
Family Tradition

The 15th of Tam-muz marks the 248th *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Chaim ben Moshe Atar, who was born in 1696 (5456) and passed away in 1743 (5503). He is better known to us by the name of his classic Torah commentary, *Ohr HaChaim*.

Open a Chumash and you'll find his numerous commentaries, known for their deep thinking and mysticism.

Chaim was born to Moshe ben Atar in Sali, Morocco. Much of his childhood he spent under the guidance of his grandfather, also named Chaim ben Atar, in Sali. (In many Sephardic communities, children are named after living relatives.) The elder Chaim ben Atar headed a yeshiva and also ran a business with his brother Shem Tov, who lived in the neighboring city of

By RABBI CHAYIM S. CHASAN

Meknes.

The grandfather dispensed his wealth freely in order to support the poor and to establish learning centers throughout the diaspora. He relied on Shem Tov to run the family business.

The elder Chaim ben Atar was an energetic and indeed extraordinary man, who devoted hours to Torah study and the welfare of the Jewish people. In the middle of the night he would sit at his desk and weep loudly over the loss of the Holy Temple. His voice was so loud that it could be heard by his neighbors. The suffering of the Jews never escaped his mind.

His son, Moshe, was also a Torah scholar, who helped Shem Tov run the family business. Imitating his father, Rabbi Moshe left his house

open to guests and his pocketbook open to Jewish causes.

In this home young Chaim was raised. He grew extremely close to his grandfather, whose nocturnal weeping constantly awoke him. The two learned Torah together, often until dawn, exposing young Chaim to great holiness. So much did he emulate his grandfather that he too began to shed bitter tears at night, feeling his grandfather's sorrow over the diaspora. And young Chaim resolved that, when he grew up, he would do whatever possible to end the suffering. He would fall asleep crying on his pillow and dream of Jerusalem and the rebuilt Holy Temple.

Morocco was a haven for Jews. Still, their status, to a large degree, depended on local whims: when the economy was good, the Jews fared well; but when the royal treasury ran out of funds, the Jews were the first

to pay the heavy fines and taxes. Those who couldn't were imprisoned, and their belongings were confiscated.

At the time young Chaim was born, life for Sali's Jews was generally good. It took a turn for the worse, however, nine years later, and the Jews confronted the choice of paying up or moving out. They chose the latter; some, fearing for their lives, literally left everything behind and fled. Among them was the Atar family; they escaped to Meknes, the residence of Shem Tov and the family business.

Although the elder Chaim had planned to live with his brother, the town's Jewish leader, Rabbi Moshe De Avila, heard of his coming and found very suitable housing for him. The whole town rejoiced over having such a *tzaddik* in their midst. Immediately Shmuel, the scholarly son of Rabbi Moshe De Avila, became an avid student of the elderly Chaim ben Atar. The two of them tutored young Chaim, who listened eagerly to their learning and

who at twelve had already gained a reputation for Torah mastery. Eventually Shmuel became young Chaim's brother-in-law, by marrying his sister.

The Atar family spent two-and-a-half years in Meknes, until they received word that it was safe to return to Sali. Rabbi Shmuel remained in Meknes, where he became *rosh hayeshiva* and supplanted his ailing father as community leader.

to Sali, where he and his students learned under guidance of the elder Rabbi Chaim. Together with his grandson Rabbi Chaim returned to Meknes after the death of Shem Tov, and helped Shem Tov's son, who, like Chaim's son, was also named Moshe, manage the family business.

Shem Tov's son knew well the family tradition of hospitality, and, like the members of Rabbi Chaim's family, his own family was taught to

practice it. Moshe's daughter, Patzoniah, rose early to help her mother prepare for their guests' needs. One day she approached her father and asked if it would be permitted for her to don *tallis* and *tefillin* so that she could pray with greater concentration. Rabbi Moshe permitted her to wear the ritual objects, despite the fact that they were usually worn only by men.

