**“Each Generation and its Scholars” (Part 2)**

**C**

With the onset of the early Haskalah movement in Eastern Europe, the Gaon of Vilna was recruited into the camp of the “heralds” of Jewish modern nationalism, as the first members of the Eastern European Haskalah movement “conscripted” the Vilna Gaon into the pantheon of the harbingers of modern Jewish nationalism. As the sun set on Eastern Jewry’s corporate autonomy, the moderate faction of the maskilim became more and more determined to find and strengthen the threads connecting Jews who had drifted apart and factions that were fighting among themselves. With the aim of harmonizing the different currents in Judaism, these maskilim sought to define how the contributions of diverse camps to preserving historical continuity could lead to a shared future. They were also eager to reveal the camps’ reciprocal influence on one another, notwithstanding their fierce disputes and bitter rivalries.

At first, the question of classical Judaism’s attitude towards the new concept of nationalism was marginal; however, during the second half of the nineteenth century, this issue gained enormous significance when Eastern European, Jewish historians—who read history from a nationalistic perspective—joined the non-observant, Jewish intellectuals in the nationalist camp. Notwithstanding the deepening split between these two factions, nationalist historiography was nurtured by both branches—the secular-nationalist and the religious-nationalist—and these branches nurtured each other. For example, note the influence of national-religious historian Zeev Yavetz, whom we will discuss soon, on the man universally acclaimed as the founder of Zionist historiography, Ben-Zion Dinur of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

From the very beginning, the Eastern European maskilims’ historiographical tendency to reconcile divergent streams was intent on liberating the historical narrative of the Russian Empire’s Jews from the shackles of the German-Jewish narrative. Thus, the maskilim indeed internalized the negative image of their own *Ostjuden* society and culture that was rampant among German Jewry from the eighteenth century onward. Nonetheless, there were persistent complaints among the Lithuanian maskilim that their enlightened brothers in the West had completely misunderstood the internal world of Eastern European Jewry. In the Russian Empire, the insulted readers of the great historian Heinrich Graetz repeatedly claimed that in the last part of his monumental work dealing with the history of the Jews from the mid-eighteenth to the late- nineteenth centuries, Graetz almost completely ignored the history of the largest, Jewish community in the world! They therefore felt compelled to fill in this gap and write a complete, common history for all parts of this nation.

The clearest and most complete example of this historiographical “rebellion” against the superiority of the German-Jewish narrative was written by the maskil Pinhas Rabinovitch (SHeFeR) (1845–1910), who translated Graetz’ *Geschichte der Juden*’s into Hebrew. While translation, Rabinovitch’s dissatisfaction grew about the marginalized and insulting position Graetz had allotted to Polish and Russian Jewry in his work; as a result, the project increasingly became one of rewriting and not merely translating. SheFeR, who was one of the members of the *Hibbat Zion* (*Love of Zion*) movement in Warsaw, even planned to write an entire book that would replace Graetz’ final volume. In this work, Rabinovitch proposed integrating the Vilna Gaon into a harmonious national narrative. The Gaon would serve as a central pillar of a new historiography in the spirit of the moderate Haskalah bridging Vilna and Berlin. Granting the *Ost* and *Wes’t* equal standing, Rabinovitz, assured early-twentieth century Eastern European Hebrew readers that he, unlike Graetz, planned to allocate sufficient space to address all three of the movements that had transformed Eastern European Jewish society, declaring:

These are the faces of the generation that preceded the generation in which **Hasidism**, in its two primary streams, the Beshtian and Habad (of the Lithuanian and Belorussian provinces) grew, and the Gaon of Vilna’s **literal interpretation of the Torah**. I will devote a separate essay to the history of these two movements and to the new Haskalah movement (born in Berlin).

From its early days, the Wissenschaft des Judentums drew on Hegel’s dialectical philosophy in their efforts to construct a unity of the contrasting conceptions of the spirit of the nation held by ideological rivals. Eastern European Haskalah had spent decades nurturing a common Judeo-cultural identity based on inherently nationalistic foundations. It bequeathed a strong commitment to these foundations to the national movement that arose at the end of the nineteenth century. It was easy for those who deemed the Vilna Gaon a harbinger of the Enlightenment to point to his attitude toward the Tanakh, the Hebrew language, and the Land of Israel as proof of his being a forerunner of Zionism.

A historiographical discovery of national harmonization that preceded SheFeR’s work can be found in the writings of the Lithuanian Enlightenment figure, Samuel Joseph Fuenn (1818–1891). Eventually, Fuenn, too, became one of the early members of Hibbat Zion in Vilna. In his book on the Jewish community in Vilna, *Kiryah Ne’emanah* (1860), Fuenn wrote that:

The LORD saw….and he established three shepherds for us in various places to support the three pillars….Divine Providence called upon our Rabbi Elijah in Lithuania to preserve the Torah, to purify and distill its teachings, to supervise its study and the diligent immersion in it; the leader of the Hasidim in Volhyn to set the stage for the devotional and to fan the flames of emotion; and our people’s sage Moses b. Menachem in Germany, to raise the torch of Haskalah by placing it in the candelabrum of religion.

