

The Scholarly Life of the Gaon of Vilna

Allan Nadler

Among the hundreds of great rabbis and Talmudic authorities whose scholarship graced the eight-century history of east European Judaism, none quite matched the renown of the Lithuanian sage Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon of Vilna (1729–1797), the legendary *Vilner Gaon* (genius of Vilna). Although he never held an official rabbinical position and spent most of his years in a singularly intense and private pursuit of Talmudic erudition, the Gaon left a remarkable legacy that has shaped traditional Lithuanian Judaism to this day. He typified the intensely single-minded devotion to rabbinical studies that, largely as the result of his own towering influence, became the hallmark of Lithuanian Jewish piety.

The Gaon's life coincided precisely with the advent and rapid rise of Hasidism across eastern Europe. Hasidism's emphasis upon popular piety as opposed to ecclesiastical scholarship and its astonishingly fast spread to the Jewish masses of Poland and Russia were perceived as serious challenges to the established Judaism of the day and as threatening the authority of the rabbis charged with the latter's propagation and protection. Due to his unparalleled scholarly stature, it was the Gaon of Vilna who became the standardbearer and titular founder of the movement that rose against Hasidism in order to protect traditional rabbinic Judaism, and whose followers ultimately became known as the *Mitnagdim* (opponents).

The *Mitnagdim* not only polemicized against Hasidic doctrine; they waged an uncompromising war against its practitioners, placing them under the rabbinic ban of excommunication and, when possible, denouncing their *zaddikim* (Hasidic religious leaders; lit., righteous men) as subversives to the Czarist authorities. Among the most prominent Hasidic *zaddikim* active during the Gaon's lifetime was Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi (1745–1813), the founder of the Habad school (today best known as Lubavitch), who was jailed several times in St. Petersburg as a consequence of the *Mitnagdim's* denunciations. According to Habad traditions, when R. Shneur Zalman traveled to Vilna in order to initiate a theological dialogue with the Gaon in hopes of calming his opposition to Hasidism, he stood disgraced at the Gaon's doorstep, shut out of the hermetically sealed home in

which the great rabbi was immersed in his studies, adamantly refusing to receive him.

The key difference between the *Mitnagdim* and the *Hasidim* during the formative years of this great theological dispute centered on the respective roles of sober Talmudic scholarship and mystical rapture in Jewish religious life. For the Gaon and his followers, the sober study of Torah was the sole avenue for authentic religious experience. They argued that it is only through the unflagging devotion to comprehend fully the will of God as it is inscribed in the Torah that man could come to know his Creator. The *Mitnagdim* accordingly placed the pursuit of *Torah lishmah*—that is, pure Torah scholarship, engaged in with no ulterior motives and pursued as an autonomous religious good—at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of Jewish spiritual values. The *Hasidim*, on the other hand, taught that such exclusive emphasis on learning deprived the untutored Jewish masses of religious experience and resulted in an elitist, arid, unemotional, and spiritually vacuous Judaism. The extreme intellectualism of the rabbis, the *Hasidim* further argued, had created a tragic rift between them and the vast majority of the Jewish people whose spiritual mentors they were supposed to be. To invigorate the regnant, scholarly, and effete Judaism of their day and to heal the deep divide between the rabbinical elite and the Jewish masses, *Hasidism* simplified and popularized the formerly esoteric kabbalistic teachings that emphasized the immanence of God in the created Universe, His closeness to all people, both the educated and the ignorant, and the need for joy and spiritual euphoria in order to commune with the divine presence.

