Israel's Chief Rabbinate: Time for a Change

View PDF



Isi Leibler, a member of our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, is a Jerusalem-based communal leader and writer. His columns are read by a worldwide audience, and are highly regarded for their clear-thinking no-nonsense approach to contemporary Jewish life.

I rubbed my eyes in disbelief when I read that Sephardi Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef has extended the ban on television and computers by decreeing that anyone using the “abomination” of smartphones be prohibited from leading prayers. Like most Israelis, I felt profoundly ashamed that a “chief rabbi” could seek to impose such primitive views on the Israeli public. Under such circumstances, is it any surprise that Israelis have utter contempt for the Chief Rabbinate?

The time has come for the vast majority of us, including nonobservant Jews, who take pride in the fact that we represent a cultured people which was at the forefront of enlightenment and civilization from time immemorial, to stand up and say enough is enough.

The state has imposed upon the nation a Chief Rabbinate that is now dominated by the most extreme and obscurantist elements. We are not living in the Middle Ages when our sages were actually trailblazers in enlightenment and worldliness. Indeed, Maimonides, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers and halachists of all time, was an utter repudiation of what today’s ultra-Orthodox extremists symbolize. Steeped in Torah, he was nevertheless a worldly man, considered one of the great physicians of his time, and even wrote books relating to Greek philosophy. He called on Jews to adhere to the “golden path” of moderation and shun extremism. However, because of his worldliness, Maimonides today would be ineligible to teach in most haredi educational institutions.

It is clear that this obscurantism has no relationship with piety or standards of religious observance. Many ultra-Orthodox Jews, especially in the Diaspora, take pride in high academic and professional achievements. Few endorse the extremes of gender separation and inequality which have more in common with the Taliban than with traditional Jewish practice. Likewise, many haredim reject the approach of extremist Israeli-based rabbis that commitment to a Torah life necessitates eschewing a livelihood.

Under the mantle of the Chief Rabbinate, the extremists display contempt for and seek to undermine the Zionist state -- which pays their salaries. They prohibit their followers from serving in the army or performing national service.

If these elements merely sought to practice an obscurantist lifestyle, that would be their democratic prerogative. However, it is outrageous to seek to impose on the entire nation rigid and primitive lifestyles inconsistent with the Judaism that sustained our people throughout the millennia.

In the past, we were privileged to have chief rabbis who were spiritual giants -- Rabbi Isaac Herzog, Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Uziel and Rabbi Shlomo Goren -- whose piety and learning was unsurpassed and who sought to unify the nation, thus making Yitzhak Yosef’s edicts sound like the ravings of a troglodyte.

The current Chief Rabbinate and its courts are incompetent and corrupt and largely recruited on the basis of “jobs for the boys.” They lack a modicum of compassion and frequently transform what should be routine marriage applications into a bureaucratic nightmare, encouraging thousands of nonobservant Israelis to bypass the rabbinate and perform their secular weddings in Cyprus and elsewhere. Were it not for the admirable and courageous work of Tzohar, the rabbinical organization that provides a warm and friendly service for thousands of Israelis, the numbers would be even higher.

But the worst aspect of this abhorrent structure is the almost venomous approach toward converts which is disparaging, humiliating and usually forces them to withdraw in disgust.

There are over 300,000 Russian immigrants who regard themselves as Jews, are indistinguishable from other Israelis, and serve in the army but are not considered halachically Jewish. It is clearly in the national interest to encourage them to convert before the impending crisis when they will seek to wed and will be told that they are ineligible because they are not Jewish. This has potentially enormously divisive social implications and the makings of a long-term disaster

for the state.

Instead of employing halachic precedents for easing conversions of Jews of mixed marriage -- especially from a society like the Soviet Union which denied Jews the right to a religious education and ruthlessly persecuted those seeking to practice their Judaism -- today’s Chief Rabbinate does the opposite.

Indeed, current Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau was only elected after pledging not to tamper with the prevailing conversion restrictions without the approval of the extremist elements such as those who sought to retroactively annul conversions authorized by religious Zionist Rabbi Haim Drukman.

