

ELIJAH BEN SOLOMON ZALMAN (1720-1797). Also spelled Eliyahu Ben Sh(e)-lomo Zalman. Known as the Gaon of Vilna. Eminent Lithuanian Jewish rabbinic scholar.

Elijah Ben Solomon Zalman was a Talmudist, Kabbalist, and religious thinker who believed in the inherent and permanent meaningfulness of each letter and dot in the Torah (Pentateuch); the primacy of Torah studies over other forms of religious expression; the implementation of these studies by logical, philological and text-based (though religiously constrained) analysis over fanciful interpretative gymnastics; the need to master such secular subjects as are necessary for Torah studies; an ascetic and reclusive lifestyle that eschews luxuries and superfluous social contacts, even with family; and finally, fierce rejection of innovative religious movements, principally Hasidism, which was expanding considerably during his lifetime. All these traits of the Gaon of Vilna came to folkloristically define the alleged traits of traditional Litvaks (from Yiddish *lítvakes*), which literally means Lithuanian Jews, those who hail from the lands of the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They share a dialect, commonly called Lithuanian Yiddish or, to scholars, Northeastern Yiddish (Litvish), which provided the basis for standard Ashkenazic Hebrew as well as standard Yiddish pronunciation.

Gaon as used here means “great genius in traditional Torah studies,” these studies subsuming, within Orthodox Jewish lore, not only the Pentateuch and the rest of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament but the (Hebrew) Mishnah (codified c. 200 A.D.), and the two (Aramaic) Talmuds: the Jerusalem (c. 400 A.D.) and the Babylonian (c. 500 A.D.), and, ultimately, an extensive library of legalistic, homiletic and mystical (kabbalistic) works composed in various parts of the Jewish diaspora during the two millennia since the last heyday of the Second Temple period in Jerusalem, which ended when Jerusalem fell to the Romans in 70 A.D.

The popular name Gaon of Vilna comes from the Yiddish *der Vílner góen* (or simply *der góen* for short, in Lithuanian Jewish circles). His actual name was

Eylióhu ben Shlóyme-Zálmen in the Yiddish pronunciation, Eliyahu ben Sh(e)lomo Zalman in modern Israeli, and Elijah ben Solomon Zalman or sometimes just Elijah of Vilna in common English usage. Much of his earlier biography is quasi-legendary. He was born either in Selitz, a shtetl near Brest, now in Belarus or, according to another version, in the depths of the Jewish quarter of Vilna itself, now Vilnius, the capital of the Republic of Lithuania.

He was descended from the seventeenth-century Lithuanian scholar Moyshe Rivkes who left a benefaction for talented descendents, which enabled this enormously gifted great-great-great grandson to pursue a life of ascetic seclusion devoted to Torah scholarship. At a young age the Gaon exhibited precocious genius, was sent to a smaller town to study with a great authority and then, during a period mostly known from the Gaonic lore, went into voluntary exile, traveling incognito through Poland, Germany and perhaps other countries to accumulate knowledge and wisdom before settling for life in the Jewish quarter of Vilna. He also maintained a retreat in the countryside for extended periods of isolation for study and meditation, away from his family.

The Gaon never accepted the post of a community or town rabbi, and he never organized a yeshiva (rabbinical academy), although after age forty he started to study with a small circle of elite pupils, most of whom went on to luminous careers as rabbinic scholars. By his middle years the Gaon's fame had spread throughout much of Jewish Europe. Yet the stubborn ascetic, who considered most socializing, even with his close relatives and other scholars, as parasitic on the hours of one's life available for Torah study, avoided guests and contacts. His sons wrote later than he slept two hours a night. In an ethical will sent to his wife and children during an aborted trip to the Holy Land, he warned against shopping trips and even excessive synagogue attendance, given the dangers of diversionary thoughts, envy, and gossipy chatter that forever lurk in public places. He also emphasized the need to spare no expense educating one's children with the best tutors.

The number of the Gaon's written works is difficult to calculate, because he published none during his lifetime. One estimate has it at about seventy. Later printed editions were based on his manuscripts, his marginal notes on his own copies of an array of texts (and not necessarily intended as ready for press), and notes made by his elite group of pupils. In the latter two categories disagreement continues on what comes from the Gaon himself. The problem was so extensive that in 1798, a year after his death, the rabbinical court of Vilna issued a ban on publishing any Gaon works that were not authenticated as being in his own hand. Recently numerous volumes were produced by Machon Ha-Gra in the US and Israel. Ha-Gra (traditional Ashkenazic and yeshiva pronunciation is Ha-Gró) is an acronym deriving from ha-góen Reb Eylióhu (Israeli: ha-gaón Rabí Eliyáhu), meaning the genius, Rabbi Elijah.

The corpus of the Gaon's work published to date comprises commentaries on books of the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, and numerous additional works of Jewish law, homiletics, and significantly, mysticism. The Gaon's principled belief in the

handed-down text of the Pentateuch is at variance with his approach to thousands of years of postbiblical rabbinic work. He dared to disagree with the grand authorities of previous epochs, a chutzpah then quite astounding, and he introduced the method of textual comparison and reconstruction, demonstrating that some texts suddenly made sense if their scribal (or printing) errors were recognized by way of comparison with other manuscripts (or editions). In some sense the Gaon introduced the modern academic method of philologists and literary historians into the world of Torah studies, and once unleashed these tools were available for other purposes.

