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## Hagaon Harav Ovadiah Yosef, zt"l

By Ben Zion Klugman

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***Monday with the news of the passing of Hagaon Harav Ovadiah Yosef, zt"l, the Ri on Letzion and Nasi of the Moetzet Chachmei HaTorah, the glory of Sephardic Jewry and one of the greatest disseminators of Torah in our generation. For more than seven decades he stood at the forefront of Sephardic Jewry, and with his powerful force of Torah, he succeeded in being "machzir atarah l'yoshnah," restoring the glory of Sephardic heritage.***

***He was a gifted orator, and had a unique ability to connect to the simplest members of the masses. "Taamu ur'u ki tov!" he would rally. "Taste Torah and see how good it is!"***

***The entire Jewish world was plunged into mourning on Monday with the news of the passing of Maran Hagaon Harav Ovadiah Yosef, zt"l, the Rishon Letzion and Nasi of the Moetzet Chachmei HaTorah, one of the greatest disseminators of Torah in our generation. For more than seven decades he stood at the forefront of Sephardic Jewry, and with his powerful force of Torah, he succeeded in being "machzir atarah l'yoshnah," restoring the crown to its ancient glory. He was a gifted orator, and had a unique ability to connect to the simplest members of the masses. "Taamu ur'u ki tov!" he would rally. "Taste Torah and see how good it is!"***

## **History**

Harav Ovadiah Yosef was born in Baghdad, Iraq, on 12 Tishrei 5681/1920 to his parents, G-d-fearing Jews, Reb Yaakov and Georgia. He was named Ovadia Yosef (both names were first names, and in later years, the name Yosef became the family name).

At the age of four, he came with his parents and extended family to Eretz Yisrael, where they settled in the Bais Yisrael neighborhood of Yerushalayim. As a boy, Harav Ovadiah studied in the Sephardic Talmud Torah Bnei Tzion in the Bucharim neighborhood, established by Agudas Yisrael and directed by Rabbi Moshe Porush, z"l. For the rest of his life, Harav Ovadiah was grateful to Agudas Yisrael for the foundations of his chinuch that he acquired there.

Already at the age of 12, young Ovadiah could be found sitting and learning in Yeshivat Porat Yosef in the Old City. There are many wondrous stories of his diligence, brilliance and remarkable breadth of knowledge, for which he became renowned already then, more than 80 years ago.

He utilized his every moment to learn Torah. As a young man, he would arrive home each Friday night to make Kiddush. Until everyone assembled

around the table, he would open his Gemara and finish one amud, two, and three amudim. He completed entire masechtos in this fashion.

He did not acquire his Torah easily. He learned amid poverty and with great mesirus nefesh. In those days, it was extremely difficult to make a living. His father, Reb Yaakov, operated a grocery, but it was a difficult time and the burden of earning a livelihood was almost too heavy to bear. Having no choice, Reb Yaakov asked his children to take turns in the grocery.

Harav Ovadiah's righteous mother, Georgia, a"h, was concerned about her brilliant son being plucked from the Torah world. She turned to the Roshei Yeshivah of Porat Yosef, and they persuaded the father to exempt his son from anything that was not related to Torah learning.

Already at the age of 17, his rebbi, Harav Ezra Attiya, zt"l, the Rosh Yeshivah of Porat Yosef, instructed him to begin delivering practical halachah shiurim in the Bais Yisrael neighborhood. His audience was all older than him, sometimes by decades.

He published his first sefer, Kuntres Yabia Omer, in 5698/1938, while still a bachur. The sefer discusses the calculations of the lifetimes of the Tanna'im, and brings proofs for each Tanna from sources in Chazal. The sefer was printed as a small booklet, which was handwritten in the Rav's clear but small, crowded handwriting. He printed hundreds of copies and distributed them to scholars and Rabbanim in Yerushalayim. Seven years later, after he returned from Egypt, where he served as a Rav for two years before the establishment of the State of Israel, he published his first volume of Yabia Omer.

