

Weekly Biography

15 Tammuz, 5503/1743

Harav Chaim Ibn Atar, zt"l, the Ohr Hachaim

Harav Chaim ben Moshe Ibn Atar, zt"l, was born in the city of Sale, Morocco, in 5456/1696, to a family of *mekubalim* and great *talmidei chachamim*. He learned Torah mainly from his grandfather, also named Rav Chaim Ibn Atar.

Rav Chaim's father-in-law was a very wealthy man who supported those who spent their time learning Torah. He even established a yeshivah for poor scholars who could not afford to attend the regular yeshivah. Rav Chaim spent his days learning Torah in his father-in-law's house and never had to worry about money or any material needs.

Rav Chaim traveled from Sale to Meknes to Fez and then to Tetouan. In every place that he stayed, Rav Chaim made sure to spend his time learning Torah. He supported the *talmidei chachamim* and the poor. After traveling for some time, Rav Chaim decided that he would move to Eretz Yisrael. On his way there, he stopped in Livorno, Italy, and stayed for some time. He published many *sefarim* and enlisted yeshivah students to join him in Eretz Yisrael.

In the beginning of the winter of 5501/1741, Rav Chaim and his entourage arrived on the shores of Akko. He traveled through Teveria, where he was offered the chance to establish his yeshivah and become head of the *kehillah*. Rav Chaim refused and continued on to Yerushalayim, where he established Yeshivas Knesses Yisrael. Many great *talmidei chachamim* came to him to hear him speak about Torah and he became known as the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh. His great *sefer*, with commentaries on the Torah, was published there as well. It has been reprinted many times and has been greatly admired throughout the generations, and numerous commentaries have been written on it.

Rav Chaim also wrote the *sefer Pri To'ar*, which introduced new and insightful explanations on the *Shulchan Aruch*, as well as two popular *sefarim*, *Rishon Letzion* and *Chefetz Hashem*. Rav Chaim's disciple, the Chida,

wrote that as profound as the Ohr Hachaim's written works were, "they revealed but a tenth of his wisdom... and wherever he went, an aura of holiness surrounded him."

Rav Chaim Ibn Atar was *niftar* on 15 Tammuz 5503/1743, at the age of 47. He was buried outside the walls of the Old City of Yerushalayim, on Har Hazeisim. Before the Six Day War, in 1967, when the Jordanians had control over the cemetery where Rav Chaim was buried, they destroyed many *matzeivos* in the process of paving a new road. When the tractor touched the *kever* of the Ohr Hachaim, it overturned and the driver was killed. They tried a second time, and again the tractor overturned, killing the second driver. Someone tried to use a hammer on the *kever*, but the hammer turned on him and he too was killed. Finally, the *kever* was left intact.

In the Lion's Den

The governor of Sale, Morocco, where Rav Chaim lived, was marrying off his daughter. The governor's entire family bought expensive clothing and sent them to Rav Chaim to weave gold threads into the material.

He said to them, "Every month I work just enough for my livelihood, and the rest of the time I devote to Torah study. This month, I have already earned enough money for my livelihood. I will not be working again until next month."

"No," they replied. The wedding would be taking place that very month — they needed the material decorated immediately. Rav Chaim still refused the job, and he returned to his studies.

When word got back to the governor that Rav Chaim had refused to perform the work for his daughter's wedding, he was incensed. He ordered his servants to starve the lions that he kept in his courtyard and sent a warning to Rav Chaim that if he did not accept the job at once, he would be cast into the den with the hungry lions. The Rav ignored the warning and contin-

ued learning.

The governor's men eventually came and forced Rav Chaim from his home. They threw him into the lions' den, where he sat amidst the lions, reciting *Tehillim* in a sweet, pleasant voice. The lions formed a circle around him, watching him and listening to his chanting. The astounded servants quickly reported what was happening, and the governor came to see the amazing scene with his own eyes.

As soon as he looked into the den and witnessed for himself the breathtaking sight of Rav Chaim intoning the words of *Tehillim* peacefully, surrounded by the calmed (starving!) beasts, he ordered that Rav Chaim be lifted out of the den. When Rav Chaim stood before him again, safe and well, the powerful man begged this great leader for forgiveness and showered him with gifts.

Thus was fulfilled the *passuk* "And your fear and intimidation will be cast over all the beasts of the land." *Chazal* teach us that anyone within whom the image of Hashem rests in totality instills fear upon the animals: "And no animal overcomes a person unless he appears to the animal as another animal" (*Shabbos* 151b). The *mefarshim* explain that this refers to a person who has lost his *tzelem Elokim*, his G-dly image.

