



# HALACHA HOTLINE

Provides Lifeline for Community Members Worldwide

It was an hour before Shabbat when the electricity went off in Ramat Beit Shemesh. One frantic resident, Sarah Cohen, called the electric company and was told not to worry, that the electricity would be reinstated within the next two hours. This posed a halachic dilemma. In Israel, it is Jews who repair the electric lines. So, was Sarah halachically permitted to place her food onto the hotplate for the next day's *seudah* if the electricity would come on after Shabbat began? Was she, in fact, permitted to enjoy any of the electrical power once it came on? Fortunately, Sarah kept the Halacha Hotline telephone number close at hand, which she immediately dialed. Within moments, she obtained an answer to her questions by a qualified rav who explained what she needed to do under the circumstances. "As a result, we entered Shabbat with peace of mind knowing that we were acting in accordance with halacha," Sarah says.

Sarah is one of hundreds of thousands of callers taking advantage of this unique service that was established in February 2014, in memory of Hacham Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*, four months after his *petirah*. It's proved quite a success story. This year alone, the hotline received a staggering one million calls and, if other callers are like Sarah, the hotline probably dealt with even thousands of more inquiries. "I typically accumulate a number of questions during the week and ask all those questions at one time," said the young mother of six.

The Halacha Hotline is the brainchild of Harav Eliyahu Shushan from Bnai Brak, who is its founder and CEO, as well as the logistical powerhouse behind the hotline. Even though such a hotline was available for Ashkenazim, being Sephardi, Harav Shushan felt that when it came to asking his own halacha questions, he had nowhere to turn. "The idea of founding a Halacha Hotline for Sephardim kept nagging at me," he says.

When Harav Shushan finally broached this possibility with Harav David Yosef, he was very excited about the idea, and eager to get it going. Harav David Yosef, in turn, referred Harav Shushan to Harav Hagaon Moshe Paniri, who is considered to be one of Israel's top *poskim* on the issue of *tahara*, and who had a personal relationship with Hacham Ovadia. "The necessity for a clear, underlying halachic methodology was obvious. We chose the one established by Hacham Ovadia Yosef, who was the most widely accepted Sephardic *gadol* and *posek* of our generation. Maran's halachic rulings took into consideration the rulings of hundreds of *poskim* across the spectrum, including contemporary Ashkenazi *poskim* Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. We were all very happy about that because this enabled us to continue in the *tzaddik's* path," Harav Shushan says.

The hotline obviously fulfilled a vital communal need. On the hotline's first day over 200 calls were fielded from throughout



Israel. What began with twenty specially selected rabbanim manning the lines has expanded to 150 rabbanim, mainly from Israel. Rabbinic advisers include renowned *poskim* such as Harav Yaakov Sheknazy, Harav Moshe Paniri, and Harav Shabtay Levi.

Three hundred rabbanim are also on-call to answer questions specifically related to family purity. All *talmidim* of Harav Moshe Paniri, as well as many other rabbanim are situated throughout the world, including the US, Argentina, Mexico, Panama, Great Britain, and France. The hotline is open 24/6, and questions are answered in five languages in addition to Hebrew – English, French, Russian, Persian, and Spanish. International calls are local and are provided free-of-charge to callers. The hotline is endorsed by many Torah luminaries, including Hacham Yitzchak Yosef, Harav Shmuel Pinchasi, Harav Moshe Paniri, Harav Zamir Cohen, and Harav Shalom Arush.

The Halacha Hotline requires the supervision of expert rabbis who are responsible for the more difficult questions, which necessitate the involvement of the *gedolim*. Also, supervisors oversee the acceptance process for new rabbis who are interested in answering questions, and more. The head supervisor of the International Halacha Hotline is Harav Hagaon Yaron Ashkenazy. Supervisors are in place to support and monitor the rabbinical staff for each language. The English language supervisor is Harav Hagaon Yehuda Pinches. He is the head of the organization *Torat Habayit*, and is an important *Moreh Tzedek* in Jerusalem.

