As a teenager in Toronto, Yehuda Azoulay loved reading biographies of gedolim. The Noble Lives, Noble Deeds series (ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications) was his favorite. But as the son of a mother born in Tangiers and a father born in Casablanca, it bothered him that there were no biographies for gedolim with origins closer to his own. He knew they existed; he grew up attending hillulot regularly within his own community, and his father’s family claimed to be related to the Chida, the 18th-century Torah giant.

At age 17, after he moved on from Toronto’s Yeshiva Darchei Torah and Mikdash Melech Yerushalayim to further his studies in Lakewood, he expressed his disappointment to Rav Haim Benoliel, the rosh yeshivah of Mikdash Melech in Brooklyn. Rav Benoliel responded, “So you take the initiative.”

“The yeshivah in Lakewood had a computer, and I started writing up short biographies about Sephardic gedolim, just for myself,” Azoulay relates. Now 27, he’s a tall, well-mannered young man with youthful enthusiasm and ambitious dreams. “At the time, people were still using disks — I remember I had one disk for each biography.”

As time permitted, he’d add to the work; when he got married in 2007, he compiled a booklet containing about 20 short sketches to distribute at his sheva brachos. The following year, he self-published it in book form as A Legacy of Leaders, with approbations from, among others, Rav Ovadiah Yosef zt”l, Rav Mattisyahu Salomon, and Rabbi Benoliel (Israel Book Shop distributes all his work). It included brief biographical sketches of 25 well-known Sephardic chachamim along with short anecdotes of their accomplishments. “I tried to choose figures who would be recognizable to both Sephardim and Ashkenazim,” he says. The following year, a second Legacy of Leaders appeared, featuring yet another 26 gedolim.

Having set the biography machinery in motion, Azoulay kept the presses rolling. In 2005, he produced yet another book, a full-length, English-language biography of the Ben Ish Chai. This past March, he released a biography of the Chida entitled A Legend of Greatness. To unify his work and create a base for further projects and research, Azoulay founded his own Sephardic studies organization, which he calls The Sephardic Legacy Series — Institute for Preserving Sephardic Heritage. He now has four books to his credit, and the
Sephardic Legacy continues to grow and draw attention to the contributions of Sephardim.

On November 20, the Sephardic Legacy Foundation will begin realizing its goals, as the organization launches its most ambitious event to date: an "Inaugural Tribute Luncheon Honoring the Contributions of Sephardic Jewry" in the Kennedy Room of the US Capitol. The object of the congressional event, he says, is to "honor American Sephardic Jewry, and commemorate Chacham Ovadia’s pickles."

Azoulay expects about a dozen congressmen to attend, and the honorees include Rabbi Elie Abadie, an Manhattan's J. Safra Synagogue, Toronto Sephardic leader Jacob Abeckasis, New York's Daniel Harari (a businessman active in Sephardic education), and Raymond Saka, whose family has helped fund translations of the works of Chacham Ovadia into English.

Rav Yitzchak Josef was originally scheduled to speak, but as we go to press Anoulazy says he will probably be replaced by Rav Shlomo Amar, as the former is still in the middle of a shelita for his father.

There aren't many 27-year-olds who can claim to have authored four books and created a small industry around writing biographies of Sephardic rabbinic leaders, but Yehuda is a man with a mission. Even more, he's a man with a passion. Now the father of two little girls living in Toronto, he says, "I'm doing this for our children."

Identity Issues

Yehuda credits his parents for instilling him with a fierce pride in his Moroccan origins and a deep attachment to Torah. "My father went to Israel from Morocco when he was 14, and served in the Six Day War," he says. But Joseph Azoulay found the antireligious bias of Israeli society disappointing and embarrassing. "When my father would wear a kippah, people would say to him, 'Why are you wearing that? We're not in a synagoge,'" he says. His father moved to Toronto, where he met and married Yehuda's mother. "They started with nothing, and built it up," Yehuda says.

Toronto hosts a relatively small Sephardic community, with only about a dozen synagogues. There are Sephardic events there and the community retains warm relations with the king of Morocco, who donated a fountain to the Sephardic Kehila Centre. "The king's minister, André Anoulazy, attended a gala dinner in May 2011 in Toronto. He is the diplomat between Morocco and Moroccan Jewry worldwide," he says.

