

Weekly Biography

20 Teves 5640/1880

Harav Yaakov Abuchatzzeira, the Abir Yaakov, *zt"l*

The legendary name Abuchatzzeira comes to the fore in the person of Rav Shmuel Abuchatzzeira, described by the Chida as an *Ish Elokim Kadosh*. His son, Rav Masoud, became the Rav in the Moroccan city of Tafelatch, and was followed in this position by his son, Harav Yaakov, known as the Abir Yaakov.

Rav Yaakov was among the leaders of Jewry in North Africa. His name was revered and mentioned with awe, as he was known as a leading *mekubal*.

He was in contact on halachic issues with many of the era's great Rabbanim, and his correspondence became the basis of his work, *Yoru Mishpatecha L'Yaakov*.

Rav Yaakov authored many *sefarim*, on all facets of Torah: on Chumash, Shas, Halachah, Kabbalah and Drashos. In his humility, he didn't publish them during his lifetime; after his *petirah*, however, he appeared in a dream to his son and instructed him to print them.

Rav Yaakov was *niftar en route* to Eretz Yisrael, where he was headed to fulfill his heart's desire, on 20 Teves 5640/1880, and was buried in Dimanhur, Egypt.

Distinguished Family

Harav Shmuel Abuchatzzeira was the father of the Abuchatzzeira dynasty. He was born and lived in Yerushalayim, but in his later years, he moved to Damascus. He was described by Harav Chaim Yosef David Azoulai, the Chida, as an *Ish Elokim Kadosh*.

The original family name was Elbaz; Rav Shmuel, a man of *nisim* and spiritual greatness, changed the name from Elbaz to Abuchatzzeira because of a miracle that happened to him: Once he was sent as a *shaliach* on behalf of the Sefardic kollel. When he reached the port of Yaffo, the captain refused to let him on board. Having no other choice, Rav Shmuel made himself a raft, or mat, out of reeds — *chatzeira* in Arabic — and floated behind the boat to his destination. He was thus named Abu-

chatzeira, commemorating this event.

Some of his descendants moved from Eretz Yisrael and settled in North Africa, the most well known of which is Harav Machluf Abuchatzzeira, who lived in Morocco.

A large contingent of the family settled in Tafelatch, in Morocco.

Holy From Birth

Harav Yaakov Abuchatzzeira, the Abir Yaakov, was born in Tafelatch, Morocco, in 5566/1806, to his father Harav Masoud. According to his grandson Harav Meir Abuchatzzeira, this was on the same day that the Chida, Harav Chaim Yosef David Azoulai, was *niftar*.

Before Rav Yaakov was born, Rav Masoud had a dream. In the dream, he was told that he and his wife should prepare themselves for they would be blessed with a child who would enlighten all of Klal Yisrael.

His father, the Rav of Tafelatch, taught him all of *Tanach* with the *Taamim*, later moving on to learn with him all of the *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah*, and then the entire *Shas*.

At the age of just sixteen, he received warm praise from Harav Mordechai ben Shaul, who composed a song in his honor.

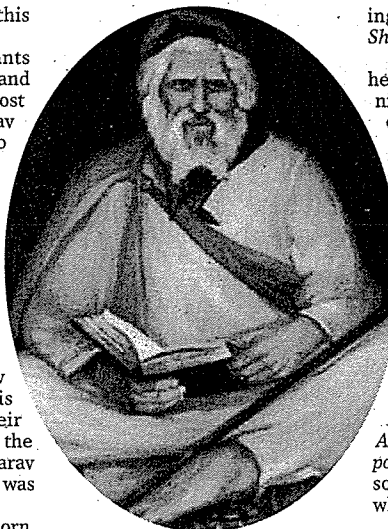
Many complicated *she'eilos* were sent to him, from leading Rabbanim and *poskim*. They were not only from Algeria and Morocco, but from even more distant locations, such as Lisbon and London.

Many of these *she'eilos* and *teshuvas* appear in his *sefer Yoru Mishpatecha L'Yaakov*.

It is told that on one occasion, Rav Yaakov visited the city of Tetuan (north of Morocco near the Spanish border). At that time, Tetuan's Jewish community was led by Rav Yitzchak ben Wallid (author of *Vayomer Yitzchak*).

Rav Yaakov had often been in contact with Rav Yitzchak regarding many halachic discussions.

