



2 The Vilna Gaon and Haskalah

THE VILNA GAON VIEWED AS A MASKIL BY THE MASKILIM

The cornerstone of the image of the Vilna Gaon as one of the forefathers of Haskalah in eastern Europe was laid by Rabbi Barukh of Shklov (1744–1808), also known as Barukh Schück, one of the pioneers of Haskalah in eastern Europe. In the introduction to his Hebrew translation of Euclid's *Elements*, Rabbi Barukh claims that, when he visited the revered sage in the winter of 1777–78, the latter advocated secular studies: "I heard from the holy one that, to the extent that a person is lacking in knowledge of secular subjects, he will lack one hundredfold in the wisdom of the Torah. For the Torah and secular knowledge are bound together. . . . He commanded me to translate whatever possible of the secular subjects into our holy tongue in order to recover what they [the

Gentiles] had devoured, . . . so that knowledge should proliferate among our people of Israel."¹

Rabbi Barukh's self-assumed mission was to promote secular studies among the Jews of eastern Europe,² to which end he wrote, translated, and published books on secular subjects. As his efforts in this vein met with hostile reactions, it is reasonable to assume his claim that the Gaon approved his activities was motivated by a desire to benefit from the Gaon's enormous prestige. Rabbi Barukh's testimony regarding this "approval" was widely quoted by Haskalah writers and historians of later generations, probably because it was the first evidence of its kind, it could be attributed to the primary source, and it seemed particularly trustworthy in that it had appeared in print during the Gaon's lifetime.

This portrayal of the Gaon as a supporter of Haskalah was to develop still further. The next stage can be illustrated by *Te'udah BeYisrael* (Admonition in Israel) by Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788–1860). In this book, the first programmatic work of the Haskalah movement in Russia, Levinsohn took pains to prove that the aims of Haskalah were consistent with Jewish tradition, and that its very roots could be traced back to that tradition. Arguing this point, Levinsohn cited a long list of Jewish leaders of the past who had not been averse to secular studies, notwithstanding their prowess as men of Torah. In this list Levinsohn included the Gaon of Vilna, relying on the above-cited testimony of Rabbi Barukh of Shklov.

However, his account seems to add some new elements. The Gaon, says Levinsohn, had not merely acknowledged the importance of secular studies and instructed Rabbi Barukh to translate scientific literature into Hebrew; he himself had been "learned in many of the sciences and he would earnestly encourage the study of sciences." Moreover, Levinsohn stated that the Gaon's position in this regard had influenced his disciples, among whom was Rabbi Solomon Zalman of Volozhin, a close disciple of the Gaon, whom Levinsohn described as "learned in grammar and geometry and the other secular subjects necessary for understanding the Talmud." Levinsohn then generalized, adding that "thus were all the holy society of the disciples of Our Master Eliyahu of Blessed Memory."³

Elsewhere, in discussing Levinsohn's efforts to prove the correctness of Haskalah within the tradition, I wrote:

rigorously to study of Torah. Moreover, rumors were now reaching eastern Europe that many of the German maskilim had rejected religious observance, and such rumors could not but create a negative attitude to Haskalah in Russia. However, Fin reports that "it was not long before a steadfast spirit was renewed among the wise men of Israel . . . to arouse the people to secular studies, . . . to teach the Children of Israel knowledge of the duties of the Israelite toward himself, his religion, his king and the country of his birth." Fin thus maintains that the reservations regarding Haskalah, common even among Mitnagdim, reflected a deviation from the Gaon's views and cannot be cited as evidence that he had not launched the movement in Russia.

THE IMAGE OF THE VILNA GAON AS A MASKIL AS A WEAPON IN THE HANDS OF ORTHODOX JUDAISM

The maskilim were not the only ones to cultivate the image of the Gaon as well versed in secular knowledge. Spokesmen for Jewish orthodoxy, too, embraced the idea, out of a desire to do battle with their opponents on the latter's own ground. For an instructive example, we turn to a letter written by Rabbi Eliyahu Rogoler, then rabbi of Kalisz and one of the most prominent figures of the rabbinic world in nineteenth-century Lithuania.⁶ Rabbi Eliyahu's letter, written at the behest of an orthodox leader, Rabbi Zvi Lehren of Amsterdam, was intended to express the response of Russian and Polish rabbis to the first synod of German Reform rabbis, held at Braunschweig in 1844.