Another moderate Enlightenment figure, Eliezer Zweifel (1815–1888), who, like many of his colleagues, was concerned by the younger maskilims’ support for radicalization at the beginning of Czar Alexander II’s reign, devoted his book *Shalom al Yisrael* (*Peace to Israel*, 1868) to conceptualizing Hasidism, Mitnagdism, and the Haskalah as unifying the Jewish nation. As the historian Shmuel Feiner noted:

The three socio-ideological streams—Hasidism, Mitnagdism, and Haskalah—were examined in this book from the perspective of the degree to which they fit in with harmonistic Haskalah…. Zweifel believed this was his calling and mission in life…. “to mediate peace between the factions that were squabbling without any real reason.”

*Shalom al Yisrael* reviews Fuenn’s aforementioned theory of the “three shepherds”—spiritual leaders—who took center stage in Jewish history in the eighteenth century: Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem-Tov (1678–1760), founder of Hasidism; the Vilna Gaon, leader of the Mitnagdim, and Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), the father of the Haskalah movement. These three shepherds, who held conflicting opinions, lived at the dawn of a new historical era, an era of new spiritual and religious vitality among the Jewish people, an era in which the opposing ideological currents within it were connected dialectically. As Zweifel put it, God desired the movements’ disputes to motivate them and to “revive the religious spirit among the people, to recharge and rejuvenate it, imbuing them with a renewed sense of vitality.”

During the 1870s, the maskil Peretz Smolenskin, the editor of the journal *Hashachar* (The Dawn), proposed a distinct dialectical synthesis fusing the Vilna Gaon and the national narrative, which was quickly integrated into the sociocultural, secular-nationalist narrative at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Vilna Gaon functioned as one of the sources of inspiration for the secular-nationalist notion of the “spirit of the people,” in keeping with the substance of Hegelian idealism. According to Smolenskin, throughout exile, the national spirit was preserved in the nation’s pious and diligent immersion in their religious texts. The Lithuanian scholar’s steadfast attachment to these Jewish cultural treasures was bequeathed to the Lithuanian Talmudical academies. Thus, the encounter with the new spirit of the modern age would liberate the national spirit that was imprisoned between the walls of these traditional institutions, and a new national culture would spring forth and replace the old. In the words of Israeli scholar, Asaf Yedidyah:

Smolenskin was opposed to the optimistic term the maskilim had given to the “new age,” as he realized how complex modernity was. He delineated the foundational principles of national-historical scholarship at whose center stood the Jewish nation and its national treasures: the Hebrew language, the Jewish religion, and the national consciousness, which temporarily compensated for the loss of the inheritance of the forefathers and national autonomy.

These possessions were embodied in the very persona of the Vilna Gaon, who, in contrast to Moses Mendelsohn, preserved the past and did not uproot it.

As SheFeR was laboring to integrate the Vilna Gaon and the Besht into the national historical narrative using a dialectical approach, the historian Ze’ev (Wolf) Yavetz (1847–1924), proposed a non-dialectical harmonization between Haskalah and traditional Talmudical scholarship by explicitly rooting both in the Jewish nationalism embedded in the Hibbat Zion movement’s ideology. Yavetz, despite his inclination towards Orthodox Judaism, collaborated with SheFeR in editing the literary annual *Knesset Yisrael*, and their thoughts on many matters were quite close. Yavetz emigrated to Ottoman Palestine in 1887, during the “First Aliyah,” and later moved from there to Vilna in 1902, eventually becoming one of the founders of the Mizrahi movement, the national-religious wing of the Zionist movement.

Yavetz conceptualized the *Hibbat Zion* movement to be a later evolutionary stage in the appropriate preservation and integration of Torah and science, an approach inspired by the Gaon that had developed in Vilna in the 18th century. Indeed, in the century separating the Vilna Gaon from Mendelssohn, the ideal balance between Torah and science had been violated, and oftentimes even disappeared, due to the radicalism of their historical successors, the maskilim, on the one hand, and the Orthodox, on the other, who had both drifted away from the golden mean. Ultimately, however, a new balance was achieved between the spirits of Vilna and Berlin, as seen in the new national movement that arose in Eastern Europe.

In 1886, on the fiftieth anniversary of Mendelsohn’s passing, Yavetz dedicated his historical treatise *Migdal Hameah* to an examination of the roots of the new national movement. For this, he delved into three figures who had played pivotal roles in the awakening of the new national consciousness, thereby providing the foundations for a renewal of the ancient historical connection between religion and society. This connection had served as the enduring basis for the collective existence of the Jewish nation until modernity. The three figures were the Lithuanian Talmudic scholar Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon (1720–1797), the German philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, and the British philanthropist Moses Montefiore (1784–1875). The Besht’s place in Fuenn’s and Zweifel’s three shepherds model was replaced in Yavetz’s model by the British businessman, Montefiore, who was able to bridge between the diverse camps in the post-corporate Jewish diaspora through his many decades of philanthropic activity and who also supported the small, Jewish community that existed in the Land of Israel before the *Hibbat Zion* movement was founded. Montefiore provided the new movement with the necessary sociopolitical infrastructure, replacing the traditional Kehilah that had been abolished. Furthermore, he became both a symbol of continuity with the traditional world and served as a focal point for bipartisan national unity. As Yafetz described him:

With the great awe in which he held his God and his faithful love for his people, he was almost the only man in Israel upon whom almost no aspersions were cast, whose very appearance filled the hearts of all of Israel with awe and respect, exaltation and love, to the point where the very name Montefiore became synonymous among the people with the love of the Torah, Israel, and Jerusalem.

