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THE LITHUANIAN YESHIVOT: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

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In 1950 most observers believed that although Orthodoxy might live on, old-fashioned Orthodoxy was a thing of the past. This was also the view of the Modern Orthodox leadership, and they regarded institutions such as Yeshiva University as crucial for the survival of Orthodoxy in the United States. They were also set on establishing Bar Ilan University, which they believed would secure the future of Orthodox Judaism in Israel. Traditional yeshivot had little place in the future vision of Modern Orthodoxy.

What a difference fifty years make. Just look around the Jewish world and you see the great influence of right wing, or *haredi*, Orthodoxy. Leaving aside the large Hasidic communities, most of these Orthodox communities are direct descendants of what is known as the Lithuanian yeshiva world. It is thus of great importance to understand what this yeshiva world was and how it continues to influence the Jewish community as a whole.

In 1943, Rabbi Aaron Kotler established a small yeshiva in the resort town of Lakewood, N. J. A remnant of the yeshiva at Kletsk, Belarus, the *Beth Medrash Gavoha* had fourteen students when it first began. Today there are approximately 3,000 men studying there full-time, many more who study part-time, and a whole community which has built up around it. Even if it is true that one of the great Lithuanian yeshivot had 500 students, which is no doubt an exaggerated number, there is many times that in Lakewood.

After his escape from Europe through Japan, R. Kotler was intent on establishing the prominence of the Lithuanian yeshiva tradition in the New World. The post-war revival of Orthodoxy, and the growing influence of the yeshiva world, can be directly traced to R. Kotler's vision of a Lithuanian yeshiva on American soil. He had this vision at a time when there was much less sympathy in Orthodoxy for such an institution than there is today, when there are many

* Editor's Note: This essay is a transcript of a talk delivered as a public lecture at YIVO on Nov. 13, 2002. It is printed as delivered, with some slight revisions. The basic oral nature of the presentation has not, however, been altered. In addition, it should be noted that the lecture was geared to a general audience, with varying levels of knowledge and background on the history of the Yeshivot.

yeshivot along this model. The most prominent ones are Telz in Cleveland, Ner Israel in Baltimore, Mir and Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn. These exist alongside numerous smaller yeshivot, all staffed with graduates of these Lithuanian-style institutions.

In addition, every major Jewish community, and some not so major ones, has a *kollel*—an institute supported by the local community in which a group of men devote themselves to studying Torah. They are paid a monthly stipend, and this is how they make their living. This model, whereby the community contributes to the creation of Torah scholars, was begun in late nineteenth century Lithuania. In Scranton, where I teach, there is a yeshiva of some 200 high school and post-high school students that was created by Lakewood graduates. As is befitting a town with a large yeshiva, there is also a *kollel* supported by the community.

Simply from what I have mentioned so far, it is clear that the influence of Lithuania on the religious experience of American Jewry is substantial. The same can be said about Israel. Jewish religious life in the Holy Land was influenced to a great extent by the students of the Vilna Gaon who settled there (recall that Vilna, Vilnius, is the capital of Lithuania). Furthermore, the Ashkenazic chief rabbis of Palestine all came from Lithuania. This is a great testament to the brilliance of Lithuanian Torah scholars, because the Ashkenazic community in Palestine was composed of men dedicated to Torah study. And yet, when it came time to choose their leader, they felt that they had to look towards Lithuania.

In the 1920's a branch of the Slobodka yeshiva, which was right outside Kovno, was established in Palestine. After the war, the Mir Yeshiva was reestablished there (as well as in Brooklyn), and there are now a number of yeshivot in Israel recreated from pre-war Lithuanian yeshivot. The administrators of these yeshivot usually have a familial connection to those that ran the pre-war yeshivot, and can thus be seen as their historical continuation.

(Incidentally, Mir might not have technically been in Lithuania, but from the standpoint of Jewish geography it was indeed regarded as such. Jewish Lithuania did not always correspond to the political borders.)

The phenomenon in Israel of tens of thousands of young men who exclusively study Torah and expect to be supported by the government is a phenomenon that has aroused animosity within the Israeli body politic and is entirely due to the influence of the Lithuanian yeshivot. Whereas before World War II, only the best and brightest of a town might go off and devote themselves to study, after which they became a rabbi or got some other job, today in Israel there is the phenomenon of families in which every son devotes himself to Torah study, some 25,000 at last count. While exclusive Torah study was certainly the ideal in Lithuania, it only became a reality when successive Israeli governments decided that the ultra-Orthodox vote was so important, that in exchange for this support the state would provide funding, through the yeshivot, to any man who

wished to devote himself to Torah study. These men also receive an army exemption, another great sore point in Israel.

The so-called yeshiva world, which exists in every place where Jews live, and is most readily identified by outsiders when they see the men who wear black hats and black suits, is a Lithuanian yeshiva phenomenon. But how did the Lithuanian yeshivot become so significant? Why are we speaking of Lithuanian yeshivot and not Polish or Hungarian yeshivot?

To answer this we must know something about the central place of Torah study in Lithuanian Jewish life. The figure of Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, stands out in this regard. He became the model for complete devotion to Torah study, and is well known for his unrelenting battle against the new Hasidic movement, which downgraded the significance of study in favor of prayer. It was the Vilna Gaon's students who realized that for Torah study to thrive it was not enough for the local rabbi to gather students around him. A more sophisticated approach was needed, one that focused on inter-communal financial support, rather than the old way of relying on the local townspeople.

In line with this vision the Gaon's great student, R. Chaim of Volozhin, founded a yeshiva in Volozhin which did not regard itself as dependant on the local community. This yeshiva soon grew into the major institution of Torah study in Lithuania. Though R. Chaim also happened to be the rabbi of the town, the other yeshivot that followed his model were completely independent of the community and attracted students from all over. These yeshivot competed with each other and this naturally raised the caliber of study.

As you can imagine, these new yeshivot were bound to create conflicts. When the rabbi was also the head of the yeshiva, everyone knew who the supreme religious authority was. But what do you do when you have both a communal rabbi and a yeshiva head? Where do your allegiances lie? Who is regarded as the supreme authority? This is a great problem in Orthodoxy today and goes back to the nineteenth-century Lithuanian yeshiva model whereby the yeshiva is independent of communal life. Much of the increasing stringency in Orthodox Jewish life can also be traced to this phenomenon. This is so because Jewish law is practiced with much greater rigor in the yeshiva. When yeshiva students come back home, they often attempt to change long-standing practices. It is not important to them if the communal rabbi supports the old way of doing things, since their allegiance is to the head of their yeshiva.

It is also worth noting that the great flowering of yeshivot occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. It was precisely when traditional Jewish life was being challenged that the great yeshivot opened up. They were to be bastions of conservatism, the bulwark against irreligiousness, *Haskalah* (Enlightenment), Zionism, and whatever new ideologies the winds blew in.

Let me now talk a bit about what was characteristic regarding the method of study of the new yeshivot, characteristics that continue to define the institutions. These are not the sort of things that are often written about, but are apparent to

anyone who has spent time in a yeshiva. Most people know that students in a yeshiva study Torah all day, from early morning until late at night. But what is the purpose of this study? It used to be, and is still this way in Sephardic yeshivot, that the purpose of Torah study was primarily about deriving the *halakhah*.

This is not the Lithuanian approach. In the Lithuanian yeshivot you study Torah for its own sake, *lishmah*. The ideal is knowledge without any practical purpose; a parallel to a professor of law versus a lawyer might be apt. In the Lithuanian yeshiva, this is the highest form of Torah study. Listen to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, grandson of the most eminent yeshiva head in Lithuania, R. Hayim of Brisk (Brest-Litovsk), and himself one of the most eminent yeshiva heads in the post-war era: “The foundation of foundations and the pillar of *halakhic* thought is not the practical ruling but the determination of the theoretical *halakhah*. . . The theoretical *halakhah*, not the practical decision, the ideal creation, not the empirical one, represent the longing of *halakhic* man.”

