**Handwritten Works of Mysterious Intellectual Giant, Elie Wiesel’s Teacher,
Opened to the Public for the First Time**

By: Zack Rothbart, the National Library of Israel

“His birthplace was, now Marrakech, now Vilna, then Kishinev, Safed, Calcutta, or Florence.” Very little is known or agreed upon regarding “Monsieur Chouchani”, a mysterious and almost mythically brilliant man who served as the personal, influential teacher to Elie Wiesel, Emmanuel Levinas, and other leading 20th century Jewish intellectual figures. Monsieur Chouchani reportedly knew the entire Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and countless other texts by heart. Prof. Shalom Rosenberg was Mr. Chouchani’s student at the time of his death, and recently donated 50 of his teacher’s notebooks to the National Library of Israel, where they are available to the general and scholarly public for the first time. The notebooks are full of thoughts and musings, concrete ideas in the realms of Jewish thought and other fields, memory exercises, mathematical formulas and more. Extremely difficult to decipher, a handful of scholars have been given access to some of the writings in recent years and they will now be open to the public for the first time. Scholars believe that the notebooks will reveal some potentially groundbreaking ideas and teachings related to Jewish thought and texts.

Chouchani’s control of language also boggled the minds of those who knew him. Wiesel poetically recalled: “He had mastered some thirty ancient and modern languages, including Hindi and Hungarian. His French was pure, his English perfect, and his Yiddish harmonized with the accent of whatever person he was speaking with. The Vedas and the Zohar he could recite by heart. A wandering Jew, he felt at home in every culture.” Chouchani’s travels brought him throughout Europe, the United States, allegedly to North Africa and elsewhere, including Mandatory Palestine and the young State of Israel where for a few months in the late 1950s, he wandered among religious kibbutzim sharing his knowledge and perhaps gaining some too. Ultimately, he landed in Uruguay and died there on January 26, 1968.

According to Dr. Yoel Finkelman, curator of the NLI's Haim and Hanna Salomon Judaica Collection, “There is no more suitable place for Mr. Chouchani’s archive than at the National Library, whose role is to preserve and make available to the public the intellectual and cultural treasures of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. We consider it of paramount importance to bring to the public’s attention the story of one of the most mysterious and influential figures in twentieth-century Jewish thought.” A live Zoom event in French exploring the collection and Mr. Shushani will be held on May 9, 2022, 19:00 French time (20:00 Israel time). Speakers include Prof. Shmuel Wigoda, Prof. Sandrine Szwarc, and Prof. Joelle Hanesselle. Free registration through the National Library of Israel's website: ……………………………………..

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Chouchani left notebooks and letters crowded with secrets. Dozens of these books are now deposited at the National Library of Jerusalem. Following the deposit of his notebooks, scholars, teachers, and artists will speak about the figure and writing of Monsieur Chouchani.