

THE LITHUANIAN LUMINARIES:  
I. THE GAON OF VILNA

- I. Only fair -- after 2 years on Hasidism, talk of Lithuanians.  
 I always strive fairness: family Hasidic, thesis Mitnagdism. For disadvantage

VILNA TODAY: 20-25, 000 Jews, mostly assimilated. About 50 Jews in shul Shabbat, no Rabbi.

Once: YESRUSHALAYIM DE'LITA -- describe...teeming population, special synagogues & Sheurim for carpenters, tailors, shoemakers...

But: beginning 18 century: all Europe impoverished. Spiritually: despair. After Sabbatai Zevi. No giants, masses despondent.

Yet: in one generation -- BESHT to Poland, R. NATHAN ADLER to Germany and Gaon to Lithuania --- sign optimism for our own generation.

LITHUANIA ESPECIALLY AFFLICTED. Massacres 1648-9 decimated.

Abr. Mariv on Lithuania: few natural resources. Little wealth. Very hard labor. Most Lith'n Js: shevet shel oni.

also: SOLEMNITY -- seriousness w which observed v'samahta b'hagekha... restraint.. Even when beer in syng Simhat Torah -- NEVER gay...

Greatest sign emotion: sing Barukh Elokenu she'baranu...

II. BIOGRAPHICAL

BORN 1st day Passover, April 23, 1720. First child: "Elijah".

Said to have been very beautiful. (Not true midwife: Look, the Vilna Gaon...)

RABBINIC FAMILY -- 2 had been Rabbis of Vilna. One, R. Moses -- small shopkeeper when elected 1670; no salary, kept store. Thus: R. MOSES KRAEMER. Members therefore patronize. He: after weekly expenses, wife closes up store -- no unfair competition. Louis Ginzburg: humor: "kraemer"...

PROGIDY: one of most phenomenal history of the species

\*age 3 -- knew Chumash by heart, count all words, letters

\*age 6 -- too advanced f Cheder, studies u der father R. Shlomo Zalman

\*age 6½ -- father teaches complex Pilpul. R. Heshel (R. of Vilna) boasts, guest: just memorizes. Put E. to test, passage Berakhot: amazes them

\*age 7 -- already famous. To Kaidan to study under Rabbi. 3 months -- unnecessary

\*age 8 -- already accompl scholar all branches Torah; Zohar in 6 months ((\*STORY: Advocate about Hafetz Hayyim... but here: factual))

\*age 12 -- was discovered had mastered much of math, science his day

\*age 13 & on: almost never left little room, blinds drawn, light candle even by day, feet in pail cold water

\*prob. at 18 -- married Channah fr Kaidan, moved there, poverty, wife worked

WORK HABITS -fantastic, phenomenal concentrtn & memory, constant review

\*reviewed everything min. 101 times; daily 100 blatt; all B.T. each month; every Shabbat all Tract's Shab, Eruvin; so: holidays

\*MEMORY: RH: all of J lit; each word: total recall.

STORY: G in Suukah: memory = functional; STORY: RH-bath-JT-3 day fast

\*SLEEP-one report: 2 hrs/day; other: 4 (yashanti az yanuah li): broken small b

HIS INTERP of kavata itim le'torah: kavata=gazalta

No lose time: recorded every mint Bittul Torah, confess YK; total=3 hours



- \*ASCETICISM: piece bread (=2 olives) soaked in water twice day. (KADUSHIN)
- \*Medicine: mastered this too, but interrupted behest father: would be obligated by Halakhah practice, abandon study Torah
- \*Family: no time for ineterst; never inquired welfare, occupation

EXILE -- few details. Reason: Kabbalistic

- \*traveled far & wide: in TALLIT & TEFILLEIN (deemed obligat'y)
- \*covered most of Poland, Germany; when recognized- left (no misuse Torah)
- \*returned home cal. 1748, age 28. Legends on events

### "GAON OF VILNA".

early known as מוילנא -- Vilna Gaon; or simply "The Gaon"-- throughout history. In writing usually: הגאון החסיד

- \*\*His authority: By CHAZON ISH: הוא נחשב כאחד מן הראשונים ... ולכן ... חולק ... גם על הרי"ף ועל הרמב"ם ... כי אנו מתיחסים להגר"א בשורה של מרע"ה, עזרא ע"ה, רבנו הקדוש, רב אשי, הרמב"ם, הגר"א שנתגלתה תורה על ידו כקדוש מעותד לכך

