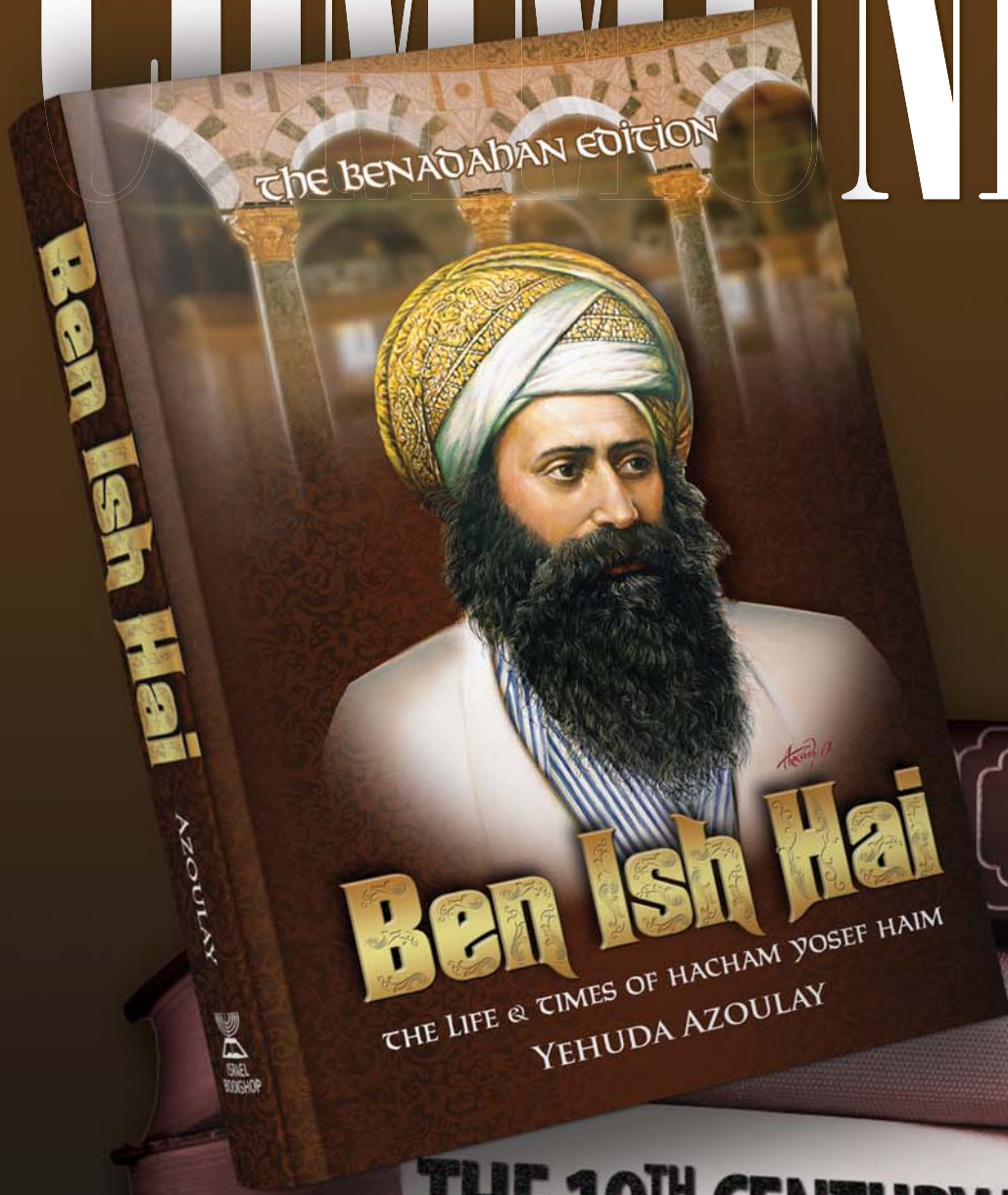


# COMMUNITY

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**The Humble Benefactor,  
Mr. Frank Beda™™**  
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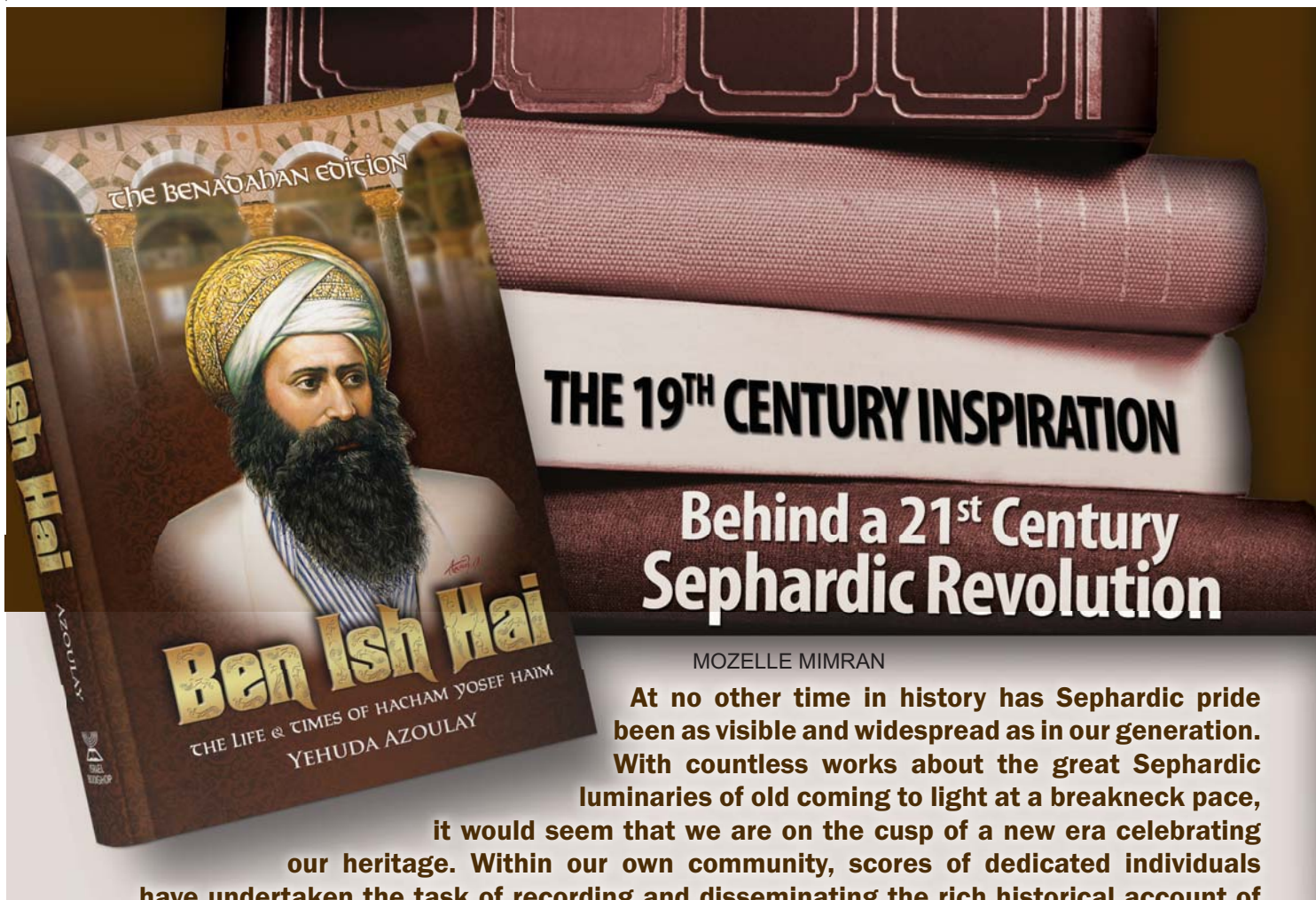
**Can a Magnet Really Open  
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**CommUNITY United in Prayer**  
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## THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY INSPIRATION

