

Great Leaders?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Very few Jews, let alone others, have heard of him. A few weeks ago Dayan Eliezer Waldenberg, the author of the magisterial compilation of legal opinions, Tzitz Eliezer, died at the age of 89. He was, in my opinion the greatest living authority on Jewish Law with particular reference to science and medicine. He was my halachic mentor. But more than this, he was a very modest man who did not allow himself to be used by politicians or indeed to get involved in politics. He was not manipulated by hangers-on filtering both questions and answers. He was self-effacing and spiritual. He met the criteria that I would apply to a Gadol, the term used to describe the great religious authorities of each generation, but he never allowed people to use it of him. His departure is a great loss.

We live in an era in which Judaism is being re-cast in an almost unrecognizable straightjacket. One of the pieces of this new paradigm is the use of the term "Gadol" ("Great") of certain rabbis. Most Jews and non-Jews only hear of Chief Rabbis or other appointees. Rarely do they hear of the true leader, the Gadol. The ultra-Orthodox world declares that one can only rely on the Gadol, for a true and authentic view and opinion on Torah. In theory it is absolutely right that only someone of great knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality, divested of personal ambition, political aspirations, and mundane physical concerns can try to fathom the depths of Torah as the vehicle of Divine communication with humanity. But until very recently no great rabbi ever was called or arrogated to himself the title "Gadol". And never over the past two thousand years has the law been the exclusive domain of one or just a few men alone,

Great Jewish spiritual leaders are still human beings and, since the days of the prophets, they have never been invested with superhuman infallibility. Yet at the latest Agudah Convention in the USA one keynote speaker is reported to have said that only the Gedolim of today can possibly understand the opinions and teaching of earlier rabbis, and that they alone have the greatness to mediate and explain them.

My cynicism about the way "Gedolim" as a generic term has been purloined and remodelled began many years ago when I became aware of the Moetzet Gedolei HaTorah, Council of Torah Sages, established by the non-Zionist Orthodox Israeli political party, Agudah, as its supreme religious authority, roping in many of the well-known Lithuanian and Chasidic rabbis. The council was, in fact, the plaything of the Augdah politicians, notably Rabbi Menachem Porush, who used them and led them a merry dance. My great Rosh Yeshivah, Reb Chaim Shmulevitz Z''L, derided the charade and indeed often publicly excoriated Agudah politics, while sadly accepting their handouts to keep Mir alive in its struggling years during the 1950's and 60's. Later on Rav Shach ZL, the head of Ponevez Yeshivah, set up alternative parties, encouraging Shas to challenge Agudah, and then Degel HaTorah, when they got too big for their boots. (I mention this as an example of the quagmire of religion and politics

that is Israel, and that even great scholars can get caught up in.)

Then other outstanding rabbis like Rav Eliashiv emerged. (One is not allowed to record that he served for many years in the State Rabbinate, because in his new metamorphosis as Big Gun of the Ultras this is considered malicious gossip). But, sadly, the new leaders allowed themselves to be misquoted and used to humiliate and defame men like Rabbi Slifkin, the Zoo Rabbi, for quoting rabbinic sources that were taboo to fundamentalists, though totally authentic. In these ways the noble and essential concept of the Gadol has been dragged down through misappropriation and manipulation.

In recent weeks the great Lithuanian (Yeshivish) centre of Lakewood, in the USA, has been the source of a statement from "Gedolim" calling for all children living in homes where the internet is available to be expelled from their schools for fear of contamination. We are by now all aware of the dangers of television and the internet. On the one hand, they both provide unimagined access to news, opinions, information, texts and resources. On the other, they both open up to all and sundry the crudest, most despicable lewdness and corruption imaginable.

Yet it has always been my belief that censorship doesn't work. I know of many children in London, Antwerp, Bnei Brak, and Monsey who are denied these tools of entertainment and information at home, then when they escape or find themselves in situations where they can access these forbidden fruits often go overboard like a starving child put in front of a banquet. But what worries me is not the desire to ban, in the vain hope it will help. What worries me is the cruel exclusion of children simply because of the presence of an inanimate object, with no consideration of whether it is being used responsibly or not. If this is symptomatic of the decisions of Gedolim, I am mightily concerned.

It was the great Chatam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer, born 1762 in Frankfurt, and died 1839 in Pressburg) who established modern ultra-Orthodoxy in reaction to the Enlightenment with the notorious misuse of a phrase that "anything new is forbidden." (Its original form referred exclusively to new produce before the tithes were taken.) This has now been adopted as the motto of ultra-Orthodoxy. But this point of view was not at all normative. Here is a quote from the Mishna Eduyot 1.6:

Rabbi Judah said, "Why are opinions of individual rabbis recorded even when they are overruled by majority of others? So that if in the future someone says, 'I have studied and I come to a different opinion and it is based on this individual,' he will have his authority to rely on."

Clearly, in those days they did think that later rabbis could conceivably come to different conclusions. They did not think that if at one moment in time an opinion gained currency that this was the end of the matter. Yet now we are told that not only can we never, ever overrule, but we cannot even understand the past!

There is one final aspect of this situation that I find most disturbing. Silence. At the same Agudah conference it was said that the Gedolim are dealing with issues of drug abuse, marital violence, delinquency, and other problems increasingly affecting the cloistered world of the ghetto that finds it cannot hermetically seal itself off from the outside world. But this is all going on behind closed doors, quietly and discretely, and we must accept this and not question, and have faith. Instead of welcoming difference and contrary contributions, the current mood of religious mediocrities is to try to suppress all this, very often using great men as mouthpieces, and very often presenting to them loaded questions to elicit required answers.

This is typical of all forms of autocracy. Obey and do not challenge. But this is not the Talmudic way, nor the authentic Jewish way in any sense. The whole point of the Talmudic method is to challenge openly and to lay one's arguments on the line. This is the very method whereby Jewish law has evolved over the years. To stop it is to betray our tradition, to betray the rabbis of the Talmud.

However, this is changing. More and more Charedi people are expressing their dissatisfaction with leadership. Not openly, of course, because they still want to belong. But increasingly bloggers are revealing abuses within the ultra-Orthodox world—and what hopeful, healthy and optimistic thing this is. These are straws of in the wind of change. Of course, a good deal of time was spent at the Agudah conference excoriating bloggers—this is clearly the new Devil's pastime! But why the fear of open discussion if there is nothing to hide?

No one person, no leader alone, can turn things around. Most contrary voices are simply dismissed with scorn. But every revolution begins at grassroots level and then slowly permeates either to change attitudes or to overthrow those who seek to suppress them. It is now clear to everyone that the real growth area in Judaism is amongst the Committed Orthodox. It is equally clear that this trend could be counterproductive if there is no adaptation.

Those of us who criticize the Orthodox world do not want to see it overthrown, for we are a part of it. But we do want to see it open up to ideas and debate. The important thing is that our views are there to be discussed and spread. Eventually they will rise to the surface.

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