

Divine Supervision

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have always felt that in a democracy it should not be the role of a state to impose personal religious practices on its citizens. Any state bureaucracy tends to become corrupt and atrophies. Its employees become pen-pushers, placeholders concerned with protecting their positions, perks, and powers. So it is with religious bureaucracies like the Vatican. One sees this too in Israel, where the Chief Rabbinate has become a byword for corruption, incompetence, politics, and alienation.

All Israelis are forced into the clutches of their religious authorities because Christian, Jew, and Muslim can only get married religiously. Often one is forced to have one's wedding performed by a clergyman whom one dislikes, despises, or finds irrelevant. Many Israelis go abroad to marry, because although there is no civil marriage in Israel, itself, it does recognize such marriages contracted abroad.

The handing of personal status to the rabbinate was part of Ben Gurion's concordat with the religious parties when he came to power. He felt that this would preserve the unity of the people and underpin the state. In theory he was right. The state should support its traditional religious identity in public, to buttress its religious institutions and educational facilities. But he was wrong in thinking that compulsion was the way to do it.

Many countries support and give priority to their religious infrastructure without making it obligatory on its citizens. Friends tell me that if Israel were to allow civil marriages or disestablish the Chief Rabbinate, religious life would collapse. What nonsense. It hasn't in the USA, where affiliation is voluntary. Britain supports most religions and their schools without imposition. And throughout the Jewish world Jews are free to choose to affiliate or not.

The argument goes that without a state rabbinate one would not know who counts as Jewish or not. But that's no different than the diaspora, where if you want to marry in an Orthodox synagogue or send your children to an Orthodox school the onus is on the individual to either justify his pedigree or put things right through conversion. Some do, many do not, but it hasn't stopped Orthodox institutions from thriving. Besides there are many ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel who don't accept the state rabbinate anyway.

Anyway other religious authorities have proliferated purely voluntarily and on the basis of commercial or sectarian criteria. Meanwhile the Chief Rabbinate fights back and makes a fool of itself trying to blackball other Orthodox rabbis it does not agree with.

Kashrut supervision in Israel in general is notoriously corrupt and unreliable. Supervisors are paid by establishment owners, and therefore are inclined to accommodate their paymasters rather than their religious

principles, turning blind eyes. They are casual supervisors, supposed to regularly drop by to check but rarely do. They sit and study (or play chess) and collect their checks. They have no interest in hygiene or training staff. Yet the system requires them because many Israelis and tourists like to have kosher food, so hotels and restaurants for commercial necessity need to have certification. Kosher certification is controlled by law, and therefore no one can claim to be kosher, even if they are, without the rabbinates' approval.

The same can be said of conversions. The system is chaotic, unfair and not working. The Chief Rabbinate argues that it must uphold tradition and the law, and that the road to hell and assimilation is paved with good, lenient intentions. But the question surely is whether the standards they apply are those the Talmud refers to as that which "most of the community can stand by".

There was a time in the sixties when the Chief Rabbinate and its rabbis were dominated by the more openminded nationalist rabbinates, which was much more moderate. Over time they have been pushed out as more Charedi rabbis take over the well paying jobs with perks. Instead of it becoming more tolerant and openminded, it is getting more rigid. There are exceptions and some remarkably human, tolerant rabbis in the rabbinates. But they are becoming increasingly Khomeini-ized!

This has led to several grassroots movements. The most famous is [TZOHAR](#), a group of rabbis eager to show the humane, tolerant, and moderate face of the rabbinates. Another is the new organization [Hashgacha Pratit](#). Its name is a pun on the term usually used for Divine Protection. The same words can mean what it stands for: Private Supervision.

It is the baby of Rav Aaron Leibowitz, and it is a community-based kashrut project. Rav Aaron is also on the Jerusalem City Council, as well as the diverse [Sulam Yaakov community in Nachlaot](#), where Sfardi, Ashkanazi, Yemenite, Chassidish, religious and non-religious residents live, work, and thrive.

Rav Aaron set up an organization that sends supervisors into catering establishments to create a personal and cooperative relationship with owners to provide certification of social trust and reliability. This includes supervision of food, ethical working conditions, and a guarantee of hygiene. It pays its supervisors rather than the owners. It is gaining more and more support from those who are dissatisfied with the Rabbinate. And it has defended itself in court against attempts by the Rabbinate to shut it down.

Rav Aaron knows he cannot change or replace set the Chief Rabbinate. He simply hopes that over time people will see the validity of his approach and pressure the Knesset for change. I admire him and urge you to support his organization.

Sadly, I see no chance of things changing because the left-wing, secular parties seem so removed from the populace that there is little chance of their gaining the power in the Knesset needed to reform the system. Just this

week the Netanyahu cabinet overturned the decision of the previous government to break the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate on conversions. A bill which allowed local rabbis to perform conversions has been rescinded because Netanyahu needs the votes of Charedi parties. Heck, I didn't like him before, I like him even less now, even if we all know how dirty all politics is.

I have an academic friend whom I admire. He was too left-wing for Bar Ilan University when he taught there and is too right-wing for Ben Gurion University where he teaches now. He tells me that in regard to the Rabbinate he is a revolutionary. Chipping away will not work. He just wants to bring the whole state religious edifice down and split off State from Religion.

Perhaps he is right. But in the meantime, I still think we should support men like Rav Leibowitz as well as TZOHAR and Rav Daniel Sperber—anyone who has the guts to stand up for the moderation they believe in and represent Judaism as a spiritual institution, rather a bureaucratic money machine.