Hakham Yehudah Moshe Yeshua Fetaya (1860–1942)

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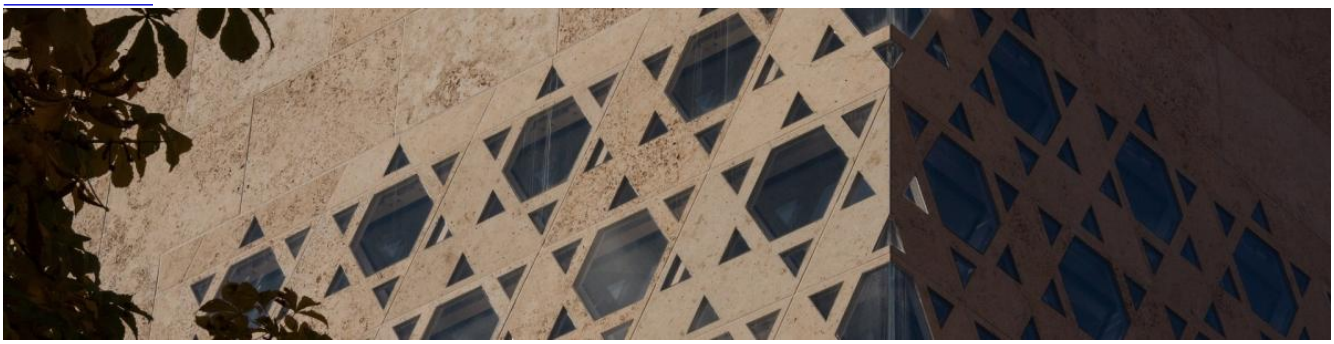

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The rabbinic roots of the Fetaya family can be traced back to Hakham Reuven David Nawi (1770–1821). Hakham Reuven was disciple of Hakham Moshe Haim, the father of the Ben Ish Hai, and was described by the latter as “the great scholar, master of the Torah, our master….” Hakham Reuven passed away at a young age, and only one of his halakhic works, *Yehi Reuven*, has been published. His grandson Hakham Moshe Yeshua Yehezkel Fetaya (1830–1905) was a mystic and a poet. He founded one of the first printing houses in Baghdad in 1866, with his brother Aharon and their partner Rahamim ben Reuven. Fifty-five books were printed by the printing house until 1882, but Hakham Moshe’s own poems, covering a range of themes from mysticism to stories of personal miracles and prayers for redemption, were printed only in 1909 by his son, my great-grandfather, Hakham Yehudah.

I have heard the following story from my grandfather, Hakham Shaul Fetaya, regarding the initiation of his father into the wisdom of Kabbalah. Hakham Yosef Haim, better known as the Ben Ish Hai, who was 25 years Hakham Yehudah’s senior, used to deliver a sermon on Shabbat afternoon at the great synagogue of Baghdad, Midrash bet Zilkha, also known as Slat il-Kbiri. The Ben Ish Hai was a mesmerizing orator, and his sermons lasted several hours and included halakha, Torah commentary, ethical teachings, and Kabbalah.

In 1869, when Hakham Yehudah Fetaya was only nine years old, he came home crying one Shabbat afternoon. To his father’s inquiry, he answered that he attended the Ben Ish Hai’s sermon and felt frustrated that he could not understand the Kabbalah part of it. His father was moved by his son’s genuine interest and promised him that he would teach him Kabbalah. He did so until his son Yehudah turned 12, at which point his father told him that he has taught him all that he knows and that the time had come to search for a greater master. Young Yehudah duly enrolled in the Rabbinic Seminary of Hakham Abdallah Somekh (1813–1889), the most prominent of Baghdad’s rabbis in the nineteenth century.

In 1876, four years into his studies with Hakham Abdallah Somekh, the Hakham asked 16-year-old Yehudah to be the Hazzan for Minha at the Rabbinic Seminary. One of the older rabbis who was present protested, claiming that a Hazzan must be a married man with a full beard, but Hakham Abdallah Somekh insisted that the teenager he chose will be the Hazzan. “I cannot make his beard grow,” he said, “or marry him off right now, but since everyone agrees that a rabbi can serve as a Hazzan, I will now ordain him.” And so young Yehudah Fetaya was ordained, as a rabbi, at the age of 16.

The honor bestowed upon Hakham Yehudah by his great master did not quench his thirst for knowledge. Alongside his studies of Talmud and halakha under Hakham Abdallah, he learned Kabbalah under Hakham Shimon Agassi and the Ben Ish Hai, eventually becoming their colleague.

