

## ***Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel***

**By Rabbi Marc D. Angel**

Zvi Zohar

**Biography:** Zvi Zohar is Professor in the Interdisciplinary Program of Graduate Studies in Contemporary Jewry, Bar Ilan University and Head of the Center for Contemporary *Halakhah* of the Shalom Hartman Institute. Specializing in the sociology and history of *halakhah* and the modern halakhic creativity of Sephardic-Oriental rabbis, Professor Zohar has published close to forty scholarly articles in Hebrew, English and French and authored four books, most recently *Tradition and Change: Halakhic Responses of Syrian and Egyptian Rabbis to Legal and Technological Change* (Hebrew), and *Luminous Faces Of The Orient: Philosophical and Halakhic Thought of Sephardic Rabbis in the Modern Middle East* (Hebrew).



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Most Ashkenazim consider Sephardic Jews to be exotic yet somewhat naive, given to colorful garb and spiced food and characterized by sincere yet simple religious devotion, with perhaps more than a dab of Kabbalistic superstition thrown in for good measure. Their rabbis, too, are mild-natured individuals, innocent of worldly knowledge and perspicacity, who may be good at rote memorization but are third-rate in intellectual depth.

Not long ago, even some *talmidei-hakhamim* held such views. The dramatic intrusion of Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef into the halakhic scene has slightly moderated this perception, but his seeming uniqueness stressed by his followers—and his periodic controversial political pronouncements—make it relatively easy for many to see him as the idiosyncratic exception that proves the rule.

However, this conventional view of Sephardic Judaism in general and of Sephardic rabbinic learning in particular is disturbingly misguided, the product of a deadly combination of ignorance and internal Orientalism. Indeed, in these respects Sephardic *aharonim* had (and have) a clear advantage over their Ashkenazic peers: All major and most minor Sephardic *aharonim* were well acquainted with the works of European Jewish *poseqim* and held Ashkenazic Torah learning to be no less valuable than their own. Rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad, Rabbi Hayyim Palache of Izmir, Rabbi David HaCohen-Scali of

Oran, Rabbi Khalfon Moshe HaCohen of Jerba and Rabbi Ovadiah Hedaya of Jerusalem are several who readily come to mind. Each of them routinely and casually cites numerous Ashkenazic *aharonim* in the course of his *teshuvot* and/or other Torah writings—but of which Ashkenazic *poseqim* can the converse be said? In addition, Ashkenazic *poseqim* and rabbinic leaders in modern times were (and are) operating under two remarkable constrictions, unaccepted by their Sephardic peers. First is the notion of “*hadash asur min ha-Torah*”—Torah prohibits the new. The adage, which is a play on the law related to the use of new grain (*hadash*), was coined by Rabbi Moses Sofer (*Hatam Sofer*) to discredit Reform innovations. The ideology it represents crippled much Ashkenazic *pesaq* by denying recourse to the potential for organic growth and change indigenous to traditional halakhic thinking. Add to this the notion of “*kol ha-mahmir tavo alav berakhah*”—better always to adopt the more stringent position; what Menahem Friedman has dubbed “*The World of Humrot*”<sup>1</sup>—and the predicament of Ashkenazic *halakhah* is more easily understood. Compare this to the Sephardic motto, so beloved of R. Ovadiah Yosef, “*koha de-hetera adif*”—the power of leniency is greater (and, thus, to be preferred)!

Let us turn, briefly, from *halakhah* to Jewish thought. Orthodox Jews who are convinced that Judaism and general human thought and culture are not inherently antithetical, and that Judaism incorporates not only a partic-

<sup>1</sup> Menahem Friedman, *The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Society – Sources, Trends and Processes*, (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1991), pp. 80 ff.

ularistic but also a universal vision of human brotherhood, seem to be hard put to find sources for such notions within Orthodox Jewish culture of modern times. In the pages of Centrist/Modern Orthodox publications such as *Tradition* and *The Torah u-Madda Journal*, such sources seem confined to the thought of “The Rav” (R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik), and (somewhat less frequently) to the thought of Rav Kook. More daring individuals refer to Yeshayahu Leibovitz. Of course, if we move back to the period of the *rishonim*, we have virtually the entire gamut of medieval Jewish philosophers advocating such views.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, all of these medieval Jewish thinkers were Sephardic/Oriental. Is it reasonable to assume that none of this found any continuation in Sephardic thought in modern times?