In recent years, the Chief Rabbinate attempted to widen its influence and also sought to centralize control of rabbis in the Diaspora akin to the Vatican’s control of the Catholic Church. It demanded total subservience to its stringent and hostile approach toward conversion and rejected conversions undertaken by more enlightened Orthodox rabbis despite the fact that, according to Halachah, a conversion court can be convened by any three religiously ordained rabbis. If successful, this centralization would lead to a reign of zealotry unprecedented in Jewish history. From the Mishnaic era, there were disputes in halachic interpretations between the more stringent followers of Shammai and the more liberal disciples of Hillel, but the people could select the rabbi they chose to follow, and no one disputed their legitimacy.

The previous government, which excluded the haredi parties, intervened and tabled legislation to enable Israelis to select the rabbis of their choice for marriage, divorce and conversion. Unfortunately, under pressure from the haredi political parties, the current government turned the clock back, reverting to the totally centralized control by the Chief Rabbinate. This emboldened the Chief Rabbinate to further abuse its power by attempting to force the retirement of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, one of the principal and highly respected Orthodox rabbis seeking to bring about conversion reform. Only due to a storm of protest did the attempt fail.

This led to a schism and the creation of a new conversion court, independent of the Chief Rabbinate, headed by a renowned scholar Rabbi Nahum Eliezer Rabinovitch, head of the Maaleh Adumim hesder yeshiva, Rabbi Riskin, and Rabbi David Stav, head of Tzohar.

This court, rather than seeking to impose the most stringent regime of observance on converts, will apply the more flexible solutions and interpretations

of Maimonides reflected in the approach of former Chief Rabbi Uziel, who approved conversions without obsessing on the minutiae of observance.

This is an explosive situation, with the haredi groups in government pressing Netanyahu to compel the Interior Ministry to endorse the Chief Rabbinate's refusal to recognize conversions by the new courts.

With a majority of one, Netanyahu is in an impossible position -- which he himself created by capitulating to all the haredi demands when he formed his government.

Yet, if the new conversion courts are not recognized by the Interior Ministry, we face a social disaster in which the most extreme elements of the ultra-Orthodox will further intensify their control of the nation.

The truth is that the current Chief Rabbinate -- which has no standing as an institution in Halachah -- alienates the nation from Judaism. No communal group accepts its authority. Despite having hijacked the Chief Rabbinate to exploit it as an instrument to impose their stringent interpretations, haredim themselves continue to despise the institution. Many also feel embarrassed by the primitive outbursts like those of Yitzhak Yosef, and recognize the need to educate their children so that they can earn a livelihood. Religious Zionists are obviously appalled with the abuse of an institution that was created to unite the nation and is now dividing it.

But it is the secular parties from both the Left and Right that created the haredi Frankenstein's monster. Most nonobservant Jews are utterly ignorant and incapable of distinguishing between any varieties of Judaism and display contempt for all forms of religion. They fail to understand that the religious orientation of the state-sponsored rabbinical establishment is at the core of national identity.

The secular parties should have ensured that qualification for rabbinical leadership, at a minimum, involves loyalty to the Jewish nation state and its institutions. To have rabbis on a state payroll who refuse to permit the prayers for the welfare of the state and its armed forces in their synagogues, is an abomination. For secular parties, for the sake of political expediency, to endorse the appointment of a chief rabbi who has himself not served in the army and does not support the draft, is unconscionable.

Today we stand at a crossroads. In an ideal society, the prime minister and leader of the opposition would suspend political differences on this issue and either

dissolve or restructure the Chief Rabbinate so that it provides a Zionist religious leadership, more in tune with the national need. But since this is unlikely to happen, the secular Zionist parties will bear the guilt for exploiting short-term political benefits to create generations of extremists and anti-Zionists who will ultimately undermine the Zionist state and devour them.

Isi Leibler may be contacted at ileibler@leibler.com