

Hacham Ovadia Yosef – The Most Accomplished Rav of Recent Generations

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

The post World War II generations have been blessed with many great and impactful Torah scholars such as my teacher Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, Rav Moshe Feinstein, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach to name but a few. The impact of these great Rabbanim might be measured by the attendance at their funerals, which ranged from 100,000 to 300,000 people. The attendance of an estimated one million people at the recent funeral of Hacham Ovadia Yosef indicates that Hacham Ovadia had more impact on the Jewish People than any of his peers in the lofty Gadol HaDor category.

The reaction to the death of Hacham Ovadia may be compared to the weeping of all the Jewish People in response to the death of Aharon (BeMidbar 20:29 with Rashi). Indeed, the fact that at Israeli soccer games held soon after Hacham Ovadia's death a moment of silence was observed demonstrates the widespread and profound impact of Rav Yosef even upon those who are not involved in the world of the Beit Midrash and Yeshivah.

We attempt to accomplish an awesome task: to properly assess the greatness of Hacham Ovadia and set forth the reasons why I believe Rav Yosef was the most accomplished Rav of recent generations. We use the style of the Dayyeinu song which we recite at our Sedarim to provide a proper perspective to Hacham Ovadia's multi-faceted extraordinary talents and contributions. This Hesperid was originally delivered at Congregation Shaarei Orah, the Sephardic Congregation of Teaneck, where I am privileged to serve as Rav of the Kehilah.

Facet #1 - Extraordinary Memory and Knowledge

Had Hacham Ovadia been famous only for his phenomenal memory and knowledge that alone would suffice to regard him as a Gadol HaDor. It is said that Rav Yosef could complete the sentence of every line in every Sefer housed in his voluminous home library. Every page of the dozens of Sefarim he composed overflows with abundant and rich references to the full range of Torah sources from the well-known to the most obscure. Indeed, more than five hundred sources appear in his twenty three page long Teshuvah addressing the use of hot water from a Dud Shemesh (solar water heater) on Shabbat (Teshuvot Yabia Omer 4:34). Each Teshuvah written by Hacham Ovadia constitutes a virtual encyclopedia on the topic he addresses.

The following two stories depict his incomparable memory. The Vatican library was reputed to contain rare manuscripts of the writings of various Rishonim that the curators would not permit Jewish scholars to copy. For example, Rashba's commentary on Masechet Eruvin was available only at the Vatican, where scholars were permitted to read but forbidden to photocopy the rare documents. Rav Yosef was sent to solve the problem. After reading Rashba on Eruvin and committing the entire commentary to memory, Hacham Ovadia returned to Israel and wrote it word for word from memory. This is how we have access to the Rashba's commentary to Masechet Eruvin.

My friend Joel Steinmetz of Woodmere, New York, told me of a skeptical attendee of one of Rav Yosef's Shiurim who noted each of the sixty four sources Rav Yosef cited to support a ruling he issued during the Shiur. He found it difficult to believe that every one of these sources existed. The skeptic proceeded to

engage in exhaustive research to investigate the accuracy of each of the sources cited. He found that 63 of the sources were accurate but thought he had caught Rav Ovadia in an error regarding the 64th source. He approached Rav Yosef and told him that he searched throughout Israel for the 64th source, and concluded it did not exist. Rav Yosef explained that the source is found in a Sefer he read in a Shtiebel while visiting the Borough Park section of Brooklyn, New York.

Facet #2 - Extraordinary Poseik

Had Hacham Ovadia simply served as a Poseik for routine Halachic matters regarding the issues that are addressed in the Orah Haim and Yoreh Deah sections of the Shulhan Aruch, it would be sufficient to classify him as a Gadol HaDor. Hacham Ovadia's Teshuvot are not mere encyclopedic lists of opinions. He did not make Halachic opinions simply by adding up the number of authorities who supported a particular approach and rule in accordance with the majority. Hacham Ovadia addresses each and every issue exercising skilled and sound Halachic and practical judgment that in most cases is just as helpful to Ashkenazic Posekim as it is to Sephardic Posekim (Shemirat Shabbat KeHilchatah extensively quotes from Hacham Ovadia; Rav Hershel Schachter once commented, "every Teshuvah of Rav Ovadia is beautiful;" Rav Mordechai Willig regularly cites Rav Ovadia in his rulings). Rav Yosef unabashedly supported the lenient approach to many issues, citing the Gemara's phrase Koha DeHeteirah Adif - the power of the lenient approach in Halachah is greater, since one must thoroughly master a topic before issuing a lenient ruling.