The long-term effects on Lithuanian Jewry of the Gaon of Vilna's singular and passionate emphasis upon scholarship as the only authentic form of spirituality, and his determined battle with Hasidism, were significant. Among his elite cadre of personal disciples, Rabbi Hayyim b. Isaac (1749–1821) founded a *yeshiva* (rabbinical academy) in his Belorussian town of Volozhin, where the supremacy and dignity of rabbinical scholarship, as taught by the Gaon, served as the guiding principle. The Volozhin *yeshiva* spawned a network of similar rabbinical seminaries across Lithuania, Belorussia, and eastern Poland, which have remained the religious institutional foundation of Mitnagdic Judaism until today. The Gaon's legacy of scholarship even shaped the popular image of the Lithuanian Jew in folklore and literature as profoundly learned, skeptical, emotionally reticent, lacking in overt religious enthusiasm, and prone to intellectual snobbery. The age-old Hasidic Yiddish epithet for Lithuanian Jews, *kalter tseylem kop* (cold-hearted and intractable), captured this image of an emotionally distant, stubborn scholar inaugurated by the Gaon.

Ironically, just as the *zaddikim* who founded the Hasidic movement were the subjects of wildly exaggerated hagiographies that recounted their spiritual greatness and miraculous exploits, the Gaon's towering legacy resulted in a parallel tradition of fantastic legends about his brilliant and erudite scholarship. In the decades immediately following his death, the disciples of the Gaon set themselves to the task of immortalizing his scholarship and his memory. They did this pri-

marily by publishing dozens of terse scholarly commentaries to the traditional rabbinic canon that the Gaon left, either in manuscript or as oral traditions received from him by his students. Along with this posthumous explosion of the Gaon's publications there also appeared a large number of books, pamphlets, and articles fabulously extolling his wisdom and scholarship, often in superhuman terms. R. Hayyim of Volozhin, who published some of the Gaon's most important legal and mystical commentaries, often prefaced these publications with lengthy tracts in effusive praise of his master. In the most remarkable of these prefaces, to the Gaon's commentary on the kabbalistic text *Sifra De-Zeniuta*, R. Hayyim describes at great length the Gaon's struggle against mystical revelations that he felt interfered with his cognitive, scholarly pursuit of the truth. In sharp contrast to the Hasidic rebbes, whose very authority derived in large part from their claims to mystical knowledge and clairvoyance, the Gaon repudiated the nocturnal angels who approached him with fantastic revelations, and stubbornly insisted on basing his religious knowledge solely upon the findings of sober scholarship.

The document presented here, R. Israel b. Samuel of Shklov's preface to *Pe'at ha-Shulkhan*, is among the finest example of such hagiographies of the Gaon. R. Israel of Shklov (d. 1839) was a close and devoted disciple of the Gaon, who ministered to his master on his deathbed and later collaborated in the publication of some of his commentaries to the codes of Jewish law. Like the Gaon, R. Israel was keen on clarifying sections of the Talmud that had been neglected by earlier authorities and had a particular interest in the emendation of corrupt rabbinical texts.

R. Israel was one of a large number of rabbis from the Belorussian town of Shklov who were devoted disciples of the Gaon. The town of Shklov, in fact, enjoyed a unique relationship with the Gaon, particularly in connection with his battle against Hasidism. In 1772, Shklov became the first Jewish community to issue an official ban against the Hasidim, reputedly at the behest of the Gaon. The rabbis of Shklov, often referred to in subsequent rabbinic sources collectively as *Hakhmei Shklov* (the sages of Shklov), were also among the most enlightened Jewish leaders of their day, and tended to be receptive to the new currents of culture and modern critical scholarship that were beginning to arrive in Russia from western Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. So, for example, one of the leading rabbinic scholars of Shklov, R. Barukh Schick, translated Euclid into Hebrew, claiming in his introduction that he did so at the behest of the Gaon in partial fulfillment of the latter's program of enhancing knowledge of the Torah by spreading scientific wisdom among the Jews.

In this remarkable text, we may observe some of the salient features of the Gaon's posthumous image. The most prominent of these characteristics is the astonishing scope of the Gaon's knowledge, his unrivaled erudition in the entire canon of traditional Jewish texts. Although the major focus of R. Israel of Shklov's testimony is clearly on his master's incredible personal discipline, asceticism, and scholarly erudition in every branch of classical Judaic wisdom, he touches upon some other themes that form an important part the Gaon's historical legacy.

