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**Egregious and Deliberate Falsifications**

It is a platitude to claim that scholarship is always a product of its own historical context and thus cannot be understood apart from the social and political concerns that motivate it. But some works of scholarship attempt to intervene more directly in their political moment than others. *The Invention of a Tradition: The Messianic Zionism of the Ga'on of Vilna* is a book that isn't shy about its political relevance. The renowned historian Immanuel Etkes's most recent book was first published in Hebrew in 2019 by Carmel. The English edition was translated by Saadya Sternberg and comes adorned with an introduction by the Jewish historian David Biale. Etkes's book seeks to debunk an idea with profound political and religious implications, central to an Israeli political faction characterized as “religious Zionism.” Etkes argues exhaustively against the notion that Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon, (1724-97) called the “Vilna Gaon” and perhaps the most prominent rabbinic figure of the eighteenth century, promoted mass Jewish migration to the Holy Land as a component of a messianic activism. Furthermore, he claims that the textual sources that have been used to support this claim are based on egregious and deliberate falsifications.

According to the standard account, Zionism, the movement to establish a state in the biblical land of Israel, began in the late nineteenth century as an outgrowth of secular European nationalists. The founding figures of Zionism, most prominently the Austrian writer and journalist Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), rejected traditional Judaism. Moreover, the European Jewish immigrants who laid the foundation for the State of Israel were largely secular. In claiming the Vilna Gaon as the true founder of the Zionist movement, rather than those of the age of Herzl, religious Zionists adopt a counternarrative in which the Jewish state is an organic part of Jewish traditionalism rather than Jewish secularism.

Across a distinguished career, Etkes has produced many studies of the most important figures in modern Eastern European Jewry as well as essays devoted to its social history. His work is best epitomized by the title of his recent collection of Hebrew essays: *For the Sake of Heaven: Hasidim, Mitnagdim, Maskilim and their Interrelations* (2016). Many of Etkes's books center on influential figures from each of these camps, including *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement: Seeking the Torah of Truth* (1993), *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image* (2002), *The Besht*:
cian, Mystic, and Leader (2005), and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady: The Origins of Chabad Hasidism (2015). The most relevant forerunner to the present study is The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image. Rather than a biography of the Vilna Gaon, it is a study of how the Gaon has been depicted by a variety of modern Jewish groups with competing, and often conflicting, interests. Similarly, The Invention of a Tradition shows how the Gaon’s legacy has been, he argues, co-opted for political ends.

Etkes’s book is a meticulously researched and carefully argued monograph. But it is more than that. It is also a case study in scholarly debunking, in how to do scholarship that (the author hopes) has clear political implications, and presented in the rhetoric of scholarly polemics. Moreover, the book appears in English when the Israeli political situation is in extreme turmoil. From the protests against judicial reforms to the response to the Hamas attacks on October 7, the present and future of Israel have not been this uncertain in a long time. As David Biale notes in the introduction, the religious Zionist coalition is now the third-largest political party in Israel. Biale adds, in the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War, religious Zionists sought to add “historical and ideological pedigree” to the “settlement movement in the newly occupied territories” (p. vii.). Thus, Etkes’s book is far from a mere academic study, of interest primarily to other scholars. Rather, it is also an intervention in a deeply complex political situation, one in which historical memory informs the present.

Ostensibly, The Invention of a Tradition endeavors to make one definitive argument: the literary texts that underlie the view that the Vilna Gaon promoted settling the Holy Land as part of a broader messianic vision were fabricated by one man with specific political aims: Shlomo Zalman Rivlin (1884-1962). Etkes calls this account “Rivlinian myth” and takes pains to debunk its component parts.

