

A LOOK INTO THE LIFE OF HaGaon Hacham Mordechai Abadi

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Last month's issue initiated an exciting new column offering a glimpse of the outstanding work of the Sephardic Heritage Museum. This time, we take a look at what they've managed to uncover about another Sephardic sage – a man so great, so wise, and yet so unknown to many.

*We will explore the distinguished life and precious masterwork of HaGaon Hacham Mordechai Abadi zt"l, the esteemed author of numerous works, focusing on *Ashrei Ha'am*, which was recently printed from the rabbi's old manuscripts by the hardworking experts of the Sephardic Heritage Museum. Much of the information is excerpted from the preface to *Ashrei Ha'am*.*



Hacham Mordechai's grandson,
Hacham Matloub Abadi

Born in 1826 in Aleppo, Syria, Rabbi Mordechai Abadi seems to have had scholarly aspirations in his blood. As he mentions in his commentary on Psalms, *Ne'im Zemirot*, his grandfather, Avraham Abadi, was an accomplished scholar who, together with his son, Yaakov, had a profound influence on young Mordechai. Besides these two figures, the names of most of those who influenced and inspired Rabbi Abadi are mostly lost to the annals of history. Rabbi Moshe Swed zt"l, former Chief Rabbi of Aleppo, is the only one of his teachers whom Rabbi Abadi refers to in his writings. In one of his responsa, he refers to Hacham Swed as "the teacher of my youth, my master," suggesting that Rabbi Swed was probably one of his main teachers, if not his primary mentor.

From Aleppo to Turkey...and Back Again

After growing up in Aleppo, Hacham Mordechai later moved to Kilis, Turkey, to serve as the rabbi of the community, returning to Syria later in life. The exact dates of his rabbinical tenure in Turkey are unknown. While it is commonly accepted that he remained in Kilis until his death, Rabbi Abadi's own writings clearly indicate otherwise.¹

The Abadi Family

Rabbi Abadi had three sons – Shaul, Yaakov, and Avraham – and a daughter, Rivkah. His children faithfully followed in their father's footsteps, and his grandchildren continued to bring honor to the Abadi name.

His son, Avraham, was the proud father of Hacham Matloub Abadi zt"l, who faithfully served the Syrian community of New York for nearly 50 years, and wrote the scholarly volume *Magen Ba'adi*.

A Mentor of Giants

Many of Rabbi Abadi's students went on to become towering scholars and authors. The impressive list of his students include: Rabbi Yaakov Haim Yisrael Raphael Alfieh, who authored *Rei'ah LeYitzhack*; Rabbi Yeshayah Dayan, who served as head of the rabbinical court in Aleppo and authored *Zeh Ketav Yadi* and several other important volumes; Rabbi Haim Shaul Dweck, a world-renowned Kabbalistic scholar and author of *Eifah Shelemah*, *Pe'at Hasadeh* and other significant works

of Kabbalah; Rabbi Yaakov Shaul Dweck, who succeeded Rabbi Mordechai as rabbi of Kilis and later became Chief Rabbi of Aleppo and head of the city's rabbinical court; Rabbi Eliyahu Hamway, who served as head of Aleppo's rabbinical court; Rabbi Shaul Sutton-Dabah, who became Chief Rabbi of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and authored an important book of responsa entitled *Diber Shaul*; and Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Rofeh, who emigrated to Buenos Aires and authored *Kol Mevaser*. In that volume, Rabbi Rofeh writes that all the great scholars of his time were students of Rabbi Abadi!

Priceless Volumes

The names of two of Rabbi Abadi's scholarly works begin with the word "*ma'yan*" ("fountain"): *Ma'yan Mayim*, a commentary on the Humash, and *Ma'yan Ganim*. In the introduction to *Ma'yan Mayim*, Rabbi Abadi explains that he purposely used the word "*ma'yan*" as part of the title to serve as an acronym for his and his father's names: The *mem* stands for "Mordechai," the *ayin* stands for "Abadi," the *yud* stands for "Yaakov," and the *nun sofit* stands for "*ben*," or son – Mordechai Abadi, the son of Yaakov.

Rabbi Abadi's most celebrated work, *Ma'yan Ganim*, consists of lengthy, elaborate responsa that reveal his deep and penetrating analysis of the material and his vast breadth of knowledge of rabbinic literature. Rabbi Abadi was such a great scholar that Rabbi Ezra Attieh, Rosh Yeshivah of Porat Yosef, was effusive in his praise of him. In one of his letters, Rabbi Attieh says about Rabbi Mordechai, "Our master and teacher; the great and mighty *gaon* [genius], an overflowing wellspring; there is no one who can fathom the depths of his understanding, penetrating analysis and mighty Talmudic arguments; our master and the crown of our head, Rabbi Mordechai Abadi, whose name extends from one end of the world to the other!"

Interestingly, in *Ashrei Ha'am*, which the Sephardic Heritage Museum is printing for the first time, Rabbi Abadi frequently mentions novellae that he composed for his scholarly work, *Divrei Ha'am*. Upon closer examination of *Mayan Ganim*, the museum staff discovered that the novellae that Rabbi Abadi mentions as being written in *Divrei Ha'am* actually appear in *Mayan Ganim*, suggesting that *Ma'yan Ganim* was originally meant to be titled *Divrei Ha'am*.

