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David Lau. Photo by: MARC ISRAEL SEIFEM/THE

## Religious fundamentalism is against Jewish diversity

By URI REGEV

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Israel's leaders are presenting a dichotomic view of Israel's Jewish character.

It is difficult to conceive of a greater contradiction than that between Chief Rabbi David Lau's outrageous statement last week, lashing out at Education Minister Naftali Bennett's visit to the Conservative Movement's Schechter School in Manhattan, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's welcome declaration at last month's General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America, where he stated that he would "ensure that all Jews – Reform, Conservative and Orthodox – feel at home in Israel."

Lau's hate message toward Conservative Judaism was delivered in a public radio interview, where he rebuked Bennett for not consulting with a rabbi before visiting the school, "because this conduct is not acceptable to the Jewish people." Clearly Lau maintains that such consultation is imperative, and that refraining from doing so and speaking at an identifiably Conservative institution is tantamount to recognizing it and its path, thereby "distancing Jews from the Jewish people ... which can have no justification."

Bennett posted an enthusiastic tweet following his visit to the school, lauding it and sharing his impressions: "so much love of Israel, so much love of Judaism." In contrast, Lau's response left no doubt as to his ignorance of the realities of contemporary Jewry and his antipathy toward non-Orthodox Judaism: "If Minister Bennett had asked my opinion before the visit, I would have told him explicitly that 'you can't go to a place where the education distances Jews from the tradition, from the past and the future of the Jewish people.'" You may ask why I feel so strongly about Rabbi Lau's recent pronouncement.

Needless to say, there are plenty of misguided and bigoted rabbis and laypeople who, in an open and free society, can shoot off their mouths as they see fit. However, we are not dealing with a private individual in this case. We are dealing with the chief Ashkenazi rabbi of Israel who, by definition, holds one of the highest religious posts in the State of Israel – although appointed by the secular government – exercising many monopolistic and coercive authorities at the expense of Israel's taxpayers. For such an individual to label Conservative Judaism, a key pillar of the

American Jewish community, as “distancing Jews from the Jewish people,” “doomed to lose their children to assimilation,” and contact with which should be forbidden to Israel’s leaders, is not merely an objectionable example of hate speech, but rather an unacceptable pitting of the State of Israel against the pluralistic Jewish Diaspora.

This is not the first time that Israel’s chief rabbis have given expression to their extreme and narrow sectarian outlook, which stands in contrast to the rich Jewish tapestry characterizing not only contemporary world Jewry, but Israel’s Jewish community as well. Lau’s predecessor, former chief Sephardic rabbi Shlomo Amar (currently serving as chief rabbi of Jerusalem) said that an Israeli Jew who may find himself in an American Jewish community during the High Holy Days should refrain from participating in High Holy Day services altogether, rather than set foot in a Reform synagogue.

Clearly, had Lau’s and Amar’s eagerness to distance Israel and its leadership from the overwhelming majority of American Jews been heeded, Israel would have found itself in open warfare against the very communal leaders, philanthropists and investors whose support of Israel is deemed to be a major strategic asset, essential for ensuring Israel’s wellbeing. Needless to say, the Laus and the Amars of Israel’s rabbinic and political ultra-Orthodox establishment couldn’t care less. They and their likes are repeatedly telling us that it is their disciples studying and praying in Israel’s yeshivot who are actually responsible for Israel’s security and economic wellbeing.

Most Israelis not only reject this condescending account, but also believe that it alienates Israelis from the Jewish tradition.

Moreover, Lau is similarly dismissive of Israel’s law regarding this very issue.

Back in the early ’80s, the then minister of education [and leader of Bennett’s party] found himself pressured by the chief rabbis regarding the permissibility of conducting archeological digs in the City of David. The Supreme Court has made it amply clear that the chief rabbis have no authority over state officials carrying out their responsibilities. Bennett followed this important principle of democracy and the rule of law, and appropriately rebuffed Lau’s rebuke. It is clear that Lau is not only ignorant and dismissive of the conditions of contemporary world Jewry, he is also dismissive of the limitations imposed by Israeli law and the civil judiciary upon his own office.

Netanyahu, sensing the gradual distancing of American Jewry from Israel, especially the “next generation,” and recognizing the devastating strategic impact that this may have on Israel’s key interests, has proclaimed the antithesis to the Laus and Amars of Israel’s religious establishment. Most recently, he expressed this at the GA quoted above. It followed similar recent statements issued by the Prime Minister’s Office. For instance, he publicly admonished his minister of religious services, ultra-Orthodox Sephardic Shas Party member David Azoulay, who had publicly attacked the Women of the Wall and stated that he has a difficult time viewing Reform Jews as Jews.

Can anyone seriously think that Azoulay’s deep seated prejudice against non-Orthodox Jews wouldn’t impact his policies, as he provides religious services to the whole of Israel’s Jewish population? Can he truly do so equitably and without discrimination? As for Lau, ironically the Chief Rabbinate’s increasingly fundamentalist worldview has now gone beyond assaulting

Reform and Conservative Jews to fighting modern Orthodoxy and denying the legitimacy of its rabbinic functions, such as conversions.

It is important to stress that these examples of religious fundamentalism and rejection of Jewish diversity are not shared by the general Jewish community.

The opposite is true. The overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews, per Hiddush's repeated in-depth polling, support equal recognition by the state of all major streams of Judaism, ending the monopolistic authority of the Rabbinate, equal recognition of civil and non-Orthodox marriages, and excluding the ultra-Orthodox political parties from Israel's government coalition.

It's time to stop settling for mere verbal expression of commitment to religious freedom and Jewish diversity. It's time to recognize that the existence of a coercive and bigoted Chief Rabbinate is antithetical to basic democratic principles, and put to pasture a Rabbinate that pushes Israel toward collision with world Jewry.

No democracy in the world tolerates the notion of a coercive religious establishment, and neither do Israelis. The Laus and Amars of Israel are entitled to express their misguided prejudices, but not at the state's expense, and not while wearing the official robes of office.

As was so aptly put by Thomas Jefferson in 1820 in a letter to the founders of the synagogue in Savannah, Georgia: "In religion, unlike in politics, divided we stand, united we fall." Israel, the Jewish people and Judaism need religious diversity and free choice. Continued ultra-Orthodox religious coercion and forced uniformity will not only result in a weakened Judaism, but will also undermine the Jewish and democratic State of Israel.

The author, a rabbi and lawyer, heads Hiddush – Freedom of Religion for Israel, a trans-denominational Israel/Diaspora partnership for religious freedom and equality.



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