But the small size of Toronto's Moroccan population means that many of them are marooning out of the community. And even those who don't marry out become more distant with each generation. "They have grown up with no knowledge of who they are, and no knowledge of where they came from, and they know little of their grandparents, and their grandparents, and their grandfather,..." Yehuda's parents used to bring their entire family to participate in Moroccan hilla’ot (celebrations honoring the yederetza of a tzaddik). But even then, Yehuda was able to perceive that something was missing.

"The Sephardim have a lot of emunah chachamim, and a great sense of tzaddikim," he says. "They'll go to a hilla’ot, and in one night the organization might raise $100,000. But despite their passion, many of the people have only a very hazy idea who the tzaddik being honored was. They know which city he came from, and they know the miracle of the bones being pulled out, but beyond that, they may not know what the tzaddik represented in terms of the Torah world."

While the Sephardim were exposed relatively late to Hasidic ideology, and therefore retained emunah pshutah and attachment to tradition that many Ashkenazim simply abandoned, their entry into the modern, secular world meant that Judaism was sometimes degraded from Torah learning into a form of entertainment. "There are traditions like the mitnagdim (Mozaiski Pesach party), henna (a pre-wedding festivity) or swane (a Syrian prenuptial party in which each party was sent back and forth with gifts). Although all of these have become beloved traditions, many of them are non-Jewish in origin."

"There is a famous legend that the Ben Ish Chai once remarked that rabbinic scholars should have a brush for never having had a Reform movement," Anoulazy says. "But on the other hand, they often don't have a strong connection to their past. I recently spoke at a Sephardic synagogue in New York about Sir Moses Montefiore, a historical figure I love. But many Sephardim don't recognize his greatness. Aren't settlements in Eretz Yisrael (which Montefiore funded) more important than heno par'ah?"

While the Sephardim certainly have a rich history, Anoulazy says, it is not as well documented as European Jewish history. What does exist, in terms of historical record and biography, tends to exist in Hebrew or other languages, rendering it inaccessible to the English-speaking public. His own, self-created role is to serve as a popularizer of Sephardic history and lore to today's modern, English-speaking Sephardic Jews of all origins. When asked if that market is large enough to warrant the investment of time and money, he replies, "I'm able to find sponsors for my books, so the work is paid for before the books go to press... on the other hand, finding sponsors is the most stressful part of the work."

He also notes that the US has an estimated 450,000 Sephardim, and Canada another 55,000, so in North America alone he could potentially reach over half a million people (his books have since been translated into French and Spanish, and will soon be rendered into Persian and Russian as well). Any additional revenue brought in by the books is used to finance travel for his continued research.

The Making of a Writer

When asked where he picked up the ability to write, Azoulay shrugs. "I went to Darchei Torah in Toronto, where we got a good grounding in limuder chabab. I say, 'That's where I really learned to express myself well.'"

In order to hone his scholarship, Azoulay is currently pursuing an MEd in education and administration at Yeshiva University's Azrieli graduate school, in a program split between on-site summer coursework (he spends every summer in the New York area) and online coursework. He hopes to eventually earn a PhD in Sephardic history. As a day job during the academic year in Toronto, he teaches Judaic studies for St. Michael's College at Toronto College with an instructor to give "capstone courses" in Jewish thought and ethics. He also works with the Torah High program, an NCYI in-service initiative that offers after-school classes in Judaism to public school students, teaching Jewish philosophy and political science. To top things off, he's serving temporarily as a part-time administrator for a Sephardic kollel.

His most ambitious project to date has been the biography of Chacham Ovadia Yosef, who was clearly his biggest hero. "People didn't realize the greatness of Maran," he says. "I follow everything he did. He's the one who raised Sephardic Jewry in Eretz Yisrael, who restored their dignity and pride. For years he was the only real, visibly helping agun." There are also episodes in Chacham Ovadia's life few people know, Azoulay says. "When he served as rabbi in Cairo in 1947, he was thrown in jail three times. Once was for wearing a black hat, so he had to start wearing a different hat; once he was jailed for giving dinaim in Hebrew instead of Arabic, and he had to switch to Arabic, and another time he was accused of being a spy for Israel."

He also has spent every Yom Kippur and Succos in Har Nof with Chacham Ovadia. "Yom Kippur was a sight to see," he says. "It's very small and personal in the shul — a hundred people tops. When Maran got to the part where we say 'Ribono shel Olam,' where he asked the Chida for shemoneh esrei, the whole place was like a baby."

