

The New York Times

Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, Venerated Talmudic Scholar, Dies at 94

He initially insisted, “Canceling Torah study is more dangerous than the coronavirus.” But he had a change of heart, even before testing positive.



Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky (seated) leads a prayer at the Western Wall Plaza in Jerusalem in February 2020. “When you ask him a question and he answers,” one rabbi said, “it’s as if the Torah is speaking.” Artur Widak/NurPhoto, via Getty Images

By Joseph Berger

March 18, 2022

Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, one of the greatest Talmudic interpreters of his generation and one of the most revered figures among the world’s ultra-Orthodox Jews, who considered him the leading authority on fine points of Jewish law, died on Friday in the Israeli city of Bnei Brak, near Tel Aviv. He was 94.

His death was announced by Agudath Israel of America, the umbrella organization of ultra-Orthodox groups, which did not specify a cause.

Rabbi Kanievsky, a soft-spoken man whose furrowed face was framed by a broad but unruly snow-white beard, was particularly venerated by the non-Hasidic branch of Orthodox Judaism that traces its roots to the towering sages and yeshivas of Lithuania in the 18th century if not earlier. Rabbi Kanievsky himself was regarded as such a wise man.

In March 2020, as the coronavirus sickened large numbers of people in Israel's teeming Orthodox neighborhoods, where communal prayer and Torah study are ironclad traditions, his followers asked him for his guidance on government measures like the closing of schools.

At first he resisted the restrictions, saying that it was essential to keep schools open. "Canceling Torah study is more dangerous than the coronavirus," Rabbi Kanievsky said to one of his grandsons in a videotaped conversation. With the ultra-Orthodox making up about 12 percent of Israel's population, his critics accused him of helping to spread the disease.

But two weeks later, as the toll surged, he changed his thinking and began vocally supporting decrees by the Israeli authorities, insisting that sustaining life must take precedence over adherence to familiar ways. People must pray and study alone in their homes, he said, and avoid large gatherings.

In the fall of that year, when the government said that the rate of infections was low enough to allow preschools to open, Rabbi Kanievsky decreed that Orthodox elementary schools must open as well, as long as students and teachers wore masks and maintained adequate separation. He himself [tested positive](#) for Covid-19 in October 2020.

Rabbi Kanievsky was famous for his analytical prowess and granular knowledge when it came to the Torah and the dozens of volumes of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, which he pored through year after year. Blessed with a photographic memory, he could recite entire passages.

"When you ask him a question and he answers, it's as if the Torah is speaking," said Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz, editor of *Yated Ne'eman*, a leading Orthodox newspaper based in New Jersey.

Rabbi Kanievsky wrote and published dozens of volumes on Jewish law, often focusing on seemingly obsolete edicts — the prescribed rituals in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, or the species of locusts regarded as kosher to eat — and deducing their ramifications for modern life. Pondering the biblical commandment to shoo away a mother bird before snatching her eggs or her chicks, he discovered lessons about charity and kindness.

Hundreds of Jews, regarding him as a modern-day prophet able to work miracles, would flock to his modest, book-lined apartment in Bnei Brak to seek his advice on questions both profound and personal.

Rabbi Lipshutz recalled the time when a surgeon told him that he needed an operation to remove a sinus tumor, prompting him to travel to Bnei Brak to seek Rabbi Kanievsky's advice. Rabbi Kanievsky told him that he would recover if he wore his hat brim up, in the old-fashioned style of European Jews. He did, he said, and the tumor turned out to be benign.



Rabbi Kanievsky in 2019 reading the Book of Esther during a Purim service in the Israeli city of Bnei Brak, where he lived. Revered by many as a modern-day prophet, he approved of the use of medical marijuana but frowned on smartphones. Menahem Kahana/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

As a result of his veneration by Haredim — a Hebrew term, meaning “tremblers” before God, that is applied to rigorously observant Jews — Israeli politicians, even those not known for their religiosity, made sure to pay him homage. When Rabbi Kanievsky learned he had Covid-19, Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister at the time, tweeted that he wished a “quick and complete recovery for the Torah genius.”

In his later years, according to [Daniel Retter](#), a New York lawyer and Talmud scholar, Rabbi Kanievsky issued a number of controversial rulings on adapting ancient Jewish laws to modern life. He allowed the use of marijuana for medicinal purposes but

prohibited smartphones unless the owner received permission to use one from an authoritative rabbi. He ordered Haredi paramedics to treat victims of terror attacks before they treated wounded terrorists, even if the terrorists' injuries were more grievous.

Most significant was his ruling that instances of sexual abuse of children should be reported to the civic authorities and not handled exclusively within the Haredi community. This was a sharp departure from a tradition under which those who reported crimes by fellow Haredim were viewed as traitorous informers.

Chaim Kanievsky was born on Jan. 8, 1928, in Pinsk, a city that today is in Belarus but was then in Poland. At the time, Jews made up three quarters of the city's 28,000 inhabitants. His family was Orthodox aristocracy. His father, Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, was known as "the Steipler Gaon" (the Steipler genius), after the Yiddish shortening of the name of his Ukrainian village, and esteemed as a posek, a decider of fine points of Jewish law.

His mother, Miriam Karelitz, was the daughter of a notable rabbinical judge. An uncle, Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, was known widely as the Chazon Ish ("Vision of Man"), after the title of his masterwork, and respected worldwide as an authority on Jewish law.

Chaim was regarded as a prodigy as a child, memorizing whole sections of Torah and analyzing their meaning and significance in remarkably mature fashion.

The family migrated to the British mandate of Palestine in 1934, settling in Bnei Brak, just east of Tel Aviv, which was growing into a center of Haredi Jews; today, with 205,000 people, it is one of the world's 10 most densely populated cities.

Chaim's father was appointed head of a yeshiva for older teenage boys while Chaim studied at the Lomza Yeshiva, in the nearby town of Petach Tikva. It offered a "Mussar" education, which emphasized ethical as well as intellectual development and the cultivation of traits like modesty, responsibility, compassion and discipline.

Rabbi Kanievsky served in the army, stationed as a guard in the Jaffa area, during Israel's 1948 war to cement its independence. He married Batsheva Elyashiv, a daughter of [Rabbi Yosef Sholom Elyashiv](#), who until his death in 2012 was regarded as the unofficial leader of the Lithuanian Haredim.

[Mrs. Kanievsky died](#) in 2011. Rabbi Kanievsky is survived by four daughters, Leah Koledetski, Rutie Tzivion, Brachah Braverman and Deena Epstein; three sons, Rabbi Avraham Yeshayah Kanievsky, Rabbi Shlomo Kanievsky and Rabbi Yitzchak Shaul Kanievsky; and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Another daughter, Chana Streinman, died in 2014.

Rabbi Nosson Scherman, the general editor of Art Scroll, a leading publisher of Jewish religious texts, recalled a legend told about Rabbi Kanievsky that offers a flavor of how astonished his followers were by his powers.

Once, when asked on the spot how many times the name of Moses is mentioned in the Torah, Rabbi Kanievsky performed a mental tabulation and answered: 97. When he was told that a computer had counted 99 mentions, Rabbi Kanievsky pointed out that the extra two words used the same Hebrew letters as Moses but that they had completely different meanings.