



## Serarah Shehi Avdut: Sugiyot Berabbanut Hakehillah

(Authority That is Servitude:  
Topics in the Communal Rabbinate)

By Rabbi Moshe Leventhal  
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760 pages

**Reviewed by Avraham J. Shmidman**

In recent years, Orthodox Jewry has been treated to a number of up-close and inside views of the American rabbinate. Rabbi Emanuel Feldman's classic *Tales out of Shul: The Unorthodox Journal of an Orthodox Rabbi* and Rabbi Berel Wein's recent release *Tending the Vineyard: The Life, Rewards and Vicissitudes of Being a Rabbi* are two of the more celebrated and popular works of this genre. These books are shmoozey and highly entertaining autobiographical accounts that provide personal perspectives into the often complex and chaotic careers of two previously prominent pulpit rabbis in the United States.

The North American pulpit rabbi, in particular, finds himself in the paradoxical position of being the direct employee of those for whom he is an authority figure. Precariously perched, he must consequently guide without impugning; reproach without offending; rule without causing distress. A North American rabbi must demonstrate himself to be a gifted and innovative orator, erudite in all areas of halachah, a dynamic teacher, a skilled provider of pastoral guidance, an enthusiastic youth director, an efficient administrator, a visionary community

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activist, a successful fundraiser and a creative outreach director—among other talents. He must also balance the obligations of life-cycle events and family considerations within exceedingly limited time constraints, while being accessible to all. It is abundantly clear that a rabbi's life is less than simple. The unique challenges such a figure faces are explored in works such as those written by Rabbis Feldman and Wein. These books frequently feature the wisdom and wit a rabbi needs to deftly navigate the choppy waters between the Scylla of authoritarianism and the Charybdis of irrelevance, while keeping track of all his other professional duties.

A North American rabbi and a congregation are a *shidduch*. Both parties enter into a pact if, and only if, there is mutual agreement. Curiosity about a partner in any close relationship is naturally great, and this is especially true when it comes to our rabbis. Books about the rabbinate therefore never fail to fascinate, for we enjoy a great closeness to the protagonists.

In Israel, of course, the situation is quite different. The community structure is generally different than what is found in North America. Shuls in Israel are primarily places to *daven*, and usually aren't centers of social and youth programming. The majority of them do not have the catering facilities considered *de rigueur* in their North American counterparts. Most significantly, the post of "rabbi" in Israel is

generally a state appointment, even if it involves, to some extent, those affected by the decision. The roles and responsibilities of an Israeli rabbi are therefore vastly different than those of his North American colleague; the scope of his duties is usually narrower. Ultimately, an Israeli rabbi is account-

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able to the government, not to the people he directly serves. This is especially true since Israeli rabbis do not generally serve in one synagogue; they are rabbis for entire cities or communities. Accordingly, compared to their American counterparts, most Israelis have far less expectations of their rabbis. Sadly, they often also have much less of a personal connection with their spiritual leaders.

Things, however, are beginning to change. The North American-rabbi model, with the appropriate Israeli modifications, is slowly seeping into

certain segments of Israeli society. The appearance of an illuminating work written in Hebrew by Rabbi Moshe Leventhal, *Serarah Shehi Avdut: Sugiyot Berabbanut Hakehillah, Authority That is Servitude: Topics in the Communal Rabbinate*, about the Israeli rabbinate is a significant indicator that it, and its place within Israeli culture, is undergoing a considerable change. This change is important not only for what it suggests about the Israeli rabbinate and the functions of its members, but also—and more importantly—for what it portends about how Israelis will relate in the future to their religious leaders, and more generally to their own spiritual needs and aspirations.

The book owes its existence in large measure to a grant from the Israeli Ministry of Education. Such an award suggests that Israelis recognize that a comprehensive review and analysis of the rabbinate can only contribute to the betterment of their society.

Clearly, one assessment of the Israeli rabbinate will not bring about a sea change. The author points out that this is the first work of its kind in Israel. Indeed, Rabbi Leventhal struggles to understand why such a work has not been written previously. To him, the most compelling reason for this lacuna is that Israel's rabbis do not consider themselves practitioners of a trade, and have not prepared themselves for their jobs in a systematic fashion. They have therefore never endeavored to describe their work in thorough and methodical terms. Rabbi Leventhal feels that transforming the rabbinate into a profession, in the positive sense of the word, will advance the field in Israel.

As rabbi of Beit Yatir in Har Chevron for four years—without the rabbinic support staff found in larger cities—Rabbi Leventhal found himself in charge of *kashrut*, as well as the mikvah, the *eruv*, the *chevrah kadishah* and a host of other functions. He thus has considerable personal experience to draw upon. At the time Rabbi Leventhal concluded his book, he had been out of the rabbinate for more than twelve years, and is therefore entitled to claim objectivity. Rabbi Leventhal's knowledge of the rabbinate is not limited to his own experience. His maternal grandfather, to whom the book is dedicated (along with a rabbinic friend of the author killed in Gaza), was Rabbi Moshe Dovid Flesch. An important figure in the Bais Yaakov movement, Rabbi Flesch was a rabbi in Vienna before he was murdered by the Nazis (see the book's appendix for more information).

