# Haver Ha-Ir: A Model of Rabbinic Leadership

View PDF



Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and Editor of its journal, Conversations. This article originally appeared in Black Fire on White Fire: Essays in Honor of Rabbi Avi Weiss, edited by Daniel R. Goodman, Ktav, Brooklyn, 2017. It also appears in issue 31 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Among the titles that rabbinic literature ascribes to Torah scholars is *Haver Ha-Ir*. This phrase denotes someone of great learning, integrity and commitment to the welfare of the community.[1] Rabbi Benzion Uziel noted: "The rabbi of a community is called by our Sages *Haver Ir* because he tends to the needs of the public and gathers them for prayer and Torah study."[2]

The *Haver Ha-Ir* model of rabbinic leadership deserves careful attention. The rabbi is literally to be a "friend" of the city, a person who is engaged in people's lives, who strives to make society a better place. He is to feel personal responsibility for the spiritual and material wellbeing of the community. The *Haver Ha-Ir* is not an aloof scholar nor an otherworldly mystic, but is with the people and for the people.

We may explore the *Haver Ha-Ir* model by considering the teachings of four rabbinic figures of the modern period: Rabbi Benzion Uziel (1880–1953); Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993); Rabbi Haim David Halevy (1924–1998); and Rabbi Nahum Rabinovitch (1928–).

**Rabbi Benzion Uziel: *Yishuvo shel Olam***

Rabbi Uziel was the pre-eminent Sephardic rabbi and *posek* of his generation. Born and raised in Jerusalem, he distinguished himself as an outstanding Torah scholar and communal leader. He was the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1939 until his death in 1953. A prolific author, he is well known for his volumes of responsa, *Mishpetei Uziel*.[3]

At a rabbinic conference held in Jerusalem in 1919, Rabbi Uziel urged his colleagues to take an active role in the development of Jewish life in the land of Israel. He called on them to live and work among the people, to share their worries and aspirations, and to be an integral part of their lives: "This is our duty to our God and to our nation: to walk in the midst of the people, in the work of the people, to join ourselves in the task of building in all its forms, very carefully watching for the soul of the nation." It is incumbent upon rabbis to conduct themselves "with words of pleasantness and with love for each individual Jew." The religious message is best conveyed by establishing rapport with the public, by

working with them and respecting them. “Let us walk on our path together with all the people, to love and appreciate, to learn and to teach the Torah of Israel and its tradition in the presence of all.”[4]

During Israel’s War of Independence in 1948, a group of yeshiva students approached Rabbi Uziel and asked him to arrange exemptions for them from military service. They claimed that their study of Torah should take priority to serving as soldiers. Rabbi Uziel rebuked the students sharply. He told them that religious Jews, including yeshiva students, were obligated to share in the defense of the nation. If they were to influence society to live according to Torah, they themselves had to set an example that the public would respect and wish to emulate.[5]

Among the concepts that Rabbi Uziel emphasized in his teachings was the imperative to work for the general wellbeing of society—*yishuvo shel olam*. Judaism demands that its adherents live moral and upright lives. Religious Jews must feel troubled by any injustice in society and must strive to defend and protect the oppressed. Striving to create a harmonious society is not merely a reflection of social idealism; it is a religious mandate:

We are all workers and employees, each person according to his physical and intellectual abilities and talents; we are workers in the workplace to improve human life, to raise the level of culture and to fulfill the human charter for which we have been created and through which we live: to bring peace and truth, and the love of compassion and truth, throughout our world.”[6]

Each person who works honestly and efficiently is thereby helping to build a better world and is participating in *yishuvo shel olam*. Individuals who only seek their own interests, even if they are honest in their dealings, are not living up to the proper religious standard. A religious person should be constructive, honest, and concerned for the welfare of others.

