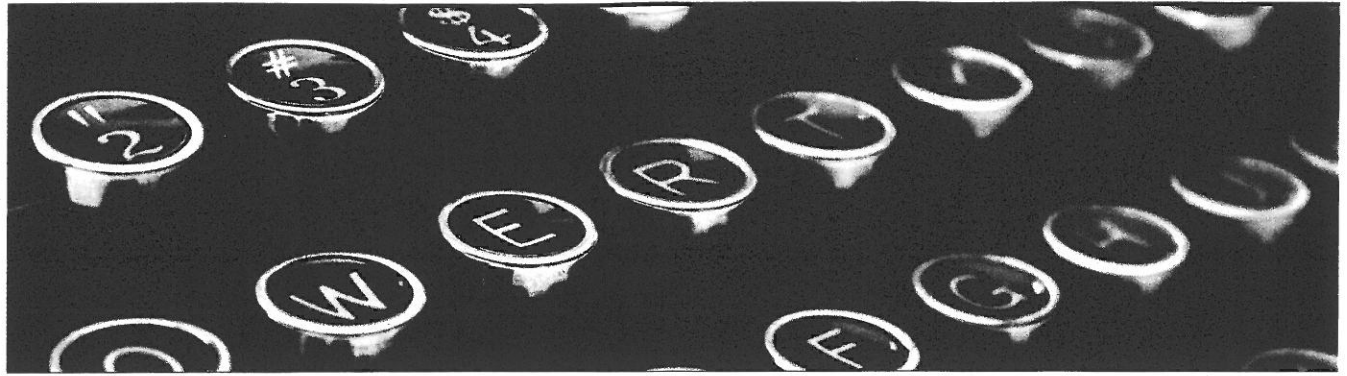


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FIRST THINGS (ISSN #1047-5141) is published ten times a year for \$39 by the Institute on Religion and Public Life, 35 East 21st Street, Sixth Floor, New York, NY 10010. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to FIRST THINGS, P.O. Box 8509, Big Sandy, TX 75755. Newsstand distribution by Comag Marketing Inc., 155 Village Blvd, 3rd Floor, Princeton, NJ 08540. Copyright © 2013 by FIRST THINGS. All rights reserved. Produced in the U.S.A. www.firstthings.com



OPINIONS

History's Most Powerful Rabbi

by Yehudah Mirsky

On October 7, some eight hundred thousand people, about 10 percent of Israel's population and roughly 13 percent of its Jews, attended the funeral of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in Jerusalem. Ninety-three at his death, he was the single most powerful rabbi in history and for decades the king-maker of Israeli politics. His extraordinary, complicated life reshaped not only traditional Judaism and Israeli politics and society but also scrambled familiar categories—of religious and secular, tradition and change, Israeli-ness and Zionism—in ways both petty and profound.

Born in Baghdad in 1920 to an undistinguished family, he immigrated to Jerusalem at age four and from childhood on displayed rare powers of memory and study, as well

as a striking mix of religious fervor and intellectual independence. Rising through the ranks of the religious hierarchy, Rav Ovadia, as he was known, served as rabbinical judge in Cairo, Petah Tikva, and Jerusalem; as chief rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa; and, beginning in 1973, as the Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel.

In his many books and countless rulings on matters of Jewish law, Rav Ovadia deployed an encyclopedic knowledge of rabbinic law to develop a new judicial philosophy with two components. First, he combined a deep adherence to tradition with responsiveness to changing times and a powerful strain of humane sympathies for the downtrodden and disenfranchised, such as Ethiopian Jews, the disabled, and the poor. Second, he sought to recover what he saw as a pristine Sephardic *halakhah* that

would serve as the authoritative—and centralized—body of law that would stand alongside, and perhaps even surpass, the institutions of the state.

Here as elsewhere, he drew on the vast literature and deep historical experience of Sephardic Jewry, whose experience of modernity had been far freer of the fierce European ideological conflicts that yielded both Zionism and Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodoxy. The State of Israel was for him neither the harbinger of the Messiah, as it is for religious Zionists, nor, as it is for the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox Haredim, the work of the devil.

