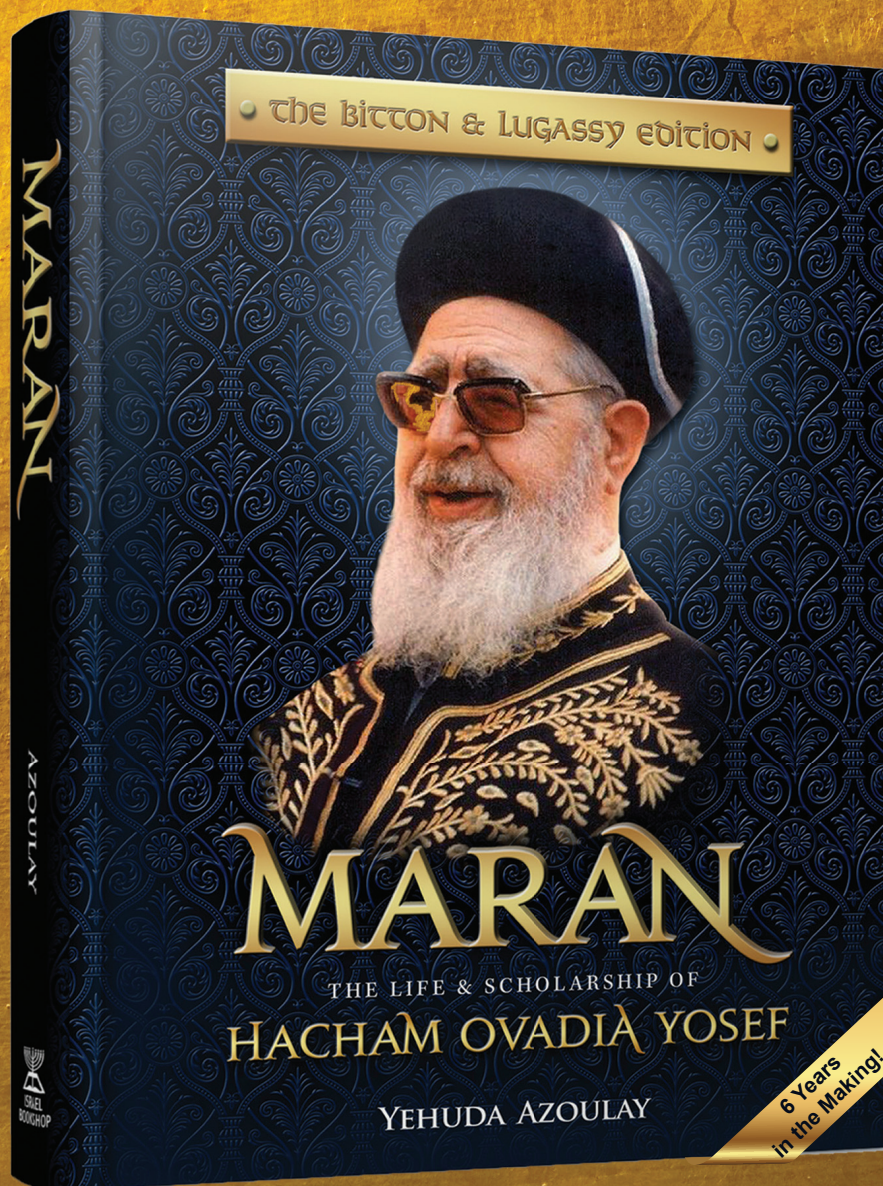


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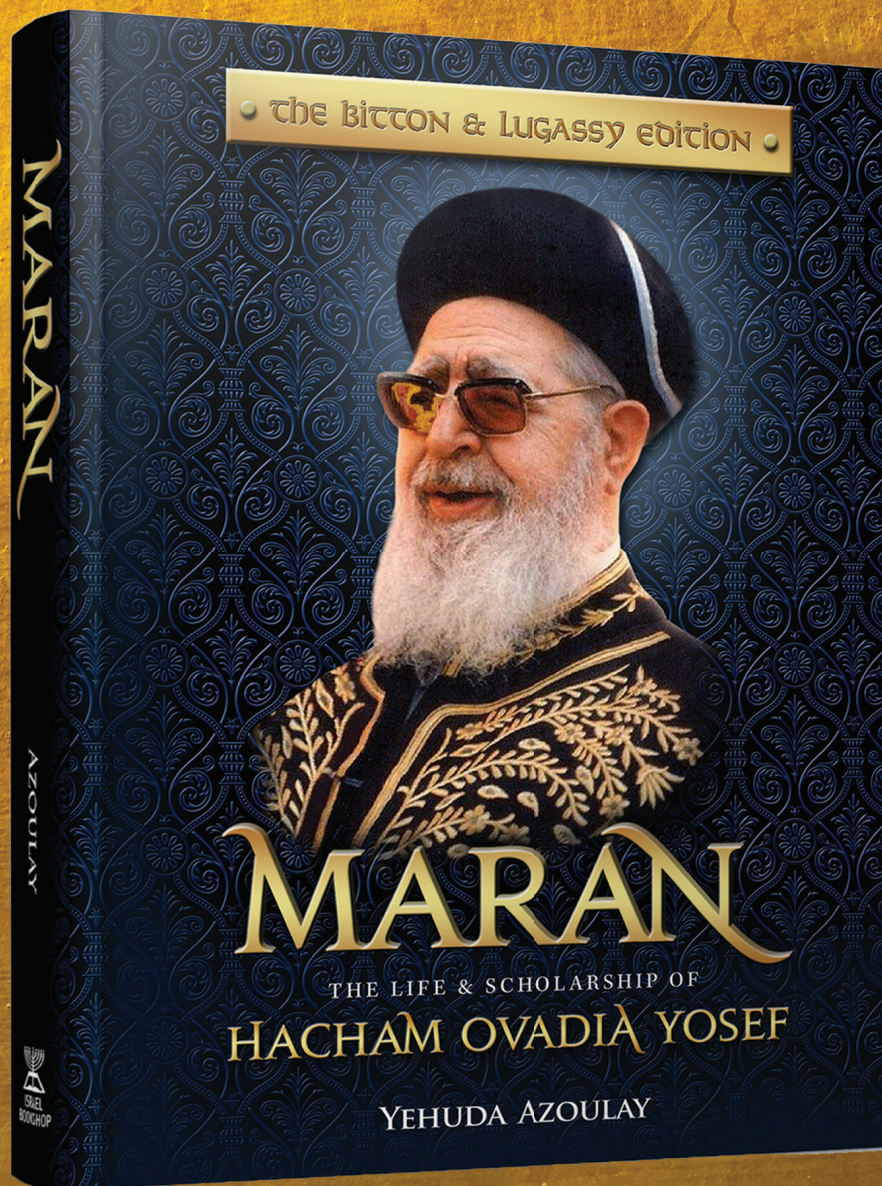


Chronicling the **Life** of a **Giant**

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The High Holiday Shopping List Fallacy
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**The Hand of Hashem: A 9/11
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DAVE GORDON

Hacham Ovadia Yosef – arguably the most influential rabbi of the modern era – was a unifier of Sephardic custom, *dayan*, noted *posek*, scholar, author of 53 books, political leader of the Shas party, esteemed lecturer, Chief Rabbi, and much more.

Affectionately referred to by many as *Maran* – or “our master” – Hacham Ovadia Yosef was a man of extraordinary scholarship whose single-handed enhancements to Sephardic culture are legendary. The 93-year-old Baghdad-born icon departed this world a year ago, on the 3rd of Heshvan, October 7, 2013, leaving behind a legacy of inspiration and guidance that continues to impact untold numbers of Jews.

His funeral is believed to have been the largest in modern history, with an estimated 800,000 participants and another 200,000 thought to have been unable to squeeze in.

“It really reflects how many people he impacted,” says Yehuda Azoulay, author of the newly-released tome on the Torah giant.

