

Man

on a Mission
to Preserve
Sephardic
Legacy

BY GAVRIEL HORAN

“You can count the number of Sephardi Gedolim in the past century on one hand,” a student in Lakewood’s BMG yeshivah commented to Yehuda Azoulay over a decade ago. And that comment changed his life forever. When he countered that there were hundreds of sephardic Torah giants, the student replied, “Prove it.” Thus the burden of proof was placed squarely on Reb Yehuda’s shoulders.

“The statement wasn’t made out of malice or spite,” he recalls. “He wasn’t a bigot or a racist. He was simply ignorant – ignorant about sephardic history. At first, I was shocked, then annoyed, and then it hit me how tragic the comment really was. I suddenly realized that thousands of Sephardim are also ignorant about the greatness of sephardic heritage and the contribution we have made in Jewish history. I realized I had to do something about it.”



Yehuda Azoulay speaking in the U.S. Congress

Simple Faith

The son of Moroccan immigrants, Yehuda Azoulay grew up in the small, tight-knit sephardic community in Toronto. His family has a tradition that they are descended from the Chida (Harav Chaim Yosef David Azoulay), and as a child he was inculcated with a great passion for the beauty of sephardic Judaism.

“Both my parents came as young children from Morocco to Canada — my mother from Tangiers, my father from Casablanca — but they brought the old world to the new world,” he says. “It was a major adjustment for them, but they tried to pass down their legacy of generations to us. Unfortunately, it’s not so easy nowadays.”

Growing up, he prayed in sephardic congregations and participated in age-old rituals, *minhagim* and *hilulot* (*yahrtzeit seudos* for *tzaddikim*), but nonetheless, he felt something was missing.

“The Sephardim have a tremendous amount of *emunas chachamim*,” he says. “Many people attend *yahrtzeit* events for *tzaddikim* and give tremendous amounts of *tzedakah* in their memory. But despite their passion, many know very little about the *tzaddik* being honored. They know which city he came from, and they know the flying-carpet stories and other miracle tales, but they rarely know what the *tzaddik* represented in the bigger picture of Jewish history and Torah scholarship.”

He points out that since the Sephardim were exposed relatively late to the Haskalah and “enlightenment” ideology, they retained a high degree of *emunah peshutah* and attachment to tradition that many Ashkenazim lost. Nonetheless, over the past century, as traditional Middle-Eastern Jewish communities dispersed, Sephardim were scattered across the globe. Often, as they entered the modern, secular world, folk traditions such as the *henna* (a wedding custom), *mimouna* (a post-Pesach celebration), or *swanee* (a

Syrian prenuptial party) were elevated above the status of Torah, *Halachah* and *mitzvah* observance.

“In addition to lacking a strong foundation in halachic observance, many Sephardim do not know about the great contributions of sephardic leaders like Moses Montefiore and others to Jewish life today throughout the world,” he relates. “Understanding the history and keeping *mitzvos* go hand in hand.”

At the Master’s Feet

After graduating high school from Toronto’s Darchei Torah, Mr. Azoulay went on to Yeshivat Mikdash Melech in Eretz Yisrael. It was his first experience learning in a sephardic yeshivah. “I felt at home, being understood for who I am,” he recalls. In Yerushalayim, he started attending the Motzoei Shabbat *shiurim* of Hacham Ovadia Yosef, *zt”l*.

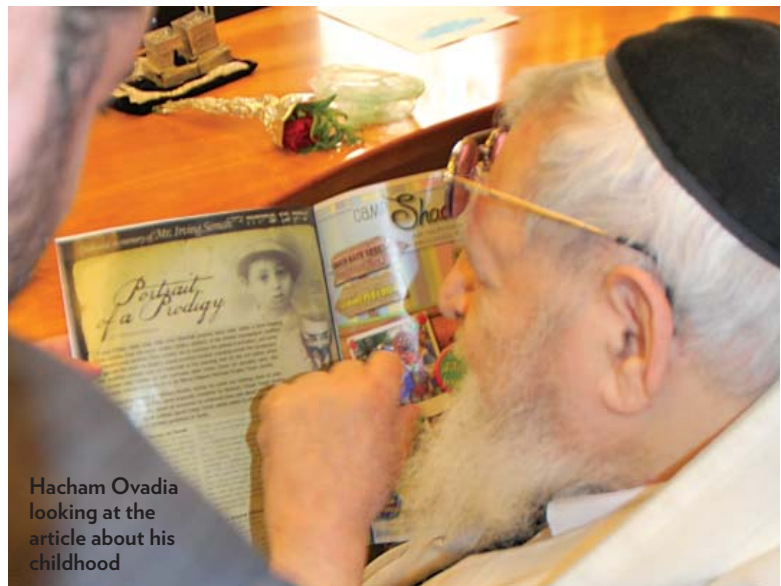
“The experience of being close to such a Torah giant started to influence my entire way of life. The *shiur* was packed with hundreds of Sephardim squished like sardines. Everyone was from all different backgrounds and walks of life, yet the *achdut* in the air was tangible. I was an 18-year-old from Toronto and couldn’t understand what I was seeing. The passion just continued to grow within me and I decided that I had to write a biography of Rav Ovadia’s life someday.” It was not long before the time would come.