¹ See Preface to *Ashrei Ha'am*



Sefer Ashrei Ha'am



Original Manuscript

Plumbing the Depths of Kabbalah

In addition to Rabbi Abadi's prowess as a Talmudic scholar, he was also an authority on the mystical spheres of Kabbalah. Rabbi Abadi would lead the daily prayers in accordance with Kabbalah, and his *Shaharit* prayers would take a full two-and-a-quarter hours each morning.

One of the scholars of Aleppo, Hacham Eliyahu Tawil, spent much of his time studying *Zohar*. Once, he came upon a certain passage of *Zohar* which he simply could not understand, no matter how much he tried. In his great desire to uncover the meaning of the *Zohar's* sacred words, he fasted and wrote down his question on a piece of paper. He then placed the note beneath his pillow, requesting that he be answered in a dream that night.

His request was granted. After falling asleep that night, Hacham Eliyahu began to dream, and in his dream he was told to seek out Rabbah bar Nahmani, who would answer his question. Rabbah bar Nahmani was the name of one of the sages of the Talmud who had passed away more than a thousand years previously, and the name was not in use during Hacham Eliyahu's lifetime. Naturally, Hacham Eliyahu asked how he could possibly find Rabbah bar Nahmani to receive the explanation of the passage from the *Zohar*. A Heavenly spirit spoke to him and instructed him to go to Aleppo's Bet Nassi Synagogue, and there he would find Rabbah bar Nahmani.

Hacham Eliyahu awoke from his dream and headed toward Bet Nassi. As he ascended the stairs of the synagogue, Rabbi Abadi came out to greet him and said, "Never repeat the contents of your dream to any person."

Hacham Eliyahu was stunned – Rabbi Abadi knew about his dream!

Showing no sign of having noticed Hacham Eliyahu's astonishment, Rabbi Abadi simply said, "After you break your fast, I will explain the words of the *Zohar* to you." And so Hacham Eliyahu broke his fast and Rabbi Abadi proceeded to explain the difficult passage of *Zohar*.

Hacham Eliyahu recognized Rabbi Abadi's Divine inspiration, and discovered that his soul contained a spark from the soul of the great Talmudic sage Rabbah bar Nahmani. He obeyed Rabbi Abadi's wishes and did not relate these events during Rabbi Abadi's lifetime. Only after Rabbi Abadi's death did Hacham Eliyahu make this story public to give people a sense of Rabbi Abadi's stature.

Ashrei Ha'am

Ashrei Ha'am is Rabbi Abadi's compilation of profound commentaries on the four sections of *Shulhan Aruch*, the Code of

Jewish Law, along with his remarks and analysis. The original volume in which Rabbi Abadi recorded these notes and essays is actually an interesting artifact in and of itself. The book was a blank tome in which he had written the numbers of the various sections of the *Shulhan Aruch*. Whenever he was studying *Shulhan Aruch* and had a comment that he wished to record relating to the particular section he was reviewing, he would write it on the corresponding page in his personal volume. Thus, there are many pages on which Rabbi Abadi recorded novellae and many pages that were left blank, as he did not have anything he wished to record on those sections.

Over the course of time, Rabbi Abadi recorded so much material that an invaluable work of novel insights into Jewish Law came into being, consisting of 427 *teshuvot* (responsa) spanning the entire spectrum of *halachah*. And like all Sephardic Heritage publications, this new volume includes an excellent and inspiring biography of the author by Rabbi David Azar.

The Passing of a Hacham Mordechai

Rabbi Abadi passed away in 1883 in Beirut, Lebanon, where he is buried. Rabbi Yosef Shayo wrote that Rabbi Abadi was in Beirut on the way to Jerusalem when he died. A number of sources state that Rabbi Abadi left this world on the 3rd of Sivan, but Rabbi Shayo maintains that his death occurred on the third day of the *week*, not the third day of the month. In his view, Rabbi Abadi passed away on the 27th of Sivan.

Although he was just 57 years old at the time of his death, he accomplished in his short sojourn in this world what would take others several long lifetimes to achieve, and he left behind a rich legacy which was honored and cherished by Syrian Jews for generations. The very mention of his name was a great source of pride for Syrian Jewry, and outstanding scholars like Rabbi Ezra Attieh and Rabbi Abraham Harari-Rafal told numerous stories of his greatness. Rabbi Abadi's name was reverently mentioned each year on the night of Yom Kippur as part of a hashkavah (memorial prayer) that was recited for *hachamim* and leaders of the Aleppo community, until the last Jews left Aleppo in 1992. His name was mentioned on Yom Kippur night in the Ohel Yaakov synagogue in Aley, Lebanon, as well, and this custom is still practiced by Syrian congregations until this day.

Thanks to the groundbreaking work of the Sephardic Heritage Museum, not only is Rabbi Mordechai Abadi's name remembered and preserved, but so are his scholarly writings, taking their place as an integral part of the treasure of Sephardic Torah literature that forms the foundation of our ancient heritage.