Along with this total mastery of traditional Jewish learning, the Gaon is also extolled for knowledge of less conventional disciplines, particularly the secular sciences. Of singular interest in our text is the surprising reference to the Gaon's interest in the religious significance of music. This may in part be directed against the Hasidim, who were widely criticized by the *Mitnagdim* for abusing music through their practice of undisciplined ecstatic singing and wild rapturous dancing. Although it is clear that the Gaon himself viewed his pursuit of such non-rabbinic disciplines as trigonometry and medicine as only ancillary to his Torah studies, and directed solely to complement and complete his comprehension of God's revealed wisdom, many of the earliest proponents of the *haskala* (Jewish enlightenment) in eastern Europe viewed the Gaon as a harbinger of their own campaign for the educational and cultural modernization of Europe's Jews. Thus, for example, Shai Ish Hurwitz, a leading nineteenth-century propagandist for the Russian *haskala*, very clearly enlisted the Gaon's authority in order to legitimize the educational reforms that were at the center of its program for Jewish enlightenment:

It was the Gaon who first created an opening, like the eye of a needle, for the critical textual study of the Talmud, which finally resulted in today's critical, literary scholarship. . . . The Gaon was a trailblazer in the field of Jewish education. He eliminated Rabbinic casuistry (*pilpul*), and was the first to establish a logical pedagogical order of study whereby Jewish children would begin with Bible and Hebrew grammar, followed by Mishnah, and only then begin the study of Talmud—a program that was later championed by all of the *maskilim*, [participants in the modern Jewish "Enlightenment"] in particularly Isaac Baer Levinsohn (the father of the Russian *haskala*). Who knows if all of the latter's' [i.e., the *maskilim*'s] efforts for the improvement of Jewish education would have taken root had it not been for the pioneering work of the Gaon? Moreover, the Gaon was a scientific scholar the likes of whom had not been seen in Israel since the days of the great geonim of Babylonia and North Africa. At his behest, Joshua Zeitlin established his center for Jewish scientific scholarship [in Shklov] . . . and at his command, Barukh of Shklov decided to translate Euclid into Hebrew. . . . And in all of this he was a shining example for his many disciples. The Gaon's students came into close contact with the biblical scholars and pioneers of the enlightenment who were assembled in those days in Berlin under the direction of Moses Mendelsohn, in a joint effort to find ways in which to improve the spiritual condition and education of the Jewish people.

Shai Ish Hurwitz, "Ha-Hasiduth ve-ha-Haskala," *He-Atid* 2 (1909): 31–32.

Among the unconventional disciplines pioneered by the Gaon, referred to by both Hurwitz and R. Israel of Shklov, was the textual criticism of Judaism's sacred texts. Unlike the vast majority of traditional, or Orthodox, rabbis to this very day, the Gaon was unafraid of correcting and emending texts that, based on his independent analytical speculation, he considered to be flawed. A trailblazer in the critico-analytical interpretation of Talmudic texts, the Gaon also tended to disregard the age-old tradition of uncritical veneration for the views of the rabbinical

authorities of earlier generations, and displayed uncommon boldness in criticizing, and often simply ignoring, the juridical opinions of his rabbinic forbears. R. Israel of Shklov alludes to this brave willingness to overturn established precedents in Jewish law at the very beginning of our text, when he refers to the Gaon as being like one of the generation of the *rishonim* (earlier sages), a reference to the rabbis who lived before the close of the *Shulkhan Arukh*, the authoritative sixteenth-century code of Jewish law whose decisions were widely regarded as sacrosanct by all subsequent rabbinic legislators who became known as the *aharonim* (later sages)

In his introduction to *Pe 'at ha-Shulkhan*, a discursive code of the Jewish ritual and agricultural laws whose observance is limited to residents of the land of Israel, R. Israel of Shklov asserts that he had relied very heavily upon precisely these trailblazing legal and textual interpretations of the Gaon, whom he regards as his primary teacher. The extensive praise of the Vilner Gaon contained in this text is presented as justification of R. Israel of Shklov's juridical methodology, particularly when relying on the Gaon's opinions that defy legal precedent or that are based on critical emendations of sacrosanct rabbinical texts.