One of Rabbi Eliyahu's arguments against the Reform rabbis was that their attempt to introduce religious innovations was closely bound up with their university education. "Apostate philosophy" and the secular sciences—which Rabbi Eliyahu regarded as a single entity—were inspiring the Reform leaders to undermine the foundations of Halakhah and providing them with the doctrinal basis for that attempt. To combat the academic authority of the Reform rabbis, Rabbi Eliyahu drew support from

our holy master, the divine teacher . . . Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, about whom the entire world would bear witness that the greatest scholars

and professors were not worth a straw in comparison to him, being utterly incompetent before him in all the seven sciences. . . . Nevertheless, behold and see what the late Gaon wrote . . . denouncing philosophy, and he took Maimonides to task for having been attracted in some respects to the accursed philosophy. . . . He would always declare that one should study no science but the Talmud, save the science of grammar alone, and he would never study the other sciences except in a place where it was forbidden to meditate on the Torah [i.e., in the toilet].⁷

Whereas the Haskalah depiction of the Gaon as learned in secular knowledge was meant to serve as a model worthy of emulation, the picture drawn in Rabbi Eliyahu's letter had a completely different purpose. First and foremost, here was a person of astounding achievement in secular studies who could therefore serve as an authoritative witness as to the nature of "philosophy." Second, the Gaon was an eloquent illustration of the marginal significance that should be attributed to secular subjects in comparison with the essential study—that of the Torah.

The image of the Gaon as an enlightened scholar assumed yet another aspect in a book titled *Aliyot Eliyahu*, by Rabbi Yehoshu'a Heschel Levine. This book, published in 1856, was the first biography of the Gaon of Vilna. In it Levine combined bona fide biographical elements with highly fanciful descriptions of the Gaon's virtues, producing what could be called a "Mitnagdic" equivalent of a literary genre that was popular in Hasidic circles: namely, fanciful biographies of Hasidic leaders—especially of Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. One of the Gaon's virtues, according to Levine, was his familiarity with secular knowledge: "When he was twelve years old, there was no science too difficult for him. . . . All natural and theoretical sciences were ruled by his strong hand." To corroborate these and other, equally florid, descriptions, the author cites passages in the Gaon's writings in which his secular knowledge is apparent.⁸

Further confirmation of the Gaon's amazing proficiency in the secular sciences could be derived—so claimed Levine—from the "enemy camp" itself. *Aliyot Eliyahu* includes two episodes concerned with scientists' impressions of the Gaon. The first episode relates that when the Gaon paid a visit to Berlin, he was approached by a German professor,

ment and of the turmoil within orthodoxy following the accession to the throne of the new czar, Alexander II. In this changing context Levine's book assumed a polemical significance, not lacking in apologetic overtones. The figure of Eliyahu of Vilna as a *maskil* was held up as refutation of the accusation that the orthodox establishment was opposed to the policies of the "enlightened" czar. At the same time, the very figure who combined secular knowledge with Torah and piety was a weapon to be brandished against "those for whom knowledge and piety have become mutual enemies . . . and whose faith has been lost and rooted out of their mouths."

For a Hasidic version of the Gaon's role in the early Haskalah movement, we turn to the writings of Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn,¹⁷ the leader of Habad (Lubavich) Hasidism from 1920 to 1950 (he was the father-in-law of the last rebbe). In his *Divrei Hayamim Hahem*, he describes the Gaon of Vilna as one who "diligently pursued his studies with unprecedented perseverance—twenty-four hours a day; Torah piety and integrity were his craft." Rabbi Joseph Isaac also reports the Gaon's alleged interest in secular studies and his desire "to increase secular knowledge within Israel in addition to knowledge of the Torah." However, claims the author, despite the Gaon's sterling qualities and virtues, he failed to discern the danger involved in such studies. This shortsightedness was responsible—albeit unintentionally—for the contamination of Lithuanian Jewry with the Berlin brand of Haskalah. In Rabbi Joseph Isaac's words:

For many years the Gaon had told his disciples, his respected brother Rabbi Issachar, and his respected son Rabbi Abraham, of his deep regret that the five books of Moses had not been translated into the Jewish vernacular—Yiddish—with an easily understood commentary, properly arranged and accessible to all.

