

## **Competing Religious Movement of Eastern Europe in the 18th & 19th Centuries**

### THE MITNAGDIM

As early as 17th century, Vilna began to achieve widespread fame as a centre for rabbinical studies. Scholars such as Joshua Hoeschel Ben Joseph, Shabbetai ha-Kohen, and R. Moses, established houses of study which began to attract students from far and wide. The Lithuanian rabbis upheld the traditional Jewish approach that equated religious leadership with scholarly mastery of the Talmud and the codes of Jewish religious law. The value of intensive study and learning was central.

By the latter half of the 18th century, Lithuania's reputation among scholars was further enhanced thanks to one extraordinary man whose brilliant mind, dedication to the value of study and commitment to truth was unmatched: Rabbi Elijah b. Solomon Zalman, the Ga'on of Vilna. With his strong personality and compelling leadership, he drew numerous disciples to his doorstep. His presence was instrumental in the growth of Vilna as one of the most stimulating religious and spiritual centers of the day. His work had a profound influence on Judaism.

### THE YESHIVA MOVEMENT

Until the rise of the celebrated yeshivot of Lithuania, the Yeshiva did not function as an independent institution. The local Rabbi acted as head of the Yeshiva as part of his general duties, and students who came to study with him were supported by the local community.

A shift occurred when the Yeshiva became somewhat independent of the Rabbi, and indeed, of the community. It had its own "Rosh Yeshivah" (Principal), its own separate buildings, and its own administrative staff. In the period following the death of the Ga'on, the Movement continue to flourish modelled on the ideals he embodied.

The Yeshiva Movement did not penetrate the Hasidic community, where young men were encouraged to study in their local Bet Hamidrash without any formal organization or course of study. (The Lubavitch Yeshiva and the Hasidic Yeshiva of Lublin were two notable exceptions.)

Most of the great Yeshivot of today are the spiritual and pedagogical heirs of the Lithuanian centres of study. Within their walls, the highest value is assigned to the study of Torah for its own sake. Most students come from out of town, thereby fulfilling the Talmudic injunction to "exile yourself to a place of Torah".

Secular subjects are never studied within the Yeshiva, although graduates may pursue courses such as science or economics in order to earn a living. They may study the Bible and other religious texts, but these, too, are not a formal part of the curriculum, which focuses on Talmudic learning. The Yeshiva is the only place where this intense type of study is practiced. It is very different from the modern methods used in university Jewish studies courses and even in Rabbinical seminaries.

The Yeshiva is a world unto itself, and the study is continuous and without end. Three of the great Yeshivot of today bear the names of the Lithuanian towns in which the Yeshivah movement first evolved and flourished: Ponevezh, Slobodka and Telz. Following the example established in Lithuania, a cohesive and influential institution continues to thrive.

### ISRAEL SALANTER AND THE MUSAR MOVEMENT

A nineteenth century Lithuanian Talmudist and religious thinker, Israel Lipkin (known as Salanter after the town of Salant, where he grew up) was the founder of the Musar movement. He held that the both the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim were

in error: the Mitnagdim because they believed they had no need for a Rebbe, and the Hasidim because they believed they had a Rebbe. The Hasidim, who had great admiration for this gifted teacher, contended that the Mitnagdim had a Rebbe in Israel Salanter, but failed to make the most of him.

Building on the early influences of Reb Zundel of Salant, Rabbi Salanter taught that a mechanical performance of the precepts was inadequate to achieve the good life as required by the Torah. The ethical demands of the Torah – who we are as human beings, how we treat one another – were of paramount importance. “One must not be frum (observant) by standing on another’s shoulders.”

Rabbi Salanter served as a sort of traveling Rosh Yeshivah, studying and teaching in a number of places. In Kovno, he founded the first Yeshiva based on his version of Musar. A literature of Musar, meaning “reproof” or “instruction”, had developed in the Middle Ages, but Salanter’s interpretation encouraged the repetitive reading of a few texts accompanied by a melancholy tune. He recognized that while observant Jews would never think of offending against the laws of kashruth, they might thoughtlessly deal unscrupulously with other people. Just as the laws of kashruth had been inculcated, so, he argued, the same habituated training needed to be provided in ethical matters. Both ethical and religious conduct had to be practiced over and over until they became second nature.

For at least half an hour each day, students closed their copies of the Talmud and sat in a darkened room rehearsing the Musar texts. To this day, the Lithuanian-type of Musar Yeshivah focuses on developing rigorous Talmudic and Halachic scholars who, at the same time, live their lives governed by yirat shamayim (fear of heaven). Even within the Musar movement, there is more than one approach. The two main schools are those of Slobodka and Navaradok. The difference between them has been summed up in these words: “In Slobodka, they taught: man is so great, how can he sin? In Navaradok, they taught: man is so small, how dare he sin?”

#### Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797), THE GA’ON OF VILNA

The Hebrew word Ga’on, meaning “pride”, was originally a title restricted to the heads of the Talmudic academies, especially in Babylonia, during the immediate post-Talmudic era until about the 12th century. Later on it came to be used in reference to outstanding Talmudic sages. Rabbi Elijah certainly fit this definition. He became the living symbol of a great Ga’on. Having demonstrated remarkable intellectual abilities as a child, he was supported by the community and allowed to devote his full energies to study, without the usual communal responsibilities of a Rabbinic position.

The scope of his learning extended beyond the normal Yeshiva curriculum, then limited to the Babylonian Talmud. He studied the full range of ancient and medieval Rabbinic literature, and ventured into such secular subjects as astronomy, mathematics and biology in pursuit of accuracy and clarity. He believed that many ambiguities in Talmudic texts were the result of inaccurate copying. The changes he made were controversial at first, but modern scholarship accepts and benefits from his explanations and interpretations.

A rigorous critical thinker, Rabbi Elijah did not approve of the casuistic mode of study known as pilpul that was

common in the yeshivas of Poland.

Though an ardent student of the Kabbalah, he rejected the popular Hasidic version of Jewish mysticism and objected to the cult of personality implicit in the leadership of the Hasidic Tzaddik.

So firm was his opposition to the Hasidic movement that in 1772, at his instigation, the Vilna Rabbinical court issued an order of excommunication against the “sect”. In 1781 the order was expanded to prohibit marriage and commercial relations with Hasidim. Not only did he question the purity of their leaders’ motives, he also challenged their scholarly credentials. His adherents became known as the Mitnagdim (Hebrew for “opponents”). After Rabbi Elijah’s death, his grave became a holy place where his followers left slips of paper with their prayers. Today, a bronze bust and memorial plaque mark the place in Vilna which was once his home.

Time and circumstance would lessen the antagonism of the Mitnagdim for the Hasidim. The Hasidim became less radical and more conventionally Orthodox, and the two groups came to recognize their shared vulnerability to the secular ideologies and religious reformers within Judaism, and the Czarist government and Christian clergy externally. It is perhaps ironic that today, the Chabad Lubavitch movement helps sustain the Jewish community of Vilna.