

principles

Senior Rabbi Joseph Dweck, Rosh Bet Midrash

An Introduction

Dayan Ofer Livnat, The Sephardi Beth Din

Seeking the Foundations

Essays by our Talmidim on

Our Hakhamim



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and many others...

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An Introduction

Senior Rabbi Joseph Dweck

Rosh Bet Midrash, The Sephardi Habura



We are not a homogeneous people.

The perspectives, thought, world-view and customs of the Jews are diverse and wide-ranging. This diversity runs to our very origins. We began as a family, but even the family was born from difference. Jacob fathered twelve children who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Those twelve children came from four different mothers, two of whom were women not related to Jacob (as Rachel and Leah were). And while today all that is left of that great and diverse nation are descendants of three tribes, the genetics of all are undoubtedly within us. We are anything but monolithic.

And yet, in the diversity of our nation there are members whose light, at times, has shined brighter than others. For much of the last century and this one, the Ashkenazic branch of the family has found the greatest public face and prominence while the Sephardic branch has been largely obscured. There are many reasons for this which are beyond our current scope. The Sepharadim, however, come from a treasury of culture, thought, and world-view that is an essential and integral part of the Jewish story. This volume, the institution it represents, and the people who comprise its membership, shine a new light upon this treasury.

The term “Sephardic” today stands for many rich and varied cultures and backgrounds. In the vernacular it essentially refers to anyone who isn’t Ashkenazic. But there is the proper meaning of the word and the generic meaning. In its proper sense it refers to Jews who originated in the Iberian Peninsula. In its more generic meaning, it refers to Jews who come from a wide geographical range including but not limited to: Western Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. The Sepharadim, literally, the “Spaniards”, brought with them a special approach and system of thought in Torah. The Andalusia in southern Spain, under Moorish rule for close to 800 years (711-1492), was home to prolific Jewish thinkers, poets, scholars, and political leaders. From this fertile land rose the likes of Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Ezra, Ibn Megas, Ibn Pakuda, Yehuda Halevi, Shemuel Hanagid, and the crown upon all our heads, Moshe ben Maimon, HaRambam.

The thought and approach to Torah that was lived and taught in this place spread after the expulsion of 1492. The Sepharadim resettled throughout the Mediterranean basin and North Africa while some moved to other parts of Western Europe and infused these regions with their cultural and intellectual gems. Today, the heirs to this way as well as other members of the nation who wish to be educated in it, must work hard to uncover it. Sadly, it has not been readily available, nor frequently taught. It has been dimmed to such a degree that when it is spoken and presented it can often seem as though it is inauthentic to Judaism. Its unique notes and rhythms are so unfamiliar to so many that when its ‘music’ is played it sounds off-tune. *It is not.* It, like other genres of music, has its own frameworks, contexts and principles. To understand and appreciate its melodies one must be at least generally familiar with its milieu. It is different than the now popular mode of Jewish life, but it is ours nonetheless, and no less genuine and authentic. It is our right to study it, live it, and teach it without prejudice or self-consciousness.

An Introduction

Senior Rabbi Joseph Dweck

Rosh Bet Midrash, The Sephardi Habura



It is with precisely this aim that the Sephardi Habura was founded. We have taken advantage of modern technology that virtually erases geographical blocks and physical obstacles in order to bring, as never before, the illustrious heritage and wisdom of Sepharad to our friends, children, and fellow Jews who wish to study it, wherever they may be. As professor Zvi Zohar, an esteemed member of our advisory board, so rightfully said: *'To limit Sephardic tradition to those of Sephardic ancestry is like limiting Shakespeare to Englishmen!*' And in that vein, we embrace all those *hakhamim* throughout Jewish history who have shared similar and complementary ideas to this Sepharadi approach to our curriculum and repertoire. For us, this is not just an endeavour to enhance and cultivate the Sepharadi way, it is an endeavour to strengthen and cultivate the rich and deep diversity that is the nation of Israel.

This journal, like our Bet Midrash, will focus on the frameworks of thought through which we understand our Torah and our world. We have called it 'Principles' based on the teaching of our *Hakhamim* (Sifre, Ha'azinu, 32:2) *'May the words of Torah always be as contextual principles in your hands rather than individual details.'* This edition of our journal highlights our teachers; the great *Hakhamim* of the generations who taught and explained our way in Torah and the world.

I am grateful to all the members of the virtual Bet Midrash who contributed essays, and I am grateful to all the instructors who donated their time and gave with great generosity of their wisdom, kindness, and care to raise the mantle of this beautiful heritage. I am particularly grateful to Sina Kahen and Avi Garson for managing and overseeing this most important endeavour and I pray that the *zekhut* of their work and heartfelt dedication stands for them and all they hold dear.

I encourage you all to take advantage of this rich resource that we have been blessed to share and to enjoy the varied offerings of our special Bet Midrash. We welcome you, and we look forward to sharing with you and learning with and from you.

May this work find favour in the eyes of the Holy One and in its merit may we see the full harmony and unity of the Jewish people shine in our days.

Rabbi Joseph Dweck is the Senior Rabbi of the S&P Sephardi Community of the UK - the country's oldest Jewish community. He studied in Jerusalem at Yeshiva Hazon Ovadia under the tutelage of former Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Ovadia Yosef. He has an MA in Jewish education. In his capacity as Senior Rabbi, Rabbi Dweck serves as a President of The Council of Christians and Jews, Deputy President of the London School of Jewish Studies, Ecclesiastical Authority of The Board of Deputies of British Jews, and Standing Committee Member of the Conference of European Rabbis.

Seeking the Foundations

Dayan Ofer Livnat

The Sephardi Beth Din, United Kingdom



"My practice always is that any place there is a hint to matters of faith to expound on it, for it is important to me to explain a foundation of the foundations more than anything I teach." – (commentary to the Mishna, Berachot 9:7)

In this brief and insightful self-reflection, HaRambam offers us a key approach to studying Torah, particularly relevant for The Sephardi Habura. Whatever you are studying, seek the fundamental beliefs lurking behind the details. This approach of HaRambam is evident not only in his pedagogics of this writings, but also in his interpretation of Halacha. I would like to offer one example for this, which we discussed in The Sephardi Habura.

Prior to writing the Mishne Torah, his codex of Jewish law, HaRambam wrote his Sefer HaMitzvot, detailing the 613 commandments. The stated purpose of this work was to serve as a template or outline for the Mishne Torah. Each commandment or set of commandments, would serve as the basis for each section of laws in the Mishne Torah. Indeed, HaRambam repeats this list of 613 commandments in the Mishne Torah, but now arranged as the headings to each section of laws. However, in quite a few places, the formulation of the commandments in the Mishne Torah change from their formulation in Sefer HaMitzvot. We will analyse one such example, regarding the commandment to blow the trumpets. The Torah commands (Bamidbar 10, 9-10):

וְכִי תִבְאוּ מִלְחָמָה בְּאֹרְצְכֶם עַל הַצָּר הַצָּר אֲתֶכֶם וְהִרְעַתֶם בְּחִצְצֹת וְנִזְכַּרְתֶּם לְפָנַי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם וְנִשְׁעַתֶּם מֵאִיְבֵיכֶם וְיִוִּם שְׂמֵחַתְכֶם וּבְמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם וּבְרֵאשֵׁי יְהוָה וְהִקְדַּעְתֶּם בְּחִצְצֹת עַל עֲלֵיתְכֶם וְעַל זְבִיחֵי שְׁלֵמֵיכֶם וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן לְפָנַי אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם:

When you are at war in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound short blasts on the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the LORD your God and be delivered from your enemies. And on your joyous occasions—your fixed festivals and new moon days—you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being. They shall be a reminder of you before your God: I, the LORD, am your God.

HaRambam lists this Mitzvah in his Sefer HaMitzvot (mitzvot aseh 59), as a commandment to blow the trumpets in the Temple along with the special sacrificial offerings of the holidays, and also to blow the trumpets during times of need and trouble, such as wartime, when we call out in prayer to God. However, in the Mishne Torah, this commandment is quoted at the heading to the Laws of Fast Days (Hilchot Ta'aniyot), where it is formulated quite differently:

הלכות תעניות. מצות עשה אחת והיא לזעוק לפני ה' בכל עת צרה גדולה שלא תבא על הצבור. וביאור מצוה זו בפרקים אלו

HaRambam here formulates the Mitzvah simply as to call out in prayer to God in times of trouble. There is no mention of trumpets at all, and no mention of blowing in the Temple on the holidays.

In the first chapter of the Laws of Fasts, HaRambam offers an explanation as to how he came to this new formulation:

It is a positive commandment from the Torah to cry out and to sound trumpets for all troubles that come upon the community; as it is stated (Bamidbar 10, 9), "upon an enemy who attacks you and you sound trumpets." That is to say, [with] every matter that troubles you — such as famine, a plague, locusts and that which is similar to them — cry out about them, and sound the trumpets. And this thing is from the ways of repentance. For when a trouble comes and they yell out about it and sound [trumpets], everyone will know that it was because of their evil deeds that this bad was done to them. As it is stated (Yirmiyahu 5:25), "It is your iniquities that have diverted, etc." And this is what will cause them to remove the trouble from upon them.

But if they do not cry out and sound [trumpets], but rather say, "What has happened to us is the way of the world, and this trouble is merely happenstance" — it is surely the way of cruelty, and it causes them to stick to their bad deeds. And the trouble will add other troubles. About this is it written in the Torah (Vayikra 26, 27-28), "but walk arbitrarily with Me. Then I will (also) walk arbitrarily with you in fury." That is to say, "When I will bring upon you troubles — if you will say that it is arbitrary, I will increase the fury of this arbitrariness." (Hilchot Ta'aniyot 1,1-4)

Seeking the Foundations

Dayan Ofer Livnat

The Sephardi Beth Din, United Kingdom



And it is (a rabbinic commandment) from the words of the Scribes to fast for each trouble that comes upon the community until they are granted mercy from the Heavens. And on these fast days, we yell out with prayers and supplicate and sound only the trumpets. And if they were in the Temple, they would sound trumpets and the shofar. The shofar blows short and the trumpets blow long, since the commandment of the day is with trumpets. And we only blow with the trumpets and the shofar at the same time in the Temple, as it is stated (Tehillim 78, 6). "With trumpets and the blast of the horn raise a shout before the Lord, the King."

HaRambam here explains that essentially the commandment to call out in prayer in times of trouble, teaches a fundamental principle of faith, that troubles arrive at our doorstep not by mere chance or random events, but as punishment for sins and as a call to repent and correct the error of our ways. If we do not call out to God when faced with trouble or danger that would be indicative that we do not see Him as the source of these events, and the events would have no effect on our behavior.

Now while this is certainly a profound and central message, how is it connected to the blowing of the trumpets?

To answer this, let us try and walk through the interpretive steps HaRambam took from the formulation of the commandment in the Torah, to his final formulation in the Mishne Torah:

1. The Torah mentioned blowing the trumpets in times of war. HaRambam interprets this to mean not only war, but any times of trouble, including also famine, plague, locusts, etc.
2. The Torah mentions blowing trumpets. HaRambam extends this to mean to call out to God in prayer, which includes praying, blowing the trumpets, and generally doing acts of repentance such as fasting and self-examination.
3. HaRambam explains that this mitzvah essentially teaches us the correct belief on the occurrence of troubles in the world.

We see therefore how HaRambam took the commandment to blow the trumpets during wartime, and through interpretation and analysis, was able to articulate from it a commandment of much broader scope, and a fundamental belief. In Sefer HaMitzvot, HaRambam formulated the commandment as it appears in the text of the Torah, or close to it. However, when he came to the Mishne Torah, he fleshed out the full scope of the Mitzvah, and reformulated it accordingly.

While we have explained how from the commandment to blow the trumpets in wartime HaRambam arrived to the commandment of praying in times of trouble, what remains puzzling is where does the commandment to blow the trumpets in the Temple during the holidays fit into the picture? Note that in Sefer HaMitzvot, HaRambam included that within the same commandment of blowing the trumpets in times of trouble.

Perhaps the answer may be found in the verses, describing the purpose of blowing the trumpets. Both regarding the blowing of trumpets in wartime and the blowing of trumpets in the holidays, the Torah states that the purpose is to be remembered before God. We may thus offer the following explanation. When telling us to blow the trumpets, the Torah is essentially teaching us to call out to God, and the trumpets are a means to amplify our voices in calling out to God.

There are two primary times we are taught to call out to God – in times of trouble and in times of joy. Just as when we are faced with trouble, we recognize God as the address for our prayers, so too in times of joy, we must recognize God as the address for our thanks. The fundamental belief we are taught is the same, that God is the source for all that occurs in our lives.

Dayan Ofer Livnat is a Dayan of the Sephardi Beth Din of the UK. A graduate of the Eretz Hemdah Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies in Yerushalayim, Dayan Livnat teaches in a number of programs for training rabbis and Dayanim, including the Semicha and Dayanut Programs run jointly by the Montefiore Endowment of London and Eretz Hemdah. Dayan Livnat has previously served in an artillery unit in the IDF and is currently studying for a PhD in Jewish studies at University College London.

Past Curriculum

Look what we've covered so far in 2020!

