

Ohr Ha'Chayim Ha'Kadosh



People of the Book – 12/10/13
Boca Raton Synagogue
Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

R' Chayim b. Moshe Attar



- ❧ Lived from 1696-1743
- ❧ Born in Sale, Morocco to an illustrious family descended from Spanish exiles.
- ❧ Attar means perfume merchant
- ❧ He studied with his grandfather and writes,
“I studied Torah with my teacher and grandfather, Rav Haim Ben Attar of holy and blessed memory. He was a great Rav, well known, pious and humble, from whom I drank living waters. From my birth, I grew up on his knees and took in all his wondrous sayings. He was so pious that I would say that he almost never slept even half a night.”

From his introduction to his sefer, Cheifetz Hashem



R' Chayim b. Moshe Attar



- ❧ Married into wealthy family and studied for a few years until his father in law died.
- ❧ Settled in Meknes to work with his brother in law after his father in law died.
- ❧ Economic crisis, plagues and famines forced him to relocate several times.



Leaving For Israel



- ❧ Political unrest inspired R' Chaim to move to Israel.
- ❧ He became excited to join R' Chayim Abulafia in his new community in Teveria.
- ❧ He wanted to build a Yeshiva for Jews from the diaspora to come to Israel in an effort to bring Moshiach.
- ❧ In his introduction to Chumash he writes:
"*Hashem* enlightened my mind's eye to rise up and go to the land of the Divine Presence, the city dearly loved by the Master of the Universe. I strengthened myself and armed myself and endured great dangers traveling through deserts to arrive here."

Leghorn/ Livorno



- ❧ He arrived to Leghorn/Livorno, Italy in 1739.
- ❧ He garnered a big following of those eager for his strong sermons and teachings.
- ❧ R' Chaim traveled across Italy to Venice, Ferrara, Modena, Reggio and Mantua encouraging Italian Jewry to make aliyah to Israel.
- ❧ He raised large sums of money to publish his books.
- ❧ In 1741, two years after arriving, he and a group of 30 disciples from Morocco and Italy set sail to Israel to found a yeshiva there.



Akko



- ❧ They arrived in Akko/ Acre 4 days before Rosh Hashana in 1742.
- ❧ They spent Yom Kippur in the cave of Eliyahu Ha'Navi on Har Ha'Carmel (Haifa).
- ❧ Hearing about epidemics in Yerushalayim, R' Chaim decided to establish a temporary yeshiva in Akko.
- ❧ Two students died and R' Chaim attributed it to Akko being outside halachic boundaries of Israel.
- ❧ He moved the yeshiva to Peki'in until he was ready to move to Yerushalayim.

Yerushalayim



- ✧ Established the Knesses Yisroel Yeshiva and a second secretive yeshiva for Kabbalah.
- ✧ In addition to intense study, the yeshiva students spent their nights in prayer for the redemption and engaged in ascetic practices.
- ✧ In a letter, R' Chaim describes joy in coming to Yerushalayim:

“I saw a great light at the time of Kol Nidre...and when I opened the heichal, it was truly like opening the gates of Gan Eden. There was such radiance in the synagogue that everyone was overflowing in supplications and abundantly crying in their desire to see the construction of the Temple. Believe me, I have never seen such a thing in my entire life.”

Chida



- ❧ One of his closest disciples was the Chida (1724-1806), R' Chaim Dovid Yosef Azulai who was only 18 at the time.
- ❧ Chida was a Kohen – Azulai is the acronym of "isha zona vachalala lo yikachu."
- ❧ In his Sheim Ha'Gedolim he writes,

“And myself the youngster, I had the merit to be part of his yeshiva. My eyes saw the greatness of his Torah, his extreme gentleness, and his extraordinary holiness. The Rav had impressive strength in study for our generation; he was like a source of living waters. One perceives his wisdom in his books, yet this represents only a fraction of his insight, the greatness of his heart, and his exceptionally sharp mind. All day long there hovered over him a spirit of holiness and detachment from the world, as well as an exceptional spiritual strength.”