The concept of fostering *yishuvo shel olam* not only relates to individuals; it is also a responsibility of the Jewish people as a whole. Just as we learn and benefit from other nations, so we are to contribute our own talents and energies for the advancement of humankind. Rabbi Uziel wrote:

Each country and each nation that respects itself does not and cannot be satisfied with its narrow boundaries and limited domains. Rather, they desire to bring in all that is good and beautiful, that is helpful and glorious to their national [cultural] treasury. And they wish to impart the maximum flow of their own blessings to the [cultural] treasury of humanity as a whole….Happy is the country and happy is the nation that can give itself an accounting of what it has taken from others; and more importantly, of what it has given of its own to the repository of all humanity. Woe unto that country and nation that encloses itself in its own four cubits and limits itself to its own narrow boundaries, lacking anything of its own to contribute [to humanity] and lacking the tools to receive [cultural] contributions from others.[7]

Rabbi Uziel noted that the Jewish people have contributed vastly to the idealism and morality of the world. Likewise, Jews have learned much from other nations. On balance, though, we have given far more than we have received.

As much as Israel drew from others…far, far more did it give of its own to others: Torah and light, purity of heart and the holiness of life, righteous justice and true ethics; love and appreciation of its

Torah, a Torah for the world; the words of its prophets and sages from generation to generation, all of whom were imbued with an elevated love of the God of the universe and all who were created in His image, of all His creations of nature, a wise ethics, words of peace and truth.[8]

*Yishuvo shel olam* is an obligation to seek the benefit of humanity. This entails not only a responsibility for the physical wellbeing of others, but also a commitment to expand human knowledge, technology, and general culture. *Yishuvo shel olam* is

a precondition and vital need for our attaining our proper way in life. In the settlement and building of the world, knowledge is increased. From our knowledge of the mysteries of nature, our eyes are opened to new and very wide horizons, from which we will arise and announce the wonders of God, Creator of the universe, and the ways of His wondrous and hidden providence, all of which are love, justice, kindness and compassion.[9]

When Rabbi Uziel became Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel in 1939, he delivered a radio address to the nation. He stressed the need for all residents of the land to work together in harmony:

Our first task is the establishment of true peace and strong unity among all segments of the people, its communities and ethnic groups, its organizations and parties; to call “peace, peace to those who are far and near” among ourselves; and peace with all our neighbors in the land, of all religions and peoples.[10]

Later in his address, he spoke in Arabic to the Arab population:

We reach our hands out to you in peace, pure and trustworthy. We say: the land is stretched out before us, and with joined hands we will work it, we will uncover its treasures, and we will live on it as brothers who dwell together. Know and trust that the word of God will rise forever. Make peace with us and we will make peace with you. Together all of us will benefit from the blessing of God on His land; with quiet and peace, with love and fellowship, with goodwill and pure heart we will find the way of peace.[11]

In his role as a *Haver Ha-Ir*, Rabbi Uziel was a role model of rabbinic leadership that was imbued with a keen sense of responsibility to individuals, to society, to people of all backgrounds. His grand religious vision sought unity and harmony in a world often characterized by dissension and violence.

**Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Moral Courage**

Rabbi Soloveitchik, the Rav, was the pre-eminent Orthodox rabbinic thinker of twentieth-century America. For many years, he taught Talmud at Yeshiva University and signed the rabbinic ordinations

of thousands of disciples. He was the *posek* of the Rabbinical Council of America, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations and the Religious Zionists of America. He was the founder of the Maimonides Day School in Boston. Through his classes, public lectures and writings, he has had singular impact on the recent generations of Modern Orthodox Jews.

In his own rabbinic career, he drew inspiration from the teachings of his illustrious grandfather, Rabbi Hayyim of Brisk. When R. Hayyim was asked to describe the function of a rabbi, he replied: "To redress the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone, to protect the dignity of the poor, and to save the oppressed from the hands of his oppressor."[12] In reporting these words of his grandfather, Rabbi Soloveitchik notes:

Neither ritual decisions nor political leadership constitutes the main task of halakhic man. Far from it. The actualization of the ideals of justice and righteousness is the pillar of fire which halakhic man follows, when he, as a rabbi and teacher in Israel, serves his community.[13]

Whereas some religions have an otherworldly focus, Judaism—as represented by halakhic man—is concerned primarily with this world. The goal is to bring comfort to those who suffer, justice to those who are oppressed, and kindness to those who are neglected:

Halakhic man is characterized by a powerful stiff-neckedness [*sic*] and stubbornness. He fights against life's evil and struggles relentlessly with the wicked kingdom and with all the hosts of iniquity in the cosmos. His goal is not flight to another world that is wholly good, but rather bringing down that eternal world into the midst of our world.[14]