JUNE 2020		
29th	Hashkafic & Halakhic Differences between Sephardim & Ashkenazim	Rabbi Daniel Kada & Sina Kahen
JULY 2020		
8th	The Introduction to Mishneh Torah (Part 1)	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
15th	The Impact of Hashkafa on Halakha	Dayan Ofer Livnat
22nd	The Introduction to Mishneh Torah (Part 2)	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
28th	Sephardi Hakhamim of London - Sasportas, Nieto, Gaguine	Rabbi Shalom Morris
AUGUST 2020		
5th	The Introduction to Mishneh Torah (Part 3)	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
12th	God's Foreknowledge vs Free Will	Rabbi Daniel Kada
19th	The Approach of Hakham Ben Zion Uziel	Prof. Zvi Zohar
26th	The Introduction to Mishneh Torah (Part 4)	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
SEPTEMBER 2020		
2nd	Democracy / Theocracy / Dictatorship - What does the Torah prefer?	Rabbi Shmuli Phillips
9th	The Authority of the Hakhamim - Rambam vs Ramban	Dayan Ofer Livnat
16th	The Introduction to Mishneh Torah (Part 5)	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
23rd	Yom Kippur & Sukkot Through A Sephardi Lens	Rabbi Daniel Kada
30th	Rambam & Ramban - Two Different Sephardi Approaches	Prof. Moshe Halbertal
OCTOBER 2020		
7th	Sephardi Teshubot Series: Hayim David Halevi on Halakhic Innovation	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
14th	Was Rambam hiding his Aristotelianism?	Rabbi Daniel Rowe
20th	Sephardi Teshubot Series: Matloub Abadi on Kashrut/Dishwashers	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
28th	Jewish Denominations: A Halakhic Analysis	Rabbi Daniel Kada
NOVEMBER 2020		
3rd	Sephardi Teshubot Series: Yosef Qafih on Invoking G-d in Daily Life	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
11th	"We Accept the Rulings of Maran" (Part 1)	Rabbi Yonatan Halevy
17th	Sephardi Teshubot Series: Ovadia Yosef on Kabbalah in Halakha	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
25th	Avraham's Razor: God, Reality, and Religion	Rabbi Sam Millunchick
DECEMBER 2020		
1st	Sephardi Teshubot Series: Rambam on Leniency	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
9th	The Approach of Hakham Yisrael Moshe Hazan	Prof. Zvi Zohar
15th	The Roots of Hanukkah's Conflict	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
23rd	"We Accept the Rulings of Maran" (Part 2)	Rabbi Yonatan Halevy
29th	Sephardi Philosophy and The Beginning of Time	Rabbi Dr Sam Lebens

To watch the recordings of these classes, just search 'The Sephardi Habura' on YouTube.

Upcoming Curriculum

Look what we've got planned for early 2021!

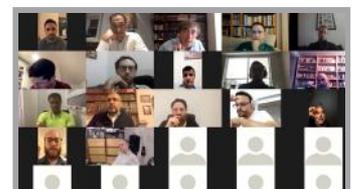
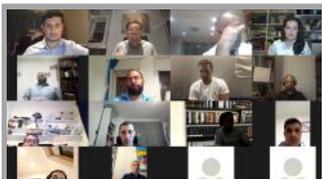
JANUARY 2021		
Weds 6th	How World Jewry Responded to Maran's Shulhan Arukh	Rabbi Yonatan Halevy
Tues 12th	Thoughts of Hakham Gaguine (Part 1)	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
Weds 20th	Learning Talmud: Differences between Sephardim and Ashkenazim	Rabbi Harold Sutton
Tues 26th	Thoughts of Hakham Gaguine (Part 2)	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
FEBRUARY 2021		
Weds 3rd	Sefer HaMitzvot	Dayan Ofer Livnat
Tues 9th	Surprise Topic	Surprise Guest Speaker
Weds 17th	Yemenite Commentaries on the Torah	Rabbi Daniel Kada
Tues 23rd	Were Amalek the first Existentialists? A Maimonidean Approach	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
MARCH 2021		
Weds 3rd	How to Study a Sugya in Sepharad (Part 1)	Rabbi Avraham Faur
Tues 9th	Principles: From the Mishne Torah and the Moreh (Part 1)	Rabbi Joseph Dweck
Weds 17th	How to Study a Sugya in Sepharad (Part 2)	Rabbi Avraham Faur
Tues 23rd	Principles: From the Mishne Torah and the Moreh (Part 2)	Rabbi Joseph Dweck



To find out how to join these and future classes...

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WhatsApp: take a picture of the QR code below



R. BAHYA IBN PAQUDA

by Avi Garson



Hakham Bahya Ibn Paquda (c. 1050–1120), sometimes referred to as Rabbenu Beḥaye was a prominent Dayan in Zaragoza, in what was the north-eastern part of al-Andalus (not to be confused with another Rabbenu Beḥaye - Bahya ben Asher - who lived in Zaragoza two centuries later). Ibn Paquda was also a philosopher who is famed for his treatise "*Hobot Ha-lebabot*" (The Duties of the Heart). Apart from being a contemporary of R' Yehuda Halevi, very little is known about his personal life.

The Duties of the Heart was one of the first Jewish system of ethics, written in Arabic in 1040 under the title "*Kitab Al Hidayah ila Faraid al-Kulub*" (Guide to the Duties of the Heart), and translated into Hebrew by the prolific translator and physician Yehuda ibn Tibbon in the years 1161-1180. The *Hobot Ha-lebabot* is divided into ten "gates" which correspond to the ten core foundations upon which spiritual life is founded on. It is undoubtedly one of the most popular books on Jewish faith, for it speaks to the more philosophically-inclined as well as the layman who finds in it deep spiritual comfort, guidance and *hizuk*.

The impetus to compile this ethical-philosophical work was because he had noticed that Jews at the time were paying attention to the outward observance of the Law, "the duties to be performed by the parts of the body" (*hobot ha-ebaram*), but little attention was paid to the ideas behind them that constitute the 613 Mitzvot, "the duties of the heart" (*hobot ha-leb*). The work is not a polemic trying to defend Jewish doctrines, it is an appeal to the sentiments, to stir and elevate the hearts of the people.

In the concluding parts of the *hakdama*, Ibn Paquda describes his initial reluctance and inadequacy in undertaking a work of this magnitude, but fearing his intentions not to go ahead were based on insincere ulterior motives, he ultimately decided to take upon himself this arduous but much needed task that would leave a major impact on the Jewish people. Despite his own claim that he lacked the knowledge and diction to compose such a publication, the sefer is carefully written with beautiful eloquence and deep felt emotion. His penetrating ideas are packaged with vivid poetic imagery consisting of relatable parables and stories that speak to all people.

Although *Hobot Ha-lebabot* is studied across the Jewish world today, and many of its teachings are widely disseminated, its introduction can be dismissed and glossed over in some quarters. The introduction, however, tends to encapsulate the *raison d'etre*, wider context and general worldview of the author and is therefore a fundamental component of the work itself. We will examine some of the more revealing aspects of the preface.

The purpose of the sefer is to demonstrate that faith, religious fervour and spiritual commitment are logical and reasonable endeavours. Muslim Spain was an enlightened advanced, culture where intellect and reason were revered within the context of a religious life, hence this message that the duties of the heart are rooted in rational principles was a critical one.

His depth of knowledge of the classical Rabbinic sources (such as the *Emunot Ve-deot* of Sa'adia Gaon whom he mentions in the *hakdama*) and familiarity with non-Jewish philosophy is patently clear from his writings. His arguments are based on reason and supported by Scripture but at their core, many of his ideas are drawn from ancient Greek wisdom, Islamic literature and Sufi mysticism.

וסמכתי להם מה שמצאתי כתוב בספרי הנביאים ואחר כך סמכתי להם דברי הקבלות שקבלנו מרבותינו ומן החסידים והחכמים שבכל אומה שהגיעו דבריהם אלינו מפני שקוית שיהיו הלבבות נוטים אליהם ומקשיבים אל חכמתם כמו דברי הפילוסופים ומוסרי הפרושים ומנהגיהם המשובחים

"I supported my arguments with what I found written in Scripture and afterwards with the words of tradition received from our Sages. I quoted also the pious and wise of other nations whose words have come down to us, hoping that my readers' hearts would incline to them and give heed to their wisdom, as for example, the words of philosophers, the ethical teachings of the ascetics, and their praiseworthy customs."

He goes on to bring Talmudical proof that is incumbent on us to incorporate the good from the outside world and obviously reject that which we think adds no value or contradicts our tenets of faith and moral principles. At the beginning, however, he discusses the concept of *hokhma* and its critical importance:

"The noblest of the gifts which G-d bestowed on His human creatures next to having created them with mature faculties of perception and comprehension, is Wisdom which constitutes the life of their spirit and lamp of their intellect."

R. BAHYA IBN PAQUDA

by Avi Garson



He proceeds to divide wisdom into three categories: “Al-Ilm al-tibi” is the science of nature and branch of knowledge dealing with the essential and incidental properties of material bodies. “Al-Ilm al-Riazi” are the ancillary sciences comprising mathematics, engineering, astronomy, and music. The third division, “Al-Ilm al-ilahi” is theology and philosophy.

וכל חלקי החכמה לפי מחלוקת ענינה המה שערים פתחם הבורא יתברך למדברים להשיג בהם התורה והעולם אלא שמקצת החכמות הצורך אליהם יותר לענין התורה ומקצתם הצורך אליהם יותר לתועלת העולם

“All these divisions of wisdom, and their respective branches, are gates which the Creator has opened for humans through which they may attain [a comprehension] of the Torah and of the world. Nonetheless, some sciences are more needed for Torah while others are more needed for secular interests”

Finally, in his introduction he also lays out the core fundamental beliefs that are at the root of all worship of the heart (*Avodat Shebalev*):

וממצות עשה שבחובות הלבבות. שנאמין כי יש לעולם בורא ובראו מאין. ושאין כמוהו. ושנקבל עלינו יחודו ושנעבדהו בלבנו ושנתבונן בפלאי יצירותיו כדי שיהיה לנו לאות עליו

“Among the duties of the heart are the belief in a Creator, creation ex nihilo. There is no parallel, acceptance of G-d’s unity, worship of the heart and to meditate on the marvels exhibited in His creatures.”

Contemporary Lessons

The *Hobot Ha-lebabot* is laden with powerful messages of bitahon, humility, spiritual growth and devotion. Perhaps in slight contrast to Sa’adia Gaon and HaRambam’s more rationalistic approach, Ibn Paquda’s outlook allowed more room for asceticism and rational contemplative mysticism. His task was to eliminate any facets that clashed with Jewish monotheism and Mosaic law and present a rationally grounded spiritual roadmap for Jews looking to develop a deeper religious relationship.

Perhaps a pertinent lesson that can be gleaned from the above is that our inward duties are as significant as our external duties. Our observance of outward *Mitzvot* must be accompanied by internal progress and increased sincere devotion. Nonetheless, this process of inner awakening should be gradual and stable, it must be balanced, grounded in reality and never at the expense of rationality in contradiction to what our *sekhel* and *da’at* are informing us. It is therefore fundamental we strive to work on improving our inner and outer duties within the framework established by our rational capacity and our esteemed *hakhamim*.

The *Hobot Ha-lebabot* provides a holistic, comprehensive approach to *avodat shebalev* and I see it fitting we conclude with some sage advice he offered his readers in the tenth and final chapter:

“Make reason your emir, prudence your vizier, make wisdom your leader and asceticism your companion. Go slowly when acquiring new positive traits in keeping with your ability and circumstances. Do it gradually lest you perish, for excess oil extinguishes the light of the candle”.

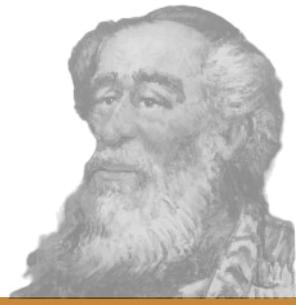


AVI GARSON - 25 - London

Originally from Gibraltar, Avi is now based in London. After finishing high school in Gibraltar, Avi attended Gateshead Yeshiva Gedolah and Midrash Shmuel in Jerusalem. He studied Politics at City University of London, and recently finished a Masters degree in Security Studies at UCL. He currently works in public affairs for a London-based political consultancy firm, and is associate director at The Pinsky Centre.

R. ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

by Daniel Jonas



Abraham ibn Ezra was born in 1089 in Tudela in the Spanish kingdom of Navarre. Tudela was the hometown of not only the famous travelogue, the eponymous Benjamin, but also of the celebrated poet and philosopher Yehuda haLevi, with whom ibn Ezra was a close friend and frequent travelling companion.

Ibn Ezra is justly famous for his own extensive travels to transmit Sephardi culture onto Ashkenazi soil, for which he drew praise from figures like the eminent translator ibn Tibbon. However, he travelled not only within Christian Europe, but also within Spain and the Islamic world. Encountering many different Jewish communities at the time of the early Crusades, ibn Ezra became highly aware of the effects of both Christian and Muslim intolerance and persecution, with Tudela itself conquered by the Christians in 1110.

Like most of the Jews of Spain, ibn Ezra was a native speaker of Arabic and a master of its literary and scientific forms, as well as the Judeo-Arabic religious canon. He was a renowned poet and philosopher, but what distinguishes him from many of the great Sephardi sages is his mission: the safeguarding of cultural knowledge by educating the community in Hebrew grammar. Ibn Ezra understood that those without the benefit of native knowledge of Arabic were at a significant disadvantage when it came to the comprehension and interpretation of works of Torah.

Ibn Ezra is known as a polymath, having composed extensive works, including not only his famous works on Hebrew grammar. He is recognised almost universally within the classical Sephardi world – as well as by his great critic, the Ramban – as the greatest interpreter of the grammar of the Tanakh. He produced two versions of his Introduction to the Torah, a Biblical commentary known as ‘Sefer ha-Yashar’, incorporating his famous commentaries on Isaiah, Tehillim, Iyyob, Daniyyel and Qoheleth as well as the Torah itself. He also wrote monographs on numerals and Divine Names, a number of books on mathematics, astronomy, and astrology (considered a science at the time). He frequently translated others’ scientific works. As a literary figure he was equally well known, composing both religious and secular poems and as a master of the classic form known as muwashshah.

Ibn Ezra’s great grammatical mission, began with his journey to Rome in 1140. In 1145 he travelled to Lucca and then Pisa, where he carried out astrological and astronomical experiments. In 1146-47 he continued on to Mantua and Verona, writing grammar books, then to Genoa and Beziers in Provence. Heading north, he arrived in Rouen in 1152, and (though this is disputed by Roth) spent his last years in England, which he reached in 1158 during the reign of Henry II and composing ‘*Yesod Mora Vesod HaTorah*’, on the reasons for the commandments. He is thought to have died in 1164 at the hands of ‘anarchic English hordes’ in a forest north of London.

The “Five Paths” of Exegesis

Ibn Ezra has been claimed by everyone from Biblical critics to Spinoza to the adherents of “Kabbalah”. Yet it is apparent from his own writings that his position combines a commitment to linguistic correctness and staunch adherence to traditional halakhic authority, supported by open scientific and philosophical inquiry.

