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RATIONALIST JUDAISM

EXPLORING THE LEGACY OF THE RATIONALIST MEDIEVAL TORAH SCHOLARS

TUESDAY, MARCH 23, 2010

The Gedolim and Leadership

I write this post with a heavy heart.

Over the last decade, the Gedolim of the Charedi world have done many things that, in the opinion of many, did not reflect well on their judgment.

The ban on *Making Of A Godol*, the ban on my books, the financially devastating ban on the Lipa concert and subsequent abrupt reversal, etc.

While I maintain that serious wrongs were committed in these cases, I tried my best to explain the Gedolims' point of view to people. Hence my essay, "In Defense of my Opponents."

Then came Troppergate, which eclipsed them all. Where the real *chillul Hashem* was not that this *menuval* did what he did, but that this man, who was known for decades to be a *menuval* and manipulator, was given so much power and honor, and even after being publicly exposed was not publicly condemned, because of the millions of dollars that he gave to the yeshivos. And nor was there any investigation into what improprieties (signatures on pashkevillim, false conversions, and who knows what else) were arranged by his money.

But now there is something that makes Troppergate look positively mild.

Rabbi Elijah Chertok of Beitar was indicted for some of the worst child abuse allegations ever. He fled to Brazil but was extradited back to

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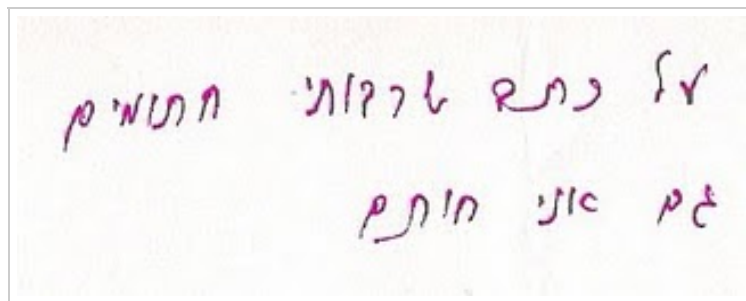
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Israel where he will stand trial. According to prosecution officials, the evidence against Chen is so overwhelming that there is absolutely no doubt that he will be convicted.

But recently, a letter appeared, signed by several of the Gedolim, asserting that they *know* Elio Chen to be a *marbitz Torah* and a righteous person and thus innocent of all charges, and asking people to support him!

At first, I did not post about this, because I couldn't bring myself to believe that these signatures of the Gedolim were authentic. As much as I had seen what I believed to be improprieties in the Gedolim affixing their names to things, surely they couldn't do this. I was inclined to agree with all the commentators at the afore-posted link who insisted that the signatures must have been faked. People close to the Gedolim insisted that the letter was not authentic.

But then a neighbor of mine wrote to Rav Chaim Kanievsky, asking him why he signed it. He received the following reply:







על כתב שרבותי חתומים גם אני חותם

"On a letter that my rabbis are signed on to, I also sign."

The implications of this sentence are so appalling that I can't even think of how to write about it in a way that will do justice to it.

I have always tried to write respectfully about the Gedolim, even when disagreeing with them strongly. But now I am honestly not sure if one should be respectful about the signing of this letter, especially when it is defended on the grounds that other rabbis signed it. The best *limmud zechus* I can think of is that, due to their intense dedication to staying in the Beis HaMidrash, the Gedolim are simply

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naive about the world and/or easily manipulated. But if that is the case, and it results in them signing letters such as this, then how are they suited for leadership positions? The fundamental belief of charedi society, that total dedication to Torah is what makes the ideal leader, is thereby exposed as hopelessly wrong. And even with this *limmud zechus*, one has to wonder how a Rav could attest with certainty to the innocence of someone who has been indicted for such terrible crimes, with one child suffering permanent brain damage and in a vegetative state for the rest of his life, merely because other rabbis say that he is innocent.

With the publication of the letter supporting Elijah Chai, is there any way to justify the system of leadership in the charedi world?

