

When a Rabbi is Accused of Heresy: The Stance of the Gaon of Vilna in the Emden–Eibeschuetz Controversy

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It is commonplace to list the Gaon of Vilna (d. 1797) among those who sided with R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz (d. 1764) against R. Jacob Emden (d. 1776) in the Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy.¹ Strangely, no one has attempted a comprehensive study of the Gaon of Vilna's stance in the controversy.² If we walk where angels fear to tread, it is not merely because that is what fools do; it is also in honor of the 200th yearzeit of the Gaon. It is certainly time that this aspect of the Gaon's life be examined critically and comprehensively. Not all the problems can be solved, but at least for the first time an attempt shall be made to delineate them and to gather all the relevant evidence. Should this enable others to unravel the loose ends and solve the problems that remain, והיה זה שכרי.

* In memory of a distinguished scholar and loyal friend, הררה"ח ר' יצחק טברסקי זצ"ל, for whom the quest for truth was an act of worship. He never lost sight of the rabbinic adage: חרותו של הקב"ה אמת. His every spoken and written word was articulate, precise, and intellectually honest. יהא זכרו ברוך.

¹ See, e.g., J. H. Levin, *Aliyot Elyahu*, Jerusalem 1970, pp. 54–55; S. J. Fuenn, *Kiryah Ne'emanah*, Vilna 1915, p. 145; M. J. Cohen, *Jacob Emden: A Man of Controversy*, Philadelphia 1937, pp. 224–227; I. S. Feder, *Toldot ha-Dorot*, Bnei Brak 1981, III, p. 132; B. Landau, *Ha-Ga'on ha-Hasid mi-Vilna*, Jerusalem 1978, p. 52; and many others.

² For the fullest discussions to date, see H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, Leipzig 1897, X, p. 383; S. P. Rabbinowitz' note in H. Graetz, *Divrei Yemei Yisrael*, Warsaw 1899, VIII, p. 492; D. Kahana, *Toldot ha-Mekubbalim ha-Shabta'im ve-ha-Hasidim*, Tel Aviv 1927, II, pp. 59–61; L. J. Greenwald, *Ha-Rav R. Yehonatan Eibeschuetz*, New York 1954, pp. 75–77; and cf. L. Ginzberg, *Students, Scholars and Saints*, New York 1960, pp. 129–130, and p. 275, n. 16.

In a series of pamphlets and broadsides that began to appear in 1752, the anti-Eibeschuetz forces charged Eibeschuetz with being a closet Sabbatian.³ The primary evidence was a series of amulets that Eibeschuetz had written in Metz, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Altona, and elsewhere. These were interpreted by the anti-Eibeschuetz forces as Sabbatian documents. Eibeschuetz denied the charges, claiming that the amulets were either misread or tampered with. Despite the denial, the anti-Eibeschuetz forces kept publishing pamphlets and broadsides in an attempt to defrock Eibeschuetz. In a typical broadside, published in 1753 and signed by R. Jacob Joshua Falk (d. 1756), Chief Rabbi of Frankfurt am Main, we read:⁴

ובפרט כבר נודע בשער בת רבים משפט האב"ד שלכם הנקרא ר' יונתן אייבשיץ ומעשהו, שכל עניניו מעודו הכל דברי שקר וזיוף, לבדות מלבו דברים אשר לא כן ולכתבם על ספר... והמופת החותך על זה, שאם כדברי האב"ד שלכם כן הוא, שרוב החכמים והלומדים מצדיקים אותו בזה, מדוע לא עשה דבריו בפומבי, לחוק את כל דבריהם בעט ברזל בדפוס, כל הקמיעות והפירושים דבר דבר על אופנו.

Specifically, the status and deeds of your Chief Rabbi, popularly known as Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschuetz, are already public knowledge. All his deeds, from the earliest times, are characterized by deceit. He invents events that never happened and puts them in writing.... The decisive proof that this is so is the following: If your Chief Rabbi is correct in his claim that he has been vindicated by the majority of rabbinic scholars, why hasn't he published their letters, as well as all the amulets and their respective interpretations?