Core to ibn Ezra’s philosophical thought is the idea, in his Introduction to the Torah, of five different methods or “paths” of exegesis, in tension with the correct interpretation of halakha. He emphasises that interpretation, like the movement implicit in the word *derekh*, is dynamic, not static. It is striking that his basic conceptual approach parallels the famous “parable of the King’s palace” in Rambam’s ‘Guide’, with several circuitous paths surrounding the central Divine knowledge and truth, attainable by ibn Ezra’s own “straight path”.

The first path described, at the circumference of the circle of truth, is that of the “Jewish sages of Islamic realms”, who include the Geonim of Babylonia, who are criticised for citing sources out of context and without evidence, as well as for lengthy digressions. Ibn Ezra also criticises them for insufficiently selective reliance on Islamic philosophy and science, as well as being influenced by Zoroastrianism.

R. ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

by Daniel Jonas



However, possibly recognising his own inconsistency, he later moderated his criticism of the Geonim, recognising that he himself benefited from the enormous scientific, grammatical and philosophical expertise of the Islamic world.

The second path is that of the Karaites, the group of sectarians that posed a significant challenge to mainstream rabbinic Judaism at this period. They are acerbically described, despite occasions on which ibn Ezra admits their superior knowledge of biblical verse structures, as “meanderers”, who deviate from truth by following their own intuitive, imaginative interpretations, due to their rejection of traditional rabbinic interpretation, ending up by wandering outside the circle of truth.

The third path is that of the Christian allegorists, who are severely castigated as “benighted”, being entirely outside the circle and ignorant of its centre, due to their insistence on interpreting Biblical verses in accordance with their ideological wish to shoehorn Christian interpretations into Torah texts.

The fourth path is that of midrash. Although this path is within the circle, close to the centre, it misses the centre due to a lack of mental discipline. This lack of discipline causes both the repetition of midrashim without understanding their correct traditional interpretations, combined with irrational misinterpretations due to poor spelling and deficient grammar. Hence, a lack of scientific and philosophical knowledge is likely to lead to an incorrect understanding of Torah.

The fifth path, ibn Ezra’s own espoused way, is that of exegetical freedom, with a distinction between etymology and interpretation. Favouring history and common sense, he nonetheless insists that for laws, one must follow the correct authorities. Tellingly, however, ibn Ezra notes the ignorance of grammar shown by other Jewish communities of his time, and underlines his own willingness to convey his own grammatical expertise to them.

Lessons for Today

In his poetry as much as his grammatical and philosophical work, ibn Ezra demanded precision and self-discipline. However, he was not averse to barbed critiques of the Jewish community itself: notably his famous comment that “in Edom there is no room for a sage who dwells in the land of Kedar”. This is clearly meant as an attack on the opposition of the Jews of Christian Europe to the ideas of the Jews of the Islamo-Spanish world of Andalusia.

Ibn Ezra maintains that the correct use of secular subjects, science and philosophy is essential for a true understanding and correct practice of Jewish law. Although he corresponded with and was both an admirer of and admired by Rabbenu Tam and Rashbam, he took issue fiercely with what he considered serious halakhic errors caused by lack of access to accurate grammar books written in Arabic, relied on by both the Tosafists and Rashi, who ibn Ezra singled out for particularly harsh criticism on this count. He was particularly severe on what he regarded as the abuse of biblical peshat, whether intentional or unintentional, in order to justify departures from the mainstream of halakhic interpretation in the Sephardi tradition. Ibn Ezra’s commitment to meaning and language is a duty to understand what things say rather than what they do not. He places the understanding of grammar and structure at the heart of hermeneutics. Like him, we should honour the obligation to make a robust understanding of language and text central to the transmission of Sephardi heritage.



DANIEL JONAS - 50 - London

A well-known figure on the Jewish cultural scene, as both the founder of the critically-acclaimed Sephardic world music group Los Desterrados and the new JudeoArabic ensemble zyin. BA (Romance Languages) from Manchester University, MSc (Systems Analysis) and MBA from City University. Professional background in corporate innovation, venturing and critical national infrastructure. Senior Fellow of the “radical centre” thinktank, Radix and chair of Nahamu, advocacy and policy organisation combating inward-facing extremism in the Jewish community.

RAMBAM

by Daniel Palin



HaRambam is known by many names. Some of the common names by which he is referred include Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, and Maimonides. Today we rarely call him by the name that he gave during his lifetime: Mūsā bin Maimūn bin ‘Ubaidallāh al-Qurtabī, which is Arabic for Moshe Ben Maimon Ben Obadia of Córdoba.

HaRambam (1138-1204) was born to a prominent Jewish family in Córdoba in Andalusian Spain, where he spent the first two decades of his life. Both the Jewish and secular culture of Andalusia had a major impact on his life and thinking. Even after leaving Spain at a relatively young age, he regularly referred to himself in writings as haSepharadi (the ‘Spaniard’). Indeed, HaRambam saw the Spanish schools and approaches to Torah as superior to that of the long established schools of Babylonia.

The breakdowns of society that HaRambam experienced at the beginning of his life, specifically the unraveling of Andalusia and its strength as a revered and powerful source of Jewish law and thought, impacted his desire to rectify these breakdowns in various ways throughout his life. He described his feelings in his Epistle to Yemen/Igeret Teiman as follows:

"I am the most minor among the scholars of Spain whose stature is low in exile. I am always dedicated to my duties but have not attained the wisdom of my forbears, for evil days and hard times have overtaken us and we have not lived in tranquility; we have laboured without finding rest. How can halakha become clear to a refugee from city to city and from country to country? Yet, I have pursued everywhere the reapers and gathered ears of grain, both the solid and the full, as well as the shriveled and thin. Only recently have I found a home..."

HaRambam believed that by making the Torah available to all in a clear, ordered and concise fashion he could affect the halakhic breakdowns that took place in exile, and ensure a strong future for the Jewish people. His greatest attempt at this was the Mishne Torah - the most comprehensive code of Jewish law ever composed. However, all of HaRambam's works, such as his letters/responsa, his Commentary on the Mishna, and the Moreh Nevukhim (Guide to the Perplexed), sought to affect real change in the way that people interacted with Torah, God, and the world around them.

Starting at Logic

Although many are unaware of this, HaRambam's first published work was a treatise dedicated to logic. Composed sometime between 1151-1161 CE, this foundational treatise was originally composed in Arabic, and later translated into Hebrew by Moshe Ibn Tibbon. Right up until the 12th century, only one person had attempted to address logic, and that was Aristotle - or, as HaRambam called him, ‘the chief philosopher’. Indeed, HaRambam is considered to be one of the most authoritative and intellectual figures in Jewish history, so logic was a natural beginning for the Spaniard. He stressed the foundational requirement of logic even in his later, more popular, works.

"It is certainly necessary for whoever wishes to achieve human perfection to first train himself in the art of logic." (Moreh Nevukhim, 1:34)

The trademark clarity and decisiveness we expect from HaRambam is evident even in his first book. He did not steer clear of controversy and did not offer a mere excerpt of most conventional doctrines, but took sides where opinions clashed and occasionally carved out his own path.

RAMBAM

by Daniel Palin



It is worth exploring why HaRambam wanted to promote the foundational nature of logic.

After all, the science of logic is to the mind what the science of grammar is to language. Information without a system of organisation is a mess, or white noise. Just as words on a page arranged with no rhyme or reason result in non-sense, the same applies to thought. There needs to be a rule system governing our thoughts and actions. There is a reason why “illogical” and nonsensical ideas such as the occult, witchcraft, and alchemy were so widespread in human history, and so strongly forbidden by the Torah. Rituals were followed without knowing or understanding the link between action and consequence. The world was deemed to be a mystery ruled by arbitrary and magical laws.

Ata Honen La-Adam Da'at

Judaism is no stranger to logic or its tools. The Book of Bereshit opens with many fundamental concepts. Distinctions are made between things, such as light and darkness. They are also assigned functions, as the sun causes daylight, the moon allows for nightlight. We have categories and subcategories, so animals and birds fall under living creatures. The list goes on.

In the morning blessings, we bless the cockerel for being able to distinguish between day and night. This is a general thing to be thankful for, to be able to test something and have the ability to differentiate. Without differentiation we have no definition. Finally, the first blessing in the main part of the daily *Amida* involves thanking God for providing us with the capacity to know - one needs a functional and operational brain to know and to serve The Creator.

Codifying to Coding

HaRambam went on to use these logical methods to create some of the most fundamentally important and authoritative *halakhic* works on the planet. He has influenced realms of knowledge beyond that of Judaism's. Further, the first rays of light from the Enlightenment can be found in HaRambam's works. The seeds of computing and technology are here. We have hints of Occam's Razor, and the roots of Boolean logic - without which many modern innovations would exist. Indeed, nobody should be afraid to re-examine the logical foundations of the physical world. Many of the greatest innovators today, such as Elon Musk and Stephen Wolfram, stress the importance of “going back to first principles.”

HaRambam the halakhist, the philosopher, the doctor was also the man who explicated the foundational element at the core of most innovations of our modern world - logic.



DANIEL PALIN - 30 - London

Daniel has studied at Yeshivat HaKotel, and the Shehebar Sephardic Centre, in Eretz Yisrael. He is currently working in Telecoms while learning Data Science.

R. MENAHEM ME'IRI

by Yehoshua Benzadon



Rabbi Menahem Me'iri (1249-1315) was one of the most popular Talmudists and Halakhists of his time. He was born in Provence (France), which was a cultural crossroad in medieval times that was influenced by the *halakhic* and intellectual heights of Sepharad, and the methodical Talmudic commentary of Ashkenaz.

As a student of the classical Sephardi approach, HaMe'iri was a great proponent of integration versus isolation, that is, the study of worldly knowledge alongside Torah study, in the quest to understand God and follow in His ways, ללכת בדרכיו (Devarim 27:17)

"It is a great honour for our Jewish nation when there are among us men who are perfect in philosophy, so that not all our people are bereft of philosophy to the point that the gentiles might say "Surely that nation is a simple and ignorant people" instead of saying "Surely that great nation is a wise and discerning people!" (Magen Avot, p. 30)

During his time, there was great unrest between the Ashkenazim of southern France, and Sephardim of Andalusia, given the diametrically opposed positions they each held; the former were generally proponents of isolationism, while the latter were generally integrationists. This ideological conflict reached its boiling point when Sephardim were expelled from Andalusia by a new radical Islamic tribe, and consequently settled in southern France. Following a series of bans and counter-bans published by *Hakhamim* on both sides of the integration vs isolation debate, HaMe'iri essentially had the last word on the conflict.

"Foreign learning is no longer foreign material that might be banned; it is part of Jewish culture. The sciences are necessary ... The religious problems raised by scientific study are inconsiderable in relation to its benefits. Our distinguished specialists in the sciences should be allowed to pursue their work unhindered, and their writings - however troubling - should not be suspected of heresy. To restrict access to the sciences - even from a few people for a short time - would almost certainly be to their detriment and the detriment of our community." (HaMeiri's letter to Abba Mari, in Simeon ben Joseph, Hoshen Mishpat)

Defining a 'Gentile' and the *Halakhic* Implications

His commentary, the *Bet HaBe'irah* ("The Chosen House") is one of the most monumental works written on the Talmud. Prof. Haym Soloveitchik describes it as follows:

"Meiri is the only medieval Talmudist (Rishon) whose works can be read almost independently of the Talmudic text, on which he ostensibly comments. The Bet HaBe'irah is not a commentary on the Talmud. Meiri, in a quasi-Maimonides fashion, intentionally omits the give and take of the sugya, instead focuses on the final outcome of the debate and presents the different points of view of the final result and conclusion. Also, he alone, and again on purpose, provides the reader with background information. His writings are the closest thing to a secondary source in the Rishonim library."

Moreover, in both his introduction to *Avot* and in *Bet HaBe'irah*, HaMe'iri clarifies his view on the issues of authority, *halakha*, and innovation.

R. MENAHEM ME'IRI

by Yehoshua Benzadon



"Despite all these [aids], hearts were diminished because of the many troubles, and later [Amoraic] generations found it necessary to augment [the Mishnah] either by explanation or by dismantling [the text] and reconstructing [it]. If the sages of the generation agreed to that due to the severe difficulties with which it presented them. This happened frequently, much as we today relate to the masters and elders who preceded us, lead us, and are our superiors. Thus, it is said [by R. Yehuda haNasi in the Talmud] in general that "Our forefathers have left us room to excel; "that is to say: no human beings are so perfect that those who come after them cannot occasionally disagree with them."

Another of HaMe'iri's outstanding views which carried great *halakhic* implications is how he radically redefined the concept of idolaters, or *ovdei kokhavim* (lit. "star worshippers") as referred to in the Talmud. He clearly differentiates between what the Talmud considered an idolater based on the practice and belief of Talmudic times, to the Christians we live amongst today who had little in common with them. Until HaMe'iri came about, every *halakhic* authority had refrained from drawing a distinction in principle between Christianity and the idolatrous religions. According to HaMe'iri, the prevalent discrimination towards gentiles within *halakha* is only applicable to the ancient nations "not restricted by religious practices".

There are a number of observations to be made from HaMe'iri's conclusions. Firstly, he recognises that the evolution of historical circumstances can impact *halakhic* determinations. HaMe'iri does not try to overlay the reality of his time onto the Talmud, but instead he carefully and accurately dissects a Talmudic definition to see if it applies to the reality of his time.

It is important to note however, that HaMe'iri was not trying to muddy the distinction between Jews and gentiles. Rather, he was distinguishing the restrictions that the *Hakhamim* put in place to protect Jews from idolatrous influences, and those designed to protect Jewish identity. The reasons that motivated our *Hakhamim* in the former were not existent with the Christians of HaMe'iri's time, therefore neither were the restrictions. However, the reasonings and restrictions of the *Hakhamim* still applied should an idolatrous religion reappear as they existed in Talmudic times!

Here we see a clear recognition of the subtle, but fundamental, difference between the abolishment of a law and the non-applicability of a law at a given time, but which can be applied at a later time.

May we all have the ability to recognise subtleties, the focus to distinguish between similar but different concepts, and the love and care for applying our eternal principles to the reality of our time.



YEHOSHUA YGAL BENZADON - 25 - Yerushalayim

Born and raised in Madrid to a Spanish-Moroccan family. Yehoshua studied Engineering at University College London and worked for Network Rail Ltd. He moved to Israel in 2019 and studied at Yeshivat Ohr Somayach. He currently works for DB E&C on Tel Aviv's light-rail project.

