

Rabbi Hayim Palachi (1788-1868)--Rabbi of Izmir

[View PDF](#)



Rabbi Naftali Haleva, ordained by the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, serves as a rabbi in Istanbul. He has a special interest in the history and culture of the Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire. Rabbi Haleva serves as the representative in Turkey of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

The Jewish community of Izmir was an important center of Sephardic Jewish life during the centuries following the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. It boasted vibrant synagogues and communal institutions, as well as a host of learned Torah scholars and a respected rabbinical court (Beth Din).

Izmir's Chief Rabbis enlightened the Jewish community by answering hundreds of questions in Jewish law. They answered the questions not only from Izmir but also from the distant Jewish communities. Rabbi Shemuel Yitzhak Modeliani from Thessaloniki noted that the Jewish community of Izmir was led by respected people.

One of the most important features of Izmir was its Hebrew printing press that published many books in Jewish law and thought. Izmir became an important publishing center for the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire and beyond.

The Izmir Jewish community functioned according to the religious rules. The Jews in the city fulfilled the mitzvot of the Torah in a spirit of faithfulness and traditionalism. Special teams were appointed in order to ensure the obedience of the religious laws. When these teams identified those who did not follow Torah rules, the accused were judged by the Beth-Din; and if they were found guilty, they were punished.

Beit Yaakov Rabi, founded by philanthropist Yaakov Rabi, was the biggest and most important among Izmir's 16 synagogues and 50 yeshivot. When Rabbi

Yaakov decided to move to Jerusalem, he left the management of the Yeshiva to his nephew Rabbi Yosef Hazan, author of responsa entitled "Hikre Lev". Rabbi Yosef Hazan's daughter Kaden married Yaakov Palachi, who was well known as a religious scholar. In 1788, Yaakov and Kaden's child Hayim Palachi was born.

From his early years, Hayim was in the presence of important religious leaders and received an intense education. In a short time, as a clever and enthusiastic boy, Palachi emerged as unique among his peers. The writer of "Bet Yitshak", Rabi Yitzhak Gatenyo, was one of his teachers. When he was a student at Yeshiva at the age of 20, he married Rabbi Yitzhak Gatenyo's daughter. They had two girls and 3 boys. Rabbi Hayim Palachi worked with Rabbi Rafael Yosef Hazan to prepare and publish the book, Simha le Hayim.

At the age of 25, Hayim Palachi received the title of "Haham Hashalem - Haham Kumplido" in Yeshiva. Rabbi Hayim Algazi honored him with this title and appointed him to the rabbinate. While his father was alive, he did not want to take any official duties. Yet, when his father passed away in 1827, he accepted the position of Dayan and Shofet. He also became the head of Beit Yaakov Rabi Yeshiva where he completed his education.

In 1849, he was appointed to the community's Beth Din. Together with Beth Din members, Yesua Shelomo Arditi, Hayim Binyamin Pontremoli, Rahamim Nisim Yehuda de Sigura, Nisim Hayim Moshe Modai and 45 other rabbis, they ran the Beth Din and provided religious leadership for the community.

Aside from writing his books, he answered hundreds of questions from individuals and communities of various cities. His main principle was to answer all the letters and questions. His interpretations, explanations, and rulings were accepted around the world, and communities began to teach his doctrines. Rabbi Palachi maintained correspondence with leading Sephardic and Ashkenazic rabbis. In 1852, with an edict written by Sultan Abdulmecid, he was appointed as chief Rabbi of Izmir.

His reputation spread throughout Ottoman lands, and in 1858 he was awarded a medal by Sultan Abdulmecid. At the same time, the Sultan granted him the rights of jurisdiction and the rights to judge according to both Ottoman and to Jewish religious laws. In this capacity, he became the legal judge of the Jews in Izmir. Later on, he was awarded a second medal by Sultan Abdulmecid.

As the Chief Rabbi of Izmir, he eased the administrative rules. He tried to apply the halakha in a way that made daily life easier. Meanwhile, his first wife died and

three years later, he married a Vida Nama.

During his Rabbinate period, he gave importance to social welfare; and as an important mission, he thought of founding a Jewish hospital. He requested assistance from the wealthy Jews in town. Despite his request from Baron Rothschild and his negative reply, he did not give up. With the help of respected Senior Leon Adut, they contacted Rothschild again, and received the necessary support. He was also able to receive the support from Sir Moses Montefiore. The Jewish hospital was established. At the time, the population of İzmir was 220,000, with the Jewish population consisting of about 16,000 souls.

Rabbi Palachi's set a goal to maintain mandatory education to all Jewish children. He adopted a law which required every Jewish father to give Talmud Tora education to his children. Children would continue their education until they were able to read and write properly, and could grasp the fundamentals of Tefillah. Only the Mefakeah, the instructor, was allowed to decide when the children had achieved the required educational goals. Rabbi Palachi made sure that all the poor children also received education.

Rabbi Palachi felt deep responsibility for each member of the community. In order to protect the health of his followers, he prohibited smoking. He tried to solve the problems between spouses. He tried to solve the problems among friends who had business disputes.

The following story was told. A Jewish man was about to die. Hopelessly, his family asked Rabbi Hayim Palachi for his blessings and prayers. Rabbi Palachi asked if the patient was a behor (first born male) or not. After a positive reply, he asked if he had a proper pidyon (redemption of the first born) or not. They found that there actually had been a problem with the pidyon ceremony of this man. Rabbi Palachi arranged for a cohen to visit the patient so that a new pidyon haben ceremony could be performed. Rabbi Hayim Palachi recorded a note mentioning that this patient recovered and lived another twenty years.

