*Based on an address by* RABBI SHIMON SCHWAB שליט"א *at the 61st Annual Convention of Agudath Israel of America.* Rabbi Schwab is Rav of K'hal Adath Jeshurun in Washington Heights, New York.*

Photo: Aryeh Leib Karmel.

# A Shabbos With The Chofetz Chaim זצ"ל

### Only One Concern?

We live in times of terrible crises, political and spiritual. In spite of temporary lulls, *Klal Yisroel* has hardly any dependable friends in the entire world. Think of the *yishuv* in *Eretz Yisroel,* which is surrounded by hostile nations, whose lack of unity is all that prevents them from destroying the Jewish nation; think of the millions of Jews in Russia whose last spark of *Yiddishkeit* has been all but extinguished, held captive by a regime that refuses to let them out; think of all the other Jews in all the other lands, threatened by physical intimidation or spiritual annihilation. And think of the Jews in America, where one can learn Torah without disturbance, and the colossal spiritual crisis we are experiencing in this land of unfettered freedom.

Here we are—a thousand people, gathered together to address the problems facing *Klal Yisroel* and speak of the Chofetz Chaim who left this world over fifty years ago. Shivering in a spiritual freeze, groping in the darkness of our time—do we have nothing else on our minds but the Chofetz Chaim?

This brings to mind the humble Jew standing outside on a cold winter night to be *mekadesh levana*, blessing the new moon, saying a *tefilla* יה"ר למלאת פגימת הלבנה "May it be Your will . . . to fill the flaws of the moon." Does he have no other worries, nothing else to pray for? This Jew, who has no source of livelihood, is shivering on a dark night, and his only request to G-d is that He restore the moon to its original fullness! And, indeed, he need have no other worries, because when G-d does fill this flaw, it will be the time of *Moshiach* when the light of the moon will be like that of the sun . . . and then, all of his problems will be resolved.

We too may do well to concern ourselves with the Chofetz Chaim. Would we members of the Jewish world be worthy of it, we would again be privileged to have a Chofetz Chaim in our midst, fulfilling in our days the *tefilla,* "Restore our judges as before"—meaning one great *tzaddik* and *gaon* whom the whole world, not only segments of it, recognizes for his greatness! Under his leadership, all of our problems would indeed be resolved.

### The Insatiable Hunger

The widespread interest in the Chofetz Chaim that prevails in our community is undoubtedly an expression of the spiritual thirst that distinguishes us as a people (*Sanhedrin* 76b). A Jew can never be satiated with the

* supplemented by a personal interview with Rabbi Schwab.

spiritual creations of mankind, but remains thirsty for genuine fear of G-d and for fulfillment of His *mitzvos*. Some of us may not be aware of the nature of the thirst that plagues us, for we have a husk around our soul. But under the husk throbs a yearning that proclaims צמאה נפשי לאלקים—my soul thirsts for G-d. Thus a thousand Jews come together to hear about the Chofetz Chaim who passed away more than fifty years ago—because of a hunger that can never be stilled.

### Not A Legacy of "Hanhagos"

What can we learn from the Chofetz Chaim?

I once had the privilege to visit the Chofetz Chaim in Radin, and from there I went directly to Vilna where I met Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzenski. He asked me, "What do you say about the Chofetz Chaim?"

I was astounded at his question: "What have I to say about the Chofetz Chaim? It's not for me to comment about the *tzaddik hador*—the outstanding saint of our times!"

Reb Chaim Ozer sighed, "You too? Indeed, he is outstanding as a *tzaddik*, but he is an even greater *gaon* than he is a *tzaddik*, which you did not recognize." As an example of the Chofetz Chaim's *gaonus*, Reb Chaim Ozer pointed to the ביאור הלכה, printed as part of the *Mishnah Berurah*, which he said has no equal in the last hundred years.

Thus the Chofetz Chaim was both the *tzaddik hador* and the *gaon hador*. But his *tzidkus* was of a different generation. His *hanhagos*, his daily practices, do not constitute a message for this generation. We can marvel at them and be inspired by the greatness they represent, but they are beyond us: In his humility, he did not wear rabbinical garb. He wore a cap like a simple Jew; on *Shabbos* when he spoke to the crowd, his cap covered his eyes so you could not see them.* The austerity in his home was so severe that he did not have chairs in his house, only benches. This is not our legacy. This the Chofetz Chaim packed up and took along with him to *Gan Eden*, as did the other *tzaddikim* of earlier times. The message that he left for us is the product of his *gaonus*, and this can be found in his *seforim* and his holy words: The *Mishnah Berurah*, the *Chofetz Chaim*, the *Shmiras HaLashon*—this is the Chofetz Chaim's legacy.

