“The Will of the People” or “The Will of the Rabbis”: Democracy and the Rabbis’ Authority

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PREFACE

A well-known secret is that if any candidate wants to earn the votes of several Jewish communities in Brooklyn, he does not need to go visit any bar mitzvah parties or take pictures with Jewish children. All he needs is to meet with their rabbi and convince him to order his followers to vote for him, and what the rabbi decides, they will do without any doubt.

This description might be a simple answer to the common question “Is Judaism democratic?” In these kinds of communities, the answer is a definite “no.” Without getting into the different ways to define democracy, the free will of the individual in the society is an essential part of it. Therefore, the Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities, which emphasize the value of obedience to the rabbis, cannot be considered democratic communities.

However, as we see in this essay, the truth, as always, is much more complicated. We will examine various sources as well as some research that was done on Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities, in order to present the different motives for obedience to the rabbis. We will create a scale of democracy and see the differences between the approaches in terms of closeness to democratic values.

We will focus on Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. Of course, there are big differences between the communities in this spectrum—a Chasidic community in Brooklyn is not the same as a Sephardic community in Jerusalem. Yet, the differences are going to be presented in the different ways to explain the obedience to the rabbis, as we will see.

The decision to focus on this period was made because during this time there was a huge growth in the importance of this value: obedience to the rabbis. The rabbis had an important role in the Jewish communities for ages, and they were involved in their followers’ lives in many ways, but in this period something had changed.
Described in the short and exact words by Haym Soloveitchik: “What is new in the contemporary scene is the unprecedented frequency, scope and authority currently ceded to them [the rabbis].”

The role of the rabbi was no longer limited to typical halachic topics. Rabbis were asked questions about business and financial issues, as well as marriages and divorces. In several communities, the members ask the rabbi whom to marry, where to invest their money, and whether to renovate their houses. Another important aspect of the obedience to the rabbis is politics. Rabbis are involved in each decision of the political representatives of their communities, and they are the real leaders of ultra-Orthodox political parties.

The political aspect of obedience to rabbis is another aspect of the change in the role of the rabbis during the period with which we are dealing. The political institutions, with the authority of the rabbis, strengthened their power and influence. The rabbis became much more famous as they got exposure from the political party and thus gained many more followers who looked for their advice and obeyed their decisions. Furthermore, they got the opportunity to directly influence a wide variety of issues, with national and even international significance.

This value became very important in ultra-Orthodox communities, and in some ways, we can say that it defined and separated them from other Jewish religious communities. We can see how some groups in Religious Zionism define themselves by resistance to the involvement of rabbis in wide aspects of life, as happened in the ultra-Orthodox communities.

Other developments in the obedience to the rabbis during this time are the theoretical explanations for it that were discussed and written by the rabbis, who gave this value deeper and more diverse meanings. The theoretical explanations for the meaning of obedience to the rabbis will be the basis for our discussion in this article.

FOUR MOTIVATIONS FOR OBEDIENCE TO THE RABBIS

We can arrange and divide the explanations for obedience to the rabbis into four different concepts: political-social, mystic, halachic, and rational.

THE POLITICAL-SOCIAL CONCEPT

Usually, the political-social concept will not appear in internal Orthodox sources—although we can find some expressions of it, as we will see. However,
according to some research, this is the main cause for the growth of rabbinic obedience in this period.

According to this concept, obedience to the rabbis is a way to deal with the weakening of the traditional Jewish community. Modern influences led some Jewish leaders to fight back by strengthening the borders of Jewish communities. This is the foundation of Jewish Orthodoxy, in which obedience to the rabbis is considered one of the main characteristics of this process.\(^6\)

This obedience to rabbis created a system that requires members of the community to keep close relations with the rabbi and leaders of the community. If you are taught to ask the rabbi about every step in your life, you cannot leave the community. Strengthening this value became a way to prevent abandonment of the Orthodox community.

In addition, the empowerment of the rabbis’ position reduces the independence of individuals, and it is therefore easier to keep them away from new ideologies that may be opposed to Orthodox ideology.

Furthermore, as mentioned before, this value became a way to define and separate Orthodox communities and Orthodox parties from other groups in Jewish society. The difference between who accepts the authority of the rabbis and who does not emphasized the uniqueness of Orthodox identity and helped to strengthen the borders of these communities.

