

The Admor of Holmin in the United States., Rabbi Sholom Yehudah Gross interviewed by A. Artzi

- 1) **The luxuries and ostentationess
threatening the orthodox
community.**
- 2) **The battles on Kashrus
and Shechita.**
- 3) **The 180 Seforim with over
a half million copies that
he wrote on these issues.**

The Warrior

The battles that the Rav of Holmin leads is mostly fought through his Seforim. He is perhaps one of the most prolific writers in the world. Until now, he has published 180 books which discuss Halacha and inspiration and discourses on various topics. Over 60,000 copies are made of each Sefer 150,000 copies were printed of "Madrich LaKashrus" and it had widespread distribution. All these books have one underlying principle - they are distributed free! That is how these Seforim can be found in Batei Midrashim and in private homes in all parts of the world. So far, over a half million Seforim were printed.

Where the money came from to distribute these books is a story all on its own. The Rebbe says: "The holy Tzaddikim say that the test to ascertain whether a Sefer is necessary or not is in "Siyata Dishmaya" that one has in printing it. I must tell you that more than once it has happened that I had almost finished preparing a Sefer and someone I had never met before came to me with a large donation to enable me to print the Sefer. The Jews feel the need to spread words of rebuke and direction in this confusing world and they feel a need to be inspired to strengthen themselves and get them to change their ways. I also see and hear people's reactions to my writings on luxuries and other issues."

"For all the things that need correcting in the United States, in Israel there is also much to be done in this field. It would be proper to establish committees in all the various religious sectors to fight against materialism which has no limit. This change would greatly aid in improving the atmosphere. If someone would assume the leadership of this campaign, not only would much money be saved but many potential tragedies would be averted."

The Rav of Holmin is well known in the United States as fighter for reforming laxities in the orthodox community. He fought tremendous battles in the field of Kashrus. He indicated basic flaws that were corrected even though there were many who opposed. Today he is in Eretz Yisroel in honor of a family celebration. The last issue he was involved in,

was the changes required in the way the orthodox community plans its weddings and other family celebrations.

To fight a personal battle against the ostentatious weddings in America is like an exercise in futility... who is willing to hear uninvited advice on the size of weddings and other details?

You have no idea how low the Jewish community has fallen and I am referring to the ultra-orthodox community. There is a sense of an open, gaping cavern; an overwhelming passion for spending and a craving for material goods that you would not believe. This leads to terrible tragedies. Men have had heart attacks after arranging a wedding. Men get married and instead of being joyful, they are burdened with impossible and insurmountable piles of debts. Men borrow money with high interest and enter a dizzying cycle of borrowing to repay others...

We have always had celebrations. Is there some new development in this topic?

The new development is the unprecedented race after luxuries. I, personally, have helped make Sholom Bayis in Jewish households. In the past year, 90 families have had problems most of which, I can honestly say, were based on the lust for luxuries which is never-ending. It is like pouring water into a bottomless barrel. This, of course, is not the only problem. Another common problem was parental interference, which I also would like to warn about. Not long ago, I

listed to an important Rav the three types of people who will not rise from Gehenom. Among them is the person who swears falsely in Hashem's Name and the person who causes conflict between a man and his wife. The word, "causes conflict" does not only refer to the person who intentionally intends to cause family conflicts but also to the person with the best intentions. Like the father who says to his daughter that her husband, his son-in-law, should behave just a little better. This father is causing conflict between man and wife. Even these slight comments... I said to this Rav, "Observe what this person is compared to. To a person who swears falsely using Hashem's name. This is a terrible act that every Jew fears to commit."

The Rav answered me, " You have enlightened me. Now I see that everything I wanted from my son-in-law was foolish. Suddenly I understood this. If I would have continued my pestering,, all the Mitzvos I have done would not have helped me and I would stay in Gehenom with those who descend there and do not ascend.

This phenomenon has always existed, even before the problem of luxuries...

