**“Each Generation and Its Scholars”: The Changing Faces of the “Historian’s Gaon”**

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**A**

For over two centuries, historians, writers, and men of letters have pondered the part the Vilna Gaon played in the modernization processes that transformed the nature of both European Jewish society and the rest of the Jewish diaspora. R. Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, remembered for posterity as the Gaon of Vilna, was a colossal Talmudic scholar who lived and flourished in eighteenth-century Vilnius (Henceforth: Vilna, as popularly referred to by the Jews). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he was adopted by many of the opposing and diverse religious, cultural, and political Jewish factions and schools of thought, as an iconic figure. Like many other outstanding, eighteenth-century, heroes populating the pantheon of Jewish culture, the personality, activities, and innate creativity of this Lithuanian Talmud genius were integrated into a host of historical narratives that themselves metamorphosized over the years. The Vilna Gaon received the same treatment at the hands of the historians—the biographers and those who wrote pedagogical works—as, for instance, the founder of the Hasidic movement, R. Israel Ba’al Shem-Tov (1700?–1760) and the philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore (1784–1885).

Indeed, the Vilna Gaon, qua historical figure, was recruited into the culture wars that raged after his time and integrated into political struggles that neither he nor his contemporaries could have foreseen. Several of these continue to be waged in the State of Israel and the Jewish diaspora to this very day. However, please be assured that in making this statement, I do not mean to disparage this phenomenon; in fact, the opposite is true. Analytical historians tremendously value deciphering the ahistorical codes that guided earlier history buffs who penned histories, for through them, they can learn how an individual and his actions impacted globally and temporally extending far beyond his or her locale and time.

By exploring the Vilna Gaon as a representative case of the evolution of a Jewish historiographical figure and comparing this iconic figure which evolved anachronistically with the actual historical figure who lived in Vilna, we will be able to determine the degree to which Jewish Vilna’s influence extended beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The title I chose for this lecture recalls the name of Isaac Hirsch Weiss’ well-known Wissenschaft des Judentums work published in the second half of the nineteenth century. Weiss, a historian and Talmudist, was known as the “Darwin of the Talmud” because he described the creation of the Oral Torah as a historical process, an evolutionary process that spanned the ages. In its time, Weiss’ approach engendered a religio-cultural debate that gave birth to several important written responses. It did not fit in with the Orthodox approach which both rejected the attempt to historicize Jewish law and fiercely opposed the scholarly positions adopted by those associated with the reformist movement and the radical Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment Movement), as they deemed the Talmudic corpus to be an outdated and flawed text. In this talk, I will engage with my eponymous “scholars” within their “generational” context. Both the Gaon and his ever-changing character and the researchers and scholars who refashioned his image will be viewed from the perspective of their own times and places and through the lens of their own opinions and beliefs.

Over forty years ago, Professor Immanuel Etkes, one of Israel’s outstanding academicians, who devoted a significant part of his lengthy, scholarly career to studying the Vilna Gaon and his writings, conducted pioneering research on the changing perceptions of the Vilna Gaon’s character. In an article entitled, “The Gaon of Vilna and the Haskala: Image and Reality,” published in Hebrew in 1980, Etkes demonstrated that, in contrast to the popular belief that held sway among the eastern European Haskalah circles until the beginning of the twentieth century, the Gaon was not one of the forerunners of the Jewish Enlightenment. As Etkes wrote: “The conceptualization of the Vilna Gaon as a harbinger of the Haskalah, which we discovered in the writings of the historians reviewed above, does not withstand critical analysis. This perception is flawed by both its inaccurate presentation of the facts and its anachronistic interpretation of them.” Etkes asserts, that at most “if we can speak of the Vilna Gaon’s role concerning the beginning of the Haskalah in Russia, this would primarily entail the part his image as *Maskil* [enlightened Jew] played, several instances of which we reviewed above. This image was founded on an arbitrary collection of the Vilna Gaon’s character traits that patently ignored others, inaccurately presented the facts, and most problematically removed the facts from their original contexts, shining an anachronistic light on them. This image does not teach us about the Vilna Gaon’s actual connection with the Haskalah, but rather about the deep need the maskilim had to ascribe their approach to an impeccable source—placing it ‘on the shoulders of a giant.’ In other words, the Vilna Gaon did not influence the very birth or growth of the Haskalah movement; however, after the movement arose due to a host of other factors, in retrospect, the maskilim nurtured the image of the Vilna Gaon-maskil and utilized it.” In 1997, on the two-hundredth anniversary of the Vilna Gaon’s death, the global scholarly community joined in a conference held at the University of Vilnius to provide a picture of the current state of critical research on the Vilna Gaon’s image. In the conference volume published (in English) in 1998, *The Gaon of Vilnius and the Annals of Jewish Culture*, which addressed a diverse collection of schools of thought, religious streams, and movements—from Hasidism over the centuries to Lithuanian Jewish Orthodoxy to twentieth-century, national-religious Zionism. In my lecture, “The Vilna Gaon as a Portender of Zionism: Pseudo-Epigraphy in the Service of the Movement,” I followed in Etkes’ methodological footsteps, proposing that we examine the Gaon’s image in national-religious Zionist historiography in the same way he had examined the image of the Gaon, the colossal Lithuanian Talmudist, in the writings of the maskilim. Among other things, I wrote the following:

“National movements attempt to rewrite a people’s past….Some even say that modern nationalism equips its people with a past that has never even existed. The modern national Jewish movement is no exception to this rule. Certain figures from the nation’s past are reconfigured in the national memory to suit the nation’s new needs; they are given an anachronistic overhaul, and inserted into the new pantheon…. It is true that various groups within the Jewish national movement have put, and are still putting, various figures from the Jewish past to various uses. The host of figures at the forefront of historical inventionism among the proponents of socialist Zionism does not resemble the corresponding figures among the national-religious Zionists. The case of the Vilna Gaon, the epitome of a religious scholar of extraordinary intellectual capacity and accomplishments, may illuminate the way a personality from the pre-national period has been inserted directly into the center of the national-religious portrayal of the past.”

To the best of my knowledge, the most recent study of the historiographical evolution of the Gaon’s image was published about a year ago in Morgenstern’s *The Rivlin Family and the Messiah at the Gates of Jerusalem*. Dr. Arie Morgenstern, a veteran Israeli academic specializes in the history of the pre-Zionist, Ashkenazi settlement in the Land of Israel.At the beginning of the nineteenth century, hundreds of Lithuanian Talmud scholars emigrated to the Land of Israel. They self-identified as followers of the Vilna Gaon. Morgenstern’s book is dedicated to a critical analysis of the conflicting versions found in historical works about this ascent to the Land of Israel.

Morgenstern delineates the sea-change that took place in the way in which the Gaon’s image was molded and in the way in which its influence was perceived in the forty years preceding the publication of his book. As he writes, “Let’s begin with the evolving scholarly perception of the Gaon’s image, which until my studies was never even remotely considered to be a messianic one. And suddenly in recent years, a profound change has occurred among the scholars researching earlier perceptions of the Gaon’s character….[from] studies about the Gaon and his disciples’ thought, to other studies which we will presently discuss, that step-by-step establish the Gaon as a messianic figure. But, [it is crucial to note, that] his messianism apparently possesses various forms. In this chapter, I will discuss the earthly aspect of this messianism which was expressed by the Gaon’s decision to emigrate by himself to the Land of Israel out of the belief that this ascent would help to hasten the redemption. The fact that this attempt to emigrate failed was also pivotal, for this failure brought about a strategic shift in the thinking of the Gaon and his disciples about how to bring about the Redemption, as we will see below.” The scholars to whom Morgenstern is referring are not historians, but experts in Jewish mysticism. They rely upon the connection he proposes between the Gaon’s esoteric and exoteric thought and the historical events of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Morgenstern’s novel understanding of the Vilna Gaon’s part in the modernization process Jewish society underwent engendered a lively and lengthy historiographical debate both in Israel and North America which I played a significant part in.

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For a few minutes, let’s try and forget about everything that happened in Vilna, in Lithuania, in Europe, and around the globe after 1797. I will now describe the world in which the Gaon’s fellow city dwellers—the community of Vilna—lived in the year the Gaon died. While it is immensely difficult to erase our knowledge of the social changes, political movements, religious denominations, and literary works that shaped Jewish society over the last two centuries; it is crucial to do so, so that we can distance ourselves from the “background noise” that impedes our ability to reconstruct the actual historical experience that an eastern European, urban, Jewish community underwent in the Early Modern Period.

