Divided We Stand:
The Failed Experiment of "Mizug Galuyot"

Rabbi Yonatan Halevy

An Israeli news reporter once interviewed a Hassidic rabbi about the secret of his community's long-lasting marriages, in contrast to the general public's seemingly higher divorce rate. The Rabbi explained: "In our community, husbands and wives take great care to eat separately at weddings, sit separately at the synagogue, and some of our neighborhoods even have separate sidewalks for men and women. Ultimately, we do everything separately – in order to stay together!"

Though the above story is shared in jest, I was reminded of it when honored with the request to contribute an article to this special journal of The Ḥabura.

I was once walking with Mori HaRab Yaaqob Pereṣ when we passed a sign outside a Yeshiba building, proudly boasting that it was a "Lithuanian Kollel". Mori HaRab turned to me and said: "Do you know how viciously the Lithuanians murdered these people's forefathers? I cannot understand why anyone would wish to name a Bet Midrash after them!" When I remarked that the same could be said about our very own Yeshiba which proudly boasts "Sefardi" in its title, he responded, "Of course! You are correct! I did not name the Yeshiba! Sefard is a country of idolaters in Ḥuṣ La'Areṣ. What did they give us aside from an Inquisition? We are in the Land of Israel; "Yisra'elim" and "Yehudim" are the only words we should use to describe ourselves!"

Our beloved Rishon LeṢiyon, Rabbi BenṢion Meir Ḥai Uziel, so eloquently said in a speech given at the World Sefardi Federation [2] in 1925 [3]:

What is the reason for the name of this Federation? Many are doubtful as to its purpose, and many see in it something dangerous... It does not only frighten the others, but also us Sefardim, for the question arises within us: is it not our desire to create one solidified unification of the entire nation? How do we wish to unite the redemption with the exile? The bitter exile separated us, and the redemption must erase the impressions of the exile. And why does Spain – the land of blood – deserve to once again be placed on a platform?

Indeed, in Iraq, Iran, Morocco, Algeria and Yemen, we were not considered Iraqis, Iranians, Moroccans, Algerians or Yemenites – but rather "Jews"! [4] I might even be so brazen as to add that our Ḥakhamim did not view themselves narrowly as "Sefardic Ḥakhamim", but much more broadly as Jewish Ḥakhamim, who were responsible for the entire Jewish people wherever they may be from. We therefore must ask ourselves: are we not being divisive by continuing to allow the impressions of our various exiles to remain upon us? Is it not time to stop being divisive and finally unite into one nation?

Rabbi Uziel himself announced his desire to abandon such terms in his inaugural address [5] as Ḥakham Bashi of Yaffo:

"It is my tremendous desire to unify all of the divisions that the diaspora tore us into, the separate communities of Sefardim, Ashkenazim, Temanim, etc. This will not be a difficult task for me, since unity is in our nature and our national character as a people. It was only our dispersion throughout the diaspora that created the particular linguistic and communal divisions that exist amongst us. As we now return to our 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."

Regarding this natural unity among the Jewish people, Rabbi Uziel writes elsewhere [6]:

"The bitter exile has torn us into separate communities and ethnic groups, separated by distance, language, and speech... but each [Jewish] community was united internally, and maintained its brave bond to the one, united Jewish people. Nonetheless, we were divided into two camps, Sefardim and Ashkenazim... both of which were like the Cherubs who faced each other and recognized each other as brothers in knowledge, tradition, suffering, and hope, yearning to gather together in a moment of opportunity in the Land of Hope, the melting pot which would enable us to once again return to being one, united nation in faith and language... and to dwell together as "brothers who dwell together"." [7]

Rabbi Uziel himself felt this duality in the essence of his being. In a speech he gave at his fiftieth birthday celebration, he shared the following thoughts [8] with his friends and colleagues:

"I*n his address tonight, my friend and colleague Rabbi Fishman touched upon the Sefardic and Ashkenazic elements within me. I have already expressed on many occasions that I do not relate to any distinctions or separations between Sefardim and Ashkenazim. It is not the countries of Spain (Sefard) 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.*

To my childhood friend, the honorable author A. Elmaliach, 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."