Hakham Yehudah was a prolific author, who wrote his first commentary on Kabbalah at the age of 23. The book, which he called *Afiquei Mayim*, is a commentary on Rabbi Haim Vital’s *Etz Hayim*, and was only published in a facsimile edition. He later expanded the commentary to what has become his magnum opus, the two-volume commentary on *Etz Haim* known as *Beth Lehem Yehuda*. This commentary was praised when first published and is still considered by leading scholars in the field as “The Rashi” on *Etz Haim*. Hakham Yehudah also wrote commentaries on portions of the Zohar, *Yain HaReqah,* on the portions known as *Idera Raba* and *Idera Zuta*, and *Matoq LaNefesh* on the Zohar of *Parashat Mishpatim*. He chose to write a commentary on those portion because they were widely studied during anniversaries for the deceased, and he wanted people to better understand what they were reading.

In general, one could say that despite his lofty field of study, Hakham Yehudah was very much down to earth and involved with the people. His house was open for all and he addressed questions and counseled people constantly. In his private diary, which is kept by my family, he describes a period in his life in which he experienced great closeness to God, a meditative state known as *Devekut*. He writes how his legs would carry him to his destination, while his mind and soul were elsewhere, but when he got to the yeshiva to deliver a class on Talmud, he reconnected with reality. I find that story intriguing not only because of the meditative state it describes, but for the ability of Hakham Yehudah to detach himself from this state of spiritual bliss for the sake of his students.

Among the many books of Hakham Yehudah, there are anthologies of commentaries on the Torah and *Pirkei Avot*, original prayers, and mystical writings, but the most popular of his works is no doubt the one he calls a notebook. That book, *Minhat Yehudah*, is basically a kabbalistic commentary on the Bible, but in several places, the author segues to discuss the interpretation of dreams and issues related to reincarnation. In the introduction to the book he writes that his main purpose in writing the book was to inform people of the full spiritual scope of their life in this world and the world to come and to encourage them to repent.

Among the many disciples in the field of Kabbalah were H. Sasson Mizrahi, H. Yitzhak Khadouri, H. Salman Moutzafi, and H. Salman Eliyahu, father of H. Mordecahi Eliyahu, Chief Rabbi of Israel and a very close friend of my grandfather and my family, but although his printed works focus on Kabblah, H. Yehudah’s activism and teachings were not limited to the esoteric. In one of his few halakhic responses that were preserved, he uses harsh words to criticize men who take advantage of women desperate to get married. He calls on the other judges to amend the situation where all the power was in the man’s hand, saying that women should not need to suffer by being summoned to court, or by feeling that they are tied in marriage to a man against their will.

He was also concerned with the physical and mental health of the people who came to him for a blessing or to seek help. My mother, who was eight years old when her grandfather passed away, told me that people used to say about him in Arabic “*idou khudhra*”—his hands are green—meaning that they felt special spiritual energy when he blessed them. She herself felt it, and I have experienced it as a child when my grandfather, H. Shaul, took care of me after I was frightened by a dog and could not sleep several nights. He sat me on his lap, placed his hand on my chest and recited verses, and I felt a

pleasant warmth spreading through my body and soul. Years later, when my own children went through similar experiences, I tried to do the same, thinking that it might have been a placebo effect, but I failed.

There are many stories about H. Yehudah as a miracle worker, but the one that is close to my heart is one that can be emulated by all of us, and does not require an expertise in Kabbalah. The story is about one of his students in Baghdad, whose wife was expecting. H. Yehudah was concerned that the due date had passed, and asked the man about his wife's health and whether she gave birth already, but his student dodged the question. The Hakham understood that something was wrong and kept pressing, until finally the man admitted that his wife was acting in a strange manner after she gave birth, and so she was sent by the embarrassed family to live with a Muslim foster family in a village outside the city. H. Yehudah asked for the name of the family and their whereabouts, and then immediately left the Rabbinic Seminary and went home. He asked his daughter Lulu, who was 17 at the time to join him, and together they traveled several hours until they arrived at the foster family's house. They found the woman, who suffered from what today is known as postpartum depression, in a miserable condition. Besides the shock of being rejected by her family and separated from her young daughter, she was weak and emaciated, since she refused to eat non-kasher food.

H. Yehudah promised the woman that he would help her. He then traveled with his daughter Lulu to the nearest Jewish settlement and went directly to the local rabbi's house. The rabbi was amazed to see the great hakham at his door. H. Yehudah explained that he was traveling with his daughter to Baghdad and that they were very hungry, and asked if the rabbi can offer them a hearty meal. Once the meal was ready, however, Hakham Yehudah said that he cannot delay and asked the perplexed host to pack the food "to go." The Hakham and his daughter returned to the woman's bedside where they fed and took care of her until she was strong enough to travel back to the city of Baghdad. When they arrived there, the women in H. Yehudah's household took care of the woman for several months until she recovered physically and mentally. H. Yehudah then called the husband and reintroduced him to his wife, not before rebuking him for abandoning her at her darkest hour.

