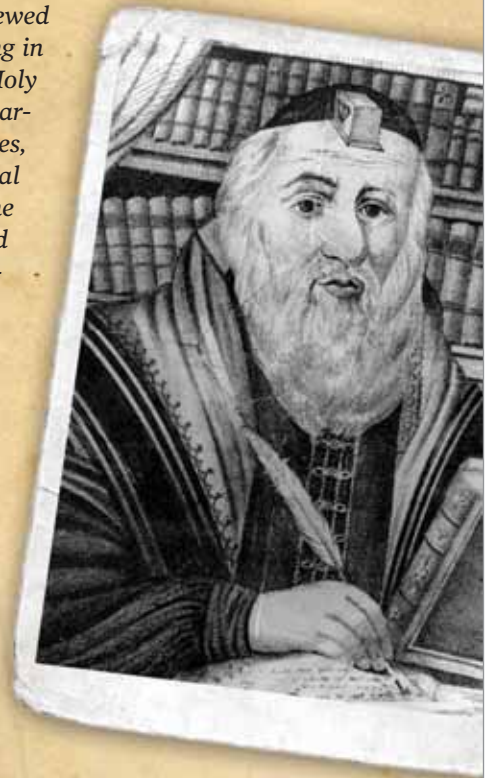


# Two Hundred Years in Eretz Yisrael:

## The Seminal Aliyah of the Talmidei HaGra (1808-1810)

*The year 2008 marks the bicentennial of a significant aliyah movement, which took place from 1808 to 1810—the arrival of 511 disciples of the Vilna Gaon and their families in Eretz Yisrael. A new book by Dr. Arie Morgenstern focuses on this aliyah and presents it in an entirely new light.*

*Basing his book HaShivah L'Yerushalayim: Chiddush HaYishuv HaYehudi B'Eretz Yisrael b'Techilat HaMeah Ha-19 (The Return to Jerusalem [Jerusalem, 2007]) on original research, Dr. Morgenstern concludes that it was these olim who renewed the Jewish presence in Eretz Yisrael. He further maintains that their settling in Jerusalem in 1816 ensured that by 1860 there was a Jewish majority in the Holy City, which has been maintained continuously to the present day. The author argues that the Jewish resettlement of Jerusalem, led by the Vilna Gaon's disciples, was an implementation of the idea of hastening the Redemption via natural means. The rebuilding of the Old City and the first neighborhoods outside the city walls formed the foundation upon which the State of Israel was established in the following century. According to Dr. Morgenstern, the aliyah of these pioneers, known as the talmidei haGra, should rightfully be called the "First Aliyah" in terms of modern Jewish history. An excerpt from his book follows.*





## The Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna

(1720-1797), often called by the acronym “the Gra,” is renowned as the most important Torah authority of Ashkenazic communities in the past thousand years. His extraordinary talents, phenomenal memory, great wisdom and mastery of all branches of Jewish and general knowledge formed a figure that was larger than life—almost superhuman. The mere mention of “the Gra” evokes an image of constant, assiduous Torah study surpassing ordinary limits, of utter devotion to service of God and of character perfection. Since 1802, when the Volozhin Yeshiva was founded by the Gra’s disciple, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (who was considered the “father of the Lithuanian *yeshivot*”), generations of *talmidei chachamim* have been raised to aspire to this ideal.

Not many, however, are aware that the areas in which the Gra was principally engaged was kabbalah and the process of Redemption. According to the Gra’s thinking, the *Geulah* is not a one-time event but rather a gradual process. In his view, we are currently experiencing the *ikvata d’Meshicha*, the pre-Messianic period, and, on the historical timeline, we are standing on the threshold of the “Mashiach ben Yosef” period. According to the Gra’s approach, Redemption begins by natural means—as in the days of Coresh and the Second Temple—via *aliyah* to Eretz Yisrael, settling the Land, bringing it out of its desolate state and, most importantly, rebuilding Jerusalem. (The Gra’s work *Aderet Eliyahu* states, “for the main thrust of the *mitzvot* is dependent on the Land.”) It was the Gra who, through his charismatic authority, dismissed the traditional passive approach of waiting for heavenly miracles to initiate the *Geulah*, which was based on the prohibitions known

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as the “three vows.” These vows are to not “go up as a wall” (referring to mass immigration to Eretz Yisrael), to not attempt to hasten the Redemption and to not rebel against the ruling nations while in exile. In his commentary on Shir HaShirim, the Gra states that these three vows apply only to the building of the *Beit Hamikdash*: “They are sworn not to, of their own volition, go out to build the Temple, until [the *Mashiach*] comes.”