Ohr Ha'Chaim's Death



- ❧ R' Chaim died on the 15th of Tammuz, 1743, at 47 years old.
- ❧ He died approximately one year after arriving in Yerushalayim.
- ❧ He died during mincha time of Shabbos, Parshas Pinchas. At that moment, far away, the Ba'al Shem Tov told his students, "the western candle has been extinguished."
- ❧ He is buried on Har Ha'Zeisim, the Mount of Olives.



Ohr Ha'Chaim Shul



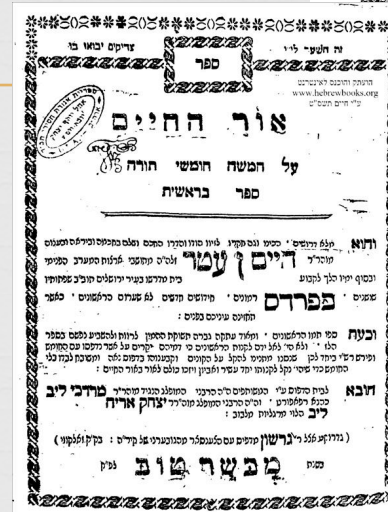
- ❧ Building that housed the yeshiva today has a Shul on the 2nd floor called Ohr Ha'Chaim Synagogue.
- ❧ It remains active today as an Ashkenazi shul, though he was Sefardic.
- ❧ In 1534, the Ari"zal was born on the lower floor of the same building.



Works



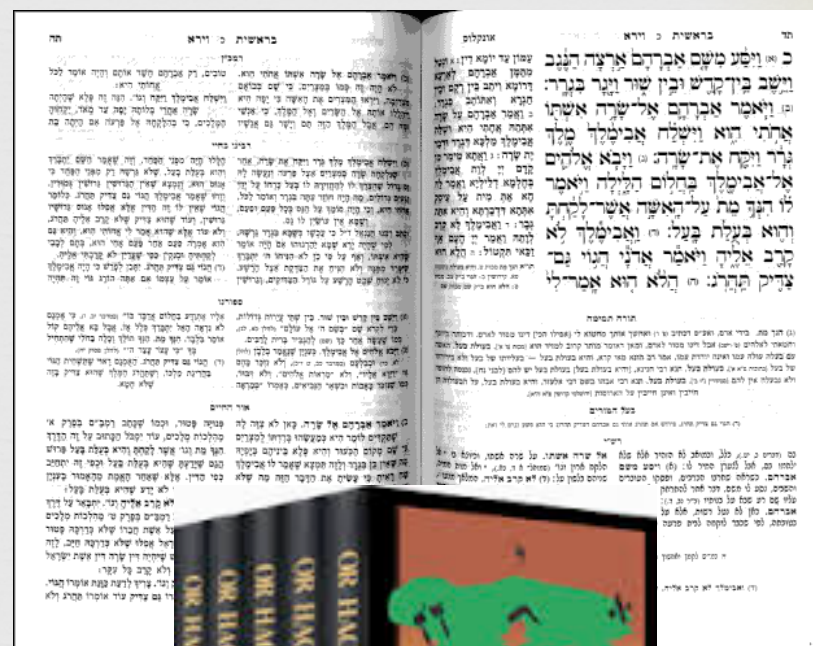
- ✧ In 1732, while still living in Sale, his book **Chefetz Hashem**, a commentary on the Gemara was printed in Amsterdam.
- ✧ **Ohr Ha'Chaim** was first published in Venice in 1742.
- ✧ **Peri To'ar**, a commentary on Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dei'ah was published in Amsterdam in 1742.
- ✧ **Rishon L'Tziyon** on Nach, published in Constantinople, 1750



Ohr Ha'Chaim



- Published in 1742 alongside Chumash, Rashi and Onkelus.
- Was included in standard Mikra'os Gedolos displacing early medieval commentaries.
- Became extremely popular among Chassidim in particular, many of whom study the parsha each week with the Ohr Ha'Chaim
- English addition



Ohr Ha'Chaim and Besht



- ✧ In aftermath of Shabbtai Tzvi controversy, Jewish community is devastated. Tremendous split between the scholars and the ignorant. Many are pious but illiterate.
- ✧ R. Yisroel ben Eliezer (1698–1760), known as the Ba'al Shem Tov or Besht lived in Ukraine and becomes known as a healer and miracle worker.
- ✧ He was amazingly sincere and sought to elevate the spirituality of the masses. He taught that true service of Hashem is not only about learning and scholarship, but about faith, trust, sincere love and passionate prayer.
- ✧ He settled in the town of Medzhybizh in the Ukraine and from there he spreads Chassidus in a systematic fashion.



