

From Italy to Jerusalem

Fifty Years Later

Marking the reburial of
Hacham Haim Yosef
David Azoulay, z.s.l.
(1724 - 1806)

The Hida

YEHUDA AZOULAY

HACHAM HAIM YOSEF DAVID AZOULAY, z.s.l., was born in Jerusalem on Friday night, 11 Sivan, 5484/1724. His father, Hacham Raphael Yizhak Zerachiah Azoulay, was an outstanding *talmid hacham* and son of the great Hacham Avraham Azoulay, author of *Hesed Avraham*. Hacham Haim Yosef David Azoulay is generally referred to by the Hebrew initials of his name – “Hida.”

The Hida was recognized as one of the world’s leading *hachamim* of his time, publishing over 85 Torah works.

The Hida’s rulings on matters of halacha and custom were deemed authoritative in most Sephardic communities, and they remain so until today. It has been said that “from Yosef to Yosef, there arose no one like Yosef”¹, comparing the Hida’s acceptance in the area of halacha to that of Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575), author of the *Shulhan Aruch*. Hacham Abdallah Somech (1813-1889), Chief Rabbi in Iraq, wrote (in the name of Hacham Moshe Haim²) that “the decisions of the Hida have been accepted like the decisions of *Maran* [our master, Rabbi Yosef Karo].”³

On Friday night Shabbat Zachor, 11 Adar, 1806/5566, amid the impassioned prayers of thousands, the Hida left this world at the age of 83 in Livorno, Italy.

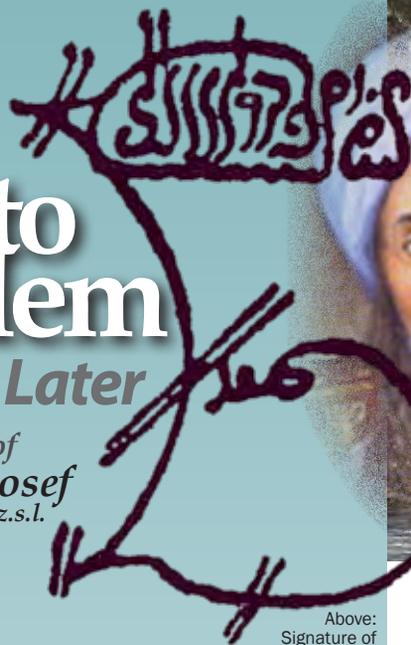
Eulogies were given throughout Italy, Eress Yisrael, Turkey, North Africa, Germany and Poland. Hacham Uziel Al Haich, the outstanding scholar of his time in Tunis who had become acquainted with the Hida during his visit there, issued a ruling that every Torah scholar is considered a *talmid muvhak* (primary disciple) of the Hida, and as such was obligated to rend his garments as a sign of mourning.

The remains of the great sage were interred in the Jewish cemetery on Via Del Carala in Livorno, Italy. When the cemetery was expropriated by the Fascists in 1941, the Hida’s remains and tombstone, as well as those of other earlier Livorno scholars, were moved to a special section in the new cemetery.

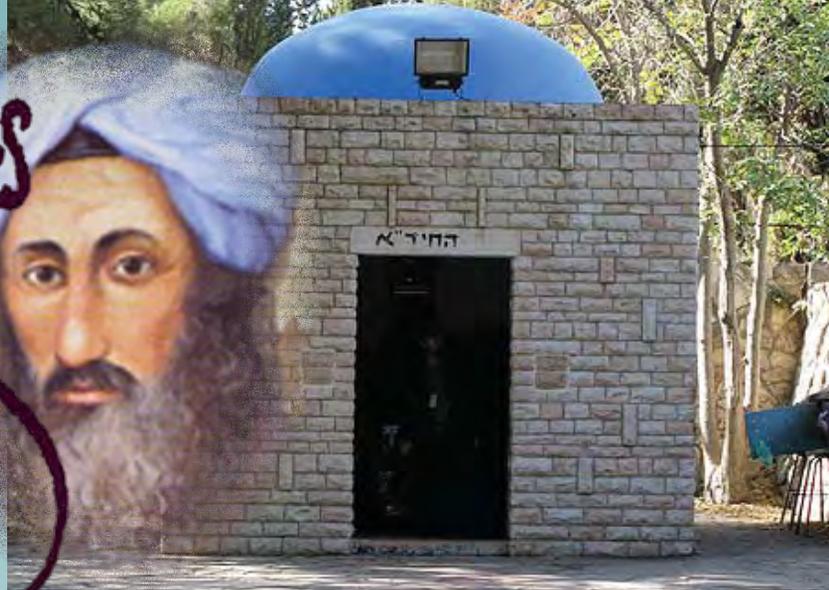
1 Ammer, Minhage HaHida , p. 48.