Yes, the problem of luxuries invades every issue. I know a man who rented an apartment for \$700 a month. This was until a friend of his wife's rented an apartment for \$1,500 a month. This man could not explain to his wife that he was less "successful" than someone else so he was forced to rent an apartment for

\$1,500. as well. A year later, this friend bought an apartment for an enormous sum, perhaps a quarter of a million dollars. A ground floor apartment like this can cost \$150,000.

It sounds even high by E. Israeli standards.

The prices are sky rocketing.

More than inflation?

Much higher than inflation. It rises steadily. Lately the prices have remained steady but it still is so expensive.

But the custom in America is to rent apartments. This method was always praised for being the cheapest for those marrying off children.

Lately, this custom has also fallen under the influence of the competition and chasing of luxuries. Not only is one obligated, in some circles, to buy an apartment, but also the apartment has to be brand new and not only that, but the Choson and Kalla themselves, ironically, must plan out the apartment. It didn't seem possible that anybody else should plan out their apartment. Should the contractor tell them where the living room and the kitchen should be? It would be absurd. This man who bought this apartment is a good person...

But?

He didn't have a choice. His wife's absorption with the competition didn't leave any other option open. He

borrowed money from everybody he knew and bought a house.

Now he owns a lovely home...

And with how much heartache. Not long ago, Rav Wachtfogel of Lakewood came to see me. We spoke a long time and he literally cried.

If so, how is it possible to get married?, How many people have a quarter of a million dollars to spend on an apartment for every child?

The problem of the apartment is not the worst problem. The apartment lasts and is worth money. What is worse than this is the amount spent on the wedding itself. You cannot imagine how the situation is. People cannot meet these obligations.

A neighbor of mine, a Jew from Hungary, a man of moderate means, lives frugally. He never buys himself anything. That is his nature. He invited me to his child's wedding. We are neighbors, so I went. The wedding was in Flushing, in an elaborate hall built in the shape of an airplane. I figured that such a wedding must cost 70-80 thousand dollars. Later, he told me that it cost him 90 thousand dollars.

Ninety thousand dollars? Could there be such a thing? It sound like madness!

The problem is that the wedding is only the beginning. Afterwards, there are Sheva Brochos that end up costing thousands of dollars, the man told me.

What can you get for \$90,000?

It costs 45-50 dollars a couple. That is in middle of the week. For Shabbos Sheva Brochos, obviously, it costs much more and when you must invite the whole family from both sides... I asked him, "How can you, a person who never wastes money, ever dream to spend \$90,000 on a wedding which is like throwing your money into the ocean?"

"I'll tell you," he answered, "When this son was Bar Mitzvah, I didn't even make a Seudah (meal) just like my father didn't make me. When he was engaged to a Kallah from a rich community and the topic of the location for the wedding came up, I mentioned a few halls in Boro Park.

The Kallah made a one-time announcement, "If so, there will be no wedding." What should I do? Break the engagement? I didn't have much money so I borrowed \$50,000. "This is lost money". It isn't a small thing to take so much money and throw it away. A few days after the wedding, a "Hatzala" ambulance came to take his wife to the hospital.

The troubles don't end at the wedding, they continue afterwards. The luxuries make people crazy. The women wear \$700 dresses. Why? Ribbono Shel Olam, why?

This has unpleasant repercussions. There are stories of stealing clothing. One sin leads to another, even until theft. If this is an obligation and one person does

not have it, he steals it. This is the affect of luxuries, of the passion and competition among people who are busy amassing more and more wealth and then waste it for no good reason.

It sounds almost like the weather. You can talk about it but there is nothing you can do to change it.

That is totally inaccurate. There are things that can be done and they are being done. Not long ago, I published an essay against this. You have no idea how many reactions I received. From private people, public figures, Rabbonim, Roshei Yeshivos... Everyone thought that my words were directed to them.

What happened?