Vilna, the ancient capital of Lithuania since 1323, by the eighteenth century, was a city in which various religions and cultures had encountered one another for centuries. It was an important hub in the religious, cultural, and linguistic transnational networks that expanded alongside one another across the span of Europe. In Vilna, Lithuanians, Poles, Belorussians, Germans, Jews, and Karaites lived side-by-side. Vilna functioned as a religious center for Catholic Poles and the Belorussian Orthodox Church. During the many years since its foundation, and up until its annexation by the Russian Empire a few years before the Vilna Gaon’s death, Vilna was conquered by Germans belonging to the Teutonic Order, the armies of Sweden, and Russian Muscovite soldiers.

The political, religious, and social exchanges, which characterized the cities found in the transitional regions bridging Catholic Western Europe and Orthodox Christian Eastern Europe, molded Vilna into a city whose culture contained many diverse cultures, languages, and lifestyles. In the mid-sixteenth century, Vilna housed the first printing presses in the Polish and Belorussian languages, and from 1540 and on it was a focus for the expansion of Protestant Christianity. It was, therefore, no accident that during the Counterreformation, the Jesuit Order chose Vilna as the hub of its educational activities in Lithuania. In 1578, the Jesuits even founded a college in Vilna whose mission was to spread Catholicism throughout the north-eastern part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In Vilna, the Italian and Spanish Baroque style fused with the eastern European Belorussian artistic tradition and the Germanic one that came from nearby Prussia. Within this mix, and as part of the unique transcontinental, Jewish, religious, cultural, and linguistic network that possessed its own unique religious and cultural flavor, the Jewish community in the Vilna Gaon’s time grew to be one of the Commonwealth’s largest. It was a “city within a city.” The Vilna Jewish community's cultural, religious, and social ties were far tighter with distant Jewish communities than with the Christian, urban communities next door.

Vilna was an important hub in the Early Modern cultural network that conducted printed and written materials and oral communications via a communications channel that linked the elite Jewish families living in hundreds of cities all over the continent. The Gaon due to his extraordinary intellectual abilities was a central figure in this network during his time. Like the other sociocultural transcontinental networks, in which the elites conducted most of their cultural dialogue with members of their own ethnoreligious community spread out over hundreds of other locales, so too the Jewish networks, did not interface with representatives of other networks living in their own towns. Vilna was connected with the important communities of the Ashkenazic Jewish diaspora which stretched from Metz in Alsace and Amsterdam in Holland to the cities of the eastern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

The community’s continued cultural existence was sustained by members of the elite families who wielded their power to fortify their positions as communal leaders. Wealth, a distinguished lineage, and scholarship were the attributes most highly prized in their quivers. The core of the intellectual world inhabited by the men in these families was halakhic literature. Of course, this was a cultural niche that only the men took part in. The connection between the business world and control of the economic centers of power in the *kahal* and prowess in Jewish learning often gave rise to disputes. While the Vilna Gaon sat isolated in his study, a bitter controversy over the incumbency of the municipal rabbi waged outside for close to thirty years. The origin of this dispute was not religious, nor was it even based on halakhic considerations; rather, it stemmed from competition between the leading families over who would control the economic levers of power in the community. One of the rabbi’s supporters—who was trying to increase the extent of his power within the communal leadership structure—was the son-in-law of R. Joseph b. Elijah, a wealthy relative and patron of the Gaon whom he supported financially! In these power struggles that riled up the Jewish citizenry, each of the opposing Jewish sides was supported by their own allies in the Polish aristocracy, a ploy typical of the communal and supra-communal political machinations in the eighteenth century. Thus, even though the Gaon distanced himself from public affairs, he was a member of one of the internal political camps that set the community on edge as it fought for power over communal and economic affairs.

According to some academicians, including Adam Teller, the Gaon’s virulent opposition to Hasidism did not merely stem from their different approaches to Kabbalah, but rather also from his unyielding belief that the movement's early leaders did not offer “a proper source of spiritual authority for Jewish life.” The Lithuanian Talmudist, isolated in his study, also fought a social war against the Hasidim because he perceived them to be competing with the leadership model he represented in an era in which there was a “a decreasing status of the communal rabbinate.”

