

Rabbi Yosef Kafach: *A Life Fulfilled*

By Matis Greenblatt

In 1172 the Rambam wrote his *Epistle to Yemen*, which played a decisive role in rescuing Yemenite Jewry from apostasy and conversion to Islam. In a remarkable expression of gratitude, Yemenite Jews inserted a reference to the Rambam in the daily *Kaddish*. They have never forgotten the Rambam's support, and he has remained their leading authority for all subsequent generations.

This past summer, Rabbi Yosef Kafach passed away in Jerusalem. Born in San'a, Yemen in 1917, Rav Kafach's entire life was permeated with the Torah and *mesorah* of Yemen. His father and grandfather, Rabbis David and Yichya Kafach were devoted to teaching the works of the Rambam and establishing the correct text of his writings. To this end, they spent huge sums in order to recover manuscripts, even fragments of manuscripts of his works. Rav Yichya instituted the study of the original Arabic commentary to the Mishnah on Friday nights from midnight to daybreak. He repeatedly expressed a desire to see the publication of a new, correct version of the Rambam's works.

Yosef's father died when he was a small child and his grandfather died in 1932. Though very young, Yosef married shortly thereafter. (In Yemen, Jewish orphans were forcibly converted to Islam, unless married.) He worked as a silver/goldsmith while continuing his studies.

In 1943, he and his family emigrat-

ed to *Eretz Yisrael*. He lived in Tel Aviv, where he pursued his trade. However, the contrast between modest, insular Yemen, and brash, cosmopolitan Tel Aviv produced a profound feeling of loneliness in Rav Kafach. He comforted himself by recollecting life in Yemen and wrote *The Ways Of Yemen (Halichot Teiman)*, a description of Yemenite life and customs, which he did not publish until he was urged to do so in 1961.

Rav Kafach moved to Jerusalem, where he attended Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav and the Harry Fischel Institute. He was selected to become a *dayan* by Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog and served in that capacity from 1950 to 1988.

Towards the end of his life, the Rambam was asked by the scholars of Lunel, France, to translate part of his *Guide to the Perplexed* into Hebrew. He replied that he would be most happy if he could translate all of his Arabic works, but was unable to do so. Subsequently, translations of all of his Arabic works were published, however there were inadequacies in all of them.

In 1940, at a meeting with Rav Dov Kook (director of the Harry Fischel Institute) and Rabbi Meir Berlin, the conversation turned to the Rambam's writings, and Rav Kafach broached the possibility of undertaking a new translation of the commentary on the *Mishneh Torah*, as well as all of the Arabic writings. He was encouraged to do so. Rabbi Kafach began the painstaking work of comparing the best extant manuscripts, including original manuscripts in the Rambam's own hand, which were in the possession of

Rabbi S. D. Sassoon and which were extant on a substantial part of the *Mishneh*. The commentary was first published with the Arabic original in seven volumes, and then in the Hebrew version alone in three volumes. It was completed in 1967. Rav Kafach was awarded the Israel Prize in 1969.

In this work, Rabbi Kafach points out numerous errors in the previously printed versions of the commentary. He also makes note of the revisions made by the Rambam. Thus, for example, in the first *mishnah* of the sixth and ninth chapters of *Sheviit*, he cites three versions of the commentary, and in the fifth *mishnah* of chapter 10, he cites four versions. This work is a classic and is indispensable for the study of the commentary, as well as showing its relationship to the *Mishneh Torah*.

The standard edition of the *Guide to the Perplexed* contains the translation of Rabbi Shmuel Ibn Tibbon, which is difficult to follow because of its use of Arabic syntax. Rav Kafach prepared a new, readable translation accompanied by highly informative footnotes. He also translated the Rambam's *Book of Precepts (Sefer Hamitzvot)* and a volume of his letters, and published a small volume *Hamikra B'Rambam*, which indexes all of the Biblical passages on which the Rambam commented in any of his works.

