

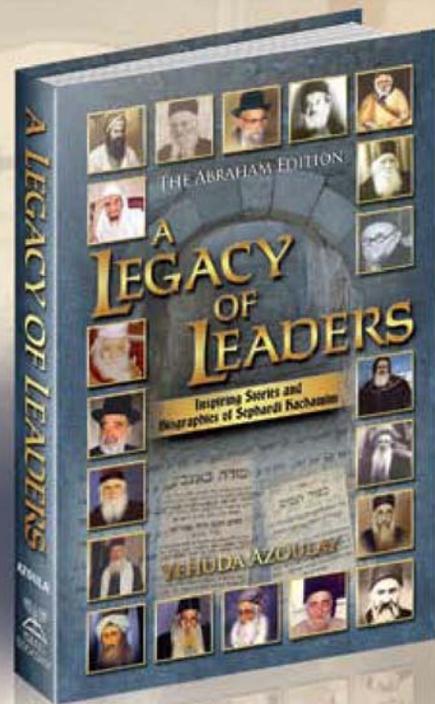
# COMMUNITY

Nisan 5768 April 2008

Volume VII No. 7

## Celebrating the Giants of Sephardic Jewry

*A compelling  
new book  
brings to life  
the rich legacy  
of our revered  
Hachamim*



**Ten Things You Never Knew  
About the Ten Plagues**

Rabbi Eli Mansour

**\$40 Million for Yeshivas?**

**Shwekey Inspires With the Power of Music**

**Why Your Rabbi Supports Kupat Ha'ir**

# Sephardic Pride

**Groundbreaking volume examines the lives of 25 legendary Sephardic Rabbis**

*“He usually slept on a wooden bench, rather than a proper bed... adhered to a daily quota of fifty-three pages of Zohar... ate only vegetarian foods during the week... and would impose a harsh fine on himself if he ever felt anger in his heart,” explains Yehuda Azoulay*

He was Rav Haim Yosef David Azoulay (1724-1806), better known as the great Sephardic luminary, the Hid"ra. But to Yehuda Azoulay, the great sage was also both a direct ancestor and the central subject of a lifelong fascination with Sephardic scholars of old.

Anyone who has been exposed to the rich tradition of Sephardic Torah scholarship has undoubtedly come across household names such as the Or Ha'haim (Rav Haim Ben-Atar, 1696-1743), Rav Haim Palagi (1688-1788), the Kaf Ha'haim (Rabbi Yaakov Haim Sofer, 1870-1939) and the Ben Ish Hai (Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909). Most of us have probably also heard of the more recent pillars of Sephardic halachah, such as Hacham Ben-Sion Abba Shaul of Jerusalem (1924-1998), Hacham Obadiah Hedaya (1890-1969) and Rav Shalom Messas (1913-2003). Kabbalistic masters such as the Baba Sali (Rav Yisrael Abuchatzera of Morocco, 1890-1984) and Rav Yitzchak Kaduri (1894-2006) have also left an indelible impact upon Sephardic tradition.

But how much do we really know about these hachamim, about their qualities and virtues that made them into such great leaders and scholars? How do we ensure that their piety, devotion and diligence will continue to guide and inspire future generations of Jews? With these questions in mind, Yehuda Azoulay turned his passion for the history of Sephardic hachamim into a groundbreaking volume.

## A New Book, an Ancient Tradition

This month, the Lakewood, N.J.-based Israel Book Shop Publications ([www.israelbookshoppublications.com](http://www.israelbookshoppublications.com)) will begin distributing this seminal work which presents thorough portraits of twenty-five of the most prominent Sephardic Rabbinic figures of the last two centuries. A Legacy of Leaders is a collection of comprehensive, biographical profiles arranged chronologically, from Rav Haim Ben Atar through Rav Ben-Sion Abba Shaul. Each entry begins with an overview of the Rabbi's life and achievements, and then presents a series of stories that offer a glimpse into his conduct and virtues, and the respect he received from the Jews he encountered – and, in many instances, the respect shown to him by gentiles as well. The book's blurb describes these portraits as “the birthright of Sephardim” and “a heritage of greatness in Torah and mitzvot.” The book is adorned with dozens of beautiful

photographs of the Rabbis, as well as of numerous colleagues and disciples.

Mr. Moshe Kaufman, president of Israel Book Shop Publications, remarked that one of the unique features of this work is the way it instantly appeals to a variety of audiences. The writing style is straightforward such that even young children can read, enjoy and gain inspiration from these accounts, yet the material is also intriguing for even the most educated and sophisticated adults. Mr. Kaufman also emphasized the instructive, didactic quality of this work. “Most of the stories chronicled in the book are not only of the moftim (‘wonders’) type, but are rather beautiful, inspirational accounts that can inspire a reader to want to emulate the Hacham. Beyond simply describing the greatness of these towering figures, it also provides concrete examples of their greatness in a manner with which even ordinary laymen can identify and from which they can learn.”



