I first visited Tel Aviv’s Chief Rabbi Haim David Halevy, of blessed memory, in the summer of 1984. I was then a 15-year veteran of the American Orthodox rabbinate serving a large congregation in New York City.

At our meeting, we discussed the increasing authoritarianism and extremism that were spreading relentlessly within the Orthodox world. With sadness in his eyes, he asked me: “Have you heard of the mafia? We have a rabbinic mafia here in Israel!” A small clique was arrogating power to itself and marginalizing those who held opinions that differed with them. Instead of viewing halakha in its remarkable diversity, this clique was advocating a halakha that seemed to have only one answer to every question, one view on every issue.

In my mind, I have relived my 1984 meeting with Rabbi Halevy many times. As I write these lines, I am reliving that meeting once again.

Rabbi Halevy lamented the marginalization of rabbis who do not follow the “party line,” who offer original halakhic opinions, who refuse to stifle their freedom in order to curry favor with the rabbinic power-brokers. This tendency has only worsened in recent years.

We read of a “rabbinic blacklist” on the part of the Rabbanut in Israel. We know, first hand, of rabbis who prefer to stay silent or remain “neutral” rather than to stand up against religious extremism and fanaticism. We see the growing conformity in dress, behavior and thought in large segments of the Orthodox world.

In a fascinating responsum, Rabbi Naftali Tsevi Yehudah Berlin--the Netsiv--reminded his readers that during the time of the Second Temple, the Jewish people was divided between the Perushim and Tsedukim. Competition between the groups was intense. The situation became so bad that Perushim branded as a Tseduki anyone who deviated even slightly from prevailing practice. To dissent from the predominant opinion led to one's being ostracized. The Netsiv applied the lesson to his own time:

"It is not difficult to imagine reaching this situation in our time, Heaven forbid, that if one of the faithful thinks that a certain person does not follow his way in the service of God, then he will judge him as a heretic. He will distance himself from him. People will pursue one another with seeming justification (be-heter dimyon), Heaven forbid, and the people of God will be destroyed, Heaven forfend."(Meshiv Davar, Warsaw, 5654, no. 44.)

The Netsiv was concerned that self-righteous individuals were attempting to suppress the opinions
of others. In the name of Torah, they sought to discredit others—even branding them as heretics. Yet, Jewish tradition respects the right and responsibility of individuals to express opinions which are fully based on proper Torah authority—even when those opinions differ from those popularly held. Rabbi Yehiel Michel Epstein, author of the *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, noted in his introduction to the section on Hoshen Mishpat, that differences of opinion among our sages constitute the glory of the Torah. "The entire Torah is called a song (*shirah*), and the glory of a song is when the voices differ one from the other. This is the essence of its pleasantness."

Responsible intellectual freedom is the hallmark of a healthy religious community. Diversity of opinion and freedom of expression are vital to our wellbeing as Jews—and as human beings. Those who attempt to serve as a coercive “thought police” are doing a vast disservice to our community and to the Torah itself.

The coercive tendency will not be turned back unless thinking Jews stand up and resist it. If not us, who? If not now, when?

- Log in or register to post comments