A minimum of three rabbanim are on call at all times; this number can jump to seven rabbanim prior to the holidays, especially before Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Pesach. About 60% of these rabbanim volunteer their time; those on salary work late into the night, supervise the calls, or comprise its rabbinic courts. The rabbinic courts are headed by Harav Hagaon Elchanan Peretz, whose department deals with interest and financial matters. “We are not politically affiliated in any way. We don’t get funding from the government. We support ourselves from month to month through good people sending donations,” Harav Shushan says.

“Our constant availability enables callers to receive halacha answers whenever they are required. Many appreciate the anonymity it offers, given that they may feel uncomfortable asking their own rav certain personal questions. Mostly, though, it fulfills a specific need. Most rabbanim are not trained in every aspect of halacha; this hotline enables callers to obtain a ruling from a rav who is versed in the particular halacha pertaining to their situation. The hotline’s *poskim* rule in accordance with the *Shulhan Aruch* of Bet Yosef,” says hotline supervisor and Jerusalem resident Harav Yaron Ashkenazy. Harav Ashkenazy is the *Moreh Horaha* and *Rosh Kollel* at “Choshen Mishpat” and has been associated with the Halacha Hotline from the start.

On any given day, the hotline receives about 3,000 calls. Before the holidays, especially before Pesach, these inquiries can quadruple. This year, before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the hotline received 13,000 calls. There were 25 rabbanim on-call together with a doctor to answer questions pertaining to the fast. Callers suffering from diabetes and high blood pressure asked about whether they needed to fast, and should they need to break their fast, how they should go about doing it? What *shiur* of food, they wanted to know, is permissible for them to eat?

The *poskim* manning the lines are chosen not only for their halachic expertise but also for their ability to feel out the callers to get a sense of who they are and their particular circumstances. There are some callers who admit to not keeping any halachot, except for those pertaining to a specific issue. “We want to make sure that that caller feels comfortable calling us, and that we can competently answer their questions,” Harav Ashkenazy says.



Harav Shmuel Pinchasi



(L-R) Rabbi Yaron Ashkenazy and Rabbi Moshe Paniri.



Hacham Yitzhak Yosef at one of the Halacha Hotline events.



Harav Eliyahu Shushan



The caller's background – whether they are from Morocco, Iran, Iraq, or Syria - is also significant, especially when it concerns *minhagim*. *Shiva* callers from Morocco don't partake in any food in a *shiva* house, for instance, while those from other countries do. Should there be a conflict between *minhag* and halacha, Hacham Ovadia ruled that customs bow to the halacha. For example, leftover food from a *shiva* house should not be thrown away, as some customs dictate, as doing so is considered *bal tashchit*. Even though the rabbanim will base the halachot on Hacham Ovadia's rulings, they can also *paskin* for Ashkenazim.

Most inquiries can be answered quickly. What to do with a hot, meat pot when milk accidentally spills into it? When in a rush before Shabbat, can open trays – one containing meat and the other fish – go into the oven at the same time? Other questions concern business matters, *tahara*, and mourning practices that may require further inquiry. There are many early morning calls. Questions concerning whether to hook someone up to life support or whether to induce a birth can come in throughout the night. "If a decision has to be made in the middle of the night, most people will shy away from waking up their rav. In this regard, we provide a much-needed alternative," Harav Ashkenazi explains.

At times, a situation is more complicated than it first appears. There are occasions when the rav calls back callers after having discussed their particular situation with other *poskim*. Fertility questions, for instance, may require the input of *gedolei hador* such as the Rishon Letzion Yitzchak Yosef and Israel's former Chief Rabbi Harav Bakshi Doron, who make themselves available for hotline questions.