In this concept, obedience to rabbis is not described as a Jewish value—or as a value at all. It is a political and social tool that is used to promote several concepts and targets. Therefore, we do not expect to find this concept in any internal Orthodox sources. We can assume that it will be displayed and explained in much more ideological ways.

However, we can find traces of it in some rabbis’ writings. For example, an interesting explanation of the importance of total obedience to rabbis was given by Rav Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, known by the name of his book—Chazon Ish.\(^7\)

In his book, he talks about people who do not trust the rabbis and think that maybe they have private motives in their decisions—just like any other people. In response, he does not talk about the greatness and holiness of the rabbis, which makes them think and act differently from other people. Instead he speaks about the danger of this thinking. He explains that if we do not trust the rabbis, it will break the entire social and juridical system and will cause anarchy. He claimed that without total obedience the generation will become orphans, without any leadership.\(^8\) According to his explanation, obedience to the rabbis, without any doubts in their motives, is a way to keep order in the community and maintain social stability.
An interesting comparison was made by Gershon Bacon between obedience to the rabbis in ultra-Orthodox communities and the decision regarding papal infallibility made by the Vatican Council at the end of the nineteenth century. According to some research, the motive for this decision was to “enhance his sovereign power as the head of the church,” as Brian Tierney termed it. We can see in both cases how religious decisions and values can be used for political and social needs.

**THE MYSTIC CONCEPT**

According to this concept, the rabbi is considered to be closer to God and to have special spiritual powers. His decisions represent God’s will, and therefore ordinary people must obey them.

By this concept, obedience to the rabbis has significant importance. It is not only a matter of keeping community order or the regular halachic obligation. The rabbi’s decisions represent God’s will, and so disobeying is actually resisting God. This concept gives unlimited power and authority to rabbis and encourages followers to widen the involvement of rabbis in their lives—who does not want to have direct guidance from God in every step of his life?

Researchers argue about when this concept started to be popular as an explanation to rabbinic obedience—after the Holocaust or maybe after the establishment of the State of Israel. However, many agree that its origin is the Chasidic concept of the *Tzadik*—the spiritual religious leader—and the expansion of this concept is an expression of the influence of the Chasidic movement on the entirety of Jewish Orthodoxy.

One way to identify the mystic concept of obedience to rabbis is when the rabbis give their answers and orders without any explanations or sources. In regular rabbinic writings, rabbis base their decisions on traditional sources or previous cases. This sort of writing gives other rabbis and followers the ability to discuss the conclusions and to argue about the way the rabbi understood the sources. According to the mystic concept, the source for the rabbis’ decisions is their closeness to God, and therefore there is no need to bring in other sources or explanations, and it is also impossible to disagree with their decisions.

There is a similarity between this concept and the Catholic dogma of papal infallibility that we mentioned before. If the rabbi has close relations with God and if his decisions represent God’s will, then it makes sense that he cannot be wrong. Some researchers claim that we can find sources for this
idea in Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy, in the argument about rabbis’ leadership during the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{13}

However, most rabbis avoid using these kinds of terms and do not describe rabbis as totally infallible. Followers should obey rabbis without any doubts, and their decisions have a highly spiritual significance, but not in the same way that happened within the Catholic Church. The common explanations talk about the huge distance between the rabbis and regular people. Therefore what seemed to be the rabbi’s mistake is actually the follower’s mistake—the assumption that the rabbi can never be wrong is usually not stated.\textsuperscript{14} This can be explained by a reluctance to relate total divine abilities to a human being in Orthodox Judaism—even when he considered to have special spiritual abilities.

THE HALACHIC CONCEPT

This concept seems to be the most conservative concept because it bases obedience to rabbis on the traditional halachic obligation to the rabbis, which is mentioned in the Torah and the Talmud. However, this concept is radical due to the unlimited number of topics considered to be part of halacha, which made every kind of question part of the rabbis’ responsibility—from political decisions to personal finance questions. According to this concept, members of the religious community should ask their rabbi who to marry or where to build their home in the same way they should ask him how to make kosher food and observe the rules of Shabbat.

