

The Project Inspire Seventh Annual Convention -- It's All About Us!

By Malky Lowinger

It's Erev Shabbos at the Project Inspire Convention, and we enter a beautiful lobby with soaring ceilings. A lavish buffet is spread before us as musicians entertain us. After a quick check-in, we expect to meet our 1300+ fellow participants enjoying the vast culinary selection. But we underestimate them. Instead, they are already perusing the program and attending the workshops and events. It was a typical start to an awesome Shabbos, a weekend that will carry us on a journey of inspiration.

Welcome to the Project Inspire Convention, the ultimate Shabbos experience that offers the best in gashmiyus coupled with an overwhelming dose of ruchniyus. To the casual observer, it may have seemed that the people who checked out of the Crowne Plaza Hotel on Sunday afternoon are the very same people who registered at the front desk on Erev Shabbos. But we are not the same. We are inspired. We are empowered. And we are now 1300 Jews on a mission.

Project Inspire is dedicated to activating the Torah community to reach out to our fellow Jews to help stem the tide of assimilation.

By providing tools, opportunities, and training, Project Inspire encourages frum Jews to form a grassroots kiruv movement and help change the world. Armed with our warmth, caring, and ahavas yisroel, all of us can do outreach.

Dusk settles upon the city of Stamford, and the stirring melodies of Kabolos Shabbos and Maariv, led by Simcha Leiner and the Travelling Chassidim, set the tone for the entire event. A sense of majesty reigns as we welcome the Shabbos Queen in all her glory. We are an assortment of yidden from a wide variety of communities, but we are united in our desire to ignite the spark of inspiration.

The esteemed Rav Asher Weiss Shlita, joins us for Shabbos and speaks about the concept of Kol Yisroel Areivim. In his eloquent address, he tells the captivating story of his own father's close relationship with the Klausenberger

Rebbe during his harrowing years in a Nazi concentration camp and beyond. He speaks of the Rebbe's



HaRav Shmuel Kamenetsky Shlit'a at the Motzei Shabbos Keynote Presentation

unwavering commitment to uplifting every single Jew, no matter how downtrodden or dejected. He speaks of the meaning of true mesiras nefesh. This celebrated posek, Rosh Kollel, and mechaber seforim encourages us to embrace outreach and ahavas yisroel. The significance of that message coming from this Godol is not lost on any of us.

Concurrent sessions are a necessary component of a Convention of this size, but also the source of some agonizing decision making. With most of the Torah world's superstar presenters speaking this weekend, participants had some difficult choices to make. Rabbi Dovid Orlofsky, Rabbi Eytan Feiner, Rabbi Yitz Greenman, Rabbi Yosef Wallis, Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi, Mrs. Aviva Feiner, Rabbi Yom Tov Glazer, Rav Gav Friedman, Dr David Lieberman, Charlie Harary, are just some of the many outstanding speakers. New to the Convention this year is the brilliant and captivating Rabbi

Shlomo Farhi. Clearly, a Shabbos nap is out of the question this week.

In fact, we barely sleep at all. Sessions continue till the wee hours of the night, often becoming more thought provoking as the hours go by. After a beautiful Oneg Buffet and a heartwarming Tisch by the Travelling Chassidim, we follow Rabbi Shlomo, Rav Gav, and Charlie to the International Ballroom for a candid discussion on the challenges that children face in today's world. It may be close to 2:00 AM but that doesn't stop several hundred of us from participating in this lively discussion.

A beautiful morning tefillah is followed by a Gala Kiddush and a powerful keynote presentation by Rabbi Farhi on the special qualities of Rachel Imeinu. We are a huge crowd of 1300, but by now we are no longer strangers. We are sharing something special together



Dancing at Havdallah

this weekend, and we find ourselves smiling and nodding at each other in the lobby and hallways, all of us understanding that we are part of something big.

Our presenters this weekend are invariably amazing. They are all accomplished, warm, insightful, dramatic, and often delightfully funny. But in the end, they are not the true heroes of this Convention. The heroes are us, Am Yisroel, the regular people. We may not be kiruv professionals or outreach experts, but we have the power to create a Kiddush Hashem every single day.

