

Sermon for Parshat Toldot and R. Chafetz 300th Yahrtzeit
 November 26, 2011; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA
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*(also delivered that day at Temple Beth-El, Birmingham, AL, by Larry Brook,
 and as a longer class at Congregation Beth David, Saratoga, CA)*

Normally I would say something now about how we neglected to say the special Hallel prayer for Shabbat Yom Turkey, “Tarnegol Hodu laHashem Ki Tov.” Or that tomorrow is the beginning of the month of Kislev, whose name comes from “because we were slaves in Egypt.” But I’m going to be more legit today. A little bit.

Toldot begins “And these are the generations of Isaac son of Abraham, Abraham begat Isaac.” Why did this need to be restated here? We already knew who we’re talking about. And why was Abraham’s fatherhood of Isaac stated here twice, in two different ways?

Joel Hoffman, in his intriguing book “And God Said,” which evaluates the translation – and rampant mistranslation – of the Bible, might simply say that this is a common poetic form in the Torah where the same thing is stated twice in a row, slightly differently. But regardless of style considerations, Judaism has explored literal interpretation for longer than it has sponsored putting lox on a bagel. So let’s explore.

In his 18th-century Torah commentary, Meleket Machashevet, Rabbi Moshe Chafetz says “a complete man is the head of his family and evil ends there... a wise and honest man would not inherit from his fathers who were shameful and lacking... My family begins in me and your family you will complete in you.” Thus he explains, “(this) passage tells that Abraham and Isaac were pure and straight and their family started in them, and they were the head and name to their family.” In other words, by being good guys, their family lineage would be known as originating from them, and not known by their previous generations who weren’t so good, or in this case, who did not know G.

So, who was Moshe Chafetz? You probably haven’t heard of him unless you’ve heard me talk up here before. Moshe Chafetz was a rabbinic scholar in Venice, Italy. He was born in 1663 in nearby Trieste, into a family of rabbis that were also known by their Italian family name, Gentili. He rose to prominence as a teacher of Talmud and Midrash, as well as a poet, who dealt with philosophy, math, and natural sciences. He would reference Galileo, Aristotle, or Descartes just as he would cite Rashi, Rambam, or the Kli Yikkar.

He wrote two books: a Torah commentary, and a detailing of the architecture and sacred objects of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. While not widely known today, his commentary is cited here and there in sermons found on the internet, but most visibly he’s cited numerous times in the renowned contemporary works of Nehama Leibowitz. He died in 1711, and this Shabbat is the 300th anniversary of his yahrtzeit, for which today’s Kiddush is in recognition.

Reb Chafetz died on the 30th of Cheshvan, a date which occurs only in some years (not this year), when it’s added because of the Rosh Hashanah postponement rules – which

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are about as comprehensible as the infield fly rule, and are far too complicated and uninteresting to explain here. Suffice to say, knowing when to commemorate the 30th of Cheshvan is like having your birthday on February 29th, except you can't blame your mother for this one. But, as a result, while he technically died in 1711, he really died only about 100 30th-of-Cheshvan's ago, so you could say his teachings are two hundred years more relevant to us today than those of his contemporaries.

In fact, some of his commentary touches on seemingly modern issues. A couple verses further into today's parshah, it talks about Rebecca being pregnant with the twins Jacob and Esau. "And the sons struggled inside her" and then "and G said to her 'two nations are in your womb'." R. Chafetz asks numerous questions about this, including "'and the sons struggled inside her,' isn't this movement of sons in the womb customary in all pregnant women?" R. Chafetz would often ask questions based on the latest contemporary knowledge, and common sense, of his time. And some of the answers he provided could transcend his own era.

In this instance, R. Chafetz cites the Talmud, which regarding this verse – as some of you might have heard before – said that while Rebecca was pregnant with Jacob and Esau, "when she passed near idol worship Esau would get excited, and when she passed a place of learning Jacob would get excited." We know well that Jacob and Esau did not get along in life, probably because when they were kids, Esau played Barry M*nilow all the time. But from this verse and this Talmudic tale, R. Chafetz addresses the question of when does the Yetzer HaRah – the evil inclination – first enter a person, at birth or earlier? This is, of course, somewhat similar to the contemporary debate about when life begins, at birth or at different points during pregnancy.

He says that from this, according to the Talmud, the evil inclination is not present until birth. But Rebecca knew that their distinct behaviors were a message from G to her indicating what was to come between them after they were born.

To understand R. Chafetz's approach and opinions, it is helpful to understand him and his times. When you hear "Rabbi in Venice around 1700" what image do you conjure? You probably see a black hat, black coat, long beard, and long bookshelf. But that image is not the real deal.

