

BOOK REVIEWS

The posthumous Gaon of Vilna and the history of ideas

Etkes, Immanuel, *The Gaon of Vilna. The Man and his Image*, translated by Jeffrey M. Green, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 2002, 299 pp., ISBN 0-520-22394-2.

The author explains at the outset that he was inspired to write this book during his visit to Lithuania for the 1997 conference at Vilnius University to mark the 200th *yortsayt* (anniversary of the death) of the Gaon of Vilna, Eyliohu ben Shloyme-Zalmen (Eliyahu ben Shelomo-Zalman; Elijah of Vilna; and many other variants).¹ This excellent translation brings to English readers a foremost contribution to “Gaonia” (as the products of the growing intellectual fascination with the Gaon of Vilna have been dubbed by Stefan Schreiner).

Etkes is a master in reconstructing the history of ideas. The most original and lasting contribution of this book is its core: the chapters devoted not to the historical Gaon of Vilna (c. 1720–97), whose life and times are recorded more fully elsewhere, but to the differing concepts of “the Gaon of Vilna” that emerged among the (Lithuanian, primarily Habad-Lubavitch) Hasidim, the anti-Hasidic Lithuanian Misnagdim, and the modernizing Maskilim who supported secular education. In a narrative rich in suspense, Etkes traces the development of these three constructs, paying careful attention to detail and demonstrating how the same paltry corpus of “famous facts” about the actual Gaon took on a continuously evolving life of its own in radically differing ways among diverse thinkers and historians of the 19th century (and beyond). These splendid chapters might well serve as a standard introduction to familiarize students of Jewish history with the history of ideas and the degree to which diverse branches of one civilization can recreate a deceased individual to serve their purposes without ever “lying” or consciously falsifying sources. Incidentally, there is a parallel book waiting to be written on the city of Vilna and how it, like its Gaon, became a potent concept in the hands of the same (and other) branches of post-Gaonic (c. 1800 onward) Jewish Eastern Europe. That mystique may be traced, in part, to the line in the Gaon’s sons’ oft-cited memoir about their father, in which the city of Vilna is referred to by a biblical epithet for Jerusalem: “Blessed are you, O Vilna, City of Splendour,” where “City of Splendour” is a poetic reference to Jerusalem in Jeremiah (49:25). Vilna, of course, became known as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.”²

Another achievement is the chapter on the mystical thought of the Gaon’s best-known pupil, Chaim Valózhiner (Chaim of Valozhin, 1749–1821).³ There is perhaps nothing “completely new” here, but matters are explained rather better than before. Valózhiner’s posthumously published *Nefesh ha-Chaim* first appeared in Vilna in 1824. (The title translates as “the soul of life” or as per its midrashic source, “the soul of the living,” in either case playfully evocative of “the soul of one man Chaim” as well.) While the now classic Misnagdic

notion that intellectually demanding Torah scholarship is itself a high mystic activity (higher than prayer) has been fathomed by others, Etkes is strikingly successful in explaining the precise philosophic point of contention between Valózhiner and the Hasidic (quasi-)pantheistic position on Divine Immanence (pp. 189–91). His pinpointing of litigious issues, their extraction from many layers of literary garb, and their lucid (and brief) explanation surpasses even the painstaking work of A. Nadler's *The Faith of the Mithnagdim* on this irksome point. All in all, incidentally, D. Fishman's *Russia's First Modern Jews*, Nadler, and Etkes's book under review make a fine trilogy for the English-reading student who wants to come to grips with this enchanting period in Jewish cultural history. Etkes's earlier *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement* is likewise a valuable contribution. Perhaps it was a reluctance to revisit ground already covered that dissuaded him from including a chapter on the idea "Gaon of Vilna" among the Mussarists (*Músernikes*). Nobody could write it as well as he, and it remains a desideratum for the next edition.

Etkes is able to disagree forcefully without losing respect for his opponents or even his detractors. He is strict about the principle that something is unproven until it is proven, especially in highly contentious, deeply fought-over matters where human nature is, well, only human. He counters R. Elijor's belief that the purported "Minsk Debate" of 1782 (which the Hasidim allegedly "won") actually took place, without dismissing her impressive discoveries about the actual *claims* that such a debate took place, and her elucidation of the importance of those claims (pp. 123–27). If the proverbial gloves do ever come off, they come off with style, for instance, in the rejoinder to Y. Mondshine, a scholar *and* Habad-Lubavitch adherent himself who has tussled with Etkes in print. Etkes concedes that "Mondshine's connection with Hasidism is not in itself evidence relevant to the truth of his account of events. In other words, only after his claims have been examined on their own merits may the tendentiousness of his writing be taken into account" (p. 133). And, "as one for whom the historical controversy between Hasidim and Mitnagdim remains an issue with existential significance, it is difficult for him to imagine the psychological distance with which a critical scholar approaches the subject of his or her research" (p. 138). There is no hubris in the occasional (and delightful) light touches of satire (satire of the "classic Lithuanian-Misnagdic type," incidentally, in terms of Jewish folklore). Etkes mentions, for instance, that Mondshine "suspects me of belonging to the Mitnagdim. In point of fact, the critical scholar is also liable to err. The naive view that it is possible to deal with history with complete objectivity has long since faded away. However, there is a great difference between a scholar committed to discovery of the truth and to striving for it—aware of his or her limitations and of the relative character of historical research—and a scholar bound by religious or ideological commitment" (p. 138).