The Gaon's brother and son, besides being incomparable scholars of the Torah, also possessed a wide knowledge of various sciences and spoke Polish, German, and French. And when it was heard that a great and meticulously observant scholar in Berlin [Moses Mendelssohn] had translated the Pentateuch into lucid German, they chose five of the best students . . . and sent them to Berlin to investigate the character of the learned translator of the Pentateuch and to copy the translation.

The students who had been sent remained in Berlin for more than a year and copied many pages of the translation of the Pentateuch, and brought them to the aforementioned scholars. The latter liked the translation and praised it to the Gaon himself; and his permission was secured for the students to make several dozen copies of the translation, to distribute them among literate persons and set times for public instruction.

The distribution of Mendelssohn's translation among students of Torah and literate persons not only detracted from the brilliance of the Torah's sanctity but served as a bridge over which dozens of pious and highly talented young men from the study houses of Vilna, Shklov, Slutsk, Brisk and Minsk made their way to Berlin to learn the German language and the sciences of medicine, astronomy and geometry, among them Rabbi Barukh Schick, Rabbi Benjamin Zeev Rivelish of Shklov, Rabbi Menasseh of Ilya, Rabbi Pinchas Eliyahu of Vilna (the author of *Sefer Haberit*), and the well-known grammarian Rabbi Solomon Dubnow.

In other words, it was this deplorable error on the part of the Gaon and his disciples that had paved the way for the Berlin Haskalah to infiltrate Lithuania. The Hasidic leaders, however, had taken great care to avoid such unfortunate intrusions because of an admonition handed down to them in the name of the Ba'al Shem Tov, according to which Mendelssohn was a tool of the devil and his desire was "to entice Israel with false opinions . . . to produce those who would deny the Lord and His Torah." It is highly ironic that Rabbi Joseph Isaac adopts the Haskalah position here, which is that the Gaon truly did play a decisive role in the spread of Haskalah in Lithuania. However, what the *maskilim* held to the Gaon's credit was held against him by the Hasidic leader.

The story of the role played by the Gaon and his disciples in introducing Haskalah to Lithuania is a strange mixture of truth and imagination, typical of the historical writing of Rabbi Joseph Isaac. It is true that the men mentioned at the end of the quotation did study science, and some of them were close, to one degree or another, to the tendencies of the Haskalah movement. However, the story of the dissemination of Mendelssohn's translation of the Torah in Lithuania by permission of the Gaon and by his disciples is groundless. Nevertheless, the story does express faithfully the view that was common in Hasidic circles during the

Dov Baer of Mezhirech (d. 1773) assumed the mantle of the movement. He further refined and systematized the teachings of the Besht and succeeded in attracting large numbers of adherents (many from the learned classes) to Hasidism, even from Lithuania, the bastion of traditional rabbinic learning.

This document presents a description of the court of Dov Baer, known as the *magid* (i.e., preacher). It was written by Solomon Maimon (see chapter 6, document 1) who in his late teens or early twenties spent several weeks in Mezhirech.

2. "M"—Mezhirech.
3. "B"—Baer, i.e., Dov Baer.

