

OUR SERIES ON LEADERS WHO HAVE SHAPED RELIGIOUS ZIONISM OVER THE LAST 150 YEARS

## Rabbi Yehuda Bibas

In 1789, Yehuda Aryeh Leon Bibas was born in Gibraltar to a Sephardic family. One of his maternal ancestors was Chaim ibn Attar (1696–1743) one of the most prominent rabbis of the Moroccan Jewish community and author of the influential *Or HaChaim*.

Bibas's father came from a line of Rabbis in Tétouan who emigrated to Gibraltar in 1859 after a pogrom. Bibas studied as a child in Gibraltar and after his father's death, he moved in with his grandfather in Livorno, Italy, home to a prestigious and educated Jewish community. It was there Bibas received his Jewish education, became a doctor and gained fluency in English, Italian, Spanish and Hebrew. He then returned to Gibraltar where he established himself as head of a local *yeshiva*, attended by students from England, Italy and North Africa.

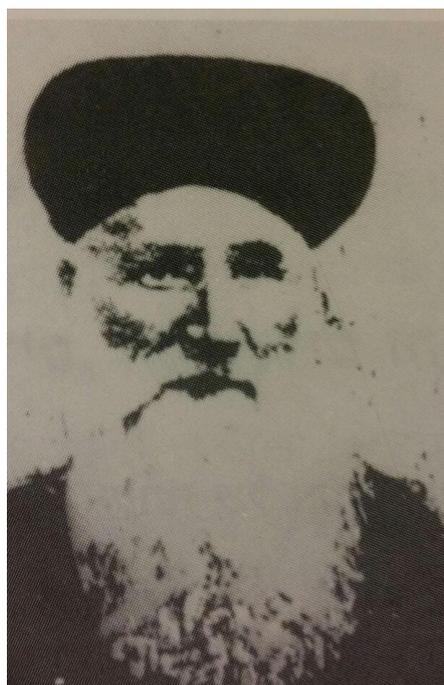
In 1810 he came to London, England, where he met with the famous Jewish activist and philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore. The two later collaborated on many projects, Montefiore also being a staunch advocate of strengthening the Jewish population of the Land of Israel.

In 1831, Bibas was appointed Chief Rabbi of Corfu, Greece.

By 1839, Bibas was well on his path of activism on behalf of uniting World Jewry regarding the Land of Israel. It could be considered the beginning of the Zionist Movement, proto-Zionism. The Land of Israel at the time was ruled by the Ottoman Empire, based in Turkey, which was not always hospitable to the indigenous Jewish community. Inspired by a series of Serbian and Greek revolts against the Ottoman Turks, Rabbi Bibas advocated mass repatriation of Jews to Israel. In 1839, he embarked upon a tour of European Jewish communities to advocate *aliyah*.

By 1852, one year after his wife passed away, the 63-year-old Rabbi Bibas made the permanent move to the Land of Israel and was welcomed by his students in Jaffa.

He made his home in Chevron, where he built his extensive library and was appointed supervisor of the Magen Avot Fund, a local organization that helped purchase property and maintain community institutions.



After years of advocacy work on behalf of the Jewish homeland, Rabbi Bibas died only two months after arriving in Israel and was buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Chevron, near the graves of many other great Jewish sages.

His vast collection of rare books was donated to local *yeshivot*.

According to a brief article from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency dated October 23, 1952, the now world-renowned

Dead Sea Scrolls were originally housed in Rabbi Bibas's library:

*"The charge that the Hebrew Scrolls discovered sometime ago at the Dead Sea came from looted synagogues and the library of Judah Bibas in the city of Chevron, which were sacked by the Arabs in the bloody riots of 1929, is made by Prof. Solomon Zeitlin in the current issue of the Jewish Quarterly Review, published by Dropsie College."*

*"...Prof. Zeitlin, who from the beginning questioned the antiquity and authenticity of the Scrolls, claims that they were not in fact discovered in caves near the Dead Sea by Bedouins, but were stolen by Arabs in the Chevron massacres and then hidden for many years before being produced as new finds. He points out that for the last few years many of the Torah Scrolls which were stolen from Chevron were offered for sale by men connected with the Syrian Convent who also bought the Dead Sea Scrolls from an Arab."*

We will never know whether Rabbi Bibas knew he was in possession of one of the world's most important ancient documents. However, the ransacking of his precious library and the selling of Jewish holy texts was not nearly as reprehensible as the razing of the cemetery and desecration of his final resting place by the Jordanians who controlled Chevron from 1948–1967.

Today, Rabbi Bibas's legacy is in the philosophy of the Jewish right to self-determination and a return to the ancestral homeland based on religious precepts and national aspirations. These concepts were revolutionary at the time but went on to influence the creation of a thriving Jewish State that today is at the forefront of high-tech, environmental and medical fields, and a haven for seekers of spirituality. ■

