



HACHAM DAVID OVADIA AT 100

MARKING ONE YEAR SINCE THE
PASSING OF ONE OF THE LAST
SAGES OF MOROCCAN JEWRY

IYAR 5671 (MAY 1911)* SEFROU MOROCCO - 18 IYAR 5770 (MAY 2, 2010) JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

YEHUDA AZOULAY

IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF A GOLDEN AGE. After decades of uneasy relations with Arab magistrates, the 1912 Treaty of Fez making most of Morocco a French protectorate, ushered in a period of relative peace and prosperity for the hundreds of thousands of Jews living in Morocco. And it was around this time that one of Morocco's greatest leaders was born – Hacham David Ovadia, *z.s.l.*, one of the last *hachamim* from Morocco and an extraordinary figure who devotedly served the Moroccan Jewish community during its golden era.

The ancient Moroccan Jewish community dates back to the end of the Second Commonwealth. Jews began emigrating to the region as early as 70 CE, and they maintained a strong presence in the country – numbering over 250,000 in 1948 – before anti-Semitic violence triggered a mass exodus between 1948 and 1970.

Moroccan Jewry coexisted among the many cultures that shaped Morocco's general society, namely Jewish, French, Spanish, Arab and Berber. But the primary influence on Moroccan Jewry has always come from its rabbis and leaders, who developed and shaped the community throughout the centuries.

Hacham David Ovadia was born in Iyar, 5671 (1911)¹, to Hacham Yehoshua Shimon Haim Ovadia *z.s.l.*, who was known as the “Yismah Levav” and served as Chief Rabbi

and head of the Rabbinical Court of Sefrou, Morocco. Hacham Yehoshua was known as an accomplished scholar and especially devoted leader. During this time, the European Enlightenment was beginning to make inroads among the Jewish community in Morocco. Hacham Yehoshua Shimon Haim perceptively realized how destructive the ideology of the Enlightenment would be if it were introduced in the Jewish educational system. He therefore brought a *talmid hacham* named Hacham Shemuel Atar from the city of Mogador to serve as the local teacher so the Jewish children of Sefrou would receive a pure, genuine Torah education.

Young David Ovadia, together with his friend, who is today known as Hagaon Hacham Yehoshua Maman *shelita*, ranked among the brightest students in Hacham Shemuel's class. Resisting the influence of the government and advocates of Enlightenment, these boys and their peers devoted themselves to Torah learning instead of secular studies. This strong-willed dedication to Torah would accompany Hacham David throughout his life.

At the young age of 29, Hacham David was chosen to serve as a *dayan* (judge on a Rabbinical Court), becoming the youngest *dayan* in all of Morocco. He sat on the *Bet Din* that served the communities of Marakesh, Fez, and his hometown of Sefrou. Hacham David fulfilled his duties in strict

accordance with Torah law and with pure *yirat Shamayim*. In addition, he succeeded in leading a spiritual revolution in his city, inspiring the Jewish residents to return to authentic Jewish practice. Soon enough, Sefrou became a thriving center of Torah and spirituality. Hacham David's special charm and extraordinary personality, along with his unique combination of brilliance and sensitivity, enabled him to influence all people, even those who opposed Torah. At the same time, when the need arose, he would forcefully defend the Torah and protest against those who sought to undermine its authority.

Hacham David was a tireless public servant, and established numerous Torah educational institutions, such as Yeshivat Bet David, Benot Rivka, Em Habanim and study halls for the community. Often, his efforts to establish these institutions met with opposition, but through his tenacity and natural charisma he succeeded in surmounting all the hurdles placed in his way. He delivered a daily Talmud class before sunrise, and carefully supervised all communal issues to protect against breaches in halacha. Thus, for example, upon learning that the wife of the newly-appointed principal of the local school did not observe the laws of family purity, Hacham David firmly demanded that they immediately leave the city.

Hacham David earned acclaim even

¹ Some accounts place the Rabbi's birth in 5673 (1913).

among Moroccan statesmen and leading government officials. His reputation served him well in his work as the Jewish representative and advisor, and the Moroccan government appointed him head of the Ministry of Jewish Education, responsible for overseeing Jewish education throughout the country.

CHAMPION OF JEWISH EDUCATION

But in spite of his official capacity, Hacham David faced opposition in his mission to promote Jewish education. His son, Hacham Moshe, relates an episode when wealthy representatives of a certain city came to Sefrou, and members of the city's non-observant community monopolized the visitors' time touring institutions that were not run according to Torah. Hacham David tried his utmost to arrange a meeting with the visitors, but the non-observant community members worked to ensure that Hacham David would be unable to meet them. After making some inquiries, Hacham David learned that the visitors would be staying in a certain hotel after completing their tour of Sefrou. Very late that night, he traveled on a vegetable truck to the hotel to wait for their arrival.

