Harav Yaakov Abuchatzeira, the Abir Yaakov, zt”l

The legendary name Abuchatzeira comes to the fore in the person of Rav Shmuel Abuchatzeira, described by the Chida as an Ish Elokim Kadosh. His son, Rav Mosoud, became the Rav in the Moroccan city of Tafelatich, and was followed in this position by his son, Harav Yaakov, known as the Abir Yaakov.

Rav Yaakov was among the leaders of Jews in North Africa. His name was revered and mentioned with awe, as he was known as a leading mukhber. He was in contact on halachic issues with many of the era’s great Rabbanim, and his correspondence became the basis of his work, Vora Mishpatayach L’Yaakov.

Rav Yaakov authored many sefarim, on all facets of Torah: on Chumash, Shas, Halacha, Kabbalah, and Drashot. In his humility, he didn’t publish them during his lifetime, after his petirah, however, he appeared in a dream to his son and instructed him to print them.

Rav Yaakov was niftar on route to Eretz Yisrael, where he was headed to fulfill his heart’s desire, on 20 Teves 5640/1880, and was buried in Dimanuh, Egypt.

Distinguished Family

Harav Shmuel Abuchatzeira was the father of the Abir Yaakov. He was born and lived in Yerushalayim, but in his later years, he moved to Damascus. He was described by Harav Chaim Yosef David Azoulai, the Chida, as an Ish Elokim Kadosh.

The original family name was El prze Rav Shmuel, a man of risim and spiritual greatness, changed the name from El prze to Abuchatzeira because of a miracle that happened to him: Once he was sent as a shlichot on behalf of the Safedic kollet. When he reached the port of Yaffo, the captain refused to let him on board. Having no other choice, Rav Shmuel made himself a raft, or mat, out of reeds, chatezeira in Arabic, and floated behind the bost to his destination. He was thus named Abu-chatezeira, commemorating this event.

Some of his descendants moved from Eretz Yisrael and settled in North Africa, the most well known of which is Harav Machlouf Abuchatzeira, who lived in Morocco.

A large contingent of the family settled in Tafelatich, in Morocco.

Holy From Birth

Harav Yaakov Abuchatzeira, the Abir Yaakov, was born in Tafelatich, Morocco, in 5606/1846, to his father Harav Mosoud. According to his grandson Harav Meir Abuchatzeira, this was on the same day that the Chida, Harav Chaim Yosef David Azoulai, was niftar.

Before Rav Yaakov was born, Rav Mosoud had a dream. In the dream, he was told that he and his wife should prepare themselves for they would be blessed with a child who would enlighten all of Klal Yisrael.

His father, the Rav of Tafelatich, taught him all of Torah with the Rambam, later moving on to learn with him all of the Shishah Sidrei Mishnah, and then the entire Shas.

At the age of just sixteen, he received warm praise from Harav Mordechai ben Shaul, who composed a song in his honor. Many of the songs were sent to him, from leading Rabbanim and poskim. They were not only from Algeria and Morocco, but from even more distant locations, such as Lisbon and London.

Many of these she’elos and tahshuus appear in his sefer Vora Mishpatayach L’Yaakov.

It is told that on one occasion, Rav Yaakov visited the city of Tetuan (north of Morocco near the Spanish border). At that time, Tetuan’s Jewish community was led by Rav Yitzchak ben Wallid (author of Ya’avor Yitzchak).

Rav Yaakov had often been in contact with Rav Yitzchak regarding many halachic discussions. After entering the city anonymously, Rav Yaakov sought lodging at one of the local inns. After a short while, one of Rav Yitzchak’s talmidim entered the inn. Sensing that a talmid chocham stood before him, Rav Yaakov sought to engage the youth in a Torah discussion. The young man told Rav Yaakov that Rav Yitzchak’s yeshivah was currently studying a particular topic in the Gemara that was extremely difficult to comprehend. Rav Yaakov asked him which topic, whereupon the student told him which maaseh and which sugya.

Immediately upon hearing this, Rav Yaakov pulled out a quill and a sheet of paper from his pack, and proceeded to write down the explanation of the difficult matter. He then handed the paper to the young student, who joyfully departed for the yeshivah and presented it to Rav Yitzchak. As Rav Yitzchak looked at the paper, his eyes lit up. “This is the handwriting of Rav Yaakov Abuchatzeira!” he exclaimed. He immediately instructed the student to seek out the illustrious visitor and bring him to Rav Yitzchak’s house.

It is told that Rav Yaakov was secluded in the attic of Rav Yitzchak’s house for eight months, studying Torah and serving Hashem with yiras Shomayim.

After he received semichah, he served as Rav in the community of Taflipt, upon the petirah of his father.

A Life of Learning

Rav Yaakov loved solitude and did not leave the beis mezuzah all week, day and night, except on leilah Shabbos.

Rav Yaakov’s son, Rav Aharon, described his father’s daily schedule: He knew the Shishah Sidrei Mishnah by heart, and every night he studied 18 perakim.

After that, he studied Shulchan Aruch, Rambam and other poskim and he would review the sources in the Gemara from which their rulings were derived.

