

Introduction

1. Dr. Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Ovadia*, <http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/734/features/rav-ovadia/> (Oct. '10)

One of the more outsized personalities in Israel's history is Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the longtime head of the Shas political party, who has just marked his ninetieth birthday. Rav Ovadia, as he is known, rose from a poor and undistinguished family to the summit of rabbinic—and then political—leadership through the sheer force of his learning and personality, and the coincidence of his passions with some of the deepest currents in Israeli society. The foreign public knows of him, vaguely, as a right-wing fanatic. But the truth and perhaps the tragedy of the man are far more complicated and fascinating....

His ability to merge the intellectual elitism of the yeshiva with a common touch was to become one leitmotif of his career. Another was his pride, together with his boiling resentment of those who ignored or dismissed his accomplishments. Foremost among the latter were the members of the Ashkenazi establishment, religious and secular alike. They would come to regret it.

Rising through the ranks, Rav Ovadia served as a rabbinic judge in Cairo, Petah Tikvah, and Jerusalem, and as chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, teaching all the while. In dozens of immensely learned books and countless rulings, he staked out a distinctive judicial philosophy with two components.

The first was encapsulated by the slogan "to restore the crown to its former glory (l'hahazir atarah l'yoshnah). The "crown" was the tradition of Sephardi halakhah that had come to full fruition in Joseph Karo, the 16th-century author of the still-authoritative law code, Shulhan Arukh. This tradition, in Rav Ovadia's view, had been contaminated if not downright smothered by centuries of Ashkenazi stringencies, dialectics, and arrogance... The second component of his legal philosophy was his leavening of unshakable traditionalism with a humane responsiveness to changing times and circumstances...

Authoritative, audacious, and decisive, Rav Ovadia eventually got the better of his rivals. In 1972, he unseated his long-time nemesis, Yizhak Nissim, to become the Rishon l'Tsion, the Sephardi chief rabbi. And then his real troubles began.

2. Yossi Sarid, *If he's the greatest, we're in trouble*, Ha'Aretz (Oct. '13)

After his death - may he reach the ripe old age of 120 before that happens - it will be hard to call him a saint. In life, we didn't see him as a saint and so we have no reason to call him one as he lies on his deathbed.

We are not abandoning a sick old man because he was never ours to begin with. When our enemy falls – or becomes deathly ill – we must not rejoice, but, at the same time, we cannot forgive.

This is the "spiritual leader" whose spirit was bad, who viciously attacked all those who disobeyed, all those who did not bleed Shas. Now, as his family and entourage quarrel over succession, we should recall all those he cursed: Gentiles and Arabs, black people and women, teachers and gays, Reform Jews, secular Jews and even religious Jews who didn't follow his teachings. Let us not forget the cursed politicians and disparaged judges and the Israelis soldiers who were lookouts during Shabbat but did not observe the holy day and thus died of their own fault.

3. Lawrence Joffe, *Obituary of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef*, The Guardian

Resplendent in his gold brocaded black gowns and purple turbans, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who has died aged 93, often resembled a medieval stranger marooned in the modern world. In fact, he was one of Israel's most astute public operators. As spiritual head of the ultra-orthodox Shas party, Yosef influenced the course of Israeli politics. And as former chief rabbi to Israel's Sephardim and Mizrachim – Jews of Iberian, North African and Middle Eastern origin – he rekindled a sense of communal pride not experienced for centuries...

But it was as spiritual mentor of Shas – an acronym for "Sephardi Torah Guardians" – that he truly made his mark. The party began as a municipal list in Jerusalem in 1983. Then Yosef dictated its policies and handpicked its prospective Knesset members, including the 25-year-old Deri, a rabbi and friend of his son, David. Soon Shas blossomed into a national political force that fused religious zeal with an ability to articulate Sephardi grievances. For despite constituting half the population, Sephardim still felt that both Israel's secular establishment and Ashkenazi-run orthodox parties treated them like second-class citizens...

