

GREAT JEWISH BOOKS COURSE

THE VILNA GOAN AND R' CHAIM OF VOLOZHIN

Rabbi Yechezkal Freundlich

- A. Vilna Goan – R' Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman Kremer (Gr"a – גאון ר' אליהו)
 - a. 1721 – 1797, born and died in Vilna (capital of Lithuania), which was known at the time as the “Jerusalem of Lita” because of its great Torah scholarship, and he was the undisputed crown jewel.
- B. Genius amongst geniuses
 - a. Fame as a prodigy began at young age and by early 20s was already recognized as leading Sage in a city of Sages and the address for the most difficult questions
 - b. Photographic memory – though it is said he really had “no memory” because everything was fresh before him as if he just learned it
 - i. Legend: by 4 had memorized all of Tanach. At seven he was taught Talmud by R' Moses Margalit, by eight, he was studying astronomy during his free time. From the age of ten he continued his studies without the aid of a teacher due to his knowledge already surpassing all his teachers, and by the age of eleven he had committed the entire Talmud to memory.
 - c. Torah study was the supreme value and of paramount importance
 - d. Combined with astounding diligence and dedication to learning Torah
 - i. For at least 40 years (until 70) he never slept more than 2 hours out of 24, and he never slept more than 30 minutes consecutively.
 - ii. Completed the entirety of Torah every 30 days
 - e. Breathtaking range of knowledge.
 - i. there was no subject he did not know intimately: mathematics, astronomy, science, music, philosophy and linguistics. (All of which he claimed were necessary to fully appreciate Torah). Wrote books on grammar, astrology, and geometry (legend has it in the bathroom)
 - ii. Not from math texts of his day, but from the mathematics of the Torah and the Talmud he deduced mathematical principles and formulas.
 - f. In early 20s, right after marriage went into "exile" wandering throughout Europe as was the custom of the pious.
 - g. He returned to Vilna in 1748, with considerable renown, though would never accept an official position. Privately supported by his family, and later in life by the community.
- C. Works and Commentaries
 - a. Glosses to Talmud (גליון הש"ס) and Shulchan Aruch (ביאור הגר"א)
 - i. Marginal notations, indicating emendations, highly concise and economical, seemingly cryptic comments and questions on the texts. Often not even in full sentences, just the references to other sources, and

you need to figure out what question he was raising and how he was answering.

- ii. Rejected “pilpul” – form of study in which everything has to fit together perfectly. Favoured strict adherence to meaning of the text
 - b. Responsible for emending texts – R’ Chaim would record how he would fast
 - i. Method of study focused on critical examination of textual analysis
 - c. Commentary to the Mishna (שנות אליהו)
 - d. Insights on Chumash (אדרת אליהו), Mishlei, and Esther and other sefrei Tanach
- D. Opposition to Chassidim
- a. He was one of the greatest Kabbalist of his time
 - b. But spoke very strongly against the study of Kabbalah and Chassidism and its reliance on Kabbalah. Refused even to meet with representatives and delegates
 - c. Believed Chassidus would degenerate into a cult of extremism, magic and miracle workers, and would perpetuate the potential for false messiahs.
 - i. Issued several bans (חרם) against them, declaring them heretics and even forbidding marrying their children
 - ii. Did not succeed in stemming their spread or popularity, but Chassidim were always defending themselves and he did succeed in removing the extremist elements and pushing them outside the fold
- E. Land of Israel and Redemption
- a. Longed to return to the Land and its small Jewish population
 - b. Attempted several times, actually made it to Odessa and literally missed the boat. Claimed “From Heaven they prevented me”
 - i. His students did go, first to Tzfat and then forced to Jerusalem. Became prominent in early return, founded neighborhoods and established Minhag HaGr”a in much of Jerusalem.
 - c. קול התור or "The Voice of the Turtledove" (a reference to Song of Songs 2:12) was written by Rabbi Hillel Rivlin of Shklov, a disciple of the Vilna Gaon, describing the process of Moshiach’s arrival. It was first published in Hebrew by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kasher in 1968 to whom the book was passed down over the generations.
- F. Rav Chaim Volozhin
- a. Principal student of the Goan. Saw the need to institutionalize the Yeshiva system. Had been dependent on *Tug* and funds. Enlightenment was strong, Chassidim emphasized prayer, ethics, passion, but at the expense of scholarship. Needed a school and independent on a community or a particular Rabbi.
 - b. Opened Yeshiva in Volozhin 1806-1892 (then Russia, now Belarus)
 - i. Officially called עץ חיים
 - ii. Prototype for almost all later yeshivot
 - c. Wrote letters to local rabbanim that he would produce next leaders and they sent him money and the best students
 - d. Would become hub for all Jewish intellectuals (from Rav Kook to Chaim Nachman Bialik).