## III. HALAKHAH

1. So phenomenal his knowledge that Kotzker: DER GANAV fun VILNA.....
2. Shrewdness combined w ananalysis texts. Story suspected adultress and witnesses: אם נמצאו דבריהם מכוונים .....
3. G = father of CRITICISM OF TALMUD: external & internal
4. EXTERNAL CRITICISM: reconstr'n corrupted texts. Emendations....  
 Illustr's: \* מגדיל- בשב' מגדול: לא "בשבת" אלא "בשמואל ב'"/"ההילים  
 ונאכל שם מן הזבחים ומן הפסחים; במש' מן הפסחים  
 \*or, Hagadah: ומן הזבחים -- לא "במוצאי שבת", אלא "במשנה", בניגוד להגדה  
 (this method not survive in Lith Yeshivot; but yes today Israel)
5. INTERNAL CRITICISM: heart of Talmud study; external leads to internal  
 \*when authorittv body (as: Sanhedrin, Gaomate) - text one meaning  
 \*M.A. - many authorit's = no authroity; hence- varying interps  
 thus -- felt need reconcile; so? pilpul...(this OK, but not for far-reaching reconcil'n of different authorities)  
 \*G: REASON ALONE, and RETURN TO SOURCES; AUTHORS CAN DISAGREE..  
 Used parallel lit. to Talmud as JT, Hal. Midrashim  
 (this=largely Lith Yeshivot methodology)  
 \* so? tremendous independence, originality, integrity
6. THUS: MOST WELL-KNOWN HALAKHIC WORK: באור הגר"א על ש"ע  
 \*so -acknowledges value Sh.A.  
 \*YET: no regard for persons when know truth otherwise

## IV. ERETZ ISRAEL

1. Effort to go betw 1759-1773
2. Letter to wife, mother, ch: באתי לבקש מאתכם שלא תצטערו כלל וכלל כמו  
 שהבטחתם לי. וגם מה תדאגו, הנה אנשים נוסעים על כמה שנים ומניחים  
 נשותיהם בשביל ממון... ואני ח"ל נוסע לארה"ק... ואני נוסע בשלום ב"ה  
 also: no envy worldly honors=imaginary:  
 הזמן בוגד, והוא כמאזנים: יגביר הקל ומשפיל הכבד  
 adds: Nonotח וליצנות esp. Saturday in Shul; & learn= בנחת ....
3. BUT Returns... pays back every cent. WHY? No permission Heaven: Kabbalistic
4. LATER (esp. cal. 1809) disciples go: ADATH PERUSHIM, institute MINHAGEI GERA...



V. PIETY

- \*incredible: subsisted on pittance left by ancestor for students; Trustee cheats him, he refuses to divulge the starving: insult = murder, which impermissible for monetary reasons. Later Kahal finds out
- \*TWICE IMPRISONED because of aid to forced baptisms
- \*STORY of Etrog acquired on condition give up portion Olam Haba; happy....

VI. HASKALAH AND PHILOSOPHY

1. MASKILIM - aculturation slogan: **היה יהודי בביתך ואיש בצאתך**  
GAON: No. Mordecai dispenses by King: **ואדם יכרע ולא ישתחוה**  
But whereas colleagues quiet, discreet, he announces: Bec I'm Jewish  
Thus Haman hates him: **הוא יהודי כי הוא הגיד להם כי הוא יהודי**
2. 1782 - Naftali Herz Wiesel, Austria, enlightenment.  
GAON: publicly denounce, burn
3. SECULAR STUDIES. Clear that G regarded them as necessary adjuncts study Torah -- but necessary!  
\*Thus famous quote R. Baruch-Shklov (trans Euclid): **כי כפי מה שיחסר לאדם ידיעות משארי החכמות, לעומת זה יחסר לו מאה ידות בחכמת התורה, כי התורה והחכמה נצמדים יחד**  
\*Some insist: too extreme, misunderstood. But I accept: direct **מפי קדוש**
4. SO: ANTI-RATIONALISM.  
\*anti-philos, metaphysics: only 2 good things ever learned from it  
\*great reverence for Maominides, yet attacked him harshly:  
**הפילסופיה הארורה הטעתו, וכבר הכו אותו על קדקדו**  
\*in FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS: **אמונה תמימה** (So: R. Nachman-Bratzlav)  
\*can this view do for us? See my article next TRADITION

VIII. WORKS

1. We have several dozen
2. R. Abr Danziger (**Chayye Adam**, mechutan of G): over 70 (at eulogy)  
Also: several mathematical, scientific, grammatical, Bibl archeology  
About  $\frac{1}{2}$  -- in Kabbalah
3. Many were in Ms, destroyed in W.W.II
4. BREVITY of style, succinctness: begrudging permission write Oral Law....