This story, which I have heard at a very young age, is engraved in my mind in a way which overshadows all the other stories about miracles attributed to H. Yehudah Fetaya. It is important because it teaches something that we are all capable of doing, even if we are not prodigies or great mystics. The Hakham's great sensitivity and understanding of human nature shines through this story.

He was concerned not only with the learning of his students, but with the well-being of their families; and when he heard of the crisis he dropped everything and rushed to the woman's help, but did not rebuke the husband yet, knowing that he would not listen to him. He traveled with his daughter, because he wanted the woman to feel comfortable with Lulu taking care of her. When visiting the rabbi's house, he did not reveal the real reason he was asking for food, and would rather cast himself in a negative light, barging into a home and asking for food to go, in order not to embarrass the woman who needed the food. Finally, after returning to Baghdad, he made sure that the woman has fully recovered and then orchestrated her reunion with her husband and daughter.

The many halakhot that can be gleaned from this story cannot be found in any halakhic compilation, and they should be for us a guiding light in our dealings with others. This is but one example of his tireless work for the people of Baghdad and Israel.

Hakham Yehudah's fame reached the Iraqi diaspora in India, and he was offered a position with that thriving Iraqi community, an offer that he rejected since his aspiration was to migrate to the Land of Israel. He settled in Israel in 1905, but returned to Baghdad after several years. He made a second attempt at *aliya* in 1923, and finally fulfilled his wish in 1934, at the age of 74. He initially lived in Ramat Gan, where there was a concentration of Iraqi Jews, but eventually moved to Jerusalem, where he was actively involved in the study circles of the kabbalist school Beth El, as well as Shoshanim LeDavid and Ohel Rahel, not far from Mahane Yehudah.

Bound by Hope

Hakham Yehudah Fetaya passed away the 27th of Menahem Av, 74 years ago. My grandfather told me that during the funeral the sky was covered with dark clouds and heavy rain started pouring. Being that this is very atypical to the Israeli summer, people felt that the heavens were weeping for his death. Since then, each year on the anniversary of his death (except between 1948–1967), hundreds of people ascend to his grave on Har HaZetim (Mount of Olives), to read the special prayers he composed for tumultuous times, and specifically the Holocaust. He kept abreast of the news from Europe and conducted prayers for the Jews of Germany years before the Holocaust. When the war started, Hakham Yehudah's efforts intensified. Besides running, with his son, Hakham Shaul, a center for distributing basic food staples to poor families, he wrote and published special prayers in a booklet he titled Asirei haTikva, Bound by Hope, a name that conveys the message that despite all the difficulties, we are still bound to God by our faith and hope.

The introduction to the first edition, printed in 1940, reads:

The order of prayers in this booklet is what we had to do, with great sorrow, in the holy city of Jerusalem, in the year 1940 (corresponding to the Hebrew date alluded to in the verse: Sound a great shofar and bring forth our freedom), as we were drowning in the tidal waves of disaster [in Europe]. We had to publish it to make it available for all, so we can join together, with one heart, to plead with prayer and supplications before God, and hope that He will have mercy for the remnant of his flock and will not let their blood spill like water….

Those special prayers, which Hakham Yehudah conducted almost daily at Rachel's Tomb and other sites, were not his only effort in trying to help the Jewish People. At one point, he procured an airplane from the RAF, and with a *minyan* of kabbalists performed a service of Kapparot over the Land of Israel.[1]

One of the dramatic stories I heard from my grandfather was of the time his father summoned God to trial. Hakham Yehudah gathered all the sages and kabbalists of the famed Beth El and Ohel Rahel academies in Jerusalem, and summoned God to a *Din Torah*, a trial, with the specific purpose of acquitting the Jews and proving that God must stop the massacre in Germany. In order to have a fair trial, he appointed both a prosecutor and a defense attorney [himself, obviously] for the Jews. My grandfather told me emphatically of the warning his father issued to the prosecutor: "Speak briefly. Do not cast the Jews in a negative light. After all, they all are good people." The trial came to an abrupt stop when the prosecutor went on a blaming rampage against the Jewish People, and would not stop despite threats and supplications. My mother added to that story that the man lost his sanity afterward. The message of that story guided my grandfather, and since he was my master, guides also me until this very day in dealing with questions of halakha, education, and working with the community. This unique event is typical of Hakham Yehudah, as well of his son, Hakham Shaul, who did not shy away from confrontations with God Himself.

