# Jewish Unity vs. Sephardic Particularism: Rav Uziel's Sephardic Vision for the Jewish People

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Rav Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel (1880–1953) was a visionary rabbinic leader, a strong promoter of Jewish unity, and the twentieth century's most authentic embodiment of the classic Sephardic rabbinic tradition. His leadership was characterized, on the one hand, by a burning desire to abolish divisions between Jews, yet at the same time as promoting Sephardic Judaism. How did he reconcile these seemingly conflicting agendas?

As the *Haham Bashi* (Ottoman-appointed Chief Rabbi) of Jaffa-Tel Aviv (1911–1939), and then as the *Rishon L'Zion* of the pre-State *Yishuv* (1939–1947) and of the State of Israel (1948–1953), Rav Uziel was officially the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel. But despite holding an official title and position that seems to have ethnic and particularistic overtones, Rav Uziel was an outspoken proponent of Jewish unity. He passionately sought to abolish the traditional ethnic divisions amongst Jews, especially in Israel. His push for Jewish unity was persistent and thorough, and he articulated his vision of Jewish unity in many forums, including public addresses, written position papers, and halakhic rulings.

From his earliest moments as a young rabbinic leader, all the way through to his famous “Spiritual Will to the Jewish People” written a few weeks before his death in 1953, Rav Uziel advocated Jewish unity as an ideal position.

If Rav Uziel so actively sought Jewish unity as an ideal, then what was his understanding of his own particular title and role as a *Sephardic* Chief Rabbi? What was Rav Uziel’s definition of Sephardic Judaism within the context of a Jewish community that, in his own view, should no longer express these ethnic divisions?

In order to answer this question, it is helpful to begin in 1911, when, upon being appointed *Haham Bashi* of Jaffa, Rav Uziel articulated a grand vision of unity for the Jewish people:

> It is my tremendous desire to unify all of the divisions that the Diaspora tore us into, the separate communities of Sephardim, Ashkenazim, Temanim (Yemenites), etc. This should not be a difficult task, for unity is in our nature and our national character as a people. These divisions amongst us are not natural. The particular linguistic and communal divisions that exist amongst us were created due to our dispersion throughout the Diaspora. As we now return to our natural homeland, there is absolutely no reason to continue living by these communal and linguistic divisions imported from the Diaspora. Instead, we will be one unified community. Should I succeed in helping to quickly realize and fulfill this unity amongst us, great will be my merit.

This was Rav Uziel’s “I have a dream” speech. Fully aware of the 1,900-year history in which Jews lived as separate and distinct communities throughout the Diaspora—with different rabbis, customs, languages, prayer rituals, and halakhic rulings dividing them—Rav Uziel nonetheless believes that unifying the Jewish people “should not be a difficult task” because the divisions born in the Diaspora are alien to the essence of the Jewish people. He does not consider his desire to abolish the Diaspora’s divisions into Sephardim and Ashkenazim to be a new or radical idea but a return to our true nature. He declares that unity “is in our national character,” and by becoming “one unified community” we are returning to our original essence as a people.

The most remarkable part of this speech is the context in which it was delivered—an acceptance speech upon becoming the *Haham Bashi* of Jaffa. As he accepted a title and position traditionally associated with the Sephardic community in the Land of Israel, Rav Uziel boldly declared that, as *Haham Bashi,* he would serve the entire community and work tirelessly to abolish the divisions among all Jews. Rav Uziel did not see his position as a Sephardic rabbi in the narrowly ethnic sense, rather as a potentially unifying force within the Jewish world. This being the case, what, if anything, did being a "Sephardic Rabbi" mean to Rav Uziel?

In 1930, at a gathering celebrating his 50th birthday, Rav Uziel addressed the apparent contradiction between preaching unity while maintaining Sephardic Judaism. Responding to the several friends who spoke his praises that night, Rav Uziel began by re-affirming his passion for Jewish unity:

> In his address tonight, my friend and colleague Rabbi Fishman touched upon the Sephardic and Ashkenazic elements within me. I have already expressed on many occasions that I do not relate to any distinctions or separations between Sephardim and Ashkenazim. It is not the countries of Spain (Sepharad) or Germany (Ashkenaz) that gave us great Torah scholars, rather the Torah itself—regardless of locale—that has inspired generation after generation of Torah learning.
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> To my childhood friend, the honorable author A. Elmaleh, I say: I love the concept of unity for our people, and my goal is to see the elimination of the unnatural divisions amongst us that were created by the diaspora. I absolutely hate divisiveness, and I sharply condemn and reject all divisiveness masked as religion.