IX. FURTHER BIOGRAPHY

1. about age 40, leaves total seclusion. Most works written before then. Permission Kahal own Minyan: **"דעם חסידים קלויז"**  
always Minyan students all day in Tallit, Tefillah. Today: Rubble, sign
2. The TWO VIEWS OF GAON: CONVENTIONAL (recluse); SHAPIRO ..(kind, leader)
3. NEVER ANY OFFICIAL POSITION --- not RABBI
4. BUT FACTUALLY: HEAD OF THE COMMUNITY, WORD LAW  
This true -- tho never mixed POLITICS  
STORY (R. Nissim) Noah's Ark: SHEKKER..CHUTZPAH ..= Politics....  
YET: could override duly const'd officers. Story: Centralized charity. He said No, demanded, got, special subvention...(JCCF...)
5. His interp of verse on Tzedakah: that have to give **dei mahsoro**....  
**פוחה תפחה את ידך** --if open hands, fingers uneven....

X. KABBALAH . Do you get view of archetype "cold, rational Lithuanian?"

1. If do - absolutely false.
2. Wrote more in KABBALAH than all Hasidic leaders together. \*JB STORY....
3. READ WERBLOWSKY... charismatic gifts.....



## XI. HASIDISM AND THE GAON

1. G the arch-foe of Hasid'm; his influence alone kept Lith "clean"
2. In 1772 -- 2 things, related: children's epidemic -- hundreds lives; & discovery 2 crypto-Has'm, great scholar & City Maggid.  
Epidemic explained by spiritual contam'n Hasidim  
The 2 brought t G t apologize, he refuses them  
Kehillah decides: burn all Has'c lit, excommunicate. G: Not enough!
3. Later that month, letter signed by G, 17 others, to Brisk.  
\*\*\* READ DUBNOW, P. 116 \*\*\*\*
4. 24 years later, in response to Has'c rumor he retracted, Gaon (June 1796) reaffirms earlier stand same vigor
5. When RSZ tries to visit him, dialogue, he refuses. They persist, he leaves town. Attributed influence his mother.
6. Source his antagonism: \*SCETARIAN nature movem't; separate minyainim, different nusah ha-tefillah; \*\*purported refusal mull over sins; \*\*\*suspected Sabbatarian antinomianism
7. MAJOR THEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES? - Yes, but not as great as thought  
Transcendence/ Immanence. Hasidim: emphasis Immanence -- literally thus: "Melo kol ha-aretz kevodo"  
GAON: rejects, apparently, this dichotomy. God not WITHIN, but also not totally separated. G-d's total otherness precludes immanence; Rather: Absoluteness/Realtness. God not IN world, but reveals Self to & is concerned with world.  
----where G say this?-- One word comment on Isaiah VI, to verse השגחה he adds: מלא כל הארץ כבודו .

XII. THE END

1. FAMILY. Was oldest 4 brothers, several sisters. All family scholars  
2 Had 3 sons (published his works) and 3 daughters  
2. DISCIPLES. None in formal sense.. Closest & greatest, RH,  
would come 2-3 months year, present questions, get answers  
YET: his influence great enough: alone stemmed Has'c tide, and,  
more: made Torah scholarship a status-symbol  
3. ILLNESS. disliked doctors. But 2 weeks before demise, family  
begs him get one. Call famous REB YAAKOV LUBASHITZ. Examine.  
Family: "VU HALT ER? Answered: MASEKHTA KEILIM!....  
\*TOLD: first 180 days, chance teach Torah Heaven, saving 2.....  
\*EREV Y.K. called family, blessed. They: anguish  
\*EREV SUKKOT: demanded be brought, in bed, into Sukkah.  
\*3rd /DAY HOL HAMOED, Dawn, takes Lulav & Etrog, holds all day.  
At one point, takes TZITZIT in hands: How hard to take leave  
of you, O World! Here one can buy Tzitzit for few pennies, thru/  
them prove worthy Presence Shechinah. Where I'm going now -  
nothing more can ever be done...  
\* And so, died: October 17, 1797; age: 77½  
\*funeral same day -- first time no Minyan f Minchah Great Shul Vilna  
4. STORY R. Levi Yitzhak Berditchever -- suffered terribly Mitnagdim.  
\*loved particularly Etrog, joy  
\*third day Hol Hamoed, clouded temperament..... "Something happened"  
\* told: Vilna Gaon has died... Will tell you what'll happen:  
No imperfection. saint. But every little blemish counts: anti-Has'c.  
So decide: either attend Has'c lecture R. Nachum Tchernobeler  
or to Heaven via opening of Hell. G- prefers latter. But suddenly  
all thousands pages Talmud, Torah he studied & illuminated  
pile up, block out entrance to ehenom, & GAON --straight  
to Gan Eden