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Women to Know:

Giving our Community a Voice

By Chaya Silber

A Chat with Rivkie Feiner, CEO of Universal Communications Network, and one of the select female 'askanim' in our Community

Like most Monsey residents, Rivkie heard about the Motzei Shabbos Chanukah stabbing just moments after it happened. Well aware that the media would soon descend on the scene in order to build a sensational story, she knew that she was needed on the scene to filter unsubstantiated statements. In the wake of a crisis, responding to the media can be a dangerous game with far-reaching repercussions.

“I was, frankly, afraid to drive there, because at the time the perpetrator was still on the loose,” Rivkie recalled. “And then I got a phone call from Michael Cohen, the Eastern Director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, who planned to drive to Monsey and visit the shul. He offered to pick me up and we drove there.

“As soon as we pulled up near the crime scene, we met State Senator David Carlucci, whom I had met many times. As soon as I began speaking with him, all the cameras from the news agencies - CNN, CBS- converged on us and began recording our conversation. I expressed that the stabbings have transformed our community and taken away our innocence and I reinforced the need for more security, a stronger police presence for his constituents and the importance of his advocacy in Albany to be able to effect this change in current government policy. I am always careful to speak to politicians in a respectful and firm yet non-confrontational manner, as I am well aware that far more can be achieved with a discreet approach. Following that conversation, a number of reporters asked if they could speak to me to hear my thoughts as a local resident. That interview was subsequently recorded and replayed by numerous media outlets, and has gone as far as Europe and Israel.” In the ensuing days, says Rivkie, there have been numerous high profile events featuring prominent politicians, all of whom have assured the Monsey community that they are committed to ensuring its security.

On Monday afternoon, Congressman Elliot Engel and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand joined other prominent officials, including Ramapo Police Chief Brad Wiedel, at a meeting at the Ramapo

Town Hall. Also that day, Attorney General Letitia James met with Rockland leadership and other Jewish leaders from across NYS at JCC Rockland. Later in the evening, a standing-room-only crowd of 700 crowded into the JCC building in West Nyack, where Senator Chuck Schumer; Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul; Mark Wilf, Chair of the JFNA Board of Trustees; Evan Bernstein, the NY/NJ Regional Director at the ADL, and others addressed the gathering.

Rivkie attended all the events as a community activist. As she recalls, the politicians were all unequivocal in condemning the scourge of anti-Semitism, and promising to increase security across Ramapo and the rest of New York. “As of last week, security funding for non-urban Jewish communities has quadrupled,” Rivkie reports.

Who is Rivkie Feiner and what is her mission? Rivkie, 46, is the CEO of Universal Communications Network, a grant-writing firm (soon to be rebranded as Feiner Grant Strategies). This local mother of five has made it her life’s mission to advocate on behalf of the Jewish community in Rockland County and beyond. As such, she has used her connections and the relationships she has built with government officials and their staffs to help her fellow Jews in far reaching ways.

Rivkie Feiner, whom I have had the privilege of knowing for many years, has been living in Monsey all her life (aside for one year as a newlywed in Eretz Yisroel). Her day job for nearly thirty years is fascinating and unusual: CEO of a grant writing company, whose mission statement is to assist nonprofit and for profit organizations, via grant writing, to secure funding from federal, state, and city agency, foundations, and corporations.

Yet her grant writing office, which has fourteen employees, including Rivkie’s married daughter Tova Saks, plays second fiddle to her true passion: serving as an educated and eloquent voice inside the halls of power, acting as a liaison on behalf of her community both locally and in Albany, building bridges of understanding.

Over the years, Rivkie has cultivated strong contacts in Albany, Washington D.C. and among governmental offices across the U.S. She was also on the board of the Jewish Women’s Foundation of NY, and currently serves on the Jewish Federation and Foundation of Rockland’s Community Relations Council and JCC Rockland’s board, the only Orthodox female to hold these prestigious positions. Additionally, as a member of the Superintendent’s Community Circle

of the East Ramapo Central School District, she attends monthly school board meetings and is called upon to represent the religious community when critical issues come up.