The central idea holds that the Vilna Gaon taught that immigration would foment the later stages of redemption. Using the Kabbalistic idea of “arousal from below” (itaruta diletata), the development of a holy community in the land of Israel would spur the later stages of messianism “from above.” Rather than being a well-known component of his esoteric teachings, the Gaon’s supposed activist messianism was revealed only to very few of his disciples. The writings of his best-known disciples (such as Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, 1749-1821, who catalyzed the supra-communal Yeshiva system) bear no clear trace of this alleged messianic activism. Rather, Rabbi Binyamin Rivlin (1728-1812) and his son Rabbi Hillel Rivlin (1757-1838) were the caretakers of this myth. Binyamin Rivlin was indeed an associate of the Vilna Gaon and planned to move to the Holy Land in 1812, although he died before being able to leave Europe.

Hillel Rivlin successfully moved to the Holy Land in the 1830s. The year 1840, corresponding to the year 5600, witnessed a rise in messianic fervor in much of the traditional Jewish world. Other members of the Rivlin family were involved in the first modern Ashkenazi settlement in the Holy Land, later called the “Old Yishuv.” According to the Rivlinian myth, the Rivlin family promoted the agricultural growth of the Holy Land as well as the creation of educational institutions at which students were exposed to non-Jewish subjects. These activities are strikingly similar to the state-building tasks of the “second Aliyah” (1904-1914), the wave of immigration of Jewish people from Europe, motivated in large part, by Zionist ideals.

Some aspects of this “Rivlinian myth” are rooted in reality. It is well known that a group of associates of the Vilna Gaon, including Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Shklov (d. 1827), immigrated to the Holy Land. Called prushim, they formed a community that, later, became part of the Old Yishuv. Messianic ideas are, indeed, found in the variegated writings attributed to the Vilna Gaon.
Members of the Rivlin family were part of the Old Yishuv. However, as discussed below, Etkes argues that the motivation for immigration to the Holy Land was not messianic. Moreover, the type of community that emerged was much different than the Rivlinian myth presents. Rather than a proto-Zionist community, the prushim were motivated by the well-known ideals of the Vilna Gaon, that is, the centrality of Torah study, and the Old Yishuv faced significant economic, political, and public health challenges.

How does Etkes make his argument? Throughout the book, Etkes compares what we know about the prushim and the Old Yishuv to the writings attributed to and about the activities of the Rivlin family, primarily those published by Shlomo Zalman Rivlin. Rather than a mere debunking, Etkes also speculates about the political and personal motivations for the propagation and proliferation of the myth.

The Invention of a Tradition is divided into four parts, each with a specific objective. The first part, “The Books Hazon Zion and Kol ha-Tor and the Rivlinian Myth,” outlines the basic components of what Etkes seeks to debunk as the “Rivlinian myth.” As explained above, the notion that the prushim put into practice the messianic vision of the Vilna Gaon is central to the Rivlinian myth. The two major textual sources for this view are Hazon Zion: Shklov ve-Yerushalayim (Vision of Zion, Shklov and Jerusalem) and Kol ha-Tor (Voice of the Turtledove). Despite narrating events from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the books were only published in the 1940s by Shlomo Zalman Rivlin. Rivlin claimed that he prepared them from manuscripts that had been closely guarded by his family and were thus unknown to outsiders.

With the basic parameters of the Rivlinian myth and its central textual sources outlined in section 1, the second section, “The Vilna Gaon and His Disciples as the First Zionists: The Evolution of a myth,” critically compares extant historical sources about the prushim to the two books examined in the previous section. The first chapter of this section, “Chapter Four: Why Did the Disciples of the Vilna Gaon Immigrate to the Land of Israel?” is representative of Etkes's methodology in The Invention of a Tradition. He compares extant accounts of the prushim’s activities and their motivation for immigration to the Rivlinian myth.

For example, he analyzes an autobiographical testimony by R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov, a leader of the first wave of immigration and a close disciple of the Vilna Gaon. Copied from an authentic manuscript, the testimony first details Menahem Mendel’s two years spent under the Gaon’s tutelage before traveling to the Safed and then to Jerusalem. In Safed, Menahem Mendel, inspired by the teachings of the Vilna Gaon as well as the memory of his “righteous and honest forefathers” (p. 40), established “a study hall and synagogue for Torah and Prayer” (p. 40). Thereafter, he built a synagogue in Jerusalem.

