

Publication: Hamodia  
Date: 29.05.19

ANTWERP

## 250 Chief Rabbis, Dayanim and Rabbanim Meet in Antwerp

RABBI CHAIM BURMAN,

AMSTERDAM

The recent 31st bi-annual Convention of European Rabbis took place in the Hilton Hotel, Antwerp with an unprecedented number of attendees.

Of the 600 plus delegates, about 250 were Rabbanim, Dayanim and Chief Rabbis of European communities. Many influential community lay leaders also attended. The three-day conference brought together Rabbinic leaders and educators to discuss political, social and technological developments; articulate policy decisions; undergo training from experts and share ideas with colleagues who grapple with similar challenges in their own local contexts.

There was a constant buzz of movement and discussion as Rabbinic transitioned between informative, often parallel, training sessions; focus-groups; panel discussions and press conferences.

No space was wasted, with the walls of the coffee room lined with manned stands from companies advertising services that Rabbanim might find useful for their communities, such as synagogue architectural design; *shidduch* databases for older singles; and even groundbreaking opportunities for digital Torah learning.

The opening day began with addresses by the two Chief Rabbis of Israel, the Rishon LeTzion Harav Yitzchak Yosef, *shlitza*, and the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Harav David Lau, *shlitza*, both giving their words of support to Europe's Jewish communities.

*Shivrim* on topical issues were presented by outstanding figures including Harav David Cohen, *Rosh Yeshiva* of Chevron, and Harav Asher Weiss, *Gaon Darchei Hovavah*, among others. These discussions explored central contemporary topics such as conversion; the *kashrus* status of lab-grown meat; and medical ethics and *halachah*.

Dayan Menachem Gelles of the London Beth Din offered an open Q&A forum for Rabbinic to present dilemmas that faced them, and an exclusive training session was held for Rabbanim of the United Synagogue. U.K. Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis addressed perspectives of Rabbinic leadership, while a session dedicated to maximising meaningful Jewish engagements for women was run by Mrs. Lori Palastnik, Founding Director of Momentum.

Discussions on European political and social developments took place, focussing on the alarming centralisation of Far-Right views in

European political discourse; contemporary pedagogical challenges; increasingly invasive governmental legislation regarding school curricula and building, among other issues. Panels included Rabbanim alongside influential political figures such as Mr. Markus Grubel, a member of the German Parliament and German Federal Commissioner for Religious Freedom; Ms. Katharina von Schnurbein, Special Coordinator for Combating Antisemitism for the European Commission and Eilan S. Carr, United States Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, who spoke about how bans on religious slaughter were tantamount to the "forced expulsion" of the Jewish community. Also present to inform discussions on practical issues were a number of expert doctors and professors of medicine, technology and sociology.

An edition of *Seridim*, the halachic journal of the CER, was published especially for the conference and deals with many topical issues such as communal events in Europe, *kashrus* and *hirus rechokim*. Although the sessions and deliberations continued until well after midnight, the mornings started early with a *Daf Yomi shiur* before *Shacharis*.

*Hamodia* interviewed Rabbi and educators from across Europe, asking for their impressions of the CER, and how it has benefited them.

**RABBI YITZCHOK LOEWENTHAL – RABBI OF MACHZIKEI HADAS AND DIRECTOR OF CHABAD, COPENHAGEN**

The sessions are informative and I find the networking aspect of the conference particularly useful. Rabbanim can identify experts in specific fields whom they can call upon for advice.

There's a lot to learn from these speakers, not only from their content, but also regarding the kind of language and tone we use to respond to contemporary questions.

The conference provides Rabbanim with the tools and confidence to deal robustly with sensitive issues. Of course, every community is different, with its own particular challenges, but still we share a lot of overarching similarities.

**RABBI SHMUEL KATZ – MEMBER OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE OF CER, RABBI OF YESHUAS YISROEL CONGREGATION, AMSTERDAM AND SECRETARY OF THE AMSTERDAM BETH DIN**  
There's a feeling that you can



The Rabbanim hearing a shiur from Rabbi Asher Weiss

contribute something to address some of the major problems that European Jewry is facing. The standing committee meets to discuss international concerns and articulate policy decisions, which are communicated to the individual Rabbanim.

The conference has a spirit of friendship and comradeship. Often Rabbanim work alone but here we feel part of an international community of Rabbinic. That energises us to work towards shared goals.

**RABBI SHIMON KUTNOSKY, RABBI AND CHAIRMAN OF JERMALA, LATVIA**

I run a small community of under 100 members and I am quite alone in my job. Yet, when I come to the CER I realise that I am part of something bigger. That gives me support and encouragement and helps me to re-appreciate the importance of what I am doing. I particularly gain from the smaller focus-groups for starting Rabbanim and the opportunity to consult senior Rabbinic authorities on communal issues. There's a sense of unity since Rabbanim from across the spectrum of *Klal Yisrael* are here.

**RABBI ALFONSO ARBIV – CHIEF RABBI OF MILAN**

Just the opportunity for Rabbanim to come together and dedicate time to learning is so important. We hear Torah from great *taimidei chachamim* and get a *chelek* in our own learning. The conference also plays the vital role of establishing clear and shared standards and policies in central issues for the European *kehillah*, such as conversion. Rabbinic need to ensure that they are offering clear and consistent answers to big questions like these. The conference helps people to be on the same page with these issues.

**REB ELIEZER NOY – DIRECTOR FOR MORASHA GERMANY, A KIRUV ORGANISATION THAT FOCUSES ON BUILDING JEWISH IDENTITY THROUGH SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING FOR STUDENTS AND YOUNG PROFESSIONALS**

It's great to hear the sessions from this calibre of speakers.

The organisations advertising services are very useful for me. For example, there is an organisation here that offers guidance to young Jewish professionals in

navigating *shidduchim*. I know a number of young Germans who have become more connected with their Judaism and start looking to get married and set up a Jewish home. Then they get stuck. They feel like they already know all the Jewish-German singles and if they haven't found their match there, they start to give up. These organisations have compiled databases of Jewish singles across borders and specialise in making *shidduch* suggestions. That's a vital tool for me.

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