

[הקדמת בני הגאון לביאור הגר"א]

הקדמת הרב המופלג החריף ובקי חכם ושלם נכבד לכית ישראל מוהר"ר **אברהם נ"י**. ואחיו הרב המופלג בתורה וביראה חכם ונבון כבוד מוהר"ר **יהודא ליב בני הגאון** האמיתי חסיד ה' **רבינו אליהו** וצלה"ה מוויילנא נשמתו ערן

מאז לא הסתכל עד יום מותו מד' אמותיו חוצה, ושלא להנות מעוה"ז רצה, אכל לחם צר צנומה, שרויה במים שיעור ב' זיתים, ואכל אותן ערב ובקר, ולא טעמן בחכו רק בצען שלמות תוכו רצוף אהבה: **התורה** והעבודה שם אפריון עשה לו, שם לילות כימים, לגלות דבר ה' אמתה של תורה, אחרי נמכר בידי תלמידים שלא שמשו כל צרכן, גאולה תהיה לו:

מי כמוהו מורה פנים חדשות כהלכות ואגדות, מי פתי יסור מהשכיל לבנו, ודרך תבונת מהר ימהרנה לו:

הן הוא הבין את דרכה, והוא הודיע את מקומה, ידיו רב לו להניף תנופה, כמלחמתה של תורה לאמתתה. הרחיב גבולה בתלמידים רבים ונכבדים, עמקים בעמקי הלכה ישדדים. וכולם לא הגיעו לחצי קרסוליו. לשליש ולרביע ספק קרוב לו:

כל ימיו ורגעיו ועתותיו, בתורת ה' חפצו ובה נפשו דבקה, הקשיב על שפת אמת ולן בעומקה וירא ראשית לו:

ששה שנים און וחקר היטב תלמוד בבלי וירושלמי ותוספות מכילתא וספרא וספרי, והאיר אפילת חשכת עבי הנסחאות ודרך חכמה שכבשוה בפלפולא יתירא אשר אין יוצא ואין בא, ופתח לרוחה ואמרו הכל, אשרי העם שככה לו:

הן מי כמוהו נטע תורת אמת בתוכו, כמוהו מורה אמת לאמתו, חכמה ודעת קדושים, ונהנין ממנו עצה ותושיה, פרי ישוה לו:

עוד ששה שנים עסק בדברי פוסקים ראשונים ואחרונים, המה הגדולים אשר מעולם אנשי השם נאונים קדמאי ובתראי. ולא פנה אל גדולת גדולתם, ולחכמת חכמתם ולקדושת קדושתם, להצילם מכל מכשול ושניאה לתרין דבריהם, רק בכל כחו עבד ושמר להבין ולהשכיל דברי חכמי הגמרא הקדושים, אשר כל דבריהם כנחלי אש מלחשים, אשר באות אחת מדברי רז"ל דחה הרבה מדברי המחברים, ארובות אור ממרום נפתחו לו כי הפליא ה' חסיד לו:

האומנם איך נעיו פנינו, לשער ידיעתו וחכמתו, ולמדוד מדתו על פי מדותינו. ה' הרועה אותו שלח לפניו אורו ואמתו, להדריכו בדרך ילך. האמת היתה נר לרגלו, להגיע לסוף ההכרה והידיעה, להשכיל בתורת ה' גדולות ונצורות אשר לא ידע איש מקומה, כי פועל אדם ישולם לו:

ואחד הצמיחה לו קרן ישועה, לסתור סברות נפסדות בה חתר מחתרת ונתגלה לו תעצמות אורה. אם תפקח עיניך אחי, ותעביר עיונך בביאורו על שרע משער לשער, ומסימן לסימן באהבתך ובחמלתך על האמת, עיניך תחזינה מישרים כי מר"ן ב"י ז"ל הוא היה המאסף לכל הדעות ונשא ונתן בהם כפי דעתו הרחבה, ואספן כעמיר גורנה בחיבורו הקצר. וקנינו הרב הגאון מהר"ם שחיבר באר הגולה, גילה מקור הדינים וכל הדעות דלה לנו מחיבורו הגדול של מרן ב"י, (כמבואר בהקדמת באה"ג). ומר אבא הגאון וצלה"ה בחיבורו זה, הראה את מקורן כל תיבה ותיבה היא גמרא מפורשת בבלי או ירושלמי או דברי רש"י ותוספות, מה שלא שערו מרן ב"י וכל קדמוניו זולת פלפולים עמוקים ומתוקים. ותחי רוח דבריהם, ונראה פנים חדשות כאלו כל הדעות מרועה א' נתנן אל אחד אמרן לא ידענו מה היה לו:

במה הועילה לו תשוקת האמת, היא נתנה לפנינו מסילה נכונה וישרה, עמה גבר על כוחותיו הטבעיים, להכניסם במסורת הברית. הקדיש נפשו ולכו אל ה' מנעריו דודי לי ואני לו. לא הספיקו דמויים

במה אכף ובמה אקדם, על כל אשר נמלנו כרחמיו על צאן ידו ועם מרעיתו, ואליהם תשוקתו. מיום היותה עד היום הזה, לא זו מחבבה, מבקש אהבה, כיד אלהינו הטובה. דור הולך דור בא, וישראל עומדים על תלה של תורה חליפות וצבא, זרח השמש ובא, עד שלא שקעה שמשו של צדיק זה להפטר בחבה, זרחה שמשו של צדיק אחר על ארץ רבה, אבי ראה גם ראה רבה העוברה. ערן ועדנים, אב לבנים לא יוכל להודיע אמתה של תורה מרוב צרות ואונים. כי ארכו לנו הימים מחורבן בית מקדשנו, ותשש כחנו, ושמש לבנו, ורפו ידינו, וכחו עינינו, וכבדו אונינו, ונאלם לשונינו, ונימל רוב מדברנו, ונסתמה מעיינות חכמתנו. ונשתבשו הסברות, וגדלו המחלוקות ורכו הדעות, ולא נשארה הלכה פסוקה שאין בה דעות שונות. האומנם יוצר אור כטובו מחדש תמיד מעשה בראשית, מאורות הצדיקים נתן סביבות זמן חשכת הגלות. הכין ופעל והרי מחברים מזהירים כוהר הרקיע. לא זכינו כולנו לאורם ונגששה כעורים בצהרים, הן אראלם, לכן של ראשונים שפתחו של אולם, ואנחנו יתמי דיתמי בלי נשמע קולם, אם הקדמונים כולם עמדו ברום עולם. פומין ממללין רברבין, ובמלחמה של תורה עבדין קריבין, ומשמיעים יחד קול מלך עולם. אין לנו פה ולשון, ואור תורתם אין מאיר עינינו באישון. כי עונינו כסו פנינו, ועלומינו את מאור תורתנו. כי כל ימינו פנו בתורה שלא לשמה כלינו שנינו בהבל של חמא:

