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Photo credit: Ron Habbaz

Community Welcomes Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Hacham Yitzhak Yosef

The Sephardic community of Brooklyn and Deal was graced last month by the presence of Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Hacham Yitzhak Yosef, *shelita*, son of Maran HaGaon Hacham Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*. After his arrival on Thursday evening, May 8th, the hacham honored our community by visiting numerous institutions in Brooklyn and Deal, sharing words of Torah and inspiration, offering his heartfelt blessings, and assuring us all that the cherished legacy of his esteemed father is alive and strong.

The Making of a Chief Rabbi

Hacham Yitzhak is the sixth child of Maran Rabbenu Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*, and, like all his brothers and brothers-in-law, he has followed his father's extraordinary example of piety and scholarship, and emerged as a very influential Torah figure among Israel's Sephardic population.

Born in 1952, he attended school at Talmud Torah Yavneh, and later, at age 12, he enrolled in the famed Yeshivat Porat Yosef. He also studied at Yeshivat HaNegev in Netivot, and in the Hebron Yeshiva in Jerusalem.

In 1971, as a 19-year-old student at Yeshivat HaNegev, young Yitzhak Yosef collected halachic rulings from what was then five volumes of his father's masterpiece, *Yabia Omer*, and published them as a separate work under the title *Yalkut Yosef*. The book was eventually published with his father's support and under his supervision.

Several years later, in 1975, Hacham Yitzhak was appointed rabbi of the towns Nes Harim and Mata near Jerusalem, where he delivered classes on halachah several times a week and took care of religious affairs. As part of his responsibilities, he delivered lectures in the secular public schools to strengthen the students' religious education.

In 1980, he was ordained as a rabbi and *dayan*.

Just several months before his father's passing, on July 24, 2013, Hacham Yitzhak was elected to serve as the Rishon Le'tzion, or Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, a position he will hold for the next decade. The inauguration took place on August 14, 2013 at the official residence of the President of Israel.

A Prolific Author

Yalkut Yosef is a 24-volume masterpiece, a lucid, well-organized compendium of the halachot that every Jew must know in order to properly observe the *mitzvot*. It covers all areas of Jewish law, and strictly follows the halachic rulings of the rabbi's father, Hacham Ovadia, *zt"l*. The work is widely regarded as an indispensable resource for every Sephardic home.

But while Hacham Yitzhak is best known for *Yalkut Yosef*, the rabbi has also authored several other books. In his *En Yitzhak*, the hacham explains in great detail the proper methodology for learning and understanding Mishnah, Gemara, and *Shulhan Aruch*, and the system of determining the final, authoritative halachic ruling.



Hacham Yitzhak Yosef at his coronation as Rishon Le'Tzion.



Hacham Yitzhak with YDE's Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Meir Yedid.



Hacham Yitzhak receiving a warm welcome while entering Yeshivat Darchei Eres (YDE).



Hacham Yitzhak blessing students of Yeshivat Shaare Torah. (L-R) Sammy Gindi, Abraham Haber, Joseph Sayegh, and Alan Menaged.

His work *Shulhan Ha'ma'arechet* discusses laws and customs in alphabetical order, and includes a collection of halachic responsa concerning the proper approach to Torah learning and the process of reaching a final halachic ruling. *Iggeret Le'ben Torah* – “Letter to a Student of Torah” – is an exceptional guide that coaches today’s aspiring young scholars toward success in Torah study. It offers advice, guidance and inspiration through the teachings of *Hazal*, along with fascinating anecdotes about the author’s father.

Beholding the Sight of a *Tzaddik*

The story behind the hacham’s visit to these shores began several months ago, when Morris Dweck, President of the Edmond J Safra Synagogue of Brooklyn, placed a call to a close colleague of Hacham Yitzhak to invite the Chief Rabbi to synagogue’s groundbreaking ceremony in May. Well aware of the rabbi’s busy schedule, Morris knew the prospects were dim. At the same time, however, it was certainly worth the try, and sure enough, the hacham graciously accepted the invitation. Adding to the excitement surrounding the trip was the news that he would be traveling with his esteemed colleague, Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi HaRav David Baruch Lau, *shelita*.

