

To the Parents that have Children in Lamplighters Yeshivah:

In a time of uncertainty and confusion, it is important that truths are told as only through real transparency (not just one side of the story) can we appropriately assess a situation. Specifically, in regard to Lamplighters, I have heard many misguided rumors and mistruths told, and I believe it important that my voice is added to the mix. I was vocal for many years when I chose to support Lamplighters and I believe that it is equally important that I talk openly about what decisions led to me walking away as a financial supporter of Lamplighters.

I write this letter in my own name and not on behalf of the board of Lamplighters – although it is certainly with their knowledge.

Firstly, I want to apologize for my role for potentially enabling Lamplighters' current reality—by not cutting off funding earlier when I realized that things were awry. As a board member and major donor to Lamplighters, I feel I should have been tougher and cut off funding sooner, in order to encourage a corrected course.

By way of context: I was first introduced to Yocheved Sidof in 2012 and began supporting Lamplighters shortly thereafter. My support grew and I was able to encourage people close to me to contribute as well. In the 2016-2017 academic year, my family accounted for roughly 40% of the donations to the school.

Unfortunately, while Lamplighters was growing in number of students, it was also growing in the number of disappointed parents. It wasn't uncommon for me or a family member of mine to receive an email from a parent expressing disappointment around Lamplighters. While all schools have complaints, there was particularly strong feedback around poor academics that kept repeating itself. At first, when I brought this up to the administration, an explanation was provided about the "uniqueness" of Lamplighters, which in retrospect, I too readily accepted.

As I continued to hear complaints that were surrounding low standards in both Jewish and secular subjects, I began to demand more information. Some of my family members heard similar feedback and as those complaints became more frequent, they ceased financial support for the school.

So that there is no misunderstanding around what I am taking about here: some Lamplighters parents were complaining that their children didn't have a good understanding of basic math, while others were disappointed that their child didn't know the Ma Nishtana. The dissatisfaction was on *both* the secular and Jewish studies sides. It is no secret that many parents have left Lamplighters over the years in search of greener pastures.

Despite the fact that my other family members ceased support for Lamplighters prior to the 2017-2018 academic year, I stayed on—but with my confidence in the school's leadership significantly damaged and my desire to see change redoubled. So, I leaned in and took an even more active role in the school and agreed to continue to provide the same level of financial support as all of my family had for one more year, in the hopes that improvements would be made in academics and in financial management.

At the end of the academic year of 2017-2018 (nearly a full year after my other family members had ceased support for Lamplighters), a meeting was called for our family to sit with Rivkah Schack and

Yocheved (who were co-leading the school) to better understand how they were being addressed and to see if confidence could be restored.

The meeting did not go well. It was clear to us that there was disregard for parents' concerns (a "we know better than they do" attitude) and not much had been done to truly understand the source of the parents' concerns and how they intended to correct the problem. What we had hoped would be a meeting to meaningfully discuss how to improve parent satisfaction was instead focused on how to keep our family as donors. We expected to arrive to a meeting with an analysis of the parents' concerns and which of their issues could be addressed and how. Instead, we were being told how unique, amazing and innovative the Lamplighters model was—in essence, that the administration knew better than the parents. We were shown a flowery presentation about how a holistic education could revolutionize the Jewish world and Lamplighters' contribution to humanity, with no acceptance of responsibility or commitment to repair the relationships with parents.

Our family left the meeting with affirmation of the previous decision to no longer support Lamplighters; I was left wondering why I was supporting a school with which many parents weren't pleased and that had a leadership team that was comfortable burying their head in the sand.

As time progressed, it became clear that no substantive changes were being made and that by providing the same financial support without explicit "strings attached", I had made a gross error in judgment. I knew a change was needed and I also knew that as the largest donor for the last couple of years, my decision to write a check or not was important. In retrospect, continuing to fund the school financially while poor decisions were being made probably enabled poor leadership and poor decision-making. Each year, a number of full tuition-paying parents were leaving, and previous donors were turned off or burnt out. The school was growing the overall student body—but with little regard to parents' ability to pay or sufficient focus on tuition collection—and taking on massive new commitments (building leases, double digit percentage year-on-year increases in staff, etc.), while ignoring the customer feedback and financial accountability that organizations everywhere rely on to create sustainable models.

Most troubling, it was very difficult to get honest answers to questions from leadership. The first response to my inquiries almost never included the full truth and required further prodding or asking the question in different ways—which would typically produce radically different responses.

Going into the 2018-2019 academic year, my trust had been lost in leadership—both in terms of competence and transparency. I felt it was essential to bring in objective third parties to assess the school, so I demanded both a financial audit and an academic audit to be performed by reliable and professional third parties who could provide the board of directors with information on how to act.