2 Hacham Moshe Haim was the grandfather of the Ben Ish Hai (Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909).

3 Zivhe Tzedek, ch. 110, no. 158.



Above:
Signature of
the Hida



From Livorno to the Holy Land

In 1956, on the 150th anniversary of the Hida’s passing, Israel’s Sephardic Chief Rabbi Hacham Yizhak Nissim, who had devoted much of his scholarly research and output throughout his life to learning from the Hida, lobbied for the transfer of the sage’s remains to Jerusalem. Hacham Yizhak’s friend, Dr. Shlomo Nahon, had earlier initiated the project to bring precious items from desolate synagogues in Italy to Israel. He brought to Israel priceless Judaica and manuscripts, as well as approximately forty arks, which were distributed among synagogues throughout the country, including the Ponevezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak, Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh in Kibbutz Yavneh, and the synagogue in the Knesset building. In honor of the momentous achievement, he composed a special set of songs called “Hanukat HaAron,” an elegant literary collection which can be found in the Hechal Shlomo synagogue in Jerusalem.

At the behest of Hacham Yizhak, Dr. Nahon brought the matter of the Hida’s reburial before the Livorno Communal Council, which unanimously accepted the proposal.¹ The society secured a special plot, 600 square meters in extent on Har Hamenuhot, for the reburial of the Hida on 20 Iyar 5720, and the construction of an *ohel* over the grave.



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An honorary committee called Agudat Ne'emane Yad HaHida society was founded in Jerusalem in the year 1959/5719. The group obtained permission from the Livorno Jewish community to bring the Hida's remains to Israel and also arranged the entire funeral ceremony including taking care of all the expenses, in order to restore the Hida's glory to its rightful place among the Jewish people. Founders included Mr. Yizhak Ben-Zvi, President of the State of Israel; Hacham Yizhak Nissim; Dr. Umberto Shlomo Nahon, Chairman of the Italian Jews Society for Spiritual Activity; Mr. Shmuel Toledano, architect; Professor Meir Benayahu, Director of the Ben Zvi Institute; and Dr. S. Z. Cahana, Member of Agudath Israel.

The building of the *ohel* over the Hida's grave was completed well before the designated day, on 11 Adar II, and arrangements were made to enable mass pilgrimages.

To mark the event, the Israeli Ministry of Education and Culture

instructed all schools to devote an hour to the life and work of Hacham Haim Yosef David Azoulay. The Society printed a special booklet for this purpose, which the Education Ministry distributed to the schools.

The Chief Rabbinate instructed all rabbis and synagogues to commemorate the Hida in the course of the services on Shabbat, 17 Iyar. Newspapers published on the preceding Friday printed articles about the great sage. Memorial meetings were held in conjunction with the Information Authority of the Government of Israel.

The central memorial service, *Ma'amad HaHida*, was held at 8:30 pm, 19 Iyar, 5720 – the evening preceding the burial ceremony – in Jerusalem's Yeshurun Synagogue. Speakers included Mr. Y. Ben-Zvi, Hacham Yizhak Nissim, and Mr. Z. Shazar, Chairman of the Executive Jewish Agency. Part of the ceremony was broadcast by Kol Israel radio.

The Hida's Final Resting Place

Early on the morning of Tuesday, 20 Iyar, the *aron* (coffin) containing the remains of the Hida was removed from its grave in Livorno. Among those present were members of the Livorno Communal Council and the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Dr. Elihu Toaff. The *aron* was sent to Rome some 180 miles away, from where it departed on the three hour flight to Israel, accompanied by Dr. Toaff.

Hacham Mordechai Eliyahu, an expert on the writings of the Hida and

a respected scholar who would later become the Rishon Lesson, was appointed by Hacham Yizhak Nissim to oversee the reburial of the remains to ensure they received the proper respect they deserved.²

On the morning that the flight was due to arrive, Hacham Mordechai immersed himself in a *mikveh* in Jerusalem and then traveled by bus to the airport. Waiting at the airport with him were Hacham Yizhak Abuchassera, (Baba Haki)³ and Hacham David Laniado as well as a special delegation of public leaders, including a representative of the Italian Ambassador in Israel.

2 R' Shmuel Zafrani, *Doresh Tov Le'Amo*, p. 145.

3 Hacham Yizhak Abuchassera (Baba Chaki, 1895-1970) was the brother Hacham Yisrael Abuchassera's (Baba Sali), and was the Chief Rabbi of Ramle at the time. He was one of the individuals who laid down the casket of the Hida to its resting place (Min Ha'Har El Ha'am, pg. 279).

