

COMMUNITY

Volume VIII No. 4
Tevet 5769 January 2009

EL RABINO HACHAM SION LEVY ^{ZTL} 1922 - 2008

*How the Chief Rabbi of Panama
transformed a fledgling outpost
of Syrian-Sephardic families into one of the most
distinguished communities in the world.*

**Winter Vacation –
The Ultimate Opportunity**
Rabbi Eli Mansour

The Battle Over Peace House
Dave Gordon

**Community Families Going Hungry –
Sephardic Food Fund Responds**

**SPECIAL PARTY
& BRIDAL SECTION**

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THIS PUBLICATION CONTAINS MESSAGES OF TORAH AND HALACHOT. PLEASE HANDLE IT APPROPRIATELY.

HACHAM SION LEVY Z.T.L.

5682/1922 (JERUSALEM) – 25 HESHVAN 5769/NOVEMBER 23, 2008 (JERUSALEM)

CHIEF RABBI OF PANAMA

YEHUDA AZOULAY

The Sephardic community of Panama traces its roots back to the opening of the Panama Canal in the early 20th century. A 1911 census listed Panama's entire Jewish community at just 505, but two decades later, in 1933, hundreds of Sephardic Jews from Israel and Syria established a second community and the Orthodox synagogue, Shevet Ahim. This community, which would be led for over fifty years by Hacham Sion Levy, is now the largest congregation in Panama.

When Hacham Sion first arrived in Panama at the age of 29, he seriously wondered what his teachers in Jerusalem were thinking when they sent him. He encountered a community numbering under 200 families, only a small handful of which observed kashrut and Shabbat. Now, 57 years later, Panama's Sephardic community is a thriving stronghold of Orthodox Jewish observance, and likely the strongest Jewish community in the region – an accomplishment for which its leading members unanimously give credit to Hacham Sion.



THE EARLY YEARS OF A LEGEND

While still a young man, Hacham Sion had to bear the difficult burden of supporting his widowed mother and family. So when a position opened teaching high school math, he applied for the job, despite never having taken any math courses.

The dean of the high school took the young rabbi to a classroom, where he saw students struggling to answer a complex problem written across the blackboard. Without hesitation, Rabbi Levy walked up to the board and quickly solved the problem. He was hired on the spot.

Later, his family suggested that he open a store, which his mother and sister would run to allow him to resume full-time Torah learning. Hacham Sion liked the idea, but did not have the capital he needed. A friend recommended that he meet with a certain wealthy, pious Jew who might be willing to help. Hacham Sion met with the man to discuss his loan request, and the man responded by asking if the young rabbi would learn Torah with him. After they spent some time studying, the wealthy man instructed his assistant to give Hacham Sion 70 Lira – the full amount he needed to open the new business. He told the rabbi that instead of repaying the loan, he should instead learn with the man one hour every Shabbat. The store was a success, and Hacham Sion was able to devote all his time to learning, except for the several hours each week he needed to manage the business.

Soon thereafter, he applied for the position of head kashrut supervisor in Jerusalem. Candidates for the job had to have expertise in *shehita* (slaughtering), *nikkur* (removing forbidden animal fats), and the entire *Yoreh De'a* and *Even Ha'ezer* sections of the *Shulhan Aruch*. After several months of searching, it became clear that Hacham Sion was the only qualified candidate, and he was thus named to this prestigious position. He immediately got to work improving the kashrut standards in Israel, closing down the shops that were found selling non-kosher meat to the unsuspecting public.

During Israel's War of Independence in 1948, Hacham Sion joined a military battalion and was involved in the liberation of the land upon which Hadassah Ein Karem hospital was later established. Appropriately enough, just a few years ago, a new Trauma Center was donated at Hadassah Ein Karem in memory of

his oldest son Yaakov, and in honor of his wife, Sara.

In 1951, Isidore Azrak, a representative of the Shevet Ahim congregation of Panama, came to Israel in search of a young, talented rabbi to lead their community. The Panamanian Jewish community had no rabbi, *mohel* or *shohet*, and faced a grave religious crisis. Mr. Azrak met with Hacham Ben Sion Uziel and Hacham Ezra Attiah, two of Israel's leading Sephardic rabbis, and they right away recommended Hacham Sion. Realizing that he was unquestionably the most qualified candidate for the job, and upon hearing the gravity of the situation in Panama, the rabbis of Jerusalem did not even offer Hacham Sion a choice – they issued a halachic ruling requiring him to assume this difficult position.