R. YOSEF CARO

by Darren Vanning



Rabbi Yosef Karo, or Maran, lived from 1488-1575.

He was descended from a rabbinic family, his father becoming the chief rabbi of Nikopol. He is the author of the *Shulḥan Arukh* – where the final *halakha* on all key topics, rather than being wrapped up with aggada and differing opinions as it is in the *Gemara*, is presented clearly, liked a ‘laid table’ (The *Rema* provides commentary from the Ashkenazi perspective on this).

He, like the Western Sephardi tradition itself, encountered several cultures in his life. He was born in Toledo. But unlike the previously more open culture in Spain which had allowed a more open Jewish culture to thrive, he and the rest of Spanish Jewry were expelled. A similar fate awaited him in Portugal before he moved to the Ottoman Empire, via Morocco and Cairo. Here, he lived in Constantinople, Adrianople, Nikopol and then Tzfat. Over his life, he met a number of other important rabbis, in particular Rav Shlomo Alkabetz, Rav Shlomo Molkho, and the Ari.

Though well versed in Kabbalistic works, he was much more focused on *halakhic* concerns. He married three times, and had at least three surviving children. His famous students included Rav Moshe Alshich, Rav Moshe Galanti and Rav Moshe Cordobero.

In his introduction to the *Bet Yosef*, he explains that he has collated opinions from the works of the Rif, the Rambam and the Rosh in order to create ‘one Torah and one law’. This was to distinguish clarify for its readers between different opinions and enable them to review *halakha* (divided into thirty pamphlets) every month and thus twelve times a year. One law would also prevent division among Jews who held different opinions. The *Shulḥan Arukh* became authoritative; the *Ḥida* for instance said that Maran was divinely chosen for this task, Rav Yosef Yedid compared Maran to two hundred rabbis and *Ḥakham* Obadia Yosef suggested that Sephardim who follow the Rema in his place might need to do *teshuba* (repentance).

It is told that Rav Yosef Karo was once struggling with understanding a piece of Talmud. He eventually deciphered it, but shortly afterwards he encountered someone who was learning part time and yet was easily able to do what he had spent several days and nights attempting. He was distressed at this. But in a dream that night it was revealed to him that his toil day and night to understand it had released that passage’s meaning into the world for the first time, and allowed others who were less learned to also access that insight. Our tradition believes in the importance of the wisdom and toils of our forefathers, but also in our ability to build on this and unlock insights for future generations too. *Pirke Abot* says that one who does not add to his knowledge, decreases it and we know that our tradition is a living one, that is enhanced and increased by being studied through the generations, with the unique and different perspective each generation and person can bring. This is what made the decision to write the Oral Torah down so difficult and counter-intuitive to a Jewish tradition that had thrived on Jewish practices being spoken about, actively debated and (in a literal sense) remembered, rather than the domain of books that may or may not be read.

R. YOSEF CARO

by Darren Vanning



Perhaps the *Shulḥan Arukh* can be seen as a culmination of that, perhaps non-ideal, process of turning an oral tradition into a written one – but there are still important lessons that we can learn from it.

Firstly, the importance of clarity. The clear exposition of *halakha* in the *Shulḥan Arukh* is an example to us of how simplicity is underrated – there is sometimes a tendency in scholarly debate to be overly verbose. But speaking as clearly as possible can often have the most reach and potential to enlighten others of our tradition. It is no coincidence that this method has ensured the key importance of Maran's work to this day. Depth of knowledge is best built from the ground up – and that is most effective when each layer is clear in our mind.

Secondly, the importance of action. The *Shulḥan Arukh* boils down the discussions to the *halakha* – we must never forget that intellectual discussions must have an end purpose. Words without action are meaningless. A theoretical framework without practicing one's principles is not sustainable. As *Pirke Abot* says, “אָמַר קְמַעַט וַעֲשֵׂה הרֵבֵה” - say little and do much. It compares someone whose wisdom exceeds his deeds to a tree whose roots are few and can be blown over when it is windy – we must ground our intellectual discussions to a lived reality. May we use the increased knowledge we gain from the teachers in our Bet Midrash to indeed do much and to create something that positively impacts our daily lives and the lives of others.

And lastly, we should remember the journey of the Western Sephardi tradition - that many different societies helped to shape and influence Rav Yosef Karo and his works. The Western Sephardi tradition did not stay still, and neither should we. It enriched itself on its journey through different cultures, and so should we. And like Rav Yosef Karo, we should look at the world and see uncertainty as a challenge, but also part of G-d's world. Rav Yosef Karo was expelled from two countries as an infant, but eventually met holy individuals such as Rav Shlomo Alkabetz (the composer of *Lekha Dodi*) and the Ari. These last few months, the world at large has faced disruption, but we have used this as an opportunity to launch The Sephardi Hābura. It is important, despite the many negatives of the current situation, that we seize any opportunities it presents to rethink and revitalise our community, and to (in whichever small way we can) leave a lasting impact on the future generation. The Jewish people have often sought to snatch opportunity from the depth of crisis – that responsibility falls no less on our generation than it did on those before us.



DARREN VANNING - 26 - London

Darren was raised in London, and went to Immanuel College. He went on to study History and Economics at Oxford University, and is currently working in the Department for Transport.

R. YAACOB SASPORTAS

by Michael Amselem



Hakham Yaacob Sasportas's name comes from the Spanish *Seis Puertas* (six doors), and he was the first Rav of a community in London in 1664. This made him the first Rabbinic authority since Jews had been expelled in 13th century Europe.

Having been born in Algeria in 1610, it did not take long for him to be recognised as a great *Hakham* and spiritual leader, and he had already become a respected authority across his community at the age of 24. This continued when he moved to Fez and then to Marrakech shortly after. In 1646, he was imprisoned by the Moorish King but managed to escape roughly 7 years later with his family to Amsterdam.

Only three years later, the Spanish & Portuguese community of London was established - but it was not until 1664 that *Hakham* Sasportas was inaugurated as the Rav and leader of the community, giving him the authority to establish regulations that all members new or old were required to adhere to. For example, *Hakham* Sasportas demanded that all members were to have a *Berit Mila* if they were to be part of the community. This may seem obvious today, but it was not necessarily a given at the time. After all, most of the Jews were conversos arriving in London from Portugal, who had been e hiding their Jewish identities from both the Spanish and the Portuguese authorities. Having a *Berit* would no doubt give away their identity, and since many of these Jews were still doing business dealings between London and Lisbon, they were not keen to get a *Berit Mila*. *Hakham* Sasportas discusses his approach to this conundrum, and where the line must be drawn.

In his first year as the leader of approximately 100 members of the community, *Hakham* Sasportas signed in the new regulations, as well as the Parnasim who helped to formalise the community. Although he was the *Hakham* in London for only a year, his influence on the community can still be felt today as he laid the foundations for everyone that followed.

During his time in London in 1665, things became a lot more interesting in the Jewish world with the awry mysticism of Sabbatianism on the rise. *Hakham* Sasportas was one of the few opponents to the false Jewish messiah named Shabbetai Zevi. Jews everywhere from the eastern fringes of the Ottoman Empire to the European edges of the Atlantic Ocean greeted the news of redemption with uncritical enthusiasm, so the fact that *Hakham* Sasportas took a strong stance against the movement of the false messiah through his deep knowledge of Torah, demonstrates how committed he was to upholding *halakha* and Sephardi *mesorah*. At the core of his account stood the *Mishne Torah*, the legal code of HaRambam, which he relied upon to build out the case against the Sabbatians.

R. YAACOB SASPORTAS



by Michael Amselem

In an open letter to the rabbinate of Amsterdam, *Hakham* Sasportas outlines the reasons for his skepticism:

"Even though I have not believed in this man [Sabbetai Zevi] as the king Messiah, I have not sinned as long as I have not seen his claims established according to the [standard] in HaRambam's at the conclusion of the laws of Kings: "If there arise a king from the House of David who meditates on the Torah, occupies himself with the commandments, as did his ancestor David, observes the precepts prescribed in the written and Oral law, prevails upon Israel to walk in the way of the Torah and to repair its breaches, and fights the battles of the Lord, it may be assumed that he is the Messiah. If he does these things and succeeds, rebuilds the sanctuary on its site, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he beyond all doubt is the Messiah."

Another letter to the rabbinate in Amsterdam written by *Hakham* Sasportas some six months later provides an indication of how central HaRambam was to his demand for critical skepticism:

Have you seen in a single book that one must believe in a Messiah about someone who says about himself, "I am the Messiah," or about whom they say, "this is the honored king," before he performs the deeds of the Messiah according to the formulation of HaRambam's in the laws of kings; even if he provides several other signs and wonders, are these sufficient to establish him as the Messiah? . . . The Messiah's deeds are dependent upon him fighting the war of the Lord, the construction of the Temple, and the gathering of exile. For if this were not the case, anyone who wanted to take the name Messiah, would simply come and take it, as long as his piety served as proof. And there would be as many Messiahs as there were pietists.

Hakham Sasportas outlines the need for skepticism in these challenging and most important matters, and not only is this the expected method but actually a *halakhic* obligation for Yisrael. We should draw upon this, to remind us that it is more important to follow the teachings of our Torah, and let it guide us on these matters, as opposed to manipulating the laws and skewing them in a way that aligns with our own agenda. If we are able to approach all matters in a humble way and look to our *Hakhamim* for guidance, then we increase our chances of heading in the right path, as opposed to the false approach taken by the Sabbatians who were able to manipulate the Torah to fit it with their own ideas.



MICHAEL AMSELEM - 27 - London

Raised in Gibraltar, born in Yerushalayim to Sephardi parents from Morocco and Colombia. Michael spent a year in Yeshivat Hakotel in Yerushalayim and then moved to London to study Engineering. He currently works for Dell Technologies as a Systems Engineer and has a keen interest in disruptive technologies.

R. DAVID NIETO

by Jack Hodari



Hakham David Nieto (1654-1728) embodied the values of Western Sephardi Jewry.

He was the first *Hakham* of Bevis Marks, having moved from Livorno S&P when the synagogue was completed in 1701. His educational background was a precursor for his *hashkafa*: he was a doctor and rabbi. He studied theology and medicine at the University of Padua. His contract did not allow him to continue practicing medicine in case it took away from his focus as full-time rabbi. A possible reason was skepticism against mixing religion with science, after a past controversy about nature and God.

Nieto used his scientific and *halakhic* knowledge in an integrated manner. His knowledge of astronomy informed his calendar, the first ever with Shabbat times for the latitude of England. He authored *Pascalogia*, to explain a month discrepancy between the dates of Pesach and Easter one year, defending the Jewish calendar. He had a broad perspective and used 'secular' disciplines to enrich the Torah that he preached, and vice versa.

As the leader of the Sephardi community in England, Nieto addressed the needs of his time. His community members were originally conversos, so they had practiced Catholicism, based on the Bible, but did not readily accept Rabbinic teachings. Their Karaism and distrust for rabbis strengthened after Shabbetai Zvi. His books, *Matteh Dan* and *Esh Dat*, addressed those two points respectively. In the latter, he based his arguments on verses from Tanakh, which his community accepted. He wrote from the perspective that they understood.

Views on Providence

Nieto lived amongst English Enlightenment theologians such as Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688), who believed that God created nature and gave it semi-autonomy to run the world. Nieto objected to this idea, and deemed it “blasphemous”, as nature would become a semi-deity if separated from God. Nieto worried that this type of thinking could lead to deism.

According to Nieto, the Torah says “God” where we might use the word “nature”, a word that refers to God’s Providence. This philosophy was later termed panentheism, which is the belief that the world is imbued with God, who transcends the world. (This is not to be confused with pantheism which does not have the transcendence of God beyond the laws of physics.) God can act however He chooses, which is usually through a natural interface.

Consider, for example, open miracles. A pantheist would say that nature rules, with no possibility of miracles. A deist would say that God intervenes against the rigid system of nature. But for a panentheist like Nieto, a miracle is when God acts in a way that cannot be identified as His regular manner.

If God interacts with us through nature but is not bound by it, Providence consists of “daily miracles”, as we say in Modim. There is no “fixed” nature; its regularity is incidental, it being God’s usual interface with us.

R. DAVID NIETO

by Jack Hodari



Nieto faced controversy for these views and had to justify them in his work, *De La Divina Providencia*. He received support from the *Hakham Zvi* (the rabbi of Amsterdam), who wrote: “His statement that nature and God and God and nature are all one is what I say as well.”

Nieto was not opposed to learning from the scholars of the world. Ruderman (1992) writes that Nieto protested “too loudly” that his sources were Jewish – his style and ideas were similar to his contemporaries. Most notably, Robert Boyle (1627-1691) also equated nature with Divine Providence for the same reasons. Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) wrote that “nature” is just God’s regular way of interacting with us:

“The course of nature, truly and properly speaking, is nothing else but the will of God producing certain effects in a continued, regular, constant, and uniform manner.”

This clear view of nature shows its lack of significance, as opposed to God's continual power upon it, which is reflected in the statement in *Shaharit* that God “constantly renews” his creations.

Lessons for Today

The world shows evidence of its Creator, like artwork with the artist’s signature. The Torah and *Mitzvot* teach us to see the Godliness within all aspects of life. We learn about God by studying His creations, because the world is an expression of God. HaRambam uses this as the reason for studying philosophy and sciences, in his *Moreh Nebukhim* (1 34:5):

"There is nothing else in existence but God and His works, the latter including all existing things besides Him: we can only know Him through His works."

The world is all God’s handiwork, so studying the world is, for HaRambam, an essential step towards knowing God.

This could explain why Nieto was as comfortable in the schools of theologians and scientists as with halakhists and Talmudists. With the framework of God’s direct and continuous Providence – with no external force of nature – Nieto gave us a strong basis for studying God’s world. *Hakham Nieto* taught us how “you can be fully part of traditional Jewish life while fully part of society as well” – a model for Western Sephardim.



JACK HODARI - 21 - London

Jack grew up in Manchester and studied at Yeshivat Shaalvim. He is currently in his final year of Mechanical Engineering at Queen Mary University of London (the burial place of Hakham Nieto!) and was President of the Jewish and Israel Society.