The latest volume from Yehuda Azoulay's *Sephardic Legacy Series* – weighing in at nearly 700 pages – takes the reader on a fascinating journey through the work of one of history's greatest Torah personalities.

“Like Nothing I Have Seen”

Entitled *Maran – The Life and Scholarship of Hacham Ovadia Yosef*, the detailed volume culls, for the first time, the reflections of rabbis, politicians, educators, family members, disciples, and even critics on this extraordinary figure.

“When I attended his famous Saturday night lectures when I was 18 years old in yeshiva,” Azoulay writes, “...I was awed by the sensitivity, humor and scholarship of this great man at that time ... I said to myself, ‘One day I want to write about him.’ Finally, it's here.”

What he is most enthusiastic about is the “originality of the book and the research,” touting six years of toil, with some 80 reference books researched specifically for the project, including 28 Hebrew biographies.

“We read everything: online, and even controversial,” says Azoulay. He relates that he and fellow researcher Rabbi Shai Cabessa combed through Hacham Ovadia Yosef's 53 published works to bring to light a myriad of information, anecdotes and rulings. The result is a monumental volume that adds invaluable background and insight into Hacham Ovadia Yosef's life that would have otherwise never become public.



Speaking at the Inauguration ceremony in the Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai Synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem.



Hacham Ovadia Yosef observing an Etrog.



Family portrait of the Ovadia family taken in 1924. Hacham Ovadia is the boy on the top left.



Hacham Ovadia and Hacham Ben Tzion Abba Shaul (far right) being escorted from Panama Airport.

“You can see the way he lived, his lifestyles, philosophy, and everything,” Azoulay says. The book includes significant historical events and inspirational accounts of his and his colleagues’ experiences.

One of Hacham Ovadia Yosef’s sons, Rabbi Moshe Yosef, heaped kudos on the book, saying, it “is like nothing I have seen for any publication on my father’s life, in Hebrew or in any language.”

Azoulay had the privilege of forging a personal connection with Hacham Ovadia Yosef, a bond which provided the inspiration to produce this groundbreaking volume.

“I was close with him, had a relationship with him to the extent they asked me to translate some works from Hebrew to English. I followed his way of life and his halachah.”

While in Israel, Azoulay sat in on classes given by Hacham Ovadia Yosef in the Yazdim Persian Synagogue in Jerusalem. “I never forgot those profound lectures, simply presented, and those hours I spent drinking in his every word, planted the seeds that grew into this book.”

One of Azoulay’s many important discoveries as he researched the life of Hacham Ovadia was the fact that despite his 30 years of political involvement as founder and leader of the Shas party – which in 1999 won an astonishing 17 seats in the Knesset – his main goal wasn’t politics. His passion and point of focus was the study and dissemination of halachah.

“He crosses the world within his halachic decisions,” says Azoulay. He writes in his book that Hacham Ovadia Yosef made it his life’s mission to turn the *Shulhan Aruch* into the primary authority for all Sephardic Jews.

“He was a brave man and went up against all odds. People were against him for practically everything, but they were proven wrong,” remarked Azoulay.

Among the lesser-known areas of the sage’s work documented in the book is his spearheading the opening of numerous new institutions of learning. In 1965, he established the Study Hall for Rabbis and Rabbinical Judges, whose purpose was to train men to lead communities and serve as judges, with an emphasis on Sephardic tradition. In 1986, he established Kollel Yehaveh Da’at together with his son, Hacham David. He opened another institution 10 years later – Hazon Ovadia – which is led by his son, Rabbi Yitzhak, who now serves as Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel.

The Meteoric Rise of a Rabbinic Sage

The book relates how already at the age of 10, Hacham Ovadia Yosef exhibited dazzling proficiency in Talmud. Once, as he accompanied his father on a business trip to Baghdad, young Ovadia Yosef stopped by the prestigious Iraqi yeshivah Bet Zilka, where he spoke with the students and dazzled them by reciting entire passages of Talmud from memory. And already in his teens, he was writing and publishing Torah essays.

