

After ten years of debate, Jerusalem elects rabbis for its two top positions

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [December 10, 2014](#) issue

After more than a decade of rancorous debates and court decisions over the election of two chief rabbis of Jerusalem, Aryeh Stern and Shlomo Amar were chosen for the roles.

By tradition Jerusalem has two chief rabbis, one who is Sephardic and one who is Ashkenazi. Sephardic Jews descend from communities in Spain and Northern Africa. Ashkenazi communities developed in Central Europe.

The positions had been open since the previous rabbis died. Among the conflicts that arose afterward was an argument over who would be allowed to vote. Traditionally, the voting was spread among members of the Municipal Council of Jerusalem. This would have involved 48 people representing a variety of opinions but skewed toward the ultra-Orthodox because of the way the council is set up. Zionists campaigned for 12 of the 48 votes to be cast by representatives from synagogues throughout the city. The decision was taken as far as the High Court, which adjudicated according to a scheme whereby four votes went to synagogues of Zionist persuasions, four to Sephardic synagogues, and four to the ultra-Orthodox. (The ultra-Orthodox may be described as anti-Zionist, for they reject the legitimacy of the state of Israel.)

There was an attempt to postpone the vote until Stern—the main Zionist contender—reached the age of 70, at which point he would be ineligible. However, partly through the work of Stern's followers, elections finally got under way at the end of October, just two months before Stern's 70th birthday. Amar is 66.

Other candidates had included Shmuel Eliyahu, who as chief rabbi of the city of Safed put out a fiat that forbade Israel Jews from selling or even renting property to Arabs. Although he later apologized, the damage was done. He lost, but he was supported by the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Party and won 18 votes (out of a possible 48).

Another Ashkenazi candidate, Moshe Chaim Lau, ran on an ultra-Orthodox ticket and received 20 votes as opposed to Stern's 27.

Stern was supported by Nir Barkat, mayor of Jerusalem, and Naftali Bennett, who heads the Jewish Home party in the Knesset. Stern, who was born in Israel, has a background in yeshivot (rabbinical seminaries) and set up an institute to clarify Jewish legal issues. He was a community rabbi in Jerusalem for many years.

Barkat also supported Amar for one of the positions. Amar, who was born in Morocco and immigrated to Israel at age 14, was previously chief rabbi of Israel. Although ultra-Orthodox, he was opposed by the national leader of the ultras, Aryeh Steinman, for supporting conversion in the army (mainly of Russian immigrants). His books include Jewish legal decisions about Israel's agriculture, kashrut (laws of food), and clinical death. —*Christian Century*