**Chapter 2 - The Organization of the Rabbis of Hapoel Mizrachi**

During the founding of the State of Israel as well as during the settlement period, the religious sector was constantly on the defensive. Many abandoned the religious way of life and were swept up by the secular Zionist movement which was in its heyday during this period. The holocaust of European Jews also caused a deep spiritual crisis for many, and the Torah world was at an unprecedented low. The religious parties were in the minority within the national institutions and waged numerous struggles to protect the religious rights of the citizens, in addition to preserving the Jewish character of the newly established state.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Few yeshivot existed in Israel at that time;  most of them identified as ultra-Orthodox yeshivas. Individual yeshiva high schools were scattered throughout the country, and post-secondary Zionist yeshivot did not exist, except for Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav Kook in Jerusalem, which was also experiencing a decline and more than a few difficulties.[[2]](#footnote-2)   The rabbis who were identified with the Mizrachi and HaPo'el HaMizrachi parties were mainly the rabbis of cities and towns who were ideologically connected to the religious Zionist idea and were subject to the authority of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel under the leadership of Chief Rabbis Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Halevi Herzog[[3]](#footnote-3) and Rabbi Ben Zion Chai [Uziel.](https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/" \l "m_-2711626950260079339__ftn3" \o ")[[4]](#footnote-4) The religious problems of that period were dramatic and significant for the religious public, and the need to assist the Chief Rabbinate to solve them was the underlying motive of the initiative to establish a formal rabbinic body in the Hapoel HaMizrachi movement.

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The idea of ​​establishing the Hever HaRabbanim was conceived by Rabbi Kathriel Fishel Tchorsh. Rabbi Tchorsh was born in 1896 in Poland. His father, who was the rabbi of Wloclawek, joined the Hibat Zion movement, participated in the founding meeting of "HaMizrachi" in Vilnius, and was one of the movement's most important workers. Rabbi Tchorsh studied in the city of Słupczak in his youth, and with the outbreak of the First World War, also became active the Mizrahi movement in Poland, and was mainly concerned with matters of immigration to Eretz Israel. In the year 1933, he immigrated to Eretz Israel and was appointed rabbi of the Shapira neighborhood in south Tel Aviv. He founded the kashrut department in the municipality of Tel Aviv and headed it throughout his lifetime. In 1948, a few months after the establishment of the state, he founded the "Hever HaRabbanim of Hapoel Hamizrachi", which he headed until his death in 1979.[[5]](#footnote-5)



Moshe Krone, later chairman of the 'World Mizrahi Center', describes the establishment of Hever HaRabbanim, focusing on the organizational issue behind its establishment:

*And yet Hever HaRabbanim was a unique creation in the movement, which began with slow, hesitant steps. Members in the big cities, and first and foremost in Tel Aviv, felt that they needed a rabbi–at least one rabbi- someone who shared our ideology. So, when the members of the "Hapoel HaMizrachi" began to set up and establish agricultural moshavim and, the question of the rabbinate arose among them, it was clear that in religious moshavim there must be a rabbi ,And it is essential that this rabbi be trained in fostering the movement., Little by little, rabbis of this type gathered together and as the settlement map of the "Mizrachi Hapoel" branched out and as the number of religious immigrants in the development towns, in the moshavot, and in the cities increased,–This is how the power of Hever HaRabbanim was strengthened and amplified.[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Krone describes the establishment of Hever HaRabbanim as an integral part of the party. He views its establishment as an organizational phenomenon that arose from the need to appoint religious-Zionist rabbis in the various settlements, and then, to unite them under one roof. Krone's words clearly show how the party perceived the responsibilities of Hever HaRabbanim – to deal with matters of education and settlement and to promote the religious-Zionist rabbis.

Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli, one of the leading rabbis of Hever HaRabbanim, whom we will discuss in detail later, links the establishment of the Rabbinate with the establishment of the state  (both events took place in the same year):

*The general ideological direction will be marked by the fact that the emergence of the Hever HaRabbanim was simultaneous with the emergence of the state. It is not mere coincidence that in Menachem Av 5708, the month which on the one hand symbolizes mourning and on the other, the hope of redemption is attached to it, the community of Hever HaRabbanim convened. We wished to accompany the great event, the occurrence of a miracle whose like has never been seen during all the years of the exile - the emergence of Israel's independence, the emergence of the State of Israel.[[7]](#footnote-7)*

The words of Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli, in effect, encapsulated the ideology of religious Zionism - the religious view that sees the establishment of the state as "*at'halta de-geula*" - the beginning of Israel's Redemption. These words, which clearly link the establishment of the state to the establishment of Hever HaRabbanim, are the banner proclaiming the ideological context underlying the establishment of Hever HaRabbanim.

Asher Cohen and Dov Schwartz describe the establishment of Hever HaRabbanim against the backdrop of religious Zionism's disappointment with the meager activity of the Israel Chief Rabbinate in promoting the idea of ​​a Torah state. Cohen points out that Hever HaRabbanim was unique in that it was a combination of the two types of leadership, religious and political. The founding fathers of the organization are rabbis who were closely related to the Chief Rabbinate by virtue of their positions, and at the same time were members of the HaMizrachi political party.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The first convention of Hever HaRabbanim was held in Av 5708 (1948)in Kfar HaRoeh and the second in Nisan 5710 (1950) in Kfar Avraham. These two conventions are distinguished by a lack of clarity about the responsibilities of the new organization.  The conventions that followed were mainly used as a platform to report on the activities of Hever HaRabbanim, to discuss current issues on the agenda, and to express positions and make general declarations. Below we will focus on these two conventions, whose most prominent feature is, as mentioned, a fundamental debate about the scope of the organization's responsibilities.

From the opening remarks made by Rabbi Tchorsh, we can learn already of the aspirations that Hever HaRabbanim set for itself. Rabbi Tchorsh began with a reference to the state of war prevailing in Israel and from this, one may conclude that this was at the forefront of the minds of those attending the convention.

After this beginning, Rabbi Tchorsh turned to a discussion of the establishment of Hever HaRabbanim, its goals and functions. Rabbi Tchorsh actually admitted that "the impetus for this convention is connected to the spirit of the time and its historical events"; however, he emphasized that the discussion "will not go beyond the framework of the movement." It is probable that most of the members attending the convention believed that the convention was related to the historical events of the year 1948 - and that Rabbi Tchorsh was trying to limit the discussions to internal activity within the movement. The nature of the activities conceived by Rabbi Tchorsh for Hever HaRabbanim can be learned from his following remarks, which reflect his desire to act chiefly within the framework of the movement:

*It must be emphasized in advance: Our intention is not to create a special forum within our movement, a sort of "Council of Torah Sages". We do not want shed the layers of the masses of members of all types and shades who make up our movement and to be hewn into a special division, to be rolled into a distinct loaf of our own. Our intention is to consult, to dispute, and to have a comprehensive and complex discussion about all these problems. To create a kind of standing advisory institution, which will be used to support and benefit the supreme institution of our movement and its departments, while working in reciprocity and synchrony, which will be a blessing to the governing institutions and the movement as a whole.[[9]](#footnote-9)*

Thus, Rabbi Tchorsh referred to the parallel model of the "Council of Torah Sages" in Agudat Yisrael, and in fact, differentiated between the two bodies– Unlike the Council of Torah Sages, the Rabbinical Council did not intend to impose itself on the movement but rather to strive for "working in reciprocity and synchrony ".

