# An open letter to Chief Rabbi Mirvis regarding the Dweck Affair: From Dr. Daniel Jackson

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Dr. Daniel Jackson, a member of our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, has written this open letter to Chief Rabbi Mirvis regarding the current controversy surrounding Rabbi Joseph Dweck of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation of London. Right wing elements of the Orthodox community have been waging a campaign against Rabbi Dweck, in the hope of having him removed from his rabbinic position. Chief Rabbi Mirvis has been drawn into this controversy.

It’s not too late to prevent a catastrophe

An open letter to Chief Rabbi Mirvis regarding the Dweck Affair

Dear Chief Rabbi Mirvis,

The Jewish community is looking to you for wise guidance regarding the Dweck Affair, and appreciates your desire to respond sensitively and carefully. At the same time, your statements (and your silences) to date have not been reassuring.

I’m writing as a member of three communities: as a British citizen, as an Orthodox Jew, and as a long-time member of the Spanish and Portuguese community. I speak only for myself, but I am confident that others share my views on this matter. Indeed, I’m somewhat reluctant to express such unoriginal thoughts, but I believe that it is important to speak up at times like this.

The fundamental question at stake here is how to respond to attacks on a rabbi when those attacks, even if based on legitimate differences of opinion, are expressed as bile-filled rants, and focus on the character of the speaker rather than the issues under debate.

First, as a British citizen, I understand that it is undesirable for internal Jewish disputes to be aired in public. But communities, especially religious ones, are judged by how they treat the extremists within their midst. Remaining silent in the face of egregious character assassination makes us accomplices. Extremism within our own Jewish community must be repudiated by responsible religious leadership—just as we demand of the leaders of other communities—and we should not be viewed as passive onlookers when our Jewish (and British) values are being trampled upon.

Second, as an Orthodox Jew, I interpret the silence of the centrist Orthodox rabbinate in response to charedi provocations as a sign that, yet again, we will cave readily to extremism, and lack the courage of our convictions. Rabbi Marc Angel has written extensively about the damage that this phenomenon has caused. The mistaken belief that the confidence of the ultra-Orthodox can be retained while responding to the needs of the larger Orthodox community, especially its youth, is naive. Young people are looking to leaders such as Rabbi Dweck, and to you, to help them navigate the reality in which homophobia is no longer socially acceptable, and many of them have friends who are gay and wanting to live lives of Torah and mitzvot. They do not expect the Rambam to be sensitive to LGBT issues, but they will not forgive contemporary rabbis who minimize the problem, and speak glibly of the pain suffered by a significant part of the community. And perhaps worst of all is the message this affair sends about our values as an Orthodox community: that even as we begin the period of *Bein HaMetzarim*, we are more concerned about ideological purity than *sinat chinam*.

Third, as a member of the Spanish and Portuguese community, I am hoping that you will stand up for the traditional principles of rabbinic independence and local governance. You have an important role to play as a spiritual leader. But Judaism is not Catholicism, and the Chief Rabbi (whether of Britain or Israel) is not the Pope. So I would expect your first reaction to any calls that you “fire” a rabbi, from whatever source, to be a clarification that this rabbi is not employed by you and does not serve at your pleasure.

You recently conveyed through your spokesman that you are assuming full "responsibility for bringing this episode to a suitable conclusion” and that you will “establish a dignified and appropriate format which will allow for concerns relating to a wide range of Rabbi Joseph Dweck’s teachings and halachic rulings to be considered”.

The most “suitable conclusion” to this matter, in my view, would be to announce that you have looked into the lecture given by Rabbi Dweck and have found

nothing in it to justify the vile attacks that followed; and that ad hominem attacks against distinguished rabbis are unacceptable. Such a statement would neither refute nor endorse the views of Rabbi Dweck, but would give you an opportunity to remind the community that we celebrate *machloket leshem shamayim*, and that conformance with your opinions—or indeed the opinions of any other rabbi—is not a condition for serving as a rabbi in the UK. Nevertheless, the community is no doubt eager to hear your own analysis of the halakhic, moral and social aspects of this issue, perhaps in a lecture at a later point in which you address the substantive arguments made by Rabbi Dweck and others.

But I fear a different ending, which in my view would be disastrous: namely, that you announce that an investigation has been conducted; that Rabbi Dweck has "clarified" his comments; and that you nevertheless deem him fit to continue to serve the community. Such an outcome would, by omission, fail to address the real issue as I've outlined above. But it would also have a chilling effect on the Orthodox community in the UK, by signalling that rabbis should avoid addressing controversial issues, lest they be subject to an inquisition. Young rabbis are looking to you to reaffirm their right to speak honestly and freely, and to follow their consciences without fear of prosecution. And the damage would extend beyond the shores of the UK, as rabbis the world over who might consider posts in Britain reflect on the humiliation of one of their most talented and thoughtful colleagues.

Yours,

Daniel Jackson