Rav Kafach's second great love was for the works of Saadiah Gaon and he prepared a new translation of the *Book of Beliefs and Opinion* based on the last version written by Rav Saadiah. He also published Rav Saadiah's commentary on the Torah containing the

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then known extant fragments of that commentary. He published, for the first time, the complete translation of Rav Saadiah's commentary with introductions to the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, and Daniel. Each of these is a major work, which has not been sufficiently appreciated. Rav Kafach also translated Bachya ibn Pakuda's *Duties of the Heart*, though unfortunately in the American edition published by Feldheim, his valuable notes were omitted.

With his translation of Judah HaLevi's *Kuzari*, Rav Kafach had completed translations of all the major medieval works of Jewish thought that had been written in Arabic. He also edited the responsa of Rabad and the Ritva and many other works. Suffice it merely to mention his publication of many Yemenite halachic, midrashic, and philosophic works.

Rabbi Kafach's last major work was a new edition of the *Mishneh Torah* in 23 volumes, accompanied by a massive commentary based on hundreds of commentators. Each volume runs from 400-800 pages. He presents the text based on Yemenite manuscripts, which he considers to be the most accurate — citing an old tradition that during the Rambam's lifetime, Yemenite Jews sent expert scribes to Egypt to copy the *Mishneh Torah* from the Rambam's own manuscripts. From time to time, they returned to update the changes the Rambam had made. Rav Kafach points out that many scholars are not aware of the Rambam's revisions, which helps to explain some of the difficulties in the *Mishneh Torah*.

As in all of his works, Rabbi Kafach worked completely alone without benefit of assistants or computers. Amazingly, all 23 volumes were published in only two years, from 1984 to 1986. Rabbi Kafach anxiously looked forward to completing this work, apprehensive that he might not live long enough. Some students of the Rambam see a split between the Rambam of the

Guide to the Perplexed and the Rambam of the *Mishneh Torah*. Rav Kafach strongly disagreed with this school of thought, believing that there is total unity within all the Rambam's works. (See Rav Kafach's introduction to volume 14.) Those whose main focus is philosophy failed to understand that the Rambam's ultimate objective was to recognize the Creator of the world (*L'hakir et Mi she'amar v'hayah haolam*). One might add that Rav Kafach himself was unique in that



Rabbi Yosef Kafach zt"l (1917-2000)

he contributed significantly to the Rambam's philosophic as well as halachic works.

Rabbi Kafach possessed an unusual combination of modesty and forthrightness. Though he was respectful of his predecessors, he did not hesitate to reject opinions which he felt were erroneous. His style was direct and at times even feisty, reflecting his primary objective of discovering the truth, whether it be a correct text or a proper interpretation.

The sheer immensity of his output is a tribute not only to Rav Kafach's diligence, but above all to his great love

for the Rambam and Saadiah Gaon. In the case of the Rambam, one feels almost as if he were representing Yemenite Jewry in repaying an old debt of gratitude.

Though his scholarship was impeccable, he was anything but the detached scholar. In his introduction to Saadiah's commentary on Psalms, Rav Kafach wrote: *Though my primary goal was redemption (from oblivion) of the commentary, and clothing it in the Hebrew language... the entire time I was occupied with it I was suffused by a spiritual world of emotions, as if standing before the King of the World.*

On the Seventeenth of Tammuz, towards evening, Rabbi Kafach told his wife, Brachah, that he felt his life coming to a close. He washed and dressed, and at about 9:30 sat down to learn, which was an unusual break of his normal pattern. (On most nights he went to bed about this time, and rose at about 1:30 a.m.) At about midnight, she looked in on him and saw that the rabbi's face "shone like an angel's," as she had never before seen. At 2:00 a.m., she awoke, rose and found him lying on the floor surrounded by his open, beloved *seforim*. He was 82, the same age his grandfather had been at his demise.

Jewish life in Yemen is just about over. Most Yemenite Jews have emigrated to Israel. In Yemen, their ancient Jewish tradition had been preserved. (Many believe their pronunciation of the Hebrew language is the most accurate of world Jewry.) Rav Kafach was hopeful, but not optimistic, that these traditions would continue in Israel. In his own life, he was able to maintain the Yemenite tradition, notwithstanding his encounter with contemporary life and thought. To many of his brethren he was an outstanding example that "the ways of Yemen" could yet find expression amidst modern society. **JA**