The booklet *Asirei haTikva* offers an example of his unabated love for the Jewish People, his deep pain for their suffering, and his willingness to argue with God.

When people visited his grave on the anniversary of his death, these gatherings did not include dancing, eating, or lighting candles at the grave. Rather, the prayers he composed were read by the public in what was an awe-inspiring event that left a very deep impression on me as a young child. My grandfather, Hakham Shaul, our cantor, Gurji Yair, and many elders of the Iraqi community would go around the grave seven times, reading the prayers Hakham Yehudah composed during the Holocaust.

Hakham Shaul, following in the pathways of his great father, felt the pain of the needy and the poor, the Holocaust survivors whose spirit was broken, and those who felt imperfect, whether spiritually or physically, and his prayers echoed his pain.

The pinnacle of the prayers at Hakham Yehudah's gravesite were the special poems he composed in honor of our Mothers, Sarah, Rivka, Rahel, and Leah. He wrote these poems in the early 1900s as an addition to the traditional Haqqafot, which mention only men. One might say that he wrote the first modern feminist Midrash. Hakham Yehudah wrote four poems, one for each one of the mothers, but Rahel received a special treatment. Her poem, *Zekhut Rahel*, is three times as long as all the others combined. The special affinity of Hakham Yehudah for Rahel was a product of his kabbalistic background, and of the special attention given to her by the prophet Jeremiah and the midrashic literature, but it also had a personal element. His wife's name was Rahel (affectionately, in Iraqi Arabic: Chahla), and they had lost several children in their infancy. They had also suffered the blow of losing their married daughter Simha and her husband Shimon during the plague of 1914, and had taken the couple's little orphaned daughter, Haviva, under their wing. The tragic life of our matriarch Rahel, was for him much more than a biblical image and a mystical metaphor for the Shekhina, it was the real-life story of a bereaved father sharing the pain with his beloved wife Rahel.

In the poem, he pleads with God but also argues bitterly with Him, demanding a better treatment for the nation and the individual. Here is the full text of the poem with my translation:

For Rahel's Sake

Recall, God, the merit of Rahel, for her wandering children.

She who has brought her adversary under her own bridal canopy in a sleepless night.

She hid under the bed and responded from there [instead of her sister].

Please, from your seat on high, hear her bewail and lament.

Her thundering voice, shattering walls, can be heard from great distances.

She who was buried at the crossroads, is wailing and asking:

"Where is Joseph, where is the one who hugged me? Woe to me for my sweet child!

Where is Ben Oni, who never saw me, who never rested on my chest?"

She went and asked the Patriarchs: "Where are my dear children?"

[They said:] "Go ask ben Amram, who is buried on Mount Avarim!"

"My son Moshe, please speak up, where have you abandoned the flocks?"

From the grave, speaking to her, rose a mournful, lamenting voice:

“Why are you wandering on the mountains, what are you searching for, dear aunt?”

[She answered:] “Now is not a time for idle talk, as I have to mend the broken wall.”

Moshe, in deep sorrow, answered: “I have handed them to your son, Yehoshua.”

[She told him:] “Yehoshua my son, please answer me, where are the tribes?”

Faced with her agony and lament, he responded with his own tears

And the voice of their crying and wailing rose to the heavens.

“Please mother” [cried Yehoshua], “please stop, before I die and perish;”

“I have handed them to the elders and to the shepherd kings of the House of David.”

She left him and rushed to the grave sites of the city of Zion.

[The kings] told her: “On the Temple Mount, there they shall be sought and found.”

Alas, when Rahel saw that there are no walls nor fences,

And the Temple has been burnt to the ground,

And that there are no priests nor Levites, and no Ark nor Cherubim,

She shrieked in agony, and cast away her shoes.

She tore the striped robe, and her scarf, and her dresses.

She wore sackcloth and rolled on the rocks,

Slapping her flesh to mourn her lost son.

Clad in sorrow for God’s people, she was howling in grief.

Hurriedly she leapt above, towards God, sitting on high,

Speaking for the People of Zion, and raising her voice with tears, [she demanded:]

“Please Father, see my pain, and heed my plea with mercy!

My Rock, My Hope, will Your people be forever lost?

How could You tear a bride from her husband’s lap and send her into exile?

How could You shoo the nesting mother, but not take care of the fledglings?

How could You abandon Your sheep among devouring lions?

How can you remain quiet while the People of Edom [Germany] turn them into sacrifices?

Were they not punished enough, were they not engulfed by vicious waters?

Are a thousand years not enough for You?

The sun is already setting on the second millennium, and the pain is not letting.

Where is the miraculous sign? When is the Time of Times?