“People don’t always realize the greatness of Maran,” he points out. “I follow everything he did. He’s the one who almost single-handedly raised sephardic Jewry in Eretz Yisrael, restoring their dignity and pride.”

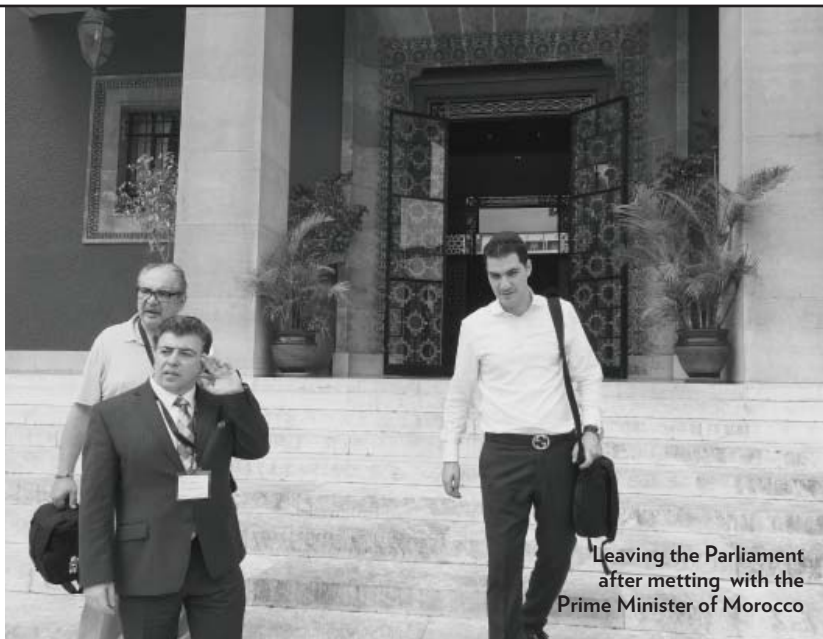
He will never forget the time he prayed with Rav Ovadia on Yom Kippur. There was only a 15-minute break throughout the entire Yom Kippur. Word got to the Rav that an elderly Moroccan man went home because he wasn’t feeling well but was still adamant about fasting. Hacham Ovadia, already elderly himself, got up from his chair and ran outside to catch



Yehuda with Hacham Ovadia Yosef



Hacham Ovadia looking at the article about his childhood



Standing with an advisor to the King of Morocco



up with the man, telling him he had to eat. Crying, the man told him that he had never broken a fast in his life. Hacham Ovadia responded, “You’re not breaking your fast. You are fulfilling a *mitzvah*. Now go and eat!”

Mr. Azoulay relates another one of his favorite stories about Maran. An Israeli girl from a religious sephardic family went off the *derech* and became completely estranged from her parents. After many years away from her family, she eventually gave birth to a child.

A religious doctor noticed that she didn’t have any family visiting her in the hospital. He inquired who her parents were and learned that her father was a close follower of Rav Ovadia. When the doctor told Rav Ovadia the story, the Rav asked the doctor to bring the girl to his house. He then called the father and told him to come over that evening.

“I have something for you,” he said. When the father arrived, he was surprised to see his daughter there, after so many years without any contact.

“*Mazal tov* on your grandson,” Rav Ovadia said. “Let’s make a *l’chaim*. You have to accept your daughter for who she is, just as we want Hashem to accept us.”

“That’s who Hacham Ovadia was,” Mr. Azoulay recalls emotionally. “He overlooked the issues even if someone wasn’t in line with Torah and *mitzvos*. The average Rabbi doesn’t always see the big picture like that. Maran could overlook the details and see the beauty of the Jewish *neshamah*.”

