Blacklists: Another Black Eye for the Israeli Chief Rabbinate

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By Rabbis Marc D. Angel and Avraham Weiss

The Talmud teaches that the mission of rabbinic scholars is to increase peace in the world. One interpretation is that they are to bring peace between Jews and the Almighty. Another interpretation is that they are to bring peace among all Jews, and indeed, among society as a whole. The challenge of rabbinic leadership is to actualize both interpretations.

Peace between Jews and God: Orthodox Judaism sees Torah, mitzvot and halakha as the key ingredients in our relationship with God. Orthodox rabbis devote their lives to fostering the ideals, values and observances of Torah Judaism. The hope is that when Jews find spiritual fulfillment in Torah and mitzvot, they will also find peace in their relationship with the Almighty.

This is precisely what the Chief Rabbinate represented when it was led by such luminaries as Rabbi BenzionMeir Hai Uziel and Rabbi Yitzhak Herzog, both of blessed memory. It was then an honored institution. It was visionary, inclusive, loving, compassionate, inspiring Jews across the spectrum to come closer to Torah.

With profound sadness we note that the present Rabbanut has not lived up to these ideals. Rather, it has fostered policies and attitudes that are exclusionary, insensitive and alienating. It has generated controversy and ill-will within our community. It has caused unnecessary grief to countless many who have come before the rabbinate with personal status issues; in particular, converts and those seeking to marry.

Indeed, the Orthodox rabbinic establishment in Israel has lost sight of its responsibility to bring peace between Jews and God. The Israeli Chief Rabbinate, in its increasing authoritarianism and insularity, is a chief source of dissension within Israel and the world Jewish community. Instead of being a bastion of God's Torah, the Rabbanut is perceived as a power-hungry, extremist entity that is bent on forcing its narrow views on Jewish society.

In a most recent outrage, it has been discovered that the Chief Rabbinate blacklists Orthodox rabbis who do not fit into their extreme, haredi worldview. Thus, hundreds of devoted, learned and upright rabbis are not trusted by the Rabbanut to perform conversions or even to attest to the Jewishness of individuals.

This egregious disregard for upstanding Orthodox rabbis is another black eye for the Orthodox rabbinic establishment. It demonstrates the suppression of legitimate diversity within halakha; it seeks to discredit anyone who will not fall into line with the narrow Orthodoxy that the Rabbanut espouses. The Chief Rabbinate and its cohorts promote policies that alienate Jews from God, that alienate would-be converts from Judaism, and that undermine the religious idealism that is the true foundation of Torah Judaism.

Peace among Jews: Matters have gotten worse. In its most recent ploy, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate has released a draft of a plan to accept only designated diaspora courts, not only for conversions – but for marriage and divorce as well. The stakes are higher, as invalidating divorces, sometimes going back years, could lead to irreversible problems of mamzerut in Israel, America and throughout the world. The Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) is mentioned as a court that will help the Chief Rabbinate carry out its decree.

It is critical that the Knesset and Jews worldwide challenge these dicta. The time has come for the Knesset and the Israeli government to restrict this increasing authoritarianism that attempts to exclude rabbis from the diaspora who do not share such narrow haredi opinions. The time has come for rabbis within the RCA to join in raising a voice of protest and not capitulate to the demands of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

Today, Israel's citizenry is pushing back against the Chief Rabbinate. Many conversions in Israel are being done outside of the rabbinate. An alternative Kashrut authority is certifying food kosher. A growing number of Israelis are marrying outside of the rabbinate.

It is precisely now when the Rabbanut is losing standing amongst Israelis, that it is doubling down and attempting to consolidate its power by introducing stricter ordinances not only in Israel, but in the diaspora. This effort must be rejected by all. The Knesset must declare that the Chief Rabbinate is no longer authorized to establish policies for the State of Israel and for Jews around the world. The Orthodox community worldwide, who wish the State of Israel to function as a modern Jewish democracy, must raise a voice of protest.

We believe that Israeli and diaspora Jewry want—and deserve—a rabbinate that is intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive.

It has been aptly noted that it is better to walk alone than to walk with a crowd going in the wrong direction. The Orthodox rabbinic establishment in Israel and the diaspora have been going in the wrong direction. It is time for all thinking Jews to turn the tide back in a proper direction. It is time for us to foster real peace between us and our God. It is time to work to bring genuine peace among ourselves.

"Rabbinic scholars increase peace in the world." Let this be so.