Rabbi Obadia ben Ya’aqob Yosef z”l, 1920-2013

Today is a very sad day for Am Israel. Hakham Obadia Yosef passed away at the age of 93. Hakham Obadia was not just a former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel (Rishon LeTsion) but also the Rabbi that lead the Sephardim in Israel and the diaspora to reclaim their customs, traditions and Halakhot.

Rabbi Obadia Yosef’s passion was the study of Tora. Particularly, all the legal aspects of Judaism. Jewish jurisprudence is a very complex discipline. And one has to read many, many books, some of them of an encyclopedic size, in order to become a master in the field. Rabbi Yosef was probably the most knowledgeable Rabbi of this generation. He was gifted with an exceptional memory which allow him to know and quote by heart thousands of rabbinic opinions, analysis and rulings. This extensive knowledge, of course, is not the product of just an exceptional memory and mental talents but mainly of an uninterrupted dedication to Tora study. I remember that his son, Rabbi Ya’aqob Yosef z”l once told us that his own passion for studying Tora began once he saw his father gently rocking the crib of one of his baby brothers with one hand, while holding and reading a book in the other hand.

What characterized Rabbi Yosef as the leader of the Sephardic Jewry is that besides his extraordinary knowledge he also had the courage to reclaim the Sephardic Halakhic voices of the past as authoritative and binding in the present. That was not a small task, considering that at that time he had to openly challenge other movements and schools (revisionists, extremists, assimilationist, mystical, etc.) that also claimed to represent an authentic Sephardic approach. Most of these schools considered that rabbi Obadia Yosef’s rulings were too lenient.

As a poseq (rabbinic legislator) his main contribution was perhaps the enhancement and the virtual reinstallation of Maran Rabbi Yosef Caro and his Shulhan ‘arukh as the ultimate authority for Sephardic Jews in Israel. “qibalnu hora-ot Maran Bet Yosef” (we accepted the rulings of Rabbi Yosef Caro) is the foundation of his Halakhic legacy.

In the coming days, BH, I will explain a little more about his opinions and books as a humble tribute to his memory