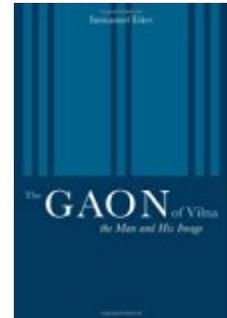




**Immanuel Etkes.** *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. viii + 299 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-22394-3.



**Reviewed by** Steven Bowman

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Rav Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman (1720-1797), Gaon of Vilna, is undoubtedly one of the most prestigious names among modern Jewish scholarship. He symbolizes the culmination of traditional scholarship on the one hand, and is touted by contemporary scholars of Haskalah and Wissenschaft as their harbinger. Even his Hassidic opponents, against whom he waged incessant war and utilized the herem as his most powerful weapon, acknowledge his deep learning. Indeed, in addition to his mastery of the Talmud and ancillary literature, the Gaon was the most prolific kabbalist of his age, and left more writings on the subject than all his contemporary Hassidim combined. He was the towering influence of his generation despite having no official position.

The questions that Immanuel Etkes raises provide a review of the Gaon's intellectual activities, his influences on his own time, the appropriation of his name to endorse later new trends (which he would have eschewed had he had the opportunity), and his misinterpretation by modern scholars. In addition, Etkes examines the collateral development of intellectual and pedagogi-

cal trends between Ashkenazi Jewry that form the background to later approaches to traditional texts. The question, however, the reader is left with is: How would the ghost of the Gaon read modern Jewish scholarship, which has proliferated into areas of the sciences and humanities, and detract from the mastery of torah?

Etkes begins with an investigation of the two honorifics applied to the Gaon already in his lifetime: "ha-gaon" ve "ha-hasid". The first is self-evident. It describes his mastery of all traditional literature and its manuscripts, so that he could critically read any Talmudic text. The only present-day scholars who allow this reviewer to fathom the depth of this concept are Benzion Wacholder with his Volozhin-trained memory, and the late David Flusser [nishmato biyeshivah shel maalah]. Both represent a mastery of texts and manuscripts that, coupled with a critical reading, allow for creative and honest understanding of the past 2500 years of all Jewish scholarship, though they write only in specialized fields.

The second honorific--"hahasid"--is more complex, since the term has a number of meanings in

Jewish tradition through the ages; major among them are the Psalms, the Maccabean period, Hasidei Ashkenaz, and the Besht's disciples. So what does the honorific mean when applied to the Gaon? Perhaps the rabbinic/scribal designation of "complete sage" [hakham shalem], in the sense of one who dedicated himself totally to the spiritual and ethical, as well as the intellectual, wisdom of torah and all knowledge that helps to understand it, may help us understand this application. Joseph Karo and Moses Hayyim Luzzatto are earlier figures of this type. Great sages, however, are rare in any generation, let alone the phenomenon of complete sages. In the fourteenth century Shemarya Ikriti critiqued the fragmentation of knowledge among his contemporaries. The recent biography of Menahem of Ilya by Isaac Barzelai (not in bibliography here) reminds us how much work is still necessary to bring these isolated geniuses out of historical obscurity.

Etkes examines critically the claim by modern historians that Eliyahu was a harbinger of the Haskalah. This claim, already promulgated in his lifetime, has become axiomatic among such modern historians as J. S. Raisin, Zeev Yavetz, Ben-Zion Katz, Joseph Klausner, Israel Zinberg, Louis Greenberg, Raphael Mahler, and others. These mistakenly based themselves on an uncritical reading of a few statements emanating from the tiny circle surrounding the Gaon that were already tendentiously read by mid-nineteenth-century proponents of Haskalah. Etkes reminds us, as do scholars of other disciples, that one should always read the sources lest, like "to'im" of all ages who appropriate names and ideas, another misguided path emerges that would claim to be the truth. History unfortunately is littered with such "unrechte Verbindungen" [mistaken assumptions] as Flusser called them, and graveyards are still being filled with their victims.

On the other hand, the Gaon had mastered all of the texts and manuscripts available to him. Therefore he felt competent to critique every in-

terpretation that did not resonate with his learning. He emended texts of the Talmud and Kabbalah. He critiqued the Shulhan Arukh and its sources. He even disagreed with the Gemara in its understanding of the Mishnah. Moreover, he critiqued his contemporary pedagogy, especially the pilpul and hilluk that proliferated among the fertile young minds of the yeshivah that were being stultified by traditional instructors. But he did not restrict himself to pshat alone, as maskilim claimed. Rather he mastered drash and sod as essential facets of torah study. He even delved into secular studies where necessary to understand a text. But he did not advocate secular studies as a substitute for his definition of torah. Etkes's critical review of the misappropriation of the Gaon is expanded in his excursions on the scholarship of Shklov, Volozhin, and Vilna, which he sets in their historical context of a flourishing economy [im eyn kemah eyn torah]. The same approach had already allowed modern scholars finally to understand the flowering of sixteenth-century Safed as a city of saints and scholars and textile workers.

