YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THE VILNA GAON**

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SHIUR #8: BETWEEN CONSERVATISM AND CHANGES

I. A TRADITION THAT EVOLVES OVER THE COURSE OF ITS TRANSMISSION

The last *shiur* was dedicated to a discussion of the ways in which the Gra's views, practices and method of study – those that we have thus far studied – are reflected in the teachings of his disciple, R. Chayyim of Volozhin. We saw that there is room for different interpretations of R. Chayyim's approach. Some see it as based on the "principle of dissociation," that is to say, the absolute separation between the supreme value of Torah study and all other religious values, e.g., fear of heaven, personal religious morality, and *devekut*. R. Chayyim does indeed demand that a Torah student be God-fearing, but according to the proponents of the dissociation principle, all other religious values, such as fear of God, must be set aside in practice when one comes to study Torah, because such "external" values interfere with it. I argued in favor of the alternative position: Despite the fact that R. Chayyim demands clarity of mind in order to reach maximum intellectual attainments, he also maintains that *devekut* and spiritual elation are meant to be the lot of one who studies Torah "for its own sake." Standing before his eyes was the image of his celebrated master, who combined all these values in a most natural manner, without erecting any barriers.

All this notwithstanding, it cannot be denied that the "principle of dissociation" is certainly found as a very concrete reality in the Volozhin yeshiva. A considerable number of the personal memoirs of students of the yeshiva in the last decades of its operation (the yeshiva was closed down in 1892), when the Netziv stood at its head, have come down to our hands. It is difficult to find in them any trace of the moral aspirations that characterize *Nefesh Ha-chayyim*, aspirations that prominently appear in the writings of R. Chayyim's disciples who lived a generation or two earlier, e.g., the author of *Menucha u-Kedusha*, whom we have previously mentioned. It is clear that over the course of time, Torah study turned from a **central** value – as taught by R. Chayyim – into an **exclusive** value. We do not find the students at Volozhin during this period dedicating even minimal time or effort to the cultivation of fear of heaven, as was taught in the book of the yeshiva's founder.

In fact, and to our great surprise, there is no mention of the book during the period under discussion. This foundational work, the greater part of which is shrouded in an atmosphere of moral-mystical spiritual elation, did not accord with the spirit of the yeshiva and its student body at the end of the nineteenth century, and in practice it was not studied. The book's popularity plunged, this fact being reflected also in its publication history. During the fifty years from its first appearance (in the 1820's), it was printed seven times. After the year 5634 (1874), however, it was not printed in Europe even once. The new climate is strongly felt in the words of a student of the yeshiva, Zalman Epstein, who explicitly relates that among the students of Volozhin during this period, there was no connection whatsoever between Torah study and the fear of heaven. Can a person with such a spiritual position find a common language with R. Chayyim of Volozhin?

What is interesting is that despite this all, the students of Volozhin saw themselves as continuing the tradition established by the Gra. Only that in order to do this they had to "update" their image of the Gra. If we accept the picture painted by this Zalman Epstein, the Gaon of Vilna was venerated in Volozhin not as "the Gaon and Chasid," as he had been commonly designated, but simply as "the Gaon." The intellectual approach enjoyed total reign. During this period many young Russian Jews studied in universities, and the students of Volozhin compared their status to that of those who entered the halls of academia.

To summarize our argument: "The principle of dissociation" is a development that evolved in practice in Volozhin over the course of time. This development created the later reality of Volozhin, and in its wake, that of all the Lithuanian yeshivot, and it reflects a shift away from the worldviews of the Gra and R. Chayyim.

This phenomenon – the stubborn insistence on the part of the students of Volozhin to see themselves as continuing the tradition, despite the fact that they significantly distanced themselves from the values and ideas that guided the founding fathers of the Mitnaged movement – requires closer examination. We will yet encounter other phenomena that at first glance indicate a strong influence of the Gra's legacy, but after careful consideration, turn out to reflect a significant change or development, which sets the later recipients of the legacy at a distance from those who created it, and perhaps even in conflict with them. Do the later figures bear the Gra's name in vain? It is difficult to provide unequivocal answers to questions of this sort. All that we can do is collect data to the extent possible, consider it, and try to draw a reliable picture of the reality. How are we then to evaluate the reality? Each person must give his own answer.

