



Bringing Legends to *Life*

HE'S YOUNG, ENERGETIC, AND DETERMINED TO PUT SEPHARDIC HISTORY AND TORAH SCHOLARSHIP BACK ON THE MAP. IT'S YEHUDA AZOULAY'S ONE-MAN CAMPAIGN TO HONOR SEPHARDIC HISTORY

BY **BARBARA BENSOUSSAN**
PHOTOS **MEIR HALTOVSKY**

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 *ztz"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 these 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 Ovadiah *ztz”l*.”

Azoulay expects about a dozen congressmen to attend, and the honorees include Rabbi Elie Abadie of Manhattan’s Edmond J. Safra Synagogue, Toronto Sephardic leader Jacob Abecassis, 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 Ovadiah into English. Rav Yitzhak Yosef was originally scheduled to speak, but as we go to press Azoulay says he will probably be replaced by Rav Shlomo Amar, as the former is still in the middle of *shloshim* 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 *gedolim*. But Yehuda Azoulay 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 alienating. “When my father would wear a *kippah*, people would say to him, ‘Why are you wearing that? We’re not in a synagogue,’” he says. His father moved to Toronto, where he met and married Yehuda’s mother. “They started with nothing, and built 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 Azoulay, 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 marrying out of the community. And even those who don’t marry out become more and more distanced from the Old Country and its *mesorah*. Yehuda’s parents used to bring their entire family to participate in Moroccan *hillulot* (celebrations honoring the *yahrtzeit* of a *tzaddik*), but even then, Yehuda was able to perceive that something was missing.

“The Sephardim have a lot of *emunat chachamim*, and a great sense of *tzedakah*,” he says. “They’ll go to a *hillula*, 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 stories, the flying-carpet stories and such. 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 Haskalah 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 an identification with folkloric traditions like the *mimouna* (Motzaei Pesach party), *henna* (a pre-wedding festivity) or *swanee* (a Syrian prenuptial party in which *chassan* and *kallah* exchange 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 the Sephardim have a *brachah* for never having had a Reform

The Skeleton That Moved

In 1958, Chief Sephardic Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim launched an initiative to move the Chida’s remains from Italy, where he died in 1806, 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 1960, Azoulay 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. Rav 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 in a *mikveh* and requested a screwdriver to open the box... as he did, there were loud knocking noises from inside the coffin. Some of the people watching fainted! HaRav Mordechai, said, ‘HaChida! 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, 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 Kehillat Jerusalem section of Har HaMenuchos.



movement,” Azoulay 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 *henna* parties?”

While the Sephardim certainly have a rich history, Azoulay says, it’s 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 much of 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 *limudei chol*,” he says. “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

Yehuda Azoulay is keeping the presses rolling. With several titles already behind him, he’s planning to produce a new book every two years

eventually earn a PhD in Sephardic history. As a day job during the academic year in Toronto, he teaches Judaic studies for an online college, and works at Excelsior College with an instructor to give “capstone courses” in Jewish thought and ethics. He also works with the Torah High program, an NCSY *kiruv* 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 Ovadiah 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 up Sephardic Jewry in Eretz Yisrael, who restored their dignity and pride. For years he was the only *rav* vigorously helping *agunot*.”

There are also episodes in Chacham Ovadiah’s life few people know about, 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 *shiurim* in Hebrew instead of Arabic, and he had to switch to Arabic; and another time he was accused of being a spy for Israel.”

For years, Yehuda spent every Yom Kippur and Succos in Har Nof with Chacham Ovadiah. “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 the *tefillah* talks about *bittul Torah*, he would cry like a baby.”

