

DOVID KATZ



# Lithuanian Jewish Culture

## מהזור לש לש רגלים

עם התפלות עפ"י נוסח אשכנז הנהוג בארצנו

עם הבאורים

## קרובן אהרן

ובאור אשכנזי (עברי דייטש) בנקודות • לכאר באור המלות והפיוטים בלשון אשכנז  
המדוברת בין בני ישראל יושבי ארצנו • למען ישוה לכל נפש.

ונוספו בו מעלות רבות על כל הקודמים לו • כאשר תחזינה עיניכם :

והדפסנו הכל כמו שהי' בראשונים, הפנים והעברי שייך באותיות גדולות,  
למען יהיה ניכר כ"א בפני עצמו לבלי היות ערבוב עם הפרושים :

ועוד הוספנו לתועלת גדול עברי שייך גם על ההפטרות, לרוות צמאון החפצים  
לדעת כוונת דברי הנביאים הקדושים.

זוילנא

# Lithuanian Jewish Culture

by **Dovid Katz**

Vilnius University



baltos lankos

# Contents

Acknowledgments / 7

5

Note on Transcription / 11

- 1 Jewish Lithuania / 13
- 2 The Ancient Heritage / 25
- 3 Ashkenaz / 37
- 4 Lita / 51
- 5 The Council of Lithuania / 73
- 6 The Gaon of Vilna / 85
- 7 Hasidim and Misnagdim / 121
- 8 A Land for Jewish Tradition / 143
- 9 Individualists and Modernists / 199
- 10 Hebrew Comes to Life / 223
- 11 Yiddish Comes to Modern European Culture / 241
- 12 Times of Revolution / 299
- 13 In Four New Republics / 317
- 14 Lithuanian Jewish Art / 343
- 15 Today / 355

Appendix:

The Karaites / 369

For Further Reading / 375

Index / 383

It comes as little surprise that the word “Lithuania,” in any of its forms, does not occur in dated Jewish documents that happen to survive from the earliest times of Jewish settlement there. The simple reason is that there *are* no such documents known to scholars. What there was or may have been, is lost and perhaps gone forever. As is usually the case, the earlier Jewish history of a place is known from explicit documents in non-Jewish sources (such as the charters of rights granted by Witold in 1388 and 1389) or from archaeological evidence (such as the 1171 gravestone in Eysishok not far from Vilna). Bishop Adalbert of Prague, who was sent by the Polish Duke Boleslaw I to preach Christianity in Lithuania in 997 makes mention of Jews there. But the “presence of some Jews in Lithuania” in these early times does not necessarily signify anything relatable to the continuous Lithuanian Jewish community (though it certainly may). On the other hand, the first solid evidence of such a community centuries later does not imply that it came into existence just before *that* coincidentally “discovered mention.” In other words, the commu-

nity arose gradually over the centuries, and any search for some single starting point is a mistake. At the same time, early attestations (such as the Stone of Eysishok) serve a valuable symbolic purpose, if they are not overstated. They are hard evidence from a time from which there is precious little.

The great Jewish historian Simon Dubnov (1860—1941) dated the origins of the Jewish communities in the east to the First Crusade of 1096 when large numbers of Ashkenazim began to flee eastward, taking with them their language and culture. It is of course a reasonable inference, leaving open the question of when Lithuanian Jewry was firmly differentiated from Polish Jewry. As we saw at the outset, the modern dialectology and cultural geography of Yiddish has established a Jewish Lithuania that looks very similar to the empire of Grand Duke Gedymin (Gediminas), who lived from around 1275 to 1341.

But that is not to say that names are not important. They are very important. A name signifies that a thing is *perceived* to exist, and in cultural history perceptions are

every bit as important as facts, sometimes more so. A person may be named shortly after he or she is born, but communities, languages, and other social constructs are often named a long time after they come into existence. And, it is common practice for moderns to extend an eventual name backward in time to the very beginning for purposes of identification and discussion, and yes, for the more subjective purpose of establishing a longer, rather than a shorter history. When did Canaanite become Hebrew? In most cases there can be no rigid answer, though cataclysmic historic events, like the Norman Invasion of Britain in 1066 can be said to be relatable to the shift from Anglo-Saxon to English. It is acceptable to extend a name backward in time, as long as the practice is stated openly, and as long as the known earlier names are noted, and not discredited as “wrong” because they are politically incorrect for later times.

Turning from these general sentiments to the history of Ashkenaz, it is important in the first place to remember that “contemporary history” was not a priority of the Ashkenazic rabbinic establishment. Places and settlements get mentioned when they happen to occur in a legal (or other) practical question that arose. In medieval rabbinic nomenclature, there is the old Ashkenaz in the west, and then Poland (in Jewish sources *Polin* or *Poylin*), then, Russia (*Rus[i]ya*), then Muscovy (*Moskva*). Final *a* is used, as noted earlier, in place names that end in the unstressed vowel, as neutral English transcriptions, where the basic name, rather than its variants, are at issue. Using our retrospective knowledge of the specific cities and

towns referred to, it becomes obvious that references to *Rusya* are possibly or definitely (depending upon the source) in fact references to places known as being in the heartland of Lithuanian Jewry.

The eleventh century scholar Eliezer ben Nason (Nathan) of Mainz, Germany, considered to be the earliest Ashkenazic scholar who wrote a complete book that has survived, records his travels to the east, referring to specific customs of the Jews of “Russia” in a context where it is absolutely clear he cannot be referring to locations east of what became the territory of Lithuania. The twelfth century Itze (Isaac) of Chernigov, one of the first rabbinic scholars in the east, traveled in the other direction and visited the Jewish communities in central Europe. The localization to Chernigov is particularly important, because we know it from later centuries as characteristic of the southeastern reaches of Jewish Lithuania. The Vatican Library contains a Bible commentary dated 1094 that was likewise written in “Russia.”

More “early sightings” could be mentioned. They all prove that there were Jews, and even rabbinic scholars, on the territory of Lithuania from the eleventh century onward, but do not go to the crux of the question of the continuous settlement and more importantly, the specific culture of Lithuanian Jewry.

For that question it may be worthwhile to ask what traditions later Lithuanian Jewry itself had about its origins. The best known tradition is the collective memory of the benevolent welcome of the Lithuanian grand dukes, particularly

Gedymin (Gediminas, ±1275—1341) and Witold (Vytautas, 1350—1430). It was of course during their reigns that the cumulative horror of the oppression in the west was reaching a certain climax (see the map on page 47).

And what about Lithuanian Jewish traditions about the origins of Lithuanian Jewish culture per se? There is in fact a tradition about a “first” Lithuanian Jewish scholar, and he is not one of those eleventh, twelfth or thirteenth century individuals who modern historians happen to know about. His is rather Moyshe ben Yankev (Moses ben Jacob) of Shadov (Shádeve, now Šeduva, Lithuania). He was born there in 1449, and moved on to Lida (Líde, now Lida, Belarus), and was taken captive and exiled to the Crimea in 1506. He lived in Constantinople and Adrianople (where he married), in Kiev, and for many years in his final home in the Crimea. To Lithuanian Jews he is known as *Méyshe ha-Géyle* (standard Yiddish *Móyshe ha-Góyle*, “Moses the Exile”). His literary output covered much of the gamut of rabbinic literature (with the notable exception of legalistic works on the Talmud, which seems not to have been his main interest). He wrote a “supercommentary” to the classic Torah commentary of the Sephardic scholar Abraham ibn Ezra (1089—1164); a kabbalistic tract on the upper *sefirot* (the ten stages of emanation between God and His creations in the Kabbalah); a Hebrew grammar; a work on the Hebrew calendar; an exotic work on cryptic writing; liturgical poetry; and a polemic work in which he debated with Karaite scholars (whom he befriended on

many of his travels; see the appendix on the Karaites, pp. 369-374). He also edited a prayerbook which for generations was known as representing the traditions of Kaffa (now the Crimean resort town Feodosia), his final home. He returned to his native Shadov at least once.

Meyshe ha-Geyle thus fits the classic mold of the founding father who is remembered as launching a tradition in spite of not having any direct pupils or followers. His intellectual approach was original and daring, his was a restless personality, and he relished debate. These were all to be counted among the folkloristic features of the later Lithuanian Jewish scholar.

The word for “Lithuania” is thought to be attested in known dated documents from the fifteenth century onward (“known and dated” being the two prerequisites for unambiguous evidence nowadays that *x* was already used as a known quantity by that time). That word is *Lito* in formal Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic, *Lite* in spoken Yiddish, and *Lita* in modern Hebrew, as well as in general English. All these are subsumed under the single Jewish alphabet form of older times (lamed-yud-tes-alef). From the late nineteenth century onward, the Jewish alphabet spelling developed distinctive forms for the Yiddish *Lite* (with final ayin), and modern Hebrew *Líta* (with final hey).

Individual towns and cities in Lita are mentioned earlier, but these mentions do not go to the question of which land these Jewish people *felt* part of, and how they were perceived by Jews in other countries.

From the fifteenth century onward there is an unbroken tradition of reference to Lita (which we may assume was pronounced *Lite* in spoken Yiddish from the outset). Among the earliest references are those in the preserved legal replies (*responsa*) of the great western Ashkenazic rabbinic scholar Isserlin (1390—1460). It occurs in a reply about a gentleman who had returned from Lita. From the casual use of the term it can be safely deduced that the name in its Jewish form was by then well known. Rabbinic style didn't incline toward the newest slang usages. Casual occurrence of a geographic concept means that that concept was probably there long before that.

And, not long thereafter, Jewish Lithuania was perceived to have its own internal divisions, which again, must be older than the first coincidental survivals. The western area appears as *Zamet* (or *Zamat*). This is of course the Yiddish term for Samogitia (Lithuanian *Žemaitija*), an area which Witold conquered in the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410.

The eastern area becomes known as *Raysn*. The word may be etymologically related to the older German *Reussen* ("Russia"), but unlike the earlier rabbinic use of the term *Rusya*, it is not ambiguous. It refers to eastern Lita, an area including Vitebsk, Mohilov and Gomel.

As is so often the case in Jewish cultural history, the internal borders do not match the political non-Jewish borders from which they derive. The eastern border of *Zamet* and the western border of *Raysn* continued to be slippery entities right up to the modern era.

In later times, other smaller regions came to be conceived as components of Lita, too: Courland in the north (present day western Latvia), Latgalia to its east (now eastern Latvia), and Polesya in the far southwest bordering on northern Ukraine (a region now split between southwestern Belarus and northwestern Ukraine).

The internal configuration of Jewish Lithuania is illustrated in the map on page 55. There is a fair amount of correspondence between the major regions and the principal non-Jewish language with which Litvaks would have been most familiar, though like others in the entire region, they often spoke more than one of the surrounding languages. In *Zamet*, the principal language was Lithuanian; in central Lita, Belorussian (now more correctly rendered Belarussian in English) and Polish; in eastern Lita, Belorussian. For many centuries, Polish, and then Russian, served as the "imperial" language that was learned for dealings with officialdom. The coteritorial languages are sketched schematically, for orientation.

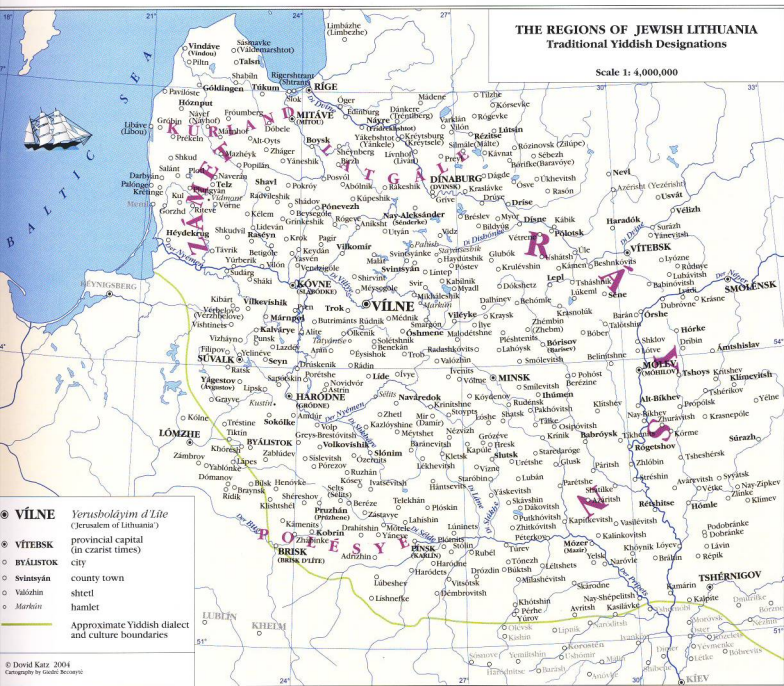


To fathom the cultural milieu evolving in Lita, it is important to walk several steps further into the thick of rabbinic culture in Ashkenazic (and not only Ashkenazic) society. In the eyes of the society, the great *rabónim* had legal power beyond just the aura of respect and authority, and beyond the ability to decide questions of law that

# THE REGIONS OF JEWISH LITHUANIA

## Traditional Yiddish Designations

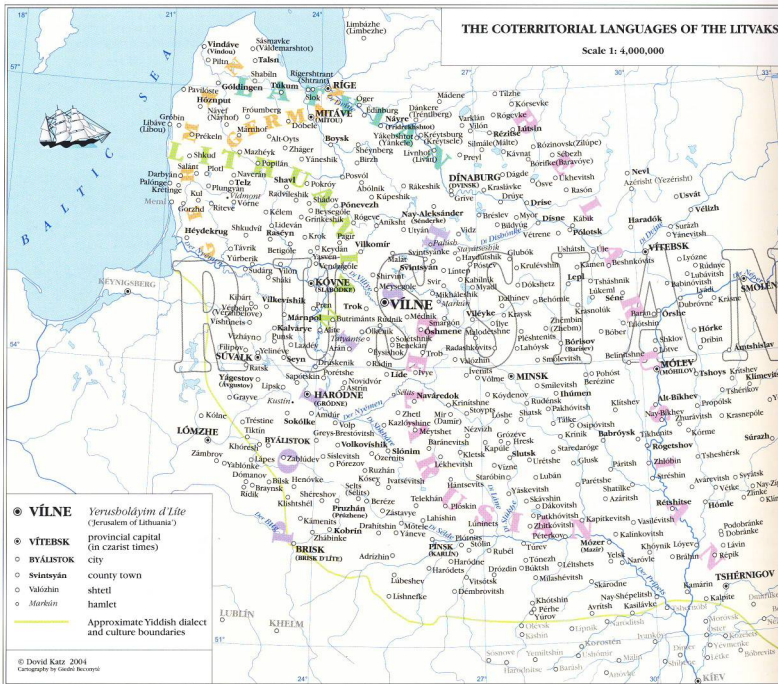
Scale 1:4,000,000



- **VÍLNE** *Yerúsólam d'Lite*  
(Jerusalem of Lithuania)
- **VÍTEBSK** provincial capital  
(in czarist times)
- **BYÁLISTOK** city
- **SVIATÓYIN** county town
- **Valóshin** shtetl
- **Marshin** hamlet
- Approximate Yiddish dialect and culture boundaries

© David Katz 2004  
Cartography by Geacel Records





were theoretical rather than practical (such as laws of ancient animal sacrifices, laws of the Temple in Jerusalem, or on waging war). Through the institution of the rabbinic court, the *bes-din* (*bezdn* in usual spoken Yiddish), they wielded enormous clout in all kinds of matters that arise in daily life.