In this context, it is noteworthy that Rabbi Tchorsh's statement is consistent with Moshe Krone's description of the relationship between the rabbis and the party:

*Hever HaRabbanim will be accorded a place of honor in our camp, without this being totally formal. It was not written anywhere that the movement must accept the opinion of Hever HaRabbanim in all matters, and it must be said that the rabbis themselves did not demand this, although they demanded that they be taken into account more than was the practice. However, at no time did our rabbis make a demand to consider them a sort of "Council of Torah Sages.”[[10]](#footnote-10)*

According to the concepts proposed by Asher Cohen, Hever HaRabbanim at

its inception aspired to the "limited advice" model and not to the "mandatory instruction" model.[[11]](#footnote-11) This means that Hever HaRabbanim at this stage did not aspire to the supremacy of "da'at Torah", as it was expressed in the ultra-Orthodox camp. It is possible that some of the rabbis in their inmost heart sought a status more similar to the Council of Torah Sages, but it is equally probable that their familiarity with the political leadership and modern mindsets led them to present limited aspirations. Another pillar of the relationship between Hever HaRabbanim and the party was the budgetary issue. Its activity, as part of the religion department in Hapoel Hamizrachi, was financed by the party.[[12]](#footnote-12) Because of this, there was a mutual dependence between the party and Hever HaRabbanim.

Later in the book we will return to the topic of the relationship between the Hever HaRabbanim and the movement. At this point, we will only mention the importance that Rabbi Tchorsh ascribed to the activity of the rabbis within the movement, while emphasizing the spiritual activity required in the movement, especially the subject of Torah study and the subject of education. Later on in his speech, Rabbi Tchorsh spoke about the problem of the religious soldier and the issue of religion in the army (at that time the IDF rabbinate had not yet been established) as well as the problem of the immigrant absorption camps and the need to focus there on spiritual issues.[[13]](#footnote-13) . So far, Rabbi Tchorsh had outlined the activities of Hever HaRabbanim within the party domain. Afterwards, he turned to discuss the national domain. Hever HaRabbanim was ostensibly supposed to operate within the party limits, and therefore Rabbi Tchorsh's discomfort was palpable when he was discussing issues that apparently went beyond the movement.

*"We said that at this gathering, we would discuss only the internal questions in our movement, but it is impossible to avoid also touching on a general question that both is directly and indirectly intertwined with and related to our movement, which is the question of the character and spiritual image of our state that is being established before our eyes" (ibid.).*

Here Rabbi Tchorsh moved to discuss the idea of ​​the state based on the Torah, which is supposed to be within the authority of the Chief Rabbinate. Rabbi Tchorsh commented on this and said "This painful question is being discussed in the top echelons of the Chief Rabbinate, and in its expanded council", but "the matter has not moved forward at all.”[[14]](#footnote-14)  In this way, Rabbi Tchorsh pointed to the criticism of the functioning of the Chief Rabbinate, in that it does not fulfill its role and mission. Here, in effect, he assigned an additional role to Hever HaRabbanim to "unite the religious forces in the country" in order "to clothe our land with the vestments of holiness".

From Rabbi Tchorsh's opening speech, one can identify the lack of clarity regarding the goals of the Hever HaRabbanim. Should it operate within the movement or also outside it?  Should it focus on organizational, political, or spiritual matters? The variety of topics that Rabbi Tchorsh spoke about show this lack of clarity regarding the goals of the new organization. This can be clearly seen in the debate between the various members.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Most of the speakers brought up various issues that the rabbis thought should be addressed, such as the issue of education, respect for the Torah, relations with the Chief Rabbinate, the absorption of Aliyah, religious problems in the army, and the like.[[16]](#footnote-16).The common denominators of these matters relate to various issues which go beyond activities in the party itself. Below we will look more closely some of the speakers at the founding convention of the Hever HaRabbanim.