4. Gavriel Fiske, *Rabbi Ovadia Yosef buried in largest funeral in Israeli history*, Times of Israel Oct '13

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the powerful, much-loved and sometimes controversial spiritual leader of Israel's Sephardi community, passed away in Jerusalem early Monday afternoon after being hospitalized repeatedly over the last several weeks. He was 93. Ovadia was laid to rest Monday night in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Sanhedria, with some 800,000 mourners converging from all over the country to attend what became the largest funeral in Israeli history. Despite the huge crowds, far beyond the numbers police had anticipated, there were no reports of serious injuries...

"A few hours ago I went to the hospital to say goodbye to my teacher, my rabbi, my friend Rabbi Ovadia Yosef," President Shimon Peres relates in an official statement. "It was a difficult time. Tears filled my eyes and my throat was choked with emotion. I held his hand which was still warm and kissed his forehead. When I pressed his hand I felt I was touching history and when I kissed his head it was as though I kissed the very greatness of Israel," he added.

"Immediately after the fall of the Second Temple there were two greats of the Torah — Yohanan ben Zakai and Yehuda Hanasi," Peres continues, adding, "I mention them because they came to the conclusion that for the Jewish people to survive we need to study. Rabbi Yosef symbolized that and acted upon it. He was simply a great man. His greatness wasn't measured but rather it was felt as a spiritual wind in every corner, lighting up the darkness in unexpected places. When I met him I sensed he was a great man with an unbelievable memory and the wisdom to share his knowledge with others. His contribution was his love for Israel and he solved problems no one else could solve using his wisdom and spirituality."

Peres, who had known Yosef for decades, was among the last to visit the rabbi's hospital bed earlier in the day, before his passing.

Ashkenazim and Sephardim in Early Israel

5. Kevjn Lim, *From Plowshares to Swords: The Sephardi-Ashkenazi Schism and the Problems of Ethnic Discourse in Israel*, Nov. '04

Despite the Yishuv's Sephardi tenor, the early Zionists who engineered the founding of Medinat Israel were predominantly Ashkenazim. Having conceived of the Labor movement among other Zionist strains, the Russian and Polish Jews of the Second and Third Aliyot in particular developed a pioneering ethos reflecting their Socialist values. If the prospect of the Biblical Ingathering attracted the more traditional Sephardim, the raw secularism of Ashkenazim alienated them. As Dowty, Ben-Rafael and Sharot observe, the 'New Jew' and the 'anti-Diasporism' postulated by Ashkenazim contradicted the Sephardi ideal of Zionism as "a reinforcement of traditional Jewishness rather than a revolution against it". With greater education and resources, the European-born pioneers were able to establish a network of institutions that by 1948 had coalesced into a full-fledged infrastructure and "the basic point of reference". For all its rhetoric, the Zionist elite failed to implement an inclusive model for the Integration of Exiles (mizug galuyot), forcing the 'backward' and 'primitive' Sephardim into a Eurocentric Procrustean bed instead.

6. Edo Konrad, The roots of anti-Mizrahi racism in Israel, +972 Magazine (Dec '15)

Israel's media was abuzz Monday following the release of an overtly racist commercial targeting Mizrahi Jews.

The commercial for the upscale housing development of "Karmeit Gat," planned to be built in the middle of Kiryat Gat, a working class town largely populated by Mizrahim (Jews from Arab and/or Muslim countries), features a religious Ashkenazi family (Jews of eastern European origin) lighting Hanukkah candles together. All of a sudden they are disrupted by two neighbors — unabashedly portrayed as Mizrahi — who barge in to ruin Hanukkah with their vulgarity and ignorance of authentic Jewish practice.

The message? By moving to Karmeit Gat, you can live among other real, white Jews without having to worry about those pesky, benighted brown people.

The video, produced by "Be'emuna," a real estate company that specializes in building "quality housing for the religious public," was widely panned in the media, and was taken down almost as quickly as it went up. But the bitter taste couldn't be wiped out, especially since the video was released on the very same day that official Israel commemorates the expulsion of Jews from Arab and Muslim lands...

Those who may be shocked by the blatant bigotry in the Karmeit Gat video must remember that racist attitudes toward Mizrahim are part and parcel of Israel's DNA. The founders of the state, Jews of Ashkenazi origin who were raised on

European ideas of nationalism and socialism, viewed "Oriental Jews" as backward and primitive from the moment they began arriving en masse on Israel's shores, shortly after the founding of the state.