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Rabbi Yiṣḥaq Nissim, Rishon LeṢiyon and successor of Rabbi Uziel, wrote the following words in his eulogy for the latter [9]:

This character trait of Ahabat Yisrael along with the complete and total recognition for the need to unite the Jewish people, to merge the tribes and the ethnic groups, were present in all that he did. [11] He always rose up against ethnic separatism, against the tendency to build barriers of separation between ethnic groups. How important is this noble task in our generation of the "ingathering of exiles."

We find similar sentiments among many of the Ḥakhamim of that unique generation in which the Jewish people returned home to Ereṣ Yisrael after two-thousand years of longing.

Most notable is Rabbi Yosef Kapach (Qafih) [11], who – while valiantly continuing his family's mission to maintain and preserve authentic Yemenite tradition and practice – authored a short article titled "Educating The Youth To Merge [Exiles]" [12] in which he writes:

"One of the tasks of our generation is that of 'merging the exiles", which means: creating one lifestyle, which will replace all the customs which currently exist among the various ethnic groups."

Rabbi Kapach is careful to warn us that in order for this to be accomplished, there must exist:

"M*ore cordial relations between the ethnic groups, in such a fashion that will enable every group to see in its counterpart the light, the positive, the good inherent in it." [13]*

After two pages in which he discusses various suggestions on how to merge customs, prayer rites, Hebrew pronunciation, tunes, and even how to abandon superstitions, he concludes:

"One thing is clear to me; we are already in this process, and we must steer it in the proper direction in order to achieve our desired result, which is: one singular, united practice among all of Israel."

As mentioned above, many of our Ḥakhamim returned to Israel with this dream in their hearts. Unfortunately, many of them were not aware that this willingness was often only one-sided. [14] Whatever the reason, this reality quickly caused many of our Ḥakhamim to reconsider their stance regarding the "merging of the exiles".

The next article [15] of Rabbi Yosef Kapach contains in it the following episode, illustrating the practical difficulty in executing this ideal of "merging exiles". In response to questions he received concerning the education of young women, Rabbi Kapach instructs the teachers to:

"[Teach Halakha] by separating actual Law from customs belonging to various ethnic groups. Similarly, it is important to point out the customs of various ethnic groups – so long as the teacher genuinely knows them – while stressing the legal foundation in them. Also, while teaching elementary Law, she must emphasize the various legal stances of the Posekim. For example: "the RaMBa"M rules this way" and "the Shulḥan Ạrukh rules this way" and "the custom is this way". This is so that when a young lady will hear in her home something different, she should know that the custom of her parents is not mistaken, and so that the school will not contradict the home. [16]

There was an instance where a young lady of a particular ethnicity was instructed by her mother to observe her forefather's age-old practice. When this reached her "Madricha", who was from another ethnicity, she rebuked her harshly saying that this was a non-Jewish custom. Ultimately the matter was clarified, and it was shown that the young lady's mother had instructed her properly, in accordance with the rulings of the early Posekim – which the "Madricha" was entirely ignorant of."

The same article of Rabbi Yosef Kapach contains in it the following grievance, which shows just how quickly this "merging of exiles" backfired :[17]

"Regarding whether or not "merging of the exiles" should take place in Halakha; my opinion is that we must leave everything as it is, and we should even encourage the observance of customs as they are, since they originate from holiness. This claim of "merging of the exiles" is a deceptive illusion. I have not yet heard of an Ashkenazi community which has accepted upon itself Yemenite Halakhic custom, or even Sefardic custom. All of this discussion regarding the "merging of exiles" is nonsense, and is instead intended to blur and destroy the customs of exile. In some instances, it even happens that they abandon the more correct and foundational customs, and force inferior and less foundational customs in their place. There are even some who preach to us that we must stand in front of "three ignoramuses" [18] to perform an "annulment of vows" in order to abolish our beautiful and foundational customs. They are even willing to volunteer themselves to be the "ignoramuses" for this purpose! Therefore, it is proper to leave matters as they are until the Righteous Ruler [19] will come."

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This concern regarding unity coming at too-high a cost was shared by Rabbi Uziel when he said [20]:

"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), Ḥoqerim (philosophers) and Meshorerim (poets), Parshanim (Biblical commentators) and Mequbalim (mystics/kabbalists). This is my goal, and this is my prayer. Will I merit to see this take place in my lifetime? May Hashem say yes. But in this way, I hate the self- and ethnic-belittlement. It is from this ideological worldview that I lent a hand to strengthen the World Sefardi Foundation, but from the very first moment, I told them that their most important mission lies in the areas of culture and Tora. More than once, I asked to create, under their umbrella, a Bet Midrash LeRabbanim (a rabbinical school), because I believe that Tora and higher intellectual education are the foundations for peace and unity amongst us."