After entering the city anony-



mously, Rav Yaakov sought lodging at one of the local inns. After a short while, one of Rav Yitzchak's *talmidim* entered the inn. Sensing that a *talmid chacham* stood before him, Rav Yaakov sought to engage the youth in a Torah discussion. The young man told Rav Yaakov that Rav Yitzchak's yeshiva was currently studying a particular topic in the *Gemara* that was extremely difficult to comprehend. Rav Yaakov asked him which *sugya*, whereupon the student told him which *masechta* and which *sugya*.

Immediately upon hearing this, Rav Yaakov pulled out a quill and a sheet of paper from his pack, and proceeded to write down the explanation of the difficult matter. He then handed the paper to the young student, who joyfully departed for the yeshiva and presented it to Rav Yitzchak. As Rav Yitzchak looked at the paper, his eyes lit up. "This is the handwriting of Rav Yaakov Abuchatzzeira!" he exclaimed. He immediately instructed the student to seek out the illustrious visitor and bring him to Rav Yitzchak's house.

It is told that Rav Yaakov was secluded in the attic of Rav Yitzchak's house for eight months, studying Torah and serv-

ing Hashem with *yiras Shamayim*.

After he received *semichah*, he served as Rav in the community of Tafilalt, upon the *petirah* of his father.

A Life of Learning

Rav Yaakov loved solitude and did not leave the *beis medrash* all week, day and night, except on *leilei Shabbosos*.

Rav Yaakov's son, Rav Aharon, described his father's daily schedule: He knew the *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah* by heart, and every night he studied 18 *perakim*. After that, he studied *Shulchan Aruch*, Rambam and other *poskim* and he would review the sources in the *Gemara* from which their rulings were derived.

Near *chatzos* he took a nap, then he would arise for *tikkun Rachel*, and afterwards he would also say *tikkun Leah*. He would next study leading kabbalistic works until before daybreak, when he would hurry to don his *tallis* and *tefillin*, to be one of the first ten to arrive for the *minyan*. After he *davened Shacharis*, he would sit and learn Torah, eating only a minimal amount for subsistence.

Rav Yaakov held himself in utmost humility, and shunned all signs of honor. He was known for his great *anivus*, and for that reason, he never took any credit for anything done under his name. He barely mentions his name in his *sefarim*, and didn't let them be published during his lifetime, for he felt that they were not worthy of being printed. Only after his *petirah* did his children publish his many *sefarim*.

Rav Yaakov was a *mekubal*, renowned for his piety and accustomed to performing miracles. It is said that Eliyahu Hanavi appeared to him.

His vast knowledge of *Kabbalah* and *sifrei Kabbalah* are clearly noticeable in his works.

Despite his familiarity with *Kabbalah*, Rav Yaakov did not forsake *halachah* — which he saw as the potion of life, for without it, how would people know how to act — and he dealt with

halachah on a daily basis. His son, Rav Avraham, writes in his *hakdamah* to the *sefer Ginzei Hamelech*, that there are four groups of *talmidei chachamim*: those who delve in *Gemara* study, *poskim* of *halachah*, *darshanim* and those who deal in the hidden Torah, and he adds that all these four things could be said of his father.

Rav Yaakov was a very well-known *baal tzedakah* and a *baal chessed*; his home was wide open to guests.

He was also very active on behalf of his brethren, in settling scores between those who had disputes and seeing to alleviate the plight of every individual in strife.

His Petirah

Rav Yaakov strongly desired to go to live in Eretz Yisrael all his life, but the members of his community refused to let him go. He tried to convince them to let him go to Eretz Yisrael six times, and on the sixth time, in 5640/1879, they finally acquiesced. This was because he promised them that his son Harav Masoud would serve as their Rav in his stead.

On the earlier attempts, Rav Yaakov tried to keep it a secret from them and go to Eretz Yisrael clandestinely, but they always caught up with him and brought him back.

This last time, he explained that as he was already old, he felt that it was high time for him to actually go to Eretz Yisrael, to dwell in its holy atmosphere and to gain from the *kedushah* of the land; he begged that they finally allow him to fulfill his heart's desire. He hinted that he wasn't sure that he would actually make it to the shores of Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Yaakov set out to Eretz Yisrael via the Algerian Sea, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt.

On the previous Shabbos, Rav Yaakov had stayed at the home of Rav Moshe Sharashi, and on Shabbos night during *Kiddush*, the candles were suddenly extinguished. Rav Yaakov com-

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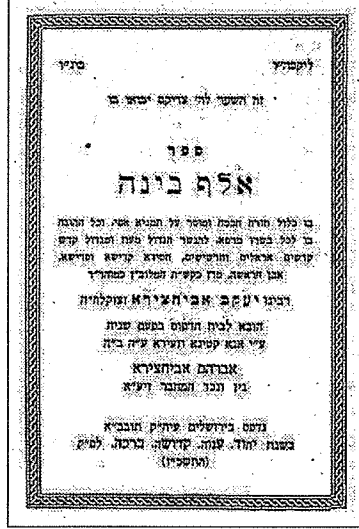
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Harav Yaakov Abuchatzzeira, the Abir Yaakov, zt"l



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mented about this event, saying that it was a sign that the *neshamah* would be returning to its place, and the body would remain behind. Those who were there at the time were shocked.

