



# 8<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL PROJECT INSPIRE CONVENTION HIGHLIGHTS

## Jew in the Elevator- Project Inspire's 8th Annual Convention Creates Enduring Ripples of Inspiration

By Baila Klein

Each year, when I return from the Project Inspire Convention, I experience a similar sensation. It's hard to get back to the daily grind after the 'high' we've experienced. And perhaps it's better that way. Because Project Inspire isn't just about the temporary 'wow,' the effect of hearing so many profound messages, packaged in one incredible weekend.

Project Inspire is about absorbing these messages and life-altering examples, of learning from the regular men and women who got up on stage to share how a simple shalom, a warm hello and invitation, opened the door to so much more.

Project Inspire, a program of Aish HaTorah, founded by Rav Noach Weinberg zt"l, has come a long way since its humble beginnings nearly a decade ago. Today, under the direction of Founding Director Rabbi Chaim Sampson, Yossie Friedman, Rabbi Mordechai Tropp, Rabbi Yaakov Giniger, Rabbi Simcha Barnett and Rabbi Yoni Zakutinsky, it's a worldwide movement that trains, empowers, and activates the Torah observant community to reach out, inspiring others and ourselves.

The quality and breadth of the speakers, the caliber of the attendees, and the dedication of the Project Inspire team, pale in comparison to the intensity of their message.

For it's not about the stellar program, the delicious food, and beautiful milieu at the upscale Kalahari Resort in the Poconos. It's about the Jew in the elevator.

It's about Jews like Corey Gersten, a young, aspiring businessman who'd never quite met a religious Jew before. A couple of months ago, Corey was at a highly charged conference with prominent executives, trying to orchestrate a million dollar deal that ultimately imploded. Dejected and dispirited, Corey went downstairs to get some fresh air. As it happened, there was an energy conference on the ground floor of the same hotel, attended by Mr. Nachman Auerbach, an upstanding Yid and

CEO of his company.

Mr. Auerbach was not a professional kiruv worker, nor was he trained in outreach. As it 'happened,' though, he had recently attended the seventh annual Project Inspire convention. At the Motzoei Shabbos program, he witnessed the powerful story of a 'chance' encounter between Fernando, a high school student from San Diego, who was eager to learn more about his heritage, and Reuven Handelsman, a Brooklyn Yid who sent him to yeshiva. When mentor and mentee expressed how much their friendship transformed both their lives, Nachman was transfixed.

Fast forward to the encounter in the elevator a couple of months later.

"I noticed that the man in the elevator had a kippah, and said 'shalom,'" Corey recalled at the Friday night keynote session. What happened next was truly a classic 'Project Inspire' moment. Nachman and Corey spoke for a while, connecting as only two brothers can, in a completely alien environment. The longer they spoke, the more they realized that this 'chance' meeting was truly meant to be. Nachman invited Corey to his home for a Shabbos meal.

It was only a Shabbos meal, but it was the beginning of so much more. As Corey recalled, choked with emotion, "Nachman and his family opened their home -- and their hearts -- to me. I felt like I'd found a new family."

After several months, Nachman broached the idea of sending Corey to learn in Eretz Yisroel, all expenses paid. Corey was flabbergasted, Corey was

speechless, and Corey was incredibly grateful. He boarded a plane to Ben Gurion nine months ago, and is now learning and growing at Aish HaTorah. This is a credit not only to Nachman and his family, but to the star of last year's presentation, who set the example. As Nachman challenged the crowd at the keynote address, saying, "We have 1,500 people in this room. If only ten percent reach out and send even one person to yeshiva or seminary, we can save another



HaRav Hillel David שליט"א and Dr. Hershy Mendelsohn

150 young men or women and their future generations!"

Indeed, one can never tell the far-reaching effect of a genuine smile, of saying shalom and taking an interest in someone's life. As Rabbi Yaakov Salomon masterfully expressed in the film shown on Motzoei Shabbos, kiruv isn't just something the experts do. Kiruv has gone mainstream.

Rabbi Salomon interviewed random people in Boro Park about kiruv a couple of years ago, getting lackluster responses, shrugs, or blank looks. Sure, people agreed, it's nice to do kiruv, but it's not for me. Too busy, too self-conscious, no time, no energy...the excuses ran the gamut.

A couple of years later, same place, same video. Same question, with far different responses. Now the random people who were stopped were enthusiastic in their response. "Kiruv? Of course!" They were each involved in some way, either by learning with a partner, inviting guests for Shabbos, or simply saying hello to the mechanic in the body shop.

Kiruv is for regular people, like Dr. Leiby Weiss of Toronto, who inspired the crowd on Friday night, describing the impact of attending a Jinspire trip to Israel with his less affiliated brothers. Leiby, who has a thriving dental practice, partnered with the Village Shul of Toronto to create a learning program, which is now going strong, with over 120 weekly chavrusas! His wife and her friends created a similar highly successful program for women.

Today there are Project Inspire and Jinspire groups in Brooklyn, Queens, Flatbush, Monsey, New Jersey, Manhattan, Toronto, and many other locations across the tri-state area and beyond.

From the powerful introduction by Mr. Isaac Gross, Convention Chairman, a dedicated activist and lay leader, to the mesmerizing



Shlomo Simcha and the Zimra Choir



Alex Clare



Rav Gav Friedman

presentation by Rebbe Hill, in memory of his father, Mr. Steve Hill, who turned his life around at the age of sixty; from the surprise appearance of Alex Clare, an award-winning musician, today a ben Torah; to the closing keynote remarks of Dr. Stuart Hytman, Founding Partner and Chairman of the Board, the upscale weekend surpassed all expectations.



Rabbi Steve Burg, Dr. Stuart Hytman, HaRav Shmuel Baron שליט"א, and Rabbi Chaim Sampson (from left to right)

The weekend, attended by nearly 1,500 people, was graced with the presence of Rav Hillel David and his Rebbetzin. Rav Shmuel Baron, a special guest from Eretz Yisroel, addressed the crowd on Shabbos, while Rav Shalom Kamenetsky, Rosh Yeshiva of Philadelphia, honored us with his presence on Motzoei Shabbos, delivering a powerful keynote address.

Judging from the passion and commitment of the crowd, Project Inspire is a movement that has changed the trajectory of Torah Jewry, and our commitment to our lost brothers.



HaRav Shalom Kaminetsky שליט"א at the Project Inspire Convention

Rabbi Yitzchok Fanger, special guest speaker from Eretz Yisroel, whose mesmerizing presentation, "From the Jungles of India to Torah Life," related a haunting story told by Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein about a Holocaust survivor, tormented by guilt over causing his brother's death, who constantly asks himself, "Why didn't I wake up my brother?"

As Rabbi Shlomo Farhi thundered, during the closing session, repeating a famous quote from Rav Shach. "If one man, (Hitler,) can kill six million, one man can save six million. Our brothers are fast asleep. We are losing them to intermarriage at an alarming rate. What will we do when they ask us, in the World of Truth, 'Why didn't you wake up your brother?'"

"The inspiration that people gained from the weekend was palpable," Rabbi Sampson remarked. "It's incredible to see how many people are willing to turn their inspiration into action, to make a difference to our brothers and sisters, who are waiting for us to notice them."