לולא ה' הותיר לנו חמיכה אחת בעולמו, ד' אמות של הלכה, הוא חלקו של הקב"ה, הוא זיוו והדרו. הופיע אורו בשנת תפ"ב לאלף הששי, זה היום יום ראשון של פסח, שמענו קול רנה וישועה, באהלי צדיקו של עולם הרב הגדול המפורסם זקני מוה' **שלמה זלמן** מיקס מעלץ עיר מלאה חכמים וסופרים, סמוך לק"ק בריסק דליטא. קול נתנו שחקים, הנה בן ניתן לו, הוא יקים עול תורה. יגלה עמוקות, ישיביע נפש שוקקות. גם באיים רחוקות. קדושתו ופרישותו. הולך וגדול וטוב מיום הולדו. רק אך עד ששה שנים למד אצל רב, ומאז קול ה' לעיר יקרא. באזני מבחר הנבונים, הביטו בעיני פקוחה על הנער הזה, בוצינא דנהורא, פה מפיך מרגליות במושב זקנים, שפתותיו שושנים, פה ששונה חילוקים. בהיות ששה שנים וחצי, דרש בכית הכנסת חילוק אשר למדו אביו, ובסעודה שלישית של שבת הביאו אביו לפני הרב הגאון ר' העשיל אביד' דק"ק **וויילנא** וצלה"ה, אמר הרב רבי העשיל לגדולים אשר ישבו לפניו, הנמצא חכם ונבון כמו הילד הזה, המה השיבו אמריהם אין זאת מהנפלאות, רק אות על טוב השנתו, הן אביו למדו ויורדו ויאמר לו פעם שתיים ושלשה וקיבל היטב. ויען הרב ר' העשיל, נכון לבי כטוח בילד הזה ומעשהו, כי יוכל להגיד כזאת וכזאת מלכו. אתן לו שעה אחת להתכונן תראו נפלאות, ויתכונן בעצמו ערך שעה אחת, והקשה עוד קושיות רבות ותירץ כולם בסגנון אחד. המה שמעו כן תמהו, רצון אחותם לנשקו ולחבקו, אחרי שמעו כל זאת אמרו אין נבון וחכם כמוהו:

בהיותו בן תשע שנים ויהי ידיו רב לו כמקרא במשנה ובגמרא, וישבע מסברות דבריהן, גם מדרשי אגדות צומחות אחריתן, רוח מכינתו הקיצו ותאמר לו:

למי שיח סודות הנעלמות מכל נמצא הוא בספר עין החיים, אם חתום הוא מעיני כל חי ה' יראה לו, ואם בדברים החמורים בשיטות הש"ס בפוסקים ושו"ת ומפרשי קדמונים ואחרונים, דעת מכינתך ישחק לו:

ינתת ולא מצאת אל תאמן לבכך, מיד השיג ללמוד ספרים בנגלה ובנסתר ולמד כל כתבי עין החיים בחצי שנה... מה' היתה לו:

מי אסף רוח חכמה והשגה לספר כל תהלותיו, הן בהיותו בן י"ג שנה **יו"ם** א' קבל חוקף חסידותו ופרישותו כתועפת ראם לו:

ויראה משנתו שלמה המפורסם לשבח מו' שמחה בונים נר"ו. ואחיו היה הרב הגדול בתורה ועבודה, הרועה בשושנים דעה והשכל מכל אבקת רוכל, המפורסם לשבח מו' מנחם מעניל נר"ו. גם המה גבורי כח עושים דבריו, חרדים אל דבר ה' לעבדו ולשמרו יומם ולילה. המה באו בצל קורתו לעת זקנתו, כי בא השמש פנה היום לעת ערב. לנגה ברק וזו תורתו והכמתו, ראו אור גדול. שמו לילות כימים, לגלות עמוקות מני חשך. הספיקות במשנה ובתוספתא כמכילתא וספרא וספרי וירושלמי וד' טורים. הן כל ראתה עיני, ועלימו ועלי תפוף אור תורתו. והוא זיל שמע את קולם מתהלך בגן התורה, ומצא כונתם ומעשיהם רצוים לפני ה', הפיק הוא להם רצונו. ויותר שהיה חכם, למד דעת את העם, וחוקם ואמצם שילמדו בסדר נכון שלא ימנעו ורגליהם. בראשונה הזהיר לעבוד עבודתו יתברך להיות בקי בראשונה כל כ"ד ספרים עם הנקודות והטעמים ערוכים בכל ושמורים, עד שבדק אותם בכל אלה, ועל צבאם דגל חכמת הדקדוק. וכבר בחנו פקחים ושלמים שבחכמת הדקדוק בדברים עמו, לא מצאו ידם ורגלם. שמו בצמא דבריו, ולעו מענותיהם כל אהיו. ובשום אלהיהם, ענו ואמרו מי שלא שמע דבריו, אין רואה ואין יודע. אחר צוה להיות ששה סדרי משנה שגורה בפיו, עם כללות פירושה המפורסמות, ועל צבאה דגל גרמותיה הנכונות. תלמידיו הגדולים המה ראו כי חכמת אלהים בקרבנו, כי מגדל בקיאותו ועוצם חריפותו לאמתה של תורה, הודיע חדשות אשר לא שערם אבותינו המפרשים הקדמונים והראה מדברים הנרגשים מסדר המשנה או מכל תיבותיה, והכירו כי יודעי שרשיה ועיקריה, המה הולכים למישרים בלתי מקבלים ביאורים רחוקים:

אחר הזהיר על דרכי העיון בים התלמוד. ולעיין היטב בפירושי רש"י כי הם נכוחים מאוד למכין וכחידושי בעל תוספות ז"ל. מתנאיה שיהא ישר העיון. שונא רב הקושיות, מודה על האמת אפי' מפי תינוקות של רבן. וכל הפציו מדרך השכל לא ישוו נגד האמת כי אז יצליח וישכיל בלמודיו. ודברי חרדין צוה להמניע. גם מתלמידים החסרים, וילדים הרבים. הן אמת החריפים השלמים. כאשר שמעו דברי אמת יוצאין מפיו הקדוש והטהור, לא נותר בהן רוח, ואמרו לריק יגענו, כל מספר ימי חיינו:

ולהשלים את בני דורו, יסד בית מלא תורה. להיות אנשי תמיד עומדים על משמרתם סביב לשולחן ה', דשנים ורעננים ממקרא משנה וגמרא. והוא גם היה מיסב עמהם בראש לעתים קבועים, וסדר לפניהם מעשה השולחן לכל מעשה עבודתם, איך כמעט שנים ישנו לדעת כל התלמוד ערוך כפיהם. וידעו מקור הדינים והתורות של כל ארכנה טורים בתכלית השלימות. והזהיר שלא לעסוק הרבה בפלפול אשר סופו להגמל, ולפעמים שהוא לקנתור חלילה. הוא הריסה גדולה אל רצונו יתברך כי בו תרכה הפשע ותגדל העון, ויופסד החיבור הנעים ויגורש האמת מעדת ה', והפלפול טוב לכוון אל ההלכה. וקיימו וקבלו עליהם ולמדו כחיים חיותו שמונה עשרה שנה בביתם. והוא היה נהנה מנחת רוח שנעשה רצונו הטוב. והמה בהשקפתם בזיו תורתו ערב ובקר, וכו' אל תענוג הנפלא, תענוג וזיו שאין לשער. אוי לבנים שנגלו מעל שלחן אביהם זאת נחמתינו אשר זכינו לאור תורתו כביאוריו על ארכנה טורי ש"ע, ונוכה כלנו להנות מאורן. אשרי המחכה ויגיע, לאור תורתו שיפוצו מעיינותיו. לדלות ולהשקות צאן קדשים, המתאווים להנות מזיו חכמתו כנגלה וכנסתר. אין לשער רוב חכמתו, ואין להגיע עד סוף תכונתו. ואין למפר תכלית קדושתו, והליכות דרכו בקודש. אפס קצוה ספרנו מקצת תהלתו כמר מדלי. הנוטע אוזן הוא יכרה אוני לרצונו לשמוע קצת מלמודיו, היוצר עין הוא יאיר עיני להבין קצת כוונתו:

