



THE ARCHITECT OF THE SYRIAN COMMUNITY

Marking 10 Years since the Passing of our Leader

Hacham Baruch Ben Haim, *zt"l*

On 24 Iyar, 5765 (June 2, 2005), our community mourned the loss of our revered leader and teacher, Hacham Baruch Ben Haim, *zt"l*. For 56 years, Hacham Baruch built, nurtured, and steered the Syrian community of Greater New York towards the prominent status it holds today. Now, 10 years later, we take a step back to appreciate the rabbi's extraordinary life and accomplishments, and the enduring imprint which he has left upon us and all of Sephardic Jewry.

The Early Years of Rabbi Baruch Mizrahi

Hacham Baruch was born on November 18, 1921 in the holy city of Yerushalayim to his parents, Rav Haim and Miriam Mizrahi. His father, initially a businessman, ultimately came to be an influential educator, assuming the reins of leadership over a Talmud Torah in Jerusalem, following a disturbing incident.

"What happened?!" Rav Haim asked his son, who returned home from school with a bloody nose.

Baruch explained that his teacher had thrown something at the disruptive student sitting next to him, and evidently, he missed his target. Rav Haim was shocked, and immediately convened a meeting

demanding that a new Talmud Torah be opened where classes would be smaller, and it would be forbidden to hit a young child. Many agreed and supported the idea, including a wealthy Jew from India who agreed to pay all expenses if Rav Haim would assume position as *menahel* (principal). Rav Haim agreed to leave his store and direct the new Talmud Torah. He later opened the Maskil El Dal Synagogue in Jerusalem's Bet Yisrael neighborhood.

Although Rav Haim raised his children in the ways of Torah and *yir'at Shamayim* (fear of Gd), it is his righteous mother to whom our leader attributes much of his achievement. Every night, before putting her precious son to bed, Rabbanit Miriam read from



Magen David Yeshiva – Class of 1962.

Nifla'im Ma'asecha, a book of inspiring stories by Rabbenu Yosef Haim of Baghdad (the Ben Ish Hai). She told her son the captivating tales with great passion and enthusiasm until Baruch dozed off into a deep sleep. Hacham Baruch later commented, “Instead of dreaming of ridiculous, senseless things, I dreamt about *mal'achim*, angels. If I ever became anything, I owe it to my mother.”

Beginning a Career of Torah

Baruch was one of nine children in the Mizrahi household. Their destitute circumstances called for tight living, and their modest home consisted of just three small rooms and one bathroom.

From the early age of three, Baruch was sent to follow a vigorous schedule of Torah study at school, and he assiduously took advantage of every moment. As soon as he felt his Baruch was fit, Rav Haim introduced him to the difficult study of Gemara, beginning with *Masechet Bava Kamma*, and soon thereafter sent him to Talmud Torah Bene Sion, where he learned under the great Hacham Shelomo Abbu, *zt"l*.

By age 10, young Baruch was ready to advance, and his mother informed him of his father's decision to enroll him in the renowned Yeshivat Porat Yosef; an institution flowing with many of the greatest Torah minds of the generation.

“I will take you tomorrow,” she said, brimming with pride. “We will go see your new school.” The following day, the two headed for the Old City, where the prestigious yeshiva was located.

“My dear son,” she began as they approached, “when we open the doors, you will see *mal'achim*, angels. They all possess *ruah ha'kodesh* [divinely inspired insight]. You are going to sit with them.”

Baruch was spellbound as he slowly entered the building. In his later years, Hacham Baruch recalled this incident, and how it instilled within him a sense of awe and reverence for his teachers which remained with him the rest of his life. “So much *pahad*, so much awe... I couldn't lift my head!”

The Wonder Class

Hacham Baruch learned in Porat Yosef during its most glorious years, studying alongside many outstanding young disciples who, like him, grew to become pillars of Sephardic Jewry. These include HaGaon Hacham Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*, Hacham Sion Levi, *zt"l*,



The 'Wonder Class' of Porat Yosef

Bottom Row (R-L): R' Ezra Shayo, R' Saadiah Lofez, Hacham Baruch, Hacham Ovadia Yosef, R' Shabbetai Atoon, R' Pinhas Vaknin and R' David Levy.

Middle Row (R-L): R' David Shalush, R' Yosef Harari-Raful, R' Ezra Ades-Herzliyah, R' Eliyahu Shrem, R' Raphael Ades and R' Yosef Elnadav.

Top Row (R-L): R' Aharon Aboud, R' Moshe Yosef Ades, R' Sion Levy and Hacham Ben Sion Abba-Shaul.