The Rabbi arrived at JFK International Airport at approximately 7:45pm on Thursday evening, May 8th. He was greeted by a representative of the Edmond J Safra Synagogue and a close American colleague, and immediately embarked on his whirlwind series of visits. The morning following his arrival, the rabbi joined Rabbi Eli Mansour and his congregation, the Edmond J Safra Synagogue, for *Shaharit*. Following the prayers, he was escorted to Barkai Yeshiva and Yeshivat Darchei Eres (YDE) where he delivered words of *hizuk* (inspiration) to the students, encouraging them to lead lives of Torah and *mitzvot*, and stressing the importance of allotting time for Torah study every day.

The rabbi’s entrance into the YDE building was dramatic and memorable. With the school’s beautiful banner hanging high, the Chief Rabbi entered to the sweet sounds of the *pizmonim* sung by the third grade choir. YDE’s Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Meir Yedid, introduced Hacham Yitzhak, who proceeded to speak about the beauty of Torah study. The boys stared with their eyes wide open, amazed by the sight of the Rishon Le’tzion.

The rabbi accepted Shabbat with Kahal Bene Yitzhak, and on Shabbat morning he arrived at 6:30 in Shaare Zion, where community members joined together for the singing of the *Bakashot* in the Dome. He then joined them for *Shaharit*. On Shabbat afternoon, he delivered a *shiur* in Ahi Ezer and an insightful lecture during *se’udah shelishit* at the Safra Synagogue.

On Sunday Morning, the rabbi attended *Shaharit* in Congregation Ahava VeAhva, where he was warmly welcomed by Rabbi Shimon Alouf, who shared memories of Hacham Ovadia *zt”l*, and spoke in praise of his son, the congregation’s esteemed guest.

“A Place of Torah and *Tefillah*”

Later that day, the rabbi attended a watershed event in the history of American Sephardic Jewry – the groundbreaking ceremony of the permanent building of the Edmond J Safra Synagogue.

Established in 2005, the Edmond J Safra Synagogue, formerly Congregation Bet Yaakob, has been temporarily housed in the previous Ahava VeAhva Synagogue at the corner



Torah Contest winners from Magen David Yeshivah, Yeshivah of Flatbush and Barkai Yeshivah.

The following Torah Contest winners earned the honor of meeting Hacham Yitzhak in person. **Top row standing:** Teddy Cohen, Morris Franco, Abe Chetrit, Gabriel Bildirici, Raymond Massry, and Joseph Sutton. **Bottom row sitting:** Jacob Missry, Albert Hamui, Chief Rabbi, Alan Sassoon, and Isaac Chabot.

of Ocean Parkway and Avenue R. After years of anticipation, the congregation was finally given the opportunity to celebrate the groundbreaking of their permanent home.

The size of the crowd that assembled for the historic event far exceeded even the most optimistic expectations. Arranged by synagogue President Morris Dweck, Building Chairman Ike B. Dweck, and Event Coordinator Yvette Hanan, the event marked an unforgettable display of unity, bringing together over 1,000 people from all segments of the community. Rabbis and laymen, men and women spanning the spectrum of religious observance and financial status, flocked to the site to celebrate what was truly a “groundbreaking” event for the Sephardic community. The ceremony was also graced by the presence of several dignitaries and elected officials, including Senators Simcha Felder and Marty Golden; Assemblymen Steven Cymbrowitz and Dov Hikind; Councilmen David Greenfield and Chaim Deutsch; Wolf Sender, Community Liaison to Brooklyn DA Ken Thompson; and Chairperson Theresa Scavo.

The celebration began with a warm, heartfelt tribute to the beloved leader of the Safra Synagogue, Rabbi Eli J Mansour. Master of ceremonies, President Morris Dweck, expressed deep appreciation on behalf of the congregants for the rabbi’s hard work and devotion, briefly describing the rabbi’s impact upon the synagogue members, and concluding, “The Rabbi is, above all, a loyal friend to us all.”

