

HACHAM YEHUDA FETAYA *z.s.l.*

BAGHDAD, IRAQ 5619-5702/1859-1942

YEHUDA AZOULAY

To be conferred *semiha* (rabbinic ordination) by the great sage Hacham Abdallah Somech, is a tremendous achievement – but to be bestowed with this honor at the age of seventeen is truly remarkable. Such is just one of the accomplishments of Hacham Yehuda ben Moshe Fetaya, *z.s.l.* Born in Baghdad, Iraq on the second of Shevat, 5619/1859, Hacham Yehuda's father, Hacham Moshe, was himself an acclaimed *talmid hacham* and accomplished scholar of Kabbalah. It was in this unique aura of Torah and sanctity that Hacham Yehuda's unquenchable thirst for knowledge and kind, gentle personality were forged.

Young Yehuda began his life-long career of Torah study at Midrash Talmud Torah, where he exhibited an extraordinary intellect and intense desire to learn and observe the Torah down to its last detail. He learned in the Bet Zilka study hall with his teacher Hacham Shimon Agasi. He would eventually earn the affection of another teacher, Hacham Abdallah Somech, who regarded the budding scholar so highly that he conferred *semiha* (rabbinic ordination) upon him already at the age of seventeen, granting him the authority to teach and rule on halachic matters. Later, Hacham

Yehuda emerged as one of the foremost disciples of the Ben Ish Hai (Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909).

After mastering the Talmud and its commentaries, Hacham Yehuda proceeded to delve into the profound wisdom of Kabbalah. Already at the age of 25, he authored *Bet Lehem Yehuda*, his first great work on Kabbalah, which dealt with both theoretical and practical aspects of Jewish mysticism.

Hacham Yehuda's scholarship was rivaled only by his humility. He did whatever he could to conceal his academic and spiritual accomplishments, in order to avoid honor and prestige. Despite these attempts, however, his reputation spread far and wide, and countless people – both Jews and non-Jews alike – sought his spiritual guidance and *berachot* (blessings).

The hacham felt a particularly close connection to Eress Yisrael and Jerusalem. He visited the holy city in 1905 and in 1923, and in

THE EXORCISM OF A VILLAIN

In his famous work *Minhat Yehuda*, Hacham Yehuda chronicles his experiences with earth-bound souls and the exorcisms that he performed. One such incident occurred on 22 Kislev 5663 (1903), when he was approached by a man named Yehezkel Ezra Bachur, who for many years had been plagued by thoughts urging him to renounce Judaism and embrace Christianity. This was not the first time Hacham Yehuda had heard Bachur's story. Nearly twenty years earlier, Bachur consulted with the Ben Ish Hai, who immediately penned a letter to Hacham Eliyahu Mani of Hebron (1823-1903), inquiring into the reason for these thoughts. Hacham Mani responded that this young man had an impenetrable *klipah* (obstruction) over his heart, and that he was unable to help him. The Ben Ish Hai then approached Hacham Yehuda, who wrote a *mezuzah* for Bachur to wear over his heart. But the *mezuzah* had no effect, leading Bachur to suspect that he perhaps had a harmful spirit inside him. He returned to Hacham Yehuda to ask him to eliminate the spirit.

Hacham Yehuda began to perform *yihudim* – the recitation of sacred passages from the *Zohar* – speaking directly into Yehezkel's ear. The breath of the *yihud* entered his ear and then into his internal organs, disturbing the spirit.

Bachur suddenly started to laugh. He explained that he heard a voice inside himself – the voice of the spirit – viciously cursing Hacham Yehuda.