### The Legacy of Learning

No home where Torah is studied is without a *Mishnah Berurah*. The pages are bent, a little torn, with notes written on the margins. By contrast, the *Chofetz Chaim* is still nicely bound, hasn't been touched since the owner's

ספר
משנה ברורה
והוא פירוש יפה ומתעה על
אורח חיים
וואַרשא

*First edition of Mishnah Berurah.*

Bar Mitzva when the owner received it as a gift. That is what we suffer from. . . .

We are experiencing a great awakening in Torah study, as is evident in Daf Hayomi, involving tens of thousands of Jews through group *shiurim*, radio and telephone lectures; in the Klausenberger Rebbe's *Mifal Hashas* which is inspiring yeshiva students to strive for *bekius*—encyclopedic knowledge of the Talmud. May Hashem grant us the strength to continue this *hisorrerus*, this awakening, to act on it, and to apply it to our daily lives.

But shouldn't this include *Chofetz Chaim* and *Shmiras HaLashon?* Marking this 50th *Yahrzeit* of the Chofetz Chaim should inspire all Torah Jews to undertake the study of a fixed portion from *Sefer Chofetz Chaim* every day, and then on the following day to review the old passages and study another section. Then the thirsty soul of the *Yid* would be refreshed with new knowledge, new inspiration, new guidance. . . . The Chofetz Chaim's written words are waiting for us to consult them and learn from them.

### The Chofetz Chaim: Looking Ahead

It was fifty-three years ago, when I was a young man of twenty, that I had the privilege to spend one *Shabbos* with the Chofetz Chaim. I heard him speak, and those words were, in their way, addressed to us today. I came on a Friday and left on Sunday. The Chofetz Chaim talked to me privately on my arrival in Radin. And I heard him several times on *Shabbos*.

An incident took place that weekend that gave me a glimpse into the measure of the man. Had I not been witness to it myself, I would not have believed it. It was before *Motzaei Shabbos*. The Chofetz Chaim had eaten a frugal *Seudah Shlishis*. When I came in, he was already talking—this was before *bentching* (Grace). The room

* His family explained that when he became older, the Chofetz Chaim became physically smaller, and his old cap no longer fit him. He refused the family's offers to buy him a new cap—the old one was still in fine shape. With some paper in the lining, it could still fit well. On *Shabbos*, however, the Chofetz Chaim removed the paper, and the hat tended to slide over his eyes. NW

was dark, and crowded with people. The Chofetz Chaim was speaking of the responsibility everyone present has to go out and be *mekarev rechokim*: "Go into the *shuls* and talk to the people about *mitzvos*, doing *teshuva*—keeping *Shabbos* and *Kashrus*, *tefillin* and *taharas hamishpacha* . . . I will also go, *bli neder, bli neder*"—which he did; he went to Grodna to speak to the people there.

(And how right he was! People are thirsting for *dvar Hashem*, even when they are unaware of it! On a recent flight, my seat companion was a very non-Jewish looking Jew. It was in the middle of the night and he insisted on telling me that he is an atheist. After he informed me of this a third time, I realized that the man "protesteth too much," so I told him, "You are an atheist like I am an atheist. You are a *Yid* with a husk. Inside it, you have a Jewish heart. Your heart is calling out for Hashem. You are hungry and thirsty; you haven't been given any nourishment. You have to break through that husk and feed that thirst." How strong our obligation is to reach out to such Jews and quench their thirst!)

The Chofetz Chaim continued, talking about how the generations have gone down: "What love for Torah former generations had! People vied with one another to be close to anyone who was involved in Torah study. Everyone of us is obligated to work at bringing people back to the ways of the *Ribbono Shel Olam!*"

Then he said, "It's time to *bentch*"—and he started to *bentch*, like a simple Jew, saying one word at a time . . . I did not see anything special in his manner. Suddenly, when he reached רחם נא (the blessing that begins "Have mercy . . ."), something seemed to have happened to him. He cried out: על ישראל עמך (". . . on Your nation, Israel) *oy! oy!*—על ציון משכן כבודך (. . . on Zion, home of Your glory) *oy! oy!*" He continued in this manner until he reached the *"Horachamons"* and stopped. At this point he said, "I see what will be ten years from now. [This was 1930.] You don't see; but I do. A great conflagration will burn!" In the middle of *bentching* he suddenly had a vision of future events. "Twelve million is child's play!"