## FOR A 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SEPHARIC REVOLUTION





## THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY INSPIRATION

# Behind a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Sephardic Revolution

MOZELLE MIMRAN

**At no other time in history has Sephardic pride been as visible and widespread as in our generation. With countless works about the great Sephardic luminaries of old coming to light at a breakneck pace, it would seem that we are on the cusp of a new era celebrating our heritage. Within our own community, scores of dedicated individuals have undertaken the task of recording and disseminating the rich historical account of our ancestors through print, the web, and even motion picture. Among the innovators at the forefront of this trend is Yehuda Azoulay, who had previously authored a two-volume anthology of great Sephardic sages, which illustrate the extraordinary sense of pride and commitment that is fueling this 21<sup>st</sup> century Sephardic renaissance. Now, in his first full biography focused on a single sage, Azoulay has aptly chosen to headline an illustrious leader who himself is credited with spearheading a resurgence of Sephardic tradition and pride some 150 years ago.**

### Filling a Void

Full of passion for his heritage, Yehuda Azoulay, a direct descendant of Hacham Haim Yosef David Azoulay (the Hida, 1724-1806), is determined to bring about, what he terms, “a revolution” of Sephardic education and cultural pride. As a student, he discovered a great void in the historical literature of the various Sephardic communities, particularly, the lives of the sages that have shaped *halacha* (Jewish law), *mussar* (Jewish thought), and tradition. The dearth of such material stood in stark contrast to the vast amounts of recorded history of the great Ashkenazic sages.

“While I was in school,” he recalls, “I found many books in the library and in Judaic bookstores on the lives of influential Ashkenazic rabbis. But, except for a book that I found on Baba Sali z.s.l., I couldn’t find one book on our great Sephardic sages.”

With tireless energy and dedication, Azoulay set his mind on studying the great contributions that our sages had made to the Sephardic world, delving into the archives of museums and universities to uncover the stories of the lives and personalities of Sephardic Torah luminaries.

“It wasn’t a question of *whether* this job should be undertaken,” he says. “The need for more Sephardic literature was clear – and becoming increasingly urgent. We need to know about our heritage to develop a sense of pride in our culture and in the rabbis who influenced us. This is who we are.” Azoulay aspired to “educate the uneducated” about our glorious history.

His vision became a reality after years of research yielded the two-volume work *A Legacy of Leaders: Inspiring Stories and Biographies of Sephardic Hachamim*.

These volumes, published in April, 2008 and December, 2009, have been hailed as “a wondrous, scrupulously researched collection of over one hundred stories about these revered *hachamim*” that “brings their rich, spiritual legacy to life, providing inspiration to readers from all backgrounds.”

They are intended both for home reading and as a research text, and the clear style and format make the works suitable for adults and children alike. The two volumes have been translated into Hebrew, French and Spanish, and distributed to Sephardic communities worldwide.

## Portrait of a Spiritual Giant

Azoulay's latest work, *The Ben Ish Hai: The Life and Times of Hacham Yosef Haim* explores the remarkable life of one of the most extraordinary Torah figures of modern times. Hacham Ovadia Yosef, *shelita*, personally encouraged Azoulay to undertake the task of chronicling the life of the *Ben Ish Hai* – just as he himself did in an article in the journal *Kol Sinai* (Elul, 5722/1962) “in order to proclaim our great and boundless appreciation for his exalted level of holiness.” According to Rabbi Shemuel Choueka of Congregation Ohel Simcha in Elberon, NJ, Hacham Yosef Haim was the spiritual leader in Baghdad who “overshadowed everyone who lived in his time...and reenergized and revitalized *halacha*”. And his powerful influence on *halacha* continues to resonate, so that today, any halachic discourse among Sephardic *poskim* is considered incomplete without consideration of the *Ben Ish Hai*'s rulings. This new work is thus a vital link in the chain between our past and present, giving us the opportunity to learn and gain inspiration from a towering figure who shaped modern Sephardic religious observance.

## A Scion of a Torah Dynasty

Hacham Yosef Haim was affectionately known as the *Ben Ish Hai* (literally, “son of a living man”), the title of his most popular work which is based upon the description of King David's general, Benayahu ben Yehoyada (Shemuel II 23:20). He was born in Baghdad, Iraq on 27 Av, 5594/ September 1, 1834, into what Azoulay describes as “a dynasty of towering Torah giants that had led Iraqi Jewry for generations.” He was preceded by his father and grandfather, Hacham Eliyahu Haim and Hacham Moshe Haim, whose Torah scholarship and tireless devotion to their community earned them the reverence and love of Jews throughout Iraq. In the introduction to his work, Azoulay describes the tremendous impact this illustrious family had upon the Iraqi Jewish community:

