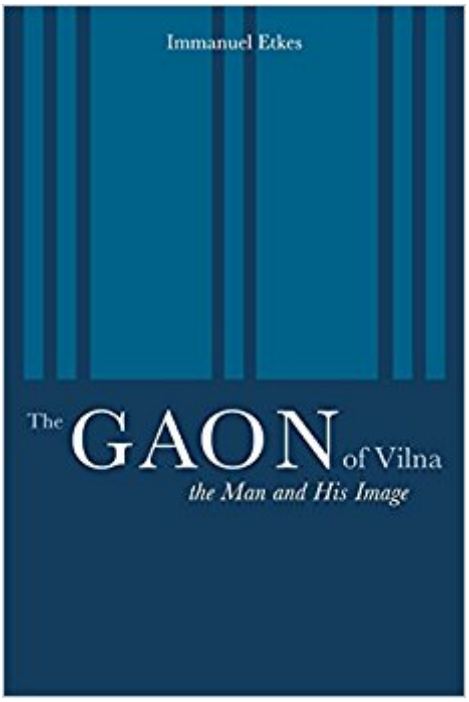
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The Gaon Of Vilna: The Man And His Image



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Synopsis

A legendary figure in his own lifetime, Rabbi Eliahu ben Shlomo Zalman (1720-1797) was known as the "Gaon of Vilna." He was the acknowledged master of Talmudic studies in the vibrant intellectual center of Vilna, revered throughout Eastern Europe for his learning and his ability to traverse with ease seemingly opposed domains of thought and activity. After his death, the myth that had been woven around him became even more powerful and was expressed in various public images. The formation of these images was influenced as much by the needs and wishes of those who clung to and depended on them as by the actual figure of the Gaon. In this penetrating study, Immanuel Etkes sheds light on aspects of the Vilna Gaon’s "real" character and traces several public images of him as they have developed and spread from the early nineteenth century until the present.

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Customer Reviews

"A pathbreaking book in Jewish Studies.... Etkes is careful to separate the man himself from the mythic role he later came to occupy in the modern Jewish landscape. This emphasis upon ’image,’ and not only upon the ’man,’ gives the Etkes volume a unique and broad flavor." -David Ellenson, author of Between Tradition and Culture; "[Etkes] provides a sophisticated sense of the dynamism and power of historical images in forging battle lines in the highly fractious world of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish culture,"-David N. Myers, author of Re-inventing the Jewish Past

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A great work describing the philosiphy of the Gaon and how his works and especially his image influenced future generations of Eastern European Jews.Regarding the comments of why hasn't the Gaon writings been translated into English. This is really not the purpose of the book. Etkes discusses how Eastern European Jews of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century interpreted the Gaon not how present day American Jewry disseminates Torah. There are a few books of the Gaon in english, some of them adapted and expanded: these include the juggler and the king (expanded version of the Gaon on selections of Aggadah), his commentary to Yona, and his commentary to the Passover Haggadah. As to why more has not been translated my guess is that many of his works, from his commentary to Mishlei to his multiple works on Kabbalah, contain mystical concepts that are not easily communicated to an unlearned public. Furthermore much of his works are cryptic and written almost as short term notes. His comments to the Shulchan Aruch, for example, is oftentimes presented as short sentences or one or two words just identifying the source to a Halakha. One would need to translate and reprint the words of much of the Talmud and the Rishonim (Rosh, Rif, Rambam ect) to begin the grasp what the Gaon is talking about.

A classic

This set of essays discusses a wide variety of issues, starting with the Gaon of Vilna himself and then discussing the work of his disciple Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin.The first and last essays focus on the Gaon himself, trying to explain why this man was so influential. Apparently, he combined charisma with excellent memory, intellectual effort and almost infinite persistence. And while other rabbis relied primarily on medieval codifiers of Jewish law, he evaluated the Talmud on its own merits, feeling free to reject the halachic views of later commentators. But unlike other Jewish genuises (such as Maimonides, who combined halachic writings with a commitment to community leadership, philosophy and medicine) he was a recluse: he practiced (and preached) the idea of

ascetic withdrawal in order to focus on Torah study, so much so that he spent little time with his children or other scholars. Perhaps his ascetism and reclusiveness increased his prestige by making him seem like the model of a holy man.But these essays raise questions that they fail to answer. Why are so few of the Gaon's works translated into English? And even in Hebrew, was he as productive as the more well-known medieval scholars? And did he think about how Jewish society could function if its brightest rabbis were hermits?Other essays discuss the Gaon's attempt to wipe out Hasidim; Etkes tries to explain both what really happened and how Hasidic leaders responded to his conduct. Apparently, the Gaon had heard rumors that the early Hasids behaved wildly during prayer and expressed contempt towards Torah scholars. Rather than being willing to speak with Hasids and hear their point of view, the Gaon suggested that they were heretics and urged other Jews to shun them. However, Hasidic leaders were relatively restrained in their reaction to such conduct, because of the Gaon's prestige.A later essay discusses Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, one of the Gaon's disciples. Rabbi Hayyim did not seek to read Hasids out of Judaism, but nevertheless disagreed with them. His view was that one cleaves to God primarily through Torah study; by contrast, the more moderate Hasidim certainly favored Torah study, but emphasized prayer perhaps more than did Rabbi Hayyim. And because the Hasidim emphasized the value of "Torah study for the sake of cleaving to God", Rabbi Hayyim worried that young students would be afraid to study Torah at all out of a fear that they were doing so for the wrong motives.

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