The famous Sefardic historian, Rabbi Moshe David Ga'on [21], wrote the following emotional introduction to his magnum opus [22] :

"Before ascending to Ereṣ Yisrael from Bosnia, the land in which I previously had dwelled, I was unfamiliar with the term "Eastern Jews" – though I am Sefardi from birth and have been raised in a location populated with Jews… Rarely, in passing, my ears picked up conversation surrounding Jews whose customs differed one from another… [but differences] which were not intended to cause separation and division…

Only upon reaching the holy city of Jerusalem – which I had previously imagined and envisioned as a place intended for the ingathering and merging of exiles – was I awoken from my drunken stupor, and was my childish innocence violated.

I stood for a moment, surprised, at the Kotel – that monument of shame of the people of Israel; my face contorted and twisted in shame, my heart depressed within me. Walking afterwards in the city streets, the state of the Jewish union was revealed to me in all its ugliness. I realized that my miserable nation was torn and ripped to pieces, each tribe and its flag, each family and its direction, customs and traditions.

I soon realized that, apparently, I no longer belong to one organized, suffering nation which is fighting for its survival with all its strength, but rather I belong to one small ethnic group which stands for itself.

This matter awakened me to ponder the essence and purpose of tribalism, and what justification exists for this unusual phenomenon. These musings troubled my mind greatly, torturing me immensely, and shaking me to my core… "

What is the purpose of this tribalism?

Perhaps we will never know the answer to that question; unable to understand the justification for this unusual phenomenon.

What I can suggest though – from my familiarity with this fascinating Ḥabura – is that it exemplifies the true meaning of the word "Sefardi":

"It must be known that "Sefardim" are not exclusively those who come from Spain. All who have embraced the influence of the [Ḥakhamim] of Spain and its customs, are considered "Sefardim"… We were honored because of that unique Torah, song, philosophical research, and [Jewish] nationalism." [23]

Or as we say in the Shiviti Bet Midrash: "Sefardic is not about where you come from; but rather about where you wish to see yourself go".

I bless us all that until we are able to properly unite our divides, heal our rifts, and fuse our destinies, we utilize this Ḥabura to ensure that – with the help of HaQadosh Barukh Hu – from it: will emerge Posekim and Darshanim, Ḥoqerim and Meshorerim, Parshanim and Mequbalim.

This is my goal, and this is my prayer.