The Gra’s authority, according to his *talmidim*, stems from a Divine mission placed upon him to discover secrets of the Torah and to accelerate the Redemption. This idea is based on a verse in Devarim, “*Even sheleimah vetzedek yihiyeh lach...* [A perfect and honest weight you shall have]” (25:15). The verse, found in the sixth *parashah* of *Sefer Devarim*, includes the words “*even sheleimah*,” which are understood to allude to Eliyahu ben Shlomo (the Gra). According to this kabbalistic interpretation, the books of the Torah represent human history: The story of Creation in *Sefer Bereishit* represents the first millennium of the world’s existence; the rest of *Bereishit* refers to the second millennium; *Sefer Shemot* tells of the third; *Sefer Vayikra*, the fourth; *Sefer Bamidbar*, the fifth and *Sefer Devarim*, the sixth. Each of the ten *parshiyot* in Devarim (with *Netzivim* and *Vayelech* counted as one) represents one century of the sixth millennium. On this timeline, the words “*even shleimah vetzedek*,” towards the end of the sixth

*parashah* of Devarim, fall just at the point in history when the Gra, made his appearance on earth to carry out his Divine mission. The following *parashah*, corresponding to the seventh century of the sixth millennium, is that of “*Ki tavo el haAretz* [When you shall come to the Land].”

According to this interpretation, this clearly means that from the year 5600 (1840) the process of *kibbutz ha-galuyot*, the ingathering of the exiles, begins, and the process of Redemption on the deterministic path of “*beitah*,” in its appointed time, starts to unfold. The Gra himself, in the view of his disciples, was “a spark of Mashiach ben Yosef.”

The French Revolution of 1789 and Napoleon’s expedition to Eretz Yisrael in 1799 were interpreted by the Gra’s followers as historical proofs of the dramatic changes taking place in the world. As a result of these changes, the belief that the Gra indeed had a Divine mission to advance the Redemption was strengthened, and his disciples began organizing groups for *aliyah*. Arriving in three waves, 511 followers of the Gra and their family members settled first in the Galilee region and,



*Dome of the Rock from the Jewish Quarter, 1850s, by Mendel John Diness. The fascinating vintage prints in these pages were taken by nineteenth-century photographers James Graham and his student, Mendel John Diness. Drawn from the Israel Museum’s extensive holdings of vintage nineteenth-century photography of the Holy Land, the photographs were accidentally discovered at a Minnesota garage sale in 1989 and are now in the collection of the Israel Museum.*

*Courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem*

later on, in Jerusalem. These *olim* were not fleeing from war, economic hardship or persecution, and they included some of Lithuania’s wealthiest and most respected and learned Jews. In fact, their *aliyah* was part of a Messianic revival that took place among

the Jewish people in the early nineteenth century. But unlike the thousands of other Jews who had left the lands of the Ottoman Empire for Eretz Yisrael at that time to await the coming of *Mashiach*, whom they expected to

permits necessary for rebuilding the shul would be granted, those promises were not fulfilled. The Muslim authorities did not wish to see a revival of the Ashkenazic community in Jerusalem, and they did all they could to banish

of the Perushim discontinued certain customs associated with mourning the destruction of the Temple, such as the midnight recitation of Tikkun Chatzot and the stanza beginning "*Hitna'ari, meafar kumi*" from the liturgical poem

## Not too many are aware that the areas in which the Gra was principally engaged was kabbalah and the process of Redemption.



Panoramic View of Jerusalem, 1857, by James Graham

arrive suddenly and by miraculous means in 1840, the Gra's disciples clung to the view that the *Geulah* was a historical process that should be advanced by human action.

