

Showing the ruling of the *Beis Din* of Vilna regarding the printing of the works of the Vilna Gaon: "B'chen... – It was decreed by *Beis Din* to announce in all *batei knesses* and *batei medrash* that one should not listen to or believe anything said in the name of the Gaon, whether purportedly heard directly from him or copied from his actual writing ... until ascertained that it is definitely from him and verified by *Beis Din*... Clearly, one should not bring anything to print in the name of the Gaon without this clarification... It is incumbent on all *Dayanim*, Torah leaders and heads of communities in all lands throughout the dispersion of Israel to publicize this matter."
 Dated 19 Kislev 1797, Vilna. Printed in *Shenos Eliyahu* (Lemberg, 1799).

ברוך ויצא מאבות בני דוינין דק"ק ווילנא יע"א • על האנשים שלא שמשו כל צרכן ונטלו עטרה לעצמן לקבוע הלכה בשם אדמו"ר ורבן של כל בני הגולה הגאון האמתי החסיד המנוח המפורסם מו' אליהו זללה"ה :
 שלא ירדו לסוף דעתו ומלאו לכם לכתוב שמועתו ולקבוע בדפוס :

באשר שגזאלו איזה אנשים אימרים דינים והנהגות ופירושי תורה בשם מו"ר תפארת ישראל הגאון האמתי המנוח החסיד המפורסם הכ"מ וידוע ועפורסם שלא ילא מפס קדוש הגאון הנ"ל דבר שאינו מתוקן ח"ו כאשר המה בכתובי חבוריו כנגלה ובנסתר הכל על קו האמת ויש לחוש פן יוקבעו הדברים שאומרים בשמו להלכה וגם יודפס בדפוס כאשר עינינו רואות שיש בהרבה ספרי קדמונים דברים אשר לא ילאו עפי המחבר • ולהסיר המכשלה הזאת : ככן ילא מאת שני כתות דיינים שהם הממשים דק"ק י"ו יכריזו בכל בתי כנסיות ובכל בתי מדרשות דקהילותינו י"ו שלא ישמע ולא יאמין שום אדם לדברי האומר בשם הגאון החסיד זללה"ה בע"פ או יביא כהב שהעתק מכ"י הגאון הנ"ל איזה דינים והנהגות ופירושי תורה עד שיתברר בבירור גמור שהם מכתבו הגאון הנ"ל שכתב ידו ממש ויקוים הכתב ע"פ בד"ר דק"ק י"ו בלירוף מורי הוראות דק"ק י"ו ופשיט"א שלא להעלות שום דבר בדפוס • ע"ש הגאון עד שיתברר כנ"ל • וכל מי שילפס איזה דבר בלי בירור כנ"ל הורע חוקתו ולא להאמין בו שהם דברי הגאון הנ"ל ומחמת שהינות הגאון החסיד הקדוש זללה"ה הי' עמוד הדור מזה על כל אבות בני דוינין והגאונים ומאסה"ג וכל ב"ד וראשי עם קהילת בכל המדינות והקהילות בכל תפילות ישראל לפרסם הדברים הנ"ל ע"פ כרוז דפוס למען ידעוון שכל הדברים שלא יהיו עליו בירור הנ"ל הוא הדבר אשר לא דברו הגאון הנ"ל ילא מאת שני כתות דייניי ב"ד רבא דק"ק ווילנא י"ו יום ר'ע"ש"ק י"ט כסלו תקנ"ח : נאו' דוד ספרא דב"ד דק"ק י"ו : הוכרו כל הני"ל בכל הבתי כנסיות ובהמד"ר דקהילותינו באנו ע"ה"ח ב"ך כסלו תקנ"ח : נאום יתחק בא"א מוהר"ר יהודא ליב זללה"ה שמש דק"ק ווילנא : ונאו' משה בא"א מוהר"ר מרדכי מייזל זללה"ה שמש דק"ק ווילנא : ונאו' נפתלי שערן במוהר"ר לבי הירש ניי שמש דק"ק ווילנא : ונאו' משה בא"א מוהר"ר אהרן כג"ל זללה"ה שמש דק"ק ווילנא : הועתק בדפוס ב"ד ד' פ"ו ט



The Vilna Gaon

And the printing of his sefarim

BY RABBI AKIVA AARONSON

Niftar on Chol Hamoed Sukkos 1797, more than 200 years ago, the Vilna Gaon was one of the key figures in the transmission of Torah through the generations, illuminating Torah for Klal Yisrael. Unprecedented rules governed the printing of his sefarim, which appeared only after his passing, laid down by the Vilna Beis Din two months later, in Kislev of the same year. Marking their historic ruling, author Rabbi Akiva Aaronson elaborates on the difficulties faced and unusual circumstances under which the sefarim of the Gaon were brought to print.