Famed Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban described in 1957 how Mizrahi Jews were, in the plainest sense, a direct threat to the nascent State of Israel: "The goal must be to instill in them a Western spirit, and not let them drag us into an unnatural Orient. One of the biggest fears... is the danger that the large amount of immigrants of Mizrahi origin will force Israel to compare how cultured we are to our neighbors."

7. Tol Staff, *Yemenite families of disappeared children file class-action lawsuit*, Times of Israel, Oct '18

Dozens of families of Yemenite Jews who say their children were taken from them by Israeli authorities in the 1950s are filing a class-action lawsuit demanding millions in reparations from the State of Israel and the Jewish Agency, Channel 10 reported Thursday.

The lawsuit seeks to force the state to accept responsibility for at least 69 infants known to have disappeared from public institutions such as hospitals and day care centers.

Some 49,000 Yemeni Jews were brought to the nascent State of Israel in Operation Magic Carpet in 1949-50. Since the 1950s, more than 1,000 families — mostly immigrants from Yemen, but also dozens from the Balkans, North Africa, and other Middle Eastern countries — have alleged their children were kidnapped from Israeli hospitals and put up for adoption, sometimes abroad, in what is known as the Yemenite children affair.

Disputed by scholars and seemingly refuted by three state commissions that examined the affair and concluded that most of the children had died, the case has kept resurfacing, not least because most of the families were not given their children's bodies or informed of their burial places.

The claims also come against a background of neglect and marginalization with which many Muslim-world Jewish immigrants were greeted when they arrived in an Israel controlled at the time by an Ashkenazi Jewish elite.

Families have also noted that many of the children's death certificates were riddled with errors, and most of the missing children were sent army draft notices to their original families 18 years after their alleged deaths. There have also been sporadic cases of adopted children who were able to confirm, through DNA tests, that they were from Yemenite families who were told they had died.

A Brief Biography

8. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Yabia Omer 9:Choshen Mishpat 9

Israeli Chief Rabbi Isser Yehudah Unterman was asked by Rabbis of Israel to contend in the elections to be held on 7 Cheshvan 5733, against the other candidate, Rabbi Shlomo Goren, so that he might remain in his sacred post. He acquiesced to their request on condition that I, a youth, put forth my candidacy for Israeli Chief Rabbi against Rabbi Yitzchak Nissim. He claimed that since Rabbi Nissim controls the Sephardi members of the Chief Rabbinate Council, and they boycott the meetings of the Chief Rabbinate at Rabbi Nissim's order because of past quarrels with Rabbi Unterman, the Chief Rabbinate is paralyzed, as a majority of members don't participate in the Chief Rabbinate Council... All of the members of the Supreme Rabbinical Court, the well-known scholars Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Rabbi Betzalel Zolty and Rabbi Eliezer Goldshmidt and other sages, have agreed that I must acquiesce to the request of Rabbi Unterman and submit my candidacy for the post of Israeli Chief Rabbi...

In truth, I was pained by this, for thank Gd, I have already served in a holy capacity the sacred community of Tel Aviv-Yafo for years, and they have not budged from treating me with love, affection and admiration, for I have found favour in their eyes in my conduct and the spread of the Torah I have taught in all parts of the city, may His Name be praised eternally for His kindness to us has been great. I live among my nation in peace and tranquility. But I cannot bear the pushing by the aforementioned scholars, and even though I sent my doubts in writing to Rabbi Elyashiv regarding removing a rabbi from his post, for we elevate in sanctity and do not reduce... He responded that since Rabbi Nissim is making every effort to remove Rabbi Unterman from his post, supporting Rabbi Goren with all of his strength, whose path and conduct the rabbis of the Supreme Rabbinical Court do not approve of, there is no doubt that I may contend against him, and it is a mitzvah...

It is the honour of Gd to conceal matters, and I will say nothing of the conduct of Rabbi Nissim, but only regarding the legal principles involved...

9. Rabbi Yehuda Heimowitz, *Maran Harav Ovadia*

At a reception for Harav Ovadia at the home of Israel's president attended by the Cabinet and the leaders of the military, President Zalman Shazar and Prime Minister Golda Meir both urged the new Rishon LeZion to find some way for the Langer children to marry. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan was particularly open about the government's expectations, declaring, "I don't care how you find a *heter*, the bottom line is that we have to rule leniently for those who were prevented from marrying."