POSTED BY NATAN SLIFKIN AT 6:38 AM 

34 COMMENTS:



Nachum said...

R' Slifkin, bad as this is, the much more practical issue of the emergency room and the graves is far, far worse. There is absolutely no justification, especially halakhically, for what the haredim are doing here, and everyone seems to know it. And the Chillul Hashem is enormous.

MARCH 23, 2010 10:16 AM

DP said...

The emergency room is the same idea. Rather than checking things out themselves and talking with experts, the Gedolim seem to rely on second- or third-hand possibly biased information.

MARCH 23, 2010 10:53 AM

Gedaliah said...

I have seen in numerous places that Elijah Chai has no smicha. Have you seen otherwise?

MARCH 23, 2010 11:19 AM

BLOG ARCHIVE

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The Gedolim and Leadership

Very Exciting News!

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► February (5)

Garnel Ironheart said...

I wrote about this on my blog (which you comment on far less than I comment on yours... I'm just saying)

Most people assume that what they know everyone knows. We often forget that we are plugged into a world of information. Television, radio, internet, and everything else that lets us see and hear everything going on in the world today. We also often forget that the Chareidi leadership is deliberately unplugged from such sources of information.

Really, what do Rav Eliashiv, Rav Shteinman, et al do all day? They sit in their beis medrash and learn. One in a while they meet with some askanim or a public official or two but unlike us they don't check a couple of dozen websites for the latest news from Israel and around the world. They have no clue if the Dow Jones was up or down yesterday. As the line in Fiddler on the Roof went, "If I want to hear bad news, I'll read about Noah and the flood!"

They are so completely disconnected from the outside world that askanim with agendas can completely influence them into making any decisions they want.

Look, if someone came to you and told you a certain person was trying to do something bad, what is the first thing you'd do? You'd probably investigate the issue before coming to a decision. Similarly, if a person came to you for a reference, you'd want to know more about this person and conduct some research.

The Chareidi gedolim clearly do not do this. They listen to what their askanim tell them, accept it as fact because of their trust in these people, and then issue decisions based on the information they were given.

Or as the old computer saying going: GIGO Garbage in = garbage out.

► January (10)

► 2009 (121)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NATAN SLIFKIN

I have published several works on the interface between Torah and the natural sciences. My interest focused on rationalism after three of my books were deemed heretical and placed in cherem, sparking a huge controversy in the Orthodox Jewish community.

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4,436

When your book was banned, did a single signatory on the book read it before making his decision? No, he trusted what his askanim told him and signed the ban. Well, when Tropper's misdeeds were revealed, what do you think the gedolim were told? The truth, or a heavily edited version of it? Do you think they've heard one iota of the accusations against Chen? I am quite confident that the askanim told each gadol "There's this guy Chen, a real mekubal, and those nasssty chilonim are persecuting him for no reason!" If that's all they know about the guy, why wouldn't they sign a letter supporting him?

What this says about the leadership is obvious. But to quote Obi-wan Kenobi from Star Wars, "Who's the more foolish? The fool or the one who follows him?"

MARCH 23, 2010 2:37 PM

 Nachum said...

DP, the sad thing is that even if every single one of those second and third hand reports were true, there would *still* be zero halakhic (and kal v'chomer any other) justification for not building the emergency room.

MARCH 23, 2010 3:43 PM

 Larry Lennhoff said...

In the days of the Sanhedrin judges ruled on an issue from least senior to most senior, precisely to avoid this sort of problem. It would be a good idea to adopt the custom that if Rabbi A signs a decree, only rabbis who consider themselves of greater stature than Rabbi A will sign it subsequently.

MARCH 23, 2010 4:57 PM

Anonymous said...

Nachum, see <http://www.jpost.com/Israel/Article.aspx?id=171511> for a contrary view.

MARCH 23, 2010 5:32 PM

Anonymous said...

