RIBBI SAADIA BENZAQUEN: Rabbi of Rabbis

Some men are more angels than men. That was the case with Ribbi Saadia Benzaquen z”l, my first teacher. He led the beautiful synagogue on Piedras Street, which only filled up on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, because his beloved Moroccan-Argentine community—of which my father and grandfather were part—did not have many regular attendees for daily or even weekly Tefilot. Rabbi Benzaquen was a great leader, a visionary with ambitious goals for the Jewish people. He believed that the community in Argentina urgently needed young, well-trained rabbis who could face the challenges of the present day—rabbis fluent in a sufficiently sophisticated vocabulary to speak to young professionals who were increasingly assimilated and no longer understood the older rabbis. He wanted to develop rabbinic leaders who were eloquent and capable of expressing the timeless ideas of the Torah in modern language.

This was the mid-1970s. I believe that Ribbi Saadia, like many other geniuses, was ahead of his time. He did not have institutional support to create an orthodox rabbinic training program, but that did not stop him from pursuing his dream. Far from giving up, he personally set out to train his own students, motivating them to study Torah with the goal of receiving rabbinic ordination.
I was one of those privileged students. In 1980, Ribbi Saadia learned that Rabbi Yaakob Eljarrar z”l, originally from Spanish Morocco, was starting a Kolel for Dayanim—a school of advanced rabbinic studies—and he asked him to organize a special rabbinic program for three of his students. At age 19, I had the privilege of being one of them. I left my studies at Yeshiva University halfway through and went to Israel, to the Kolel on 4 HaTurim Street, next to the Mahane Yehuda market in

Jerusalem. The Kolel, I believe, was called Zekhor LeDavid and housed the library of the famous Ribbi Itzchak Bengualid, the luminary of the Jewish community in Tetuan—the city where my grandparents and Ribbi Saadia were born.

At Ribbi Saadia's request, Rabbi Elcharrar found us the best possible teacher: the now-famous rabbi of Baqaa, Jerusalem, and current candidate for Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Eliyahu Abergel Shelita. Under the direction of Rabbi Abergel and Rabbi Elcharrar, and with the constant supervision of Ribbi Saadia, his son Rabbi Abraham Benzaquen, Rabbi Mijael Acrich and I studied intensively for several years. We passed four exams at the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and received rabbinic ordination, thus fulfilling one of Ribbi Saadia's dreams.

But this was only one part of what he did for us. He also gave us solid training in one key area for any community rabbi: public speaking. This began a bit earlier, when I was 15 years old. My childhood had taken place in Castelar, in the province of Buenos Aires. After my Bar Mitsva, which was celebrated at the Piedras synagogue—Ribbi's sanctuary—my parents decided to move to the capital. They were concerned that my sisters and I be in a Jewish environment. They bought a small apartment on Chacabuco Street, in the San Telmo neighborhood, choosing that location exclusively for its proximity to the Piedras synagogue.

The meetings where he trained us in public speaking took place on Shabbat afternoons. It is hard to describe what it was like to spend a Shabbat with Ribbi Saadia. After lunch with my family, I would rush to his house on Sargento Garay Street. Entering the building was an adventure, because the doorman was never available. I can see myself shouting at the top of my lungs from the ground floor to the second: "Alberto! Albertooo! Albertooooooo!" I kept yelling until Abraham would hear my screams and come down to open the door.

Once inside, we studied Gemara and Mishna Berura until it was

time for seuda shelishit, which, due to circumstances, we had to eat before Minha. Ribbi Saadia would sit at the head of the table, for many years alongside his father Abraham and his dear wife Raquel, who spent more time standing than sitting, attending to her honored guests: Ribbi Saadia's handful of students. Doña Raquel would serve us delicious sweet pastries, syrup-soaked and fluffy, and an intoxicatingly fragrant herbal tea with lemon verbena (Yerba Luisa) . On special occasions, we also enjoyed fiyuleas, crispy rolled pastries also drenched in syrup.

After the majestic seuda shelishit, we would all walk together to the synagogue on Piedras. Normally, it should have taken us ten minutes to get there, but we never took less than half an hour. Why? Because Ribbi Saadia would stop to greet every single neighbor he met on the way. Everyone: the newspaper vendor, the pharmacist, the greengrocer, the women washing the sidewalks, and the men sitting outside a bar playing cards. He knew them all by name. And his greeting was never a formal "good afternoon," but a whole conversation centered on them: the neighbors, their parents, their children, their relatives. Ribbi Saadia would ask about everyone with genuine interest. The neighbors, as you can imagine, showed great respect and admiration for this very special man who took an interest in all of them. It was a half-hour of pure Kiddush Hashem.

When we finally arrived at the synagogue, Ribbi Saadia would have us sit upstairs, in the seats reserved for the "future rabbis" and for Samuel Chocrón, his secretary, assistant cantor, and practically his adopted son. We would pray Minha, and then came the moment we had all been waiting for: public speaking. There were three or four of us delivering a derasha (rabbinic sermon), which had to last around five to ten minutes. We prepared as best as we could, following Ribbi Saadia's guidelines: that what we said should be clear and relevant, and that our speech should have a message applicable to the complex realities of modern life.

They say public speaking is the number one human fear—stronger even than the fear of death or snakes. Forcing us to do it was the best (or only) way to help us overcome that fear. We had two strategic advantages. First, the synagogue was not particularly full. In fact, besides us, there were maybe seven or eight elderly men, most of whom could easily fall asleep. In that ideal oratory laboratory, we could take risks without fear of embarrassment, because even if our speech was a disaster—which was not uncommon—"nothing happened." I remember one time while delivering my derasha, I had a mental block. My brain froze, completely paralyzed—I didn't know how to continue. Since it was Shabbat, we were required to memorize our speeches and couldn't read from notes. I stood silently for what felt like an eternity—probably a full minute. It was a little embarrassing, but soon forgotten. The intensity of the mishap was as low as the number of listeners.

The second strategic element was Señor Gozal. A very special person. A partner—or perhaps accomplice—of Ribbi Saadia in our oratory training. Sr Gozal (I am not sure I ever knew his first name) was an older man, but with tremendous presence. Tall, thin, energetic, impeccably dressed, wearing a stylish brown hat. The closest thing I can recall to an English gentleman. Sr Gozal had a penetrating gaze and paid full attention to everything we said. But not passively—his eyes never left the speaker and sometimes widened dramatically, raising his thick eyebrows in a gesture of approval. Naturally, I—and I think all of us—couldn't help but speak directly to Sr Gozal. He was the audience. We aimed for the highest prize: his approving smile, which felt like a standing ovation emanating from his face.

His constant encouragement was incredibly motivating for us, the aspiring speakers. To our delight, when we had all finished our speeches, the experts—Ribbi Saadia and Señorr Gozal—would gather to review them aloud, analyze them, and inevitably praise the high quality of the content, the

brilliance of the ideas, and the excellence of the speakers. It was a flood of compliments, which we naively believed, and which helped inflate our confidence, reduce our fear of public speaking, and inspired us to try harder the next Shabbat.

This is how Ribbi Saadia Benzaquen trained us to speak in public—and to be better rabbis for a world moving at an ever-faster pace.

By Rab Yosef Bitton