Poisoning the Soul of Judaism

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is founder and director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (jewishideas.org). He is past president of the Rabbinical Council of America. He and Rabbi Avi Weiss are co-founders of the International Rabbinic Fellowship.

I first visited Tel Aviv's Chief Rabbi Haim David Halevy, of blessed memory, in the summer of 1984. I was then a 15-year veteran of the American Orthodox rabbinate serving a large congregation in New York City.

At our meeting, we discussed the increasing authoritarianism and extremism that were spreading relentlessly within the Orthodox world. With sadness in his eyes, he asked me: "Have you heard of the mafia? We have a rabbinic mafia here in Israel!" A small clique was arrogating power to itself and marginalizing those who held opinions that differed with them. Instead of viewing halakha in its remarkable diversity, this clique was advocating a halakha that seemed to have only one answer to every question, one view on every issue.

Rabbi Halevy looked forward to the day when all Jews would be living in Israel. But as long as Jews were living in the diaspora, they needed religious leadership. Rabbi Halevy—and other leading rabbis of those days—viewed the American Orthodox rabbinate as partners and friends. They understood that these rabbis devoted their lives to spreading the teachings of Torah, and that they struggled mightily to maintain Orthodoxy within an American Jewry that was overwhelmingly not Orthodox.

In my memory, I have relived my 1984 meeting with Rabbi Halevy many times. As I write these lines, I am reliving that meeting once again.

Rabbi Halevy lamented the marginalization of rabbis who do not follow the "party line," who offer original halakhic opinions, who refuse to stifle their freedom in

order to curry favor with the rabbinic power-brokers. This tendency has only worsened in recent years. One manifestation of this is the current attempt to marginalize Rabbi Avi Weiss of Riverdale, New York. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel has refused to accept Rabbi Weiss's letter attesting to the Jewishness of one of his congregants.

Rabbi Weiss has spent a lifetime working for Torah and mitzvoth. His Orthodox commitments are beyond reproach. He is one of the most prominent Orthodox rabbis in America, having built a thriving community, having brought many Jews into Torah learning and observance, having founded an Orthodox rabbinical school, having sacrificed so much for the honor of Torah, Israel and the Jewish people.

How then is it possible for the Chief Rabbinate to discredit him? I recall Rabbi Halevy's sad observation that there is a rabbinic "mafia" at work, a group which sees itself as the only legitimate gatekeepers of Orthodoxy. Rabbi Weiss is surely not popular among this "mafia." He unabashedly argues for a creative, open, modern Orthodoxy. He seeks ways, within halakhic parameters, to increase the role of women in our synagogues and communities. He seeks ways of working together with all Jews, Orthodox and non-Orthodox. He strives to enhance relationships between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish communities among whom we live.

Rabbi Avi Weiss does not wear a black hat, nor have a long beard, nor hang his tsitsith outside his pants. But he surely is Orthodox, and proudly so. For the Chief Rabbinate to delegitimize Rabbi Weiss's Orthodoxy is not only a sin against Rabbi Weiss, but against all modern Orthodox rabbis—and a sin against Torah itself.

Rabbi Halevy—and other leading rabbis of his time—viewed the Orthodox rabbinate of the diaspora as allies. The Chief Rabbinate relied upon these rabbis and trusted their documents of Jewish identity and conversion.

This sense of partnership snapped when the Chief Rabbinate of Israel in 2006 stated that it would no longer accept documents of conversion by Orthodox rabbis of the diaspora, unless these rabbis were on an "approved" list. Thus, in one fell swoop, the Chief Rabbinate undermined the authority and credibility of hundreds of American Orthodox rabbis. The sense of partnership has slipped into the outright alienation of many American Orthodox rabbis from the Chief Rabbinate. The Rabbanut's shoddy treatment of Rabbi Weiss deepens this alienation.

Modern Orthodox rabbis and their many communities wonder: Can we still have respect for Israel's Chief Rabbinate? Why has the State of Israel allowed its Chief Rabbinate to slander Rabbi Weiss and the entire modern Orthodox Jewish community of America? Why is the glory of Torah being dragged into the mud by a clique of rabbinic power-brokers whose views on Torah are so narrow and extreme?

I can still visualize Rabbi Halevy's sad countenance when he spoke to me of the rabbinic "mafia" that was endangering religious life. I can still hear his words of encouragement to me and other diaspora Orthodox rabbis: "Happy are you who keep the flame of Torah alive in your communities." It is now nearly thirty years later. The extremists have grown more extreme. The partnership between the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and the diaspora modern Orthodox rabbis has frayed to the breaking point.

The issue today is not the Orthodox legitimacy of Rabbi Weiss and the modern Orthodox rabbinate. The issue is the legitimacy of Israel's Chief Rabbinate and the "hareidized" rabbinic establishment. Will the Jews in Israel and the diaspora finally stand up against a religious tyranny that is poisoning the soul of Judaism and undermining the spiritual wellbeing of the Jewish people?