THE RABBINICAL LEADERS OF VILNA

11. Excommunication of the Hasidim (April 1772)¹

Our brethren, sons of Israel, says the manifesto, as you know, new people have appeared, unimagined by our forefathers, who have formed a sect of *hashudim* [i.e., Hasidim; in the text the word *hashudim*—"suspicious ones"—appears, in a play on words with "Hasidim"] . . . and they associate among themselves and their ways are different from other Children of Israel in their liturgy. . . . And in their recitation of the Eighteen Benedictions they roar in abominable words in the vernacular [Yiddish] and they behave in a crazed manner, and say that their thoughts wander in all worlds. . . . And they belittle the study of the Torah, and repeatedly claim that one should not study much, nor deeply regret one's transgressions. . . . Every day is a festival for them. . . . And while standing during their false prayers, [they] voice sounds that are different, and there is a loud commotion in the town, . . . and they behave like the Vision of the Wheels, upside down and bottom up.² . . . This is just the tip of the iceberg, one of their thousand despicable

ways . . . as the above *hashudim* [Hasidim] have admitted to us, . . . and praise God that their crime was revealed by Heaven, here among us, that they themselves confessed following a thorough investigation. . . . Therefore we have come to inform our brethren, Children of Israel, from near and far: . . . All leaders of our people must wear the mantel of zealotry, zealotry for the Lord of Hosts, to destroy and expunge, and to sound to them the voice of excommunication and banishment. And with God's help we have already uprooted their evil belief from among us, and just as we have uprooted it here, may it be uprooted everywhere. . . . And though they entreat [you], do not believe them . . . for the seven abominations are in their hearts. . . . Until they themselves repent completely, [they] must be divided and dispersed such that two heretics should not be found together, because two of the same breed are prohibited from everything, . . . and it befits the world to separate them.

NOTES

1. As Hasidism spread, it sought to establish itself as an alternative to existing forms of Jewish worship and community—the latter being ex-

pressed by Hasidism's introduction of its own authority for ritual slaughter, which in addition to enhancing the position of the rabbis who super-

Source: *Zemir arizim veharvot zurim* (Vilna, 1772), reprinted by Simon Dubnow, *Hasidica*, supplement to *Heavar 2* (Petrograd, 1918): 22–23. Trans. by G. Svirsky.

Here is the announcement of a grave matter of controversy and unjustified hatred. Therefore it is worthy for the whole community whose heart has been touched with awe of God, and who fears for His word, to be very careful of being a cause or a cause of a cause of damage, . . . for therein also last year, after the passing of his honor the Gaon of blessed memory of Vilna, I wrote a dreadful warning to all of our faction not to speak ill after the bier of a Torah scholar, not a hint of reproach or the hint of a hint, without any permission in the world. But this time now, in the hard times we are undergoing, perhaps it might be suspected that the reins were loosed, perish the thought, because many people lean on the great tree, none other than his honor ha-Gaon he-Hasid of blessed memory. Therefore I have come again with a double and redoubled warning to our entire faction, near and far, in every place of their dwelling, without anyone giving permission to himself, to open mouth or tongue against the honor of the Torah, the honor of ha-Gaon he-Hasid of blessed memory. For it is clearly known to us that he was not responsible, perish the thought, for acting greatly against us, and all the days of his life the obstacle and error did not proceed from the ruler, perish the thought.³⁰

Thus it turns out that, soon after the death of the Gaon, Rabbi Shneur Zalman warned his Hasidim not to dishonor his memory. Now, after his release from prison, he hastened to warn them again about the same thing. He knew that his Hasidim felt strong resentment against the Gaon. He probably was apprehensive lest those feelings might grow stronger and harsher because of his imprisonment. With his request to restrain such feelings, Rabbi Shneur Zalman argues that it was not the Gaon who had called for addressing the authorities. He repeats that statement in more general terms: "All the days of his life the obstacle and error did not proceed from the ruler, perish the thought." It is somewhat ironic that the degeneration of the struggle against the Hasidim to the level of informing against them to the authorities made it possible for Rabbi Shneur Zalman to say something to the credit of the Gaon. True, the Gaon had initiated and led the struggle against the Hasidim; however, he had never supported an appeal to the authorities.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Shneur Zalman's attitude toward the Gaon was far more complex than it appears. The very year that he wrote to his followers in favor of the Gaon, he wrote in a rather different spirit to Rabbi Phinehas Horowitz, the rabbi of Frankfurt am Main: "Please pardon me