For those who intuitively feel that the *haredi* path of insularity and *humrot* cannot be the way of Judaism in our times, Sephardic tradition offers an invaluable wealth of resources. However, a dearth of scholarship has made it difficult for all Jews, and especially for the English-reading public, to become acquainted with the fascinating world of Sephardic rabbinic creativity in modern times. Rabbi Marc Angel’s book on Rabbi Uziel is a major contribution to rectifying this situation.

R. BenZion Meir Hai Uziel (1880-1953), born and bred in Jerusalem, scion of an illustrious family hailing back to pre-expulsion Spain, was one of the greatest rabbinic figures of twentieth-century Judaism. In the grand tradition of Sephardic rabbis, he was both a *poseq* and a religious

thinker, who authentically combined commitment to *halakhah* and Judaism with openness to the context and socio-cultural realities of contemporary life. In *Loving Truth and Peace*, R. Angel presents and analyzes R. Uziel’s religious worldview, integrating his halakhic and philosophic *oeuvres*.

Chapter five of the book is entitled “Approach to *Halakhah*,” and chapter nine is called “Halakhic Framework for a Modern Jewish State,” but most of the other chapters as well include discussions of halakhic issues – together with their philosophic and ideational concomitants. This is especially so with regard to chapter seven (“Conversion”) and chapter eight (“Issues Relating to the Status of Women”). In both these chapters, R. Angel presents R. Uziel’s view and compares them with those of other *poseqim*. Thus, when discussing conversion, R. Angel first presents the more hesitant views of R. Uziel’s contemporaries, Rabbis Herzog and Kook. Only then does he present the closely argued *teshuvot* of Rabbi Uziel supporting conversion of the gentile partner in virtually all cases of intermarriage, without any requirement that the *beit din* be convinced that the convert intends to observe a halakhic lifestyle. This conclusion is derived from analyses of relevant halakhic sources, which indicate that “the condition to keep the *mitsvot* is not a *sine qua non* for conversion, even *ab initio* (*afilu le-khatehilah*)<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, before presenting R. Uziel’s traditionalist position on hair-covering for women, R. Angel discusses the views of other rabbis in modern times, including the position of another great twentieth-century Sephardic *poseq*,

<sup>2</sup> Thus, even a seemingly “particularistic” philosopher such as Yehudah HaLevi actually grounds himself in a world of dialogue with general thought and culture – not to speak of his adoption of non-Jewish modes of meter and other literary devices in his poetic work.

<sup>3</sup> *Respona Mishpetei Uziel* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 5724), no. 20. The *teshuvah* dates from 1951. When I first read this *teshuvah* of Rav Uziel, it seemed to me totally preposterous. But I subsequently had the opportunity to devote several years to studying the halakhic literature on conversion, from talmudic to contemporary times, and I now realize how strongly grounded R. Uziel’s position is in the halakhic tradition. Cf. Avi Sagi and Zvi Zohar, *Giyur ve-Zehut Yehudit* (Conversion to Judaism and the Meaning of Jewish Identity) (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute and Shalom Hartman Institute, 5755).

R. Yosef Mesas (Meknes, 1892 – Haifa, 1974), who ruled that in our times there is absolutely no halakhic requirement that married women cover their hair.<sup>4</sup>

In each chapter, there clearly emerges R. Uziel's vision of Judaism as a religious-ethical framework with a strong universal component. In presenting the case for integrating Jewish and general topics within the curriculum of Jewish schools and the culture of rabbinic life, R. Uziel stressed that "the sages of each generation did not limit themselves to their four cubits and the walls of their study halls. Rather, they learned and knew all that was transpiring in the world of knowledge and law [*be-olam ha-madda ve-ha-mishpat*] and they studied it carefully." In choosing the phrase "four cubits", R. Uziel is, of course, alluding to the classic talmudic dictum by Ulla, that "ever since the Temple was destroyed, God has in this world nothing but the four cubits of *halakha*" (*Berakhot* 8a); and he is stating that whatever else this dictum may mean, it categorically does *not* mean that Jews in general, and *talmidei-hakhamim* in particular, should refrain from studying the general world of knowledge and law. R. Uziel noted that in maintaining this view he was continuing the classic Sephardic tradition of medieval Spain. As R. Angel points out after analyzing R. Uziel's approach, "the double bind in the conflict between religious and general studies vanishes, when these two areas are seen as being part of one enterprise: the attempt to understand truth."<sup>6</sup>

