



# IN CONVERSATION WITH Rabbi Menachem Levine

*Rav of Kehillas Am Echad in  
San Jose, California*

### *Rabbi Levine, please tell us a bit about your background.*

I grew up in Miami Beach. My four grandparents were Polish Holocaust survivors. I attended the Rabbi Alexander S. Gross Hebrew Academy. After high school I studied in Yeshivas Ohr Yerushalayim and afterward I went to Yeshiva University; on graduating I went to Eretz Yisrael to learn in Mir Yerushalayim, where I learned *b'chavrusa* with Harav Nissan Kaplan. Upon my return to America I learned in Shaar HaTorah in Queens under Harav Zelig Epstein, *zt"l*. I married and entered *kollel* in Lakewood, where I was a *rosh chaburah*.

After the Lakewood years I started law school in the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, with approval from *Gedolei Yisrael*. I frequented the yeshivah there and became close with the *Roshei Yeshivah*, Harav Shmuel Kamenetsky, *shlita*, and his son Rav Shalom. In fact, I was able to learn two *sedarim* in addition to attending my law school classes.

### *Can you share an inspiring story or insight in connection with your rebbeim?*

When we lived in Philadelphia, many times I drove Harav Shmuel Kamenetsky to meetings or *simchos*, especially to his *talmidim's* children's weddings. When I asked him why he took so much time from his demanding schedule to attend a *talmid's* child's wedding — where he likely did not know the *chassan* at all — he explained that he had two reasons. The first was that since *talmidim* are like children, the *talmid's* child's

wedding is really a family *simchah*, and secondly, through his participation, his *talmidim* and their families will feel connected to him and know they can turn to him for *she'eilos* and guidance.

I try to emulate Rav Shmuel and share in the *simchos* of our *mispallelim*, and be available for their *she'eilos* and problems, despite the time and effort involved, since I really view them as family.

### *How did you get involved with kiruv?*

While in law school I noted that one-third of my class was Jewish. Assimilation was rampant, and I decided to act. I offered to learn *Pirkei Avos* with the three most popular boys in the class, which gradually drew in other young men as well. By the end of my first year there, I had around 150 students and professors attending a weekly lunch-and-learn *shiur*.

I also taught for Aish HaTorah in Philadelphia. I experienced more satisfaction from transmitting Torah than from studying law, although I had already passed the bar. I discussed my feelings with Rav Shmuel, who influenced me towards *Rabbanus* in view of my speaking ability.

### *How did you get to San Jose?*

I learned that there was a shul in San Jose that sought a Rav; they said they wanted a "Lakewood Rabbi with an Ivy League background." Penn is an Ivy League school, so I fit

the description!

San Jose is located in the Silicon Valley. Twenty percent of the U.S. economy derives from its high-tech industry, and some of the brightest and most influential Jews in the country reside there and work in the industry. Yet there was a spiritual holocaust going on there, including a 90-percent intermarriage rate. As a grandchild of Holocaust survivors I was especially sensitive to this tragic reality and wished to address it. In March 2007 I traveled there to apply for the position and was accepted.

### Please tell us about your shul.

Kehillas Am Echad was established around 1970. When I arrived, there were close to 30 member families; today there are around 85. We are very close to completing an *eruv*, which will attract even more young families. The level of learning has been raised. In the beginning, I was teaching *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*; today we learn *Mishnah Berurah* and I deliver an in-depth *Gemara shiur*.

Classes on various topics for men and women take place in shul. My wife lectures for the women on *Chumash* and *tefillah*. We had a series of 20 classes on Jewish history. On Shabbos we have an inspiring, slow *davening*, and I give a 30-minute *drashah*. Well-known *marbitzei Torah* and *Rabbanim* come out here to inspire us, such as Harav Hillel David, *shlita*, *kashrus* authority Rabbi Yosef Eisen and *kiruv* personality Rabbi Mordechai Becher.

All this was made possible because our members are *mevakshim*. They truly seek to grow in Torah and *ruchniyus*. *Frum* Yidden with a high-tech background have started to make inquiries about relocating here since the bar has been raised in the area through our *kehillah*. My focus is to create a *makom Torah* that will draw people in and influence those already here.

To that end, I constantly focus on ensuring my own growth as well as my family's growth in *ruchniyus*. In fact, I go daily to learn at the *kollel* in nearby Palo Alto.

### Do you have any significant memories from your years in San Jose?

There was a young man from a local Conservative house of worship who came into shul one day. I greeted him and he told me he wanted to see what an Orthodox shul was like. I spoke with him a while and gave him my email address so that he could stay in touch. Eventually he gave up the relationship with the non-religious girl he knew and in three months he became *shomer Shabbos*. He moved closer to the shul and

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started coming regularly. I had the *zechus* to be his *mesader kiddushin* and marry him off, and today he and his wife have several children and are a fine *Torah* family. At his *aufruf* I read, with his permission, one of his early emails about his fear of pursuing Orthodoxy!

Another time, on Purim night I noticed a girl leaving the nearby Conservative house of worship, said hello and suggested she visit our shul. A couple of months later, she actually did show up. We established a connection with her; she grew in *Yiddishkeit*, and I made a *shidduch* for her.

I used to say, “You can make a difference.” Experience has taught me to change that to: “You always make a difference!” In a place like Lakewood a *frum* Yid is one of thousands;

in a place like Silicon Valley where we are not many, there are numerous opportunities to impact on others.

The *eruv* is another interesting example of this phenomenon. Our *kehillah* was actually instrumental in having a California law changed in order to accommodate the *eruv*, which will be on a very high standard. While fund-raising for this project I contacted a gentleman from a traditional background who has secular children. I explained the concept of an *eruv* to him, but he did not understand why he should partner with us on this project. I told him that when his children drive on Shabbos and see the members of our congregation in their Shabbos finery, walking with their children, that reminds his children of Shabbos. The *eruv* will help everyone in the sense that it will attract more people to the community, thus making for a more vibrant *Yiddishkeit*. It made sense to him.

### How can those of us who are not Rabbanim or educators have a positive impact on others?

We need to feel an obligation to serve as ambassadors of Torah to others. Secular people often remark to me about how a *frum* individual had a positive or negative impact on them. During a trip to New York I met a Russian car-service driver who often drives *frum* Yidden; he told me that in the 33 years he has been living in New York no one ever made overtures about *Yiddishkeit* to him! Every person has potential — if not them, perhaps you can make an impact on their children. Invite someone to your Shabbos table, Purim *seudah* or to your *sukkah*. People are searching for meaning, and we have what to offer them. We need to believe in ourselves. You never know where you can make a difference! ■

Thank you, Rabbi Levine. We wish you much continued *hatzlachah* in your *avodas hakodesh*.