The Four Cardinal Rules of the Rabbinate

When the rabbi and his wife moved to Panama in 1951, they very quickly realized that the situation was even worse than they had thought. No kosher food was available locally; a small shipment of kosher meat arrived each week for the small handful of observant families in the community. There wasn't even a *mikveh*.

In his memoirs, Hacham Sion recalled the feeling of dejection as he wondered how he could build a Jewish community from oblivion. He then picked up a pen and paper and wrote down four cardinal rules that he would follow in tackling this overwhelming task:

1. He would not get involved in people's private lives.
2. He would consider even the slightest improvement in any *mitzvah*, or avoiding even a single sin, a significant accomplishment.
3. He would not accept any money from any member of the community; all services from birth until death would be rendered free of charge.
4. He would build an organized and vibrant community, and raise money to build a new shul.

Hacham Sion adhered to these principles for the rest of his life. On his fiftieth anniversary as Chief Rabbi of Panama, Hacham Sion announced, "Nobody here can testify that I ever took any money from them. In the few instances where people forced money on me, I had a receipt sent to them from the *tzedaka* organization I gave it to."

THE PRODIGY

Hacham Sion was born in Jerusalem in 5682/1922 to Hacham Yaakov and Esther Levy. Hacham Yaakov was a prominent dayan (rabbinical judge) and distinguished community leader in Morocco, until he migrated to Eress Yisrael to study in Jerusalem's illustrious Yeshivat Bet El. His wife delivered a baby boy the day the family arrived in Jerusalem, and they named him 'Sion' – one of the biblical names of the holy city.

Young Sion joined Yeshivat Porat Yosef where he would soon be recognized as one of the yeshiva's most outstanding students. Displaying capabilities well beyond his years, he skipped from 5th to 9th grade. He continued to progress

and ultimately established a particularly close relationship with the Rosh Yeshiva, Hacham Ezra Attiah z.t.l. (5647/1887 – 5730/1970).

Hacham Sion was also privileged to study under some of the foremost experts in various fields of halacha (Jewish law). At just 22 years of age, he received semicha (rabbinic ordination) from Rabbi Mordechai Meyuches for shehita (slaughtering) and nikur (removing forbidden fats from a slaughtered animal). Two years later, he received his general rabbinical ordination from four towering luminaries: Hacham Ben-Sion Meir Hai Uziel, Hacham Ezra Attiah, Hacham Yaakov Ades and Hacham Yosef Yedid Halevi. Shortly thereafter he was ordained as an authority on the laws of marriage and divorce.

Hacham Sion also learned *berit mila* under Hacham Yaakov Sasson, a leading expert in the field.

His mastery of these different fields of halachah would serve him well upon becoming the rabbi of Panama's Sephardic community, where he functioned as not only the community's rabbi, but also its mohel and shoheit.



COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP

Hacham Sion understood that his mission's success depended upon his rabbinic autonomy; taking orders from laymen would undermine his authority and thus sabotage his efforts to strengthen religious observance.

He asserted this autonomy soon upon his arrival in Panama, when the community leaders handed him a contract detailing precisely what he could or could not do in his role as rabbi. He immediately ripped the paper in half.

"I came here against my will," he explained, "to obey the instruction of the sages in Israel. Anytime you'd like to fire me, I will go. Do you think I came here to sign contracts, or to sanctify the Name of Gd?"

The community leaders stood up and applauded the rabbi's courageous and uncompromising leadership. Hacham Sion then proceeded to establish his own terms and conditions:

- Anyone who intermarried would not be accepted in the community.
- Conversions would not be permitted.
- The rabbi would exert exclusive, uncontested authority over the shul and its policies.

He also demanded that a *mikveh* be built, threatening that he would otherwise return to Israel. Within a week, a crude but satisfactory *mikveh* was built in a small room in the back of the synagogue. Later, Hacham Sion announced that he would perform weddings only if the bride first immersed in a *mikveh*. Within just a few years, a proper, respectable *mikveh* was constructed.

As the community's only *mohel*, Hacham Sion confronted the problem of the "Sunday morning *berit*." He discovered that all *beritot* in Panama were held on Sunday morning, so that people could attend without missing work. Of course, this practice ran in direct opposition to the strict obligation to circumcise an infant on his eighth day. Hacham Sion unhesitatingly announced that he would only perform *beritot* at the proper time – on the eighth day, in accordance with *halacha*.