Hacham Ben Sion Abba-Shaul, *zt"l*, Rav Shabbetai Atoon, *zt"l*, Rav Eliyahu Shrem, *zt"l*, and many more. They belonged to what is today referred to as “The Wonder Class,” a remarkable group of students that possessed extraordinary learning and teaching capabilities. The young scholars grew together, as one team, drawing every bit of knowledge from their teachers, to whom they looked with great admiration and esteem.

Hacham Baruch once described their intense schedule: “We used to sit... eight, ten hours a day with our rabbis; there was no such thing as a vacation, there was no such thing as a midday break... You ate a few minutes, you prayed a few minutes, and you sat with your rabbi and sucked in all the Torah, all the *kedushah*.”

Every morning and evening, Hacham Baruch and his close friend, HaRav Yehuda Moalem, walked to and from the yeshiva. Rav Moalem would later reminisce how his friend learned the entire way: “The whole way he would speak words of Torah, words of *mussar*.”

Wise Beyond his Years

During his years in Porat Yosef, Hacham Baruch was approached by one of his rabbis – the revered kabbalist Hacham Ephraim Kohen – who advised the young prodigy to begin studying the lofty teachings of the Kabbalah. Hacham Baruch was taken aback by the suggestion.

“My teacher,” he asked, “are there not several conditions that must be met before one can begin engaging in the study of Kabbalah? I still have much to learn in the Talmud and the *poskim* [halachic works]... I am young, unmarried, I do not have a beard... How can I begin to study the secrets of Kabbalah?!”

Hacham Ephraim explained to young Baruch that he too, was instructed to begin learning Kabbalah at a young age. The instruction was given by none other than the saintly Ben Ish Hai.



(R-L) Hacham Baruch, Hacham Yaakob Kassin and Rabbi Avraham Hecht at the wedding of Isaac and Marilyn Shehebar in 1972.



Hacham Baruch getting carried in a chair during the wedding of his son Eli.

“When I was younger,” he told, “my rabbi approached me, just as I have come to you. He instructed me to begin learning Kabbalah, though I was stunned by his request. I asked, ‘But does my rabbi not write in his books that one must be over 40 years old and married? How can I begin learning the secrets of the Kabbalah?’ He told me that yes, I was correct, he did in fact write such guidelines. However, he explained, such was his instruction to the *kelal*, the masses. He clarified that there are *yehidim*, individuals, who may begin its deep study, despite not possessing all conditions.”

The rabbi’s family does not believe that Hacham Baruch complied with the request. Regardless, this remarkable exchange demonstrates the deep impression the young student made upon the great sages of Porat Yosef through his extraordinary diligence, piety and scholarship.

Hacham Ezra Attiah, *zt”l*, the esteemed Rosh Yeshiva of Porat Yosef, would send his students to deliver *derashot* (lectures) throughout Yerushalayim to prepare them for the work that lay ahead. They were being trained to teach, to build, and to someday lead communities all over the world. Yeshivat Porat Yosef was seen as a fountain of Torah that was desperately needed to quench the thirst of Jewish communities around the globe which found themselves in dire spiritual straits. Hacham Baruch and his peers were thus groomed to become the scholars, teachers and leaders who were needed to steer the Jewish People through the turbulent period of the modern era.

And so in 1947, at the age of 26, Hacham Baruch was sent on his first leadership position. While his close friend, Hacham Ovadia Yosef, was sent to Egypt, Rabbi Baruch Mizrahi set out for Cape Town, South Africa.

A Kiddush Hashem

The 1930’s marked a troubling era for Jews. Hitler’s rise to power in Germany led to the enactment of harsh laws against Jews, as well as the prospect of war, prompting a wave of Jewish refugees to flee Western Europe. Some 70-80,000 Jews came to South Africa at this time, all hoping to reestablish what they had devastatingly lost.

By the time Hacham Baruch arrived, Cape Town was home to South Africa’s largest Jewish community, with about two-thirds of the South African Jewish population living in the city.

The South African general elections always brought the Jews of South Africa to heartfelt prayers, and the 1948 vote was no exception. The incumbent Prime Minister, Field Marshal Jan Smuts, a prominent South African and British Commonwealth statesman, had an established record of friendship toward the Jews of South Africa, and had even raised funds for multiple Zionist organizations. The same could not be said of his opponent, Dr. Daniel François Malan, more commonly known as D. F. Malan, who, to the Jews’ dismay, won the election. Almost immediately after taking office, Malan called for the Jews to leave for Israel, desperate to “save” the city of Muizenberg from remaining what he derisively called “Yudenzenberg.” Nearly 70 percent of the community packed their bags and headed off for the newly-founded State of Israel.

