

YEHUDA AZOULAY - A MAN ON A MISSION

Meet Yehuda Azoulay a dynamic, educated, driven, and accomplished man. At 29 he is already a noted Sephardic historian, educator, author, activist, and entrepreneur. Yehuda Azoulay is an up and coming leader in the Sephardic community in North America.



Yehuda Azoulay currently holds a Rabbinical Degree, a Bachelor's Degree and recently completed his Master's degree from Yeshiva Universities' Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration. His next plan is to pursue a Ph.D. in Sephardic studies.

"I think what motivates me is a combination of everything: family, what Sephardic Judaism could offer to the world as the Sephardic voice is lacking in all facets in the world. People are preached to by Chabad, there is a lot to hear coming out of the general Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism, and we don't often hear about Sephardic Judaism. It has a lot to offer simply because... it offers a balanced way of life," Azoulay said.

Azoulay discovered the need for English biographies of Sephardic rabbis during a year of post-high school study in Israel. An extensive search through bookstores, libraries, archives and even online sources yielded a single publication: a book about Baba Sali, the illustrious 20th-century Moroccan spiritual leader. Back home in North America, his continued search also yielded nothing.

There is an enormous imbalance between the number of English-language biographies of Ashkenazi rabbis and those of Sephardi rabbis. It was clear to Yehuda that a parallel Sephardi library was needed. But it was a cavalier by a student at a kollel where Azoulay was studying that the number of Torah-great Sephardi rabbis throughout history could be counted on one hand that impelled him to start writing.

He was 19 years old.

In 2006, Yehuda founded Sephardic Legacy - "Institute for Preserving Sephardic Heritage". The aim is to help structure future Sephardic publications, articles, lectures series, documentary films, and extensive research on vast Sephardic topics and other works geared for the benefit of Sephardic communities worldwide.

Azoulay's first book, *A Legacy of Leaders*, was published in 2008, and a second volume, *A Legacy of Leaders II*, the following year. Designed to appeal to all readers, the books contain brief biographical chapters and vignettes of better-known Sephardi rabbis, intentionally including those that Ashkenazim might recognize, too. However, Azoulay's third book, *Ben Ish Hai*, is a 400-plus-page tome devoted to a single rabbi, Rabbi Yosef Haim.

The books have garnered incredible feedback. People have contacted Azoulay not just to laud his work and appeal for more publications, but many have reached out to him as an ambassador of Sephardi heritage.

Azoulay has also found that his audience extended well beyond the Sephardic community, which was actually his objective.

"That's the goal: to educate everyone," he says. "Sephardic Judaism belong to us all yet it is unknown to many."

Following a relationship with the late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef that spanned almost a decade and included six years of diligent research, Yehuda Azoulay has published his fifth book about the Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, Maran - *The Life and Scholarship of Hacham Ovadia Yosef*, a biography about the late Baghdad-born rabbi.

However, writing this book wasn't a simple matter. Yehuda has been working on this book for over six years. He and a team of five researchers read 28 Hebrew biographies about the rabbi, and all of Rabbi Yosef's 53 books.

"His books are beyond academic-only religious people who understand the questions and answers would appreciate the scholarship," he said. "Within those books there were anecdotes.

He talked about experience in his life, about World War II, he talked about Hitler, about the Damascus blood libel in the 18th century, he goes through history, talks about life and experiences through Jewish law.”

“When I was 18, I had attended his lectures in Hebrew when I was in yeshiva (in Israel). I was drawn towards him, his scholarship and his humour. Granted, many people consider him controversial,” he said, “but there is no rabbi in the State of Israel over the last 65 years, from both a Sephardi and Ashkenazi perspective – everyone would agree with me unanimously – about how influential this rabbi was,” Azoulay said.

To date, Yehuda has authored five renowned books and published over thirty articles on Sephardic historical topics. Writing books is not where it ends for Azoulay. In 2013 Yehuda lead ‘The Inaugural Tribute Luncheon Honoring the Contributions of Sephardic Jewry in America’ in US Congress. This historic event brought together Sephardic communities from over 20 cities where leaders, Senators, Rabbis and philanthropists from across North America where together in order to

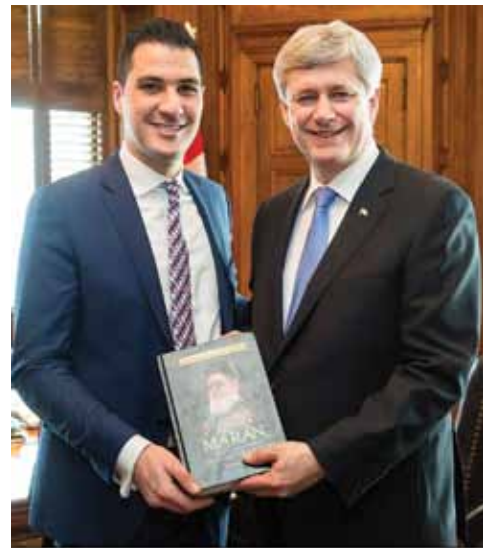


unify under one voice and honor for the first time Sephardic Jewry in the US Capitol.

This past February 2015, Yehuda and Bnai Brith Canada lead a Sephardic National

Delegation to Parliament Hill where he brought 30 most influential Sephardic Jews across Canada to meet with Ministers and share their support and to build further relations with the Government of Canada. He recently met privately with Prime Minister Stephen Harper and gave him his recent book on Rabbi Ovadia Yosef as a gift.

Looking forward, Azoulay said he continues to move the Sephardic machine forward as he is invited to speak at the United Nations human rights committee on Justice for Jews from Arab lands on November, 30 2015. Furthermore this March 2016 he will be having his annual event in Morocco. “International Conference of



Moroccan Jewry” - Continuing to further Judeo-Muslim Dialogue & Intercultural Relations. He plans on making an International conference for the most influential Sephardic Jews annually which will shape the future Sephardic North American Jewry. As a profession, Azoulay is a Mortgage Agent, and head of Investment Relations which manages a Mortgage Investment fund for Concrete Mortgage Capital Inc.

Mr. Azoulay speaks all over the world to inspire and educate about Sephardic Judaism. He is actively involved on many fronts assisting Sephardic Jewry around the world. This past Summer 2015 he was chosen as one of the 36 world representatives for the Diplomatic Seminar for Young Jewish Leaders hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel. Azoulay mentions “this recent young diplomatic mission gave me a behind scenes view with what is really occurring with the State of Israel... how blessed are we to have our State for the Jewish people.”

In his goal to educate and motivate others, he says that researching and writing about these rabbinic personalities and Sephardic Judaism in general have inspired him, too, reinforcing his own connection to G-d, Sephardic leaders and the community. And through his work, he has greatly expanded his network within the Sephardic world Internationally, assisting him in his ongoing research and placing him at the vanguard of Sephardic society and leadership today.

Special thanks to Sabrina Toledano for her help with this article.