The elder Rabbi Chaim saw that this girl, young Chaim's second cousin, would make a perfect wife for

the budding scholar. With the agreement of her father the match was made.



In the middle of the night he would sit at his desk and weep loudly over the loss of the Holy Temple.

Eventually the tables were turned, and the city of Meknes began to oppress its Jews. Rabbi Shmuel fled

◆
The grandson settled in Meknes, where he became spiritual leader and received numerous visitors from

other communities. About this time he began writing the works that would make him famous.

Though steeped in learning,

young Chaim had acquired a valuable lesson from his grandfather regarding the importance of supporting anyone who thirsted for Torah. Although

Eagerly the messenger approached him with the offer.



Though known for the support of his scholars (see this month's story "The Silence and the Exile"), Rabbi Chaim ben Atar directed plenty of attention to the needy as well. From his relatives he learned to cherish the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim* [hospitality]. Guests were no strangers to him; so desirous was he of their company that he went out of his way to find them and despaired when he didn't.

It happened that one *erev*

Pesach there were no guests in town. Even the poor beggars had returned to their homes for the holiday. Anxiously the Ohr HaChaim sent messengers to scour the area for anyone who might need a place to stay.

The messengers probed the entire length and width of the town. Finally one of them came to the edge of a cemetery, where a Jew was sobbing.

Eagerly the messenger approached him with the offer of his master. But to no avail. The Jew

Mutual

growled, "Leave me alone! Go away! I want to die!"

"Come with me to the house of Rabbi Chaim ben Atar," the messenger wheedled sympathetically. "He will comfort you."

But the Jew refused, and finally the messenger returned empty-handed to Rabbi Chaim. By then the Ohr HaChaim was pacing in utter frustration, having received word that no one needed a place for the holiday.

The messenger quietly mentioned the man in the cemetery. At once Rabbi Chaim hurried there, where he found the Jew, still sobbing.

The sage tried to speak with him, but the Jew refused to answer. Finally, after much prompting, he told his story:

He had left home, a neighboring city, some ten years earlier, because he had many children whom he was unable to feed. He had arrived in Europe, where distant relatives owned a business and employed him. There he had labored twenty hours a day, regularly sending home funds and saving up for the day when he himself could return, marry off his children properly, and live in

young Chaim received aid from his father and father-in-law, he believed that more money was needed in order to properly care for his students'

needs. Desiring to become self-sufficient, he began to learn jewelry-making, and in time became an expert craftsman. His skill at weaving gold

threads into clothing earned the attention of royalty, which flocked to him and paid him handsomely for his work.

Fortune

comfort.

At last the day came. The man converted all his savings into gold and boarded the ship, which took him to Sali. From there he would hire a driver to transport him to his home town.

As he stood on deck, watching the Sali port loom into view, a strong wind came, shaking and tilting the ship. In the turmoil the man's purse slipped out of his hand and fell overboard, where it vanished into the waves. Gone were not only the years of toil, but the funds given to him in trust by relatives of an orphan girl in his town, who needed a dowry in order to get married.

"I cannot return home," the Jew cried. "Better that I die here near the cemetery out of starvation. It is here where I shall spend Pesach, and nowhere else." With that he wept even more bitterly.

Listening to the man, the Ohr HaChaim melted in pity. "Come with me to the port," he said. "I promise you that all shall be well."

Trusting in the words of the holy man, the Jew followed.

Together with the messenger they came to a lonely part of the shore, where the Mediterranean Sea



Together with the messenger they came to a lonely part of the shore.

calmly rolled. Standing by the edge, Rabbi Chaim fixed his gaze on the sea and said, "You will soon see many treasures. But I warn you: You may take only what is yours."

The Jew agreed. Immediately the Ohr HaChaim swayed into a trance, mumbling and praying.

Suddenly, one by one, valuable objects emerged from the ocean spray: Jewelry, coins, even weapons floated on top — costly and dazzling. But none was theirs for the taking, as they were not part of the lost treasure.