There were Rabbonim and Admorim who established Takanos (regulations). The Admor of Bobov instituted some very rigid Takanos.

This lady who felt that she must get married in Flushing, in the hall shaped like an airplane will not be very affected by the Takanos of Bobov.

We didn't get to this lady yet. There are many other people who have to be worked on first. Even among people out of town the problem is very great. Everywhere the waste of money is terrible. A wedding costs a fortune.

Does the Takana of the Admor of Bobov have any effect on the community as a whole?

Surely; we are talking about a community of a thousand families who will marry into another thousand families.

If they do not marry within their sect...

Yes, that happens many times. The influence is there and it is felt.

In Eretz Yisroel we are very far from all this in spite of all the complaints about what happens here. It seems like a nightmare. There are some halls here who are not bent on profiting and they sell a portion for only \$6.00.

Boruch Hashem, I married off a few children over the years. All of them married inhabitants of Eretz Yisroel from simple homes. It was still cheaper for me to make the wedding there than to make a wedding in America.

How much does it cost to marry off a child in America?

At least \$100,000 if you are lucky. In other instances, it costs much more. The sky is the limit. I told you only a few stories but they are not exceptional.

In Boro Park, how much does a portion cost?

\$50.00 a couple.

This is the cheapest?

There are cheaper, perhaps \$37.00.

Almost free...

You laugh but it is very sad.

Why should the prices be so high, the food itself is quite cheap.

The owners of the halls collect that sum. In Bobov, the Takanos are very strict. You cannot invite more than ten men to a Bar Mitzva, a Kallah's jewelry cannot cost more than \$3,000...

It sounds quite conservative...

It is conservative, especially against the background of the luxuries being enjoyed in the United States. The wedding is also limited as to the amount of guests.

"Public campaigns aid. It is a fact that there was a time that many people in America were eating non-kosher and forbidden foods out of ignorance. Today, this would not happen."

The largest sect is Satmar...

They also enacted Takanos. But, if a person wishes to sidestep the regulations, there are no means of forcing him to comply. There are those who find a way to break the rules and still seem as if they are obeying.

Surely just the fact that there are Takanos has an influence on the atmosphere.

Certainly, it has a great influence.

If Satmar is spurred to take action then it is possible to do something...

Of course. Those who outsmart the Takanos are not a majority. Most people obey them and that is the main thing, a willingness to comply.

What is happening in the Litvishe community?

Like what is happening in other communities. The Bochurei Yeshiva who are getting married mostly want to learn but the girls are not sufficiently geared toward this and that is the root of the problem. They do not have enough specialized education against that sort of thing. It would be worthwhile, very worthwhile, to correct this situation. Obviously what is happening to the girls has an affect on the community as a whole...

The situation in Eretz Yisroel is much better...

Certainly, it does not have the terrible things that exist in America, like the prices of every step of the wedding.

Besides this, a person in Eretz Yisroel who cannot afford to marry off his child usually travels to Europe or the United States. What should a Jew in America do? Where should he travel?

To my great sorrow, the source of trouble is from the heads of the community. I always directly say that the fault lies with the large weddings made by Rabbonim. They must set the example and if the example set is of large, elaborate weddings, should we be surprised when there are those who stubbornly imitate them? At this opportunity, I turn with a plea to all the Rabbonim and Admorim: Please, even if the situation warrants it and the Chassidim are interested and the public is invited, the very nature of the wedding is to be large. Concede on having a large wedding (and certainly an elaborate one), it is for the good of Am Yisroel. The Bobover Rebbe is marrying off a grandchild and there will be only 50 people at the meal. Not more! The wedding will be at Khal Chassidim which is barely big enough for a Melave Malka. At the Bar Mitzva he arranged for his grandson, there were not more than 10 people there and this was before the Takanos... This is a method of showing responsibility to the public and for the outcome of ones actions.

"In Williamsburg, 80% of the people refrain from eating meat in order not to transgress eating non-kosher food."