In his essay, Yavetz responded to the type of question that contemporary historians are reluctant to address: What would have happened if the harmony prevalent in Vilna between the Vilna Gaon’s scholarship and Mendelssohn’s Haskalah had been preserved? In his response, Yavetz wrote:

Mendelssohn’s wisdom became a powerful force for change when it arrived for until that point Torah was king, as the spirit of the Vilna Gaon wafted above Vilna, so knowledge—like Mendelssohn’s wisdom—disseminated slowly and peacefully over time, and consequently the course corrections were made instinctively, for a nation that is in spiritual equilibrium quickly recalibrates its deeds and needs. However, the winds of change that blew in from the maskilim in Vohlyn….this Haskalah brought a bitterness of the soul….and the Haskalah became a symbol of the jealousy that engenders feuds between brothers. Mendelssohn’s wisdom, the moderate Haskalah, was rejected in favor of the radical Haskalah of Friedlander’s Enlightenment and the Vilna Gaon’s Torah fled for refuge to the houses of study and the Talmudical academies; but, even so, it created an evil spirit between itself [Torah] and the [new] wisdom….

While Yavetz did not say so explicitly, he was clearly employing a Hegelian dialectical model to depict the modern national movement’s appearance on the stage of history as a historically unprecedented synthesis between traditionalists (thesis) and innovators (antithesis). He did not accept the validity of the dialectical historical critique adopted by the secular trends of nationalist, Zionist historiography, such as those of Semion Dubnow or Raphael Mahler whom I mentioned earlier. According to Yabz's method, the national harmonization between tradition and Haskalah was a return back in time, to a state of pre-modern harmony, free of contradictions, whose successors in the 19th century he believed to find in German neo-orthodoxy, a stream that was in reality quite far from the new Jewish national idea

In Yavetz’s monumental historical work, *Toldot Yisrael*, which was published decades after *Migdal Hamea*, Yavetz again portrayed the Vilna Gaon as a German, neo-Orthodox maskil. According to the historian Immanuel Etkes:

Yavetz portrays the Vilna Gaon as an archetype of the *Torah and Derekh Eretz* approach. Not only did he legitimize studying secular wisdom by declaring secular study to be on par with the study of Torah, he even took pains to promulgate it among the Jews.

Curiously, Etkes did not connect the historian’s enthusiasm about the Vilna Gaon’s openness to the sciences with his own uncontested religious-nationalist position.

**D**

During the 19th century, at the same time that the moderate-Orthodox model of Zeev Yavetz, which initially aligned with German neo-Orthodoxy but ultimately led to religious Zionism, was crystallizing, two extreme Orthodox approaches developed: Lithuanian Mitnagdism and Hasidism, in the form of Habad. Both were imbued with anti-modernist tendencies and offered their creators a platform for engaging in religious polemics in the decades following the Vilna Gaon’s death.

The common thread connecting these two approaches—that to this very day feature prominently in Haredi historical discourse, be it in Israel, in Europe, or in North America—is the absolute negation of the claim commonly made by maskilim and the moderate orthodox that Judaism’s modern ideological streams continue the legacy of the Gaon in one way or another. The Gaon’s characterization as a Talmudic Scholar who exclusively inhabited “the four cubits of the Jewish law,” to whom secular wisdom and the sciences were merely adjuncts necessary to bring the pre-modern Torah world to full fruition, provided the Lithuanian rabbi, Eliyahu Rogoler from Kalish, with ammunition in his mid-nineteenth century battle against the reformers. As Etkes writes about Rogoler:

The Vilna Gaon’s example taught the extreme degree to which wisdom must be marginalized and forced into the dark corners, in contrast to the place of Torah study, which is the main thing.

The Haredi historian, Yaakov Lifshitz, continued this anti-Enlightenment stance, and even radicalized it further in his trilogy *Zichron Ya’akov*, which was published after World War I and recounted the history of the Jews in the Russian Empire from 1740 to the beginning of the twentieth century. He sanitized the Gaon’s reputation—ensuring that no link whatsoever would be discovered, whether direct or indirect, between the new heretical movements and the Gaon. However, he chose a very different approach than did Rogoler: the path of concealment. By introducing a method of historical periodization that differed from the one employed by all other modern Jewish historiographers, he was able to entirely obscure the historical reality known to every Jewish resident of Vilna that there was contact between the Berlin Haskalah and the Talmudist community in Lithuania. While Lifshitz, ever the Haredi historian, does date the beginning of the dissemination of the Berlin Haskalah and its influence on the Austrian parts of the Commonwealth to the period following the first partition in 1772, he begins describing the battle against the Enlightenment movement in the Russian Empire, which is the focus of *Zichron Ya’akov*, only in 1840, the year that, in his estimation, signifies the beginning of the new era for Eastern European Jewry. As for the previous period, spanning between 1740 and 1840, he writes:

The previous one-hundred-year period [which] was distinguished by the cypresses of God, the mighty Torah scholars….and they nurtured many disciples who shone like brilliant stars in the firmament of Judaism…thus, those rabbis of ours illuminated our people with the radiance of their Torah and invigorated and energized the knowledge of Torah and awe of Heaven. And from the words of their mouths, Israel lives the life of a nation righteous in its faith…I will, for instance, recall the mighty Torah scholars, the Vilna Gaon and his disciples, led by Our Rabbi, the Gaon Rabbeinu Hayyim of Volozhin….and others, of whom we do not have sufficient space to speak.

