

BIOGRAPHY OF THE CHOFETZ CHAIM

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Rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen Kagan is commonly known as the "Chafetz Chaim," the name of his famous work on guarding one's tongue. Born in Zhetel, Poland on February 6, 1838, he was taught until age 10 by his parents and then moved to Vilna to further his Jewish studies. Refusing the pulpit rabbinate, the Chafetz Chaim settled in Radin (Poland) and subsisted on a small grocery store which his wife managed and he did the "bookkeeping"-watching every penny to make sure that no one was cheated. He spent his days learning Torah and disseminating his knowledge to the common people.

As his reputation grew, students from all over Europe flocked to him and by 1869 his house became known as the Radin Yeshiva. In addition to his Yeshiva, the Chafetz Chaim was very active in Jewish causes. He traveled extensively (even in his 90s!) to encourage the observance of Mitzvos amongst Jews. One of the founders of Agudas Yisrael, the religious Jewish organization of Europe and later the world, the Chafetz Chaim was very involved in Jewish affairs and helped many yeshivos survive the financial problems of the interwar period. Exemplifying the verses in Psalms 34:13-14, "Who is the man who desires life...? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit," the Chafetz Chaim passed away in 1933 at the ripe age of 95.

The Chafetz Chaim's greatest legacy is the 21 sefarim (holy books) which he published. His first work, Sefer Chafetz Chaim (1873), is the first attempt to to organize and clarify the laws regarding evil talk and gossip. He later wrote other works, including Shmirat HaLashon, which emphasized the importance of guarding one's tongue by quoting our Sages. The Mishnah Brurah (1894-1907), his commentary on the Daily Laws of a Jew (his first series in the Shulchan Aruch), is found in many Jewish homes and is accepted universally to decide Halacha.

Firmly believing that he was living right before the time of Moshiach and the rebuilding of the Holy Temple, the Chafetz Chaim wrote a work that stressed the learning of laws concerning sacrifices, the Holy Temple, and related topics. He also published seforim to strengthen certain aspects of Jewish life including kashrus, family purity, and Torah study.

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