

The History Of Chief-Rabbis Sephardic

Leaders have always been an essential part of history. Every successful country, state, city, community, institution, and group has had either political or spiritual leaders who have guided them to help forge their collective identity and pursue their collective goals. This has been especially true among the Jewish people. Since our nation's founding with Avraham Avinu, and until this very day, we have been blessed with capable spiritual leaders who have guided us throughout our tumultuous history.

Sephardic religious leadership – particularly the positions of Chief Rabbi, Rishon LeSion, and Hacham Bashi – has a long and illustrious history. The title of Rishon LeSion – literally, “The First of Zion” (see Yeshayahu 41:27) – dates all the way back to 1665/5425, when it was assumed by Rabbi Moshe Galante z.s.l. Ever since then, this title was worn by the official rabbinic leader of the Jews of Eress Yisrael. Nowadays, the title of Rishon LeSion is worn by the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel.

The term Hacham Bashi is the Turkish translation of Chief Rabbi, and this was the title of the official rabbinic leader of Turkish Jewry. In 1842, while Hacham Yona Moshe Navon z.s.l. served as Rishon LeSion in Israel, the Turkish authorities renamed the position to Hacham Bashi. This arrangement continued even after the region came under the rule of British Mandate in 1917, until the establishment of the Chief Rabbinate of Eress Yisrael in 1921. The Rabbinate system added an Ashkenazic leader to the Rishon LeSion, such that there was both an Ashkenazic and a Sephardic Chief Rabbi, an arrangement which continues to this day.

The rabbis who held these leadership positions served as the official ambassadors of the Sephardic community to the ruling powers. They also led the civic establishment that was responsible for providing all the community's needs, including assistance to the poor, burial, and operating a bet din (rabbinic court) that handled marriages, divorces and financial disputes.

Despite the different names assigned to this position, the rabbis all filled the same role – to serve the community, advocate on their behalf, and, most importantly, represent the Name of Hashem and His people amongst the nations. The face of the Sephardic Jewry changed numerous times as a result of the difficult challenges and political transformations that took place in Eress Yisrael during this period. Yet, throughout all the upheavals, the rabbinic leadership's role remained constant – to serve, help and represent the people, and to shape the future of Sephardic Jewry.

We present here brief biographical portraits of the great Chief Rabbis who have led the Sephardic community of Eress Yisrael in the last 100 years.

HACHAM YAAKOV MEIR Z.S.L.

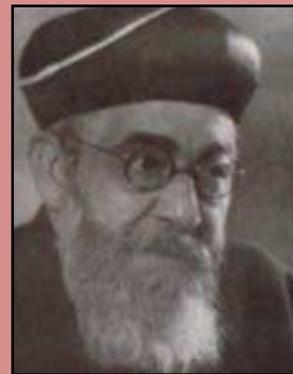
(1856/5616- 1939/5699)

Born in Jerusalem to a fine family of Iraqi descent, Hacham Yaakov was the first Sephardic Chief Rabbi chosen under the British Mandate of Palestine. A great scholar with a passion for Jewish tradition, he was at the forefront of the effort to revive Hebrew as a spoken language. Hacham Yaakov was appointed Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem in 1911, and when the office of Chief Rabbi of Palestine was established in 1921, he was elected to fill the post with the title of Rishon LeSion, a position he held until his passing in 1939/5699. Hacham Yaakov was awarded the French Legion of Honor and received decorations from British, Turkish and Greek governments, as well as from other countries.



HACHAM BEN-SION MEIR HAI UZIEL Z.S.L.

(1880/5640 -1953/5713)



The Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the British Mandate of Palestine from 1939 to 1948, and of the State of Israel from 1948 to 1954, Hacham Ben-Sion was born in Jerusalem and began teaching Torah already at the young age of 20. He also founded Yeshivat Mahazike Torah for young Sephardic students. In 1911, he was appointed Hacham Bashi of the Jaffa region, and worked vigorously to improve the condition of the Sephardic communities in Israel.

In 1921, Hacham Ben-Sion was invited to become Chief Rabbi of Salonika, and the Tel Aviv-Jaffa community granted him a three-year leave of absence to fill this role. He returned to Eress Yisrael in 1923 and was named Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, the position he served until his appointment as Chief Rabbi of Palestine in 1939. Hacham Ben-Sion also founded Yeshivat Shaar Zion in Jerusalem. He passed away in 1953/5713.



HACHAM YIZHAK NISSIM Z.S.L.

(1896/5656 - 1981/5741),

While still a young man in Baghdad, Hacham Yizhak was renowned as one of the greatest scholars and sages, whose opinion was considered decisive in both spiritual and rabbinical matters. In 1925 he fulfilled his dream, together with his wife Victoria, and moved to Jerusalem. His home in the holy city became known as a meeting place for hachamim.

Over the years, he earned a widespread reputation for his vast Torah knowledge and leadership skills, resulting in his election as Rishon LeSion and Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel in 1955. Hacham Yizhak envisioned the Chief Rabbinate as the singular rabbinic authority that would serve all the Jewish people, in Israel and the Diaspora. He visited Jewish communities around the world and strived in good faith to find solutions for their problems and needs.

Hacham Yizhak Nissim passed away in 1981/5741.