But, now then, can there be an excess of objectivity? For example, should ideas propagated by conspicuously non-objective sources be rejected even when such ideas may happen to coincide with some degree of historical reality? This comes to mind when reading Etkes's (as usual, persuasive) retorts to what he has categorized (p. 139) as the three positions on the Hasidic–Misnagdic controversy: (a) an "apologetic" trend that argues that the Misnagdic war on Hasidism declared by the Gaon had a positive influence on Hasidism, tempering its early extremes; (b) a "harmonistic" trend that sees a classic "debate in the name of Heaven" between two trends, some of whose adherents respected each other; and (c) "intentional forgetfulness" on the part of those orthodox historians and chroniclers who see the whole debate as an embarrassment to be minimized or ignored for purposes of modern consumption. Let us consider these three positions in reverse order.

Trend (c) is a position concerned with “what is good for religious Jews today” and therefore beyond the scope of historical argument. Etkes cites Bezalel Landau’s Hebrew book on the Gaon, *HaGaon heHasid miVilna*, published in Jerusalem in 1965, in which the author explains that he ditched his chapters on the Hasidic–Misnagdic imbroglio altogether. Etkes allows himself some more light satire. “Landau lived and was active within the Haredi community of Jerusalem,” he notes. “His journalistic and historical writings are marked by contemporary Haredi ideology, which is to say an uncompromising struggle against secular Jews and secularism. Naturally that struggle necessitated closing ranks and overcoming internecine controversies. Therefore, there is no reason to recall forgotten episodes that could interfere with the unity of the camp” (p. 146).

Trend (b) is (“like it or not”) in part an accurate characterization of *some* relations between Hasidic and Misnagdic scholars after the initial acrimony died down. It is actually true that in the wake of the advent of a major new common foe—the Maskilim—throughout the 19th century and beyond there were in fact countless instances of Hasidic–Misnagdic coexistence, partnership, and intermarriage in the very heartland of the old battleground, Lita (Yiddish *Líte*—Jewish Lithuania in the wider sense, comprising the territories of today’s Lithuania and Belarus as well as big chunks of Latvia and northern and eastern Ukraine, plus some sections of northeast Poland and western Russia). The religious chroniclers did not, for example, invent the close cooperation between the leader of Misnagdic Jewry, Reb Itsele Valózhiner (Rabbi Isaac of Valozhin, d. 1849), head of the Valozhin yeshiva, and the Habad-Lubavitch rebbe of the day, Menachem-Mendel Schneersohn (“the Tsemakh-Tsedek,” 1789–1866), when it came to the Russian tsar’s conference on Jewish education in the summer of 1843. The *heirs* of the deceased opponents, of the Gaon of Vilna and the founder of Habad, Shneur-Zalman of Lyadi (1745–1813), did in fact work together.

That leaves position (a) as the most beguiling grist for intellectual history. It is of course only natural that orthodox historiography (chronology, hagiography, and so forth), which predictably seeks to either “forget” the embarrassment of the conflict, or to stress later incarnations that entailed mutually respectful discourse, would come up with a theological explanation for the whole business, claiming that it was after all preordained (*bashéert* is the operative Yiddish term) high up in Heaven, for the ultimate good of true believers. But the critical modern scholar’s need to reject *bashéert*-type arguments does not obviate the possibility that a bitter campaign by the establishment of society *x*, led by its universally acknowledged greatest scholar in many generations, against a radical new movement, might well have *tempered* that movement’s radicalism. Is this notion so implausible that it merits a priori dismissal simply because it *also* became part of a belief system that does not adhere to the standards of critical scholarship?

