Remembering Haham Solomon Gaon

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Haham Solomon Gaon passed away on 19 Tevet 5755 (December 22, 1994). During the course of his lifetime, he impacted on many thousands of people. He served for many years as the Haham of the Spanish and Portuguese community in London; and was the founder and director of the Sephardic Studies Program at Yeshiva University in New York.

As one of Haham Gaon's first students at Yeshiva University in 1963, I want to share a few thoughts about a man who was not merely a teacher, but a mentor and friend. Had I not studied with Haham Gaon, I almost surely would not have become a rabbi; had he not been a constant guide and friend, I almost surely would not have had a rabbinic career spanning five decades.

Solomon Gaon was born in Travnik, Yugoslavia in 1912 and studied at the yeshiva in Sarajevo. Both his parents died in the Holocaust. He received his rabbinic ordination from Jews' College in London. In 1949 he became Haham (Chief Rabbi) of the Sephardic congregations of the British Commonwealth. With Alan Mocatta, he is credited with revivifying a declining community. Beginning in 1963 he became involved (initially on a part-time basis) with Yeshiva University in New York, and was integral in the founding of its Sephardic Studies Program. While in New York, Haham Gaon was closely identified with Congregation Shearith Israel where he attended services regularly.

Haham Gaon had an uncanny understanding of human nature. He seemed to know what was on your mind without your ever having to tell him. He was one of those rare rabbis and teachers who actually cared about others with a fullness of concern. He held impressive titles and received many honors; but he was among

the humblest people I have ever known. Whatever he achieved was not directed at self-glory, but was for the glory of God. He spoke to all people with respect and kindness. He was as non-judgmental a rabbi as I have ever met. His motivating emotion was love; his compassion and empathy seemed to know no bounds.

Haham Gaon seemed to have boundless energy. He traveled extensively; he visited many Sephardic communities around the world. He spoke at many conferences and scholarly gatherings. As busy as he was, he always seemed to have time for family, friends, and students. He and Mrs. Gaon were gracious hosts; they enjoyed being with people, sharing happy times.

Haham Gaon had a lively sense of humor. He also had gravitas. He knew how to carry himself with great dignity while still not becoming aloof.

Haham Gaon, like the classic rabbis of Sephardic tradition, placed great emphasis on prayer. He seemed to have a remarkable spiritual intimacy with the Almighty. When Haham Gaon prayed, all of us in his presence felt an extra spiritual energy in the room.

In an article I wrote on Sephardic models of rabbinic leadership, I referred to Haham Gaon: “As a young rabbi, I learned much from my teacher Haham Solomon Gaon, with whom I studied at Yeshiva University, and to whom I turned for guidance for many years thereafter. I once complained to Haham Gaon that I was called upon by various organizations and committees to attend their events and meetings. I felt I should be exempt from these communal responsibilities, so that I could devote more time to my studies. I thought the Haham would support my request. Instead, he gently rebuked me. He said: the people who devote their time and effort on behalf of the community need to know that the rabbi is with them. They need to see the rabbi, to hear the rabbi’s suggestions, to know that the rabbi appreciates and participates in their work. Yes, you need time to study; but you also need to devote time to working with members of the community. Haham Gaon was a Haver ha-Ir, a friend of the community.”

I went on to write that the classic Sephardic rabbinic model personified by Haham Gaon has been on the decline. “For a variety of sociological and psychological reasons, there has been a sea change in Orthodox rabbinic leadership in general—and an even more profound change in Sephardic rabbinic leadership. The upsurge in the influence of extreme Hareidi religious authorities has dragged much of Orthodoxy to the right.”

Haham Gaon represented a balanced religiosity, deeply faithful to tradition while deeply sensitive to the needs and feelings of modern men and women. Haham Gaon was a model of dignity, compassion, and total commitment to the People of Israel and the State of Israel. He did not attempt to validate his religiosity by adopting “Hareidi” style rabbinic garb; on the contrary, as a proud Sephardic rabbi, he refused to compromise his own traditions in order to curry favor among others. He respected Ashkenazic rabbis who were faithful to their traditions, and he expected them to be respectful of his traditions.

As we mark the anniversary of the passing of Haham Gaon, we may well also be marking the end of an era of Sephardic rabbinic leadership. The broadness of vision, tolerance, spirituality and humanism of the Sephardic rabbinic tradition is on the brink of extinction. At the very moment when the Jewish world needs exactly this kind of spiritual leadership, we miss Haham more than ever.

Haham Gaon was an optimist. He believed that the tradition he embodied would be a source of strength to the Jewish People in the generations to come. Those of us who were his students and friends must also be optimists. We must be worthy heirs to the spiritual legacy he has left us.