Sadly, both of these requests were met with firm resistance from management—both Rivkah and Yocheved. This was startling to me: which organization wouldn't want to have outside eyes look in and help understand how they are doing?!

(To add finer clarity to this last point, typically my contact with Lamplighters was directly with Yocheved and not others in the school. When the idea of both audits were raised, it was initially met with agreement by Yocheved. Resistance came later on – as it often did to what I considered very reasonable requests. To this day, I do not know if it was Yocheved who changed her mind so regularly or once the idea was introduced internally, the resistance came from others and Yocheved was forced to relay it.)

It was explained to me that an academic audit was not possible at Lamplighters because of the unique construct of the school (in other words, “we know better” and “no one would understand our special model”). I was also told a financial audit was not realistic due to other priorities and was also not necessary. Both red flags.

It was clear to me that the leadership at Lamplighters wanted to be responsible and responsive to no one. Parents’ complaints fell on deaf ears because leadership knew better; donors’ requests fell on deaf ears because leadership knew better. It was unclear to me what made Lamplighters a “community school” when it was really a sandbox for the whims and desires of its leadership. For years, I had heard it was a “child-centered” or “mission-centric” school, but it was beginning to feel to me like a “leadership-centric” school, based in no small part on a cult of personality. This leadership was resistant to any feedback or criticism; it seemed resistant to reality itself. Even when real estate and personnel costs were exploding, tuition collection was down, parents were leaving, and everything pointed to impending organizational doom, all I would hear from leadership is that “another Lamplighter’s miracle” was on the horizon.

At this point, I made the decision to withdraw my support from Lamplighters entirely. My requests for third-party assessments continued to be ignored and all signs pointed to impending doom.

Then, I was introduced to Dov Tuzman.

After a successful business career, Dov had gone through a very difficult period in his life. As part of his own rehabilitation process, he was teaching one day a week at Lamplighters with the mesivta boys. Earlier in 2018, Yocheved had also begun working with Dov on increasing organization and accountability in the school’s fundraising function.

From the first time I spoke with Dov, I was impressed. He had a deep and relevant business restructuring background and, perhaps more importantly, he had real life experiences underlining that decisions have consequences and that miracles are not to be relied upon. Dov was straightforward with me and told it like it was. It was a breath of fresh air to speak to someone at Lamplighters and not be given the run-around. “The patient is critically ill”, I remember him telling me after his initial organizational diagnosis, “but it is not dead”. “If you are willing to roll your sleeves up with me,” he said, “I will too.”

So, I agreed to give Lamplighters another shot now that someone was involved upon whom I could rely for unfiltered information.

In Fall 2018, the financial/organizational audit was completed, and several things became clear:

- a. Costs were rising dramatically but revenues weren’t. Real estate costs were on track to double; payroll had increased over 35% while tuition income had increased only 2%.
- b. Financial and hiring decisions had been made without proper forecasting and enough focus on earned income (i.e., enrollment and tuition). Lamplighters had major real estate obligations that had been entered into without proper consideration and planning going into assuming these liabilities. For example, too little analysis was performed on how a high school fit into the Lamplighter’s model and mission, particularly given that it required an additional building (1345 President Street), several new staff members and provided very minimal tuition income.

- c. No one person had budgetary authority at Lamplighters. While several people could spend money (most pronouncedly Rivkah), Yocheved was simply expected to fundraise to fill the difference between costs and tuition revenue—even if this gap was exploding year-on-year. Scholarships were given out with little consideration, teachers were hired or given pay increases without proper checks and balances. There seemed to be little-to-no attention given to the financial consequences of these decisions, and no willingness to reduce teaching staff.
- d. The Lamplighters board of directors was a board in name only. It served almost no real oversight purpose and was made up of several staff members in the school, a couple of “honorary members” and a few, mostly neutered independent voices. The board would convene every so often, and leadership would congratulate each other in front of other members of leadership, fellow employees and honorary members. Reliable budgets weren’t provided, there was no financial forecasting, and no tough decisions (ones that involved any sacrifice to spending) were made. Lamplighters leadership had little interest in opening the kimono—by getting parents involved who might really see “under the hood”, as an example. The leadership attributed this to being able to maintain a “clear mission”, but it seemed to me that it was done to avoid visibility or real accountability, and to be able to safely push false narratives when needed. Lamplighters was the equivalent of a business that forever relies on its investors to fund its losses instead of creating a product worthy of financial support by its own customers.
- e. While the State of New York and many academically-focused foundations offer programs and grants that other schools were able to benefit from, Lamplighters relative inattentiveness to code compliance and other such practices left Lamplighters unable to do this in any meaningful way.