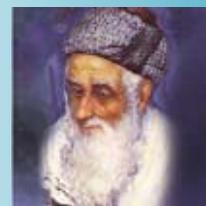
Hacham Obadiah Hedaya



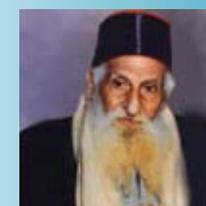
Hacham Yisrael Abuhassera - Baba Sali



Hacham Ephraim Meneshe Hakohen



Hacham Shalom Sharaby - Rashash



Hacham Yizhak Kadouri

Additionally, Mr. Kaufman hopes that this book will be of interest even to Ashkenazim, despite the fact that it focuses exclusively on Sephardic Rabbis. “The rich heritage portrayed in this work belongs to all of Kelal Yisrael. We very much hope that many in the Ashkenazic community will take advantage of this opportunity to learn about this heritage.”

The volume received enthusiastic letters of approbation from numerous prominent Rabbis, foremost among them Hacham Ovadia Yosef shelit”a. In his letter, the Hacham called the book “distinguished” and wished the author continued success, citing the timeless blessing from the Book of Psalms (1:3), “He will be like a tree set into the ground near streams of water, which yields its fruits in its season, and whose leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does he will succeed.”

The work also received a warm endorsement from Hacham Ovadia’s son, Rav Yitzchak Yosef shelit”a, Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivat Hazon Ovadia in Jerusalem. Rav Yitzchak stressed how this volume will instill within its readers, particularly the youth, a deep sense of pride in their rich Sephardic heritage which produced such great personages as those depicted in the book. The Rabbi cited in this context a verse from the Book of Divrei Hayamim II (17:6) that says about the pious King Yehoshafat, “His heart was elevated in the ways of Hashem,” referring to his pride and unwavering determination in upholding the traditions of his righteous predecessors.

A number of prominent Ashkenazic Rabbis also graced this volume with their *haskamot* (approbation letters). Rabbi Matisyahu Salomon of the Beth Midrash Govoha of Lakewood described the biographical study of great Rabbis as *shimush talmidei hachamim* – “serving” Torah scholars – which the Mishna (*Pirkei Avot* 6:5) lists among the means by which one acquires Torah knowledge. While learning the actual works of Torah scholars enables one to obtain knowledge, studying their conduct demonstrates firsthand how to live a life of religious devotion. Similarly, Rabbi Simcha Bunim Cohen of Lakewood, in his letter, cited the *Hatam Sofer* (Rabbi Moshe Schreiber of Pressburg, 1762-1839) as commenting that it is a *misvah* to study and disseminate the stories of righteous people.

**A Passion for Knowledge**

The author, Yehuda Azoulay, was born and raised in Toronto, in the renowned Sephardic community of Hacham Amram Assayag, and studied in a number

of prominent institutions including Ner Israel Toronto, Yeshivah Darchei Torah and Yeshivat Mikdash Melech. He is currently a part-time student in Lakewood’s Beth Midrash Govoha.

Yehuda Azoulay tells that already in his youth, he felt a passionate longing to learn about great Rabbis, particularly the Sephardic Hachamim who shaped the tradition in which he was raised. “I very much wanted to learn more about them, but there was precious little material available. I received a lot of encouragement from my Rabbis and teachers to pursue this information and learn as much as I could about our great Hachamim.”

Eventually, this passion for knowledge was translated into an intensive, systematic endeavor to compile information about the lives of great Sephardic Rabbis. This massive undertaking included trips to museums and university libraries, and countless hours of reading through books, *sefarim*, encyclopedias, newspapers and magazines. Yehuda Azoulay made a point of verifying the authenticity and precision of each and every account, which often entailed contacting some of the individuals involved. One of the stories recorded in the book was confirmed directly by Rav Mordechai Eliyahu, former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, in a personal conversation with the author. Upon completing the collection of material, Yehuda Azoulay brought the manuscript to many leading Rabbis spanning the spectrum of the Torah world to receive their input, advice and support.

Yehuda Azoulay felt that these tireless efforts were necessary in order to fill the void of information about the Hachamim. “The objective here is to inspire young and old, parents and children, educators and students, with our rich heritage of greatness in Torah and *misvot*.” The title of the work, *A Legacy of Leaders*, is, according to Yehuda Azoulay, not merely a description, but also an admonition urging the readers to follow the legacy of piety and scholarship so vividly portrayed in this volume. “We must all follow the legacy of our leaders. Although we are, unfortunately, very far from these hachamim’s level of *yirat Shamayim* [fear of Gd], we must nevertheless strive to follow their example to the best of our ability.”

