**Chapter 5 – Hever HaRabbanim and the Chief Rabbinate**

The rabbis who were members of Hever HaRabbanim actually held rabbinic positions and therefore, in effect, wore "two hats" – both of Hever HaRabbanim and of the Chief Rabbinate. The rabbinical group did not see itself as replacing the Chief Rabbinate but as a body that should support and help it in certain areas. From a group of rabbis numbering approximately thirty during its founding period, Hever HaRabbinim grew, and by the beginning of its second decade, had a membership of approximately two hundred rabbis. The rabbis belonged to religious Zionism, politically and ideologically. At its inception, Hever HaRabbanim belonged to the "Hapoel HaMizrachi" and in 1956, after the union with the Mizrachi; Hever HaRabbanim belonged to the United Party– Mafdal.

An analysis of the first period of Hever HaRabbanim reveals a trend where its main activities were in the more down-to-earth areas of Torah and halacha. During this period, the areas of activity of Hever HaRabbanim overlapped with those of the Chief Rabbinate, which created a dilemma regarding the reciprocal relationship between the two leadership bodies. A review of Hever HaRabbanim conventions in the 1950s shows that the topics discussed in detail above, namely: the Torah Umedina publications, the composition of the Independence Day prayer, shmita, yarchei kala, and the Settlement Adoption Project were the issues that concerned the members at these gatherings.[[1]](#footnote-1)  Seven conventions were held by Hever HaRabbanim from 1948 to 1960, in the years: 1948, 1950, 1952, 1954, 1957, 1958, and 1960.[[2]](#footnote-2)  The vast majority of topics discussed at these conventions revolved around education, Torah and halacha, immigrant absorption, etc. The issue of interaction with the party hardly came up during this period. In 1955, Rabbi Yisraeli, one of the most prominent rabbis in Hever HaRabbanim , spoke at the party convention, where he raised the issue of what he considered the party's need to consult with the rabbis.[[3]](#footnote-3)  However, this issue was marginal and the level of engagement with it during this period was very minimal, certainly compared to the preoccupation with it during the period of the 1960s. In the years to come, Hever HaRabbanim would have to deal with weighty issues that were to erode its status as a dominant and influential group.

Already at the beginning of its career, the dilemma arose regarding the function of Hever HaRabbanim operating alongside the state religious leadership, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. The situation whereby the Chief Rabbinate avoided tackling the issue of promoting the ideal of ​​the 'Torah State' left a void that was filled by Hever HaRabbanim at that time. Against this background, one can understand why halachic issues at the national level were raised to top priorities in the activities of Hever HaRabbanim. It would be an exaggeration to state that Hever HaRabbanim aspired to be a substitute for the religious authority of the Chief Rabbinate. And yet, the very fact that a partisan religious leadership had to take on areas of activity that fell within the responsibility of the Chief Rabbinate shows the difficulties that the Chief Rabbinate had at the time, and Hever HaRabbanim tried to solve them while giving its unqualified support to the authority of the Chief Rabbinate. For example, already in the early days of the state when the Chief Rabbinate ruled against the recruitment of religious women to the IDF, Hever HaRabbanim protested the damage done by the religious kibbutz movement to the Chief Rabbinate's authority.   [[4]](#footnote-4)In *Hatzofe,* the division of labor between Hever HaRabbanim and the Chief Rabbinate was described as follows:

*The Chief Rabbinate is the supreme Torah authority by which everything will be judged based on halacha and the Torah, while the members of Hever HaRabbanim are subordinate to the Chief Rabbinate and help to rendering practical halachic decisions, especially being engaged in clarifying and raising questions that come up in everyday life. We represent the "member rabbi" sitting on the extended council of the Chief Rabbinate; they are the living link between the Rabbinate's halachic decisions and the practical work carried out in the field.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