Rnown from the acronym of his name as the Gra,¹ the Vilna Gaon was born on the first day of Pesach 1720. Descended from a long line of Torah scholars, his ancestors included Rav Moshe Kramer, Av Beis Din of Vilna² and Rav Moshe Rivkes, author of *Be'er Hagolah* on *Shulchan Aruch*.³ By the age of three the young Eliyahu was proficient in *Chumash*, and at the age of six delivered a complex Talmudic discourse in Vilna's central *beis medrash*. He did not have many teachers, only up to the age of seven when he studied for a brief period with Rav Moshe Margalios.⁴ Although still in his youth, there were few who could teach him, and he pursued a rigorous self-imposed program of Torah study, largely on his own.

The Gaon lived in Vilna, Lithuania, where he refused any rabbinic position. Instead, wrapped in *tallis* and *tefillin*, and endowed with great physical strength, he slept no more than two hours a day, his nights like days in continuous learning of Torah.⁵ During the day the shutters of the room in which he studied were kept closed as the Gaon learned by candlelight in order to avoid distraction, his feet in cold water to keep him awake.⁶

Master of Torah

The Gaon mastered all areas of Torah, both *nigleh*

(revealed Torah) and *nistar* (hidden Torah or *Kabbalah*). In revealed Torah he left us works on *Chumash*, *Neviim*, *Kesuvim*, *Mishnah*, *Talmud Bavli*, *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Tosefta*, many *Midrashim*, *Shulchan Aruch* and more. Despite this unparalleled achievement, however, his legacy was even greater in *nistar*. In this area he left us works on *Zohar* (which include *Safra D'Tzniusa*, *Heichalos*, *Raaya Mehemna*, *Idros*, *Midrash Hane'elam* and *Zohar Chadash*), *Tikkunei Zohar* and *Sefer Yetzirah*.⁷

These works left us by the Gaon include those in the form of annotations (mainly corrections to texts), written in the margins of the *sefarim* he used. In addition, he left certain independent works — *chibburim* — written in separate notebooks. However, the majority of the works of the Gaon are not in his own hand, but were taught orally to his *talmidim*, and have come down to us as recorded by them.⁸

Preparing the Gaon's Works for Publication

Nothing from the Gaon was printed during his lifetime — except for certain public notices on which his name was included, and approbations to three *sefarim*; they were printed only after his passing. However, preparing them for publication presented significant difficulties, a task that could be accomplished only by



Portrait of the Gaon purportedly painted by a young Lithuanian *talmid chacham*



a select few. These were a number of *talmidim* and his sons, usually in conjunction with each other, who had been part of his inner circle of students.⁹ The Gaon's foremost *talmid*, Rav Chaim of Volozhin, was not directly involved in bringing his works to print, although some were brought to him for his *haskamah* (approval). The primary difficulty faced by those preparing the Gaon's works for publication was not only the quantity — an unparalleled amount from a single person — but also the subject matter, which was often very complex. Moreover, the Gaon wrote in an extremely succinct manner, often no more than a list of abbreviations. In contrast to the works the Gaon left us in his own hand, in regard to his work recorded by his *talmidim*, there were additional complications. A significant number of copies were available, not all of which were the same, thus it was no easy task to prepare a full and accurate text. To compound the difficulties,

Above: *Sefer Mishlei* with commentary of the Vilna Gaon, first edition (Shklov, 1798). Brought to press by Rav Menachem Mendel, son of Rav Baruch Bendit of Shklov (originally from Chaslavitch).