I turned to the person next to me and asked him what he meant with his comments. He replied, "He always talks about it. Twelve million is the sum total of those killed in the World War."

I never forgot this scene, and for ten years I repeated it, and waited watchfully, fearfully, for its realization—until ten years later, in 1940, when it started to come true.

This was the Chofetz Chaim.

### With the Chofetz Chaim

On Friday night—it was Rosh Chodesh Nissan—the Chofetz Chaim said, "The *Chachomim*, our wise men, taught us that the *Geulah*, the redemption from Egypt, was in the month of Nissan, and the future *Geulah* will also be in Nissan. It is now Nissan, and the *Geulah* may well be this very month."

He was sitting in his own room with his cap over his eyes. There were 60 to 70 people in the room, yet he talked in a loud voice as though he were addressing an auditorium of several thousand people. In fact, I had the feeling that he was speaking to the entire world. He said, "How do you deal with the possibility of *Moshiach's* coming: maybe he's coming this very month, maybe he's not coming? *Al pi din*, objectively speaking, it's a doubt of equal possibilities. Let us assume the positive, that he will be here. You might think that everyone will be so happy. Not so. You'll run away in fear and hide in the deepest crevices. *Moshiach is coming! The Ribbono shel Olam is revealing His Shechina!* Out of shame, we'll hide in the bunkers. . . . *Avraham Avinu* is passing through the streets, to judge us—everybody has to run for cover!"

When he was saying this it seemed to me as though *Yeshaya HaNavi* (Isaiah the Prophet) were saying: ויטמן בעפר מפני פחד ה' מהדרת גאונו "They will hide in the sand for fear of G-d, from the magnificence of His glory."

"Are we ready?" he continued. "Who am I? Am I ready to receive *Moshiach?*"

The Chofetz Chaim then spoke of something else: The *mon*—the manna—had the taste of whatever food the person was thinking of. "What happened (he asked) if someone was not thinking at all. What taste did the *mon* have then?" Nobody answered. . . . He continued, *"Az men tracht nit hott es kein ta'am nisht.* If you don't think, it has no taste." He repeated this several times: *"Az men tracht nit, hott es kein ta'am nisht*—because the *mon* is *ruchniyus*, spiritual, and if you don't think, it has no taste. . . . What can be more tasty than a piece of *Gemora?*" He kissed the tips of his fingers. "It is so sweet, but only if you think. If you don't think, you sit by the *Gemora* and it has no flavor whatsoever.

"Suppose *Moshiach* comes, and we don't think. It has no flavor. You won't even be aware of what is going on!"

### Evaluating the Chofetz Chaim's Legacy . . . With His Help

When a man of such stature speaks to us, and has given us a legacy—*Mishnah Berurah, Chofetz Chaim*, and *Shmiras HaLashon*—we must value this legacy and see to carry it out, translate the concepts into practical actions.

But how do we manage it? How does one abstain from *lashon hora?* Wherever we turn, we encounter *lashon hora*. The American Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and free access to information—and that constitutes *lashon hora*. All newspapers, with few exceptions, are organs of *lashon hora*. Most of our conversations involve *lashon hora*.

Indeed, the *Gemora* asks how one can avoid *lashon hora*, and advises, *Ya'asok ba'Torah*. As long as everybody will be conversing in Torah, then it will not be difficult to avoid slander. Further, עם הארץ ישפיל דעתו—the simple folk will be humble; if a person thinks about his own shortcomings he will rejoice that no one is talking about him.

The Chofetz Chaim was of the opinion that the best antidote to *lashon hora* is studying about the *issur* (prohibition) against *lashon hora*. Once the objective facts are established, it becomes simple.

*Midrash Rabba* tells of a peddler who was announcing that he was selling the elixir of life. ("Who wants life? Who wants life?") Rav Yannai asked him to come to him but the peddler explained, "My elixir is not for you." After Rav Yannai insisted, the peddler took out a *Sefer Tehillim* and read to him the passages that are the elixir of life: "Who is the man who wants life . . .? Guard your tongue from evil." (34: 13,14) Rav Yannai said, "All my life I've been reading this passage without realizing how simple its message is until this peddler came along."*

What new insight did the peddler offer? A peddler does not sell on credit. He only sells on a cash-and-carry basis. And this opened Rav Yannai's eyes to an astounding truth: "If I am tempted to talk *lashon hora*—it's on the tip of my tongue and I would like to say it—and I succeed in suppressing it and don't say it, at that very moment I am buying life. That's how simple it is."