**II. HOW DOES ONE DISSEMINATE A DEMANDING SPIRITUAL LEGACY?**

Having raised this question – and it will continue to occupy us – consideration should be given to several general issues connected to the aforementioned phenomenon, which maintain it, and even underlie it.

First of all, we have already seen that the Gaon himself hardly spread his teachings to the community at large, and that this mission fell to his disciples who diligently and capably worked toward its fulfillment. However, even before this process gained momentum, changes had already taken place in the spiritual and cultural climate in which the Jews lived. Chassidut, against which the Gra had fought already during his lifetime, established itself as a permanent influence. The Enlightenment was already rising on the horizon as a dominant factor that would eventually eclipse even Chassidut in its powerful presence in the world of the Jewish elite. Under new circumstances, the attempt to continue learning from the Gra's teachings while struggling with the new winds that were blowing, necessitated adjustment, change, redefinition and even waiver of certain elements of his teachings in deference to others.

It seems, however, that even without taking into consideration the changes in the surrounding cultural climate, turning the Gra's ways into a model for general emulation involved great challenges. How can a person who is not a "gaon" with great talents apply Gra's ways in his personal life? The problem began already when the elite community of Torah scholars was approached, as we find in R. Chayyim's introduction to *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta*, and becomes all the more acute as the Gra's disciples turned to larger audiences, in order to magnify the impact of their master's teachings. Modifications and adjustments were absolutely necessary.

A historical example may be found in the educational enterprise of another "Gaon" – the Rambam. The Rambam defined spiritual perfection in philosophical terms. But the acceptance of this model faced difficulties of the two types mentioned in connection with the Gra. The philosophical ideal that the Rambam promoted suffered practical defeat already towards the end of his life in Egypt, in the wake of the decline of the status of philosophy there. Saladin, who had seized control of Egypt, did not like the philosophers, and preferred a different spiritual school of thought - Sufism. The strengthening of this trend is very striking in the writings and communal leadership of R. Avraham, the son of the Rambam, who inherited his position as "Naggid."

More fundamentally, however, the Rambam's educational enterprise stood in the shadow of the tension between elitist spiritual aspirations and the need to educate all strata of Jewish society. The Rambam had established for himself, and for a select number of his disciples, the true spiritual ideal, which according to him involves realizing the image of God in man, and he even argued that all of human society exists only in order to produce this tiny elite. On the other hand, the Rambam saw himself obligated to more general education, which was apparently meant to draw each and every person closer to the aforementioned ideal to the greatest extent possible. This motive was behind his popular commentary to the Mishna and his most important work, the *Mishneh Torah*, which were meant for the general community of Torah students. In his commentary to the Mishna, in his introduction to chapter *Chelek*, he notes the need to consider the spiritual level of the student, and not to demand of him perfection in his religious intentions:

Let us assume that a young lad was brought to a teacher so that he may be instructed in Torah, this being a great good for him because it will draw him near to perfection. Only that he, owing to his young age and lack of reason, will not understand the value of that good, nor the value of that perfection. Now necessity will force the teacher who is more perfect than he is to encourage study by means of that which is dear to him owing to his young age, and he will say to him: "Study, and I will give you nuts or figs"… And when he will be of greater intellect, and this too will be small in his eyes, and he will know that it is of no value, they will coax him with something more important, and say to him: "Study so that you will be a rabbi or a judge; people will honor you and stand up before you and fulfill your words, and your name will be glorified in your lifetime and after your death, like Such-and-such." And then he will study, and try to achieve that stature, and the goal for him will be that people should honor, extol and praise him… For not all people attain the truth, and are like Avraham our father. Accordingly they permitted the masses to do good for the sake of reward, and to avoid evil for fear of punishment. *And we encourage them in this and strengthen their thoughts concerning it*, until he who understands and knows the truth and what is the perfect way, just as we do with a lad when he studies, as in the analogy brought above.

As is well-known, the Rambam writes in his *Guide of the Perplexed* that the Torah itself took into consideration the state of the general community, and therefore mandated sacrifices, which represent a way of serving God that corresponds to a relatively inferior spiritual level.

The Gra as well – like the Rambam – realized in himself a powerful spiritual ideal that matched his natural abilities. But in contrast to the Rambam, he left the task of disseminating his teachings among the people to his disciples, and for this purpose they were forced to mobilize not only their capabilities as Torah scholars, but also their leadership skills, their imagination, their discretion and their familiarity with reality.