The most outstanding example of Rav Yosef's lenient approach is his Sefer Taharat HaBayit, a very comprehensive presentation of Hilchot Nidah. There are three premier Sefarim addressing Hilchot Nidah addressing the special issues and concerns that have arisen due to advances in technology – the Badei HaShulhan (written by Rav Feivel Cohen of Flatbush), the Shi'urei Sheivet HaLevi (written by Rav Shmuel Wosner of Bnei Brak, Israel,) and Rav Yosef's Taharat HaBayit. The first two Sefarim are quite strict and appropriate for the Halachic elite for whom the strict approach is appropriate. Taharat HaBayit, on the other hand, is quite lenient regarding many issues. Rav Yosef felt he needed to compose a work that was appropriate for the entire Jewish people. The lives of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews are enriched and improved by Rav Yosef's reasonable approach. Had Rav Yosef not published this work, a serious void in the Jewish community would exist.

We should clarify that Rav Yosef did not always adopt the lenient approach. In fact, there were certain strict rulings that Hacham Ovadia vigorously encouraged, such as wearing not only Rashi Tefilin, but also Tefilin whose Parashiyot are arranged according to Rabbeinu Tam's opinion (Yalkut Yosef, Kitzur Shulhan Aruch 31:3; I heard a recording of a Shiur in which Rav Yosef told his audience that their attendance at his Shiur constitutes prima facie evidence that they are on a sufficiently high spiritual level that they should wear Rabbeinu Tam's Tefilin). He also strongly encouraged (see, for example, Yalkut Yosef Kitzur Shulhan Aruch 624:5) waiting to end Shabbat until it is over according to Rabbeinu Tam's strict opinion (72 minutes after sunset,) and insisted (Teshuvot Yehave Da'at 3:56) that Sephardim eat only meat defined as Glatt by the highest standards (Beit Yosef Glatt). It is well known that Hacham Ovadia forbids women from wearing Sheitels (see, for example, Teshuvot Yabia Omer 6:13), despite the preference of many Jewish families (we should note that many great Sephardic Posekim such as Rav Shalom Messas in his Teshuvot Shemesh UMagen disagree). Nonetheless, Hacham Ovada preferred presenting the lenient

approach as a viable option so that Halachic observance would be practical and accessible for all Jews, not only the Halachic elite.

Of course, Hacham Ovadia's rulings are of monumental importance for Sephardic Jews. Prior to Hacham Ovadia's emergence as a major authority, Sephardic Jews regarded the Ben Ish Hai as their primary Halachic authority. However, the Ben Ish Hai was renowned for basing many of his rulings on Kabbalah and for ruling strictly in many areas of Halachah. Rav Yosef made a change for Sephardic Jews by creating a more lenient Halachic option for those for whom the strict approach was not a viable option. Rav Yosef's Yalkut Yosef (which we shall discuss subsequently) and Taharat HaBayit have created a new option for many Sephardic Jews which opens the door for a much wider circle of observance.

Facet #3 – Extraordinary Dayan

The area of Halachah where Hacham Ovadia found his most extraordinary greatness is in the area of Dayanut, in dealing with extremely sensitive matters of personal status. At age 25, Rav Yosef was appointed a Dayan in 1945 by the great Sephardic Chief Rabbi Rav Ben Zion Uzziel, his first rabbinic position. Hacham Ovadia excelled in adjudicating the most delicate areas of Agunah (women unable to remarry due to uncertainty as to whether their husbands remain alive) and Mamzeirut (ineligibility to marry due to conception from illicit circumstances).

Rav Yosef exhibited utmost care, concern and compassion and issued thousands of creative and often courageous approaches to permit potential Agunot and Mamzeirim to remarry. Rav Eli Mansour, a leading Sephardic Rav from Brooklyn, New York, reports that of the nine thousand Agunot that Rav Yosef ruled they are free to remarry, not one of their husbands ever reappeared, thus corroborating the proper judgment exercised by Hacham Ovadia.