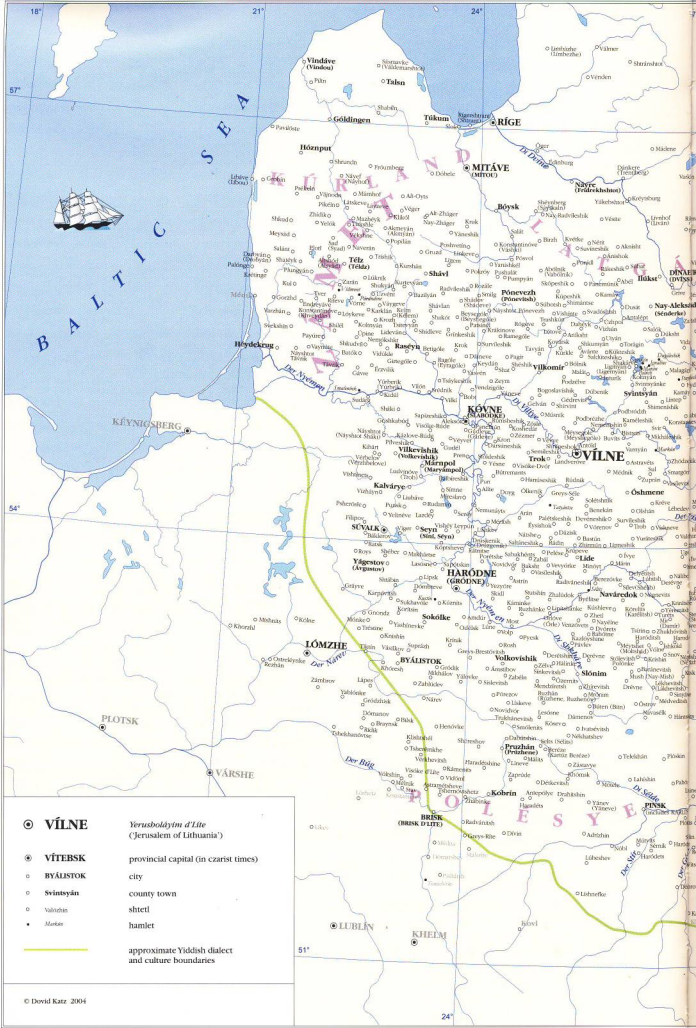
The realm of these powers covered (and in traditional communities continues to cover) myriad matters of birth, marriage, divorce, death; kosherness of food in many doubtful cases; interpersonal, civil, financial and business disputes; questions on observance of religious law, Sabbaths, holidays, prayers; questions arising on how to deal with all sorts of real life situations in internal Jewish life and in relations with the outside world. While single town rabbis could decide many questions, issues demanding a full court had to be adjudicated in rabbinic courts of three judges following to the hilt the laws of courts as laid out in the Torah, as interpreted in the Talmudic tractate *Sanhédrin*, as evolved over time by the growing body of Jewish legal literature (in Hebrew or Aramaic). *Sanhédrin* was the name of the great supreme court in the times of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

Even in places where authority was not officially granted to the rabbinic courts by the powers that be, there was a taboo within the Jewish community on taking any dispute to government courts. Things had to be solved where possible by the Jewish court, and this societal pressure itself conferred vast authority on such courts. Moreover, on matters of purely Jewish law (like whether a certain food is kosher), it would have been quite ri-

diculous to even think of taking the question to the (usually not philo-Semitic) civil authorities.

The degree to which life and law were inseparably intertwined meant that the legal system had to be a sophisticated and stable one for the society to function. There is a highly developed vocabulary for speaking about this system, much of it deriving from Hebrew and Aramaic, and rendered in Yiddish pronunciation among Ashkenazim.

One pivotal word is *póyseck* (plural *póskim*). The *póskim* were rabbinic scholars whose judgments on matters of new, open or disputed law came to have validity in their generation (and often far beyond). They are sometimes called "codifiers" in English though not all of them compiled codes of law; some simply issued decisions and rulings which came to be recognized as inspired and accurate. One way of looking at Jewish traditional intellectual history (or the history of Torah study in the sense in which the concept is used by traditional communities) is as a dual track enterprise in which some scholars seek certain higher truths, for the sake of pure scholarship, while others become engrossed in matters of practical law. For example, many rabbinic scholars have dedicated their lives to the minutest laws of the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem when Messiah will come. Others have invested the same magnitude of time and talent in the minutest laws of forbidden and permitted foods in the time and place in which they lived. Both types concentrate on law. Many other rabbinic minds preferred speculative Kabbalah and wrote treatises on the



● **VILNE**

*Yerusheleym d'Lite*  
(Jerusalem of Lithuania)

⊙ **VITEBSK**

provincial capital (in czarist times)

○ **BYALISTOK**

city

○ **Svintyán**

county town

○ **Váshet**

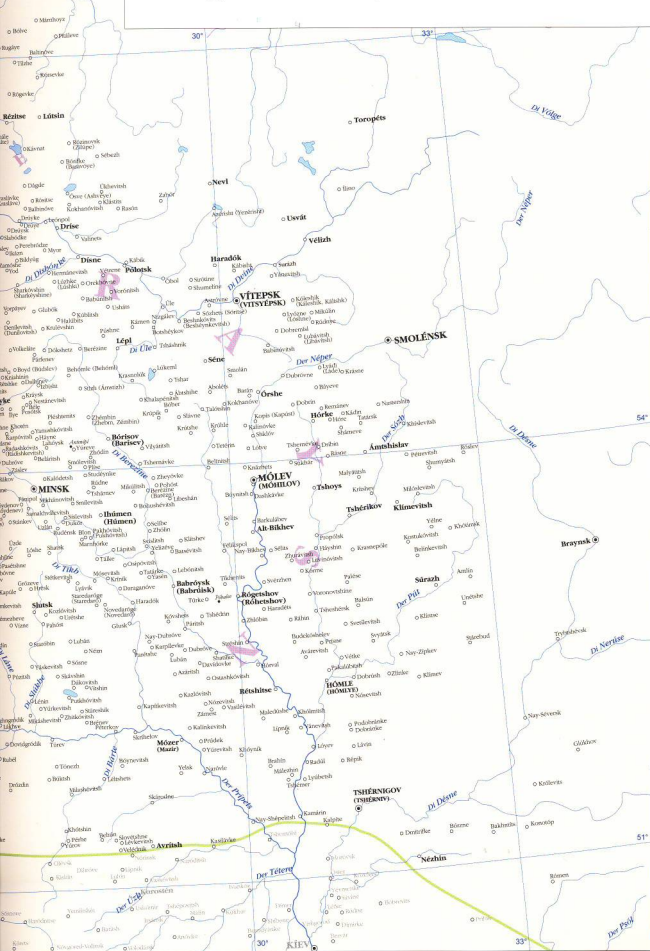
shtetl

• **Hamlet**

approximate Yiddish dialect and culture boundaries

# LITA (LÍTE): JEWISH LITHUANIA

## Approximate Territory of Northeastern Yiddish



COPYING OF MAP AND YIDDISH PLACE NAMES (BASED ON IN-SITU EXPEDITIONS) BY DOVID KATZ, CARTOGRAPHY AND DESIGN BY GIEDRE BECNYTE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

origins of the universe, and still others specialized in Bible commentary. Again, it is necessary to remember that the concept *rabónim* is better translated "recognized scholars in traditional Jewish society" rather than "rabbis" in any modern sense, though to be called *rov*, one needed rabbinic ordination.

The top scholars from among the *rabónim* of each generation might achieve the title *góen* (modern Hebrew and popular English usage *gaon*), a term designating a person of exquisite mental talent in traditional Jewish learning (and in modern Yiddish and Hebrew extended to the concept "genius" more generally). There is even a special term for a young scholar of rare talents, *iluy*, who shows signs of turning into a future *góen*.

These scholars acquired this (and other) rabbinic epithets neither by further degrees or diplomas, nor by any form of formal election by committees or communities (though there were processes of selection for official community or town rabbis).

The title *góen* was acquired by an individual over decades by growing universal acknowledgment of his brilliance in Torah studies coupled with traits of character (humility and disdain of luxuries and money are a recurring measure). In certain times and places, a capacity for leadership was also called for, and great rabbinic figures sometimes became legendary leaders of their communities. In Jewish lore, this is best known from the Maharál of Prague (Yehude-Leyb ben Betsalel, ±1525—1609). The historical Maharál was a brilliant author on a wide range of

subjects. In Jewish lore, he is said to have created, through kabbalistic means, the famous Golem of Prague, a "homunculus," to save the city's Jews from an awful threat. It became a key topic in twentieth century Yiddish literature.

Once a high status was attained, the scholar would frequently be known (as might other authors of books) by an acronym derived from his own name, the name of a beloved book he wrote, or even an intimate Yiddish form of his name. So it was, for example, in the case of two of the eminent fourteenth and fifteenth century rabbinic leaders of western Ashkenaz encountered above. Jacob Mollin remains known as *der Maharil* ("the Maharil") after the acronym fashioned from one of the forms of his "extended name". Many rabbinic acronyms start with *Maha-* derived from the words *Moyreynu hoRav*. Literally, the words translate as "our teacher the rabbi" and in the cultural history of Ashkenazic Jewry the words came to mean that the person so designated was regarded as a major teacher of his generation. On some occasions, a more intimate appellation "stuck." Israel ben Pesachia became best known as *Isserlin* (the western Yiddish diminutive of *Iser*, which itself derives from an old Yiddish form of "Israel").

The *póskim* occupy a special place in virtue of their concentration on everyday law, on matters of potential concern to an entire population under their jurisdiction, even if they also passed rulings on many matters not directly relevant to daily life. The work of the *póskim* over many centuries can be compared, with all the usual caveats, to that of a long standing legislature which evolves

a nation's laws over time, always taking into consideration both precedents and the changing needs of the times.

Such a legislative tradition requires a stable community of scholars. A minimum of peace and tranquility are prerequisites for almost any prolonged and intensive scholarly activity. It is scarcely a surprise that the high points were reached in times and places where traditional Jewish civilization was able to thrive in the context of the contemporary "external" situation. This is where European history and its Jewish component crucially interact.

The "Golden Age" of Sephardic Jewry produced a Maimonides whose code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, remains a major milestone in Jewish law and history. Jacob ben Asher, "the Tur," the great Ashkenazic *póysef*, spent much of his life in the relative peace and quiet of Toledo, Spain. While the turbulent history of early Ashkenaz produced many individual cases of genius and creativity, the center of gravity of Jewish legal scholarship was moving eastward to Poland along with the major population shift to Poland. It seems that in the case of each of the population shifts of the Ashkenazim (from the German speaking lands to Poland; and from both those lands to Lithuania — the vaunted "eastward trek"), it took several centuries for Talmudic culture to fully establish itself. As we have seen, the year 1500 is taken as a symbolic shift from Germany to Poland, as it is around that time that some of the most talented scholars moved eastward and established themselves in the midst of preexisting

Jewish communities who were "ripe" for this development.

But the international nature of Jewish scholarly development means that it is not enough to limit even a brief overview to the Ashkenazic area or even to Europe. In fact, the most sensational single advance in legal codification after the Sephardic Maimonides (the Rám bam) and the Ashkenazic Tur came from the pen of Joseph Karo. Born in Spain or Portugal in 1488, he found himself, as a boy, among the exiles fleeing the Spanish Inquisition of 1492. He spent much of his life in Nicopolis and Adrianople in Turkey, before settling in the Land of Israel in the 1530s. He eventually settled in the famed "city of Kabbalists," Safad, where he died in 1575. His great work, the *Shálkxon órukh* (*Shulhan Aruch*) is organized according to the structure of the Ashkenazic Tur. In a sense there is a direct chain of works here, from Mishna to Talmud to Maimonides to the Tur to Karo and his *Shálkxon órukh*. It remains one of the most studied reference works of Jewish law.

There was, however, one impediment. Karo, not surprisingly, preferred his native Sephardic laws and rulings over those of the Ashkenazim where the two major European Jewish cultures clashed. And in many instances, he wasn't familiar with central and eastern European practice. Yet it was too much a work of genius, a work necessary for rabbinic law, to be rejected; moreover, in a multitude of cases, the rulings *did* apply to both "halves" of European Jewry. It was left to a younger contemporary (who actually died a few years before Karo) to write "emendations"

to the *Shálkhon óruk* that were themselves to amount, cumulatively, to a work of brilliance. That contemporary was the Ramó, as Moyshe ben Yisroel (Moses ben Israel) Isserles is known from the acronym of his name. Isserles (1520—1572) was born and died in Cracow, Poland. He came from a well to do rabbinic family and was able to devote his life to learning. The words *Shálkhon óruk* mean “prepared table.” The name *Mápo* (“tablecloth” for Karo’s “prepared table”) came to be widened in popular usage from one of the Ramó’s works to all his commentaries on Karo. And, in popular Ashkenazic terminology, the name *Shálkhon óruk* came to apply to Karo’s *plus* the Ramó’s works taken together, even as *Gemóra* (see above p. 32) came to apply to the Mishna *plus* the *Gemóra*.

The age of the Sephardi Joseph Karo, and the Ashkenazi Isserles — the Ramó — came to be seen in rabbinic history as the beginning of a new era in traditional Jewish intellectual history. The scholars before these two masters are called the *Rishóynim* (*Rishonim*, literally “the early ones” or “the first ones”). Although chronologists of European Jewish culture differ on details, it is generally accepted that Karo and the Ramó are, taken together, the launchers of the age of the *Akhróynim* (*Aharonim*, literally “the last ones” or “the latter ones”).

The *Akhróynim* in Poland, those who came after the Ramó, took after “the founding father of Talmudic studies in Poland,” Yankev Polak (1460s—1530). Polak and a large number of Polish rabbis who came after him from the sixteenth

century onward followed his method of Talmudic research called “pilpul” (*pilpl* in Yiddish, *pilpál* in modern Hebrew). The concept is much older but it took on a new meaning in Poland. It is a method of explaining away contradictions, unclear texts and logical, historical, conceptual and textual problems of all sorts by... To a supporter of pilpul, the three dots would be filled in by “brilliance,” or “originality” or perhaps “the study of logics and creative thinking.” To its detractors, the dots would be filled in by “casuistry” or “forced analysis” or even “study for the sake of showing off cleverness.” Both sides concede that there are many variations of pilpul, some involving more fanciful flights of logic or imagination than others. To be sure, pilpul breathed new life into Talmudic studies in Poland, and enabled the rise of many yeshivas where the main point of a day’s work was to come up with a novel interpretation whether or not it is particularly likely (or even intended to be) historically accurate in the sense of achieving comprehension of the original intention of a text.

How does Lithuania fit into all of this? In at least three major ways.

First, internal societal forces within Lithuanian Jewry had for some generations been aspiring to develop Talmudic scholarship in the country. For wealthier members of communities, and for communities with means, a tradition was well established by the sixteenth century whereby communities would “bring” top scholars from Germany and Poland to come and settle in Lithuania to teach and head Jewish communities,

and to study and write. The everyday Yiddish verb *lénnen* came to mean both “teach” and “study” and especially to be immersed in the study of Torah.

This process is illustrated for a representative selection of these scholars in the map “Rise of Lithuania as the World Center of Rabbinic Scholarship” (p. 64). It is evident that notwithstanding the role played by a number of communities, it was one community in particular that was “importing” Talmudic scholars in the same spirit in which other societies have imported artisans and entrepreneurs or gold and silver. That community was the city of Vilna.

Second, the method of pilpul was revered in Lithuania but not, usually, as the prime method for Talmudic study, and certainly not as a means of solving serious problems of law. It was revered as an oratorical art, to be practiced for fun, and particularly by *magidim* (traveling preachers), as a means of delighting their audiences. When it came to hard core scholarship, the emerging Lithuanian type scholar was straight and unyielding in searching for the *actual* meaning of a text, and for “solving” contradictions in ancient texts only so far as logic would allow, and admitting ignorance beyond that point. This tendency fed into East European Jewish folklore, as types of scholars came to represent their people in the popular psyche. While the Polish Jew appears as warm, excitable, loving of a “nice” explanation that has charm, the Lithuanian Jew — by then known as a Litvak — comes across as somewhat dry, over concerned with facts, truths and always demanding evi-

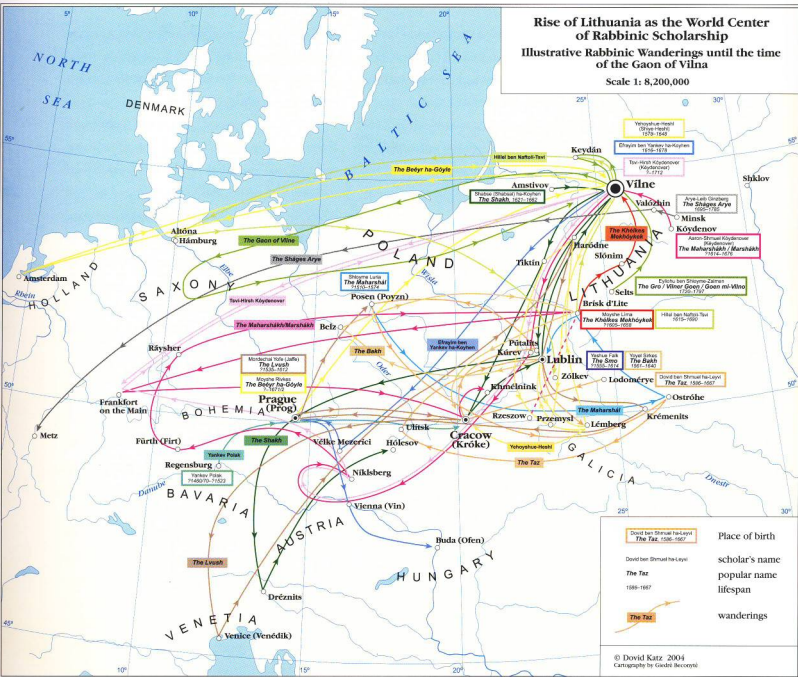
dence. In many a Yiddish folktale, the Litvak doesn’t believe something until he sees all the evidence for himself. This in turn fed into yet another folkloristic differentiation: that the Polish Jew (*der Póylisher yid*) is depicted as having deeper belief in God and every last detail of his or her religion, while the Litvak, a born skeptic, must always be convinced with a big stack of what moderns might call empirical evidence.