To wage a battle for righteousness requires tremendous courage. One must be prepared to confront powerful opponents, people who wish to maintain their own control over others. "Halakhic man does not quiver before any man; he does not seek out compliments, nor does he require public approval."[15]

Rabbi Soloveitchik refers to an incident in the life of his grandfather, R. Hayyim of Brisk. It happened once that two Jews died in Brisk on the same day. In the morning, a poor shoemaker died. Later, a wealthy and prominent member of the community passed away. According to halakha, the one who dies first must be buried first. However, the members of the burial society decided (after they had apparently been given a handsome sum from the rich man's heirs) to attend to the rich man's burial first. When R. Hayyim learned of this, he sent a message to the burial society to desist from their disgraceful behavior. The members of the burial society refused to heed R. Hayyim's directive, and they continued to prepare for the burial of the wealthy man.

R. Hayyim then arose, took his walking stick, trudged over to the house of the deceased, and chased all the attendants outside. R. Hayyim prevailed—the poor man was buried before the rich man. R. Hayyim's enemies multiplied and increased. Thus have true halakhic men always acted, for their study and their deeds have blended together beautifully, truly beautifully.[16]

Halakha is unequivocally dedicated to fostering righteousness. The hallmark of great halakhic sages has been their lofty ethical standards and their deep respect for the dignity of others.

To recognize a person is not just to identify him physically. It is more than that: It is an act of identifying him existentially, as a person who has a job to do, that only he can do properly. To recognize a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person means to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him. The Halakhah equated the act of publicly embarrassing a person with murder.[17]

Halakhic Judaism is the antithesis of mystical quietism that views pain and suffering in a passive, fatalistic manner. Rather, the halakha "wants man to cry out aloud against any kind of pain, to react indignantly to all kinds of injustice or unfairness."[18]

In one of his *teshuvah* lectures, the Rav elaborated on the connection a Jew must feel toward *Knesset Israel*, the community of Israel that transcends time and place.

The Jew who believes in *Knesset Israel* is the Jew who lives as part of it wherever it is and is willing to give his life for it, feels its pain, rejoices with it, fights in its wars, groans at its defeats and celebrates its victories.[19]

The *Haver Ha-Ir* must have moral courage so as to set an example to others. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, "heroism is the central category in practical Judaism."[20]

**Rabbi Haim David Halevy: *Kevod HaBeriyot***

Rabbi Haim David Halevy was a prolific author and teacher, a gifted halakhic scholar, a devotee of kabbalah, and a creative thinker who applied Torah wisdom to the dilemmas of the modern world. From 1972 until his death in 1998, he served as Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv.

For a number of years, Rabbi Halevy conducted a popular Israeli radio program, *Asei Lekha Rav*, in which he answered a wide range of questions posed to him by listeners. He later wrote up and elaborated on his responses, publishing them in a series of volumes also entitled *Asei Lekha Rav*. In the first responsum in Volume One of this series, Rabbi Halevy noted that a rabbi was not simply a decisor of rabbinic law who ruled on what was forbidden and what was permitted. "Rather he is also—and perhaps mainly—an advisor to everyone in his community for all questions, small and large."[21]

A recurring theme in his voluminous writings was the respect due to fellow human beings. Sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others is a basic feature of proper religious life. An example of this sensitivity is evident in a responsum he wrote relating to wedding ceremonies.

Some rabbis had the practice of reciting the wedding blessings and then taking a sip of wine themselves. They then gave the wine to the groom and bride for them to drink from the wine cup. Rabbi Halevy ruled that rabbis should not drink from the cup before giving it to the couple. Some people feel uncomfortable drinking from a glass from which someone else has drunk. Even if many people do not mind drinking from the cup of others, "Aren't we obligated to worry about even the one

in a thousand who is particular, and who will drink the wine and feel hurt?"[22] Rabbi Halevy added that when he recited Kiddush at home, he would pass it to family members who did not mind drinking from a shared cup. But whenever he had a guest at the table, he poured from the Kiddush cup into a separate cup from which he drank. He would then pass the Kiddush cup to the others so that they could pour a bit of wine into their own clean cups.

