

A Cheat Sheet on the Israeli Chief Rabbinate

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The Israeli Chief Rabbinate is Israel's supreme religious authority regarding issues of Jewish law (*halakha*) in the State of Israel. It is an Orthodox body that retains numerous legal and administrative powers directly affecting much of the state's religious nature and overlapping with many secular matters.

Who They Are

The Israeli Chief Rabbinate consists of two Chief Rabbis; an Ashkenazi rabbi and a Sephardi rabbi (also known in Hebrew as "*Rishon LeTzion*," or "first to Zion"). The current Sephardi Chief Rabbi is Shlomo Amar, and the current Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi is Yona Metzger.

Timeline

The position of *Rishon LeTzion* (that is, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi) has existed since the early seventeenth century, though at the time it referred to the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, seeing as Israel wasn't yet a sovereign state. Under the British Mandate of Palestine in 1922, the Orthodox Rabbinate was created, which added an Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, transferring religious power to these two main branches of Jewish descent and tradition.

Official Functions

The Chief Rabbinate oversees a number of issues pertaining to religious life in Israel. These include (among others) kosher certification, overseeing smaller Israeli rabbinical courts and certifying rabbinical ordination, and personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, and conversion.

Election Process

The two Chief Rabbis and the larger Chief Rabbinate Council (a group of senior rabbis) are elected by an assembly convened directly for this purpose. The assembly is composed of 150 leading rabbinic and public figures, including thirty local chief rabbis, ten rabbinic court judges, thirty mayors and heads of other regional councils, five Knesset Members, and fifteen heads of local religious councils. The term of office for both Israeli Chief Rabbis is ten years.

Local Rabbinate Offices

The two Chief Rabbis are part of the Chief Rabbinate Council, which comprises sixteen members. The other members include the Chief Rabbis of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Be'er Sheva, Haifa, and ten other local rabbis. The Rabbinate has different offices to meet its different needs all over the country

(examples of some of these offices include the Cemeteries and Burial Department, the Conversion Services, the Mikvah (ritual bath) Division, etc.).

Rabbinate Offices the World Over

Many cities with large Jewish communities all over the world have their own chief rabbis. Some of the more prominent ones include the Chief Rabbinate of England, which was formalized in 1845. The current Chief Rabbi of England is Jonathan Sacks. In France, the Chief Rabbi gets elected through an often-heated electoral process, especially in the most recent elections (in 2008), when an Ashkenazi won the post from a Sephardi rabbi for the first time in 28 years. Other countries that boast Chief Rabbis and some form of Rabbinate body include Ireland, Austria, Denmark, and Iran, though the post never gained traction in the United States, interestingly enough.

Criticisms of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate

Though regarded by many as a functional, accomplished body, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate does have its flaws. One main problem opponents find with it is what they deem to be its tendency to solely promote an Ultra-Orthodox ideology that is both distancing and disconcerting to many secular Israelis who don't fit the mold. The root of the problem is the Chief Rabbinate's holding the reigns of the way many central religious rituals are performed (marriage, divorce, conversion, etc.), enforcing a stringent, Ultra-Orthodox approach that is often not desirable and unwanted by the non-Orthodox Jews undergoing them. The Rabbinate does not allow non-Orthodox rabbis or converts to take part in wedding ceremonies, conversions, Jewish immigration issues, among others, creating a friction between it and different facets of the Jewish community.

Fun Facts

- In early 2009, the Chief Rabbinate severed ties and closed its communication with the Vatican after a papal decision was put forth to reinstate a bishop who publicly denied the Holocaust.
- Since the *Rishon LeTzion* position was first established in the mid seventeenth century, there have been 39 rabbis who have held the title. In contrast, there have been 8 Ashkenazi Chief Rabbis since the post was created in the 1920s.
- Some Jewish communities and rabbis from around the world direct their queries on Jewish law to the Israel Chief Rabbinate. Other communities have no serious connection to the Rabbinate in these matters.
- The current Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Yona Metzger, made the headlines in April when he warned President Obama that a deciding factor of his re-election in 2012 will be whether or not he frees the convicted Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard. Rabbi Metzger's assertion is an odd

one, working on the premise that the imprisonment of Jonathan Pollard is an issue weighing heavy on the hearts of a large swath of American Jews.