A Present for the Sultan

The vizier of Morocco hated the Jewish people, but although he was very powerful, he could do nothing. The sultan showed favor toward his Jewish subjects and would not let the wicked vizier harm them. The cruel viceroy had no choice but to impatiently bide his time and wait for an opportunity to arise.

Eventually, the sultan decided to travel to the distant provinces of his land, and he left his vizier in charge of affairs. The vizier immediately prepared and executed a trumped-up charge against the Jews of the capital and incited the Moslem populace to attack the Jewish quarter. The bloodthirsty Arabs did not need

much of an excuse to commit violence — especially against the Jews.

The sultan, meanwhile, had reached the city of Meknes, where Rav Chaim lived. Rav Chaim knew of the danger threatening his brethren and hoped that he could help to avert it. He went to the palace where the sultan was staying and asked for an audience, but he was refused.

"Tell the king that I have brought him a gift for his birthday, but that I insist on giving it to him personally," Rav Chaim beseeched the guards. The sultan, his curiosity aroused, gave instructions for the Jew to be brought before him. Rav Chaim bowed respectfully and took out a small mirror from his case.

"This is my gift to His Majesty," he announced. "It is a mirror with special powers. Please look into it, and tell me what you see."

The sultan gazed into the small looking glass and his eyes grew round with wonder. There was the capital, his palace, his throne — and the vizier sitting on it as if he were the sultan himself! A heavy scowl suffused the features of the sultan as he ordered his servants to prepare for his immediate return home.

The sultan arrived at the palace just in time to prevent a massacre of the Jewish community. In a fit of fury, he slew his rebellious vizier, and the Jews of Morocco breathed freely once more, thanking Hashem for the great miracle that He had performed for them.

When a Tzaddik Decrees

When the Turkish governor of the province decided one day that he required some extra funds, he demanded that the Jews pay a sudden, inordinately high tax. An urgent, secret meeting was organized in the Karaite *beis haknesses*. As the *beis haknesses* had literally been built underground, everyone agreed it would be the safest, most unobtrusive place to hold the meeting.

At the appointed time, the leaders of the community filed

down the steps. As Rav Chaim descended, he slipped and fainted on one of the stairs. Those present laid him on the floor and tried to revive him. Some reasoned that because of his immense *kedushah*, he had fainted in a place built by people who advocated a philosophy diametrically opposed to Torah. The Karaites believed in the Written Torah but blatantly disregarded and ridiculed any belief in the Oral Tradition or in *Chazal*.

While waiting for Rav Chaim to revive, his colleagues searched the area around the step where he had slipped. They discovered underneath it a volume of the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*. The Karaites had secretly planted it there so that the *chachamim* would unknowingly trample over it.

When Rav Chaim regained consciousness, he denounced the Karaites and decreed that as a punishment, they would be responsible for paying the full tax demanded by the mayor. Furthermore, he cursed them that they would never have a tenth man to make a *minyán*. From that day on, whenever a newcomer joined their ranks, a veteran member died.

Nearly a hundred years later, in 5594/1834, twenty Karaite families emigrated from Russia to Yerushalayim. As soon as they entered the gates of the city, all the men became deathly ill and died. People then recalled the curse that Rav Chaim had placed on the sect and gave praise to Hashem — for "when a *tzaddik* makes a decree, Hashem fulfills it."

The British consul, James Finn, likewise recorded in 1853, "It was a judgment from Heaven on the Karaites that they were never able to muster a prayer quorum."

Seudah Shelishis of the Baal Shem Tov

The founder of the Chassidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov, maintained that if he could join forces with the Ohr Hachaim, together they could bring Moshiach. The Baal Shem Tov made several attempts to reach Eretz Yisrael, all of which failed. On the day that Rav Chaim came to Yerushalayim, the Baal Shem Tov told his chassidim, "Today Moshiach ben Yosef entered Yerushalayim."

Rav Chaim was *niftar* at *Minchah* time on Shabbos *Parashas Pinchas*. At that exact moment, the Baal Shem Tov was eating *seudah shelishis*, and he cried out, "The western candle has been extinguished!"

After Shabbos was over he explained, "The *tzaddik* in the west, Rav Chaim, left the world, and here is the proof. There is one secret about *netilas yadayim* which is revealed to only one person in each generation. The secret was known only to Rav Chaim. When I washed my hands for *seudah shelishis*, that secret



Shaar Blatt of Chafetz Hashem



Shaar Blatt of Ohr Hachaim



The kever of the Ohr Hachaim