R. MOSHE HAIM LUZZATO

by Ohad Fedida



Against the backdrop of the devastating Shabbetai Tzvi episode, the confusion brought about by Spinoza, and the overall enlightenment which would soon rip apart Ashkenazi Europe, Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzato, or the Ramḥal, was born.

In the few short years of his life during these turbulent times, Ramḥal set a profound legacy which still influences us to this day.

Ramḥal (1707-1746) was born into a very wealthy and enlightened family in Padua - a beautiful metropolitan Italian city hosting one of the world's oldest universities. With his parents investing heavily in his education, and the young boy being a prodigy, Ramḥal very quickly mastered both his Torah and secular studies. Already by the age of 16 he wrote a morality play, at 17 he published his first book (a treatise on rhetoric), and by 20 a 150-chapter poetic and Kabbalistic work on *Tehillim*.

Being a passionate and well-versed genius, Ramḥal, unsurprisingly, quickly garnered a following. His core followers called themselves the Padua Circle and were comprised of Jewish men attending the city's university. The group started leaning toward theurgic Kabbalah (vs. theoretical) which was socially off-limits especially after Shabbetai Tzvi, and engaged in *Tikunim*, or the Kabbalistic practice of 'repairing' the lacking presence of God in the world through prayer and the reading of holy texts.

By 1727, at the young age of 17 years old, Ramḥal reported to the group the appearance of a *Magid* (an inner spiritual voice or angel). With the group extremely excited, Yekutiel Gorden, a follower throughout Ramḥal's life and a medical student, began spreading news of this vision. Once heard by Rabbi Moshe Hagiz, a local rabbi, Ramḥal was quickly thrust into his first conflict with rabbinic authority which would dominate the majority of his life. Rav Hagiz summoned the young Ramḥal for a Bet Din trial and a review of his teachings and works, an ordeal which would ultimately last three long years and conclude with the Ramḥal being forced to give over his writings, stop teaching or writing about Kabbalah until he would be married, 40 years old, and residing in Israel.

At 23, Ramḥal married a woman named Tzipora and they moved to Frankfurt, Germany in hopes for a new start. Preempted by Rav Hagiz, who informed the Frankfurt Bet Din to keep their eyes out for him, very quickly Ramḥal is again embroiled in a controversy which concludes with Ramḥal giving up all his recent manuscripts.

From there, Ramḥal and his family moved to Amsterdam, where the Jewish community was more open and Ramḥal was allowed to teach. With the relative calm, Ramḥal was able to focus on writing and it is during this time when he writes most of his great works, such as *Mesilat Yesharim* and *Derekh Hashem*.

Presented with the opportunity and with a deep love for Israel, Ramḥal and his family moved to Acre, where in less than a few months Ramḥal was infected by a pandemic which was spreading across the country and he passed away in the year 1746 at the age of 39 years old.

Legacy

In his short life, the Ramḥal revolutionized and became a towering figure in many fields. He was an extremely prolific writer and published around 42 works that we know of ranging from plays to books on rhetoric and logic, to *Mussar*, Biblical commentary and Kabbalah. His works serve as the basis of Kabbalistic thinking, and his presentation of Jewish thought reigns supreme as the fundamental presentation of Jewish theology.

R. MOSHE HAIM LUZZATO

by Ohad Fedida



His works of *Mussar* are studied by all and lead the way toward perfection. According to the Vilna Gaon, only three words are out of place in the entire *Mesilat Yesharim*, and had Ramḥal lived in his time, he would have walked across Europe by foot to meet him! Even in secular circles, Hebrew grammarians such as Nachum Bialik regarded Ramḥal as the father of Modern Hebrew.

Lessons for Today

Three fundamental elements stand out from the life, thought and works of Ramḥal, which are unity, clarity and wholesomeness.

Working from the position of God's oneness throughout His creation, Ramḥal, and the Sephardi tradition as a whole, saw no contractions between God's Torah and His creations. Unlike other communities which saw the world as a dangerous trap, Ramḥal had no issue engaging with his environment or engaging with creative endeavours such as play-writing.

Secondly, Ramḥal displayed extreme clarity and organization, with all his works clearly structured, systematized and organized. This idea is directly taught in the Sifri as "לעולם יהיו דברי תורה בידך כללים ולא פרטים" - Torah matters should always be in your hands as principles and not details; all matters must be in their place and presented with their appropriate context. This quality is also clearly expressed by the Rambam and is an important quality within the Sephardi tradition.

Finally, unlike many other communities which saw breakdowns between those spiritually oriented and intellectually oriented, the Sephardi tradition, as a whole, had no such breakdowns. This quality is expressed within the Ramḥal himself who was unquestionably, a massive rational academic and intellectual, and also, unquestionably, a towering figure in the realm of 'spirituality'. Ramḥal recognized the prime direction of this entire journey as toward a wholesome and loving relationship with the Almighty. As such, no contradictions exist between rational rigor and spirituality - they are all necessary facets of our Being, required for the proper service of God. While fully utilizing his capacity of intellect, Ramḥal did not fall into the traps of intellectualism, and although he was a prodigious Kabbalist he did not fall to the traps presented by spirituality.

These three elements of unity, clarity and wholesomeness, are all related to each other and are just three of the many important qualities this great man possessed. It is also these three qualities and perspectives which place the Ramḥal as an important figure within the Sephardi tradition.



OHAD FEDIDA - 22 - Miami

Ohad attended the Talmudic University of South Florida. He is now completing a B.S in Psychology from Florida International University and is a research assistant at the TIES Lab. He is working toward a Clinical Psychology, PhD.

R. RAPHAEL MELDOLA

by Joseph Cohen



After members of London's Sephardi community voiced frustrations at the unsatisfactory state of religious education in 1803, the Ma'amad (community council) appointed a committee that warned: *"in this Kahal, which had shone brilliantly for more than a century as one of the principal of Europe, the study of the Law will be entirely lost, and the Kahal will become an object of contempt and ridicule"*. They suggested appointing a *Hakham*, as the community had been without a spiritual leader for two decades.

Within two years the congregation had selected Raphael Meldola, a rabbi of impeccable credentials. He was born in Livorno in 1754, into a distinguished family of *Hakhamim* that spanned five centuries. His father, Moses Hezekiah Meldola was a *Hakham* and Professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Paris. His grandfather was *Hakham* of Pisa and his uncle *Hakham* of Amsterdam.

Following in the family tradition, Meldola received *semiha* from Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azulai (the *Hida*) and became a Dayan in 1803. True to the custom in Western Sepharad of pursuing worldly knowledge alongside Torah, he received a thorough university education.

The *Hakham* was an accomplished theologian and philosopher, authoring several works; among them, *Qorban Minha* (1791), *Hupat Hatanim* (1797), *Hezek Emmunah* (published posthumously by his son David Meldolda). He spoke several languages and was in correspondence with some of the most prominent Christian clergymen and scholars of his time.

Steeped in 'secular' wisdom, clean-shaven and dressed like the nobility of his generation, one might have mistakenly thought the *Hakham* was a moderniser, but he was a fastidious preserver of the tradition. On hearing Hazan Isaac Almosnino read the word *מַצֹּה* as '*matz-u*', he instructed the Hazan to pronounce it '*mah-tze-u*' as the tradition accorded. The Hazan argued that in Amsterdam they read it '*matz-u*', so the *Hakham* wrote to Amsterdam requesting clarification. They replied, *"We write now to acknowledge that we have received a Letter; from you most Reverend Sir, and in which we find with real concern and regret, that there are persons in your place who do not read correctly,"* continuing *"when they assert that our reading is like theirs, we beg leave."* After giving their decision, they concluded *"although you do not stand in need of it, as your decision, Reverend Sir, is quite sufficient, and we consider it merely an act of humility of yours to request of us a declaration of our sentiments on this subject"*.

The *Hakham* was held in reverence by both Jew and gentile alike and following his death in 1828, the bells of Aldgate Church rang, and local tradesmen closed their stores for the funeral procession.

The Early Days

Following their expulsion three centuries earlier, Jews began resettling in England in 1655. Sephardim made up the overwhelming majority of the new arrivals. They were not just greater in number than their Ashkenazi brethren, but often greater in social standing. Many of the Ashkenazim that arrived were desperate and destitute, having escaped extreme persecution on the continent. In contrast, the Sephardim often came from affluent backgrounds, such as the Villareal family, who brought to England a vast fortune that they'd amassed at the Court of Portugal, or Sampson Gideon, a State Financier who became so wealthy that Picciotto described him as the Rothschild of his day.

In these early days, the Sephardim distributed charity indiscriminately, both in England and abroad. When the Jews of Poland were in desperate need of help in 1710, the community donated 2275.11 florins to *"our poor brethren in Poland in view of their calamities"*. This sense of brotherhood wasn't limited to charity and lacking a congregation of their own, a small number of Ashkenazim were admitted into the Sephardi Congregation as *Yehidim* and accepted wholeheartedly.

R. RAPHAEL MELDOLA

by Joseph Cohen



When the Jews first returned to England, they numbered around 35 households, by 1753 the population had exploded to approximately 8,000 Jews, of which Ashkenazim made up the majority. Concerned about their ability to survive the changing demography, the Sephardim introduced *ascamot* (congregational rules) aimed at preserving the Sephardi complexion of their congregation. An unfortunate but direct consequence of these measures was that a wedge was driven between brothers. Inter-marriage between the two groups became a taboo. In one instance 33 years before the *Hakham's* arrival in London, the Ma'amad peremptorily forbade Asser del Banco from marrying an Ashkenazi woman. In another instance, they passed an *ascamah* limiting the election of Parnas or Gabay to those of Sephardi lineage.

Perhaps it's conjecture, but it's said that among some of the early Sephardim, there existed a sense of social superiority. In the introduction to his father's most popular work, Benjamin D'Israeli describes this sentiment "*They were all of them Sephardim, that is to say, children of Israel*". He continued, "*Most of these families, who held themselves aloof from the Hebrews of Northern Europe, then only occasionally stealing into England, as from an inferior caste, and whose synagogue was reserved only for Sephardim*". To his credit, D'Israeli went on to praise the achievements of the Ashkenazi newcomers. It is against this backdrop that we can rightly appreciate the *Hakham's* sense of *ahdut*.

The Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Solomon Hirschell welcomed the new *Hakham* when he arrived Rosh Hashanah 1805. They then spent the festival together praying in both communities. The following day they sat together learning the differences between their respective communities, which was the beginning of a close and collaborative friendship. It is in part thanks to the broad-mindedness of these religious leaders that a new spirit of collaboration developed among the Jews of England.

Prior to his arrival, London had suffered from issues with its kosher meat supply. One of the *Hakham's* first accomplishments was to establish a joint Board of *Shehita* with the Ashkenazim, regulating the trade and protecting the community from consuming forbidden meat. This collaborative initiative became one of the *Hakham's* lasting legacies, and to this day, the Board supervises the slaughter of kosher meat in the UK.

Hakham Meldola didn't limit cordial relations to the Children of Israel, but extended this philosophy to all mankind. In *Hezek Emmunah* he writes "*We are bound to observe as a rule, that in everything which has a tendency to preserve and promote the happiness of mankind at large, our law admits no distinction of nation, creed or class: for one God has created us and one father is common to us all.*"

Lessons for Today

The 18th century *Yehidim* foresaw their community becoming a minority among Anglo-Jewry and acted to safeguard their traditions. Thanks to their foresight and the loyalty of their descendants, this rich tradition was preserved. The actions of *Hakham* Meldola and men like him ensured that this preservation didn't come at the expense of *ahdut* and that a spirit of unity remained amongst Sephardim and Ashkenazim. A spirit that is kept alive by The Sephardi Habura.



JOSEPH COHEN - London

Joseph Cohen is originally from Newcastle, currently based in London. He is the founder of the Israel Advocacy Movement, which is one of the UK's leading pro-Israel organisations.

R. BEN ZION UZIEL

by Matthew Miller



Hakham Ben-Zion Meir H̄ai Uziel (1880-1953), who lived until the ripe old age of 73, held a few truths to be time honored and hallowed, those of Jewish unity and harmony being chief among them. Throughout his illustrious career as Sephardi chief rabbi of both Mandatory Palestine and the State of Israel, he preached these values, marshaling both *halakhic* and *aggadic* sources to bolster his position.

Born to an illustrious family - his father (Rav Yosef Raphael) served as chief Sephardi rabbi of Jerusalem - *Hakham* Uziel was destined for greatness. He was appointed *Hakham Bashi* of Jaffa in 1911, where he worked closely with Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook, who at the time was leading the Ashkenazi community of the *yishuv*. *Hakham* Uziel advocated for the Jewish people. For example, during the first world war, he interceded on behalf of persecuted Jews of the Ottoman Empire (which ultimately led to his exile to Damascus). He also served as a member of the Jewish Assembly of Representatives and the Jewish National Council.

In 1921, he spent a three year period as chief rabbi of Salonika. Subsequently, he returned to Israel in 1923 to become chief rabbi of Tel Aviv. He would spend over 15 years in this position before being appointed the chief rabbi of Mandate Palestine.

Someday We'll All Be Together

Hakham Uziel believed that our possession of and dwelling in the land of Israel could serve as a catalyst for bringing the Jewish people together, both physically and spiritually, speaking in his ethical will about the importance of bringing

...peace among all Jews physically and spiritually, in their words and actions, in their thoughts and in the ruminations of their hearts, in all their steps and deeds, at home and in the street, in the village and in the city." (Marc D. Angel, *Loving*

Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel, p. 244.)

As important as being together in a physical sense was for *Hakham* Uziel, the importance of radical unity in the form of uniformity of practice was even more important. He writes to Rav Levitsky, Rabbi of Givat Rambam in Tel Aviv about the importance of breaking barriers between different groups in the Jewish people and forging a deep bond. He writes:

"Among all the virtues that distinguish and separate Israel from all the nations, first and foremost is, the wonderful union of this nation in its Torah, which is the foundation of its nationality and the secret of its eternal existence...We are commanded to maintain and emphasize in all our situations and work for the Rock of our Salvation to create unity with Israel and Torah." (Shut Piskei Uziel B'She'elot HaZman 2)

Although this uniformity was not all encompassing, since he allowed for the continuation of long-held traditions of communities, such as Ashkenazim and Sephardim, it was certainly far reaching. For example, he looked to unify the prayer text to quell the gap between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews (much the same way Rav Shlomo Goren would in later years).

R. BEN ZION UZIEL

by Matthew Miller



For example, in a responsum to Rav Yitschak Nissim (Yeyn HaTov #7) he discusses the need to unify the practice of how to count the Omer to minimize confusion and questions.

The unity which R. Uziel preached extending beyond the unifying of the various parts of the Jewish people. He also believed in the unity of all forms of knowledge, arguing for the importance of expanding one's horizons and studying a wide range of subjects in order to properly understand God and His world. He wrote:

It is impossible to understand Torah - certainly to plumb its depths - without a profound and broad knowledge of all worldly wisdoms and sciences...Our holiness will only be complete if we are nourished by all the new developments in the world, by all the wondrous discoveries, by all the philosophical and scientific ideas which flourish and multiply in our world. (Mikhmani Uziel, p.405, p.552-553; Hedyonei Uziel, vol. 2, p.133-134)

His clarion call for unity was not only directed toward his Jewish brethren. His mission to achieve unity might have been largely focused on his people, but he realised full well that complete and total redemption will only come when all people on this earth can achieve harmony. Rabbi Marc Angel illustrated this with a short, yet poignant, episode:

In 1921, a battle erupted between Jews and Arabs in the outskirts of Tel Aviv. When Rabbi Uziel learned that both sides were shooting at each other, he went out to the battleground in his rabbinical garb. Fearlessly, he walked between the two camps. The gunfire stopped. Rabbi Uziel spoke to the Arabs with emotion. He reminded them that Jews and Arabs are cousins, descendants of Abraham. *"We say to you that the land can bear all of us, can sustain all of us. Let us stop the battles among ourselves, for we are brothers."*

In conclusion, *Hakham* Uziel had a thoroughgoing notion of unity of God, His people, and His Torah. As such, he fought with the very fiber of his being to uphold and bolster this unity in his various leadership positions through his philosophical writing and legal responsa. Through his pen and through his courageous actions he brought the Jewish people closer to this position. May we merit the highest level of unity, speedily and in our days.

MATTHEW MILLER - 27 - Chicago

Matthew completed a BA in Jewish Studies and Linguistics at McGill, and an MA in Hebrew Linguistics at Queen Mary University of London. He also studied at Yeshivat Yesodei HaTorah. Matthew is a global citizen, having lived in 6 cities and 4 countries. He currently lives in Chicago with his wife, Georgia.



R. AVRAHAM KOOK

by Itamar Katsch



Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook was born in a small north-western Russian shtetl called Griva, in 1865.

He was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel and was one of the most interesting, controversial, and unique thinkers throughout Jewish history, and has had an impact on world Jewry that few can rival.

To understand Rav Kook's strikingly original thinking, it is first important to understand a little about his family background. His father, Rav Shlomo Zalman Kook, was a student of the famed Lithuanian yeshiva of Volozhin, then considered the "Harvard" of Talmudic schools, where Talmudic scholarship was considered paramount. His mother, Zlata Perl, was from a family of devout followers of the Chabad Hasidic sect. Lithuanian and Hasidic thought have long been thought of as being diametrically opposed in many ways, with one focussing on intellectual prowess and analytical Torah study, and the other focussing on the more spiritual and interpersonal dimensions of Judaism. It is a small wonder then that Rav Kook had a penchant for dialectic thinking and being fully at ease with seeming polarity.

As a child, it was clear that he was a prodigy and he, like his father, attended the yeshiva of Volozhin. It is there where he encountered some of the most outstanding Jewish personalities of his day: the proto-Zionist Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Berlin (the Netziv), the pietist Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan and the kabbalist Rabbi Solomon Eliashev. Rav Kook only stayed in this yeshiva for a year and a half, but this was enough for the Netziv, the Rosh Yeshiva at the time, to state that "if the yeshiva was founded to only educate Rav Kook then it would have been worthwhile". Considering the great number of famous rabbis who studied in this yeshiva, this praise is truly remarkable and highlights the genius of Rav Kook.

Rav Kook is known for writing theological essays, *halakhic* responsa, spiritual diaries, poetry, and many personal letters. Many of Rav Kook's ideas are revolutionary and can be considered well ahead of his time. He was able to engage with ideas presented by many thinkers who most may consider to be antithetical towards Judaism e.g. Nietzsche, Darwin, Hegel and Schopenhauer. One major reason for this was his view, as taught in kabbalah, that everything has its source within the divine, as the Zohar states – "there is no place devoid of Him". This idea allows one to look at sources external to Judaism and see that it too has elements which can be used in the service of the divine.

I believe that the idea that everything has its source within the divine is something which heavily influenced Rav Kook's ideology and permeated much of his writings. There are two examples which clearly highlight this idea's influence on Rav Kook's thought: his attitude towards atheism, and Zionism. According to many, atheism is to be utterly shunned as it is considered to be in opposition to Judaism. Yet, for Rav Kook, atheism had the potential to be a purifying force which teaches us to reject incorrect and irrational theological beliefs of God and religion that have been absorbed by Yisrael during exile. By rejecting incorrect beliefs, Yisrael would be able to embrace a higher and more sophisticated form of faith.

"This type of atheism has a temporary authority to divest the worshipper of the misdirection which has attached itself to faith in general. With the passage of time, misguided spiritual notions have entrenched themselves within our religion. Atheism, therefore, of necessity, had to arise as part of the fabric of the culture of secular society, in order to remove the slag that has attached itself to religion." (Orot, 5)

To highlight how powerful this idea is, it is important to note that throughout Jewish history there have been many great religious thinkers opposed the study of philosophy, even if they permitted the study of science. For Rav Kook, however, philosophy was not only something to not be avoided, but even atheism had something that we, as practicing Jews, could benefit from learning!

Indeed, Rav Kook looked to classical Sephardi *Hakhamim* as prime examples of Torah scholars who studied worldly knowledge through the lens of Torah:

"When the medieval sages such as Sa'adia Gaon and Rambam saw an increase of heretical books in the world, and that intellectual storms and mistaken ideas about the roots of Torah were being placed in people's hearts, they made great efforts to take the perplexed out of their perplexity. Thus, they straightened out the path for the people of their generation...It is the obligation of the true sages of our generation to follow in the footsteps of our medieval rabbis to look after our perplexed people and to broaden their knowledge of the intellectual disciplines, according to the newest researches. They must show them how all truths must be viewed from the perspective of Torah." (Le Nevukhei HaDor, Chapter 2).

R. AVRAHAM KOOK

by Itamar Katsch



Another example of Rav Kook's openness to see the divine in everything is his approach to Zionism. Zionism was, after all, viewed as a secular replacement of religious Jewish identity, as some of the earliest Zionist leaders desired. However, for Rav Kook, Zionism also had the potential to strengthen the Jewish national body by promoting a love of Jewish peoplehood.

More than this, he believed that the Jewish return to the land of Israel heralded the beginnings of the Messianic redemption. This idea was taken a step further in Rav Kook's eulogy for Theodor Herzl, where he discusses the relationship between Mashiah ben David and Mashiah ben Yosef; with each Messiah coming to redeem a different element of the Jewish nation. Mashiah ben Yosef comes to redeem the body, and David comes to redeem the soul. According to Rav Kook, Herzl and other secular Zionists took up the task of redeeming and strengthening the national Jewish body by establishing the land of Israel.

"The Zionist vision manifest in our generation might best be symbolized as the "footstep of Mashiah ben Yosef". It behoves us to take to heart, to try to unify the "tree of Yosef" and the "tree of Yehudah," to rejoice in the national reawakening, and to know that this is not the end goal of Yisrael, but only a preparation. If this preparation will not submit to the spiritual aspect, if it will not aspire to it, then it is of no more value than the kingdom of Ephraim, "a cake readily devoured," because "they abandoned the source of living waters". This is the benefit to be gained by remorse over one whom we might consider the "footstep of Mashiah ben Yosef", in view of his influence in revitalizing the nation materially and generally. This power should not be abandoned despite the wantonness and hatred of Torah that results in the expulsion of God-fearing Jews from the movement. We must develop the courage to seek that any power that is of itself good be fortified, and if it is lacking spiritual perfection, let us strive to increase the light of knowledge and fear of the Lord such that it is capable of conquering a powerful life-force and of being built up through it. Then there will be fulfilled in us the prophecy, "I will grant unto Zion salvation, unto Yisrael My glory". (Orot, 1)

Not only does he want to diminish the impact of the secular (and, in some cases, anti-religious) founders of Israel, but he even equates their role to that of Mashiah ben Yosef! However, it must be noted that he of course realised the limitations of Herzl's Zionism from a religious perspective and therefore wrote that *"if it is lacking spiritual perfection, let us strive to increase the light of knowledge"*. This is another clear example in which Rav Kook highlights that everything has its source in the divine and everything can be utilised in the service of God, even if at first glance it may appear to be in stark opposition to Judaism.

The fact that something might appear to be in opposition to Judaism was of little consequence to Rav Kook. He was more interested in how something could be utilised as another step within history that would bring us to a deeper understanding of God and a further push towards transcendence and perfection. Therefore, he was – as so many of our greatest ḥakhamim have been – sensitive to the difference between context and content. However, it must be noted that just because Rav Kook was able to see the benefit of studying areas that many would think of as being in opposition to Judaism, this did not mean he was not able to also see their potential pitfalls. For example, modernity overly focused on intellectual rationalisation, which meant that it failed to realise the importance of emergent experiences such as spirituality, faith, and mysticism. By ignoring this vital experiential component, humanity can descend quickly into despair. After all, when humanity forgoes its search for transcendence, there will be an inevitable loss of collective meaning, causing society to quickly break down: *"Only from the Source of life can life pour forth"*.

If there is one lesson which this great Ḥakham can teach our Bet Midrash, it is the importance of striving for truth wherever it may be found: whether in Kabbalah, Ḥasidut, Talmud, Halakha, Science, Philosophy or even atheism, because everything can be utilised in the service of God if channeled correctly, and in the right context. He was a truly open individual who did not focus on one area of scholarship, and by perceiving everything as having a potential in being utilised in the service of God he enabled us to not be fearful of opposing ideas, but rather to remain open and constantly view everything as having immense spiritual potential.



ITAMAR KATSCH - 28 - London

Itamar went to Hasmonean High School and studied at Yeshivat Har Etzion. He previously worked as a science teacher as part of the Teach First programme, and is currently working as an occupational psychologist for Deloitte.

R. SHEM TOB GAGUINE

by Asaf Fedida



Hakham Shemtob Gaguine was born on September 5, 1884 in Ottoman Jerusalem. From his father's side, Shemtob was part of the Gaguine rabbinical dynasty, his grandfather being Rabbi Shalom Moshe Chai; Rosh Yeshivat HaMekubalim Beth El. From his mother's side he was the great grandson of the Kabbalist Sar Shalom Sharabi (the Rashash). Already from a young age, Shemtob learnt in a very serious manner, and studied in Talmud Torah Doresh Tzion and later with the Rav Yaakov Alfiyah.

Ottoman Jerusalem at the time was a crossroad in which almost all of Jewry was passing and we see this international attitude permeated deep into Rav Shemtob even at a young age. Rav Shemtob was not only fluent in six languages, but also versed in the literature of each language. Moreover, in Judaism, he was well versed in both Sephardi and Ashkenazi *halakha* and felt very comfortable in whatever circle he participated; this became a key point that he carried with him throughout his Rabbinical career.

Interestingly enough, at the young age of 23, Rabbi Shemtob was given semicha by Rav Chaim Berlin who was the former chief Rabbi of Moscow and the assistant head rabbi of the Ashkenazi community of Jerusalem at the time. Rabbi Shemtob would then get further ordinations from Rabbi Yaakov Meir, and Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook. Rabbi Shemtob would go on to serve as a Dayan to the Jewish community in Cairo, and was later appointed as a Dayan of the Ashkenazi community in Cairo too.

In 1920, Rabbi Shemtob Gaguine was offered to serve as the *Hakham* and Av Beth Din of the Spanish and Portuguese Community of Withington England which he held for the rest of his life. During his tenure there, *Hakham* Shemtob would go on to serve as a member of the Ashkenazi Beth Din of Manchester, as well as the Av Beth Din of the Spanish community in London, as well as serving as the Rosh Yeshiva of the Judith Montefiore Theological College in Ramsgate.

True to his international nature, Rav Shemtob's seminal work, the *Keter Shem Tob*, works to document the different traditions of the various communities around the world alongside explanations as to why and how these traditions were developed. Very much like an ethnographer, Rav Shemtob creates a space in which each custom is understood in its proper context, and he sheds light onto the situations of the community which led to the development of a particular custom. Consequently, the *Keter Shem Tob* has become the chief source for many *minhagim* that are seldom remembered or practiced. Besides documenting the *minhagim* of communities such as the Jews of Cochin, *Keter Shem Tob* is a compendium of Spanish and Portuguese *minhagim* for Amsterdam and London.

However, even more notable than the documentation of these *minhagim* is the truly Sephardi approach the *Keter Shem Tob* utilizes to understand these *minhagim*. Rarely does Rav Shemtob disagree or express criticism against a *minhag*, but when he does, he makes sure to explain why the context in which the *minhag* was designed is not valid anymore. We see that the role of the *posek* in the Sephardi tradition is to keep track of the trends of the community in every aspect of life and determine the *halakha* in accordance with the reality of his time and community.

R. SHEMTOB GAGUINE

by Asaf Fedida



Furthermore, in the introduction to his book, Rav Shemtob writes a poem in which he describes his task as finding and fitting every precious stone into its proper place on a crown. Rav Shemtob felt that by excluding, dismissing, or even misplacing one of these gems, the entirety of the crown will undoubtedly lose its value. We see here a deep respect and yearning to understand every tradition which makes up the fabric of Jewish existence. It is thus very apropos that he served as the Rosh Yeshiva of the Montefiore Yeshiva in Ramsgate, as Moses Montefiore was also a man who felt a deep respect and connection to every Jewish community around the world. This is another hallmark of the Sephardi tradition and ability to integrate and interact in harmony with the society in which one lives, without compromising observance.