Can you provide any proof that the Gedolim of yesteryear (all the way back to Chazal) were more in touch with their communities? How do you know that this is an aberration of just the current generation?

MARCH 23, 2010 5:46 PM

David Litman said...

I believe that things used to be different for several reasons:

1) The leading sages were probably generally younger/stronger. Only in modern society are people able to live to be old and frail.

2) The rabbis were more involved with the world, and less cloistered in the Beis HaMidrash. Leading rabbinic figures were community rabbis, not Roshei Yeshivah.

3) Rabbis probably didn't rule so much on faraway, remote cases. They ruled on cases within their own communities, which they would have known much better.

MARCH 23, 2010 6:08 PM

a mother said...

Dear Rabbi Slifkin,

Could you also write about the Ashkelon hospital emergency room in vs. ancient graves? What could possibly be the considerations?

It seems so backwards - in addition to the life and death problems with the hospital itself, it's as if someone wants to make sure all the rebellious high school children will be sure that a religious life can only be a travesty of morals and common sense.

MARCH 23, 2010 6:21 PM



Abandoning Eden said...

"The fundamental belief of charedi society, that total

dedication to Torah is what makes the ideal leader, is thereby exposed as hopelessly wrong."

I came to a similar conclusion around 10 years ago, when through 3 decisions by my former (right wing modern orthodox) Rabbi I was totally disillusioned as to the validity of his role as a spiritual leader of anybody, and eventually ended up leaving the Jewish community entirely (for that among other reasons).

The first was when he advised my parents to send me to Israel for a year to seminary because my parents did not like my boyfriend's yichus and did not want me dating him anymore and went to him for advice. Which would have been very much against my will, and ultimately since I was 18 and downright refused to go, they could not force me. Although they tried very hard after his advice, and the repercussions of those arguments still affect our relationship today.

The second was when one of my parent's friends in the community was pregnant with 6 fetuses and was told by her doctors that if she didn't have a selective abortion they would ALL die. She went to him for a shayla, and he refused to give her a straight answer about whether it was permissible to have a selective abortion and kept putting her off on this very time-sensitive issue. She eventually gave up on getting a straight answer out of him, and asked another rabbi who told her it was OK, and ultimately gave birth to very health twins.

The third and final straw for me was when he harbored Baruch Lanner in his home for several months after the Lanner scandal broke and Lanner's wife kicked him out. I was a member of NCSY and my ex boyfriend (the same guy the rabbi advised my parents to send me to Israel to get away from) was one of the guys physically abused by Lanner.

I personally know tons of people just like me who are utterly disgusted by the behavior of these so called "leaders" and have turned away from Judaism entirely as a result.

MARCH 23, 2010 6:34 PM

Jameel Fan said...

There's a good write-up about the situation with the graves at <http://muqata.blogspot.com/>

MARCH 23, 2010 6:48 PM

Isaac said...

Can you provide any proof that the Gedolim of yesteryear (all the way back to Chazal) were more in touch with their communities? How do you know that this is an aberration of just the current generation?

We have proof of many gedolim throughout the generations having non-Torah professions. Tanaim named "Hakappar" or "Hasandlar" were literally potters and shoemakers. It's not hard to find examples of amoraim mentioning their professional experience in the gemara (e.g. Rav http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abba_Arika#Status_in_life).

Rashi was a vintner. The Rambam was a physician. The Chofetz Chaim had a grocery store.

Have there been gedolim throughout time who were exclusively in the beit midrash? Sure. But many, and some of the most respected, also spent their time on other things. If I'm not mistaken, the latter phenomenon is essentially absent in the Chareidi world nowadays.

There's also an economic argument to be made here. Until very recently, society couldn't afford to have very many people doing anything other than farming. Thanks to the agricultural industrial, and information revolutions, the world (especially the developed world) can now support a huge population with only a few percent of people farming, and more and more people doing white collar work or even no work at all.