In the world of Ashkenazic Jewry, Reform Judaism stressed the universal aspects of Israel's "Mission to the World." In reaction, Orthodox leaders seem to have come to regard such universalistic parlance as almost heretical,

and it is hard to imagine a religious ethos more particularistic and more rejectionist of universal human brotherhood and morality than that of today's *haredil yeshivah* world. In contrast, R. Uziel's views regarding the connection of the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds are not confined to intellectual awareness of general culture. R. Angel writes that according to R. Uziel "the Torah was given to the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai so that they should become a role model for humanity. They were to become 'a light unto the nations,' inspiring all people to live righteous and spiritual lives. To accomplish this grand mission, the Jewish people had to participate in the life of the world, to interact with other peoples, to set a proper example of religious life."<sup>7</sup> In that vein, it is fitting to move towards the conclusion of this review with a rather extended quotation from R. Uziel (as translated by R. Angel):

Each country and each nation which respects itself does not and cannot be satisfied with its narrow boundaries and limited domains; rather, they desire to bring in all that is good and beautiful, that is helpful and glorious, to their national [cultural] treasure. And they wish to give the maximum flow of their own blessings to the [cultural] treasury of humanity as a whole, and to establish a link of love and friendship among all nations, for the enrichment of the human storehouse of intellectual and ethical ideas and for the uncovering of the secrets of nature. Happy is the country and happy is the nation that can give itself an accounting of what it has taken in from others; and more importantly, of what it has given of its own to the repository of all humanity. Woe unto that country and that nation

<sup>4</sup> R. Angel presents R. Mesas's view at p. 183, based on R. Mesas's *Responsa Mayyim Hayyim*, (Jerusalem, 5745), vol. 2, no. 110. In fact, a fuller presentation of R. Mesas's views on this matter (with the identical "bottom line"), may be found in his work *Otsar ha-Mikhtavim* (Jerusalem, 5729; reprint, 5758), vol. 3, no. 1884 [pp. 211-213]; the *responsum* is dated 5714, Meknes.

<sup>5</sup> *Sha'arei Uziel* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 5704)

<sup>6</sup> Angel, p. 28. Earlier in the same chapter, at pp. 21-25, R. Angel identified and explained the apparent "double bind."

<sup>7</sup> Angel, p. 47.

that encloses itself in its own four cubits and limits itself to its own narrow boundaries, lacking anything of its own to contribute [to humanity] and lacking the tools to receive [cultural contributions] from others.<sup>8</sup>

Marc Angel's work on R. Uziel simultaneously opens the world of modern Sephardic rabbinic culture to an English-reading audience and demonstrates the crucial significance of that culture for all Jews who seek to sustain and expand a Judaism that integrates tradition and change, *halakhah* and general culture, particularism and universal vision.

Finally, a word of advice to potential readers of this book: While conversing with me several years ago, R. Angel mentioned that he regarded R. Uziel's disciple R. Hayyim David HaLevi<sup>9</sup> as the leading halakhic authority of the second half of the 20th century. Coming from a

Sephardic rabbi well acquainted with the writings of R. Ovadiah Yosef, that is a weighty statement indeed. R. Angel may well be correct in his assessment. Yet when I had occasion to discuss R. HaLevi's work with another person, I was nevertheless told that, "anyone can see that R. HaLevi is not a first-rate authority. His *teshuvot* are written in an almost insultingly simple style!" In truth, R. HaLevi was unusually erudite – but he strove to make his work accessible to the widest possible range of readers, not merely to impress others with his erudition. He thus bent over backwards to write in a simple and transparent modern Hebrew. In this matter R. Angel is a true disciple of R. HaLevi: In this book, as in his other works, Angel writes in a lucid, deceptively simple English, making R. Uziel's "grand religious worldview" accessible to all.

Enjoy the book – and be forewarned that its apparent simplicity of style reflects not lack of sophistication, but true wisdom.

<sup>8</sup> *Hegyonei Uziel* (Jerusalem, 5714), vol. 2, p. 127; cited in Angel, op.cit., p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Jerusalem, 1924 – Tel Aviv, 1998. R. HaLevi was chief rabbi of Tel Aviv from 1973. He wrote over twenty-five volumes of rabbinic works, including twelve volumes of *responsa* (nine volumes of *Asei Lekha Rav* and three volumes of *Mayim Hayyim*) and five volumes of *Shulban Arukh Meqor Hayyim ha-Shalem*.