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Atty. De Hartoch Slaps MK Rabbi Yaakov Cohen of UTJ

By Eliezer Rauchberger

The Knesset and political establishment was shocked by the growing violence against Knesset members, which reached a new peak on Tuesday when Atty. Amnon de Hartoch, a Justice Ministry official in charge of approving support funding criteria, slapped MK Rabbi Yaakov Cohen on the face inside the Knesset building.

Following the alarming incident UTJ held an urgent meeting at which it decided to demand de Hartoch's immediate dismissal, saying he cannot be allowed to continue serving as a public servant. UTJ then sent a letter to the Civil Service Commission firmly demanding that he be fired without delay.

The head of security at the Knesset filed a police complaint against de Hartoch, who was held for questioning. Following the interrogation de Hartoch was released subject to certain restrictions.

The Knesset presidency also convened an urgent meeting to discuss the violent event. The presidency heard a report by the head of security, emphasized the seriousness of the incident and issued a staunch condemnation. Presidency members unanimously said the event should be viewed as a blow to MKs' immunity. "Violence anywhere should be denounced and all the more so in the Knesset building," said presidency members.

Knesset Chairwoman Dalia Itzik, on an official visit to London, received a report on the incident immediately and decided to permanently ban de Hartoch from the Knesset building.

The incident took place during a heated exchange in the hallway outside the committee meeting rooms over the amount of funding the State should provide educational institutions whose students do not study all of the subjects required by the Core Curriculum Program.

Irate over de Hartoch's remarks, Rabbi Cohen said, "Why do you lie to us? Why do you scheme against us? You're destroying the Torah world."

"You're an animal," de Hartoch replied. "You're like the Germans."

Rabbi Cohen responded to de Hartoch's harsh words by saying, "What you're doing is like the Germans who wanted to destroy the body and soul."

"Stop talking like that," said de Hartoch. "You don't know me. I'll give you a smack."

"Let's see you," said Rabbi Cohen.

At that point de Hartoch failed to control his rage and slapped the MK very hard across the face. A security guard standing nearby held de Hartoch against the wall and summoned security personnel, who held the attorney for questioning.

MK Rabbi Cohen was stunned by what happened. "Even my father never hit me that hard," he said as he was receiving treatment. "I saw stars and everything went black. Everyone was shocked. He is a threat to the public. I call on the Justice Minister to dismiss him."

During the UTJ meeting held to discuss the assault, MKs voiced resentment over the failure of the Justice Ministry, the Justice Minister and the Attorney General to denounce the violent attack in a timely manner. Meanwhile UTJ praised the Knesset presidency for its decision, but said it would not be satisfied unless de Hartoch is fired.

The party also condemned the silence by the majority of MKs and parties, saying had this happened to a secular MK there would have been tremendous outrage. One of the few MKs who did call for de Hartoch's dismissal was Uri Ariel (Halchud HaLeumi-NRP). "If the Justice Ministry does not fire Atty. de Hartoch it will be the end of the State of Israel as a country of law. An official cannot slap a publicly-elected official and remain at his post."

On the other hand, fellow party member MK Tzvi Hendel tried to justify de Hartoch's act. MK Yossi Beilin (Meretz) also defended him, but acknowledged the severity of the incident and called for a police investigation. Dr. Shlomo Cohen, head of the Israeli Bar Association, chose to praise the violent official for his dedication to public service.

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