While it would not be practical to go into every decision that has been made over the last year until today, it is safe to say that the school would have shut down last year were it not for the changes that were made, as a result of the third-party audit. I agreed to continue to donate a meaningful amount to the school during the 2018-2019 academic year, we moved from a co-director model to a direct line of accountability through the CEO (Yocheved), a number of parents were invited and joined the board, a budget was put in place (and enforced), financial forecasting was implemented, and a concerted effort was made to only make promises that could be kept. Alas, much of the damage had already been done (in the form of an overhang of debt, choking lease obligations, and staffing levels exceeding any reasonable fundraising). It’s been a steep uphill climb to extricate the school from the many years of poor decision-making, alienation of parents and donors, and unrealistic commitments made to parents and staff.

Due to the collective efforts of the Lamplighters team (board, leadership, and staff), we were able to negotiate a lease—with an option to purchase—on a new location, 196 Albany Avenue, that was code-compliant and more affordable than being spread between three locations. Had this building not been found, Lamplighters would not have opened this year as it had no location. I personally agreed to sign the 196 Albany agreement, since the landlord did not want to have a community school as a tenant. Seven other individuals (including four board members) agreed to be co-signers/personal guarantors. As a condition to having others take on this significant risk, Yocheved committed to me and the board that

she would dedicate incoming tuition to cover payroll and raise enough money to eliminate the school's outstanding debts by the end of the year (the largest debt being unpaid payroll to staff from last year). The latter commitment was not met, and in fact the financial hole got deeper.

It became very clear that there never was a plan to meet this financial commitment. It seemed to have been done to get myself and the other guarantors to sign an agreement but never because the school administration believed they could keep their word. Later, I learned that promises were made by Yocheved to teachers to clear up last year's debt mostly as a response to unrelenting pressure from Rivkah. Once again, this commitment was made without a clear plan for how that would be accomplished. It seemed everywhere I turned another promise had been made that could not be kept. The allure of taking the easy way out of difficult conversations by saying what others wanted to hear seemed too difficult to resist.

Once it was made known to me that leadership at Lamplighters was sufficiently fractured to the point that Yocheved and Rivkah were no longer on the same page, I knew I had to completely pull my support. Rivkah needed more time to buy into Yocheved's vision, I was told. She was still bitter about the decision in the prior year to remove some of her authority. Yocheved was effectively neutered as leader and CEO of Lamplighters. Rivkah had not demonstrated the ability to report to Yocheved's singular authority and Yocheved felt powerless to enforce her authority. The school and Yocheved were in effect being held hostage by Rivkah who refused to accept decisions that curbed her authority.

In fact, earlier this week, this proved to be the case. When Rivkah was finally informed that leadership of the school expected her to be a team player, she immediately resigned.

We now have another (last?) chance. The leadership responsible for the creation and growth of Lamplighters, but also its near total collapse and a mountain of unpaid debts, has stepped aside. Rivkah Schack in particular made it clear she was unwilling to be a part of cleaning up the past mess, describing herself in her resignation letter as "too mission centric to a particular vision" to be involved in "financial cuts". The silver lining is that this gives room for other leadership to step in. It is my hope and prayer that past leadership will move on in a peaceful manner that allows new leadership to emerge and manage Lamplighters through to stability and sustainability. While there is no guarantee of success, there is a recipe for failure: more of the same. I implore past leadership to rise above their own egos, and not to dissuade or discourage others from doing something positive for the school.

Finally, it is important that I state unequivocally, that I believe the root of the current crisis at Lamplighters is *not* financial. I believe the current financial situation is a *symptom* of other, deeper problems—which caused tuition-paying parents and large donors to leave the school. I have little doubt that when those issues are successfully addressed and professional management is put in place, so will the financial situation. I know of several parents and donors who would love to fund a true community school that is run with proper oversight and delivers a high-quality product to a satisfied group of parents. I believe the challenges our school faces are traced to poor management, a subpar product, inattention to customer feedback, over-reliance on miracles, and a lack of transparency with stakeholders.

It is my further hope and prayer that we will continue to see more of the type of transparency, honesty and strong leadership that we saw from Yocheved and Arthur Shumlevksy last week in explaining the true purpose of the Charidy campaign (to ensure the school's financial viability through the end of the

year), and in giving Rivkah the opportunity to be part of the solution going forward (without shying from making it clear that difficult decisions lie ahead in terms of cost-cutting and increasing tuition revenue). I believe that transparency and honesty, while extremely difficult, led to unmatched support for the Charidy campaign and to Rivkah's resignation—which I think will be ultimately healthy for the school despite how destabilizing it may feel at the moment. Should a virtuous cycle of transparency and financial support be created whereby more honest communication and financial forecasting results in more support, and then more support results in more transparency and better forecasting, the goal of finishing this year out should be very attainable, and hardly even miraculous. We may even have a successful community school for decades to come...

Eli Nash