When will you have mercy? When will you console us?

You keep putting us away, day after day!

Almighty God, redeem us already! Do not soothe us with words!"

A voice was then heard from the Divine Throne: "Hush my daughter, oh bride of the mighty!

Let your eyes stop crying; Let your voice rest from supplications.

Because of your tears and lament, the heavenly worlds are now in exile.

And He rose up above, and mercy has been invoked.

I shall not rest until I revenge the spilled blood of my servants,

And shortly I will sever and destroy the wicked.

I will cut the stone, smash the idol, breaking it to shards.

I will open the sealed coffers and release the swallowed souls.

Rise up, shake away your sorrow, and wear your precious clothes."

I hear the voice of my nation saying:

"Though we are sinners, do for Your great name's sake!"

The Midrashic Origin of Rahel's Merit

This poem, in which Hakham Yehudah Fetaya casts Rahel as a defense attorney for her children, is based on two midrashic sources, which are in turn inter-connected. The first Midrash[2] has been made famous by Rashi, who included it in his commentary on Genesis,[3] in order to explain the mystery of how Yaakov was tricked into marrying Leah instead of Rahel. According to that Midrash, Yaakov and Rahel suspected that Lavan would attempt a deception, and so decided on a secret password to enable Yaakov to identify his bride. At the last moment, however, when Rahel realized that her father was determined to lead her sister down the aisle, she felt sorry for her and gave her the password so as not to shame her.

The second, less-known Midrash, is found in the introduction to Eikha Rabbah,[4] the midrashic commentary on the Book of Lamentations, and is based on a verse from Jeremiah[5] which describes Rahel's agony after the destruction of the Temple:

A voice is heard in Ramah [also: a strong voice is heard]. It is the sound of wailing and bitter tears. It is the voice of Rahel, mourning her children, refuses to be consoled for her sons who are now gone!

In the dramatic narrative of the Midrash, Abraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, and Moshe are pleading with God on behalf of the Jewish People. Each of the men steps forward and asks God that as a reward for his many sacrifices and dedication to God, the Jewish People will be forgiven and redeemed, but none of them is answered. Rahel then jumps the line, apparently uninvited, and speaks to God about her own experience with her sister. She describes how despite her great love for Yaakov she was willing to let her sister Leah take her place because she did not want her to suffer disgrace, and then levels this question at God:

I am but flesh and blood, dust and ashes, yet I was not jealous of my rival [Leah] and did not cause her shame and disgrace! You, Eternal and Merciful King, why were You jealous of idolatry, which has no value? How could you send my sons go in exile, be killed by the sword, and handed over to their enemies to do with them as they wish?

Unlike God's treatment of the men who spoke before Rahel, He hears her request and promises redemption, using the subsequent verses in Jeremiah:[6]

Let your voice mourn no more, let your eyes shed no more tears, for your deeds are rewarded… they shall return from enemy lands… your destiny is filled with hope… as the exiled sons will come back home….

Feminine and Masculine Perspectives

At first glance it seems that Rahel's argument follows the same pattern as the men, and that the only reason the midrashic author makes God answer her and not the others, is that Jeremiah spoke of the dialogue between Rahel and God. A more thorough and comparative reading, however, will reveal deep insights on the nature of men and women and on our understanding of divine justice.

Abraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, and Moshe, appear before God as if they were in court. They maintain decorum, and each one presents a similar argument: "I did this and that, so I deserve a reward." Each one of them is ignored, and they interpret it as a sign that their request is turned down, and do not argue any more. Rahel, the bereaved mother, breaks the rules. Like a wounded lioness, she pushes her way past the men and speaks uninvited, as if rebuking them for giving up and retreating.

Rahel is not asking for a reward, but rather lectures God, telling Him that He should learn from her. She suggests that she, a mortal woman, was able to overcome her natural selfishness and jealousy, and that God should follow her example and not be jealous of the "second wife" of the Israelites—the idols.

The audacity of the author of the Midrash is shocking. He questions one of the fundamental prohibitions of the Torah, arguing that God should not punish His children so harshly for worshipping idols. The author speaks more as a loving mother than as a disciplinary leader we know from the stories of the judges and the prophets. I am certain that my great-grandfather understood the pain of all mothers, and of course of his own wife Rahel, and that he took the role of defender of the Jewish people to new levels.

Mother Rahel = Hakham Yehudah

Hakham Yehudah uses the midrashic Rahel to present his theological dispute. From behind Rahel's mask we can hear the voice of Hakham Yehudah, who conveys both his personal pain and his shock at the terrible massacre of Jews in Europe, while emphasizing the different approach of the forefathers and the one mother.

