

Selections from  
**The Ascents of Eliyahu**  
[Aliyot Eliyahu]  
by Joshua Heschel Levin  
(1856)

The story of his life and activity

As the sun rises in the morning, so did an eternal light rise  
And the earth shone from the glory of the great  
holy one in Israel

Translated by  
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On Tuesday, the first day of Passover, 5480 after the creation of the world (1720), a child was born, a son was given to the great Rabbi, the saintly Reb Shlomo Zalman of Vilna, born to him by the saintly woman Mrs. Trayna from the city of Seltz near the Holy Community of Brisk-of-Lithuania, and they named him Eliyahu. A shoot came out of the stock of the gaon,<sup>1</sup> our teacher Reb Moshe Rivkes of Vilna, the author of the *Be'er ha-Gola*,<sup>2</sup> and a limb from the root of the exalted gaon, the light of Israel and its holiness, our teacher Reb Moshe Kramer, chairman of the court and head of the yeshiva in the Holy Community of Vilna. He was his father's firstborn, and superior to all the geonim of the generation. His four brothers, whose names were known throughout the world for their splendor, eminent rabbis and geonim, made him their champion.

From the day of his birth he gave signs that he would be an eternal light, the joy of each generation. The glow of his face was like an angel of God, entirely beautiful and handsome. From his youth all who saw him were pleased by him, for a man's wisdom will brighten his face. His deeds also showed that he would raise the yoke of Torah, reveal deep things, and

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<sup>1</sup>(pl. geonim) Lit., "greatness," but used in this period as an appellation for a particularly learned scholar. Eliyahu of Vilna, because of his extraordinary erudition, is referred too simply as "the Gaon" or "the Gra" (acronym for Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu).

<sup>2</sup>A gloss on Joseph Karo's code of Jewish law, the *Shulhan Arukh*.

satisfy craving souls. Even in distant lands, the reputation of his holiness and restraint increased daily.

Only until six years of age did he learn with a teacher, and from then on the voice of God called in the ears of the greatest scholars, "Keep an eye on this lad, a source of illumination, from whose mouth pearls of wisdom shall emerge, whose lips are lilies in the company of sages." At the age of six and a half he lectured in the synagogue on a portion that his father taught him. At the third Sabbath meal his father brought him before the gaon Reb Heschel, chairman of the court of the Holy Community of Vilna, who tested his ability to say such things on his own and to advance his own novel interpretations. He gave him an hour to think. After this, young Eliyahu demonstrated wonders, raising more questions --which he would ask and then answer himself -- all in a singular manner. The great scholars who were sitting before him saw and were dumbfounded; they wanted to hug and kiss him. After hearing all this they proclaimed that there was no one as intelligent or as wise as he.

At the age of eight he began to delve into esoteric matters to understand the words of knowledge in the *aggadot* of our Sages, which are in the form of parables. The principles of true knowledge lit his path, and all his ways were peaceful without strain or difficulty.

By the age of nine he was fluent in Scripture, Mishna, and Gemara. He satiated himself with their reasoning and with the aggadic *midrashim* that sprout from it. His intelligence served him in difficult matters: Talmud and legal literature, the responsa, early and late commentaries.<sup>3</sup> Who knew the secrets hidden from all in the book *Ets Hayyim*<sup>4</sup>? If it was sealed from the eyes of all living things, God would show it to him. He succeeded in studying books of the revealed and the hidden<sup>5</sup> and he studied all the writings of the *Ets Hayyim* in half a year; he was assisted by God.

At the age of ten he had a permanent companion, closer than a brother, his neighbor, the famous rabbi and gaon, our teacher Reb Aryeh Leb of blessed memory, chairman of the court

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<sup>3</sup>"Early" authorities are rabbis from before c. 1600, before the publication of the *Shulhan Arukh*.

<sup>4</sup>*Tree of Life* by Hayyim Vital, sixteenth-century kabbalist of Safed, containing the teachings of his teacher Isaac Luria (known as "Ari," an acronym for Ashkenazi Rabbi Yitshak).

<sup>5</sup>"Revealed" Torah includes Talmud, halakha, etc.; the "hidden" wisdom is kabbala.

of Chechnowitz, who was his partner in the study of *gefet*.<sup>6</sup> They set up watches with scheduled times. He set aside only a few hours a day, to faithfully study that which flows from the wellsprings of knowledge, all the sections of the *Zohar* and *Pardes*<sup>7</sup> and the writings of the Ari of blessed memory. He stretched out his hand and encountered it by himself, without a companion. In six months he went from chapter to chapter, covering all of the *Zohar*'s teachings, and the light of his mind spread over it, arriving at the first principle, knowledge of God.

By the age of eleven, any praise would be damningly faint. None of the men of wisdom and knowledge could clearly comprehend the spirit of his mind, which flowed like a spring. On the day of his rejoicing, which was the night of Simhat Torah,<sup>8</sup> he remembered that at a particular time he had pledged to study the tractates *Zevahim* and *Menahot*,<sup>9</sup> and to complete them by Simhat Torah. But he had not yet begun his work, for during the entire year his mind was occupied with *gefet*, the first four sections of the Mishna,<sup>10</sup> and with early and late legal writings. At that moment he was driven by intense love for God, and his eyes remained open that entire night. A good and noble person slept there, the pride of the generation, wise and erudite, knowledgeable in secrets, our late teacher Mikhel of blessed memory, of Datnavi. He awoke in the middle of the night and wondered where the boy had gone. He entered the room, which was nothing less than the house of God, wherein he found him preoccupied with the study of Torah, in its glory and splendor, on page fifty of tractate *Zevahim* [which is less than half-

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<sup>6</sup>An acronym for Gemara, Perush ("the commentary," i.e. the commentary of Rashi [d. 1105]), and Tosafot (12th-13th cen. French commentary). A page of Talmud is composed primarily of these three texts.

<sup>7</sup>Refers to the *Pardes Rimonim* [Pomegranate Orchard] of Moses Cordovero, the sixteenth-century Safed kabbalist.

<sup>8</sup>"Rejoicing of the Torah": The holiday in which the yearly cycle of the Torah reading is completed and begun anew.

<sup>9</sup>"Animal Sacrifices" and "Meal Offerings," respectively, two difficult tractates of the Talmud.

<sup>10</sup>The Mishna is divided into six sections: Seeds, Festivals, Women, Torts, Holy Offerings, and Purity. The last two sections were not commonly studied as they pertain mainly to the Temple service. *Zevahim* and *Menahot* are in the fifth section.

way through the tractate]. Upon seeing all this before him, Reb Mikhel raised his voice: "In only two hours you studied fifty pages of difficult matters?" . . . He began testing him with questions on the complex passages in the *gefet* of those fifty pages. On each of those complex passages he gave satisfactory answers and multiple possibilities. After testing him thus ten times over, Reb Mikhel said to himself, "I am now certain that his light will shine on all those who dwell on the earth, for even in his youth his brilliance confounds the moon and shames the sun."

He returned before dawn and found that he had begun tractate *Menahot* and that he had studied more than half of it. He said to himself, "Who could match your ambitions?" and said to himself as before, "Who could believe the quickness of his learning?" He began testing him again on the complex passages in the half which he had studied that night and found him more than proficient, indeed, extraordinarily keen. He concluded that he was nothing less than an angel, for he could resolve any Talmudic query. He blessed him and said, "Your name shall be blessed in the community of the upright." He was not still until he fulfilled his pledge; he completed the tractates *Zevahim* and *Menahot* before the morning prayers and prayed with the congregation with great joy and gladness in his soul, rejoicing on Simhat Torah.

At the age of twelve it was not known that he had internalized all the seven sciences with ultimate precision and accuracy. The elders of that generation, all pious performers of God's will and giants of Torah, decided in their old age to study Maimonides's Laws of the Sanctification of the Month<sup>11</sup> with its commentaries, for they knew how useful this study would be for many issues. They were occupied with this for half a year, when they decided to see the ways of God. They instructed that spheres be constructed for them in order to understand the movement of the planets: their conjunctions and oppositions, their moons and the length of their periods, their positions in each of the constellations, and the times they set and rise. The month arrived when they convened, each with his sphere in hand, and they attempted to analyze the subject. But they failed and could not determine the paths of the planets, for the craftsman who made the spheres, due to his lack of comprehension, did not anticipate the errors which would arise at the end, and in this difficult work he did not adjust the axes and the horizons, without which there can be no correct wisdom.

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<sup>11</sup>A section of the *Mishneh Torah*, the Code of Maimonides, which contains astronomical calculations.

A few days before they convened -- he was about eight -- the power of his superior and boundless wisdom led him to think that he could construct a heavenly sphere by his own intelligence and by his own good and correct thinking. He had dabbled in astronomical works for a few days, about half an hour daily. In these hours he would examine the book *Tekhnat ha-Shamayim*<sup>12</sup> and he became aware of the problems, the simple as well as the complex; he found that in this science a few words signify much. Because he was astute he waited for the day of their convention and kept the matter to himself while the great scholars of the generation were preoccupied for many hours with numerous problems concerning the project. When they had nowhere to turn he entered the worthy council. He made a request, saying, "May I say something? Not to increase my honor or to detract, God forbid, from the honor of the gentlemen . . . I merely seek a technique of making a heavenly sphere from wooden hoops using a proper method, in order to complete this project . . ." He pointed to a certain type of branch. The craftsmen, who were foiled in their construction of the spheres, saw the resolution of their perplexity and attended to their work with a great diligence, as befit their intellectual level, finding that his words were completely accurate. Seeing that he was on target, they all agreed that he was exceedingly brilliant in *gefet* and that he was facile in all the exalted sciences . . .

At the age of thirteen and a day he took upon himself great piety and restraint. Who was his equal in offering novel interpretations in halakha and aggada? . . . He pushed back the frontier of Torah by training numerous and honored students who delved into the complexities of the halakha, but none of them even reached his ankle . . . All his days and moments were spent studying God's Torah and his soul cleaved to it. He listened to its true language and resided in its depths.

For six years he researched and carefully examined the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the *Tosefta*,<sup>13</sup> *Mekhilta*, *Sifra*, and *Sifre*.<sup>14</sup> He illuminated the obscurities of the

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<sup>12</sup>*The Construction of the Heavens* by Raphael Halevi of Hanover. This book was first published in 1756, when the Gaon was 36, making the details of this story somewhat apocryphal.

<sup>13</sup>A legal text contemporary with the Mishna.

<sup>14</sup>Halakhic Midrashim on Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers/Deuteronomy, respectively.

variant texts, and had no equal in Talmudic analysis. He opened it wide, and all said, "Happy is the people who have one such as he" . . .

For another six years he occupied himself with the words of the early and late legal authorities . . . In attempting to account for the difficulties in their works, he did not defer to their greatness, wisdom or holiness. Rather, he strove with all his might to understand the holy words of the Talmudic sages whose words are all crackling embers of fire. With one letter of the Sages he pushed aside many words of the later authors . . .

He was exceedingly learned in grammar: verbs, pointing, cantillation marks, and the cantillation of Job, Proverbs, and Psalms<sup>15</sup> . . . He first mastered arithmetic and trigonometry, algebra and geometry, and subsequently music, as our teacher, may he rest in Eden, mentions in his commentary on the *Tikkunim*.<sup>16</sup> He stated that the cantillation of the Torah, the songs of the Levites and the secrets of the *Tikkune ha-Zohar* cannot be known without it. In medicine, he knew anatomy and its related subjects. But as regards practical pharmaceuticals, he wanted to learn it from the contemporary physicians but his father decreed that he should not study it in order not to squander time from his Torah study -- for after mastering it he would have to go out and save lives.

Above all he knew astronomy, turning to it in his youth, telling it, "You are my servant." For the early prophets prophesied, "Lift up your eyes on high and see: who has created these? He who brings out their host by number, etc."<sup>17</sup> . . . and this knowledge also complements the statements of the Sages regarding the sanctification of the month<sup>18</sup> . . . and is necessary for

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<sup>15</sup>The entire Hebrew Bible is noted with cantillation marks that punctuate each verse and also serve as musical notation for public reading. Job, Proverbs, and Psalms have their own, more complex cantillation system.

<sup>16</sup>The *Tikkune ha-Zohar*, a part of the *Zohar* which is structured as commentary on the first portion of Genesis.

<sup>17</sup>Isaiah 40:26.

<sup>18</sup>The Jewish calendar is based largely on the phases of the moon. In the rabbinic period, a new lunar month was "sanctified" after witnesses testified that they had seen the new moon.

understanding the secret of intercalation<sup>19</sup> in complex passages of tractates *Rosh ha-Shanna* and *Eruvin* . . .

He knew philosophy completely. He once said that he derived two things from it: the seventy forces within man and one other thing. There was no science too advanced for him in either natural philosophy or mathematics, for his strong hand ruled over them all. Even witchcraft, which the Sanhedrin<sup>20</sup> and the tannaim<sup>21</sup> knew in their day . . . he knew and investigated; he was only missing the knowledge of the composition of grasses and their final construction.

Now that we have described a small part of his vast knowledge and intelligence, let us return to his numerous deeds which are more important than his wisdom. Just as his spiritual powers were boundless, surpassing the human limit, so did he restrain his physical desires, saying, "Come no further!" His beholders were amazed at his endurance and at how one so weary from a day full of Torah and devotion was able to take on such an unbearable burden. Yet his face was not depressed and the brightness of his appearance cast light about him . . .

From the age of thirteen and a day until the day of his death, he did not look further than his four cubits.<sup>22</sup> If we carefully consider all the actions that he performed throughout his life, from beginning to end, we would see that they were all done with ultimate diligence and perfection. This pertains to the personal peril he took on in his war with his physical desires, as well as the difficulty of the commitment he took upon himself throughout his life, not to sleep more than two hours per day. He never slept more than a half-hour at a time and during that half-hour his lips would whisper halakhot and aggadot. When the half-hour was over he would

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<sup>19</sup>The lunar year lags behind the solar year by about eleven days, but the lunar-based holidays must fall out in their solar-based seasons. In order to correct this discrepancy, an extra month was inserted or "intercalated" in the lunar year at certain intervals. The knowledge of this procedure was considered difficult to master.

<sup>20</sup>The highest court in the Jewish commonwealth of the rabbinic period, composed of seventy-one elders.

<sup>21</sup>The sages of the Mishna.

<sup>22</sup>In rabbinic literature, an individual's space is four cubits (about six feet). Within this space one was constrained by the demands of the halakha, giving rise to the expression, "the four cubits of the halakha." The point here is that the Gaon did not aspire to anything beyond his own space, in which he was thoroughly immersed in the halakha.

gather strength like a lion, wash his hands,<sup>23</sup> and begin studying aloud; then he would sleep for another half-hour. This was the quantity of his sleep: three half-hours during the night and one during the day. He employed strategies against his desires, commanding them at will, such that he distanced himself from what was not truly good. He tolerated the pain of hunger, desiring not to enjoy this world. In his youth he would eat a thin piece of bread soaked in water, the size of two olives, eating this in the morning and at night. He did not taste it, but would swallow it whole.

His manners were like those of the early authorities, may they rest in Eden. He never walked four cubits without Torah or tefillin, and never spoke idly. Even when he sat in the company of learned men, he would listen only to true Torah. From youth, he would study for long periods in the forests, in a desolate house, secluding himself in a place unknown to others. God chose for him a wife, the pious Mrs. Hanna, the daughter of the wealthy Rabbi Judah of blessed memory of Kaidan; his helpmeet in holiness was pure. Only she would occasionally visit his secret place, staying there to keep her eye on him and sustain him.

When he was still young, he took upon himself to go into exile, to be a wanderer. For many years he roamed in exile, in holiness and purity, cloaked in a tallit and crowned with tefillin. He even passed through Berlin and Lisa. Wherever he passed, great things were told of him.

When he returned from his exile he hired, due to his weariness, a carriage for traveling day and night. He paid the rider a fee for the time that he waited while he said the *amida* prayer.<sup>24</sup> Once, when the Gaon was standing and reciting the prayer, the carriage rider rode off with the horses and with all of his possessions, leaving him empty-handed. When he returned home he studied Torah in great poverty. During the day he would close his shutters while studying and study by candlelight in order that no one disturb him. This was his way in his youth, studying Torah for its own sake. He would review the entire Babylonian Talmud each month.

There occurred the following incident: In his large populated city, the Holy Community

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<sup>23</sup>This refers to the ritual hand-washing required after sleeping.

<sup>24</sup>Lit., "standing." This prayer, also called the Eighteen Blessings, is the central prayer of all three daily services and is said standing.



decided to give him a weekly stipend for the sustenance of his family. A certain communal officer, whom the Holy Community would send to deliver the stipend, kept the money for himself and did not deliver it. This went on for some years, but the Gaon told no one. He suffered such poverty that his pious wife and his small children had nothing with which to keep themselves alive. She came to him, and he instructed her to go with her small children to his neighbors during mealtime; as it is the manner of children to ask for food when seeing others eating, they will be given food. He did not wish to reveal the matter of his stipend being cut off, due to his great faith, and so that no one would be humiliated on his account. Finally, when that officer became ill and was close to death he confessed before all that for a number of years he did not give the Gaon the stipend that was sent with him. The officer then died . . .

His great intelligence and exertion in the service of God allowed him to resist any adversary and removed from his heart all worry and sadness; he served God with joy and gladness of heart all his days . . .

How dedicated he was to distancing himself from the company of his family, his sons and daughters . . . to the point that he never inquired of his sons and daughters as to their livelihood and their condition. If one of his sons ever came to town, although he would rejoice greatly, not having seen him for a year or two, he would not ask him about the state of his livelihood . . . His son, the great rabbi, a man of Torah and *yir'ah*, our late teacher Shlomo Zalman of blessed memory, when about five or six, was gentle and his father's favorite; he was loved by his father and was his joy all the time, for he recognized his goodness and saintliness. Once the boy became ill and before he regained his strength the Gaon decided to travel to his place of seclusion . . . There the wellsprings of nature were shut up, to the point that he forgot his family for days. One day he went to the bathhouse -- where, as is well-known, one is forbidden to contemplate Torah matters -- and he began to consider his affairs. He remembered that he had left his home for more than a month and his precious son was left lying on a sickbed. Overwhelmed with compassion, he directed that his carriage be prepared to return to his home in order to inquire about his son.

Because of such things it is fitting to call our teacher a Hasid and Kadosh.<sup>25</sup> It is impossible to describe his exertion in Torah study; he reviewed what he learned hundreds and

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<sup>25</sup>A pious and holy man.

thousands of times, each chapter and each tractate. Out of love for the Holy Torah he once, during a long night in Tevet,<sup>26</sup> reviewed one Mishna in the tractate *Taharot*<sup>27</sup> all night long. In his youth -- during the winter when the cold was fierce -- he would study in a room where no furnace was burning in order to prevent sleep. Who could relate his saintliness and piety, that he not once engaged in idle talk, and never took on the yoke of the community or the rabbinate, or any burden. He was a hater of ill-gotten gain.

Even greater than his enormous learning, relative to the great scholars, was his sense that he was inferior to any man on the face of the earth. One can discern his great humility in the fact that he almost never cited any scholar with whom he disagreed; rather, he simply discussed the matter according to his usual method, as if he were discussing the word of God, in order not to be glorified by the shame of the criticized scholar or author. He studied the holy words of the sages with the flame of the love of God and the fear of His majesty, in holiness and purity and inestimably wondrous *deveikut*. While studying Torah and serving God he was enraptured and overtaken by love for it, to the point that his soul nearly left his body . . .

His major disciples, from the day they entered his study house, tried to shorten the distance between themselves and the source of their life. They were not idle in their course and were not weary in their pursuit, for they sensed their immense distance from him and they knew that they had a long way to reach their destination.

The premier student was the gaon, the saintly light of the exile, our teacher Rabbi Hayyim of blessed memory, chairman of the court and head of the yeshiva of the Holy Community of Volozhin. He gazed upon the beautiful splendor of his Torah with an open eye. Though he was very powerful -- for he slept in the valley of halakha from youth -- and skilled in the analysis of Torah and basked in its shade, he was unwaveringly humble and reverent toward God. When he came to stand before the Gaon to hear from his mouth words of the living God, the Gaon's lucidity and sharpness passed over his face and purified it, breaking its pride. Since he first perceived the awesomeness of the Gaon's mind, how great were his deeds! how deep were his thoughts in the revealed and in the hidden! He desired to dwell under the

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<sup>26</sup>A winter month in the Jewish calendar.

<sup>27</sup>A difficult tractate in the mishnaic section Purity.

shadow of his beam . . .<sup>28</sup>

Our teacher, a holy and ascetic man . . . encouraged his disciples to study in a proper sequence, so that their legs would not falter.

First, he directed a student to serve God, to be fluent in the twenty-four holy books<sup>29</sup> with the pointing and cantillation marks carefully noted, and he tested him on all these. The science of grammar was a priority. Many intelligent and worthy individuals realized that when they discussed the science of grammar with him they could not hold their own . . .

Then he instructed that the six sections of the Mishna be fluent in his mouth, with the prominent commentaries; the correct version of the text was of foremost importance. His major disciples saw that the knowledge of God was within him . . . that he made known new interpretations that our fathers the early commentators never imagined . . .

After this he directed him to study the methods of analysis in the sea of Talmud; to examine closely Rashi's commentary, for it is very precise to those who understand; to study the comments of the Tosafists of blessed memory, on condition that it be done honestly. He detested the excessive asking of questions.<sup>30</sup> He required him to acknowledge what was true, even that which came from schoolchildren; indeed, he should never insist on his own theory in the face of the truth. [If he followed this advice] he would succeed and be enlightened in his studies . . .

At the age of forty he acquired an additional measure of understanding, becoming like a flowing spring; time does not permit the writing of all that was revealed to him. From then on he neither wrote nor composed, except by means of his disciples. All the compositions that he himself wrote were written before he reached the age of forty . . .

Our holy teacher was like one of the early authorities<sup>31</sup>. Since the period of the

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<sup>28</sup> Discussion of other students of the Gaon follows.

<sup>29</sup>The books of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>30</sup>A reference to the classic pilpul method of study where theoretical questions were raised for the sake of demonstrating one's intellectual prowess and erudition.

<sup>31</sup>Talmudic authorities from c. 1000-1600 CE. The opinions of these rabbis carried great legal weight.

Saboraim<sup>32</sup> and Geonim<sup>33</sup> no one had arisen like him in terms of his Torah and his numerous compositions on both the written and oral laws. On the hidden knowledge, he composed more than seventy volumes. All his words were clear and concise, like the stars in the heavens; the entire world lay beneath him.

He opened the doors of the house of God with his complete commentary on the Bible; he provided a wonderful aid with his commentary on the entire Mishna, using a method unimagined by our fathers. He removed the obscurities impeding a clear understanding of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the Sifra, Sifre, Tosefta, and Mekhilta; in vain did the earlier builders exert themselves to resolve the difficulties, ultimately producing forced interpretations . . . His commentaries on *gefet* dripped sweetness . . . and he wrote great commentaries on many passages of the *Zohar* . . . on the *Shulhan Arukh* . . . and on the aggadot of the Talmud. . . . He wrote a long composition on astronomy . . . explaining the constellations, . . . and wrote three hundred and three new principles in algebra, never before seen in the Land of Judah . . . A lover of mitzvot such as he is never satiated with mitzvot: He decided to travel to the Holy Land and set out by way of Prussia and Hungary. When he arrived at Koenigsburg he sent a letter to his family, full of ethical teaching, *yir'ah*, and proper guidance in the fear of God . . . In his old age they asked him many times why he did not go the Holy Land, but he did not answer. Once, after much entreaty, he answered: "I do not have permission from above" . . . When he set out for the Holy Land, many wealthy individuals provided his expenses, and when he returned he reimbursed each one. . . .

The greatest of all his awesome deeds is that he did not gratify himself with anything but his own labor in wisdom, knowledge, and skill. When, after his great toil, the Heavens pitied him and the wellsprings of knowledge were revealed to him, he considered this a gift from God. Without his own exertion he eschewed such heavenly communications, even though the Heavens wished to confer them on him without labor or exertion, by means of revelations. But he did not pay attention to this; it was near him, yet he distanced himself from it. His disciple -- the gaon and saintly man, our teacher Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, may he rest in Eden -- testified that he heard him say many times, "I do not wish to comprehend Torah through the

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<sup>32</sup>Babylonian rabbis following the compilation of the Talmud (c. 500-700 CE).

<sup>33</sup>Rabbinic leaders of Babylonian Jewry between c. 700-1038 C.E.

agency of any intermediary at all. Rather, my eyes are raised to Him, may His name be blessed, awaiting whatever He wants to reveal to me . . . I want nothing save that which is in His mouth" . . . Moreover, our teacher used to say that even that which the soul perceives during sleep . . . by means of an ascent of the soul . . . was not very significant in his opinion. What is most important is what one apprehends in this world, by means of exertion . . . but that which the soul perceives during sleep, without exertion or free will, is but a reward in which God gives us a taste of the world to come in this world . . . In order to perfect his generation he established a house full of Torah; that men should at all times be posted at their watch . . . studying Scripture, Mishna, and Gemara. He would sit at their head at scheduled times and set out before them . . . a program of how to be fluent in the entire Talmud within a few years, and to know the sources of the laws perfectly. He cautioned them against engaging in too much pilpul, saying that occasionally it is used for provocation, God forbid; that it is very destructive to the will of God, for by its practice iniquity multiplies and sin increases, and pleasant fellowship is ruined, and truth is driven out of God's community, when its purpose should only be to arrive at the halakha. They accepted this upon themselves and studied for eighteen years during his lifetime. He was pleased that his good will was followed and they, by gazing day and night at the light of his Torah, merited the wondrous pleasure and light that is indescribable.

When he reached the age of seventy-one -- this was in the year 5551 (1791) -- the weakness of old age weighed heavily upon him; his strength was increasingly deteriorating. His bodily powers weakened and he became ill. Our teacher did not then seek out doctors nor did he turn his attention to worldly delights to amuse himself, to distract his thoughts from his sickness, for the powers of his soul were not dissipated. They strove to be delighted only by the love of God and his Torah which was planted in his heart since his youth. He sought the company of the Rabbi, the holy Maggid<sup>34</sup> of Dubno, sending him a letter in his own hand, requesting that he come to him to calm his soul with his pleasant parables that delight both God and men . . .

In the year 5558 (1797) on the eve of Yom Kippur, he called to his children and said,

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<sup>34</sup>An itinerant preacher; the Maggid of Dubno was known for his use of everyday parables to illustrate the meaning of a biblical passage.

"Gather near me and I will bless you." All his sons, daughters and grandchildren gathered near him, and he placed his hand on the head of his oldest son, the great learned Rabbi, Reb Avraham. He blessed him and began to cry. All those in attendance were amazed; they were gripped by fear. "It is incredible," they said, "he has never acted this way." But they did not dare to ask him. On the day following Yom Kippur he was seriously ill; each day he became more ill. Even the Sukkot<sup>35</sup> holiday was made sorrowful and all happiness was darkened. On Monday, the third day of the intermediate days of Sukkot, he was exceedingly weak. But our teacher, despite his physical frailty, was invigorated by love and he gathered strength in order to fulfill the mitzva of lulav and etrog<sup>36</sup> in its proper time, with immense joy of the spirit, as he always did. While these were still in his hands he straightened his legs and passed away. He died at a ripe old age, at the age of seventy-eight. All those in attendance, seeing that the angel of death had prevailed, that their crown had fallen, broke out crying. The joy of the holiday turned to mourning, and through all the streets of Vilna one could hear only wailing. All those in the city, from young to old, came out to accompany him to his final resting place. Wherever the bad news reached that the eternal light had been extinguished, there was great mourning and lamentation for the Jews. The great geonim in each and every city arose to eulogize him and tell of his glory. They called for crying, lamentation, and intense mourning . . .