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Rabbi Natan Zvi Friedman (1914-1993) was a rabbi, writer, and researcher; one of the most veteran of the rabbis in Bnei Brak. He was born in Hungary. In 1934 he was ordained to the rabbinate and after World War II, served as rabbi for the surviving remnant of the Jewish community in Bavaria. He was a member of the council of liberated Jews in Munich and a representative of She'erit Hapleita ( surviving Jewish refugees) at the 22nd Zionist Congress. After the Holocaust, he immigrated to Israel and served as rabbi in Givat Shmuel. In 1952 he was appointed rabbi of the neighborhood Shikun He in Bnei Brak, which housed new immigrants from Eastern Europe and Yemen, serving in this position for some forty years. He had a Zionist worldview and expressed support for the State of Israel. Rabbi Friedman's major work is the encyclopedic work "*Otzar HaRabbanim*", which contains close to twenty thousand entries about the great rabbis and Torah luminaries. At the convention, Rabbi Natan Zvi Friedman emphasized the need to appoint rabbis in every community in the country: "Let them make sure that in every point, neighborhood, and settlement in the State of Israel they appoint 'holy vessels' which hold blessings, who will influence the spiritual situation."

Rabbi Simcha Bunim Auerbach (1913-1971) was born in Warsaw, studied at Yeshiva Mir and the Beit Midrash for Rabbis "Tachkemoni", and was ordained as a rabbi. With the outbreak of World War II he fled to Vilnius; his wife and his entire family perished in the Holocaust. Rabbi Auerbach himself managed to escape to Japan, and from there via South Africa, he arrived in the summer of 1971 in Israel. He completed his academic education in the field of philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Between 5706-5709, [1946-1949] he was the rabbi of the moshav Sdeh Yaakov and later was appointed rabbi of Kiryat Tivon, a position he held until 1967. He served as an emissary of the Jewish Agency. At the founding convention of Hever HaRabbanim, Rabbi Auerbach lamented that "the status of Torah scholars is low in the eyes of the public. "

 Rabbi Simha Bunim Auerbach

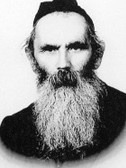
Rabbi Raphael Zvi Yehuda Meltzer (1899-1969) was rabbi of Pardes Hana and then rabbi of Rehovot. He was one of the moving spirits behind the founding of Midrashiat Noam and the founder and head of the Kletsk Yeshiva in Eretz Israel and Yeshivat HaDarom. Rabbi Meltzer claimed at the convention that it was vital to establish a national rabbinical organization and not to be content with a partisan rabbinical organization.  [[17]](#footnote-17)





 Rabbi Yehuda Meltzer

Two speakers at the convention presented their critique of the actual functions of Hever HaRabbanim: Rabbi Yehuda Shulman and Rabbi Moshe Levin. Rabbi Shulman was a military chaplain, later with the rank of Lt. Col. Rabbi Moshe Levin (1907-1977) was born in the town of Dreverna in Lithuania. He studied at the Baranovich yeshiva with Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman, at yeshivot of Radin and then Mir. In 1935 he immigrated to Palestine. He was the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Netanya beginning in the 1950s. Prior to that, he served as rabbi of the moshav Balfouria. Rabbi Shulman posed the question: "What is the way and what is the force that will compel the national institutions to implement our decision?" while Rabbi Levin made an even more cynical comment: "Blessed are you, dear Rabbis, that you have so many problems that you cannot solve." The many problems raised by the rabbis expressed the feeling that the role and function of Hever HaRabbanim are not clear and that the impression was that the rabbinical council had taken on a large number of roles, and it was doubtful that it would be able to handle most of them.

Rabbi Moshe Levin

Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neria was also one of the founders of Hever HaRabbanim. Rabbi Neria (Mankin) (1913-1995) was born in Lodz to Rabbi Petachiah and Rachel Mankin. He studied Torah in Minsk and Shklov and immigrated to Israel in 1930 after Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook helped him obtain a certificate. When he arrived, he became connected to Rabbi Kook, and to his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook. He studied at Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav and at the "Mizrachi Teachers' Seminary". In 1939 he set up the first "Bnei Akiva yeshiva in the moshav Kfar HaRoeh. He served as a member of the Seventh Knesset on behalf of the Mafdal (1969-1973), and is known as the "Father of the Knitted Kipa Generation". At the founding convention of Hever HaRabbanim, Rabbi Neria presented a realistic view of its duties . His words were referred to in the *Netiva* newspaper as a "regulator" of future actions:

*"Don't bite off more than you can chew", climb up, step by step. A wise strategy for someone who occupies the fortress: first of all he must safeguard what he conquered yesterday before he storms the next objective.*

 Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neria

Rabbi Neria's incisive words were intended to dampen some of the enthusiasm that existed among the founders of Hever HaRabbanim regarding the numerous duties it set for itself. Rabbi Neria called to proceed step by step and not try to overreach. In this spirit, the editor of '*Netiva*', Nehemiah Zvi Aminoach, writes: "May it be (in Hever HaRabbanim ) that if you overreach, you achieve more.[[18]](#footnote-18) The rabbis' convention in Kfar HaRoeh was even mentioned in the children's newspaper *HaTzofe LaYeldim* and naturally the focus was on decisions concerning children:

*At the Bnei Akiva yeshiva in Kfar Haroeh, the rabbis of Hapoel HaMizrachi gathered and dealt with religious and educational questions. Among the decisions: to be active in the appointment of rabbis in Torah and Avodah settlements and kibbutzim, to assist in the establishment of Talmud Torahs and Yeshivot, to expand the network of religious kindergartens and to hold evening classes in Torah for school children. The conference welcomed the introduction of additional Talmud classes in several schools in Israel.[[19]](#footnote-19) .*

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At the second conference that took place in Kfar Avraham in Nisan 1957, the phenomenon of the multiple roles taken on by the rabbis repeated itself. [[20]](#footnote-20) Although after about two years, issues were on the agenda that had already been dealt with by the rabbis, such as the *Torah and Medina* compilations, the Independence Day prayer and the Shmita year (which will be discussed in detail later). However, the issues that were raised at the first conference, such as the issue of education, the religious situation in the movement, etc. came up repeatedly. One of the speakers at the conference was Rabbi Reuven Katz, the rabbi of Petach Tikva (1880-1963). Rabbi Katz was a member of Agudath Israel and a student of Rabbi Haim Ozer, who was not considered a Zionist but nonetheless moved to Eretz Israel and under the influence of Rabbi Kook, became very sympathetic to the settlement of the land and made efforts to bring the ultra-Orthodox and religious Zionist people closer together. At the conference, Rabbi Katz challenged the need for a rabbinic organization like Hever HaRabbanim in a situation where there was a state-sponsored chief rabbinate. Rabbi Katz's opinion was not accepted at the end of the discussion.

 Rabbi Reuven Katz



At the conclusion of the convention, they announced the resolutions:

*The convention adopts a resolution to establish a rabbinic association (Hever HaRabbanim) of Hapoel HaMizrachi. Hever HaRabbanim will include rabbis who are serving in practice and heads of yeshivot who are members of the Hapoel HaMizrachi. Its responsibilities will be to work together to strengthen the religious situation in the movement in religious observance, deepening awareness, and raising the moral level. The convention has passed a resolution to establish a coordinating committee for Hever HaRabbanim which will direct and coordinate the work of the committees. The coordinating committee will operate under the Hapoel Mizrachi Cultural Center.  The convention charges the cultural center with dealing especially with the appointment of rabbis in moshavim and kibbutzim as well as the appointment of rabbis as spiritual leaders in the movement's branches and neighborhoods in Israel.  The convention adopts a resolution on the scheduling of study days for Hever HaRabbanim to be convened periodically to discuss practical halachic questions and clarify the current problems in society and the state.[[21]](#footnote-21)*

  Nehemiah Zvi Aminoah, the editor of the movement 's organ *Netiva*, describes this convention as a gathering that "did not bring with it an innovation that would trigger a reaction as is customary nowadays."  Later, Aminoah pointed out that "not everything that the organizers and attendees of the conventions wished to discuss has succeeded, and in contrast, some of the distinguished guests and invitees said much without adding anything."  Nevertheless, this gathering must be hailed as a "beautiful and lively spiritual phenomenon".

