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Analysis || Rabbi Ovadia Yosef: Sectorial party leader or a social revolutionary?

To see the greatness of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, one must look separately at Ovadia A and Ovadia B.

By Yair Ettinger | Oct. 8, 2013 | 9:03 AM | 1

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Aryeh Deri, (L), a political kingmaker and head of Shas, holding the hand of the party's spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in 1999. Photo by Reuters

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Few people have had so much influence for such a long period on the Israeli public and on many Jews in the Diaspora as Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

For the past two decades, every one of Israel's prime ministers has sought his company and nearly every child in Israel has known who he is. Dozens of books on Jewish religious law have been written in the wake of his religious teachings, generations of experts and journalists have analyzed his every move, and biographies and doctoral theses have focused on his character and religious teachings. Yet a puzzle has always hovered above his head: Who is the real Rabbi Ovadia Yosef?

The leader of a sectorial party or a social revolutionary? Did he

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perpetuate illiteracy in the flock of his followers or did the movement he founded raise up from the dust of humiliation masses of Sephardi Jews who were scorned by mainstream Israel? As a rabbi, was he sensitive and courageous in his religious rulings or was he conservative-minded and aggressive? The answer is: All of the above.

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef was a multi-faceted rabbi who could be hated by his enemies and looked up to by his admirers; however, both parties would have to agree that he was a unique leader in his generation and that his activities will almost certainly have an impact on the next generation of Jews. This statement is less valid for Shas and for Israeli politics as it is for his approach to Jewish religious law, an approach that has come to dominate the world of religious rulings for hundreds of thousands of observant Jews. After Rabbi Yosef, it is difficult to imagine any rabbi capable of issuing religious rulings to such a large group of Jews.

Yosef was responsible for daring religious rulings on subjects that most authoritative rabbis avoided for centuries. First and foremost, his rulings on thousands of marital status cases whose existence most of the public is unaware of – such as cases involving agunot (literally, “chained women,” i.e., women whose husbands refuse to grant them a Jewish divorce) and mamzerim (illegitimate offspring from the standpoint of Jewish religious law). He also handed down historic religious rulings, such as his recognition of Ethiopian Jews as full-fledged Jews, his granting of official rabbinically sanctioned widowhood to women whose husbands were killed in the Yom Kippur War but whose status as widows was uncertain, and his permitting organ harvesting in cases of brain death.

On the other hand, however, over the past few years he has given in time and time again to the rabbinic leaders of Lithuanian Jewry in Israel and has aligned his positions with theirs when his many admirers and adherents expected him to display the same degree of courage he had shown when he was a younger man. The list of his concessions includes religious Zionism’s conversion enterprise, which did not always receive backing from him when it was attacked by the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) community; his refusal to call on the members of his flock to be posthumous organ donors despite his recognition of brain death; and his acceptance of the position of the Haredi Lithuanian Jewish community in the Immanuel affair, which involved discrimination in a school in the West Bank settlement of Immanuel against Sephardi Jews, including victims who were members of his own party, Shas – his spiritual brothers and sisters.

The riddle surrounding Yosef’s ideology also touches on the ongoing debate between right and left in Israel and is closely connected to what he wrote in one of his books, “Yabia Omer”: “If the heads and commanders of the army, together with government members, determine that this is a life-and-death issue and that there is the danger of war immediately breaking out ... and if, by returning territory [to the Arabs], the danger of war can be averted and there is the prospect of a lasting peace, it would then appear that all should agree that it is permissible to return parts of the Land of Israel in order to obtain this goal.”



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This passage was one of the reasons for the amicable relations between Yosef and politicians like President Shimon Peres. However, over the years Yosef used every opportunity to express his disgust with secular Judaism and secular Jews (“they have abandoned the Torah and have become fools”), especially leaders of the secular left, such as former Meretz party leaders and former Knesset members Shulamit Aloni (“on the day she dies, a feast should be held”) and Yossi Sarid (“he should be hung on a fifty-cubit-high gallows” [like the one on which the arch-villain of the Purim story, Haman, was hanged]).

Many people in Israel know about Yosef only through his plebeian sounding statements, made for the most part during his Saturday night sermons, which were primarily focused on issues of Jewish religious law. His disgust with the left was later replaced by scorn and hatred for Religious Zionists when they pushed Shas out of the government. On the eve of the recent Knesset elections, Yosef declared that the Habayit Hayehudi (which literally means the Jewish Home) party led by the present economy minister, Naftali Bennett, was a “house of Gentiles.” He described Rabbi David Stav, the religious Zionist candidate for the office of Ashkenazi chief rabbi, as a “villain” who did not fear God.

So who was the real Rabbi Ovadia Yosef?

In order to understand Yosef’s greatness, one must polish one’s long-range memory and sharpen one’s medium-range memory. Yosef played a prominent role as an important issuer of religious rulings during the period immediately preceding the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948 and during the early years of the Jewish state, with his courageous, unconventional rulings. Most of these brave rulings were handed down up until the end of his term of office as Sephardi Chief Rabbi in 1983. During the past decade, in contrast he has, as noted above, repeatedly backed down on critical religious issues in order not to anger Lithuanian rabbinical authorities while leading a political party that was at times tainted with corruption.

Whoever chooses to look at Yosef only through a short-term lens will remember him primarily as a political, rather than a spiritual, leader and will recall the disputes surrounding Shas, as well as Yosef’s poisonous statements in the course of his Saturday night sermons against his rivals, against Holocaust victims, secular Jews and religious Zionists. Rather, one should recognize the fact that he was a rounded figure with many facets. One can also look at his biography and decide that there is an Ovadia A and an Ovadia B. Ovadia A was a courageous trailblazer while Ovadia B was a political leader who settled political scores – not just in the political arena but also on his home turf, that is, in the realm of religious rulings.

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Similarly, a period of 30 years cannot be erased. Regarding that period, one must credit him for the scope of his writings on matters of religious law and for his image as a Sephardi Jewish leader. Although Shas may have killed the image of the traditional Sephardi Jew, replacing it with a Lithuanian-style ultra-Orthodoxy and preventing its followers from studying secular subjects or from pursuing a profession, it also rescued – and I mean literally – young men and women treated as second-class citizens in Israel from a far worse fate, a fate of crime and deprivation, simply through the hot meals it provided in the schools belonging to its Ma'ayan Hahinuch Hatorani education system. The state did not bother to fill this vacuum.

However, that is not the reason why Yosef was such an important Sephardi Jewish leader. He and his political representatives hardly ever involved themselves with social protest and the admiration expressed toward him stems from his being a symbol of the renaissance of a proud Sephardi Jewish culture.

His most cherished ambition was that his books would appear in every library of Jewish religious law and that they would be placed on the same shelf as such classics of Jewish religious law as Maimonides' Mishneh Torah and Rabbi Yosef Karo's Shulchan Aruch. Yosef had a historically-oriented way of thinking, and perhaps he hoped that history would forget everything that was unrelated to his work in the field of religious law. Unfortunately for him, this has not happened.

Nonetheless, these words are being written perhaps too close to the events of his life. In a perspective spanning many years, the clashes, the use of power politics, the plebian sounding language, will perhaps become only colorful footnotes to the image of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

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