Rather, as sociologist Shlomo Fischer, one of the keenest observers of Israeli religious life, has brilliantly put it, Rav Ovadia bypassed the Haredim and the utopianism of religious Zionists, as well as secular Jewish nationalism, by seeing the state and its institutions as yet another, albeit deeply significant, body to be judged, case by case, according to the traditional law that historically shaped Jewish private and collective life.

His tenure in the rabbinate was cut short in 1983 when the political establishment, eager to rid itself of his Ashkenazi counterpart, the intellectually formidable and cantankerous Shlomo Goren, enacted new term limits that

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got rid of him too. It was only the latest in a lifelong string of humiliations the proud Ovadia was made to suffer at the hands of Ashkenazi elites, religious and secular alike.

For decades, Sephardi resentment had sought some political outlet. The humiliation of Rav Ovadia at the apex of his career finally let it out. In 1984, he endowed his considerable prestige onto Shas, a hitherto small, Jerusalem-based party. Shas went national and received the backing of the then-unquestioned head of the ultra-Orthodox, Rabbi Menachem Shach. Shach hoped the party would be a pliable tool of his own camp, but, as so often happens, his would-be beneficiaries had minds of their own. Over time, Rav Ovadia became the power broker of Israeli politics. One politician after another donned a yarmulke and came begging at his door.

Shas broke the mold, not only of Sephardi disenfranchisement but of religious politics. It was and remains an avowedly ultra-Orthodox party whose rank and file are themselves traditional but not ultra-Orthodox. The Sephardi encounter with modernity was not as jagged and brutal as that of the Ashkenazim, and Sephardic Judaism was as a result less ideologically mobilized when it came to fighting for or against change. This enabled it to reach out to and represent a large public, which, though attached to tradition, did not see it, as do the Ashkenazi Haredim, as an adversary culture.

Rav Ovadia was the one towering Israeli rabbi ever to endorse the principle of land for peace. This religious commitment to preventing bloodshed and the comparative political moderation it seemed to yield enabled him to agree in 1992 to join the coalition led by Yitzhak Rabin.

In 1996, he chose to win votes by having the party distribute magical amulets to potential voters, embracing the cheap mysticism and religious hucksterism he had powerfully fought

for decades. His demiurge here was the brilliant Machiavellian Aryeh Deri, whose mix of smarts and dovishness has enabled him to play Israel's coalition politics, then and now, like a fiddle.

Throughout his career, Rav Ovadia mixed intellectual acumen with the common touch. As the years went on, the latter took center stage in his increasingly brutal diatribes against liberals and the left. These always took place in Saturday-night homilies in his old Jerusalem neighborhood and were ritually disavowed by his spokesmen in the morning. They came to be the only pronouncements of his that younger generations of Israelis ever knew.

One of the leading scholars of Ovadia's life and work, Ariel Picard, has suggested that his rhetorical violence, which revolted much of the public and disturbed those who knew and appreciated his supple and humane jurisprudence, was his—undeniably crude—way of showing that his moderation and judicial leniency were not to be confused with anything like liberalism or tolerance for the ideology of secular Zionism, which he frankly abhorred.

As Shas made more inroads into government ministries and developed its networks of religious and social-welfare institutions, it remade the familiar categories: an ultra-Orthodox party most of whose rank-and-file voters are more moderate traditionalists; an ultra-Orthodox party that sees itself not in sectarian opposition to the establishment but as a natural part of it; a national community in which politics, social welfare, and religion seamlessly mix, along with family ties. This mixing of seeming incommensurables, not to mention its relative moderation on the peace process, long made Shas the crucial set of swing votes in coalition negotiations.

That seamlessness and those family ties have also made Shas a moveable feast of corruption. One after another

of its leaders have been marched to jail unrepentant, arguing that they were being punished for nothing more than what the Ashkenazi elites had allowed themselves all along.

The family ties and tensions were on full display last summer when the elections for the Chief Rabbinate boiled down to which of Rav Ovadia's sons would prevail over his brothers. After an exhausting process, the official mantle went to Yitzhak, the most scholarly, as a last resort. This victory also sealed the comeback of party chairman Deri, who, since doing jail time for corruption, has retaken the reins of the party.