Rav Yonah Reiss of the Beth Din of America reports that about ten years ago he was struggling to discover a Halachic basis in which to rule that a certain individual is not a Mamzeir. After exhaustive research Rav Reiss was about to give up. The night after he lost hope he had a recurring dream in which the words Rav Ovadia Yosef repeated in his mind throughout his sleep. He resolved to submit the Mamzeirut question to Rav Yosef and sure enough within a few weeks he received a lengthy reply in which Rav Ovadia articulated a creative argument concluding that the individual is not a Mamzeir.

Hacham Ovadia's greatest hour as a Dayan occurred in the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur when nearly one thousand wives of married soldiers required Halachic verification that their husbands had perished in the war, in order for them to remarry. Rav Yosef for months focused only on these situations and found Halachic permission for each one of these women to remarry. Rav Yosef presents the Halachic basis at great length in Teshuvot Yabia Omer 6: Even HaEzer 3.

In an example of extraordinary heroism, Hacham Ovadia about ten years ago delayed emergency heart surgery that the doctor ordered he undergo immediately after experiencing a heart attack in order to devote a few hours to complete the Teshuvah he was writing to permit an Agunah to remarry. Rav Yosef feared that if he died on the operating table the woman would not find a Rav who would permit her to remarry.

The decision of Hacham Ovadia that had the most impact was the ruling he issued as Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel that Ethiopian Jews are Jewish, following the rulings of the Radbaz and his student the Maharikash. More than 80,000 Ethiopian Jews were rescued by the State of Israel as a direct result of Hacham Ovadia's ruling. In Teshuvot Yabia Omer (8:11), Rav Yosef vigorously and persuasively articulates his assertion that the rulings of the Radbaz and Maharikash affirming the Jewish identity of

Ethiopian Jews outweigh and supersede anthropologists' arguments that the Ethiopian Jews are not Jewish. Rav Yosef cogently and forcefully defends his ruling against the dissenting opinions of Halachic giants such as Rav Yitzchak Herzog, Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Eliezer Waldenberg.

In his eulogy for Hacham Ovadia, Rav Shlomo Aviner relates the following poignant anecdote: One day in our yeshiva, a student told me that he had gotten engaged. "Mazel Tov! I am happy to hear!" I said. "There is one problem, however," he added. "She is Ethiopian and I am a Kohein" (some authorities say that Ethiopians must go through a "Giyur LeChumrah – a conversion for stricture" since some question their Judaism. A Kohein may not marry a convert). "Why did you get yourself involved in a complication like that?" I asked. "I didn't think about it," he replied. "I appreciate her and I love her. I didn't notice her color." I sent him to a few different great Rabbis, whose opinions I knew, but they feared putting their rulings in writing. I then turned to Maran HaRav Ovadia Yosef. The next day I received a letter permitting him to marry. "Take it," I said to him, "it is a piece of paper worth a billion dollars."

Facet #4 – Connecting with the Masses of Am Yisrael

Every truly great Gadol BeYisrael is not only successful in his discourse with Torah scholar, but is distinguished for his ability to relate to the wide masses of the Jewish People. For example, both the Ben Ish Hai and the Hafetz Haim commanded the awe and respect of their peers as well as the broader Jewish community who flocked to hear the lectures of these two great rabbis. In the United States, the Lubavitcher Rebbe and Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik attracted the greatest scholars as well as thousands of ordinary Jews to their speeches.

The rousing Haskamot (rabbinic endorsements) of the first two volumes of Teshuvot Yabia Omer from the greatest Posekim alive in Yerushalayim in 1954 and 1955, Rav Zvi Pesach Frank, Rav Yitzchak Herzog, Rav Dov Ber Weidenfeld (author of Teshuvot Doveiv Meisharim), Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv testify as one hundred witnesses to the great respect to which Rav Yosef was held by the greatest of his older and contemporary rabbinic colleagues. The fact that nearly a million Jews attended Hacham Ovadia's funeral stands in awesome testimony of the ability of Hacham Ovadia to connect with the masses of Jews. His radio broadcasts and his Motza'ei Shabbat Shiurim which were televised via closed circuit television worldwide attracted tens of thousands of devotees. I recall as a Yeshiva student in Israel very much enjoying listening to Hacham Ovadia's radio broadcasts on Friday afternoon. I, together with tens of thousands of listeners, was enthralled with his clear presentation and captivating charismatic manner.