The poet uses Rahel as a symbol for the nation, and in few lines, sketches Rahel's tragic life. He speaks of her grief for her lost descendants, and simultaneously of the grief of her immediate sons Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph is described as a toddler who is very close to his mother. In the original Hebrew, he is said to be hovering, conjuring the image of a mother and child huddling together, deriving comfort and joy from each other's company. Benjamin is referred to here as *Ben Oni*, the name given to him by Rahel at birth. The name has a double entendre; it could mean the son of my sorrow, or the son of my [last] strength. Rahel is lamenting not being able to breastfeed her son, depriving him, as if it were, of the important role of the mother for the child, that of a nurturer and giver of life. Finally, as if to add insult to pain, she is buried at the crossroads, as if she were not important enough to be have proper burial.[7]

After her initial shock and mourning, she rises from the dust and takes action, going from one male leader to another to inquire about her children. In the original Midrash there is no interaction between the men and Rahel, but Hakham Yehudah creates a dialogue which intensifies the image of Rahel the bereaved mother. She uses terms of endearment when talking of her children, and includes not only her direct descendants, Joseph and Benjamin, but all 12 tribes. She uses harsh words when talking to Moshe, first accusing him of abandoning his people, and then telling him that he is wasting his time in trying to calm her.

In Rahel's encounter with Yehoshua there is a new element. Not only does she exchange words with him, but her tears and mourning affect him so powerfully that he pleads for his life, even though the readers are aware that he speaks from the grave. The protagonists address each other as direct relatives: aunt, mother, son, showing that a true leader cares for the people the way relatives care for each other, with unconditional love. The poem shows gradual progress as Rahel moves from one man to another. The patriarchs shake away the responsibility and refer her to Moshe. Moshe tries to talk her out of worrying but she would not hear of it. Finally, Yehoshua is influenced by her emotions but it is too much for him to bear and he pleads with her to stop.

Rahel finally arrives at the Temple Mount and witnesses the destruction and desolation. Her spirit broken, she expresses her grief by slapping her flesh, a practice mentioned in the Bible[8] and still common in the Middle East. She tears her striped robe, a reference to Joseph, as well as the attack on Tamar by her brother Amnon.[9] The robe embodies the suffering of Rahel as a mother whose son was torn from her arms.

The following stanza is a turning point in the poem, and it is based on the line in the Midrash which describes Rahel as "jumping" and speaking out of turn.

Hurriedly she leapt… she demanded… Father, see my pain, and heed my plea with mercy… How could You tear a bride from her husband's lap and send her into exile? How could You shoo the nesting mother, but not take care of the fledglings?

Unlike the men, who remain passive in their grief, Rahel is able to rise from the crushing pain and take action. She approaches God with harsh words that are, of course, the words of Hakham Yehudah

Fetaya. He again uses the language of blood relations, as he makes Rahel address God as “Father” and speaks of the Jewish People as a bride who is driven away. Of all the arguments presented here, the boldest is the analogy Hakham Yehudah draws between the people in exile and the nesting bird. This analogy refers to the commandment of sending away a nesting bird while taking its eggs or fledglings.[10] Obviously, the Torah did not mean to say that one is obligated to separate the mother from its offspring, but rather that if one needs the eggs or fledglings, he should spare the mother. The analogy Hakham Yehudah makes is bold and daring because the talmudic sages specifically said about this commandment that one is not allowed to use it to invoke divine mercy:[11]

If [the one leading the services] says: May You show mercy to us as toy did to the nesting bird… he must be silenced.

The Talmud offers two explanations that seem to suggest that the rabbis feared that such statements will encourage a discussion of theodicy, or divine justice, which was a very sensitive issue for post-destruction Judaism. Not only does Hakham Yehudah Fetaya not shy away from this issue, practically accusing God of treating Jews unfairly and of abandoning them, he very cleverly changes the dynamics of the analogy, making it more dramatic. Whereas the commandment calls for releasing the mother and taking the eggs or fledglings for consumption, in the analogy the mother is sent into exile and the fledglings become the responsibility of the hunter, which in this case is God.

Here, the evolution of Hakham Yehudah’s Rahel is complete. She first transitioned from a bereaved mother to a wandering mourner, and she now becomes a fierce advocate for the Jewish people, firing a rapid succession of 14 arguments against God’s treatment of her children. Through Rahel, Hakham Yehudah speaks of his deep pain over the Holocaust, using midrashic Edom to refer to Germany. He pleads with God but does not hesitate to use an accusatory tone, saying that God has abandoned us and that He does not keep His promises.