Back in the day, it would have been unthinkable to have entire Jewish communities in which the majority of men spend all or even a great deal of their working years learning full-time. Nowadays, it's possible to use the welfare state and donations from rich Jews to support such communities (at least for a generation or two, before the system collapses under its own demographic weight). If the entire community is learning full-time, naturally its leader will do so.

MARCH 23, 2010 7:06 PM



Baruch said...

How come no one is asking the gedolim to sign a letter to help the family that Chen the monster destroyed what must the husband and children feel like when they see a letter signed by the gedolim. Does anyone care about this husband and his children whose lives were destroyed? Everyone is concerned that they signed for Chen how come no one has come to the support of the family that has been destroyed and gets further destroyed when they read letters signed the gedolim what type of people are those that surround the gedolim don't they read the things they put in front of these people to sign. We live in a crazy world and then you have to wonder how many things the gedolim have actually have said perhaps these people surrounding them are the ones responsible for a lot of crazy things that happen.

Char kosher Vsameach

Hoping for better times

Baruch

MARCH 23, 2010 7:31 PM

Phil said...

Please see my comment here:

<http://www.rationalistjudaism.com/2009/09/dealing-with-inconvenient-sources.html>?

showComment=1251955529859#c2195440042517368727

MARCH 23, 2010 7:42 PM

Yehudah said...

This Elijah Chumsky story is one of the worst and cruelest I have ever heard of in my life: unfathomably evil. (I know one of the child's relatives.)

Of course the "gedolims'" signatures do not put them in a positive light, which (among other reasons) is why I have long questioned why many people (even in the MO world) consider these people "gedolim."

What have they accomplished? On which pressing issues of the day do they offer leadership and guidance? They are completely removed from the world and know a great deal of Gemara -- that's it. That makes them gedolim?

MARCH 23, 2010 7:52 PM

Yehudah said...

I forgot to add: It's not just the lack of leadership of the "gedolim." It's that they've actually done harm on numerous occasions.

From what I know of people like Rav Elyashiv, it's hard not to conclude that he's done more harm than good.

MARCH 23, 2010 8:05 PM



Michael said...

I feel your pain R'Slifkin. More and more I'm appreciating the value of strength of character over lumbdus, especially in matters that pertain to how one person treats another.

I do think many of these "gedolim" are easily manipulated, however, and have gotten into the careless habit of signing their names to things, simply because a trusted colleague or teacher of theirs did likewise. I am not sure they are truly

aware of the disastrous consequences that have ensued as a result of such behaviors.

People can always say that they should know better, as the community has appointed them leaders. I agree with this up to a point, but I also believe that this perspective denies these men the right to make human errors. In a weird way, it's a perspective that validates the unsustainable image of "gadlus" the chareidim have advocates--i.e. that true Torah leaders should be inerrant, virtually prophetic human beings.

The reality, in my view, is that many of these men are very smart, albeit ivory tower types, that are not truly aware of the ripple effects simple statements they make have on remote sections of the Jewish world. They are very old, and are subject to a certain myopia that accompanies many as they age, regardless of how accomplished they are. They do not appreciate how a careless signature can precipitate a crisis of faith for a person on the other side of the world. The world they grew up in was not like this.

MARCH 23, 2010 8:36 PM

elemir said...

There's more to this problem than simply the seemingly clueless so-called "Gedolim". It's also an unfortunate mindset found among the ultra-RW. That is, if anything that is not found explicitly forbidden by the Torah or by Chazal then it can't really be all that bad. Thus pedophilia, stealing from non-jews, and cheating on taxes etc. etc. are really OK.

MARCH 23, 2010 8:37 PM



Shadesof said...