Hacham Ovadia was able to move vast audiences to reach closer to Hashem and His Holy Torah. Tens of thousands of people would throng to hear Hacham Ovadia deliver words of inspiration before Selihot recited a few days before Kippur at the Kotel HaMa'aravi. Rav Yosef was able to deeply move audiences of thousands at motivational assemblies devoted to bring Jews back to their Torah roots. Hacham Ovadia knew how to connect with his audiences and brought warmth and a sense of humor that drew his audiences close to him and more important to allegiance to Torah. Hacham Ovadia took every opportunity that time and health permitted to speak throughout Israel and often throughout the world to bring his special words of inspiration and spiritual uplift to as many Jews as possible.

Hacham Ovadia was also extraordinarily successful in reaching the masses of Jews through his writings. In the 1980's Hacham Ovadia created a new genre of Halachic writing with his Teshuvot Yehave Da'at.

These were simplified Teshuvot from which many people, ranging from extraordinary scholar to the average laymen, could prosper. Rav Yosef writes in an engaging, elegant and concise manner. The amount of substance Hacham Ovadia covers in a relatively short space is extraordinary. A prime example is Teshuvot Yehaveh Daat 1:75 where in only a few pages Rav Yosef succeeds in discussing and summarizing the great volume of Halachic literature that addresses the question of whether to first recite Havdalah or light Hanukah candles on the Motza'ei Shabbat of Hanukah.

With the help of his son Hacham Yitzhak, the Yalkut Yosef was written. These lengthy volumes codify Halachah for routine Jewish life and are summarized in two volumes of a Yalkut Yosef version of the Kitzur Shulhan Aruch. Hacham Ovadia's Kitzur Shulhan Aruch has become a standard work in Sephardic synagogues and homes. This work renders Halachic practice in contemporary life accessible to all.

Anyone with even just a basic knowledge of Hebrew can easily access these two volumes for quick guidance for most Halachic issues that a Jew will confront during his lifetime.

Finally, Rav Yosef, with help from his sons, has produced and advised Sephardic Siddurim such as Yehaveh Da'at and Ohr VaDerech that provide clear and concise Halachic guidance for every Sephardic Jew. Thus, in his countless public lectures and dozens of Sefarim was able to connect with hundreds of thousands of Jews.

Facet #5 – Hazarat Atarah LeYoshenah: Restoring the Prestige of Sephardic Jewry

The twentieth century was a time of great upheaval for most of Sephardic Jewry. Sephardim who had been living continuously in Arab countries for many centuries found themselves uprooted by entirely unjustified Arab violence in the wake of the United Nations decision in 1947 to partition Eretz Yisrael into Jewish and Arab States. Upon arrival in Israel and elsewhere, Sephardic Jews unfortunately found that their age old and venerated Halachic practices and customs were often not accorded proper respect.

Rav Ovadia Yosef led a movement LeHahzir Atarah LeYoshenah, to restore the crown of the majestic Sephardic tradition to its original and rightful prestige. Three examples of Rav Ovadia's Teshuvot Yabia Omer illustrate what is involved in this monumental project. In Yabia Omer 6: Orah Haim 10, Hacham Ovadia responds (in 1970) to a question regarding the Nusah of prayer at the Yeshiva High School in Afula. More than ninety percent of the students were Sephardic but yet the Tefillah at the school was conducted utilizing Nusah Sefarad (the Nusah commonly used by Ashkenazic Chassidic Jews which is primarily the Ashkenazic text with some Sephardic practices incorporated). The argument was made that this Nusah prepares the students for service in Tzahal and learning in Yeshivot Bnei Akiva where the Tefilah is (in those years) conducted using a similar Nusah designed to accommodate the mix of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews in these venues.

