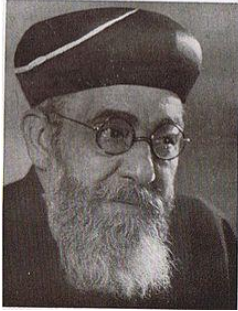




Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Chai Uziel
Rabbi Jonathan Ziring: jziring@torontotorah.com



Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel (Hebrew: בן ציון מאיר חי עוזיאל, born 23 May 1880, died 4 September 1953) was the Sephardi chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine from 1939 to 1948, and of Israel from 1948 until his death in 1953.

Biography

Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel was born in Jerusalem, where his father, Joseph Raphael, was the av bet din of the Sephardi community of Jerusalem, as well as president of the community council. At the age of twenty he became a yeshivah teacher and also founded a yeshivah called Mahazikei Torah for Sephardi young men.

1. Rabbinic Career (Wikipedia)

In 1911, Uziel was appointed Hakham Bashi of Jaffa and the district. There he worked closely Abraham Isaac Kook, who was the spiritual leader of the Ashkenazi community. Immediately upon his arrival in Jaffa he began to work vigorously to raise the status of the Oriental congregations there. In spirit and ideas he was close to the Kook, and their affinity helped to bring about more harmonious relations than previously existed between the two communities.

During World War I, Uziel was active as a leader and communal worker. His intercession with the Ottoman government on behalf of persecuted Jews finally led to his exile to Damascus but he was permitted to return to Palestine, arriving in Jerusalem before the entry of the British army. In 1921, he was appointed chief rabbi of Salonika, accepting this office with the consent of the Jaffa-Tel Aviv community for a period of three years. He returned to become chief rabbi of Tel Aviv in 1923, and in 1939 was appointed Chief Rabbi of Palestine.

Uziel was a member of the Jewish Assembly of Representatives and the Jewish National Council, as well as being a representative at the meeting which founded the Jewish Agency. He appeared before the Mandatory government as a representative of the Jewish community and on missions on its behalf, and impressed all with his dignity and bearing. He was also founder of the yeshivah Sha'ar Zion in Jerusalem. He contributed extensively to newspapers and periodicals on religious, communal, and national topics as well as Torah novellae and Jewish philosophy.

*Translations taken from *Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel* by Rabbi Marc D. Angel, or <https://www.jewishideas.org/article/grand-religious-worldview-rabbi-benzion-uziel>

2. Ethical Will of Rabbi Uziel (Loving Truth p. 244)

...to spread Torah among students, to love the Torah and its mitzvot, to love the land of Israel and its holiness, to love absolutely every Jewish man and woman and the people of Israel in its entirety; to love G-d, the Lord of Israel; to bring 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; to bring true peace in the house of Israel to the entire congregation of Israel in all its subdivisions and groupings; and between Israel and their Father in heaven. These goals are actually one, since they stem from one source, namely the Torah of the living G-d and the King of the universe, Who is the King of Israel and its Holy One Who gave the true Torah to His people, a Torah all of whose ways are pleasantness and all of whose paths are peace.

3. Ibid, on the Value of the State of Israel

A great and awesome merit has been revealed to this generation of our, the revelation of G-d's mighty and hidden hand over his chosen people of Israel. He has gathered our scattered one and has brought us back to our land, the inheritance of our ancestors, so that we are here on the land, a nation dwelling on its own land. This ingather of exiles, - which took place over the past decades- is the seed of the flowering of our redemption... [G-d] spread a spirit of wisdom and heroism in the hearts of all our heroic pioneers.

Melting Pot or Mosaic?

4. R. Uziel in Shut Piskei Uziel B'She'elot HaZman 2

To the honorable Rabbi Levitsky, Rabbi of Givat Rambam, Tel Aviv.

Enlightened Rabbi! The question that came to you – As, thank G-d, in our days, the settlement in our Holy Land has increased, may it continue to increase, many of our brothers have gathered here from all scattered parts of the Exile with unique customs in prayer and the like, each as he received from his parents, the he has been accustomed to his whole life, and each loves his father's customs and won't move from them.

On Sukkot, I saw regarding the shaking of the lulav, that there are many different customs which many divergences.... They all pray together in one synagogue and each follows his custom, and good comes from this as peace reigns. The same is true for differences for prayers and liturgy, tachanun. As much as possible, each keeps his own custom. This is a daily occurrence, with no breach – and there is peace and tranquility. However, I am afraid that there may be a violation of making factions...
[After explaining the technical halachic issues:]

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.

Thousands of years have passed since the revelation at Mount Sinai, and the Jews have been exiled many times and nation to nation and from kingdom to kingdom, with many decrees imposed on it and its teachings to destroy or falsify it, to confuse its letters and disrupt its intentions. Nevertheless, despite all this, Judaism came out pure and complete in its character and spirit, united and unified in its foundation, and all those who tried to harm the unity of this Torah, the Samaritans, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Karaites and the sects of the disciples of false messiahs were completely lost or exist in a pathetic existence which will disappear from the world. This unity emanates from a faithful source of the Torah of the living G-d, who is the only One in the world, unique in the heavens and in the earth and all their legions, and therefore He commands His faithful prophet of His house to say:...just as He is the only one in the world, so shall your work be special before Him...