I agree that the current system is responsible for perpetuating a denigration of kavod hatorah. I think the community needs to step in and organize better. Perhaps the community needs to take some pressure off the Gedolim, as Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz wrote after the Lipa issue:

"These individuals live simply and shun luxury. Many are far beyond the age of retirement, and no one could fault them if they chose to retire from a frenetic, public life and spend time with their children and grandchildren. Yet they graciously accept the incredible burden of communal responsibility with sincerity and dignity. We see them night after night participating at multiple weddings and other simchos, fundraising for the mosdos, and being available to listen to the sufferings of people who seek their bracha. We are burning them out, as my chaver Shiya Markowitz wrote in an excellent column that appeared in The Jewish Observer over fifteen years ago"

(This does not completely explain gedolim's policies of signing on letters, but time considerations seem to be one aspect)

MARCH 23, 2010 8:54 PM



משה רפאל said...

I find it remarkable how so many people are so reluctant to admit the obvious: The emperor has no clothes. While it is even much worse: The emperor is evil.

MARCH 23, 2010 9:10 PM

S. said...

>There's more to this problem than simply the seemingly clueless so-called "Gedolim". It's also an unfortunate mindset found among the ultra-RW. That is, if anything that is not found explicitly forbidden by the Torah or by Chazal then it can't really be all that bad. Thus pedophilia, stealing from non-jews, and cheating on taxes etc. etc. are really OK.

It has to be more than that, because reading a John Grisham book, eating a kosher hot dog at a baseball game and wearing a knit yarmulke (or no yarmulke) are also not explicitly forbidden by the Torah, but these and many more behaviors and attitudes certainly aren't regarded as not really that bad. On the contrary. So if you're looking for a method to the madness, it's not that those things you mentioned aren't

explicitly forbidden.

MARCH 23, 2010 9:19 PM

 Michael said...

"While it is even much worse: The emperor is evil."

I am not clear what you mean by this: if your meaning is that the chareidim have nurtured a system that allows evil to, at times, flourish, I would agree with you.

If you mean to imply that R' Kanievsky is evil, and that he would not have recoiled in horror, had he personally witnessed Chen inducing brain damage in a child, I would disagree.

Unfortunately, however, one of these Rabbis had to be the first to make a claim that Chen was innocent--whether it was one of the askanim, gedolim, or whoever. What was this decision based on, apart from an assumption that one of their own, a chareidi Jew, could never commit such a crime, (or worse, that he should not be prosecuted by the secular authorities, even if he was guilty)?

Somebody had to kick this thing off--do we know whom?

MARCH 23, 2010 9:54 PM

J. said...

I'm not convinced the letter says he IS innocent. This is the money quote:

היות שאנחנו מכירים אותו כאיש ישר
והגון, מחוייבים אנו להוכיח צדקתו

It says that 'we must prove that he is innocent'. I'm not convinced that they are saying he is innocent now.

Regardless, this letter is outrageous. If this guy is strongly suspected of being the worst child abuser in Israel's history - you don't write that about him. It makes me sick.

MARCH 23, 2010 10:11 PM

Anonymous said...

R' Slifkin, could you post the full letter and response instead of just posting your interpretation of the request.

MARCH 23, 2010 11:31 PM

Yossi said...

I am thinking of pursuing a research project investigating the pathological implications of living an austere hermitic life style. Physiologically and psychologically our brains are geared for hedonistic pleasures, such as the euphoria we feel after eating and sex. I was involved in a research project that looked at the neural mechanisms underlying the anti-phagic effects of Rimonabant (an anti-cannabinoid drug promoted by Pfizer as a weight loss drug). We found that its appetite reducing effect was due to preventing hedonistic circuits in the brain from functioning, presumably making eating less appealing.

My point is that when one cloisters themselves, and denies pleasurable activities to themselves, they need to find pleasurable stimulation expresses itself in pathological form. Hence priest, who deny themselves sex, express their sexuality so pathologically. Unfortunately I think the same is possibly true of people (I cannot bring myself to call them Rabbis) who spend all their time in the Beit Midrash. The Social pressure to engage in activities and lifestyles which bring them no psychological joy results in aberrant expression of their need for such an outlet.

I suspect that this is why people like Elijah Chaim engage in the behaviour they do.

MARCH 24, 2010 12:01 AM

Yossi said...

