

THE PILLAR OF VOLOZHIN

RABBI NAFTALI ZVI YEHUDA BERLIN AND THE WORLD OF
NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITHUANIAN
TORAH SCHOLARSHIP

STUDIES IN ORTHODOX JUDAISM

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GIL S. PERL

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	7
Preface	9
The Life and Times of Neẓiv	11
<i>‘Emek ha-Neẓiv</i> : A Window into his World	19
Method and Approach	23
Note on Transliteration	26
CHAPTER I: The Text of <i>‘Emek ha-Neẓiv</i>	27
Dating the Printed Text	28
The Manuscript	32
Censorship	36
The End of <i>‘Emek ha-Neẓiv</i>	38
Conclusions	40
CHAPTER II: Neẓiv as an Early Nineteenth-Century Midrash Commentator	42
Midrash Commentary Prior to the Vilna Ga’on	42
The “Vilna Circle”	43
The “Volozhin Circle”	54
The Influence of Radal on the Young Neẓiv	57
CHAPTER III: <i>‘Emek ha-Neẓiv</i>: An Early Nineteenth-Century Midrash Commentary	61
Straightforward Interpretation	61
Textual Emendation	66
Intellectual Breadth	83
The Selection of <i>Sifre</i>	90
Dual Commentary	91
Poetic Adornments	94
CHAPTER IV: The Young Neẓiv and the Ancient Rabbis	97
Rabbinic Methodology	97
Identification of <i>‘Asmakhta’</i>	101
De’ Rossian Hermeneutics	105
Explicit Use of <i>Me’or ‘Einayim</i> in <i>‘Emek ha-Neẓiv</i>	111
The Unattributed Influence of de’ Rossi	120
CHAPTER V: <i>Emek ha-Neẓiv</i> in its Cultural Context	127
The Influence of the Vilna Ga’on	127
The Vilna Ga’on in <i>Emek ha-Neẓiv</i>	137

The “Halakhic” Progression of Torah Commentary	142
The Lithuanian <i>Maggid</i>	146
Hebrew Print and the Study of Midrash	149
Neziv’s Use of Newly Available Books	160
CHAPTER VI: From ‘Emek ha-Neziv to Ha’amek Davar	167
From ‘Emek ha-Neziv to Ha’amek She’elah	167
Dating Ha’amek Davar	169
‘Emek ha-Neziv as the Foundation for Ha’amek Davar	171
Exegetical Positions Rooted in <i>Sifre</i>	180
Ha’amek Davar as Nineteenth-Century Midrash	182
CHAPTER VII: The Polemics of Ha’amek Davar	190
Literal Aggadah in Ha’amek Davar	192
Hermeneutics of a Rosh Yeshivah	193
The Antiquity of <i>Pilpulah Shel Torah</i>	196
The Salvific Power of Torah Study	202
Citation in Ha’amek Davar	206
The Hermeneutics of Traditionalism	208
The 1840s: Tension without Fissure	209
The 1860s: A Splintered Society	216
Lithuanian Torah Scholarship Responds	220
Maskilim in Ha’amek Davar	229
Afterword: Avenues for Further Research	239
Appendices	
Appendix A: The Unattributed Influence of Radal on Ha’amek Davar	242
Appendix B: Emendations to <i>Sifre ‘Ekev</i> According to the Ga’on and Neziv	246
Appendix C: Selections from Ḥayyim Berln’s “Letter on Education, 1902”	257
Appendix D: <i>Birkat ha-Neziv</i> and the Question of Genre	262
Bibliography	269

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Gil Perl

April, 2011
Memphis, TN

PREFACE

The traditional historiographical account of Lithuanian Torah scholarship most often begins with a portrait of the unrivaled intellectual prowess and fierce communal polemics of Eliyahu ben Shelomoh (1720-1797), commonly referred to as the Vilna Ga'on. With the Ga'on's death in 1797, the story refocuses on his outstanding student, Hayyim of Volozhin (1749-1821), and his pioneering efforts in establishing the first of the great Lithuanian yeshivot in 1803 as well as the path he blazed in the world of Jewish ideas with the publication of his *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*. From his Ez Hayyim Yeshivah in Volozhin, historians generally shift their gaze toward the subsequent establishment of similar yeshivot, its progeny, throughout Lithuania. The story then proceeds to the rise of Yisrael Salanter's (1810-1883) *Mussar* movement in the middle of the nineteenth century, which acts as both an heir and a corrective to the world of Torah learning born in Volozhin, and then to the innovative method of study introduced by Hayyim Soloveitchik (1853-1918) of Brisk and his disciples as the nineteenth century draws to a close. This new method, by all accounts, served as a catalyst for the growth of traditional Lithuanian Torah scholarship well into the twentieth century.

The unspoken assumption of this historiographical account is that once Volozhin appears on the scene in 1803, yeshivot immediately become the center of intellectual activity for the rabbinic scholars of Lithuania's traditional Jewish community. Yet there is no question that, during the first few decades of the nineteenth century at the very least, the great minds of traditional Jewish Lithuania were not to be found in the large yeshivot. They were, much as they had been in the centuries before, the rabbis of communities and the heads of rabbinical courts, privately funded scholars and communally funded preachers. And, whereas the rise of the yeshivah, with its standardized curriculum and the ensuing social pressure to master it, gradually narrowed the focus of Lithuanian Torah scholarship to the proverbial four cubits of Talmud study, the Lithuanian intellectuals of the earlier decades of the nineteenth century knew no such bounds. To date, however, these scholars and their scholarship have been lost in the exaggerated shadow of the Lithuanian yeshivot.

This book focuses on the work of a man who is best known for having served at the helm of the yeshivah in Volozhin as it reached its pinnacle of success and eventual decline in the second half of the nineteenth century. As such, one is apt to view his scholarly work against the backdrop of the yeshivah world and its particular ideological and intellectual proclivities, but, as we shall see, when viewed against such a backdrop Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Neziv; 1816-1893) emerges as a cultural oddity. His work is not confined within the curricular boundaries of traditional Talmud study and he is not interested in the conceptual underpinnings of halakhic reasoning, nor is he preoccupied with the drawing of legal distinctions between seemingly similar instances of Jewish case law, as are most of the great works of Torah scholarship which were produced in the yeshivot of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ However, when one dims the lights shining on the yeshivot of the late nineteenth century and recognizes that during the formative years of Neziv's intellectual development the world of the yeshivah was still in its infancy, a very different understanding of his scholarship comes into focus. It is one which recognizes that while Neziv's early years were spent in the physical space of the Volozhin yeshivah, the cultural and ideological forces which later came to dominate the world of the yeshivot had yet to take shape. Therefore, the intellectual interests and methodology of the young Neziv and his associates in Volozhin were rooted in the vibrant world of early nineteenth-century Lithuanian Torah scholarship, still unconstrained by the distinctive mold of the modern yeshivah.²

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- 1 See, for example, the works authored by and attributed to Hayyim Soloveitchik (1853-1918), Shimon Shkop (1860-1940), Moshe Mordecai Epstein (1866-1934), Baruch Ber Lebowitz (1870-1940), Issar Zalman Meltzer (1870-1953), and Elhanan Wasserman (1875-1941), amongst others.
 - 2 I do not mean to suggest that all Lithuanian rabbinic scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were, in fact, constrained by such a mold. There were indeed preeminent Lithuanian scholars such as Meir Simḥah of Dvinsk (1843-1926) and later Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz (1878-1953) who rose to prominence without spending time in the famous yeshivot, and whose scholarship is, therefore, of a different character. Likewise, there were rabbinic scholars such as Yosef Rosen (1858-1936) and Avraham Yizhak Kook (1864-1935) who, though having spent time in the world of the mitnagdic yeshivot, were also clearly influenced by intellectual worlds well beyond it. Neziv, however, is unique in that he spent his entire adolescence and adult life, from the age of fourteen to the age of seventy-six, within the confines of Lithuania's leading yeshivah. It is this fact that leads one to view him as a cultural oddity rather than a late product of a cultural mainstream which was eventually eclipsed by the rise of the Brisker school.