My translation is based upon Israel b. Samuel of Shklov, *Sefer Pe 'at ha-Shulkhan* (Safed, 1834), pp. 5a–6b.

Further Reading

Although there is no full English biography of the Vilner Gaon, a fairly good account of his theological differences with and battle against Hasidism can be found in E. J. Schochet, *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1994). The fullest treatment of the theology of the *Mitnagdim* is Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mitnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). A thorough treatment of the rabbis of the town of Shklov in the early nineteenth century is David Fishman, *Russia's First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov* (New York: New York University Press, 1995). Very few of the Gaon's original writings or those of his disciples are available in English. Two notable exceptions are the Gaon's remarkable ethical testament, published in Israel Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1948), and an excerpted English version of R. Hayyim of Volozhin's aforementioned introduction to the Gaon's commentary to *Sifra De-Zeniuta*, in Louis Jacobs, ed., *Jewish Mystical Testimonies* (New York: Schocken, 1977).

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Behold how our holy and pious rabbi, of blessed memory, was an untarnished pearl, like one of the generation of the *rishonim*, as the sacred teachings con-

tained in his writings demonstrate. For he authored more than seventy works, in which all of his words, though very concise, were fiery, like unto the heavenly stars. And among [his writings] are numerous, very brief and esoteric books . . . regarding the secrets of the Torah, which require many extensive commentaries.

He completed all of his written works before he reached his fortieth year, after which he did not write anything. Whatever was [subsequently] published [in his name] was actually written by his disciples. For he was a mighty fountain whose teachings could not fully be captured in print by any one individual. I heard from his eldest son, of blessed memory, who heard directly from him, that he developed one hundred and fifty interpretations of a single verse from the [biblical] Song of Songs, but no scribe was found sufficiently swift to record all these views, and he himself did not want to spend the time necessary to record them all. . . . It is further related that when he finished his commentary to the Song of Songs, he lifted his eyes to the heavens and, in an intense mystical state, he blessed and praised God for having enabled him to apprehend the full light of the entire Torah, both its exoteric and esoteric parts.

He declared: "All of the sciences are necessary for [the comprehension of] our Torah and are included within it." And he knew them all fully, and enumerated them: algebra, trigonometry, geometry, and the wisdom of music. He particularly praised the latter [i.e., music]. For he used to say that the secrets behind most of the Bible's cantillations and the songs of the Levites and the commentaries to the *Zohar*, are unfathomable without it. And through the beauty of [music] men can attain a mystical death, and its secrets that are enshrined in the Torah can empower men to revive the dead. He also said that Moses himself brought down from Mount Sinai numerous tunes and notes, out of which all other songs are composed; and he [the Gaon] knew them all.

As for the medical sciences, he knew surgery and its attendant procedures. Although he wanted to master pharmacology and planned to study it with the physicians of his day, his righteous father forbade him from studying this. For he feared that its mastery would lead him to neglect his Torah studies each time he would be called upon [for prescriptions] to save lives. And his father similarly warned him against studying witchcraft. . . . As for philosophy, he claimed to have mastered it in its entirety and to have learned only two things from it . . . and all the rest of it must be discarded.

As a consequence of all this, he declared that, thank God, he had totally mastered the entire Torah that was given at Mount Sinai, as well as all of the prophetic and other biblical writings. Also [he apprehended] the entire oral Torah . . . so that by his later years, there did not remain a single doubt regarding any *halakha* [Jewish law] or Talmudic passage . . . to the point where he understood the entire corpus of the oral Torah and the halakhic codes, including every commentary written to the *Shulkhan Arukh* [the authoritative sixteenth-century code of Jewish law]. He clarified them all, and exposed all obscurities to the light of day and corrected all the flawed texts.

As for the esoteric teachings [in the kabbalistic texts of] *Zohar*, *Tikkunei Zohar*, *Sefer Yezirah*, and the writings of Rabbi Isaac Luria, of blessed memory, he completed them all and corrected many textual errors, thus editing these books of all scribal mistakes. In fact, there were only two very difficult matters in the entire esoteric lore that remained unresolved by him . . . of which he said that if he only knew who had their solutions, he would walk until he reached him and wait for the answers until the coming of the Messiah.

