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# Rabbi Yosef's legacy

By JPOST EDITORIAL 10/07/2013 22:11

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Yosef reached out to a large segment of Sephardi Israelis whose observance was not rigidly Orthodox



Rabbi Ovadia Yosef Photo: Courtesy

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's death marks the passing of one of the most creative and original halachic minds of the modern era. In nearly every possible field of Jewish law, Yosef left his mark.

Perhaps the most famous of his rulings – and the one with the most far-reaching political implications – was Yosef's 1979 opinion that Halacha permitted ceding parts of the Land of Israel if doing so could be proven to save Jewish lives.

The Camp David peace accords with Egypt – including the return of the Sinai Peninsula – were being negotiated at the time of the ruling and Yosef, who was then Sephardi chief rabbi, provided prime minister Menachem Begin with a halachic justification for clinching a deal with Egyptian president Anwar Sadat.

Though Yosef was praised at the time by the Israeli Left, he came under fire for breaking with haredi rabbis, who tend to distance themselves from "political" questions of Jewish sovereignty resulting from the creation of the State of Israel, and from right-wing religious-Zionist rabbis like Rabbi Shlomo Goren, who served at the time as the Ashkenazi chief rabbi.

According to Nitzan Chen and Anshel Pfeffer in Maran, their biography of Yosef, it was the rabbi's experiences dealing with over 900 widows whose soldier-husbands had been killed in the Yom Kippur War which made him more dovish.

In 1973, in another controversial move, Yosef, as newly appointed Sephardi chief rabbi, broke with the consensus of haredi Ashkenazi rabbis – including rabbis from Chabad, a movement normally so active in Jewish outreach – and ruled that the Beta Israel from Ethiopia were full-fledged Jews, thus facilitating their immigration to Israel.

Arguably, Yosef's biggest impact was in improving the

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religious prestige of Sephardi Jewry, a process he referred to as "returning the crown to its rightful place" (hachzarat ha'atara la'yoshna). He leveraged his influence in the religious establishment by creating Shas, which ran for the Knesset for the first time in 1984. Thanks to Shas's political success – which unlike Ashkenazi haredi parties rested on a less religiously observant constituency of Sephardi Israelis – Yosef managed to get more Sephardi rabbis and judges appointed in the Chief Rabbinate and the religious courts, institutions that had once been dominated by Ashkenazim. Today, someone named Vaknin has an as good if not better chance of being appointed to a rabbinic position as someone named Weinstein.

The political movement that he led also created the El Hama'ayan network of schools, with 40,000 students and the lucrative Beit Yosef kosher supervision apparatus.

Both institutions have helped strengthen the Sephardi customs and culture endorsed by Yosef.

Yosef, who unlike haredi or even religious-Zionist rabbis, reached out to a large segment of Sephardi Israelis whose observance was not rigidly Orthodox, promoted a "melting pot" approach of unifying the customs of Sephardi Jews and rejected the traditions that developed in the Diaspora. With the return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land, argued Yosef, the rulings of Rabbi Yosef Karo, the author of the Shulchan Aruch who lived in the Land of Israel, should take precedence – at least for Sephardi Jews. He insisted that Sephardi young men keep their separate Sephardi customs, even while studying in Ashkenazi yeshivot.

Inevitably, Yosef clashed with those among Sephardi Jewry – particularly Iraqi and North African Jews – who wanted to maintain their old customs.

Yosef strove in his rulings to be lenient in a wide range of issues, large and small. While many haredi rabbis refused to recognize conversions performed by IDF rabbis and considered those who underwent these conversions gentiles, Yosef ruled these conversions were completely kosher and that those who underwent them were fullfledged Jews. Unlike most Ashkenazi rabbis, he permitted placing fully cooked dry food on a hotplate on Shabbat.

And he supported his daughter's project – the first haredi academic college – which provides haredi men and women with university degrees in fields such as computer science, social work and psychology.

Unfortunately, Yosef will be remembered by many – at least in the short term – for his outrageous outbursts, usually made during his weekly Saturday night sermons. But in the long term, hopefully he will be remembered for his tremendous Torah scholarship and his transformation of Sephardi Jewry



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