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1. Whereas Kibbuṣ Galuyot means the "ingathering of the exiles", "Mizug Galuyot" or "merging of the exiles" is the term used for the subsequent ideal of integrating them into one, homogenous people. This issue of Mizug Galuyot was a cornerstone of early Zionist philosophy, and is discussed frequently in rabbinic texts from that generation.
2. The World Sephardi Federation (WSF) was founded in 1925 at the international convention of Sefardi Jews held in Vienna, prior to the 14th Zionist Congress. The initiative behind its establishment came from the heads of the Sefardi and Oriental communities in Palestine, who, together with the heads of the Sefardi communities in the Balkan countries and central Europe, set up the World Union of Sefardi Jews. Moshe Pichotto was chosen as the first president of the union, whose center was set in Jerusalem. In a unanimous resolution, it was declared that the establishment of this union was essential for the Zionist movement, in order to build the land with the cooperation of all the Jewish communities. Source: Avi Shlush: Letter of Introduction. The World Sefardi Federation.
3. Mikhmane Ụziel, Volume 4 (page 260).
4. I use this term lightly, as there is much to be said about when we begin to find the word "Yehudi" replacing the word "Yisraeli" in Jewish literature.
5. Mikhmane Ụziel, Volume 1 (page 325). English translation courtesy of Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, with minor changes of my own.
6. Mikhmane Ụziel, Volume 4 (pages 94-99).
7. Tehillim 133:1.
8. Mikhmane Ụziel, volume 1 (page 473-474). English translation courtesy of Rabbi Daniel Bouskila.
9. LeDor Dorot, Volume 1 (page 226).
10. Much has been written about Rabbi Ọbadia Yosef's negative perception of Rabbi Ụziel's dream for unity, understanding it as nothing more than a "fantasy", and even accusing him of "being submissive to his Ashkenazi counterparts", namely Rabbi Abraham Yiṣḥak HaKohen Kook. See Rabbi Binyamin Lau's article in Akdamot, volume 10 (Kislev 5761). For Rabbi Ọbadia Yosef's own words, see Yabiạ Omer, Volume 6, Oraḥ Ḥaim (43), and Eben HaẸzer (14), among others.
11. Rabbi Yosef Kapach himself transliterated his last name as "Kafih", slightly different from his grandfather who transliterated it as "Alkafeh" (as seen in his book "Milḥamot Hashem"). I have chosen to use the colloquial Israeli pronunciation of his name here.
12. This undated article in Ketabim (volume 1, page 100) leaves much to be desired. It's brief style and lack of sources indicates to me that it may be a transcription of an oral interview or something of the sort.
13. Rabbi Kapach is adamant that the elders of the community will not be able to maintain their level-headedness throughout this process, and rather it is proper to shift the focus to the youth, in which we can hope this process can happen more peacefully.
14. Though here is not the place to do so, serious research must be dedicated to why it was the sad reality that the willingness to unite the Jewish people under one umbrella that was so much the dream of Sefardic Ḥakhamim, was only reciprocated in rare instances by their Ashkenazi counterparts.
15. Ketabim (volume 1, pages 102-108), undated. The significance of these articles being undated is that I have no way to tell how much time elapsed between Rabbi Kapach's initial support of the "merging of exiles" and his withdrawal from it.
16. With the help of Hashem, I hope to one day share my personal thoughts and experiences on this painful topic in a future article. Rabbi Ḥagai London of Israel once composed a prayer for the parents of a new schoolchild, in which he wrote these heartfelt words: "May the values of our child's school not clash with the values of our home".
17. I believe that is for reasons such as these, that Rabbi Ụziel's student and secretary for many years, Rabbi Ḥaim David HaLevy, set out to write his book Mekor Chaim, a unique work of Halakha and custom which intends to preserve the various practices of the Jewish community by recording them in one book which can be studied by all. From my experience, familiarity with different stances and practices can go a long way to create the comfort and cordiality required to bring about true unity of the Jewish people.
18. Shelosha Hedyotot; a lay "Bet Din", similar to the annulment of vows performed on the Eve of Rosh HaShanah.
19. Presumably, the Mashiaḥ. This phrase should not be confused with the "Teacher of Righteousness" found in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, referring most likely to the group's founder.
20. Mikhmane Ụziel, volume 1 (page 473-474). English translation courtesy of Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, with minor changes and additions of my own.
21. Rabbi Moshe David Ga'on was born in Sarajevo (Bosnia) in 1889. After getting a degree from the Vienna University (Austria), he immigrated to Ereṣ Yisrael and settled in Jerusalem. He was a school master in various primary schools in Jerusalem, İzmir [Smyrna] (Turkey) and in Buenos Aires (Argentina). Upon returning to Jerusalem, he became a member of the Sefardi Community Committee and at the same time a Municipal Council member until his passing in 1958. Rabbi Ga'on's son, Yehoram Ga'on, is an Israeli singer, actor, director, comedian, producer, television and radio host, and public figure.
22. Yehude HaMizrach BeEreṣ Yisrael, "To The Readers" (page 1). Rabbi Moshe David Ga'on published many publications among which the most important is this two-volume work, Yehude HaMizrach B'Ereṣ Yisrael (Eastern Jews in Eretz Yisrael), published in 1928 and 1938. This is a biographical dictionary of close to three-thousand rabbis, scholars and notables etc., in Spain, Provence in France, Italy, the Ottoman Empire including the Balkans and the Middle East and North Africa. He also published a bibliographical historical survey of the Ladino press. It is my opinion that the study of this work – perhaps one of the most important ever written on Sefardic history – would change much of the modern perception of Sefardic contribution to Jewish history in the eyes of Ashkenazim and uninformed Sefardim alike.
23. Rabbi BenṢion Me'ir Ḥai Ụziel, Mikhmane Ụziel, volume 4 (page 294). I cannot recommend enough that one take a look at the important footnote on this topic in the writings of the late Rabbi Dr. Yosef (José) Faur, in his book "Rabbi Yisrael Moshe Hazzan: The Man and His Works" (chapter 1, footnote 1).

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