If so, why the great outcry? The situation, in essence, is quite good. Bobov and Satmar institute

Takanos, maybe other places too. The situation sounds ideal.

The problem is that the Takanos began only recently, when the issue was publicized.

This kind of thing does not have to be publicized. When one is forced to arrange a wedding for \$100,000 there is an awareness. Which head of a community would not be made aware when the public is forced to attend such insane affairs like these?

100,000 is not common. This neighbor of mine was forced to do it because of the demands of the Kallah. Other people spend less but it is still too much.

\$50,000 is nothing. It is not enough to raise a loud, bitter outcry and all the possible Takanos. It is simply a slaughtering of men whose sins were that they wanted to arrange weddings for their children.

Thus there was outcry and therefore it fell on listening ears.

If it is so profitable, every person should open a wedding hall. Why should a person get involved in any other business?

A wedding hall is profitable but that is not the most expensive thing. The expense includes more than just the real expenses, it includes the ostentationess displays and the luxuries which are so expensive.

People feel obligated to chase after the latest craze, the largest variety of food and showiness.

How much does food cost?

The owners of the halls know how to earn money very well. They charge for every little thing and people are forced to pay.

Instead of enacting Takanos, we should open halls that are attractive and reasonably priced.

That also depends on how the heads of the community act. They are the ones who influence the whole community. For the imminent wedding that I am arranging, I told my Mechutonim (the Admor of Spinka in Yerushalayim) that I do not want them to buy a diamond ring for my daughter. An imitation diamond is good enough. It is enough that they have to spend so much for an apartment... I understand that a new family needs some furniture and some electrical appliances but a diamond ring is not commanded by the Torah. It is not that necessary and one can manage very well without it. Also, the average person cannot tell the difference between a genuine diamond and an imitation so for the public eye, an imitation is good enough. There is no need to waste money on a real diamond. The Kiddushin are valid without it. What is important is that the Choson should be a genuine diamond. If someone would like to spend more money, he can give it to the young couple that the Choson can sit and learn and not to waste it on a

diamond that no one would know whether it is real or not.

The Kallah agreed to this?

This you should ask the Mechuton. The Kallah went and chose a ring with an imitation diamond. It cost about \$70 and everyone praised the beautiful diamond. It did not dawn on anybody that it was an imitation. Tell me, is there a need to spend so much money on a real diamond and to saddle the Mechutonim with another loan?

In Eretz Yisroel too, you feel the rising prices from \$6 a portion to \$15, \$20 or even \$30...

It is almost like in America. A couple costs \$45, cold cash. In my opinion, it is the main job of the press, instead of involving themselves in politics, they should educate the public against ostentatious behavior. It would be more worthwhile and more honorable. They would have a major impact and they would be involved in a true crusade. Not long ago, I led an outcry against these extravagant weddings made by private individuals and by Rabbonim. Many Rabbonim signed it. There was a strict Cherem (ban) against this sort of thing and I must say that it had a great influence. About 40,000 flyers were distributed in the streets of the United States and it seems to me that every penny we invested in it was worthwhile. Also the Jewish newspapers helped a bit.

"In the past year, I helped 90 families with 'Shalom Bayis'. Most of the problems were revolving on the desire for materialism; a keg without a bottom."

Some people say that there weren't these kind of weddings in their days because people simply did not have the money...

And you think today people have money? See how many Jews had heart attacks after the expensive wedding they arranged... Some Jews are forced or they feel forced to engage in degrading work in order to marry off their children. You read horrible things. Every person feels obligated to show himself as a rich man and make an expensive wedding and when there is no money, they try to obtain it in a thousand and one different ways. Not all of which are honorable. I do not want to elaborate on this. I am not saying this on the basis of some secret knowledge but rather on what I read in the newspaper. It is enough to read and hear to understand the gravity of the situation.

Nu, has not the time arrive to form an international organization against this wasteful spending?