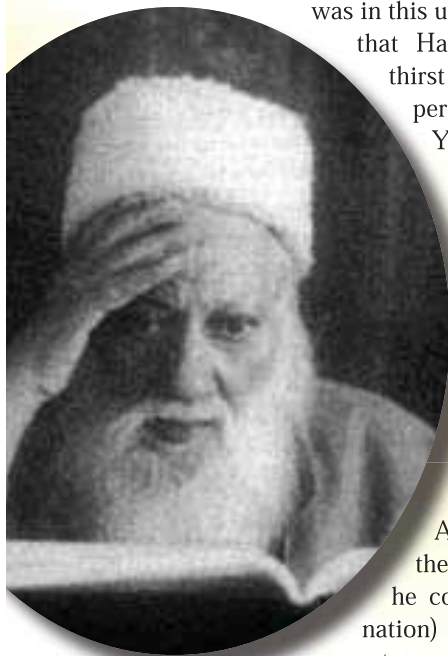
Rabbi Fetaya continued to recite the *yihudim* and then blew a *shofar*. Finally, the spirit could bear it no longer and bellowed, "What does Hacham Yehuda want from me?"

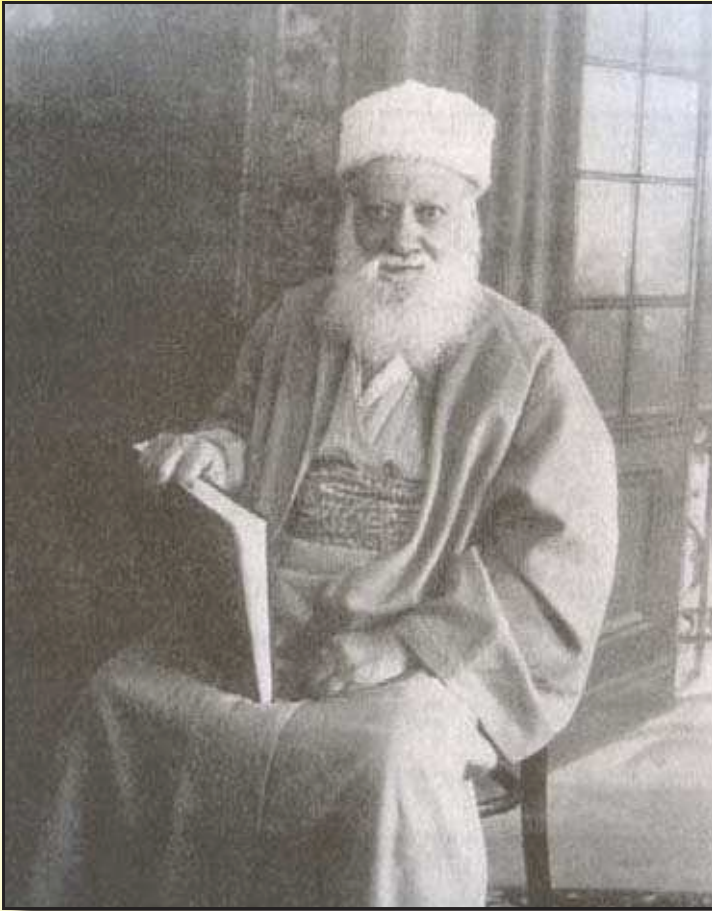
Hacham Yehuda asked him his name and city of origin, warning him of the harsh consequences he would endure if he didn't speak the truth. The spirit initially refused to divulge the information and derided Hacham Yehuda, but after Hacham Yehuda continued with the *yihudim*, the spirit had no choice but to relent.

His name was Tzvi Ben Rivka from the city of Smyrna. He had been an apostate, and possessed Bachur some seven-teen years earlier.

***"Go to Gehinom!"
Bachur angrily shouted at the spirit.***

"I cannot," the spirit answered. "I am not yet worthy to enter into *Gehinom*, as I am guilty of too many sins to allow for my atonement through the suffering of *Gehinom*."





1934, he realized his dream of settling permanently in the sacred city of Yerushalayim.

In a *haskama* (letter of approbation) to his work by Rabbi Shimon Agasi, Hacham Yehuda was described as “a great, righteous man and Kabbalist, renowned as a holy man – the wisdom of Hashem is within him. His works prove the extent of his sanctity and his hidden wisdom, which is evident to those who love to learn.”