As an ultra-Orthodox businessman who considered the contemporary Hasidim his allies in the battle of the Torah giants against the Haskalah, Zionism, and Jewish Socialism, Lifshitz minimized the importance of the harsh dispute waged by the Hasidim and Mitnagdim just 100 years before his time, and simultaneously liberated the Vilna Gaon from any ties he might have had with the Haskalah or individual maskilim. The historiographical compositions of Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, which were published during the interwar period in booklets and books in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English (all now available on the Chabad movement’s websites), did not portray the Gaon as a harbinger of the Haskalah or even as a figure who inspired the first maskilim, but rather as the stronghold of traditional Judaism’s religious leadership. However, in contrast to Lifshitz, who raised concealment to an art form, and made no mention whatsoever, nor even hinted, at the Vilna Gaon’s family members and familiars, who had considerable contact with Mendelssohn’s Berlin circles, the twentieth-century Chabad narrative empowers the contemporary maskilim in Vilna**.**

According to Rabbi Schneersohn, a cunning, heretical, underground network labored assiduously within Vilna, collaborating with the anti-traditional, Enlightenment network that had spread far and wide throughout the Ashkenazic diaspora to undermine the old social order and wipe out its values. The Vilna Gaon, who was old and weak, was unable to stand in the breach against them. Instead, he followed the advice of his relative Joseph Pesseless, who worked in concert with Moses Mendelssohn’s secret agents. Thus, the Vilna Gaon’s weak leadership allowed the heretical maskilim to achieve almost complete control over the Vilna community during the waning days of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. According to this Chabad narrative, this extraordinary scholar spent the last two decades of his life in vicious combat with the Hasidim instead of with the maskilim. He fought the wrong enemy (though unsurprisingly, this unsubstantiated claim has no corroborating historical source)!Naively, he failed to identify the horrific threat that the Westjuden had smuggled into the very heart of the traditional Lithuanian stronghold. He granted their activities legitimacy and did not prevent them from spreading the maskilim’s heretical thought. This narrative of the Vilna Gaon’s failure was a harbinger of the similar failures his disciples suffered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in their battles against collaborators working for the Czar’s government and Soviet government agents. Rabbi Schneersohn settled an old eighteenth-century score with his formidable opponent, the Vilan Gaon.

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the Vilna Gaon’s history from the narrative composed by Schneersohn, the arch-leader of the fighting Orthodox: a man who passionately rewrote the past, anachronistically exaggerating the power of the agents of modernization in 1790s Vilna and transforming the figure of the Vilna Gaon—the greatest Talmudic scholar of his generation—into that of a weak leader who was led astray by his close family and friends. We can, however, learn from this episode much about the perception of modernity and the way in which contemporary Haredi orthodoxy traditionally conceptualized the world.

**E**

Let us return to our exploration of the Vilna Gaon as a harbinger of religious nationalism, this time with a depiction taken from a later period when he was fashioned the possessor of a redemptive messianic vision. This is an image not found in the writings of Zeev Yavetz, one of the forefathers of the Mizrahi movement and a historian whose historical writings were influenced by the vision of the return to Zion. In fact, the messianic Vilna Gaon, a figure who is alive and well in the Israeli national-religious discourse to this day, was a product of the ever-increasing focus of both secular and religious Zionist historical thought on the centrality of the Land of Israel. This focus removed personages, institutions, and pre-modern events from their concrete diasporic contexts and inserted them into a new historical narrative in which the Land of Israel took pride of place.

What was there about the persona of the Vilnius Gaon that made him seem, in the eyes of stalwarts of the national religious movement, like a primeval portender of their movement? At first glance, no historical figure is further removed from Zionisma modern movement with a conceptual worldview culled from nineteenth-century, European, national movements. The Vilna Gaon, both in terms of his personality and his way of life, was the very embodiment of the examplary denizen of the Ashkenazi Jewish religious and social milieu over the past few centuries discussed above. He was the epitome of the religious scholar whose sole pursuit was Torah, who was a member of the elite that unified Torah erudition, family lineage, and wealth. In addition, the Vilna Gaon took no part in public life in Vilna and held no formal position in the city’s Jewish community. He ventured from his study chamber only when he believd an emergency to be at hand, as in the case of his involvement in anti-Hasidic boycotts. Not only was he not politically active, but he had no ambition to reform the communal order, let alone of promote radical change in Jewish life. Nor did he advance any propoganda supporting setttlement of the Land of Israel. In short, he took no action that might be construed as a rebellion against the reality of Diaspora life. Regardless of this, Religious Zionism treated the Vilna Gaon as the Haskalah movement had done several decades earlier: even though he did not belong to the Haskalah movement, several of his actions and ideas were chosen to support the argument that he was a forerunner of the Jewish Enlightenment in Eastern Europe.

This fascinating phenomenon, in which an extraordinary, eighteenth-century scholar was ripped out of his immediate historical context and appropriated by modern nationalism—a political-cultural movement that appeared on the world stage after his demise and that was fundamentally different than his spiritual world—rested upon, as in the cases discussed earlier, the selective and creative use of a trove of historical facts we possess about this extraordinary figure.However, even more remarkably, the Vilna Gaon’s “nationalization” was carried out through a dialogue with the prior counterhistory invented by the scholars of the Haskalah and the Wissenschaft, who also uprooted the Gaon from his own historical period.