In 1932, Hacham Ovadia Yosef enrolled in Porat Yosef, the only Sephardic learning institution in Jerusalem at the time, where he quickly became a top student.

In 1947, at the age of just 27, Hacham Ovadia Yosef became the head of the Cairo *bet din* and *rosh yeshivah* of Ahavah V’ahvah. The Jewish community of Cairo at that time was mainly nonobservant, and had little in terms of religious leadership. Hacham Ovadia dealt with many difficult halachic issues, including marriage, divorce and conversion. One hurdle he came up against was the widespread practice of using electricity on holy days, including the use of microphones in the synagogue on Shabbat. After rigorous research, Hacham Ovadia concluded that there was no halachic justification for the use of electricity on Shabbat and holidays, and publicly announced his decision. He ultimately prevailed in convincing the community to stop the practice.

He also made significant inroads in the area of kashrut. Astonishingly, the local butchershops had no oversight, and credible rumors spread of non-kosher meat slipping into the stores. Hacham Ovadia initiated a system of supervision, thus exposing himself to the scorn and resentment of the butchers. But he remained steadfast, and ultimately succeeded in establishing proper standards of kashrut in the city.

A Sephardic Leader in the Jewish Homeland

Upon returning to Israel, Hacham Ovadia Yosef became a judge on the Jerusalem *bet din*, the first of many prestigious rabbinical posts that he would occupy and utilize to enhance religious life in the Jewish State.

In 1969, he was named Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, where he opened a branch of Porat Yosef. His goal was to create a home and hub for Sephardic students so that those interested in higher Torah education would not have to enroll in Ashkenazic institutions. As he did in Cairo, the hacham invested immense efforts to improve the system of kashrut in Tel-Aviv. He mandated the use of “*halak*” meat, as required by Rav Yosef Caro, the leading Sephardic authority.

Additionally, he set up a network of kashrut supervisors to improve oversight, and saw to it that utensils were immersed in a *mivkeh* as a matter of course.

In 1973, Hacham Ovadia was named Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, in the capacity of which he issued one of his most famous and historic halachic rulings, declaring that Ethiopian Jews, who were later airlifted in heroic rescues, are unquestionably Jewish. His ruling opened the doors for the tens of thousands of Ethiopian olim who arrived over the course of the next 20 years, and onward, to marry other Jews and fully integrate into Israeli society without conversion.

Over the course of his 10-year term as Chief Rabbi, the hacham visited Jewish communities around the globe, leaving a tremendous impression wherever he went. During Hacham Ovadia’s visit to France in 1978, Azoulay notes in the book, the Parisian police accorded him a special guard of honor, much as they do when heads of state pay visits. As an expression of gratitude, the rabbi conferred a special Hebrew blessing for several minutes to the police officers, who gathered around him. Despite the language difference, the officers felt the hacham’s



The young Rabbi Ovadia Yosef giving a shiur in the Shaul Tzadkiah Synagogue in Bet Yisrael, Jerusalem neighborhood.



Learning in the hospital.



Maran with his father-in-law, Hacham Avraham Phatal.



Hacham Ovadia giving hizuk to Israeli soldiers.

sincerity and the gravity of the moment, and some of them were said to have welled up.

President Jacques Chirac said about this memorable occasion, “I received a wonderful letter from the French police force. They wrote that the Jewish ‘pope’ is a very special person. They wrote that he has a caring, sensitive heart, that he treats every person with great honor, and that he thanks anyone who helps him.”

Such was the impact that the hacham had on Jews and gentiles alike.

The Posek Hador – Leading Halachic Decisor of the Generation

Among the distinctive qualities of Hacham Ovadia’s approach to halachic decision-making – alongside his truly extraordinary, encyclopedic knowledge of Talmudic literature – was his sensitivity to the need to make halachah observance accessible to the general public. He feared that unnecessarily stringent rulings would cause widespread disillusionment and rejection of the authority of halachah. And thus while many of his contemporaries championed the approach of stringency in an effort to satisfy all differing opinions, the hacham felt that to the contrary, lenient positions should be accepted when appropriate in order to encourage the masses to embrace a halachic lifestyle. One example, among many hundreds, is his ruling that although it is best for a man not to shave, one may shave as long as the hair roots are not removed.