THE CRISIS IN TORAH STUDY AS VIEWED
BY RABBI HAYYIM OF VOLOZHIN

Rabbi Hayyim's *Nefesh ha-hayyim* provides important insight into the crisis of Torah study in general and into the motivations of Torah scholars attracted to Hasidism in particular. This insight is of special significance for our discussion, since it shows how Rabbi Hayyim himself understood the nature of the crisis. At the beginning of the fourth section of *Nefesh ha-hayyim*, which is entirely devoted to elucidating the virtue of Torah study, Rabbi Hayyim reveals what impelled him to write:

I also intended to write about the greatness of the obligation to deal with Torah, . . . because it has been many days for Israel that occupation with the holy Torah has been laid low in every generation. And now, in these generations, it has fallen very very far, and it is placed in the obscurity of the lowest step, may the Merciful One save us. As our eyes see now that most of the sons of our nation suffer greatly from bearing the burden of a livelihood, may God have mercy. And some of those who desire closeness to God have chosen for themselves to place the main emphasis of their study in books of *yira* and ethics all the time, without placing the main burden of their occupation with the holy Torah in Scripture and in many Halakhot; . . . may God forgive them, for their intention is for heaven, but this is not the way in which the light of the Torah dwells.²⁶

Rabbi Hayyim describes the crisis in Torah study as a two-stage process, in which the latter is more severe than the former. In writing about the early stage, Rabbi Hayyim appears to allude to slackening support for yeshivot, a point to which we shall return. This phenomenon is connected with the dwindling of economic resources, which he mentions. However, in speaking of "these generations" he refers to the exacerbation of the crisis following Hasidism's rise and the increase in its power. Rabbi Hayyim views neglect of the study of Halakhah and concentration on books of *yira* and ethics as a severe symptom of the crisis. But in describing the Hasidim as people "who desire closeness to God," and in saying "may God forgive them, for their intention is for heaven," Rabbi Hayyim admits the purity of the intentions of those who depart from Torah study.

Later Rabbi Hayyim expands his description of the gravity of the crisis, and the nature of those drawn to Hasidism becomes clearer:

And now, in these generations, for our many sins, the opposite is the case, and the high one is lowered. For quite a few have placed all the essence of their study most of the day only in books of *yira* and ethics, saying that this is the essence of man in his world, to be occupied always with these, for they inflame hearts, and then his heart will surrender and will subdue and smash the [evil] impulse from its appetites and to straighten itself in good virtues. And the crown of Torah is left in a corner. And with my own eyes I have seen one region where this has spread so much that in most of the houses of study there are mainly many books of ethics, and not even one complete set of Talmud; . . . and soon, with the passage of time, they could be, perish the thought, without a rabbi or guide. And what will become of the Torah?²⁷

The turn to occupation with books of *yira* and ethics is described here as a revolution. This probably refers to Torah scholars who once "place[d] the main emphasis of their study" on the Talmud and *posqim*, but who, after they were affected by Hasidic propaganda, turned their backs on that occupation and devoted themselves to the study of ethical works. It is typical of Rabbi Hayyim that he did not conceal the positive motivations of those former Torah scholars. They pore over books of *yira* and ethics because that is the path that, in their opinion, promises the smashing of the evil impulse and moral regeneration. These achievements are so important because they are prerequisite to the effort to cleave to God.

Two works by Mitnagdim who argue against the claims that Hasidic propaganda used in order to draw certain scholars away from the traditional mode of Torah study can also teach us about those claims. The works in question are the already mentioned *Nefesh ha-hayyim* and an earlier work, *Keter Torah*, by Rabbi Phinehas ben Judah.²⁸ Following in the footsteps of Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda, author of the medieval Spanish ethical work *Hovot Halevavot*, the author of *Keter Torah* presents his argument in the form of a debate with the evil impulse. The evil impulse disguises itself and dissembles, piling up arguments whose only purpose is to keep scholars away from their studies. While the author does not identify the