- e. Set curriculum to finish Talmud, set lectures every day, began with Brachot, rigorous and analytic study 14-18 hours a day, all years round.
- f. Nefesh HaChaim - complex understandings of the nature of G-d, secrets of prayer, the importance of Torah, the purpose being "to implant the fear of G-d, Torah, and pure worship into the hearts of the upright who are seeking the ways of G-d".
 - i. It presents a clear and orderly kabbalistic understanding of life that addressed many of the same issues as the Chasidic texts of the day

Addendum and Sources

Source #1 – Value of Torah Learning

Mishna, Peah, 1:1

אלו דברים שאין להם שיעור. הפאה, והבכורים, והראיון, וגמילות חסדים, ותלמוד תורה.
אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פרותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קנמת לו לעולם הבא. כבוד אב ואם, וגמילות חסדים, והקצאת שלום בין אדם לחברו, ותלמוד תורה כנגד כלם:

These are the things that have no prescribed measure: *Peah* [corner of the field which, while harvesting, must be left for the poor], *Bikurim* [First-fruits that must be brought to the Temple and given to the priest], the appearance-sacrifice [brought to the Temple on Pilgrimage Festivals], acts of kindness, and the study of the Torah.

These are things the fruits of which a man enjoys in this world, while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: Honoring one's father and mother, acts of kindness, and bringing peace between a man and his fellow. But the study of Torah is equal to them all.

Commentary of the Goan, Shnot Eliyahu

The mitzvah of learning Torah has no shiur (minimum requirement) for even with one word one has fulfilled the mitzvah/obligation... The Tanna taught that Torah has no minimum in order to convey that person should exceedingly cherish the Torah, for with each and every word he learns he fulfills a separate mitzvah unto itself. The proof to this is the fact that one can fulfill the mitzvah with just one word, and this mitzvah is equal to all of the other mitzvot. This is why the halacha is that one does not interrupt learning Torah even for the sake of a mitzvah as long as long as that mitzvah can be fulfilled by someone else, because every word is its own mitzvah and equal to all of the other mitzvot. Therefore if, for example, one learns just one page, one has fulfilled hundreds of mitzvot, which is obviously far more valuable than one mitzvah. However, when the mitzvah cannot be fulfilled by someone else, only then does one have permission to suspend his learning to fulfill that mitzvah.

Source #2 – Kabbalistic Insight

מסכת בבא בתרא טו.

(דברים לד, ה) "וימת שם משה עבד ה' "אפשר משה מת וכתב "וימת שם משה" אלא עד כאן כתב משה מכאן ואילך כתב יהושע, דברי ר"י ואמרי לה ר' נחמיה. אמר לו ר"ש אפשר ס"ת חסר אות אחת וכתב (דברים לא, כו) "לקוח את ספר התורה הזו" אלא עד כאן הקב"ה אומר ומשה אומר וכותב מכאן ואילך הקב"ה אומר ומשה כותב בדמע

Talmud Bava Batra 15a

“And Moses the servant of the L-rd died there” (Deuteronomy 34:5); is it possible that after Moses died, he himself wrote “And Moses died there”? Rather, Moses wrote the entire Torah until this point, and Joshua wrote from this point forward; this is the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda. And some say of Rabbi Nechemya.

Rabbi Shimon said to him: Is it possible that the Torah scroll was missing a single letter? But it is written: “Take this Torah scroll” (Deuteronomy 31:26), indicating that the Torah was complete as is and that nothing further would be added to it. Rather, until this point the Holy One, Blessed be He, dictated and Moses repeated after Him and wrote the text. From this point forward, the Holy One, Blessed be He, dictated and Moses wrote with *dima* (tears).

The Vilna Gaon explains that Rabi Yehudah and Rabi Shimon are actually in agreement with one another. The Torah, before its revelation at Sinai, existed in the form of combinations and permutations of letters and words, resulting in the formation of many different Names of Hashem. This “proto-Torah,” in its pristine state, was given to Moshe, who then “revealed” the Torah that we have today and committed it to writing. The Gaon explains that the word “dimah” in this context means combined or mixed together. He suggests that Moshe brought down the last eight psukim, but left them in their mixed (or hidden) state because it would not have been truthful to write explicitly “And Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there” while Moshe was still alive. They were then revealed and committed to writing by Yehoshua, following Moshe’s death. According to this explanation, even Rabbi Yehudah agrees that Moshe was involved in the transmission of the last eight psukim and thus is considered to have written the entire sefer Torah.

