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**Eliyahu Stern**. *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. 336 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-17930-9.

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**The Gaon of Vilna: How Modern Was He?**

Eliyahu Stern has set for himself a daunting task and argues his case with conviction. He intends to correct a widespread assumption shared not only by the general public, but by the scholarly community as well. According to this narrative, the Vilna Gaon (hereafter the Gaon) should not be seen as a traditionalist defender of the past, but actually a modern Jew, and one who helped usher in the modern era in Jewish history. In Stern's words, "I [have] come to believe that [Jacob] Katz's and [Michael K.] Silber's notion of tradition and traditionalism fails to explain the experience of the overwhelming majority of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century eastern European Jews who did not spend their days either combating the western European secular pursuit of science, philosophy and mathematics or holding on to the same political and social structures of their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ancestors. Katz and Silber might have been right about [Moses] 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" (p. 7).

This is quite a claim, and it would be a major revision of the historical picture if Stern could prove the point. Stern also argues that the Gaon's notes to the sixteenth-century legal code *Shulhan Arukh* were influential in Jews moving away from a "code-based learning culture supported by the *kehilah*" (p. 11). By focusing on Talmud study for its own sake rather than for the sake of determining the halakhah, a paradigm shift occurred in which commentary replaced code. This occurred at the very time that the yeshiva took the place of the kehilah, as seen in the establishment of the Volozhin yeshiva by the Gaon's disciple, R. Hayyim. Thus, the hierarchy of religious authority was restructured, which leads to what Stern refers to as "religious privatization" (p. 11). As he sees it, "the Volozhin yeshiva was founded not in opposition to the cultural and intellectual upheavals of the nineteenth century. It was itself built on the most modern of assumptions, the separation of public and private spheres" (p. 141). Stern even makes the bold claim that in certain respects the Gaon was more modern than Mendelssohn, arguing that "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" (p. 64). In seeking to turn the Gaon into a more modern Jew, one who is not, as standard scholarship assumes, an opponent of philosophy, Stern even argues that the Gaon did not believe in "demons, magic, [and] charms" (p. 129).

After mentioning that the Gaon is embodied in the Jewish residents of Tel Aviv and New York, who live as though they are majorities, Stern concludes his book with this striking assertion: "From the birth of the State of Israel, to the Jews' involvement in radical ant-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" (p. 171).

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. We know that the Gaon was fearless in emending rabbinic texts, but for Stern, "Elijah's emendation project addresses the charge that Leibnizian idealism leaves no room for the possibility of progress, redemption, and critique.... Elijah embroidered the theological concept of

evil around the idea of textual error" (p. 61). Isn't this reading too much into what the Gaon had in mind? Why does the approach of the Gaon have to be given such theological weight that Stern can conclude that "emendation is the path toward redemption and a restored original harmony" (p. 62)?

In another example of his revisionist approach, Stern argues that the Gaon did not oppose philosophy. Rather "Elijah's problem with Maimonides revolves around issues of linguistics, interpretation, and hermeneutics and not whether it is permissible to read secular philosophy" (p. 130). As noted already, Stern also assumes that the Gaon did not really believe in "demons, magic, charms and other irrational objects" (p. 129). There is no question in my mind that Stern is in error here. Because the Gaon was a traditional Jew, whose approach to the classical rabbinic texts was not influenced by rationalist philosophy, this is precisely why he believed in demons, magic, and charms. The only reason to reject these things, as did Maimonides, is because one is influenced by rationalist thought.

I see no evidence that the Gaon was influenced in any substantial way by such knowledge, and his occasional use of Aristotelian terminology does not by itself indicate real influence. Furthermore, everything in his writings leads one to believe that when it came to the occult his mental universe was no different than the great rabbis of his time and subsequent to him, for whom demons did indeed exist. In his famous attack on Maimonides, found in his comment to *Yoreh Deah* 179:13, he specifically mentioned the efficacy of magic, and contrary to Stern this is to be taken literally. In fact, a few notes later, 179:26-27, which are not mentioned by Stern, the Gaon again wrote about demons, mentioned that one was permitted to consult with them if it was not the Sabbath, and cited talmudic and midrashic texts that show humans interacting with demons. The Gaon's position in this matter does not need to be explained. Pretty much every traditional Jew in his day believed in demons, and he did as well. It is Maimonides' opinion that is not traditional.