This week I was at the Belzer Rebbe who also enacted strict Takanos for his Chassidim. One of them was that no Belzer young man should purchase a hat

right after his Bar Mitzva but should rather wait until he is age 15. Until then, he should wear a 'Chassidische Kest' (cap).

From the look of things, it seems that the weddings are made according to the economic status of the community. Every person wishes to show his riches and generosity.

Generosity? Yes, generosity? You could show generosity to the person who asks you for charity. Not by throwing it into the bonfire of desires which has no limit nor logic.

Inhabitants of Eretz Yisroel, 'shnorr' about 5 million dollars in various forms from the United States. That influences what happens here and that, too, is thrown into the bonfire of desires.

I am more familiar with the situation in the United States, less so with that of Eretz Yisroel. I know what the results are in America. From where do we have the robberies...? If someone needs an apartment worth a quarter of a million dollars and a wedding of a hundred thousand dollars and all the other expenses like dressing the family and the presents... what should a man do and not sin?.

An average person must work three hundred years in order to purchase an apartment.

If he has to marry off seven daughters, it is a story of this craziness multiplied by seven. After the wedding, the expenses are not finished. If the standard

requires one to spend so much money on the wedding, it comes as no surprise that this entails more demands after the wedding. People want expensive clothing... It is hard to stem this wild flow of desire for materialism. There are those who wear a new suit of clothing every day. This craziness has no limit so the other desires like the airplane in Flushing, arise. A person whose wife is stubborn in her unlimited wasting of money on her wardrobe read the essay that I publicized against luxuries and pleaded: "Write more and more on this topic. Maybe that will somewhat stop this craziness that has grabbed people. Maybe when the women will see this mass opposition, they will reconsider."

How much does it cost for an average family to manage?

An apartment costs hundreds of thousands of dollars a month, the minimum. The food is not cheap either, even though the inflation is lower but, I repeat, this is not the problem. It is not the low standard but the high demands. People find it hard to perceive the tragic consequences of their actions.

There are wedding expenses besides the actual meal...

A photographer charges \$1,500.

\$1,500 for an evening? That is highway robbery!

"A tragedy has occurred in our community. An unprecedented desire and yearning for luxuries."

All the photographers united and decided to amass millions...

There are those in general opposed to photographers I think that in Skver they do not hire a photographer. They have very strict Takanos. Their weddings are very inexpensive. The meal itself costs only \$6 a portion. Not more. The large community of Skver all makes their weddings in this form. If only all the sects would organize and make their weddings this simply. It would really be Pikuach Nefesh. Otherwise, it is a problem. Simple people cannot marry, only rich ones. One who is not rich cannot marry and cannot be assured of a reasonable life after the wedding.

What are the average expenses of a family?

Very high and getting higher.

If a garment costs \$700, how does one exist, even if you do not buy a new garment every week and even if you wear the same garment two days in a row?

Not every garment costs \$700, there are those that cost \$300, \$200 and \$100.

There are those E. Israelis who travel to America for bargains on clothing.

A major article of clothing cannot be obtained cheaply. There is no such thing today. Clothing for a wedding is very expensive. A wedding gown costs \$1,000-\$1,500, another major wedding expense. We should raise an outcry against this before it is too late. People are being asked to pay enormous sums and they pay. For the wedding I made last week, we rented a gown and even that, to my distress, cost \$500. Most people buy and that is a needless expense. It has no worth and no lasting value. This wedding was rather inexpensive without comparing it to what goes on in America. Yerushalayim, it seems, is cheaper than other places in Eretz Yisroel and that too, is something. I, myself, had wanted a small wedding of 50 people maximum. There is no need for more than that. The problem is, that in order to do that, you need Takanos. Otherwise, it is hard to do and to be the only individual doing that which seems strange and embarrasses the Choson and Kallah. That, no one wishes to do. If the Bais Din would establish strict Takanos, it would be easier because it would become the local custom and would cause no embarrassment to those who do this.

