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The Contemporary Reflection of a Deep-Rooted Tradition: The Chief Rabbinate in Türkiye and Its New Leader

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The Jews of Türkiye are once again set to go to the polls for the Chief Rabbinate, an institution that has stood at the center of their religious and communal life throughout their deep-rooted history. Rabbi David Sevi's election as Chief Rabbi by a large majority signifies the unity and continuity of the community. It also reflects the political context of Türkiye's contemporary approach to minority relations. Despite ongoing tensions in the Middle East and occasionally turbulent relations between Türkiye and Israel, this election is a significant step in reinforcing the Jewish community's harmonious coexistence with the state and the state's commitment to social peace.

This article examines the history and organizational structure of the office of Chief Rabbinate, a long-standing institution of Türkiye's Jewish community. Additionally, it explores the institution's relationship with the Turkish government, by contextualizing this interaction within the broader framework of minority-state relations in modern Türkiye.

Historical Background of the Jewish Community in Türkiye before the Modern State

Jews of the Islamic world in general and the Ottoman Empire in particular were long recognized as "People of the Book" and given *dhimmi* status, as a protected but subordinate group. Over the past 2,500 years local *batei din* or Jewish religious courts around the Middle

East evolved and ran parallel to various Islamic legal systems.¹ Local Jewish communities, often labeled simply as *Mizrahim* (Jews of the East), were revived and transformed by the exile of Sephardic Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in the 15th century, and together they were recognized as a *millet* in the Ottoman Empire.²

Until 1835, local congregations elected their own Chief Rabbis without any central representative body. After the Jewish community petitioned the Ottoman administration for the establishment of a single authority similar to the Armenian and Greek patriarchates, Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839) issued a decree granting official recognition to the office of the Chief Rabbi. Abraham Levi was appointed as the first Ottoman Chief Rabbi and held the office between 1835-1836.³

Subsequently, the authority of the Chief Rabbinate was extended to major Jewish centers throughout the empire. As part of the reform process of the mid-19th century the Chief Rabbinate Regulations (*Hahamhane Nizamnāmesi*) was drafted by Yakir Geron, the Chief Rabbi of Edirne between 1863-1872 and approved by Istanbul in 1865. It defined the duties, powers, and election principles of the Chief Rabbinate. The regulation also introduced a balance of authority between the Secular Council (*Meclis-i Cismānī*), the Religious Council (*Meclis-i Rūhānī*), and the General Council (*Meclis-i 'Umūmī*) which was composed of members from the other two councils.⁴

The Role of the Chief Rabbi in the Turkish State

Throughout the Republican era, Jews of Türkiye were granted equal citizenship rights under the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). However, they sought to further adapt to the nation-state framework by relinquishing certain minority privileges. In that process, the Jewish community, like broader segments of the Turkish society, encountered social, cultural, and economic challenges. For example, the ‘Citizens Speak Turkish!’ (*Vatandaş Türkçe Konuş!*) campaign, initiated in 1927, was perceived as an assimilationist initiative that undermined the Jews’ linguistic and cultural identity together with other minorities. Similarly, the prohibition of religious education in 1932 hindered the intergenerational transmission of traditional languages, especially Ladino and Hebrew.

The 1934 ‘Thrace Events’ (*Trakya Olayları*) - a series of adverse incidents - were marked by the harassment and commercial boycott of Jewish communities. These events resulted in significant population movements to larger urban centers, such as Izmir and Istanbul. During

World War II, the implementation of the Wealth Tax (*Varlık Vergisi*) in 1942 caused deep social trauma and significant economic losses for the community.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 further accelerated the mass emigration of Türkiye's Jews, shrinking the community's population from around 80,000 after World War I to 13,000–15,000 today. The widely condemned mob attacks of September 6–7, 1955, which mostly targeted the Christian communities, as well as the synagogue attacks of 1986 and 2003, intensified communal anxieties regarding their physical security and left a lasting impact on the collective memory. All these events have contributed to the gradual decline of the cultural identity, economic vitality, and demographic structure of the Jews in Türkiye.⁵

Despite various adversities encountered over time, Jews, particularly during the Republican era, tended to interpret the challenges they faced as outcomes of prevailing historical circumstances. They strove to maintain cordial and constructive relations with the state.

The transition to multiparty democracy in 1946 which included Jews, the liberalization policies implemented by the Motherland Party (ANAP) governments led by Turgut Özal in the 1980s, and the reforms pursued by the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since 2003, within the context of global integration, have collectively facilitated profound sociocultural and economic transformations. These processes have facilitated the integration of Jews into the state and society, as well as other segments of the population.

