

# 10 QUESTIONS FOR

› Rachel Bachrach

## Sam Ulrich

Sam Ulrich is the chief executive officer of The Seforim Sale at Yeshiva University. The three-week extravaganza, which features more than 15,000 titles, is the largest Jewish book sale in North America.

# 1

### What's your selection like?

It's in the range of 30,000 to 40,000 seforim, books, music, and educational software, spread out over a room that's almost 5,000 square feet. We sell everything: Sephardic, chassidic, Ashkenazic, secular, everything in between. Till now, we only had seforim in Hebrew and English, but this year we're introducing a few in French. And the people who come reflect that mix, because we get all types — and from all over! We got a call from a guy who's flying in from Australia for the sale. I was utterly shocked by that. Then there's the guy who's coming from Florida. That's more understandable, but still, it's far.

### 2 What are your most popular genres?

Our most popular section is English halachah and English *mussar*. The most popular sefer can change year to year. I know we usually sell a whole skid — a pallet — of Rabbi Ribiat's *39 Melachos*. We also sell an incredible number of the five-volume *Toras Chaim* every year. Other than that, it's hard to judge — and I'd really love to know, because now, we just base orders off last year's sales.

# 4

### How do you go about setting up a mega-sale?

We pretty much split the room into sections. It can be hard to categorize some seforim. Does it fall under *tefillah* or halachah? Is *lashon hara* halachah or *mussar*? A lot of *mussar* starts as halachah — *lashon hara* can be both. We're trying to make it more organized, maybe put it in both sections. Haggados can also be difficult.

### 5 What is the sale's draw?

You can come to buy or because you're tagging along with someone else. Alumni meet up, sometimes *shidduchim* are made here. It's a big social. And we try to do a little bit of an event, entertainment, each day of the sale. We have bands that perform. Book signings — the Bostoner Rebbe from Jerusalem did one last year for his sefer. We get speakers, singers. Politicians come by. It's happening!

### 3 The size of the crowd you get and the demand for seforim have both increased significantly in recent years.

#### How do you keep up?

For one thing, we're redesigning the room layout. It used to be all tables with a few bookshelves lining the walls. We're adding bookshelves to the floor to replace some tables, so it should be easier to get around and it will accommodate more people. And we used to ship only in the US, but now we'll go anywhere. We also want to work on the overall organization. In the past, if you wanted to sell your book here, you could just come drop it off, but we had a problem — the person supplying us with one book. Their book used to fall through the cracks and didn't get placed out on the floor. Now, we're asking that you come through a vendor. This way, it will be easier for us to keep track.

# 6

### Is the sale a business venture or a learning experience?

It's supposed to be a fundraiser for student activities. It's run and organized and managed entirely by students, and I think it gives great insight into real life business and procedures. Working at the sale, you're in a real position at a real business — and you learn so much! For example, this is my fourth year here. I started off as a floor manager, last year, I was the COO and now I'm CEO — and I'm seeing what can be done to improve the sale logistically, from the front- and back-ends, to make it better for us and for you.

### 7 What topics are already flooded and don't need additional titles, and what topics do you get asked about that are virtually untouched?

If someone else writes a book about dating and marriage... In the past, we only had to use one table, now we're doing two bookshelves of them. But they're pretty popular, which is why I guess people are still writing about it. As for topics that aren't covered enough, I don't think there are any. There are seforim on everything — literally, every single thing! But anyway, most people come in with a list of seforim they know they want. Very rarely — I've never had it happen — will someone walk in and say do you have something on this topic.

# 7

### Are there challenges in organizing a sale that is also a social event?

We've had requests to filter our staff better, because a lot of people work here because it's a fun time. Last year, just to see what it's like, I asked some of my friends to go undercover, to walk over to everyone wearing a badge and ask a question. They said 10 percent knew what they were talking about. They weren't being malicious, but obviously, as a business, we need to be run better. We're now making it that everyone has to apply, we ask for resumes, they come in for interviews. The previous CEO also suggested making a schedule for employees instead of having people show up whenever they want.

# 9

### Has the economic downturn had an impact on sales?

Not really. A lot of people hold off buying seforim all year so they can buy at the sale. That doesn't mean we're bringing in more money, because our markup is very little. Last year, we grossed \$1.3 million and our markup was 24 percent. This year, it's only 18 percent, but our goal is still to break last year's sales, to bring people in and get them to buy. Last year, we had 15,200 people here, which was more than the year before, when we got 14,800. And half of the people who walk in buy something.

# 10

### Do you get complaints from bookstores about competition?

The only feedback we've gotten is that seforim stores do really poorly this time of year. Obviously, that's not our goal, which is why we make it a seforim sale and not a Judaica sale. We know we could sell Judaica — people have asked why we don't — but we don't want to be direct competition.



Photo: Menachem Kozlovsky

Ten Questions appears every second week.