דברי בניו הבאים ע"ה"ח וידינו נוטפות מור שובר, וארכבותינו דא לדא נקשן, וכל גופינו ינודו כאשר ינוד הקנה כמים, מקדושת זכרון קדשו ושבח מעשי ידיו המהורים:

יהודה ליב בהגאון האמיתי החסיד רבינו אליהו נ"ע
אברהם בהגאון האמיתי החסיד רבינו אליהו נ"ע

ובא לשמוע תורתו, ושמש אותו שנים רבות, ולמד ממנו הרבה, בכל יום יום כנבואו לפני המלך עם הספר, פנים מסבירות הראה לו:

והחמישי הרב המאזיג המפורסם מו' שלמה ז"ל ממלאמשיין מגיד דבריו ליעקב בק"ק ווילנא. כמה חיבה יתירה נודעת לו שלמד אתו וזהר וספר יצירה, וכל דבר הקשה לו בכתבי גורי האר"י ז"ל הסביר לו פנים לפי כחו ותכונת מדעו. וכמה דברים העלים ממנו ולא הגיד לו. ואחר פטירתו של הרב ר' שלמה הנ"ל, הדר ביה ואמר מדוע נסיתי ממנו דברים הכבושים, הלא בכל כחו היה ירא את ה' מנעוריו, כי פועל אדם ישלם לו:

והששי הרב הגדול החריף ובקי המפורסם מו' צבי הירש נר"ו מסעמיאטיץ. כחו רב כנגלה ובנסתר, שמש אותו שנים רבות, דבק בקצת דרכי חסידותו ופרישותו, וכן נאה לו:

והשביעי הרב הגדול החריף ובקי המפורסם מו' שלמה ז"ל מק"ק מאהילאב. מזויין היה במלחמתה של תורה, ירא וחרד לכה ר' פני להבים בעזו היראה והעבודה, למד ממנו הרבה ומאז הגיע אליו תלמיד ותיק היה לו:

אשריך עיר התהלה ווילנא, כולם למגדולם ועד קטנם קבלו קצת תועלת נפשי, איש לפי הכנתו. וכל פעולותם בתלמוד תורה ועבודת הצדקה, שם הוא היה עושה, בעזו יראתו ותוכחתו על פניהם. כי עצתו העולה היא תקום להם עד בלי ירח. כעצתו ותוכחתו נעשו קהל גדול מריבצי תורה, מדקדקים כמצות, שונאי הרבנות, מכבדי האלקים. בעשרם לא גבה לבם, כל מכשף ה' ישמח בהם. עשו תורתם קבע ועסקיהם עראי, ומלאכתם נעשה ע"י אנשי ביתם, התורה והעבודה הם לבדם עסקיהם. ואח"כ קבלו עליהם כמעט כל אנשי מדינתו. כי עיקר תוכחתו היתה אל הקרובים העומדים לפניו, להודיע גם אל הרחוקים, שלא יוציאו זמנם באפס תקוה להיות כל איש עיניו פקוחות על חלקי זמנו, לרגעים יבחנו. ושתהיה הוצאת זמנו בדברים היותר יקרים שאפשר והוא עסק התורה והעבודה, ולהודרו כה לפעול בעוצם החריצות, כי כל השתדלות וכשרון מעשה זולת זה לא יועיל מאומה, הלא דרכי השכל בעבודת הבורא הוא רק להכיר רע של וולתו ולחנף את עצמו. זולת התורה והעבודה מתישין כל מעללי יצרי לב האדם ותחבולותיו. וכל צמח צדקה ותהלה נראו בעירו ובמקומו, וגם הרחוקים אשר לא ראו את גדלו ואת חסידותו, השתוקקו ללכת ככל כחם בהנהגתו אשר הורה להם:

כמה מעלות טובות למקום אשר עמד שם לפני ה' בתורה ובעבודה יותר מחמשים שנה, וכמה חיבה יתירה נודעת לעיר התהלה הזאת. אשר נעשית שותפו, לקבל זיו חכמתו, וזהו קירון פניו בכל עת, המה קבלו שיעור מהשנתתו עליהם, כשיעור השתדלותם לקרב אל הקדש לתקן ענייניהם, למען ילכו בדרך טובים:

וגם אלה לחכמים, עיר וקדיש קהלה קדושה שקלאוו, אנשיה ראו מכותם בחכמת הפלפול היתירה, אם האחד בונה ובא חבירו ומפילו. ועודם בעורת מר אבא הגאון וצלהיה, צפו וראו כי הוא זכה לדברים הרבה, אשר זוכה הלומד תורה לשמה, כי נגלה לו רזי תורה. ונהנין ממנו עצה ותושיה. וכל חידושי תורתו ממקור האמת נובע, מימיו נאמנים, אין כדבריו נפתל ועקש, קולע אל שערת האמת ולא יחטיא. ודעת לנכון נקל היה הרב המופלג בתורה ובעבודה הנגיד המפורסם לשבח, איש חי רב פעלים, פרי קדש הילולים כבוד מו' בנימין נר"ו מק"ק שקלאוו. עלה למרום שבתו לק"ק ווילנא, לעשות נחת רוח ליוצרו, ותדד שנתו מעיניו, וזכה לשמוע מפיו הקדוש והטהור בלימודים. ואור תורתו ויראתו נגה עליו מאז כדרכו והנהגתו. וגם על ידו נבנתה עיר התהלה ק"ק שקלאוו על תלה, קיימו וקבלו עליהם הרבה מהנהגותיו בדרכי הלימוד, ונתיבות המצות כתיקונן. הרבה מאנשי עירו ומדינתו עשו כמו הרב ר' בנימין הנ"ל, ולא עלתה בידם לקרב אל הקודש, רק להני תרי אחי עלתה וחפץ ה' הצליח בידם. היה הרב הגדול המופלג בתורה

Abba of Glusck story with the Gaon

He [the GRA] spoke in Hebrew and asked me what the questions were. I posed one of my heretical questions and inclined my ear to hear his response. He thought for a moment and then asked me, “What else did they ask?” I added more questions. While he was immersed in thought for a moment, I too considered what else I might ask him and I posed a great many questions to him. When I saw that he had not even responded to the first question, I said, “These are all the questions.”

Believe me, my friend, I was shaken to hear him begin his wise illuminations. . . . “Although your questions are seventy-three in number, they are in reality only fifteen questions, because the first and the seventh and the twenty-fifth and the forty-seventh are really one question in the same category.” And he proceeded to subdivide and to sort into categories all of the numerous diverse questions, neither omitting any nor adding any to the list.

What a remarkable feat of wisdom! Almost beyond human conception. To be able to take such penetrating matters and to review them instantaneously and to logically sort them into groups! And he then proceeded to brilliantly reply to the questions.

