

Immanuel Etkes

The **GAON** of Vilna
the Man and His Image

The Gaon of Vilna

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THE S. MARK TAPER FOUNDATION SUPPORTS
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The Gaon of Vilna

THE MAN AND HIS IMAGE

IMMANUEL ETKES

TRANSLATED BY JEFFREY M. GREEN

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Rabbi Eliyahu, the son of Shlomo Zalman, known as the Gaon of Vilna—or by the acronym Ha-GRA, for “ha-Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu”—enjoyed exceptional authority during his lifetime. Even among his rivals the Hasidic leaders, whom he persecuted, were those who acknowledged his status as the greatest scholar of his generation and who applied to him the epithet “unique in his generation.” In the eyes of his disciples and admirers, the Vilna Gaon was not only unique in his generation but also unparalleled in many generations. Some disciples and admirers accorded him the same status as the Sages of the Talmud, while others made the lesser comparison to the Geonim of Babylonia. They all viewed him as a kind of angel from heaven, sent by divine providence to guide his generation in the proper way of studying Torah.

It is not out of place to wonder how and why the Vilna Gaon attained

this status. Unlike other great rabbis in his generation, the Gaon never held an official post. He never served as a rabbi, nor was he the head of a yeshiva. The disciples who studied Torah with him were few in number, and they were not disciples in the common sense of the word—students who acquired most of their knowledge from him. In fact, they were mature scholars who visited him from time to time or stayed with him for a brief period. Moreover, the Vilna Gaon's writings were published only posthumously. Hence, the fame he enjoyed during his lifetime cannot be attributed to them. How, then, and why, did this man become such an admired and influential figure?

The first chapter of this study is an effort to answer this question, if only partially. That chapter focuses on descriptions of the Gaon written by his sons and several of his disciples. These are evaluations, impressions, and testimony included in the introductions that these men added to editions of his writings. True, they were written after his death and evidently display the familiar tendency of authors to emphasize and exaggerate their admiration for a great person who has recently departed from life. Nevertheless these accounts are the most immediate and reliable testimony regarding the Vilna Gaon as he was perceived and interpreted by his disciples and associates. These descriptions are important not only because they were written by men who had spent time in his presence but also because these men were among the small number of "those who saw his face." Hence it may be presumed that these men played a considerable role in forming the public image of the Vilna Gaon during his lifetime as well.

In the first chapter I also describe the unusual distinction of the Gaon's achievements as a Torah scholar, a distinction that made him a symbol and model of greatness in Torah scholarship in the eyes of his disciples and, through them, in the eyes of many others. However, his exceptional scholarly achievements represent only one aspect of his image. The second aspect is embodied in his pious and ascetic way of life. Because of his conduct, the Gaon was called *he-Ḥasid* by his admirers. Of course they meant *ḥasid* in the sense of that term before the growth of the Hasidic movement founded by Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov. In my opinion, the key to understanding the distinguished status of the Vilna Gaon, in the view of his contemporaries as well as in that of following generations, is

his embodiment of these two aspects, a combination expressed in the pair of epithets commonly applied to him: ha-Gaon he-Hasid.

One of the main expressions of the Gaon as a Hasid was his affinity for Kabbalah. This refers not only to the decisive impact of Kabbalistic ideas on his worldview, nor only to the commentaries he wrote about Kabbalistic works, but also to mystical experiences that he underwent. The principal source of our knowledge on this subject is the unique testimony written by Rabbi Ḥayyim of Volozhin. This testimony indicates that the Gaon rejected repeated offers of *maggidim* who wished to reveal the secrets of the Torah to him. Similarly, he did not attribute great importance to the knowledge he gained by means of ascent of the soul. He viewed the knowledge of the Torah that he acquired by force of hard intellectual work as the most exalted expression of divine revelation, for in his opinion intellectual work was inspired by divine grace. Thus we have before us an exceptional and original view of the encounter between human intelligence and divine revelation.

The force and authority embodied by the Gaon were expressed in the myth that developed around him after his death. One of the manifestations of this myth is that of the Gaon as a maskil. This myth is known in several versions, some of them contradictory, and all of which are related to the tense and complex encounter between traditional Jewish life in eastern Europe and the secularizing tendencies of the Haskalah movement. The early stages of the development of Haskalah in eastern Europe were characterized by a pronounced effort to prove its religious legitimacy. Underlying this effort was the conviction that, far from uprooting traditional Jewish life, Haskalah was consistent with it. Thus it is not surprising that proponents of Haskalah fostered an image of the Gaon as a maskil and used it to mobilize support. The source of this image lies in the position taken by the Gaon on the matter of involvement with "external wisdom," or areas of knowledge that transcend the boundaries of rabbinical culture. He believed that not only was it permitted to deal with this "wisdom," it was even vital, because this knowledge was a necessary tool for studying Torah. He himself studied several fields of science and even left manuscripts of works in these areas. This is the factual basis on which the myth of the Vilna Gaon as a maskil was constructed.