Morris then introduced Rabbi Mansour, who, in characteristic form, enlightened and inspired the gathering, noting the appropriate timing of the historic event, and delivering a message of *hizuk*.

The rabbi then proceeded to introduce Hacham Yitzhak, who began his speech with heartening words of *berachah*, followed by words of glowing praise for Rabbi Mansour and for the legendary community philanthropist Edmond J Safra, *a”h*. He explained that the efforts of the synagogue’s rabbi and its devoted congregants will undoubtedly serve to elevate the soul of Edmond J Safra, after whom their building is named. “He is certainly happy,” the hacham said, “that in this very spot will be a place of *tefillah* and Torah, and that Torah will be multiplied in *Am Yisrael*.”

The crowd then paid tribute to the esteemed founding members of the synagogue: senior lay leader of the Syrian Community, Mr. Ralph S Tawil, and Mr. Jack V Cohen. In addition, they honored the memories of Hacham Baruch Ben-Haim, *zt”l*,





Hacham Yitzhak signing the Megillat Yisod.



Hacham Yitzhak delivering words of *hizuk* to the students of Magen David Yeshiva.



Hacham Shaul Kassin, *shelita* and Rabbi Eli Mansour with Hacham Yitzhak during the groundbreaking ceremony for the permanent building of the Edmond J Safra Synagogue.

Rabbi Jacob S Kassin, *zt"l*, Mr. Edmond J Safra *a"h*, and Hacham Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*. These tributes included pictures of these great men, as well as beautiful words expressing their contributions to the community and to the Jewish world.

A moving tribute was also given to Mr. Moises Saba Masri, *a"h*, an internationally renowned philanthropist who generously supported countless worthy charitable causes around the world, and who was also a committed student of Torah. Mr. Saba's life tragically ended in a fatal accident at the young age of 46, and it was formally declared that all Torah studied in the new synagogue is being dedicated in his memory.

The celebration also included the placing of a *Megillat Yesod* – "Foundation Scroll" – underneath the building's foundations. This ceremony follows an age-old custom to write a declaration upon a parchment scroll committing to use the new building for the purpose of honoring and serving the Almighty. The document underneath the synagogue's foundations, which was signed by leading rabbis as well as the synagogue's leaders and major donors, will serve as an everlasting testament to the lofty goals which the building is meant to achieve.

The Beauty and Sweetness of Torah

The following morning, the rabbi addressed the students of the Magen David Yeshiva. He emphasized the importance of Torah study and urged the students to set aside time for learning, describing the gratifying feeling experienced through Torah learning. The hacham related that his father would review the words of Torah in a sing-song style, basking in the unparalleled joy of Torah. Speaking to the girls, the rabbi stressed the importance of marrying someone who is meticulous in mitzvah observance and sets aside time for learning.

The rabbi then traveled to Queens to deliver words of *hizuk* at the Kollel Mekor Haim of Rabbi Eliyahu Ben Haim, Av Bet Din (head of the rabbinical court) of Mekor Haim. He later returned to Brooklyn, proceeding to Shaare Zion where he delivered a fascinating, in-depth lecture on the laws of Shabbat.



Hacham Yitzhak with Hacham Yosef Harari-Raful, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Ateret Torah.

On Tuesday, the rabbi prayed *Shaharit* at Ateret Torah, and afterward engaged in a warm exchange with Rosh HaYeshiva Hacham Yosef Harari-Raful. He then embarked on a visit to all five divisions of Yeshivat Sha'are Torah. He arrived at Sha'are Torah Boys High School and found the school brimming with excitement. The seniors dressed in suits and ties for the occasion, and songs were beautifully sung in the rabbi's honor.

