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Why I Disagree With My Cousin, the Israeli Chief Rabbi

[Amichai Lau-Lavie](#) December 14, 2015

Image: Lab/Shul

The other day, I woke at the crack of dawn to finish studying halachic rulings in time for my Jewish Law class at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. But as I was plugging in, social media alerts from several sources alerted me that just minutes ago the Israeli Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi David Lau had slammed Naftali Bennett for visiting a school affiliated with the Conservative movement. “You can’t visit a place where the education distances Jews from tradition, from the past and future of the Jewish people,” Rabbi Lau exclaimed in a radio interview that has gone viral.

Rabbi Lau and I are first cousins. We come from the same world and share a distinguished family heritage of rabbinic leadership stretching back many consecutive generations. We spent many childhood hours together and I have a lot of affection for him and his family. But we don’t exactly live in the same present, and to my great dismay, we apparently also won’t experience a shared future in which Jews respect one another despite their differing ideologies, in the vein of *machloket le-shem shamayim*, an argument for the sake of heaven, the traditional values of the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai.

The Chief Rabbi went on to say: “Don’t forget that in almost every Jewish family you’ll find a religious grandfather or Haredi grandfather or even a grandfather who’s a rabbi. You won’t find many families with a Conservative grandfather. Which is to say that ultimately, when we’re looking to the future, Orthodoxy is the only right path.”

Maybe he simply doesn't know? I'm privileged to be partner in raising three incredible kids here in New York, together with a lesbian couple who, like me, were searching for an authentic way to build a family and raise happy Jewish children — without lying to ourselves about the sexual orientation we were created with, in Divine image — in a respectful and inclusive Jewish community. We are so fortunate to have merited — and worked hard for — this reality. My kids have an American grandfather and grandmothers who grew up in the Conservative movement, established communities with great generosity of spirit, and recently even built a school in New Jersey that brings in Jewish children from all the denominations, including Orthodoxy. Many of the friends I study with are also the children, grandchildren and sometimes great-grandchildren of leaders in the Conservative movement, which is just a bit over 100 years old.

As I write this, instead of focusing on Jewish legal studies, I am getting ready to go to a shiva morning minyan, to comfort the mourners over the death of Rebbetzin Greenberg, a woman of valor and kindness, the widow of the important Conservative leader Rabbi Sidney Greenberg. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren have gathered every day of this Shiva to pray and study in her memory in the home of one of her granddaughters who opened a Special Needs Jewish Day School on the Upper West Side that brings in students from all denominations — again, including Orthodoxy.

It's important to be specific in noting facts.

Many of the world's Jews have been distanced from their Jewish roots, in large part because of baseless hatred, strict and non-inclusive halacha, and unwillingness to accept new realities. For these reasons I chose, as many generations (past and present) in many family have done, to occupy myself with spiritual education and leadership.

I'm proud to study in a respected rabbinic institution that's over 100 years old, that bravely balances tradition and modernity, and that offers ordination to women and to LGBT students. This vital and modest movement, trying with all its might to reconcile past and present, our grandfathers' tradition and the needs of future generations, has an important and meaningful voice that we must hear, appreciate and respect — not demean or belittle.

To Naftali Bennett: I have plenty of disagreements with you, but I invite you with a warm heart to join me this coming May for my rabbinic ordination ceremony in New York.

To Rabbi Lau, my respected cousin: We came together not too long ago at my father’s grave, where we paid joint tribute to the heritage of our forefathers. But let’s bear respect not only for our beautiful past. Here and now, let’s look together toward the future — in which there is great animosity and many foes, but also a great thirst for spirituality and religion and in which there can also be great peace emerging out of mutual support and the discovery of courageous ways to work toward the continuity of our tradition, in all its many faces.

I invite you, with great respect, out of love for our shared heritage and shared concern for the whole Jewish people, to come visit the JTS study hall on your next trip to New York, share your concerns, teach us, hear us, and engage in respectful dialogue for the sake of our children and all generations to come.

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