

Toward Democratization in the Haredi Leadership?

**The Doctrine of *Da'at Torah*
at the Turn of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries**

Benjamin Brown

Abstract

What will the leadership of the Lithuanian stream of ultra-Orthodox Jewry be like in the next generation? Will it retain its centralized-authoritarian nature? Or will it look to leadership models that are decentralized and perhaps more democratic? These questions should be of interest also to the non-Lithuanian, and even to those who are not part of haredi society. The *gdol ha-dor* (leading rabbinic scholar of the generation) of the Lithuanian stream is highly respected in haredi society, particularly in matters of policy and “*hashkafa*” (ideology). In the next generation, he will be confronted with several major issues, first and foremost the integration of yeshiva students into military service (or a civilian alternative) and of married yeshiva students into the labor market. As the power of the haredim in Israeli society has grown, so has the importance of these questions – and of those who will decide them.

* Translated by Karen Gold

The leading Torah scholars of the Lithuanian community derive their authority from the doctrine of *Da'at Torah*, which empowers them to decide also public and private questions unrelated to halakha (Jewish religious law). Since its early formulations at the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of changes have taken place in the substance and application of this doctrine. A review and analysis of these changes can contribute to understanding the dynamic of the Lithuanian haredi leadership and the ways that it has evolved.

The first three stages of *Da'at Torah* gradually increased its scope: From a concept emphasizing the greatness of Torah, it became a model that emphasized the greatness of the authorities who interpreted the Torah, and from there, a demand to “observe to do according to all that they inform thee” (Deut. 17, 10). The doctrine reached its height in the fourth stage, under the leadership of Rabbi Elazar Menahem Mann Shach (1898–2001). During this period, the influence of the haredi leadership extended far beyond the boundaries of the community, reaching deep into general Israeli politics. For the first time, Rabbi Shach called for the monopolization of *Da'at Torah* so that it expressed the “pure *hashkafa*” – namely, his own. In the name of this position, he entered into battle with virtually every sector of haredi society.

After more than two decades of leadership, Rabbi Shach stepped down in the mid-1990s, leaving behind both weakened haredi leaders and ruptures that were hard to mend. It appeared as though the Lithuanian community would be headed by two leaders – Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliashiv (born in 1910) and Rabbi Aharon Leib Steinman (born in 1914). Ultimately, the leadership of Rabbi Eliashiv triumphed, and he continues to lead the community as of late 2010, at the age of 100.

Rabbi Eliashiv is not a man of *hashkafa*, and his primary focus is

on issuing halakhic rulings and studying Talmud. The practical work is carried out for him by the “attendants” surrounding him, who exert great influence on his decisions. It is therefore possible to view the period of his leadership – the fifth stage in the evolution of *Da'at Torah* – as the technocratization of the doctrine. Rabbi Eliashiv’s pragmatic, non-ideological approach has enabled him to silently accept the “opening-up” of haredi society in several areas during the past decade, for example, professional training and job acquisition for married yeshiva students, and vocational and military service programs under army auspices.

The rule of the “technocrats” would seem to denote a transition from quasi-charismatic authority to a quasi-bureaucratic regime. Does this transition reflect the fading of the aura surrounding the great rabbis of the generation? And if so, is this process paving the way for a more democratic form of authority? Even if the probability of the haredi leadership being chosen by the public is nil, will a more decentralized, perhaps collective, leadership emerge in the next stage of the *Da'at Torah* doctrine? Will it be more favorably disposed to the forces in the field that are leading the way toward change?

There is no question that the charismatic leadership of Rabbi Shach’s era is a thing of the past. Already today, many haredim, in particular the young, know that in truth it is not the *gdol ha-dor* who decides; but this does not appear to disturb them as long as “things run smoothly.” Apparently, however, the Lithuanian community would still prefer a centralized leadership, with the possible exception of the interim period between the death of Rabbi Eliashiv and the consolidation of the status of his successor. The names that come up most often as possible candidates are those of Rabbi Hayim Kanievsky (whose chances are slim), Rabbi Nissim Karelitz, and Rabbi Shmuel Auerbach. Each of them, if they win the exalted

position, is likely to establish a different pattern of leadership. But it is hard to imagine a situation in which haredi society would be willing to go back to the days of “pure *hashkafa*” of the Rabbi Shach school. Hence, it seems that in the end one leader will be chosen who will also inherit, to one degree or another, the rule of the technocrats along with the relative weakness of the leadership. The growing openness of haredi society will be stronger than him, and it is a process unlikely to stop. The greater these changes, the more pragmatic and removed from *hashkafa* the religious authority sought by haredi society will be. Thus, *Da'at Torah* will not become democratic, but it will be less authoritative than in the past. This change as well will take place as a result not of ideological awareness but of social weakness.