I considered how I might answer and challenge his words, and so I said to the Gaon: “Perhaps they will object [to your answers] as follows. . . .” He replied, “You did not understand my words, incline your ear and listen again.” Believe me, my friend, he did not add one more word to what he had said the first time, and I realized that his short reply did, indeed, cover all possible contradictions.

I again asked, “Might they not try to reply. . . .” . . . again he reviewed the matter including in each answer all possible arguments in their respective categories.

I want you to know the truth as I perceive it to be. Among all the scholars of all the nations, there is absolutely no one comparable to him.⁴⁹

R' Chaim Volozhiner on the Gaon

R. Hayyim of Volozhin paid tribute to the Gaon with rhapsodic praise, writing in his introduction to the GRA's commentary on *Yerushalmi, Seder Zeraim*, that:

The Almighty enlightened us by sending us a radiant holy one from heaven, the master, who may be likened to an Angel of the Lord of Hosts—our great teacher, who is known for his piety and profound Torah scholarship throughout the world, the Gaon and *hasid*, Rabbeinu Eliyahu of Vilna, may his memory be blessed. . . .

His thoughts were centered entirely around the Torah; he did not walk four cubits without *tefillin* or devoid of Torah; he hardly knew the taste of sleep. . . . The entire *Talmud Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*, the *Mekhilta*, the *Sifrei*, the *Tosefta*, the entire *Midrash* and the *Zohar* . . . all the words of the *Tannaim* and of the *Amoraim* which are extant in both the revealed and mystical Torah law, were all justified perfectly on his lips, methodically arranged and guarded within his heart. . . . Above all, there was nothing in all the Talmudic and Midrashic literature or the very most mysterious secrets, to which he did not find cryptic reference in the Torah.⁵⁵

R. Hayyim continued his praise in his introduction to the GRA's work, *Sifra deTzeniuta*:

God, in His mercy and to perform His good word that the Law would not be forgotten, sent us a watcher and a holy one, a man in whom there was the spirit of God, our great master, the Gaon and light of the world, whose learning and piety proclaimed his holiness from one end of the earth to the other, our pious and holy master and teacher Elijah of Vilna, from whom no mystery was hidden and who illumined our eyes in exoteric and esoteric lore. . . . For there are few only that can study the sources of our exoteric Torah . . . the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud . . . let alone the innermost mysteries of the Torah . . . and the writings of the Ari. . . . For even the saintly disciples of the Ari could not penetrate the innermost depth of the meaning of this holy one of the most high, the Ari, except R. Hayyim Vital. . . . Until He, for His righteousness' sake, to magnify the Law and make it honorable and to show us marvelous things from His Law, made His merciful kindness exceedingly great over us; and behold one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven, to him glory was given, unique was this great man, none had been like him for many generations before him . . . all the ways and paths of exoteric and esoteric wisdom were clear to him . . . this is the *gaon* of the world, the *hasid* and saint, our great and holy master

Iggeres Ha'Gra

Iggeres HaGra - The Vilna Gaon's Letter

(This letter was sent by the Gaon, R. Eliyahu of Vilna, ז"ל while traveling to the holy land of Eretz Yisrael, to encourage and instruct his family in the ways of Mussar. This classic letter was written in a manner which would bring fire into the hearts of his family in the ways of fearing and carrying out the word of HASHEM)

I ask you to refrain from becoming sad, as you truly promised me, and not to worry (or: as Mother promised me - besides, what is there to worry about?). It is common for men to leave their wives in order to travel and wander destitute for years to make money.. But I, thank G-d, am traveling to the Holy Land - which everyone longs to see - the Jewish people's Most Beloved (or: Hashem's Most Beloved, desired by all heavenly and earthly beings). And I am traveling in peace, thank G-d. You are also aware that I have left behind my children, for whom my heart moans, and all my precious books, and I am as a stranger in a foreign country. Yes, I have left everything behind...

It is well-known that this world is all emptiness, that every amusement is worthless, and woe is anyone who pursues vanity, which is worthless. And don't envy the rich, for "riches are hoarded by their owner to his misfortune" (Koheles 5:12); "As he had come from his mother's womb, naked will he return...exactly as he came he must depart, and what did he gain by toiling for the wind?" (ib. 14, 15); "Even if he should live a thousand years twice over, but find no contentment - do not all go to the same place?" (Ib. 6:6); "Even if man lives many years, let him rejoice in all of them, but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is futility" (ib. 11:8); "And of joy, what does it accomplish?" (ib. 2:2). Tomorrow you will cry for having laughed today. Do not lust after imaginary honor, for it is worthless, and time is a traitor: it is like scales, which lift the light and lower the weighty. The world is like one who drinks salty water: he thinks it quenches his thirst, but it only makes him thirstier. No one leaves the world with even half his cravings fulfilled (Koheles Rabbah 1). "What profit does one have from all his toils under the sun" (Koheles 1:3)? Remember our predecessors, all of whose love, desire and joy have ceased to exist (see Koheles 9:6), but who are being judged severely for them. And of what benefit is gratification to man - whose end is dust, maggots and worms, as he is bound to die - when all his enjoyments turn to bitterness in the grave? And what is this world, whose days are full of anguish and pain which prevent one from sleeping? Neither is death a mikveh. Man will be judged for everything he says; even the slightest expression is not overlooked. Therefore I exhort you to train yourself to sit as much as possible, because the sin of the tongue is the most severe, as our Sages said (Tosefta Pe'ah 1): "These are the things...and lashon hara is equivalent to them all." I don't have to elaborate on this most serious sin of all. "All man's toil is for his mouth" (Koheles 6:7). Our Sages said that all man's mitzvos and teachings are not enough to counterbalance what comes out of his mouth. "What should be a man's pursuit in this world? He should be silent" (Chullin 89a). One must seal his lips as tight as two millstones. Idle words are like powerful weapons which can reach from one end of the world to the other. Now this is true concerning mere excessive speech. Where forbidden speech is concerned - e.g. lashon hara, mocking, swearing, vowing, fighting and cursing - especially in the synagogue, and on Shabbos and Yom Tov - for every utterance of this type it is impossible to imagine the pain and suffering one will receive (Zohar)! No word is lost; everything is recorded. Winged beings attach themselves to everyone, recording all they say. "For a bird of the skies may carry the sound, and some winged creature may tell the matter" (Koheles 10:20). "Let not your mouth cause your flesh to sin, and do not tell the messenger that it was an error. Why should G-d be angered by your speech and destroy the work of your hands?" (ib. 5:5).

Purchase all your needs through a messenger, even if this would cost two or three times as much. "Is there a limit to what G-d can provide?" (Bamidbar 11:23). Hashem feeds all creatures, from the greatest to the smallest (see A.Z. 3), and provides all their needs. And on Shabbos and Yom Tov do not speak at all about things that are not urgent, and be brief even with what is important, for the Shabbos is very holy and our Sages barely permitted the exchange of greetings on it (Yerushalmi Shabbos, and Tosfos Shab. 113). See how strict they were concerning even a single expression! Continue to give great honor to the Shabbos as when I was there. Do not cut back [on your Shabbos] expenses, since "Man's entire sustenance [for the year is fixed for him from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur,] except [the expenditure for Sabbaths and Festivals,] etc." (Beitzah 16a). I also implore and plead with you to guide your daughters very carefully to refrain from cursing, swearing, lying and fighting. Rather, everything they do should be done peacefully, with love, affection and gentleness.