The poem concludes with a promise of redemption with many mystical elements, but its essence is a replay of what has transpired between Rahel and Yehoshua. Just as Yehoshua begs Rahel to calm down because he is overwhelmed by the emotions she stirred in him, God now tells Rahel to stop crying, using the verse from Jeremiah. The reason for that request, according to Hakham Yehudah, is that her powerful prayers caused the Divine worlds to commiserate with her suffering and as a result they are now in exile. Using Rahel as a mask, Hakham Yehudah issues a call to all Jews to be relentless in their efforts to usher in the redemption.

The way to do it, as he signaled in his poem about Rahel, as well as in his teachings and leadership, is to be active and not sink into depression, indifference, and apathy. He taught us that we cannot keep quiet when people suffer and that we must constantly challenge ourselves, and God, until we have a perfect world.

Halakha and Kabbalah

Hakham Yehudah Fetaya is considered one of the leading kabbalists of the twentieth century, both in terms of his outstanding disciples and colleagues, and his very important commentaries. It is therefore extremely important to hear his view on the role of Kabbalah in Jewish law, as was conveyed by his son, Hakham Shaul Fetaya. My grandfather explained that halakhot influenced by or instituted by Kabbalah were never meant for the public, but rather only for the true kabbalists. That is because the idea at the basis of these laws and practices is that by performing a certain act in this world, one

impacts and changes the divine worlds. Let us consider a famous example of a practice stemming from this kabbalistic approach.

Sweetening the Harsh Judgment

The Talmud says in the name of Rava that one must add water to the wine of Kiddush, or else it will be undrinkable and undeserving of being called wine.[12] Rava's rationale is that without adding water the wine is too strong. Rava's opinion was not accepted as binding but rather as a recommendation, and Rabbi Yosef Karo writes that one is allowed to make Kiddush with a very strong wine. He does add that it is preferable to dilute the wine, as long as it is done properly, meaning that the final product is better than the original. Rabbi Moshe Isserles, the Rema, comments on that: "Our wines are better as they are, without diluting."[13]

According to both Rabbi Karo and the Rema, the practice of diluting wine with water should have disappeared in the modern age, as most wines are drinkable, without any addition of water. This is indeed the case for most Ashkenazim; but the Sephardic world, under the influence of Kabbalah, took a different course. The practice of adding water to wine was explained by kabbalists as an act which weakens, or sweetens, the harsh judgment, as water represents mercy and wine represents rigor.[14] To avoid extreme dilution of the wine, the Kabbalists recommended adding three drops of water to the Kiddush cup, a practice kept in many Sephardic households.

The idea that a person can change God's mind by adding three drops of water to the Kiddush cup could be deeply disturbing to anyone who is familiar with Maimonides' principles of faith, and specifically the one that states that God is immutable.

There are several ways to reconcile this contradiction. One is to reject all Kabbalah-influenced practices, while another is to find deeper symbolism and meditative tools in the kabbalistic principles. In the case of water and wine, for example, when one adds the water to the wine, he should contemplate his behavior and decide to make a special effort to override his anger and be more kind and sensitive.

The third approach, that of Hakham Yehudah Fetaya, is that there might be a way in which humans induce change in God's world. However, this is a role reserved for people with a very high spiritual level, namely the true kabbalists. Hakham Shaul, faithful to his father's teachings, taught us not to add water to wine and not to wash our hands with Last Water, another practice that would have disappeared if not for Kabbalah. In general, Hakham Shaul was uncomfortable with the popularization of Kabbalah study, as he felt that the study is technical and superficial, and that no attention is paid to spiritual growth and interpersonal relationships. He was also opposed to the phenomenon of seeking blessings from "kabbalists" and rabbis who charge for their services. He told me that Hakham Yehudah Fetaya had a very clear opinion on this issue, which is that one is not allowed to seek advice, guidance, blessings, or prayers, from anyone who expects something in return for those services.

He explained that God does not need middlemen, and if there exists a person who was invested by God with special powers or access to Him, that person should care enough for others as to offer prayers and blessings without asking for a penny. My grandfather added that even if the rabbi does not ask for a payment, but says that he will bless a couple with a child on the condition that he will serve as the Sandak, one should decline the offer.

My grandfather, Hakham Shaul Fetaya (1910–1982), refused to serve as a rabbi, and instead dedicated his life to help people from all walks of life. He was a member of the Etzel underground and helped organize caravans to Jerusalem during the War of Independence. He fought for the inclusion of Iraqi and Sephardic Jews in the administrative offices of the newly born State of Israel, and continued his

father's tradition of helping the poor and needy.

He took care not only of material needs, by personally delivering supplies to immigrant families, but also of spiritual needs, counseling and advising thousands in his little store-office near Mahane Yehuda. His method of dream interpretation was studied by Dr. Yoram Bilu, who was astounded to discover a whole world of symbolism in the mystical teachings of Hakham Shaul and his father.