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The period of the sixties is characterized as a year of crises in the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. Hever HaRabbanim anxiously followed the status of the Chief Rabbinate, which met with a crisis known as "the crisis of the Rabbinate", after the death of the chief rabbi, Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Halevi Herzog in 1958. For some five years, no Ashkenazi chief rabbi was appointed in his place, creating a void in the rabbinate system. During this period Hever HaRabbanim was the driving force that pushed for elections and the election of a new chief rabbi, along with a call to the community of rabbis to unite around the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, "the supreme halachic institution in the country.”[[6]](#footnote-6)  After repeated postponements, it was determined that the elections for the Chief Rabbinate would take place in 1960. At that time, the subject of elections for the Chief Rabbinate had not yet been regulated by law, and so this was enacted as part of a special regulation. Following heated debates about the composition of the electoral body, the elections for the rabbinate were postponed. Hever HaRabbanim was among the bodies that demanded that the elections be postponed "in order to allow fair and direct elections, as befits a Torah and spiritual institution.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the elections held in 1963, Rabbi Isser Yehuda Unterman was elected to be the Ashkenazi chief rabbi.[[8]](#footnote-8)  In sharp criticism of the reasons for postponing the elections, Hever HaRabbanim presented in Shivilin its approach regarding the need to rehabilitate the Chief Rabbinate from the crisis:

*It seems to us that the time has come to warn all those who are delaying the holding of the elections, and to explain to them clearly, that even without them, there is a way to hold elections for the Chief Rabbinate and to restore the rabbinical crown to its former glory.[[9]](#footnote-9)*

At the 8th convention of Hever HaRabbanim, in Sivan 5723 -1963, the "crisis of the rabbinate" was one of the main topics on the agenda. Rabbi Tchorsh, in his speech at the convention, focused on the status of the Chief Rabbinate:

*The rabbinate in Israel should be the dynamic spiritual factor in the building of the state, the solid, active force for lofty spiritual creations, standing guard with it over the ancient tradition…Therefore, we have the obligation and concern to raise the prestige of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. This is the highest Torah institution in the state, which conducts the spiritual life of the state and its direction …We hope that the day is not far-off, and the elections will take place and the Chief Rabbinate will return to its crown and glory.”[[10]](#footnote-10)*

Shortly after this convention, the elections for the Chief Rabbinate were indeed held, and Hever HaRabbanim credited itself with the rehabilitation of the Chief Rabbinate.[[11]](#footnote-11)  All along the way one can clearly identify the importance that Hever HaRabbanim saw in the proper functioning of the Chief Rabbinate, as it perceived itself as a body that supported the rabbinate. For example, Rabbi Tchorsh published a comprehensive article in *HaTzofe* where he called for a law to be enacted to protect the Chief Rabbinate of Israel "lest anyone dare speak thoughtlessly, with scorn and slander about it and its rabbis." And Rabbi Tchorsh wondered further:

*There is a law against contempt of court and judges. Why is there no law protecting the honor of those who carry the Torah and the nation's sacred treasures? It is the government's duty to calm the furor, the duty of the police to stand in the breach, and the duty of the press to maintain its essence, value, and role. To preserve the honor of the Torah sages of our generation, at least as much as the intelligent nations which respect their scientific and cultural dignitaries. We were defined as a special people, the People of the Book. We most surely must insist on the honor of Judaism and its flag-bearers.”[[12]](#footnote-12)*

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An unusual case is the attitude of Rabbi David Salomon, one of the members of Hever HaRabbanim, in the discussion he had with the faction in the Knesset and the party administration.  Rabbi David Salomon (1910-1965) served as rabbi of Kfar Avraham and Ein Ganim in Petah Tikva. Rabbi Salomon was born in Kharkiv, Ukraine. Upon arriving in Israel, he began his studies at the Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav Kook, and some four years later, was ordained as a rabbi within the yeshiva by Rabbi Ya'akov Moshe Harlap. Despite his Zionist activities and his affiliation with the Mafdal movement, he had close relations with the rabbis of the ultra-Orthodox community. He also worked with Agudat Israel in educational enterprises, when he founded the Torah UMelacha yeshiva network under the management of an Agudat Yisrael member and member of the Knesset on its behalf, Rabbi Shlomo Ya'akov Gross.



