Rabbi Ya’aqob Meir (1856-1939) First Sephardic Chief Rabbi Of Israel

Rabbi Ya’aqob Meir (his original last name was “Mercado”) was born in Jerusalem in 1856. He was the son of a very successful and generous merchant, Caleb Mercado. He studied with Rabbis Menachem Bekhor Isaac and Aharon Azriel. He was an accomplished Talmudic scholar who was fluent in Hebrew and five other languages. At the age of 16 he married Rachel Yitzhaki. While studying, he devoted himself to activism for the benefit of the incipient Jewish community in Palestine (Israel). In 1879, he was one of the founders of Bikur Cholim, which established the Misgab Ladach Hospital in Jerusalem.

KIBUTZ GALUYOT

In 1882, he was sent as an emissary to Bukhara (Uzbekistan). The Jews of Bukhara, who rarely had such prestigious visitors, received him with great respect. And in his honor they called all his children born during his stay with his name. The Rabbi helped them with the formulation of religious and community regulations and encouraged them to emigrate to Israel. Thanks to his encouragement, from 1889 the Jews of Bukhara began to emigrate en masse to Israel. From 1888 to 1899 he was a member of the Rabbinical court of Ya’aqob Shaul Elyashar, Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. In this capacity he helped establish new neighborhoods, such as Ezrat Yisrael, Yemin Moshe, and the Bukhara neighborhood in Jerusalem (shechunat habujarim).

ACHDUT ISRAEL

At that time the differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews were very significant, culturally and even religiously. Both communities wanted their own Rabbis and did not agree. Rav Meir, aware of the importance of us Yehudim sticking together, worked tirelessly to bridge the gap between the two communities. One of his projects was the establishment of the HITACHDUT, an organization of Sephardic “and” Ashkenazi rabbis, something unprecedented until then. One of the first things this organization did was to appoint Naftalí Hertz HaLevi, an Ashkenazi rabbi born in Białystok, Poland, to serve

as the sole rabbi of the city of Jaffa, and to be accepted by Ashkenazim and Sefaradim. HEBREW LANGUAGE Rabbi Meir was also noted for his effort to revive the Hebrew language. Hebrew had ceased to be a spoken language by 2,000 years. Rabbi Meir founded the organization “Safa Berura” together with Rabbi Chaim Hirchenson. Later the famous Eliezer Ben-Yehuda joined this organization. These tireless volunteers roamed the schools and Yeshivot of the Yishub teaching Hebrew and encouraging its daily use.

ISRAELI POLITICS

After Rabbi Elyashar’s passing in 1906, Rabbi Yaakov Meir was the natural candidate to be the new Rishon LeZion. But many leaders opposed him and accused him of being “too Zionist” (an accusation that certainly made him proud) and the Rabbi was frowned upon by the Turkish-Ottoman authorities, who ruled Palestine until 1917, and they were not in favor. agreement on the immigration of so many Jews to Israel.

THESSALONIKI

In the summer of 1907, Rabbi Meir was invited to serve as Chief Rabbi in Thessaloniki, Greece. At that time this was one of the largest Sephardic communities in the world with about 100,000 members. Thessaloniki also stood out as the only city with a Jewish majority. The Rabbi stayed in Salonika for 10 years. When the First World War began he did something extraordinary: he organized a group of young Greek Jews, “The Hebrew Legion”, to fight for the liberation of Palestine. He also encouraged many Jews from Thessaloniki to settle in the land of Israel.

GONE WTH THE FIRE

In 1917 there was a tragic fire in Thessaloniki that irreversibly devastated the community. More than 50,000 Jews lost their homes in this fire. 16 of the 33 synagogues and the Rabbinate with all its archives were destroyed. Rabbi Meir’s home was also affected, and his entire library was destroyed. The worst and most tragic thing for Rabbi Meir was that the fire also consumed his manuscripts: all the explanations, the comments and the rabbinical responsa that he had strict for 20 or 30 years… he could never find consolation for this loss. Since there were no books written by him then, his words and opinions were recorded in the books of other rabbis, such as Rabbi Ben-Zion Cuenca and Rabbi Isaac Abulafia.

RISHON LEZION

In 1919, Rabbi Jacob Meir returned to Erets Israel where he was honored and decorated with the Commander of the Order of the British Empire award for his service in war. In 1921 with the help of Rabbi Abraham Kook, he was chosen as Israel’s chief Sephardic Rabbi aka, Rishon leZion. He held this position until his death. The 1920s and 1930s were very critical times for the “Jewish settlement” that was not yet independent. And there was much to do. One of Rabbi Meir’s main contributions was the establishment of a Rabbinical Court of Appeal: although the law of Palestine was established by the British authorities, if a legal ruling opposed Jewish law, a Jew residing in Israel had the right to appeal and ask to be tried by Jewish law in this court of appeals that was founded and headed by Rabbi Meir.

PEACE WITH THE ARABS

In 1924, he participated with Colonel Frederic Kish and David Yellin in meetings in Amman, Jordan, with Hussein bin Ali and his son Abdullah, in an attempt to establish good relations between Arabs and Israeli Jews, which at that time was not inconceivable. The Sephardic rabbis and leaders (such as Abraham Shalom Yahuda and others) had a great advantage over other rabbis and politicians in this area: they spoke the language of the Arabs, they were part of a similar eastern culture and shared a similar mindset, and this allowed them a more fluid and diplomatic dialogue with the Arabs. Rabbi Meir passed away in May 1939 and Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel took his place.

WATCH this rare historic footage from 1918. The 3rd rabbi to appear is Rabbi Ya’aqob Meir.

The sad words of rabbi Jacob Meir about the consequences of the fire in Salonika

היות כי לדאבוני פרצה תבערה גדולה בשאלוניקי בשנת תעז ”ר ונשרפו
כל בתי עיר הפנימית ובכללם גם משרד הרבנות והמעון שאני דרתי בו ,
נשרפו גם שני הקונטרסים אשר טיפחתי וריביתי בימי בחרות , הראשון
על שו ”ע אבן העזר והשני על חושן משפט , ולא נשארה לי העתקה מהם …
חוץ מזה לא נשאר בידי כלום . עתה אין בכוחי לכתוב חידושי תורה
מחמת כמה סיבות . ראשית , אין לי כל הספרים הדרושים לתכלית זו ,

ספרייתי העשירה שהייתה לי לפני נוסעי לסאלוניקי התפוררה והתפזרה ...
שני טרדות הציבור מונעות עתה ממני להפנות לזה ושלישית הנה באתי
בימים וזקנה קפצה עלי . אני מוסר מודעה כי כל מה שאנוכי רושם
וכותב בפנקסי אינו לשם חיבור כדי להדפיסו היות שידעתי שאין בו
”...דיבור של ממש