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Chief Rabbi's rebuke is divisive

by Rabbi Uri Regev
Posted on Dec. 16, 2015 at 1:32 pm

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David Lau, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, at the Or Avner traditional Jewish school in Berlin, Nov. 8, 2013. Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Last week, Chief Rabbi of Israel David Lau publicly rebuked Naftali Bennett, Israel's minister of education and Diaspora affairs. Bennett's religious sin, per Lau, was visiting the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan, and tweeting an enthusiastic reflection of the school and the love for Israel and Judaism that he had seen there.

According to Rabbi Lau, Bennett should have consulted with a rabbi before the visit. Lau expects Bennett to heed rabbinic "guidance," which, per Lau, would instruct him that such a visit is prohibited because by visiting, one conveys legitimacy to this Conservative institution and its path. Had Bennett consulted him, stated Lau, he would have told him that such a gesture was not allowed, insofar as the school bears a Conservative identity, as Schechter schools do, for Conservative and Reform Judaism "distance Jews from the tradition, from the past and the future of the Jewish People," and their children are destined to be lost to the Jewish fold.

Lau's lashing out is representative of so much that is wrong with the institution of the chief rabbinate and the threat it poses to the Jewish people, Israel's core strategic interest, and the future of Israel's relationship with American Jewry.

Moreover, Lau's outrageous admonishment also raises serious questions as to his integrity and basic wits. In January, Lau visited de Toledo High School (formerly New Community Jewish High School) in

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Los Angeles, the second-largest Jewish high school in the United States. The school rightly prides itself for celebrating a pluralistic Jewish environment. Its faculty consists of rabbis of all streams, it holds egalitarian prayer services, and at its graduation ceremonies, in a way that reflects its egalitarian religious spirit, male and female graduates wear the school tallit. True, the school does not bear the labels “Conservative” or “Reform,” which Lau disdains, but it treats non-Orthodoxy and pluralism as virtues, while Lau holds them to be religious abominations. In fact, Lau also didn't see anything wrong with visiting the communal Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital, yet another pluralistic school, in October. The lovely photograph, including a young girl wearing a kippah among the group of students with whom Lau met, speaks for itself.

How feeble minded does Rabbi Lau think we all are? If the mere visit to a school implies legitimization of its Jewish path, then Lau's rebuke reeks of hypocrisy. Making a distinction between the labels “Reform” and “Conservative” on the one hand, and the labels “pluralist” and “egalitarian” on the other is ridiculous. We would be overjoyed to hear that while Rabbi Lau does not approve of Reform and Conservative, he does give his stamp of approval to egalitarian minyanim and the active participation of women in religious ritual life, attired in prayer shawls, studying for the rabbinate, etc. And if he doesn't, as we regretfully suspect, why does he think that his visits do not impart a similar level of legitimization to these patently non-Orthodox practices and norms? Is this yet another case of, ‘Do as I preach, not as I do’ (Matthew 23:1-4)?

The chief rabbi is Israel's highest religious Jewish authority. For him to label Conservative Judaism, a key pillar of the American Jewish community, as “distancing Jews from the Jewish people,” is not merely an example of ignorance and bigotry, but also an unacceptable pitting of the State of Israel against the pluralistic Jewish Diaspora. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, sensing the gradual distancing of American Jewry from Israel, and recognizing the devastating strategic impact that this may have on Israel's core interests, has proclaimed the antithesis to Lau's sentiments. Netanyahu knows how essential the Diaspora communal leaders, philanthropists and investors are for Israel's well-being. There simply can be no greater contradiction than that between Lau's outrageous assault on America's diverse Jewish tapestry and Netanyahu's welcomed declaration at last month's General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America that he would “ensure that all Jews — Reform, Conservative and Orthodox — feel at home in Israel.”

Lau is not only ignorant of the state of contemporary world Jewry, but is also dismissive of the limitations imposed by Israeli law upon his office. In the early '80s, the Supreme Court ruled that the chief rabbis had no authority to interfere in the functions of state officials!

It's time Netanyahu recognizes the dire need to dismantle the regressive, bigoted state rabbinate. If he is serious in declaring that he wants to ensure that all Jews, regardless of religious denomination,

feel at home in Israel, surely he must realize that the rabbinate's continued demonization of the pluralistic Diaspora and its continued monopoly over Jewish life contradicts his praiseworthy vision. He also surely knows that the overwhelming majority of Israelis will applaud him if he were to embark upon a path of religious freedom and equality. Mere verbal commitment to the promise of freedom of religion and conscience enshrined in Israel's Declaration of Independence is simply not enough anymore. Whether the chief rabbi is a hypocrite or merely witless, he is a threat to Jewish unity and to the Jewish, democratic State of Israel.

Rabbi Uri Regev heads Hiddush — Freedom of Religion for Israel, Inc. — a transdenominational Israel/Diaspora partnership for religious freedom and equality in Israel.

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Zsolti Hermann · SEMMELWEIS University SOTE

There has been a lot of criticism labelled against the Chief Rabbi, against the Israeli President in recent days for acting in ways of causing separation within Israel and worldwide Jewish community. And then of course there are those who for a long time have been acting in very self-serving ways of "selling out" other Jews, Israel for selfish gains, for appeasing others.

From "simple people" to leaders in the limelight we all have to understand our absolute responsibility for our actions due to our absolute responsibility towards one another.

"All of Israel are responsible for one another".

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Edward Ponderer

I think that you are right-on target Zsolti Herman.

Let me further this to give the author pause, as I am also as sickened by hypocrisy. Forgive me for a moment if I too attempt to defend this "Pharisee hypocrite" of a Chief Rabbi.

Firstly, I will agree wholeheartedly that Orthodoxy must for its part and even from its perspective, treat that we are in a confused world, that we too are many generations from sages who "if we are men, they were angels, but if they were men, then we are donkeys—but not like the donkey of Pinchas Ben Yair." As such in this confusion, we hug other Jews whatever ... See More

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