Later, he published the works Yechaveh Daas, Chazon Ovadiah, Maor Yisrael, Livyas Chen, Halichos Olam and other sefarim.

Throughout his life, Harav Ovadiah worked to convey the Torah of the Beit Yosef, zt"l. He would tell his listeners that the study of halachah had to be with the Beit Yosef, that the foundation of Halachah was Maran the Beit Yosef. The Beit Yosef was the Mara d'Asra of Eretz Yisrael, he said, and "Maran" was an acronym for mimasayim Rabbanim nismach — he was supported by 200 Rabbanim.

"In Tzfas, where the Beit Yosef lived, there were 200 Rabbanim, not Rabbanim of our generation, but each one a giant in his own right, and they all relied on Maran the Beit Yosef. Don't desist; make every effort you can to learn Beit Yosef," he would urge.

He related that in his youth, Harav Shimshon Aharon Polanski, zt"l, the Tepliker Rav, his neighbor from Beis Yisrael with whom he had a special bond, told him to "make sure to learn a lot of the Sephardic sefarim, such

as Machaneh Ephraim, Shaar Hamelech, Birchei Yosef, and Machazik Brachah.”

In his youth, he learned in Yeshivas Midrash Bnei Tzion, under Harav Tzvi Pesach Frank, zt"l, the Rav of Yerushalayim. Many of the Gedolim of Yerushalayim learned there. He also developed a close relationship with the Tchebiner Rav, zt"l, and Harav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zt"l.

All Rabbanim, from across the spectrum, respected him greatly and saw that he was destined for greatness. He had a close connection with the Beis Yisrael of Gur, zy"a. He would mention the Rebbe's name with great longing and fondness, emphasizing that the Rebbe was a true "ohev Yisrael.”

Often, he would relate the following anecdote: At the time, he would deliver a shiur for hundreds of listeners on Friday night in Yeshivat Porat Yosef. Once, there was a blackout in the yeshivah building and he could not deliver the shiur. When the Gerrer Rebbe heard, he sent a message that the shiur should not be canceled, and he should come and deliver it in his beis medrash, on nearby Rechov Ralbach. And so it happened that the Rebbe conducted his tisch on the top floor, while Harav Ovadiah Yosef delivered his Friday night shiur for hundreds of people on the bottom floor of the Gerrer beis medrash.

He was also close to the Sanzer Rebbe, zy"a, and he was the one who brought the founding donor for Laniado Hospital to the Rebbe. Harav Ovadiah attended the groundbreaking ceremony and the Chanukas Habayis, and the Rebbe accorded him great respect. The bond between them was formed after the Rebbe visited Harav Tzion Levy, zt"l, in Panama and saw the sefer Yabia Omer there. He was most impressed and began to correspond with Harav Ovadiah on matters of halachah.

Some 40 years ago, he studied Kabbalah under the mekubal Harav Mordechai Sharabi, zt"l, together with, ybl"c, the Belzer Rebbe, shlita. Since then, they shared a close relationship.

Several years ago, Harav Ovadiah visited Harav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, zt"l, and they discussed how their various ailments prevented them from learning as they would wish and as they used to in the past. They both burst into bitter tears over this painful situation.

## **Rav of Cairo**

At the age of 24, Harav Ovadiah was appointed as a Dayan of the Sephardic Beis Din in Yerushalayim. Three years later, in the winter of 5708/1948, he moved to Cairo, Egypt, to serve as the Rav and Av Beis Din.

The Jewish community sought a suitable candidate to restore the

community, and contacted the Sephardic Rabbanim in Yerushalayim, Harav Ezra Attiya, Rosh Yeshivah of Porat Yosef, and the Chief Rabbi, Harav Ben Tzion Uziel, who suggested the young avreich, Harav Ovadiah Yosef, and urged him to accept the position.