That leads to one of the prime conundrums in grappling retrospectively with the life and work of the Gaon. Although the strictest of the strict on observance of Jewish law, his philosophy of rational means to understand the Torah implied for him the need for the study of geography, agriculture, mathematics, astronomy, and formal Hebrew grammar, all subjects outside the scope of the vast majority of rabbinic scholars. He even wrote expository tracts on a number of these subjects. His work on trigonometry, for example, first published in 1833, was called *Áyil meshúlosh* (*Áyil meshulásh*, a three-year-old ram in Genesis 15:9, but a play on the second word meaning triangle as well as three-year-old).

The amalgamation of textual comparison and reconstruction, and its necessary result, the rejection of some readings cherished as sacrosanct by others, and the forays into secular subjects for the sake of Torah studies, became hallmarks of the Lithuanian method. One of those few who studied with the Gaon, Chaim of Valozhin (1749-1821), established a yeshiva in that spirit in Valozhin in 1803. It became the model for Lithuanian yeshivas, a number of which were transferred to America or Israel before or during the Holocaust.

In Jewish religious circles debate rages to this day about whether the Gaon's study of secular subjects even for the sake of Torah studies somehow led to some people going astray in the sense of following the modernization and secularization program of the Haskalah, or Jewish version of the Enlightenment, which was flourishing in Berlin in the late eighteenth century, coinciding with the Gaon's intellectual prime. Whether because of, in spite of, or irrespective of the Gaon's teachings, the German-Jewish Haskalah eventually established a foothold in Vilna and other East European cities, and the Gaon, usually long after his death, was alternatively credited or blamed.

The Gaon descended only rarely from his ivory tower to participate in debate on contemporary issues. Once it was in connection with a dispute between two would-be chief rabbis of Vilna. The most sensational intervention was on the question of the new Hasidic movement, a mystical trend in Judaism founded by Israel Baal Shem Tov (c. 1700-1760) of Podolia, a region of Ukraine. The Hasidic movement moved the central figure of authority in a Jewish community from rabbi (rov) to rebbe (rébe), a mystical leader presumed infallible and to have a direct line to heaven, and one whose authority is passed down within his family. Hasidim also emphasized making merry and ecstatic prayer. Some versions included a form

of pantheism, blurring in the eyes of the Gaon and his followers the distinction between Creator and Created.

The reaction from Vilna was decisive. From the early 1770s onward circular letters, actual bans of excommunication (herems), and legal action (both within the Jewish autonomic court structures and in denunciations to government authorities), were fired at the Hasidim, most vehemently at those who had organized a beachhead in Vilna. The Gaon reportedly ordered the public burning of various Hasidic books that are today considered among the movement's great classics, for example, *The Testament of the Baal Shem Tov*, which was burned in Vilna about 1794. A particular antagonism developed toward the nearby Lithuanian brands of Hasidism, including the most famous, the Chabad movement of eastern Lithuania, now eastern Belarus, founded by Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi (1745-1813). That movement is now often called Lubavitch, after the town (now Lubavichy, Russia) where the second rebbe, Shneur-Zalmen's son, moved the seat of his court. At the same time it is significant that the Gaon's broadsides helped indirectly to forge Lithuanian Hasidism of the Chabad variety, which synthesized Hasidism with the Lithuanian Jewish ideals of serious study and meticulous scholarship. The Gaon became the archetypal misnáged (literally protestant) for the majority of Lithuanian Jewry, who rejected any form of Hasidism, and who became known as the misnágdim and their movement as misnágdus (mishnagdism, literally opposition).

In the more than two centuries since his death, the Gaon of Vilna has posthumously become a symbol for various things and to various groups—first and foremost, for the traditions of Lithuanian Jewish rabbinic learning, but also for rabbinic scholarship in general (with the waning of the Hasidic conflict, the Gaon entered the general pantheon of Jewish religious heroes even among modern Hasidim); the love of learning among East European Jewry; the culture and lore of the Litvaks, the Jews of the Lithuanian lands, and, although he would never have approved, for the application of his critical text-comparing and analytic methodology by modernists, either applied to Jewish texts in the absence of necessary belief (as in modern Judaic studies), or in the pursuit of secular studies. That he continues, posthumously, esteemed by all is testament to his towering, and lasting, impact.

Bibliography: Israel Cohen, *Vilna* (Philadelphia, 1992), 211-252; Immanuel Etkes, *The Gaon of Vilna. The Man and his Image* (Berkeley, Cal., 2002); Dovid Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture* (Vilnius, 2004), 85-111, 138-140; Betzalel Landau, adapted into English by Yonason Rosenblum, *The Vilna Gaon* (New York, 1994); I. Lempertas and L. Lempertiene, eds., *The Gaon of Vilnius and the Annals of Jewish Culture* (Vilnius, 1998); Elijah Judah Schochet, *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna* (Northvale, N.J., 1994).