In the wake of the horrific stabbing which took place on Motzoei Shabbos Chanukah at the home of Rav Chaim Leibish Rottenberg, adjacent to his shul, we had a long-ranging conversation with Rivkie about what has been happening since.

We began our conversation with a bit of history, as Rivkie, nee Shapiro, recounted her childhood, and her first foray into ‘askanus.’

“I am a Monsey girl, who was born and raised in the community. In fact, I still live within walking distance of my parents and sister, in the neighborhood I grew up in, and still daven in my childhood shul.”

Rivkie was born with a passion and drive to succeed, though she says school was a struggle as she was bullied as a child. By her own admission, “My report cards were filled with red marks. My mother would come home from PTA crying.”

All that changed when a caring and compassionate fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Friedman, a’h, changed her life. As she recounted in an interview, “I believe a teacher can make or break a child. She instilled confidence in me. I really believed I was stupid before then.” Rivkie attended YSV, ASHAR and Bais Yaakov, later going to seminary in Brooklyn and taking night classes in Touro.

She married her husband, Yehoshua Feiner, who comes from Britain, a few months after finishing seminary, when she was barely nineteen. At the time, she was working on Wall Street as a receptionist and typist, and later became licensed as a stockbroker, a trade she was good at yet didn’t particularly enjoy.

After spending shanah rishonah in Eretz Yisroel, Rivkie, her husband and newborn daughter returned to Monsey, where she was introduced to Mrs. Ursula Lea Lehmann, a former English professor and the founder of UCN. Rivkie was initially hired as a part-time secretary in her consulting and grant writing firm. Her initial job soon grew into bookkeeping, grant budgeting and research as her responsibilities grew and her career evolved. Rivkie explains that writing government grants is far more complicated than it appears. “You need to understand the issues

comprehensively and figure out which language to use to get results. It's a complicated formula, but one that Mrs. Lehmann specialized in. I soon graduated to the position of bookkeeper, and later became the office manager. Almost immediately, I began to attend conferences and high-level meetings with her, and she shifted more responsibility onto me.”

Eventually Rivkie purchased the expanded company from Mrs. Lehmann, and became its CEO.

Today she leads an office with clients across ten states and Israel. Some staff are trained in grant writing, while others deal with the technical or organizational aspect of the business. “We have staff with extensive research capabilities, and expertise in creative and technical writing, graphics, marketing, strategy and budgeting.

“At first, we were mainly writing grants in Rockland County and for Agudath Israel, which helped ‘get my feet wet’ in community activism. When I was in my early 20s, I accompanied Mrs. Lehmann to Washington D.C. on behalf of the Agudah. In fact, on the day of Rabbi Sherer’s *levaya*, we were heading to Washington, for a government conference about potential funding for the community. We were about to cancel our trip, but Mrs. Lehmann said, ‘I think Rabbi Sherer would have wanted us to attend.’ She taught me the true meaning of responsibility for the community.”

Seven years ago, she joined the Agudah on a mission to Washington, to meet with then Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano. At the meeting, she recalls, she was one of a handful of women sitting with sixty men, yet she was invited, as a mother and local activist, to speak about the need for security funding in Rockland, which she did with passion and eloquence.

On a later Agudah mission, she spoke while seated, but someone soon gestured for her to stand up. When she was done, the administration’s FEMA representative said, “You clearly know your data!” Rivkie explains that having someone knowledgeable about the facts, and with the ability to express them clearly and effectively, is a very important asset, and can be learned.

Rivkie received no formal training in *askanus*, though she did graduate from the 2015 Jewish Community Relations Council New York’s Community Connections Fellowship Program. She credits the support of her husband, who works in a different business, and her children, a married daughter and four sons, ages 23-8, as being instrumental in her success.