The community in Cairo was largely secularized, and even used a microphone during the tefillos of the Yamim Nora'im. He struggled to restore Torah and halachah to its rightful place. But harassment both from the government and within the community over religious issues, shechitah and kashrus led the Rav to resign from his position and return to the holy city of Yerushalayim. In Tammuz 5710/1950, he resettled in Yerushalayim.

During those difficult days, he pledged to publish a sefer zecher l'yetzias Mitzrayim, in gratitude to Hashem for taking him out of Egypt. The sefer was Chazon Ovadiah on the Haggadah, also an expression of Yetzias Mitzrayim.

## **A Guide and Dayan**

Upon his return to Yerushalayim, Harav Ovadiah resumed delivering his halachah shiurim, which he had begun as a bachur, and then added to them.

At that time, the Rav was appointed as a Dayan on the Beis Din of Petach Tikva by Harav Reuven Katz, the Av Beis Din and Rav there. In the morning he would sit on the beis din in Petach Tikva, and in the afternoon he would return to Yerushalayim, to Midrash Bnei Tzion. He served in Petach Tikva for ten months until he gave up the position in favor of writing his sefarim.

In 5714/1954 the first volume of Yabia Omer appeared, and in 5716/1956 the second volume was published. In the approbation of Harav Reuven Katz on the second volume, the Rav of Petach Tikva writes that "I have become familiar with the great attributes of his Torah and that he is destined for greatness, and I have long said that he is going to be one of the Gedolei Hador, b'ezras Hashem."

The Petach Tikva community approached the Rav again to ask if he would become a Dayan in the city again, with better terms. The Rav agreed, and in the summer of 5716/1956 he moved to Petach Tikva again for two and a half years, until he was summoned back to Yerushalayim to serve as the Sephardic Dayan on the Beis Din in Yerushalayim.

In 5725/1965 he was selected to serve as a member of the Beis Din Hagadol, the youngest Dayan on the beis din.

## **Gifted Speaker for the Masses**

Over the course of 70 years, Harav Ovadiah Yosef became known for his dissemination of Torah through his many shiurim. He would travel from place to place all over Eretz Yisrael to deliver shiurim.

At the time, he was one of the founders and supporters of Torah V'Yahadus L'Am, and even participated in gatherings and siyumim that the organization held. He would say that disseminating Torah to the masses is the principle of our existence. His son Harav Yaakov Yosef, zt"l, encouraged and supported the Torah V'Yahadus L'Am shiurim, and several of his grandsons teach for the organization. Numerous shiurim were established by the Rav in the Mossayof and Yazdim batei kneset in Yerushalayim, where they are held throughout the day.

## **Moser Nefesh for Chinuch**

One of the primary objectives of his shiurim was to encourage everyone, even simple people, to give their children a Torah education.

He stopped at nothing to draw people closer to Torah. He would go to the homes of individuals in order to influence them to follow the Torah, to keep Shabbos, kashrus and taharat hamishpachah. During the registration period for students, he would travel each day to a different city to urge people to register their children for Talmudei Torah of the Chinuch Atzmai and chareidi schools. He would travel by bus from the north to the south, making sure not to skip a city. He would carry registration forms with him and fill them out with people as he inspired them. He used his gift of speech, adding jokes and stories to try to convince people to heed his call. He would often attend graduations at Chinuch Atzmai schools and impart to the students a message of commitment to their religious observance. He also traveled to the United States to attend dinners on behalf of Chinuch Atzmai.

## **Tel Aviv Rabbinate**

After the passing of Harav Toledano, zt"l, the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, public figures, among them the heads of Agudas Yisrael, approached Harav Ovadiah, then 47, and asked him to agree to serve as the Chief Rabbi of the city.

The Rav was not enamored by the idea, as he wanted to work on publishing his sefarim, but he acquiesced after being instructed by Harav Ezra Attiya, zt"l, to do so.