Near chenas he took a nap, then he would arise for tikun Rachel, and afterwards he would say tikun Leah. He would next study leading kabbalistic works until before daybreak, when he would hurry to don his tallis and tefillin, to be one of the first ten to arrive for the minyan.

After he donned Shacharis, he would sit and learn Torah, eating only a minimal amount for sustenance.

Rav Yaakov held himself in utmost humility, and shunned all signs of honor. He was known for his great animus, and for that reason, he did not accept any credit for anything done under his name.

He barely mentions his name in his sefarim, and didn’t let them be published during his lifetime, for he felt that they were not worthy of being printed. Only after his petirah did his children publish his many sefarim.

Rav Yaakov was a mekubal, renowned for his pietry and accustomed to performing miracles. It is said that Eliyahu Hanavi appeared to him.

His va’ad: knowledge of Kabbalah and safet Kabbalah is clearly noticeable in his works.

Despite his familiarity with Kabbalah, Rav Yaakov did not forsake halachah — which he saw as the potion of life, for without it, how would people know how to act — and he dealt with halachah on a daily basis. His son, Rav Aharon, writes in his hakdamah to the sefer Ginzei Hamelech, that there are four groups of talmidim chachamim: those who delve in Gemara study, poskim of halachah, darshanim and those who deal in the hidden Torah, and he adds that all these four things could be said of his father.

Rav Yaakov was a very well known baal tzedakah and a dual chamber, his home was wide open to guests. He was also very active on behalf of his brethren, in settling disputes and seeing to alleviate the plight of every individual in strife.

His Petirah

Rav Yaakov strongly desired to go to live in Eretz Yisrael all his life, but the members of his community refused to let him go. He tried to convince them to let him go to Eretz Yisrael six times, and on the sixth time, in 5640/1883, they finally acquiesced. This was because he promised them that his son Harav Mosoud would serve as their Rav in his stead.

On the earlier attempts, Rav Yaakov tried to keep it a secret from them and go to Eretz Yisrael clandestinely, but they always caught up with him and brought him back.

When he explained that as he was already old, he felt that it was high time for him to actually go to Eretz Yisrael, to dwell in its holy atmosphere and to gain from the kedushah of the land, he begged that they finally allow him to fulfill his heart’s desire. He hinted that he wasn’t sure that he would actually make it to the shores of Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Yaakov set out to Eretz Yisrael via the Algerian Sea, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt.

On the previous Shabbos, Rav Yaakov had stayed at the home of Rav Moshe Sharachi, and on Shabbos night during Kiddush, the candles were suddenly extinguished. Rav Yaakov commented...
Rav Yaakov wrote many sefarim, although he did not allow them to be printed or published while he was alive. He told his son that when he passed away, he would see if Hashem agreed with them and then he would come to him in a dream and give him permission to print them. His sefarim deal with various issues in Torah, halacha, Kabbalah, and his dryshos.

After his petirah, Rav Yaakov revealed himself in a dream to his son, Rav Mosdov, and told him that he could begin printing the sefarim. Only twelve of his works were published.

His sefarim include: Pischei Chosen — Pischei is the gematria of Yaakov Abuchatzeira — explanations on the Torah based on Kabbalah;

Machsof Halavan, another work on the Torah;

Ginzei Hamalech, an entire work of two hundred and seven explanations on the first passuk in the Torah;

Bigelei Hasrad — seod being the gematria of Yaakov Abuchatzeira — on the Haggadah shel Pesach based on the hidden Torah;

Maagei Tzedek, on Nach — most of the sefer is on perek 119 in Tehillim;

Alef Binah, on Tehillim;

Shaarei Aruchah, on the Yamim Nora'im and Sukkos;

Duref Tov, seventeen of his dryshos. Tov has the gematria value of seventeen and Duref is gematria of Yaakov;

Shari'ah Teshuvah, on the topic of teshuvah;

Levonah Zakah, his comments on sugos in Shas, arranged according to the order of the parshiyos, each parashah with the sugos that are relevant to it;

Yoru Mishpatecha L'Yaakov, his response;

Yad Gil Yaqov, a compilation of the pijuitim composed by Rav Yaakov and his children. The pijuitim speak about the praises of Eretz Yisrael, the suffering of galus and issues of bitachon.

Shabbos Kodesh, another kabbalistic work, was never printed.

Also never published was his comments on the margins of Rav Chaim Vital's Eitz Hachaim and the notes he wrote at the end of the sefer. His grandson, the Baba Sali, related that after completing this work, Rav Yaakov was elated. A few short hours after completing this, a fire broke out in his home, totally burning his notes at the end of the sefer; miraculously, the sefer itself remained whole.

Rav Yaakov understood this to be a sign from Heaven not to write them again or publish them.

In his hakdamah to the sefer Alef Binah, Rav Yaakov writes that it is incorrect to learn Kabbalah without prior learning of Gemara, adding that the Gemara is the basis for Kabbalah. He also advises people to emulate the approach to his learning: first learning Tanach, then Mishnayos, and only afterwards to Gemara; then one should learn halachah, and only later can one delve into the study of Kabbalah.

Zechu'os yagen aleinu. Parts of the article were extracted from an upcoming book by Yehudah Azulai on Sephardic Gedolim.