I have left behind several Yiddish books on Mussar (morality). See that [the children] read them constantly, especially on the Holy Shabbos, when Mussar is the only thing they should read. Always instruct them according to Mussar books. Don't hold back from hitting them when they curse, swear or lie. Don't be lenient with them, because parents will be punished severely for the corruption of their children, G-d forbid. And even if one constantly teaches them Mussar, but they do not follow it, one's sorrow and shame in the World-to-Come will be great. As it is written (Vayikra 21:9), "She defiles her father" - [in such a case] the son of a righteous man is called "the son of a wicked man" (Sanhedrin 52a). Similarly in other matters, lashon hara and gossip.

Their eating and drinking should always be preceded and followed by the appropriate blessings. They must be careful to say the blessings, Birkas Hamazon and Krias Shema with proper kavanah (intent). Most importantly, they must not wander outside the home and must obey and respect you and my mother and all their elders. They also need to observe all that is written in the Mussar books.

Raise your own children as well correctly and sensitively, and pay their tutor well, for "Man's entire sustenance for the year is fixed for him from Rosh Hashanah...except TiShReY (Talmud, Shabbos, Rosh Chodesh and Yom Tov - Beitzah 16a). I have also left books for them. For Hashem's sake, guide them well and gently. Take care of their health and make sure that they always have enough to eat. First have them learn the entire Chumash, seeing to it that they know it almost by heart. The learning must be done without undue pressure, rather gently, because it is best absorbed when one is relaxed. Give them coins, etc., as a reward. Always focus your attention on these matters and not on others, because all else is trivial. For man can salvage nothing from his labor to take with him (see Koheles 5:14), except two white garments (shrouds). Also (Tehillim 49), "A man will not redeem his brother...Fear not when a man grows rich...For when he dies, he shall carry nothing away..." Don't say, "I will leave a portion for my children" - who will tell you in the grave? The children of man are like grasses of the field, some blossom and some fade (Eruvin 54a). Everyone is born under his constellation and Divine Providence. They are glad when he dies and he goes into the nether world. [At his death] Resh Lakish left his children a kav of saffron, and he applied to himself the verse (Tehillim 49:11), "...and they leave their wealth to others" (Gittin 47a). Woe to all who plan on leaving [wealth] to their children! The only reward from sons and daughters is through their Torah and good deeds. Their sustenance is fixed for them. It is also known that women earn merit by making their children learn Torah, etc. (Berachos 17a). And our Sages said (Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Rabba 9): "The only proper wife is one that does her husband's will."

Vilna Gaon vs. Chassidic Movement – Great Rivalries – Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Of course, I am writing you words of the Living G-d. Therefore, I am certain that you will follow all that I have written. Nevertheless, I wish to strongly advise you not to deviate from anything that I have written. Read this letter every week, especially on Shabbos before and during the meal, in order to prevent idle talk and, even worse, lashon hara and the like, G-d forbid. I reiterate my request that you guide your sons and daughters with words of kindness and Mussar that will find a place in their heart. This is true especially if we merit to arrive in Eretz Yisrael, because one must be extra cautious to follow Hashem's ways there. Therefore, train them well, since one must work hard on one's speech and character traits, and only through good habits can we control ourselves (Shaarey Teshuvah). All beginnings are hard (Mechilta Yisro). But afterwards, one is worthy of praise (Mishlei 20:14). For the wicked person knows that he is taking the wrong path, but it is hard for him to change. But this is man's main task, not to go after his desires, but (Tehillim 32:9) "to restrain himself with a bit and bridle when he is being groomed." Man must deprive himself until he dies, not by fasting or asceticism, but by controlling his mouth and desires. This is teshuvah. And this is the whole reward of the World-to-Come, as it is written (Mishlei 6:23): "For the commandment is a lamp and the Torah is a light" - but "the way to life is the rebuke that disciplines." And that is worth more than any amount of fasting and self-affliction! For every second that man controls his tongue, he merits some of the "hidden [by Hashem for the righteous] light," something which no angel or [other] creature can imagine (Midrash). And it is stated (Tehillim 34:13,14): "Who is the man who desires life, and loves days that he may see good? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceitfully." This will atone for any sin and save one from Gehinnom, as we find (Mishlei 21:23): "He who guards his mouth [from too much eating and drinking] and tongue [from idle words] guards himself from trouble." Also (ib. 18:21): "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Woe to one who gives away his life for one word! Then what advantage is there to one who has a tongue (see Koheles 10:11)? And, "Everything has a cure except, etc." It is most important to refrain from speaking words of praise about anyone. How much more so does this apply to speaking ill of anyone! Why must one speak about others? "The mouth that speaks strangely is a deep pit; he who angers Hashem falls into it" (Mishlei 22:14).

Concerning solitude, the main thing is to remain at home. Even your visit to the synagogue should be very short. In fact, it is better to pray at home, for it is impossible to be spared from jealousy or from hearing idle talk or lashon hara in the synagogue. And one receives punishment for this, as we find (Shabbos 33a), "Also one who hears and is silent...." This is even the more so on Shabbos and Yom Tov when they gather to talk - It is then better that you don't pray at all. Refrain also from going to the cemetery (especially women), as it leads to all kinds of sorrow and sin. It is also advisable that your daughter not go to the synagogue, because she'll see beautiful clothes there, become jealous and talk about it at home. This will lead to lashon hara, etc. She should rather cling to Mussar and not become jealous of anything in this world, where everything is vanity and illusions, appearing and disappearing overnight (Yonah 4:10). "Though he grows as high as the sky, his head reaching the clouds, he perishes forever..." (Iyov 20:6,7). "For property does not last forever, or a crown for all generations" (Mishlei 27:24). And even while it exists it is worthless, loathsome and disdained by any sensible person. Woe to him who is impressed by it. Envy only the fear of Hashem (ib. 23:17). She should not say, "How can I earn a share in the World-to-Come? - I can't do it!" For we have learned (Berachos 17a): "One may do much or one may do little, provided he directs his heart to heaven." For the sake of Hashem, give a fifth of all earnings to charity. Do not give less, as I have already warned you, because that causes the transgression of several positive and negative mitzvahs every minute! It also implies a rejection of the Holy Torah, G-d forbid.

But the main way to merit Olam Haba is by guarding one's tongue. That is worth more than all the Torah and good deeds. This is the meaning of (Isaiah 32:9) "tranquil women" (Berachos 17a), because the mouth is the holiest of the holy. Among my books is a copy of Mishlei with Yiddish translation. For the sake of Hashem, have them read it daily. It is better than any Mussar book. They should also read Koheles a lot, because it points out the vanity of this world, and other books as well. But G-d forbid that reading should be the objective! Reading Mussar alone does not necessarily move one to act differently. Going out into the world without a good understanding of it defeats the whole purpose. It is like one sows without having plowed; the wind and birds will carry the seeds away, because they aren't closed off and protected. So is he who merely reads Mussar like him who plants without a fence; pigs will eat and trample on everything. Some plant on stone. This is comparable to a heart of stone which cannot be penetrated unless it is struck until it breaks open. That's why I wrote you to hit our children if they don't obey you. "Train a lad in the way he ought to go" (Mishlei 22:6). This is an important principle of education.