Not long thereafter, South Africa faced a severe drought which crippled the country’s agriculture, businesses, and households. In desperation, Prime Minister Malan ordered the entire country to pray for rain, evidently recognizing that the situation was beyond his mortal hands and required divine intervention. Over the next several days, the citizens spent their days in churches, praying urgently for an end to the devastating drought, though to no avail.

With virtually nowhere else to turn, the Prime Minister penned a letter to Cape Town’s Chief Rabbi Baruch Mizrahi. He pleaded, “Please, gather the Jews and pray to your Gd for rain.” Hacham Baruch obeyed, and requested the men of the community to come to synagogue in the afternoon for a special prayer service. The men recited *selihot* and other prayers, beseeching the Almighty to bless the country with rain. Malan was thunderstruck when rain poured from the skies the very next morning.

After spending two years leading the Ashkenazic community of Cape Town, the Rabbi Baruch was informed of his brother’s untimely death in an unfortunate accident. Despite the fervent pleas of his adoring community, he decided that he must return to Israel, and he made his way back to Jerusalem.



Hacham Baruch sharing a laugh with Hacham Ovadia Yosef in Shaare Zion.

Permission Pending...

After several months back in his native Jerusalem, Hacham Baruch once again decided to go out to the Diaspora to serve his fellow Jews. He was given three choices: Holland, Iran, and New York. The rampant anti-Semitism in Holland at that time led the rabbi to turn down that offer. It remains unknown why he chose not to come to New York, and decided instead to serve the Jewish community in Iran.

Providence, however, stepped in to direct the rabbi's footsteps westward. He applied for an Iranian visa and waited for some time for a reply. After not receiving any response, he called the officials to ask for an explanation. It appeared that due to the political strife that existed between Iran and Iraq during the mid-1900's, Iranian officials carefully scrutinized all Iraqi-born applicants to ensure to keep spies out of the country. Hacham Baruch tried explaining to the officials that he was just a rabbi seeking to teach Judaism. They suggested he call back at a later time, but when he called again the following week, he was told that the decision was still pending.

Destiny Awaits

It was during this same time that Mr. Isaac Shalom, one of the main founders of New York's Syrian community, wrote what has become a historic letter to Hacham Ezra Attiah, *zt"l*. Little did he know that his letter would change the face of his nascent community.

In his message, Mr. Shalom asked Hacham Ezra to send an assistant to the community's current Chief Rabbi, Hacham Yaakob Kassin, *zt"l*, for a period of six months. Upon receiving the letter, Hacham Ezra was quick to reply, and immediately dispatched one of his most prized students, Baruch Mizrahi, to Brooklyn. He was likely unaware that Hacham Baruch would spend the next 56 years building, nurturing, and developing the Syrian community into the vibrant, renowned bastion of Torah and kindness that it is today.

Before embarking on his long journey to the United States, Hacham Baruch went to receive the blessings of Israel's two chief Rabbis: Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Herzog, and Sephardic *Rishon LeSion* Hacham Ben Sion Meir Hai Uziel. Upon hearing the news of Hacham Baruch's imminent departure, Rav Uziel was saddened that the young sage would be leaving, and told him that he



Hacham Ovadia Yosef and Hacham Yaakob Kassin at the home of Hacham Baruch.

had always assumed that the post of Chief Rabbi position would be filled either by Hacham Baruch or by his best friend, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Rabbi Herzog also expressed sorrow over Israel's loss of such an accomplished young scholar, and walked Baruch down the block as one does when taking leave of a great Torah scholar.

Hacham Baruch left Israel by boat in December 1949. The three-week voyage was accompanied by horrific winter storms, but he eventually arrived at the shores of New York City in early January, 1950, and headed straight for the home of the community's Chief Rabbi, Hacham Yaakob Kassin, *zt"l*.

Hacham Yaakob Kassin, *zt"l* (1900 - 1994)

In 1932, Hacham Yaakob was selected by the *Rishon LeSion* Rav Yaacob Meir and Hacham Ezra Raful to travel to the United States on a fundraising mission on behalf of the Sephardic orphanages of Jerusalem. Upon arrival, he was greeted by the rabbis and lay leaders of Brooklyn's fledgling Syrian community, which urged him to extend his two-month trip to six months. Before leaving, Hacham Yaakob was beseeched to remain and assume the position as the community's Chief Rabbi. Though humbled by the offer, Hacham Yaakob declined, as he believed his future was in Yerushalayim. He did agree, however, to sign a letter stating that should he ever leave Israel to serve as a rabbi in the Diaspora, he would first spend a year in Brooklyn's Syrian Community.