In another case, Rabbi Halevy dealt with the following situation. On a Shabbat, a large group of family and friends attended a synagogue to celebrate with a bridegroom. Among the guests was a young man, who had become blind through an injury in battle while serving in the Israel Defense Forces. The family requested that this blind young man be given an *aliya*, but the rabbi of the synagogue cited the *Shulhan Arukh*, who ruled that a blind person may not be called to the Torah. The blind soldier told the rabbi that he was called to the Torah in his regular synagogue, but the rabbi was not swayed. Feeling angry and humiliated, the soldier and some members of his family left the synagogue.

When Rabbi Halevy heard of this case, he was deeply pained. The young soldier, who had sacrificed so much on behalf of his country, was treated shabbily. If the soldier told the rabbi that he had been receiving *aliyot* in his regular synagogue, the rabbi should have given credence to this. "How careful one must be when it comes to *kevod haBeriyot*, who were created in the image of God." Rabbi Halevy noted that the Sephardic community generally did not accept the ruling of the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayyim* 139:3) forbidding *aliyot* to blind people, but rather followed the opinion of other rabbinic authorities permitting this practice.[23]

Rabbi Halevy was asked if non-observant Jews should be allowed to participate in the celebration of finishing the writing of a Torah scroll. Usually, a qualified scribe would write the entire Torah, leaving the last few letters to be filled in by the sponsors or donors of the writing of the scroll. Rabbi Halevy permitted non-observant Jews to participate in this happy occasion. "If we prevent them from doing this, there is a fear of complaints, Heaven forbid, since the general practice [is to let non-observant Jews participate]." How embarrassing it would be for the non-observant people to be turned away from participating in this mitzvah. It would be a public humiliation that could deepen their alienation from religious observance.[24]

Rabbi Halevy criticized a practice of some religiously observant Jews to publicly scream at those who were violating Shabbat or other ritual laws. These pietists are vocal in their protest of laxities in ritual observances, yet "they remain quiet and take things in normal stride when they see social and ethical breakdowns in many areas of our public life, when people swallow each other alive, and the moral thread of our life is broken."[25] For Rabbi Halevy, religious Jews should demonstrate concern for all society and for the general moral health of society.

Rabbi Halevy's concern for society included his concern for the wellbeing of non-Jews. He argued that Christians and Muslims were not to be considered as "idolaters," nor were they to be subjected to talmudic rulings that related to idolaters. "Providing their sustenance, visiting their sick, burying their dead, comforting their mourners are all to be performed because of the human ethical imperative, not specifically [only] for the sake of peace."[26] Relationships between Jews and non-Jews, whether in Israel or the Diaspora, were to be governed by the moral obligations that bound all human beings.

**Rabbi Nahum Rabinovich: *Shutafut***

Rabbi Nahum Rabinovich has served as Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Maale Adumim for many years. A respected *posek* and thinker, his teachings provide important insight into the role of a *Haver Ha-Ir*.

Rabbi Rabinovich draws on the halakhic idea that members of a community are in a partnership relationship. They each share equally in rights and obligations. Since societies include members with different views, the notion of *shutafut*, partnership, is very important. Instead of each individual or group struggling in an adversarial manner against those with different opinions, all members of society should recognize that they are partners in the same venture. In spite of differences, they need to find ways of working together for the betterment of society as a whole.

In order to reach a practical agreement and cooperation among various groups of society, it is necessary to open doors of genuine dialogue among these groups. Dialogue among the various groups in society will enable them to overcome the deep rifts and conflicts that exist and that are growing.[27]

Rabbi Rabinovich pointed out that the religiously observant community had a responsibility to society as a whole, not merely to their own religious enclaves. Since the religious, along with all other citizens, are partners with equal rights and obligations, they need to be concerned with issues beyond their own neighborhoods. For example, since the Torah was given to all Jews, it is incumbent upon the religious education leaders to recognize their responsibility to the entire public. They should work in harmony with the general education system in order to meet the needs of all students, not only the students in the religious school system. They need to work for the inclusion of Torah values, without diminishing the need for students to study science and technology and other subjects that are essential for the social and economic life of the nation.