Who can recount his righteousness and piety, that he never engaged in mundane conversation, and he never accepted any communal or rabbinical responsibilities, nor anything else that might divert him [from Torah study]. He despised all financial rewards, and would just study in isolation, in the woods, or alone in his house.

When he departed for the land of Israel, some of the communal leaders gave him money to cover his expenses. And when, for reasons known only to him, he turned away and came back home, he returned all of the money. When he would travel into *golah* [a self-imposed exile from his home], he would become renowned for his many wondrous deeds, wherever he went. . . . And when he returned home, he would only study Torah in a state of self-denial. He would close all the shutters of his house [even] during the day and study by candlelight so as not to be disturbed by the eyes of passers-by. Such was the nature of his study in the days of his youth that he would always review the entire text of the Babylonian Talmud each month.

For all of these reasons, it is appropriate to call our rabbi the "Saint" and "Holy One." It is impossible [adequately] to describe the intensity of his study of the holy Torah. He would review each chapter and tractate [of the Talmud] hundreds and thousands of times. Then again, on account of his abundant affection for the holy Torah, he might spend an entire, long midwinter night reviewing [over and again] just a single *mishna* from the order of *Toharot*. In his younger years, he would spend the frigid winter days studying in his unheated room, where he would keep a bucket of ice water in which to immerse his feet, so as not to doze off. . . .

A great rabbi from this region . . . recounted that one year, just before the festival of Sukkot, he [the Gaon] rebuked the [congregation] assembled before him and proclaimed that there is an obligation upon every student of Torah to commit at least one tractate of the Talmud to memory. He would thereby never have to neglect the commandment constantly to be studying the Torah at all, even while traveling or when in an unlit place. Upon hearing this directive from the Gaon's very holy mouth, this particular rabbi immediately and with intensive effort studied the Talmudic tractate of *Sukkah* [dealing with laws of the biblical festival of Sukkot, or Tabernacles], reviewing it over and over again until he had committed it to memory. He then examined himself in it and also had his erudition tested before others, in order to be sure that he had properly committed it to memory.

Subsequently, during the intermediate days of the festival [of Sukkot], while a group of great talmudic scholars were gathered before the Gaon, this rabbi entered and proclaimed before the assembled: "I have completed studying tractate *Sukkah* and I have committed it to memory." And the Gaon responded: "So, would you like me to test your knowledge by asking you a few questions?" And he answered him: "Yes, for I know it by heart." So the Gaon asked him a question that he could not answer, regarding the exact number of dissenting opinions between each of the various groups of rabbis [cited] in this tractate. Subsequently, the Gaon opened his mouth and enumerated, like someone counting precious gems, each and every [talmudic dispute], and he dissected and analyzed the minute details of every aspect of each such case. . . . [B]ehold how amazing was his erudition in every tractate of both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, and in the entire Torah.

He knew each and every textual variant and scribal error in the Talmud. . . . He even knew the names and the personal affairs of every human being in the world, and he could tell you where all of these are alluded to in the Torah.

How great, lofty and amazing was his comprehension of the [Torah's] secrets and many wonders! Aside from his holy published [commentaries on the kabbalistic texts] *Sifra de-Zeniuta*, *Sefer Yetsira*, and on parts of the *Zohar*, we still have many of his manuscripts in our possession. There I saw a secret doctrine that was revealed to him by the [biblical patriarch] Jacob, our forefather, regarding a matter in the writings of Rabbi Isaac Luria, with which he was having some difficulty.

He tended often to reject the commentaries of the earlier rabbinical authorities, in order to develop his novel exegetical approach to the true understanding [of the text]. Indeed, in many places it is clear and evident that he merited a revelation of the truth as a consequence of his exceedingly diligent scholarship, and with heavenly help that he received [as a reward] for his studies that were pure and without ulterior motives.

He was indeed a mighty fountain! And so let us follow his light with respect to all of his holy teachings.