Rav Shemtob's ability to fulfill his role as a Dayan for not only the Sephardi community, but also the Ashkenazi community, and not only in the Orient, but also in Western Society, must have come from a deep-rooted understanding and love towards all Jews. We rarely come across a person who is able to dissect the most technical of *halakhot* in all areas of Judaism while simultaneously composing poetry and songs. How can a man who must be so "dry" be able to convey such emotion? Rather, it must be that it was from the same love that Rav Shemtob Gaguine writes songs and poems, that he was able to sit and compile volumes upon volumes of Jewish law.

*"I shall praise the name of God in a song to express my feelings of gratitude
For that he has placed my lot with those who deal in the Torah and Avodah
And put within me her love and her desire
And my soul longs and yearns for her."*

Hakham Shemtob passed away at the age of 68 in the year 1953. His holistic approach to community, law, and life remains an example for all of us and future generations.



ASAF FEDIDA - 21 - Miami

Asaf recently completed a Bachelor's degree in Talmudic Law from the Talmudic University of South Florida, Alfred and Sadye Swire College of Judaic Studies. He is currently preparing to write the LSAT and begin Law school.

R. MATLOUB ABADI

by Daniel Levy



Hakham Shaul-Matloub Abadi, the first posek of the Sephardi Community in Brooklyn, was born in Aleppo, Syria in 1887.

Taught by Rabbi Yitzhak Dayyan, *Hakham* Abadi broadened his knowledge beyond the curriculum taught in yeshivot. Guided by books written by classical Sephardi sages like Rambam, Yehuda HaLevi, Rabbenu Bahya, and Sa'adia Gaon - he delved into *halakha*, Hebrew grammar, poetry, history, and philosophy. All the learning and knowledge attained was only for the true love of Torah and God. After moving back and forth between Israel and Aleppo, *Hakham* Matlou Abadi ultimately rejected the position of Rosh Yeshiva at the esteemed Porat Yosef, and instead settled in New York with the goal of educating the youth of the local Sephardi Community. Given his impassioned statements about the developing Zionism of his time, *Hakham* Abadi must have felt remorse that he did not settle there:

“Happy shall you be if you use this time for the good of the Land of Israel, the pride of our past and the luminescence of our future, to fulfil your duty toward it and to help it with all the means and the ways leading to rebuilding its ruins and making its settlement bloom.” (Magen Ba’adi, p. 304)

Quick to recognize the dominance of Ashkenazi thought and practice in New York, *Hakham* Abadi understood the necessity for a proper Sephardi educational system. He soon organized traditional Syrian and Sephardi Rabbis, and launched an after-school program, teaching Torah to boys of his community. This was followed by the opening of Yeshivat Talmud Torah. After years at the school, *Hakham* Abadi’s salary was reduced in a world where cost of living increased. With a clear understanding of consequences of financial dependency, *Hakham* Abadi would turn to the world of business – another example of just how responsive he was as a person, not only in his *halakhic* rulings but also in his private life.

Taking no official titles or positions, *Hakham* Abadi became the most prominent *posek* and arbiter of his community, if not the greatest Sephardi *posek* in America. He was approached daily with *halakhic* questions in all areas, from conversion and adoption to Shabbat and Kashrut. These questions came not only from his community in Brooklyn but many other Syrian communities throughout the diaspora. Later in life, *Hakham* Abadi’s opus *Magen Ba’adi* was published. *Magen Ba’adi* consists of *teshubot* on all of these topics and more. Upon studying this immense collection of responsa, one is able to see how beautifully *Hakham* Abadi was able to integrate historical and empirical data in his *halakhic* rulings, and how open and sensitive he was to new genres in religious writings. Further, his *teshubot* display just how highly *Hakham* Abadi regarded the role of local and specialised legal rulings that are sensitive to realities on the ground, relative to global and standardised legal rulings that cannot always be. This is seen by *Hakham* Abadi’s tendency to prioritise the legal conclusions of Aleppan rabbis over those of Maran’s seminal *Shulhan Aruch*. When disagreeing with a *Hakham* or one of their rulings, he often maintains a confident, composed, and perceivably humorous tone: *“I yearn to see the books on which this rabbi based his opinion.”* (Magen B’adi, p. 196)

One of the reasons why *Hakham* Abadi’s rulings were so cutting-edge and logically organised may be due to the Sephardi way in which he was taught Talmud by Rabbi Avraham Shayyo. This method of learning Talmud emphasised the fact that it is the written compilation of discussions between supreme courts spanning 700 years. Being that it was discussions between supreme courts, it was written in a legal style with a specific structure. Talmudic rulings were meticulously and methodically analyzed in depth, and then deconstructed in order to determine the building blocks which made the ruling possible. By committing to this method of learning, he was able to take those blocks and principles and see how they can be applied to contemporary realities

R. MATLOUB ABADI

by Daniel Levy



One of the reasons why *Hakham* Abadi's rulings were so cutting-edge and logically organised may be due to the Sephardi way in which he was taught Talmud by Rabbi Avraham Shayyo. This method of learning Talmud emphasised the fact that it is the written compilation of discussions between supreme courts spanning 700 years. Being that it was discussions between supreme courts, it was written in a legal style with a specific structure. Talmudic rulings were meticulously and methodically analyzed in depth, and then deconstructed in order to determine the building blocks which made the ruling possible. By committing to this method of learning, he was able to take those blocks and principles and see how they can be applied to contemporary realities.

One example of this is how *Hakham* Abadi ruled on the use of mixing meat and dairy dishes and utensils in the dishwasher, simultaneously. For hundreds of years it was widely accepted that one cannot wash meat and dairy dishes in the same basin. Inevitably, this ruling was accepted as a truism and thus applied to dishwashers. Rather than relooking at the original ruling against new circumstances, the old ruling was applied to the new circumstances. The way the structure of the ruling was understood was that one cannot benefit from cooking meat and milk together. At the time of the old ruling, meat and dairy dishes were placed in the same basin with hot water running over the plates and mixing hot food and dishes together in the same water. In *Hakham* Abadi's careful analysis, he analyses in detail the workings of a dishwasher. He comes to the conclusion that one is indeed allowed to wash dairy and meat dishes in the dishwasher simultaneously, due to just some of the following reasons:

- 1) The taste of the meat will not be absorbed into milk dishes (and vice versa), as the detergent/soap in the water would render any potentially absorbable taste as unpalatable (*ta'am nifgam*)
- 2) The temperature of the water in the dishwasher is not the temperature that is considered "cooking" in a primary vessel (*keli rishon*)
- 3) The dishes can be cleaned or rinsed before placement in the dishwasher, removing most foods.
- 4) In a basin, the water fills up the basin and mixes everything in it, whereas in a dishwasher the water is sprayed and circulated and goes down a drain

Indeed, a similar ruling was published by another Sephardi giant (*Hakham* Obadia Yosef) more than 40 years later.

What was so unique about this ruling was not merely making life in the kitchen easier (which has its own tremendous value). Rather, it is in *Hakham* Abadi's commitment to logical methodology, to challenging supposed truisms, and to responding to new situations – without intimidation.

It is our hope that the talmidim of our Bet Midrash can – like *Hakham* Matlou Abadi – use their intelligence and experience to view modern details through the lens of classical Jewish principles. In a time where this *mesorah* has been sidelined by many, it is our duty to continue it. As our futures are yet to be written, we must remember that "to save a heritage, one must be able to repossess it."

DANIEL LEVY - 28 - New York

Born and raised in Brooklyn, NY, Daniel attended Magen David Yeshiva. He completed a product management program at the Fashion Institute of Technology. He is currently Director of Sourcing and Production at a family-owned wholesale apparel company, and is on the Board of Sy Israel Link. Daniel lives in NY with his wife and two kids.



R. YOSEF QAFIH

by Sina Kahen



What is the role of learning biology, physics, language and other “secular” topics in the life of a Jew? Are they to be avoided, or included? Are they a road to a heresy, or can they be accommodated?

It is no secret that some Jewish communities around the world have long grappled with the place of so-called “secular” subjects within the educational curriculum. From 'Torah Im Derekh Eretz' to 'Torah U'Madda', many models have been proposed. Which subjects should be entertained, and for how long? On the other hand, do we really want to risk detracting from “holier” studies?

Enter *Hakham* Yosef Qafih (1917-2000), arguably the greatest product of Yemenite Jewry and one of the leading Sephardi *Hakhamim* of his generation:

"All those subjects and sciences which, for some reason, people refer to as “secular knowledge”, if a person studies them in order to arrive at insight and knowledge of God – behold, they are surely sacred." (Ketavim, Vol. 2, p. 594)

Before we delve into why and how he arrived at such a conclusion, it is worth delving into the man, his work, and his *mesorah*.

Noble Heritage

Hakham Yosef Qafih (or "Mori") was of noble heritage, being the son of *Hakham* David Qafih and the grandson of *Hakham* Yihye Qafih. These giants of Yemenite Jewry were proud devotees of HaRambam, critics of irrational forms of Jewish mysticism, encouragers of studying worldly knowledge as a means to “know God”, and guardians of classical Sephardi works. Of the many Jewish communities around the world, it seems that Yemenite Jewry was one of the proudest communities that successfully exhibited the unified commitment to philosophical/scientific inquiry and religious practice as codified in the rabbinic tradition.

In 1943, *Hakham* Yosef Qafih left Yemen for Israel, studied at the Merkaz HaRav yeshiva, and became a Dayan in the Supreme Rabbinical Court. His literary work was focused on translating seminal works of classical Sephardi *Hakhamim* – such as Sa'adya Gaon, Rabbenu Bahya Ibn Paquda, and others – from Judeo-Arabic into Hebrew.

However, the works of HaRambam hold a unique place in *Hakham* Qafih's treasure trove of contributions. He translated everything from HaRambam's letters/responsa, restatement of Jewish law (Mishne Torah), to his seminal elucidation of Jewish philosophy (*Moreh haNebukhim*). Thanks to the unique access he had to authentic manuscripts, *Hakham* Qafih was able to correct the abundance of errors that he discovered in contemporary editions of some of HaRambam's major works that are still used across the Jewish world today:

"The Mishne Torah was subjected to severe editing by the printers...to the extent that there is hardly any halakha that has not been emended. I know of no other book that was so severely emended...every third or fourth rate scholar who thought himself capable of doing so, would presume to try his hand at making emendations and corrections according to his own understanding. Also, there were truly great scholars who expressed their opinion here and there as a result of a difficult issue raised by the words of HaRambam, and they suggested an alternative reading. They never even thought of changing the text of the book, but others after them did erase the words of HaRambam and inserted the alternative reading proposed by the earlier scholars, thereby distorting the meaning and purpose of HaRambam. But the original words of HaRambam, if they are understood according to their plain meaning, are crystal clear, and the emendations are nothing but mistakes." (Introduction to MT, Qafih edition)

R. YOSEF QAFIH

by Sina Kahen



A Holistic Mesorah

Hakham Qafih's efforts and outlook were rooted in a classical Sephardi approach, whose *Hakhamim* considered Yisrael's chief task to be acquiring the knowledge (*da'at*) of *HaKadosh Barukh Hu* through His Word and His world. It is for this reason that *Hakham Qafih* lists the following seemingly "secular" subjects as obligatory learning: logic, astronomy, natural science (biology, zoology, physics), medicine, and language. For *Hakham Qafih*, knowledge that is gained for the purpose of gaining insight into God and His works is considered holy, not secular. This classical Sephardi principle reminds us that the Torah must act as a lens through which we interpret the data of worldly elements around us. This may come as a surprise for some people in the Jewish world today who view worldly knowledge as diversions, rather than expressions, of God. Nevertheless, the obligation to observe and study God's world is even elucidated in *halakha*:

"And you shall love the Lord your God." (Devarim 6:5)

– *What is the path to loving Him? Upon one's contemplation of His works [Torah, Talmud, etc.] and His great and wonderful creations [science, nature, etc.] – discovering in them His endless and limitless wisdom, one comes directly to love and to praise, glorify and yearn with a great desire to know Him.* (Rambam, MT, H. Yesodei HaTorah 2:1-2)

If the love of God - clearly a quintessential Torah value - was to have any real meaning, it could only flow from a knowledge of the Creator's handiwork, and this includes a pursuit of worldly knowledge.

So, what are some of the lessons that the students of our Bet Midrash can take from *Hakham Qafih*?

First and foremost, we are to remember that the Author of the Word and the Author of the world are the same. Therefore, the study and contemplation of worldly knowledge – through the lens of Torah – should never be viewed as a cute supplement or side-dish to our lives as members of Yisrael. Rather, these efforts are fundamental in our efforts to know and to love God through His works, within the context of Covenant (*berit*). After all, by studying the *effects* that we perceive around us, we can come to acknowledge The First Cause that brought everything to be.

Secondly, we should strive to honour the immense commitment of *Hakham Qafih* in providing an accurate representation of his Sephardi *mesorah*: to delineate between what is said by an author and what is said by a commentator; to delineate between the context of an original statement and the context of a modern interpreter; to delineate between truth (*emet*) and falsehood (*sheker*).

May our *talmidim* – with guidance from our teachers – come to obtain the tools necessary to obtain intellectual and experiential knowledge of *HaKadosh Barukh Hu's* Word and world, just as our beloved "Mori" *Qafih* did.



SINA KAHEN - 31 - London

Born in Iran and moved to London at the age of 3. After Hasmonean High School, Sina studied Biomedical Sciences, and completed his MBA from Imperial College. He currently works in the Med-Tech and AI industries, and is the author of 'Ideas' - a series of books on the weekly parashah. He lives in London with his wife, Talya, and two kids.

R. OBADIA YOSEF

by Ezra Dweck



Hakham Obadia Yosef was born in Baghdad, Iraq on September 24th, 1920 (12th of Tishrei 5681).

He immigrated to Yerushalayim with his family in 1924. The family was poor and he was forced to work at a young age, but his passion and skill for Torah study was apparent. *Hakham* Obadia attended Yeshivat Porat Yosef and advanced to the top shiur taught by the Rosh Yeshiva, *Hakham* Ezra Attiya. He received rabbinic ordination at age 20 and when he was 24, he married Margalit Fattal. In 1947, he was invited to teach in the yeshiva of *Hakham* Aharon Choueka in Cairo and served as the head of the Beth Din, but returned to Israel a few years later. In 1951, he published his first *halakhic* work (*Hazon* Obadia), which received the approval of the two chief rabbis of Israel at the time, *Hakham* Ben-Zion Uzziel and Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog. He served as a Dayan until 1968 when he became the chief rabbi of Tel Aviv.