“Recently someone asked my son how many hours his mother works. His ready answer? ‘The only time she’s not working is when she’s sleeping!’ It’s very hard to keep up such an intense schedule, but I feel very blessed, because my husband and family are incredibly supportive.”

Over the years, Rivkie has traveled extensively across the world, forging invaluable contacts with influential community leaders, which she later used to benefit the Orthodox community.

My husband and I consult with Rav Gamliel Rabinowitz, Shlita, the family’s Rav, the Cszaber Rov, Rav Yitzchok Yaakov Weinberger א"ט י"ט, and local rabbonim as well before joining any organizations or making any major decisions. In fact, she does not travel to important meetings without receiving a bracha from rabbonim.

She has been to Albany on Agudath Israel missions numerous times to advocate for the Education Investment Tax Credit for nonpublic schools which would include yeshiva education. Many parents are choking under the burden of tuition. There are many *askanim* who worked tirelessly to lobby for this legislation, but so far the efforts have not been successful.

Yet it was her experience in finding a school for her youngest that solidified her path in ‘askanus.’

As Rivkie related, “When my now eight-year-old son was two, he was diagnosed with severe, anaphylactic allergies to numerous foods, including nuts, eggs and milk. He needed an Epi-pen, and an emergency plan to help him in an emergency situation. It was extremely challenging to find a frum school that was able to accommodate his needs. One school wanted to accept him but wanted him to eat at a separate table and one school wanted to take him, but refused to take responsibility for his safety.

With great reluctance, I researched alternative options, and found an excellent early childhood center in West Nyack, run by the JCC. We went to see the school, which is on a beautiful campus. The staff was very caring, with a small student-to-teacher ratio, and, best of all, they were equipped to deal with our son’s needs.

“However, we had a few concerns, including what would be the level of kashrus and the curriculum. As it turned out, they were receiving meals from a glatt kosher caterer from

Monsey. They were great to work with, and ensured that our son received foods that he could eat.

“The JCC were extremely accommodating and hired a young frum woman as a teacher, who would make brachos with him and teach him some Hebrew. Our experience at the JCC, where our son was a student for years, has always been wonderful. Whenever they made a birthday party or other event, they insisted on serving only foods that our son could eat, so that he shouldn’t feel left out.

“I was so grateful for what they did for me, that I resolved to repay them. As I was CEO of a grant writing company, I offered to help write a security grant, requesting funding for the JCC. The school was awarded a grant of \$100,000, the first such award in Rockland County! I was very glad that I was able to show my appreciation.”

Eventually Rivkie, who became very involved with the school, was approached by one of the women on the board, who invited her to join the board of the JCC, a prestigious appointment and a significant accomplishment for the frum mother of five.

“I was hesitant but they were quite persistent. I decided to accept the position, primarily to make a Kiddush Hashem. Ultimately, it was Hashem’s way of placing me in a situation where I could help the Jewish community. Serving on the board, where I still serve today, has given me the opportunity to meet many prominent leaders and advocate for our community.”

"She's certainly an extremely busy person," said David Kirschtel, CEO of the Rockland JCC. "She doesn't need more obligations or responsibilities. Any obligation she takes on she takes very seriously and really commits herself to those responsibilities."

Ever since she joined the board, Rivkie was treated with tremendous respect and consideration. As she recalls, “every year some board members travel to a conference, to meet with leaders of the JCC in other states. Last year I traveled to Memphis, to join over 600 delegates at the JCCA conference. One night, the members of our delegation chose to eat out together. As one voice, they all insisted on coming with me to the only local kosher restaurant, a humble fast-food place with self-service and paper plates!”

Eventually Rivkie was invited to join the Rockland Jewish Federation's Community Relations Council, where she also works with leaders of the ADL, tasked with fighting anti-Semitism. "The ADL is far more important than our community realizes," Rivkie adds. "When they speak, the media listens. Unfortunately, they don't yet have a strong presence within the Orthodox community, but we are working to expand this relationship."