This has important implications for the curriculum. One who follows this approach studies areas that have no practical application whatsoever. One studies about sacrifices and impurity and the reasoning behind rejected opinions. In the Lithuanian model one connects to God most deeply through the study of Talmud and other areas of Jewish legal literature. This is important to stress, since many people think that the yeshiva students are reading the Bible or studying theology all day, as if they were training to be Jesuits.

While they do study this, the overwhelming bulk of the day is devoted to Jewish legal matters. A whole year can be spent on the laws of witnesses or responsibility for damages caused by an ox. Some of you might be wondering how one possibly connects to God by studying the laws of goring oxen. I think this is the most difficult thing for outsiders to appreciate when they are first exposed to the yeshivot. Yet if you believe that all of Jewish law is ultimately derived from biblical verses and an oral tradition, and is thus no less than God’s will on earth, then you begin to see that this is indeed how one connects to God. We cannot know anything about God’s essence, but we can know His words and His will, so to speak, and these words, as all who have read the Torah know, do not merely concern theology or helping widows and orphans, but extend to more mundane matters such as how to establish that witnesses are telling the truth.

Since the Talmudic debates concern Holy Writ, there is no real significance to the fact that some tractates’ laws are practical and others aren’t (for example the laws of sacrifices). Remember, it is the study of Torah for its own sake. Therefore, all areas are the subjects of careful study. Because of this emphasis on theoretical *halakhah*, the greats of the Lithuanian yeshiva world are not known for their works on practical Jewish law. Rather, they devote themselves to theoretical analysis of Talmudic points. A class in a yeshiva is devoted to such analysis. Everyone must learn the practical law, but you can do that on your own. You don’t need to spend time with a Talmudic master for this.

Lithuanian Talmud study is also characterized by a brilliant conceptual approach. This method, also called the analytic approach, was primarily developed by R. Hayim Soloveitchik of Brisk (1853-1918) and quickly conquered the yeshiva world. It created a revolution in Talmud study. Since the Lithuanian approach, with its conceptual clarity and analytical categorizations, is so dominant today, many people do not know that there was a time when this approach was new in Lithuania and many old-time Lithuanian Talmudists opposed it.

It is impossible in a short oral presentation to give any sense of what this method is about, but let me give one example nonetheless. Maimonides states that one who prays without *kavanah* must pray again. But, what does the word *kavanah* mean? There are two possibilities. *Kavanah* can mean to be aware of the words you are saying. This would mean that when one prays it must not be by rote. There is also another type of *kavanah*, and that is that one must regard himself as standing in awe before God. So what happens if one has the first form of *kavanah*, that is, awareness of the words, but not the second form? Or vice versa, let's say you clear your mind of all extraneous thoughts and regard yourself as standing before God but you do not have active awareness of what you are saying, what then is the law?

This is a typical analysis, yet in some schools matters went to an extreme. For example, there is a talmudic principle that if you are brought to court in a monetary dispute and you will not take an oath to clear yourself, you have to pay. The question was raised as to how one should understand this. Does it mean that essentially you are obligated to pay, but you can exempt yourself with an oath, or does it mean that essentially you are obligated to take an oath, but if you choose not to then you have to pay? One opponent of this way of thinking, R. Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, called it a foolish Telzer analysis, and said that it is no different than the following ridiculous inquiry: Do we say that essentially X is set to die and only if he eats will he live, or do we say that essentially X is set to live and only if he chooses not to eat will he die? It has always been a struggle to prevent true conceptual analysis from degenerating into this sort of semantic game.

Perhaps the leading opponent of the new Lithuanian method of study was R. Jacob David Wilovsky (1845-1913) of Slutsk, known among other things for his monumental commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud. In the introduction to his responsa R. Wilovsky writes as follows:

A certain rabbi invented the "chemical" method of study. Those in the know now refer to it as "chemistry," but many speak of it as "logic." This proved to be of great harm to us for it is a foreign spirit from without that they have brought in to the Oral Torah. This is not the Torah delivered to us by Moses from the mouth of the Omnipresent. This method of study has spread among the yeshiva students who still hold a *gemara* in their hands. In no way does this type of Torah study bring men to purity. From the day this method spread abroad this kind of Torah has had no power to protect its students. . . . It is better to have no rosh yeshiva than to have one who studies with the "chemical" method.