For example, the establishment of the Quincentennial Foundation (*500. Yıl Vakfı*) was founded to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Sephardic immigration from Spain, enabling Türkiye's Jewish community to play an active role in lobbying efforts in the United States and contribute to Turkish foreign policy.⁶

In recent years, relations between Türkiye and Israel have been tense, primarily due to developments regarding the Palestinian issue. Issues such as Türkiye's close relationship with Hamas, the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident, the status of Jerusalem, and the Gaza blockade have been particularly decisive in shaping this tense relationship. Nevertheless, the Turkish government has consistently avoided associating these disputes with the domestic Jewish community. In fact, the government has maintained a positive and constructive approach toward the Jewish community and has taken concrete measures to safeguard its well-being.

Officials of the Chief Rabbinate have repeatedly emphasized that the government under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has adopted an exceptionally positive stance regarding the election of the Chief Rabbi and matters concerning Jewish foundations, associations, educational institutions, and other spheres of communal life. They also note that any problems that arise are generally solved promptly.⁷ In practice, the Chief Rabbinate primarily conveys its concerns, requests, and opinions to the provincial authorities in Istanbul through the community's Secular Council. State institutions typically respond with a constructive approach. In certain cases, they display flexibility beyond formal legal provisions to reach practical solutions.

Alongside the effective role of the Secular Council in maintaining relations between the state and the community, the contributions of charismatic religious leaders — most notably the late Chief Rabbi Isak Haleva (in office 2002-2025) — have also been decisive. Rabbi Haleva embodied a leadership style that emphasized harmony and mutual trust between the Jewish community and the state, as well as with broader society, throughout the Republican era. He fulfilled this role thanks to his profound knowledge, experience, and personal virtues.

As one of the last representatives of the rabbinical tradition that the republic inherited from the empire, Rabbi Haleva embodied Türkiye's cultural codes with the language he used and the ideas he put forth, as well as with his personal conduct and working principles. Although he was fluent in Ladino, the traditional language of Sephardic Jews, he was the first Chief Rabbi to deliver sermons in Turkish in synagogues. This was in line with the community's socio-cultural transformation. Through his charismatic personality, Haleva united his community in religious and social terms. His multifaceted qualities strengthened the social integration and representational capacity of Turkish Jewry vis-à-vis the state.⁸

Rabbi Haleva remained remarkably composed during times of crisis, especially when synagogues in Istanbul were targeted by terrorist attacks in 1986 and 2003. He denounced these violent acts as despicable attempts to undermine social unity and solidarity. All segments of Turkish society unequivocally denounced the attacks. The government, led then by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, displayed the highest level of solidarity with the Jewish community.⁹ Against this backdrop, Erdoğan's official visit to the Chief Rabbi - the first by any prime minister in the history of the Republic - stands out as a landmark moment, symbolizing a commitment to religious tolerance and the promotion of intercultural dialogue.¹⁰ Throughout this extraordinary period, Haleva consistently emphasized that Jews in Türkiye lived equally and in harmony with their fellow compatriots.¹¹

Furthermore, by choosing to speak Turkish at intercultural gatherings in Türkiye and abroad, he played a significant role in promoting peace at national and global levels on behalf of Türkiye's Jews.¹² Thus, he was recognized as a religious leader who safeguarded the security of his community, promoted social cohesion within the country, and fostered harmonious relations with the state.

New Chief Rabbi David Sevi

As the sole candidate in the community elections to be held September 28–29, 2025, Rabbi David Sevi is set to be elected as the fourth Chief Rabbi of the Republic of Türkiye and the thirty-fourth since the Ottoman era,¹³ barring any unexpected developments.

Having served in various capacities within the Jewish community since 1967, Sevi has played an active role in social services and held leadership positions and board memberships across numerous foundations and associations. He is widely recognized in Türkiye and abroad for his expertise in the distinctive *Maftirim* musical tradition, which blends Turkish melodies with Jewish liturgical hymns. His pioneering contributions to preserving and transmitting this tradition have earned him multiple awards and strengthened his reputation as a cultural bridge-builder and a respected religious leader.

Sevi has deep roots in the religious, legal, and cultural spheres. Following his predecessor's example, Sevi was appointed to this position for a renewable seven-year term. Barring any extraordinary developments, he is expected to continue serving as the spiritual leader of Türkiye's Jewish community until 2032.

Conclusion

The Chief Rabbinate of Türkiye is the contemporary embodiment of a deep-rooted historical heritage. It functions as the spiritual authority of the Jewish community and as a pivotal institution that shapes its relations with the state and the broader society. The recent election of Rav David Sevi as Chief Rabbi demonstrates the community's capacity for internal unity and consensus, as well as its commitment to constructive dialogue with the Turkish state. This development underscores the shared determination of Türkiye's diverse faith communities to coexist peacefully and highlights the trajectory of the Jewish community toward a more robust future in religious life and sociocultural engagement.

From a contemporary political perspective, it is noteworthy that successive Turkish governments have maintained a constructive and protective stance toward the Jewish community despite the turbulent course of Türkiye–Israel relations. At a time when conflicts in the Middle East and the Palestinian question have strained Türkiye’s foreign policy, the state’s inclusive approach toward its Jewish citizens has reinforced the state’s deeply rooted commitment to pluralism. Within this framework, Rabbi David Sevi’s leadership is poised to foster Jewish community’s cohesion and contribute to Türkiye’s internal stability, cultural diversity, and enhanced international standing in foreign policy.

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Notes

¹ For detailed information on these historical institutions, see S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 119-124; Nuh Arslantaş, *Jews in Islamic Society* (Istanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2008), 82–86 (in Turkish). See also, Minna Rozen, *A History of the Jewish Community in Istanbul: The Formative Years, 1453–1566* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 16-18; Goitein, “Minority Self-Rule and Government Control in Islam,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 31 (1970): 109.

² For the Ottoman millet system, see Stanford J. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* (London: Macmillan Press, 1991), 43-44; M. Macit Kenanoğlu, *The Ottoman Millet System* (Istanbul: Klasik Publishing, 2004), 130–49 (in Turkish).

³ Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic*, 149-155.

⁴ Naim Güleriyüz, *The Jews of Türkiye from Byzantium to the 20th Century* (Istanbul: Gözlem Publishing, 2011), 153-156 (In Turkish).

⁵ Rifat Bali, *A Turkification Adventure (1923–1945)* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001), 243–474 (in Turkish); idem, *Aliyah: The Story of a Mass Migration (1946–1949)* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003), 129–270 (in Turkish).

⁶ Ester Yannier, “[Naim Güleriyüz ile 8. yılında 500. Yıl Vakfı Türk Musevileri Müzesi](#),” *Şalom*, December 25, 2007 [Accessed: September 9, 2024].

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- ⁷ See Vivet Pitelon Sparkes, *Chief Rabbi Rav Isak Haleva: A Life Dedicated to Love and Tolerance* (Istanbul: Gözlem Publishing, 2025), vol. 1, 186–200 (in Turkish), for the statements by former Chief Rabbi Rav Haleva regarding President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's quick handling of issues facing the Turkish Jewish community. Other examples can be found in “[President Erdoğan Accepts Members of the Turkish Jewish Community and the Rabbis’ Alliance of Islamic Countries](#),” on the Presidency of Türkiye Official Website [accessed August 17, 2025], and “[President Erdoğan Gave a Speech at Reception for the Alliance of Rabbis in Islamic States](#),” on *Şalom Türkiye* [accessed August 17, 2025].
- ⁸ For detailed information on Chief Rabbi Haleva’s charismatic leadership and his relations with both the Jewish community and broader Turkish society, see Sparkes, *Chief Rabbi Rav Isak Haleva*, vol. 1, 104 ff.; 205–206 (in Turkish).
- ⁹ *BBC Turkish*, “[İsrail Dışişleri Bakanı İstanbul'daydı](#),” November 16, 2003.
- ¹⁰ “[Hahambaşını Ziyaret Eden İlk Başbakanım](#),” June 3, 2004, *NTVMSNBC*, November 14, 2005 [accessed August 17, 2025].
- ¹¹ Sparkes, *Chief Rabbi Rav Isak Haleva*, vol. 1, 200 (in Turkish).
- ¹² For some of Chief Rabbi Haleva’s speeches of this nature delivered at various international meetings, see Sparkes, *Chief Rabbi Rav Isak Haleva*, vol. 1, 182–83 (speech in New York, 1992); vol. 2, 130–31 (United States Declaration, 2007); vol. 2, 149–52 (Paris, 2012); vol. 2, 200–201 (Madrid, 2019); vol. 2, 172–174 (2021, Ankara) (in Turkish).
- ¹³ Güleriyüz, *The Jews of Türkiye from Byzantium to the 20th Century*, 208.