Rivkie has met with Evan Bernstein, the NY/NJ Regional Director at the ADL, numerous times, acting as a powerful voice for the local Monsey community. About seven years ago, noting that Rockland County was not eligible for any security funding, Rivkie began her quest to secure funding for areas that were not yet eligible for such funding.

Together with David Pollock, Associate Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council NY, who generously provided invaluable guidance and resources, Rivkie voluntarily devoted over 100 hours and the resources of UCN to sponsor a free security workshop for mosdos in Rockland County – the first of its kind.

"Two years ago, thanks to the efforts of Congresswoman Nita Lowey and others, we did begin receiving funding. Now, after the Motzei Shabbos stabbing, we sadly can expect to see substantial security funding."

I asked Rivkie her opinion about the proliferation of anti-Semitic crimes and the overall culture of anger and hate directed against the Jewish community, in levels not seen for many years. In fact, many experts feel that the explosive atmosphere and tension, as well as the brutal attacks, are eerily similar to those before the Holocaust.

Rivkie directs me to an Op-Ed she wrote for the Rockland Journal News, in which she tackled this issue, blaming the proliferation of social media, where bias and bigotry are accepted and go unchallenged.

As she wrote, "Everyone is painted with the same broad brush. The venom spewed by small minorities have come to be seen as representative of entire groups, a distortion of the truth if there ever was one. The blame game has become almost universal, lumping together the few with the many."

Rivkie describes a recent encounter at the East Ramapo Central School Board meeting, where strong language is used about the Jewish community, and her efforts to begin a respectful dialogue.

“The East Ramapo Central School District is very unique, in that over two-thirds of the students attend private schools. The result is a skewed balance, with the school district being denied much of the funding they are entitled to from Albany. Over the years there has been lots of bad blood and accusations on both sides, from the public school parent body and the private school parent body, with each side accusing the other of mismanagement.

“So there I was, an Orthodox Monsey-born-and-educated woman CEO of a Monsey-based consulting firm, meeting with men and women representatives of the full array of Rockland residents. Face to face, we openly addressed common concerns and were able to make our cases. I was able to explain that rather than the widespread misconception that Orthodox Jews are “takers” and deplete the county’s resources, Orthodox growth has led to many millions of dollars in tax revenues. That the public schools don't have enough funding is not the fault of the Jewish community, but rather of the skewed state funding formula.

“The sad lack of knowledge and familiarity with my community, and the misconceptions and myths that seem commonplace, were shocking to me. The contributions of thousands of hardworking Orthodox residents — doctors, lawyers, accountants, therapists, teachers, writers, researchers, store owners, cooks, bakers, electricians, plumbers — are ignored or overlooked. Despite this, I detected a willingness to listen and understand, which was encouraging and perhaps a harbinger of hope.

“Most significantly, as we talked, I saw barriers break down as we shared our common interests and concerns: our families, and particularly our children; the infrastructure and beauty of our community; the lack of a fair share of funding for our needs from the state. I saw clearly what we could accomplish if we united, directing our energies in a positive way to achieve the results we desire and realize our common dreams. Unity and harmony would open the door to endless possibilities.”

In the course of her activism, Rivkie has met controversial County Executive Ed Day numerous times. She claims that despite his perceived bias against the Jewish community, at the end of the day he understands the need to satisfy his constituents, and responds positively to respectful dialogue.

Rivkie had been called upon as an eloquent and knowledgeable spokesperson during last winter's measles epidemic, speaking to the media, assuring them that the majority of the Orthodox population vaccinate their children. These interviews have been published worldwide.

She has also been instrumental in advocating for the Vaad Ha'eruv during their recent struggle with the town of Mahwah, NJ, meeting with the Rockland County Human Rights Commission, headed by Constance Frazier, an African-American woman Rivkie had befriended at an event several years earlier.