Ohr Ha'Chaim and Besht



❧ Chida writes in his Sheim Ha'Gedolim:

“We have heard that in Poland, they hold it in high esteem and it has been printed two more times. And this was inspired by the pious and holy rabbi, our master R. Yisroel Ba'al Shem Tov, having spoken of the great soul of our aforesaid master, R. Chaim.”

❧ R. Yisroel of Ruzhin (1796-1850), in 1849 endorsed a special printing of Ohr Ha'Chaim and is quoted by his son, R. Dovid Moshe of Czortkov as saying:

“Just as in earlier times the holy Zohar had the capacity to purify the soul, today, study of the holy Ohr Ha'Chaim on the Torah as the capacity to purify the soul.”

Ohr Ha'Chaim - Sefardim



✧ R. Yitzchak Yehudah Yechiel Safrin of Komarno (1806-1874) wrote in his Netiv Mitzvosecha:

“One who accepts a single commandment in faith is worthy of having the holy spirit alight upon him...and for that reason, God sets against him wicked accusers who scorn him...as they did the holy rabbi, our Rabbi Chaim ben Atar, who was scorned by some accursed one who said: ‘you are a deceiver and a hypocrite.’ And to this day, the stupid and foolish among his countrymen scorn him... but our teacher the Besht said of our holy rabbi the Ohr HaChaim that his soul has the spirit of Dovid from the world of emanation.”

✧ In 1870, R. Yechezkel Shraga Halberstam (1818-1898), son of R. Chaim of Sanz, went to the grave of the Ohr Ha'Chaim on his yahrzeit. He was shocked to find no sefardim present. [Sefer Ma'seot Yerushalayim p. 95]

Overview of Ohr Ha'Chaim



❧ R' Chaim writes in his introduction:

“God’s Torah lay written before me; it awakened me and gave me expression. It illuminated my soul in the sweetest of lights, and my soul felt as if she had seen its secrets. She will eat and become sated of its savory delights, though many remain yet untasted; in the light of the countenance of the living King.”

❧ His explanations are verbose, generated by stylistic and grammatical questions or textual contradictions.

❧ He believes a verses peshat, plain meaning and Kabblaistic and mystical interpretations are equally true and relevant.

❧ Unlike most early commentaries, he often offers multiple interpretations. Multiple truths [Bereishis 3:11]

Overview of Ohr Ha'Chaim



- ❧ Later commentators are generally less daring and novel than the medieval ones and show a great deference to them.
- ❧ Ohr Ha'Chaim is a bold exception as he is not afraid to disagree and reject interpretations of great authorities and respected commentaries. [See handout, Vayikra 26:40]
- ❧ He notes that Chazal often gave homiletical interpretations that contradict the simple meaning. In some instances he accepts their interpretation and in others he insists the verse be understood according to its peshat, its simple meaning.
- ❧ As long as the interpretation doesn't effect halacha, commentators have freedom. [See handout, Bereishis 46:8]