**“Scholarship and Adventure Filled with Torah”**

Yehuda Azoulay’s ancestor, the *Hid”a*, was among the greatest and most influential Sephardic Rabbis since the Middle Ages, and is naturally one of the figures



Hacham Ezra Attia



Hacham Yaakob Abuhassera - Abir Yaakob



Hacham Haim Shaul Dweck Hakohen



Hacham Mordechai Sharaby



Hacham Yehuda Sadka



Hacham Yaakob Mutzafi

portrayed in *A Legacy of Leaders*. He was born and raised in Jerusalem, where he studied under Rav Haim Ben Atar, but in 1753 he was appointed as the emissary to travel abroad and raise funds for the struggling Jewish community in Jerusalem. Despite his frequent travels, the Hid"ra nevertheless managed to become one of the most prolific authors in Jewish history, composing over eighty-five works of Torah scholarship (only a portion of which have been preserved).

The younger Azoulay mentioned that while he is awed and enamored by all twenty-five Rabbis he researched, he found the life of the Hid"ra particularly inspiring. The sage's scrupulous piety and self-discipline, Yehuda Azoulay explained, combined with his extraordinary memory, make the Hid"ra an especially fascinating figure and somebody from whom we all have much to learn. As noted earlier, the Hid"ra shunned material excesses so that he could devote all his time, efforts and concentration to Torah learning. Additionally, as told in *A Legacy of Leaders*, the Hid"ra made a point of remaining silent even when jealous adversaries would accost him. Once, a certain ignoramus had the audacity to ridicule Sha'ar Yosef, one of the Hid"ra's more famous works, and not only did the Hid"ra not respond, but he even showed the man honor by escorting him as he left the city!

Yehuda Azoulay also marveled at the Hid"ra's remarkable literary output, which covered the entire range of Torah literature – Biblical and Talmudic commentary, practical halachah, homiletics and Kabbalah. The Hid"ra also composed *Shem Ha'gedolim*, a collection of brief biographical and bibliographical sketches, an invaluable resource that in fact served as one of the sources of information for his descendant's publication. Astonishingly, this book, which profiles 1,300 Rabbis and 2,200 Torah works, was written in just forty days – from memory!

Yehuda Azoulay describes his ancestor's life as "a fascinating mixture of scholarship and adventure filled with Torah," a living example of how one can achieve greatness even under harsh and difficult conditions, through diligence, devotion and a willingness to forgo physical comforts and luxuries.

**Lessons in Respect and Reverence**

Each story in this volume presents the reader with a unique message and reflects a particular aspect of religious greatness. When asked to point to one or two incidents which he finds especially significant and meaningful, Yehuda Azoulay referred to two episodes that underscore the importance of affording proper respect to great Rabbis and to their authority.

The first incident involved a wealthy man who approached Rav Haim Ben Atar to plead for help when the streams in his newly purchased fields suddenly ran dry. The Rabbi offered his visitor a drink, and noticed that he drank without reciting a berachah. Rav Haim explained to the man that if he would begin reciting berachot and encourage others to do the same, then he would enjoy success and prosperity from the streams in his field. Sure enough, the man began reciting berachot and the waters returned. The second story is of Rav Salman Mutzafi (1900-1975), who warned a young man in his community to treat his parents respectfully. The youngster ignored the warning and suffered a devastating punishment as a result.

Yehuda Azoulay noted that these incidents highlight the theme of Rabbinic authority and convey the message of adherence to the instructions of our Hachamim. The first story demonstrates how following the words of the Sages brings blessing and success, and the second serves as a chilling warning against disregarding their authority. In essence, this encapsulates the basic objective of this volume, to recognize and appreciate the greatness of our Rabbis. As Yehuda Azoulay remarked, "My primary goal is to impress upon people the importance of listening to the Hachamim and giving them the respect and reverence they deserve."

**Looking Ahead**

The overwhelming support and enthusiasm with which this project was received has encouraged Yehuda Azoulay to begin thinking about future projects. "With Hashem's help, I would like to continue spreading the greatness of our Hachamim so that subsequent generations can learn about our glorious heritage."

With Yehuda Azoulay's insatiable thirst for knowledge, youthful energy and devotion to disseminating information about the Hachamim, combined with the fervent support of Rabbis and laypeople alike, it does not seem at all unlikely that additional works of this genre are on their way. All that remains is for the English-speaking Sephardic community to show an interest in the history of their Hachamim and call for the expansion of this area of Torah literature. It is the author's hope that this book will indeed generate such an interest, and whet the public's appetite for more information about the great pillars of Sephardic tradition.

For more information about *A Legacy of Leaders*, please contact Israel Book Shop Publications at 1-732-901-3009, or visit their website at [www.israelbookshoppublications.com](http://www.israelbookshoppublications.com).



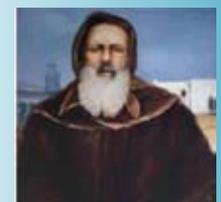
Hacham Haim Yosef David Azoulay - Hida



Hacham Shalom Messas



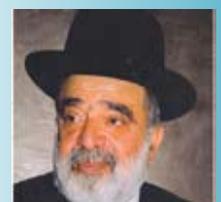
Hacham Yaakob Ades



Hacham Yaakob Ades



Hacham Yosef Haim - Ben Ish Hai



Hacham Ben Sion Abba Shaul