Rabbi Hayim Palachi was very sensitive to events that affected Jews outside İzmir as well. During the blood libel in Damascus in 1840, he called for the support of his Egyptian Jewish friend Don Avram Kamando, Baron de Rothschild and Sir Moses Montefiore. Through their intercession, the innocent Jewish victims in Damascus were exonerated.

On a trip to Israel, Montefiore stopped in İzmir and reinforced his friendship with Rabbi Palachi. Montefiore contributed generously to the Jewish organizations of İzmir. In appreciation, Rabbi Palachi wrote a book dedicated to Montefiore and his

wife. He also wrote a book in Ladino called “Y?MTSA HAY?M” that praised the English Queen’s efforts on behalf of the Jews of Damascus.

With the beginning of Tanzimat period—when the Ottoman government introduced modernization reforms-- we observe changes that were beginning to occur within the Jewish community of Izmir. Until then, the community was solely directed by its own Beth-Din; but with the Tanzimat, a council made up of a lay board of directors was formed. This secular administrative council had the authority to control the income of the community.

During Rabbi Palachi’s last years, there were disagreements concerning the management and organization of the community. In November 1865, the community formed a board made up of 1 president and 9 members. At their first meeting, this board invited Rabbi Palachi. They requested that he not sign any important decisions without first consulting the board. They also asked him to rescind a tax that he had imposed on the sale of alcoholic beverages, since he had not complied with the new administrative procedures. Rabbi Palachi acceded to the board’s demands. and Rabbi Palachi removed the taxes.

Soon, factions arose within the community—some in support of Rabbi Palachi, and some opposed to his continuing in his post as Chief Rabbi. As the situation worsened, the Chief Rabbi in Istanbul appointed Yakir Geron in order to maintain a stability in Izmir. Meanwhile, Baron de Rothschild advised Rabbi Palachi not to worry and if he wished, he would be glad to offer him a position in London’s Grand Rabbinate. But Rabbi Palachi did not wish to leave ?zmir, in spite of the growing tensions within the community.

In 1866, the Secretary of Istanbul’s Chief Rabbi, Samuel Danon, was sent to Izm?r. In his report to the Chief Rabbi, he indicated that the only way to solve the complicated situation in Izmir was to remove Rabbi Palachi from his position and to appoint a new Chief Rabbi. The Chief Rabbi Geron approved this report, that had been signed by 60 people from ?zmir. The Chief Rabbi applied to the government in order to receive permission to remove Rabbi Palachi from his post.

This tension and polarization within the community deeply saddened Rabbi Palachi, and he shut himself into a synagogue. He opened the ark and put 2 candles in his hand; he turned candles upside down and began to pray. At that moment, there was a very strong earthquake. People were terrified and came to apologize from Rabbi Palachi, fearing that the earthquake had occurred due to the Rabbi’s prayers. Even his opponents now wished that he would be the Chief Rabbi. In resuming his post, Rabbi Palachi forgave all that was done to him and

did not foster any bad feelings against anyone.

Rabbi Hayim Palachi wrote 72 books in total. The names of his books always included the word “hayim”. This was both an allusion to his name, as well as an allusion to the Torah being a source of life.

Izmir suffered fires from time to time. In one great fire, many Jewish houses, including Rabbi Hayim Palachi’s, were burnt down. The fire spread to the Jewish neighborhood at night, while people were asleep. Despite the fact that fire spreaded so quickly, the Jews were able to leave their houses alive. Yet, thousands of Jews became homeless. The majority moved into their relatives’ houses until new houses could be built.

All the books Rabbi Palachi collected since the age of 16 and the books he wrote, were kept in the cellar of his house. One of his students who was informed about the cellar, put his life in danger by entering the burning house in order to save one of the boxes of books. This box had only 14 books. The other books which Rabbi Palachi had worked on for years—were destroyed in one night.

Seeing the Jews in despair and losing so many of the manuscripts of books he had written, Rabbi Palachi was deeply pained. For six months, he stayed in bed, hovering between death and life; his son Avraham cared for him tirelessly. During this illness, Rabbi Hayim dictated words of Torah to his son, who recorded his father’s words on paper. When Rabbi Hayim recovered, his son showed him his notes. Rabbi Hayim was amazed to learn that he had been able to transmit the contents of his lost manuscripts, and that his son had been able to restore much of the work that had been lost in the great fire.

As he grew old, he became increasingly weak. While reading the Torah portion on Simha Torah, Rabbi Palachi started to cry. This chapter of the Torah was the last prayer Moshe Rabenu recited to the children of Israel before his death. The congregation started crying with Rabbi Palachi. People sensed that his death was close. When he died a few months later, on 17 shevat 5628, many Jewish and non-Jewish people from Izmir attended his funeral. Due to their respect, many tradesmen closed their businesses and attended his funeral. With the Sultan’s order, an official ceremony was arranged, with part of the Ottoman army in attendance.

Rabbi Palachi was buried in Bahri Baba Jewish cemetery.

Rabbi Eliezer Gabay had lived in Izmir a while before making aliyah to Israel in the 1960’s. During his stay in Izmir, he received an education in Mahazike Tora.

After his migration to the city of Lod in Israel, he established a yeshiva in the name of Rabbi Hayim Palachi and made a great effort to teach Rabbi Palachi's books. He convinced the governor in Izmir and mayor Ahmet Piri to designate Rabbi Palachi's tomb as a sacred place. In addition, with the support of the community, using the water flowing from the nearby spring, they built a mikveh.