R. Chafetz was clean-shaved with long hair, the latter of which I wish I'd pointed out to my grandfather when I was in high school. His head was uncovered. We know all this because of a portrait of him in the front of his Torah commentary, which also happened to be the first Hebrew book to ever be published with the author's portrait in it.

At his time in Venice, a beard such as what you'd imagine would befit a kabbalist, not a rabbi. He wasn't a radical, it's just that his community was not what we today might expect of Jews at the time, so consequently he was not the image you'd expect of a rabbi at the time. And you're not alone.

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His Torah commentary, *Melekhet Machashevet*, was first published in 1710, in his native Venice. 150 years later, a second edition was published in Koenigsburg – modern day Kaliningrad. The second edition’s publisher, who found the original text so important that it needed to be reintroduced to Jewish society, had such an expectation of what a rabbi should look like that he drew – yes, drew – a kippah onto the portrait.

While he was at it, this publisher introduced confusion as to R. Chafetz’s age. The portrait’s caption can be read as “ben meah shanah” – “100 years old.” But the portrait did not look like a hundred year old man, so this second publisher also greyed out R. Chafetz’s hair, and rewrote the caption to more clearly state he was 100 years old at the time. He also published an apology in the second edition about these “unfortunate” mistakes in the first edition, which *he* took the time to fix. But as the Talmud says, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. Just talk about it. At length.” In gematriya – Hebrew numerology – the letters in the word for 100 “meah” add up to 46. Gematriya – which is why “Chai” equals 18, but fortunately chai tea is not that expensive – was commonly used for numbers in such books, and this publisher missed it in the caption. R. Chafetz was actually 46 when the book was first published.

Amusingly enough, R. Chafetz might have been having some more acronymic fun with the book’s title. An Italian literary journal in 1710 pointed out that the title’s second word, *Machashevet*, is an acronym for Moshe Chafetz Shochan Ben-Ir Trieste – Moshe Chafetz Resident Son of the City of Trieste, which would make the book’s title simply mean “Work of Moshe Chafetz.”

But with all this talk about R. Chafetz’s portrait in his Torah commentary, you might wonder: Why did he put his portrait in his Torah commentary? Didn’t Jews not do portraits, as part of “no graven images?” As mentioned, this is the first time a portrait was published in a Hebrew book. And there’s even an artist’s rendition of Moses on Sinai in the first edition, too. Why did he do it? Quite simply, it was common practice at the time around there for books to include a portrait. It’s unclear whether it was the publisher’s idea or R. Chafetz’s, but in the end it’s in there, and you’d figure if he had a huge problem with it, it *wouldn’t* be in there.

But let’s go back to earlier, because R. Chafetz wrote *two* books. The first one, *Chanukat HaBayit*, he published in 1696. It describes itself as “an explanation of the shape and structure of the destroyed Temple, in general and in its specifications, as set forth by early sages.” Specifically, it applies to the *Second* Temple. The JTS library actually has a handwritten author’s manuscript of this obscure book dated 1691, which if it ever goes missing you didn’t hear that I’m aware of. The two Temples of Tisha B’Av-fame were not identical. The First Temple – known to baseball fans as the House that Solomon Built – was far more elaborate, and was the one destroyed in 586 B.C.E by the Babylonskis. The Second Temple – the subject of this book – was completed in 516 B.C.E. (or 350 B.C.E., depending on who you read) and was the one destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. at the start of The Great Exile – the centuries-long expulsion of the Cubs from winning the World Series. In truth, the book (like the Talmud) seems to be talking about the vastly

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renovated and expanded Second Temple, resulting from King Herod's appearance on Extreme Makeover: Ancient Edition in 19 B.C.E.

By the way, you might have heard just a couple days ago that the Israeli Antiquities Agency, or whatever it's called, announced that a couple of Roman coins were found under the Western Wall. This proves that Herod's remodel took far longer than commonly believed – finishing long after he was gone, by one of his descendents – possibly being completed as late as 50 C.E., just twenty years before the Temple was destroyed. Not a great shelf life.

Most information about the First Temple comes straight out of the Bible. Most information about the Second Temple is in the Talmud, and is rather dense to decipher. So R. Chafetz pulled together into a single volume a more accessible summation of fifty-eight of the key elements of the Second Temple, from the menorah to the altar, to the various courtyards, gates, and chambers. He cites Rashi, Rambam, Tosafot, and numerous more obscure rabbinic sources. When sources disagreed, he'd present both sides and, when possible, resolve the question. For the book, he created twenty detailed drawings, including a large foldout map of the entire grounds.

The second book was the aforementioned Melechet Machashevet, a homiletical-philosophical Torah commentary. What does "homiletical" mean? It's okay, I had to look it up, too. A couple of times. It's the application of the general principles of rhetoric to theology. Indeed he applied to many Torah passages the thoughts of various scientific and philosophical notables (as mentioned before) as well as rabbinic sages, and applying practical social concerns as well as the latest scientific knowledge of his era to interpreting Creation, Noah's Ark, and various events in the Sinai.