This concept is based on the theological idea that everything can be found in the Torah—every aspect of life, every question we have. Benjamin Brown wrote a comprehensive study about the roots of this idea and showed its various origins in Maimonides’ philosophy, as well as in Nachmanides’ kabbalah.\textsuperscript{15} According to this concept, rabbis should use traditional sources as a base for explaining their decisions. It requires them to provide a creative reading of the sources and to use varying sources to find answers to many different questions.

An example for this creativity can be found in an answer written by Rav Moshe Sofer, known by the name of his book Chatam Sofer, considered to be one of the founders of Jewish Orthodoxy. He was asked if it is allowed to build the bimah, or stage, at the front of a synagogue. This question was an argument between Orthodox rabbis and the new Reform movement, which chose to place the stage at the front in their new temples. He answered that
it is forbidden to do it and used extremely unusual sources with remarkable creativity to support his decision for this simple architectural question.\textsuperscript{16}

Decisions made according to this concept result in open discussion—the same way it happens in any other halachic decisions. Another interesting result of this concept is the connection, or perhaps better to say disconnect, between their decisions and reality.

We previously discussed the claim that rabbis cannot be wrong according to the mystic concept. In the halachic concept we can find similar claims, that the rabbis’ decisions cannot be tested by their results in reality. The Chazon Ish, who was mentioned before, was quoted saying that “success is not Halacha.” This slogan means that the halachic goal is to figure out the Jews’ duties, what God is expecting them to do in each situation. Therefore, the practical result of what they do is irrelevant, as long as they believe it is God’s will.

An example of this way of thinking can be found after the establishment of the State of Israel, when the ultra-Orthodox rabbis were asked if the success of the Zionists was God’s will, and if the rabbis who opposed Zionism were wrong. The answer given by Rabbi Izhak Soloveichik, the Rabbi of Brisk—one of the most important ultra-Orthodox rabbis in Jerusalem in the first years of the State of Israel—was the same: that success means nothing if what they are doing is against halachah, as he believed.\textsuperscript{17}

This concept is a great example for Jewish Orthodoxy. The essence of Orthodoxy is the claim that nothing has changed—they observe the traditional Jewish way of life, which always included obedience to rabbis.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, great changes had occurred when obedience to the rabbis began to cover all aspects of life, and halachah itself grew new and wider meanings.

THE RATIONAL CONCEPT

Unlike the halachic concept, according to this concept there is a difference between ordinary halachic questions and all other questions rabbis were asked, which are not considered to be part of halachah. The main question is, why should rabbis be involved in nonhalachic questions? If marriage, finance, and politics are not considered part of halachah—why should people obey rabbis’ decisions in those areas?

The answer, according to the rational concept, is that the rabbis have clearer thinking and better logic than the ordinary person has, and therefore their decisions should be followed. The reason that the rabbis have these
special abilities is the Torah they studied. Some sources talk about how studying the Torah helps to shape rational skills and logical thinking. Other sources focus on the moral influence of the Torah, which purifies the minds of learners and enables them to make decisions without external influences, from desires to social concerns. This claim about the influence of Torah studying has roots in the Talmud and even the Bible, but the implication of it in total obedience to rabbis is a unique development.

We can understand that the commitment to the rabbis’ decisions here is lower, according to this concept, in comparison to the others. The rabbis are considered to be good advisors, and it can be useful to consult them in any aspect of life, but their decisions in nonhalachic topics are only advice.

Therefore, rabbis and other writers were trying to encourage people to obey rabbis, even in nonhalachic matters. Certain famous quotes sharply describe the huge difference between the rabbis’ way of thinking and ordinary people. We can see the difference between this concept and the others in the way it was presented. In practice, the result may be the same—the rabbis lead their communities with absolute control. This concept can give followers a sense of willingness and understanding of their rabbis’ leadership in their society, but does not necessarily mean that their obedience to the rabbis was different.

THE SCALE OF DEMOCRACY

After examining the four main concepts of obedience to the rabbis, we can examine their level of democracy. As mentioned at the beginning, we are not talking about full democracy in the way we usually understand this phrase. We are still talking about ultra-Orthodox communities, where rabbis make most important decisions for their followers. What we are trying to do is to build a scale of democracy, and examine the differences between these concepts, to examine their proximity to democracy—or maybe we should say to examine their distance from democracy.