PRESERVING THE SHABBAT

Hacham Sion's first week in Panama was disheartening. On Shabbat morning, the *hazan* pulled up to the synagogue in his car, entered the building, turned on the lights, and then picked up the phone to call some more men to complete the *minyan*.

"We are not praying in this building today," the rabbi promptly announced. He insisted on praying only in a place where Shabbat is observed. Albert Dabah *a"h* offered his home, and they prayed there that Shabbat.

Shabbat prayer services had to be held early, because most of the congregants would go to work after the *tefilah*. And, most of them drove to and from the synagogue. When Hacham Sion first saw people coming to the synagogue in their cars, he broke down crying. It tormented him to witness Shabbat desecration, yet he recognized that the people were not yet ready to hear that they could not to drive to synagogue. He knew that if there was no Shabbat *minyan* – there would be no community. He decided to come into the synagogue early and stay until everyone left, so that he would not have to see public desecration of Shabbat. Over time, Hacham Sion's patience proved worthwhile as Shabbat observance improved dramatically.



ONE STEP AT A TIME

The Rabbi understood that the mission he undertook would entail a long, gradual process. He therefore held the community by the hand and worked with them slowly, one *mitzvah* at a time.

He had a congregational *succah* built, and women volunteered to cook food for communal meals. Gradually, people grew accustomed to eating their Succot meals in a *succah*. He also took personal responsibility for the community's kashrut, and, with time, more and more kosher products became available. He also personally slaughtered animals early each morning.

Thanks to his efforts, many families gradually began observing the Torah's dietary laws. At the same time, Hacham Sion realized the central importance of Jewish schooling in the development of a religious community. He played a seminal role in establishing the first Jewish school in Panama. But the school attracted very few students. Parents preferred the non-Jewish academies, which offered a higher quality secular education. Once again, the rabbi focused his attention on the long term, and worked to attract one student at a time. Gradually, it gained popularity and succeeded in raising a new generation of Gd-fearing Jewish children.



Hacham Sion placed great emphasis on the importance of *sedaka*. So central was the value of *sedaka* to his religious outlook that he once told the community he was prepared to serve as rabbi of a non-observant community, but not of a community that does not give charity. The Panamanian Jewish community took his message to heart, and has become renowned for its extraordinarily generous support of Torah institutions, especially in Israel. When a rabbi would visit Panama to fundraise, Hacham Sion would offer to raise the money for him. He would then approach the congregants, who would write the checks without flinching.

Among the rabbi's greatest achievements in Panama, was reducing the intermarriage rate among the formerly assimilation-ridden population to zero. He accomplished this by taking an uncompromising stance: excluding intermarried Jews from the community and adamantly opposing any Jew's wedding with a non-Jew. On one occasion, he literally locked a Jewish man in a room in the synagogue on the day he was to marry a non-Jewish girl, in order to prevent the wedding from taking place. The groom, whose fiancée promptly broke off the engagement, later thanked the rabbi for, in his words, "saving my life."

A MODEL OF GREATNESS

Besides his exceptional leadership skills, Hacham Sion displayed personal piety that inspired those around him. Often, the living example of spiritual greatness that he presented had a greater impact than his words of guidance.

Rabbi and Mrs. Levy exemplified the value of unshakable faith and perseverance. They were childless for nine years, and, years later, their oldest son died of cancer at the age of sixteen. With remarkable strength and fortitude, the rabbi and his wife overcame the pain and remained steadfast in their faith and devotion to Hashem and their beloved community. They endured even life's most difficult and painful challenges with inspirational optimism and joy, which had a profound impact on the entire community.

His Torah scholarship was also widely recognized and revered. Once, the Klausenberger Rebbe visited Panama to fundraise, and he brought his personal *shohet* along with him. Hacham Sion asked the *shohet* to test him in the laws of *shehita*, and the *shohet* was amazed by the breadth of his knowledge. In fact, Hacham Sion posed some questions of his own which the *shohet* was unable to answer.

The community members were awe-struck by the rabbi's sincere piety, and realized they were graced with the presence of a giant. Many attributed their financial success to the blessings they had received from the rabbi, understanding the inestimable value of the blessing of such a saintly *sadik*.