These words bear a striking resemblance to the vision Rav Uziel articulated in his inaugural address as *Haham Bashi* of Jaffa in 1911. Except this time, in addition to his well-known love for Jewish unity, Rav Uziel added some personal reflections on Sephardic Judaism:

> However, hand in hand with my love for unity, I want to draw the distinction between unity and self-belittlement. It is my goal to see unity amongst us in

> the field of work and [my emphasis] in the field of literary creations. Therefore, may it come to pass that from the descendants of the great rabbis from Spain, once again will emerge *posekim* (halakhic decisors) and *darshanim* (homiletical preachers), *hokrim* (philosophers) and *meshorerim* (poets), *parshanim* (biblical commentators) and *mekubalim* (mystics/kabbalists). This is my goal, and this is my prayer. It is from this ideological worldview that I lent a hand to strengthen the World Federation of Sephardim, but from the very first moment, I told them that their most important mission lies in the areas of culture and Torah. More than once, I asked to create, under their umbrella, a Bet Midrash L'Rabbanim (a Rabbinical School), because I believe that Torah and higher intellectual education are the foundations for peace and unity amongst us.

In a bold expression of his own identity, mission and purpose as a Sephardic rabbi, Rav Uziel articulates an intellectual definition of Sephardic Judaism. He distinguishes between "unity and self-belittlement" in order to ensure that unity does not suppress the voices of his own Sephardic rabbinic forebears. Rav Uziel's goal of unity would not come at the expense of his own classic Sephardic tradition. Rather than abolish Sephardic Judaism, he sought to redefine its purpose within the larger context and goal of national revival and Jewish unity.

In Rav Uziel's broad vision, Sephardic Judaism would no longer reflect an ethnic definition but instead would offer an intellectual-spiritual framework for the entire Jewish people. To this end, Rav Uziel envisioned the establishment of a Sephardic Bet Midrash that would revive the unique curriculum that characterized the yeshivot and academies in Spain and, in turn, produce a new generation of Sephardic-*style* but universally Jewish, "*posekim* (halakhic decisors) and *darshanim* (homiletical preachers), *hokrim* (philosophers) and *meshorerim* (poets), *parshanim* (biblical commentators) and *mekubalim* (mystics/kabbalists)." This would be a "Sephardic" Bet Midrash thanks to its approach to Torah study, not because of the ethnic background of its students.

What was that approach to Torah study? In a lengthy article tracing the historical development of yeshivot and Batei Midrash*,* Rav Uziel articulates some of the key historical differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazic yeshivot. This is yet another expression of his unique understanding of Sephardic Judaism:

Yeshivot were divided into two centers of learning, known by their general name of Sefarad (Spain) and Ashkenaz (Germany). This division does not only reflect a geographic divide, rather it primarily reflects a difference in curriculum and methodology.

The Sephardic Geonim (scholars) engaged in talmudic study and composed many works of talmudic interpretation, but the primary purpose of these works was to clearly explain talmudic sections in depth, to link these sections to other relevant sections within the Talmud, with the ultimate goal of arriving at practical halakhic decisions. This is different than the yeshivot of France and Ashkenaz, who limited their scope of talmudic study to analysis of the text.

Furthermore, the Sephardic rabbis widened the spectrum of the yeshiva curriculum to include philosophical inquiry, as well as a wide range of sciences and general knowledge that they studied from non-Torah literature. The rabbis of France and Ashkenaz fenced themselves into the exclusive world of Talmud and Midrash, fearing that the penetration of external knowledge would create theological confusion amongst its students. For this reason, they feared the study of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Rav Uziel envisioned that *all* Jews, irrespective of their ethnic origins, would be able to study in such an academy, and its rabbinical graduates would serve the *entire* Jewish community. Rav Uziel believed that the uniquely Sephardic approach that was developed in Golden Age Andalusia, where yeshivot seamlessly merged talmudic scholarship, practical halakhic decision-making, philosophical inquiry, poetic creativity, Torah interpretation, and mystical speculation, all under one roof, could serve as an exemplary model and unifying force for the Jewish people.

Far from being mutually exclusive, Rav Uziel believed that Jewish unity and the Sephardic intellectual tradition are complementary. He specifically wanted to open a *Sephardic* Bet Midrash, because he believed that its broad worldview would benefit the entire Jewish people. His unique philosophy presents an opportunity for today's Jewish world to adopt and apply the teachings of Sephardic Judaism to a broad cross section of the Jewish community. Not only is the term "Sephardic" not divisive, but in Rav Uziel's worldview and own words, it has the potential to serve as a foundation, "for peace and unity amongst us."