Strikingly absent from Menahem Mendel’s account is any whiff of messianism. Like the Rivlinian myth, he acknowledges that the motivation to leave Eastern Europe for the Holy Land came from the Vilna Gaon. But in contrast to the Rivlinian myth, Menahem Mendel sought to establish centers for Torah learning in the Land of Israel which had “been taken over by foreigners and gentiles and had gone to ruin and desolation” (p. 40). The absence of any mention of messianism does not prove that messianism was not a motivating factor for his dangerous immigration, he would have mentioned it. Thus, rather than arguing from silence, Etkes first establishes that messianism should have been mentioned in Menahem Mendel’s activities. However, Etkes argues, that if messianism were a central motivating factor for his dangerous immigration, he would have mentioned it. Thus, rather than arguing from silence, Etkes first establishes that messianism should have been mentioned in Menahem Mendel’s discussion of his time from the Vilna Gaon if it were important to him. Because it was not even alluded to, and, in contrast, building institutions of Torah learning was described at length, Etkes reasons that there is no evidence that
messianism was a motivating factor for Menahem Mendel.

Additional support for the view that messianism was not a motivation for the prushim is found in the undisputed writing of Rabbi Israel of Shklov. Rabbi Israel was one of the leaders of the prushim and returned to Europe to raise money for his community. As elite Torah scholars living in the Holy Land, they relied exclusively on donations from diaspora Jews for financial support. In an autobiographical account, Rabbi Israel expresses hesitation about leaving the biblical land, explaining that it was “as heavy on me as the weight of stone and the burden of sand … to leave the Holy land to which I had bonded with great anguish and longing like one who thirsts for water” (p. 32). Describing his activities there, he highlights studying the Talmud and the Shulhan Arukh with the Vilna Gaon’s commentary in the local yeshiva alongside other devoted scholars. Nonetheless, the need for financial support for the community was so great that he returned to Europe to raise funds for the community.

Other fundraising letters supporting Rabbi Israel of Shklov’s efforts attest to the fact that the objectives of “our people who came to the Holy Land” were “for the most part to attain purity and to be occupants of the beit midrash, toiling over Torah and worship” (p. 33). Thus, according to sources from the earlier nineteenth century, the prushim endeavored to reinstitute vigorous Torah study in the biblical land of Israel that would endure indefinitely.

So, one may reasonably ask, if messianic expectation, spurred by the Vilna Gaon, was not one of the motivations for the prushim to establish a community, how did the messianic Rivlinian myth not only emerge but become so prominent? Etkes identifies Shlomo Zalman Rivlin as being entirely responsible for the propagation of the myth.

Shlomo Zalman Rivlin devoted considerable energy in the 1930s and 1940s to the publication of the writings of his forebears. Rivlin claimed that they were based on authentic manuscripts held by his family, now finally seeing the light of day due to his publication efforts. These purportedly nineteenth-century writings testify to the prevalence of messianic vision of the Vilna Gaon and the Rivlin family’s role in putting it into practice in the Old Yishuv.

In stark contrast, Etkes argues that these works are complete fabrications. In the third part of The Invention of a Tradition (provocatively titled “Additional Writings By Shlomo Zalman Rivlin”), Etkes analyzes texts attributed to members of the Rivlin family published by Shlomo Zalman. As the title implies, Etkes argues, contrariwise, that they are the product of Shlomo Zalman’s pen.

A representative case is Etkes’s analysis of the texts attributed to Shlomo Zalman Rivlin’s father, Rabbi Yosef Yosha Rivlin (1837-96). As with his analysis of the prushim, Etkes compares the image of Yosef Yosha found in stories from his lifetime with those published by his son. Based on contemporaneous sources, Yosef Yosha played an important role in the Ashkenazi community in Jerusalem as the head of the General Committee (an organization of all the religious organizations, or kollels, in Jerusalem), contributing to the building of new neighborhoods. Yosef Yosha was thus entangled in the finances of the Old Yishuv, a proximity to money that led to (seemingly unfounded) allegations of monetary impropriety that he weathered with aplomb. One eulogy panegyrizes Yosef Yosha as “a man of many talents who had it all: Torah, wisdom, and morality: self-taught and the teacher of others” (p. 132). Absent from this characterization of Yosef Yosha is any suggestion that he was proficient in Kabbalah. Moreover, the eulogist never mentions the collection of partially autobiographical poems titled Sefer ha-Pizmonim, attributed to him by Shlomo Zalman and fully published in 1947 after a small portion appeared in 1935.

