

Rav Ovadia Yosef, zt"l

My son currently learning in *Eretz Yisrael* called and told us what it was like to be among the throngs of mourners at the *levaya* of Maran HaRav Chaim Ovadia Yosef, zt"l. He was engulfed in a sea of people, and at one point it was literally like a churning sea: he was fearful that the powerful currents beyond his control pushing him here and pulling him there were going to swamp him.

It is hard to put an official number on crowd, but they seem to range from 700,000 to a million (one of the leading anti-religious, Israeli papers put the number at 500,000; still an overwhelming amount). Whatever the exact count, police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld (who was early on quoted as saying 700,000) called it "the largest funeral ever in Israel."

Within hours of the *gadol's* passing, even secular and non-Jewish media outlets the world over were reporting his death... and sharing their opinions of his life. Perusing these articles, it is remarkable how often they got it wrong. After the initial, often seemingly perfunctory accolades, many of these writers launched into an unabashed

harangue of what the Rav represented. In reality, these are less a criticism of Rabbi Yosef's rulings and opinions – which none of these writers are equipped to really evaluate from a scholarly perspective—and more an example of them using the funeral to vent their hatreds and fears of the religious camp.

For instance, one journalist wrote: "Even more famously, he blamed the deaths of Jews during the Holocaust on the spiritual deficiencies of their ancestors." My, how he misunderstood and twisted the truth!

When asked by a media person to comment of what Rav Ovadia really said, Rabbi Berel Wein explained, "...anyone who has any familiarity with traditional Jewish thought, Kabbalah, Chassidic teachings and the wealth of Jewish folk tales knows that reincarnation, expiation of previous-life sins, and the nature of the exposition of hidden G-dly reasons for inexplicable human tragedy, was not shocked by what Chacham Ovadia said. Nothing in his words contained any calumny or insult to the innocent Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Rather, he was searching for a way to comfort Israel. Anyone who knows Chacham Ovadia, even cursorily,



knows that he mourns for the victims of the Holocaust no less than the administrators of the Holocaust museums and organizations worldwide.”

This was but one example. It represents a common underlying accusation – whether explicit or implicit – in many of the secular writers who levied criticism at the Rav and his teachings: that they reflect a vindictive, mean spirit and lack of concern for others. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Yehuda Azoulay, a *talmid*, has been working on a comprehensive biography of Rav Ovadia Yosef. He describes him like this:

[A]dmired by Jews of all backgrounds, observant and non-observant... Rabbi Yosef was a remarkable blend of scholarly genius and basic human sensitivity, boldness and humility, courage and compassion....

[P]erhaps the most significant quality that has made Rabbi Ovadia Yosef such an esteemed and beloved leader is his remarkable ability to relate and connect to the masses. Already during his years in yeshiva, he stood out not only as an exemplary student, but also as a gifted educator. Just as he is unparalleled in his caliber of scholarship, he is similarly unparalleled in his ability to inspire ordinary laymen. For many years, he has delivered weekly lectures on Saturday night combining Torah wisdom, stories and humor, appealing to Jews of all different levels. These sermons were recorded via radio, TV, Internet and were broadcasted around the world, in Montreal, New York, Los Angeles, London, France, Djerba, Tunisia and even Tehran.

Therefore, before embarking on any biographical details about Rav Ovadia Yosef's life, it is crucial first and foremost to understand that the numbers at his funeral do not lie. He was loved by the masses – and not only for his genius, but for his compassion; he cared deeply for people. This is



Chacham Yosef learned day and night, even when he had to remain in the hospital due to his illness.

not the image the secular media conveyed.

Of course, in his compassion for each and every Jew he did not shy away from being a strong leader trying to guide his flock. His encyclopedic Torah knowledge and clarity of thought made him fearless in his convictions and tireless his pursuit of the truth. He was a staunch and unflinching defender of Torah tradition. Even as a young rabbi while he was in Egypt before 1948, he fought relentlessly against Jewish leaders who disregarded *halachah*.

