

An Educational Approach to the Chief Rabbinate

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Background

Israel is in the midst of electing the country's next Chief Rabbis, and many people are disturbed by the current controversy surrounding the election process. They feel that much of the related public discourse is inappropriate and unbecoming.

The following article is meant neither as an endorsement of any particular candidate nor as a discussion of the merits of the rabbinic selection process. Rather, it addresses the question: How can we, as parents and educators, help our children understand recent events?

Basic premises

1. Without prophets to tell us whom to anoint in Hashem's Name, we must rely on a human election process, which is flawed by definition. In order to ensure that the Chief Rabbinate represent the entire nation, both rabbis and representatives of the public were deliberately included in the election process. Yet, as a result, the process is subject to the same forces that affect the political sphere. Although some claim that the problem is that the politicians prevent the rabbis from reaching a decision, I believe that it is not that simple. After all, there are significant differences of opinion between different groups of rabbis. In any event, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* expects us to discuss matters for the sake of Heaven, to listen to our fellow men, and to reach a principled decision.
2. We must try and look at the bigger picture. The Religious-Zionist sector is inherently ideological, and therefore, it is comprised of different sub-sectors which prefer to emphasize different values over others. As a result, the assorted sectors often disagree as to what makes an ideal Chief Rabbi. For instance, following Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohein Kook's death, the Mizrachi party was split as to who should serve as the next Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi. Rav Maimon (a Mizrachi leader) supported Rav Charlap, but Rav Berlin (another Mizrachi leader) backed Rav Herzog (who was ultimately chosen). Similarly, during the 5724 (1964) elections, a number of national-religious leaders supported Rav Unterman, while others preferred Rav Goren. In other words, there is nothing wrong with ideological and Torah-based disputes per se, and different people and groups have the right to promote one candidate over another. Indeed, the current disagreement is simply yet another legitimate dispute in a long line of examples throughout the millennia of Jewish history. For example, Rabban Gamliel of Yavne was dismissed as *nasi* (due to his treatment of R' Yehoshua) and replaced by R' Elazar ben Azariah. Eventually, a de facto rotation was set up between these two Torah giants. (See BT Brachot 28 and other sources).

3. We must recognize that the media bears much of the blame for the current uproar. After all, the media has long since given up on reporting the news and instead has turned to generating it. Aggressive interviewing tactics are the norm, and many reporters are not above provoking someone into blurting out an unfortunate yet hastily-regretted statement. Inevitably, this statement then leads to dramatic (but not necessarily accurate) headlines, and someone with an opposing viewpoint is asked, "Did you hear what your opponent had to say? You must respond!" And thus, instead of quiet and thoughtful discussions, we are treated to media frenzies. We must recall that the controversy was partially (but not fully) exacerbated by media outlets – many of which did not exist in the past (e.g., websites, etc.).
4. These observations help us take a broader look at current events, but they are not intended to obscure the fact that rabbis do not always see eye-to-eye on what makes an ideal rabbinic candidate. Nevertheless, here, too, we must step back and see the bigger picture. We must remember that those who are actively involved in the process truly believe that their candidate best serves *Am Yisrael's* interests, and therefore, they invest considerable time and effort – at great personal cost - to promote that candidate. Meanwhile, others may feel exactly the same way about a different candidate. Sometimes, talks between the two parties gets somewhat heated, and occasionally, their students and "associates" are drawn into the dispute and act in ways that their rabbis never imagined.
5. Yet, when all is said and done, the media is filled with reports of actions and statements that are very hard to understand. Thus, the question is: What are our personal roles, and what can we learn from this issue?

Our roles

1. In general, I believe that we must talk about sensitive current events with our students and children. They should not be exposed to a journalist's slant on a given issue without hearing the Torah's approach to the same subject. However, in my humble opinion, this specific case is the exception to the rule. Many young people have no interest in this issue, and they tend to skip over the numerous scholarly articles on the topic (including those appearing in the *parshat shavua* sheets geared for the younger generation). There is no reason to drag them into the dark side of this issue, and therefore, wherever possible, I would keep them away from it.¹
2. We must consider "the day after." If our children are led to think that Rav A opposes Rav B and that Rav B opposes Rav A, they may come to believe that both rabbis are justified. In fact, the current controversy may cause them to rethink their attitude to rabbis in general and even, *chalilah*, to the Torah itself. Hence, we must make every effort to preserve their innocence. We can learn something from every Torah scholar, and the Torah is "our life and the length of our days" (from the Maariv prayer service). Woe to us, if we sit at the Shabbat table or in the living room and slander this or that rabbi (whether verbally or with our body language...). We cannot be critical of the current uproar while employing the same style and language with our children. *Lashon hara* (literally, "evil speech") comes at a stiff spiritual price, which cannot be quantified even in basic educational terms.
3. The issue at hand has its roots in many important, topical, and appropriate questions and is based on our understanding of the Rabbinat's role and inherent potential. Together with our students or children, we can examine these underlying principles. Inter alia, we can ask: Why does the modern State of Israel need a Chief Rabbinat? What does it teach us about

¹ For the minority that is interested, I recommend organizing voluntary activities in school or sounding out the kids at home, to see if they are interested in discussing the elections for the next Chief Rabbis.

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Religious Zionism? With older kids, we can delve into more complex questions. For example, theoretically speaking (without bringing up specific names), which is preferable: a Chief Rabbi who is a great Torah scholar and is revered by other rabbis or a Chief Rabbi who is a great Torah scholar and spreads the word of Hashem to the public at large? Similarly, which is preferable: a Chief Rabbi who is a great Torah scholar and is accepted by the Chareidi community or a Chief Rabbi who is a great Torah scholar and is accepted by the secular public? These are important questions, and they enable us to examine the issues without being drawn into the dark corners of the controversy.

4. At the same time, we must also discuss our own personal roles. We must learn to avoid *lashon hara*, to disregard exaggerated media reports, and to stay away from the venomous world of online comments. Instead, we must continue to look at every person with an *ayin tovah* (literally, "a good eye") and ask ourselves what we can learn from him or her.
5. And finally, we must look inward. What can the current controversy teach us about how to handle disagreements in our personal lives? What can we do to ensure that the disagreement is purely for the sake of Heaven and that a difference of opinion does not lead, *chalilah*, to discord in our hearts? Furthermore, if we feel that a certain issue impinges on the Torah's honor, *chalilah*, what can we do to strengthen and reinforce *Kavod Shamayim* (literally, the honor of Heaven)?

May we be privileged to see the big picture and to keep our eyes on the goal – namely, living our personal and public lives in a way that will lead to a *Kiddush Hashem* (a sanctification of the Name of Heaven) and the Torah's revelation in this world. And although it may tarry, we will continue to strive for it daily.

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