Yehuda’s also busily cooking up yet more ideas for books: *parshah* books culled from

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Sephardic *gedolim*, entitled *A Legacy of Torah*; history curricula for high schools; a comprehensive work, about to release, on the entire gamut of Sephardic history (*The Sephardic Journey*). He expects to churn out about one book every two years. "Rav David Pinto, a well-known Moroccan *rav*, told me this is my *tikun*," he says. "I feel it as a calling." (Between the books, the teaching, the master's degree work, and *dafyomi*, 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, which he's titled *The Untold Story*. "I was actually inspired by a *Mishpacha* article about Greece," he says. "I've read a lot about the Jewish community of Salonika, how during the war they took the *chacham* and shaved his beard and killed him. People don't realize there were many Sephardim from France, Italy, and Greece who were killed by the Nazis."

Fascination with the Chida

Just this past March, after two years of work, Yehuda published a biography dear to his heart. Entitled *A Legend of Greatness: The Life & Times of Hacham Haim Yosef David Azoulay*, it's the first English-language biography of the Chida, who shares his last name. "My father was told by his father that our family is related to the Chida," he says with pride. "We aren't direct descendants, but we're from the same family." He speculates that the name Azoulay comes from the Spanish *azul*, or blue, referring to the blue eyes still claimed to be common among the Azoulay family from Fez (the Azoulay family settled in Fez, Morocco, after fleeing the Castile region of Spain).

A relatively recent historical personality, the Chida lived from 1724–1806; the Ohr HaChaim (Rav Chaim Ben Attar) and the Rashash (Rav Shalom Sharabi) were among

his teachers. In addition to his astonishing output — the Chida wrote some 80 seforim — there are sources from that time that write about him, and the Chida himself left diaries of his travels around the world, published after his death under the name *Maagal Tov*. Azoulay waxes enthusiastic when he begins discussing the Chida, of whom people said, "From Yosef [Karo] to Yosef there arose none like Yosef [Azoulay]." "He traveled the world, he met Christian scholars and the king of France," Azoulay says. "He was interested in science and literature; he'd go to rare museums and libraries, and since in those days you couldn't take anything out or copy it, he'd read, memorize the material, then come home and write it all down." It was in that fashion that he wrote, in 40 days, a work comprised of biographies of *gedolim* entitled *Shem Gedolim*.

Born and raised in Jerusalem, the Chida was giving classes at age 13, and at age 29 was elected to serve as *shaliach* for the community of Chevron. He would travel between 1753–1758 and 1773–1778 on fundraising missions, visiting 160 cities throughout North Africa, Turkey, and Western Europe and keeping notes in two small notebooks. While in Paris, he was taken to visit the palace of Versailles, where he was introduced to King Louis XVI — due to his regal presence and dignified clothing, the king thought he was a foreign ambassador. "He was a very immaculate person who always dressed well," Azoulay says. "Between that and his brilliance, he impressed anyone who came into contact with him."

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 Ovadiah Yosef's family, activists, and other world-renowned personalities led to his receiving a personal invitation 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 Shas-style Sephardic Agudah in North America, in partnership with Rabbi Dr. Elie Abadie of Manhattan's Safra 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 new *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 chassidic 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.

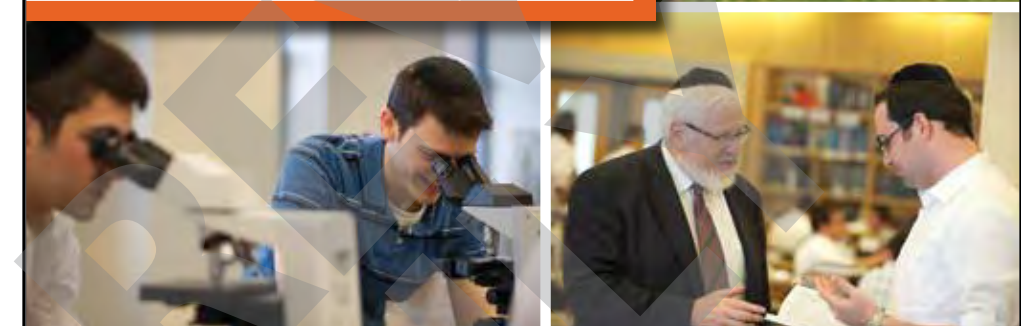
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