*Under the capable leadership of Hacham Moshe, his students and his successors, Torah study began to flourish once again in Iraq. The community again produced towering Torah personalities who devoted themselves tirelessly to teaching their communities and injecting new life and spirit into religious observance among Iraqi Jewry. And while there were many outstanding Torah personalities during this period, nobody was as successful in the effort to revitalize Torah in Babylon as Hacham Yosef Haim.*

Meticulously researched, the book contains anecdotal information about the life of the *Ben Ish Hai* and the history of the Jewish community in Iraq, a review of the extensive writings of the *Ben Ish Hai*, eulogies given upon the passing of the great *saddik*, as well as descriptions of correspondence between the *Ben Ish Hai* and various rabbis around the world. These correspondences testify to the far-reaching influence the *Ben Ish Hai* had on world Jewry, while the details of his life illustrate to us the sheer strength of character and devotion to Hashem and Torah that guided this eminent hacham in everything he did. As a young child, he used money given to him to buy treats for Shabbat to buy *hallot* for a destitute woman so that she could enjoy Shabbat, exhibiting a level of maturity and sensitivity rarely seen at such a tender age. As a leader of the Jewish world, he was presented with numerous requests for financial assistance to the needy in Israel and always immediately set out to raise funds and distribute them.

The *Ben Ish Hai* had a deep love and affinity for the Land of Israel and the people who lived there. He fulfilled a lifelong dream when he embarked in 1869 on an arduous journey to *Eress Yisrael* where he stayed for five months. His trip took him to the renowned center of Kabbalah learning, Yeshivat Bet El in Jerusalem where he met with distinguished hachamim, to the graves of the *sadikim* in Meron, and to Me'arat Hamachpela in Hebron. During his visit to Hebron, the sage was accosted by angry Arabs, an incident which drove him to work

## Sephardic Pride in Film

When the movie, *The Syrian Jewish Community: Our Journey Through History*, was first shown in October 2010 at Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center, it was billed as the largest gathering of New York and New Jersey's Syrian and near Eastern Jewish communities in history. The acclaimed documentary was later screened several more times at various venues in Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Jersey Shore area. Attended by individuals from all walks of life, the great fanfare that accompanied the movie testified to the growing pride among Sephardic communities for their history and heritage.

The feature-film quality production chronicled the history of the first Syrian immigrants who landed on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. With poignant interviews, the movie portrayed the pride and stoicism of the first generation of Syrian Jews that set the foundation for our life here.

The first in a planned series of motion-picture documentaries, the film was commissioned by the Sephardic Heritage Museum, which will soon be opening in Lakewood, New Jersey,

as part of the larger goal of preserving Sephardic culture. This project, eight years in the making, has as its centerpiece a unique collection of original, unpublished Torah manuscripts written by Syrian rabbis of previous generations. A collection of artifacts from Aleppo and Damascus are partnered with thousands of photos collected from community members along with hours of videotaped personal interviews which chronicle life in Syria and the early years in America. Joseph Sitt, who acquired the first set of manuscripts and spearheaded the project, explained in an interview with *Community*, “We send our children to school and they learn Greek history, Roman history, European history and American history. Why shouldn't they learn our own history – the history of Middle Eastern Jewry? The real motivation behind the museum is the need to inspire pride in the great legacy that we've inherited from our forbears. We often tend to look elsewhere, outside our community, for wisdom, for rabbinic scholarship. I think a lot of it is because many people do not realize the incredible legacy that we've inherited, and which we are all a part of.”

toward extricating the holy site from the hands of the Muslims. The book relates the ensuing negotiations and results of the hacham's efforts.

The *Ben Ish Hai* earned the affection and reverence of his peers, and the greatest luminaries of his time accorded him special honor and respect. Azoulay writes: "Rabbi Yehuda Sadka z.s.l., the famous *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshivat Porat Yosef, described Rabbenu [the *Ben Ish Hai*] as the consummate well-rounded scholar. He had thorough knowledge of the Talmud and *halachah*, arrived at incisive and brilliant *hiddushim* [novel Torah insights], and was unmatched in his knowledge of Kabbalah, but he was nevertheless able to teach and inspire ordinary laymen on a level that was suitable for them. His writing style, too, was clear, concise and accessible. As a leader, he was wealthy, nice-looking and charismatic. He was not only an expert in Torah, but also a remarkably creative poet and storyteller. Rarely have the Jewish people been granted a leader with such an expansive set of skills, who excelled in every area of learning and leadership."