Finally, there was the external situation. Notwithstanding setbacks in societal tolerance toward its Jewish population (such as the short-lived expulsion of 1495), the Jews continued to “feel better” in Lithuania than in Poland. Christian vehemence against Jews was much less prevalent in Lithuania (despite some tragic incidents, mostly involving the Jesuits and the kinds of outbursts known as *shílergelaif*, or rampages of theological students). Jews (and this also fed into Yiddish folklore) were poorer, by and large, in Lithuania and there was less resentment against them. Another factor is that Lithuania was more of a multiethnic society than Poland. These differences persisted in myriad ways notwithstanding the major political changes brought about by the various unions between the two nations (the marriage of Lithuanian Grand Duke Jogaila to Queen Jadwiga of Poland in 1386; the Union of Lublin federating the two states in 1569 into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; the Union of Brest-Litovsk in 1596 attempting to unite the Catholic and Orthodox churches, and the late eighteenth century partitions which put all of Lithuanian and much of Polish Jewry under the same Russian czarist rule).



**Rise of Lithuania as the World Center of Rabbinic Scholarship**  
**Illustrative Rabbinic Wanderings until the time of the Gaon of Vilna**

Scale 1: 8,200,000



© Dovid Katz 2004  
 Cartography by Gaudi Beceyoni

## A Scholarly Tradition is Established in Lithuania. . .



VIVO

"The Shakh" (Yiddish *der Shakh*)

is the popular name of Shabse

(Shabsai) ben Meir ha-Koyhen

Major features of the intellectual makeup of classic Lithuanian Jewish culture can be found in the works of seventeenth century rabbinic scholars.

"The Shakh" (Yiddish *der Shakh*) is the popular name of Shabse (Shabsai) ben Meir ha-Koyhen, one of the first generation of Lithuanian born-and-bred "international masters" of Talmudic learning. His life and work are a microcosm of the rise of Lithuania to the status of world center of traditional Jewish learning. He is known by an acronym deriving from his first work, a legal commentary called *Sifsey Koyhen* (literally "Lips of the Kohen [priest]"), a play on his own family status as a member of the first (priestly) caste of the three ancient groups into which Jews traditionally fall (Priest, Levite and Israelite). As

is so frequently the case, the name of his book and the reference to himself are both taken from a biblical passage, in this case from the last of the Hebrew prophets, Malachi: "For the lips of the priest should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts" (Malachi 2: 7).

There is uncertainty as to whether the Shakh was born in Vilna or in Amstivov near Vilkovishik. In either case he hails from the depths of Jewish Lithuania, studied in Tiktin and went on to Poland to teach and continue studying before settling in Vilna and becoming a member of its rabbinical court. He fled during the war of 1655, and after stints in Lublin, Prague and Dresnitz, settled in Holesov, Moravia, where he died in 1663. There, incidentally, he befriended Christian scholars in what was becoming an ecumenical spirit between Lithuanian Talmudists and certain tolerant Christian scholars.

In the yeshivas of the world today, every student is immersed in debates “between the Shakh and the Taz.” The Taz was a contemporary with whom the Shakh disagreed on many points of law and interpretation. The major works of both are commentaries on the *Shulkhoh orukh* code of law by Joseph Karo (1488—1575). The Taz too was named for commentary he wrote, *Turey Zohov* (“Columns of Gold”), a play on several Biblical passages referring to the columns (or rows) of various building materials for Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings, chapters 6 and 7). In the name of the commentary, which then became the popular name of its author, the transposed reference is to columns of print in the texts of the commentaries. It is a classic case of semantic refashioning of building blocks of houses to building columns of print that symbolize intellectual structures.

And so, in the world of yeshivas to this day, and for all time, the Taz and the Shakh have it out with each other in their numberless legal and logical and textual debates. The Taz by the way was “in real life” Dovid ben Shmuel ha-Leyvi (1586—1667), a Ukrainian Talmudist, who like his opponent moved westward in troubled times. In the end, it was the rulings of the Litvak, the Shakh, that were usually accepted in Lithuania and Poland, and those of the southerner, the Taz, that prevailed in German Jewish circles. Nevertheless, each legal instance, and the opinions of each within a long chain of scholars (that now extends centuries beyond both), continues to be examined in its own right.

The story of “the Shakh and the Taz” can illuminate the “soul of the Litvak,” and particularly the element therein variously known (depending on the perspective of the beholder) as argumentativeness, passion for debating, intellectual challenge for its own sake, and fearlessness in disagreeing with even great authorities. For the anti-Litvak, so to speak (as in non-Litvak Jewish folklore), all this was sometimes considered an egocentric exercise in flaunting intellectual prowess and belittling an opponent. It is curious that in the introduction to his replies-to-replies commentary on the Taz, the Shakh wrote:

“It should not occur to the reader of this book of mine, that it is because of some personal dispute I may have had with the author of the *Turey Zohov* [the Taz], or some grudge against him in my heart that I proceeded to write critiques on his book. For it is after all known to everybody that the relationship between us is that of ‘Vaheb in Suphah’ [from an obscure passage, Numbers 21: 14, interpreted by the Babylonian Talmud, at Kidushin 30b as the love between two who study at the same gate of Torah]. ‘And the Torah seeks its home’ [Babylonian Talmud, Bovo-Metsiyo 85a], and I proceeded to make my home into a home for the author of the *Turey Zohov*; and he stayed with me for three

days, and I honored him with great honor, so great that it would be hard to believe, and he reveled in this honor, and rejoiced with me in great joy, literally like the joy of the Rejoicing at the Libation Water Well [Mishna Suko 5:1]. And as far as concerns God he knows that I wrote this book, the *Nekudots ha-Kesef* [‘Studs of Silver’ — Song of Songs 1: 11], only for the sake of Heaven, to explain and to clarify the truth. . .”

*from the introduction to Nekudots ha-Kesef [reply to the Tax, among the commentaries of both upon the Shulkhan orahk code of Jewish law], Frankfurt on the Oder, 1677*

The Shakh’s other accomplishments are also “literary” within the context of traditional Ashkenaz, not in the sense of the “western genres” of prose, poetry or drama. In addition to his extensive legal commentaries, he wrote some treatises that are more in the realm of logic and the methodology of intellectual research, most famously on doubt and on the unknowables in life and in law.



Yivo Matisyohu Strashum Collection

A profound book of Jewish philosophy by a  
 “young man from the land of Lithuania”  
 (published in Prague in 1611)

All that is known about Yoysel ben Yitskhok ha-Leyvi Segal is what the publisher writes about him on the title page of this short book that appeared in Prague in 1611: that he is “from the Land of Lithuania” and that he is “a master of wisdom, and young in years.” The book offers a profound critique of medieval Jewish philosophy, including that of Maimonides. This Litvak moved west and became acquainted with leading Jewish scholars in Prague whom he introduced to philosophy. In the book the young Litvak boldly declares that Talmudic law is not enough to make a scholar whole. It is necessary to delve into wider issues of philosophy. Although he has deep respect for Maimonides he does not hesitate to challenge the proofs he proposed for the existence of God.



Title page and frontispiece of a brilliant 1661 commentary by an ancestor of the Gaon of Vilna



Bodleian Library Oxford

Title page of the Amsterdam 1661 edition of Joseph Karo's legal compendium *Shulkhon orukh* with the commentary by Moyshe Rivkes of Vilna, an ancestor of the Gaon. The frontispiece contains the kind of imagery (borrowed from Christian books) beloved of Amsterdam Jewish publishers and rarely found in East European Jewish editions. Moyshe Rivkes' textual and legal commentary is called *B'êyr ha-Gôyle* ("Well of the Exile" or *B'êyr ha-Gôyle* "Well of the Exiled One").

Rivkes, who was born around 1595, and brought up in Vilna (his birthplace is disputed), was one of those expelled from Lithuania (along with the Shakh) in 1655 during the invasion of Vilna by Muscovite and Cossack forces. He

eventually reached Amsterdam where the well established Sephardic community marveled at his erudition, and commissioned him to proof-read and prepare for the press a new edition of the *Shulkhon orukh* code of Jewish law. Rivkes went much further, writing a commentary that has become classic, and that is reprinted with all standard modern editions of the *Shulkhon orukh*. The comments offered are extraordinarily brief and brevity became another "classic Litvak trait."

At more than one point, Rivkes stresses the absolute need for respect, good relations and meticulous honesty in all dealings between Jews and Christians.

Despite his good life in Amsterdam, Moyshe Rivkes yearned for his native Vilna and returned home. He died in Vilna in 1671. He left his life's earnings to be invested in a trust fund, with instructions that it was to be used in the future to support such descendants as may be true Torah scholars. One of those direct descendants was Elyohu the Gaon of Vilna (see *Genealogy of the Gaon of Vilna*, p. 87), who was able to devote his entire life to study, thanks to Moyshe Rivkes' legacy.



Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

The rabbinic tract by Yehude-Leyb Pukhovitser (published in Hamburg in 1692)

The rabbinic tract *Seifer Divrey Khakhomim* (“Book of the Words of the Wise Men”) by “Yehude-Leyb, may God watch over him, Pukhovitser, whose permanent residence is in the place of his birth, a place of Torah, the sacred community of Pinsk, may God watch over it and keep it.” It was published in Hamburg in 1692. The title page of this copy, in the Yivo Library in New York, bears the famous stamp of the collection of the nineteenth century Vilna scholar and bibliophile Matisyohu Strashun (see p. 188).

Pukhovitser’s family stemmed from the village Pukhovitsh, east of Minsk (now Puchaviy, Belarus). Although his works show profound kabbalistic influence, their essence is legal and homiletic, with a practical eye toward application of ancient laws to the realities of the author’s time, which included the Chmielnitski massacres of 1648 and 1649.

Pukhovitser (± 1630—170?) was a forerunner of the academic traditions of Lithuanian Jewish culture, setting out principles that were later to be associated with the Gaon of Vilna (1720—1790), his pupil Chaim of Valozhin (1749—1821) and the

yeshiva network that followed. He insisted on the study of Torah (in other words of the entire rabbinic literature) for its own sake, not just for practical reasons. At the same time, he called for systematization of the study process, including set times and development of a curriculum that progresses from the easy to the more difficult. He condemned the playful logic called *pilpul*, very popular in Poland, and insisted that a scholarship system be instituted to enable poor students to study based on their academic merit only. The overt Lithuanian Jewish antagonism toward *pilpul* is sometimes traced to Pukhovitser.



Yivo Mattisyohu Straashun Collection

Mystical tract by a scholar from Shklov  
(published in Frankfurt on the Oder in 1702)

The kabbalistic tract *Or Yisroel* ("Light of Israel") by "Yisroel [Israel], son of Rabbi Aaron of blessed memory Yofe [Jaffe], head of the rabbinical court and head of the academy of the sacred community of Shklov in the Land of Russia." It was published in Frankfurt on the Oder in 1702.

Born in the Ukraine around 1640, Yofe was taken north to Glusk (now in Belarus), in the Jewish Lithuanian area, as a boy, in 1648, when the family escaped the Chmielnitski hordes. He eventually became rabbi of Shklov. This tract is divided into two commentaries, one on Kabbalah, one on a code of law. The author vehemently denied charges that he was secretly a believer in the false messiah of Sabbethai Zevi. That dispute, which centered on whether certain insertions in the text were his own or were maliciously inserted at the print shop, make this one of the most controversial kabbalistic works.

The beloved ethical, kabbalistic and story-rich tract *Kav ha-Yosher* (The Straightforward [Honest] Measure) by Tsvi-Hirsh Keydenover (or Koydenover). Originally published in Frankfurt on the Main in 1705 in Hebrew, the work had been written earlier in the author's home town, Vilna. In 1709, he published his Yiddish version. It became a popular work, and bilingual editions have appeared ever since, with the traditional layout of Hebrew in the top and Yiddish in the lower half of each page. This facsimile is of the Vilna 1875 bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish edition, one of many published by the Romms of Vilna in the nineteenth century. The accompanying facsimile (to the left) is a sample page from within the text.

The book's name, *Kav ha-Yosher* is a playful multilayered construction of a type beloved of traditional rabbis. *Kav*, in addition to being an ancient measure, used here meta-



Menke Katz Collection

Kabbalistic table of mystic names  
in the *Kav ha-Yosher*



A later 19<sup>th</sup> century Vilna edition  
of the beloved *Kav ha-Yosher*

phorically for the measure of justice, also equals 102 in the Hebrew numbering system, a mark for the book's 102 chapters. Moreover, the letters of the word *ha-yoshor* ("straightforward, honest, upstanding") are the same as those of the author's Yiddish forename, Hirsh, but with the order of two letters reversed.

Keydenover (who died in 1712) was the son of Aaron Shmuel Keydenover (± 1614—1676), a Talmudist and preacher who hailed from Keydenov (or Koydenov), now Dziarżynsk in Belarus.

The Talmudic and astronomical tract *Yeshua be-Yisroel* ("Salvation in Israel") by "The Torah scholar and astronomer, our teacher, the rabbi Rabbi Yehoyonoson [Jonathan] son of our teacher, the rabbi Rabbi Yoysel [Joseph] from the sacred community of Rozhenoy of the Land of Lithuania" (published Frankfurt on the Main, 1720).

Rozhenoy, where the author was born in the late seventeenth century, is also known as Ruzhan; it is between Pinsk and Grodna (now Ružany, Belarus). Jonathan, who was blind, made a vow during a plague in town in 1710, that should he be spared, he would devote his life to astronomy. And he did. This tract is a commentary on a work by Maimonides (1135—1204) concerning the intricate laws of blessing the new moon each month, and exploring more generally the interface between Talmudic (mainly calendric) studies and astronomy.

The fusing of Jewish and secular learning was a Lithuanian Jewish passion long before the nineteenth century spread of East European Haskalah. And, during his travels in Germany, Jonathan befriended the famous Christian bibliographer of Hebrew books, Johann Christoph Wolf (1683—1739).



The Talmudic and astronomical tract *Yeshua be-Yisroel* (Salvation in Israel) appeared in 1720

Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection



## The Gaon of Vilna

In the later 1700s, the continuing rise in the stature of Lita, and particularly of Vilna, in the eyes of traditional Jewish scholars internationally, reached a pinnacle. The growing concentration of scholars and new works was crowned by *one* scholar of extraordinary talent and strength of personality (though in no way a charismatic, warm leader of his people). He was of course Eyliohu ben Shloyme-Zalmen (Elijah the son of Solomon Zalman), best known as: the Gaon of Vilna or the Vilna Gaon (a popular English construction taken from the Yiddish — *der Vilner góen*). He was born around 1720 and died in 1797.

For generations, his ancestors had been rooted in Vilna but not there alone. Some had hailed from, or lived in other European towns and cities, in Lithuania and outside it. The travels and relocations were the result of one of three factors. The two happy ones include travel for marriage and for study with great sages at great yeshivas (or both). The unhappy cause was flight from war, persecution and civil disorder. The accompanying outline genealogy and map (p. 87) are intended to summarize the major known episodes in the

Gaon's genealogy. Most startling is the story of his ancestor, the sharp Talmudic scholar Moyshe Rivkes of Vilna, who lived from around 1590 to 1671. Rivkes fled Vilna in 1655, during the Russian-Polish war, and made his way to Amsterdam where his Talmudic learning dazzled the well-to-do Jewish community there. He was commissioned to proofread Joseph Karo's *Shúlkhon órukh* (see p. 61) for a new edition. He also added comments which taken together amount to a new commentary. It turned out to be a precursor of the work of his descendant to be, the Gaon. He analyzed texts for their true meaning and proposed emendations where he found the text faulty. After completing his contract in Amsterdam, he returned to his beloved Vilna a wealthy man, and left a trust fund for such of his descendants who would excel at Torah studies, to enable them to devote their lives to scholarship and not worry about making a living. It was that stipend that enabled Eylióhu to spend his life immersed in learning.

The Gaon was acknowledged by masters of Talmudic learning to be the sharpest rabbinic mind for a thousand years (or more). Moreover, a

few of his own traits of character came to symbolize, at least in folklore, the anecdotal traits of the Litvak. But his “personal extremism” was all in the cause of devoting himself to study and shunning the time-wasters and temptations that account for so much of our lives. The absolute love of learning, even if it could be emulated only a little bit by everyday people, helped make the words *Vilne* and *Lite* among the most intimate and beautiful in the Yiddish language.

In faraway towns deep in Poland, parents would tell their children, in Polish Yiddish: *Vilno, 'esti zaan a guen!* (“If you only want it badly enough, you will become a Gaon,” a play on the near homonymy of “If you only want to” and the word for “Vilna” in this dialect of Yiddish). The word *gaon* had in the late first millennium meant “the official head of Babylonian Jewry” but in Ashkenaz, the *góen* came to mean, plain and simple, the leading Talmudic scholar of a generation. Used on its own with just the definite article, the meaning of *der góen* is quite unmistakable in Yiddish of recent centuries. It can mean only Eyliohu of Vilna.

