

Key rabbinic vacancy in Jerusalem stays unfilled

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [September 5, 2012](#) issue

Some two years ago a group of journalists was invited to a meeting to discuss the election of a new Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Jerusalem. The post had been vacant for about six years. The mayor himself, Nir Barkat, was there, as was Rachel Azaria, a member of the city council who had organized the evening. The assembled journalists expected that some news would soon be announced.

Yet today the post is still unfilled—a sign of the ongoing conflict between ultra-Orthodox Jews, or *haredim*, and the non-*haredim*. The ultra-Orthodox may also be described as anti-Zionist, for they reject the legitimacy of the state of Israel.

By tradition Jerusalem has two chief rabbis, one for Sephardic Jews and one for the Ashkenazi. Sephardic Jews descend from communities in Spain and Northern Africa. Ashkenazi communities developed in Germany and Central Europe. Azaria had proposed that the Ashkenazi chief rabbi be a Zionist, a proposal warmly seconded by the secular mayor. Barkat outlined his vision of a Zionist chief rabbi who could present an image of tolerant, flexible Judaism.

In many ways, no one has been greatly troubled by the absence of a chief rabbi. The previous holders of the position were known more for their absence than their presence. Journalist Yossi Seidov castigated the chief rabbis (both now deceased) for doing little while receiving payment from the government.

The idea of having chief rabbis in the Holy Land for the community as a whole emerged prior to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. The first Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Isaac Kook, and the first Sephardic chief rabbi, Jacob Meir, were appointed under the British Mandate. The practice continued with the establishment of the state of Israel, with appointments being made at the city level as well as the national level. Chief rabbis of cities deal with local religious services, marriage certifications, divorce, overseeing of kosher foods (especially in public places such as restaurants and hotels) and issues related to *mikva'ot* (ritual bath houses) and

burial.

Jerusalem's religious community is a complex mix of ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox and non-Orthodox factions. The Sephardim remain independent. The Sephardics' choice to be their chief rabbi has been clear all along: Rabbi Yosef, a son of Ovadia Yosef, former Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel. The Sephardics agreed to go along with the election of a Zionist rabbi for the Ashkenazim as long as the Ashkenazim voted for Rabbi Yosef for the Sephardic post.

In recent years the ultra-Orthodox have grown in numbers and influence in Jerusalem. They constitute at least 29 percent of Jerusalem's adult population and 50 percent of grade-one classrooms. Whereas modern Orthodox tend to work in regular jobs, the ultra-Orthodox, if they work at all other than studying Torah, tend to do so in the religious sector, doing such jobs as overseeing kosher food, registering marriages at the rabbinical offices, checking *mikva'ot* and supervising burials.

The *haredim* accept the state only as an unavoidable evil, not as a reality they are obliged to support. Nevertheless, the jobs they take in the religious sector are paid for by the government. Few of these employees are supervised by the government, however. Indeed, the norm is that a good number of these employees are paid in cash, with no questions asked. So far the chief rabbis, who have been drawn from the ultra-Orthodox camp or who support the *haredim*, have accepted this practice or looked the other way.

A truly Zionist chief rabbi who supports the state would presumably feel obliged to record every transaction that goes on, collect receipts and report information to the tax authorities. According to Ilan Kaminetsky, who heads a group of representatives of Jerusalem synagogues, this prospect of such financial oversight is the main reason that the *haredim* resist having a Zionist chief rabbi.

A law passed in 2007 gives representatives of some synagogues a role in the election, thereby giving new influence to those outside the ultra-Orthodox community. Altogether 48 people can vote in the elections. Half of them will represent a select group of synagogues (out of the many hundreds that flourish in the city), and the other half will be members of the rabbinical establishment.

The Zionist camp has a candidate: Rabbi Aryeh Stern, a member of the so-called Tzohar group of relatively liberal rabbis, who are strict in issues of formal law but

who resist the extremes of the *haredim*.

As for the mayor, despite his secular credentials he now prefers to support the *haredim*, who make up a good part of his governing coalition. Last year he forced Azaria out of his coalition, acting under pressure from local *haredi* politicians who objected to her attacking their more extremist moves, particularly their effort to limit the public role of women.

According to Azaria, the likelihood of an election taking place before next year's municipal elections is slim. This is Jerusalem, after all, where nothing happens till it happens.