## Lecturer Par Excellence

While Hacham Yosef Haim excelled in every area of the rabbinate, he was especially renowned for his mastery as a *darshan* (lecturer). We can only wish we had lived in his time so we could have heard his inspirational lectures. The hacham had a keen sensitivity to his audience, and knew precisely how to tailor the content and tenor of his *derashot* to the people he addressed. He describes his philosophy on delivering *derashot* in his work *Ben Ish Hayil*, a compilation of his *derashot*:

*It was not my custom to deliver complex Talmudic discourses... since the enormous crowd that gathered there had no way of grasping this kind of argumentation... Rather, the agadah (Talmudic stories) needs to be accessible and understandable to everyone. All the darshananim (speakers) who used to address the people did this, leaving aside complex analysis...and instead giving simple and direct interpretations of the agadah.*

This approach was embraced by many of our illustrious rabbis, and has proven resoundingly successful in inspiring audiences.

Aside from his weekly *derasha*, which would sometimes last for three hours, the *Ben Ish Hai* would also speak on four special occasions throughout the year. Azoulay elaborates:

*Rabbenu (our rabbi) inherited from his father and grandfather the honor of delivering four major annual derashot in Zalat Lachbiri, the Great Synagogue of Baghdad. On these four Shabbatot, he was the only rabbi in Baghdad to give a public lecture. All the rabbis and scholars from throughout the city, as well as thousands of laymen – men and women – crowded into the synagogue to hear the Ben Ish Hai's presentation. These four Shabbatot were Shabbat Shuvah (before Yom Kippur), Shabbat Zachor (before Purim), Shabbat Hagadol (before Pesach) and Shabbat Kallah (before Shavuot).*

Despite his unparalleled stature of prominence throughout the Sephardic world and beyond, the *Ben Ish Hai* remained humble, unassuming, and grateful for all he had. In his introduction to *Ben Ish Hayil*, he writes:

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*How can I repay Gd for all His benevolence toward me? In His great kindness and mercy, I was found worthy of standing in the divine courtyard and serving a large community, of speaking words of Torah and morality and fear [of Gd] and halacha on the four special Shabbatot every year. I delivered a derashah in the presence of a large audience that would befit a king – on Shabbat Shuvah, Shabbat Zachor, Shabbat HaGadol and Shabbat Kallah. I stood in the same place where my holy fathers stood before me to address the community, as is the Jewish custom observed throughout the world, instituted by Moshe Rabbenu, that the rabbis address the public regarding the laws of the holidays on the holidays, the laws of Pesah on Pesah and the laws of Shavuot on Shavuot. Although I know that I, myself, am not worthy of this, the merits of my fathers have earned me this honor, may their souls enjoy eternal life.*

## From Baghdad to Jerusalem

In addition to his profound impact upon his community and upon the world of halachic scholarship, the *Ben Ish Hai* was also instrumental in the creation of what quickly became one of the most illustrious religious institutions in the world – Yeshivat Porat Yosef in Jerusalem. The generous philanthropist Yosef Avraham Shalom of Calcutta, India contacted Hacham Yosef Haim in the late 1800's expressing interest in creating a hospital to meet the needs of the Jewish community in Jerusalem. The hacham responded, "Others besides you can take care of physical health. I do not, however, see too many people concerned with spiritual wellbeing. Therefore, my suggestion is that you establish a yeshiva that is a healing station for all ailments of the soul..." The *Ben Ish Hai* lovingly encouraged Mr. Shalom to commit to funding this project, which would inspire others to donate, as well.

Hacham Yosef Haim remained intimately involved in this project throughout its inception, guiding Mr. Shalom in development of this institution. It was he who chose the site of the new yeshiva, writing, "Surely a synagogue or study hall built closer to the Temple Mount is superior and holier, since it is closer to the gateway to heaven. This is especially true if the worshippers within it can see from its windows the ground of the site where Bet Hamikdash stood. This is superior to all! Fortunate is the one who is privileged to pray in such a synagogue and to study in such a house!" (p.66-67).

