

Empathy in Action



Avi Schnall tours a local
rehab center in his quest to
enhance senior services

ELISHEVA BRAUN



Avi Schnall with
Yehuda Kramer,
administrator
of Concord
Rehab



When Agudath Israel's New Jersey director threw his black hat into the ring, the news made headlines.

As evidenced by the paper-the-town marketing campaign backed by major *rabbanim* and the fascinated coverage by all types of media, Avi Schnall's was no ordinary political campaign. A lot was at stake, and locals came out in droves to support Avi.

With the historic win now under his belt, Avi is devoted as ever to serving his brothers and sisters in Lakewood and across the state. He promises to help alleviate tuition, an albatross around the neck of many a frum family.

Avi has also turned his attention to a much older demographic—the seniors who live in Lakewood. Aside from its already-large senior population, a significant number of those in their later years have moved here to be closer to their children as they age. For them, geriatric resources are a central priority. But New Jersey is infamous for its limited resources, poor reimbursement trends, and paltry medical funding.

More must be done to support seniors. And Avi is determined to do it.

Avi Schnall's commitment to the senior community is not new. In his role at Agudath Israel, he helped found Zahav, the popular senior support initiative recently featured in these pages, which has guided thousands of seniors through the unique challenges of their life stage.

In one of the frenetic last days before he took his seat at the State Assembly, Avi spent a morning learning about the needs of the geriatric community and seeing, firsthand, the work that is being done to help them live their best lives. He chose Concord, a premier rehab and nursing facility known for its cutting-edge therapies and exclusive kosher program, as his destination.

When Rivky Zelinger, director of Concord's kosher program, invited me to tag along, my interest was piqued. I was curious about how the Agudah leader-turned assemblyman intends to advance his advocacy for seniors in his new role.

To the rehab administrator, it's imperative that staffers are understanding of the trauma and uncertainty and are sensitive to new patients' emotional states



THE WALK-THROUGH

As we headed to meet Avi at the entrance, we passed the 24-hour concierge desk. Yehuda Kramer, administrator of Concord, explained, "Usually, when a new patient comes in, his entire life is topsy-turvy. Very often, he's suffered a stroke, been in a car accident, or experienced some other traumatic event. His family might have flown in from Eretz Yisrael and out of town, and everyone's in a frenzy. Checking into a nursing home or rehab center can be a very, very overwhelming process."

While a nursing home is a place where no one wants to end up, the sad stat is that 70 percent of people over age 65 will need rehab at some point.

To the rehab administrator, it's imperative that staffers are understanding of the trauma and uncertainty and are sensitive to new patients' emotional states.

"It's for this reason that we have full-time concierge. When a patient comes in, no matter if it's night or day, whether they're the only new patient of the week or one of five admissions that day, they're made comfortable immediately. Within 24 hours, we've developed a tailor-made plan of care for them."

As he stepped inside the facility, Avi made his intentions clear.



As he shook hands and headed for the sliding exit doors, Avi reiterated his intent to bring geriatric resources up to par

"The geriatric community is one of the largest-growing communities statewide. And yet, it's no secret that compared to other states, New Jersey is behind in terms of funding senior services. We're going to change that."

The wide hallway we walk through seems to be the main artery of the building. I breathe in the clean, lightly floral scent and the bright, cheery spotlessness. More than the aesthetics, there's an unmistakable warmth about the place. People smile at each other; chatter and laughter float out of the rooms we pass.

Everywhere we went, Avi asked patients how they were. Invariably, they told him how well they're doing and expressed appreciation for Concord's high level of care.

In the gym, Concord's state-of-the-art therapy room, I met OT director Elisse Schechter.

"It's frustrating to work with the insurance companies," she told me. "They often refuse to cover necessary therapies or allow only shorter sessions when the patient can really benefit from more time." Technical obstacles don't stop the dedicated therapists. "At Concord, it's all about giving the patient what they need. It's what drives Concord; it's why we're all here. It's why I drive an hour each way to be here."

Elise recounted, "We had a stroke patient who could barely move on his own. For months, we worked with him extensively. We didn't give up. It was so gratifying to see him leave Concord on his own two feet with only a cane for support."

One woman was using a bar to hit a ball back and forth as she chatted and laughed with her therapist. The exercise seemed lighthearted and enjoyable; I was speechless when I heard that this was one of the exercises that brought this crash victim from barely mobile to fully functioning.

A WARM GOODBYE

As I was getting ready to leave, I noticed a woman in the lobby.

"I'm being discharged today," she told me. "When I came in, I'd just had a stroke and could barely move." It was heartwarming to watch her walk, steady and straight-backed, down the hall just months after the incident.

At the tail end of the tour, Avi shared his impressions.

"Concord is a beautiful facility on a very high standard of care. It's very impressive. Whoever has family here knows that their loved ones are very well taken care of in a warm facility.

"The environment here is very positive. Everyone's very happy. Being here today was a great experience."

As he shook hands and headed for the sliding exit doors, Avi reiterated his intent to bring geriatric resources up to par.

"From speaking to some of the new legislators who will be coming in, I can tell you that several of us are going to be focused on senior services. There's going to be a lot of talk about it and a lot of movement."

He added, "At the end of the day, it's our responsibility to our parents or grandparents. It's our opportunity of fulfilling the mitzvah of *kibbud av v'eim* and ensuring that they can go through their golden years at their utmost." ●