

**OBITUARY** MANY HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS EXPECTED AT FUNERAL

# Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, one of Israel's leading religious authorities, dies at 94

Kanievsky was a hugely influential leader of the non-Hasidic Lithuanian Haredi community, with hundreds of thousands of followers; politicians laud 'one of the generation's greats'

By [TOI STAFF](#) 18 March 2022



Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky in the northern Israeli city of Safed, February 26, 2020. (David Cohen/Flash90)

Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, one of Israel's most prominent ultra-Orthodox rabbis, died Friday at the age of 94.

Medics were called to Kanievsky's home in Bnei Brak after he collapsed and attempted to resuscitate him unsuccessfully.

His funeral will take place on Sunday. According to Channel 12 news, police expect it to be the largest funeral event in the country's history, and hundreds of thousands — perhaps near one million — are expected to attend, causing severe traffic disruption throughout the country's center.

Kanievsky, a hugely influential leader of the non-Hasidic Lithuanian ultra-Orthodox community in Israel, with hundreds of thousands of followers, was a scion of rabbinical dynasties known for his elite Talmud study.

Israeli leaders paid tribute to Kanievsky. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett expressed “deep sorrow” over the passing of “one of the generation's greats.

“Despite his greatness with the Torah and [standing with] the public, the rabbi made sure to always receive everyone with an open heart and a light in his eyes. He was a true public leader.”

Foreign Minister Yair Lapid called Kanievsky “an important and meaningful leader in the lives of many Jewish people” and offered condolences “to them and to his family.”

Defense Minister Benny Gantz added: “Beyond his greatness when it came to religious law, Rabbi Kanievsky was a man with deep life wisdom. He cared for the Torah, and he cared for humankind.”

Opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu said that “the people of Israel lost a tremendous, wise scholar, who was a central link in the chain of passing down the Torah from generation to generation.”



Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky seen at his home in the city of Bnei Brak on his 92nd birthday, January 11, 2019. (Shlomi Cohen/Flash90)

Kanievsky was born January 8, 1928, in Pinsk, the Second Polish Republic. His father was Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, known as the Steipler Gaon, a renowned Torah scholar and spiritual leader, and his mother, Miriam Karelitz, was the sister of Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, known as the Chazon Ish, a landmark figure in the ultra-Orthodox world of the 20th century.

Kanievsky arrived in then-British Mandatory Palestine in 1934 when his father brought the family to live in the city of Bnei Brak.

He married Batsheva Elyashiv, the daughter of Rabbi Yosef Sholom Eliashiv, another prominent ultra-Orthodox rabbi who lived in Jerusalem until his death in 2012.

His decades of study in yeshivas were marked by tutoring from some of the biggest names in the Israeli ultra-Orthodox community, among them his uncle the Chazon Ish (Karelitz) and Rabbi Elazar Shach, who was also a leading Lithuanian rabbi in Israel.

Kanievsky had given his support to the rise of Rabbi Aharon Yehuda Leib Shteinman as the prominent figure in the Lithuanian community, a choice largely based on a rabbi's following rather than any official declaration. Following Shteinman's death in December 2017, Kanievsky was himself elevated to that position, along with Ponevezh Yeshiva head Rabbi Gershon Edelstein.

Kanievsky was known for keeping to a strict and intense study schedule that would see him each year, among other things, study the entire Babylonian Talmud — a process that is more popularly completed over seven and a half years by learning one page a day.

Unlike most prominent rabbis who regularly give public lectures, Kanievsky would only give lessons or talks three times a year, on the death dates of his father, his uncle, and Shach, his former teacher.

Thousands came to his modest Bnei Brak home seeking rulings on religious law, advice, or simply a blessing. Those who arrived came from far and wide, including from abroad. More locally, senior public figures, among them politicians, visited him for talks, in particular at times of major national events, such as elections, or more recently the coronavirus outbreak.

Kanievsky, known for his brief responses, would famously deliver blessings as a two-syllable phrase “Boo’ah,” the word formed from the initials of the Hebrew phrasing meaning “Blessings and success.”

He aligned with the Degel Hatorah ultra-Orthodox political party (part of United Torah Judaism), although he refused to become a member of its guiding spiritual council.



Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky casts his ballot at a voting station in Bnei Brak, during the Knesset elections, on September 17, 2019. (Aharon Krohn/Flash90)

Kanievsky published over a dozen books on traditional Jewish law, known as halacha, and prayer. Among his most prominent works is “Derech Ha’emunah” (Way of the Faith) which deals with religious commandments specifically related to living in the Land of Israel.

Some of his rulings made headlines when they touched on topics relevant to ultra-Orthodox life in modern Israeli society.

In 2012 he ruled that it was prohibited to own or use a smartphone without specific permission from a rabbinic authority, and that those who already had them could not sell them but must destroy them instead.

In a responsum to a reader published in the ultra-Orthodox daily newspaper Yated Ne’eman, he wrote that “it is forbidden to be in possession of [an iPhone], and one must burn it,” despite the fact that the question came from a business owner who said it was “crucial for [his] dealings.”

A controversial ruling in 2015 reportedly instructed paramedics of the ultra-Orthodox United Hatzalah organization that at the scene of a terrorist attack, they should treat injured victims before treating terrorists who carried out the assault even if it meant leaving them to die. The ruling came at a time when the Israeli Medical Association was [grappling with the issue](#) based on the principle of “charity begins at home” to justify medical professionals treating victims first.

In 2016 Kanievsky ruled that medical [cannabis is kosher for use on Passover](#), as long as it does not violate the law of the land.



Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky is greeted by followers at his home in the central city of Bnei Brak, on September 22, 2020. (Aharon Krohn/Flash90)

In 2017 he ruled that reporting child sex abuse to police without the need to first consult with a rabbinic authority is “logical” because it is saving another person. The ruling was seen as an important step towards combating abuse in the ultra-Orthodox world that shies away from outside involvement in community life.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kanievsky faced intense criticism for his handling of the crisis. He made headlines on March 12, 2020 when, despite appeals from the Prime Minister's Office and the Israel Police, he insisted that yeshivas and schools remain open in defiance of government calls to close them, handing down a religious ruling stating that "canceling Torah study is more dangerous than the coronavirus." At the time, there were 200 active coronavirus cases in the country and no deaths.

He changed course two weeks later, as the infections climbed to hundreds daily and as his hometown of Bnei Brak saw widespread infection, ordering followers to pray individually and keep to health rules. He also ruled that people may transgress Shabbat by answering their phones — an action only allowed for life-saving circumstances — in order to get virus test results.

He came under criticism again later in the pandemic after advising yeshiva students against getting follow-up tests for COVID-19 after contact with a known virus carrier, saying it would take them away from their studies.

But Kanievsky was also a strong proponent of vaccination, and he and his family even received threats from anti-vaxxers after he came out in support of vaccinating children aged 5-11 to protect against the coronavirus.