The Gaon's position regarding the study of non-Jewish wisdoms was

not unique among the traditional scholarly elite. Similarly, it is doubtful whether, when expressing this position, he was at all aware of its possible consequences regarding the Haskalah movement. Nevertheless, the closeness in time of the Vilna Gaon to the origins of Haskalah in eastern Europe, along with, of course, his enormous authority, fostered the image of the Gaon as a maskil and led to the exploitation of this image as an instrument of propaganda by proponents of Haskalah. However, opponents of Haskalah of various types also promoted the image of the Gaon as a maskil and clung to it for their purposes. His expertise in non-Jewish wisdom and science proved, in their opinion, that the way of the maskilim offered nothing, for although the Gaon was not inferior to the greatest of their scholars, he did not deny the values of the tradition. On the contrary, he was a model of devotion to those values. Most ironically, the opponents of Haskalah had an interest in exaggerating his mastery in fields of general knowledge, for the greater he was in wisdom and science, the more his figure served as a powerful weapon to strike at the maskilim.

The second chapter in this book deals with the myth of the Vilna Gaon as a maskil among both proponents and opponents of Haskalah. The chapter also follows later traces of this myth as reflected in the historiography of the Haskalah movement. This discussion shows that the matter of the Gaon and Haskalah is an instructive example of the continuity between Haskalah literature of the nineteenth century and Jewish historiography of the end of that century and the first half of the next. Following the survey of historical writing, the chapter offers a critical examination of the image of the Gaon as a maskil. This examination compares the image with various sources and tries to determine the real place of the Gaon with regard to the beginnings of the Haskalah movement in eastern Europe.

Chapters 3 through 5 deal with various aspects of the controversy between the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim. At the center of chapter 3 stands my effort to reconstruct the first moves in the development of the controversy. This reconstruction is meant to examine the role played by the Vilna Gaon in the struggle against Hasidism. According to both Hasidic and Mitnagdic sources, which confirm and complement each other, the Gaon initiated and led the struggle against Hasidism. This finding con-

tradicts the view that the struggle against Hasidism began as an initiative of the oligarchy, and that the Gaon merely served as a figurehead that the establishment was pleased to use. Not only did the Gaon initiate the attack, he also prevented reconciliation between the warring camps during his lifetime. These findings are, of course, important for understanding the motives for the struggle against Hasidism. Naturally, the more prolonged and complex a controversy of this kind is, the more it is bound up with various and sundry motives. However, my findings regarding the role played by the Gaon at the beginning of the controversy clearly prove that the basic motives underlying the struggle against Hasidism were spiritual and religious, and not political and social.

How did the persecuted Hasidim regard their persecutor? How did the Hasidic leaders explain to themselves and to their flocks the fact that their chief opponent was the greatest scholar of their generation? I discuss this question in chapter 4. I have based my examination primarily on a number of letters written by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady. This prominent leader of the Hasidim of White Russia was involved in the controversy with the Mitnagdim from its beginning in the early 1770s until its final, harsh manifestations near the end of the eighteenth century. Moreover, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady was himself a victim of informers and twice was arrested by the Russian authorities. Hence his responses to the Mitnagdim in general and to the Vilna Gaon in particular are of great interest.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman's response to the role played by the Vilna Gaon in the struggle against Hasidism was dual: on the one hand, he acknowledged the Gaon's eminence as the greatest scholar of his day, and, on the other, he absolutely challenged his authority to determine that Hasidism was a heresy. Rabbi Shneur Zalman bridged the distance between these two positions by explaining that the Gaon was acting in innocence but was deceived by perjurers. He also offered a dialectical interpretation, according to which the struggle against Hasidism ultimately proved beneficial to Hasidism. Rabbi Shneur Zalman went so far in this direction as to present outbursts against Hasidism as products of divine providence seeking to abet Hasidism.