A careful study of the life’s work of the founder of Habad, Shneur-Zalman of Lyadi (Shnéyer-Zálmen Lyáder), reveals his conscious and unrelenting demolition of the more extreme tendencies within Hasidism. He developed his brand of Hasidism partly in response to what he regarded as the justified attacks by the Gaon (and the Misnagdim) on those more extreme tendencies, while arguing that the Gaon’s application of sanctions against the Hasidic movement generally was in his view wholly unjustified. In short: the Misnagdic movement played a major role in shaping moderate (Lithuanian) Hasidism, and it is that kind of Hasidism that comes into focus in Etkes’s book.⁴

Now this in turn takes us to a question in the sociology of Jewish historical scholarship in contemporary Israel of which the present book is also a part. Let it suffice to quote from Abigail Radoszkowicz’s now-famous *Jerusalem Post* report (3 May 2002) about the furor over

Dov Eliach's recent work on the Gaon of Vilna. "While Eliach's three-volume tome, *The Gaon*, published earlier this year, proved to be a bestseller in the haredi community, selling out of its first printing, not everyone was pleased. Posters condemning the book were plastered on buildings in orthodox Jerusalem neighborhoods. For two months running, the glossy monthly *Olam ha-Hasidut* (*The Hasidic World*) displayed on its cover an image of the offending book going up in flames. One newspaper reported that the book was even publicly burnt in one of Bnei Brak's biggest yeshivas, and that Eliach himself was thrown out of the synagogue where he attends daily prayer services." The article cites a comment by "Prof. Immanuel Etkes of the Hebrew University's Institute of Jewish Studies" too: "While those of us who are uninvolved can look at the conflict dispassionately, for Hasidim and Mitnagdim it involves real trauma ... For Hasidim, it's very difficult to acknowledge that so great an authority as the Gaon considered them heretics."

But can unbridled dispassion be achieved at all in this environment? Even by a dispassionate Hebrew University professor (one is tempted to say: "a dispassionate Litvak," given the folkloristic Litvak's propensity to dry, cold, analytical dispassion, but that would somehow compromise things in the current discussion)? Bearing in mind both Etkes's own (correct) assertion that there is no absolute objectivity, and the Israeli scene where the questions raised in his book are anything but "objective historical issues of interest only to professional scholars," one question invariably arises. What is most susceptible to potential unconscious repression in a book such as this? The "offend at your own risk" camp here comprises the haredim—the traditionalist orthodox camp ("ultra-orthodox" is the secularists' subjective label, of course), and particularly its Hasidic component.

The author's virtuoso analyses of the post-Gaon literature and the three distinct constructions of "the Gaon of Vilna" are, as noted at the outset, the book's major and permanent achievement. They are scrupulously unaffected by what anybody might think, say, or do. Some exposures of Hasidic less-than-forthrightness on historical issues are in fact rather courageous (e.g. pp. 109, 111, 120, 126, 130).

On what counts, then, might a contemporary author in Israel incline toward reticence? In the actual documented history of the Hasidic–Misnagdic conflict. This is not the primary focus of the book, to be sure, but it is frankly necessary for the comprehension of the polemics, accusations, and counter-accusations and, consequently, the bitterness of the dispute during the Gaon's lifetime and the repercussions of that bitterness to this day. An outsider reading the book might be forgiven for failing to understand what all the fuss was about. The few hints at the untoward include brief mentions (without elaboration) of the accusations (in the 1770s) that the Hasidim practised public headstands and other gymnastics, even during prayer; yelled out "bah" during prayer; and made fun of Torah scholars (pp. 82, 85, 257, etc.). There is a citation (from the original bans of 1772) that "one of them was polluted with lying with a man, and he confessed to this before the court" (p. 88, quoted from Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*). But there is also a sceptical reference to Dubnov's (correct) reminder that Frankism had not yet died out at the time, and that it would be common sense to assume, in the circumstances, that another heretical, pseudo-messianic movement was in the works (p. 75).

The various 18th-century accusations must be evaluated by the only measure that matters, if the goal is retrospective comprehension of the dispute in a framework of cultural and intellectual history. That measure entails looking through the eyes of the society in question—traditional Ashkenazic civilization of the period—for they are the only eyes that count here. And in those eyes these "details" in the accusations represented earth-shaking heresies that would threaten Jewish life every bit as much as the Sabbateanism of the 17th century.

Etke's own view is interred deep in the endnotes: "My opinion—that the Vilna Gaon's response to Hasidism was not necessitated by reality, and that in response to the dilemma posed by Hasidism for the spiritual leadership of the generation it would have been possible to respond differently" (p. 256, n. 46). That view, coming from Etke, is extremely significant, and it should, in a future edition, be expounded fully and proudly in the main text. But, even as expressed, it goes some way toward indirectly sanitizing and minimizing the early accusations against the Hasidim. The English reader who wishes to be apprised of a fuller roster of the original 1770s accusations against the Hasidim can consult *inter alia* Elijah Judah Schochet's *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna*, which provides a generally unexpurgated and uncensored account. Those accusations incorporated claims of substantial similarity with Sabbateanism, Frankism, and false-messianism (infallibility of the Hasidic *tsádik*, elevation of sin, plotting of a permanent schism) as well as promotion of masturbation with ejaculation during prayer, homosexual rape, wild and licentious gaiety, and glorification of alcohol and tobacco. These accusations (completely apart from their degree of veracity) explain to the hilt the Gaon's and others' harsh reactions. Inexplicably, Schochet's book is not to be found in the extensive bibliography provided by Etke (pp. 281–94). Whether Schochet's residence in California (as opposed to Jerusalem) has something to do with the willingness to "go down the list" is itself a question of relevance to the history of ideas, which is the principally relevant discipline in these discussions.