We do need to consider the national-religious Vilna Gaon’s uprooting from his own historical context and replanting in another imagined past that, curiously, the creators of the enlightened Vilna Gaon had no interest in and which the Habad historiographers also deemed of little importance. Both the Enlightenment and Orthodox-Hasidic narratives placed the Vilna Gaon’s encounter with the new age on the axis of the Jewish Enlightenment’s spread from German lands into the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. However, in the case of the messianic, religious Zionist narrative, the story moved along an axis that had one pole in Eastern Europe and Exile and the other in the Land of Israel and Redemption. Indeed, when the messianic, national religious version addresses those very phenomena that enabled the historians to bolster the Vilna Gaon’s reputation as a maskil, it adopts the method of harmonization familiar to us from the moderate maskilim. In other words, the Vilna Gaon’s purported proximity to Jewish Enlightenment thought is interpreted to be one of the ingredients that fueled his messianism.

I will now briefly discuss three issues that enabled the religious Zionists then and even now to support their claim that the Vilna Gaon’s messianic vision portended the religious Zionist movement that only arose later in time:

1. His journey to the Land of Israel, which was documented in a letter printed several decades after his demise;
2. The messianic, redemptive Torah that was alluded to in his writings, according to a significant number of those interpreting his connection to the Land of Israel; and
3. The early-nineteenth-century emigration of a group of Lithuanian Talmud scholars to the Land of Israel and their settling in Jerusalem and Safed.

First, the story of the Vilna Gaon’s immigration or aliyah—literally ascent—to the Land of Israel is one of the most obscure in his biography. Most of our information comes from a letter he sent his family during his journey to the Land of Israel. It was printed only decades after his death in a small booklet entitled *Alim Literufah* (*Medicinal Leaves*)*.* Indeed, there were many who ascribed messianic intent to the Vilna Gaon’s journey; however the Gaon himself refused to divulge to those close to him the reason why he turned back on his journey, and it is difficult to find anything unique in this letter, which is similar to dozens of letters sent by rabbis and Torah scholars on their way to the Land of Israel. The customary references to the love of the Land appear; however, the letter contains no allusion whatsoever to a new redemptive school of Torah thought or to the establishment of a movement dedicated to supporting aliyah to the Land of Israel. Even the most ardent interpreters of this redemptive Torah attributed to the Vilna Gaon have not been able to connect the letter’s contents to the Lithuanian aliyah movement that came after his death. Indicative of their difficulty is their use of hypothetical language, embodied in the following exemplars, “Was there a mystical component central to the Vilna Gaon’s life in this journey?” or, “And if his journey to the Land of Israel was delayed because the appropriate time had not yet arrived—the *et ha-pekidah* [literally, the time of remembrance]*—*then perhaps others were granted permission and [indeed] were entrusted with the mission of redeeming the Shekhinah [Divine Presence] from her exile?”

The second issue, the Vilna Gaon’s messianic, redemptive Torah, has been adduced from a number of diverse passages found throughout his writings that are supposed to fuse into a complete, well-arranged school of thought, as it were. One example can be found in his legal ruling on the commandment to settle the Land of Israel in our time. In his commentary on *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De’ah*, the Gaon supports Rabbi Yosef Karo’s ruling in his dispute with Maimonides, establishing that this commandment is still obligatory in today’s exilic time. This ruling seems to corroborate the notion that the Gaon departed from the traditional attitude towards the Land of Israel in post-exilic times. However, in truth, the Gaon is merely agreeing with the reigning position adopted throughout the Diaspora for many generations—that of *Shulhan Arukh*.

Similarly, Vilna Gaon’s famous passage in *Biur Ha-Gr”a* on *Sifra DeTzeniuta* hints that he knew “the secret of the end of days” (when the Messiah would arrive) and commanded his readers not to reveal it. However, this sentence does not allude to a particular school of redemptive thought demanding that Jews emigrate to the Land of Israel before a certain date, establish settlements, and create a political organization intent on facilitating the supreme Divine Redemption. This sentence containing the words “the final end of days” makes no reference whatsoever to the messianic activism purportedly ascribed to the Vilna Gaon’s redemptive Torah. Indeed, fusing together all the allusions regarding this messianic, redemptive Torah—few enough in number in and of themselves—fails to create the intellectual underpinnings or recipe for Religious Nationalism, unless we add later materials, most of which are legendary in character or engage in highly hypothetical suppositions**.** Undoubtedly, the Vilna Gaon studied eschatology and even touched upon the subject from time to time in his kabbalistic compositions; however, it is very difficult to identify a connection between what the Gaon wrote about the future redemption, any action taken by himself or by his disciples in his name, and a political school of thought that sprang forth directly from his kabbalistic thought or a concrete plan for emigration and settlement that is found in his writings.