The Life and Times of Neziv

Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, today known by the acronym Neziv,³ was born on the eve of Rosh Hodesh Kislev in the Jewish year of 5577 (November 20, 1816)⁴ to a prominent family in the small Lithuanian town of Mir.⁵ Mir, along with much of the eastern regions of what was once the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was appropriated by Imperial Russia during the second partition of Poland in 1793. By 1795, the remaining areas of Lithuania and much of Poland came under Russian rule as well. Along with Polish-Lithuanian territory the Russian Tsars inherited its Jewish population, which is believed to have numbered close to one million at the end of the eighteenth century. While Catherine the Great, the architect of Russia's conquest of Poland, fashioned herself as an Enlightened Absolutist and thus a friend of her new Jewish subjects, the policies initiated during the reign of her son Paul (1796-1801) were characterized by his fear that the Jewish community might shift its allegiance to parties opposed to Imperial rule and his consequent desire to pull this large, cohesive, and culturally distinct population into mainstream Russian society. Alexander I (1801-1825), who succeeded Paul, began his rule by adopting a stance toward the Jewish population akin to that of his grandmother Catherine, as evidenced by his opening of state educational institutions to Jewish students. This too, however, was a failed attempt to facilitate the Russification of the Jewish population, and his seemingly progressive posture became far more oppressive and reactionary when he feared the development of a Jewish allegiance to

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- 3 Traditional parlance tends to treat rabbinic acronyms as common nouns, and they are thus preceded by the word "the" as in "the Rambam" or "the Neziv," whereas academic literature treats them as proper nouns, thus obviating the need to precede the acronym with the word "the." In the case at hand, however, the acronym for Rabbi Berlin spells the Hebrew word *naziv*, meaning pillar. When referring to Berlin as "ha-naziv," therefore, the Hebrew speaker hears both the letters of Berlin's name and a reference to "The Pillar." While the preservation of this double entendre justifies reference to Berlin as "the Neziv," my work will defer to the general preference of the academy and thus refer to him simply as Neziv.
- 4 Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, *Mekor Barukh* (IV: 1678); Meir Bar-Ilan, *Rabban Shel Yisrael* (New York: Histadrut ha-Mizrahi beAmerikah, 1943), 131. The year of Neziv's birth is often misstated as 1817.
- 5 In what is today Belarus. The region referred to as cultural Lithuania by the nineteenth-century Jewish community is an expansive territory which generally corresponds to the territories which once comprised the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and includes modern-day Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, parts of north eastern Poland, and parts of the western-most areas of modern Russia.

Napoleon during the invasion of 1812.

Naftali was nine years old when Nicholas I (1825-1855) crushed the Decembrist Uprising of 1825 and with it the liberal ambitions of its protagonists, thereby securing his place as successor to Alexander I on the Russian throne. What followed were decades of oppressive legislation that sought to curtail Jewish cultural activity and forcibly bring the Jewish population into line with Nicholas' imperial vision of "orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality."⁶ As a result of the consistent failure of these policies to encourage widespread acculturation, combined with the general sense of political stability brought about by the iron fist of Nicholas' lengthy reign, Jewish intellectual life during this period not only survived but flourished in an unprecedented manner.

Indeed, many of the movements which came to characterize Lithuanian Jewish society by the end of the nineteenth century emerged from the thirty years of Nicholas' reign. As noted above, the subsequent decades of the nineteenth century saw bastions of traditional Torah learning, following in the footsteps of the talmudic academy founded by Ḥayyim of Volozhin in 1803, rising throughout Lithuania, forming the foundation of the modern yeshivah movement.⁷ Following the publication of Isaac Baer Levinsohn's *Te'udah be-Yisrael* in 1828, calls for Jewish educational reform coalesced into the movement for the general enlightenment of Russian Jewry known as the Haskalah.⁸ The 1840s witnessed the creation of a movement, following the charismatic lead of Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883), that championed the study and practice of ethical behavior known as the *Mussar* movement.⁹ It is in this world

6 For a general history of the period, see Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959) and W. Bruce Lincoln, *Nicholas I: Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989). For a social and political history of the Jewish community under Nicholas' rule, see Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia, 1825-1855* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1983).

7 See Shaul Stampfer, *Shalosh Yeshivot Lita'iyot bi-Me'ah ha-Tesha-'Esreh* (PhD dissertation, Hebrew University, 1981) and idem., *ha-Yeshivah ha-Lita'it be-Hithavutah ba-Me'ah ha-Tesh'a-'Esreh* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 1995).

8 See Immanuel Etkes, *Te'udah be-Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1977), introduction to photographic reprint; and Mordekhai Zalkin, *Ba-'a lot Ha-Shahar: ha-haskalah ha-yehudit be-'imperiah harusit be-me'ah ha-tish'a 'esreh* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000). The term Haskalah here refers particularly to the movement for Jewish enlightenment in Eastern Europe and should be differentiated from the related movement which began decades earlier amongst a small circle of Jewish intellectuals in Western Europe.

9 On Yisrael Salanter and the early *Mussar* movement, see Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel*

of political oppression and intellectual vibrancy that the young Naftali Berlin comes of age.

Naftali's father, Ya'akov Berlin, a learned descendant of a German rabbinic family, earned a living as a moderately successful wool and flax merchant.¹⁰ His mother, Batya Mirel, was a member of the Eisenstadt family, which took its name from Meir of Eisenstadt (1670-1744), the author of the highly respected work of halakhic responsa entitled *Panim Me'irov* (Amsterdam, 1715). The Eisenstadt family also included Yosef David Eisenstadt (1760-1846) and his son Moshe Avraham, who served as the communal rabbis of Mir for the first half of the nineteenth century, thus solidifying the position of the Berlin family amongst the upper echelons of their local community.¹¹

In keeping with the aristocratic nature of Lithuanian Jewish society,¹² the children of Ya'akov and Batya Mirel Berlin generally assumed positions of prominence in the Jewish community as well. Avraham Meir Berlin lived in Pinsk, worked in Warsaw, and devoted much of his time to assisting in the publication of the work of the Vilna Ga'on. Eliezer Lipman (Lipah) Berlin lived first in Moghilev before leaving for the Land of Israel, and authored commentaries on the Talmud. Netanel Berlin was appointed to the rabbinate of the small town of Mileitzitz near Brest-Litovsk but died at a young age. Hayyim Berlin was considered amongst the lay leaders of the Vilna community and was actively involved in the early Zionist organization Hovevei Zion.¹³

Naftali's sisters found their way into the social elite through the mar-

Salanter and the Mussar Movement: Seeking the Torah of Truth (Philadelphia: JPS, 1993). See also Menahem G. Glenn, *Israel Salanter, Religious-Ethical Thinker: The Story of a Religious-Ethical Current in Nineteenth-century Judaism* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1953); Dov Katz, *Rabbi Yisrael mi-Salant* (Jerusalem: ha-Histadrut ha-Tsionit ha-Olamit, 1974); Hillel Goldberg, *Israel Salanter: Text, Structure, and Idea* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982); Rivka Horowitz, *Controversies Surrounding the Life, Work and Legacy of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter* (MA thesis, Touro College, 1993); Smadar Sharlo, *Polmos ha-Mussar ha-Sheni: Ben Shitat ha-Mussar Shel ha-Rav Kook le-Shitato Shel R. Yisra'el mi-Salant* (MA thesis, Touro College, 1996).

10 Epstein (IV: 942).

11 On the Jewish community of Mir, see *Sefer Mir*, ed. Nachman Blumenthal (Jerusalem: Encyclopedia of the Diaspora, 1962).

12 See Immanuel Etkes, "Marriage and Torah Study among the Lomdim in Lithuania in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, ed. David Kraemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 153-178.

13 Bar-Ilan, 15. See also Hayyim Berlin, *Nishmat Hayyim: Ma'amarim u-Mikhtavim* (Jerusalem, 2003), 326. I have not been able to determine reliable dates of birth and death for Neziv's siblings.

riages which Ya'akov Berlin secured for them. Lipshah Berlin married Hayyim Leib Shaḥor, scion of a wealthy rabbinic family whose position in Lithuanian Jewish society is indicated by the fact that he was referred to as Hayyim Leib *ha-Naggid*, Hayyim Leib the Dignitary.¹⁴ Miḥlah Berlin married Yeḥiel Mikhel Epstein (1829-1907), best known for his massive and highly regarded halakhic code and commentary entitled '*Arukh ha-Shulḥan*'.¹⁵

In 1829, as a boy of but thirteen and a half years old, Naftali Berlin had an aristocratic marriage arranged for him as well. A year later he was married to Rayna Batya, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Isaac of Volozhin (1780-1849) and, at the age of fourteen and a half, left his parents' home in Mir for that of his in-laws in Volozhin.¹⁶

Nothing is known of the formal education given to the young Neẓiv prior to his arrival in Volozhin, but one can presume that both his learned father and the Eisenstadt family of Mir played a crucial role in his development. Barukh ha-Levi Epstein writes in a line that subsequently found its way into the popular imagination of the contemporary heirs of the Lithuanian Jewish community that his uncle,¹⁷ Neẓiv, was a boy of "average intelligence" who rose to the greatest of heights through his "extraordinary diligence."¹⁸ The available evidence, however, suggests otherwise.

To begin, it is rather unlikely that Isaac of Volozhin, popularly known

14 Epstein (II: 950).

15 The fate of Rivkah Berlin, another of Ya'akov and Batyah Mirel's children, is unclear. Bar-Ilan (*Rabban*, 15) writes that she married a man named Haslovitz but provides no further details. Contemporary members of the Bar-Ilan and Shaḥor families related to me that Rivkah was baptized and married a general of the Russian army, with whom she lived in the Belarussian town of Mstislavl (Amtchislav in Yiddish).

16 Bar-Ilan, 16-18. According to Eliezer Leoni, Neẓiv was taken by his father to Volozhin at age eleven, and was married to Rayna Batya when he was thirteen and a half. See his *Sifra shel ha'ir ve-Shel Yeshivat "Ez Hayyim"* (Tel Aviv: ha-Irgun shel bene Volozhin be-Medinat Yisrael uve-Artsot ha-Berit, 1970), 112.

17 Neẓiv was Barukh ha-Levi Epstein's uncle by virtue of the marriage of Yeḥiel Mikhel ha-Levi Epstein to Neẓiv's sister, Miḥlah Berlin. After the death of his first wife, Rayna Batya, Neẓiv married his own niece, Batya Mirl Epstein, the daughter of his brother-in-law Yeḥiel Michel Epstein and his sister Miḥlah. Batya Mirl is also the sister of Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, and thus as a result of Neẓiv's second marriage, Barukh Epstein becomes Neẓiv's brother-in-law in addition to being his nephew.

18 Epstein (IV: 1678). Tanhum Frank writes, "And henceforth for almost twenty years he isolated himself in his room, worked at his tasks with modesty and complete silence, to the point that even his relatives—and even his father-in-law—did not know of his greatness." See Tanhum Frank, *Toldot Bet ha-Shem be-Volozhin* (Jerusalem, 2001) 60.

as Reb 'Izele, would have chosen a boy of “average intelligence” to marry his daughter. As the son of Ḥayyim of Volozhin, who founded the Ez Ḥayyim Yeshivah in Volozhin, authored the highly influential *Nefesh Ha-Ḥayyim*,¹⁹ and was widely viewed as the preeminent student of the Vilna Ga'on,²⁰ Reb 'Izele's family was more distinguished than all but a few families in the Jewish world. Although not the innovator that his father was, Reb 'Izele succeeded his father as head of the yeshivah in Volozhin and was widely recognized as one of the preeminent communal and intellectual leaders of Russian Jewry. As such, it is rather unlikely that he would have chosen a husband for his daughter who did not exhibit promise as a budding Torah scholar.

Furthermore, in recounting a meeting he had with Reb 'Izele in 1841, Max Lilienthal (1815-1882) writes that he was received by his “son-in-law Rabbi Lebele,”²¹ a man of some 30 years and one of the most celebrated Talmudists in Russia.”²² In truth, Neẓiv was only twenty-five years old at the time. The fact that Lilienthal's statement was first published in the late 1850s,²³ prior to the publication of any of Neẓiv's works, and the reasonable assumption that it was composed before Neẓiv was appointed head of the yeshivah in 1853, suggests that Lilienthal's tangential comment is an authentic reflection of Neẓiv's reputation in 1841 rather than a retrospective perception of a Rosh Yeshiva's youth. Therefore, either Epstein's 20th century characterization of the young Neẓiv as a boy of “average intelligence” is incorrect, or the perception of Neẓiv underwent a remarkable transformation from a boy of “average intelligence” to “one of the most celebrated Talmudists in Russia” over the course of only ten years.²⁴

19 See Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1989).

20 A claim which Ḥayyim of Volozhin denied in the letter which he circulated to garner support for his new yeshivah. A copy of the letter can be found in Tanhum Frank, *Toldot Bet Hashem be-Volozhin* (Jerusalem, 2001), 8.

21 Hirsch Leib is the Yiddish equivalent of Zvi Yehudah, thus the reference here is to Neẓiv, Naftali Zv. Yehuda, Berlin.

22 Max Lilienthal, *Max Lilienthal, American Rabbi: Life and Writings*, ed. David Philipson (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1915), 344.

23 1855-57 in *The Israelite of Cincinnati*.

24 If Epstein's characterization is incorrect, the misperception probably results from two different factors. The first is Neẓiv's own humility, to which his writings clearly attest (for example, see MD 1: 32; MD 1: 36; MD 2: 91; MD 4: 24). The second is the longstanding tradition stemming from the 1856 dispute between Neẓiv and Yosef Baer Soloveitchik over who would lead the yeshivah in Volozhin, in which the learning style of Neẓiv was

While there may be debate over the distinction of Neẓiv's earliest years, the lengthy career of the mature Neẓiv was incontrovertibly distinguished. The letter of appointment by which Neẓiv would officially become Rosh Yeshivah in Volozhin notes that he had already begun giving *shiurim* during the lifetime of Reb 'Izele.²⁵ Lilienthal notes that as early as 1841 Reb 'Izele had told him that due to his old age, his son-in-law Neẓiv had replaced him in giving the daily *shiur* at the yeshivah in Volozhin.²⁶ Upon the death of Reb 'Izele in 1849, his older son-in-law, Eliezer Isaac Fried, replaced him as the yeshivah's head, and Neẓiv was appointed as his assistant. When Fried died prematurely in 1853, Neẓiv, at the age of thirty-six, was appointed Rosh Yeshivah.

Neẓiv's tenure as head of the yeshivah began in a rather tumultuous manner with a series of challenges posed by descendants of Ḥayyim of Volozhin, who were thought by some to be more qualified than Neẓiv for

characterized by sweeping breadth and that of the Soloveitchik family was characterized by incisive depth. The genius and charisma of Hayyim Soloveitchik, son of Yosef Baer and son-in-law of Neẓiv's daughter, firmly cemented the incisive method as the intellectually superior mode of study in the imagination of Lithuanian rabbinic circles in the early twentieth century. As a result, it became perfectly plausible that, when viewed from the perspective of the proponents of Soloveitchik's methods, Neẓiv would be viewed as someone of "average intelligence," whose rise to prominence must have been due to the inordinate amount of time he devoted to acquiring his exceptionally broad knowledge base. While Epstein was indeed a member of Berlin's family, his high esteem for the Soloveitchik family (as evidenced by the fact that he sought rabbinic ordination from Yosef Baer Soloveitchik in addition to that granted by Neẓiv, as related in Chapter 38 of the fourth volume of his *Mekor Barukh*), the fact that his own method of study does not resemble that of Neẓiv, and the fact that his reconstruction of the Neẓiv's early years takes place in the 1920s, well after the death of Neẓiv and the rise of the Brisker school to prominence, makes Epstein's adoption of a Soloveitchik perspective on Neẓiv's youth all the more plausible.

- 25 *Volozhin; Sefer Shel ha-Ir-Shel Yeshivat "Ez Hayyim,"* ed. Eliezer Leoni (Tel-Aviv: 1970), 112.
- 26 Lilienthal, 348. The fact that Neẓiv started giving a daily *shiur* during the lifetime of Reb 'Izele is corroborated by his son Meir Bar-Ilan (*Rabban*, 25). Bar-Ilan (*ibid.*) and Epstein, (vol. IV, 1680) record differing accounts of Neẓiv's sudden public emergence as a first-rate Torah scholar. Bar-Ilan writes that Reb 'Izele happened upon a letter from David Luria (1798-1856) to Neẓiv in which Luria, a rabbinic scholar of considerable renown in Lithuanian circles, shows considerable respect for the erudition of Neẓiv. At that moment, writes Bar-Ilan, Reb 'Izele recognized that his son-in-law was a formidable scholar and asked him to begin delivering a *shiur* in the yeshivah. According to Epstein's account (vol. IV, 1680), and that of Moshe Shmuel Shapira, *Ha-Rav Moshe Shmuel ve-Doro* (New York, 1964), 51, it is Reb 'Izele's random discovery of Neẓiv's commentary on *Sifre* that opened his eyes to the erudition of his son-in-law. Both versions, however, are built on the assumption that Neẓiv's intellectual prowess was unknown prior to the random and fateful discovery by Reb 'Izele. Considering the weakness of the latter assumption, the difference in the two accounts, and the similarity between both accounts and those of typical hagiographic tales of the emergence of unknown heroes, there is good reason to suspect the authenticity of them both.

the position of Rosh Yeshivah.²⁷ In each case, however, Neẓiv mounted a successful defense, and for the next forty years he stood at the helm of the world's most prestigious institution of traditional Torah study, the Ez Ḥayyim Yeshivah in Volozhin. During that time he taught, advised, and guided thousands of Jewish boys and young men,²⁸ many of whom went on to offer their own significant contributions to the world of Jewish ideas both within the sphere of traditional Jewish learning and well beyond. From Ḥayyim Ozer Grodzenski (1863-1940),²⁹ Moshe Mordekhai Epstein (1866-1933),³⁰ Shimon Shkop (1860-1939),³¹ and Avraham Yiẓḥak Kook (1865-1935),³² to Avraham Harkavy (1839-1919),³³ Mikhah Yosef Berdyczewski (1865-1921),³⁴ and Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik (1873-1934),³⁵ countless leading minds of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were cultivated under his tutelage. In 1892 Neẓiv was forced to close his famed yeshivah,³⁶ and he died in Warsaw a year later.

In addition to the minds he impacted through direct contact, Neẓiv penned numerous commentaries, some of which remain staples of the traditional Jewish library to the present day. From 1861 to 1867, he published a massive commentary on the geonic halakhic compendium *She'iltot de-Rav Aḥai Ga'on* entitled *Ha'amek She'elah*,³⁷ with an extensive

27 See Epstein (IV: 1691-1702); Bar-Ilan (Rabban, 27-28); and Leoni (Volozhin, 131). See also Ḥayyim Karlinski, *Ha-Rishon Le-Shoshelet Brisk* (Jerusalem: Mekhon Yerushalayim, 1984)

28 According to Bar-Ilan (*Rabban*, 137), at its height the yeshivah boasted an enrollment of over 500 students per annum. Others place the number closer to 400.

29 Rabbi in Vilna and leader of traditional Lithuanian Jewry.

30 Head of the yeshivah in Slobodka.

31 Head of the yeshivah in Telz and Grodno.

32 First Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of modern Palestine.

33 Historian and librarian at the Imperial Library in St. Petersburg.

34 Secular Hebrew, Yiddish, and German author.

35 Hebrew poet.

36 On the exact circumstances surrounding its closing, see Jacob J. Schacter, "Haskalah, Secular Studies and the Close of the Yeshiva in Volozhin in 1892," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 2 (1990): 76-133, and the forthcoming work of Shaul Stampfer.

37 Professor Bernard Septimus pointed out to me that the correct pronunciation of this title might be *Ha'amek She'alah* based on the verse in Isaiah 7: 11 and the commentaries ad loc. All Neẓiv tells us of the title's origin is that his son Chaim Berlin is the one who devised it (HS KH p.12). However, given the fact that the work was published thirty years prior to Neẓiv's death, one would imagine that in Volozhin Neẓiv would have insisted that it be pronounced correctly and that some oral tradition would have developed within the world of the yeshivot, referring to the work as *Ha'amek She'alah*. However, to the best of my knowledge no such tradition exists. Also, if the pronunciation in Isaiah was intended by Neẓiv, the title would mean "sink to the depths," the "depths" (from the word *she'ol*) being a reference to the netherworld or Hell—a rather strange title for a work of halakhic commentary. In all likelihood, therefore, Neẓiv intended his title as a play on those words

and only tangentially related introduction entitled *Kidmat Ha-'Emek*.³⁸ *Ha'amek She'elah* is distinguished by Neẓiv's interest in drawing heretofore relatively obscure works of *halakhah*, such as the works of halakhic midrash, the Talmud Yerushalmi, and the works of the Ge'onim, into the mainstream of halakhic discourse, and by his focus on textual inaccuracies and anomalies in the *She'iltot*, the Talmud, and other halakhic texts. *Kidmat Ha-'Emek* is a lengthy excursus in three parts which presents Neẓiv's understanding of the nature of Torah study and its historical development.

From 1879 to 1880 Neẓiv published a commentary on the entire Pentateuch entitled *Ha'amek Davar*,³⁹ which was based heavily on the daily lectures he gave in the yeshivah in Volozhin on the weekly Torah portion. This commentary is marked by a unique blend of sensitivity to Hebrew grammar and syntax and an unwavering commitment to the method and content of rabbinic halakhic exegesis. While *Ha'amek Davar* displays a significant degree of intellectual independence and creativity on the part of Neẓiv, its repeated emphasis on the theological significance of Torah study reflects its strong connection to the ideological world of nineteenth-century mitnagdic society.⁴⁰

In 1883 Neẓiv published *Rinah Shel Torah*, which included a commentary on Song of Songs and a lengthy essay on the roots of anti-Semitism.⁴¹ Once again, his interpretation of the Song as a metaphor

from Isaiah pronounced *Ha'amek She'elah*, meaning "delve into the question" or perhaps "delve into the *She'iltot*." In fact, he plays on the phrase even further by transforming the imperative verb *ha'amek* of the title, meaning "delve into," into the noun *ha-'emek*, meaning "the valley," in entitling his introduction *Kidmat ha-'Emek*. Therefore, in the absence of any further evidence to the contrary, we will continue to refer to this work as *Ha'amek She'elah*.

38 First edition (Vilna, 1861-1867). Most recently Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, *Ha'amek She'elah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1999). The Neẓiv's lengthy introduction to *Ha'amek She'elah* was recently translated and published as an independent work. See Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, *The Path of Torah: The Introduction to Ha'amek She'elah*, Rabbi Elchanan Greenman trans. and ed. (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2009).

39 First edition (Vilna: 1879-1880). Most recently published with Neẓiv's later additions in Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, *Ha'amek Davar* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Volozhin, 1999).

40 The term mitnagdic refers to the highly intellectual and emotionally sober culture of Lithuanian Jews which developed in response to the rapid spread of Hasidism in the second half of the eighteenth century. See Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997).

41 Published recently as the sixth volume of Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, *Ha'amek Davar* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Volozhin, 1999). Some version of this text had been composed long before its publication, as evidenced by Neẓiv's references to it, which can be found in the 1861 edition of his *Ha'amek She'elah*. An English translation of the essay on anti-Semitism appears in Howard Joseph, *Why Anti-Semitism: A Translation of "The Remnant of Israel"*

for the relationship created between man and God through the study of Torah reflects the centrality of Lithuanian mitnagdic ideology to Neziv's work.

Throughout his career Neziv corresponded with leaders and laymen in the extended Jewish community on issues of halakhic and communal importance. With his reluctant approval, some of these letters were collected in the final years of his life and then published posthumously under the title *Meshiv Davar*.⁴² Recently, a collection of his letters, taken largely from the Abraham Schwadron Collection at the Jewish National and University Library of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, along with approbations he gave to the works of his students and contemporaries, was published under the title *Iggrot ha-Neziv*.⁴³

Neziv also composed a commentary on the Passover Haggadah entitled *'Imre Shefer*, which has been published numerous times on its own and has been incorporated into larger anthologies of Haggadah commentaries as well.⁴⁴ From the 1950s to the 1970s his commentary on Talmud, *Meromei Sadeh*,⁴⁵ his commentary on *Sifre*, known as *'Emek ha-Neziv*,⁴⁶ a commentary on *Mekhilta*⁴⁷ and notes to *Torat Kohanim*⁴⁷ were also brought to press.

'Emek ha-Neziv: A Window into his World

This book proposes that unique insights into the creative and highly influential mind of Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin can be derived from an analysis of his earliest intellectual product, a commentary on the rabbinic compilation of halakhic midrash known as *Sifre*, posthumously published (1958) under the name *'Emek ha-Neziv*. Specifically, it argues that Neziv's earliest work belongs to the intellectually vibrant, yet heretofore unstudied, world of early nineteenth-century midrash commentary. Viewing it in such context allows one to see the significant impact which

(New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1996).

42 Published recently with additions in Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, *Meshiv Davar* (Jerusalem: 1993).

43 *Iggerot ha-Neziv* (Jerusalem: 2003).

44 It was first published in Warsaw in 1889.

45 Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, *Meromei Sadeh* (Jerusalem: 1953-1959).

46 Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, *'Emek ha-Neziv* (Jerusalem: *Va'ad le-Hoza'at Kitve ha-Neziv*, 1959-1961).

47 Printed most recently at the end of *Birkat ha-Neziv* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Volozhin, 1997).

the methods and interests of this world had upon the intellectual development and literary endeavors of Neẓiv. Furthermore, grounding Neẓiv in his early nineteenth-century context serves to highlight the instances in which his later work diverges from his earlier intellectual roots, which, we shall argue, directly reflects the ways in which the Lithuanian Jewish society of his adult years differed from that of his youth.

While biographical accounts of Neẓiv's life abound, none has focused on *'Emek ha-Neẓiv*, and most are severely lacking in academic rigor. The accounts of his contemporaries, while offering invaluable pearls of information, are generally brief and represent the heavily biased views of his students and family members.⁴⁸ There are three works that treat much of the life of Neẓiv that were written after his death as well.⁴⁹ Since, however, their authors were, respectively, Neẓiv's son, Meir Bar-Ilan, who was only thirteen years old when his father died, and Neẓiv's nephew, Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, they too suffer from the biased perspective of close family members and from a heavy reliance on undocumented oral and often hagiographic evidence as documented above.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the biographical narrative in all of the literature to date covers the twenty-three years between Neẓiv's arrival in Volozhin

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- 48 Mikha Yosef Berdyczewski, "Toldot Yeshivat Ez HaḤayyim," *He-Assif* (1887): 231-242; Mikha Yosef Berdyczewski, "'Megilat Shir HaShirim' shel ha-Neẓiv," *Ha-Zefirah* (25 Tevet 5648 [1888]); Hayim Nahman Bialik, *Igrot Hayim Nahman Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1937-39); Zalman Epstein, *Kitve Zalman Epshtayn* (St. Petersburg: Joseph Luria, 1904); Avraham Yizhak Kook, "Rosh Yeshivat Ez Ḥayyim," *Kenesset Yisrael*, ed. S.J. Finn (Warsaw, 1888), 138-147 [also in *Ma'amarei HaRe'iyah* (Jerusalem, 1984), 123-126]; Avraham Yizhak Kook, "Zvi La-Zadik," *Maḥzike Ha-Das* 8 (1886); *Sefer Turov*, eds. Isaac Zilbershlag and Yohanan Twerski (Boston: Bet ha-Midrash le-Morim, 1938); Joseph Litvin, "Naphtali Tzevi Berlin (the Neẓiv)," *Men of the Spirit*, Leo Jung, ed. (New York: Kymson Publishing Co., 1964); Simḥah Assaf, *Mekorot le-toldot ha-hinukh be-Yisrael* (New York: Bet ha-Midrash le-Rabbanim be-Amerikah, 2001). Bits of biographical information can also be gleaned from the writings of his son Ḥayyim Berlin, recently collected in the work of Ya'akov Kosovsky-Shahor under the name *Nishmat Ḥayyim: Ma'amarim u-Mikhtavim* (Jerusalem, 2003). While sparse on detail, the information provided is possibly more accurate than that given by Meir Bar-Ilan, as Ḥayyim Berlin was born when Neẓiv was a mere sixteen years old and served as a lifelong confidant, while Bar-Ilan, his half-brother, born to Neẓiv at age sixty-four, only knew his father in the final years of his life.
- 49 Meir Bar-Ilan, *Fun Volozhin biz Yerushalayim* (New York: Oryom Press, 1933); Meir Bar-Ilan, *Rabban Shel Yisrael* (New York: Histadrut ha-Mizrachi be-Amerikah, 1943); Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, *Mekor Barukh*, vol. IV (Vilna, 1928). Other smaller works of note are: Meir Bar-Ilan, "Introduction to *Ha'amek Davar*," *Ha'amek Davar*, ed. Hillel Cooperman (Jerusalem: 1981); Moshe Zvi Neriah, *Toldot ha-Neẓiv* (1942 / 1943); Moshe Shmuel Shapira, *Ha-Rav Moshe Shmuel ve-Doro* (New York, 1964).
- 50 See note 26 above.

as a boy of fourteen and his appointment as the yeshivah's head in but a few sentences, which simply state that he spent those years engrossed in diligent solitary study and offer no further detail.

There are also a number of studies which focus on Neziv's intellectual activity, the most significant being Shelomoh Yosef Zevin's portrayal of Neziv in his *Ishim ve-Shitot* (1952), Hanah Kats's *Mishnat ha-Neziv* (1990) and Nissim Eliakim's *Ha'amek Davar la-Neziv* (2003).⁵¹ None of these works, however, treats *'Emek ha-Neziv* in any depth, nor do they adequately place *Ha'amek Davar* within the historical context of nineteenth-century Lithuania or the intellectual context of Neziv's other writings, as this book proposes to do.

Considerable attention is also given to Neziv in Shaul Stampfer's seminal work on the Lithuanian Yeshivot. The information presented by Stampfer, however, focuses on Neziv's role as Rosh Yeshivah in his later years and reveals little of his personal development or intellectual endeavors.⁵² The same is true of the considerable memoir literature stemming from Volozhin, much of which has recently been collected by Immanuel Etkes.⁵³ To date, then, there is no published work which explores the formative years of Neziv's life or provides an adequate contextual analysis of his intellectual work. This book proposes to do both.

51 Shelomoh Yosef Zevin, *Ishim Ve-Shitot* (Tel Aviv: Bitan Ha-sefer, 1952); A.R. Malakhi, "Pa'alo ha-Safruti shel R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin," *Jewish Book Annual* 25 (1967-68): 233-238; Hannah Kats, *Mishnat ha-Neziv* (1989/1990); Y. Hager-Lau, *Ha-Hayyil ve-ha-Hosen: Zava u-Milhamah be-Ha'amek Davar u-ve- Meshekh Hakhmah* (Mercatz Shapiro, 1989); M. Bar-Ilan, "Peirush 'Ha'amek Davar le-ha-Neziv z"l," *Afikei Nehalim* III (1971): 119-125; M. Isaacs, "ha-Zava ve-ha-Milhamah be-Mishnat ha-Neziv," *MiZohar LaZohar* (1984) 9-21; Shubert Spero, "The Neziv of Volozhin and the Mission of Israel," *Morasha* 2: 2 (1986): 1-14; A. Eisenthal, "Mishnat ha-Neziv," *Erez Zvi* (1989), 71-89; H. Lifshitz, "ha-Neziv ve-Yehuso l'Yeshuv Erez Yisrael," *Kotleinu* 13 (1990): 559-563; Y. Kupman, "Et Milhamah li'umat Et Shalom al pi ha-Neziv," *Merhavim* 1 (1990): 285-297; Z.A. Neugroschel, "Behirat Am Yisrael be-Mishnat ha-Neziv MiVolozhin," *Talelei Orot* 6 (1995): 144-156; B.Z. Rosenfeld, "Ben Ish le-Ishto al pi Peirush ha-Neziv BiParhsat Isaac ve-Rivkah," *Talelei Orot* 6 (1995): 216-236; Y. Weiner, "Mavet Mohi – Da'at ha-Neziv MiVolozhin" *Asya* 13: 3-4 (1996); Howard Joseph, "As Swords Thrust Through the Body: Neziv's Rejection of Separatism," *Edah Journal* 1: 1 (2000); Henry Adler Sosland, "Discovering the Neziv and his 'Ha'amaik Davar'" *Judaism* 51: 3 (2002): 315-327; Nissim Eliakim, *Ha'amek Davar la-Neziv* (Moresheet Ya'akov, 2003).

52 Shaul Stampfer, *Shalosh Yeshivot Lita'iyot be-Me'ah ha-Tesha-'Esreh* (PhD dissertation, Hebrew University, 1981); idem., *Ha-Yeshivah ha-Litait be-hithavutah ba-me'ah ha-tesha-'esreh* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 1995). Mordechai Breuer's recent work on yeshivot also describes Volozhin and Neziv's role therein. See Mordechai Breuer, *Ohole Torah: ha-Yeshivah, Tavnitah ve-Toldoteha* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2003).

53 *Yeshivot Lita: Pirkei Zikhronot*, eds. Immanuel Etkes and Shlomo Tikochinsky (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2004).

The social and political conditions under which Neẓiv developed as a young man have been amply described in Michael Stanislawski's work on the reign of Tsar Nicholas.⁵⁴ The intellectual history of the same period, however, tends toward an examination of the posthumous influence of the Vilna Ga'on and Ḥayyim of Volozhin on early nineteenth-century Lithuanian scholarship⁵⁵ or a retrospective analysis that seeks to locate the roots of the Eastern European Haskalah movement in the work of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Jewish intellectuals.⁵⁶ While Jay Harris describes a few of the intellectual products of this era, he does so with the intent of portraying their role in the fragmentation of modern Judaism and, therefore, does not explore the larger indigenously Lithuanian intellectual context from which they arise. A serious study of the dominant intellectual trends in Lithuanian scholarship during the first half of the nineteenth century, then, remains a desideratum.⁵⁷

This book, then, will offer three contributions to the current scholarship. It will describe the intellectual forays of the heretofore unstudied formative years of Neẓiv's life. It will examine the most famous book of Neẓiv's literary oeuvre, his *Ha'amek Davar*, against the backdrop of his

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- 54 Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia, 1825-1855* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1983).
- 55 Ḥayyim Hillel Ben-Sasson, "Ishiyuto shel HaGRA ve-Hashpa'ato Ha-Historit," *Zion* 31 (1966); Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sake in the Works of Rabbi Ḥayyim of Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (New York, NY: Yeshiva University Press, 1989); Immanuel Etkes, *The Ga'on of Vilna: The Man and His Image*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); *ha-GRA u-Bet Midrasho*, eds. Moshe Halamish, et al. (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003).
- 56 Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil?: Judah Leib Gordon and The Crisis of Russian Jewry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Mordekhai Zalkin, *Haskalat Vilna* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1992); *Ha-Dat Ve-ha-Ḥayyim: Tenu'at ha-Haskalah be-Mizrah Eiropa*, ed. Immanuel Etkes (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 1993); Immanuel Etkes, "Le-She'elat Mevasrei ha-Haskalah be-Mizrah Europah," *Tarbiz* 57 (1987): 95-114 [reprinted in *Ha-Dat ve-ha-Ḥayyim: Tenu'at ha-Haskalah ha-Yehudit be-Mizrah Eropah*, ed. Immanuel Etkes (Jerusalem, 1993), 25-44]; David E. Fishman, *Russia's First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Mordechai Zalkin, *Ba'a lot ha-Shahar: ha-Haskalah ha-Yehudit be-Imperial ha-Rusit be-Meah ha-Tish'a 'Esreh* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000).
- 57 The paucity of material which has come down to us regarding the early years of Volozhin and its circle of scholars is recognized even in more traditionalist works of history and historiography. After offering a relatively sparse list of exceptional scholars known to have studied in Volozhin under Reb 'Izele, Tanhum Frank writes in his *Toldot Bet ha-Shem be-Volozhin* (Jerusalem, 2001) that, "It goes without saying that during the 28 years of Reb 'Izele's service, many more great [students] learned there. But in those times who would [care to] write down words of history?" (46).

earlier work. Finally, it will sketch a preliminary portrait of the world of nineteenth-century Lithuanian midrash study, to which *‘Emek ha-Neziv* belongs, and the significant cultural factors which gave it rise.

Method and Approach

The proposition that unique insight into the intellectual development of Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin can be derived from an analysis of his earliest intellectual product, *‘Emek ha-Neziv*, relies on two basic assumptions regarding the text of that work. The first is that the printed text of *‘Emek ha-Neziv* is an accurate representation of Neziv’s commentary on *Sifre*, and the second is that Neziv’s commentary on *Sifre* does, indeed, date from the earliest period of his literary career. As such, these two issues will be the first ones addressed. Through an analysis of textual clues and information gleaned from an examination of Neziv’s manuscript, credible evidence will be offered in support of the validity of both assumptions.

Once we have established *‘Emek ha-Neziv* as the earliest product of Neziv’s prolific pen, and have shown that most of its content dates to the 1830s and 1840s, we will then proceed to place the commentary in the context of early nineteenth-century midrash study. We will first describe three generations of interconnected Lithuanian Torah scholars for whom the study and explication of midrashic texts was of paramount importance.

Our exploration of this intellectual coterie and Neziv’s place therein will bring into focus an intriguing intellectual milieu at the very heart of traditional Jewish society, which was characterized by the unapologetic use of a broad array of literary sources, a keen sensitivity to textual errors and variant readings, and a desire to present only a close and straightforward reading of rabbinic texts. The young Neziv and the work he produced, we shall argue, are directly connected to that world. We will further demonstrate that the cultural elements which gave rise to this intellectual milieu, namely the influence of the Vilna Ga’on, the role of the Lithuanian Maggid, and the rise of Hebrew print, are clearly manifest in the pages of *‘Emek ha-Neziv*.

Armed with an understanding of Neziv’s earliest intellectual endeavors, we will then examine his later work against the backdrop of *‘Emek ha-Neziv*. Doing so will demonstrate that much of Neziv’s later commentarial endeavors are natural outgrowths of his early work and his forma-

tive experiences in the world of early nineteenth-century midrash study. At the same time, we will demonstrate that setting his later work against his earlier endeavors helps to highlight limited, yet critical, points where Neẓiv's *Ha'amek Davar* diverges significantly from the exegetical path he took in *'Emek ha-Neẓiv*. Much of this divergence will be attributed to the impact of a Jewish society which had greatly changed over the course of Neẓiv's life. Specific attention will be given to the rise of the Haskalah and the rabbinic reaction thereto, as well as to the growth of the ideology of Torah study which Neẓiv, after four decades in the study hall of Volozhin, seems to have accepted. These changes in society confronted the Lithuanian rabbinic establishment with an altered set of norms, expectations, and fears, many of which are reflected in Neẓiv's *Ha'amek Davar*. Thus our exploration of Neẓiv's later work offers important insight into the intellectual and religious development of Neẓiv, as well as into the history of nineteenth-century Jewish Lithuania as a whole.

The different components of this study require the employment of differing methods of historical study. A source-critical study of *'Emek ha-Neẓiv* and *Birkat ha-Neẓiv* (Neẓiv's *Mekhilta'* commentary) reveals evidence of multiple recensions in the printed text of both commentaries. I rely on historical references found within these texts, as well as references to their composition in other writings of Neẓiv, to establish approximate dates of composition of their core texts.

I am fortunate to have had a working relationship with the Shapira family of Jerusalem, who are the heirs, editors, and publishers of Neẓiv's manuscripts.⁵⁸ As members of contemporary Israeli ultra-Orthodox society, however, they are understandably skeptical of me and my work. To date, they have granted me limited access to the manuscript of *'Emek ha-Neẓiv*, under their constant supervision. My requests for unencumbered and unlimited study of the manuscripts have been declined. However, I have gained considerable insight into the text from my limited study of it, which has been incorporated into Chapter One.

Bibliographic methods also factor prominently into this study.⁵⁹ Over four hundred citations found in *'Emek ha-Neẓiv*, generally given in ab-

58 Theirs are the only known extant copies of Neẓiv's manuscripts.

59 Basic bibliographic information was ascertained through the use of the Institute for Hebrew Bibliography's software entitled "The Bibliography of the Hebrew Book 1473-1960," accessed via <https://yulib002.mc.yu.edu:8443/login?url=http://www.hebrew-bibliography.com/search/>.

breviated or acronymic form, are identified in an effort to reconstruct the library which influenced the young Neẓiv.⁶⁰ Additionally, the section of Chapter Five which examines the rise of print in Lithuania as a significant cultural factor in bringing about the move toward midrash study also draws heavily on bibliographic records.⁶¹

The literary analysis of *‘Emek ha-Neẓiv* found in Chapters Three and Four identifies the most common characteristics of the commentary in an effort to reconstruct Neẓiv’s objectives in writing the work and the means he employed in pursuing them. However, the comparative analysis of *‘Emek ha-Neẓiv* with *Ha’amek Davar* in Chapter Six does not focus on Neẓiv’s exegetical technique. As the purpose of this book is to describe not *Ha’amek Davar*’s place in the history of Bible commentary⁶² but its relationship to the larger corpus of Neẓiv’s writing and the society from which it emerged, emphasis is placed instead on literary style, statements of purpose, and the content of the commentary, which seems to be in conversation with contemporary events and trends.

This book is not intended as the definitive work on Neẓiv. Its intent is rather to begin providing an intellectual and historical context for his voluminous writings and to open the vibrant, yet heretofore neglected, world of Lithuanian Torah scholarship in the first half of the nineteenth-century to further critical study and exploration. And, by noting the eclipse of that world by the more traditionalist elements of Lithuanian Jewish society, it intends to extend the questions of the origins of Orthodoxy which Jacob Katz, Moshe Samet, Michael Silber, and others have asked in regard to the Jewish community of Hungary to the Jewish community of late nineteenth-century Lithuania. It is, in the language of the Talmud, a means of stating *ta’ shema’*: come and listen, come and learn, come and study the world of nineteenth-century Lithuanian Torah scholarship.

60 After accounting for multiple citations of the same source, *‘Emek ha-Neẓiv* contains references to approximately 150 different works.

61 Basic biographical information will be drawn from the following sources: S. J. Fuenn, *Keneset Yisrael* (Warsaw, 1886); Aryeh Loeb Feinstein, *‘Ir Tehilah: Ha-Lorot le-‘Adat Yisrael she-bi-‘Ir Brisk* (Warsaw, 1886); Moshe Reines, *Sefer Dor ve-Hokhamav*. (Cracow: Fischer, 1890); Hillel Noah Maggid Steinschneider, *‘Ir Vilna*, vol. I (Vilna, 1900), vol. II (Jerusalem, 2002); *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901-1906); S.J. Fuenn, *Kiriah Ne’emanah* (Vilna, 1915); Jacob Mark, *Gedoylim fun unzer Tsayt: Monografyies, Karaktershriken un Zikhroynes* (New York: 687 [1927]); Israel Cohen, *Vilna*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1992).

62 For an overview of Neẓiv’s exegetical technique in *Ha’amek Davar*, see Nissim Eliakim, *Ha’amek Davar la-Neẓiv* (Moreshet Ya’akov, 2003).

Note on Transliteration

As the book includes significant Hebrew transliteration, the following system has been employed throughout:

א	'
ב	<i>b</i>
ב	<i>v</i>
ג	<i>g</i>
ד	<i>d</i>
ה	<i>h</i>
ו	<i>v</i>
ז	<i>z</i>
ח	<i>h</i>
ט	<i>t</i>
י	<i>y</i>
כ	<i>k</i>
כ	<i>kh</i>
ל	<i>l</i>
מ	<i>m</i>
נ	<i>n</i>
ס	<i>s</i>
ע	'
פ	<i>p</i>
פ	<i>f</i>
צ	<i>z</i>
ק	<i>k</i>
ר	<i>r</i>
שׁ	<i>sh</i>
שׂ	<i>s</i>
ת	<i>t</i>
ת	<i>t</i>

CHAPTER ONE:
THE TEXT OF *'EMEK HA-NEZIV*

A historical analysis of the text and context of a printed work must always begin with an investigation as to the authenticity of the printed work. More specifically, the historian must always ask whether the work printed between the covers of a modern book is, in fact, what it purports to be.¹

The printed edition of *'Emek ha-Neziv*, which was first published some sixty years after Neziv's death, opens with a short introduction from the publishers offering a brief historical description of the commentary. The second paragraph of their introduction reads as follows:

And these are the beautiful words² which the honored Ga'on, the author, may the name of the righteous be a blessing, wrote himself in his gilded language in the *Kidmat Ha-'Emek* of the *She'iltot*, 1:17,³ **regarding this book:**⁴

And I, of meager stature (*he-'ani*), in my innocence pursued during my youth an investigation of the exegesis of our Rabbis of Blessed Memory which are scattered amongst the Talmud [and] which are not understood upon first glance at the Bible. And I poured over the *Mekhilta'* and *Torat Kohanim*, the primary books of source material, and from there explained positions of the sages of the Talmud, who are the true warriors, until I discovered explanations with the help of He Who Grants [Knowledge] even to the unworthy. And I wrote in a book

1 I am indebted to Professor Haym Soloveitchik who first sensitized me to these critical questions during his tenure as a visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania (1998).

2 A word play on the title given to Neziv's commentary on the Passover Seder *'Imrei Shefer*. The following passage is one of a few places in *Kidmat Ha-'Emek* in which Neziv writes in rhyming prose. The awkwardness of the translation can be attributed to the poetic flourishes which he employs.