By the time Harav Ovadia rose to address the crowd, the atmosphere in the room had grown tense, and it seemed at first that he would capitulate and guarantee to provide the solution they sought. His opening words were: "I am from a line of Rishon LeZions dating back more than 300 years," he began, "all of whom worked with *koha d'heteira* to try to solve *halachic* issues that arose." But before anyone could misinterpret his words, Harav Ovadia declared, "However, *halacha* is not determined at Dizengoff Square; it is determined in the *beit midrash* and by the *Shulhan Aruch*. If there is any way to be lenient and permit something, the Sephardic *hachamim* will be the first ones to rule leniently. But if there is no way to permit something, and after all the probing, investigating, and *halachic* examination that we do, we still cannot find a basis to allow it, we cannot permit something that is prohibited, Heaven forbid."...

On November 15, exactly one month after their election, Harav Ovadia felt that he had no choice but to report to the press that his Ashkenazi counterpart had issued an ultimatum four days earlier: If Harav Ovadia would not join him on a new three-man *beit din*, Chief Rabbi Goren would cut off all contact with him and refuse to participate in a joint inaugural ceremony. Chief Rabbi Goren denied issuing the ultimatum, but Harav Ovadia Yosef repeated the charge in an interview published in the *Jerusalem Post*.

10. The mantra of Shas *l'hachzir atarah l'yoshnah* – to restore the crown to its ancient [glory]

Blending Rabbinat and Politics

11. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Yabia Omer 5:Orach Chaim 1

It is known that in all matters of prohibition and permission we have accepted the ruling of our master, the Shulchan Aruch, our great master Rabbi Yosef Karo, whom the King of kings of kings wishes to honour, as per the great later authorities, among them *Maharanach*, who wrote, "The Beit Yosef has already been accepted upon us as master in our communities, to follow his rulings." And *Parach Mateh Aharon* wrote, "And we have already accepted the rulings of the great master Rabbi Yosef Karo in all of our communities, and especially regarding the laws of prohibition and permission" – meaning, whether to be lenient or to be strict.

12. Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Aderet (13th century Spain), Responsum 1:253

[W]henver they follow one of the leading authorities for all of their deeds, where they follow Rif's *Halachot* for all of their deeds, or where they follow Rambam's composition for all of their deeds, they have made these giants as their rabbis. However, if there is a sage there, who is worthy of ruling, and he sees reason to prohibit what they permit, then they must follow the prohibition. These [texts] are not like their actual rabbis. If they would follow the dissenter's view in the place of their actual rabbi, they would take his honour lightly in his place.

13. Rabbi Chaim Yehuda David Azulai (18th century Israel, Italy), Shem haGedolim: Sefarim "Beit Yosef"

Know that I have received from elders of Torah and reverence who heard from the sacred mouth of the great master, the angel and holy one, Rabbi Chaim Abulafia, that he held a tradition that regarding the rule set by our master [Rabbi Caro] in halachic rulings, to follow the three pillars of the House of Israel, Rif, Rambam and Rosh, etc, that close to 200 sages in his time agreed to this...

14. Rabbi Jeffrey Saks, *The Making of an Iconoclast*, Tradition 40:2 (2007)

Remarkably, R. Ovadia began this battle at the age of seventeen, when R. Attia sent him to teach a daily halakha class in a Persian-Jewish Jerusalem synagogue based on the popular *Ben Ish Hai* of the revered R. Yosef Hayyim (1835-1909), rabbi of Baghdad, among the greatest modern *posekim* of the Sephardic community, acknowledged in the same way the *Mishna Brura* is in the Ashkenazic community. However, "Yosef could no longer control himself" (Gen. 45:1). The *Ben Ish Hai*, because he occasionally rules against R. Yosef Karo's *Shulhan Arukh*, was guilty of being one of those corrupters of the pure Sefardic tradition (29-31). The laypeople and senior rabbis revolted against young Ovadia's critique of the *Ben Ish Hai*, but R. Attia supported the young teacher, whose iconoclasm has grown ever since.