As for "Gedolim",

I think it is an oxymoron to suggest that a person who is

willing to add their name to a letter about a topic they know little about, and haven't taken adequate care to be accurately informed about, and who is easily manipulated, repeatedly, by the "guardians" sycophants that surround them is really a gadol.

The Rabbinic leadership, since the time of the Haskala has been fighting a losing battle over their "honour". Before the enlightenment Rabbis were probably the most educated members of their communities, and the person the entire community turned to for advice. While in the Chareidi world it still appears apparent that the "Gadol" is venerated and their advice sort after, it can no longer be said that Rabbis are either the most educated persons in their communities, nor the best informed or positioned for leadership. Having studied talmud back to front and inside out does not prepare you, or inform you, about the realities of modern life. As has amply been demonstrated, that while the Talmud may be full of what was cutting edge knowledge 1500 years ago, perhaps even as recently as 200 years ago, as a source of an explanation of reality it is hopelessly inadequate today. A life lived only studying these sources makes you expert in nothing but these sources.

MARCH 24, 2010 12:09 AM



David Bar-Cohn said...

"On a letter that my rabbis are signed on to, I also sign."

Assuming these are the Rav's words, either he's admitting that he never looked into the case himself -- or he's saying that even after examining the case, he still stands by his signature because his rabbis signed it.

This is a prime example of placing one's trust in authority over knowledge.

It's either: Once you have it on authority, you *needn't bother* acquiring knowledge.

Or: Place your trust in authority *despite* the knowledge.

In fairness, I can see the nobility of such an approach -- trust your true friends and mentors even when it *appears* they are wrong. Lehavdil (which way, you decide!), in Harry Potter there's the theme about Harry trusting in Dumbledore about Snape, despite Harry's experience telling him otherwise...

It's a common theme in stories, but how "noble" does it turn out to be in real life?

In this case, it results in a terrible chilul Hashem.

Really, this issue underscores the central theme of this blog -- the divergence of approach (and the potential 'nafka mina's) between those who place a primacy on knowledge & experience vs. those who say that faith & authority trump all.

MARCH 24, 2010 12:31 AM

lamedzayin said...

I just read the charges against Chen. I think I am physically ill. This is the man Elyashiv, Steinman and Kanievsky are protecting? You know what, I don't care how much Torah you know, what semicha you have, who considers you a gadol, when you read the charges against Chen and side with a child torturer rather than his victims, you are no longer deserving of the title Rabbi or even the honorific Reb.

What is the point of Orthodox Judaism? Clearly there is no correlation between Torah scholarship and basic human decency. If the "Gedolim" support someone like Chen then maybe I need to turn in my kippa.

MARCH 24, 2010 1:28 AM

Pliny said...

Is there anyone reading this website who can print out this post and drop it off in R' Kanievsky's (or his son's, or anyone else you deem proper) mailbox?

MARCH 24, 2010 1:55 AM

David said...

"I write this post with a heavy heart."

May your heavy heart cease functioning from its load.

MARCH 24, 2010 4:48 AM

 משה רפאל said...

"I am not clear what you mean by this: if your meaning is that the chareidim have nurtured a system that allows evil to, at times, flourish, I would agree with you.

If you mean to imply that R' Kanievsky is evil, and that he would not have recoiled in horror, had he personally witnessed Chen inducing brain damage in a child, I would disagree."

Blaming "the system" or "the askanim" is still one step away of the simplest and most logical explanation.

MARCH 24, 2010 5:46 AM

 Natan Slifkin said...

R' Slifkin, could you post the full letter and response instead of just posting your interpretation of the request.

I don't have anything else to post. My neighbor told me that he sent a copy of the letter with the signatures to RCK and asked him if his signature was forged. The response was exactly what I posted, no more and no less.

MARCH 24, 2010 6:04 AM

 Joshua said...

David Litman,

Regarding your third point that's clearly not true. For example, Rambam wrote letters about halachic issues

concerning communities very far from him.

MARCH 24, 2010 6:32 AM

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