

For the first time in a century, the Holy Land has no chief rabbi

by [David I. Klein](#)

July 4, 2024



The Rabbinical Court of Tel Aviv offices on November 5, 2016. (AP Photo/Dan Perry)

In a historic moment, Israel's two chief rabbis, David Lau and Yitzhak Yosef, left office on Sunday with no clear successors elected in their stead, leaving the posts vacant for the first time since the 1920s.

Last week, the pair closed out what were supposed to be 10-year terms that had been extended a year due to internal politicking that has repeatedly delayed the election of their replacements by the 150-member council of rabbis and public officials.

A department of the Israeli government, the Rabbinate has sweeping power over many facets of Israeli life, mostly those that intersect with Jewish ritual and law, such as marriage, divorce, conversion, and more.

The system is led by two chief rabbis, one Ashkenazi, representing Jews of Eastern and Central Europe heritage, and one Sephardic, representing Jews with backgrounds in the Middle East and North Africa. The structure predates the state of Israel, with the Sephardic position having been established under the Ottomans and the Ashkenazi rabbi under the British.

In recent decades the Rabbinate's [popularity has plunged](#) among much of the Israeli public, with many viewing the office as a haven of mismanagement, corruption and nepotism, and dominated by Israel's Haredi minority. It is accused of being out of touch with the general public, including even other religious Jews.

The current debacle is in part the result of a battle between the Rabbinate and Israel's supreme court over the role of women in the election of the chief rabbis. For years, women's rights groups in Israel have argued that women are severely underrepresented on the Rabbinate electoral council.

For the strictly Orthodox Rabbinate, the idea of female rabbis is a nonstarter, so that the 80 seats reserved for rabbis include no women. Women also face disadvantages in attaining the other 70 seats, which are reserved for mayors, heads of regional councils, and other political figures, so that women make up only a minority of a minority of the electoral council.

In January, [the supreme court ruled that women were eligible for the seats designated for rabbis](#), but stopped short of compelling the Rabbinate to appoint any.

Nonetheless, factions in the Rabbinate have latched on to the issue as a reason to delay elections further.

Yehuda Avidan, director general of Israel's Ministry of Religious Services, [speaking at a departure ceremony for the former chief rabbis](#), accused more liberal members of the council of trying "to force the Chief Rabbinate to examine women and to ordain them as rabbis," calling this "not another small loophole, but an attempt to destroy the rabbinical institution."

But the election has also been delayed by questions about past chief rabbis' appointing electors when their direct family members were running for chief rabbi. Both Lau and Yosef are sons of previous chief rabbis, and among the front-runners to replace them were their own brothers.

[ITIM](#), a nongovernmental organization that advocates for fairness and transparency within the Rabbinate, has repeatedly raised these issues with the Israeli judiciary and was at the supreme court in Jerusalem on Tuesday to make sure that the Rabbinate will be transparent in how it moves forward in this unprecedented situation.

In the absence of elected chief rabbis, their responsibilities have fallen to senior members of the rabbinic councils and courts they presided over. However, after several of those in line refused the job, it was decided that Rabbi Eliezer Igra will assume Lau's role as the head of Israel's High Rabbinic Court, on an interim basis, while Rabbi Yaakov Roja will take on Yosef's role on the Council of the Chief Rabbinate, which sets religious policy.

Roja, the city rabbi of Bat Yam, a Tel Aviv suburb, has gained prominence in the past year for his role in identifying the bodies of civilian victims of Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel.

Identifying the remains of victims of terror and navigating the religious concerns around their burial is a field of Jewish law Roja has pioneered since his own military service during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Though not previously a candidate, in just the few hours since assuming the interim role, Igra has expressed interest in running for chief rabbi, further compounding questions about the power of interim rabbis to appoint electors for an election they may run in.

Another issue with the interim solution is that the two interim rabbis are both Ashkenazi.

For many secular Israelis, the current chaos in the Rabbinate only confirms their preconceptions of the body, as well as serving as a symbol of how the bonds between the competing factions of Benjamin Netanyahu's wartime coalition are fraying after nine months of war.

“I’m not exactly the target audience, but I think that since this government doesn’t manage anything, why would you think that it would actually manage to manage the Chief Rabbinate?” opposition leader Yair Lapid, who has long advocated for limiting the powers of the Rabbinate, [said in response to a journalist’s question on Monday](#).

Even something they care about, they manage to bungle, he added.

Rabbi Seth Farber, ITIM’s director, said in an interview: “It is tragic that the leadership of Jewish life in Israel is incapable of being a leading force of solidarity—particularly at a time of war—and instead is bogged down by politicians interested less in the divine and more in providing jobs to their families. ITIM turned to the supreme court to serve as a corrective.” —Religion News Service