Outsiders saw this strength as intolerance. They failed to acknowledge or realize that tolerance is not the same as lacking convictions. A person without convictions finds it easy to tolerate otherwise intolerable behavior. Tolerance means having convictions, but knowing when to speak out against violations of them. Only someone from Rav Yosef's perch, as a leader, can know when the generation needs *mussar* and when the situation requires silence. A *gadol's* greatness is that when it comes time to give *mussar* he gives it, even if that makes him unpopular. Rav Ovadia Yosef was fearless when it came to expressing his convictions – the Torah's convictions as he saw them. Yet, none of that detracted one iota from his love of people. To the contrary, his expression of an opinion was a result of his love for the Jewish people.

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From an historic, biographical point of view, the most important thing to know about Rav Ovadia Yosef was that, as Yehuda Azoulay

put it, “he ushered in a new era of a return to Sephardic roots, and a renewed commitment to the magnificent, millennia-old spiritual heritage and legacy of Sephardic Jewry....”

He accomplished this in part through his prolific pen. The sheer volume of his works staggers the mind. He composed 58 *halachic* works, all of which are standard texts in the field of practical *halachic* decision-making. As one writer put it: “There is almost no significant *halachic* work published over the past 30 years that does not relate, in one way or another, to Rav Ovadia's *halachic* rulings. There is almost no significant *halachic* realm

that Rav Ovadia did not address.... And anyone who is not well-versed in Torah literature in general, and the *halachic* realm in particular, cannot truly appreciate Rav Ovadia.”

Although such prolific output might lead one to think that his genius lay in his breadth of knowledge, his ability to analyze and penetrate to the core of a given topic is also part of his legacy. Furthermore, his prodigious pen did not prevent him from training thousands of accomplished *halachic* scholars, untold numbers of who serve as rabbis, writers and educators in Israel and around the world. ■

Although it is impossible to capture even in a voluminous biography, and certainly in an article, the life of Rav Ovadia Yosef, here is a brief timeline of some major events (taken in great part from David Azoulay):

1920—Born on 12 Tishrei (September 23) in Baghdad, Iraq.

1924—Family moved to Yerushalayim. His father, Chacham Yaakob, and his mother Georgia (Yaffa), were known for their dedication to Torah and to their eight children, of whom Rabbi Ovadia Yosef was the oldest.

1920s—As a young boy, he was educated at the Benei Sion School in Jerusalem's Bucharian neighborhood, and was recognized as a child prodigy.

1930—He transferred to Yeshivat Porat Yosef, where he earned a reputation for unmatched diligence, quick comprehension and a phenomenal memory. He studied under the tutelage of the famed Rosh Yeshiva of Porat Yosef, Chacham Ezra Attiah, *zt"l*.

1937—When he was 17, he composed a short pamphlet consisting of several pages of intricate *halachic* discussion, the kernel of what would ultimately become his monumental 10-volume work *Yabia Omer*.

1939—Received *smichah*.

1943—Appointed as a *dayan*.

1944—Met Margalit Phatal, the daughter of Chacham Avraham Phatal, a distinguished scholar from Aleppo, Syria, and the two are

married. Throughout her life, Rabbanit Margalit Yosef is known for her wholehearted devotion to her husband and for lending him the support he needed to become a Torah giant.

1947—The couple moved to Egypt, where Rabbi Yosef served as Deputy Chief Rabbi and head of the Rabbinical court, until eventually assuming the position of Chief Rabbi of Cairo.

1950—After three years in Egypt, he returned with his wife and children to Israel and was appointed judge in the Bet Din of Petah Tikva. By this time, Rabbi Yosef had already authored five scholarly *halachic* works.

1954—Founded Or HaTorah Yeshiva for gifted Sephardic *talmidim*. This yeshiva was the first of many which he established, later with the help of his sons, in order to facilitate Torah *chinuch* for Sephardim and establish the leadership of the community for future generations.

1960—Appointed as a judge in Jerusalem's Bet Din HaGadol.

1968—Named Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv.

1972—Appointed Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel. ■