath Israel of America's **COMMISSION ON SENIOR CITIZENS**

- Sponsors three senior citizens centers in Borough Park, Flatbush and Washington Heights.
- Offers 1,000 elderly senior citizens free, kosher hot lunches and a wide range of social services.





**COPE AND PROFESSIONAL CAREER SERVICES** (PCS), with offices in both New York and New Jersey, provide training, job readiness and career placement for young men and women.

- The New York office served more than 350 people
- More than 85% of COPE graduates find jobs in their field
- Junior Accounting Program: 115 students enrolled in 2015; over 2,000 total since inception
- CPA Track Program: more than 60 students enrolled in 2014; over 500 total since inception

**ADULT EDUCATION AND LITERACY SERVICES** provides assistance to hundreds of immigrants every year by offering English language courses, preparing participants for employment.

**SOUTHERN BROOKLYN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION** is committed to helping low and moderate-income residents obtain and maintain affordable housing. It also provides a broad spectrum of housing services to strengthen the viability and quality of life in Brooklyn neighborhoods.

- Serves 300 clients annually



**PIRCHEI AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA** is a national youth group program of Agudath Israel of America.

- 20,000 participants ranging from Pre-K – 8th grade.
- 10,000 children in New York State
- 115 branches nationwide



**BNOS AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA** is an afterschool youth program for Orthodox Jewish girls.

- Bnos 38 cities
- 125 branches
- 100 advisors
- 200 branch leaders
- 1,000 leaders
- 20,000 participants
- 300 Bnos 1 on 1 pairs



Agudath Israel's **CAMP DIVISION** provides a wholesome summer experience for thousands of children.

- 4 campuses in New York State which service 7 camps and 2,500 campers
- 5 campuses in the Midwest which service 9 camps and 1,700 campers





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