Hacham Yehuda determined that he was a *gilgul* (reincarnation) of Rabbi Yehezkel ben Yehuda Landau of Prague (1713 - 1793), a legendary Ashkenazic sage more commonly known by the name of his work, *Noda Beyehuda*. Although the *Noda Beyehuda* achieved greatness during his lifetime as both a scholar and *saddik*, Hacham Yehuda asserted, his soul had to return to earth to fulfill his Torah obligation to study Kabbalah. Hacham Yehuda therefore focused his time and energies on the study of Kabbalah, in order to perfect the soul of the *Noda Beyehuda*.

Indeed, Hacham Yehuda attained a level of Kabbalistic proficiency that few other masters in the field achieved. He learned how to detect the presence of spirits and demons, as well the art of exorcism – eliminating these harmful forces from a person. Additionally, when approached by somebody claiming to have had encountered a spirit, Hacham Yehuda had the ability to discern from the person’s report whether or not such an encountered had in fact occurred.

Hacham Yehuda Moshe Fetaya passed away on the 27th of Av, 5702/1942, and was buried on Har Hazetim (Mount of Olives), in the section of the great *talmidei hachamim* of Bavel.

Hacham Yehuda then asked, “Aren’t you the notorious Shabtai Tzvi from Izmir, who made himself to be a Mashiah?”

The spirit confirmed that he was, indeed, Shabtai Tzvi the infamous false Messiah, born in 5391/1631 in Smyrna (today Izmir, Turkey). During his turbulent life, Tzvi purported to be a rabbi and Kabbalist, and, following a difficult period in Jewish history, ultimately attracted a very large following of Jews who believed him to be the long-awaited Mashiah. Under pressure from the Sultan, Tzvi later renounced Judaism and began practicing Islam. He died in obscurity in 1666 in Dulcigno, Montenegro.

“Two hundred and thirty seven years have already passed since your death,” Hacham Yehuda continued. “Tell me, where have you reincarnated until now? How were you judged?” The spirit refused to answer, and again mocked Hacham Yehuda.

Hacham Yehuda recited additional *yihudim*, and explained to the cursing and agonizing spirit that he sought this information for his benefit, to enable him to achieve atonement. Finally, the spirit felt assured and allowed Hacham Yehuda to continue.

The *hacham* asked whether the *yihudim* helped rectify him, and the spirit replied, “Yes, yes, your honor, I feel that the weight of the *klipah* is lighter upon me.”

“How thick is the *klipah* that is left upon you?” the rabbi inquired.

“Without exaggeration, it is at least two feet thick. I am indeed Shabtai Tzvi. I did not repent before my death, and I was buried in a gentile cemetery. Even while I was yet alive, the *klipah* would materialize before my eyes, and this is what caused me to become evil.”

The spirit proceeded to express remorse for the sins he committed and his desire to complete his process of rectification. He also thanked and blessed Hacham Yehuda for helping him, and began elaborating on his story. After his death, he endured demonic beatings for twelve years and was reincarnated numerous times within wild animals. His invasion of Bachur’s soul marked his first time possessing a human.

Hacham Yehuda advised Bachur to learn Torah and Zohar each day in the early hours of the predawn morning and after his meal for the sake of elevating the soul of Shabtai Tzvi. He further instructed him to immerse in a *mikveh* every day and disregard any evil thoughts. Rather than pay heed to them, he was to respond instead by concentrating on certain *pesukim* (Biblical verses).

The spirit also requested that Hacham Yehuda continue to recite *yihudim* and blow the *shofar* into Bachur’s ear each day, as this, too, would help him earn the right to enter *Gehinom* and achieve atonement.

Within a few days, Bachur was no longer disturbed by the thoughts that had plagued him for so many years. Hacham Yehuda examined him and confirmed that the spirit had departed for *Gehinom*.

Yehuda Azoulay is the author of A Legacy of Leaders, a groundbreaking English book of biographies and stories of Sephardic hachamim.