Harav Ovadiah's influence spread far beyond the borders of the chareidi and religious community. When the Rav went out into the streets of a city, everyone rose for him in respect — secular and religious, Ashkenazi and Sephardi. They would gaze after him in open admiration.



An entire year elapsed between the time he was elected and the official inauguration ceremony, but the Rav was not idle. As soon as he was elected, he began to travel to Tel Aviv, leaving his home and family in Yerushalayim for two days each week. He would stay at the famed Devorah Hotel, on the corners of Rechov Gordon and Ben Yehudah.

The Rav requested that the inauguration ceremony take place in the Ashkenazi Great Synagogue and not the Sephardi Ohel Moed synagogue, in order to express the fact that he wanted to serve the general public, including the Ashkenazim. When the Rav made a Shabbos Hagadol or Shabbos Shuvah drashah, everyone in the city would go to hear him speak.

In Tel Aviv, Harav Ovadiah's day began with a morning session of the beis din, where he sat with the avos beis din (there were seven panels of dayanim in Tel Aviv at the time). They would marvel at his decisive rulings and solutions that he would present for each difficult problem. From there, he would begin a series of Torah shiurim, which took up the lion's share of his time .

## **Learning Day and Night**

Before, during and after attending to the religious needs of the community, he would delve into Torah study.

At the end of a long day of working on the beis din and in the rabbinate, receiving the public and delivering shiurim, he would return home and retire to his room, lined with sefarim, to write his halachic responsa and arrange them for print. It was not unusual to see him bent over his writing until the wee hours with tremendous focus and concentration. It was during that time that he prepared the fifth volume of Yabia Omer for print.

On Friday nights, despite the toll that the week's schedule took, he would sit and learn until 2 or 3 a.m.

In Iggeres L'Ben Torah there is a story of an Ashkenazi Rav who was a maggid shiur in Bnei Brak who told his students that he lived across the street from Rav Ovadiah in Tel Aviv. On Friday night, the lights went off at 1 o'clock. He saw the Rav go out onto the porch and learn by the light of the street lamp for a very long time. When the maggid shiur arose to daven at the netz, he saw the Rav in the same position as when he had gone to sleep, still learning.

## **Rishon Letzion, Chief Rabbi of Israel**

In Cheshvan 5734/1973, Harav Ovadia was chosen as the Rishon LeTzion. He left an imprint on the life of the residents of Eretz Yisrael in all areas of halachah.

Among other things, he expanded his activities on behalf of the Jews in the Diaspora, traveling to them to disseminate Torah, to draw them to learning and to giving their children a Jewish chinuch.

In Iyar 5743, a law was enacted setting term limits for chief rabbis for 10 years, and thus his term came to an end.

As Chief Rabbi, he spent days and nights following the Yom Kippur War, to resolve the painful plight of agunos whose husbands were presumed killed while serving in the army.

His son Harav Dovid Yosef, shlita, the Rav of Har Nof, related in his hesped that 14 years ago, when his father had a heart attack and was hospitalized for the first time, he needed an angioplasty. Before the procedure, the Rav asked to be released from the hospital for three hours. "We asked him, 'Abba, why? What's so urgent?' and he replied, 'I'm in the middle of writing a response to a she'eilah about an agunah. I must finish it. Who knows if I will awaken after the anesthesia, and then what will be the fate of that agunah?'"

Harav Dovid Yosef concluded at the levayah, "And now, Abba, that you are gone, who will have compassion on the agunot?"

Once, during his tenure as Rav of Tel Aviv, a principal of the Bais Yaakov High School in Tel Aviv contacted him about a certain student, a Russian immigrant, about whom rumors were spreading that the family was not Jewish. The Rav said that the family's case was under discussion and he would inform the principal of the decision. Several days later, Harav Ovadiah called and said, "Harav Binyamin Scharansky, I'm sitting here with Harav Elyashiv. We have permitted the family." And he burst into tears, because these things touched him to the core.