THE WONDER CLASS

Hacham Sion belonged to an elite group of *illuim* (geniuses) in Porat Yosef, a group that included prodigies such as Hacham Baruch Ben-Haim z.t.l., Hacham Ben-Sion Abba Shaul z.t.l. and sheyibadel l'haim Hacham Ovadia Yosef shlita and Hacham Yehuda Moalem shlita. Hacham Sion maintained a close friendship with these Torah giants for the rest of the life. Hacham Ovadia Yosef and Hacham Ben Sion Abba Shaul even traveled to Panama to see the community that Hacham Sion built. Hacham Sion also frequently corresponded with Hacham Baruch Ben Haim, and paid Hacham Baruch several visits in the hospital before his passing.

At the age of 25, Hacham Sion married

YESHIVAT PORAT YOSEF'S WONDER CLASS OF 1939



Top Row (from left): Hacham Aharon Aboud (Rabbi of Haifa), Hacham Moshe Yosef Ades, Hacham Sion Levy (Chief Rabbi of Panama), Hacham Ben-Sion Abba Shaul
Middle Row (from left): Hacham David Shalush (Rabbi of Netanya), Hacham Yosef Harari-Raful (Religious Ministry), Hacham Ezra Ades (Herzliyah), Hacham Avraham Shrem, Hacham Raphael Ades (secretary of Rabbinical High Court), Hacham Yosef Elnadav (killed in 1948)
Bottom row (from left): Hacham Ezra Shayo, Hacham Saadiah Lofez, Hacham Baruch Ben-Haim, Hacham Ovadiah Yosef (Rishon LeSion), Hacham Shabbetai Atoon (Rosh Yeshiva of Reshit Hochmah), Hacham Pinhas Vaknin of Jerusalem, Hacham David Levy (Tel Aviv)

RESPECT AND KINDNESS FOR ALL

Intent as he was on raising the community's religious standards, Hacham Zion would never disparage somebody due to his lackadaisical Torah observance. Nor would he apply pressure. He would often comment that every Jew has a spark inside, and the Jew must ignite it himself, with just some encouragement from the rabbi. Many congregants recall how the rabbi knew just what to say, and when, in guiding them toward observance, which made his efforts spectacularly successful.

The rabbi accepted invitations to all community members' homes, even those which did not observe kashrut. Graciously, the Rabbi would eat only fruit. But when he and his wife returned the invitation, they served their guests a royal feast. This very much typified his relationship with his congregants: he demanded nothing, but gave as much as he could.

Hacham Zion knew he had to choose his battles and wait for the opportunity to implement changes. In the early 1990s, a family in the Panamanian community made a wedding at a time when Hacham Ovadia Yosef was visiting in honor of Rabbi Levy's fortieth anniversary as Chief Rabbi of Panama. The family asked Hacham Zion to request that the great sage officiate at the wedding. Hacham Zion agreed – but only on condition that the men and women sit separately during the ceremony. Hacham Zion seized the opportunity



to establish separate seating at all public functions henceforth.

His kind, gentle demeanor, and remarkable ability to relate to all different kinds of people, earned him widespread respect and admiration. People would frequently come to his office to discuss their problems and seek his counsel. His office became called the "Western Wall," as it was there where Jews would come to cry during trying times.

Eventually, Hacham Zion's reputation spread even beyond the Jewish community. Mr. Ramon Azrak related that once, while he was away, his worker, Fidel, got drunk and acted inappropriately. His conduct upset Ramon's son, who fired him. Despondent and hopeless, Fidel didn't know how he would ever find a new job. He then remembered that whenever the Jews have a problem, they consult with the "Rabino." So, he approached Hacham Zion and explained his problem.

"Don't worry, Fidel," Hacham Zion gently replied. "Speak to Ramon when he returns, and if he doesn't accept you back, you can work for me."

Hacham Zion also commanded the respect of government officials. Each year on Yom Kippur, the rabbi would invite the President of Panama to the synagogue, and publicly give him a blessing right in front of the ark.



Sara Bitton, a fifth-generation resident of the Land of Israel, who descended from Hacham Yehuda Buzaglo of Haifa.