During the meeting, Rivkie was called upon to speak before over a dozen of Human Rights Commission members, to explain the halachic implications of the eruv. "I told them to call a Rabbi, but they said no, they wanted to hear from a local mom who knows what's going on. There are so many rumors and half-baked stories," she quips. "One of the members of the commission was convinced that the eruv was a Jew-string that would try to make them Jewish!"

As Rivkie spoke, County Executive Ed Day walked into the meeting, and thanked Rivkie for her words. Her explanation of the eruv and its religious importance made a powerful impression on the assembled, and the issue was settled shortly thereafter.

Nowadays, Rivkie says, her askanus and community outreach, which she does on a purely voluntary basis, take up the bulk of her time. At times, such as during the school board crisis when the dialogue turned heated, she also received nasty threats. Yet she remains above the fray, and doesn't allow hatred to frighten or stop her.

Rivkie stresses that she sees the Yad Hashem in her interactions all the time.

"Recently I was at the airport headed home from Washington, when I met with Representative Nita Lowey, (D-NY). I was fortunate to be able to discuss the importance of increased security in person and she was very receptive. Although I have spoken with Rep. Lowey's staff many times,

and I even spoke to her staff the day after the stabbing to discuss the impact on our community, there is nothing like speaking in person.”

“She was flying economy, and the flight attendants had no idea who she was. I whispered to a flight attendant, telling her to take care of Rep. Lowey, who, despite her humility, is very influential in Washington.”

On another occasion, also on a trip to Washington, I received an email from the Agudah just as I was taking my seat, asking if a group of us could discuss our concerns about security. I turned around, and there, in the row behind me, sat Senator Chuck Schumer with his security detail! As soon as the flight had taken off, I asked his security people for permission to speak with him, and made my ‘airplane pitch.’ The Senator was very gracious, giving me a thumbs up, assuring me he was on it.

“It was uncanny. What were the odds that I would find Rep. Lowey and Senator Schumer on my flight? It was truly *Yad Hashem*.”

A short while later, Rivkie was able to help a local Yid who was making a simcha but had an issue with his passport and couldn’t fly out of the country. She contacted the Congresswoman’s office and they were able to help. “If you build a relationship and are respectful, you can use this relationship to help others,” says Rivkie.

Has Rivkie ever felt discriminated against because she is a woman? “Almost never,” she replies. “I am invited to speak at many meetings consisting of almost exclusively of men; everyone is very respectful and I never have any issues. After all, we are all interested in doing our jobs and obtaining funding for their organizations. Even non-Jewish colleagues and community leaders will meet me for lunch in a *glatt* kosher place, and never make an issue.”

What Rivkie does encounter is the persistent attitude of naysayers, who assure her that the community’s goals of more funding or a greater voice, “will never happen.” As Rivkie assures me, “When I hear someone saying something will ‘never happen,’ I try to work harder. When I get a ‘no’ or encounter opposition, it only galvanizes me to keep going.

When asked if there is anything a regular Jewish 'citizen' can accomplish, Rivkie has three excellent suggestions.

“First and foremost is to exercise our right and obligation to vote, to make our voices count, especially as many local elections are won by a very narrow margin. “There was a recent election with far-reaching repercussions that we lost by just eleven votes! Imagine if you were the one who stayed home.

“Another suggestion is to take the census seriously. It’s not just an annoyance or another task to cross off your list. After all, a proper count of the numbers of the frum community directly affects the amount of funding we receive. We recently were involved in obtaining more funding to carry out an accurate census, which is more crucial than you can imagine. The community should be educating itself about the impact the census has on so many things that greatly affect the quality of our lives including infrastructure, police, security, and many other services.

“The third, and most important thing we can do is conduct ourselves in a manner befitting Shomrei Torah U'mitzvos, with dignity and consideration to others. We must remember, despite the provocation, not to descend to their level, but maintain our self-respect. Let us remind ourselves that they are always watching, and that our words and behavior, leave a lasting impression. It is everyone’s sacred duty to constantly make a Kiddush Hashem.”