A slew of pseudepigraphic works containing the Vilna Gaon’s redemptive Torah, which were disseminated decades after the Gaon’s death and the ascent of the Lithuanian Talmudists to the Land of Israel, also occupy an important role in promoting this narrative. Chief among these is *Kot Hator* (Voice of the Turtledove) which contains, as it states: “chapters on the Redemption composed by the Gaon and Kabbalist Rabbi Hillel Shklover, kith and kin and a disciple of Our Rabbi the Gaon of Vilna, of blessed memory, in which [we find] the splendid vision of the Vilna Gaon which sheds light on the events of our time.” This kabbalistic composition is ascribed to Rabbi Hillel of Shklov, who wrote it, as it were, during the Vilna Gaon’s lifetime! This claim notwithstanding, by all accounts, this work has a later provenance**.**

The third issue involving the aliyah of several groups of rabbinic scholars to the Land of Israel in the early nineteenth century is, presumably, the strongest evidence in favor of the strong connection between Zionism and the Vilna Gaon. What could be more Zionist than an organized immigration to the Land and subsequent colonizing of Galilee and Jerusalem? It’s no wonder, then, that from Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Rivlin’s invention of a Zionist political movement named *Hazon Zion* (Vision of Zion), in his popular rabbinic novel published in 1950s Israel, to *Ha-Tsofeh*—the national-religious party newspaper—as recently as June 1997, the argument has been made that the contemporary movement of national revival did not begin with the foundation of the Zionist movement in 1897, but significantly earlier.Thus the roots of the national Jewish revival movement are nurtured by traditional Jewish society’s genuine attachment to the notion of redemption and the return to Zion as they were formulated by the activist messianism developed by the Vilna Gaon and his disciples’ study houses—100 years before the arrival of Zionism.

The claim that the aliyah of the Gaon’s disciples from Vilna to the Land of Israel at the beginning of the eighteenth century was, in essence, the beginning of the national Jewish revival movement apparently grew as a family tradition passed down in certain families descended from these Lithuanian emigrants. The narrative gained force when it encountered the later national-religious version found in Zionist histories.This tradition at first sufficed to quench the thirst of several pre-Zionist, Old Yishuv, stalwarts who wished to fit in with the new nationalist discourse that had achieved dominance as the New Yishuv established itself in the Land of Israel. Concepts, terms, and events that were characteristic of the new Zionist discourse, including the purchase of land, agricultural settlement, protection, and defense were appropriated by the Lithuanian emigrants and their descendants in various ways**.** An entire popular body of literature comprised of dozens of books and articles focused on various, diverse aspects of the Jewish history of settling the Land of Isarel was written. This literature clearly reflected and internalized the language used and arguments made in these “family” narratives.These claims even penetrated the academic world, either because the academics citing the rewritten texts were insufficiently aware of their sources’ provenance or because the old claim fit in neatly with the new religious-Zionist version regarding the Jewish memory of the past.

Following in the footsteps of Adam Teller’s aforementioned approach concerning the voluntary socio-religious model of leadership that the Vilna Gaon embodied, I will suggest here an entirely different explanation for the Vilna Gaon’s disciples’ settlement in the Land of Israel. The argument is that the Lithuanian rabbinic elite emigrated to the Land of Israel, as one disciple wrote in one of the first letters sent back to the Diaspora, in order to “fuse the four cubits of flawless Jewish law with the four cubits of the holy and pure Land.” According to this same letter, they founded a yeshiva named for the Vilna Gaon in which they spent most of the time immersed in learning Jewish law like he did. In other words, the new community they established in Safed was actually a Collegium, a supracommunal, voluntary corporation of students independent of any permissions from non-Jewish authorities. This socio-religious initiative, realized far from the borders of the Russian Empire, consequently,preceded the abolition of the *kahal* by the Russian authorities in 1844.

The Russian abolition of the *kahal* was an administrative step that naturally drew pre-existing, voluntary bodies into the organizational vacuum that resulted. The roles fulfilled for centuries by the semi-autonomous *kahal* were subsequently fulfilled successfully by the Hasidic courts of the righteous (Tzaddikim), the Lithuanian, supra-communal heads of Talmudical academies, and the many societies present in every community. All these voluntary bodies preserved Jewish communal cohesion during a time of immense political, social, economic, and cultural change and strengthened the unique ethno-religious identity that had been preserved by the formal *kahal* until the nineteenth century. The establishment of a Collegium of elite, rabbinic learners in Safed in the Galilee—a yeshiva which was a community—based on the model presented by the Gaon in the second half of the eighteenth century, can thus be understood as a national-diasporic initiative, without drawing any direct or indirect connections to the modern wave of nationalism that was sweeping Europe, or to the new national movement that appeared among the Jews several decades later.

**F**

The final historiographical stop (at this pointr) in the hunt for the historians’ Vilna Gaon is Yale University in the United States. In a book that was published only about a decade ago, a new front was opened in the historians’ polemic concerning the Gaon’s persona. In *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (2013), the American-Jewish scholar Eliyahu Stern presented the scholar from Vilna as a figure of enormous influence upon the development of modern Judaism. The Vilna Gaon, claims Stern, was not a man of the old world fighting to protect tradition, but rather a modern man who influenced the way in which Jewish history was shaped in the new age. As Stern writes:

I [have] come to believe that the historians’ notion of tradition and traditionalism fails to explain the experience of the overwhelming majority of 18th and 19th-century eastern European Jews who did not spend their days either combating the Western European secular pursuit of science, philosophy, and mathematics or holding onto the same political and social structures of their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ancestors. The student of Jewish Orthodoxy might have been right about Hatam Sofer. . . But figures such as the Gaon of Vilna or Hayyim of Volozhin (the Gaon’s student and Sofer’s contemporary), who did not express hostility toward modernity, elude their grasp.