Hacham Ovadia forcefully responds that since the overwhelming majority of the students in the Afula Yeshiva High School hailed from Sephardic families, proper Sephardic Siddurim should be used and Sephardic customs observed. He writes that it is the responsibility of administrators and teachers LeHahzir Atarah LeYoshenah to teach Sephardic students to take pride in their Sephardic heritage and observe Sephardic practices and customs.

Teshuvot Yabia Omer 10: Even HaEzer 34:6 records a heartrending story of a woman scheduled to remarry whose first Get was not recognized by the Beit Din of Petah Tikvah in 1957. The Get was conducted in Baghdad, Iraq before the woman made Aliyah to Eretz Yisrael. A Dayan who is not Sephardic sat with Hacham Ovadia (the Av Beit Din of Petah Tikvah, the venerable Rav Reuven Katz, was

sick and unable to attend that Beit Din that day) and argued that the Get was invalid due to improper transliteration of the husband's name Victor. Hacham Ovadia argued vociferously for the Kashrut of the Get since it was transliterated properly according to Sephardic tradition. The Beit Din was deadlocked and the non-Sephardic Dayan ordered the woman to postpone her marriage. The woman cried in desperation, since her wedding was scheduled for that very day! Hacham Ovadia vigorously defended the validity of the Get and even resigned from the Beit Din in protest of his colleague's intransigence. When Rav Katz recovered and returned to the Beit Din, he sustained Hacham Ovadia's ruling and arranged for the marriage to take place as soon as possible. He also apologized to both the woman and Hacham Ovadia and then convinced him to return to the Beit Din. Hacham Ovadia concludes, "This incident is carved in my heart all these years since then until now (the tenth volume of Yabia Omer was published in 2004) and a wise individual should listen and derive a lesson."

It is remarkable that even at a relatively young age (he was 37 in 1957) Hacham Ovadia was willing to defend Sephardic practice in the face of opposition of older colleagues. Another example of such courage at an early age is recorded in Teshuvot Yabia Omer 6: Even HaEzer 11, in which Rav Yosef requested a replacement Get be sent by the venerable Rav Eliezer Silver of Cincinnati, Ohio. Rav Silver was a great and forceful personality, but Rav Ovadia stood his ground in asking for Rav Silver to write a new Get in conformity with the accepted customs of Eretz Yisrael (a Get should be written in accordance with the customs of the locale in which it is delivered, Beit Shmuel 129:2). On a personal note, when I met Hacham Ovadia to receive his authorization to administer Gittin in 1993, he strongly urged me to administer Gittin for divorcing Sepharadim in accordance with Sephardic practice and to master the rules of transliterating Arabic and other names in accordance with Sephardic standards as set forth in Halachic works such as the Sheim Hadash.

A final example may be found in Teshuvot Yabia Omer 6 Even HaEzer 14. In 1950, the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Chief Rabbis, Rav Ben Zion Uzziel and Rav Yitzhak Herzog made a number of Takanot (enactments) to unify the Jewish People, such the acceptance of Heirem DeRabbeinu Gershon forbidding polygamy. Included in the Takanot was an agreement that all Jews would eschew Yibbum in all circumstances and opt for Halitzah instead when relevant God forbid.

Hacham Ovadia notes, however, the Sephardic Jews have accepted the rulings of Rambam and the Shulhan Aruch that Yibbum is preferred and to be encouraged. In 1951, at the age of 31, Rav Yosef courageously upheld Sephardic tradition and ruled that the Takanah of the Chief Rabbis is invalid. Rav Yosef did not make this ruling in a vacuum – he issued it acting as a Dayan on the Beit Din of Petah Tikvah in an actual case. The Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, Rav Shalom Messas (Teshuvot Shemesh UMagen), supported Rav Yosef's bold ruling and followed it in practice in actual Beit Din situations.

Facet #6 – Unifying Sephardic Practice

Yet another major contribution would have been sufficient for us to consider Hacham Ovadia as the most accomplished Rav of the past half century. Sephardic Jews hail from a wide variety of countries and maintain a dizzying array of customs. Yemenite Jews (properly described as Eidot HaMizrah), for example, maintain practices that differ significantly from other Sephardic Jews. Moreover, there are

three major sub-groups of Eidot HaMizrah; Baladi, Shami and Dor Da'im. The first immigrants to Israel and elsewhere were able to maintain their specific Minhagim as they tended to cluster and reside among those who emigrated from the same region. However, in subsequent generations many Sephardim no longer lived in such groups. Thus, it is not uncommon to find in one Sephardic community individuals who hail from a wide variety of countries. For example, included in Congregation Shaarei Orah in Teaneck (the Kehilah I have the privilege of serving as its Rav) are Sephardic families who come from thirteen countries (Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen).

