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Rabbi Ovadia Yosef

(1920 – 2013)

By

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Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, one of the foremost Talmud scholars of his generation, former chief Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel and the founder of the Shas Party, died in Jerusalem on 7 October 2013 after prolonged illness. The 93-year old Rabbi Yosef was hailed as the generation's leading religious arbiter by his supporters, and a divisive and polemic figure by his detractors.

Born Abdullah Youssef in Baghdad in September 1920, he made aliya with his parents to Mandate Palestine at the age of four. He enrolled at Porat Yosef Yeshiva, the leading rabbinical

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Sephardic seminary in Jerusalem. He was ordained as a rabbi at the young age of 20 and made a religious court judge at 25. In 1947, Rabbi Yosef was appointed the chief Rabbi of Cairo, at a time when the security of Egypt's tiny Jewish community was threatened because of the Arab-Jewish tensions in Palestine. Yosef returned to Israel in 1950 and in 1968, he became chief rabbi of Tel Aviv. Yosef was appointed the Chief Sephardic Rabbi in 1973, a post he held till 1983. During his tenure, he issued a number of important rulings including that were to affect the Israeli society for generations to come. In one of his ruling he ended a longstanding dispute regarding the status of Ethiopian Jews by ruling that they are Jewish by Halacha (Jewish law) standards and should thus be allowed to immigrate to Israel.

Yosef was known for generally lenient rulings and progressive stances which few Israeli rabbis favoured. In 1974, for instance, he allowed around 1,000 women whose husbands remained missing in action after the October War of 1973 to remarry. But it was his role as the spiritual mentor of the political party Shas—an acronym for Sephardic Torah Guardians— that he truly made his mark. The party began as a municipal list in Jerusalem in 1983. Yosef dictated its policies and handpicked its prospective Knesset members. In August 1989, Yosef ruled that Israel should relinquish parts of the biblical 'Land of Israel' (namely, the Palestinian territories), if that could prevent bloodshed and bring lasting peace. This was a landmark ruling that challenged the traditional Ashkenazi Orthodox camp, and was made based on the Halacha principle that saving lives takes precedence over all other claims, including religious claims to the land.

Under the guidance of Rabbi Yosef, Shas became a major player in governing coalitions, and Israeli leaders of all stripes made pilgrimages to his home in Jerusalem seeking his support. As a Sephardic Torah scholar and arbiter of Halacha he was often described by followers as “the greatest of the generation.” He wrote Talmudic commentaries and volumes of answers, known as *responsa*, to questions on religious law. In 1970, he was awarded the prestigious Israel Prize for his contribution to rabbinical literature.

On the other hand, he was often accused of taking abstruse, even offensive positions. He lambasted Reform Jews as ‘destroyers of religion,’ and claimed that Jewish law forbade men to walk between women. In 1999, he repudiated the Supreme Court after his protégé, Aryeh Deri, was convicted on bribery charges. In 2000, he called Holocaust victims ‘reincarnated souls of sinners’ and evoked widespread anger from the survivors. Likewise, he likened Palestinian and Arab foes to snakes and vipers. Despite such outburst, he encouraged various Israeli politicians to engage in the peace process with the Palestinians and, by abstaining, helped secure the passage of the first Oslo peace accord through the Knesset.

A charismatic leader credited for bringing the Sephardic Jews into the Israeli mainstream, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef was never too far from the public spotlight. Simultaneously considered a spokesman for the downtrodden and a champion of faith, or a bigoted autocrat who undermined

democracy, and whose political dalliances sullied his religious purity. As a torah scholar, spiritual leader, voice of the marginalized Sephardic community and a skilful political personality, Rabbi Yosef dominated the Israeli public sphere for more than four decades. He was buried in the Sanhedria cemetery in Jerusalem on 7 October.

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