Words in this spirit were also spoken by Rabbi Neria, who reiterated his position that the Hever HaRabbanim "should not bite off more than they can chew." Here Rabbi Neria pointed out that " its arena of ​​ activity is defined within the framework of the movement."  In speaking thus, Rabbi Neria rejected the position of his fellow rabbis, who thought that Hever HaRabbanim should deal with many other matters. In the end, a number of committees were established, which show how Hever HaRabbanim perceived its role at the beginning:

**The first committee,**  the halacha committee, was tasked with answering halachic questions, mainly dealing with the mitzvot related specifically to agriculture in Eretz Israel. At the beginning of the discussion, the uniqueness of Hever HaRabbanim was noted as a body that functions alongside the state authority of the Chief Rabbinate. Already at this stage one can see how the Hever HaRabbanim "filled the void" of the Chief Rabbinate, which many thought did not do enough on the subject of national laws.

**The second committee** was the committee for appointing rabbis, whose function was to organize the matter of appointing rabbis to the various communities. This committee focused on the organizational/internal aspect. This is where the first idea was planted about the function of Hever HaRabbanim as a professional union of the rabbis of religious Zionism. Later we will see how this issue, which was also mentioned in the description of Moshe Krone at the beginning of this chapter, became one of the causes of an internal debate and eventually, the decline of Hever HaRabbanim.

**The third committee** was a committee for religious affairs, whose responsibility was to take care of religious matters in the movement's local branches, to help in purchasing ritual objects and building synagogues, mikvahs, etc. This activity focuses on the party circle, and in addition on other matters that are within the scope of the Chief Rabbinate's activities. Here, too, one can see the weakness of the Chief Rabbinate in its handling of these matters, when Hever HaRabbanim usurped its role. During the 1950s, as will be shown below, the project of adopting the settlements will be the most significant expression of this committee's activity.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Set above all the committees was a central committee that coordinated the activities of Hever HaRabbanim. In addition there were sub-committees that dealt with specific issues such as: religious education, religion and the military, as well as a committee that dealt with the Hever HaRabbanim's Torah publications which, as will be elaborated later, were a prominent linchpin in the extensive activity of Hever HaRabbanim.

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   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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7. Archives of the Institute for Research on Religious Zionism, PM, 646. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cohen, *The Tallit and the Flag*, 104; Schwartz, *Religious Zionism*, 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rabbi Tchorsh, “Divrei Petiḥa,” [“Opening Words,”] Institute for Research on Religious Zionism, PM, 645 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kroneh, *My Rabbis and Teachers*, 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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14. Cohen, *The Tallit and the Flag,* 44-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. "Rabbinic Convention of HaPoel HaMizraḥi,” 1949, 4-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See for example: “Ḥaver HaRabbanim shel hapoel hamizraḥimitztaref l’maḥat harabannim harishonim l’eretz Yisrael,” [“The Rabbinic Association of Hapoel HaMizrachi Joins the Protest of Israel's Chief Rabbis,”] *HaTzofe* (September 10, 1948) [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Nehemiah Zvi Aminoaḥ, “Bein rabbanei Torah v’Avodah” [“Among the Rabbis of Torah and Labor,” *HaTzofe* (September 17, 1948) [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Aminoaḥ, *Among the Rabbis*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “Hasket veHaskel,” [“Pay Attention and Learn”], *HaTzofe* *for Children*, September 9, 1948, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
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21. “At a Convention of HaPoel HaMizrahi Rabbis in Kfar Haroeh,” *HaTzofe,* September 3, 1948, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. HaPoel HaMizraḥi, *Pirkei peulah: Doah shel hapoel hamizraḥi* [*Records of Activity: Report of the Hapoel HaMizrahi Movement*] (1955-56), 77.  [↑](#footnote-ref-22)