Rabbi Leventhal has written about the rabbinate in Israel as only a rabbi would. The book reads like a captivating *derashah* (sermon); it is clear, emotional, insightful, enriching and interspersed with vignettes. Alas, it is also reminiscent of some *derashot* in its remarkable length; its tome-like quality may, sadly, scare off some potential readers. Several other facets of *Serarah Shehi Avdut* clearly identify it as the work of a soulful rabbi and not that of a detached academician. The very form of the book, with its four “gates” (and homiletically titled chapters, thirty-three in all), lets us know that its craftsman is first and foremost a yeshivah student. But more blatant than its form is the language employed. Although ostensibly in Hebrew, the book overflows with Talmudic and

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rabbinic phraseology. Finally, while the bibliography at the end of the book is replete with secular sources, *Serarah Shehi Avdut* seems to primarily employ classic Torah texts to advance most of its arguments.

Arguably, the most important contribution of *Serarah Shehi Avdut* lies in its comprehensiveness. Almost every area of rabbinic life, from the personal

willing to tread through this entire work will find it a useful and refreshing resource tool.

Rabbi Leventhal's stated goals in authoring the book are to sensitize the Israeli laity to the numerous challenges confronted by rabbis and to offer prospective rabbis a personal glimpse into the joys and difficulties of this unusual career. At the outset of

unique religious character and complexities of the community that will be affected by his *pesukei din* and direction. And often, a halachic ruling appropriate for one shul is not necessarily correct for another. At times, a rabbi is at a loss to determine in which direction to turn. A highly educated *talmid chacham* is at times not qualified to address the issues of a locality whose circumstances are, for him, not completely clear. Indeed, it is not uncommon for a world-renowned *posek* to declare himself unfit to make decisions for a place with which he is unfamiliar. This often presents a dilemma for a rabbi seeking direction: Do I seek it from someone not fully qualified, or do I not seek it at all?

In this respect, the Israeli rabbinate has much more to offer. Israel's official rabbinate is a hierarchy, with rabbis overseeing neighborhoods, areas, cities and indeed the entire country. Many see the downside of such an arrangement, as bureaucracy and politics abound. In his book, however, Rabbi Leventhal indicates how he benefited from the council of his superior who lived and served in the same area as he but had a more expanded role. Rabbi Dov Leor's wisdom, age and experience, combined with his intimate knowledge of the people in the area, made him a natural resource for the younger Rabbi Leventhal. Unfortunately, the Diaspora does not have a parallel to this.

Rabbi Leventhal notes that in Israel marriage, divorce and conversion, among other significant life-cycle events, are under the provence of the general rabbinate and not under the purview of individual rabbis. Here, too, there are critics. Israel's systems and policies controlled by the rabbinate have undergone persistent and withering attacks. The validity (or lack thereof) of these complaints aside, the notion of having a uniform standard for such crucial issues is one of the Israeli rabbinate's greatest strengths. Hierarchy and standardization beget challenges, but *Serarah Shehi Avdut* demonstrates that they also provide stability to the rabbinate. After reading this book it is difficult not to conclude that we in the Diaspora would do well to learn from the Israeli rabbinic experience in an effort to enhance our own rabbinate and communities. ■

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to the professional, is carefully explored in this volume. Issues such as prioritizing responsibilities, techniques of public speaking, salary and the role of the *rebbetzin* are all discussed. Rabbi Leventhal also courageously tackles prickly issues facing the rabbinate as a whole, like its approaches to life-cycle events and *pesak halachah* (halachic rulings) as compared with the approaches of the Yeshivah World. Even the reader un-

the work, Rabbi Leventhal defends his heavy reliance on experiences and source material culled from Diaspora rabbis and their writings by claiming that most literature on the rabbinate comes from outside Israel. Furthermore, he observes that the rabbinate in North America is more professional by nature, and boasts many successes worthy of study.

Rabbi Leventhal maintains that filling the void created by an apparent lack of literature about the Israeli rabbinate will only improve the profession's standing within Israel. *Serarah Shehi Avdut* presumes a measure of weakness in the Israeli rabbinate as compared to the seemingly more defined Diaspora rabbinate. Ironically, the book unintentionally presents us with a number of the Israeli rabbinate's strengths. Two examples follow.

When a prospective rabbi interviews for a position, invariably one of the questions almost every search committee asks is, "When you have a *she'eilah* [question], whom do you consult?" A rabbinic candidate who has no answer to this query indicates a level of hubris most congregations would find off-putting. The candidate who answers the question often reveals the *derech hapesak* (approach to halachic decision-making) and *hashkafah* (religious outlook) he has imbibed from his mentors.

Interestingly, a rabbi, and perhaps more importantly, his congregants, particularly in a small community, must make sure that the one guiding him truly understands the conditions and the context of the congregation he is serving. The rabbi providing guidance must comprehend the



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