In such communities, which Sephardic customs should be followed? How can a compromise be forged between the myriad of Sephardic customs? Hacham Ovadia came to the rescue with a Halachic approach presenting, in *Yalkut Yosef* and in *Siddurim* published under his auspices, unified customs suitable for all Sephardic Jews that accentuate Minhag Yerushalayim and the rulings of Rav Yosef Karo, the author of the *Shulhan Aruch*. Hacham Ovadia often writes that Rav Yosef Karo is the *Mara DeAtra*, the Halachic authority for Eretz Yisrael and ultimately for all Sephardic Jewry. Hundreds of Kehilot inside and outside of Israel, such as Congregation Shaarei Orah in Teaneck, rally around *Yalkut Yosef*. Rav Yosef also endorsed *Siddurim* to create a coherent and unified Sephardic custom appropriate for all Sephardic and Eidot HaMizrah Jews.

Facet #7 – Educating Jewish Children: Rav Yosef's Political Activities

We continue with what is undoubtedly the most controversial aspect of Hacham Ovadia's accomplishments – his political activities. Many Rabbanim would argue that Rabbanim should stay far removed from politics, since, almost by definition, politics is divisive and controversial. It is important, though, to understand why Hacham Ovadia in the last thirty years of his life was not only a leading Rav, Poseik, and Dayan, but also reigned as one of the major political leaders in Israel.

Rav Shlomo Aviner, in his eulogy for Hacham Ovadia, presented a poignant quote from Rav Ovadia which succinctly explains his choice to enter politics in 1984 after completing his ten-year tenure as Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel. He cited Hacham Ovadia saying that he cannot sleep at night worrying about how 10,000 more Jewish children will be reading *Keri'at Shema*. Hacham Ovadia was a great man who had great ambitions and plans for the Jewish people, especially Sephardic Jewry. Hacham Ovadia understood that the only manner in which he would be able to make a profound and lasting impact on the education of Jewish children in Israel is by becoming a powerful part of the Israeli government. Rav Yosef understood that the Israeli government has more influence over Jewish children than all other entities combined. He realized that if he became an influential part of the Israeli government his impact could be extraordinary.

Hacham Ovadia also recognized that he lived in a time of profound spiritual crisis and opportunity. The transition into the modern era was a difficult one for many Jews in both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities. Tragically, many were lost to Torah observance and ultimately lost their Jewish identity entirely in the course of a few generations. However, in most cases, those Sephardic Jews who stopped rigorously observing Torah law nonetheless remained "traditional." They would, for example, honor the holidays, light candles and recite *Kiddush* every Friday night, and observe *Kashrut* at least at home.

Moreover, they would retain belief in the fundamentals of Torah belief and respect for Rabbis and Torah.

It is relatively easy to shepherd traditional and believing Sepharadim to Torah belief and practice when there remains a residual level of observance and belief. Hacham Ovadia knew very well, though, that this type of traditional Judaism has a limited shelf life. Such residual practices and beliefs are difficult to transmit to succeeding generations and the allegiance to Torah becomes diluted as the generations pass. Thus, Hacham Ovadia knew he had a limited window of opportunity to reach out to the masses of traditional Sephardic Jews and LeHahzir Atarah LeYoshenah, restore their full observance and allegiance to a Torah way of life. If he did not act when he did, tens of thousands of families would most likely lose any semblance of Jewish observance for eternity.

Hacham Ovadia's political success permitted him to lead to the building of the El HaMa'ayan Sephardic school system. The school day was made longer to provide parents, especially poor parents, coverage for their children while they were at work. El HaMa'ayan schools would also provide quality meals to the children during longer school hours, making the schools even more attractive to traditional Sephardic Jews, especially the poor.

