

THE LEADERSHIP VACUUM FACING ULTRA-ORTHODOX JEWRY

By Anshel Pfeffer Tags: Jewish World Orthodox Jews

As the last of the generation of rabbis born in the early 20th century close their eyes, an age of rabbinical hegemony is coming to an end.

On the top floor of a Jerusalem hospital lays a very old man. He is slowly dying, but he won't be left in peace. A small circle of courtiers around him continue to issue in his name edicts and rulings, ensure that his signature still appears on letters and when his medical situation improves temporarily, they will remove him from hospital and seat him in his chair at the synagogue, where everyone can see him. The hospital staff grumbles that all this just prolongs the old man's agony, but there is nothing they can do as the retinue controls all the old man's moves.

Only a tiny handful of relatives and trustees are allowed to talk with him, and they jealously guard his real mental situation while everyone is told that he is fully lucid and talking with his family and doctors, praying and studying as normal.

This is how the great rabbis die nowadays. These were the circumstances of the last years of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, as the Chabadniks fought over him, manhandling him to the window of his study so he could wave to the crowds on Eastern Parkway, steadily deifying him as he descended into his last coma. His body died in 1994, at the age of 92, but many of his followers still believe he is with us.

Rabbi Elazar Menachem Shach suffered similar indignities when visitors to his home in Bnei Brak were shown the volume of Talmud he was studying from, but were not told he had been on the same page for 10 years. Just before he turned 100, he was finally allowed to retreat from the public stage and given a few years of rest before he died at the age of 102.

The retainers of Kabbalist miracle-maker Yitzhak Kadouri bodily carried him to events well into his 11th decade, making sure he muttered the required incantations, shouting in his near-deaf ear the names of those to be blessed, and continued a brisk trade in his handwritten amulets until death finally liberated him from their clutches at 106.

Momentous rulings

By some accounts, 101-year-old Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, the great sage of the "Lithuanian" ultra-Orthodox community, is undergoing the same treatment as these words are being written. For months now he is being shuttled back and forth from hospital to his tiny apartment in Mea She'arim; but despite growing reports on his frailty, he still seems capable of publishing momentous rulings on the pages of Yated Ne'eman, such as the one that appeared two weeks ago forbidding Haredi men and women from participating in military or academic vocational courses under non-Haredi auspices. While there are those who treat these verdicts as the word from up on high, speculation is growing that for months now, if not years, Rabbi Elyashiv's name has been appended to endorsements and prohibitions he has never heard of.

Modern medicine has created an intractable theological dilemma for Haredi Jewry. While it prolongs the lives of rabbis well in to their 90s and beyond, it does not guarantee soundness of mind. But how can a community brought up on the doctrine of "Da'at Torah," rabbinical infallibility, accept that their leaders' memory and reasoning can deteriorate. They liken their rabbis in old age to Moses, whom the Torah tells us that at the age of 120, "his eye was not darkened, nor his moisture ceased." And above all, their mind, this god-given gift to an entire nation, surely cannot fail, only gain strength and wisdom. But that is simply not the way of the human body.

And human nature being what it is, those surrounding the great rabbis are reluctant to relinquish their meal ticket. For decades they have derived a living and social standing from a proximity to his holiness - it is too much to expect that they supply the faithful with an accurate account of the revered sage's medical condition. To publicly admit to his physical limitations is tantamount to transferring power to a rival court.

Generation gap

But the inability to own up to a great rabbi's frailness goes beyond theology and avariciousness. There is literally no replacement to this dying generation of nonagenarians and centenarians. Elyashiv earned the title "Posek Ha-dor," the arbiter of the generation, decades

ago - long before he replaced Shach as the supreme leader of the Lithuanians. But his followers have splintered into warring sects and there is no other rabbi today with such a consensus behind him.

Likewise, among the "Admorim," the hereditary leaders of the Hassidic dynasties, there is no figure who commands respect that transcends their courts - most of them have trouble keeping even their own flock together. Lubavitch did not appoint a successor to Schneerson - how could anyone stand in the messiah's place? Neither does the Sephardi ultra-Orthodox community have a viable candidate to fill 91-year-old Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's gigantic shoes when the day comes. His sons are already quarreling over his estate, but none of them will command anything near the same authority and they certainly won't allow an outsider to prevail.

And while there is no shortage of wizards, soothsayers and wonder-doers, the fierce competition between them assures that we will not see another "Zekan Ha-mekubalim," elder of the kabbalists, after Kadouri.

Ultra-Orthodoxy is the fastest-growing demographic in the Jewish world, not just in Israel but in the United States, Canada, Britain, France and other major communities as well, but it is facing a leadership vacuum. The yeshivas are booming, the number of men with a comprehensive grounding in all fields of Torah and Talmudic learning is unprecedented in Jewish history, but their prospects of one day becoming a venerated Gadol ha-Dor, the greatest in the generation, are nil.

The younger generation of rabbis are today under a level of scrutiny their predecessors never had to undergo. The details of their personal lives and foibles are circulated on websites. Rival factions have multiple channels through which to disseminate damaging gossip and promote their own champions. The mythologization necessary in constructing the image of a gadol is impossible. The successful resurrection of the yeshivas after the ravages of the Holocaust produced thousands of charismatic and learned rabbis. The market of Torah greatness is wide open and no competitor has a chance of cornering it.

In previous generations, leading rabbis could rely on the relative ignorance of most of their followers, who could not spend decades of their own in study, but tens - if not hundreds - of thousands of Haredi men, and a small but increasing number of women, are capable today of analyzing rabbinical rulings and picking and choosing their preferred rabbi.

It is impossible to predict how the ultra-Orthodox community will evolve in this new era of choice. Will rabbis try and rival each other with excessively hardline edicts, or will there be competition with those trying to liberalize Haredi ideology, making it more compatible with a modern lifestyle? Most likely we will see both these developments simultaneously.

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