Finally a purse appeared. It bobbed through the water, drifting

closer. In joy and relief the stranger rushed forward and scooped it up, he thanked Rabbi Chaim and the heavens, praising his good fortune.

"My family!" he declared. "I must hurry to them!"

Then he stopped. "The hour is already late. I will never make it home in time for Pesach."

"Would you like to spend the holiday with me?" Rabbi Chaim asked innocently.

The Jew agreed. And it was a happy holiday indeed for him, as well as for the Ohr HaChaim.

Although his considerable talents might have made him wealthy, the man who would become known as the Ohr HaChaim preferred to devote only a few hours a day to work. The rest of the time he spent on Torah.

There is a story that he even turned down an offer to work for the royal family. As a wedding approached, the royal women desired to have their dresses woven spectacularly in gold and silver. Informed of this expert young Jew, they rushed their clothing to him and offered him incredible riches should he complete the job by the appointed hour.

Without hesitation Rabbi Chaim told the messenger: "I'm sorry, but I've already made all the money I need for this month. Therefore, I have no time to do any more work."

The messenger pleaded, but to no avail, and he returned to the royal family. The family, surprised and furious, commanded that the rabbi be brought to court and placed in the palace, surrounded by hungry lions. Should he not change his mind, the lions would decide for him.

When the message was conveyed, Rabbi Chaim quietly took his *tallis* and *tefillin* and told his wife he would return shortly.

He reached the palace. There he was thrown into a roped-off area which he shared with the King of Beasts. The lions roared ferociously over their potential dinner, while around them spectators waited.

The lions were released. They rushed toward the Jew, snarling. Then they stopped, and like pussy cats curled themselves around him, as if to protect him.

When the news was brought to the royal family, they hurried to see this miracle with their own eyes. So

awed were they by the grandeur of this *tzaddik* that they showered him with gifts and escorted him home.

Although Rabbi Chaim himself escaped the harassment with his life, his father-in-law Moshe did not. When Rabbi Chaim was 29 years old, the governor of Meknes arrested Rabbi Moshe for alleged tax evasion and had him tried in a kangaroo court (a court where the decision has been reached even before the case is tried, and the trial is just a charade).

Since Moshe could not pay the fantastically huge fines, he was tossed in prison, where he stayed until he eventually died.

Not content with humiliating Moshe, the governor had his home and business confiscated. Rabbi Chaim was thrown out into the street. He returned to Sali where, with the financial help of his father, he reestablished a yeshiva. Soon his beloved grandfather passed away, and young Rabbi Chaim had to take

Terms Of Agreement



ot long before he passed away, the Ohr HaChaim told his wife Patzoniah that, after his death, a wealthy man would approach her and ask for his *tefillin*. This man would offer a very high price.

Rabbi Chaim permitted his wife to sell the holy object. But he added: "You must stipulate one condition with the man. He must never think a strange thought or forget for one moment that he is wearing the *tefillin*." Shortly later he died.

To her amazement, Patzoniah was indeed approached by a wealthy man, from the city of Kushta, who struck up the deal with her. He agreed to her terms, and the sale was made.

When the man returned home, he continued wearing the *tefillin* daily, concentrating only on prayer and sacred matters. The *tefillin* had a wonderful effect, constantly uplifting the man and inspiring him with holiness.

One day, while the man had on the *tefillin*, a house servant came in with an urgent matter. Despite the master's gestures to be left alone, the servant persisted. The man then listened to the matter, mumbled a quick answer, and motioned for the servant to leave.

He tried to return to his holy thoughts. But though this incident with

charge of the students and the community.

Not long afterward, his father also died. Reluctantly Rabbi Chaim became embroiled in a family dispute over the inheritance; he came out with very little.