The *talmidei haGra*, also known as the Perushim, first directed their activities towards the rebuilding of Jerusalem. In 1816, after receiving a permit and an official order exonerating them from the monetary debt incurred by the Ashkenazic community of Jerusalem in the time of Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid [see sidebar on the Hurva for more detail], a group settled in the Holy City, led by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Mishklov, the greatest of the Gra's disciples in kabbalah and the person responsible for printing most of the Gra's works on halachah and kabbalah before leaving Europe. After anchoring themselves in their new community by setting up a *beit midrash*, the *talmidei haGra* set their sights on a goal: to rebuild the Chatzer HaAshkenazim, the ruined courtyard of Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid, and, as an act of "*tikkun*," to restore the ruined Hurva Synagogue and to build a residential neighborhood adjacent to it. For twenty years, the Perushim tried to overcome the opposition of the Muslim waqf and the Ottoman authorities to the restoration of the synagogue, since the building of synagogues was prohibited under Muslim law in every place under Muslim rule. Although the Perushim managed, through heavy bribes, to extract promises that the

the newcomers from the city. Again and again, they accused the Perushim of spying for the Russian Empire and attempted to deport them back to Lithuania. Despite the pressure put upon the Ottoman Sultan's court by the ambassadors of world powers in Constantinople to allow the rebuilding of the old Ashkenazic neighborhood and the Hurva, the community leaders could not obtain a permit to undertake the project.

Only in 1836, during the rule of the Egyptian pasha Muhammad Ali in Eretz Yisrael, did the *talmidei haGra*, exercising tremendous shrewdness, succeed in obtaining a permit to rebuild the courtyard and dedicate their *beit midrash* as the "Menachem Tzion," a name derived both from the name of their leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Mishklov, and from the phrase in the Tishah B'Av prayers "...*menachem Tzion bevinyan Yerushalayim*." Since Muhammad Ali sought to win legitimacy in the eyes of the Western powers over his rival, the Turkish Sultan, the Perushim offered to help him get political and financial support from the Rothschild family in exchange for the permit that would allow them to rebuild. Having finally obtained the long-awaited permit and begun the building project, the Gra's disciples viewed these events as nothing less than the *etchalta deGeulah*, the beginning of the Redemption, heralded by this symbolic "rebuilding of Jerusalem." Accordingly, in 1837 some

"Lecha Dodi," traditionally sung at the onset of Shabbat, on the assumption that the Redemption was already underway [see *Hastening Redemption*, by Arie Morgenstern (New York, 2006) pp. 130-131].

While these activities were being directed towards the rebuilding of Jerusalem as an expression of the kabbalistic concept of "*et'aruta deletata* [awakening from below]," a group of the Gra's disciples in Tzfat was attempting to re-establish authentic rabbinical *semichah* and to re-institute the Sanhedrin, both of which are necessary steps in the Redemption process and are prerequisites to the coming of the *Mashiach*. At the head of this second group stood Rabbi Yisrael Mishklov, the Gra's last *talmid*, who was close to the Gra through the final year of his life. Rabbi Yisrael Mishklov arrived in Eretz Yisrael in 1810, settling in Tzfat with other disciples of the Gra, but was asked to travel to Lithuania, Russia and Poland to raise money. Upon his return to the Holy Land in 1813, a plague broke out, taking the lives of most of the Gra's disciples there. Rabbi Yisrael lost his wife, his daughters, his sons and his son-in-law in the plague, as well as his parents, who had also made *aliyah*. In the preface to his work, *Pe'at HaShulchan*, Rabbi Yisrael Mishklov describes the experience:

*I was lying in the middle of a sea in the aforementioned blazing fire, and my friends and neighbors removed themselves from me, and I was lying on the*

roof, weeping, throwing myself about, and pleading before our Father in Heaven. And my daughter, the modest Marat Sheindel, tichyeh, was also of tender age and lay ill beside me. And my tears were upon my cheeks, my eyes poured out water over all that had come upon me, and my sorrow was great.

At that time, Rabbi Yisrael Mishklov made a vow that if he and his daughter survived he would write a *sefer* on the *halachot hataluyot ba'Aretz* [laws that apply to the Land of Israel] according to the approach of the Gra. In contrast to Rabbi Menachem Mendel Mishklov, who thought that the plague had come upon the *olim* as a punishment because they had not settled in Jerusalem, Rabbi Yisrael Mishklov decided to remain in Tzfat. He wanted to build it up as a spiritual center in a further effort to advance the *Geulah* by the earthly means of re-



Wailing Wall, 1850s, by Mendel John Diness

living true *semichah* and the Sanhedrin. As is known, the chain of *semichah* that began with Moshe Rabbeinu was broken after the destruction of the Second Temple. The first attempt to restore the Sanhedrin was made by Rabbi Yaakov Beirav in 1538, who relied on the Rambam's opinion that if all [i.e., a majority of] the sages of Eretz Yisrael agree to revive the practice of *semichah*, it could be done. Strong opposition to the attempt was led by Rabbi Levi ben Chaviv (Ralbach), and a protracted dispute ensued, leaving the matter unsettled.

