

**THE GAON OF WILNA: A
REVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND
INFLUENCE (PP.1-76)**

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A Review of His Life and Influence

BY

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To
My Mine Water

PREFACE.

THE present work deals with the life and importance of one of the most remarkable figures in Jewish history. There is scarcely a reader of Hebrew to whom the name of the Gaon Elijah of Wilna is not more or less familiar. Yet, often as his name occurs in Hebrew literature, and significant as are his achievements in numerous fields of endeavor, he is quite unknown even by name to the reader who is dependent for his information upon English publications. This work would seem, therefore, to require no apology; but a word or two as to its nature may not be out of place.

One of the most difficult tasks connected with the compilation and presentation of the material before us consisted in discriminating between the true reports about the Gaon's life and work, and such exaggerated and fictitious statements as will always gather about the memory of the truly great. This undertaking was the more difficult as almost all of his biographers, in

their intense admiration for the man, have permitted themselves to be influenced by popular notions about him. I have endeavored to avoid falling into a similar error, and have omitted all accounts which seemed to me to bear the stamp of legendary origin, except a few examples which I have preserved for purposes of illustration and have grouped in a separate chapter under the head of legends. If after that my description still appear too partial and favorable, the fact will be due not to blind admiration on the part of the writer, but to the surpassing greatness of one of Israel's rare geniuses whose life forcibly calls to mind the Talmudic exclamation:

In conclusion I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my friend Mr. Ephraim Deinard for having placed at my disposal his magnificent collection of Hebrew books and manuscripts. My thanks are also due to Mr. A. S. Freidus, of the New York Public Library, for assistance rendered in the gathering of material. And lastly I acknowledge my obligation to my friend and colleague, Rabbi Joseph Jasin, for some valuable suggestions.

Duluth, Minn., Sept., 1905.

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THE GAON OF WILNA.

CHAPTER I.

HIS LIFE.

ELIJAH, son of Solomon, was born on Tuesday, the 15th of Nissan (April 24th), 1720 (1), in Wilna, the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." His father was a very poor but learned man, who occupied himself with nothing but the study of the Law, and who was supported from a fund which a relative, R. Moses Rivkes, had left for indigent scholars.

Elijah was very handsome and displayed great cleverness already as a child. At the age of six he was able to dispense with a teacher, and a few months thereafter he delivered an address in the "Grand Syna-

(1) Elijah was born in 1720, and not as Graetz, Fuerst, and Steinschneider have it, in 1722. Their mistake is no doubt due to a mis-statement in the introduction to the Schulchan Aruch, where the date is given as 1722. That this is a mistake is evident, for in 1722 the 15th of Nissan fell on a Thursday and not on a Tuesday.