Including its original publication in 1710, there have been five known editions in all, from 1860 in Koenigsberg to 1964 in Jerusalem. The second edition included an added commentary by its publisher that's carried forward in all future editions. But why did R. Chafetz write this Torah commentary? Don't we have enough already? Two reasons.

First, as stated in the Jewish Virtual Library, "the 16th to 18th centuries are characterized by an almost complete neglect of the study of the Bible as such. Kabbalah (already known by science then as Red String Theory) and Talmud both became almost the sole subjects of study. Only in Italy was the study of the Bible as such pursued, and it produced (such) epoch-making works." But why R. Chafetz? Because of his son.

Gershom Chafetz was considered a prodigy, just as his father had been, and R. Chafetz cites his opinions five times in Melechet Machashevet. Gershom also wrote a book, a Hebrew rhyme lexicon called Yad Charuzim, which R. Chafetz published for his son posthumously in 1700. Yes, posthumously. Gershom died earlier in 1700, just before his 17th birthday, from plague.

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R. Chafetz was embittered by the death of his son and wrote in the introduction to *Melekheth Machashevet* that he wrote this book “in order to restore his dismal soul because the Torah of G is pure in restoring the soul.”

In *Yad Charuzim*, R. Chafetz included his son’s eulogy, and an introductory biography of his son including a very detailed account of the community celebration of his birth, his studies growing up, and his suffering in the end – the symptoms of which seem to indicate smallpox. In this biography, R. Chafetz sounds quite angry that his son was taken so young. Interestingly, the book ends with a poetic rendering of Rambam’s enumeration of the 613 mitzvot in the Torah (*Shir l’Taryag Mitzvot*). Gershom’s work was significant enough that *Yad Charuzim* even received an updated second publishing in 1740, though merely as an expanded rhyme dictionary, that included Gershom’s original twelve rules for Hebrew usage in poetry and rhyme scheme, but omitting all the personal information and the mitzvot poem.

Why a rhyme lexicon? They lived at the beginning of a poetic renaissance, in which it was a common form of literary expression. According to the *Jewish Quarterly Review* from early last century, which mentions Gershom Chafetz’s poetic work, in Chafetz’s time, “the bulk of the poetry of the seventeenth century is philosophical, didactic, and polemic rather than religious. True poetic feeling is beginning to manifest itself.”

So, why am I talking about all this? Chafetz is rather obscure, though you’ll find him in *Encyclopedia Judaica* under the family’s Italian name, Gentili. While his commentary is sometimes quoted, as mentioned before, none of his works have been translated. Until now. I’ve been slowly translating them for some time. And if you want to know why, it’s been passed down through the family for generations that we’re descended from him. (The family name was Chafetz until it got Americanized in the early 1900s.)

R. Chafetz offered a mix of existing rabbinic commentary; the latest thinking in science (Galileo), mathematics (Descartes), and philosophy (Aristotle); and his own commentary wherein he often evaluated the deeper meaning in the literal text while applying contemporary sense and wisdom to Torah passages.

For example, one of my favorites at the moment, is from *Devarim*. In Deuteronomy 3:27, G tells Moses “look at (the Promised Land) well, because you will not cross the Jordan.” This is a reminder of Moses’s punishment for not getting to enter the Promised Land that he’d led the Israelites to for forty years. R. Chafetz’s opinion of this Almighty reminder of Moses’s punishment? “Good for him!” Yes, literally. Even the exclamation point.

Why is it good for Moses that he’s being punished in this way? R. Chafetz reminds us that Moses was 120 years old and as such probably wouldn’t have survived the crossing anyway. This way, he gets to see the Promised Land from just outside it rather than instead to die trying to set foot in it. What is commonly portrayed as G punishing Moses, in reality is giving Moses a break.

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In discussing aspects of the Creation story in Genesis, R. Chafetz applies the very new teachings of his countryman Galileo, who had recently revealed to civilization that the universe does not actually revolve around the Earth, and that the Earth itself actually revolves around football season. *Roll Tide.*

R. Chafetz wrote his commentary less than a hundred years after Plymouth Rock, and 66

I do not know if R. Chafetz knew he was going to die soon when he published his commentary. I do not know if R. Chafetz thought he was old. His commentary gets progressively shorter with each book of the Torah, which might hint that he was hurrying to finish, but it might not.

But whether he expected mortality in years or in days, he would probably be pleased at the *immortality* of his work, and the assemblages of knowledge that he provided which have survived three hundred years after his death, and will hopefully persist – even moreso – in the three hundred years to come.