In the meantime fierce wars between the Arabs and the Berbers began, and Jews from both sides suffered. (The Berbers were a North African people who practiced the Muslim faith.) The Jews were

vandalized and brutalized, and their possessions were confiscated to aid the war effort.



This culmination of events prompted Rabbi Chaim to make his last great decision. He would leave Morocco for good and settle in the Land of Israel, where he would realize his youthful dream. He had heard that the community of Tiberias, on the Sea of Kinneret, had been reestablished, and was hopeful that

settlement in the Holy Land was possible.

The trip was begun in 1739, and Rabbi Chaim, along with his disciples, reached the city of Leghorn, in Italy. His Torah classes were extremely popular there, and it was often hard to find seats for his lectures, due to the large crowd that attended.

Rabbi Chaim urged the Jews of Italy to settle in the Land of Israel, saying that "he who has ideals will immigrate and inherit the land."

Rabbi Chaim and about 30 of his friends finally reached Palestine in the summer of 1741, arriving in the port town of Acre. There was a great epidemic in Jerusalem at the time, and Rabbi Chaim did not wish to risk losing his students, so he founded a yeshiva in Acre. A year later he moved to Peki'in, and afterwards to Jerusalem. In the Holy City he set up the Midrash Kneset Israel Yeshiva. There were two branches—one for younger students and the other for advanced scholars. The latter branch did not focus so much on the Talmud and its traditional commentaries; its main focus was the halachic codes, such as the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* and the *Shulchan Aruch*.

Ironically, Rabbi Chaim ben Moshe Atar did not live much longer; ten months after arriving in Jerusalem his soul left this world and his body was laid to rest at the Mount of Olives.

His legacy included many famed students, such as Rabbi Chaim David Azulai (the Chida), and a number of great works, such as the *Ohr HaChaim*.

Rabbi Chaim Atar had no sons, only daughters, and so his name was carried on by the students of his many works. JR



One day, while the man had on the tefillin, a house servant came in with an urgent matter.

the servant had lasted scarcely a few minutes, the holy feeling had dissipated.

Suspecting that the lapse had caused the tefillin to become unfit, the master brought them to a *sofer* for examination. He and the *sofer* opened up the tefillin and, to their amazement, found the parchment completely blank! Not one letter was on it.