Rabbi Yisrael Mishklov tried to avoid the same problem that had

brought about the previous failure. He decided to search for *chachamim semuchim*, sages upon whom *semichah* had already been conferred, and so in 5591 (1830), he sent an envoy to the deserts of Yemen to look for the Ten Lost Tribes. He believed that the Ten Tribes were somewhere in the world, and that the institution of the Sanhedrin had been preserved among them since their expulsion from Eretz Yisrael at the time of the destruction of the First Temple. Therefore, he thought, there must be *semuchim* among them who could trace their *semichah* back to that given by Moshe Rabbeinu; through these *semuchim*, the *semichah* of sages for a restored Sanhedrin in Eretz Yisrael could be effected. Thus, significant advances would be made in encouraging the Redemption through these acts of "*et'aruta deletata*," or, as he gracefully expressed it in his letter to the Ten Tribes, "for all these things require an initial awakening from below."

Another focus of activity for the Gra's disciples was that of the *mitzvot hataluyot ba'Aretz*, as a means of hastening the Redemption. Almost immediately upon their arrival in 1810, the *talmidei haGra* purchased parcels of cultivated agricultural land with the intention of performing the *mitzvot hataluyot ba'Aretz*, as had been suggested by Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin. Later, during the rule of Muhammad Ali (1831-1840), they appealed several times to the authorities in Jerusalem for an arrangement whereby they could lease land for agricultural purposes, and for permission to set up workshops and engage in agricultural and urban commerce. All such requests were turned down by the Mus-

lim authorities in Jerusalem. When Moshe Montefiore visited Eretz Yisrael in 1839 and sought to purchase more than 100,000 dunams of land, mainly agricultural fields in the

Galilee, with a view towards making a large portion of Eretz Yisrael's Jews into farmers, he did so in cooperation with the *talmidei haGra*.

In 1837 an earthquake struck the Galilee, wreaking nearly total destruction on Tzfat and Tiberius and killing 2,016 Jews. The Perushim of Jerusalem then claimed that it had been wrong to settle in Tzfat rather than Jerusalem, and, indeed, after the disaster, most new *olim* had no choice but to settle in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was thus built up as a result of the leveling of Tzfat. Due

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to a shortage of housing, many Jews bought property in the Muslim Quarter, and the Jewish presence in Jerusalem expanded significantly. In 1855, Moshe Montefiore succeeded in obtaining a permit from the Sultan to

build the large Hurva Synagogue (otherwise known as “Beit Yaakov” Synagogue) in the courtyard of Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid. Upon its completion in 1864, the courtyard once again became the center of community life for the Ashkenazim of Jerusalem, and served as a symbol of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The courtyard included the Beit Din Tzedek of the community, *batei midrash*, Yeshivat Eitz Chaim and

Volozhin; Rabbi Meir Auerbach of Kalish; Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin and his son, Rabbi Yitzchak Yerucham Diskin; Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld and many others.

In retrospect, it is clear that the connections forged by the *talmidei haGra* with political circles in Britain upon their arrival in the Holy Land were a crucial factor in determining the fate of the future Jewish *Yishuv*.

the plans of the other great powers (Russia, Prussia, and Austria) to turn Eretz Yisrael into a Christian state or an independent Arab state under Muhammad Ali. Had these tempting proposals been implemented, they might have put an end to the return of the Jews to their ancestral land.

The principle held by the *talmidei haGra*—that the rebuilding of Jerusalem should be undertaken as a way of hastening the Redemption—led to, among other things, the tremendous effort invested in building the first housing projects outside the Old City walls. The results of this effort were astonishing; within a period of only fifty years, the Jews of Jerusalem were transformed from a persecuted minority to a clear majority of the city’s residents, outnumbering even the combined Muslim and Christian populations. The Jews have continually maintained this demographic predominance [in Jerusalem] since the 1860s.

The activist ideology of the Gra’s disciples, with its central dogma of encouraging *aliyah* and undertaking the rebuilding of Jerusalem—evident in the re-establishment of the courtyard of Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid and the Hurva Synagogue; the building of Jewish neighborhoods outside the city walls; the creation of the agricultural settlement of Petach Tikvah; the initiation of fundraising among the Diaspora Jews to support the *Yishuv* and the elicitation of political support among Western powers for the concept of the “Return to Zion”—played a major role in the turn of events that took place in the nineteenth century resulting in the renewal of a Jewish presence in Eretz Yisrael.

