

Siyum on Hilchos HaGra U'Minhagav
Shabbos Shoftim – 5785
Maimonides Kehillah – Brookline
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R. Eliyahu ben Shlomo was born in Vilna, Lithuania, on April 23, 1720. By the age of seven, he had already memorized several tractates of the Talmud Bavli, and by the age of ten, he began studying on his own. By the age of 28, after wandering from town to town in Poland and Germany, as Talmudists did in the 18th century, he returned to Vilna with a considerable rabbinical reputation.

Despite his eschewing any rabbinical position offered to him, the Gaon of Vilna, as he began to be called, studied with a few select students using his own critical methodology. The Gaon focused on careful linguistic analysis of the Tanach and Mishna (which were notably ignored by most Yeshivos of his time), with a special emphasis on the Talmud Yerushalmi, and an eye towards integrating science and mathematics with Torah knowledge.

Interestingly, the Gra encouraged his star pupil, R. Chaim ben Yitzchak, to found an institute to educate future talmidim in this scientific and deeply analytical approach to Torah study. The Volozhin Yeshiva, an institute that opened in 1803, was established several years after the Vilna Gaon's passing.

The Gra wrote on a dizzying array of topics in Tanach, Talmud, Halacha, Aggadah, Kabbalah, grammar, mathematics, and astronomy. The Gra passed away during Chol HaMoed Sukkos, October 9, 1797, in Vilna. All his works were published posthumously.

The Jewish world is blessed that one of the Gra's students, Rabbi Saadya, while living in Tzfat, compiled a sefer between 1809 and 1813 regarding the personal legal practices and customs of his Rebbe. This compilation, known as Maaseh Rav, has been printed in numerous editions and remains a fertile sefer for students of the Gra.

R. Moshe Sternbuch of Har Nof, is the Gaon Av Bais Din of the Eidah HaCharadis in Yerushalayim and the Rav of the Gra synagogue. He is a direct descendant of the Vilna Gaon. Born in London in 1928 and recognized as a child ilui before the age of 10, it is said that during WWII, when, as a result of his family moving out of London due to the Blitz and sharing a room with Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, the author of the Michtav MeEliyahu, that R. Dessler predicted that his roommate would grow to be a gadol HaDor.

R. Sternbuch has written many popular and widely disseminated Seforim on Halacha, including the 9 volumes of Moadim U'Zmanim and 7 volumes of Teshuvos V'Hanhagos. In 5758 (1998), he published a slim volume titled Sefer Hilchos HaGra U'Minhagav – The Halachic Practices of the Vilna Gaon and His Customs. This sefer contains 221 brief essays spread across 11 subject areas. Topics include Tzitzis, Tefillin, Kriyas Shma, Shmoneh Esray, Kriyas HaTorah, Milah, and others. The final topic is Talmud Torah, a subject that served as the core of the Gra's approach to life.

In mid-2004, when our son, Jonathan, was studying at Yeshivat Har Etzion, he presented me with this Sefer by R. Sternbuch as a gift. Jonathan wrote in the inscription that he hoped I would have many future years of being mekayem the interpretation of the pasuk in Habakuk 3 in Megilla 28, which states, “Halichos Olam Lo” – Al Tiqreh Halichos elah Halachos. The Navi describes that the ways of HaShem are eternal. The Gemara interprets the pasuk as teaching that we who learn the ways of HaShem (by studying the laws) are assured of a reward in the world to come and help maintain this world that HaShem created through and for the Torah.

In early 2023, after the third Yahrzeit for my father, Tzemach ben Yosef, a”h, and having finished the three volumes of R. Shlomo Zalmen's set, Halichos Shlomo for each of my father's first three Yahrzeits, I took Hilchos HaGra down from my bookshelf and decided to learn it for the next Yahrzeit. I dedicated the time between Mincha and Maariv at the Bostoner Beis Midrash on Monday through Thursday evenings to this project. Baruch Hashem, two and a half years later, I recently completed this project and am making the Siyum now to not only honor my father, a”h, but all those in Eretz Yisrael who are putting their lives on the line every day to fight for us. May HaShem bless them and keep both them and their families strong and safe.

The final Halacha of the Sefer, within the section on Talmud Torah, is brief but teaches us an important lesson:

**רמא. הלומד קיצור דינים ואינו מעיין בבל
הלכה במקורו הוא רמאי ולבסוף שוכח
הבל.**

The title sends out a strong message. One who studies Jewish law in a superficial manner and does not critically analyze the text and its import down to its basic source may be perceived as a deceitful person and, in the end, may forget all that one has learned. If one

is not fully prepared to explain to others what one has learned and cannot provide a satisfying and logical answer to a questioner, then what is ultimately the purpose of one's study? When should study be superficial and when should it be deeper?

R. Sternbuch quotes the Gra in his commentary on Mishlei 14, possibly pasuk 8.

חִכְמַת עָרוֹם הִבִּין דִּרְכּוֹ וְאַנְלָת כְּסִילִים מְרָמָה:

It is the wisdom of a clever person to understand their course;
But the error of the arrogantly self-reliant person is delusion.

בביאורו למשלי (י"ד) שהלומד קיצור דינים

ואינו לומד שורש הדין במקורו ורצונו רק
להראות שהוא בקי ויודע הכל בסופו שישכח
הכל, ורק בלימוד סוגיית הגמרא בעמקות
והבנה ולאסוקי שמעתתא אליבא דהלכתא
יכולים להבין היטב השולחן ערוך ולכוין לקיים
המצוות כהלכתם כרצונו ית"ש, ומזה לבד נוכל
לפרות ולרבות ולחדש חידושי דינים לאמיתה
של תורה, והקב"ה יזכינו ברוב רחמיו להעמיק
בתורתו הקדושה ובמצותיו לעשות רצונו ית"ש
אמן!

Based on the verse, the Gra emphasized that one who studies to self-aggrandize will ultimately lose the trust and support of one's community. He continues that it is only in the deep study of the essence of the Gemara, along with mental clarity and with the ability to derive the correct conclusion that undergirds the Halacha, that one can ultimately correctly understand the Shulchan Aruch. Furthermore, one can then have the proper intention to fulfill the Mitzvos according to their proper protocol, as is the will of HaShem, may His Name be blessed.

The Gra continues that it is only with this mode of uncompromising methodology to Talmud Torah that we can successfully apply the Torah to new situations that arise before us while

acting in perfect alignment with the Amita Shel Torah, with the truest intentions of the Torah's principles.

If we can accomplish this task, the Gra expresses the hope that HaShem will help us merit continued success in understanding the Torah in successively deeper ways, which will, in turn, continue to sharpen and focus our actions as Torah Jews. This is a profound lesson for all of us as we are privileged to experience Chodesh Elul once more.