Apparently, Eibeschuetz decided to grab the bull by the horns, and in 1755 he published the only defense he would put into print against the endless charges brought against him by R. Jacob Emden. Entitled *Luhot 'Edut*, the volume consisted of some 50 letters with over 300 signatures of rabbis from all over the world, all of them vindicating Eibeschuetz. This was certainly an effective rejoinder to the criticism of R. Jacob Joshua Falk. The very last letter in the volume, printed separately from all the other letters almost as an afterthought, is the letter of the Gaon.

³ See, e.g., J. Emden, *Sfat Emet u-Leshon Zehorit*, Altona (more correctly: Amsterdam) 1752; idem, *'Akizat 'Akrav*, Altona 1753.

⁴ *Aspaklaryah ha-Me'irah*, Amsterdam 1753. It is reprinted in J. Emden, *Hit'avkut*, Lemberg 1877, p. 91b.

Its position in the volume reflects the fact that the Gaon held no official rabbinic position and was relatively unknown at the time. In fact, this letter marks the first time in history that the Gaon's name appeared in print. He was 35 years old at the time. A cursory reading of the letter would lead one to believe that it is a vindication of Eibeschuetz. Certainly Eibeschuetz thought so, which is why he printed it. The letter, together with Eibeschuetz' introductory remarks, reads as follows:⁵

וכמו כן שלחתי פירושי דקמיעות לק"ק ווילנא, כי ביחוד שמעתי בתוך חכמי עיר יש א' מיוחד החסיד קדוש וטהור ישראל כולו כל החכמות חריף ובקי ולו עשר ידות בנסתו, מהור"ר אלי יצ"ו, אשר נודע תהלתו בכל פולין ובברלין וליסא מקום שעבר החסיד הנ"ל יספרו ממנו גדולתו, ובקשתי ממנו לעיין בפירושים וליתן עדותו כי כנים הם, והא לך תשובתו: ישיש כגבור לרוץ אורח משרים בתורה ויראת חטא ולקרב העם לתורה ותעודה רבה דעמ' מדברנת' דאומתא הרב המאור הגדול הגאון אמיתי המפורסם חריף ובקי נ"י ע"ה פ"ה כבוד קדושת שמו נאה לו מהור"ר יונתן נר"ו: הגעני מכתב פתוחי חותם גיה"ק ששלח פירושי אמיתי על ה' קמיעות דמיץ הנדפסי אשר יסודת' בהרדי קודש, וביקש ממני לעיין בו אם ישירים הם, והטריח עצמו מגודל צערן ס"ת בעו"ה שרוי' בצער, והוא הודיעו צערן לרבים, ומי יתן לי אבר כיונה אעופה ואשכנה לעשות שלום שישתקע אש התבערה אש זרה ממחלוקת אשר לא כדת, אבל מי אנכי מארץ מרחק שישמעו לקול דברי להצדיק הצדיק, הן למראה עינים מעון אריות היושבים על כסא הוראה בקהלות קדושת מעידי בתומתו, ואי דבריהם נשמעין ומטים אוזן לדבריהם להכריע מה צורך עוד לדברי, ואם דבריהם אינם נשמעין מי אנכי מארץ מרחק צעיר אנכי לימי נחבא אל הכלים אשר ישמעו לי, ולכן ידון אותי אדוני לכף זכות ומחמת טרדות רבות ויריטת בעל הדרך לא הי' באפשר לסדר הדברים כראוי והוכרחתי לקצר, בטוח אני ברב ענותנותו וצדקתו שידנני לכף זכות, כ"ד ד"ש תמיד הצעיר אלי במהור"ר שלמה זלמן פה ק"ק ווילנא יצ"ו, יום ה' סיון תקט"ו ל'.