Sefer ha-Pizmonim is a collection of poems extolling the same sort of messianic Zionism found
in *Kol ha-Tor* and *Hazon Zion*. The text pays respect to his forebearers Benjamin and Hillel Rivlin as initiating the first wave of Ashkenazi migration to the Holy Land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem for messianic purposes at the behest of the Vilna Gaon. *Sefer ha-Pizmonim* also emphasizes the notion that the age of redemption is on the horizon with the appearance of the Messiah ben Yosef (to be followed by Messiah ben David), whose soul was linked with that of the Vilna Gaon. More specifically, the Messiah ben Yosef foments the ingathering of Jewish exiles in their ancestral homeland as part of the struggle against the forces of evil, which will be defeated at a later stage in the messianic process. The rebuilding of Jerusalem is part of the beginnings of exile (*athalta de-geula*). These messianic ideas are explained using letter combinations called *gematria*, an esoteric practice prominent in the Kabbalistic tradition.

These two themes (the glorious exploits of the Rivlin family in the building up of Jerusalem and the “earthly aspect” of redemption) abound in the writings of the Rivlin family published by Shlomo Zalman. Given the difference between the image of Yosef Yosha found in contemporary sources and the one that emerges from *Sefer ha-Pizmonim*, questions about the authenticity of Rivlin’s authorial attribution are reasonable. Etkes asks if it is conceivable that “a literary work purporting to express the secrets of Redemption according to the teachings of the Gaon of Vilna, whose idea supposedly guided Yosef Yosha Rivlin as a public leader, was unknown to anyone? How did it leave no trace among his contemporaries and those near to him for the duration of the 1850s, when it was supposedly composed, until 1935?” (pp. 128-129). Etkes argues that the most reasonable explanation is that Shlomo Zalman is the author of *Sefer ha-Pizmonim* (as well as the other works he published but attributed to his family).

As Etkes argues at length in the fourth part of *The Invention of a Tradition*, these texts serve Shlomo Zalman’s two primary objectives in perpetuating the Rivlinian myth: (1) to depict the Rivlin family as important builders of the Old Yishuv, and (2) to portray the development of a Jewish settlement in the Holy Land as the putting into practice of the messianic vision of the Vilna Gaon. Why would Shlomo Zalman devote such a considerable effort to the construction of an alternative religious Zionism? Moreover, to what extent did he believe his own fabrication of the past? Etkes speculatively proffers a psychological explanation: Shlomo Zalman sought to reconcile his commitment to Zionism with his ardor for his ancestors, members of the Old Yishuv. What resulted was “an anachronistic projection of the characteristics of the Zionist enterprise onto the Old Yishuv, that is, in the claim that the immigration of the students of the Vilna Gaon to the Land of Israel in the early nineteenth century was the beginning of Zionism” (pp. 159-160).

Additionally, Etkes traces the scholarly absorption of the Rivlinian myth. Although *Kol ha-Tor* was embraced by a small number of Jews in the first few decades after its publication, it was not until the late 1960s that the conception of the Vilna Gaon as the messianic forebearer of Zionism emerged as the Six Day War of 1967 breathed new life into religious Zionism. Not only was the Israeli victory viewed as miraculous by many, but it also engendered a messianic fervor among some religious Zionists, particularly those influenced by Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook. In the context of a newly invigorated and expanded Israeli state, the Rivlinian myth found an audience eager to embrace a “kosher” form of Zionism that could be traced back to the great Vilna Gaon.