Stern leaves it as an open question whether the Vilna Gaon called philosophy "accursed" (p. 245). This is obviously an important issue, since if Stern is correct that the Gaon was not really opposed to philosophy, one would not expect him to use the word "accursed." Yet there is no doubt that the Gaon did indeed use this word. It appears in the first printing of the Gaon's commentary to the *Shulhan Arukh*, and its authenticity was attested to by R. Samuel Luria who examined that actual manuscript. Only later was the word removed by the publisher. Contrary to what Stern states, Samuel Joseph Fuenn, Matisyahu Strashun, and Hillel-Noah Maggid Steinschneider do not claim that later editors put in this phrase. The one to make this assertion was R. Zvi Hirsch Katzenellenbogen, and he was hardly a neutral observer.[1]

Several other issues emerge in the book. Stern quotes *Aliyot Eliyahu* as stating that before the age of thirteen the Gaon was "studying books on engineering for half an hour a day" (p. 38). I am not sure why Stern mentions anything about "thirteen," as the text is explicit that he was around eight years old. Furthermore, the text says nothing about "engineering." Rather, it states that the Gaon studied astronomy (*tekhunah*).

Stern writes that the Gaon "rejected outright" the *Shulhan Arukh* (p. 60). This is a strange statement being that the Gaon wrote a commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*. Furthermore, this commentary was designed to show the earlier rabbinic sources upon which the *Shulhan Arukh*'s laws were based. It is true that there are many times when the Gaon disagreed with the *Shulhan Arukh*. However, what is significant with the Gaon is precisely that he accepted the *Shulhan Arukh*. He had the stature to reject it had he chosen, and to write his own code, yet he did the exact opposite. By attaching his notes to the *Shulhan Arukh* he was affirming the work. He personally did not need the *Shulhan Arukh* and would decide halakhah from the Talmud and *rishonim*. But when the *Shulhan Arukh* decided the halakhah correctly, he was content to show the sources for the law, meaning that the work had value and that is why he affirmed it.

Contrary to Stern (pp. 77-78), there is no evidence that the Gaon was influenced by Elijah Levita and the Gaon never mentioned him. When the Gaon wrote that the Masorah disagreed with the Talmud, he was referring to how to spell certain words, and this formulation comes from the Tosafists. He was not in any way identifying with Levita's notion that the Hebrew vowels originated in post-talmudic times and was certainly not addressing "the veracity of the cantillations of the Bible" (p. 78). When the Gaon's son cited Levita, he was also not referring to his view of the vowels, only of the spelling of words.

I do not know what Stern means by "following Nachmanides, the Gaon argues that the book of Deuteronomy was written later than the other four books of the Bible" (p. 80). Quite apart from Nachmanides, this position is found in *Gittin* 60a, where one view is that the Torah was given "scroll by scroll." Also on page 80, he states that "the Gaon, in contrast, builds on the historical position laid down by Ibn Ezra that the last verses, though inspired

by Moses, were actually 'arranged' by Joshua." This has nothing to do with Ibn Ezra as the Talmud already contains the view that the last verses were written by Joshua (saying nothing about being "inspired" by Moses).

On page 133, Stern quotes a passage from the introduction to R. Judah Epstein's *Minhat Yehudah* (1877) where he writes of "thousands who came to study and the miracle it would take for one to emerge with any teaching ability." In the Hebrew the final words are *"yatza lehora'ah*." This has nothing to do with teaching but refers to the ability to decide halakhic questions. The expression originates in *Kohelet Rabbah* 7:49.

Finally, he writes that "when the Volozhin yeshiva opened its doors in 1802, it was the first time that young men from all economic and social backgrounds were afforded the opportunity to study" (p. 150, see also p. 162). I know of no evidence to support this assertion. Both before the Volozhin yeshiva's opening and after, opportunities for study were limited to those who could afford to support a child away from home, and give up the income he would bring in for the family.

Even though I am not convinced by Stern's thesis, there is no doubt that this book is filled with learning and insight and has understandably created a good deal of excitement. To appreciate Stern's efforts and ingenuity, one must read very carefully, and this reading will be rewarded in many ways.

Note

[1]. See Samuel Joseph Fuenn, *Kiryah Ne'emanah* [Faithful city] (Vilna: n.p., 1860), 160. In Stern's book, the page number is mistakenly given as 169.

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