Indeed, the following assertion that Stern makes in his new book, which appeared to some as provocative and lacking in any scholarly basis to some of the critics of the thesis that the Vilna Gaon was a harbinger of Jewish modernity:

From the birth of the State of Israel, to the Jews’ involvement in radical anti-statist modern political movements, to the creation of a robust vibrant Jewish life in the United States, Jewish modernity derives much of its intellectual dynamism, social confidence, and political assertiveness from an astonishing source: the brilliant writings and untamed personality of Elijah ben Solomon.

In his book, Stern confronts the ultra-Orthodox appropriation of the Gaon and, in fact, returns to the old argument made by the maskilim about the Gaon’s modernity and to its later Zionist iterations. It is crucial to note that in another one of his studies on Jewish materialism, Stern points to the Gaon as one of the sources of inspiration for Peretz Smolenskin’s secular-nationalist concept of “the Spirit of the nation” (that we discussed briefly earlier). Stern claims that the Gaon’s focus on learning Talmud as a goal in and of itself (Talmud study for its own sake), instead of as a means to arrive at legal decisions initiated a far-reaching, paradigmatic, cultural change that had an enormous impact on society. The immersion in textual interpretation replaced the study of religious legal codes in the Russian Empire’s Jewish communities. This change took place just as the Lithuanian Talmudical Academy took on the communal leadership role when the kehillah lost its authority. Stern adduces this from the establishment of the Volozhin Yeshiva in 1802 by the Gaon’s disciple, Rabbi Hayyim, just a few years after the Gaon’s death. This process initiated a significant structural transformation in the socio-religious hierarchical authority, which Stern refers to as ‘religious privatization.’ In keeping with his approach, Stern claims that:

The Volozhin yeshiva was founded not in opposition to the cultural and intellectual upheavals of the 19th century. It was itself built on the most modern of assumptions, the separation of public and private spheres.

Stern even asserts that the Vilna Gaon’s comments on the sixteenth-century legal code, *Shulhan Arukh* helped distance Eastern European Jewry from the “code-based learning culture supported by the kehilah.”

In other words, according to Stern, the Vilna Gaon did not take part in Orthodoxy’s growth as a traditionalist response to the challenges the new age brought. Rather, the change he initiated in his own society’s culture was part of the unprecedented social and intellectual revolutions taking place in nineteenth-century Europe.

Stern, thus, challenges the two-hundred-and-fifty year old convention assuming Eastern Europe’s delay in modernization compared to Western Europe. He radicalizes the position we discussed above regarding the very early purported integration, as it were, between Mendelssohn’s Haskalah and the Torah of the Vilna Gaon. And he claims that, in many ways, the Vilna Talmud scholar was more modern than the philosopher from Berlin, writing:

It was the Gaon’s hermeneutic idealism that called into question the canons of rabbinic authority, while Mendelssohn tirelessly defended the historical legitimacy of the rabbinic tradition to German-speaking audiences.

Stern even goes so far as to claim—in support of the Vilna Gaon’s modernity—that the scholarly assumption pertaining to the Vilna Gaon’s rejection of philosophy is wrong. The Vilna Gaon simply did not believe in “demons, magic [and] charms.”

In a scholarly article on Stern’s work, “How Modern Was He?” (2014), Marc Shapiro, an academic specializing in American Jewish Orthodoxy, examined Stern’s main points. He studied the texts upon which the Yale scholar based his claims regarding the Vilna Gaon’s modernity and innovativeness and determined that:

As with all revisionist theses there is bound to be reluctance to accept a new paradigm. The successful revisionist thesis is the one able to withstand the initial skepticism. Does Stern’s thesis fall into this category? Despite his enthusiastic and tempting arguments, I am not convinced. Reading the book, I could not help wonder if, for example, drawing contrasts with the thought of Leibniz offers any real insight into the thought of the Gaon.

In contrast to Shapiro, who primarily critiques what he believes to be Stern’s problematic interpretation of the sources, Professor Shaul Maggid from Indiana University examines the historiographical aspects of the thesis, concluding that:

Most other works on Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, known as the Vilna Gaon, focus primarily on his leadership, his rabbinic learning, his stature as a hero of Lithuanian Orthodoxy, and his polemic against Hasidism. Stern presents him primarily as a metaphysician and unwitting architect of an alternative version of Jewish modernity that has its roots in the traditionalism of Eastern European Judaism.

According to Maggid, Stern designed an innovative historiographical project that completely undermines Katz’s Weberian paradigm which recounted the history of the new age based upon the binary model of “tradition” versus “modernity.” Maggid continues:

Drawing upon recent social theorists, including Ulrich Beck and José Casanova, Stern challenges this entire paradigm by suggesting something akin to Shmuel Eisenstadt’s theory of multiple modernities, arguing that Eastern European traditionalists were not simply fighting a rearguard action against “modernity” but in fact constructing the building blocks of an alternative vision of the modern—one that was no less and sometimes even more radical than the Western European Enlightened version inaugurated by Moses Mendelssohn.