***Rabbi David Salomon***

In reference to the crisis of the rabbinate, Rabbi Salomon contended "that it is possible that in our situation, there is no room for electing chief rabbis.”[[13]](#footnote-13)  In the 'Shvilin' publications, there is an explicit mention that this subject was not discussed at all, and at the conclusion of the session, it was decided that the party would take no action concerning the rabbinate elections that would not be in accord with the opinion of Hever HaRabbanim. From this case, we learn that the issue of abolishing the positions of the chief rabbis was not relevant, and at the same time, we can clearly see the strong influence of Hever HaRabbanim so that nothing significant related to the rabbinate happened without its approval.

The period of the rabbinate crisis in the early 1960s undoubtedly strengthened the power of Hever HaRabbanim. But it is natural that at a time when the Chief Rabbinate was in acute crisis, Hever HaRabbanim filled the void. From the discussions between Hever HaRabbanim and the party, as we saw earlier, it appears that they saw eye to eye on the crisis and its resolution. At the same time, it seems that the Chief Rabbinate had developed a certain apprehension that Hever HaRabbanim was gaining strength. A tendency in this direction can be identified in the words of the Sephardi Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim, at the eighth convention of Hever HaRabbanim held in Sivan 5773, as the rabbinate crisis came to an end:

*The virtue of Hever HaRabbanim is that they knew the boundaries of the duties and areas of activity to be dealt with. Not a central rabbinic institution versus the Chief Rabbinate but a rabbinical organization that works diligently for the status of the rabbis in Israel and stands to the right of the Chief Rabbinate, to fortify and support it in its campaigns and struggles.[[14]](#footnote-14)*

In his words, Rabbi Nissim mentioned the genuine apprehension of the Chief Rabbinate that Hever HaRabbanim would take over the role of the Chief Rabbinate.  Rabbi Nissim specifically stated that Hever HaRabbanim must stand to the right of the Chief Rabbinate and not opposite it. The fact that Rabbi Nissim felt the need to say that Hever HaRabbanim should know the boundaries of its duties shows a certain criticism of it and the apprehension felt on the part of the Chief Rabbinate.

Indeed, at the same time as supporting the Chief Rabbinate in principle, the rabbis did not refrain from criticizing its functioning. In Shvilin, there is a severe criticism of the functioning of the Chief Rabbinate.  First, it was written that the Chief Rabbinate should serve as a center of deciding halachic decisions "for the solution of the various questions that arise in the life of the state, based on the foundations and principles of halacha" and that this was "the main hope, tendency, and desire of those elected to the Chief Rabbinate Council." Here, Hever HaRabbanim addressed his criticism:

*But as mentioned, four years have already passed, and we have not yet reached the goals and objectives we anticipated, although, the institution did its work faithfully. There were meetings of the Chief Rabbinical Council but not of the proper and desirable magnitude. The technical mechanism was not put on a stable and active basis that was appropriate for comprehensive and proper functioning. No departments or divisions were established for information dissemination, kashrut, Shabbat, education, practical teaching and more, on the one hand, nor for an employment contract for the various branches and its matters, on the other. This situation sometimes leads to a lack of coordination between the two agencies: the rabbinate and the rabbinic judiciary, as if they are fulfilling the same function, when there is no clear definition and differentiation of their roles. The result is a misunderstanding that inevitably prevents benefit and efficiency in ongoing matters at both levels. Moreover, as a result of this flaw, "certain" reverberations leak out to the public, which do not instill respect and warmth for the supreme rabbinical institution, and that is a pity![[15]](#footnote-15)*

This criticism, which attacks the functioning of the Chief Rabbinate in almost every matter, leaves no room for doubt.  A recognition of the ineffectiveness of the work of the Chief Rabbinate began to crystallize within Hever HaRabbanim. It seems that its criticism was intended to correct the institution of the Chief Rabbinate, which Hever HaRabbanim always considered the supreme institution, as is clarified below:

