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Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau speaks to The Jerusalem Post (Photo: Chaim S. Shalev / THE JERUSALEM POST)

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The Chief Rabbinate: Who is its constituency?

"I view Conservative rabbis in America as my partners, not as my enemies; My enemy is assimilation, the tragic loss of American Jewry to assimilation and intermarriage."

Rabbi David Lau, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi, unwittingly committed a serious error when he announced that he would have forbidden Education Minister Naftali Bennett from visiting a Solomon Schechter (Conservative) High School on his last New York trip.

Unfortunately, not only did the Chief Rabbinate head demonstrate his (understandable) lack of knowledge of the Conservative Movement in America, he also exposed how far the present chief rabbis of Israel have wandered from the inclusive vision of our first chief rabbi, Rabbi Yitzchak Haohen Kook.

Yes, the Conservative Movement does not accept Orthodox fealty to Halacha, and so it officially mandates mixed seating in the synagogue and permits driving to the synagogue on Shabbat. And yes, rarely do Conservative Rabbis preach taharat ha'mishpacha (family purity) or the prohibition of cellphones and electricity on the Sabbath.

As a consequence, an Orthodox Jew may not participate in a Conservative mixed-seating prayer service.

Nevertheless, I view Conservative rabbis in America as my partners, not as my enemies. My enemy is assimilation, the tragic loss of American Jewry to assimilation and intermarriage (41.2 percent according to the recent Pew report). Conservative and Reform rabbis today are not making inroads into Orthodoxy, which has never been stronger in America, but Conservative and Reform rabbis are striving to influence Jews with less commitment to Judaism and Zionism to become Jews with greater commitment to Judaism and Zionism.

In the vast majority of instances, the alternative to the Solomon Schechter school is not an Orthodox yeshiva but rather a public school or a secular private school. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein,

the greatest halachic decisor in 20th-century America, ruled that Orthodox rabbis may teach in Conservative day schools and Hebrew schools. And the Solomon Schechter Schools as well as the (Conservative) Ramah summer camps are the strongest bastions of traditionalism and Zionism within the Conservative Movement.

Hence, anyone bringing Jews closer to the majestic, world-redeeming enterprise of Judaism is my partner.

I do not agree with the Conservative and Reform rejection of many of our halachic norms, but most partners I know disagree on many of the aspects of their joint enterprise.

I am fully confident that the closer the Jew comes to traditional observance, even if the steps in the beginning are hesitant and partial, the initial embrace of Torah will eventually bring him/her to adopt the wholeness of the entire magnificent tapestry.

Finally, the chief rabbi of Israel ought to see himself as the shepherd of every single Jew, including everyone and excluding no one; his sensitive reach must extend to the most wayward no matter where he may have wandered. To this end Rabbi Kook spent many Sabbaths in the most secular kibbutzim and moshavim, bringing his own food and without any chastising or even preaching. He merely embraced the kibbutznikim, sang with them, danced with them and regaled them with stories. A chief rabbi especially must be a “disciple of Aaron; a lover of peace, a pursuer of peace, a lover of humanity, a person whose love will bring everyone close to Torah.”

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