When they arrived at the hotel, they were surprised to see Hacham David Ovadia waiting for them.

"Why is the rabbi here?" they asked.

"You were in my city," the rabbi replied, "and could it be that you did not come to meet with me?" His words, spoken with passion and sincerity, made a deep impression, and they inquired about his projects. Hacham David described to them all the Torah institutions he ran – yeshivot, a kollel, seminaries, etc. It became obvious that a large donation was needed to maintain this vast educational network. Impressed by the rabbi's humility, integrity and altruism, the visitors willingly gave him the entire sum required to maintain the institutions.

Upon returning to Sefrou, Hacham David made a point to thank the non-religious representatives who had hosted the visitors, for their part – albeit unintentional – in helping him secure the generous donation.

TRUE TO HIS WORD

Hacham David's commitment and integrity was perhaps best expressed in his fulfillment of *kibud av ve'em* – honoring his parents. Once, before attending a meeting of rabbis in the neighboring city of Fez, Hacham David assured his father that he



Above: Giving a class to young boys in Sefrou
Below: With the *hachamim* and leaders of Morocco.



would return to Sefrou that night. But on the way home, the car that was driving the contingent of rabbis back to Sefrou broke down on the outskirts of Fez. Realizing they had no alternative means of transportation at that hour of the night, the rabbis turned back toward the city. Hacham David, however, was intent on keeping the promise he had made to his father. He walked some 15 miles through the night, arriving at Sefrou shortly before dawn. As he approached his home, all the effort of this arduous journey became fully worthwhile as he caught the first glimpse of his father's face in the window, shining in the fresh morning light.

A LEADER OF JERUSALEM

With the lifting of emigration restrictions in 1963, an additional 80,000 Jews left Morocco reducing the country's Jewish population to 60,000 by 1967. With the bulk of his community emigrating, Hacham David Ovadia decided to leave his successful leadership career in Morocco and move to Israel, despite the harsh economic conditions he would face in the Holy Land.

He moved to Israel in 5724/1964, and was offered several positions outside Jerusalem, but he chose instead to dedicate himself to ensuring proper kashrut standards in Jerusalem. He also received a position as a *dayan* and was named rabbi of Jerusalem's Bayit Vegan neighborhood. He delivered many Torah lectures in the community, inspiring and guiding countless numbers of students and followers.

PIONEER IN KASHRUT

In his capacity as kashrut official, Hacham David established the foundations of the Jerusalem Rabbinate's "Mehadrin" standard of supervision, and worked tirelessly to ensure that the strictest standards of kashrut were maintained. Hacham David would wake up during the nights to make surprise inspections to ensure that everything in the establishments under his supervision was run according to halacha. He also established the kashrut standards for the "Off Yerushalayim" ("Jerusalem chickens") company.

His sons recalled that on the first day he visited the company, a large complimentary

shipment of chicken arrived his house. When he saw the delivery, he became angry.

“Why did we get this delivery?” he asked. “This is bribery!”

Before he even took off his coat, he immediately called a taxi and traveled to the manager’s office in Bet Shemesh.

“Take what’s yours,” he sternly instructed.

The manager, impressed by Hacham David’s uprightness, promised to faithfully follow whatever terms he would set regarding *kashrut*.

This level of virtue was also evident in Hacham David’s scrupulous personal observance of every detail of halacha. He would never eat with anyone he did not know well, or if he did not know who cooked the food. In fact, he ate only meat and chicken that he had slaughtered himself. Hacham David lived with genuine fear of Hashem and went to great lengths to avoid even the slightest, questionable violation of halacha.

HUMILITY AND SENSITIVITY

One of Hacham David’s son’s described his father’s relationship with a certain individual who had abandoned the Torah. Instead of alienating him, Hacham David visited him every day. When he learned that the man kept his store open on Shabbat, he arranged to sleep near the store, and on Shabbat day, he walked over and showed the man how to avoid basic Torah transgressions. That Shabbat, the man resolved never to open his store again on Shabbat. Eventually, he returned to full Torah observance – all because of Hacham David’s warmth and accepting approach.