**III. UPDATING THE LEGACY OF THE GRA IN THE *NEFESH HA-CHAYYIM***

In light of all that has been said it should come as no surprise that even R. Chayyim of Volozhin saw a need to adjust the Gra's legacy to his target audience.

Let us reexamine our specific example – R. Chayyim of Volozhin as disseminator of the Gra's method of Torah study, a method which combines study and spiritual elation. For the Gra, this level was achieved through devotion to Torah study, both the exoteric law and the esoteric law. The Gra dedicated much of his time to the study of Kabbala, despite the fact that he did not occupy himself with the "intentions and unifications" that might follow from such study. Anyone who reads the words of R. Chayyim in his introduction to *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* understands that the personal spiritual life experienced by the Gra was rooted in his deep knowledge of Kabbala. For example, could the Gra have merited "ascents of his soul," had he not fully understand the concept through his absolute mastery of the esoteric law? I strongly doubt it.

Now when R. Chayyim preaches in favor of Torah study in the fourth part of *Nefesh Ha-chayyim*, we do not find instructions to study Kabbala in particular. On the contrary, R. Chayyim lauds the study of the Halakhic sources. In order to excite his readers into studying Torah for its own sake, he reveals the supreme spirituality that awaits them:

He is the darling son among the members of the king's household, in the king's palace, to whom alone is permission granted at all times to search in the storehouse of the holy king, and all the supernal gates are open before him… And he enters the gates of the holy Torah to comprehend and to see the inner light, the depths of its supreme secrets, as it is written: "And they reveal to him the secrets of the Torah"…. (ibid, chap. 20)

What is "the storehouse of the holy king"? It would seem that we are dealing with kabbalistic revelations connected to the esoteric lore. His promise to his readers hangs not only on citations from the *Zohar* which he brings later in the passage, but on the living example of his master, who already in his lifetime was a member of the heavenly academy. But how can someone who is not familiar with the esoteric lore merit such revelations? And in general, what meaning can such revelations have for a student in the Volozhin yeshiva, even a good student, who occupies himself day and night in "the discussions of Abaye and Rava"?

Once again R. Chayyim refrains from directing his readers to the study of non-Halakhic sources in particular, and makes the success of his prescription dependent exclusively on the study of Torah "for its own sake," that is to say, with perfect intention from a moral perspective. In the past we have seen that R. Chayyim himself attached importance to the study of Kabbala. The scholarly consensus is that in actual practice he taught Kabbala only to select individuals, and in a personal framework. This can easily be explained. The students learning in the yeshiva were mostly young, more or less of the age of students in a typical Hesder yeshiva today. In those days (as opposed to the situation today), they still respected the uniqueness of Kabbala, and approached it in accordance with the words of the Rambam (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13):

I maintain that it is not proper for a person to stroll in the *Pardes* unless he has filled his belly with bread and meat. "Bread and meat" refer to the knowledge of what is permitted and what is forbidden, and similar matters concerning other *mitzvot*.

But this is precisely the point. Not only does R. Chayyim minimize here the importance of "intentions and unifications," but he deemphasizes the study of Kabbala in general, because he wishes to attract a community of Torah scholars who are fit at this stage to delve into the study of the Talmud and the codes, that is to say, "the exoteric law." But nevertheless, he uses the perfect example of the Gra as a source of inspiration, and as the basis for far-reaching spiritual promises, in his attempt to fascinate young people, whose abilities to reach such levels must still be proven.

**IV. CONTINUATION OF THE TRADITION OR CULTIVATION OF INDPENDENCE?**

Apart from the need for cultural mediation, and for bridging diverse gaps in human potential, there are additional elements that characterize the transmission and acceptance of the Gra's legacy. I wish to mention two of them. The Gra was a Renaissance man in the full sense of the term, and as we have already seen, unifying all parts of the Torah, in its broadest sense, was for him a matter of principle. Do we also find that same all-encompassing breadth by his disciples? With respect to some of his disciples, the answer is yes, at least to a certain degree. At the same time, however, it can be said that the heirs to the Gra's legacy dedicated themselves to the dissemination of their master's teachings, each one according to his personal inclination, and under the banner that he had adopted from among the variety of values that were realized by the Gra – the exoteric law, the esoteric law, Biblical commentary, ethics, messianic activity, textual clarification, and integration of general knowledge. In each case the question may be raised: At which point does the transmitter turn into a creator? What constitutes a seed that took, and what did that seed bring forth – what is the additional growth that could not have been seen from the outset?