He became the Rishon Letzion in 1973 and held the position for ten years. In 1984, *Hakham* Obadia Yosef founded the Shas party in response to minimal representation of Sephardi Jews in the Ashkenazi-dominated Agudat Yisrael. It became a formidable political force, becoming part of the coalition in most of the elected governments since.

His knowledge of *halakha* was unmatched and he wrote over 50 books spanning every topic. *Hakham* Obadia died on October 7th, 2013 (3rd of Heshvan 5774) at the age of 93. His funeral in Yerushalayim was the largest in Israel's history, and perhaps the largest gathering of Jews since before the exile with an estimated attendance of over 850,000 people.

Hakham Obadia had many ideas that influenced his leadership and *halakhic* rulings. One particular idea of relevance is that the Torah and *Mitzvot* are meant as a framework for life. The *pasuk* says “וְחַיִּים בְּהֵם” and the Sages learn that that implies “וְלֹא שִׁמּוֹת בְּהֵם”. Yet, besides for just saying that we must physically be alive to carry out the Torah, it teaches us that the *Mitzvot* are not meant to restrict our lives but rather to give us life. They give context and meaning to our lives and are not there to simply limit us. Because of this, *Hakham* Obadia worked tirelessly to serve the entire nation by removing unnecessary restrictions. He cared deeply about every member of Yisrael, and responded to challenges with empathy and sensitivity. This can be seen in his awe-inspiring efforts to free *agunot* (women unable to marry due to *halakhic* complications).

Hakham Obadia would often quote “כְּחַזק דְּהִיתְרָא עֲדִיקָ” which means that the power of leniency is greater; anybody can say it is better to steer clear of something but it takes greater power to take the dangers into account and allow it. *Hakham* Obadia generally held such ideas as the driving force when ruling on *halakhic* matters, and worked tirelessly to allow people freedom within *halakha* and against those who wanted to restrict it.

R. OBADIA YOSEF

by Ezra Dweck



Another example of this is his ruling on the eruv in Brooklyn, NY. Even though it was a very complex and controversial issue, he was careful to analyse the challenges and rule leniently. Indeed, he was worried about the people who would have issues if they were not allowed to carry at all on Shabbat.

Our *Hakhamim* famously stated that “התורה חסה על ממונם של ישראל”, that “*the Torah is sensitive to the money of Yisrael*”. This is yet another statement that highlights the beautiful idea that the Torah is cognizant and careful of even minor issues of every individual, especially in legal rulings. *Hakham* Obadia refers to this principle whenever he ruled leniently on issues that he could have easily prohibited due to uncertainty. He was methodological, brave, and experienced enough to be able to stand up for what he thought was the right way to rule and the right way to lead and provide for the nation of Yisrael.

There is so much we can all learn from these things. As *talmidim* of a virtual Bet Midrash, something we can immediately take away is that anything we learn from Torah can be applied to our lives, that we must use it as a context for living rather than see it as a burden to restrict our very freedom. Future generations can also learn that it is important to be truthful and precise when it comes to *halakhic* rulings, and that we should not be afraid to actually rule on a particular issue, instead of just steering clear of whatever may be questionable.

Hakham Obadia ensured that “*the crown*” was “*returned to its former glory*”. May we ensure that this is continued for now and evermore.



EZRA DWECK - זי - Yerushalayim

Ezra is Originally from Brooklyn, NY. He Studied in Yeshivat Malale Adumim for three years and went on to Yeshiva University. He is currently in his final year of a bachelors degree in Computer Science. He currently works for Sefaria, and is a madrich in Yeshivat Moreshet Yerushalayim.

R. HAIM DAVID HALEVY

by Mordechai Maman



Yehoshua Ben Perḥiya tells us in Avot that we should:

“*Make for yourself a teacher; acquire for yourself a friend; and judge every person positively*” - אבות א:ו

The first teaching, that we should “make for yourself a teacher” is the subject of the first teshuba in Rav Haim David Halevy’s nine-volume work, *עשה לך רב*. Rav Halevy clarifies the requirement and role of such a teacher, basing his approach on that of the Me’iri who saw the role of a teacher not only as one who decides *halakha*, but who also serves as an advisor for all members of their community.

Born in Yerushalayim in 1924, the young Haim David was identified by the Av Bet Din, Rav Ben Zion Avraham Cuenca, as being a genius, and convinced his parents not to send him to the Alliance Israelite Universelle (as was the norm), but rather to send him to Yeshiva Porat Yosef where he would prove himself as a diligent student. Learning alongside students who would become leaders of Jewry both in Israel and around the world, he found the teacher who would have the most impact upon him – *Hakham* Ben Zion Uziel.

Hakham Ben Zion Uziel was the president of Porat Yosef, and became the first Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel. *Hakham* Uziel would host a class at home to a small group of students, which included Haim David Halevy. By studying the *Kuzari*, this was an opportunity for *Hakham* Uziel to pass on the importance of Jewish thought and philosophy. Furthermore, he encouraged his students to attain a wider general knowledge alongside their Torah knowledge.

After receiving semikha from both *Hakham* Uziel and Rav Ezra Attia, he went on to teach at *Hakham* Uziel’s Yeshivat Sha’arei Zion, before serving during the War of Independence in 1948. In 1950, Rav Halevy became Rabbi of the Sephardi community in Rishon Letzion, and then the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. Alongside serving these communities, he was involved with the *Agudat haRabbanim haSephardim beYisrael*, fighting for equality in the Rabbinate for Sephardi Rabbis. He would go on to receive several awards, and an honorary doctorate from Bar Ilan University, before passing away in March 1998.

Rav Halevy never set up a formal yeshiva to transmit his teachings, stating proudly that “his books were his yeshiva”. As well as the *halakhic* *מקור חיים השלם* he wrote *תורת חיים* on the *פרשיות השבוע* and the *moladim*, together with two sets of *שאלות ותשובות*, the three volume *מים חיים* and the nine-volume *עשה לך רב*.

In recent years, the teachings of Rav Halevy have received renewed interest as people sought out Rabbis and teachers who were both Torah scholars and part of the wider Zionist camp. His works speak to the modern Jew, dealing with Yom Ha’atzmaut, Yom Yerushalayim, and what a Jewish state should look like and act on various levels.

His understanding of *halakha* and its applications is the subject of *teshuba* 54 in volume 7 of *עשה לך רב*. Here, he responds to a correspondent who took issue with an article he had written discussing innovation in *halakha*. He is asked “*Do we even have permission to move an inch from the halakha as it is written and transmitted to us? What could this innovation even be, for if it is in line with the Shulchan Aruch it is not innovative and if it isn’t then who permitted us to waver?*”

Rav Halevy does not rely on logic alone in answering his interlocutor, but brings examples from Torah and *Gemara*. For instance, he cites the *Bavli* in *Sota* and the *Yerushalmi* in *Kiddushin*, which tell us of the three instances where *halakha* “superseded” the text of the verse. The Torah tells us to write a ‘*sefer*’ for the purposes of divorce, but practically we can write it on anything not connected to the ground. The Torah commands us to cover the blood of a slaughtered animal with dust, yet we can use anything as long as it is like dust. When the Torah tells us to lay *tefillin* or

R. HAIM DAVID HALEVY

by Mordechai Maman



build a *sukkah*, the *halakha* comes to elaborate on how to do so, but in these instances the Torah is very clear with the words it used and the *halakha* comes to broaden the definition! Rav Halevy uses this to demonstrate the innovative power of *halakha*.

Rav Halevy describes the nature of *halakha* – its root being "הלך" ("to go") – as a matter that goes from Sinai until now. It is abundantly clear, we are told, that no detail of a legal principle should have to stand the test of time. Any statute that would have been good when it was enacted would not always be appropriate in a generations time. Rav Halevy applies this to how God gave us a Torah which would be fitting for all the generations, but the role for us is to determine how. God gave the Sages the permission to innovate *halakhic* novelties depending on the time, allowing us to travel on this path from Sinai until now.

He concluded his letter by correcting the misconception that *halakha* and the *halakhic* process is set in stone, unequivocally stating "*there is no flexibility like the flexibility of halakha*". Only this flexibility would allow our *Hakhamim* to innovate across the ages.

This was not merely theory for Rav Halevy – he applied this practically. When asked about a *Gemara* in *Sukkah* 29a which seems to suggest that an eclipse is a bad omen, Rav Halevy replies that we now know an eclipse is a natural occurrences, and acknowledged that this should require a blessing. Unwilling to compose a post-Talmudic blessing, he suggests reciting the first part of "*vayevarech David*" which thematically aligns with the blessing that would be required. Further, on Tisha B'Av we recite the *nachem* prayer, which speaks of a destroyed Yerushalayim. Not willing to change the whole prayer, he advocated switching the wording to say "*she-hayeta*", that it was destroyed.

Other rabbis may have indeed sympathised with the current understanding of eclipses and of Yerushalayim, yet they would have refrained from actually suggesting anything practical in response. Rav Halevy saw the evidence and was able to respond, by balancing the commitment to principles with the need to act.

Rav Halevy continued in the spirit of Sephardi Rabbis who were sensitive to the changes of God's world. From his community role to his *teshubot* and his conversations with callers on the radio, Rav Halevy was able to rule accordingly. This was combined with a deep love for the people of Yisrael. For the Bet Midrash and beyond, Rav Halevy serves as a guide for every generation, as we travel on the long path from Sinai.

There is an alternate reading of the *Mishna* in *Avot* cited at the start of this essay. Instead of reading it "make for yourself a Rabbi", one could read it "*Make yourself a Rabbi*" – that everyone who can should take the opportunity to teach Torah to those who need it. Given the influence of *Hakham* Ben Zion Uziel on his approach, it is clear that Rav Halevy fulfils the plain reading of this text. However, by being a Rabbi to so many communities and writing so many books, Rav Halevy was able to fulfill the alternative reading of this text too. Rav Halevy was indeed an ideal example of a *Hakham*, serving as the interface between *halakha* and a developing world.



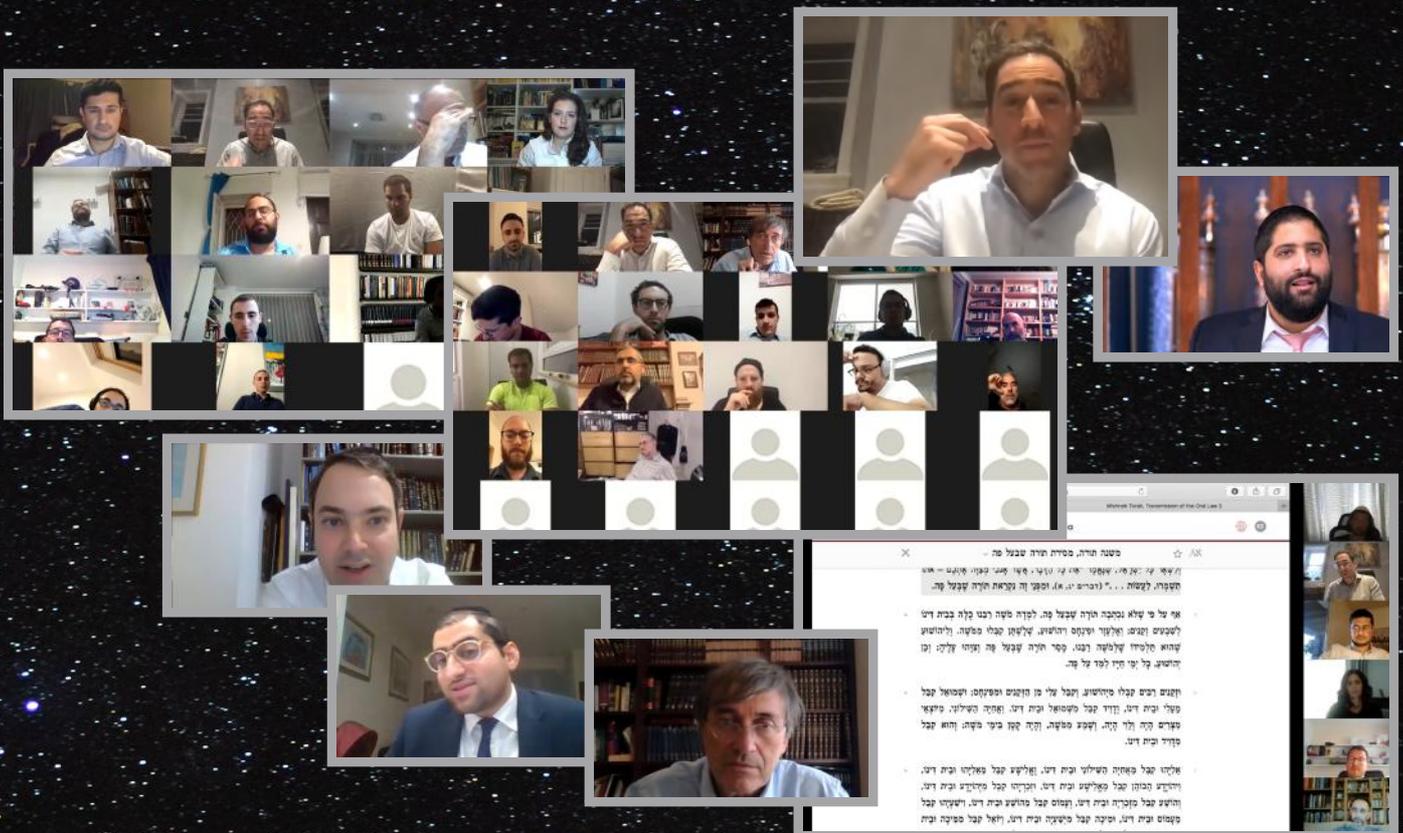
MORD MAMAN - 35 - Manchester

Mord is from Manchester, UK, where he attended Jewish Grammar before learning at Mercaz HaTorah in Yerushalayim. He has a degree in History and now works at a data analysis and software development startup. He was recently appointed Parnas Presidente of the Manchester Congregation of Spanish and Portuguese Jews.

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