David is one of our heroes.



Hadvallah

CONVENTION HIGHLIGHTS



Rabbi Yom Tov Glaser and the Traveling Chassidim Bringing Shabbos in with Ruach

David addresses the Convention on Friday night, telling us his remarkable story. With his rye humor and quick wit, he speaks of his personal journey that began when one person reached out to him at JFK airport. He quickly becomes the sensation of the weekend. A key element of his success, he tells us, is the enthusiastic encouragement of the Director of Project Inspire, Rabbi Chaim Sampson, who cheered him on as if he was an all-star champion.

Mrs. Berger, a Chassidic woman from New Square, is another hero. Determined to be mekarev others, she will let no obstacle get in her way. With endearing sincerity, she speaks of how she desperately wanted to attend a recent Aish Conference, but needed to find an unaffiliated partner to accompany her. She davened for hatzlacha, begging Hashem to help her fight His battle for the neshomos of klal yisroel. In the end, she was rewarded.

Dr. Stuart Hytman, Louis Mayberg and Nachman Auerbach are heroes. They are three successful business people, each of whom was blessed to find his way to a life of Torah and mitzvos. They may have achieved personal hatzlacha, but they aren't

content to rest on their laurels. All three have decided to 'give back' to the Jewish community and all are actively involved in various kiruv programs and initiatives. What's more, they are more than happy to share their expertise with us during this Shabbos.

Fernando is a hero. We meet 17 year old Fernando during the Motzei Shabbos Keynote Session. He lives in Mexico but attends Hebrew School in San Diego, which means he must cross the border and travel three hours each day so he can learn Torah. Fernando dreams of studying in Eretz Yisroel one day, and Project Inspire will be making



Rabbi Chaim Sampson Presenting Dr. Stuart Hytman with an Award

his dream come true. Rabbi Yaakov Salomon, Senior Lecturer at Project Inspire, invites Fernando to the stage, surprising him with the incredible news that he has been accepted to Aish HaTorah's Gesher program next year. His

benefactor is Reuven Handlesman, who met Fernando on a recent Project Inspire trip to be mechazek the San Diego community. Reuven was the recipient of a similar gift just a decade ago and decided it was time to pass on the torch to someone else.

Geri is also a hero. She is embarking on her own journey, and is fortunate to have a strong support system – a group of women who call themselves Queens Inspire. It's not that she is looking to become religious, but she somehow finds herself drawn to attend their events in spite of herself. "It's not the speeches," she explains, "or the events or even the challah baking. It isn't any of that. It's something about these women. I just want to be with them."

"It is a weekend of 'Wow,'" observes Rabbi Salomon. But he also cautions us to ensure that it will be transformed into a lifetime of 'Now!'. The inspiration is there, but it must be channeled into action. A Project Inspire Convention is not a spectator sport. As much as we enjoy sitting back and absorbing the inspiration, there is much work to be done. The challenge is upon us.

Rabbi Sampson tells us of the power that one woman, Sara Schenirer, had. And how her tears of caring were able to impact Klal Yisroel profoundly. "Each one of us," he said, "has the same power, if we but care."

HaRav Shmuel Kamenetsky, Shlita, Rosh Yeshivas Philadelphia, joins the Motzei Shabbos Grand Presentation and Keynote Session. "People have a great need for friendship," he says. "We just have to open our hearts." He, too, is inspired by Project Inspire. "The Ribono shel

Olam," he says, "is proud of your accomplishments!"

At the Sunday Keynote Session, Dr. Hytman expresses a call to arms. "All these great speakers are inspiring us to use our unique talents to inspire other yidden. It starts here. It starts tomorrow. Let us all walk out of here not just inspired, but also empowered!"

And if we still don't get it,



HaRav Asher Weiss Shlit" a with R' Pinny Borenstein

Rabbi Orlofsky makes his message resoundingly clear. "There is no stronger, more dedicated group in klal yisroel than the people in this room right now. You have the koach to change people's lives and to change the course of history. You are so close to changing the world. It's time to wake up!"

After all is said and done, it really is all about us.



Reuven Handlesman Presenting Fernando with His Acceptance to Yeshiva in Yerushalyim