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## 1920-2013 | Analysis || Rabbi Ovadia Yosef: The great opportunities missed

Yosef was the most famous rabbi in modern Israel, but his acquiescence to Aryeh Deri and Ashkenazi rabbis prevented him from making the outstanding contribution that he was capable of.

By Anshel Pfeffer | Oct. 7, 2013 | 4:22 PM | 9

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Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in his office in Jerusalem. Photo by Olivier Fitoussi

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Some of the myths told during his life and even a few of the superlatives being poured on Rabbi Ovadia Yosef after his death on Monday are based on fact. He was endowed with all the qualities that transform a yeshiva student into a Torah great, a Gaon. Prodigious memory, unrivalled Talmudic knowledge and indefatigable analytical prowess made him the most prolific writer and arbiter of Halakhic issues and judgments in living memory. And he had a healthy ego; he recognized his abilities and knew he was destined to lead and teach multitudes.

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But even with these rare capabilities, which the yeshiva world sees perhaps once in a generation, Yosef failed to attain nearly every target he set himself throughout his long life. Of course, he was personally successful. He became chief rabbi, spiritual leader of one of Israel's largest parties and the most famous rabbi in Israel since the state's establishment. But the changes he wrought in the nation's life were rather minor. His single lasting achievement is a pile of books, a major milestone in rabbinical literature but a meager return for a man who was capable of so much more.

Some yeshivas (though for now only a minority, as the Ashkenazi establishment has yet to embrace his output) will continue to study his responsa, perhaps for centuries to come. But outside, in the real world, where dayanim sit in rabbinical courts and rule on critical issues of family life and conversion, they will continue to confirm to the hidebound rulings of the "Lithuanian" establishment. Even most Sephardi dayanim will do so, as they know who decides their promotion. That was the case with most of Yosefs rulings as a dayan, which may have been bravely lenient, but were nearly always in a minority against two Ashkenazi rabbis. Nothing has changed.

No doubt, for thousands of religious Mizrahi families, the popular halakha books, edited by his son the now-[Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef](#) and based on his rulings, serve as a daily guide for life. But his insistence on following the rulings of 16th Century [Rabbi Yosef Karo](#), jettisoning centuries of tradition from the different communities of the east, will eventually become a nuance understood only by insiders. The rabbis of Moroccan, Iraqi, Persian and Tunisian extraction are just waiting to put their versions back on display.

Yosef's other major spiritual failure was opening the door wide to the mysticism he disdained. His writing and judgments were based on "open source" Torah. He shunned Kabbala and its practitioners, but at the urging of Shas political leader Aryeh Deri he agreed to adopt the amulets and incantations of [Mekubal Yitzhak Kaduri](#) for Shas' election campaigns. He visibly abhorred Kaduri and his whisperings, but his acquiescence had a major part in deepening the hold of mystical kabbala culture on Israeli society.

In a 1979 lecture, Yosef said that, according to the Torah, Israel must relinquish parts of the Land of Israel in return for a peace treaty and to prevent bloodshed. But his words, and the hopes pinned on him by the left following his speech, failed to lead to a breakthrough in the peace process. At every juncture, he gave in to his political representatives, who were worried that Shas' right-leaning voters would desert the party. Shas MKs and ministers never voted in favor of a peace initiative in government or the Knesset. He continued to believe in his pro-peace positions, but was incapable of making it his party's official policy and he always had an excuse why "the hour is not correct" or "there is no one to make peace with."

It wasn't due just to the anti-Arab racism that was often evident in his speeches. His was not a one-dimensional hatred. He remembered with nostalgia his days as a rabbi in Cairo in the late 1940s and continued to

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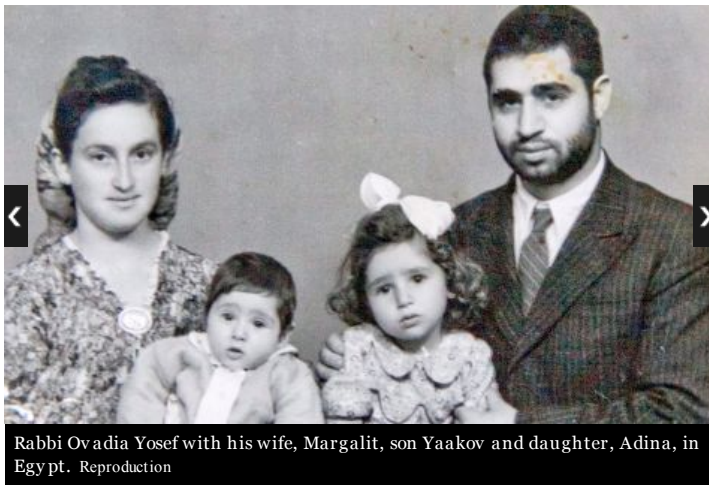
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listen to classical Arab music. He met more Arab leaders from Israel and abroad, including former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, than any other Haredi rabbi. They all wanted to believe he would lead the way to an historic agreement, persuading his followers that peace was both desirable and attainable. He wanted that also, but he was too weak, too inconsistent, too easily swayed by the last person he spoke to. There wasn't a promise he gave Shimon Peres, who rushed to his bedside this morning to bid farewell, that was fulfilled. There was always an Aryeh Deri or Eli Yishai around to make sure the rabbi's will would not be done. Or an Ashkenazi rabbi who would pressure him.

But more than he disappointed politicians and statesmen, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef failed in the service of his own Mizrahi community. He symbolized for them a figure of huge pride, but he failed to change their landscape. The most respected yeshivas and women's seminars all remain Ashkenazi; even Ovadia's grandchildren prefer to study in them - as do the children of other Shas leaders - and not in the second-rate institutes set up by Shas' Maayan network. Despite Shas' electoral success, he failed to stand up to the patronage of Ashkenazis. He also failed in pushing forward a much more necessary reform for traditional Mizrahis in Israel. He gave only quiet support to the programs that provide vocational training and academic study within the Haredi community, such as the women's college in Jerusalem established by his daughter Adina Bar-Shalom. He feared opposing the strident edicts of the Ashkenazi rabbis, who abominate such studies and never lead publicly on this issue.



Rabbi Ovadia Yosef with his wife, Margalit, son Yaakov and daughter, Adina, in Egypt. Reproduction

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef could have brought about a revolution for an entire sector of Israel's population, made a huge contribution to closing the gaps in society and articulated a Jewish-religious life philosophy that would have been in tune with the 21st Century, while remaining true to tradition. He had the strength to do so, but his weaknesses were too great and he feared taking on his opponents. He is worthy of eulogies – he was the most significant spiritual figure the Jews have known since the state of Israel's establishment - but we should also eulogize the great opportunities he had and were never realized.

Anshel Pfeffer wrote "Maran – The Biography of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef," together with Nitzan Chen.

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