SUMMONED TO A SPIRITUAL WASTELAND

In the year 5711/1951, a representative from Panama's Shevet Ahim congregation came to Jerusalem in search of a rabbi for the community. The leading rabbis urged Hacham Zion – who was just 29 years old at the time – to assume the position. Leaving behind his family, rabbis and childhood memories, he and his wife traveled to Panama, to a community with no religious infrastructure, which he was somehow expected to lead. Hacham Zion served as the Sephardic

Chief Rabbi of Panama with selfless devotion for nearly fifty-seven years. At first he received a meager salary, yet he refused to accept payment for officiating at weddings or performing beritot. It was this honesty and self-sacrifice that earned him the trust and adoration of his community. It's no wonder, then, that his congregants flocked to his house at all hours to seek his guidance and assistance. He treated all visitors with dignity, kindness and respect, and helped untold numbers of people with his warmth, sound advice, and blessings.

Hacham Zion's courage and dynamic personality wrought a religious revolution among the Panamanian community. From a spiritual wasteland he produced

a vibrant, observant community, which is now home to a kollel, schools, beautiful mikvaot and readily available kosher food. Scores of its sons and daughters are now living rich Jewish lives of Torah and misvot.



A BASTION OF HUMILITY

Panama's Jews treated their rabbi with the utmost honor and respect – but this was the last thing he wanted.

Hacham Zion shunned honor his entire life. He conducted all his affairs in such a simple, personable manner, out of the spotlight of the Jewish world, that scarcely few Jews knew that he was a *gadol ha'dor* (giant of the generation), a Torah sage of the highest caliber. He wore a simple hat and suit jacket, and sat alongside the *bimah* together with the congregants. He never allowed people to kiss his hand as an expression of reverence. The community implored him to move into a large, dignified residence, but he consistently refused, preferring to remain in the same apartment in which he had lived since his arrival in Panama.

Mr. Marvin Azrak *a.h.* arranged a burial plot for Hacham Zion in the same section as his esteemed mentor, Hacham Ezra Attiah. But Hacham Zion flatly refused, insisting that he was unworthy of such a dignified plot.

While Rabbi Levy kept himself in relative obscurity, over the years there were many who discerned his true greatness. One such man was Isaac Shalom *a.h.*, distinguished philanthropist and founder of many of our community's establishments. Rabbi Levy heard of this great man, who was renowned for his efforts on behalf of Syrian Jewry and the Jews in Israel, and he very much wished to meet him. On a trip to New York in the early 1950s, he had such an opportunity. During his conversation with Mr. Shalom, Rabbi Levy mentioned his efforts to build a shul in Panama. After the meeting, Mr. Shalom gave the rabbi a check for an enormous sum toward the new building.

Much to Mr. Shalom's surprise, the rabbi refused the donation.

"I cannot accept this from you," Hacham Zion said. "Give this money to the poor people in Israel, who need it more desperately."

"People wait in line all day to see me," Mr. Shalom replied, "and no one has ever turned down a donation."

Hacham Zion responded, "If the people of Panama cannot raise the money to build their own shul, then they don't deserve to have one." The rabbi's comments left a profound impression upon Mr. Shalom, who from that day on would regularly seek his advice. In fact, he frequently flew to Panama to visit and consult with Hacham Zion.



AN OUTPOURING OF LOVE AND PRAYER

Several weeks before his passing, Hacham Zion began feeling ill. Two doctors from Israel's Tel Hashomer Hospital flew to Panama, and after examining the ailing hacham, recommended that he be flown to Tel Hashomer.

Hacham Zion's illness triggered an outpouring of heartfelt, tearful prayer throughout the Panamanian Jewish community. Each night at midnight, the community gathered to recite Selihot and Tehillim. Men and women filled the shuls to capacity and begged Hashem for their leader's recovery. They prayed like a child beseeching Gd to cure his ailing parent.

These prayers undoubtedly served as a regal accompaniment for the hacham, when on 25 Heshvan/November 23, at the age of 86, Hashem summoned the great leader's pure, sacred soul back to the Heavens.

Just hours after his death, many Panamanians were already on their way to Israel for the funeral. And on the day of the funeral, the entire community of Panama closed their businesses and poured into the shuls and schools from 5:30am to watch the proceedings via satellite.

Hacham Zion left behind a beautiful, righteous family, who very much reflect his values and unique character. He is survived by his lifelong partner

and wife Rubissa Sarah, his sons David and Haim, and twelve beautiful grandchildren. Hacham Zion's presumed successor is his son, Rav Haim, who eight months before his father's passing moved from Jerusalem to Panama.