He arrived in Alexandria, Egypt, on 15 Teves, resting up there a little, before continuing on to Dimanhur. Whilst in Dimanhur, Rav Yaakov took ill.

He told those with him that it had been revealed to him that he would be *niftar* after Shabbos, as he still had things to do in this world, especially *tikkunim* of Shabbos, despite the doctor's prediction that he would be *niftar* before Shabbos. He also told them that he willingly accepted upon himself the decree.

On Sunday, 20 Teves, 5640/1880, Rav Yaakov called over two of his *talmidim* and asked them to attend to his *keverah*, but on condition that they would pass away shortly after, and they agreed. He began to recite *Shir Hashirim* and *vidui* and at *Shema Yisrael*, his *neshamah* ascended on high.

Rav Yaakov was buried in Dimanhur, Egypt, as per his request, and to this day, his *kever* is known as a place of many *yeshuos*.

Reb Yaakov left behind four sons: Harav Masoud, Harav Aharon, Harav Avraham and Harav Yitzchak. Harav Yisrael, the son of Harav Masoud, is better known as the Baba Sali of Netivot.

Sefarim

Rav Yaakov wrote many *sefarim*, although he did not allow them to be printed or published while he was alive. He told his son that when he passed away, he would see if Hashem agreed with them and then he would come to him in a dream and give him permission to print them. His *sefarim* deal with various issues in Torah, *halachah*, *Kabbalah* and his *drashos*.

After his *petirah*, Rav Yaakov revealed himself in a dream to his son, Rav Masoud, and told him that he could begin printing the *sefarim*. Only twelve of his works were published.

His *sefarim* include: *Pisuchei Chosen* — *Pisuchei* is the *gematria* of Yaakov Abuchatzzeira — explanations on the Torah based on *Kabbalah*;

Machsof Halavan, another work on the Torah;

Ginzei Hamelech, an entire work of two hundred and seven explanations on the first *passuk* in the Torah;

Bigdei Hasrad — *srad* being the *gematria* of Yaakov Abuchatzzeira — on the *Haggadah shel Pesach* based on the hidden Torah;

Maaglei Tzedek, on *Nach* — most of the *sefer* is on *perek 119* in *Tehillim*;

Alef Binah, on *Tehillim*;

Shaarei Aruchah, on the *Yamim Nora'im* and *Sukkos*;

Doresch Tov, seventeen of his *drashos*. *Tov* has the *gematria* value of seventeen and *Doresch* is *gematria* of Yaakov;

Shaarei Teshuvah, on the topic of *teshuvah*;

Levonah Zakah, his commen-

taries on *sugyos* in *Shas*, arranged according to the order of the *parshiyos*, each *parashah* with the *sugyos* that are relevant to it;

Yoru Mishpatecha L'Yaakov, his responsa;

Yagel Yaakov, a compilation of the *piyutim* composed by Rav Yaakov and his children. The *piyutim* speak about the praises of Eretz Yisrael, the suffering of *galus* and issues of *bitachon*.

Shabbos Kodesh, another kabbalistic work, was never printed.

Also never published was his comments on the margins of Rav Chaim Vital's *Eitz Hachaim* and the notes he wrote at the end of the *sefer*. His grandson, the Baba Sali, related that after completing this work, Rav Yaakov was elated. A few short hours after completing this, a fire broke out in his home, totally burning his notes at the end of the *sefer*; miraculously, the *sefer* itself remained whole. Rav Yaakov understood this to be a sign from Heaven not to write them again or publish them.

In his *hakdamah* to the *sefer Alef Binah*, Rav Yaakov writes that it is incorrect to learn *Kabbalah* without prior learning of *Gemara*, adding that the *Gemara* is the basis for *Kabbalah*. He also advises people to emulate the approach to his learning: first learning *Tanach*, then *Mishnayos*, and only afterwards to *Gemara*; then one should learn *halachah*, and only later can one delve into the study of *Kabbalah*.

Zechuso yagen aleinu.

Parts of the article were extracted from an upcoming book by Yehudah Azulai on *Sephardic Gedolim*.