The two lines of argument found in Rabbi Shneur Zalman's writings

influenced the approach taken by Habad historiography to the phenomenon of opposition to Hasidism. Indeed, the question of the meaning of the struggle against Hasidism, and the fact that the Gaon led that struggle, continued to concern and disturb Hasidim during the generations that followed. Hasidic historiography—mainly that connected with Habad—sought to present a picture that would heal the wounds of the past and serve the needs of the present. In chapter 4 of this book I survey and examine three prominent examples of this kind of historical writing, as well as examples of the discussion of the struggle against Hasidism in the works of various orthodox writers, including some who had a pronounced affinity with the Mitnagdic heritage. One may point to three main types among these writers: those that apologize, those that harmonize, and those that deny. Writers of the first type admit that the Hasidim were persecuted, but they justify the Gaon and his supporters with the claim that these persecutions rescued Hasidism from severe and dangerous degeneration. Those who take the harmonistic line bring out the advantages that both sides gained from the struggle between them. Allegedly, both the Hasidim and their opponents learned from each other and were positively influenced. As a result, the gap between the two viewpoints was narrowed and everyone benefited. The writers of the third type ignore the persecution of the Hasidim. These writers share a common orthodox outlook, viewing both the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim as “true Jewish believers” who were supposed to have cooperated to defend the values of the tradition against external threats.

Chapter 5, too, discusses the controversy between Mitnagdim and Hasidim and is devoted to Rabbi Ḥayyim of Volozhin’s response to Hasidism. It is somewhat ironic that this rabbi, who was regarded as the greatest of the Vilna Gaon’s disciples, waged the struggle against Hasidism in a style entirely different from that initiated and led by his teacher and master. In contrast to the unrelenting war waged by the Gaon, which was intended to eliminate the deviant sect, Rabbi Ḥayyim chose to struggle against Hasidism on the plane of ideas and education. Behind that response lay his realization that the Hasidim were not heretics and their motives were pure. At the same time, Rabbi Ḥayyim had no doubt that the Hasidic way of worshiping God was mistaken. Most of all, he was ap-

prehensive about the blow Hasidism dealt to the status of Torah study and its practitioners.

Rabbi Ḥayyim's polemics against Hasidism were characterized by a restrained and seemingly impartial tone. As one who knew the doctrine of Hasidism firsthand, Rabbi Ḥayyim could expose what appeared to him to be its principal weak points. However, his response to Hasidism was not restricted to polemics. In his book *Nefesh Ha-ḥayyim*, Rabbi Ḥayyim set out systematic theological doctrine, which can be seen as a response to Hasidism. Central to this doctrine is the effort to restore the status of Torah study to its former place at the head of the hierarchy of Jewish values. One of the conspicuous innovations in this thought can be called the mystification of Torah study, or the effort to endow Torah study with mystical significance.

In chapter 5, I also discuss Rabbi Ḥayyim's establishment of the Volozhin yeshiva, the innovations in organization and content that characterized it, and the role it played in the confrontation with Hasidism. In a certain sense, Rabbi Ḥayyim's thought and the yeshiva he both established and led were two faces of the same coin, for by means of the yeshiva he sought to translate the religious ideals he had developed into educational activity that formed a pattern of life. It is also possible to say that, with his intellectual and educational project, Rabbi Ḥayyim sought to make the heritage of the Gaon widely available.

The relations between Torah scholarship and the institution of the rabbinate in nineteenth-century Lithuania are central to chapter 6. What at first appear to be two complementary phenomena prove on deeper inspection to be an intricate and complex web of relationships. One expression of these relationships is the apparent contradiction between the ideal of *Torah lishma* (Torah study for its own sake) and the rabbinate. Among the explanations of this contradiction one may point to the roles played by the heritage of the Vilna Gaon and that of Rabbi Ḥayyim in shaping the ideal of Torah study. Of course, other contemporary factors were present. In any event, inspired by the ideal of Torah study, scholars tended to relate to the rabbinate as a livelihood that would permit them to continue studying Torah. In these two respects the rabbinate occasioned them bitter disappointment.

The seventh and last chapter of this book closes the circle by returning to the Vilna Gaon himself. In it I discuss his outlook and practice regarding the relationship between the value of Torah study and that of *yira*. The ancient rabbis were extravagant in their praise of Torah study, but they were severely critical of great scholarship not accompanied by *yira*. These attitudes of the Sages made the question of the relationship between Torah and *yira* an immanent issue in Jewish culture. Over the generations, questions arose repeatedly regarding the nature of the required *yira* and the correct equilibrium between it and Torah study. Examination of the Gaon's outlook and way of life regarding these questions fills in the picture of the ha-Gaon he-Hasid with which this study began.

Naturally it is very difficult to estimate the influence of a person such as the Vilna Gaon on his contemporaries and on Jewish culture in the generations that followed him. Nevertheless, it is possible to point to two areas in which his influence is especially notable: the struggle against Hasidism, and the flourishing of the world of Torah in Lithuania.