Besides halachic issues, the rabbis have recently taken on matters pertaining to *shalom bayit*, parenting, and *shidduchim*, as well as to matters pertaining to other life situations, under the supervision of well-known speaker Harav Avner Kavas. A young woman recently inquired if she should continue seeing a young man whose mother was Jewish but whose father was an Arab. "Does the young man identify as a Jew or an Arab?", the rav astutely asked. When she answered the latter, the rav explained that this can result in mixed marriages in future generations, which convinced her to break up the relationship.

A particularly disturbing call concerned what to do halachically before committing suicide. Rather than panic, the rav calmly asked the caller why he wanted to kill himself. He answered that he was in a lot of financial debt and couldn't handle the pressure anymore. When he asked to be admitted to the hospital because he could no longer cope, he was rudely asked to leave. He appeared to be too calm to be taken seriously. The rav immediately connected the

caller to the head of the psychiatric department at a local hospital. This intervention saved the man's life.

*Pikuach nefesh* issues concern spiritual matters, as well. Recently, the hotline added Persian to its list of languages in order to accommodate Iranian Jews living in Iran. Iran's chief rabbi, Rabbi Yosef Hamadani, passed away in March, 2014, leaving behind a community of 20,000 families without a rav. For them, this hotline serves an essential spiritual need. For political reasons, they cannot dial directly to Israel; the hotline, therefore, established a service for the community to enable them to call through the United States. Having Persian speaking rabbis on call benefits those living in Israel, as well. "I just spoke with someone whose father made *aliyah* from Iran who doesn't speak a word of Hebrew. He was so grateful that he has someone to communicate with through this hotline. He asked if we can organize *shiurim* in Persian," Harav Shushan said.

Shortly after the hotline came into effect, many *kiruv* organizations such as Hidabroot, Arachim, and Lev LeAchim started taking advantage of its numerous benefits. "After becoming religious, then what?" Rav Ashkenazi asks. "Basic issues constantly arise: How to make *Kiddush*, how to *kasher* the kitchen, *tahara*, etc."

Many such calls come in from Ukraine and Russia, even though the hotline isn't publicized there. Most callers, Rav Ashkenazi says, discover the hotline through the website, a reader-friendly site that provides *divrei Torah* on the *parsha* as well as *shiurim* on halacha. All international calls are considered as local and are provided free-of-charge to callers. Since the availability of kosher products is not as up-to-par in some Eastern European countries as in the West, questions from there can concern, for instance, how to *kasher* chickens. A rav will then walk callers through the salting process. A German woman wanted to know what to do with her food after accidentally infusing it with non-kosher wine vinegar, which she understood to be *yayin nesech*. Before Rosh Hashanah, a desperate call arrived from Ukraine. Because his flight was delayed, the caller ended up arriving in Ukraine a half hour before Shabbat. He was on his way to Uman, which was a three-hour drive away. It was not safe for him to remain at the airport. Can he hire a non-Jewish taxi driver to drive him to Uman? Should he pay him in advance? What should he do with his suitcases?

It's been over four years since Harav Shushan's dream of a Halacha Hotline was actualized; it addresses every aspect of Sephardi life. Whether it's pertaining to issues of halacha, or online Torah classes, Rav Shushan is constantly on the run, deeply grateful for a project whose success has far exceeded his wildest dreams.





SEPHARDIC HALACHA  
INTERNATIONAL HOTLINE



# Introducing The Sephardic Halacha Hotline

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- Kashrut
- Blessings
- Holidays
- Money Matters
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According to the rulings of  
Maran Rabbeinu Ovadia Yosef zt"l

NO QUESTION TOO SMALL.  
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The *Sephardic Halacha Hotline* was founded in memory  
of Maran *Rabbeinu Ovadia Yosef zt"l* in 2014.

- Over 1 Million calls have been answered within the last year.
- Over 150 Rabbi's are available to answer Halacha Questions
- Professional high level quality service

### *Endorsed By:*

- Harav Yitzchak Yosef Shlita
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- Harav Zamir Cohen Shlita
- Harav Yaakov Shkenazy Shlita
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- And More...
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