The dimensions of this life are beyond our understanding, and to this, too, the Chofetz Chaim opened my eyes during that fateful stay in Radin. The Chofetz Chaim said to me on Friday morning: "וחיי עולם נטע בתוכינו 'You planted eternal life in our midst'—what does that mean? What do you think when you say these words in the *bracha* when you are called to the Torah?"

I did not answer him, so he continued: "I'll explain what 'Eternal Life' means: Where will you be 100 years from now? With the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. And where will you be 1,000 years from now? The same—with the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. And 5 million years from now? Again the same—with the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. This is Eternal Life!"

And one can buy it, as though from a peddler; and he's selling it a thousand times a day. Don't say *lashon hora*, suppress it—and immediately, cash-and-carry, Eternal Life is yours. That's how simple it is. This too is what the Chofetz Chaim taught me and is teaching you.

### Silver Lining?

The Chofetz Chaim said more . . . What do you assume his comment to us would be if he would see our preoccupation with *Olam Hazeh*—this-worldly attainments? The glitter and glamour of fashion, our designer wardrobes, our diamond and fur coat accessories, our ostentatious *simchos* . . .? May I offer another gem from our conversation on that Friday. . . .

He asked me: "Were you ever in the Ural Mountains? . . . I was there and I saw how they dig for silver. They lie in the *blotteh* (mud) all day and *grob* (dig) and grab in the *blotteh*. Finally they take something out, the object of their quest, which is also caked in *blotteh*. . . . What is silver if to get some you have to lie in the *blotteh*, dig in the *blotteh*, get all dirty and become covered with *blotteh*? Then it must be *blotteh*. . . ."

The Chofetz Chaim's message from that Friday would be to question most of our present-day preoccupations. For actually our hearts are thirsting for *Emes* (truth) in a time when confusion and falsehood and *Chilul Hashem* prevail. Since we want *Emes* for ourselves, we must lift ourselves to a higher level, and not wallow in *blotteh*. Because, in the final analysis, what is it but *blotteh*—mud?

Then the Chofetz Chaim put very strong emphasis on Torah study. When I told him that I was learning in the Yeshiva of Mir, he beamed and stroked my arm. "A yeshiva *bachur*. How wonderful! So many are drowning today. Only through Torah can you survive. How fortunate that you are learning! Only Torah study makes us Jews. Twenty *talleisim* and twenty pairs of *tefillin* cannot make a person into a Jew, but the *bracha* that we say on Torah every day declares that we are marked as Jews because 'He gave us His Torah!' This and this alone distinguishes us as Jews."

### Answering the Call With the Chofetz Chaim

That same Friday afternoon, the Chofetz Chaim asked me, "Are you a *Kohein?*"

"No," I replied.

He went on, "Maybe you are a *Levi?*"

"No."

"What a pity! *Moshiach* is coming and the *Beis Hamikdash* will be rebuilt. There will be a tremendous yearning to enter the *Beis Hamikdash*. The *kedusha* exerts such an irresistible attraction. If you're not a *Kohein* you can't enter the *Beis Hamikdash*. And you're not even a *Levi*—who can gain entry into some places. You're left completely outside. . . . Perhaps you've heard—I'm a *Kohein*.—Tell me, why aren't you a *Kohein?*"

I was puzzled by the question. "Because my father isn't a *Kohein*," I answered.

"And why isn't he a *Kohein?*" he asked further.

The explanation would be the same, of course, but I decided not to answer. He obviously had something in mind.

"I'll tell you why," he went on. "Because 3,000 years ago, at the incident of the Golden Calf, your ancestors didn't run when Moshe Rabbeinu called out, *'Mi Lashem Eilai*—Whoever is with G-d should come to me!' My father, and all the other *Leviim* ran to Moshe. Your father did not. So we are the *Kohanim* and the *Leviim*. Now take it to heart. When you hear the call, *Mi Lashem Eilai*, come running!".

This is the message of the Chofetz Chaim. We are living in a time when any thinking person can hear a Great Shofar blasting from all sides, calling out: *Mi Lashem Eilai!*—and it is incumbent on us to come running.

Let us all be in the forefront of those responding to this call.

* The title of the *sefer Chofetz Chaim* was inspired by the passage quoted in this Midrash.