THE ADMIRATION OF HIS PEERS

The levaya (funeral) took place in Yeshivat Porat Yosef, and was attended by thousands of mourners who came to give honor to one of the generation's greatest figures. Eulogies were delivered by some of the most distinguished rabbis in Israel, including Maran Hacham Ovadia Yosef shlita and current Chief Rabbi Hacham Shlomo Amar shlita.

THE PENETRATING INSIGHT OF A GADOL

Great sages see things that ordinary people cannot. Just as a person standing on the roof of a skyscraper can see many more miles into the distance than his fellow on the sidewalk, similarly, Torah giants are capable of seeing, understanding, and anticipating that which is concealed to the rest of us. And this was certainly true of Rabbi Zion Levy. A member of the community once fought with the rabbi on a certain issue, and went so far as to threaten his life. The rabbi assigned a bodyguard to stand by the synagogue, and didn't give the threat another thought. But one night, the bodyguard ran to the rabbi warning him that the man had come looking for him, carrying a gun. The rabbi insisted that the bodyguard leave the premises, despite the danger.

It wasn't long before the man entered the shul and said to the rabbi, "I'm here to keep my promise."

Rabbi Zion asked, "Can I say shema and die like a Jew?" The man agreed, and the rabbi began praying before the opened hechal (ark). Minutes later, his adversary threw himself on the floor and begged the rabbi for forgiveness.

After the rabbi granted his forgiveness, the man pleaded, "Rabbi, please, when I take my last breath, please be there with me to say shema." Rabbi Zion promised to make every effort to be at the man's side for his dying moments.

Years later, as this man lay on his deathbed, the family called Rabbi Levy and asked that he quickly come to the hospital to help the man recite his final prayers. The rabbi dropped what he was doing and rushed to the hospital, but it was too late – the man had already passed away. The man's son and doctor were standing outside the room, as the nurse was inside removing the wires and tubes. Rabbi Zion asked if he could see the patient even though he had already died, and he entered the room and cried the patient's name.

The man suddenly sat up and shouted, "Hacham, ambistanak (I'm waiting)!" The rabbi said the prayers and (once again,) the man died. The nurse and doctor nearly fainted from shock, and this remarkable incident inspired the doctor to become observant. Several years ago, as the rabbi attended his grandson's bar mitzvah in New York, his daughter-in-law introduced him to a friend who needed a beracha. She had been married for many years without

a child. The rabbi blessed the couple and assured them that they would have sons. He also urged them to start using a Jewish doctor. Last year, when the rabbi visited New York, the woman brought her twin boys to receive blessings from Rabbi Zion.

On another occasion, a childless couple visiting Panama from the United States came to Rabbi Zion and asked for a blessing for children. They had been married for eight years, during which they underwent numerous treatments, consulted with several different hachamim, and tried countless segulot ("charms"), all to no avail.

Rabbi Zion asked them but one question: "Do you follow the family purity laws?"

The couple answered in the negative, explaining that they found these laws too demanding and difficult to observe.

Rabbi Zion did not give the couple a beracha. Instead, he offered to study with them the laws of family purity by phone once they returned home to America, on condition that they would follow the instructions of the hachamim. They agreed, and, under the rabbi's guidance, they began studying and practicing the laws of taharat ha'mishpaha (family purity).

The following year, the couple gave birth to a healthy baby boy. And recently, only a few days after Rabbi Zion's, passing, they had their second son, whom they of course named Zion. During his son's graduation ceremony, Rabbi Zion suddenly told his wife that he did not feel well and wished to return home. She implored him to stay, but he insisted and quickly left. The moment he returned home and opened the door, the telephone rang. The personal shamosh (attendant) of the Klausenberger Rebbe – a dear friend and admirer of Rabbi Zion – had called to inform him that the Rebbe needed emergency surgery. However, he refused to allow the surgery to begin with first receiving Rabbi Zion's blessing and permission.

Rabbi Zion asked a few questions, and then gave his beracha that the procedure should succeed.

He then turned to his wife, who had followed him home, and said, "I feel better, we can go back to the graduation now."

We present here several excerpts from the inspiring eulogies spoken in memory of Hacham Zion:

Maran Rishon L'sion Hacham Ovadia Yosef: "Hacham Zion and I learned together in Porat Yosef. He was a lifelong friend of mine, since I was a child. Hacham Zion was a person filled with Torah, with deep knowledge of all facets of Torah. He was not only a great scholar who served his community devotedly, but also a multitalented

individual. He was a hazan, shohet, mohel and a rabbi dealing constantly with communal affairs."