Etkes identifies the Israeli academics Arie Morgenstern and, subsequently, Raphael Shuchat as primarily responsible for lending scholarly respectability for the Rivlinian myth. Morgenstern’s 1985 Hebrew-language book *Messianism and the Settlement of the Land of Israel* “clothed the Rivlinian story in the cap and gown of academic historical research” (p. 51). In addition to accept-
ing the literary sources planted by Shlomo Zalman, Morgenstern, according to Etkes and other Israeli academic critics such as Israel Bartal, “liberally” interpreted sources to support his goals of bolstering the messianic mythology of the Vilna Gaon. Morgenstern, in Etkes’s telling, has rejected much of the criticism of his work, instead emphasizing the political relevance of his work, which shows, in the main, that secular Zionism postdates the religious Zionism inspired by the Vilna Gaon.

*The Invention of a Tradition* is both an academic monograph and a political polemic. Consequently, Etkes’s rhetoric is sometimes brash albeit devoid of ad hominem attacks against other scholars, even though his disdain for Shlomo Zalma Rivlin is unmistakable. Nonetheless, he does not present his book as part of a broader scholarly conversation. In short, this is a debunking through and through. Throughout the book, Etkes emphasizes his point that the Rivlinian myth is just that—completely false in all its details. To give three representative examples of Etkes’s rhetoric:

1. “To remove all doubt, it is worth reiterating that none of the exploits attributed by the author of the pamphlet to R. Hillel Rivlin have any basis in reality. As we have shown, the story of the Messianic Zionist movement and his son R. Hillel with the blessing of the Gaon is baseless” (p. 44).

2. “To remove all doubt, it must be said immediately that none of this is true” (p. 78).

3. “Thus far the author’s sentiments are on firm ground, yet from this point onward he soars off on flights of fancy” (p. 103).

Some of the forceful language may be explained by the fact that it stems from a long-standing disagreement between Etkes and scholars such as Arie Morgenstern. Nonetheless, the reminders that the Rivlinian myth is a pernicious fiction abound. He doesn’t cede an inch to the validity of the Rivlinian myth and his disdain for Shlomo Zalman is palpable. This testifies to the stakes of the book as not merely a work of scholarship but a text that seeks to correct a politically significant fiction that bears upon the present and future of Israeli politics.

Nonetheless, the book can be read another way, one Etkes seems to acknowledge but does not pursue (see pp. 162-163). *The Invention of a Tradition* is a case study in religious and political myth-making in a text-centered culture. Using this lens, the Rivlinian myth can be compared to other forms of the production of alternative configurations of the past, from the Kabbalistic tradition contained in the *Zohar* to Mormonism to new religious movements such as the Black Hebrew Israelites and countless others. The Rivlinian myth is, perhaps, distinctive in the “planting” of textual evidence to support an alternative start to a religiously significant political project (religious Zionism). Thus, it offers fertile ground for comparison with other mythmaking projects and for the ways in which Jewish people shape the past to meet the needs of the present. Etkes is certainly aware of the fecundity of his study, but, this reviewer suspects, exploring such scholarly questions may have threatened the force of his debunking.

These are delicate matters. Discussing them critically, even in an ostensibly neutral scholarly forum, is likely to garner a strong reaction among those who have accepted the prushim as the legitimate founders of modern Zionism, rather than secular Jewish nationalists. Whenever one writes about a beloved, almost mythic political figure and their relation to emotionally charged political events, the stakes are more than merely scholarly. It bears noting that the most recent monograph on the Vilna Gaon, Eliyahu Stern’s *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Makings of Modern Judaism* (2013) generated considerable scholarly controversy. Although Etkes’s book has already appeared in Hebrew, its appearance in English and the subsequent Israel-Hamas War may shape its reception. Either way, the response to Etkes’s book will be instructive for scholars. On the one hand, it might have a significant impact on the confidence religious Zionists have in claiming the Vilna Gaon
as supportive of their politico-religious project. On the other hand, if it makes only a minimal impact, it raises questions about the power of historical scholarship to shape political conversations, as well as the resilience of political mythmaking. Whatever its reception will be, it is a meticulously argued and politically mindful study that adds to Etkes’s legacy as one of the most influential historians of modern Judaism.

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