3 *HS*, vol 1, 11.

4 Emphasis added.

a composition on *Sifre Midrash Bamidbar* and *ve-'Eleh ha-Devarim*, in which the ways of the Tanna' are brief, and from there explained some *beraiyot* in *Mekhilta'* and *Torat Kohanim*, which have not been addressed by the commentators. Yet, it⁵ is hidden with me until I find the time, with the help of He who formed the luminaries, to bring it to press and to distribute it (*le-hakhnis le-she'arim*).⁶

The task at hand, then, is to determine whether the printed text of *'Emek ha-Neziv* is, in fact, an accurate rendition of the commentary which Neziv penned in his youth and to which he refers in the above-cited passage. This question can be further broken down into two component parts. First, we must question whether Neziv himself edited, revised, or rewrote his original work on *Sifre* in the years following the publication of the above passage. Second, we must determine whether the text posthumously brought to press under the name *'Emek ha-Neziv* veers in any significant manner from the text actually written by Neziv over a century earlier.

The significance of these questions to the larger project at hand should be quite clear. In order to use the text of *'Emek ha-Neziv* as a window into the early years of Neziv's intellectual development, one must first determine that the text does, in fact, accurately represent the thoughts of Neziv during the 1830s and 1840s.

Dating the Printed Text

In the passage from *Kidmat Ha-'Emek* cited above, Neziv mentions his commentary on *Sifre* as a product of his youth⁷ and laments having been forced to bring the *She'iltot* commentary to press prior to his commentary on *Sifre*.⁸ From these statements one can conclude that a text worthy of being called a "composition"⁹ and in the pre-publication stage was extant well before the 1861 publication of *Ha'amek She'elah*. In fact, Neziv most definitely had composed at least part of a commentary on *Sifre* as early

5 The *Sifre* commentary.

6 EH, *'Im Ha-Sefer*, introduction.

7 *Ha'amek She'elah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1999), 11.

8 Ibid., 12.

9 See citation above.

as 1846, as evidenced by his letter written to Ḥayyim Yehudah Agus¹⁰ in the fall of that year, in which he states that, “More than this I have expounded with the help of God on the *Sifre*, Torah portion *Hukat*, and this is not the place [to go into further detail].”¹¹

The date of the *Sifre* commentary’s composition can be pushed back even further through an analysis of Neziv’s work on *Torat Kohanim*. The edition of this work printed at the end of the 1997 edition of *Birkat ha-Neziv* opens with “The year 5602¹² with the help of God.” This date suggests that the printed work does reflect, at least in large part, the work on *Torat Kohanim* mentioned by Neziv as a product of his youth in the *Ha’amek She’elah* passage. While this brief collection of notes to the halakhic midrashim of Leviticus clearly contains lines and references added later than 1842,¹³ the frequency with which this text refers to Neziv’s commentary on *Sifre*—over fifty times in the span of forty pages of commentary—makes it difficult to believe that all such references represent later additions. Furthermore, many of the references to the commentary on *Sifre* found in the notes to *Torat Kohanim* bear the imprint of Neziv’s original composition, rather than later authorial or editorial insertions. Thus, for example, in the middle of his comments on *Tazri’a* 1:3 (24) Neziv cites a passage from the beginning of *Sifre Naso* and writes mid-sentence, “...And I explained there with the help of God that...”¹⁴ Were this comment, and the others like it, to be located at the end of a passage, one might well assume that they were added later, when Neziv returned to his *Torat Kohanim* commentary after having composed his commentary on *Sifre*. The placement of these comments in the middle of several passages, however, suggests that the *Sifre* commentary, or at least parts thereof, had been composed prior to the composition of his work on *Torat Kohanim*, and, thus, prior to 1842. As such, Neziv’s work on *Torat Kohanim* also seems to suggest

10 For more on Agus, see Hillel Noah Maggid Steinschneider, *‘Ir Vilna*, vol. II, ed. Mordechai Zalkin (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003), 172, n. 1.

11 *Meshiv Davar* (II: 96) (Jerusalem: 1993).

12 1841 or 1842.

13 See Chapter 8.

14 Similarly, see *Shemini Mekhilta’ de-milu’im* 30 (18), “*Ve-’ayyen mah she-katav be-Sifre Pinḥas be-siyyata’ de-shmaya*,” *Shemini Mekhilta’ de-milu’im* 1: 2: 12 (20) “*ve-’ayyen mah shekatav be-ta’ameh de-ḥanina’ be-siyyata’ dishmaya’ be-Sifre parashat Matot piska’ 5*,” “*Aḥare Mot* 5: 3 (30) “*Sifre Hukat...u-kimo shekatavti sham be-siyyata dishmaya*,” “*Kedoshim* 4: 1 (p.33) “*Pirashṭi be-Sifre parshah Shoftim piska’ 5 be-siyyata’ de-shmaya*,” “*Kedoshim* 4: 18 (33) “*be-Sifre parashat Tezeh ‘al ha-pasuk lo’ tilbash sha’atnez bi’arti da’at Rashi ‘al ha-nakhon be-siyyata’ dishmaya*” *Emor* 17: 12 “*Sifre parashat Re’eḥ piska’ 33 u-mah she-katavti sham be-siyyata dishmaya*.”

that the composition of his commentary on *Sifre* commenced in the 1830s, while he was in his late teens and early twenties.

The question remains, however, as to whether the text later printed with the title *‘Emek ha-Neziv* is, in fact, the text referred to by Neziv in 1846.

From his statements in the introduction to *Ha’amek She’elah* it is clear that Neziv intended to publish his *Sifre* commentary. Nonetheless, the work did not appear in print during his lifetime. In fact, it remained unpublished until 1958 when it was edited and printed by the Shapira family (descendants of Neziv’s son-in-law Raphael Shapira) under the aegis of the *Va’ad le-Hoza’at Kitve ha-Neziv* (Committee for the Publication of the Works of Neziv). In 1977 the 1958 edition was reprinted with minor editorial corrections.

Given the fact that nearly a century elapsed between the composition of the work referred to in the 1861 edition of *Ha’amek She’elah* and the 1958 publication of *‘Emek ha-Neziv*, one cannot assume that the printed text is identical to that which Neziv was preparing for publication in 1861. Thus, even though his commentary on *Sifre* is, in theory, his earliest literary product, assigning a date to the work reflected in the printed text, on which this book is based, requires further investigation.

The earliest textual clue to the work’s date of composition is found in Neziv’s comments on *Naso* where the printed text reads “the book *‘Emek Halakhah* was newly printed after having written [this].”¹⁵ The book to which he is referring, Zev Wolf ben Yehudah Ha-Levi’s *‘Emek Halakhah*, was first printed in Vilna in 1845.¹⁶ As such, the comments directly preceding this statement in the printed text can be dated prior to 1845.

A similar conclusion can be drawn regarding passages in *Shelah* and *Be-ha’alotekha* in which Neziv cites his father-in-law, Reb ‘Izele, and follows his name with the word “*she-yihyeh*,” “may he live,” which is a customary blessing of long life appended to the name of noted personalities who are still alive. The printed text follows the word “*she-yihyeh*” with brackets containing the acronym “*ZaZaL*,” “may the memory of the righteous one be a blessing,” a clear addition to the text, by the Neziv or by a later editor, following Reb ‘Izele’s death.¹⁷ Since the original “*she-yihyeh*”

15 EH Naso 49 (I: 181) “‘*ahar kotvi yazah me-hadash sefer ‘emek halakhah.*”

16 There is a printing error in the pagination in the 1845 Vilna edition of *‘Emek Halakhah* and Neziv’s citation refers to what should be (32) but is printed as (30).

17 EH be-Ha’alotekha 37 (I: 297) “*hotni she-yihyeh [zazal]*”; EH Shelah 1 (II: 10) [*u-piresh hotni ha-*