After the sun set, his disciples spread forth from their shepherd. They made their champion the gaon, light of the exile, the pious and erudite man, our teacher Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, may he rest in Eden, disciple of the Gaon. He began to disseminate his Torah . . . A number of the Gaon's disciples went to the Holy Land and set up their study house there in order to illuminate the Eastern lands with the eternal light, the Torah of their teacher the Gaon, the Hasid, may he rest in Eden. There they increased and were successful, and cast a new light on Zion and Jerusalem.

His sons, the great Rabbis, his son-in-law the great Rabbi Reb Moshe of Pinsk, and his

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<sup>35</sup>Seven-day "Festival of Booths," commemorating the erection of booths by the Israelites during the exodus and celebrating the fall harvest. It is an especially joyous holiday.

<sup>36</sup>Palm branch and citron, two of the four species that are taken in hand during prayers on Sukkot.

major disciples labored together to disseminate his Torah through his numerous compositions, publishing many of them. But many more books remain in manuscript . . . The wealthy and generous men here in Vilna also labored to realize his idea and establish his large study house; they expanded its structure and its floors, making it a great sight. They also collected a large library there. To this day, great Torah scholars and men of *yir'ah*, who day and night are never silent in their Torah study, are established there . . . The leaders of Vilna stream to the holy study house and have set up groups: Some study Alfasi,<sup>37</sup> some study Talmud, and some Mishna, Scripture, or Midrash. They have also set up nighttime watches. They are not silent for even one second . . . so that the study of the Holy Torah may not cease for even one second in the study house of the great Gaon . . .

Happy are you, exalted city of Vilna! All of them, from the old to the young, received some spiritual benefit: each according to his capacity. All their efforts in Torah study and charity were inspired by him -- by his awe and his admonition . . . By his guidance and admonition they became a large community of Torah disseminators, of people who are painstaking in mitzvot, who detest mastery over others, and give honor to God. Their wealth did not make them arrogant, they pleased all those who sought God, they made their Torah primary and their professions secondary; Torah and the worship of God were their only occupation. Then nearly all his fellow residents decided to tell the outlying people -- for his teaching was primarily to those nearby -- that they should not squander their time; that every man should keep an eye on his schedule, judging the seconds, and that their time should be used only for the most precious things, which are Torah study and the worship of God; to be zealous and very diligent. For all effort and skill besides this will not benefit at all; nothing but Torah and the worship of God which weaken the machinations of one's desire and its schemes . . . We must give thanks to God who sent before us a pillar of fire to illumine our dark times . . . with true Torah and pure *yir'ah* of God, without whom who knows what would be our present lot . . . May the good God bestow goodness, may what He planted bear fruit for us and for our children forever, to grasp the tree of life of Torah and *yir'ah* of God, to walk on the true path which He has shown us, for our good always.

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<sup>37</sup>Talmudic code of the North African halakhist, Isaac Alfasi (d. 1103).

# 9

## Marriage and Torah Study Among the *Lomdim* in Lithuania in the Nineteenth Century

IMMANUEL ETKES

Among the major expressions of the process of modernization in European Jewry during the nineteenth century was, as is well known, the change in the nature of the family. The traditional family, whose values and characteristics were consolidated and took root during the Middle Ages, gradually gave way to the modern family. Among the Jews of Russia, to whom the process of modernization came markedly later than in Central and Western Europe, the change in the character of the family also came relatively late. Harsh criticism of various aspects of the traditional family can indeed be found in the autobiographical writings of the maskilim of Eastern Europe from the late eighteenth century on.<sup>1</sup> However, actual changes in the nature of the family only began to take place at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Yet even before the traditional Jewish family in Eastern Europe was influenced by the trend towards modernization, it was affected by factors