We must create religious schools not only for children [from religious families] but also for children whose parents want them to excel in computers, mathematics, vocations and other fields. In these schools children will also learn Torah…. Religious education can draw to itself a large portion of children in Israel, if only it would know how to approach the various groupings of society.[28]

As another example of how the religious community should be working in partnership with other segments of society, Rabbi Rabinovich points to economic issues. All society is impacted negatively by rampant inflation. Why then are the religious parties not front and center in dealing with this problem? Shouldn't rabbis throughout the land be preaching and teaching about the ills of inflation, the sufferings of the poor, and so forth? Why should economic issues be relegated to the domain of the "secular" community, when this is an area that impacts on society as a whole?[29]

Another striking example: seat belts. Many Israelis are killed or injured in automobile accidents each year. Some years ago, a suggestion was made to make wearing seat belts a legal requirement. This would save lives and reduce injuries. Yet, before a seat belt law was enacted in Israel, there were delays so that studies could be made to determine the effectiveness of seat belts. Yet, such studies had already been made in other countries and the evidence was clear that seat belts are an important safety feature. Why was so much time lost before enacting the law in Israel? Why wasn't this issue high among the priorities of the religious community? "The time has come for us to recognize that confronting such issues is a moral and religious obligation, and we must be the acute prodders in confronting situations which involve safety to life."[30]

Rabbi Rabinovich notes that

the light of Torah cannot be revealed or shown as long as Torah manifests itself as the Torah of a particular group, but only when the Torah is the Torah for all society. The challenge at the door of the sages of Torah is to demonstrate how great is the power of Torah for arranging the life of the community at large….We have the genuine opportunity to spread Torah among large segments of the Israeli public, and ultimately to almost all the residents of the State, if only we can succeed to break the sectarian or religious party muzzle. This will not be an easy task, and there are those on all sides who wish to protect their narrow interests and who strive to strengthen those muzzles. Nevertheless, we must undertake this task.[31]

For Rabbi Rabinovich, the principle of *shutafut* is at the heart of creating a vibrant and healthy society. Each member of society needs to feel a sense of partnership with all other members of society. Breaking into small self-contained "interest groups" undermines the general harmony of society.

The *Haver Ha-Ir* model of leadership entails a grand religious vision, courage, respect and a sense of partnership with all members of society. The rabbi, as an exemplar of this model of leadership, must strive not merely to study and teach Torah, but to *live* Torah.

[1] See *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, Jerusalem, 1978, volume 12, columns 532–536.
[2] *Sha'arei Uziel*, Jerusalem, 5751, Volume 1, 52.
[3] For more on Rabbi Uziel, see Marc D. Angel, *Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999).
[4] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, Tel Aviv, 5699, 328.
[5] Reported by Shabbetai Don Yihye, *HaRav Benzion Meir Hai Uziel: Hayav uMishnato* (Jerusalem: Histadrut HaZionit, 5715), 227.
[6] *Hegyonei Uziel*, Vol. 1, Jerusalem, 5713, 206–207.
[7] *Hegyonei Uziel*, Vol. 2, Jerusalem, 5714, 127.
[8] *Ibid*., 128.
[9] *Ibid*., 109.
[10] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, 424.
[11] *Ibid*., 429.
[12] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 91.
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] *Ibid*., 41.
[15] *Ibid*., 89.
[16] *Ibid*., 95.
[17] *Idem*, "The Community," *Tradition* 17:2 (1978), 16.
[18] *Idem*, "Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah," Ibid., 65.
[19] *Idem*, *Al haTeshuva*, ed., Pinchas Peli (Jerusalem: 5736), 98.
[20] "The Community," 13.
[21] Rabbi Haim David Halevy, *Asei Lekha Rav*, Tel Aviv, 5736, 1:1. For more on Rabbi Halevy, Marc D. Angel and Hayyim J. Angel, *Rabbi Haim David Halevy: Gentle Scholar and Courageous Thinker* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2006).
[22] *Asei Lekha Rav*, 8:74.
[23] *Ibid.*, 6:20.
[24] *Mayyim Hayyim*, 2:57.
[25] *Asei Lekha Rav*, 8:32–35.
[26] *Ibid.*, 9:33.
[27] Nahum Rabinovich, *Mesilot Bilvavam* (Maale Adumim: Maaliyot, 5775), 372.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 393.
[29] *Ibid*., p. 396.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 397.
[31] *Ibid*., p. 400.