There is also some reticence about the unpleasant things that Jews did to each other during the most bitter years of the Hasidic–Misnagdic conflict. There were concocted betrayals of opponents to government authorities (particularly nasty in regions that fell to tsarist Russia after the partitions of Poland), and, it must be said, some serious acts of violence (including murder) which Jewish historiography prefers to keep hushed up. An unsanitized version could help explain various later phenomena, including the three "legends" of the Gaon that arose later on, after the bitterness had dissipated and things quieted down, and that are so magnificently traced in Etke's major and lasting work.⁵

NOTES

1. It is high time that the field of East European Jewish studies adopt culturally, philologically, and historically accurate transcriptions, at least among the variants provided. The ahistoric, anachronistic, and ideologically (anti-East European Jewish culture) motivated, 20th-century propensity to "Israelicize" Ashkenazic history is now, from the viewpoint of the history of ideas, rather dated. In this review, the reviewer's "Misnagdic," "Misnagdim" coexists with the author's "Mitnaged," "Mitnagdim."
2. The epithet "Jerusalem of Lithuania," which may or may not derive from this early 19th-century text, is certainly older than Fin's 1859 *Kiryó Neemono* (*Kiryah Ne'emenah*, "Faithful City," using the poetic reference to Jerusalem in Isaiah 1:21, 26), which is sometimes cited as the source for the romantic Jewish name for Vilna (cf. Harshav, "Introduction," xxxi). Another old tradition has it that "Jerusalem of Lithuania" was coined by Napoleon during his 1812 sojourn in the city (cf. Cohen, *Vilna*, 105).
3. Yiddish and Belarusian Valozhin, Russian Volozhin, now in Belarus. It is also high time that East European Jewish studies stop treating Jewish place names as if they were vowel-less skeletons from ancient hieroglyphics or craters on the moon. There is a rich geographic and toponymic literature. Books such as the fine volume under review could well benefit from at least one map showing the places discussed in the text and providing both Yiddish and

current official variants of their names. This would elucidate a number of issues discussed in the book, especially where geographic proximity or distance between ideological allies (and foes) can itself be illuminating. Place names are usually given in a hit-or-miss transcription from a particular Hebrew letter rendering rather than from the evidence of empirical cultural studies. For example, Antókele (later Yiddish Antokl, now Antakalnis in Lithuanian), a suburb of Vilna, becomes “Antikolya” (p. 89, transcribed letter by letter and Israelized [by the translator?] from a famous 18th-century Hebrew document published in Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, 66); Yiddish Naváredok (Belarusian Navahradak, Polish Nowogrodek, now in Belarus) becomes “Novhardok” (p. 217). The famous Lithuanian yeshiva town Kelm (or Kélem) is referred to only as “Kelme” (after the Lithuanian-language form, Kelme; e.g. pp. 212, 227).

4. In fact, the vast majority of references to “Hasidism” in the volume pertain to Habad, the Lithuanian Hasidism that came into sharpest conflict with Vilna-based Misnagdism. The initial conflict included or focused on the other Hasidic “rebels at home,” the various (largely forgotten) branches of Lithuanian Hasidism, best known to the outside world from W. Z. Rabinowitsch’s *Lithuanian Hasidism*. The core branches of Hasidism “down south,” in Ukraine, Poland, and Hungary, were by and large bystanders to the fracas. Their own latter-day anthologies of tales of *tsadikim* sometimes include the Gaon of Vilna as just another member of the pantheon. As happens not infrequently in the history of ideas, the most bitter battles are those fought between two trends that share much and are to be found in the same or contiguous space.
5. Sincere thanks to Lars Fischer (King’s College London) and Dov-Ber Kerler (Indiana University, Bloomington) for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this review, and to Ada Rapoport-Albert (University College London) for generous assistance with sources during the reviewer’s preparation of his *Lithuanian Jewish Culture* (Vilnius 2004). Naturally, full responsibility for the content is assumed by the author alone.

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Dovid Katz is Professor of Yiddish Studies at Vilnius University, Lithuania, and Director of Research at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute.