

## The commemorative dates of two talmidim Of the Gaon of Wilna:

- **Rabbi Haim of Wolozhin;** (14<sup>th</sup> of Sivan 1,839)
- **Rabbi Yisrael of Shklov.** (9<sup>th</sup> of Sivan 1,839)

This is the month of "Matan Torah". So too this is the month in which the world renowned Rosh Yeshiva of the biggest Yeshiva in Lithuania (Wolozhin) died (on the fourteenth of Sivan). The Zohar teaches (Book three, page 296b) that the date of a person's demise is considered uplifting, just as a wedding date. Since on that day he forsakes this world of the senses and travail, and rises to receive his eternal reward. Since it was Rabbi Haim who accomplished so much for the cause of the study of the Torah, it is utmost fitting that his month of entry into eternal paradise should be Sivan, that of Matan Torah.

Let us mention a few of his praises.

Some decades before Rabbi Haim's period, the Hasidic movement made great progress in influencing the masses. At that time, the heavy yoke of the Galut, the constant troubles inflicted by Anti-semitic governments, occasional pogroms, prevalent lack of the ability to earn a decent livelihood (due to restrictions imposed by Gentile neighbors so that the Jews cause less competition to Gentile artisans and workers) all these tended to lessen the ability to study Torah diligently. A worried person finds difficulty in concentration; more so in retention.

Therefore it was a good thing that the Hasidic Masters placed the emphasis on enthusiastic prayers, on song and dance, on connection with a charismatic teacher, on warm togetherness of the Hasidic flock. These innovations and so-too accentuations of sub-current trends in Judaism served an important purpose in developing the community.

**However**, on the other hand, these served to the detriment by weakening the duty of Torah scholarship. If a person could be well-loved by G-d by hurtful holy emotion, why go to the trouble of being awake till late at night until unraveling an abstruse and difficult Tosfot? Even more, some leaders of the new group poked fun at the Yeshiva population to claim that if a person did a Mitzva but lacking proper devotion of awe of the Lord and His love, that Mitzva was so to be non-consequential.

Service of the Lord via hurtful emotion was to be so important, that cold regular study of The Law was eclipsed. Following that, the number of youth applying themselves to Yeshiva study dwindled.

It was just due to the aforementioned failings that the Gaon of Wilna placed the Hasidic sects under anathema. But his disciple Rabbi Haim of Wolozhin went at length to do something positive. He erected the world-famous Yeshiva of Wolozhin. This started with ten students alone but within that century it produced thousands of scholars. At the end of the century it was the biggest Yeshiva in the world and nearly every famous Posek or Godol HaDor found his first training in this institution. It was only after this Yeshiva was closed by AntiSemitic government action (during the period of Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berlin, the NeTziv) that all of the other Yeshivos cropped up: Mir, Radin, Slobodka etc. But until then, this was the one and only yeshiva in all of Russia and Lithuania.

Not only that, but Rabbi Haim wrote a masterpiece called "nefesh ha-haim". This consists of four sections.

1. The first deals with explaining (in a Kabbalistic way) the substance of the Jewish soul. Apparently Rabbi Haim wished to write a counterwork to that of the famous Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi (of Lubavitch) who wrote on the same topic in his book "Tanya". Rabbi Haim wanted that Lithuanian Yeshiva youth should not lack this knowledge and should not go "searching" such material in milieus that encourage enough a complete immurement in Talmudic study.
2. The second and third sections deal with the qualifications of "kavvanah" (proper intent) at the utterance of benedictions. Here too Rabbi Haim wished to achieve those self-same goals that the Hasidic Masters engendered, since of course those were of Torah origin. Yet he was careful to warn of mis-steps. If, due to lack of proper intent, a person would be lax in complying with the ritual law, mistakenly thinking that his worship would be superfluous and of no use whatsoever, therefore Rabbi Haim warns that the major part of Judaism is, **action!**, not mere thought. To practice (even without proper mental dedication) is worth more than following the advice of

- pedants who place great emphasis on intent and therefore when that is faulty, skip and mar actual practice.
3. In the third section Rabbi Haim goes to great length to counteract the Hasidic dictum that G-d's Presence is world pervasive. Apparently he feared pantheistic tendencies, which smacked of Sabbateanism. Dr. Norman Lamm (Of Yeshiva University) wrote a book on these issues called "Torah Le-Shma". Rabbi Haim agreed that the idea per se is true, but it must have limitations and restrictions; otherwise unwise youth might have immoral permissiveness and claim it all to be G-d originaive.
  4. The fourth section of this book, and the most important of all sections, is that which calls for a constant and total commitment to the study of Torah. Masterfully, Rabbi Haim quotes tens of Hazzal sources, from Midrash and so too from Zohar, exhorting a person to dedicate all of his energies to mental development. All the mitzvot aside, there is absolutely nothing in the world that can compete with Limmud ha-Torah as achieving G-d's Presence. Apparently here in this book we have before us the answer par excellence to the Hasidic innovation of any substitute (as it were) to the importance of study.  
This work is a keystone of Mithnagdlim thought.

Rabbi Haim added practice to words. Not only did he cite that if G-d forbid the world over for even one minute would transpire without any individual studying the Torah, the world would perforce expire (Section four, chapters 11, 25) but he put this thesis into action by instituting study shifts over a twenty-four hour basis. There were groups of disciples that came to the Bet Midrash from 8 till 2 after midnight. Others went to sleep early and came to the Bet midrash from 2 A.M. on till the morning prayers. All this so that there not be a wasted minute that nobody in the world is studying Torah. This idea is truly inspiring!

Another innovation in his yeshiva was the the routine to learn a Daf-Gemarra a day, day in day out. Five days a week they progressed, and the last two days of the week were dedicated to repetition and memorization.

Rabbi Haim was a practicing Rabbi, but never took an official salary. Not when he was the official Rabbi of Wilkomir, then he had a wool-processing factory, and not when he was the Rabbi of Wolozhin. Torah is a non-profit venture. It is idealistic and all spiritual!

He also authored Sh'a lot U'teShuvot Hut Hashani, and the commentary to Pirkei Avot called "Ru'ach Haim".

As aforementioned, his yahrzeit is the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month (year 1839).



### **Rabbi Yisroel of Shklov**

Rabbi Yisroel's yahrzeit is the 9<sup>th</sup> of Sivan.

He was the major Founder of the Ashknazi Lithuanian community in Tiberias and Z'fat. A complete summary of his projects and successes are recorded in the introduction to his masterpiece "Pe-as ha-Shulchan". This work is an encyclopedic collection of the many laws involved in keeping the agricultural mitzvos of Eretz Yisroel. Of course the tremendous Mitzva of Yishuv Eretz Yisroel is flawed and damaged if the mitzvos are not practiced. Therefore we must know well these laws.

Rabbi Yisroel had a prodigious memory and could quote at ease tens of sources. He also did a great service for the Jewish people by authoring a simple running commentary for the difficult Yerushalmi work Tractate Sh-kolim. This treatise is called "Taklin Hadatin". It is now published in each and every set of Talmud Bavli, at the end of Tractate Pesachim. Since he spent over half a year in the presence of the great Gaon of Wilna (1897) he clarified many points in personal discussion with him.

Even more so, the running commentary of the Gaon of Wilna to the Shulchan Oruch (Volumes Orach Haim and so too Yoreh Da'oh) were edited and published by Rabbi Yisroel. He also added much material that the Gaon wrote under separate cover.

But Rabbi Yisroel came to prominence due to his efforts to organize the existing Jewish communities of the Galilee. In the year of 1,810 he travelled from Lithuania to Israel along with seventy hardy souls, despite the great difficulties of overseas travel in that day of yore. He found there an existing community brought nearly to starvation. They had no sources of income, no lands to till. Besides the many tolls and exorbitant taxes imposed on them by local despots (who utilized local Arab rough men to beat and torture any tardy payer) he found much illness and frequent diseases. He taught them the European concept of quarantine during the frequent appearances of epidemic and so too sent for the intervention of European consuls (at that time holding office in not-far-away Beirut (Lebanon) who sent letters of protest to the ruling Pasha, who somewhat restricted the local Arabs (at least most of the time).

Due to faulty building, at any time that there were earthquakes or even slight earth tremors, tens of buildings fell on their inhabitants. This took a great toll of lives. During the aforementioned plagues, hundreds of inhabitants died. Amongst them Rabbi Yisroel's wife, son and daughter and so too both parents who had accompanied him on his travel to Israel.

Despite all of the above, Rabbi Yisroel never lost his spirits.

True to the greatest lessons of Mussar (as exemplified in "Hovos Halvovos", Part Ahavas HaShem' Chap. One) he accepted with true humility and Hasiddus the censorship of the Lord. He told others, as he constantly repeated to himself "He whom the Lord loves, He chastises. Just as a Father who cherishes His son" (Mishlei 3, 12). That is to say that since G-d has a great interest that those in the Land of Israel be clean of sin, he constantly cleans them of past transgressions.

This educational point is taken up by Hazzal. (Tractate Kesubos, page 111a "Ha-am Ha-yoshev bah nesu avon", even though "halisi" see "shita meKubetzess").

Another point that Rabbi Yisroel mentioned is that all this was Divine trials, just like that of Abraham at the Akedah. (For more material on this point, see "the Guide for the Perplexed" by the Rambam, book three chapter twenty four).

Another student of the Gaon, Rabbi Hillel of Shklov (from the same village as Rabbi Yisroel) wrote in his work "Kol ha-Tor" (end of chapter one) that Eretz Yisroel is acquired by suffering (as Hazzal teach in Tractate Berachos 5a) but thereby it is truly and everlastingly

aquired! A mother who has undergone suffering and privation due to her child, only loves that offspring all the more. A person who has amassed some sum due to hardships, is not easy to throw away what he achieved.

So too, Rabbi Yisroel would say that the troubles that G-d brought about immediately following his arrival in Israel, were not negative lessons but to the contrary, to raise the value of "nevertheless!" Every mitzva that a person puts into action "despite" his hardships has exactly that much more value.

For long periods Rabbi Yisroel returned to Europe to amass funds so to support the tens of families left hungry. Together with Rabbi Haim of Wolozhin he succeeded (as he writes in his foreword to "Pe'as ha-Shulchan"). His last days he spent in Jerusalem, where he was actually the head of the community.

His yahrzeit date is the 9<sup>th</sup> of Sivan.