Additionally, Hacham Ovadia worked to uphold the Sephardic halachic tradition, which he feared people were abandoning in favor of the Ashkenazic halachic rulings, which are often at odds with Sephardic practice. Thus, for example, he famously ruled that although among many Ashkenazic circles it is customary for married women to wear wigs, this was forbidden according to Sephardic practice, and women should cover their hair with hats or scarves, instead.

Hacham Ovadia made it a life mission to unify Sephardic Jewry under the authority of Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of the 16th-century halachic code *Shulhan Aruch*, who is regarded as the chief halachic authority for the Land of Israel. He urged people to accept the rulings of the *Shulhan Aruch*, and succeeded in having Sephardic yeshivot use it as the basis of their halachic study.

Hacham Ovadia was committed to enhancing religious observance among the masses, rather than allowing it to remain the exclusive province of the scholarly elite. To that end, he ruled that it was a mitzvah for siddurim to offer translations of the prayer text so that people can understand what they are reciting. The need to lovingly reach out to nonobservant Jews was another driving force behind his halachic approach. Thus, for example, he ruled that synagogues may call to the Torah on Shabbat men who were not Shabbat observant (as long as seven observant men were called, as well).

Hacham Ovadia was called upon to address scores of questions that arose with the advent of advances in medicine and technology. Among

his many important rulings was his 1996 decision that organ donation is a *mitzvah*, and a 2002 ruling forbidding experimentation on animals in the cosmetic industry.

The Hacham with World Leaders

Hacham Ovadia Yosef’s reputation and gravitas allowed him the opportunity to interact with some of modern history’s most famous heads of state.

When meeting King Carlos of Spain, Hacham Ovadia explained to the king why Sephardic Jewry goes by the word “Sepharadim,” which means “Spanish.” Although Sephardic Jews hail from Middle Eastern and North African countries, they are known as “Sepharadim” because they received their guidance from the Rambam, a Spanish native.

Numerous Israeli politicians – including Prime Ministers – developed close friendships with the hacham that transcended politics, and they held him in genuinely high esteem. One such figure was former Prime Minister and President Shimon Peres, who knew Hacham Ovadia for many decades, studied with him, and treated him with great respect. In fact, Azoulay quotes Peres as saying, “I myself felt that a Torah sage is deserving of more honor than a president so I deviated from the generally accepted custom and went to visit him myself, instead of expecting him to come to me.”

“An honest, straight man,” was how Hacham Ovadia Yosef described Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who consulted with the Chief Rabbi on a biweekly basis.

The book also tells of the most unlikely relationship which the hacham had with another world leader. Nearly 30 years ago, Hacham Ovadia met with then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to protest the construction of a highway directly over a Jewish cemetery where Torah sages were interred. With a sensitive ear, Mubarak agreed to change the highway route, recognizing the potential disgrace to the departed Jews buried in the graveyard.

A gifted educator and statesman, Hacham Ovadia Yosef was admired by people of many different types. He touched the lives of Jews of all backgrounds, from towering scholars to otherwise unaffiliated Jews. He spoke to both the observant and secular populations, bringing greater Torah understanding to the masses.

For the majority of his 93 years, Hacham Ovadia Yosef successfully stemmed the tide of assimilation, and inspired a historic process of Sephardic renewal, both in Israel and around the world.

“What stuck out for me,” says Azoulay, “are his original thoughts, and he stood up for what was right. I admire that. He had a great mind, and with that, he could have called it a day. But he didn’t.”

Those who pick up *Maran – The life and Scholarship of Hacham Ovadia Yosef* will find it difficult to put down – and will begin to understand why Hacham Ovadia Yosef is regarded as one of the greatest Torah leaders in Jewish history.