

Ovadia's Choice

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WHEN RABBI OVADIA YOSEF first appeared on the national scene, I heaved a deep sigh of relief.

Here was the man I had dreamed of: a charismatic leader of oriental Jews, a man of peace, a bearer of a moderate religious tradition.

“Rabbi Ovadia”, as everybody called him, who died this week at the age of 93, was born in Baghdad, came to Palestine as a boy of 4, gained huge respect as a religious scholar. During the 1948 war he was the chief rabbi of Egypt, later he became the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel. When his appointment was not renewed, as a result of some obscure political intrigue, he founded a new political party, Shas, which quickly became a force in Israeli politics.

He first attracted my attention when, contrary to most other prominent rabbis, he decided that Jewish religious law, the Halakha, allows giving up parts of Eretz Israel for the sake of peace. The “saving of lives” takes precedence.

BEFORE WE proceed, let's define some terms. “Sephardic” and “oriental” are often confused. But they are not quite the same.

Sepharad means Spain. Sephardic Jews are the descendants of the Jews who were expelled from Spain by their Most Catholic Majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella, in 1492. Almost all of them shunned Christian anti-Semitic Europe and settled in countries under benevolent Muslim rule, from Morocco to Bulgaria.

The Ottoman Empire was based on a system of “millets”, religious-ethnic communities which governed themselves under their own leaders, laws and traditions. The Jews throughout the empire were governed by the Hakham Bashi, the chief rabbi, who was, of course, a Sephardi. This was a secular appointment—in Jewish law there is no chief rabbi, no Jewish pope. All rabbis are equal, every Jew can follow the rabbi of his choice.

When the British took over, they were prevailed upon to appoint an Ashkenazi chief rabbi too. Since then we have two chief rabbis in this country, one Sephardi and one Ashkenazi, each upholding the traditions of his community.

However, the great majority of Jews from Islamic countries are not Sephardis. Nowadays they prefer to be called

“Mizrahim” (eastern, oriental). Still, the terms Sephardi and Oriental overlap and have come to mean more or less the same.

THE NUMBER of people who took part in the funeral of Rabbi Ovadia has been estimated at 800 thousand—more than the total Jewish population in the country on the day the State of Israel was founded. Even assuming that this number is vastly overblown, the event was extraordinary. Jerusalem was practically blocked, the car bearing the body could hardly reach the cemetery.

All these hundreds of thousands, all male, were wearing the “uniform” of orthodox Jews – black garments, white shirts, big black hats. Many were weeping and moaning. It bordered on mass hysteria.

The eulogies of religious and secular leaders and commentators were limitless. He was called the greatest Sephardi Jew of the last 500 years, a “Great in the Torah” whose teachings would echo for centuries to come.

I must confess that I have never quite understood his greatness as a thinker, religious or otherwise. He always reminded me of what Yeshayahu Leibowitz once told me: that the Jewish religion had died 200 years ago, leaving nothing behind but an empty shell of rituals.

Rabbi Ovadia wrote 40 books of judgments and interpretations of religious law. While Ashkenazi rabbis generally tend to make it harder to comply with religious injunctions, Yosef tended to make it easier. In this he followed Oriental tradition, which was always much more moderate (as was Islam, until recently).

Yosef allowed widows of fallen soldiers to marry again (a complicated procedure under the Halakha). He decided that the Ethiopian Falashas were Jews, and thereby enabled them to come to Israel under the Law of Return. In innumerable individual cases, he made it easier for people to evade stringent restrictions. Since in Israel large areas of private affairs, such as marriage and divorce, are ruled by religious law administered by rabbis, this was very important for secular people, too.

But a profound thinker? A modern sage? I have my doubts. As one commentator dared to point out, the new pope has, in a few months, done more to change the theological and social outlook of his church than Rabbi Ovadia in his lifetime. Reform Judaism has done far more to

modernize Judaism than Yosef.

BUT MY initial appreciation of and final disappointment with the rabbi does not concern religious questions.

