Re-Think the Israeli Chief Rabbinate

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This article by Rabbi Marc D. Angel was originally published in the Jerusalem Post, May 28, 2007. Unfortunately, little has been done to improve the Chief Rabbinate since then; indeed, in many ways, things have actually worsened.

The Chief Rabbinate has had a monopoly on many aspects of the religious life of the State of Israel. It controls marriages, divorces and conversions to Judaism; it regulates public kashrut as well as offering kosher supervision to private establishments. It operates a network of rabbinic courts. It has a visible, public platform for teaching the ideas and ideals of Judaism to Israeli society, and for serving as a religious beacon of inspiration to world Jewry. One would think that after these many years, then, the Chief Rabbinate would be one of the most beloved and revered institutions in Israeli society. The rabbis have had daily opportunity to interact with all Israelis - religious and otherwise - and to show them the beauty of Judaism, the kindness of Torah, the pleasantness of the Orthodox message.

Yet, amazingly and tragically, the Chief Rabbinate seems to be one of the least beloved and revered institutions in Israeli society. It has little or no authority in the hareidi community; it generates little or no enthusiasm among religious Zionists; it is of little positive significance to the remainder of Israelis. Although the Chief Rabbinate and its many functionaries include some fine, sincere and wonderful people, the overall image - and reality - of the rabbinate appears to be negative.

In the field of kashrut, the supervision of the Chief Rabbinate is disdained by the hareidi community, which has set up its own kosher supervision system (the Badatz). Apparently, the Badatz has achieved - in many circles - a higher level of trust for its supervision than has the Chief Rabbinate. Indeed, in all areas of Jewish law the hareidi community turns to its own authorities, and not to the Chief

Rabbinate.

In the area of marriages, stories are legion of couples, especially non-Orthodox ones, who have had unpleasant experiences with rabbinic functionaries. The growing demand for civil marriage in Israel is an indication of dissatisfaction with the rabbinic marriage bureaucracy. In the area of divorce, the Chief Rabbinate has been notoriously unsuccessful in addressing the aguna problem, allowing a situation to fester where husbands refuse to grant a divorce unless they are paid off. I myself have been involved in several cases where Israeli rabbis have actually encouraged the husband to demand payment and various other rights before granting a divorce. The Chief Rabbinate finally felt compelled to convene a conference to deal with the issue, but then cancelled it at the last moment - apparently under pressure from hareidi elements. It seems increasingly clear that a solution to the aguna problem will not emerge from the Chief Rabbinate, but will have to be found in the civil courts.

In the area of conversion, the Chief Rabbinate raises obstacles to prevent non-Jews from entering the Jewish fold. It has adopted a hareidi position that conversion is available only to those agreeing to observe Torah and mitzvot in full. This position is a radical break from the Talmud, Rambam (Maimonides) and the Shulhan Arukh; it is capitulating to an extreme hareidi position that took root only in the 19th century. The Chief Rabbinate not only enforces this position for the State of Israel, but has now disqualified the conversions of Orthodox rabbis in the Diaspora unless those rabbis are clearly under the rabbinate's thumb. The Rabbinical Council of America has essentially bowed to the authority of the Chief Rabbinate, since the latter has the power to decide who is Jewish and who is not Jewish in the State of Israel. If the Chief Rabbinate rejects the validity of a conversion - even if performed entirely according to Halakha - the convert and his/her children will face problems if they decide to move to Israel. The Chief Rabbinate seems intent on demonstrating its "power," and on showing that it can be as extreme as the hareidim.

How far has this institution moved from the wise, compassionate and loving attitude of the late Sephardi chief rabbi Benzion Uziel (who died in 1953)! Rabbi Uziel well understood that the role of the rabbinate was not to drive people away from Judaism, but to find every possible way of bringing them into the fold for the sake of Jewish families and the Jewish nation. When Israel was founded, Orthodox Jews placed much hope in the Chief Rabbinate. They truly hoped that it would enhance the Jewish nature of the state and win the hearts of Israel's citizens to a deeper appreciation of the Torah traditions. Regrettably, these hopes have not

been fulfilled.

The Chief Rabbinate functions as though it were leading a cult rather than a world religion with a grand, universal message. It adopts extreme hareidi positions and attitudes because it seems to view the hareidi community as the only constituency that matters. Should the State and people of Israel continue to grant power to this sort of chief rabbinate? Shouldn't there, rather, be a complete review of the rabbinate's role and functions, a top-level government commission to evaluate its successes and failures, to recommend changes in policies and procedures, to overhaul the rabbinic bureaucracy, to clarify the rabbinate's mission - its responsibilities as well as its limitations?

Establishing such a commission will surely engender fierce opposition and political infighting. Yet unless an impartial panel carries out a serious evaluation of the Chief Rabbinate and makes necessary recommendations, the damage to the State of Israel, to Judaism and to the Jewish people will be immense.

All Israelis and all Jews have a stake in an honest, compassionate, competent and courageous Chief Rabbinate, one that serves as a unifying force. The sooner the rabbinate is reconstituted, the sooner will we be able to say with a full heart: "For out of Zion comes forth the Torah, and the word of God from Jerusalem."