Yehuda also busily cooking up yet more ideas for books: parshah books culled from Bringings Legends to Life

The Skeleton That Moved

In 1958, Chief Sephardic Rabbi Yitzchak Nissan launched an initiative to move the Chida’s remains from Italy, where he died in 1836, to Eretz Yisrael. It wasn’t the first time the Chida was reinterred; his remains had been moved in 1941 when the Fascists appropriated the cemetery where he was buried, and he was taken to a newer cemetery for protection. When the remains were being moved in 1950, Anoulazy says, "The coffin was very small — only a few feet long inside a larger box. It seems the bones had been piled inside the smaller box. Ray Mordechai Eliyahu was in charge of overseeing all the proceedings, and he was shocked to find them in that state. He said the bones would have to be rearranged in the right order, like a skeleton."

"He immersed a swamp and requested a trucker to open the box... he did, there were loud knocking noises from inside the coffin. Some of the people watching fainted! Ray Mordechai, said, 'HaChalda! I am doing exactly as you specified in your sefer. I respectfully ask you to stop the noise.' He continued opening the box. Another noise ensued, and he repeated his request. Then he asked the Chida for the bones to rearrange themselves, and felt his hands moving of their own accord, and rearranging the bones until a complete skeleton was formed."

The casket was briefly displayed in the Yeshurun Synagogue before a procession of an estimated 10,000 people, including the chief rabbi and many prominent government officials, before being accompanied to the Kehilat Jerusalem section of Har HaMenuchos.
I recently spoke about Sir Moses Montefiore. But many Sephardim don’t recognize his greatness. Aren’t settlements in Eretz Yisrael more important than henna parties?

Fascination with the Chida Just this past March, after two years of work, Yehuda published a biography dear to his heart: Entitled A Legacy of Greatness: The Life & Times of Hacham Yosef David Azoulay, it’s the first English-language biography of the Chida, who shares his last name. “My father told me this is my khitam,” he says. “I feel it as a calling.” (Between the books, the teaching, the master’s degree work, and daf yomi, Yehuda admits to stinting on sleep to fit everything in.)

He’d even like to explore other media and contexts, for example, he’d like to do a film about the Sephardic victims of the Holocaust, who he’s titled The Untold Story. “I was actually inspired by a Nishpoche article about Greece,” he says. “I’ve read a lot about the Jewish community of Salonika, how during the war they took the hacham and shaved his beard and killed him. People don’t realize there were many Sephardim from Europe, Italy, and Greece who were killed by the Nazis.”

Putting Sephardim on the Map

An unexpected consequence of Yehuda’s research is that he has found himself somewhat drawn into the political arena. His close relations with Chacham Ovadia Yosef’s family, activists, and other world-renowned personalities led to his being invited to the Knesset. “The meetings were confidential, but my goal is to put Sephardim on the map in every aspect,” says Yehuda. 

In the meantime, he’s also involved with efforts to create a Shaas-style Sephardic Agudath in North America, in partnership with Rabbi Dr. Elie Abadie of Manhattan’s Safran Synagogue. He envisions being able to represent the interests of Sephardic Jewry and host events like gala dinners for the Sephardic chief rabbi and other great Sephardic personalities.

The Sephardic Legacy event will also serve as the book launch for a history of Sephardic Jewry by Dr. Sarah Taieb-Carlen and Yehuda Azoulay entitled The Sephardi Journey – Sephardi Contributions Throughout History, and Azoulay’s newest The Legacy of Maran Hacham Ovadia Yosef: Stories, Anecdotes and Inspiration. (A second book, Maran: The Life and Times of Hacham Ovadia Yosef, will be issued later this year.)

Azoulay sees events like the congressional luncheon as a way “to unify and support Sephardic identity, especially in smaller communities where the heritage runs the risk of being lost and absorbed into larger communities.”

There have been previous attempts to create pan-Sephardic federations, but thus far few have achieved much clout. “Look at Ezra Friedlander,” he points out. “He manages to bring both chasidic Jews and Chai Lifeline to the attention of Washington. Why shouldn’t we do the same thing, with close to half a million of us? Sephardic Jews have a long history in the US — they were the first Jews in the New World. Even the inscription on the Statue of Liberty was written by Emma Lazarus, a Sephardic Jewish woman.”

“I tell every Sephardic Jew, open your heart to your Sephardic heritage, and join the revolution.”