The *aliyah* in 1808 by the Gra’s disciples was a turning point in the history of Eretz Yisrael. In the wake of their arrival, the concept of “Eretz Yisrael” underwent a metamorphosis, changing from an abstract idea—a subject of prayers and dreams—to an actuality, a concrete community of Jews living in the Holy Land. The *olim’s* accomplishments provided the subsequent Zionist movement a foundation upon which to build. It is fair to say that everything Zionists have built in Eretz Yisrael, up to the establishment of the State of Israel and beyond, was made possible by this seminal *aliyah*. ■

## The Hurva Synagogue

In 1701, a group of Polish Jews, led by Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid, began building a synagogue for their community in Jerusalem. Two decades later, because of a lack of funds, the building was still unfinished. The congregation’s failure to pay for the construction resulted in riots and in its expulsion from Jerusalem in 1720. Arab creditors

tore down the incomplete structure. The remnants remained for some time, giving the synagogue its name, “Hurva,” which means “ruins” in Hebrew. The *talmidei haGra* rebuilt the synagogue, designed in a grand Neo-Byzantine style, in 1864, and for the next eighty-four years it was one of the largest buildings in the Old City. In 1948, during Israel’s War of Independence, the Jordanian army destroyed the Hurva as part of an effort to eradicate the Jewish presence in the Old City. Since the Israeli capture of Jerusalem in 1967, the Hurva has been under Israeli control. For decades, little remained of the synagogue except for a slender arch, erected in 1977. In 2006, the Israeli government began work on a multi-million dollar project to construct an exact replica of the Hurva. - Ed.



*The Hurva Synagogue in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, 1995. The building has been built, destroyed and rebuilt several times. It is currently undergoing construction. Photo courtesy of Moshe Milner and the Israel Government Press Office*

its accompanying *talmudei Torah*, a *bikkur cholim* society and other charitable institutions.

A list of all of the giants in Torah scholarship who have lived in Jerusalem since the *aliyah* of the Gra’s disciples would be very long. Among them were Rabbi Hillel Rivlin and his son, Rabbi Moshe Maggid; Rabbi Yosef Zundel of Salant and his son-in-law, Rabbi Shmuel Salant; Rabbi Yaakov Berlin, father of the Netziv of

The influence of British policy-makers was central to the pivotal decisions made in 1840 at the conference of the Christian powers of Europe, which took place in London, concerning the struggle between the Turkish Sultan and Muhammad Ali. The British proposal to restore power in Eretz Yisrael to the Sultan, under British protection and supervision, kept the option of returning to Zion open for the Jewish people. At the same time, Britain foiled

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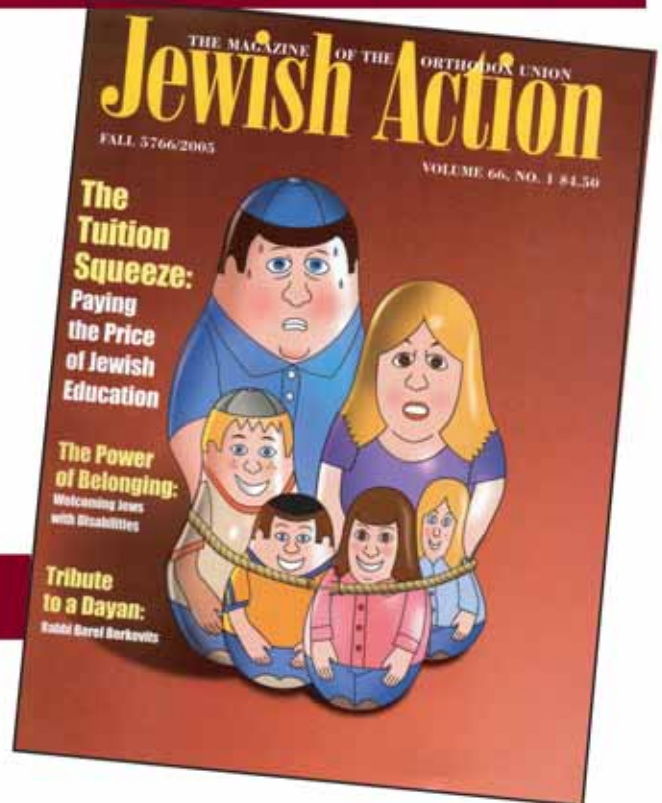
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