לא יוכל לראו עד קץ הכנתו כאשר אין לשער הכנסת קץ יום הגדול; והנה זה הפירוש על ספר משלי נדפס חיותו אמר לי בעם א' שירוב ראשונה כי כלו מלא יראה וראשית הכמה כו' וגם רבים וכן שלמים הצירו כי לכן העלימו להדפיס ואספיה אל פוק ענה שנתמי עמה קחם בפירוש שלא אמר השטט נשים פוק אם לא ידע הבוד שלו והלניבו נכשע הפסוק בל כן אף שיבאם ענה פסוקים שלכאורה הן נראים כשונים לא השתמי הוחס כי אף שהם נראים כשונים פנל הם פולם מונכ ארצה וראשם עניע לבמי שמים

Left: The Introduction to *Sefer Mishlei*, Shklov, 1798. "V'hinei zeh hapeirush... — Behold, this is his commentary on *Sefer Mishlei* [concerning which] the Gaon said to me in his lifetime that it should be printed first [among his *sefarim*], because all of it is filled with *yiras Shamayim*... Also, many worthy people have been pressing me [to do so]; therefore I have brought it to print."

after the Gaon's passing thirst for his work — *Toras HaGra* — was great. Many wanted to bring it to print as soon as possible, including those not worthy to do so, possibly for personal or financial motives.

Decree of Beis Din

In order to ensure the accurate transmission of the Gaon's Torah, on 19 Kislev 1797, two months after his passing, the *Beis Din* of Vilna was convened. They issued a ruling forbidding the publication of the Gaon's works without their express approval. Such a measure — strict control placed on the printing of the work of a Torah sage after his passing — was unprecedented.

Sixteen months later, on 3 Adar I, 1799, the *Beis Din* of Vilna convened once again and authorized the printing by the sons of the Gaon of seven works: commentary on the *Mishnah* of *Seder Zera'im* (*Shenos Eliyahu*), commentary on *Seder Zera'im* of *Talmud Yerushalmi*, and five works of *Kabbalah*. In practice, there were significant delays, and they were largely preceded by other works.

First Works of the Gaon to Be Brought to Print

Following the Gaon's explicit instructions, the first of his *sefarim* to be printed, in 1798, was his commentary on *sefer Mishlei*. The commentary on *Mishlei* was followed by *Shenos Eliyahu*, in 1799, one of the original seven works authorized by Beis Din.

Subsequent early *sefarim* of the Gaon to be brought to print include his commentary on *sefer Yonah* (1800); his work on the borders of Eretz Yisrael and the plan of the Beis Hamikdash called *Tzuras HaAretz* (1802); commentary on *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*

(1803)¹⁰; commentary on *Pirchei Avos* and commentary on *Chumash* called *Aderes Eliyahu* (both 1804); commentary on the *Haggadah* (1805); commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah* (1806), which was the first of the Gaon's works on *Kabbalah* to be printed; and annotations of the Gaon on *Talmud Bavli*, which first appeared in the Vienna edition of 1808-16.¹¹

Eretz Yisrael

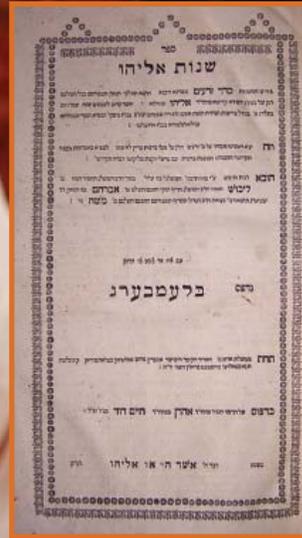
A decade after the passing of the Gaon in 1808, the first group of his *talmidim* arrived in Eretz Yisrael, settling in Tzfas, and later Yerushalayim. Dedicated to bringing the Torah of the Gaon to Eretz Yisrael, they followed his customs and established his *nusach of tefillah*.

Shortly afterward, a second group arrived, led by Rav Yisrael of Shklov, formerly involved in bringing the Gaon's work to print, author of *Pe'as Hashulchan*.¹² Concerning *mitzvos hateluyos baAretz* (related to growing produce in Eretz Yisrael), he drew on the works of the *Rishonim* and on the Gaon — *Rabban Shel Kol Bnei Hagolah* (Head of the Exile), Rabbeinu Eliyahu of Vilna.