Hacham Yitzhak began his address by praising the Rosh HaYeshiva, Rabbi Hillel Haber, *shelita*, recalling the time when they studied together in Yeshivat Porat Yosef under the guidance of Hacham Yehuda Ades. He then proceeded to the primary message which he sought to spread – the beauty and sweetness of Torah. He impressed upon the boys how much they could accomplish given their young age, while at the same time warning that life is shorter than we think. The hacham lovingly pleaded with the boys to use their time productively, and not to waste it on meaningless, wasteful pursuits.

Hacham Yitzhak then proceeded to the Boys Elementary School, Sha'are Girls High School, the Preschool, Girls Elementary School, and Sha'are Binah Seminary. Later, the rabbi made a visit to the Sephardic Community of Montreal, Canada, returning to Brooklyn by the next morning.

Wednesday began with payers and then a *shiur* at Bet Torah, and continued with visits to Yeshivat Ohel Torah, Ahiezer Yeshiva, Benot Rahel, and Lev Torah. He later delivered a *shiur* on the laws of Shavuot to over 300 people in Bnai Yosef, and joined YDE for its Honor Society Event in the Sephardic Lebanese Congregation (SLC). At the end of this jam-packed day, the hacham delivered a late-night *shiur* at Midrash Moshe ben Maimon Congregation.

Chief Rabbi on the Jersey Shore

On Thursday, the rabbi and his entourage headed southward to the Jersey Shore, visiting numerous institutions in the sunny, 70+ degree spring weather.

The hacham arrived at Bet Yaakov of the Jersey Shore and was greeted by a swarm of precious, innocent preschoolers who looked in awe at the rabbi's special attire. One little boy marched forward to show the guest an illustration he had drawn of the Chief Rabbi. The rabbi was visibly moved, and warmly blessed the boy with a future of success. He was then escorted by the Menahel of the Yeshiva, Rabbi Shmuel Choueka, to the assembly room where he addressed over 200 girls.

Later, the rabbi and his entourage pulled up to a festive gathering of students at the Hillel Yeshiva, all waving flags and chanting songs in honor of the Rishon Le'tzion. He was led to the assembly room where he was introduced by Rabbi Moshe Douek, rabbi of Congregation Sha'are Tefillah of Eatontown, and a teacher in Hillel's High School. Hacham Yitzhak continued his holy mission of spreading the message of Torah learning.

His next stop was Ilan High School, where he met with Rosh HaYeshiva Rabbi Shlomo Diamond, *shelita*. The girls listened in awe as the Chief Rabbi spoke, paying close attention to each and every word. He noted the importance of Jewish womanhood and the significance of creating a Torah home, where men are encouraged to learn and the children are brought to yeshiva. One teacher described the stirring lecture as "a lesson on how to be an *eshet hayil*."



Rabbi Shlomo Diamond welcoming Hacham Yitzhak at the Deal Kollel.



Hacham Yitzhak leaving Shaare Binah Seminary.



Hacham Haim Benoiel greeting Hacham Yitzhak outside Bnai Yosef Synagogue.



Hacham Yitzhak speaking at the West Deal Synagogue. Seated on left on Podium: (L-R) Rabbi Moshe Malka, Rabbi Moshe Douek, Rabbi Shmuel Choueka, and Rabbi Mordechai Dabbah (in back). *Photo Credit: Ron Habbaz.*

An *Agunah's* Prayer

Hacham Yitzhak was then escorted to Rabbi Diamond's other establishment, the Deal Kollel, whose students greeted the rabbi with both reverence and excitement.

The rabbi seemed to feel right at home in the kollel as he addressed the students. He delivered a masterful *shiur* in halachah, occasionally interjecting words of inspiration, enlightening stories, and his reflections on Jewish history and contemporary political issues. Numerous students later expressed their surprise at how comfortable the rabbi felt sharing several personal experiences with the audience. One kollel member saw this as an example of how Torah scholars naturally feel at home in places of advanced Torah learning. "Perhaps he felt more connected. The rabbi grew up as an aspiring scholar himself, and he must be thrilled to address a room filled with aspiring young scholars!"