We must emphasize that this teaching of Keri'at Shema and providing of food to tens of thousands of Jewish children could have been accomplished only by the Israeli government and only by those who have major clout in the Israeli government. Hacham Ovadia's involvement in politics facilitated teaching Torah and feeding tens of thousands of poor Jews. For this alone Hacham Ovadia deserves to be regarded as a man of extraordinary accomplishments.

It is important to remember that politics anywhere is a very rough and tumble sort of enterprise, and in Israel it is even more so than in America (as anyone who has watched the Keneset in action has observed). Thus, the words of an Israeli politician will often be expressed sharply and will not be well-received by many. Accordingly, even if we do not agree with everything Hacham Ovadia uttered and did in his role as the leader of a political party, we must understand that Rav Yosef did so in the pursuit to insure that as many Jewish children as possible be adequately fed and taught to read the Shema.

I am certain that in whatever way we evaluate his political activity, Hacham Ovadia's intentions were directed purely and entirely towards Hashem. This assertion stems from two points. My Talmid, Rav Ezra Frazer, reports that when the Orthodox Union decided to open Israeli branches of its NCSY youth outreach program, its leaders met with Hacham Ovadia. Hacham Ovadia, the leaders report, was convinced of the sincerity and Torah fidelity of its leaders and said "I have seventeen members of Keneset at your service to help further your programs." We see that Hacham Ovadia saw his political involvement as focused on furthering Torah observance even by organizations whose style and character differed significantly from Shas schools and programs.

Moreover, Hacham Ovadia in his writings refers to Religious Zionist Posekim such as Rav Kook and Rav Herzog as 'HaRav HaGa'on.' Hacham Ovadia regularly visited Yeshivot Hesder and Yeshivot Bnei Akiva to deliver Shiurim. He visited Yeshiva University a number of times and showed deep respect for Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik and Rav Hershel Schachter. Rav Ovadia Yosef endorsed in writing the Rabbinical Council of America's prenuptial agreement and endorsed in writing a permission to remarry issued by the Beth Din of America to an Agunah from the World Trade Center terrorist attack (Teshuvot Yabia Omer 10: Even HaEzer 18). Hacham Ovadia consented to have this Teshuvah translated into English and included

in a publication of the Beth Din of America. On a personal note, Hacham Ovadia's 1993 endorsement of my credentials as a Mesader Gittin (Jewish Divorce Administrator) is a signature, to paraphrase Rav Aviner, worth a billion dollars to both me and the people I have serviced.

Similarly, Rav Yosef (see, for example, Teshuvot Yabia Omer 10: Even HaEzer 14) refers to Rav Elyashiv as Yedideinu, our friend, even though the styles of these two eminent Torah scholars differed significantly.

I am convinced that Rav Yosef's political involvement was intended purely to advance the cause of Torah in a manner that is unparalleled in scope and reach. Thus, I firmly believe that when judged objectively we can say that had Hacham Ovadia served only as the political leader of Shas, he would still have been considered a great man.

Facet #8 – Students

Fortunately, Hacham Ovadia did not leave us without great leaders to follow in his path. Among his most outstanding Talmidim are his son Hacham Yitzhak (the current Sephardic chief rabbi of the State of Israel), his son Hacham David, Rav Pinhas Zabihi, Rav Shmuel Pinhasi and Rav Shlomo Amar. Although no one can completely fill Hacham Ovadia's shoes, Hacham Ovadia trained many great scholars, Posekim, and leaders who will guide us in Hacham Ovadia's path.

Conclusion

The breadth of Hacham Ovadia's Torah accomplishments are unparalleled and unequaled by any other rabbi of the past fifty years. While many of the Gedolim share some of Hacham Ovadia's accomplishments and may exceed him in certain specific areas, no one can compare to his multifaceted and wide-ranging areas of outstanding accomplishments. The giant of Torah has fallen, but we are left an unparalleled legacy of greatness which will inspire the current and future generations to devote themselves to excellence in Torah study, activity, and living. We thank Hashem for having sent Hacham Ovadia at the perfect time – a time of extraordinary spiritual challenge and crisis – and for giving him the extraordinary talents, wisdom, and energy that facilitated his rescue of the spiritual life of hundreds of thousands of Jews worldwide.