Yeshivat Porat Yosef produced numerous Torah giants who emerged as the primary sources of religious guidance and inspiration for the Sephardic world, including our very own Hacham Baruch Ben-Haim z.s.l. as well as, *sheyibadel leheim* the leader of Sephardic Jewry today, Hacham Ovadia Yosef *shelita*. The realization of Hacham Yosef Haim's vision and dream of a Yeshiva facing the Western Wall continues to this day, as the institution consistently produces scholars and rabbis that serve Sephardic communities around the world.

## A Messenger for Sephardic Heritage

In his introduction to the book Azoulay writes:

*It is difficult, or perhaps even impossible, to properly assess Hacham Yosef Haim's impact upon Iraqi Jewry and the Torah world generally. He was an extraordinary gaon (genius) in all areas of Torah, writing dozens of sefarim (books) that cover topics spanning the spectrum of Talmudic and halachic literature. His halachic rulings were*

*unequivocally accepted by many segments of Sephardic Jewry... They rapidly spread and were enthusiastically received throughout the Jewish world, and they are studied and analyzed in all circles of Torah scholarship even today.*

This extensive biography of a pious, righteous sage, to be published this month, is one of the many projects that Azoulay has undertaken to ensure the proliferation of Sephardic

history. "I am a *shaliah* (messenger) for this *missva*," Azoulay recently said. "I just want to educate and create awareness for our community." Currently studying for his Masters degree in Jewish Education in his spare time from teaching and learning Torah, Azoulay has begun to compile a curriculum of Sephardic history to be taught in *yeshivot* and day schools around the world. To date, 20 schools have chosen to integrate the curriculum into their existing program, and 20 more have expressed interest in the material. "It is my hope to create for Sephardic Jews everywhere a pride in their heritage and an intensified faith in Hashem and His Torah."

In addition to his writing, Azoulay has developed two websites dedicated to the needs of the Sephardic community. SephardicLegacy.com is a website aimed at "enabling us Sephardic Jews to preserve our Sephardic heritage, tradition and culture for the future generations to come" and "ensuring that the history, legacies and traditions of the great Sephardic communities throughout the world be recorded and remembered as an integral part of our rich heritage for generations to come." His second website, SephardicBookstore.com, offers for sale a wide array of books of Sephardic interest, all from one portal. From Rabbi Sutton's seminal work, *Aleppo – City of Scholars*, to *Aromas of Aleppo*, Poopa Dweck's world famous cookbook and the *Sephardic Children's Hagadah* by Rabbi Ellis Safdeye, the site features a wide array of titles including *siddurim*, *mahzorim*, books on *mussar*, and of course, biographies about Sephardic luminaries. SephardicBookstore.com ensures that today's students will not experience Azoulay's frustration as a young man, when he could not find books relevant to his heritage.

From our past, our present emerges. If we are not aware of our history, we cannot develop and sustain tradition and cultural pride. "Throughout history Sephardic communities have always produced world-class Torah scholars and sagacious leaders," explains Jack Cohen, Executive Editor of *Community Magazine*. "But, for various reasons, the greatness of these brilliant luminaries remained something of a local secret. The surge in quantity and quality of published works, including Yehuda Azoulay's significant contributions, that recount the grandeur of the Sephardic communities of old, has brought about a renaissance of sorts in the Sephardic world."

Despite this "surge," Yehuda Azoulay believes there is more that all of us can do. "We have to focus on where we come from in every aspect of our daily living, not only the food we eat, but rather as a way of life, culture, and, ultimately, a love for Torah. We cannot forget any aspect of our blessed and enriched heritage, minor or major." And he passionately believes that we must bequeath to our children a comprehensive record of their roots. "Our current leaders – synagogue presidents, rabbis, educators, teachers and so on, have to be the guiding force for our children." In a society where every ethnic group has a "pride parade," we, too, must preserve this legacy for all the generations to come. And Azoulay's latest book – like the ones that preceded it – is a significant contribution toward this effort.

For more information about Sephardic Legacy Series – Institute for Preserving Sephardic Heritage, visit [www.sephardiclegacy.com](http://www.sephardiclegacy.com).

For dedication and sponsorship opportunities, contact [info@sephardiclegacy.com](mailto:info@sephardiclegacy.com).