I also wish to appeal to my son-in-law to adhere to all the above. Read to the children as I have stated and learn for the sake of Heaven. Become well-versed in it for Hashem's sake. Don't pay attention to those who say that it is unnecessary for the child, G-d forbid. To the contrary, "Train a lad, etc." It is easier to remove the skin of a nut before it hardens into a shell.

Most importantly, it is through such study that one merits everything, as our Sages stated (Avos 6:1): "Rabbi Meir said, 'Whoever studies Torah for its own sake merits many things; furthermore, the whole world is worthwhile for his sake alone.'" You should study Tractate Avos, especially Avos D'Rabbi Noson, and Tractate Derech Eretz, since Derech Eretz (good manners) are more important than Torah study. Honor both your mother-in-law and your children's great grandmother. Also always treat everyone with politeness and respect..

My Dear Mother, I know that you don't need my advice, because you are very modest. Nevertheless, I wish someone would read this letter to you, for it consists of words of the Living G-d. I beg of you not to grieve over me, as you promised me, and G-d willing, if I merit to arrive at the gate of heaven in the holy city of Jerusalem, I will pray for you as I promised. And if we deserve it, we shall all be reunited, please G-d. I also ask my wife to honor my mother, as the Torah dictates, especially since she is a widow to whom it is a grave sin to cause even the slightest pain. I also ask you, Mother, to please cause peace to reign between you, and that you should strive to bring happiness one to the other. This is a great mitzvah incumbent upon everyone, as we find (Reishis Chochmah): "When man is judged, he will be asked, 'Did you make your fellow a king over you?'" We see that one must gladly enhance his friend's honor. In fact, the main goal of the Torah is to bring joy to man. Even if one of you should happen to act improperly, excuse each other and live in peace for Hashem's name. I also ask of you, Mother, to supervise and guide my children with gentle words, so that they will accept them. I instruct my sons and daughters to honor her, and not to fight among themselves at all, but to settle everything peacefully. May the Master of Peace grant you, my sons, daughters, sons-in-law, brother and all Israel life and peace.

Your loving Eliyahu the son of R. Shlomo Zalman ztz"l

Letter of Ba'al Shem Tov

On Rosh Hashanah of the year 5507^[2] I performed, by means of oath, an elevation of soul^[2], as known to you, and saw wondrous things I had never seen before. That which I saw and learned there is impossible to convey in words, even face to face.

When I returned to the lower Garden of Eden^[4] I saw innumerable souls, both living and dead, some whom I knew and others whom I did not. They were fleeting back and forth, going from one universe to another through the Column^[5] that is known to those who delve in mysteries. Their state of joy was so great that lips cannot express it, and the physical ear is too gross to hear it.

There were also many wicked people who had repented; their sins were forgiven, since this was a special time of grace. Even to my eyes it was wondrous how many were accepted as penitents, many of whom you know. There was great joy among them too, and they also ascended in the above mentioned manner. All of them beseeched and petitioned me unceasingly: "Because of the glory of your Torah, G-d granted you greater understanding to perceive and know these things. Ascend with us, so that you can be our help and support."

Because of the great joy that I saw among them, I decided to ascend with them. Due to the great danger involved in ascending to the supernal universes, I asked my master^[6] to come with me, as I had never before ascended to such a high level. I ascended from level to level until I entered the chamber of the Mashiach^[7], where the Mashiach learns Torah with all the sages and *tzadikim* and also with the seven Shepherds.^[8]

I saw great joy there, but I did not know the reason for it. At first I thought that the reason for this joy was because I had passed away from the physical world, heaven forbid. Later, they told me that my time had not yet come to die, since they have great pleasure on high when I bring about Unifications through the holy Torah down below. To this very day, I do not know the reason for that joy. I asked the Mashiach: "When will the Master come?"^[9], and he answered: "By this you shall know:

"In the time when your teaching will become public and revealed in the world, and your wellsprings will burst forth to the farthest extremes, that which I have taught you and you have comprehended, and they also shall be able to perform unifications and elevations as you, and then all of the *kelipot* will cease to exist, and there shall be a time of good will and salvation."

The Mashiach sets five conditions for his coming; each of these is a step in a cumulative process:

1. "Your teachings will become public and revealed in the world": *For most mystics and spiritual-focused people becoming a public figure is a very painful experience. Nonetheless, it is a challenge that must be faced if one's insights and teachings are to affect the world.*
2. "Your wellsprings will burst forth to the farthest extremes" (*Proverbs 5:16*): *His whole self, his "wellspring," must be revealed. If Mashiach is to come, everyone must be able to experience something of what it is like to be the Baal Shem Tov.*
3. "That which I have taught you and what you have comprehended [yourself]": *Expressible ideas and even those ideas that are inherently inexpressible must be revealed.*
4. "They also shall be able to perform unifications and elevations as you": *The Baal Shem Tov's power of unification must become public domain. In its simplest sense, this means that everyone must subscribe to the Baal Shem Tov's doctrine of the equality-of-soul of all Jewish people, the basis of his infinite love of all Jews (see Tanya ch. 32).*
5. "All the *kelipot* will cease to exist and there shall be a time of good will and salvation":

Evil can be eradicated and the transcendent light of G-d can shine. The eradication of evil on this level can be understood as seeing it as ultimately good. This, however, cannot be successfully accomplished without first attaining the previous four levels.

I stood in wonder and great distress as to the length of time necessary for this, when can this be?! But from that which I learned there - three potent practices and three Holy Names, easy to learn and explain - my mind settled, and I thought that possibly by means of these, men of my nature will be able to achieve levels similar to mine. They would then be able to ascend, learn and perceive, just like myself. But I was not given permission all the days of my life to reveal this.

Nonetheless, according to Rabbi Mordechai of Neshchiz (1748-1800), the Baal Shem Tov alluded to these practices in the continuation of his letter (Imrei Kodesh 40; Sefer Baal Shem Tov p. 122, end of note 13).

For your sake, I made a request that I might be allowed to teach this to you, but permission was denied. I am still bound by this oath, but this may I inform you and may G-d help you, your way shall ever be in the presence of G-d and never leave your consciousness in the time of your prayer and study. And every word of your lips intend to unite^[10]: for in every letter there are Worlds and Souls and Divinity^[11], and they ascend and connect and unify with each other, and afterward the letters connect and unify to become a word, and [then] unify in true unification in Divinity.

Here, only two verbs are used: "connect and unify." In the following phrase, "And [then] unify in true unification in Divinity," only one verb, "unify," appears. From this we learn that, in particular, there are three stages of meditation: meditation of the secrets of individual letters; meditation on the dynamic process of letters combining to form meaningful words; and, in the terminology of Tanya (II, ch.12 [89b]), meditation on the "light above all" which spontaneously appears around the total structure of a finished word.