Becoming a Leader

Upon returning to North America to learn in BMG in Lakewood, comments like the one related in the introduction showed Mr. Azoulay just how little people knew about sephardic history. He also noticed that there was a tremendous lack of written material on the subject. At the time, a search for English books revealed only one biography of a Sephardi *Gadol* — the Baba Sali. When he mentioned his frustration to the *Rosh Yeshivah* of Mikdash Melech, Harav Haim Benoliel, the *Rosh Yeshivah* responded, “If it bothers you, do something

about it.”

So, at age 19, Yehuda Azoulay started writing short biographies of sephardic leaders whenever he had free time. After getting married at age 21 in 2007, he distributed a booklet of short biographical sketches during his *sheva brachos*. A year later, it was published as his first book, *A Legacy of Leaders – Inspiring Stories and Biographies of Sephardi Hachamim* (Israel Bookshop), with *haskamos* from Harav Matisyahu Salomon and Rav Benoliel, *shlita*, and *lbch”l* Rav Ovadia Yosef, *zt”l*. The book contains 25 biographies of Sages throughout the ages along with stories and anecdotes.

The book was better received than he had ever imagined and set off a veritable revolution. Reb Yehuda was rapidly propelled to the forefront of the Jewish world, meeting with Torah leaders, political leaders, and even monarchs. “Here I was, a 21-year-old young man, suddenly a voice for sephardic Jewry. Who was I? It was incredibly humbling, yet at the same time I felt a tremendous responsibility to use the opportunity to help strengthen and preserve my heritage.”

Mr. Azoulay went on to found his organization, the Sephardic Legacy Series Institute for Preserving Sephardic Heritage, as the focus of his life’s work. “I quickly filled a void at a very young age. People were blown away that such a young guy had written a book like this, and they started giving me an unusual amount of attention. It sparked a revolution because it was needed,” he explains. “I am devoting every last breath to sephardic Jewry because we are at a monumental time in our history. The quality of the sephardic *mesorah* is at risk because we are no longer living in our own communities. The culture, *minhagim*, the color and joy, is so rich and alive, and we need to preserve it.”

Over the next decade, Mr. Azoulay went on to publish several other books including *Legacy of Leaders II*, highlighting 26 more *hachamim*, as well as full-length biographies of the Chida and the Ben Ish Chai, and two biographies of Rav Ovadia Yosef. He also wrote over 30 articles on sephardic historical topics. He did all this while

simultaneously completing his Masters of Science degree from Yeshiva University's Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration. His books have since been translated into French and Spanish, and will soon be rendered into Persian and Russian as well.

Kings and Politicians

In 2012, Mr. Azoulay was surprised when asked to become the international director of Shas — Rav Ovadia Yosef's political party in the Israeli Knesset. He had the privilege of spending an entire week in Rav Ovadia's house while meeting with numerous members of the Knesset around the clock. "It wasn't the politicians that impressed me; it was watching the way Hacham Ovadia conducted himself. I will never forget the privilege I had to be by his side," he recalls. In the end, he declined the position because he didn't want to get involved in politics. Rav Ovadia was disappointed, but he understood and gave Azoulay his *brachah* to continue his other endeavors.

Despite his desire to avoid politics, Mr. Azoulay was at the forefront of some very monumental political events over the past few years. In November of 2013, he initiated the "Inaugural Tribute Luncheon Honoring the Contributions of Sephardic Jewry in America" in the Kennedy Room of the U.S. Capitol.

As part of the event, he brought 200 Sephardim to Washington, D.C. to celebrate 250 years of Sephardic history in America. They were addressed by Senators Ted Cruz, Chuck Schumer and others who acknowledged Sephardic contributors to America, such as Emma Lazarus, whose poem is engraved on the Statue of Liberty.

At the meeting, he met with U.S. officials to work out a plan to preserve the Iraqi Jewish archives discovered by U.S. soldiers during the Iraqi war. Again in 2015, Reb Yehuda led a Sephardic National Delegation to Ottawa for the first time in Canadian history, to meet with former Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Last September, he was invited to join 20

Jewish leaders from around North America to lobby in the U.S. Congress for the anti-BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions Movement) legislation.

Last summer, Mr. Azoulay organized an exclusive delegation to Morocco — the North American Conference of Moroccan Jewry — with the goal of furthering Judeo-Muslim dialogue and inter-cultural relations. The mission brought 60 influential Moroccan Jews to tour Jewish historic sites in Morocco and meet with politicians, royal dignitaries, and the senior advisor of the king, who happens to be Jewish (see sidebar).

Linking the Chain

After working for NCSY in Toronto for several years as the vice principal of Torah High, Mr. Azoulay recently left the world of Jewish education and went into business. He is currently the vice president and head of investor relations for Concrete Mortgage Capital Inc. and the president of Yellowstone Investment Inc. He is also in the process of pursuing his Doctor of Science in Jewish Studies from Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning, from Northwestern University and Yale.