## **At the Forefront of Chareidi Public Affairs**

About a year after leaving the post at the Chief Rabbinate in 5744, he was in the forefront of the establishment of the Shas movement in an effort to use its political power to restore the glory of Sephardic heritage. As part of the movement, he established the Maayan Hachinuch HaTorani, which opened chadarim and yeshivos for boys and schools for girls with the minhagim of Sephardic Jewry. He formed the Moetzet Chachmei HaTorah as the guiding spiritual entity for the Shas movement. Nevertheless, he never diverted his focus from his Torah learning.

In 1999, when Shas won a stunning 17 seats in the Knesset, a group of exhilarated activists began celebrating in the street under the Rav's home. Hearing the commotion, he asked then-Shas Chairman Rabbi Aryeh Deri, "How many did we get?" The response was "17 seats." Upon hearing this, the Rav turned right back to his sefarim.

Harav Ovadiah utilized the political power in the Knesset, the local governments and other public forums to disseminate Torah to the broader public. He indeed achieved that goal to draw the masses closer to Torah.

## **Bereft of a Father, a Leader**

As Rabbi Deri said at the levayah, “We were a mere few hundred Sephardic yeshivah bachurim when you established Shas, and look at the multitudes that are here today; they are all yours.”

He noted that for Harav Ovadiah to tear himself away from his sefarim was like the splitting of the Yam Suf, but he did it on a daily basis to establish yeshivos, mikvaos and deliver shiurim. He tried to express the feeling of being orphaned that Shas now feels: “To whom have you abandoned us? We no longer have a father, a leader! Who will answer our questions? Who will unite us all? You have left us in our most difficult hour... I can promise in my name and in the name of all my colleagues that we will be moser nefesh to continue your endeavors: your chinuch network, to fight for the Torah world that is in danger....”

In his capacity, Harav Ovadiah fought valiantly for the holiness of Am Yisrael, Shabbos and for the purity of chinuch institutions.

He was distraught over the government steps against the Torah and yeshivah world in recent months. He was especially pained by the draft law that is currently under legislation. As Harav Shmuel Auerbach, shlita, noted in his hesped, “With my own eyes I saw him shed tears over the draft law. This was his final will, to fight and to be moser nefesh against this effort to uproot Torah in Klal Yisrael.”

Several months ago, Harav Ovadia lost his son, Harav Yaakov Chai Yosef, z"l, after a prolonged illness. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu came to be menachem aveil. While enveloped in his personal pain over the loss of his son, he told the prime minister, “With all the pain and my broken heart over my private tragedy, I am more anguished by the worry over the Torah world.”

In recent months, the Rav fell ill and was hospitalized several times, including over this past Rosh Hashanah. But he was released shortly thereafter, and between Yom Kippur and Sukkos attended the inauguration of his son Harav Yitzchak, shlita, as the Rishon LeTzion. At that time, he imparted his legacy to his son, and directed him how to lead, with inclusiveness to all.

On Chol Hamoed Sukkos he was taken once again to the hospital. Klal Yisrael prayed fervently for his full recovery, and the name Chaim was added. Miraculously, the Rav regained consciousness and his ability to

speak for a few days; the fact that he was taken off life support was deemed a medical miracle by the doctors. But on Sunday afternoon his condition deteriorated once again, and he was reconnected to the respirator. On Monday morning there was a drastic deterioration, and his family was summoned to his bedside. His holy soul was summoned to Yeshivah shel Ma'aleh at 1:20 p.m. on Monday, surrounded by family and his close confidants, with thousands waiting outside the hospital and praying for his recovery.

## **Levayah**

Immediately upon hearing the news, hundreds of thousands of people began streaming towards Yerushalayim to attend the levayah, which was the largest Eretz Yisrael has ever seen in modern times.