Rabbi Ovadia was a towering figure in Israeli politics. Almost half of all Jewish Israeli citizens are of oriental origin. Until his appearance, this was an underprivileged class, remote from the centers of power, often humiliated, quite disunited. All attempts to turn them into a political force failed miserably.

And then the rabbi came. He founded a powerful party that often served as the arbiter of Israeli politics. He gave the Orientals back their lost dignity. He united them. It was a huge achievement.

But for what? I had hoped that once the Oriental Jews regained their self-respect, they would remember their past, the Golden Age of Jewish-Muslim cooperation in medieval Spain, when Jewish poetry flourished in the Arabic language, when the great religious thinker Moses Maimonides was the personal physician of Saladin, the Muslim leader who vanquished the Crusaders.

In this hope I chose Yosef's protégé and political standard-bearer, Aryeh Deri, as Man of the Year for my news magazine at the tender age of 29. Like his master, Deri, born in Morocco, was a man of peace and openly advocated a settlement with the Palestinians.

But the dream evaporated. The Shas party became more and more right-wing and supported extreme anti-Arab policies. The Rabbi, a great expert in Arabic and Hebrew curses, cursed the Arabs as much as he did his Jewish opponents.¹

There are many reasons—psychological and sociological—for the Oriental community becoming anti-Arab and anti-peace. It's not only Yosef's and Deri's fault. But they did not do anything to counteract it. On the contrary, they ran with the crowd, accelerating the process.

Rabbi Ovadia ruled the Shas party like a pope, anointing and deposing its leaders at will. The party has no democratic institutions, no internal elections. The Rabbi made all decisions himself. By joining the anti-Arab chorus, he committed a grave sin—though he never repealed his judgment allowing the giving up of occupied territories to save lives.

BEING THE party of the downtrodden, it could have been expected that Shas would at least be the leader of social protest.

And indeed, Rabbi Ovadia and his underlings talked endlessly about the plight of the Oriental masses, the poor

and disabled. But in real life, they did absolutely nothing to alleviate that plight by government policy, social reform, strengthening the welfare state and such. Indeed, their opponents accused them of intentionally keeping their electorate in ignorance and poverty, so as to keep them in a state of dependency.

As a matter of fact, Ovadia and his party used their considerable political power of extortion to extract from the government immense amounts of money for their independent educational system, and for nothing else. This system extends from kindergarten to higher yeshivot. In them nothing is taught but holy texts, rather like Muslim madrassas. Their graduates are unfit to join the labor force. Of course they do not serve in the army.

The day after the funeral, when Binyamin Netanyahu made his condolence visit to the family, the sons did not talk with him about peace or social reform. They talked only of the evil design to make their youngsters serve in the army.

Malicious tongues speak about the Yosef family's control of a huge private economic empire, based on the kosher-certification industry. Admirers of Rabbi Ovadia insisted on having their food certified as strictly kosher by persons trusted by him—for a price, of course. No one knows how much capital has been amassed by this Yosef family empire.

FOR NON-ORTHODOX Jewish Israelis, who are still the majority, Rabbi Ovadia was an eccentric, rather endearing, personality.

Television loved his way of affectionately slapping the faces of all his visitors, high or low. His curses have become part of folklore. (Once he called Netanyahu a "blind goat".)

His dress made him distinctive. Even after he was dismissed from the post of Sephardic Chief Rabbi, he insisted to the end on wearing the gold-braided Turkish uniform of that office.

Like most leaders of this type, he leaves no successor. There is no second Rabbi Ovadia, and there will not be for a long time. To build authority on personal leadership, charisma and erudition takes decades. No candidate is in sight. Even the survival of the Shas party under Deri is not assured.

For me, it is a sad story. Israel is crying out for a great Sephardic leader, able to mobilize the masses for peace and social progress.

I just hope that he will appear before the Messiah.

¹Once he announced that on the day of Shulamit Aloni's death there would be a feast. Aloni, a leftist leader, did not feast on the day of Yosef's death.