

# **The Genius**

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# The Genius

Elijah of Vilna and the  
Making of Modern Judaism

ELIYAHU STERN

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*For Sholom and Batya Stern, my Abba and Imma*

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## A Note on the Transliteration

THE TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM IN THIS BOOK WAS DESIGNED TO MEET TWO objectives: to give readers a sense of Jewish life in eighteenth-century Polish-Lithuanian lands and to allow them easy access to the sources cited. I use Polish names for towns (Międzyrzecz) and Hebrew or Polish names for individuals, according to common usage (Józef Hilary Głowacki instead of Josef Hilary Glowacki, Elijah ben Solomon instead of Eliaszel Zelmanowicz). However, when there is an accepted English spelling, I have used that version (Hayyim of Volozhin instead of Hayyim of Wołożyn, Vilna rather than Vilnius or Wilno, Safed for Tzfat).

My transliterations of Hebrew follow the conventions of the Jewish Publication Society. The letter *kaf* is transliterated as *kh* when soft and *k* when hard, *chet* as *ch*, *heh* as *h*, *kuf* as *k*, *zayin* as *z*, and *tzadi* as *tz*. Exceptions, by reason of common convention, are Hasid, Hatam Sofer, and Hayyim. Diacritical marks are not used. Apostrophes are used to clarify syllabic distinctions, for example, *Ne'emanah*, *Be'er*, *hashpa'ato*, *Ma'aseh*, *ta'anit*.

I transliterate the six consonants /*b g d k p t*/ as single letters (*b, g, d, k, p, t*) when they appear with a dagesh at the beginnings of words, after other consonants, and after a sheva. In all other cases, they are transliterated as double letters (*bb, gg, dd, kk, pp, tt*). If the bet has a dagesh, as in *batei midrash*, it is rendered *b*; without the dagesh, as in *u-vatei*, it is rendered *v*.

The Yiddish transliterations are based on the system devised by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and book titles follow the spellings used in the YIVO library catalogue.

In my citation style, Hebrew prefixes are set off with a hyphen—for example, *ha-Kehilah ha-Ivrit be-Vilna*. I follow English capitalization rules for transliterated titles. Prefixes (*ha-*, *ba-*, *she-*) are not capitalized, except when the title begins with a prefix (for example, *Ha-Minhag*). Because many of the texts are difficult to locate, I cite works as they are most commonly referenced—thus, *Aderet Eliyahu* (Dubrovna: 1804) and *Biur ha-Gra al Shulchan Arukh Yoreh Deah* (Grodno: 1806) rather than the more abstract *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (Dubrovna: 1804) and *Ashlei Ravrivei* (Hrodna: 1806). English names are used for cities in all bibliographic information (Jerusalem, not Yerushalayim, Mogilev, not Mohylów).

# Introduction

TOWERING OVER EIGHTY-EIGHT SAGES OF ISRAEL, ELIJAH BEN SOLOMON (1720–1797), prayer shawl draped over his shoulders, grips a tome in his left hand while writing one of his seventy works with the other. A white halo encircles his face, highlighting his sacrosanct position among Jewry’s most celebrated masters. Beneath him rest Jewry’s luminaries, among them the stately medieval philosopher Maimonides, regally dressed in a turban, and the learned commentator Isaac Alfasi, cradling his head in his hand while poring over a pile of books. Such is just one of the dozens of pictures featuring Elijah that hung in Jewish homes and study houses across eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

For two centuries, Elijah has been known simply by the name “Genius,” or “Gaon.” His biographers claim that “one like him appears every thousand years.”<sup>2</sup> Born into a respected rabbinic family, Elijah from early adolescence distinguished himself by his mastery of rabbinic literature, mathematics, and scientific knowledge. In the manner of other pious scholars of the time, he wandered anonymously about various towns and villages, finally settling in the Lithuanian city of Vilna (today Vilnius). Fiercely reclusive, he held no public position and spoke out only on the most pressing political matters. Still he would become known as the patron sage and spiritual leader of the Vilna Jewish community, which by the late eighteenth century had emerged as the epicenter of eastern European Jewish life.

Elijah’s contributions as author, leader, and genius—along with the sociocultural makeup of eighteenth-century Vilna, of which Elijah was so

vital a part—laid the groundwork for the central institutions and ideologies of modern eastern European Jewry. By the time of his death at the age of seventy-seven in 1797, he had written commentaries on a wider range of Jewish literature than any writer in history. He had so mastered the Jewish canon that there is hardly a major rabbinic or kabbalistic text untouched by his erudite commentary. His originality, command of sources, and clarity of thought not only place him among Jewry's luminaries, but establish him as the equal of other religious and intellectual giants such as Aquinas and Averroes. On the social plane, his works contributed to the unmooring of European Jewry from the rabbinic legal codes and political communal structures that had governed sixteenth- to eighteenth-century eastern European Jewish life. His commentaries and worldview encouraged the establishment of privately funded religious institutions such as the "yeshiva" (study house), whose doors were at least in theory open to all comers. Under his influence, public religious institutions and local communal identities yielded to a new "privatized" religious culture in which identity became determined less by place of residence than by ideological commitments.

During the eighteenth century, Jews came to form a majority among Vilna residents—a demographic development replicated throughout eastern Europe over the course of the nineteenth century. As the Vilna Jewish community grew in size and stature, it assumed greater political and economic power both within Jewish life and in regional politics. Jews may have been powerless in the geopolitical affairs of the highly decentralized Polish Sejm (parliament) and the king's court, but they played critical economic roles where they resided as virtual majorities.

Elijah exemplified the newly emboldened posture of a leader of a majority culture. He was engaged in developing his own constituency's literary heritage, language, and political tradition—all while being neither threatened by, nor overly interested in, the ideas and institutions of other religious or ethnic groups.

Elijah's confidence and genius inspired not only those nineteenth-century Jews who were privileged enough to attend yeshivot (and later, universities), but also the masses, who embraced the ideal of intellectual achievement as a means of upward social mobility. While during his lifetime Elijah's reputation was limited to a select group of scholars and lay people living around Vilna and its environs, after his death the masses of European Jewry immortalized Elijah. They hung his portrait on their



walls, read middlebrow hagiographies extolling his brilliance, and reminded their children “Vil-nor Goen” (playing on the Yiddish vocalization of the Gaon’s name); “if you will it, you too can become a Gaon [genius]” like Elijah.

Elijah’s immense popularity, his retreat from the public sphere, and his expressions of political agency as the leader of a majority culture distinguish him from his predecessors, and express in embryonic form the unique experiences of modern eastern European Jewry. Yet Elijah’s legacy is today primarily guarded by those often identified as staunch traditionalists, who cast him as the right pillar of medieval rabbinic culture.<sup>3</sup> These seemingly opposing views point to a deep misunderstanding in scholarly and confessional literature not only about the Gaon and his legacy, but also about the relationship between tradition and modernity.

Who then was Elijah of Vilna, and which contemporary movement, if any, is his rightful heir? These questions thrust us toward the essence of modernity, and more particularly, modern Jewish history.

## Tradition and Modernity

In the common narrative, modern Jews exchanged their belief in messianic redemption for citizenship in the nation-state, leaving the ghetto walls of the *kehilah* (the pre-modern Jewish governing structure) for the freedom of the coffee houses, and abandoning rabbinic study halls for universities. This approach is closely identified with the Hebrew University historian Jacob Katz, who documented the ruptures and crises of the emancipation of European Jewry and the demise of “Jewish traditional society” as Jews emerged from social and cultural segregation. In his telling, the rise of Jewish “rationalism” seen during the eighteenth-century Haskalah (Enlightenment) eroded and eventually destroyed the “traditional society” of the high Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup>

Katz’s immensely influential studies provided subsequent generations of historians with a framework to understand how “traditional” Jews entered modernity.<sup>5</sup> In their textbook *The Jew in the Modern World*, for example, Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehudah Reinharz argue that Jewish modernity derives its primary energy and legitimization from sources other than the sacred authority of the Jewish tradition. “With this in mind,” they explain, “the documents we have selected make little reference, for instance, to Hasidism. . . . To be sure, the custodians of Jewish

tradition—and the Hasidim were among the most forceful—did respond to modernity and were quick to note its ‘dangers,’ often with impressive understanding of its radical nature.”<sup>6</sup> They continue this line of thought with the following caveat: “Although historians generally agree that Hasidism had no direct impact on the shaping of Jewish modernity, it has been argued [by the likes of Gershom Scholem and Jacob Katz] that Hasidism . . . indirectly—dialectically—prepared the way to the secularization of eastern European Jewish life.”<sup>7</sup>

Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz relate to “traditional” Jews in the modern period in three ways. They either dismiss such Jews as irrelevant; view them as reactionaries against their modernizing counterparts; or (in a minority of cases) transform them into clandestine enlighteners or harbingers of modernity whose contribution to Jewish history consists of infrequent and “subtle” allusions in their voluminous writings to modern signposts such as science, Israel, and the nation-state.

The first position, that of dismissing “traditional” Jews, was illustrated at a 2007 conference of the Association for Jewish Studies in Toronto. In a session entitled “Where Does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin?” Michael Meyer, a distinguished historian of German Jewry, suggested that most rabbinic Jews living in the modern period “are not modern at all,” and are best understood as “medieval.” Meyer follows a long line of scholars who assert that the terms “tradition” and “modernity” have been “at odds since the eighteenth century.”<sup>8</sup> In this view, the powerful and protean force of modernity erodes (or in some instances fails to erode) an almost static, unchanging world of tradition.

The putative opposition of traditional and modern has been a staple of historical studies, pitting various groups, ideologies, and institutions against one another. More recently, however, this dichotomy has been challenged by those suggesting that while the terms might be opposed, when tradition becomes an ideology (“traditionalism”) the two become intertwined, reacting to each other’s positions. “Ironically,” David Gross writes, “though traditionalism is based on a rejection of modernity, it can come into being only within modernity.”<sup>9</sup>

Jacob Katz’s student Michael K. Silber expressed this point, citing the case of Moses Sofer (1762–1839), a leading Hungarian rabbinic figure who vehemently and famously opposed many of the developments and innovations of his age. Sofer’s battles showed how “tradition” is not something that exists only before or on the periphery of modernity; instead it

functions as an ideology that contests modernity's claims. Following Katz, Silber suggested that Sofer's and his disciples' militant Orthodoxy was as much a product of "modernity" as was the ideology of the enlighteners he attacked. In a groundbreaking essay called "The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of Tradition," Silber showed that "belying the conventional wisdom of both its adherents and its opponents, [ultra-Orthodoxy] is in fact not an unchanged and unchanging remnant of pre-modern, traditional Jewish society, but as much a child of modernity and change as any of its 'modern' rivals."<sup>10</sup>

Katz himself identified a select number of traditional Jews as forerunners of the Jewish Enlightenment. His work on Hasidism and the Haskalah illuminated the subtle and dialectical processes by which traditional Jews began to adopt modern modes of thought and behavior in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Since the 1960s this more nuanced approach has enjoyed a warm reception in Modern Orthodox academic institutions such as Bar-Ilan University in Israel and Yeshiva University in New York. These institutions' journals (like *Bekol Derakhekha Daehu* and *Torah u-Madda*) regularly feature articles about rabbinic figures and organizations that reflect a more harmonious relationship between modern and traditional spheres. Such studies have been conducted in large part by Modern Orthodox scholars seeking precedents for their own hybrid identities. *Torah u-Madda's* founding editor states in the introduction to its second volume (1990) that the journal's purpose is to explore "the interaction between Torah and secular culture throughout Jewish history."<sup>11</sup> Such an approach may adequately account for a rare breed of highly acculturated western European rabbinic figures whose struggles to resolve the tension between these two spheres made their modern tendencies overt.<sup>12</sup>

One might, however, be forgiven for calling this approach a needle-in-the-haystack rendering of "tradition," for it involves combing through reams of literature to locate instances where a rabbinic figure addressed "modern" issues. The dry hay of tradition—including whole Talmudic tractates, volumes of exegesis, and massive collections of legal rulings—that constitutes the bulk of the material and of the authors' concerns is feverishly winnowed in the hope of chancing across the five times an author mentions the Hebrew word for "science," the twenty times someone refers to the actual Land of Israel, or the two responsa written about the permissibility of shaving one's beard, wearing fashionable clothing, or owning books written by gentiles.<sup>13</sup>

Historians such as Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin have improved on this approach. They focus on the more subtle and disguised elements of modernity that appear in the writings of those whom many scholars have otherwise depicted as traditional figures, and zero in on the points of tradition that appear in the writings of those whom many others have identified as modern thinkers. Their careful research has raised the possibility that several different “modernities” emerged in the eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, in addition to the more commonly cited anti-religious Enlightenment that challenged the canons of tradition, Sorkin identifies a *religious* Enlightenment exemplified by the “early Haskalah.”<sup>15</sup>

The categories of what constitute modernity, however, still rely heavily on the experiences of Jews in western Europe. In most studies on eastern European Jewish intellectual history, a large portion of the subject’s intellectual accomplishments and social significance is all too often ignored in the hope of excavating a statement or position that conforms to a certain process of secularization.

Katz’s and Silber’s approaches toward traditional Jews in the modern period can be traced genealogically to studies conducted by Katz’s teacher Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) and, in turn, to his predecessor Max Weber (1864–1920). Weber examined numerous competing elements of Judaism, such as its charismatic and rationalist elements. He believed, however, that Judaism’s “genuine ethic” was “traditionalism as shown from the Talmud.”<sup>16</sup> These German scholars laid the groundwork for Katz’s and Silber’s studies—by largely ignoring traditional figures and their worldviews, by casting them in opposition to secular trends, or by nominating a select group as harbingers of modernity.

Typically, Weber and his students contrasted the static nature of traditional societies with modernity’s dynamism.<sup>17</sup> According to Weber, “a system of imperative co-ordination will be called ‘traditional’ if legitimacy is claimed for it and believed in on the basis of the sanctity of the order and the attendant powers of control as they have been handed down from the past, [as they] ‘have always existed.’”<sup>18</sup> Weber’s contemporaries used the placeholder “traditional” to describe those societies that have seemingly “not changed greatly over many years, and [where such] changes have occurred [they] are primarily adaptations to changes of external circumstances of the societies.”<sup>19</sup> This description of tradition has led many to simply ignore those groups deemed traditional or express

surprise when they locate “change” in a tradition, a traditional society, or a traditional structure of authority.<sup>20</sup>

In other cases, Weber identified certain sixteenth- through eighteenth-century Protestant pietistic figures—including John Calvin (1509–1564), Philip Jakob Spener (1635–1735), Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), and John Wesley (1703–1791)—as harbingers for trends and movements ranging from capitalism to secularism.<sup>21</sup> Weber’s analysis of these thinkers’ contributions to secularism, however, came at the expense of understanding how they also gave rise to various extreme and often highly “traditional” worldviews that flourished in modernity.<sup>22</sup>

Weber’s student Karl Mannheim likewise placed tradition in opposition to modernity—and to conservative thought in particular. Whereas conservatism is “meaningful,” “conscious,” and “reflective,” Mannheim defines “traditionalism” as “a general psychological attitude which expresses itself in different individuals as a tendency to cling to the past and a fear of innovation.”<sup>23</sup> Conservatism appears as something rational and deliberate; traditionalism is reactive and irrationally defends the status quo against deliberate challenges.

Much in the same way that scholars of Chinese and Indian civilizations, which are often labeled as traditional, have come to take issue with Weber and Mannheim for not adequately explaining these civilizations,<sup>24</sup> so too have I come to believe that Katz’s and Silber’s notion of tradition and traditionalism fails to explain the experience of the overwhelming majority of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century eastern European Jews, who did not spend their days either combating the western European secular pursuit of science, philosophy, and mathematics or holding on to the same political and social structures of their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ancestors. Katz and Silber might have been right about Sofer (although even he spent only a small fraction of his intellectual resources battling reformers). But figures such as the Gaon of Vilna or Hayyim of Volozhin (the Gaon’s student and Sofer’s contemporary), who did not express hostility toward modernity, elude their grasp.

Yet although Elijah of Vilna evinced an appreciation for certain aspects of what might be identified as western European modernity (such as embracing various elements of secular knowledge and offering a new approach toward Jewish education), these aspects remained tangential to his concerns.<sup>25</sup> The true nature of his life and his impact on modern Jewry are far more profound and have generally been overlooked. The piecemeal

nature and paucity of research produced on Elijah's life and writings are the result of applying the experiences of western European Jews—religious reform, acculturation, and emancipation—to evaluate eastern European Jews, who lived under radically different circumstances.

This book provides a new narrative of the modern Jewish experience and challenges the description of eastern European Jewry as “traditional” in the Weberian sense of the term. It suggests that the differentiation between public and private spheres, the weakening of religious governing structures, and the democratization of knowledge in Jewish society—all processes that emerged in tandem with principles such as civil rights, equality, functional differentiation, and skepticism—produced a host of unforeseen ideologies and movements, including Hasidism, Mitnagdism, the Haskalah, Zionism, and Jewish anti-statism. Many writers divide these movements into modern, anti-modern, and pre-modern tendencies. Such divisions generate imprecise terminology, concealing more than they illuminate. Most important, they fail to grasp that modernity was not just a *movement* based on a certain set of liberal philosophical principles that only certain elite sectors of society experienced. Rather, it was a *condition* that restructured all aspects of European life and thought, in diverse and often contradictory ways. Exclusivist ideologies such as Hasidism, institutions such as the yeshiva, and self-assertive Jewish political expressions all emerged from the same democratization of knowledge and privatization of religion that gave rise to the Haskalah. Those contemporary religious movements that diverge from—and at times threaten—secular and liberal conceptions of Judaism express the unforeseen side effects of a seminal tension in modernity. This tension gave rise simultaneously to exclusivist, as well as various liberal, intellectual and political movements, which were created alongside and not originally in opposition to one another.<sup>26</sup>

## **Elijah and Eighteenth-Century Eastern European Jewry**

This book follows Elijah through the course of events that mark eighteenth-century eastern European Jewish history. It opens with an overview of his life and the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century influences on his worldview. It then distinguishes his work from both the mid-eighteenth-century German Haskalah and the Hasidic movement and explains his connection to the establishment of the early nineteenth-century yeshiva. Finally, the book addresses the way Elijah's students crafted and

popularized his legacy as “the Genius of Vilna” to nineteenth-century eastern European Jewry. This approach corrects both biographies<sup>27</sup> and other studies that document the way he was appropriated by later generations<sup>28</sup> and offers a non-hagiographic rendering of Elijah’s life, while keeping an eye on the larger question: What about Elijah and his ideas made them so critical to the emergence of modern Jewry? To answer these questions and steer clear of pitfalls posed by the myriad editors involved in the publication of Elijah’s writings, I will primarily rely on Elijah’s commentaries listed in David Luria’s bibliography and only on those ideas that reappear throughout Elijah’s writings, irrespective of editor or commentary.

Chapter 1 presents an account of Elijah’s life that draws on the most historically verifiable material offered by Vilna archives, Elijah’s own work, and his immediate students’ reflections. The reflections that describe the way Elijah was experienced in his lifetime are distinguished both from Elijah’s own words and from later hagiographic statements.<sup>29</sup> Such insights by Elijah’s immediate students shed light on his relationship to the town in which he resided and the way he was experienced. By the end of his life Elijah was nearly deified among his supporters in Vilna. But his name remained obscure among the masses of eastern European Jewry until the first decades of the nineteenth century, in part because he was reticent to publish in his lifetime or occupy an official rabbinic position. Chapter 1 thus provides a historical framework to understand his writings and the role he played in the emergence of Vilna as a central locale for European Jewry.

Chapter 2, the most philosophically technical section of the book, explores the Gaon’s worldview in relation to eighteenth-century intellectual culture. It examines the Gaon’s work in its broad intellectual context, tempered by modest causal claims regarding those whose work influenced him. The Gaon does not cite any eighteenth-century work. This omission suggests something beyond an attempt to follow Maimonides’s advice to veil philosophic sources in consideration of the masses’ ignorance.<sup>30</sup> It might be argued that the Gaon’s citation style evinces what Harold Bloom has identified as an “anxiety of influence,” the fear that one’s work will be derivative.<sup>31</sup> A true genius, Bloom argues, is one who works through this anxiety to a point where he or she creates something original and unprecedented. The Gaon’s terse writing style, coupled with the ways he emends texts and dismissal of rabbinic works published in the eighteenth century,<sup>32</sup> suggests a concerted effort to remove evidence of influence (or simply indifference). Elijah read widely, but what he

read, and to what degree it influenced him, can be gleaned only by carefully comparing his writing to that of scholars living before and during his lifetime.

Elijah was a product of an idealist philosophic tradition that resurfaced in eighteenth-century European intellectual circles. He borrowed from rabbinic thinkers like Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (1707–1746) and Raphael Levi of Hannover (1685–1779), both of whom applied the idealist worldview of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1714) to Jewish thought. Leibniz and his contemporaries, like Elijah, embraced early kabbalistic ideas, reinterpreted Aristotelian categories to fit mathematical schema, and emphasized the role played by motion in the genesis of the world. For both the Gaon and Leibniz, the mathematics of motion replaces God as the principle for evaluating the reason behind being. The Gaon's removal of God from the concrete workings of nature (he instead places God *behind* nature) grants human beings the opportunity to assert themselves in history and to take an active role in the redemption of the world.

Chapter 3 examines the Gaon's relationship with his mid-eighteenth-century contemporaries in Berlin, especially the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786, another follower of Leibniz). A comparison of how each man interacted with the rabbinic tradition sheds light on the sharp social and political contrasts between Vilna and Berlin during the mid- to late eighteenth century, and more generally, on the dramatic differences between the Jewish communities of modern eastern and western Europe. In Vilna there were as many Jews as there were Catholics, while Jews lived in Berlin as a minority among the mostly Protestant population. Acting as the leader of a community that lived as a virtual majority encouraged Elijah to develop ideas that in other contexts would have been deemed threatening. Unlike Mendelssohn, who resided in Protestant Berlin, the Gaon, living in Jewish Vilna, was unfazed by its local Catholics and by whatever criticisms they may have had of the rabbinic tradition. The lack of a perceived intellectual threat provided Elijah an intellectual freedom not afforded Mendelssohn, who defended Judaism and the rabbinic tradition against both a hostile radical Enlightenment and Protestant biblical scholarship.

Despite the differences and similarities between these two intellectual giants, neither ever directly addressed the other. Whatever criticisms the Gaon may have had of the mid-eighteenth-century Maskilic movement with which Mendelssohn was associated, they never appear in his



writings. Rather, the Gaon is best known for his forceful public condemnation of the Hasidic movement at the end of the eighteenth century.

Chapter 4 details the battle between the Gaon (and his followers) and the Hasidim. The Gaon feared that Hasidic ideas and practices had links to the seventeenth-century false messiah Sabbatai Tzvi. While many may see Hasidism as having triumphed in its battle with Elijah, twentieth-century Jewry's privileging of the yeshiva over the Hasidic court (even in many Hasidic communities) highlights the Gaon's enduring influence.<sup>33</sup>

The Gaon's inspirational role in establishing the modern yeshiva is the subject of Chapter 5. His glosses to Joseph Karo's definitive code of Jewish law, *Shulchan Arukh*, encouraged nineteenth-century Jews to move away from the code-based learning culture supported by the *kehilah* (the elaborate lay-led self-governing structure used by eastern European Jews in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). The Gaon encouraged his students to focus their studies on the Talmud, a text known most for being open-ended and not legally binding. Ultimately, the Talmud replaced legal code as the central text studied in the nineteenth-century modern yeshiva founded in Volozhin. This paradigm shift—from code to commentary, from *kehilah* to yeshiva—restructured the hierarchy of authority in rabbinic Judaism and should be considered one of the many expressions of religious privatization that followed the *kehilah*'s downfall and the rise of the modern state.

Indeed the nineteenth-century yeshiva was unique in Jewish history. Previously only a chosen few were permitted entry into Jewish study halls, and even fewer were afforded the opportunity to attend secular universities. These study halls were locally run, usually comprising no more than six to ten students.<sup>34</sup> A prominent community such as Vilna, for example, granted its chief rabbi, Baruch ben Moses Meir Kahana Rapoport, twenty students in 1708.<sup>35</sup>

The book's final chapter, Chapter 6, assesses Elijah's immortalization and the defining aspect of his life and legacy—his sobriquet Gaon, or “Genius”—in part by tracing the intellectual genealogy that popularized his “genius” in the first half of the nineteenth century. In recent years scholarship dealing with Elijah has revolved around his and his students' relationship to the Land of Israel. Most notably, Arie Morgenstern and Israel Bartal have engaged in a robust debate over the place of Elijah's students in the history of Zionism. Though an important issue (one that I hope to fully address in the future), it narrows Elijah's life and legacy to

concentrate on a specific idea and group of students. Since this work focuses on the master's life and thought writ large, it explores how his genius was employed and refashioned by those associated with various modern ideological movements. Elijah's genius was understood as a product of individual will: he was revered for actualizing his inner potential and cultivating a taste for knowledge. It was a human feat, devoid of any external influences or divine intermediaries. Theoretically, any member of society could replicate it with adequate intelligence and dedication. In this sense, the lore and mystique surrounding the Gaon's genius and his intellectual charisma—more than any text he wrote, position he expressed, practice he adopted, or institution he envisioned—permanently enshrined him in the modern Jewish imagination.

# 1

## Elijah and Vilna in Historical Perspective

ELIJAH BEN SOLOMON'S LIFE AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO THE CITY WHOSE name he would share remain somewhat obscure—especially when compared to what is known about other outstanding figures of his age. Trails of correspondence and memoirs have provided ample material for scholars to document the experience of the “Jewish Socrates” Moses Mendelssohn in eighteenth-century Berlin, for instance, but few have been able to ascertain even the most basic details of Elijah and eighteenth-century Jewish Vilna.<sup>1</sup> That the life of one of the most influential figures in Jewish history remains opaque is the result of both personality and profession. Since Elijah held no official rabbinic position and had little contact with the non-Jewish residents of his city, he is only tangentially mentioned in Jewish communal documents and government archives. Unlike Mendelssohn's, then, only a few hundred of Elijah's words can be found scattered in letters of approbation or condemnation published during his lifetime—even though after his death in 1797, the task of organizing his voluminous literary estate required scores of individuals to complete.

What is clear from the archival and published data, however, is the symbiotic relationship that made both Elijah “the Genius of Vilna” and

Vilna the “mother of eastern European Jewry.” By the nineteenth century, Vilna and Gaon had become synonymous. Over the course of Elijah’s life, Vilna was transformed from a poor town with no more than a thousand Jews subjected to local anti-Semitism and economic discrimination into an economic and intellectual center where Jews lived as a majority vis-à-vis the local Catholic and Polish population. Moreover, Elijah’s genius almost singlehandedly turned what otherwise might have been simply a demographically and economically vibrant town into the center of the Jewish intellectual aristocracy. “Just as Vilna was the jewel of Ashkenaz,” it was said, “so was the Gaon the jewel of Vilna.”<sup>2</sup> Conversely, Vilna’s Jewish population boom turned what otherwise might have been a brilliant social hermit into a patron sage of modern Jewry.

### **Vilna in Ashes and Elijah’s Youth**

When Elijah was born to Solomon Zalman and Traina of Shutzk<sup>3</sup> on the first day of Passover, 1720, Jewish Vilna was in shambles, a shadow of the large community it had been before the Muscovite invasion in the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup> Vilna was just then emerging from the throes of the Great Northern War (1700–1721), when Russian and Swedish troops had invaded its territory. Fires (1706), plagues (1710), and famines (1706, 1724) decimated Vilna’s Jewish population, leaving it debt-ridden and with little more than a thousand members. In size and prestige, it was dwarfed by Kraków and Brody, then the major centers of European Jewish life.

Elijah was the first of five boys born into a family whose piety, economic self-sufficiency, and intellectual pedigree were well known to Vilna residents. He was a descendant of two of the town’s most celebrated rabbinic figures, Moses Rivkes (d. 1672)<sup>5</sup> and Moses Kraemer (d. 1688).<sup>6</sup> Both were pious scholars who gave of themselves freely to the townspeople, and both financially supported themselves—Moses Rivkes from his father-in-law’s fortune, and Moses Kraemer from his own shop.

By all accounts Elijah was a child prodigy. As legend has it, by age nine he had mastered the Bible, Mishnah, and Gemara,<sup>7</sup> and he was capable of reading an astounding 140 folios of the Talmud in half an hour.<sup>8</sup> At age ten, he is said to have mastered kabbalistic literature, including the *Zohar*, *Sefer ha-Pardes*, and the writings of Isaac Luria. By age twelve he reputedly had taught himself the “seven sciences”: logic, rhetoric, grammar, arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. He expressed an

interest in pursuing medical studies, but was discouraged by his father, who pushed his son to return to the Talmud.<sup>9</sup> Even when compared to hagiographic accounts of other Jewish figures, Elijah's contemporaries' reflections on the nature of his genius are remarkable. One of Elijah's students was later celebrated for knowing all of Talmudic literature by age twenty-four—fifteen years longer than Elijah purportedly took to master it.<sup>10</sup> Hyperbole and hagiography aside, his genius was described as incomparable in the annals of Jewish history.

Elijah's intellectual accomplishments were not the result of any particular school or institution. He did not attend the Vilna *cheder* (primary school),<sup>11</sup> established in 1690 by the Vilna community (in conjunction with the Council of the Four Lands). The *cheder* taught children from the "aleph-bet until mishnayot" and offered to instill "linguistic and writing skills."<sup>12</sup> Most of these types of schools in eastern Europe remained poorly administered and staffed by teachers whose pedagogic qualifications amounted to little more than their lack of qualification to do anything else.<sup>13</sup> The curriculum was unsystematic and students of various ages and with different levels of knowledge were often squeezed into the same classroom. Elijah was known to have dismissed the *cheder* system outright: "no word of truth was ever uttered in such a place," he remarked.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike Ezekiel Landau of Prague, one of his best-known contemporaries who studied in the Brody *kloiz* (a permanent study house for elite scholars supported by the community), Elijah did not attend any advanced study house. Nor does it seem that he benefited from a great teacher, as Moses Sofer did in Frankfurt with the mystic Nathan Adler (1741–1800). Instead Elijah studied alongside his peer Aryeh Leib Tshanavith, perhaps supplemented by very infrequent sessions with rabbinic luminaries.<sup>15</sup> Later some would cite Elijah's dismissal of the *cheder* system as support for revising the educational institutions of eastern European Jewry.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1730s Elijah moved from a decimated Vilna to the town of Kédainiai (Keidan), sixty-eight miles northwest,<sup>17</sup> where he punctiliously fulfilled the Talmudic dictum: "[at age] eighteen to the wedding canopy" (Avot 5:24). Shortly after his marriage to Hannah in 1738,<sup>18</sup> Elijah followed in the path of other itinerant scholars, leaving his wife and journeying across the continent<sup>19</sup> with his friend and eventual student Hayyim of Sereje.<sup>20</sup> Though it may seem odd that he set off traveling so soon after his marriage, throughout his life Elijah left his family for

considerable periods of time for spiritual reflection.<sup>21</sup> Self-imposed exile had strong roots in the rabbinic tradition and was commonly practiced by eighteenth-century spiritualists. Along with Elijah, other pietists such as Aryeh Leib ben Asher Gunzberg (1695–1785) and Nachman of Bratslav (1772–1810) left home to wander about in unknown lands. By detaching from family, friends, and material comforts, they aimed to cultivate a sense of humility and religious dedication—or to atone for sins.<sup>22</sup>

While Elijah focused on his spiritual well-being, Vilna's Jews fought for their very survival. The long-standing and complex relationship between the Polish-Lithuania Commonwealth and Vilna's local governmental institutions created a perilous environment for the city's Jews. In the 1730s the residents of Vilna nearly expelled the city's Jewish residents in response to the decision by King Friedrich Augustus III (1696–1763) to grant Jews trading rights in 1738. Local merchants and craftsmen balked because the ruling threatened their monopoly on the local economy. In 1740 they convinced the local magistrate court not only to overturn the king's law but also to demand that the Jews be expelled from the city.

The contradictory messages issuing from local officials, the king, and magistrate courts were a function of a weak Polish government and Vilna's position as the capital of the historic Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Founded in the fourteenth century by the pagan leader Gediminas (1275–1341), the Grand Duchy of Lithuania spanned the length of the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and covered the territory between Lublin and the Moscow Duchy. Though the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth subsumed the Grand Duchy in the sixteenth century, the historic bloc still maintained its own government, treasury, and army. Further complicating its internal political affairs was its position as the seat of the Lithuanian-Polish Catholic bishop, the powerful Radziwiłł family, and other members of the Polish landowning *szlachta* (nobility) who were *voivodes* (governors) and *castellanes* (senators) in the Polish national legislative arm, the Sejm. These authorities and chieftains vied for power and control of Vilna, leading to a highly decentralized relationship with the king and the Sejm.<sup>23</sup> This decentralization created a situation in which “what was authorized on one street was made illegal on another.”<sup>24</sup>

The vulnerable Jews tried to leverage this decentralization to their advantage, appealing to each of the parties for support. In the 1740s it was the Lithuanian “general” (the chief beadle and recorder of testimony for the court) and *voivode* Michał Serwacy Wiśniowiecki (1680–1744) who

defended them, arguing that the expulsion of the Jews from Vilna would ultimately harm the town's economy. Wiśniowiecki brokered a deal with local officials and townspeople to allow Jews to remain in Vilna on the condition that their residential and trading rights be severely curtailed to a three-block radius bounded by Żydowska (Jews Street), Juatkowa (Slaughters Street), and St. Michael (also called Glass Street). Some exceptions continued to be permitted for Jews who lived in housing complexes on Vokietchių Street (German Street), which bordered the synagogue complex, owned by various noblemen. The three blocks were connected like a maze—or, in the words of one nineteenth-century observer, like “an old wrinkly face.”<sup>25</sup> Jews were not even secure about their place on this shriveled plot of land, however. Various Christian denominations owned and hoped to expand monasteries and other religious institutions on precisely the same three-block radius, thereby effectively pushing Jews out of their only area of residence.<sup>26</sup>

While the fate of Vilna's Jews was being negotiated, Elijah wandered the continent. The few verifiable facts about Elijah's odyssey in the 1740s have given rise to numerous fantastical hagiographic stories, many of which are almost certainly not true. Elijah supposedly dazzled local rabbis with his vast knowledge,<sup>27</sup> awed hosts with his pietistic and ascetic practices,<sup>28</sup> outmatched German professors in debate,<sup>29</sup> and combed Amsterdam libraries for variant manuscripts of the Talmud.<sup>30</sup> Elijah's biographer Shmuel Luria claims that Elijah “wandered about various lands in order to locate precious hidden texts and manuscripts and bring them back to his home.”<sup>31</sup> Irrespective of the veracity of these stories' details, they do at least provide us with important kernels of information about Elijah's vast library, which extended beyond normative religious texts. More to the point, these stories also hint that he was not a cloistered mystic unacquainted with those living beyond the walls of his study house in Vilna. His travels certainly brought him to Königsberg and likely to Berlin and Amsterdam, putting him in contact with a wide range of individuals, communities, ideas, and texts across Europe.

When Elijah returned to Vilna in 1748, the city's Jews still faced harsh economic, religious, and social discrimination. Around this time, the Jewish community's growth was stunted by the threat of expulsion and more fires (most notably those in 1748 and 1749). The fires ravaged the Jewish quarter, including the old study house where Elijah's great-grandfather had studied, part of the main synagogue, Jewish stores, and

twelve churches and monasteries. The community remained afloat only by drawing from loans it received from local Christian groups such as the Basillians (a monastic order established in the seventeenth century in memory of Basil the Great and affiliated with the Greek Catholic Church), from European creditors (such as the Jewish community of Amsterdam), and from prominent Jewish families such as the Friedländers.<sup>32</sup>

Leading Polish officials, including the Catholic bishop Franciszek Antoni Kobielski (1679–1755), blamed these fires on Jews and incited anti-Semitic attacks.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the priest Stephen Turczynowicz (d. 1773) launched a Mariavite mission to promote the conversion of Jewish women.<sup>34</sup> Apparently some financially strapped and unattached Jews were enticed by Turczynowicz's promises of prosperity and upward social mobility. Some historians claim that from 1743 to 1753, as many as 153 Vilna Jews converted to Christianity.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Turczynowicz was said to have abducted and forcibly converted young Jewish children, ignoring King Jan III Sobieski's 1690 edict that prohibited the practice.<sup>36</sup>

The shrinking of Vilna's Jewish community and the economic hardships it faced forced *kehilah* leaders to sell or relinquish most of the community's real estate to Christian monasteries and churches.<sup>37</sup> Turczynowicz himself purchased from the Jewish leader Michel Gordon his home, which was eventually named after the Mariavite mission.<sup>38</sup> In 1690, Jews owned twenty-one of the thirty-two homes in the Jewish quarter; by the mid-eighteenth century they retained only a handful. One of the few residences they still owned was the "Fatel house," named after the seventeenth-century Vilna patron Michael ben Fatel,<sup>39</sup> whose heirs had donated it to the *kehilah* in 1682. The community used it to house religious functionaries, among them Elijah and his growing family, which by 1750 included three daughters. The Fatel house (or perhaps more appropriately, housing complex) sheltered some 51 families totaling 178 people. According to Klausner, there were no windows, nor even "a crack in the walls to allow for air circulation."<sup>40</sup> Elijah's very frugal accommodations underscore how impoverished the Vilna Jews were during the first half of the eighteenth century.