The main criterion in our scale of democracy will be the individual’s status in society, relative to the position of the rabbis. The heart of democracy and the basis for many democratic values is the importance of each member of a society, which is expressed in his or her independence and freedom. Therefore, the more the individual is worthless and meaningless in society, the more this concept will be considered as nondemocratic.

By this criterion, we can find a difference between the first two and last two concepts described above. The basis of the political-social concept was the
weakening of individuals in society. The strengthening of the rabbis’ position was part of a process of fortifying the boundaries of the Jewish community, in order to resist modern theories that were considered a threat to Jewish tradition.

According to this concept, the less free will the individual has and the less he or she makes decisions independently, the less ability an individual has to make changes in his or her life. And the more social institutions, represented mostly by the rabbis, have the power to control their members’ lives, the more possible it is to keep them away from any external influence.

Therefore, this concept can be considered extremely nondemocratic. As mentioned before, this political-social concept was mostly described by researchers who examined ultra-Orthodox communities, and not by the rabbis themselves. However, as we stated before, we can find examples of this concept in their writings.

The second concept, the mystic concept, also presents a total weakening of individuals, though from a different perspective. According to this concept, the rabbis have special spiritual abilities; they are closer to God than anyone else, and their decisions represent his will. Therefore, the individual has to obey the rabbis and has no right to decide on his own or even to think independently—everything is cancelled in the presence of godliness. Unlike the political-social concept, the purpose is not specifically to weaken individuals. However, the emphasis on the rabbis’ greatness and uniqueness leads to the insignificance of the regular members of society. Therefore, this concept can also be considered as nondemocratic.

In the next two concepts, however, we find a different status of individuals in society, despite their total obedience to the rabbis. We can see it clearly in the rational concept. As mentioned before, in the rational concept the rabbis are considered expert advisors, with special rationality and clear minds, and therefore their orders should be followed. The individuals in the society have full freedom to choose their way—and they choose to obey the rabbis because they appreciate their wisdom and their advice.

Of course, some might claim that it is a fake freedom, because the encouragement to obey the rabbis is actually brainwashing, and the social consequences for disobeying rabbis in these communities does not give a chance for true free will. As mentioned before, we are not dealing with the psychological aspects of obedience to the rabbis, and we are not examining the practical motives, but rather the way it is explained in the sources. We can assume, however, that in a society that educates its members according in this
manner, it will be easier for an independent individual to choose differently and to make his own decisions in life.

The halachic concept of obedience to rabbis is different in many ways, but the position of the individual is similar. According to this approach, all aspects of life are considered to be part of halachah, and therefore the rabbis, who are the halachic authority, are in charge of every kind of decision in each person’s life.

The individual, who chooses to be committed to halachah chooses to obey the rabbis. We can consider the rabbis as experts in the field of halachah, and the regular person, who is not qualified enough in this area, needs the help of the rabbis’ expertise. We can compare it to other aspects in life, such as medicine, finance, or technology, where most people defer to experts in these areas—doctors, bankers, or engineers. Obedience to the rabbis is not because they are greater than other people, but because it is their expertise.

We can see in both the halachic and rational concepts that the individual’s status is different, in comparison to the mystic and political concepts. Their obedience to the rabbis is made by their own decision to count on the rabbis’ expertise in halachah or on their wisdom. According to the democratic scale we describe before, we claim that these concepts are more democratic than the other two.

We can still claim that the decision to give up on your free will and let other people make your decisions cannot be considered democratic in any way. However, we all choose to give up our own free will in many aspects of our life and live our lives according to the decisions of different experts. The fact that this is our own choice to count on other people’s decisions is what makes the difference.

Another way to describe the scale of democracy of these concepts is by the distance between the rabbi and his followers. According to the political concept, the purpose of obedience to rabbis is to create a distance between leadership and individuals, to keep them away from any external influence, and build boundaries for Jewish society.

In the mystic concept, there is also a huge distance between the rabbis and their followers. The rabbis have a high level of spirituality, and regular members of the community are way behind. Therefore, we can, again, describe these concepts on the democratic scale as closer to dictatorship.

On the other two concepts, we can see that the distance between the rabbis and their followers is much smaller. The rabbi is an expert in his field—halachah or rational thinking—but he is not entirely different
from his followers. Theoretically, anyone in the community can study Torah and reach his level—the focus is not on the rabbis’ abilities or their social position, but on the Torah they studied, which is open to everyone to study. This social structure, where the distance between the leader and followers is limited and open to change, creates a different society in comparison to the other two approaches. This is a less hierarchical society, and therefore it can be considered more democratic.