Quite surprisingly, for one who is schooled in the radical Jewish nationalist historiography, we spoke of before, Stern returns to the nationalist, maskil, Peretz Smolenskin’s assertion (which we also mentioned above) that modern Judaism did not begin with the Germanized Moses Mendelssohn and the salons of the intermarried, Jewish women in Berlin, but rather with the solitary Talmud scholar in Vilna. However, in contrast to Smolenskin, who perceived the Vilna Gaon to be the pioneer of the new, national Jewish Spirit, and Mendelssohn to be the prophet of assimilation and absorption, Stern’s Mendelssohn was a conservative who defended the tradition, while the Vilna Gaon, in contrast, was a radical thinker! On this point, Maggid notes that the Vilna Gaon’s contribution to Jewish modernization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was no less than that of the Haskalah. Thus, Maggid adds Stern’s thesis to the historiographical school that has been developed in the last few decades by a group of Israeli historians, including Immanuel Etkes and myself, which portrays the Jewish Haskalah as a conservative stream of thought, similar to Modern Orthodoxy. Maggid observes:

In *The Genius*, Stern argues that there was a modernizing movement at the heart of traditional Judaism, most significantly in the work of the Gaon and his followers. While Enlightenment thinkers such as Mendelssohn were defending Judaism against its Christian critics and adopting much of Western Christianity’s liberal ethos to construct what has become modern Judaism in its various forms (including Modern Orthodoxy), the Gaon and his students created the prototype of an unapologetic Judaism that in many ways is more relevant today than Mendelssohn’s Judaism of accommodation.

**Conclusion**

We have now concluded, but certainly not completed, our brief journey following and illuminating the changing figure of the Vilna Gaon in the Modern Period’s Jewish historiographical streams. What is common to all these streams, which ostensbily seem very distant from one another, is the historians’ almost obsessive drive to build bridges ensuring continuity between the peak of religious creativity in the Early Modern Period to the great movements in the modern one

These historiographical streams sometimes run parallel, sometimes join up, and sometimes go their separate ways again, having led and still leading diverse historians to an ultimate destination. This is a point at which the Jews will still exist as a collective with a shared past, and at which visions of alternate, or even opposing, futures will be realized, all rooted in the pre-modern Jewish past. Over the course of our journey, we have seen how, at intermediate destinations along the way, the image of the Vilna Gaon was adapted to changing challenges posed by historical reality to the proponents of continuity, and this image had the capacity to provide a treasure trove of new ideas and unprecedented political ideologies in traditional Jewish society.

We have learned that the historians’ image of the Vilna Gaon was shaped in the shadow of the dialectical tension accompanying the Wissenschaft des Judentums from its very start at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and continuing into the heart of Jewish national historiography at the end of the twentieth century. This is a never-ending tension between preserving values and the commitment to continuity, on the one hand, and the conscious internalization of being uprooted and disconnected from the legacy of the past at varying levels on the other. This constant tension fashioned a polarized, historical narrative in which the pre-modern *Ost* reacted to the echoes of modernity that arrived from the West. This narrative played no small role in influencing how the historical consciousness of Orthodox Jewry, in which the image of the Vilna Gaon they held on to [which appears in its most polarized form in the Hasidic historiography written in the twentieth century] oscillated and, indeed, oscillates to this very day between a vision of the cautious Talmudic scholar, wary of the modernizing Western influences that had trickled into the *Ost,* and the “true maskil,” who held moderate opinions and continued to engage in the traditional type of learning while innovating from within it, but at the same time fiercely opposing the radical Haskalah identified with the West. The national historiography that had labored from its very beginnings in the nineteenth century to merge adherence to the Enlightenment legacy with an attempt to find the roots of nationalism in the Jewish pre-modern world bridged the gap between the conservative Vilna Gaon and the innovative one.

During the final decades of the twentieth century, the binary, modernist metanarrative lost much of its prestige, as the Israeli historian Shulamit Volkov concludes:

With the onset of social history and as ever more Jewish historians now attempt to predicate Jewish history on the narratives of their various host societies, the centrality of ideology began to wane. Confronting the challenges of Postmodernism, historians were now more than ever aware of their ideological biases and plunged deeply into new theoretical and methodological controversies at the expense of ideological skirmishes.

The waning of the modernist narrative greatly blurs the historians’ image of the Vilna Gaon which we met over the course of our historiographical journey. It reinforces our doubts concerning the Gaon’s roles as “harbinger of the Haskalah” or “moderate Orthodox maskil,” which were transformed during the Jews’ journey from Eastern Europe to the State of Israel into the role of “the harbinger of religious Zionism.” And to our great surprise, notwithstanding this significant transformation, the historians’ Vilna Gaon has still not been liberated completely from the anachronistic bonds of either the modernist narrative or from the anachronistic chains of Orthodoxy which still protect him from the new movements.

And, so, today, historians, 226 years after the extraordinary Gaon of Vilna’s passing, once again stand facing the man of the Early Modern period. In order to see the historical Vilna Gaon, the denizen of his period, time, and place, I believe that we need to cut the chains of modernism that bind him and liberate him from the dense, ideological thicket in which he is caught, so that we can clearly see him as one of the important founders of the ethno-religious community. Without intending to do so, without battling or threatening others, and without the conscious decision to adapt to such a new form of social living, he helped lay the foundations for the existence of an ethno-religious community without a kehilah. This is a post-corporate, voluntary alternative for preserving and strengthening the socio-religious grip of the Ashkenazi community in the face of the disruptive power of the centralized state. In retrospect, we may say that the Gaon’s study chamber was situated in the spiritual-social middle ground between the pre-modern Jewish Corporation and the modern Nation.