*Hever HaRabbanim of the Mizrachi and the HaPoel HaMizrachi,, which includes hundreds of rabbis in Israel, has served and continues to serve as a stronghold and a bastion, supporting and assisting the Chief Rabbinate…It has no interest or thoughts of narrow partisanship. Its pure intention is to raise the value of this institution and consequently to uplift and glorify the status of the Torah.*

Regarding the same matter, a delegation of Hever HaRabbanim met with the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Unterman. At this meeting, the working methods of the Chief Rabbinate came up for discussion, when the members of the Hever HaRabbanim insisted on the need to streamline the work of the Rabbinate regarding the matters mentioned above. In addition, the need to strengthen the relationship between the Chief Rabbinate and the rabbis of the country was raised. That meeting was reported in Shvilin where it was noted that Rabbi Unterman "related to the comments and suggestions of the delegation with understanding and we hope for positive results.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

To summarize the relationship between Hever HaRabbanim and the Chief Rabbinate, principled support of the Hever HaRabbanim for the institution of the Chief Rabbinate as the supreme authority in halachic matters may be separated from its specific criticism of the functioning of the Chief Rabbinate during the period in question. This is also seen as its desire to preserve the Chief Rabbinate as the highest rabbinic institution.

Hever HaRabbanim's criticism of the Chief Rabbinate in general, and of Rabbi Unterman in particular, is to reach a peak in the early 1970s, when Hever HaRabbanim supported the election of Rabbi Shlomo Goren in place of Rabbi Unterman, an episode that threw Hever HaRabbanim into turmoil and led to a split within the organization, and consequently to its decline. However, apart from its relationship with the Chief Rabbinate, Hever HaRabbanim found itself facing severe internal disputes that would fragment its power.

1. Institute for Research on Religious Zionism, PM, 644. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Institute for Research on Religious Zionism, PM, 645-647. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sharir, *The Rabbinate and the State*, 190-193. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Gilui da’at ḥaver harabbanim shel HaPoel HaMizraḥi,” [“Disclosure of the Opinion of the Rabbis of HaPoel HaMizraḥi,”] *HaTzofe,* March 11, 1951, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Avidor, “Ḥever HaRabbanim shel Hapoel HaMizraḥi,” [“The Hever HaRabbanim of HaPoel HaMizrahi”] 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Nina’aleh va’adat ḥever rabbani Hapoel HaMizraḥi,” [“The committee of the rabbinic association of Hapoel HaMizraḥi was closed,” *HaTzofe*, May 25, 1960, 1 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sofer HaTzofe, “Harav Zvi Yehuda Kook: Yeish l’da*ḥot habiḥirhot l’rabbanut c’dei lihafsik et ḥilul haShem,” [*“Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook: The Rabbinic Elections Must be Postponed to Stop the Blasphemy,”] *HaTzofe,* November 23, 1960, 1;  “Ḥever rabbanei HaMizraḥi-HaPoel HaMizraḥi mitkaked saviv l’rabbanut hareishit,” [The Rabbinic Association of HaMizra*ḥ*i-HaPoel HaMizraḥi unites around the Chief Rabbinate,”] *HaTzofe,* December 6, 1960, 1. [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Don-Yehiya, *Religious Leadership*, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Shvilin, 3* (1963): 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Institute for Research on Religious Zionism, PM, 646-648. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Shvilin, vol. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rabbi Kathriel Fishel Tchorsh, “Darush ḥok l’haganat harabbanut v’harabbanim,” [“A Law is Needed to Protect the Rabbinate and the Rabbis,”] *HaTzofe,* October 25, 1964, 2; Noah Zebuloni, “Ain shomrim al cavod harabbanut,” [“There are no Protectors for the Honor of the Rabbinate,”] *Ḥerut*, February 3, 1964, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Shvilin*, vol. 4 (1962): 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Shvilin*, vol. 6: 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Shvilin*, vols. 21-22, Kislev (1969): 22 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Shvilin*, vol. 21-22 (1969): 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)