Include your soul with them in each and every state. All the worlds unify as one and ascend to produce an infinitely great joy and pleasure, as you can understand from the joy of groom and bride in miniature and physicality: in the physical microcosm, how much more so in such an exalted level as this. Surely G-d will be your aid and wherever you turn you will succeed and reach greater awareness. "Give to the wise and he will become ever wiser."^[12] (*Proverbs 9:9*)

THE ROSH HODESH IYAR, 1772 EDICT

Not long thereafter, on the first day of the Hebrew month of *Iyar*, a letter bearing the signatures of the GRA, R. Samuel b. Avigdor, *Av Bet Din* (head of the Rabbinical Court) of Vilna, and sixteen judges was sent to R. Abraham Katzenellenbogen of Brest-Litovsk:

Our brethren in Israel, you are certainly already informed of the tidings whereof our fathers never dreamed, that a sect of the “suspects” [*Hashudim* instead of “*hasidim*”] has been formed . . . who meet together in separate groups and deviate in their prayers in the text valid for the whole people. They are wise men in their own eyes, and wonder-workers, and whoever sits among them, even an ignoramus incapable of reciting the *Shema Yisrael*, immediately upon joining them comes to merit this world and the next in one hour. . . . They are the same who, in the middle of the *Shmoneh-Esreh* prayer, interject obnoxious alien words [Yiddish] in a loud voice, conduct themselves like madmen, and explain their behavior by saying that in their thoughts they soar in the most far-off worlds. . . . The study of the Torah is neglected by them entirely, and they do not hesitate constantly to emphasize that one should devote oneself as little as possible to learning and not grieve too

much over a sin committed. Similar ugly deeds on their part have been fully delineated for us and verified by fit and truthful witnesses testifying to their ugly deeds and perverted ways. . . . Owing to our many sins they have succeeded in leading astray in many locales the sons of Zion faithful to halakha. . . . Every day is for them a holiday. . . . They that sanctify and purify themselves (to go unto the gardens behind one in the midst, eating swine’s flesh, and the detestable thing, and the mouse shall be consumed together, saith the Lord).¹¹ They receive reward for having departed from the Torah . . . and they consistently mock the angels of the Lord and desecrate the men of greatness in the presence of ignoramuses. . . . When they pray according to falsified texts they raise such a din that the walls quake . . . and they turn over like wheels, with the head below and the legs above. . . . Yet all this is only a little fraction, only a thousandth part of their disgusting practices . . . as the aforesaid *Hashudim* have themselves admitted to us. . . . Praised be God that that which has been committed by them has, with the help of heaven, been brought to light here in our camp, for by the most careful inquiries and investigations they have had to make a complete confession. . . . Therefore do we now declare to our brethren in Israel, to those near as well as far: . . . All heads of the people shall robe themselves in the raiment of zeal, of zeal for the Lord of Hosts, to extirpate, to destroy, to outlaw, and to excommunicate them. We here have already, with the help of His name, brought their evil intention to nought; and, as here, so should they everywhere be torn up by the roots. . . . Do not believe them even if they raise their voices to implore you . . . for in their hearts are all seven horrors. . . . So long as they do not make full atonement of their own accord, they should be scattered and driven away so that not two heretics remain together, for the disbanding of their associations is a boon for the world.¹²

THE BRODY HEREM, 20 SIVAN 1772

The Brody *herem* of 20 Sivan 1772 recapitulated many of the hasidic “transgressions” referred to earlier, but also introduced several new accusations against the *hasidim*, including their slaughter of animals for food with improper knives, making their meat forbidden, and their praying according to the rite of R. Isaac Luria (known as the ARI [1534-1572]), which was likewise deemed to be forbidden:

a. Listen, O Holy Congregation . . .

Whereas it is proclaimed throughout the camp of the Hebrews that because of our sins there have arisen in our midst new groups and sects who separate themselves from the community, make new customs, institute evil laws, throw off the yoke of Torah and prefer a dissolute life. . . .

These people . . . build altars for themselves so that they may be set apart from the Holy Congregation. They maintain separate quorums for prayer and do not pray . . . in the regularly appointed synagogues or houses of study. They have changed the order of prayer . . . and do not recite the Sh'ma or the Amidah at the prescribed time. They recite a version of the prayers which is different from that established . . . in these parts by our ancient Gaonim. . . . They have cast off the Heavenly yoke and have taken leave of Eternal Life; they spend their days in singing. . . . They scorn the Oral Law and study only the *Kabbalah* . . . they use the *Siddur* of the Ari, that holy man of God, which they no doubt cor-

rupt! Add to this that they use knives for slaughtering which have been sharpened by firing, a practice for which there is no support in all of the Talmud or in any of the interpretations of the Law. . . .

When in the past there appeared such evil-doers in our midst, the wise men of the time and the Parnassim and leaders of the Four Lands pursued them and made public their shame until we were rid of them. But in our time that is no longer possible and there is no one to stand up against the evil-doers. . . . How long will they remain a stumbling block for the House of Israel? . . . How long can we tolerate this wicked group which conjures up . . . new customs? . . .

Therefore do we declare the great and awful ban . . . with all the curses and maledictions of the Torah . . . the excommunication of Joshua Ben Nun. . . . From this day on all the synagogues and *Minyanim* in our communities . . . are forbidden to introduce any change in the order of the prayers; likewise are they prohibited from using the prayerbook of the Ari or of any other Kabbalist. . . . We also do decree that on pain of excommunication no one may wear white clothes on the Sabbath and holidays, with the exception of those few men who are known to us as learned and steeped in the Talmud and the legal literature, men who fear God and who are occupied with Torah and Mitzvot. . . . Whosoever shall go about in white clothes . . . shall be made to stand in the middle of the street and he will be held up in mockery and ridicule as an example to others. . . . And as for slaughtering knives which are sharpened by firing and not by hand . . . we warn you that you are forbidden to eat meat slaughtered by these knives . . . for such slaughtering borders on heresy and it is not Kosher. . . .

Should a visitor come to our city and refuse to eat meat slaughtered by the *Shochtim* of this community, or if he should practice a new custom or pray from the *Siddur* of the Ari, his host must inform the Parnas to drive that man out of the city. . . .

We do this for the glory of the Blessed God and His Holy Torah so that neither He nor His Torah are desecrated.¹⁹

This scab on our body has spread—especially in the Ukraine where there are tens of thousands of these impure people . . . and they ensnare innocent souls whom they turn away from the path of our ancestors of blessed memory in accordance with our holy Torah. They turn them aside with the smoothness of their tongues by saying “this is the proper way to go.” “Whoso is thoughtless, let him turn hither.”²² And so these [innocent souls] rush as a bird to the trap not realizing that the intent of the *hasidim* is to separate them from our sacred Torah. . . . They leave all their precious ones, their children and their wives and their property to wander off to follow those who cannot help them. . . .