"Public campaigns help. It is a fact that there was a time that many in the United States ate forbidden foods out of

ignorance. Today, that would not happen."

You were involved in other issues, the war on Kashrus also caused you to take this trip...

"Boruch Hashem. This is proof that when you admonish, you see results. The Mitzva of Tochacha (admonishing) is still active. Today, a large portion of the honorable Satmar community, after hearing the possible tragedies, totally stopped eating meat. This is in order not to transgress eating forbidden foods. In Williamsburg, which is mostly Satmar, 80% stopped eating meat and many important corrections were made in this field. At the time, people out of lack of information and lack of organization ate non-kosher and forbidden foods but today it would not happen."

In what aspect for example?

At the time, there were Shochtim who did not know how to slaughter. They could not prepare a slaughtering knife properly and if a Rav corrected them, they were insulted to the core of their souls. They would retort with the phrase, "I have been a Shochet for thirty years..." What is bothering this Shochet is that he has been doing a job for thirty years and he does not know how to Shecht and he is feeding the Jewish community non-kosher foods. Today, this is all more unlikely to happen. I know of Hechshers that were removed from meat processing plants.

When it was applicable, there was a campaign on the topic of Nikur (deveining).

Yes, there was a strong campaign. It became known that the Nikur was being done improperly. Eating forbidden veins and fats is one of the most serious transgressions. People transgressed because there was no awareness, even of the Halachos by the Shochtim who were slaughtering in Europe and the Menakrim (deveiners) did not know the law and when you do not know the Halacha, it is possible to transgress. Again, another proof that when there is a protest, it helps.

It is sometimes hard to protest. Surely not every-one agrees with this...

Of course not and I do not say that all the reactions were, 'thank you very much'. Boruch Hashem, after the storm, there were corrections made in this issue. What was already ruined cannot be corrected retroactively. More than just the transgression is the issue of the desensitizing of the heart. Eating forbidden foods desensitizes the heart's spirituality.

You also led a campaign against expensive Din Torahs (law suit in a Jewish court).

You have no idea how far this has gone. Someone recently came to me and told me about an existing Din Torah. It was held in front of five Rabbonim and cost \$5,300 for one hour! Not more and not less. I figured, the number five thousand is clear, one thousand per

Rav but why the three hundred? I figured that this must be payment for the bother of summoning the Rabbonim, you can understand what goes on here...

If a Din Torah costs a thousand dollars, you can already arrange expensive weddings in Flushing.

(laugh) Yes, yes. There is an economic basis for this. It is to our shame that this base makes a recognizable impression.

The Rabbanus turns out to be a lucrative profession.

There are of course other Rabbis that do everything 'L'Shem Shomayim' (for the sake of heaven) but there are others involved in 'Shalom Bayis' who also take a thousand dollars an hour in order to hear all the foolishness when most of the time there is nothing to any of it and they want to receive a reward because maybe it prevented them from getting involved in more of this foolishness when it was possible to tell them in a short amount of time, not to do it anymore. Even in the house, when they earn high fees for making peace in the home, not always is this an incentive to help 'Sholom Bayis', sometimes it is the opposite.

How do you get out of this?

You sidestep the issue. It is possible to do it, again, by Takanos and by consultation with Rabbonim with 'Yiras Shomayim' (fear of heaven) who do not work for the profit motive and who do not work like the lawyers

who want more profit and therefore would rejoice if there would be more conflict and more court cases.

The campaign for 'Chinuch' in the 'Chadorim' is blossoming.

Sometimes the 'Chinuch' (education) does not help when the parents are not behaving properly and are full of forbidden foods and dishonesty. It is said in the name of Rabbi Chaim of Kosov, he began the Vizhnitz dynasty, that sometimes the sons of important and great men went on a bad way because their fathers profited from money obtained illegally. This too should be stopped. Surely if all the communities would accept Takanos, much good can be done.