SUMMARY

In summary, we have seen four different ways to explain the total obedience to rabbis in ultra-Orthodox communities in the last century. We divided the four approaches into two main groups, according to their proximity to democratic values. Our main argument was that the lower the status of the individual in the society and the greater the distance between the individual and his rabbi, the more we can consider the approach as nondemocratic.

Understanding the differences between these different motives for obedience to rabbis is extremely important for understanding ultra-Orthodox communities and their way of life. In modern-day Israel, understanding these communities is very important, especially because their population growth has made them an important factor in Israeli politics and economy.

The Israel Democracy Institution has conducted interesting research about obedience to rabbis in ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel in order to understand processes happening in this field and to predict where it is going to take these communities. Their title was a question: “Are we going towards democracy in the ultra-Orthodox leadership?”

From these sources, we can answer that if democracy means that the ultra-Orthodox will no longer obey their rabbis, then the answer is probably “no.” This value is part of these communities’ identity, part of their DNA. But, even though obedience to the rabbis will remain, the motives for it can be changed to more democratic motives, and that may impact Israeli society.

In the end, we can learn from this case about the importance of taking a closer look, with an open mind, of any social phenomenon. If we just look deep enough, we will find the differences and the complexities, and maybe we will see that the reality is different than what we thought before. Even an ultra-Orthodox community, with total obedience to the rabbis, should not necessarily be considered as wholly nondemocratic.
NOTES

1. This topic became very popular after the establishment of the State of Israel. See for example, Joseph E. David, *The State of Israel: Between Judaism and Democracy* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2003).


3. An important discussion about the beginning of the involvement of the rabbis in modern Jewish politics can be found in Gershon Bacon, “Daat Torah and Birth Pangs of the Messiah,” *TARBIZ* 52c (1983): 497–508 [Hebrew].

4. Yosef Achituv, “Non Illusionary Religious Zionism,” in *100 Years of Religious Zionism*, vol. 3 (ed. Avi Sagi and Dov Shwartz; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2003), 7 [Hebrew].

5. Various sources for the following explanations and concepts can be found in the comprehensive research of Benjamin Brown: Benjamin Brown, “The Daat Torah Doctrine: Three Stages,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 16 (September 2004): 537–600; Benjamin Brown, *Toward Democratization in the Haredi Leadership? The Doctrine of Daat Torah at the Turn of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2011). Brown arranged the concepts in a chorographical order and arranged some of them differently. We focus on the meaning of each concept and its closeness to the democratic values and not its historical background.

6. Bacon, “Daat Torah,” 501. Researchers are arguing about the timing of the growth of this value, according to the political and social conditions in Jewish society. Some of them are talking about the beginning of the twentieth century, as part of the establishment of Agudat Israel; some of them refer it to the crises in Orthodox leadership after the Holocaust; and others refer it to the struggle against the Zionist movement, and especially the Religious Zionist parties, after the establishment of the State of Israel. Benjamin Brown, “The Daat Torah Doctrine,” 539.

7. He was one of the most important ultra-Orthodox leaders in Israel from the middle of the twentieth century. Comprehensive biography can be found in Benjamin Brown, *The Hazon Ish: Halakhist, Believer and Leader of the Haredi Revolution* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2011) [Hebrew].


18. Ibid., 594. Brown claims that this case can be a proof for the deep connection between Jewish Orthodoxy and premodern communities because this concept, which is usually presented as an Orthodox development, has deep roots in the traditional communities.
19. One of the most famous quotes is the saying of Rabbi Joshua Falk in his commentary to the Shulkhan Arukh that the decisions of regular people are totally the opposite of the decisions of the rabbis. Joshua Falk, Sefer Me’irat Enayim—Hoshen Mishpat (Jerusalem: 1955), 3:13 [Hebrew].
20. As mentioned, this extreme description is not happening in all types of ultra-Orthodox communities, which are separated also in the extent of obedience to the rabbis.
21. The predication of this research was that ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel is going to develop a new type of rabbinic leadership—not democratic but more pragmatic and less total. Brown, Toward Democratization, 106–11.