But the purpose of this chapter is not to repeat the usual biography. There are many encyclopedia articles and books (for a first listing, see the bibliography at the end of this volume). Following a summary of his life and work, extended quotations will be brought, in translation, from the one “intimate” document he is ever known to have written. It is an extensive letter to his family, written at a most human of moments, when a person is unsure of ever seeing loved ones again. This will be

followed by an unabridged translation of the piece written by his two sons after their father’s death. It turns out that these two genuine documents from the period are in many respects far from the hagiographic treatments that have been piled on in later times. Together they (and some other extant pieces) paint, with sharp strokes, a human picture of a very real person, who happens *not* to be the classical hero or even rabbinic leader in any usual sense of term.

It may come as a surprise that some of the most elementary details of the biography of the best known Litvak of all time are in dispute, all the more so in a society so given to writing, reading, studying in all its three languages! But this is just another intriguing cultural difference between traditional East European Jewry and modern western (and modern Jewish) culture. The genre “biography” was not part of traditional Ashkenazic culture. Latter day construction of the life of a beloved personality was in a sense meant to be based on a charmingly woven tapestry of facts, legends and praise, with lessons and morals for us simple folk all along the way. Reconstruction is rendered even more difficult by the failure of most great rabbinic scholars to record the basic details of their lives. For one thing, birthday celebrations (of oneself, one’s spouse or children) did not figure in this culture; it was typical in a family to remember a birthday in reference to the cycle of Jewish holidays, for example “So and so was born between *Péysakh* (Passover) and *Shváes* (Pentecost)” and the like. Moreover, a scholar would write as little as possible (often zero) about his own life. “My trials and

# THE VILNA GAON'S ANCESTRY

© Dovid Katz, 2004



Cities and towns in the Gaon's family background

**Yosef of Vienna**

a scholar in Vienna, exiled to Prague in 1559

**Pesachia of Prague**  
?–1598

becomes a community sofer or scribe/recorder in Prague

**Nafoli-Hirsh of Prague**  
?–1601

succeeds his father as sofer

**Moyshe Rivkes of Prague**  
c.1590–c.1671

moves to Vilna after his marriage, flees the city in 1655 during the Russian-Polish war and sets sail for Amsterdam where he writes his classic *Be'er ha-Goye* commentary on Jewish law, and returns to Vilna (where he died around 1671). Uses his generous rabbinic earnings from Amsterdam to establish a fund to support scholarly descendants. That fund enabled his great-great-grandson, the Gaon of Vilna, to devote his life to scholarship

**Pesachia of Vilna**  
?–1672

a rabbi in Vilna

daughter of  
**Pesachia of Vilna**  
c.1610–?

**Yisokher-Ber Kremer**  
?–1765

rabbi in Vilna

**Shoyme-Zalmen Kremer**

**Eylohu Kremer**  
?–1710

rabbi in Vilna, known as the *choisid* ('the good one')



**Eylohu ben Shoyme-Zalmen**

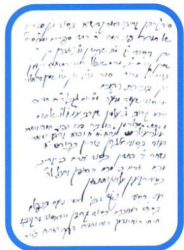
**THE GAON OF VILNA**  
1720–1797

**Benyamin-Volf of Seltz**

**Meir of Seltz**

**Trayne, daughter of Meir of Seltz**

son of a noted rabbinic family in Seltz (Seltis) near Brisk (Brest)



The Gaon's handwriting

tribulations” yarns would have been a shocking violation of the modesty and humility that are required of every true scholar in the eyes of this culture. It was also considered uniquely irrelevant: the scholar was debating in his lifework with the *commentaries* of Talmudic scholars of hundreds of years before and after, not primarily with individuals of his time. That scholars were often given acronymic names taken from the titles of their books is one component of this scene. A modern yeshiva student groping “with a difficult Taz” is struggling with a text called Taz, not with the individual who wrote it and was given this epithet based on his work (see p. 66). It is as if the name of the book that became the name of the man afterwards became the name not of the book but of the text, in this case as many, of a certain column called *Tāz* in the printed editions of the various works where it is included.

Within this culture then, it is not too difficult to understand why there is no reliable biography of the Gaon.

He was born on Passover 1720. Or, according to others, in 1722. He was born in his mother’s town Selts (Selits) near Brisk (now Brest, Belarus). Then again, he may have been born in Vilna itself. Right up to the war, the “regulars” in the Vilna *Shul-heif* would show visitors the exact dwelling in a nearby yard where he was said to have come into this world.

As a very young boy he showed two kinds of brilliance. First, phenomenal memory for many pages of Talmud and the ability to conjure up an exact text for a specific argument and to demon-

strate its relevance. And second, profound understanding of the deepest logical levels of texts. His family agreed with the visiting rabbi of Keydán (now Kėdainiai, Lithuania) that this boy should spend some years studying with a brilliantly original scholar there, Moyshe Margolis (Margalioth). Margolis was then one of the top scholars in Lita and became a specialist in the long neglected Jerusalem Talmud (see p. 32). His commentary often includes close textual comparisons between the two Talmuds, as well as daring proposed emendations of printed versions that had become faulty. Margolis also believed in the need to study natural sciences. Around the age of seventy he went to study botany at the University of Frankfurt on the Oder (to better come to grips with the Jerusalem Talmud’s tractate on the agriculture of ancient Israel). He had a profound influence on the life’s work of the boy who was sent to study with him. Eyliohu was also betrothed in Keydán to one Kháne (Chana), daughter of a well to do man (legend says he suffered huge losses between his daughter’s engagement and marriage, as God was testing the character of Eyliohu, who would not break his word). He was married to her when he was about eighteen.

At some point after marriage and return to Vilna, he followed an old tradition of ascetic scholars: to go into exile. He wandered incognito through Poland, Ukraine and Germany, visiting many Jewish communities.

The Gaon had a number of children, but the experts have come to different conclusions on that too, ranging from one daughter and two sons

to five daughters and three sons. Chaim Freedman, master genealogist of Gaonia (as the field is sometimes called nowadays) accepts the evidence for eight: a daughter (name unknown!), born around 1741; daughter Kheyéne, born around 1748; Peshe-Básyc (around 1750); a daughter (name unknown!), born around 1752; sons Shloyme-Zalmen (born 1758), Yehude-Leyb (1764), Avrohom (around 1765), and daughter Toybe (around 1768). After the death of his first wife, Kháne of Keydán, in 1782, he married a widow, Gitl of Krozh (now Kražiai, Lithuania).

As a young man, his fame spread swiftly. Rabbis twice his age appealed to him for answers to conundrums that stumped them. In one famous case, a dispute raging in Germany was sent to him for resolution. The leading Talmudist and Kabbalist, Jonathan Eybeshutz (± 1690—1764), rabbi of the “three communities” (Altona, Hamburg, Wansbek) was accused of secret adherence to the messianic sect of Sabbateans. Eybeshutz wrote to Eyliohtu in Vilna in 1756 to ask him to analyze the documents which his arch enemy, Jacob Emden (1697—1776) had offered as evidence, and to proclaim him innocent. The Gaon, in his polite reply, refused to get involved, asking “Who am I?”

That same aloofness saved Eyliohtu from involvement in a long running dispute in Vilna itself about who would be chief rabbi (the result of the dispute being that the community decided that never again would Vilna have a chief rabbi, but that is another story). Keeping out of conflict and even routine communal affairs enabled the Gaon

to devote so much of his life to research and scholarship. His distance from his own family, as we shall see from his sons’ memoir, takes matters to an extreme that nobody ever recommended as a role model for anyone. Nevertheless, a certain personal distance in general came to be one of the folkloristic attributes of the Litvak. Others include stubbornness, an intolerance for wanton innovation, an obsession to get to the bottom of every mystery confronted, a dislike of crowds and commotions and overt emotional outpourings, and an all consuming passion for simplicity of lifestyle, honesty in daily life and above all: learning, learning and more learning, a nonstop lifelong endeavor to study. All of these personified the Gaon, and his people who tried as much as they could to follow him, the Litvaks — Lithuanian Jewry.

Not only did Eyliohtu not accept any of the many rabbinic posts offered him. He did not even teach in a local yeshiva, much less set up his own. After the age of forty, he assembled a small circle of top scholars “and learned with them” as the Yiddish construction would have it (and which has made its way now into the English of today’s orthodox Jewry). Some of these pupils took the notes from which a number of his commentaries were later published. A well-to-do relation, Yesháye Peseles, purchased land next door to Eyliohtu’s home, and built a studyhouse on the lot in 1768. It became known as *dem Goens kloyz* (“the Gaon’s little studyhouse”). After his death, and right up until the war, Torah was studied there twenty-four hours a day in different shifts by scholars who would drop everything to be counted among *dem Goens*

*prishim* ("The Gaon's scholars who separated themselves from everything to study constantly"; see p. 117). For many Jews, it was considered, second only to Jerusalem, to be the most sacred Jewish spot on God's earth.

During all those years on *Yidishe gas* ("Jewish Street," now *Žydu gatvė* in Vilnius), Eylioju created some seventy works, none of which was published in his lifetime. The word "created" is used here because "wrote" (or "compiled") does not always fit the bill. In some cases a rabbinic work consists of comments written in the margins of a book which are then published in a separate publication or included in some future edition of the primary work. A number of the Gaon's published works consist of the notes made by the small circle of pupils from his sessions over the years in his *kloyz*. He thus begat them without ever writing them.

In the case of his commentary on the Talmud, the style is laconic in the extreme. On many a page the Gaon's few words "change everything" in the study of the page (see facsimile on p. 112).

Some fifty of his works have been published so far, and a new project to publish all extant works in a hundred or so volumes is well underway (see p. 108).

The Gaon did however complete the manuscripts of many books during his lifetime. These include commentaries to nearly all the Hebrew Bible, and on many works of the Mishnaic period (Mishna, Braita, Tosefta, Midrash). He completed a number of weighty tomes on Kabbalah. It continues to mystify many that this

proponent of rationalism in Talmudic studies should also be so creative in the decidedly non-logical realm of Jewish mysticism. But this same genius also completed books at the opposite end of the continuum, on Hebrew grammar, trigonometry, astronomy, calendrics, and one work of notes on a variety of subjects. According to his follower Boruch of Shklov (see p. 216), the Gaon told him in 1778 that for every failing in the general sciences, a scholar will have a tenfold failing in Torah studies.

The Gaon of Vilna's scholarship was based on a synthesis of traditional absolute belief in the sanctity of the Torah (including the notion that it contains many mysteries to occupy learned minds for eternity), and a modern analytic mind that understood that all subsequent texts (including the many editions of the Talmud and the vast rabbinic literature) were subject to being copied or published with errors. He invented for Judaic texts what is today called textual reconstruction. Where many previous rabbis (especially the Polish school of *pilpulists*) had constructed elaborate castles in the air to account for incomprehensible passages and contradictions, the Gaon used philological principles to get to the simple meaning of the original text. With his phenomenal memory, he was able to draw upon parallel or similar texts elsewhere in rabbinic literature, and was often able to reconstruct a correct original that solves the problem. To sum it up anachronistically: even if the Torah is wholly untouchable from the textual point of view, there is still one whole lot left for the human intellect to take on; and in Torah interpretation per se,

there is a way of logic within the belief system that contrasts with the methodology of hocus pocus.



Eyliohtu the Gaon of Vilna is known to have written only one down-to-earth document for “everyday people” and even that was not for the public of everyday people. It was the letter he wrote (possibly from Königsberg) to his wife and his mother (and more generally his family) while on a long, lonely journey to the Land of Israel. He never made it, and returned to Vilna for reasons unknown (in spite of the various apocryphal causes propounded to this day). The letter itself was published long after his death (Minsk 1836 and other editions).

Written in simple Hebrew (and laced with quotations from the Bible and other sacred texts), it begins with the words:

“I would like to ask of you not to be sad at all, as you promised me truly, and also not to worry, as my mother (may she live) promised me. In any case, what is there to worry about? After all, people go on trips and leave their wives for some years for money, and wander about without anything, and I, thank God, am traveling to the Holy Land, which everyone yearns to see [...] and I travel in tranquility, thank God. And, as you know, I have left my children, for whom my heart yearns, and all my precious books. I really have left everything behind.”

Perhaps because he intended it only as a “living will” for his immediate family, there are kinds of personal comments that lend him a humanity not evident from his massive scholarly

output. He begs his mother and wife to get along.

“I also want to ask my wife to honor my mother, as it is written in the Torah, and especially regarding a widow. Causing her pain even with some small thing is a grave sin. And also of my mother, I ask that there be peace among you, and that each of you will make the other happy with good words.”

There are a number of instructions for everyday life. Among them: his demand that his family always give one fifth of their income to poor people (rather than the usual tenth); that his children be educated strictly, even with corporal punishment when necessary; that a private teacher be taken to teach the children and that he be paid well; but that they be taught Torah in a relaxed atmosphere, with rewards for success. For many it may come as a surprise that Eyliohtu, whose own scholarly works are all in difficult Hebrew or Aramaic, stressed to his own family the need for books on ethics and morality (*Muser* literature) in Yiddish, the vernacular. He asks the family to read the Yiddish *Muser* books in his library

“all the time, and even more so on the holiest of holies, the Sabbath; they should not spend time with books other than these *Muser* books.”

But elsewhere in the letter he commends another Yiddish book even over these:

“And among my books there is a copy of Proverbs with Yiddish translation. For God’s sake, read it every day. It is better even than all the *Muser* books! And also the book of Ecclesiastes [...].”

One thread that runs through much of the text is the prohibition against talking ill of others (gossip and slander). For the Gaon, this greatest

of evil cannot be overcome unless one adopts a lifestyle of speaking as little as possible altogether!

"The main thing, you must not speak about a person to praise them, and all the more so must you not speak to insult someone."

He condemns small talk, trivia, and nonsense, stressing that what comes out of one's mouth reverberates for eternity and cannot be taken back. He quotes an ancient text to the effect that "treating people with respect is more important than Torah," quite a statement coming from a man who fought the battles of Torah learning as the main cause of his life.

He warns his family of the evils of jealousy. Taking into account both the temptation to be jealous of others who are better off and the risk of speaking badly of others, he commands a life of considerable isolation from other people.

"And everything you need to buy, do it by messenger, even if it is two or three times more expensive."

Even more of a shock is his warning against going out the front door, and — the dangers of synagogue attendance!

"And the most important protection is solitude, not to go outside, God forbid, from the door of your house. And even in the prayerhouse, stay very briefly and leave. And it is better to pray at home, because in the prayerhouse it is impossible to be spared from jealousy and from listening to small talk and gossip."

All in all, the Gaon's recipe for a good life is one that is, as far as possible, away from people:

"I warn you therefore, to get used to spending as much of your time as possible alone, because the sin of the tongue is worse than all of them."

A careful reading of the Gaon's letter to his

family reveals that the twin dangers — first, of falling into a "sin of speech" (gossip, small talk and so forth) and second, into envy of others — are not all that lie behind his exhortations to stay away from people. The letter contains a fairly explicit debunking of what the American Declaration of Independence, following British philosopher John Locke, calls "the pursuit of happiness," with a heavy dose of quotations from one of the saddest books in the Bible.

"'And happiness: what does it accomplish?' [Ecclesiastes 2: 2.] For tomorrow you will cry just as today you laughed! Don't lust after imaginary glory. It is worthless! Time is a traitor! It is like a set of scales, lifting the light and lowering the weighty. The way of humanity can be compared to drinking salt water. You think you are quenching your thirst but you are making it worse. People do not die with even half their passions having been fulfilled. 'What profit has man for all his labor?' [Ecclesiastes 1: 3]. Think of the earlier people, all those who came before us, that all 'their love as well as their hate and their envy, it is all long ago perished' [Ecclesiastes 9:6], and they are being judged severely for it! So what does a person need pleasure for? His end is to become dust, maggots, and worms."

The Gaon's thoughts on parents and children are also stark.

"And there is no advantage to having sons and daughters except in their Torah and in their good deeds." He warns against leaving one's wealth to one's children:

"Don't tell yourself 'I will leave it for my children' because who will tell you about it in the grave? 'People are like the grasses of the field, some blossom and



some wither away' [Babylonian Talmud, Eyrubin 54a]. Everybody is born with his luck and under the watchfulness of God, blessed be He."

There seems to be just one topic on which Eylionu turns warm, fatherly and loving: generosity to children to encourage them to excel at Torah.

"I have left them books. And for God's sake, show them the right path with goodness and pleasantness. And look after their health and food all the time, so that they shouldn't lack anything, and see that they should first study the *Khúmesh* [Pentateuch], that they should know it almost by heart. And don't do it with pressure, but gently, for what one has studied can be absorbed only with contemplation and pleasantness, so be generous with giving them pennies and the like. And put your mind to this, because all the rest is worthless."

So there we have it: a guide for a life that is so intense, it could almost have been written as a satire by an anti-Litvak (see the next chapter). But it must be remembered that extremes such as not leaving one's home never became traditions of even the smallest minority of Litvaks.

Nevertheless, like all stereotypes, there is some folkloristic and anthropological truth. Throughout Yiddish folklore and literature, the Litvak is portrayed as less given to festivity and hurrahization of life. He or she is quieter and less talkative ("less friendly and warm" in some southern anti-Litvak renditions) than the rest of Eastern European Jewry, and he or she is in love with — learning. In this sense, the Gaon's "exaggerated" traits have more than something to say about the character of traditional Lithuanian Jewry.