This association, which Israel is named, attests to the unity of the Lord, a protector and savior, and it is the union of G-d in the land that teaches man both in her Torah and in her unity, the symbol of complete unity that has nothing to separate and disintegrate. And as we are commanded to be one association, we are also warned of a severe and threatening warning: You shall not make yourselves into factions...

... We have learned from this: that it was not permitted to make factions except in cases such as Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities, which are separate in their customs and distinguished as special divisions.... In any case, the law turns out to be very well: that all the customs of prayer, performance of mitzvot, and halachic rulings that are publicly performed in one synagogue; they are, in general, guided by the prohibition against factions. And it is very close to saying that this is a mitzva that brings about a sin, and it is clear that this is not a mitzva of the finest kind. 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. And how great and profound are the words of the Sages that in the Tefillin of the Holy One, blessed be He, it is written “and who are like your people, Israel, one nation in the land” that G-d praises “Israel, You have made me unit in the world and Israel is one nation in the land (Berachot 7).

5. Mishpitei Uziel, Yoreh Deah 11

First of all, I say that I was astonished at the sight [that I saw] when I read the words of the rabbis who are members of the Spiritual Committee of the Cities of Iraq wrote that “... we have agreed that all revenues and dedications of the Babylonians, that is, the Iraqis, that are for the city of Jerusalem, are for the committee for the Iraqi community.”

Before we discuss their words in terms of Halachah, we must see what motivated them to come to this agreement... They say that this is not a cry of injustice or perversion of justice towards the poor immigrants from Iraq, but rather their desire was to build a platform for themselves and receive monthly support that will be divided by their committee.

There really is no negative discrimination here. Even if we assumed that that the revenues from Iraq are larger than all other Sephardic communities in the Diaspora, would this not be stingy and theft of the poor, to leave poor people who come from other Diaspora countries whose residents are poor and cannot support their settlement in the Holy Land? Is this the way of Torah whose ways are all the ways of pleasantness and its pathways of peace?!

6. Rabbi Uziel’s concept of Zera Yisrael, as it applies to conversion (and the applications used to find 10 Tribes of Israel)

7. Prophetic Morality as a Factor in R. Uziel's Rulings on Conversion : A Case Study of Halakhic Decision-Making from a Zionist Perspective by Rabbi Binyamin Lau

R. Uziel's use of prophetic sources shows the extent to which he sees the matter of conversion not as a private matter but as part of the overall process of the people's return to its Land. The central motivation for his tendency to rule leniently in matters of conversion grows out of an overarching vision of the nation rather than the specific laws of conversion in *Yoreh De'ah*. ... Since the inception of Zionism, decisors have taken different tacks on many questions related to Israeli society, including, among others, the commandment to settle the Land and the military draft. The issue of conversion, too, appears to be a test case with respect to the religious significance of the third return Zion. For one who sees no religious significance in this enterprise of Jews returning to their Land and their people, the laws of conversion will remain unchanged and each case will continue to be determined on its own, without regard to the overall picture. But the Zionist ideology sought to enhance the concept of the nation, thereby resulting in a changed attitude toward the question of conversion. In the position he adopts, R. Uziel reflects something of that stance, as he relies on prophetic verses that deal with the problems of assimilation and how to overcome them. We can see a similar process of nationalistic thought and reliance on the prophetic books on the part of contemporary decisors who quote Ruth – “your people shall be my people and your G-d shall be my G-d” (1:16) – as a model for accepting converts on a national basis even before they are accepted on a religious basis... It appears that relatively wide use of other verses related to meta-halakhic concepts is characteristic of R. Uziel.

8. Peace with the World (taken from Angel article)

Rabbi Uziel, who spoke Arabic fluently, felt it was vital for Jews to establish good relations with their Arab neighbors. He strenuously criticized those individuals who, in the name of Judaism, fomented anti-Arab attitudes. This was a perversion of Judaism. "The Torah of Israel, all of whose paths are ways of peace, calls for the peace and love of its people and all who are created in the image of G-d." It was up to rabbis to decry negative attitudes towards the Arabs. In 1927, Rabbi Uziel visited Baghdad and spoke to the Jewish community there, inspiring them with his message from Zion. In is speech, which he delivered both in Hebrew and Arabic, he called on the Jews of Baghdad to share in the religious Zionist ideals, to settle in Israel, to maintain their religious traditions in the land of Israel. The Arabic newspapers of Baghdad praised Rabbi Uziel's speech, and lauded his call for peace and friendship between the two great nations (Jews and Arabs), both peoples being descendants of our forefather Abraham.

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."

Rabbi Uziel fully believed that peace and harmony were achievable if goodwill could prevail. He was faithful to this vision throughout his life, even though it was rejected by political and religious leadership on both sides.

9. Ibid

In considering whether it would be preferable to obtain non-Jewish bodies for autopsies, Rabbi Uziel's response was unequivocal: "Certainly this should not even be said, and more certainly should not be written, since the prohibition of *nivul* stems from the humiliation caused to all humans. That is to say, it is a humiliation to cause the body of a human being--created in the image of G-d and graced with knowledge and understanding to master and rule over all creation--to be left disgraced and rotting in public."