Chief Rabbi Hacham Shelomo Amar: "Hacham Zion Levy was known for collecting funds, and collected millions of dollars over the course of many years. He distributed the money for the Panamanian community mainly for yeshivot in Eress Yisrael. He was known to be an honest man throughout his entire life. He served the Shevet Ahim



AS THE END DREW NEAR

One day, shortly before the High Holidays several months ago, the men in the synagogue noticed that Hacham Sion looked uncharacteristically agitated. They asked him why the rabbi – who was always upbeat and jovial – looked so despondent.

“We in Panama are blessed and protected because of the enormous sums of charity given by our community,” he explained. “But this year is going to be a difficult year for the Jews of Panama, and I am afraid that our charity will not suffice to help us!” He urged the men to commit themselves to spend some time learning every day, in order to have the harsh decree revoked.

Sure enough, the banks in Panama stayed afloat for several weeks after the financial collapse of many other world markets. It was only days after Hacham Sion left Panama to receive treatment for his illness, shortly before his death, that the Panamanian banks began to decline.

It seems that the great sage foresaw not only the economic crisis that the new year ushered in, but his own imminent passing, as well. Every year on Simhat Torah, the Rabbi would bless all the men in the shul, one by one. But this past year, inexplicably, the rabbi announced that the community’s women and children should also come to receive his blessing.

Nobody understood why he had made this change of policy, until the next day, when Hacham Sion was diagnosed with the illness that

took his life several weeks later. Before departing the world, he wanted to perform one final act of kindness, to seize the last opportunity he would have to do what he enjoyed doing most – helping and inspiring his community. This is truly who he was, and this is precisely how he will be remembered.

Yehi zichro baruch – May his memory be blessed.



congregation with devotion for fifty-seven years. The love for the rabbi was tremendous. Hacham Sion exerted tight control over his entire community, and now the entire congregation is orphaned...”

Hacham Moshe Sadkah – Rosh Yeshiva Porat Yosef: “The death of the righteous is graver than the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash. Why? A Bet Hamikdash was a great building filled with holiness, and in the times of the Bet Hamikdash one would make pilgrimages to the site. But the Bet Hamikdash cannot go to an individual or location. The hacham, however, is able to move to different locations – he is mobile and can transport his holiness. That was Hacham Sion!”

Hacham Yehuda Ades – Rosh Yeshiva Kol Yaakob: “The Mishna in Pirkei Abot says, ‘Go out and see what people say about him.’ If one goes out on the streets and hears about a worthy hacham, then in the heavens, too, he will have a great reputation. Hacham Sion was great and unique in our generation... There was no minyan, no kashrut, no mikvaot – and he elevated the people



to appreciate Torah and its misvot and respect for Hachamim...”

Hacham Yehuda Moalem – Rosh Yeshiva Porat Yosef: “We (nation of Israel) are going to feel his passing, not now, but as time goes on...”

Hacham Eliyahu Bakshi Doron – Former Chief Sephardic Rabbi: “In these critical times you left us, and you’ll be in a better place where you could help us down here and appeal on our behalf...”

Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yona Metzger: “Hacham Sion’s humility was immeasurable. I once received a personal letter

from Hacham Sion which he typed himself on a manual typewriter... No secretary or other individual helped him... He could have easily had assistance, yet his humility overcame everything.”

Hacham Shalom HaKohen – Rosh Yeshiva Porat Yosef: “Someone once asked Hacham Sion, ‘What’s the intermarriage rate in your community in Panama?’ Hacham Sion showed the man with his fingers and said, ‘Zero.’”

Hacham Abraham Shrem - Hazan of Shevet Ahim: “We lost our father, our spiritual leader, the pillar of our community... Hacham Sion always said that he hated money... One time the congregation decided to give him a raise in salary, and he told them, ‘I don’t need money now; I’ll let you know when I do.’”

May the legacy and memory of Hacham Sion Levy serve as an inspiration and source of merit for his family, his community and all Kelal Yisrael.

Yehuda Azoulay is the author of A Legacy of Leaders, an acclaimed book which profiles many of the great Sephardic rabbis from the last few hundred years.