In his ethical will R. Wilovsky returns to this criticism, directing his sons: “Be careful, and keep far away from the new method of study that has in recent years spread through Lithuania.”

Yet such objections had virtually no influence, and with the benefit of hindsight it is possible to say, without exaggeration, that R. Hayim Soloveitchik raised the quality of Talmud study to a level not seen since the days of the medieval Tosafists. In his hands the argumentation of the Talmud and medieval authorities assumed a “scientific” character, without parallel in previous generations. In fact, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik went so far as to say that “it would be most difficult to study Talmud with students who are trained in the sciences and mathematics, were it not for [R. Hayim’s] method, which is very modern and equals, if not surpasses, most contemporary forms of logic, metaphysics, or philosophy.” In other words, R. Hayim and his followers showed that Talmud study is just as serious a discipline as anything studied in the modern university.

At the same time, R. Hayim transformed the practical halakhic work *par excellence* — Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* — into both the central feature of his theoretical analyses as well as the most profound commentary on the Talmud. By doing so, he became the first to reveal the profundity of the *Mishneh Torah* in all its grandeur. The centrality of Maimonides’ code in contemporary Talmudic lectures is a direct result of R. Hayim’s influence.

Even the seemingly mundane areas of Jewish law became, in R. Hayim’s mind, an area for great intellectual creativity. As his grandson put it: “Suddenly the pots and the pans, the eggs and the onions disappeared from the laws of meat and milk; the salt, the blood, and the spit disappeared from the laws of salting. The laws of *kashrut* were taken out of the kitchen and removed to an ideal halakhic world . . . constructed out of complexes of abstract concepts.”

What was the nature of this analytic method and why did it achieve such popularity? One of R. Hayim’s students, R. Judah Leib Don Yihye, described the lectures of R. Hayim as follows: “He would approach every Talmudic theme as a surgeon. He would first search out the logical elements of every *sugya*, showing the strengths of one side and then the other. After the logical basis was clear to all listeners, he would then focus on the dispute in the Talmud or between Maimonides and Rabad, and explain it in accordance with two [divergent] logical approaches.”

In other words, whereas earlier scholars attempted to prove one side of a dispute, such as between Maimonides and Rabad, R. Hayim instead attempted to clarify the divergent understandings, so as to show what the logical and textual basis was that led each of them to their conclusions. (Along these lines, it is known that R. Joseph Baer, R. Hayim’s father, said to his son that when people point out a difficulty to me and I answer it, the questioner is happy, because he asked well, and I am happy because I succeeded in formulating an answer. However, when they ask you a question and you answer it, no one is happy, because you show the questioner that there was never a difficulty in the first place, and thus no need for any answer.)

This new way of looking at the great disputes in Jewish law was exhilarating. Rabbi Yisachar Dov Teichtal, a famed Hungarian Talmudist and Munkatcher Hasid, sent his son to study in Lithuania in the 1930's. We have one of his son's letters to him in which he describes the high level of Torah study he found there, and this letter illustrates the great intellectual power and attraction of the Lithuanian approach. He writes that even if one would spend a thousand years in Slobodka, he would still be able to grow intellectually. In other words, the yeshiva is an inexhaustible font of learning. "And with literally every breath I praise God who brought me to this place and virtually took me out of a spiritual Egypt and brought me to Mt. Sinai, that is, to the center of Torah in Slobodka, and enabled me to receive the Torah anew."

I realize, of course, that all the attempts at describing the Lithuanian analytic approach, including the wonderful writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, do not provide a complete picture. In order to truly understand the method one must experience it "in action," and only then can one begin to sense its great attraction.

In conclusion, I think it is fair to say that whereas the Jewish experience in Lithuania gave us many things, there is one aspect of Jewish life in Lithuania that is not just part of history and literature, but is experienced daily by tens of thousands of people, and that is the distinctive Lithuanian approach to Talmud study. As long as Jews study Talmud, Lithuania and the Jewish people will remain linked.