Over the course of the next year, Hacham Yaakob received offers from Sephardic communities in Mexico, Argentina and Egypt. He of course described his agreement with the Brooklyn community, and still felt his destiny was in Jerusalem. All throughout, the community in Brooklyn sent several letters to Hacham Yaakob, urging him to return and become their Chief Rabbi. He consulted with the great rabbis of Jerusalem, including his illustrious father-in-law, Hacham Shalom Hedaya, until he finally agreed to assume the position. On August 10, 1933, Hacham Yaakob, his wife, and their first four children came to New York.

Hacham Yaakob ran the *Bet Din* and formed the community's Rabbinical Council. He was the undisputed leader not only in Brooklyn, but of Syrian Jewish communities worldwide. During his tenure, Hacham Yaakob earned international repute as an expert in



Hacham Baruch with Rabbi Kamentsky.

halachah, and rabbis from all over the world sent him their halachic queries. He resolved issues involving family matters, personal problems and business transactions, providing guidance for all who sought it. Under his leadership, the Brooklyn Syrian community grew to become the largest concentration of Syrian Jews in the world.

Here to Stay

Upon realizing the wisdom and talents of the new arrival, the Chief Rabbi beseeched Hacham Baruch to stay alongside him in the United States, and to marry his daughter. Hacham Baruch replied that he was simply trialing his new position in Brooklyn for three months. Consequently, after three months of devoted and very successful work, Hacham Yaakob again encouraged the young scholar to marry his daughter. The rabbi agreed, and in just two months, Rabbi Mizrahi was engaged to Hacham Yaakob's eldest daughter, Charlotte. They were married in May of 1950.

Hacham Baruch planned to stay in America for just two years, and is later quoted to have said, "It's been a long two years!"

In 1951, the rabbi's father, Rav Haim, passed away. Several years later, the Mizrahi family made the decision to change their name from Mizrahi to Ben-Haim in his honor.

A Giant Among Giants

The rabbis gathered around the table as they prepared for the signing of the *ketubah*. The daughter of community icon Sam Seruya was getting married, and HaGaon Rav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, was conducting and arranging for the signing. Upon reading the text of the *ketubah*, Rav Moshe had a question about the Sephardic version of the text. Mr. Seruya informed him that there was a great Sephardic rabbi present, and called Hacham Baruch from the other room. The young, recently-married Hacham Baruch was puzzled.

"Why do you need me if the great Rav Moshe Feinstein is here?" he asked.

Mr. Seruya replied that the rabbi had a question about the *ketubah*.

Rav Moshe sat by the table as Hacham Baruch approached. He saw that the script on the *ketubah* included the words "*al da'at haRashba* – according to the opinion of the Rashba."



Hacham Baruch speaking with Rav Moshe Feinstein.

"Where is this opinion of the Rashba?" Rav Moshe inquired.

Hacham Baruch, who was now standing behind him, replied, "Does the rabbi not know of what the Rashba writes in..." Hacham Baruch proceeded to quote the relevant passage from the Rashba's collection of responsa. Rav Moshe was surprised and turned around.

"Who are you? Where did you learn?" he asked intriguingly.

After reviewing his brief biography, the young scholar quoted the words of the Rashba verbatim. The two sat together exchanging words of Torah for two hours. Hacham Baruch described how the great sage spoke to him like a loving father, just as his beloved teacher Hacham Ezra Attiah would.

Finally, Rav Moshe asked that Hacham Baruch come learn with him in his yeshiva, but the rabbi explained that he was far too busy with his work for the Syrian community from the wee hours of the morning until very late at night.

Hacham Baruch later said, "He was a great rabbi, very humble, and a very big *tzaddik*. In Torah he was great, and could argue on rabbis from 150 years ago. I was close with him."

Remembering our Rabbi

Hacham Baruch arrived at a time when the Syrian community that had spent 2500 years in Aleppo and Damascus was being transplanted onto foreign soil. The tests of keeping Shabbat and preserving other traditions were overwhelming. The rabbi counseled and cared for the community for over five decades. He once revealed that he had performed from a dozen to 20 weddings on some Sundays with his father-in-law, Hacham Yaakob.

After suffering a debilitating illness for many months, Hacham Baruch passed away in June 2005. His funeral was held in Magen David of Bensonhurst and was attended by over 2000 people. The hacham's body was then taken to Israel and buried on Har Hamenuhot in his native city, Jerusalem.

The countless memorials held in his honor are a testament to the profound impact he left on the community. The growth of his flock is largely due to his piety, warmth, tolerance, and love for all. May his cherished memory continue to guide, inspire and motivate us to continue promoting his legacy of Torah, kindness and love for our fellow Jews, *amen*.