Most of the biographies of the Gaon of Vilna are, quite naturally, based upon earlier biographies, and those earlier biographies drew almost entirely from one source: the piece about the Gaon written by his sons Yehude-Leyb and Avrom, which fills about one side of one huge folio page of the introductory material to standard editions of the *Óyrakh Kháyim* (*Orah Hayyim*), one of the four sections of the *Shúlkhon órukh* (*Shulhan Aruch*) code of law.

Taken as the words of sons about their father, and given the amount of information and opinion that are concentrated in the text, it seems best to simply present, perhaps for the first time, the entire text in English translation.

This translation attempts to preserve the style and spirit of the original, which itself has much to say about Lithuanian Jewish culture. It is written in a classic East European rabbinic Hebrew that fuses the everyday vocabulary of the Talmudic scholar with numerous quotations from sacred texts, mostly the Bible, but also the Mishna, Talmud and the prayerbook. These quotations are part of a stylistic mosaic where they take on a new life in the context of the piece where they appear. Most frequently they simply provide the writer with "vocabulary by association" giving the text a quasi-Biblical flavor; much of the time, it is only the phraseology rather than the Biblical passage that is being invoked. Then there are entire Biblical passages, most often at the end of a paragraph or section as a sort of rhetorical flourish that would delight an audience if performed by a traditional *máqid* or preacher who

triumphantly concludes an original monologue with a Biblical passage that sums it up or provides the moral of the story.

Many (certainly not all) of the references to the texts cited are provided in square brackets (even where the quote is not exact but its phrasing derives from a certain classical passage). The traditional title used for any respected person in traditional texts is the letter *reysh* (ר) with an abbreviation sign which is rendered *Reb* by Ashkenazim. The division into paragraphs and sentences does not follow the original.

## Introduction to the commentary of the Gaon of Vilna on the *Shúlkhon órukh*

by the outstanding rabbi, of extraordinary recall and breadth of knowledge, wise and whole, honored by the House of Israel, our teacher the rabbi, Reb **Avrohom** may his light go forward; and his brother, the phenomenal in Torah and Godfearingness, wise and understanding, his honor our teacher the rabbi, Reb **Yehude-Leyb**, sons of the true Gaon, pious one of God, our teacher Rabbi **Eyliohu** (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come) of **Vilna**, his soul now in paradise.

With what shall I bow myself and with what shall I come before you? [Micah 6: 6]. For all that He has given us as is the way of His mercy upon the flock of His hand and the people of His pasture [Psalms 95: 7], and for

them His desire, from the day of their origin unto this very day, He did not budge from his affection, pursuing love, as is the way of the good hand of our God.

One generation passes away and another comes around [Ecclesiastes 1: 4]. But the people of Israel stand on the hill of Torah, through changes of guard as in battalions of warriors. And so the sun rises and the sun sets [Ecclesiastes 1: 5]. Before the sun had set upon this righteous person to die with love of God, the sun of another righteous person shone upon a great land [Genesis Rabbo, Noah, 2].

My father saw, O he saw how great the neglect had been [Isaiah 6: 12] for a very long time, to the point where a father could not make known to his sons the truth [Isaiah 38: 19] of the Torah because of all the troubles and all the grief. For the days of the Exile from the time of the destruction of our Temple have been very long for us. And our strength has diminished. And our hearts have felt deserted. Our hands have become weak and our eyes dim. And our ears made hard of hearing. And our tongue silenced. And most of our words were taken, and the sources of our wisdom blocked. And speculations became flawed, conflict grew, and interpretations multiplied. And there has not remained a legal judgment handed down that does not show a whole array of misunderstandings.

But the creator of light [Isaiah 45: 7] in His goodness constantly renews the act of Genesis [from the prayerbook, *Yoytser*]. He has set the lights of the righteous to coincide with the time of the darkness of the Exile [prayerbook, *Yoytser* for Sabbath]. He prepared and brought into being [prayerbook, *Yoytser*] the splendor of authors who give light like the light of the Heavens [Daniel 12: 3]. Not all of us have been worthy of their light, and we

fumbled like the blind at midday [cf. Isaiah 59: 10]. Behold their valiant ones [cry out in public, Isaiah 33]: ‘The hearts of the Early Masters were as the door to the great chamber of the Temple in Jerusalem [Talmud Eyrubin 53a], and we are orphans of orphans [Talmud Kesubots 106a] whose voice goes unheard.’

The ancients all stood at the heights of the world [prayerbook], mouths that spoke great things [Daniel 7: 20], and in the war of the Torah [Talmud Sanhedrin 111b], they did battle together proclaiming the voice of the King of the World [prayerbook, *Yoytser*]. We however have no mouth and no tongue. And the light of their Torah study does not illuminate our eyes in the darkness. For our sins have covered our faces, and hide from us the light of our Torah. For all our days people turned to the Torah not for its own sake [Mishna, Sayings of the Fathers, 6: 1], and they have wasted our years in the futility of sin [Psalms 90: 9].

Nevertheless, God left us just one [Isaiah 1:9] thing in His world: the four cubits of studying the Torah [Talmud Brokhoys 8a]; that is the portion of the Holy One Blessed be He, that would be His glory and His splendor [Daniel 4: 33].

His light appeared in the year 482 of the Sixth Millennium [= 1722]. It was the first day of Passover. We heard a voice of joy and deliverance in the tents of that righteous man [Psalms 118: 15] in the world, the great and famous rabbinic master, my grandfather our teacher Shloyme-Zalmen of the sacred community of Selts [now Selits, Belarus], a city full of wise people and scribes, near the sacred city Brisk d’Lite [Brisk of Lithuania = Brest Litovsk, now Brest, Belarus].

The skies sent out a sound [Psalms 77: 17]: Behold a son is given to him [cf. I Kings 13: 2]. He shall

raise the work of the Torah. He shall reveal deep mysteries [Job 12: 22]. He shall satisfy the yearning of the soul [Psalms 107: 9], even in distant islands. His sanctity and his separation [from the world at large] went forth, increased, and was enhanced from the day of his birth. He studied with a teacher only until the age of six. And from then — God’s voice crieth unto the city [Micah 6: 9], for the ears of select people of understanding.

They looked upon the boy with intense eyes. A lantern of Light! [Babylonian Talmud, Ksubots 17a; Sanhedrin 14a]. His mouth comes out with gems in the company of old sages [Psalms 107: 32]. His lips are as roses [Song of Songs 5: 13]. A voice that distinguishes the finest nuances.

When he was six and a half years old, he gave a learned analysis in the Great Synagogue of Vilna on a fine nuance of Torah that his father had taught him. And at the third meal of that Sabbath his father took him before the great rabbinic scholar, Rabbi Heshil (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come), head of the rabbinic court of the sacred community of Vilna, and the rabbi Reb Heshil said to the great scholars seated in front of him: Is there anyone as wise and full of understanding [Genesis 41: 39] as this little boy? They replied with the words: ‘This is not a real miracle, just a sign of his good memory of things. So his father taught him and showed it to him and repeated it to him, once, twice and three times, until he learned it through and through.’

Whereupon the rabbi Reb Heshil answered: ‘Yes, but still, I feel somehow certain in my heart about this boy and his achievement, that he would be able to say similar things from his own mind. I will give him one hour to prepare something, and you will see something incredible!’

And he was left alone to prepare for about an hour. And he came up with many additional sharp challenges, and then he refuted them, each in a different style! As they listened, they marveled [Psalms 48: 5]. Everybody wanted to kiss him and hug him. After they heard it all, they said that there is nobody who is as wise and full of understanding as he [Genesis 41: 39].

By the time he was nine years old, he had mastered Bible, Mishna and Gemora. And he was very skillful [Deuteronomy 33: 7] with the views of all that is said there. All the expositions of the Agodah [Aggadah] also blossomed up in him after that.

A vision from within aroused him, saying: 'Who doesn't have curiosity for the Secrets, hidden from everybody, which are to be found in the book *The Tree of Life*? [compiled teachings of the kabbalist Isaac Luria of Safad (1534—1572)]. Even though they are sealed from the eyes of all living, God will show you! Likewise in the things that are exceedingly difficult in the *Shas* [Talmud], the Codifiers and the Responsa, and the commentators, both the earlier and later ones. That knowledge from your understanding will make you happy. You worked to find something and did not find it? Do not believe your heart!' [Talmud Megillo 6: 2].

Immediately, he succeeded to study the books of the revealed matters and the esoteric matters, and he studied all the works of the *Tree of Life* in half a year. This was only through the grace of God. Who could then collect a spirit [Proverbs 30: 4] of wisdom and perception to recount all his praises?

And when he turned thirteen years and one day [the male age of majority], he accepted the responsibilities of his special status as a righteous one, and his separation from the world at large, as the lofty horns of the wild-ox [Numbers 23: 22; 24: 8].

From that day onward until the day of his death he did not look outside his own four cubits. And he endeavored to *not* enjoy the pleasures of this world. He ate little: lean bread, to a measure of two olives, dunked into water. And he ate them evening and morning. But he did not allow his palate to taste them, but swallowed them whole. His being was imbued with love of God. He made the Torah and the work of God into a canopy for himself. He made his nights to be as his days, to reveal the Word of God through the true exposition of the Torah, after it had been sold into the bondage of error by its students, and needed to be put right.

Who can teach new aspects and novel sides of the old laws, and of the received exegesis as he does? What kind of fool would avoid [Proverbs 9: 7] trying to bring wisdom to his heart [Isaiah 44: 18], or to hasten most rapidly [Exodus 22: 15] to acquire the path to understanding [Isaiah 40: 14]?

He both understood the nature of a quandary and specified its precise source [Job 28: 23]. His hands were up to the task [Deuteronomy 33: 7] of hoisting the banner [Leviticus 10: 15] in the war of Torah [Talmud Sanhedrin 111b] in order to reach absolute truth in understanding it. He widened its borders through various distinguished pupils. He was able to delve into the depths of legal discussions. But none of them reached halfway to his ankles, and it is doubtful whether any reached even a third or fourth of the way.

His desire was for the Torah of God and that is what his soul cleaved to all his days and his minutes, and through the seasons of his life. He listened to the language of truth and resided in its depths, and 'the first part thereof he chose for himself' [Deuteronomy 33: 21].

For six years he pondered and researched [Ecclesiastes 12: 9] the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the Toseftas, the Mechilta, Sifra and Sifrei, and he illuminated the gloom of darkness that clouded the multiple textual variants as well as [correcting] the methodology that had been used with its excessive *pilpul*, which left one neither coming nor going [Joshua 6:1]. And he opened things up, wide and clear, and everyone said: 'Blessed is the people for whom things are like this' [Psalms 144: 15; prayers].

Who is like him who has planted the true Torah among us [prayerbook, Sabbath blessing on the Torah]? Like him a teacher of truth, seeking real truth, wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One [Proverbs 30: 3]? And people had the benefit of his advice and sound counsel [Proverbs 8: 14]. 'His fruits were multiplied unto him' [Hosea 10: 1].

A further six years he occupied himself with the words of the Codifiers: the Early Masters, and the Late Masters. They are those great ones from time immemorial, men of renown [Genesis 6: 4], geniuses, the first and the last. But he did not rely upon the greatness of their greatness, nor upon the wisdom of their wisdom, nor the sanctity of their sanctity, just to save them from being seen to stumble and err, or to seek justification for their views. Instead, with all his strength he worked, and was adamant to come to grips with and reach understanding of the sacred words of the sages of the Gemora itself, whose every word burns like glistening coal. With one letter of the words of the great rabbis of old he refuted many of the views of the later authors. Windows of light from Heaven were opened for him, for God made for a wonder [Psalms 31: 22] unto Himself this righteous person.

Verily, how can we be so arrogant as to assess his knowledge and his wisdom, to measure his stature according to our measurements? God who guided him as a shepherd [Genesis 48: 15], sent before him His light and His truth, to show him the way in which to go — the truth was a candle before his feet — to reach ultimate comprehension and knowledge, to achieve understanding in God's Torah of great things and mighty things whose place no man knew. But the toil of a man is repaid unto him [Job 34: 11].

And He planted for him the ray of salvation [prayerbook]: to refute indefensible opinions, which he undermined; and, through which awesome revelations in Torah were revealed to him.

If you will sharpen your eyes, brother, and pass your attention to his commentary on the *Shúlkhon órukh* from chapter to chapter and from section to section in your love and passion for the truth, your eyes will see clearly [Psalms 17: 2] that our master the Beys Yoysef of Blessed Memory [Joseph Karo, 1488—1575, author of the *Shúlkhon órukh*] was the compiler of all the accrued opinions and he deliberated on them according to his vast understanding. And he gathered them as the sheaves to the threshing floor [Micah 4: 12] in his concise compilation.

And our ancestor the rabbi, the genius, our teacher Reb Moyshe [Rivkes, died ± 1672] who wrote the *B'eyr ha-Góylo* ["Well of the Diaspora"] revealed to us the sources of all the laws and all the opinions in the great compilation of our master the Beys Yoysef (as explained in the introduction to the *B'eyr ha-Góylo*). And father, the *Góen* (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come), in this work of his, pointed to the source of each and every word in an explicit *Gemora*, in

the Babylonian or Jerusalem Talmud or the words of Rashi and Toyses [Tosafoth, mostly from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries], something that neither our master the Beys Yoysel, nor any of our predecessors were able to achieve, other than to derive them through *pilpul*, deep and sweet, and may the spirit of their words live on [after Genesis 45: 28]. And the new aspects were revealed, as if all the opinions were given from one shepherd [Ecclesiastes 12: 11] to one recipient. We cannot comprehend how he was able to achieve this [Exodus 32: 1].

How he benefited from the passion for truth, which placed before him a correct and straightforward track. With it he overcame his natural human urges and submitted his strengths to the ancient bond of the covenant [Ezekiel 20: 37]. He dedicated his soul and his heart to God from his youth. 'My beloved is mine and I am his' [Song of Songs 2: 16].

The deceitful images emanating from the pleasures of *this* world did not manage to lead him astray from the commands of God, not even from a single one. And he was quick to keep them according to all that is written. And there would not be found in him a sin that he sinned [Hosea 12: 9] relying on the opinions of some authority who interprets in favor of leniency. And he gave his life to fulfill all the intricacies of the precepts of our rabbis of old, including those not included in the *Shúlkhon óruk*. For he said: 'God created me from the womb to serve Him' [Isaiah 49: 5].

Now I will tell you about one of his habits. Once, when he was on the road, he stayed over in the home of an honest man. In the evening, the owner gave him food, and implored him to eat, and put it in his mouth, but he threw it up, because his stomach was unsettled. The owner returned and found the plate was full just as before. And he

implored him again. And he began to eat and threw it up again. And this happened three or four times. And one of the greatest of his renowned pupils who was with him asked him why he pains himself so, since he is not able to eat at that time. And he replied: 'Did not our rabbis of old say: Whatever the host tells you, do? [Talmud Psokhim 86b] and it is agreed by all that the phrase "Do it" even in a rabbinical ruling [not in the Torah] means that it should be done until one's life expires.' 'For He is thy master, and do homage unto Him' [Psalms 45: 12].

And to what extent he gave himself! To the point of distancing himself from the company of his household, and from his sons and his daughters. He sought but one source: the pure fear of God which resides between his shoulders [Deuteronomy 33: 12], to the point where in all his life he never asked his sons and daughters about their livelihoods or their situation. In all his life he did not write letters to them asking how they are. And if one of his sons came to him — even though the happiness was great, because they had not seen him for a year or two — he would nevertheless not ask him about the well being of his children, or his household or his livelihood. And when the son would rest up from a journey for an hour or so, father would warn him to make good the schedule of his learning, and told him: 'On the road you did not keep to your schedule of learning. It will be made up in my house!' 'And give him no rest' [Isaiah 62: 7].

Look, brothers, and see, how wonderful the goodness, delight, and taste are in the souls of those Godfearing who forsake the ways of *this* world and its concerns, to toil in the Torah and the commandments. They find sweetness and satisfaction. And it is enough to inspire them with an awesome strength to disconnect from the ways and pleasures of the world, to seclude themselves in the ways of

God and His Torah, until the sweetness and satisfaction that they find there free them from the excesses of nature. And they discard the bindings of the love of children, even if they are their only children. My late brother, the great rabbinic scholar, a straightforward and righteous man and fearer of God, our teacher Shloyme-Zalmen of blessed memory, when he was five or six years old, was tender and then an only son to his father. And his father loved him, and delighted in him all the time, for he recognized in him his qualities of goodness and righteousness. On one occasion, he fell ill. But father, the *Góen* of blessed memory, had previously decided to travel to the place he had prepared for seclusion, seven parasangs from the sacred city of Vilna, and it was before his son recovered. At first light of day [Genesis 44: 3] he traveled to that place where he would go as usual to be secluded, and where his natural instincts were shut off, until he forgot his house and his sons for more than a month. While there, he happened to go to the bath house, where, as is known, it is forbidden to think of matters of Torah, and he began to think about his own affairs, and remembered that he had been gone from his house on this trip more than a month, and his beloved son, who went about innocently in his ways, was separated from him, lying on his sick bed. His feelings of compassion were warmed. And he ordered that a wagon be prepared to return to his home, to find out about his son's well being. 'To know what be done for him' (Exodus 2: 4).