Last Days of the Gaon

Despite his spartan regime, the Gaon remained in almost perfect health until the age of 70. Only after that did his health begin to decline, although he would constantly resist the need for doctors.

Before Rosh Hashanah 1797, however, the Gaon's condition weakened, and this time he permitted a doctor to be called. On Erev Yom Kippur he summoned his sons and grandchildren and blessed them, his condition declining from day to day. On Sukkos he instructed that the bed to which he had been confined be



Shenos Eliyahu, commentary of the Vilna Gaon on the *Mishnah*, *Seder Zera'im*, first edition (Lemberg, 1799). Brought to press by the sons of the Gaon, Rav Leibush [Yehudah Leib] and Rav Avraham, together with his son-in-law, Rav Moshe [of Pinsk].



Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, first edition with commentary of the Gaon (Shklov, 1803).



Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dei'ah, first edition with commentary of the Gaon (Horodna, 1806).



Haggadah, first edition with commentary of the Gaon (Horodna, 1805).

brought into the *sukkah*, and made a blessing on the *arbaah minim*. Just before his passing he grasped his *tzitzis* in his hand, declaring how for just a few *prutos* (pennies) one could perform *mitzvos* in this world for which there is eternal reward, and which were no longer possible to do in the World to Come. On the third day of Chol Hamoed he returned his holy soul to his Maker, the *arbaah minim* still grasped in his hands.

The Gaon's Kloiz

After the passing of the Gaon, on the northern wall of

his *kloiz* (study hall) in Vilna, a stone plaque was affixed, in everlasting memory, so that all would know that the place was called by his name, as though he were there, still alive. On it were engraved these words: “We found a perfect *tzaddik* ... his name is spread over all islands and lands ... to tell of his praises, no person can do ... this is where he sat for 40 years ... his words are like stars that shine forever, his commentaries like the firmament ... his name will never disappear from the congregations of Israel...”

Zechuso yagen aleinu. ■

Photo Credit: Rabbi Yedidiya Fraenkel shlita; HaGaon Rabbi Shlomo Brevda zt”l

Rabbi Aaronson is the author of “People of the Book: Five Hundred Years of the Hebrew Book from the Beginning of Printing Until the Twentieth Century” (Feldheim Publishers, 2014).

1. HaGaon Rabbeinu Eliyahu.
2. d. 1688.
3. ca. 1595-1671.
4. Author of the major commentaries on *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Pnei Moshe* and *Ma'eh Hapanim*.
5. *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim*, Shklov, 1803; Introduction.
6. *Pe'as Hashulchan*, Introduction.
7. The Gaon himself said that his main Torah was in *nistar* rather than *nigleh*, indicated by the reference to him in the Torah, *Even Sheleimah* (*Devarim* 25:15) — only the *alef* of Eliyahu being written, instead of the whole word — *Pe'as Hashulchan*, Introduction.
8. The Gaon wrote down little after the age of 40, not wanting to set aside precious time to do so, original insights — *chiddushim* — flowing from him in profusion. From that time on we have what was recorded by his *talmidim* — *Pe'as Hashulchan*, Introduction.
9. Most notable among the *talmidim* of the Gaon to bring his works to print were Rav Menachem Mendel of Shklov (originally from Chaslavitch) and Rav Yisrael of Shklov (author of *Pe'as Hashulchan*). Members of his family involved were his sons Rav Yehudah Leib and Rav Avraham, his sons-in-law Rav Moshe of Pinsk and Rav Uri Shraga Feivush, Rav of Dubrovna, and a grandson, Rav Yaakov Moshe of Slonim.
10. Commentary on *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh De'ah*, 1806; on *Even Ha'ezer*, 1812-19; and on *Choshen Mishpat* 1855.
11. Main locations of printing of these early *sefarim* of the Gaon were Lithuania (Vilna and Horodna [Grodna]) and White Russia (Shklov and Dubrovna). Other places where individual early *sefarim* were printed include Lemberg (Lvov), Brinn and Vienna.
12. Tzfaz, 1836.



The Ohel of the Gaon

7 Kislev 5777 INYAN 21