### Elijah's Return and Vilna's Rebirth

From the mid-1740s until the mid-1760s, the Jews of Vilna struggled to support themselves. While the community's merchants toiled in the marketplace, trying to break the monopoly of the local townspeople,



Elijah locked himself in his room, feverishly writing notes and commentaries to classical rabbinic and kabbalistic works, and cultivating a mystique of genius that would eventually come to embody Vilna's return to glory. Elijah limited his contact with loved ones to the point that he resisted lifting his head from his books even upon hearing that his children were sick.<sup>41</sup> He was known to donate the family's food to the poor and paid little attention to his family's well-being.<sup>42</sup> Hannah described her husband as "not caring about worldly matters, his household, the health of his children, or his livelihood."<sup>43</sup> Still, he demanded strict obedience from her, reminding her that "a good wife follows the will of her spouse."<sup>44</sup>

Hannah cared for the family and provided Elijah with the time and space needed to write his commentaries.<sup>45</sup> Not since the medieval sage Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) had anyone written on as many classical rabbinic texts as Elijah, and not since the famed Safed mystic Isaac Luria (1534–1572) had a scholar penned as many works on kabbalah—among them magisterial commentaries to the early kabbalistic works *Sifra di-Tzniuta* and *Sefer Yetzirah*. Indeed, according to one historian, "The kabbalistic writings of . . . Elijah alone exceed in volume those of all his Hasidic contemporaries put together."<sup>46</sup> Elijah's energies were primarily focused on writing what some claim amounted to thirty full-length commentaries on the *Zohar*.<sup>47</sup>

Elijah's kabbalistic commentaries, like his writing on rabbinic literature, tended to focus on works he believed were of ancient origin.<sup>48</sup> Elijah interpreted these sacred kabbalistic texts according to the same principles he used when emending and interpreting Talmudic literature. Just as he freely emended two-thousand-year-old Talmudic texts, uninhibited by medieval commentators, Elijah altered kabbalistic works and boldly challenged Luria's hitherto unassailed interpretations.<sup>49</sup>

The majority of Elijah's kabbalistic works can be divided into two groups, according to their editors. The first and most authoritative group (including the earlier-mentioned works) was published posthumously by his family and those students whom he taught personally. The second group, published in the late nineteenth century by Shmuel Luria, includes Elijah's commentaries to *Heikhalot*, *Ra'ayah Mehemnah*, and *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*.

Elijah saw himself as a direct student of the earliest Talmudic and kabbalistic sages, if not their peer. According to his son Avraham, Elijah said

“with full certainty that he had no compunction about reciting his interpretations of the *Zohar* in front of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai [its purported author] himself.”<sup>50</sup> Avraham claims that his father wrote commentaries to the Bible; the Mishnah; the Babylonian Talmud; the Palestinian Talmud; the *Tosefta*; the Midrashic works *Sifra*, *Sifrei*, *Mekhilta*, *Seder Olam Rabbah*, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, *Zohar*; the mystical and kabbalistic works *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*, *Sefer Yetzirah*, and *Sifra di-Tzniuta*; as well as two commentaries to Karo’s *Shulchan Arukh*. He also wrote works on the *masorah* (the transmission of the Hebrew Bible), grammar, logic, algebra, and geometry. His students marveled that if one were to live a thousand years one would not be able to produce as prolifically as Elijah.<sup>51</sup> Not all of these works found their way to publishing houses, and those that did were sometimes edited heavily, but by the late nineteenth century most of Elijah’s commentaries on biblical, kabbalistic, and rabbinic literature could be found in Jewish libraries.

Yet more than the sheer size of his oeuvre, it is the unsurpassed quality of Elijah’s work that stands out. It is distinguished by its precise and economical language; by Elijah’s full command of sources and a mastery of the entire canon of rabbinic and kabbalistic literature; and, finally, by its originality. Though Elijah’s writings are primarily commentaries on preexisting literary texts, they nonetheless express unrivaled inventiveness, almost never containing the positions of any of his contemporaries or immediate predecessors. Never once does he mention any teacher, nor does he ever cite his own father Solomon or his brothers Abraham (1712–1797) and Yissaschar (d. 1807), all of whom also spent their lives immersed in study.<sup>52</sup> Elijah goes so far as to say that in some instances it would have been better had his own great-grandfather Moses Rivkes “kept his mouth shut.”<sup>53</sup> Though these features of his commentaries will be explored further in later chapters, one can surmise that Elijah’s commentaries reflect the stature of a scholar who is not a dwarf standing on the shoulders of giants but a giant who dwarfs his predecessors.

It comes as no surprise that Elijah never published any of his own works. He had little interest in recognition and little taste for the controversy likely to be brought about by attaching his name to a document. Moreover, that it would take some of the sharpest rabbinic minds over a century to edit his commentaries suggests that there was simply not enough time for Elijah to be both a genius with an unending devotion to study and a published author. “He did not want to waste his time,” was how one student explained his reluctance to publish and circulate his works.<sup>54</sup> This reticence limited his