And know this and be clear, my friend the reader! That his Godfearingness and his Torah were at a much higher level of exactness than we have described here. We have not told the half of it! If we pay attention to all the things that he accomplished during the days of his life,

from beginning to end, you will see that in all of them he achieved standards of thoroughness and wholeness, whether it was through what he suffered by endangering himself in his war with the forces of his own body, or whether through the heavy demands of the workload he set for himself all his days: not to sleep more than two hours in any twenty-four hour period. And all his life he never slept more than a half hour at a time, and during that time his lips were whispering laws and commentaries. At the end of the half hour he became strong as a lion, washed his hands and began to study in a loud voice, and then he would sleep again for another half hour. And this was the limit of his sleep: three half hours a night; one half hour during the day.

And he had his shrewd tactics for fighting off his natural urges. Whatever his desire would crave, he would pass judgment on it, saying: it is not truly good! And he distanced himself from it, and he bowed his shoulder to bear [Genesis 49: 15] the pain of hunger and the stress of sleep deprivation. For he said: 'Come on, let us deal wisely with them' [a humorous reference to Exodus 1: 10].

His great brilliance and energies were placed in the serving of God, and this stood by him, against all that antagonized him, removing every worry and depression from him, to serve God in joy, in good spirits [Deuteronomy 28: 47] all the time. Every day, his profound comprehension was strengthened, until the opinion of his Maker was in agreement with him and he did nothing of his own volition, small or great.

On two occasions only I heard from his holy and pure mouth that his Maker's opinion did not agree with something he wished to do, and he did not do it. In his old age, I asked him many times why he did not travel to the Holy Land and he did not answer me. On one occasion I

pleaded with him extensively, and he answered me, 'I do not have permission from Heaven.'

And similarly, he had promised me that he would compile a compendium of final decisions from the four *Turim*, recording only the opinion that reflects the correct conclusion in his wise eyes, citing powerful, overwhelming and irrefutable evidence. I asked him about it several years before he passed away, and he answered me: 'I do not have permission from Heaven.' I commented that it would be the appropriate thing except that the generation does not look like the right one for it. 'Is it not God, He against whom we have sinned' [Isaiah 42: 24].

He did not attempt to enjoy anything, in thought, word or deed, unless it was from matters of gaining knowledge and fear of God and praise of his Creator, things from which genuine goodness and everlasting deliverance could result. And anything that did not fit into this he rejected with a resolute hand, and barred with a high arm [cf. Exodus 6: 1] from his place. 'And nothing escapeth them' [Joel 2: 4].

The elders of the generation, and the remnants of those who seek God, understood a little bit of his righteous ways while recognizing that he was verily a phenomenon, and that the way he conducted himself was heavenly and incomprehensible, even though they knew that 'his thoughts are not their thoughts and their ways are not his ways' [Isaiah 55: 8].

But in any case, they did not fail to pay attention to his routine, and they would desire and long to see him once a day or even once a week, to be able to gaze upon the work of God. So they would stand in line to observe from a distance his face [Ezekiel 14: 7]. Perhaps he would cause his face to shine upon them and favor them [Numbers 6: 25] with some words. 'Therefore my heart yearneth for him' [Jeremiah 31: 19].

There were always many from God's community, from all the places where they lived, with His Torah in their heart, who would come under the shadow of his roof [Genesis 19: 8], to pray in his studyhouse, to hear the praise of God from his mouth. They saw, and straightaway they were stunned [Psalms 48: 6] at how a person can reach, as he does, to such a level of loving God. As they observed, every single word of his prayer emanated from his mouth distinctly, in sanctity and in purity [prayerbook] with goodness of thought and honesty of heart. It seemed that knowledge was being added to him with every word, and the love of God was in every utterance of his tongue. They would always strive and seek to go in his ways and to serve God out of love as he does. They saw, however, and they realized, that there is no one in our generation strong enough to cleave unto his ways and they also understood clearly, that there cannot be conceived, by any law of chance, such immensity of knowledge and fineness of intellect, from very youth, with Torah and serving of God united in harmonious coexistence. 'Thou hast given him his heart's desire' [Psalms 21: 3].

From the day they entered his studyhouse, his first students wanted with all their might to draw close to the source of their strength. They were not lazy in walking there, nor did they weary of rushing to get there, because they felt mightily just how far removed they were from him, and they knew that the way would be exceedingly long for them, in reaching their desired objective [Psalms 107: 30]. 'How good is their portion, and how pleasant their lot' [prayerbook].

The first was the rabbinic genius, our teacher the rabbi Reb Chaim, may his light go forth, head of the rabbinical court of the sacred community of Valozhin, may it be protected and delivered by God. He would watch and



observe with a keen eye and with the beauty of the splendence of his Torah. He too had shown his might from his early youth, and he dwelt in the depths of the study of the laws [Talmud Megillo 3b], and his hands were up to the task [Deuteronomy 33: 7] for discussion of the Torah, and finding his dwelling place in its shade. And bound together with him was his humility and fear of God [Proverbs 22: 4] all of the time. And when he presented himself before him to hear from his mouth the words of the living God, a spirit of understanding from father (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come) passed upon his face, and his sharpwittedness and discussion were purified, and by his understanding he smote through the pride [Job 26: 12]. And from then on he looked at things with a deeper understanding. How great were his accomplishments, and how deep his thoughts in the revealed and in the esoteric wisdom. Under the shadow of father's roof [Genesis 19: 8] he resided. 'For that was his desire' [cf. Psalm 132: 13].

And the second, the rabbinic genius our teacher the rabbi Reb Shloyme of blessed memory, head of the rabbinical court of Volkemir [= Vilkomír, now Ukmergė, Lithuania], sharpwitted and expert in the chambers of the Torah, and crowned with humility and fear of sin. Many times during the year he would knock on father's door. When he heard the words of truth in their true meaning coming out of his sacred and pure mouth, he considered his own labor that he had labored during his life to be "labor that is of no account and feeble" [I Samuel 15: 9]. And when he presented himself before him in the sacred place [of study, the Gaon's *kloyz*], he asked him about everything that was difficult for him to understand. And he gave him 'sufficient for his need that which he wanteth' [Deuteronomy 15: 8].

And the third, the rabbinic genius, the righteous and humble man, our teacher the rabbi, Reb Shloyme-Zalmen (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come), the brother of the rabbinic genius Reb Chaim mentioned above. When he came before father, all his powers were humbled. Before entering within the sacred enclosure [Mishna Zvokhim 5 (3) etc.], even though no secret was hidden [Daniel 4: 6] from him, a mantle of humility became his mantle. A master of modesty and ethics. No beloved attribute was missing. And what is more beloved than wisdom and honor? His good name. Beloved in Heaven and cherished on earth, and father (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come) loved him as he loved his own life. His love for him was greater than for all his other students. "And God had given him rest" [II Samuel 7: 1, a reference to Shloyme-Zalmen's early death].

And the fourth, the rabbi, the great and outstanding in Torah and fear of God, the famous, our teacher Reb Saadye (may his light go forth), brother-in-law of the rabbinic genius our teacher Shloyme-Zalmen mentioned above. He left his home, and came to hear father's Torah. And he ministered to father for many years, and he learned from him much every single day, and when he came before the king with the book [Esther 9: 25], with a question, father would show him the explanation.

And the fifth, the rabbi, the Great Light, the famous, our teacher, Shloyme, of blessed memory of Talotshin [Taločín, Belarus] "who declareth his word unto Jacob" [or: the *magid*, or preacher, to the people of Israel; Psalm 147: 19] in the sacred community of Vilna, how much overflowing good-friendship was shown to

him when father studied with him the Zohar and the Book of Creation. And everything that was difficult for him in the writings of the disciples of the Arizál [Ari z"] = Ari of blessed memory = kabbalist Isaac Luria, 1534—1572], he explained to him according to his abilities and the nature of his knowledge. But he kept certain things from him and did not tell him everything. And after Reb Shloyme passed away, father had second thoughts, and said: Why did I hide from him those hidden things? Was he not with all his might Godfearing from his youth? 'For He repays man according to his work' [Job 34: 11].

And the sixth, the great rabbi, the sharpwitted, expert, famous, our teacher Tsvi-Hirsh may his light go forth, of Semyatitz [Simyatitsh, now Siemiatycze, Poland]. Great is his strength in the revealed and in the esoteric. He studied under father for many years. He cleaved to some of the ways of his piety and separateness. 'And so it was befitting for him' [Passover Haggadah].

And the seventh, the great rabbi, the sharpwitted, expert, famous, our teacher Reb Shloyme of blessed memory from the sacred community of Mohilov [Molev, now Mohilev, Belarus]. He was well armed in the war of Torah, fearing and trembling before the word of God. His face was a face aflame [Isaiah 13: 8] with the power of his fear and serving of God. He learned very much from father, and from the time he came to him, he remained a steady pupil of his.

Blessed are you, O Vilna, City of Splendor [Jeremiah 49: 25, said of Jerusalem]. Everybody, from the greatest to the smallest, acquired some benefit to their soul, each according to his level. And in all their achievements in the study of Torah and the giving of charity, he was the force behind it, with the might of his

Godfearingness and his reproofing them to their faces. For his inspired word of advice would rise up before them 'till the moon be no more' [Psalms 72: 7].

With his words of advice and his reproof they were made into a great community of expanders of the realm of Torah: people who take care in carrying out the Commandments; people who hate studying for the sake of practical gain [Mishna, Sayings of the Fathers 1: 10]; people who honor God. Their heart did not turn proud when they acquired any wealth. Everyone who seeks God rejoices in them. They made their study of Torah into their regular and principal undertaking, and their businesses into a secondary concern. And their businesses are run by the members of their household. Torah and serving God are their only actual 'business.'

At first his teaching was primarily for those close to him, but later, the entire country accepted him as their leader, and proclaimed it also for the people afar: not to waste their time in useless pursuits; for each person to keep his eyes focused on the division of one's time, down to precise minutes! And to spend time only for the most valuable things possible, and that is the busying of oneself with the study of Torah and serving of God, to be energetic in it, to accomplish things with the maximum of diligence. For any endeavor and talent to do things other than in this field will bring no benefit.

Is it not the case that one's own mind, in its attempts to serve God will only, after all, recognize evil in others and heap praise on oneself? Only through the Torah and serving God can one weaken the machinations of the evil desires of a person's heart and all the tricks they play on us. And the growth of charity and of splendor can be seen in his city and place, and even in faraway places, where they did not see his greatness and his good-

ness, but sought with all their strength to go about their days in accordance with the conduct that he taught them.

How many fine qualities has the place [after Passover Haggadah] where he stood before God in Torah and the serving of God for more than fifty years! And how much extra love has accrued to this City of Splendor [Jeremiah 49: 25] that became his partner, to receive the resplendence of his wisdom, and the magnificence continuously radiating from his face? They received a measure of his attention upon them, according to the measure of their efforts to draw close to what is sacred, to make good their affairs, in order that they might walk in the way of the good.

And so it was for the scholars, the 'watcher and holy one' [Daniel 4: 10, 20] of the sacred community of Shklov. People understood that their confusion came from the domain of excessive *pilpul*. One person builds up an argument, and along comes another and demolishes it. And they were assisted by father, the *Góen* (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come). They looked and saw that he succeeded in attaining many things in which the scholar of Torah for its own sake succeeds [Mishna, Sayings of the Fathers 6: 1]. For the secrets of the Torah were revealed to him. And they benefited from his advice and insight. And all of the innovations in his study of Torah derive from the source of accuracy. 'His waters are certain' [Isaiah 33: 16] and 'there is in his words nothing crooked or sly' [Proverbs 8: 8]. Without fail, he gets right to the heart of his subject.

'Knowledge is easy to him who understands' [Proverbs 14: 6]. Is he not the phenomenal one in Torah and serving of God, the prince, famous for his praises, 'a valiant man who has done mighty deeds' [II Samuel 23:

20], 'sacred fruit for giving praise' [Leviticus 19: 24], his honor our teacher Benyomin may his light go forth, of the sacred community of Shklov. He went up to live in the sacred community of Vilna to give pleasure to his Creator. 'And his sleep fled from his eyes' [Genesis 31: 40]. And he succeeded to listen to father's sacred and pure mouth in his studies, and the light of father's Torah and Godfearingness shone upon him from that time onward, in his way and in his conduct.

And through him the sacred community of Shklov was built on its own mound [cf. Jeremiah 30: 18; image best known from the sixteenth century kabbalistic Sabbath poem *L'kho doydi*]. They accepted upon themselves much of his methodology in scholarship, and the correct ways of fulfilling commandments. Many of the people of his [Benyomin's] city [Shklov] and his country [Raysn, eastern sector of Jewish Lithuania] followed the lead of the abovementioned rabbi Reb Benyomin, but it did not work out for them to become intimate [themselves] with sanctity.

The will of God permitted only two brothers to succeed, and they are, of course: the great rabbi, phenomenal in Torah and Godfearingness, his study achieving wholeness, the renowned and praised, our teacher Simkhe-Bunim, may God watch over him and deliver him; and his brother, the rabbi, great in Torah and serving of God, 'that feedeth among the roses' [Song of Songs 2: 16] wisdom and understanding, 'with all powders of the merchant' [Song of Songs 3: 6], renowned and praised, our teacher Menachem-Mendel, may God watch over him and deliver him. For they are mighty men of valor, fulfillers of his word [Psalms 103: 20]. Trembling before the word of God, to serve Him and to guard it day and night [Genesis 2: 15].

They entered into his shelter in the days of his old age, as the sun was setting [Genesis 28: 11] and the day declineth [Jeremiah 6: 4], at eventide [Genesis 8: 11]. At the shining of [Habakuk 3: 11] the magnificence of his Torah and wisdom, they beheld a great light [Isaiah 9:1]. They gave nights as days to unearth the deepest darkness: all the doubts in the Mishna and the Tosefta, in the Mechilta and Sifra and Sifrei and in the Jerusalem Talmud and the four *Turim*. 'Lo mine eye hath seen all this' [Job 13: 1]. And upon them and upon me there dripped down [Job 29: 22] the light of his Torah. And father of blessed memory heard their voice 'going about in the garden' [Genesis 3: 8] of the Torah, and found their intentions and deeds to be desirable before God, and shared with them his wishes, and besides that he was wise he taught his knowledge to the people [Ecclesiastes 12: 9], and strengthened and inspired them to study with proper orderliness so their feet would not stumble [II Samuel 22: 37].

First of all, he urged that in carrying out the serving of blessed God, one must be expert first of all in the twenty-four books [of the Hebrew Bible] with all the vowel points and the accents, properly arranged in every respect and carefully followed. And he would test them in all this and, beyond that, the science of grammar. Those who excelled in consummate knowledge of the science of grammar had previously tested father, and when they spoke to him, they could not find their hands or their feet! They drank his words with thirst. Their rash arguments were undone as if they had never even existed, and upon returning to their abodes, they would reply to people and say: Whosoever did not hear his words does not see [Exodus 22: 9] and does not know [Ecclesiastes 9: 1].

Then he ordered that the six orders of the Mishna should flow from a person's mouth, together with the major commentaries. And on top of that, with the correct textual variants! His great students saw that the wisdom of the Almighty is in him, for with his great capability and the power of his sharpwittedness to discover the truth of the Torah, he came forward with discoveries that our forefathers in their earlier commentaries did not even imagine, and he produced tangible evidence from the structure of the subjects within the Mishna or from the seeming duplication of words. And they recognized that those who know the roots and principles pursue a straightforward path, without resorting to farfetched explanations.

Then he warned about the methods of analysis applied to the 'sea of Talmud': to search carefully in the comments of Rashi for they are very straightforward to the person who can comprehend them; and, to the innovations of the writers of the *Toysfes* of blessed memory, a principal condition being that they be studied with straightforward logic.

He hated the proliferation of argumentative challenges for their own sake, and he conceded the truth even when it came from the mouths of little children at school. All of the best conclusions derived from following one's logic did not count for him as much as the truth, for only when it was understood would he feel that he had succeeded and grown wiser in his studies. And he ordered that one refrain from the method of study that tries to sharpen the mind just for the sake of it, even for weak students and young children. It is moreover the case that when accomplished, sharpwitted Talmudists heard words of truth coming from his sacred and pure mouth, they were left speechless, and said: 'For we have achieved nothing [Isaiah 49: 4] all the days of our lives' [Ecclesiastes 6: 12].