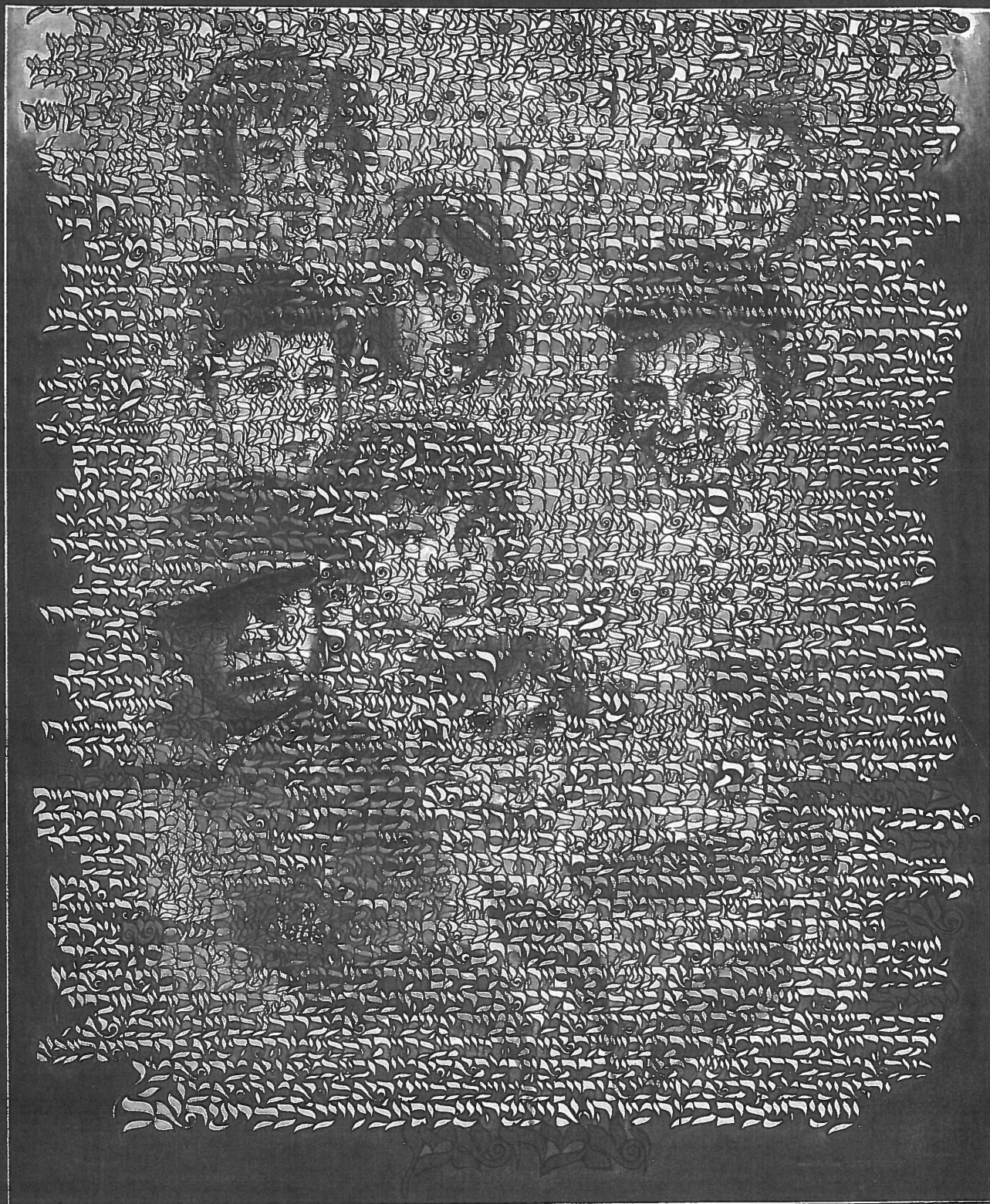
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exile.

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TO OUR READERS

Most of us would agree that *lashon hara*, slanderous talk, is a terrible sin. At the same time, most of us would agree that avoiding *lashon hara* is one of the hardest rules to keep.

We find ourselves confronted with this problem on a daily basis; even in casual conversation with our friends, the talk often turns to who did what to whom.

The current issue of *The Jewish Reader* is dedicated to the subject of proper speech. In "The Silence and the Exile," the famous Ohr HaChaim must face up to this issue. And in "Just Between Friends," a Writing Contest winner, the girls of Camp Shalom find that *lashon hara* is a destructive force in their lives.

As the months of summer vacation begin, perhaps we will all devote ourselves to improving our manner of speaking — remembering that a few ugly words can translate to a lifetime of hatred.

In Tammuz, the Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem, on their way to destroy the second *Bais HaMikdash*. Our Sages teach that the Second Temple was destroyed because of *sinas chinam*, needless hatred among fellow Jews, an example being the *lashon hara* told by Bar Kamtza to the Roman government.

Let us pray for love among Jews and for the arrival of the Mashiach and the building of the third *Bais HaMikdash*.

We wish all our readers a happy and healthy summer!

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High Praise

I love *The Jewish Reader*. My brothers and sisters fight over reading it first. I look forward to getting it.

Bluma Marcus
Los Alamitos, CA

I have been reading your magazine for about two years. Your articles are very enjoyable, especially

those about our Sages. These articles really inspire me. Please keep it up.

Miriam Newman
Brooklyn, NY

Our cover this month combines two themes: the destruction of the Temple and the Holocaust. The faces of children who perished in the Holocaust are superimposed on the walls of Jerusalem.

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