Source #3 - Channah and Eli (Samuel I, 1:13-17)

וַתִּדְרֹךְ וַתֹּאמֶר ה' צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי וְזָכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּח אֶת־אֲמֹתְךָ וְנִתְּנָה לְאִמְתְּךָ זָרַע אֲנָשִׁים וְנִתְּנִיו לָהּ כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּיו וּמוֹרָה לֹא־יֵעָלֶה עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ: וְהָיָה כִּי הִרְבֵּתָה לְהַתְּפַלֵּל לְפָנָי ה' וְעָלִי שִׁמְרֵ אֶת־פִּיהָ: וְחָנָה הִיא מְדַבֵּרַת עַל־לִבָּהּ רַק שִׁפְתֶיהָ נִעְלוֹת וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמָע וַיַּחֲשֹׁבָה עָלַי לְשִׁכְרָה: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ עָלִי עַד־מָתַי תִּשְׁתַּכְּרִין הַסִּירִי אֶת־יַיְנְךָ מֵעַלְיָ: וַתַּעַן חָנָה וַתֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲדֹנָי אֲשֶׁה קִשְׁת־רוּחַ אֲנִי וַיִּין וְשִׁכָר לֹא שָׁתִיתִי וְאֲשַׁפֵּךְ אֶת־נַפְשִׁי לְפָנָי ה':

And she made this vow: “O L-RD of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the L-RD for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.” As she kept on praying before the L-RD, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!” And Hannah replied, “Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the L-RD.

Source #4: - Sukkot

Source #5 - Nefesh Hachaim

(א:א) כתיב ויברא אלקים את האדם בצלמו בצלם אלקים ברא אותו וכן כתיב כי בצלם אלקים עשה את האדם. הנה עומק פנימיות ענין הצלם. הוא מדברים העומדים ברומו של עולם והוא כולל רוב סתרי פנימיות הזוהר. אמנם כגון נדבר במלת צלם בדרך הפשטנים הראשונים ז"ל על פסוק נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו

והוא כי מלת צלם ודמות כאן אינו כמשמעו כי כתוב מפורש (ישעי' מ') ומה דמות תערכו לו. אלא פירושו דמיון מה באיזה דבר. כמו דמיתי לקאת מדבר כי לא נעשו לו כנפים וחרטום ולא נשתנה צורתו לצורת הקאת רק שנדמה אז במקרה פעולותיו שהיה נע ונד כמו הקאת מדבר שהוא צפור בודד ומעופף ממקום למקום. כ"ה לפי הפשטנים הראשונים ז"ל וכן עד"ז הוא ענין מלת צלם. כי המה דומים במשמעם בצד מה

(1:2) In order to understand what is meant by being created in the image of ELOKIM, and not another name (the following is required). The definition of ELOKIM is that G-d is the source of all the energies in the universe, as it is written in the TUR... When we say that G-d is the source of all energies its meaning is thus: Man and G-d are very different. When a man builds a building from wood for example, the builder doesn't create and manufacture the wood from his own essence. Rather he takes wood which has already been created and builds the building. After he has organised them according to his will, if he forgets the building (and his focus is no longer on it) the building still exists. However G-d himself when he created the world, he created ex nihilo (something from nothing) with non-physical strength, also from that moment every power which exists within them and organises them is dependent only on the fact that G-d focuses energy on them at every moment....if G-d would remove the strength of his influence from them for even one moment, they would all disappear into nothingness. This is what the men of the great assembly intended when they said that G-d constantly renews creation - which literally means at every single second...

Legends: knew how many references to each Tanna and Amora in each tractate.

Was once asked "Where in the Chumash is there a verse that contains eight words that all end with the letter mem?" And the little Eliyahu, who wasn't even four years old at the time, instantly answered, "It's the verse in Parsha Vayishlach: 'Two hundred she-goats and twenty he-goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams' [Genesis 32:15]."

After teaching every thing in the world is hinted at or referenced in the Torah, was asked where he is: replied immediately **אבן שלימה**

The Gra always said, "The adjective lamdan [scholar] that we apply to a Talmid Chacham is formed in the same way as the word gazlan [thief]. In the same way that we do not call someone a thief because he has the opportunity and knows how to steal (applying it instead only to someone whose occupation is stealing), so too is it impossible to call someone a scholar because he can study. We only apply it to someone whose permanent occupation is study."

He spoke little, even at home with his family. One day his sister (who he had not seen for years) came to pay a visit. When she entered his room, he greeted her and asked about her family. He then said, "My sister, we will see each other in the World to Come. There is no time here in this world. I have to study Torah."

His son gives us the following account: "For 50 years, my father did not sleep more than half an hour at a time, and not more than two hours during an entire day. So as not to fall asleep during the long winter nights, he studied in a house that was not heated, with his feet immersed in cold water. He never went two yards without Torah and Tefillin, and he never had a useless conversation in his entire life. Before his death, while crying abundantly, he confessed to having sinned in losing four minutes of Torah study."

Because of his Torah and uprightness, everyone simply called him "the pious one". When the Gaon heard this, he was opposed to it and said, "I am not worthy of this name. I only wish to merit saying that I properly adhere to the Shulchan Aruch."

A few moments before passing away, he took his Tzitzit in his hand and said, "How it is difficult to leave this world of action, where by a mitzvah as simple as this, which costs but a few pennies, one can merit seeing the face of the Shechinah!"

Dubna Maggid - it's easy to be holed up here and be the Vilna Goan, try doing this out on the street. True, he wept, but I'm not required to.

Wore his tefillin all day.

Did not keep gabrukus.