The news cast a pall of mourning over the entire Israeli public. Even the secular media devoted hours of broadcast time to speaking about the Rav, his Torah, his numerous rabbinical positions and his influence on the Israeli public. People who are far from Torah and mitzvos wept in the streets, and many tore kria, manifesting the love that people had for him irrespective of their religious affiliation.

Public transportation was drastically augmented to enable people to get to the city, and the levayah was scheduled for 6:00 p.m. to give them time to get there.

Police estimated the number of participants at the levayah at 850,000. Most of Yerushalayim's main streets were closed to traffic and packed with people. Highway 1, which runs between Yerushalayim and Tel Aviv, and on which the main entrance to the capital is situated, was closed to private vehicles to give precedence to public transportation. Highway 443 was extremely congested, and people walked for over an hour to reach the levayah.

Gedolei Yisrael from across the spectrum attended the levayah both at Porat Yosef and throughout the route to the cemetery.

Hespedim were delivered at Yeshivat Porat Yosef. The mekubal Harav David Batzri, shlita, began with the recital of Selichos, and the Rishon Letzion Harav Shlomo Amar recited Tehillim. The maspidim were, shlita, Harav Aharon Butbul, a son-in-law; Harav Shmuel Auerbach, Rosh Yeshivah, Yeshivas Maalos HaTorah; the Rishon Letzion Harav Eliyahu Bakshi Doron; Harav Reuven Elbaz, Rosh Yeshivah, Yeshivat Ohr Hachaim; his son, Harav Avraham, Rav of Holon; Harav Yisrael Meir Lau, Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv; his son the Rishon Letzion Harav Yitzchak; Harav Shalom Cohen, Rosh Yeshivah, Yeshivat Porat Yosef and a member of the Moetzet Chachmei HaTorah; his son Harav David Yosef, the Rav of Har

Nof; the mekubal Harav Benayahu Shmueli, Rosh Yeshivah, Yeshivat Nahar Shalom; his son Harav Moshe Yosef; Shas Chairman Rabbi Aryeh Deri; Harav Yaakov Ades; Harav Moshe Tzadka, Rosh Yeshivah, Yeshivat Porat Yosef; and Harav Shimon Baadani, Rosh Yeshivah, Yeshivat Torah V'Chaim and a member of the Moetzet Chachmei HaTorah.

Rabbi Deri took the opportunity to thank Harav Moshe Yosef, the Rav's youngest son, and his rabbanit, who had lived with the Rav since his wife's passing in 1994, and have tirelessly cared for him. He mentioned that they were to have been escorting their child to the chuppah at this time, and instead, were escorting their father on his final journey; the wedding was postponed.

As Harav Lau noted, "Maran was not the Rav of one sector. He was the Rav of all of Am Yisrael. He was a rare combination of a brilliant mind and a warm, loving heart to Am Yisrael. Look at this levayah: it is a genuine demonstration of kvod haTorah. Am Yisrael knows to whom to pay their true respects. Who merits such respect?"

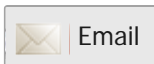
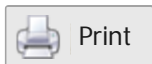
The levayah departed from Yeshivat Porat Yosef, on the corner of Rechov Malchei Yisrael and Rechov Yosef Matisyahu. It proceeded from there to Yirmiyahu and Bar Ilan, to the Sanhedria beis hachaim, where Harav Ovadiah was laid to rest alongside his wife, Rabbanit Margalit, a"h.

The Rav had 11 children, one of whom predeceased him last year, Harav Yaakov Chai, zt"l. His surviving children, ybl"c, are his sons, Harav Avraham Yosef; the Rishon Letzion Harav Yitzchak; Harav David and Harav Moshe, and daughters Rabbanit Adina Bar Shalom; Rabbanit Malka Sasson; Rabbanit Yaffa Cohen; Rabbanit Rivka Chikoutai; Rabbanit Sara Toledano; and Rabbanit Leah Butbul.

Zechuso yagein aleinu.

This article appeared in print on page 4 of the October 8th, 2013 edition of Hamodia.

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