Second, relying on the Gra as a source of inspiration for the transmission of a tradition involves an internal contradiction. Indeed, the contradiction is found already in the person of the Gra himself, as we have already seen. The Gra's method of study constantly thrives on finding the source of every law, avoiding pilpulistic Torah insights that do not directly follow from the words of *Chazal* themselves, and curbing new customs and halakhic structures that are not anchored in the sources of the Oral Law. Nevertheless, independent thought and effort, and the full expression of one's personality, are critical principles in the Gaon's thought. Through them he feels that he has reached a dialogue with God Himself. Thus the paradox in the very idea of "disseminating the Gra's legacy" sharpens. How do you turn a person into a model for imitation, when that person, as a matter of principle, did not imitate anybody else?

It seems that part of the freedom that the students of Volozhin felt "to play" with the image of the Gra stems precisely from this point. One can almost "hear" their thoughts: The most important thing that the Gra wanted us to learn from him is to think independently. He would not have wanted us to adopt everything that he did, if that would force us to be disingenuous. He would have wanted us to activate our discretion and distinguish between essential and secondary. For us – and also for him – study is the essence, the heart of the matter. We are bound to waive the less important things, if that will improve our intellectual achievements. What would the Gra have said about these thoughts? That already is a different question.

**V. THE VERSE OF EACH AND EVERY INDIVIDUAL**

These ruminations on the tension between tradition and independence bring us to the next topic, which constitutes a doorway into a broader study of the views of the Gra. In R. Israel of Shklov's introduction to his *Pe'at Ha-shulchan*, we read the following:

And he knew the names and essence of all the people in the world, how they are alluded to in the written Torah, as our master wrote in his commentary to *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta*… And I heard from a certain elder, the halakhic decisor in the city of Mileslavi, who ministered to our holy master in days of old. He saw that a certain Gaon came from far away to hear the words of the living God from our master. And he said to our master: My lord certainly knows the names of all people where they are [alluded to] in the written Torah, as the Ramban writes regarding the incident of Avner.[[1]](#footnote-1) And he answered, Yes. And he asked him: Where is [the allusion to] the name of our master? And he answered: It emerges from the verse, "A perfect and just weight" ("*even shelema va-tzedek*")[[2]](#footnote-2) – *even shelema* is *E*liyahu *ben Shelomo*. And just as the letter *alef* is hidden, so his Torah is also concealed and hidden, and therefore his name is hidden in initial letters.

A certain principle emerges from these words: There is an allusion to each and every person in some Biblical verse. The Gaon knew how to find for each person his individual verse. His own verse, according to him, is "*Even shelema va-tzedek*." The letter *alef* in the word *even* is the initial letter of Eliyahu, and the rest can be read as *ben Shelomo* (the Gra's father was named Shelomo Zalman).

If we compare this principle to what we have already learned in the past, we find a certain correspondence between people's names and words of Torah. As may be recalled, the Gra argued that every Halakha is anchored in its source, and the written Torah is the ultimate source. From here it follows that in similar fashion every person has a "source" in the Torah.

It should be noted that the source serves not only for "the names of all people," but also for "their essence" (*inyaneihem*). That is to say, not only is the technical existence of each person anchored in the Torah, but also his "essence." In light of other sources, I understand "*inyan*" here as essence, role. Each individual has an essence which is uniquely his, and which is alluded to in a unique verse containing his name. What we have here is a different angle on the uniqueness and importance of each individual according to the Gra. Only that this uniqueness is not only a personal matter that glorifies the independence of each individual. The essence and uniqueness of each person is anchored in the Torah; each person can find his unique root in the Torah.

It would be interesting to know, according to this, how the Gra saw his own unique role in this world, and how it is alluded to in the aforementioned verse. In order to sharpen the question (and whet our appetite…), I wish to cite the verse in its entirety:

But you shall have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure shall you have: that your days may be lengthened in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

This is undoubtedly an important *mitzva* – but what unique connection can there be between it and R. Eliyahu of Vilna. We shall propose a solution to this mystery in next week's *shiur*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. I have thus far been unable to identify the reference. If any of my readers can enlighten me, I will be happy to acknowledge his assistance. [See shiur #22 in this series.] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Devarim* 25:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)