Despite his busy schedule, he still manages to devote time every day to work on his mission. He is currently writing the first-ever comprehensive encyclopedia of various Sephardic communities and is involved in dozens of other projects, such as a biography of Hacham Mordechai Elijah, *zt"l*, and an anthology of noble Sephardic women.

He recounts a quintessential story of Hacham Ezra Attia, the *Rosh Yeshiva* of Porat Yosef in the Old City of Yerushalayim, that exemplifies his mission. The *Rosh Yeshiva* was once giving a *shiur* in the *beit midrash* of Porat Yosef. The windows were open, so that the people walking up and down to the Kosel were visible. In the middle of the *shiur*, as an old man walked past the yeshiva, the *Rosh Yeshiva* suddenly stood up. When asked why, he explained that that



Yehuda with Hacham Asayag at the henna



Yehuda with Rabbi Shlomo Amar



The Gift of the King

Jewish communities have existed in Morocco since as early as 70 CE. It was during the end of the Second Temple era when the first group of Jews moved to North Africa, and a second large wave of migration from the Iberian Peninsula occurred in the period leading up to and following the Spanish Inquisition in 1492.

For many centuries, the Jews and Muslims in Morocco enjoyed what was for the most part a peaceful coexistence. Although the Jews had dhimmi, or minority second-class status, in Muslim Morocco, the Moroccan monarchy established a unique relationship with the Jewish community that has continued until modern times. In fact, during the Holocaust, King Muhammad V refused to implement the anti-Semitic laws imposed upon his province by the Nazi-controlled Vichy regime in France that ruled parts of Morocco at the time.

During the years following the founding of the State of Israel, Israel and Morocco formed a unique secret allegiance focusing on emigration, intelligence and diplomacy. Moroccan-Israeli ties further strengthened in the late 1950s and '60s, and the Mossad offered intelligence support, training and weapons to Morocco's royal bodyguards and intelligence agencies.

In 1959, King Hassan II shocked the Arab world during a visit in Lebanon when he publicly argued that the only solution for the enduring conflict was to make peace and incorporate Israel in the Arab League. Then, in 1965, he allegedly passed off top-secret information to Israeli intelligence greatly assisting them in developing the strategy for the Six Day War. He was also instrumental in encouraging peace talks between Israel and Egypt and Jordan.



At the palace of the king of Morocco

The ties between the two nations have proven exceptionally profitable for both populations. Economic trade between Morocco and Israel is today estimated at \$100 million a year. In the early twentieth century, Moroccan Jews held prominent positions in the royal government of Morocco and enjoyed respect and admiration. Even today, one of the king's senior advisors, Andre Azoulay, is Jewish.

In May 2016, Yehuda Azoulay led a delegation of 60 prominent North American Jews of Moroccan descent on a mission to Morocco. The conference was held in Rabat, Morocco's capital, but the delegation also visited Casablanca, Marrakech, Ouazanne, El-Ksar El-Kbir and Mazagan, where the delegates met with high-ranking officials while visiting ancient Jewish quarters and the tombs of holy sages.

Although there are only 3,000 Jews remaining in Morocco, His Majesty King Mohamed VI maintains warm relations with Moroccan Jewry worldwide. He

personally donated a fountain to the Sephardic Kehila Centre in Toronto in 2011 and graciously provided full security escort for the delegation's entire duration.

During the visit, the delegation met with numerous government officials, including Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane; President of the House of Representatives Rachid Talbi Alami; Senior Adviser to the King André Azoulay and others. One result of the mission was the promise of the Kingdom of Morocco to start restoration of the Jewish cemetery in El-Ksar El-Kbir, which had been overlooked for many years.

"On Shabbat, 65 Jews walked from the synagogue to our meal, with *yarmulkes* proudly showing. It was amazing to walk openly in a country of millions of Muslims without any fear," Reb Yehuda recalls. "I live in Canada, but my heart is in Morocco and Israel. People say that I'm young, but I am an old sephardic soul."

man had his *tefillin* put on the very first time by the Ben Ish Chai in Baghdad. "I stood up for him because the Ben Ish Chai touched him."

"That is the beauty of sephardic heritage," Azoulay concludes. "It's an unbroken chain all the way back to our

ancestors. My job is to record the memories and traditions of the older generation, so we can take the past and apply it to the future. This is the final countdown of preserving the sephardic legacy worldwide. The clock is ticking. I'm on a race and I'm not going to stop! I'm doing this for our children." ■