The question of the Gaon's role in the condemnation of Hassidism is a similar scholarly problem. Etkes reconstructs the process that led to the condemnation and notes carefully the chronology of the affair. Such close reading allows him to present a different conclusion than many of the major scholars who reported the affair over the past two centuries. He emphasizes the role of the Gaon in his private rejection of Hassidism as a heresy. In a sense, Etkes suggests, his condemnation reflected the older tradition of the Kabbalistic Hasid, of which the Gaon was the premier example, against the revolutionary Hassidic Kabbalah. Later, it became a public controversy when the leadership of Vilna became involved and succumbed to the Gaon's influence in this matter. The ban on the sect, and its ostracism, officially lasted until the Gaon's death, after which sources cited by Etkes indicate its relaxation. Again we have an example of the necessity to revisit the sources and not rely on secondary mate-

rial that more often than not reflects its own contemporary bias.

What did the Hassidim think of the Gaon during the thirty years (!) of persecution that he initiated? Already in winter 1772, the year of the ban, the Hassidic leaders, Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and Schneur Zalman of Lyady tried to see the Gaon, but he refused. The continued protestations of the Hassidic leaders, and their claim that the Gaon and his Mitnagdim were misinformed by "false witnesses," reflects the fear on both sides of the twin heresies of Sabbatianism and Frankism that had rent Eastern European Jewish communities throughout the eighteenth century. Etkes notes the paradox that the Mitnagdim relied unconditionally on the authority of the Gaon, while the Hassidim appealed to the halakhic principle that a majority could overrule the greatest sage of the generation. The Hassidim were in an interesting bind: they had to acknowledge the authority of their opponents' leader "who was most responsible for their suffering." Yet, while Schneur Zalman was cautious to praise the Gaon during his life, and after his death, in public, he felt no constraint against chastising him when writing to leaders sympathetic to Hassidism.

Another facet of the Hassidic response was "to be silent and suffer and accept torments with love, for they are truly like birth pangs (of the messiah?)," as Schneur Zalman put it. He applied this rationale to the success of the tactics of restraint during the twenty-five years of the persecution that witnessed the continued spread of the movement. The continuation of this tactic in the face of gentile persecution during the succeeding one hundred fifty years no doubt contributed to the near extermination of the movement by the Nazis. Etkes also examines later Hassidic historiography, which he characterizes as "a strange mixture of historical fact and imaginary descriptions that have nothing at all to do with historical sources."

One of the more useful contributions of the book is the author's summary of a number of Hassidic and Mitnagdic compositions on the issue. In particular he devotes considerable space to Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin's seminal *Nefesh ha-hayyim*, and its critique of the contemporary decline of Talmudic studies in Lithuania. Etkes connects this decline, not necessarily to the powerful attraction of Hassidism among yeshivah youth, but rather to the end of the Council of Four Lands in 1764. Without state sponsorship, the yeshivahs began to close in a process similar, as I see it, to the decline of Torah studies in Eretz Israel during the fifth and sixth centuries. There too the Christian state was responsible for the end of the Nesiuth, and *bli kemah eyn torah*. Hence the reforms of Rabbi Hayyim in his new yeshivah that he founded in 1802 may be said to have saved traditional Talmudic study (following the model learning and piety that characterized the Vilna Gaon). It may also explain his less than hostile attitude toward the Hassidim, who, though they erred in practice and rationale, at least had their focus on God and Torah.

After a chapter that follows rabbinic scholarship and leadership in Lithuania during the nineteenth century, Etkes returns to the Vilna Gaon for a summary of his attitude toward torah and *yir'a*, the twin features that characterized Rabbi Hayyim's reform in the Volozhin yeshivah. This book provides a sober and useful introduction to the role of the Gaon in the opposition to the new Hassidic movement, and to the way in which his followers ultimately came to reform the study of Talmud that had previously contributed to its abandonment. In sum, the book occupies a critical scholarly middle ground between the biased extremes of a controversy that divided observant Jews in the nineteenth century, and is still going strong (although it is all but forgotten by the vast majority today).

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