One of the stories he shared was a particularly fascinating case that came before his Bet Din. A man was once brought before the court in shackles, with his hands and legs cuffed. The *dayanim* were taken aback by the sight of a shackled man accompanied by five police officers.

"What's going on?" the hacham asked.

"Write up an arrest for this man!" one of the officers demanded. "He has been wanted by the police for over five years."

"What crime has he committed?"

"He refuses to give his wife a *get*." The policemen explained that they had already lost the man once, and so they wanted him behind bars immediately.

The other two *dayanim* signed the warrant for the man's arrest without hesitating, but the Chief Rabbi was not so quick to follow. The other rabbis reminded Hacham Yitzhak of this man's story, which he had heard about in the past, and insisted that the time had come to send the man to prison for keeping his wife an *agunah* ("chained woman"), unable to remarry. But Hacham Yitzhak refused to sign the warrant, and instead asked to speak with the man and with his wife.

"Why will you not give her a *get*?" the rabbi asked gently. "It's been five years."

"Dear rabbi," the man replied, "she wants a lot of money."

"How much?"

"200,000 shekels."

The other *dayanim* grew impatient. They turned to Hacham Yitzhak and asked, "Nu, why are you going back and forth with this man? Just sign!" The rabbi refused.

"I didn't want to," he confided to the kollel members. "I could have written an arrest and he would have gone to prison, but I was stubborn. I spoke with him for three hours."

Afterward, the rabbi spoke to the man's wife, trying to convince her to withdraw her demands so she could move on and build a new family. "Why have him go to prison and remain an *agunah*?"

The woman agreed. The rabbis immediately summoned a *sofer* (scribe) and had the *get* written. They then brought two witnesses, and the man gave the woman a *get*.

After the procedure, the women told the court the extraordinary background to the story. She had been trying to



Hacham Yitzhak with Rabbi Duvi Bensoussan and congregants at Congregation Magen Avraham.

(R-L) Henry Hamra, Ralph Daniel, Leon Hamra, Marco Ballas, Morris Hara, Rabbi Duvi Bensoussan, Hacham Yitzchak and Hazan Dan Hamra.

obtain a divorce from her husband for a very long time, and the police eventually put out a warrant for his arrest.

"My husband disappeared," she said. "The police went looking for him, but to no avail. He was gone." For five long years, she remained an *agunah*.

The Friday evening prior to the proceedings, she went to the grave of Maran Hacham Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*, where she cried and prayed. She poured out her emotion, expressing her concern for the future and the hardship of raising a child alone, and begging the sacred soul of the hacham to intercede on her behalf.

The very next day, on Shabbat afternoon, she went to pray *Minhah* at the Kotel. At one point she looked up from her siddur, and her heart nearly stopped. She saw her husband, for the first time in five years, standing there. After quickly collecting herself, she approached a nearby police officer, telling her that there is a warrant for the man's arrest. This is how he was forced to come to the Bet Din.

Hacham Ovadia heard her prayers, and begged the Almighty to help her.

Upon concluding his discourse at the kollel, the hacham made his final stop, at Congregation Magen David of West Deal, where he delivered beautiful words of inspiration. A huge crowd was in attendance, including a large number of people who traveled from Lakewood to see the great sage and hear his words of Torah.

Having completed his trip to the Jersey Shore, the rabbi left for Miami.

Although we have lost our generation's guiding light, Hacham Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*, we can find comfort in the knowledge that he has left us with what we might call his "prize possession," a son who is a worthy and capable successor. Hacham Yitzhak is continuing his father's holy work of spreading the message of Torah study and religious observance with warmth, kindness and sensitivity, fulfilling Hacham Ovadia's life's mission of "*lehahazir atarah leyoshnah*" – restoring the glory of Torah. We all hope and pray that Hashem will grant the hacham many more years of leadership and inspiration, during which he will continue to illuminate the Jewish world with his scholarship and shining example of devoted service to our nation and our Creator, *amen*.