

FIVE HALAKHIC LUMINARIES

This is a series of five lectures on five of the most distinguished and influential halakhic scholars of modern times. Each lecture presents the biography of the man in question, describes his major works, and his influence in his lifetime and over succeeding generations. A good part of each lecture is devoted to presenting some of the halakhic concepts and intellectual achievements of the subject of the lecture. Since this is often quite technical, the material is simplified, and is supplemented by some brief commentaries and insights by the subject under discussion. Source material may be found in Rabbi Zevin's Ishim ve'Shitot, and in the two series by the late Rabbi Y.L. Maimon, Sarei ha-Meiah, and Midei Hodesh be'Hadsho, and related literature.

1. The Gaon of Vilna. The family background of Rabbi Elijah, and the incredible genius revealed at the very earliest age. His ascetic bent, and total devotion to study. Leader of the opposition to the Hasidim. The Gaon as Kabbalist. His relation to Eretz Israel. Pioneering work in external and internal criticism of the Talmud. His attitude to philosophy and secular studies. His anti-rationalism.

2. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin. Family background. His relationship to the Gaon of Vilna. His sterling character. Founder of the Yeshiva of Volozhin and his educational philosophy. The leading theoretician of the Mitnaggedim. His view of classical Rabbinism and opposition to Hasidism. Unprecedented emphasis on the study of Torah. His Nefesh ha-Hayyim ("The Living Soul").

3. Rabbi Hayyim Soleveitchik of Brisk. The Beit ha-Rav -- the intellectual Torah aristocracy beginning with the Gaon. His father and the "Netziv." As Rosh Yeshiva in Volozhin. His Rabbinate in Brisk. Founder of a new talmudic methodology: the halakhic dichotomy. Examples, especially concerning laws of prayer. Attitude to Hasidim-Mitnaggedim controversy. View on suspension of the Law where there is danger to life. A man of truth and a man of compassion.

4. Rabbi Joseph Rosen, the Gaon of Rogatschov. His brilliance revealed very early. A friend of Rabbi Hayyim Soleveitchik of Brisk. The great respondent and his famous post-cards. His halakhic works. His novel halakhic methodology -- "three categories." Examples. His use of philosophical terminology. His Tzophnat Paaneiach ("The Revealer of Secrets").

5. Rabbi Meir Simha of Dvinsk. Early signs of genius. Rabbi of Dvinsk at same time as Rabbi Joseph Rosen. His loyalty to his congregation. A father-figure. His attitude to Zionism. His great halakhic work, Or Sameiach ("Happy Light"). His commentary on the Torah and examples of his exegesis, especially combination of Halakhah and Bible commentary.