In the late 1970s Hakham Shaul launched a new initiative with his daughter Simha, my mother, and Dr. Hannah and Israel Openheimer, who were Holocaust survivors. That initiative was an occupational habilitation center in which people with physical and mental disabilities learned new skills or revived old ones, in order to integrate into the regular work market. My grandfather's motto was the verse from Job (31:15): "His maker made me as well, and we were formed in one womb." Hakham Shaul extended his belief in equality to the religious realm as well and taught his disciples and grandchildren not to use words such as religious and secular to describe factions in Israeli society. To our question what term to use, he replied that all Jews are observant, but each one chooses to observe different mitzvoth. He taught us that religiosity is not judged by external elements, and that there is much we need to learn about others. In the spirit of equality, he also encouraged my older sisters to have a Bat Mitzvah, as early as 1969, when this was not a popular practice among observant Sephardim in Israel.

My grandfather was the epitome of a Sephardic Hakham. He knew the Bible by heart; he read and wrote poetry; he was an activist, a philanthropist, and a philosopher. He did not believe in leading from above, and preached for loving and respecting one another. His approach to halakha was accommodating and understanding. He never forced anyone to drink wine or eat matzah on Seder night, and he tried to avoid Kabbalah-influenced practices. I remember very well how on Yom Kippur, when I was seven years old, when speaking about Shabbat observance, he said that he knows that many people watch television on Shabbat, and that he just asks them not to switch channels or play with the volume. His approach of understanding and respect has guided me in my halakhic writings and my community work.

Here is a passage from his book *Hirhurim* (Musings), in which he addresses the religious elected officials and Knesset members, whom he viewed as enslaved to their seats:

…Enough PR, arguments, and animosity… instead of the noise and storms, come down to the people, walk with the people. It will not take away from your honor, it will only augment it. Didn't God Himself come down on Mount Sinai, and doesn't it say that Moshe came down to the people? But you… you rest on the comfortable chairs in your offices and never come down… and when you do you go to synagogues and study halls, but not to the "commoners"…

Please, if you ever decide to come down to the nation, don't go only to those who know the values and principles, who apparently do not keep them, and who despite all this are called holy people…

Because this nation is wise, intelligent, and willing to listen, they will understand you, they are thirsty for knowledge, especially the youth, the knowledge of Jewish insight, the principles, values, and Israeli tradition. Speak to the youth. Speak to their heart. Explain gently, with love, sensitivity, and attention, and they will listen…

Teach the rabbis, the newly minted and the veterans, to be wise and not use the Torah as a tool to aggrandize themselves, so people will learn from them noble and worthy values.

Talk to the rock—it will give forth water… do not cause pain…

These words epitomize my grandfather, Hakham Shaul Fetaya. My grandfather's love for scholarship, Bible, poetry, and music, as well his activism has deeply influenced me and my siblings, who all

continued aspects of his legacy in one way or another. My oldest sister Haviva Pedaya is a professor of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah and a poet, and the second, Hannah, is the founder and manager of the Firqat al-Nur orchestra, and she spearheads the revival of Sephardic music and liturgy in Israel. My brother Yehudah is the rabbi of my grandfather's synagogue in Jerusalem, Minhat Yehudah, and he teaches and maintains the unique Baghdadi traditions of Hakham Shaul. My sister Ayyala is an activist, a playwright, and a poet.

As a family, we feel now that there is an awakening, a thirst and longing for the legacy of Sephardic and Mediterranean Jews, and we hope that this legacy will contribute to the creation of bridges of understanding and mutual respect.

[1] The story was documented in *The Jerusalem Post*, August 14, 1987, under the title "Circle of Blood," as it was told by the British pilot of said airplane.
[2] Bavli Megilla 13:2.
[3] 29:25.
[4] Eikha Rabba, Petihtot, 24.

[5] 31:14.
[6] 31:15–16.
[7] While the reason for Yaakov's decision to bury Rachel there is not clear from the text, the Midrash, quoted by Rashi on Genesis 48:7, says that he apologized to Yosef and explained why he acted in that manner.
[8] Num. 24:10; Jer. 31:18; Ez. 21:17; Job 27:23; Lam. 2:15.
[9] II Sam. 13:19.
[10] Deut. 22:6-7.
[11] Mishna Berakhot 5:3 and Bavli Berakhot 33:2.
[12] Bavli Shabbat 77:1.
[13] *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Haim*, 272:5.

[14]Rabbi Rephael Emanuel Hai Riki (Italy 1688–1743), Hon Ashir on Sukkah chapter 2.