Now with Rav Ovadia's passing, much is up for grabs. The moderation that led him to rule that land could be traded for peace was seriously undermined, for him as for so many, by the violence of the Second Intifada. His position on the issue won't be followed by his successors, none of whom will ever attain his stature.

Deri has solidified his control of the party, now out of the coalition and plotting its comeback. The intrigues that have wracked the Yosef family court in recent years may destabilize the party along the way. But the interesting question will be the future of the alternative Jewish-Israeli identity he created: Middle Eastern, fiercely traditionalist, seeking leadership of a state to whose ethos it isn't committed, while unapologetically joining politics to social welfare and religion, high and low.

On several occasions I attended services at the small chapel in Rav Ovadia's home in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Nof. Many children milled about, and outside men stood offering fistfuls of myrtle so that, with the traditional blessing over beautiful fragrance, worshipers could, per ancient custom, welcome the Sabbath and the extra bit of soul it brings.

As much as I had studied Shas over the years, it still amazed me to see men

whose families hailed from Baghdad, Meknes, and Aleppo dressing in the black-hatted uniforms of Lithuanian Talmudists. It was Rav Ovadia's mastery of that culture of study and his having imparted it to thousands and thousands of students that had given him and them the backbone to confront the Ashkenazi establishment on their own proud terms.

Looking at them—cabinet ministers, schoolchildren, small-business owners, and run-of-the-mill rabbis—look intensely at Rav Ovadia,

one could sense how deeply they felt that it was he who had made them, had given them, for better or worse, the standing and power that the secular Zionist establishment had failed so abjectly to provide. Just how and why it is that that standing and power have so quickly turned to corruption and the temptations of intolerance—and how this all took place on the watch of one of the greatest rabbis of all times—is a story that will still take some time to understand.

Like all great religious figures, Rav Ovadia combined deep faithfulness with nerve and audacity. Had he never entered politics, he would have been remembered as an extraordinary and humane jurist. While his mixed political legacy will continue to refigure not only his historical reputation but the shape of Jewish identity in the Jewish state, one can only hope that ultimately he will be most remembered for his magisterial and humane scholarship, for his sake—and, come to think of it, for Judaism's sake too. ■

The Naked College Quad

by Owen Strachan

Gray and magisterial, squarely planted in the heart of campus, Bowdoin's chapel keeps watch over all who traverse the quad. During my own time at Bowdoin, it was usually empty. Like an antiquated board member of a Fortune 500 company, the chapel was appreciated but generally ignored. The questions it offered were not asked by the student body; the answers it held within its great stone walls were not sought.

This was not due to a policy of hostility, at least not one that I was aware of as a young man in the class of 2003. A good many faculty members treated religion with a kind of detached skepticism. Those who taught religion usually approached it as a sociological phenomenon. A few observed a religious tradition to some extent; out of nearly 160 faculty members, I knew of about five who were Jewish, about five

who were Catholic, and about ten who were identifiably Protestant.

It was hard to tell just how religious the Bowdoin faculty was. Most had signed the metaphysical privatization contract tendered them by elite modern institutions, promising that they would hold their theological convictions largely in check. The personal expression of religious views on campus seemed *gauche*, fit more for a YouTube outburst than a rational discussion.

If you wanted seriously to debate religious ideas, you could take classes in the religion department. Otherwise, one might study the "religious account" of the world, but it was not a serious conversation partner in the classroom. Even religious students sought answers along non-religious lines. They trusted the hard sciences and distrusted moral absolutes.

And quite apart from formal philosophical concerns, there was the

ever-present pull of hedonic undergraduate life. This is itself no mean force in forming worldviews and feelings and thoughts about religion.

My experiences receive some corroboration in *What Does Bowdoin Teach?*, a recent report by the National Association of Scholars, written by Peter Wood and Michael Toscano. Wood is president of the association and an anthropologist of repute, Toscano the association's director of research projects. (Full disclosure: I am quoted in one part of this study.)

The study suggests that while "theistic religion" is treated as "the special concern of a few," so-called "secular religion," characterized by a pious, reverential approach to non-theistic issues, is "the common ground of student cultural life." The study is not without its idiosyncrasies—as Bowdoin professor Jean Yarbrough has pointed out, its "Western-civ-is-dead in Brunswick" narrative misses several survey courses on Western

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