Similarly, I sent interpretations of the amulets to the Jewish community in Vilna. In particular, I heard that among the city's scholars was a unique scholar, the pious and holy one of Israel, master of all branches of wisdom, the profound and erudite one, who is blessed [also] with ten measures of kabbalistic knowledge, our teacher and rabbi Elijah, may his Rock and Redeemer protect him. His fame has spread throughout Poland, Berlin, and Lissa. Wherever the pious one visited, great things are said about him. I asked him to examine the interpretations, and to testify that they are valid. Here is his reply:

The mighty one who runs the course joyfully, that is, the course of Torah practice and fear of sin, the one who endears the Torah to

⁵ *Luhot 'Edut*, Altona 1755, p. 71b.

the nation, the leader of the nation, Rabbi and great light, the true Gaon, the famous, the profound, the erudite, lamp of Israel, the mighty pillar at the right, the mighty hammer, his honorable and holy name is appropriate for him, our Teacher and Rabbi, Rabbi Jonathan, may the Lord keep and redeem him:

I received your letter with its engraved seal, written in your own hand. You sent the true interpretation of the five printed amulets from Metz, whose foundation rests on the holy mountains. You asked me to examine them to see if they were correct. You extended yourself [needlessly], due to your great grief, alas due to our sins, a Torah scroll immersed in great suffering. You made public your suffering. Would that I had wings like a dove, so that I could fly to the scene and establish peace, so that the fiery flames of a misguided controversy could be extinguished! But who am I, coming from a distant land, that anyone should listen to my words vindicating the righteous? Before their very eyes lions serving in rabbinates in holy communities testify to your innocence. If their words are heeded, what need is there for mine? If their words are ignored, who am I that they should heed my words? I come from a distant land, I am young, I hold no office. Therefore, I ask that you judge me favorably. Due to my many preoccupations, and pressure from the courier, I could not organize my thoughts properly, and had no choice but to present them in abridged form. I am confident that in your humility and righteousness you will judge me favorably. These are the words of the one who seeks your welfare at all times, the young Elijah son of R. Solomon Zalman. Vilna, Thursday, 5 Sivan, in the year 5515.

There are, however, several methodological problems that need to be addressed. First, the original letter of the Gaon is not extant. We are entirely dependent upon Eibeschutz for the text of the letter. Since Eibeschutz was surely an involved party, we cannot be certain that the published version is what left the hands of the Gaon. Second, the letter is a response to a package sent to the Gaon by R. Jonathan. That package included a commentary on the amulets R. Jonathan had distributed in Metz. The Gaon was asked to comment on the commentary. We do not have a copy of the commentary sent to the Gaon, and have no way of knowing what it was that the Gaon saw. More importantly, we do not know whether the Gaon was sent, or actually

saw, a copy of the original Metz amulets. At best, then, even if this was a letter of approval, we cannot be certain of what it approves. On internal grounds, the letter, in its present form, does not read smoothly. Twice the Gaon asks that R. Jonathan judge him favorably (ידון אותי לכהף) (זכות). In effect, the Gaon apologizes for not coming to the defense of R. Jonathan. Yet the opening lines of the letter indicate clearly that R. Jonathan's interpretations of the amulets are אמיתיים and regarding the amulets themselves יסורתם בהררי קודש. What need here for apology?

The problematic nature of the Gaon's letter becomes even more pronounced when viewed against the testimony of such master rabbinic scholars as R. Jacob Joshua Falk and R. Ezekiel Landau (d. 1793). The amulets were written in code and had to be decoded in order to be understood. Eibeschutz claimed the coded words were Divine names and could not be read as a connected text.⁶ The anti-Eibeschutz forces claimed that the coded words decoded as a connected text which took the form of a prayer to Shabbetai Zevi.⁷ However one chose to read it, it was clearly a kabbalistic text.

1. R. Jacob Joshua Falk testified:⁸

הן עתה נתברר ונתגלה בעליל...ביותר באותן החמשה קמיעות שבאו לידי מק"ק מיץ... וא"כ איך אוכל להחריש ולהתאפק הלא כל הרואה והשומע חייב לקרוע שהעלה דברי בפומבי בענין דאפי' תינוק דלא חכים ולא טיפש ידע לקרותן כסדרן ושלא כסדרן, ותוכן עניני הקמיע הלא המה יורדים לעומקא דתהום וחדרי המות להרוס ולקעקע יסוד האמונה והתורה והמצוה.