The Holy Community is enjoined . . . to strengthen the faith of our holy Torah and to remove the thorns from the vineyard of the congregation of Israel. . . . And upon those who strengthen their hands and give counsel and protect them, all the excommunications fall. . . . Every man should remove them with both hands. Go forth and tell them that they are excommunicated and banned, separated from the entire congregation of Israel. Of course, one may not associate with them or speak with them. Also the people who belong to this sect within our community are banned under the great ban, so that they must remove their residence from our community with their wives and children. . . . And who-

Therefore we, too, do fully and firmly endorse . . . all the words . . . of the leaders of the above-mentioned holy community [of Vilna] together with the above-mentioned *Gaon*, as written . . . in their aforementioned letter. It is fitting and proper for God-fearing men of perfect faith to strengthen and support each other and restore the crown [the *Torah*] to its former glory, that they should not be separated from each other, but should be joined together like one man, as of old. We have agreed to the enforcement of the great *herem* proclaimed in the . . . glorious community of Vilna and of the words uttered and heard in the holy community of Zelva on the day of the market. All that hear this . . . shall cease to be . . . separated from the community of the Lord . . . and [shall cease] to reject the authority of the early Sages, who from of old have followed their thoughts which are based on . . . the truth.²⁵

THE EDICTS OF VILNA, 1784, AND SHKLOV, 1786

May the righteous flourish . . . the leaders . . . and sages . . . of the holy community of Pinsk . . .

We have received your appeal . . . couched in words of truth and good will to come to your aid . . . against the man who has been set up in your community as a Teacher and *Gaon*, yet supports doers of iniquity that throw off the yoke of the *Torah* and *mitzvot* and have introduced new manners and practices unthought of by our holy forefathers. They are the sect of the suspect, the self-styled *hasidim* [i.e., pious ones]. . . . The leaders and officers of the principal communities, together with the *Rabbanim* and *Geonim*, after giving great thought to the matter, have firmly resolved to fight zealously for the Lord of Hosts . . . to root out the thorns . . . and to disperse those wicked bands of men and drive them far away from their confines, and to put an end to their practices which are different from, and opposed to, the religion of our holy *Torah*. It is the Lord's will that they [the leaders] have successfully stood firm

in the breach . . . to subdue them and make them like the dust of the earth, so as firmly to establish the true faith. . . . However, Satan is still at work among us . . . for the above-mentioned sect have spread . . . their uncleanness . . . so far that even the leaders of your community are till now members of the sect, and . . . follow the new practices . . . which they have introduced. . . . We warned them in letters, informing them of the bans and excommunications . . . proclaimed by . . . the leaders . . . together with the *Rabbanim* and *Geonim*, against the above-mentioned sect and against those that support them. . . . But the members of your community did not incline their ears and shut tight their eyes, even though there have always been in your community renowned and God-fearing men. Being oppressed by the supporters of the above-mentioned sect, they longed [to shake off the oppression] but had not the strength, until they could endure no more and determined to requite their adversaries. Whereupon the leaders of your community arose and took the courage . . . to lift up the stumbling-block and remove the stones from the highway, and they gave instructions to the *Gaon* in your community. . . . It was desirable that you should take away the crown from the *Rav* and *Gaon*. But after we saw that you agreed not to dismiss him . . . we, too, confirmed your agreement, in the hope that he might turn back from his misguided way and no longer lead the people astray. But if he obstinately refuses . . . we have already admonished you in our letter and do so now again. . . . We order you, according to the resolution of the province [Lithuania], to remove the crown from the above-mentioned *Rav*, the *Av Bet-Din* of your community. . . . He shall neither teach, nor judge . . . but shall be utterly expelled. As for their [the sect's] fabrication that the true *Gaon* . . . R. Elyahu (may his light shine out!) has changed his mind and that we, too, have had second thoughts about the bans . . . imposed till now, this is a lie and another crooked invention of theirs. On the contrary, every day their shame is publicly made known according to the books of the above-mentioned men [of the sect]. . . . We have always supported all the bans, that you should take care to observe what our whole province [Lithuania] has undertaken to do—that the above-mentioned sect be neither seen nor found in our province—and should proclaim . . . in your community [Pinsk] and the community of Karlin and the district which are under your jurisdiction, that, under pain of utter excommunication, no one shall perform . . . the abominations of that sect. And as for those that support and assist them . . . you shall draw up a list of their names and deeds, for they are a root from which poison grows and spreads. They that call their leader "Rebbe," and he is the chief of sinners, in your community and in the holy community of Karlin and in the other communities under your jurisdiction, those men must be rooted out. Be strong . . . in zealously fighting the battle of the Lord of Hosts . . . and do not rest. We are confident that you will give heed to these our words and assert your authority in the land . . . to drive out the sinners . . . from the bounds of your holy land, to harass and pursue [the members of the sect] to the

utmost of your power, and to utterly wipe out this filth. Such is our just request.

Written by the heads . . . of the holy community of Vilna . . . together with our Master, the Teacher and *Rav*, the great and renowned *Gaon*, the *Av Bet-Din* of the community of Vilna and also the great, pious and famed *Gaon*, Elyahu (may his light shine forth!). In witness whereof we have signed our names on this fourth day of the week, the 6th *Tammuz*, [5]544[=1784].

Shemuel, *Rav* of the above-mentioned holy community, and Elyahu, the son of R. Shelomo-Zalman of blessed memory.²⁶

R' Yaakov Emden

I trembled when I heard only recently that a new sect of foolish *hasidim* had arisen in Volhynia and Podolia, some of whom have come to this country, whose sole occupation is to study moral and kabbalistic works. They prolong their prayers for half the day, far longer than the *hasidim* of old who used to spend no more than an hour in prayer itself. Moreover, these men perform strange movements, weird and ugly, in the prayer of the Eighteen Benedictions. They clap their hands and shake sideways with their head turned backwards and their face and eyes turned upwards, contrary to the ruling of the rabbis that the eyes should be directed downwards and the heart upwards. The Tanhuma only advocates that the eyes should be directed upwards when the Kedushah is recited and even then they should be closed. R. Menahem Azariah in a Responsum forbids any movement at all in prayer. I stormed the battlements time and again in order to discover some compromise whereby some slight and gentle motion of the body to and fro might be permitted, and this alone is permitted in order to bestir the vital powers. The teachers of old used to recite their prayers without any physical sensation. There is a maxim, based on the *Zohar*, “When they stood, they let down their wings” [Ezekiel 1:24]. But these men make wings for themselves wherewith to fly in the heavens. Ask yourself if they would dare to do so in the presence of a king of flesh and blood. Why, he would have them thrown out so that their limbs would be shattered and their bones broken. Verily, if I ever see those who do these things, which our fathers, of blessed memory, the true *hasidim*, never dreamed of doing, I shall break their legs with a bar of iron.²

R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi

Although they [the *mitnagdim*] have achieved much in the study of the Torah and through acts of mercy—would that they kept to this in truth all their days—now they have gone too far and have acted illegally when they have gathered together to attack me and to issue a decree of apostasy against prayer. They claim that we must pray as they do, that is, only hurriedly and without any bodily movements or raising of the voice just like those angels on high who have reached a stage of which there is no higher, as it is said, “When they stood, they let down their wings” [Ezekiel 1:24]. But this is only said of the highest rank of angels known as the Seraphim and it does not apply to the other ranks, as it is said, “And the Ophanim and the Holy Beasts with a noise of great rushing.” Even of the Seraphim it is written, “A noise of tumult like the noise of a host” [Ezekiel 1:24] and they make great movements as it is said in the *Piyutim* based on the *Pirke Hekhalot*. Consequently, there is no proof from the saints of old who were greater than the ministering angels. But dare we, orphans of orphans, imagine that we can compare ourselves to them? It can only be that their heart is evilly disposed and falsehood is in their right hand.⁶