Overview of Ohr Ha'Chaim

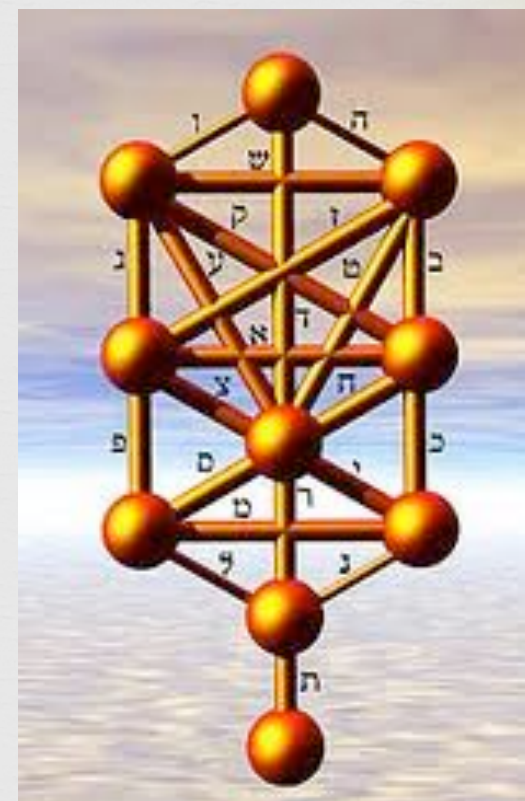


- ❧ He invokes the four ways of interpretations – pardes
 - ❧ Peshat, remez, derash, sod corresponding with asiya, beriya, yetsira and atsilus [Shemos 32:6]
- ❧ Not afraid to argue with Rashi [See handout Bereishis 7:5, Devarim 2:20], Ibn Ezra [Bereishis 38:1], Ramban as well.
- ❧ In truth, he doesn't mention them often and explains why in his introduction. [See handout, v'kidamti] He wanted to avoid plagiarism so only looked at their commentary carefully after writing his.

Ohr Ha'Chaim and Kabbalah



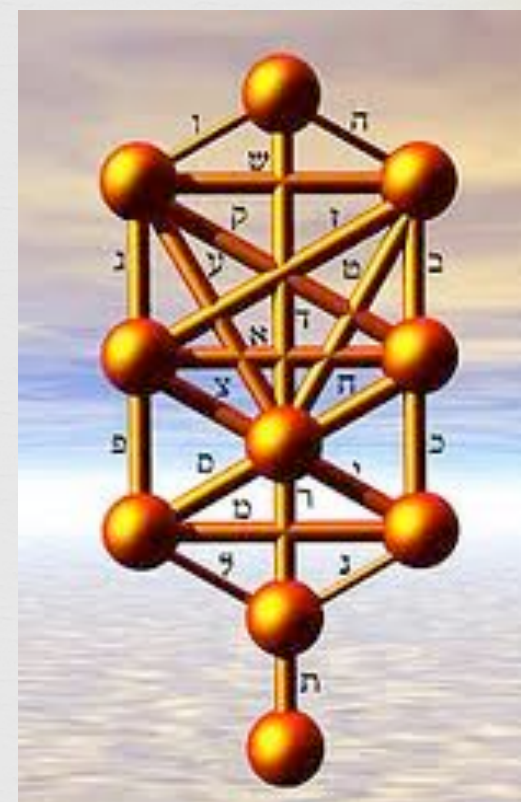
- ❧ By the early 18th century Kabbalah study was popular and permeated Jewish scholarship and Biblical commentary.
- ❧ One of R' Chaim's goals is to explain the mystical interpretation of the text. Can't find one page with Kabbalah in his commentary.
- ❧ Draws mostly from the Zohar which he cites as the teaching of Rav Shimon bar Yochai.
- ❧ He only references the Ari'zal directly a few times.
- ❧ Keeps it simple. Only one mention of Sefiros in all commentary.



Ohr Ha'Chaim and Kabbalah



- ⌘ Throughout Ohr Ha'Chaim one sees a concept of “divine immanence” in which the spiritual and physical are not entirely distinct but the physical is infused with spiritual energy. [Bereishis 2:1]
- ⌘ A complementary theme is the mandate to redeem the ‘sparks of holiness’ trapped in the physical world. [Bereishis 1:1]
- ⌘ Another theme is the love between the Divine and the Jewish people [Shemos 19:1]



Conclusion



- ❧ R' Chaim ben Attar led a life in motion and accomplished an incredible amount considering
- ❧ He was a scholar, a kabbalist, a Rosh Yeshiva and community leader.
- ❧ He was bold, creative, loyal, principled and mystical.

For Further Study



- ❧ “Or haHayyim: Creativity, Tradition, and Mysticism in the Torah Commentary of R’ Hayyim ibn Attar,” Ariel Evan Mayse, Conversations 2012
- ❧ “A Heretic Who Has No Faith in the Great Ones of the Age: The Clash Over the Honor of the Or Ha-Hayyim,” David Assaf, Modern Judaism, May 2009
- ❧ “Ohr Ha’Chayim, the Commentary of R’ Chaim ben Attar,” Dr. Chaim BenTov, Machanayim 4, Hebrew