

# Chief Rabbis

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, has voted to make changes to the positions of Chief Rabbi in Israel, notably to merge two positions into one. Of course, those who stand to lose their perks are up in arms! It is risible that religious positions should be decided by governments altogether. Indeed, I find it a joke that similar appointments are sometimes made at the behest of a collection of common and garden laymen who may be reasonably good at running businesses and very nice, sincere human beings (sometimes) but understand as much about rabbinics as a Cossack (or Madonna) understands Kabbalah.

The situation in Israel comes about because of politics. Originally it was the British Government Mandate personnel thinking they had to imitate a discredited English system. Then the position was reinforced as a result of the negotiations of religious parties who were looking for jobs for the boys. Amazingly, in the main, the choices have been felicitous. The first Chief Rabbi of Israel was the great and saintly Rav Abraham Isaac Hacoen Kook. He was totally vilified by Rav Sonnenfeld and the Ultra community who found the very notion of an appointed Chief offensive. Then there was Rabbi Isaac Herzog, another saintly, scholarly great man. Later on came fighting characters like Rav Goren and his Sephardi nemesis Rav Ovadia Yosef. Both men were scholars and fighters but ended up fighting each other. Most of their successors have been placemen of varying degrees of learning and charisma.

But after the establishment of the State politics took more specific control and only men associated with certain parties qualified for selection. And the main body of outstanding candidates from the Ultra-Orthodox communities would have absolutely nothing to do with appointments set up at the behest of a secular government and controlled by lay politicians. Perhaps had the politicians been theirs they might have!

Amongst the politically motivated innovations was the insistence on two Chief Rabbis, one for Sephardim and one for Ashkenazim—another example of unnecessary Israeli bureaucracy, doubling of jobs, offices, cars and expenses but hey, what's new in Israeli politics. The real issue was that the very Orthodox, as elsewhere in the world, didn't give a hoot for Chief Rabbis or government appointees and totally ignored the system at best, or humiliated it and poured scorn upon it at worst.

For them, a rabbi of any sort has to prove his leadership based on knowledge and, in some cases, spiritual greatness. Once upon a Talmudic time rabbis were elevated by their peers on the basis of spirit and learning rather than political manoeuvring or beauty contests. But over recent centuries the secular world has asked to have Jewish religious leaders to fulfil diplomatic and representational roles which, by their very nature, are totally different from, and often diametrically opposed to, real innovative leadership. So Israel has appointed two Chief Rabbis for limited terms, who in the main have

spent as much time treading on each others toes as they have trying to bridge the gaps between religious and secular. And, as with all politics, mud is flung around with accusations against candidates of sexual and monetary impropriety.

Now the average Orthodox Jew around the world today follows the dictates of his Rebbe, if he or she is a Chassid, or his Rosh Yeshiva, if he is a Litvak, or one of a select body of men whose scholarship and expertise is established and accepted regardless of any position they may hold. They would no more turn to a Chief Rabbi for a halachic opinion than they would to Michael Jackson to explain Bach. The role of Chief Rabbis is essentially both functionary and diplomatic, and some of the holders do an excellent job. But there's absolutely no need for two of them unless they were to divide the role quite rightly into its two very different roles. If that were to happen I'd have some sympathy. But otherwise, on balance, I do not for the life of me see what the Chief Rabbis have to offer Israel altogether. They play to a restricted constituency of largely uninterested or apathetic citizens and the money spent on them would be better used helping the poor or improving the standard of education.

Of course, I am an anti-establishment rebel and I think genuine religious leadership emerges naturally, not through appointment. But I have yet to hear persuasive arguments in favor. The most dynamic of Jewish communities, the United States, has managed far better than most without one. No one seems to have noticed!

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