In last generation before the division of Poland, some members of the Lithuanian Jewish community’s intellectual elite were not satisfied with studying the traditional Jewish texts that had been at the heart of all intellectual endeavors in the Ashkenazic diaspora until then but rather were interested in studying philosophy and the sciences. According to most academicians, these individuals were not yet members of the Haskalah movement that began in Berlin and nearby Koenigsberg in the 1760s and 1770s. However, they were spiritual kindred of several of the early enlightenment figures in Berlin and were even in contact with them.

R. Ezekiel Feivel, who was the community *magid* (preacher who delivered sermons on Sabbaths and Festivals) studied the works of Moses Mendelssohn and Naftali Herz Wessely; the Vilnius magnate R. Elijah b. Zevi Peseles—cousin of the Gaon’s father, who supported the Gaon financially—paid in advance for the printing of the *Be'ur* composed by Mendelssohn and his circle (a translation of the Bible into German with a rationalistic commentary; *Ha-Me'asef*, the organ of the Berlin and Koenigsberg Haskalahhad a considerable number of subscribers in Vilna. R. Solomon of Dubno, who was a tutor in Mendelssohn’s household in Berlin and was his partner in the Be'ur project, arrived in Vilna in the early 1780s and was supported by the aforementioned R. Joseph b. Elijah Pessels. R. Joseph also corresponded with David Friedlander, one of the richest Jews in Berlin, who would later head the radical branch of the Prussian Haskalah*.* This connection between the members of the most distinguished and wealthy Jewish families in Berlin and Vilnius and the cultural trends emerging in Berlin and Koenigsberg can explain the similar trends arising in scholarly circles in Vilnius. The focus on language, textual interpretation and philology, and the interest in the medieval exegesis of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra and R. David Kimhi was common to the Vilna scholars and the participants in Mendelssohn’s Be’ur project.

The scholarly circle which was active in Vilna between the 1770s and 1790s, combined wide-ranging erudition in rabbinic literature with an open approach to the sciences. Its members included, in addition to the above-mentioned members of the wealthy and distinguished families, physicians who had studied in Western Europe. The writings of Dr. Judah Ha-Levi Hurwitz, a physician in the service of the Vilna kahal, during the Gaon’s latter years, were admired by Moses Mendelssohn and Naftali Herz Wessely, as well as by the Lithuanian rabbis. Dr. Jacob Luboshutz, who studied medicine at Halle University in Sacsony, settled in Vilna in the 1770s. He had a well-stocked medical library and was awarded the title of “royal consultant” by the last king of Poland, Stanislaw August Poniatowski. Dr. Luboshutz was one of the subscribers to *Ha-Me'asef*. Another Vilna-born physician, who studied in Amsterdam and was also appointed “royal consultant” was Dr. Shmaria Polonus. He was involved in composing a proposal for the reform of Jewish life in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which he submitted in 1792 to the last Polish monarch. This proposal, written with the agreement of Polish political reformers, was influenced by the discussions of the French Revolutionary National Assembly on the status of the Jews and by French writings on the subject**.**

Everything we have mentioned up until now existed in the old world order in which the Vilna Kahal flourished. However, their successors did not attempt to perform the forgetfulness exercise I proposed above. They tended to interpret the historical period of the Gaon and the Vilna of his time as preparatory stages for the future that was to come. They had difficulty grasping the notion that the links between Western and Eastern Europe did not necessarily have to lead to what transpired later, that there were alternate channels through which the Western Haskalah may have been able to make inroads to the East and influence the Eastern reaches of the continent. These channels, however, did not fit in with the narrative of radical progress that shaped the perceptions of the modern, nineteenth-century historians who wrote the history of Eastern European Jewry. These historians—most of whom championed radical ideologies and belonged to innovative political movements, or who, alternatively, adopted conservative Orthodox stances—could not imagine a world in which enlightenment was on the rise and at the same time a feudal economy and corporative social order continued to persist. The Jewish parallel to this form of Enlightenment is referred to by historians as “moderate enlightenment.”