The struggle against Hasidism that the Gaon initiated and led is a fascinating example of an individual's ability to influence the course of history. Considering the decisive role played by the Gaon in this controversy, it is doubtful that the struggle would have assumed such a fierce character and been so protracted without him. Recall that the authority of the Gaon was not anchored in any official post. Instead, his power was the personal authority of a man viewed as Gaon and Hasid, and with it he guided the leaders of the Vilna community—and, after them, those of other communities—in unrelenting warfare against Hasidism. The Gaon's success in mobilizing the community leadership shows both the exceptional force of his personality and the devotion of the Jewish society in Lithuania to the values that he symbolized.

Although the confrontation between Hasidism and its opponents took on an entirely different guise after the Gaon's death, it would be no exaggeration to say that the consolidation of two principal camps in eastern European Jewry, existing side by side and competing with each other, drew on the formative experience of the Gaon's struggle against Hasidism. Certain manifestations of tension between Hasidim and Mitnagdim persist to this day, and one of them is the political division of the Haredi

community in the state of Israel. Moreover, the confrontation that took place several years ago between the Lubavicher rebbe and Rabbi Schach, the centenarian leader of the Lithuanian yeshivot in Israel, can be seen as a late and distant echo of the conflict between the Vilna Gaon and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady in the eighteenth century.

The influence of the Gaon on the flourishing of the world of Torah in Lithuania was not as direct and transparent as was his involvement in the struggle against Hasidism, for his writing, his method of study, and his Halakhic decisions were not widely disseminated. However, this cannot diminish the vitality and power radiated by the Gaon as a symbol and source of inspiration. The secret of his influence can be attributed to the fact that he appeared to the members of his own generation and those following him as the perfect embodiment of the values of Torah and *yira*. Thus the significance of a historical personage need not depend on his or her success in shaping new concepts and ways of life but may have extensive and prolonged influence because he or she is viewed as epitomizing the values and ideals to which the society is committed.

7 Ha-Gaon He-Hasid

IN HIS OWN TIME AND FOR
SUCCEEDING GENERATIONS

During his lifetime the Gaon of Vilna wielded comprehensive and exceptionally powerful authority. Striking testimony to this effect is found in the words of the Hasidic leader Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady to his followers in Vilna in 1797: "According to all accounts, no one in the districts of Lithuania will raise his heart so high as not to yield his own opinion before that of ha-Gaon he-Hasid and to say wholeheartedly that the truth is not in his mouth, perish the thought."¹ Rabbi Shneur Zalman's remarks imply that, even were it possible to persuade rabbinical authorities that the path of Hasidism was correct, they would not dare disagree with the Vilna Gaon. The organized campaign against Hasidism in 1772 offers a forceful demonstration of the Gaon's public status, for he led that struggle from the start, and he imbued it with his authority.²

How can we explain the extraordinary authority of this man? This

question becomes more acute when one recalls that he had very little public exposure. He never held official office. Moreover, he sought to cut himself off from the people around him and studied Torah intensely in the seclusion of his home. The number of his students, those counted among “the ones who saw his face,” was severely limited.³ Moreover, his writings were not published until after his death. What, then, was the secret of the Gaon’s enormous influence during his lifetime? Most probably the few people who frequented him—his students and the members of his family—served as agents of a kind, spreading his reputation far and wide. The few people in direct contact with him were deeply impressed by his personality; they interpreted it, and they shared their impressions and interpretations with others. Thus was fashioned the figure of the Vilna Gaon as pictured by the public. Naturally, the myth around him that arose after his death was nourished by these impressions and interpretations.

In this chapter I shall try to reconstruct the figure of the Gaon as it was conceived and interpreted by those few who “saw his face.” For this reconstruction I have relied on the introductions written by the Gaon’s two sons and a few of his students to his posthumously published works. These introductions are the earliest extant written testimony about the character of the Gaon. This testimony also provided the basis for biographical works about him, the first of which was published more than fifty years after his death.⁴

THE GAON

As a point of departure for examining the figure of the Vilna Gaon, as it was understood and interpreted by those close to him, let us consider the two epithets that were commonly applied to him: ha-Gaon he-Hasid. The term *gaon* indicates the Gaon’s extraordinary achievements in the study of Torah, while the adjective *hasid* relates to his way of life and character. I shall begin the discussion with those features of the Gaon’s personality for which he was called *gaon*. One of the outstanding traits, one mentioned repeatedly in accounts by his students and sons, was the astound-