Rabbi Hayim Ben Attar (1696-1743) and the power of the Grandparents

Rabbi Hayim ben Attar (or Benattar), also known as the Or HaHayim haQadosh, was born in the city of Salé on the west coast of Morocco, in 1696. His father was Moshe ben Attar, a great Tora scholar. From the age of 9 Rabbi ben Attar studied with his grandfather. The Rabbi wrote that every night he studied Gemara with him, and then his grandfather prayed and cried, begging HaShem to end our exile, to bring us back to Israel, and to see in our days the building of the Bet HaMiqdash.

The family of Rabbi ben Attar enjoyed a very good economic situation, and that allowed Rabbi Hayim to devote himself fully to the study of Tora. Over time Rabbi nen Attar grew in his knowledge of Tora and transformed his house into a Bet Midrash, a Tora academy, where anyone who wanted could come and study at any hour of the day or night. Rabbi Ben Attar also helped the needy, the poor, the widows and the orphans. Every Thursday, Rabbi ben Attar would do Shehita and would distribute the meat among the students of his Bet Midrash and the poor, so that everyone would have meat to eat during Shabbat.

Rabbi ben Attar lived in Morocco for 40 years. It was not always easy. The King of Morocco became antagonistic to his family and confiscated all their fortune. This caused that rabbi ben Attar had to leave of Salé towards the city of Fes, where he lived during the year 1738. That year, a great famine struck the city, and generated an epidemic, and the Rab had to take refuge in the North in the city of Tetuan. Being there, he made a critical decision for the rest of his life: he decided to go and live in the land of Israel. His ambitious plan was to found a Yeshiba in Yerushalayim, and he already had more than ten students who would travel with him. In those times, life for the Yehudim in Yerushalayim was very difficult. There was no food or work, and epidemics often hit the city. The Yehudim also suffered from perpetual

persecutions and abuses from the gentiles who ruled the city.
The only possibility to found a sustainable Yeshiba in Yerushalayim was to have the assistance of Jews living in Europe. Rabbi ben Attar then traveled to the city of Livorno, Italy, where there was a prosperous Jewish community, very generous with all that had to do with helping Yehudim to emigrate and settle in Israel, and particularly in Yerushalayim.
Rabbi ben Attar spent almost three years in Italy. He taught Tora classes and attracted crowds with his knowledge and charisma. The community of Livorno implored him to stay there and establish himself as Rab of Livorno. They offered him to establish his Yeshiba in Livorno and promised that he won't lack anything. But Rabbi ben Attar renounced these privileges and confirmed that his destination was Erets Israel. Personally, I think that what inspired Rabbi ben Attar to want to live in Erets Israel and to give up all the comfort they offered him in Livorno were the nights he spent with his grandfather, watching him cry for the rebuilding of Yerushalayim and the Bet haMiqdash. The melodies and cries of his grandfather, must have inspire a great love and longing for Erets Israel, in the heart of the young Rabbi Hayim …
In 1741 Rabbi ben Attar left for Israel with 30 students and their families. The majority of his disciples were from Morocco, others from Algeria and some from Italy. Among the latter was Rabbi Abraham Ishmael Hay Sanguineti, who wrote the diary of the journey from Italy to Israel, and everything that happened until they reached Yerushalayim. At first the contingent arrived and settled in the city of Acco (Acre), near Haifa. Yerushalayim was going through very bad times in terms of sanitary conditions, many people died victims of plagues and epidemics.
In 1742 conditions at Yerushalayim improved , and in the month of Tammuz the rabbi Ben Attar and his disciples arrived and settled in Jerusalem. There the Rabbi ben Attar fulfilled his dream and founded his Yeshiba, which he called "Keneset Israel", the same name of the community of Livorno that helped them economically. Rabbi ben Attar became the most important rabbinic leader in the city, and apart from teaching Tora, he was also involved in assisting those in need. In a very short time and with the help of his followers from Italy, he

succeeded in making the Jewish community of Yerushalayim to grow in size and prosperity. Some sources indicate that many Chassidim who arrived from Europe to Yerushalayim, students of the Ba'al Shem Tob, were very close to Rabbi ben Attar, and it was they who called him "HaOr haHayim haQadosh" (the saint).
Rabbi Ben Attar wrote three main books:
1. Or HaHayim, a commentary on the Tora that has a particularity. This book is read and highly valued by Sefaradim and Ashkenazim alike, something that was not very common, especially in those times.
2. A book on the Talmud: Hefets HaShem
3. A book on Yore De'a, Peri To-ar. He had brilliant pupils, the most famous among his student was rabbi Hayim Yosef David Azulay, □"□□□□ .
Rabbi Ben Attar only lived in Yerushalayim for short time, a little more than 11 months. He died on the 15th of Tammuz (July 6) of 1743, when he was just 47 years old. His soul surely rose to the heavenly Yerushalayim, and his remains were buried in the Mount of Olives (Har haZetim), Jerusalem.

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