These nineteenth-century historians were unable to place Rabbi Shimshon Mordecai of Slonim in his correct time or place. Rabbi Shimshon was a seeker of knowledge and a lover of books who wrote an enthusiastic approbation for R. Barukh of Shklov’s translation of Euclides’ treatise on geometry—the same R. Barukh who wrote books on mathematics and medicine in Hebrew and who was one of the Vilna Gaon’s familiars (“those who saw his face”). Rabbi Shimshon, the rabbi of the city of Slonim, imported steel products for sale from Britain; his network of business associates and the approbations written for the books on his bookshelves link London, Amsterdam, Vilna, Koenigsberg, and Riga. The alternate channels that introduced enlightenment into Eastern Europe fused the courts of the Polish nobility, the rabbi’s bookshelves, and the merchants’ warehouses. These were hidden from the historians’ eyes because they were blinded by the notion of progress expanding eastward across Europe in a linear-deterministic path facilitated by the centralized state and the radical Haskalah. This path became a historiographical convention that was birthed by nineteenth-century ideologues and inherited by twentieth-century historians engaged in the field.

Social, economic, political, and cultural networks overlapped across the expanse of Europe. When they encountered one another, change transpired that transformed the ethnic groups involved, including the Jewish ones. The historians who have been invested for over two centuries in promulgating various narratives about diverse movements, denominations, and ethnonationalist identities in central and eastern Europe cast their nets in a different direction and did not take into account encounter points that did not fit in with the memory of the past they wished to transmit to the next generation. In other words, according to the historians and politicians, there was only one form of “modernization,” which was reached by only one path, and societal, religious, or cultural change could have only transpired as a revolution or complete negation of what once was.

The eastern European Haskalah movement appropriated the argument made by several of those deemed the “harbingers of the Haskalah” that the Vilna Gaon was the source of their ideas. However, it is interesting to note that, of all people, the Zionist-Marxist historian, Raphael Mahler, who had a radical worldview, completely negated the claims of the early eastern European maskilim concerning the proximity between their positions and the Vilna Gaon’s. In so doing, this twentieth-century historian expressed the continued reticence of Haskalah’s radical wing of accepting this etiology, as he writes: “In providing this rationale for the need to learn ‘Wisdoms’ the Vilna Gaon preceded the maskilim, just as he smoothed the way for the Haskalah movement with his plans for correcting the educational system and by his championing the status of the study of Tanakh and grammar. It is no surprise that several of the harbingers of the moderate Haskalah, such as R. Barukh of Shklov, R. Shlomo Dubno, and R. Menashe from Iliya looked up to him and were also his familiars (“looked upon his face”). However, notwithstanding the apparent similarity, the Haskalah movement could not have progressed without weening itself off of the medieval worldview upon which the Vilna Gaon established Judaism’s foundations. A long-term compromise between the two opposing views of the old and new worlds of thought was not at all possible. Indeed, not long after the death of the Vilna Gaon, his name and his Torah teachings were emblazoned upon the flag of the Orthodox Jewish zealots’ camp which girded all its remaining strength to stand in the breach on behalf of the old Judaism, in opposition to the Haskalah which was emergent and on the rise.”

Indeed, Mahler felicitously distinguished the incongruity between the Vilna Gaon and the Haskalah; however, even though he was aware that the extraordinary Talmudist’s attitude towards the sciences was also influenced by “ways of thinking that had been disseminated from nearby Germany and penetrated Lithuania,” he did not take the time to deepen his understanding of the significance of this influence. In this, he was no different than the great Jewish historian who preceded him, Simon Dubnow, who in keeping with the spirit of the radical Haskalah was even more dismissive of the importance of the connection between the Vilna Gaon and the harbingers of the Haskalah. They relied upon the Vilna Gaon’s recommendation to use the sciences to deepen their study of Jewish law. Thus Dubnow writes about the circle of Torah scholars that lived on an estate near the city of Shklov in the waning years of the seventeenth century: “Among them were individuals who knew how to merge the study of mathematics and the science of nature with Talmudic study. They relied upon the words of the Vilna Gaon: He who knows the sciences possesses “ten handbreadths” more of the Torah, and, for instance, it is possible to use the science of astronomy to learn the secret of the intercalation of the calendar.”