And to bring his generation to wholeness, he established a house full of Torah, so that there would be people perpetually standing at their positions around the table of God [Malachi 1: 7], full of sap and freshness [Psalms 92: 15], in all realms of Torah, as they study from the Bible, Mishna and Gemora. And he himself would sit with them at the head of the table at set times. And he would set out before them, at the table, the schedule of their study, explaining how they could achieve comprehensive knowledge of the entire Talmud in a few years, and know the [Talmudic] source of the laws and the rulings in all four *Turim* perfectly. And he warned them not to busy themselves much with vacuous argument that will in any case be dropped in the end, and on those occasions when it is used, heaven forbid, just to tease and provoke. These practices are hugely antagonistic to the will of the Almighty, for iniquity would multiply [Proverbs 6: 35] in their midst. Sin would increase, the pleasant interconnectedness [of the simple meaning of a text] would be lost and the truth banished from the flock of God. Still, pilpul can have its certain elementary use in attuning one to the study of law.

And they fulfilled it, and accepted it upon themselves [Esther 9: 27], and studied in their lives the eighteen years he was with them in their house. And he had the pleasure of seeing his good will was carried out. And they, looking upon the magnificence of his Torah evening and morning, merited that wonderful joy, a joy and delight that cannot be imagined. Woe unto children who have been expelled from such a table of their father!

This is our consolation, that we lived to see the light of his Torah in his commentaries on the four sections of the *Shúlkhon órukh*, and, may we now all be privileged to have pleasure from their radiance. Blessed is he

who waits, and then reaches the light of his Torah, that his springwaters may flow about widely [Proverbs 5: 16], and to give drink to the sacred flock, who desire to have pleasure from the splendor of his wisdom in the revealed and in the esoteric wisdom. The greatness of his wisdom cannot be imagined. One cannot reach the end of his comprehension. One cannot recount the extent of his sanctity, and the paths he chose in matters of the sacred. 'But the smallest part thereof' [Numbers 23: 13] have we recounted here, and but a few of his praises, 'as a drop in a bucket' [Isaiah 40: 15].

He who implanted the ear [Psalms 94: 9], may he open my ears, and pierce them to be able to listen to even a little of his learning. He who created the eye [Psalms 94: 9], may he enlighten my eyes to understand even a little of his meanings.

These be the words of his sons, who come as witnesses and set their seal; our hands "dropping with flowing myrrh" [Song of Songs 5: 13]; "and our knees smiting one against the other" [Daniel 5: 6]. And our whole body trembles, "even as a reed is shaken in the water" [I Kings 14: 15] from the sanctity of the memory of his holiness, and praise of the deeds of his pure hands.

*Yehude-Leyb son of the true Gaon, the righteous, our  
master Eyliohu, who rests in Paradise.*

*Avrohom son of the true Gaon, the righteous, our  
master Eyliohu, who rests in Paradise.*



It is evident that Yehude-Leyb and Avrohom, the sons of the Gaon who penned this “mother of Gaon biographies,” felt they needed to address their painful disappointment that their father never did compile a massive new code of Jewish law as had Maimonides, the Tur and more recently Joseph Karo. More than two centuries after the Gaon’s death, teams of scholars continue to work to put together his works, notes, and notes of his students into accessible published form with the necessary commentary and explanation for the use of scholars. Most prolifically, the brothers Rabbi Yerucham-Fishel and Rabbi Samuel-Jacob Feffer, of New York and Bnai Brak, are producing a massive series of impressive volumes. Others, including Rabbi Yedidiya Frankel of Jerusalem, are scouring the globe for access to printed works and manuscripts which contain the Gaon’s handwriting. During a 2003 visit to Vilnius, Rabbi Frankel explained one of his recent discoveries which he had been chasing for years over three continents: a printed book with one set of brackets, corrected several times so as to move the location of the brackets in the text. These brackets and the adjustments in their location, in the Gaon’s hand, represent his reconstruction of the original text by bracketing which segments he believed to have “fallen in” through a typographical error, and how his reconstruction evolved over the years. The changes have a legal effect on the law being discussed. Such is the state of the Gaon’s literary legacy. One possible biographical explanation for the Gaon’s not having compiled a systematic compendium is given at the start of the next chapter.

But the comparison of the classic Sephardi Joseph Karo (1488—1575), and the classic Litvak Eyliohtu the Gaon of Vilna (1720—1797) does not end with discussions of the history of Jewish law and their compilations into systematic compendiums. Both were avowed mystics in addition to being top legal minds. Karo left behind one mystical tome, the *Máqid Meyshórim* (*Maggíd Meshárim*, “Speaker of Righteousness” after Isaiah 45: 19). The Gaon of Vilna left behind a vast corpus of mystical writings. It is perhaps ironic that in the realm of Kabbalah, it was the Gaon who managed to complete a series of systematic works. But the issue here is not “who did more” even if these two top minds from different centuries and different European Jewish cultures have often been compared. It is to elucidate something special about the Gaon which has become emblematic of Lithuanian Jewry.

Karo’s kabbalistic tome is a kind of mystical autobiography. It talks about the *máqid*, or preacher (literally “teller” from the classical Hebrew for “tells” or “telling” as in Isaiah 45: 19) who came to him for over fifty years, usually at night, revealing to him the true law in doubtful cases, as well as mystical secrets. In a classic document about the Gaon of Vilna’s experience with *his* special messenger from Heaven, things turn out very differently. The document is by the Gaon’s pupil, Chaim of Valozhin, and was written as an introduction to the Gaon’s commentary on the kabbalistic *Sifro d’Tsniuso* (*Sifra de-Tzeniuta* or Book of Secrecy, on Genesis). In what is perhaps the classic case of the folkloristic trait of stubborn-

ness, pride and the ethic of one's own hard work instead of hocus-pocus as attributes of the archetypal Litvak, Chaim Valozhiner has this to say about his teacher's encounters with the old *magid* from Heaven:

"It did not seem good to him [the Gaon of Vilna] to achieve something other than by his own hard work, that he would toil for with wisdom, knowledge and talent, and that results from huge effort. And when Heaven trusted him, and wellsprings of wisdom were revealed unto him, the most secret of the secrets and the most mysterious of the mysteries, this was for him a gift of God, but with one exception, he did not want them. Even when they wanted to convey to him from Heaven without any hard work or effort of the flesh those secrets and mysteries, the highest of the high, via *magidim* who are masters of mysteries and Princes of the Torah, he would not countenance it. It was given to him and he rejected it.

For I heard from his holy lips that on many occasions they agreed to release to him a number of *magidim* from Heaven, with a mission to convey to him secrets of the Torah without his having to work for them. But he would not even listen to them. One of the *magidim* was extremely insistent. Nevertheless, he would not look at his fantastic appearance, and replied: 'I do not want my comprehension of His Torah (may His name be blessed), by way of any intermediaries whatsoever. My eyes are raised to Him (blessed be His name). What he wants to

reveal to me and to give me as a portion of His (blessed be His name) Torah, through my hard work that I have toiled with all my might, He (blessed be His name) will give me wisdom from His lips, knowledge and understanding, a heart that understands, and a consciousness that streams, and I will know that I have found grace in His eyes. I do not want anything that is not from His lips, and the insights that come from angels and *magidim* and Princes of Torah for which I did not work and use my intelligence, these I do not want!

On one occasion, our master sent me to my younger brother who was greater than me in every sense of sacred goodness, our brilliant teacher the rabbi, Shloyme-Zalmen (the memory of the righteous is a blessing for the World to Come), to tell him as a command in his [the Gaon's] name, not to receive any angel or *magid* that might come to him, for in the not too distant future he too would be visited by one [...].

And even more than that, he [the Gaon] used to say, that when the soul acquires wondrous and awesome insights while a person is asleep, by way of the rising of the soul to enjoy the highest pleasures of the heavenly academies, it is not considered by him to be something essential. Because the essential thing is what a human being acquires here in This World by way of hard work and labor when he chooses the right path and concentrates himself [...]."

Chaim of Valozhin, 1820

# The Gaon's Works

The number of works written by Eyliohu the Gaon of Vilna depends on how the counting is done. None was published in his lifetime, and many were commentaries to other works which were eventually published together with those other works in the traditional layout of commentaries "surrounding" the basic text of a more ancient work. Some of the Gaon's later published commentaries reflect the reconstructions of notes and memories by his pupils, rendering the counting process even more complicated.

Still, there is a general consensus that he created some seventy works, of which about fifty have appeared in print. Some are being published now, and others republished in a more accurate form (taking into account extant variants), thanks to the "Machon Ha-Gró" project of the brothers Feffer (Nechemiah and Samuel Jacob Feffer, of Bnai Brak, Israel and Brooklyn, New York). They have already published about a dozen volumes of what will hopefully become the complete surviving works of the Gaon of Vilna.



The Dubrovna 1804 edition of the Five Books of Moses (the *Khumesh*, or *Pentateuch*), containing the Gaon's commentary, here called *Aderes Eyliohu* ("Mantle of Elijah" after II Kings 2: 13, 14), advertised, as it were, on the title page, as the second in the list of thirteen commentaries appended to the Biblical text.





Bodleian Library Oxford

The Zholkva (Zolkiev) 1804 edition of the Gaon's *Taharas ha-Koydesh* ("Purity of Holiness" after I Chronicles 23: 28), a commentary on the Tosefta (compilation of Mishna-era texts not included in the actual canon of the Mishna), on a tractate on matters of holiness. The brief introduction on this title page explains that the Gaon imparted his comments to a small circle of students, and that this text exists thanks to Meir of Vilna, one of the Gaon's pupils and assistants, who is, it is explained, a descendant of Yehude-Arye of "Shad in the land of Zamet" (Shat, now Šeta, in the Žemaitija area of western Lithuania).

The Gaon on law



Bodleian Library Oxford

The Gaon's kabbalistic commentary on the *Sifro d'Tsniuso* ("Book of Secrecy") component of the primary text of Kabbalah, the Zohar. This section, and the Gaon's commentary, deal with the mysteries of creation of the universe.

This edition, with the Gaon's commentary "surrounding" the original, was published in 1820 by Menachem-Man son of Boruch, a leading founder of the Romm family of printers. During this period, their press functioned in both Grodna, where it was founded, and Vilna, where it had moved and was to flourish right up to the Second World War.

The Gaon on mysticism

The Gaon's treatise on trigonometry and algebra, published in Vilna and Grodna in 1833, also by Menachem-Man, co-founder of the Romms. The work is called *Ayil meshulosh*. The term comes from the book of Genesis (15: 9), where it is translated "a ram three years old." The title invokes a word play on *meshulosh*, which also came to mean "triangle."



Bodleian Library Oxford

The Gaon on mathematics

## Seven faces of the Gaon of Vilna

110

During the nineteenth century, it became popular in many Lithuanian Jewish homes to hang a portrait of the Gaon of Vilna. The custom of adorning the home with “pictures of national heroes” was borrowed from Christian neighbors, and represented in some sense a loosening of an age-old taboo against depiction of the human form, derived from Exodus 20: 4 — “Thou shalt not make unto thee an idol, nor any picture of likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth below . . .” The Biblical prohibition obviously applies to idolatry and not to pictures in the modern sense. This was one of the symbolic points on which Jewish Lithuanian tradition became more lenient.

These are but seven of the dozens of “Gaons” imagined by artists who never saw him. Note that he is sometimes portrayed wearing the traditional *tfiln* (*tefillin*, phylacteries) of the head and *tallis* (prayershawl). The *tfiln* are worn on the head and the weaker arm by males over the age of majority during weekday morning prayer, and by some sages during study and scribal work as well.

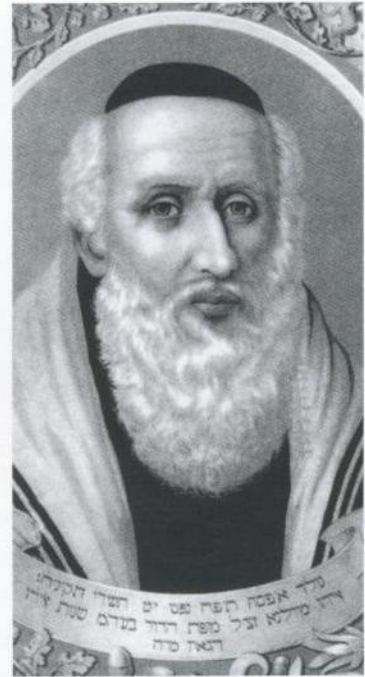
There is only one picture of the Gaon that was drawn from life. It appears later in this volume (see p. 139).



Leyzer Ran Collection



Leyzer Ran Collection



Leyzer Ran Collection



Leyzer Ran Collection

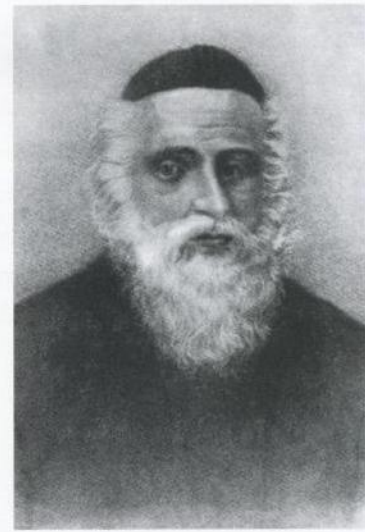
These seven images were created by later artists



Leyzer Ran Collection



Leyzer Ran Collection



Leyzer Ran Collection

# Talmud

A typical page (much reduced!) of the famed Romm Vilna edition of the Babylonian Talmud. The central column is the Aramaic *Gemora*. The Talmudic text (in square Hebrew characters) is surrounded by commentaries in rabbinic type font known as "Rashi script". Most prominent among them are the commentaries of Rashi (without large type drop-cap words — in this case on the left), and *Tóysfes*, compilations of medieval rabbinic commentaries from Old Ashkenaz (identifiable by the larger letters at the start of new sections — in this case at the right). The Gaon of Vilna's commentary here (as usual!) comprises a tiny paragraph (marked by the added arrow), in which he cites the sources necessary to solve the difficulties arising from the discussion. It is typical for a few words of the Gaon to resolve issues that other commentators grappled with for centuries, and it is typical for him to do it through a few cross references. This page is 31b of the tractate *Kidushin* (laws of betrothal and marriage).



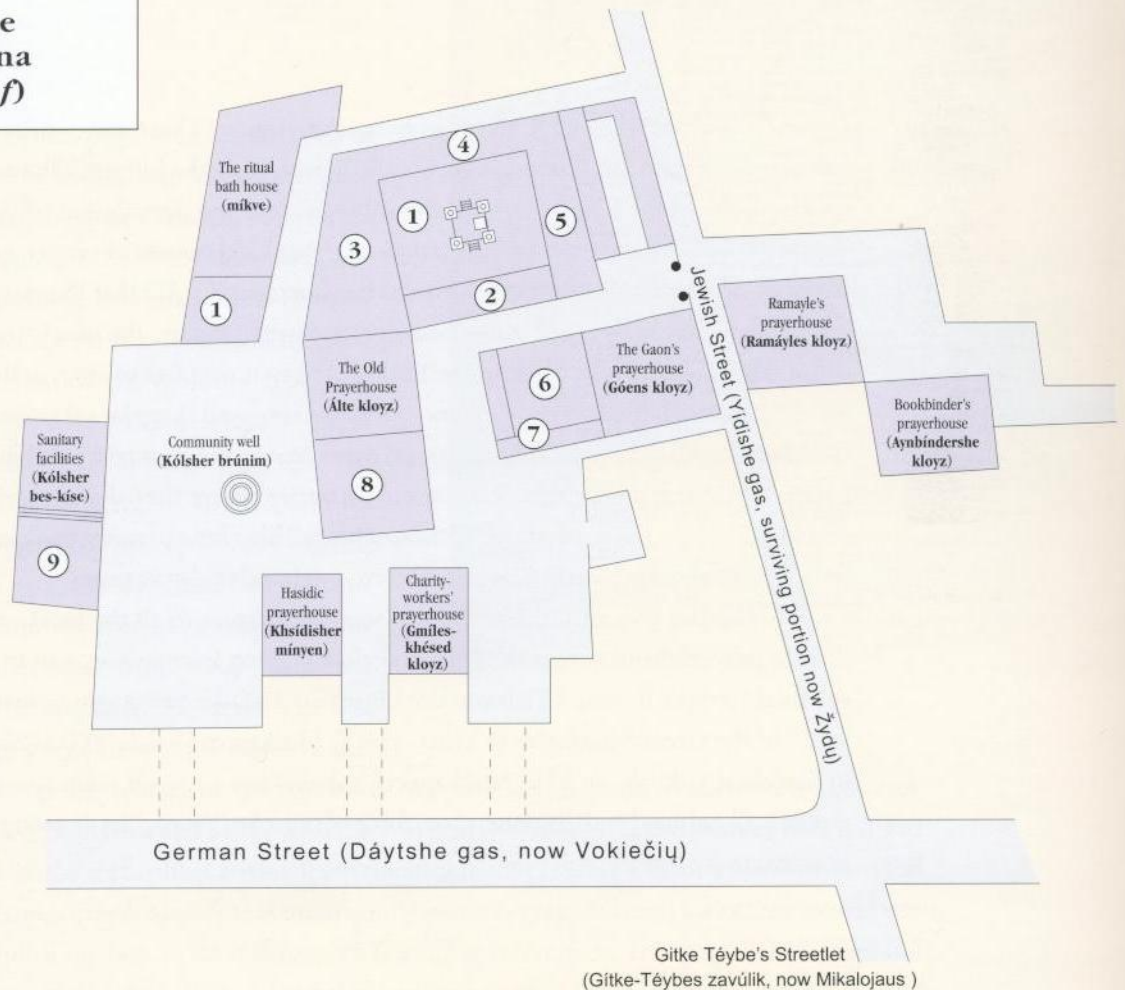
## The *Vilner Shul-heyf*

In the days of ancient Israel, there were no synagogues. There were various central tabernacles, most famously at Shiloh in the time of the Judges, followed by King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. It was after the destruction of the Temple in 586 BC, and the exile to Babylonia, that local houses of prayer apparently developed. It is not until around the first century AD that the synagogue is a widely known and stable concept. In Jewish culture, the idea is traditionally traced back to a passage in Ezekiel, the first prophet to arise in the exile: "Thus saith the Lord God: 'Although I have removed them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet have I been to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come'" (Ezekiel 11: 16). The concept of "little sanctuary" has come to mean the local synagogue, reflecting the historic shift from statehood to dispersion.