His dealings with others were always characterized by special charm and grace. Rabbi Yisrael Gellis, Director of Chabad in Dimona, worked very hard to import *etrogim* from Morocco to Israel. To honor the local *hachamim*, Rabbi Gellis would often bring some of his finest *etrogim* to the great rabbis in Israel. On one occasion, after he delivering a superb Moroccan *etrog* to Hacham David’s home, Rabbi Gellis received a phone call from the hacham, who protested the gesture.

“There are more important rabbis that should receive this gift,” he said. “Why did you bring me such a nice *etrog*?”

“The other rabbis,” Rabbi Gellis replied, “have others who will bring them *etrogim*, and, also, I know that you will recognize to value this special *etrog* more than other rabbis!”

Hacham David’s family members described him as an exceedingly emotional and compassionate person.

When one of his daughters-in-law was in Shaare Zedek Hospital on Shabbat after the birth of her first son, decided to visit. Though he was over 70 years old at the time, Hacham David traveled by foot to the hospital and walked up eight flights of stairs to visit her. When asked why he was so insistent on visiting her on Shabbat, rather than waiting until after Shabbat when he could travel by cab and ride the elevator, the *hacham* explained, “How can I wait when she just gave birth to her first child, and her parents are not in the country? She needs *hizuk* [encouragement] now, and this cannot wait for after Shabbat!”

In his later years, Hacham David would travel to communities in northern Israel to educate and urge them about the laws of family purity. He also prepared special pamphlets on the subject that he would give to newlyweds as part of his effort to raise awareness about the importance of this central *missva*.

WRITER AND PUBLISHER

Hacham David founded a publishing house that printed the works of many earlier Moroccan *hachamim*, and he also authored numerous of his own books on halacha and customs. One of his most famous works, *Nahagu Ha’am*, records the customs and practices of Moroccan Jewry with remarkable depth, breadth and accuracy. It is regarded as one of the most important works on the subject. Hacham David also published a work of halachic responsa under the title *Venatan David*. The volume testifies to his vast breadth of knowledge and his regular correspondence with many of the leading *hachamim* of his time. His books are also a valuable treasure of historical information, as they contain many letters, certificates, historical records, and accounts of *takanot* (communal enactments) and religious practices observed in Morocco.



THE PASSING OF A TORAH GIANT

Just one year ago, on Lag Ba’omer, 18 Iyar 5770 (May 2, 2010), Hacham David passed away at the age of 99 (some say 97). He was buried amid great honor on the 34th day of the *omer* on Har Hamenuchot. The funeral procession left his Bet Midrash Yismah Lev in Bayit Vegan, and was attended by thousands, including students from Israel and abroad. Numerous distinguished rabbis took part in the procession, including Hacham Yehuda Ades, Rabbi Uziel Aurbach, the rabbi of Bayit Vegan, and Rabbi Moshe Yehuda Shlezinger, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Kol Torah. The rabbis and dayanim of Jerusalem all eulogized him. They spoke of his brilliance as a Torah scholar, his tireless devotion to Torah learning and teaching, the works that he produced, and his unique piety and humility. His passing had a major effect not only on Moroccan Jewry, but on the entire Torah world.

He was survived by his dear wife Miriam *a.h.*, who departed this world less than a year ago, and who stood by his side throughout his endeavors; Hacham Pinchas Ovadia, Rosh Yeshivat Yismach Lev in Jerusalem; Hacham Yismach Ovadia; Hacham Moshe Ovadia, Rosh Kollel in the city Tuliz and Straussberg, France; Mrs. Rut Bar-Hen, wife of the Rav of Sderot; Mrs. Sarah Elbaz, wife of Rosh Yeshiva in Har Nof Shvut; Mrs. Yehudit Haber, wife of Rabbi Hillel Haber, Rosh Yeshivat Shaare Torah; Mrs. Shoshanah Levita; and Mrs. Esther Wanun.

Hacham David Ovadia was one of our generation’s final links to the customs, history, and Torah of Moroccan Jewry. This glorious chain is continued by his children, all of whom follow his example of Torah and *missvot*, and his commitment to spreading Torah to others. May his soul rest in Gan Eden, and may his merits be a source of blessing to his family and to all *Am Yisrael*.

Sources:

Yom Le’Yom (Hebrew), 22 Iyar, 5770 (May 6, 2010).

Yated Ne’eman, 22 Sivan, 5770 (June 4, 2010), p. 36.

Interview - Hacham Mordechai Lebhbar, apprentice of Hacham David Ovadia.

Yehuda Azoulay is the author of *A Legacy of Leaders*, a groundbreaking English series containing biographies and stories of Sephardic *hachamim*. More information and articles can be obtained on his website at www.Sephardiclegacy.com.