When the plane landed, everyone went up into the cargo compartment, which contained a wooden casket. Hacham Mordechai turned to the people accompanying the *aron* and asked that it not be lowered from the plane until he checked its contents. Dr. Nahon wondered why the rabbi wished to look inside, and Hacham Mordechai explained, "I am the emissary of Hacham Yizhak Nissim. I must complete my task. There are *halachot* concerning the casket and I must ascertain that all is in order."

Inside the large wooden box there was another, smaller box made from copper, measuring approximately 20-24 inches. Hacham Mordechai saw the copper box and was puzzled.

"Where is the Hida?" he asked.

Those that accompanied the casket replied, "Right here in this box."

Hacham Mordechai was aghast. "The Hida is in this small casket?"

"Yes," came the reply. "We gathered the bones and put them in here."

Hacham Mordechai had assumed that there would be a complete skeleton and asked that they excuse him for a short while. Quietly, he asked Hacham Yizhak Abuchassera if he could use the services of his driver to take him to a *mikveh*. He instructed those present not to do anything until his return.

After immersing in the *mikveh* again, Hacham Mordechai went to a hardware store and bought screwdrivers in all the sizes they carried. He had noticed that the box was fastened together with screws, but he didn't know their exact size. He returned to the airport and told the

people waiting to follow him and watch as he opened the copper box. Everyone was tense and waited in suspense, aware of the holiness contained in the casket. These were, after all, the bones of the holy Hida. They carefully followed the movements of Hacham Mordechai in complete silence as he located the appropriate screwdriver. As he began loosening the first screw on top, a loud noise came forth from inside the box. Everyone was terrified, and some even fainted from fright.

Hacham Mordechai Eliyahu stood up and said in a trembling voice, "The Hida! The Hida! You

wrote in one of your *sefarim* (he named the *sefer*) such-and-such, and I did exactly as you wrote. I respectfully ask of you to please put an end to the noise." The casket became silent, and the rabbi continued opening the box. Again there was a frightful noise, and again the rabbi said "Harav Hida, I followed exactly what you wrote in your *sefer*."

When the box was open, Hacham Mordechai held his breath and requested of the Hida that the bones rearrange themselves. Suddenly, he felt his hands moving by themselves all over the box. As if of their own accord, they placed one bone beside another until a complete skeleton was formed.

Satisfied that everything was in order, Hacham Mordechai gave the go ahead to proceed. A large convoy escorted the *aron* to Jerusalem where it was placed in state in the inner court of the Yeshurun Synagogue.

Rav Pinchas Epstein, *Av Bet Din* of the Eida Haharedit at the

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time, heard about the imminent arrival of the Hida's remains in Jerusalem. He wanted to call a halt to all work in the city in order for everyone to pay their respects to the Hida. He first verified with Hacham Mordechai that the bones were intact, and then made the announcement.

The Speaker of the Knesset ordered the Parliament's afternoon session to be delayed for one hour to permit members to pay their last respects to the Hida, and when the session finally opened, it began with a commemoration of great Rabbi's life and work.

Standing in the doorway of the Yeshurun Synagogue, the President declared that the Jewish people were paying a debt of honor to the Hida in re-interring his remains in the soil of his homeland. A crowd estimated at tens of thousands, which included people from all parts of the country, accompanied the bier to the Kehillat Jerusalem section of Har Hamenuchot.⁴ Among those present were the President of the State, the Chief Rabbi, the Speaker of the Knesset, government officials, members of the Knesset, judges, *dayanim*, rabbis, journalists and many members of the public.

The cortege left at 4pm from the Yeshurun Synagogue and took a circuitous route through Jerusalem, to enable large numbers of Jews to participate in the missva. It made its way past Yeshivat Ess Haim in *Machane Yehuda* and eventually arrived at Har Hamenuchot in Givat Shaul.

A recent photo of the inscriptions on the epitaph of Hacham Haim Yosef David Azoulay, the Hida, at his rededicated gravesite atop Har Hamenuhot in Israel.



Now, 50 years later, one of the surviving *hevra kadisha* members who attended the Hida's funeral commented that he "never saw such a respectful and dignifying funeral for a *sadik* in his lifetime."

The Hida now rests in his birthplace, in the holy city of Jerusalem, where he will remain until the days of Mashiach.

Yehuda Azoulay, a descendant of the Hida, 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 www.SephardicLegacy.com

⁴ The graves in Har HaMenuchot are divided into sections operated by various *hevra kadisha* (the Perushim, the Chassidim, the Sephardim, and Kehillat Jerusalem). The Kehillat Jerusalem section, where the Hida is buried, is the first structure visible upon entering the old cemetery.