For the Jews of Lithuania, there was, in addition to all the local and diverse prayerhouses across the land, the closest thing Europe ever had to a spiritual "temple mount." That was the *Vilner Shul-heyf*, the "synagogue courtyard" of the Great Synagogue in Vilna. The Yiddish term *Shul-heyf* (*Shul-hoyf* in Standard Yiddish, *shúlef* in rapid speech) always has a ring of sanctity and warmth. Combined with the enchanted force of the word "Vilna," its awesomeness was more intense still.

## Great Synagogue Courtyard in Vilna (*Vilner Shul-beyf*)

1. The Great Synagogue  
(*di gréyše shul* or *di shtot-shul*  
"the city synagogue")
2. Antechamber  
(*pólish*)
3. Women's section 1  
(*ézas-nóshim*, downstairs)
4. Women's section 2  
(*ézas-nóshim*, on two floors)
5. The Matisyohu Strashun library  
(*Strashún biblyoték*)
6. Undertakers' prayerhouse  
(*kabrónishe kloyz*)
7. Women's section of Gaon's  
prayerhouse  
(*ézas-nóshim*)
8. The New Prayerhouse/  
Yesod's Prayerhouse  
(*di náye kloyz/*  
*dem Yesóds kloyz*)
9. Workmen's Society Prayerhouse  
(*Kloyz khévre póyalim*)



After D. Maggid (1901)  
by Giedrė Beconytė

Section of the *Vilner Shul-heyf*, heart of the city's Jewish Quarter. The courtyard was an L-shaped area facing onto the narrow *Yidishe gas* ("Jewish Street," now *Žydų gatvė* in Vilnius), and backing onto *Daytshe gas* ("German Street," now *Vokiečių*). But this part of *Yidishe gas* no longer exists. Before the war, this narrow street continued right into *Daytshe gas* (see map on p. 114).

The Great Synagogue, known throughout Lithuania as *Di greyse shul* (the "great synagogue") was at the heart of the *Vilner Shul-heyf*. Vilna's Jews preferred the simpler name *Di shtot-shul* ("the city synagogue"). It was a magnificent structure, built in 1573. To maintain lofty proportions without violating restrictions on height imposed by the authorities, the floor was sunk beneath ground level, and steps led down into the grand structure, built in the spirit of Italian renaissance. Perhaps its magnificence seemed that much greater for being situated in a small area of winding little streetlets and alleyways packed solid with little religious, communal and historic structures that gave spiritual sustenance far and wide.



Leyzer Ran Collection

The *Vilner shul-heyf*

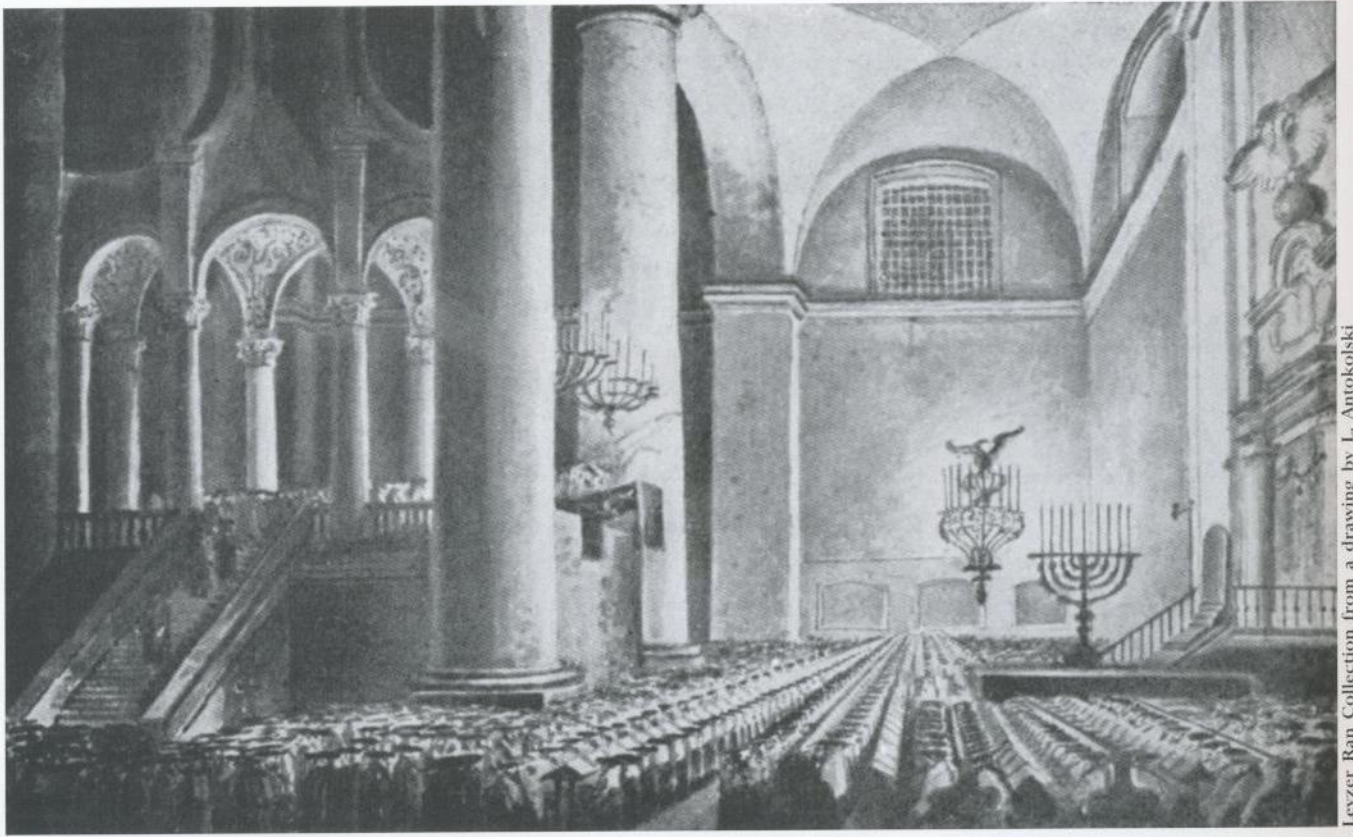
The Great Synagogue of Vilna has been the focus of many legends. On one part of its roof, an old cannonball stood for a century and a half. People (not only Jews) came from far and wide to see it. The story told goes back to Russia's siege of Vilna in 1792. When Catherine II's forces were raining cannon fire on the old city, as many Jews as could fit huddled into the Great Synagogue. An emissary convinced the reclusive Gaon of Vilna, who was not a frequenter of places with large crowds, to come and lead a prayer for safety. Eyliohu opened the sacred ark and led the people in reciting Psalm 20 seven times. Just then, a cannonball hit the *Greyse shul*, landing harmlessly on the roof, where it was to remain until the destruction of Jewish Vilna by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

The Great Synagogue was not the oldest structure in the *Vilner shul-heyf*. It had been built adjacent to the older prayerhouse which subsequently became known as *Kloyz yoshn* ("The Little Old Prayerhouse"). According to the community's records, the *Kloyz yoshn* had been erected around 1440.



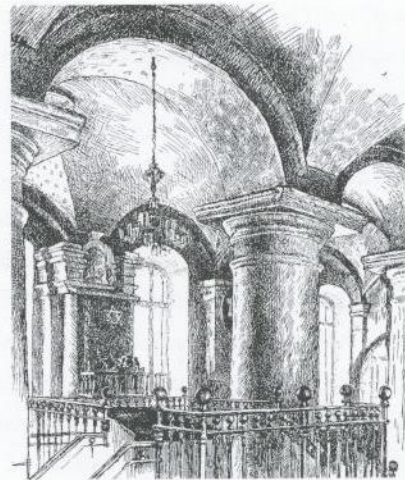
Leyzer Ran Collection from a drawing by F. Smuglewicz

Inside the Great Vilna Synagogue



Leyzer Ran Collection from a drawing by L. Antokolski

Inside the Great Vilna Synagogue



Leyzer Ran Collection

View of the bima



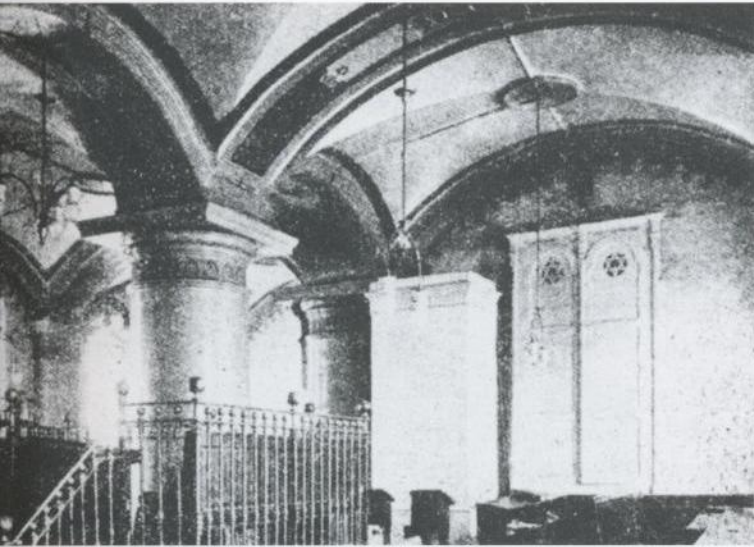
The *Kloyz-yoshn* was itself joined by a new *kloyz*, built in the middle 1750s, endowed by the *Yesód*, a well-known Vilna philanthropist whose acronymic comes from his name and professions: *Yehudo safro ve-dayono* (Aramaic for “Judah the scribe and judge”). A doorway was built linking the new and old *kloyz*.

In 1800, three years after the Gaon of Vilna’s death, the community built a studyhouse on the site of his own house. Nobody knows whether this was a remodeling or a case of razing and rebuilding from scratch. Be that as it may, a classic Vilna custom developed, and in some Lithuanian Jewish sense, *dem Goens kloyz* (“The Gaon’s Little Studyhouse”) came to represent the ideals of this culture even more than the Great Synagogue. In memory of the Gaon, it was made

into a place where ten scholars at a time (the number of the traditional Jewish *mínyn* or prayer quorum) would be immersed in studying twenty-four hours a day. When one participant left, he was immediately replaced by another. This special group of scholars were men who had decided to live their lives in the spirit of the Gaon, and take periods of time away from their wives and families and other pursuits, to devote themselves entirely to study. They were known as *dem Góens prúshim*

(“the Gaon’s *prushim*,” plural of *póresh* “one who withdraws from the concerns of this world to be immersed in study”). From 1800 until the Holocaust, ten of the Gaon’s *prushim* sat at the long table here, day and night, night and day.

There were many other prayerhouses and studyhouses in the *Vilner Shulheyf*, including: the *Shive-krúim* (“the seven called,” named for the practice of keeping the number of those called to bless the Torah Sabbath mornings to the traditional seven, unlike some places where the number was increased because distribution of this honorific function yielded contributions); the *Kabrónishe kloyz* (gravediggers’ prayerhouse); *Gmiles-khésed* (prayerhouse of the society to help poor people); *Malárske* (painters’ prayerhouse); *Khsídím-shtíbl* (the gravediggers’ Hasidic prayerhouse, serving the small number of Lubavitch followers in Vilna).



Leyzer Ran Collection

Inside *Kloyz yoshn* (the “little old prayerhouse”)

In addition to the many prayerhouses, the *Vilner Shul-heyf* was home to the offices of the Vilna Jewish Community, the *bes-din* (*bézdin*, the rabbinical court), and an array of social, philanthropic and academic institutions. The community well and ritual bath houses were also located in the courtyard.

In 1902, the famed Vilna library of Matisyohu (Mathias) Strashun (see p. 188) was relocated from its original home to a purpose built library built on to the great synagogue. Its collection included Talmudic and Kabbalistic tracts as well as Vilna's best collection of modern Judaica in many languages. The modern Hebrew and Yiddish movements naturally had their own social and cultural gathering places, apart from the religious traditionalists of the Great Synagogue Courtyard. But when it came to reading, studying and libraries, the universal Lithuanian Jewish love of learning overcame political and ideological schisms. At the Strashun Library, venerable long-bearded rabbis sat happily alongside modernist scholars and students who were immersed in study of all kinds of books and subjects. And so it came to pass that in one fell swoop a cherished intellectual address of modern Jewish Vilna found itself in the heart of the city's central *Shul-heyf*.

The scholar who best fathomed the historic import of the *Vilner Shul-heyf*, and who worked very hard every day for it to become a harmonious home for modern as well as traditional Jewish learning, was the famed librarian of the Strashun Library, Chaikel (Khaykl) Lunski. Born into a family of scholars in Slonim around 1881, he was a child prodigy who was appointed librarian of the Strashun Library as a teenager in the mid 1890s. In that role, he became known in Lita as

At the start of the twentieth century, the famed Strashun Library was relocated to this purpose built structure which was built on to the Great Synagogue. The spindles, a familiar architectural detail of the synagogue's roof area, remained visible above the library.



Leyzer Ran Collection

*der shéymer fun Yerusholáyim d'Lite* (the Guardian — Vilna Yiddish *shéymer* for standard *shóymer*) of Jerusalem of Lithuania). In 1916 he published his classic piece about the *Shul-heyf* enumerating its dazzling array of spiritual, educational, religious and social activities. His knowledge of every book and every detail in the cultural history of Lithuanian Jewry became known internationally, and he was “the first address” of innumerable foreign visitors. With the rest of Vilna Jewry, Lunski was incarcerated in the Vilna Ghetto in 1941. The “Little Ghetto” where the Great Synagogue and the Strashun Library were located, was liquidated shortly thereafter. Lunski was transferred to the “Large Ghetto” and swiftly renewed his work as “librarian to the people” in the reading hall on Strashun Street (now *Žemaitijos gatvė*) which was to exist up until the final annihilation of the Vilna Ghetto in September 1943. The incarcerated, hungry, suffering and doomed Jews of the Vilna Ghetto celebrated the borrowing of the Ghetto’s ten thousandth book in November 1942. There are different accounts of Lunski’s death. Some reported that he was tortured to death in the ghetto in 1943. Others recounted that he took his own life rather than be transported. In a letter dated December 31<sup>st</sup> 1941 he had written to Vilna Ghetto diarist Herman Kruk: “Thinking of the thousands of innocent, pure people murdered in Ponar [the infamous killing ground outside Vilna] *af kídesh-hashém* (sanctification of God’s name), of the destruction of all our holy things, the destruction of our cultural institutions, and so on, I do not want to live. Rather than be killed by a murderous hand in the pits at Ponar, it is better to kill myself and at least have a Jewish grave.” (See the reference to the recently published English translation of Herman Kruk’s diary in the bibliography at the end of this volume.)



Leyzer Ran Collection

Chaikel Lunski, the “Guardian of  
Jerusalem of Lithuania”

# Scant Remnants in Today's Vilnius

The Gaon of Vilna's "miniature mausoleum," like most of the old Jewish cemetery of Vilna, survived the Holocaust but was destroyed by Soviet authorities, when the old Jewish cemetery was obliterated to make way for construction of the current stadium. In fact, the graves of the Gaon's family were moved *twice* in the postwar period. The original gravestones of the Gaon's immediate family have survived, and Jewish visitors from around the world come to visit. Many leave personal notes containing wishes, hopes and questions, according to an old tradition of leaving notes at the most hallowed graves.



Rūta Puišytė

The Gaon's gravestone today



David Katz

A colorful poster indicating which chapters of Psalms are to be recited on which days of the year according "to the custom of the *Gro*." *Gro* is an acronym for the Gaon, Reb Eyliohtu (the Gaon of Vilna). This poster belonged to the Beys Yankev (Beth Jacob) congregation of leather workers before the war. It now hangs in the *Khor-shul*, the only functioning synagogue in Vilnius, on Pylimo Street (known in Yiddish by its prewar name, *Zaválne*). By most counts, there were 103 synagogues in town before the war, in addition to many smaller prayer rooms and studyhouses.

A surviving prewar poster with the Gaon's instructions