

Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, an architect and guardian of Haredi-secular relations

Despite focusing on ultra-Orthodox education, Edelstein found himself at political helm of Ashkenazi Jewry where he championed coexistence and pragmatism

By [CANAAN LIDOR](#) 30 May 2023



Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, head of the Ponevez Yeshiva, at his home in Bnei Brak, December 19, 2017. (Aharon Krohn/Flash90)

As the celebrated spiritual leader of Ashkenazi Haredi Jewry, Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, who [died Tuesday](#) at the age of 100, was a major

advocate for compromise and coexistence at a time of growing estrangement between religious and secular Israelis.

The head of the Bnei Brak-based Ponevezh Yeshiva and a top leader of the United Torah Judaism party, Edelstein was a pragmatist who tried to steer Haredim, and especially the Ashkenazi-Litvak (Lithuanian) communities that he headed, in a conciliatory direction and away from confrontation with Israeli authorities at various junctions.

Internally, he focused on strengthening the Haredi education system and healing the divides that have polarized Litvak Jewry in recent decades. He advocated attentive pedagogy, instructing teachers in cheiders — Haredi schools and kindergartens — to refrain from shouting or intimidating students, according to a profile in Israel Hayom from 2017.

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Externally, he consistently worked toward coexistence with secular Israelis and authorities, speaking favorably of secular Jews' sacrifice for the Jewish People.

One memorable ruling by Edelstein said of the secular, “If they give their souls to save others out of love for others, they have a place in the afterlife just like the martyrs of Lod,” referencing a well-known story from the Talmud of self-sacrifice for the sanctification of God’s Name. The ruling is viewed by some as having opened the door to service in the army by Haredi soldiers.

Edelstein also, in his writings and rulings, ascribed non-observance of religious laws to ignorance and error rather than the wickedness cited by more radical Haredi leaders.



Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, head of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak, gives a lesson to young ultra Orthodox boys at the yeshiva, on February 10, 2016. (Yaakov Cohen/Flash90)

But he was also “staunchly devoted to the Torah-based way of life,” Yaakov Vider, a Haredi member of the city council of Bnei Brak, the heavily Haredi city where Edelstein had lived and died, told The Times of Israel.

When Edelstein believed that that way of life was being threatened by secular studies, he came down hard on the side of the Torah.

Last year, Edelstein reportedly [vetoed](#) a deal favored by other Haredi politicians that would have dramatically increased the number of so-called core subjects — including mathematics, English and biology — taught in Haredi schools in exchange for more state funding for those institutions. Those subjects are considered secondary, negligible or even inappropriate in many Haredi schools that focus on religious studies, including in institutions that do receive state funding for teaching those subjects. This reality is widely seen as perpetuating Haredi poverty because it is an impediment to the integration of Haredim in the workforce.

In 2017, Edelstein was tapped to replace the late Aharon Yehuda Leib Shteinman at the helm of the majority of what is often referred to as the Litvak stream, several hundred thousand people, most of whom live in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak, which is a major and politically influential component of the Haredi community.

Edelstein, who was born to a family of rabbis and rebbetzins in western Russia and immigrated to pre-state Israel in 1934, was not a natural-born politician, preferring for most of his life to focus instead on Haredi education and halacha, Jewish Orthodox law. But as Shteinman's health deteriorated, Edelstein gradually took over his predecessor's tasks, becoming a leader of policy and political strategy for his community.

Analysts said his death would be a major blow to the community and the traditions he stood for.

“Rabbi Gershon Edelstein was the sole leader of the Lithuanian ultra-Orthodox community and the dominant leader of the ultra-Orthodox community until his death at the age of 100,” said Gilad Malach, director of the Israel Democracy Institute's Ultra-Orthodox in Israel program.



Rabbi Gershon Edelstein at his home in the ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak on January 4, 2022. (Shlomi Cohen/Flash90)

“Rabbi Edelstein’s leadership style combined a moderate attitude towards the State of Israel with a determined stand in favor of the continuity of the ‘world of Torah.’ With his passing, for the first time in many years the ultra-Orthodox Lithuanian community stands without a clear leader to guide them during an era of change and potential turmoil,” he said.

“It’s never a good time for such a righteous man to be taken, but if there was ever a time when we needed a figure like Rabbi Edelstein, if there were ever a time when we could not afford such a loss, then that time is now,” Yemima Mizrachi, an influential female Orthodox public speaker and lawyer, wrote in a eulogy of Edelstein.

“During a time of terrible divisions, when many view people who are merely different to them as evil, Rabbi Edelstein shone with his love of fellow man, his attention to every student, every issue presented to him and everyone he saw.”

His role as a bridge between Haredim and secular people is reflected in the diversity of the Jews who eulogized him within minutes of his passing, and the warmth of their tone.



Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, head of the Ponevez Yeshiva seen at his home after lighting the Hanukkah candles in Bnei Brak, December 5, 2018 (Aharon Krohn/Flash90)

President Isaac Herzog, who is on a visit to Azerbaijan, tweeted that Edelstein “was a spiritual leader of enormous stature whose Torah and pious greatness influenced our generation and will influence generations to come.”

United Torah Judaism’s political leader, Housing Minister Yitzhak Goldknopf, said in a statement, “Together with all of the House of Israel, his many students, and those who cherish his memory, I bitterly mourn the passing of the great Maran HaGaon Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, of blessed and pious memory.”

Edelstein, he said, “was entirely focused on Torah and reverence for God, fought courageously for the holy people of Israel and the observance of Shabbat, was a remnant of a generation of thought that had the honor of raising up thousands of students, and received every person who turned to him for advice and wisdom with a warm welcome.”

Aryeh Deri, who leads the Mizrahi Haredi party Shas, tweeted, “Woe to the ship that lost its captain” and lamented Edelstein’s passing “with a shocked and grief-stricken heart.”