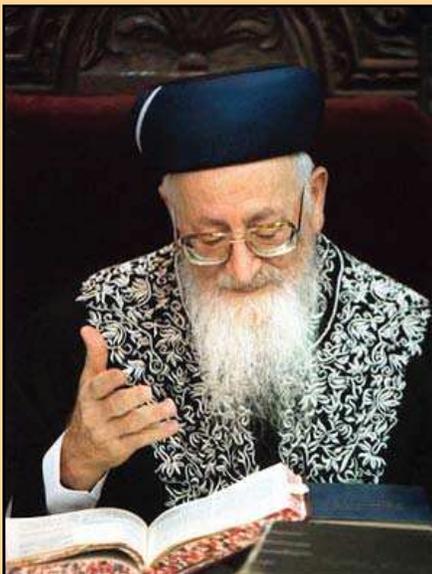
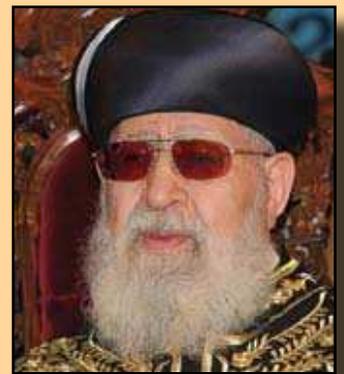
שיבדלו לחיים טובים וארוכים

HACHAM OVADIA YOSEF SHELITA

Born in 1920 in Basra, Iraq, Hacham Ovadia moved to Jerusalem with his family at the age of four. He studied in the famed Yeshivat Porat Yosef under Hacham Ezra Attiah, z.s.l., and received semicha (rabbinical ordination) at the age of 20. In 1942, Hacham Aharon Choueka, founder of Yeshivat Ahava V'ahva in Cairo, Egypt invited Hacham Ovadia to serve as a rabbi and spiritual leader of the yeshiva, which served as the synagogue, school and community center. Hacham Ovadia accepted the invitation and spent three years in Egypt, after which he returned to Eress Yisrael and served as a rabbinical judge in Petah Tikva and, later, in

Jerusalem. He eventually became the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv in 1968, a position he held until his election as Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel in 1973.

Hacham Ovadia is widely recognized throughout the Sephardic world as the leading posek (halachic authority) for Sephardic Jewry. He is also the spiritual leader of the Shas political party in the Knesset (Israel's parliament). Hacham Ovadia has written dozens of volumes of halachic works, which are studied and referenced by students and scholars across the globe, and appear in the bookcases of nearly every Sephardic home.



HACHAM MORDECHAI ELIYAHU SHELITA

Born in Jerusalem in 1928, Hacham Mordechai was privileged to learn under his father, the great Hacham Salman Eliyahu, z.s.l., a renowned Kabbalist of Iraqi descent. Hacham Salman passed on when Rabbi Mordechai was only eleven years old, and Hacham Mordechai continued his studies under other hachamim, including Hacham Ezra Attiah; Hacham Sedaka Hussen, z.s.l.; Harav Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, z.s.l. (Hazon Ish); and Hacham Yisrael Abuhassera, z.s.l. (Baba Sali).

Rabbi Mordechai served as the Chief Rabbi of Beersheva for nearly four years, and was then elected leader of the Jerusalem Bet Din, a position he continued to hold during his term as Chief Rabbi of Israel and through the present. He was elected Rishon LeSion in 1983 and served until 1993. After being hospitalized due to a serious illness, Hacham Mordechai has, Baruch Hashem, recently returned to his office for the first time in nine months.



HACHAM ELIYAHU BAKSHI-DORON SHELITA

Born in 1941 in Jerusalem, Hacham Eliyahu studied in the famed Hevron Yeshiva and distinguished himself as an outstanding scholar. Hacham Eliyahu continued learning in the kollel of Mossad Harav Kook and Yeshivat Kol Yaakov, developing a unique style of learning characterized by a combination of meticulous precision and vast breadth of knowledge.

He was appointed Chief Rabbi of Bat Yam in 1972, and in 1975 assumed the position of Chief Rabbi of Haifa, serving for nearly 18 years. In 1993, Hacham Eliyahu was appointed Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel. Today, Hacham Eliyahu Bakshi Doron continues to be counted among the great Torah figures of contemporary Sephardic Jewry.



HACHAM SHELOMO MOSHE AMAR SHELITA

Born in Morocco in 1948, Hacham Shelomo immigrated to Israel in 1962. Before his appointment as Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi in 2003, Hacham Shelomo had served as the head of the Petah Tikva Bet Din.

In 2002 Hacham Shelomo, who was already a close confidant of Hacham Ovadia Yosef, was asked to ascertain the Jewish status of the Falash Mura. The close knit Ethiopian community was claiming Jewish ancestry, though the group had already been successfully targeted by Christian missionaries. After visiting the Ethiopia, Hacham Eliyahu recommended that members of group who wish to be Jewish undergo a conventional conversion. But in 2003, as Chief Rabbi, Hacham Eliyahu qualified this ruling, saying that anyone related to a member of Beta Israel community (Jews of Ethiopia who remained faithful to their religion), through matrimonial descent qualified as Jewish and should be brought to Israel by the government. In January 2004, following the recommendations of

the Knesset and the Chief Rabbis, Ariel Sharon announced a plan to bring all of the Falash Mura to Israel by the end of 2007.

In May 2005 Hacham Shelomo publicly accepted the claims of the Indian Beneh Menashe as one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. He sent a Sephardic Bet Din to India in September of 2005 to begin the official conversion process.

Hacham Shelomo has also accomplished numerous projects aimed at preserving Sephardic tradition and strengthening the ties between all Jews in Israel. He is currently serving his first term as Sephardic Chief Rabbi and Rishon LeSion.



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