It has now been established and revealed explicitly...especially regarding the five amulets that came into my hands from Metz... How then, can I remain silent and contain myself? Anyone who sees or hears needs to rend his garment in mourning! He [Eibeschutz] made public amulets that even a child, neither wise nor foolish, could read forwards and backwards. The content of the amulets, sinking to the depths of the abyss and to the abode of the dead, undermines and uproots the foundations of Jewish belief, the Torah and its commandments.

2. R. Ezekiel Landau testified:⁹

הנה גוף הקמיעות אשר נשתלחו למדינתינו מק"ק המבורג ומק"ק מיץ ע"פ פשוטן הנראה

⁶ See *ibid.*, introduction (no pagination), second page, ד"ה זה לי. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 73b.

⁷ *Sfat Emet* (above, n. 3), *passim*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Jerusalem 1971, p. 57.

⁹ *Lubot 'Edut* (above, n. 5), p. 42a.

לענינים אי לאו חזקת כשרות של הגאון המופלא המפורסם מוהר"ר יהונתן נר"ו וחכם עדיף מנביא מוחזק שאני, הייתי גוזר ואומר כי הכותבן נלכד ברשת צבי מודה צבי שבור שחיק טמיא ונפשו יקלענה בתוך כף הקלע.

Regarding the content of the amulets that were sent to our country from Hamburg and Metz, judging from the plain sense that leaps to the eye, if not for the presumption of *kashrut* of the famous and wondrous Gaon, our Teacher and Rabbi, Rabbi Jonathan – and rabbinic scholars are greater than prophets; and one who comes with a presumption of innocence is treated accordingly – I would rule that whoever wrote them was caught in the trap of the hunted gazelle [i.e., Shabbetai Zevi], the maimed gazelle, may his bones be ground to dust and may his life be flung away as from the hollow of a sling.

That the Gaon of Vilna – perhaps the greatest Kabbalist of the 18th century – could not see through the code of the Metz amulets, as did R. Jacob Joshua Falk and R. Ezekiel Landau, and that he would write instead regarding the amulets בהררי קודש, simply defies belief. The 300 rabbis who supported Eibeschuetz were mostly disciples of his who, for the most part, were not distinguished as Kabbalists. That they supported Eibeschuetz comes as no surprise. But the Gaon was not a disciple of Eibeschuetz, and was a distinguished Kabbalist. That he could not see through the code אמן זה אומר אלא דרשני.

In 1756, R. Jacob Emden published *Shevirat Luhot ha-'Aven*, a devastating critique of *Luhot 'Edut*. He devoted all of two lines to the Gaon's letter. They read:¹⁰

והציג לפנינו עוד עדות איש בער מוילנא נער חסר לב המעיד על אמתת קמיעותיו ופרשיהם, יעלה באשם, לכן כל עזריו כמק יהיה שרשם, כי מלאה ארשם אשם.

He then presented before us the testimony of a boor from Vilna, a young fool who testifies to the truthfulness of his amulets and their interpretations. May their stench rise; may the roots of all his helpers turn to rot; for their prayer [i.e., amulet] is filled with pollution.

Obviously, Emden, like almost everybody else, had never heard of the Gaon. Given the many more famous names on the other letters printed in *Luhot 'Edut*, Emden concentrated on refuting them, and didn't bother

¹⁰ *Shvirat Luhot ha-'Aven*, Altona 1756, p. 54b. M. D. Plotzki, 'Le-Khorvei Historiah', *Diglenu*, 2:10-11 (1922), p. 191, and Greenwald (above, n. 2), p. 76, misquote this passage.

with relatively unknown figures such as the Gaon. He dismissed the Gaon as a fool who required no response. By 1769, however, Emden learned who the Gaon was, and doubtless, deeply regretted his comments of 1756. In 1769, he wrote:¹¹

ועתה תראו עוד דוגמא מהצבועים תלמידי אייבשיצר שר"י, אציגה הנה מה שהעיד הרב מדריא בפני ובפני כמה בני אדם מה שארע בוילנא בשנה זו עם שמעון ראגליר ימשי"ו תלמידו של אייבשיצר שר"י... והיה בפרק חג השבועות תקכח"ל, כי הלך שלווחו להביא על הפאשט שמה אגרת שכתב המודח הלו לאחד מבני חברתו בפרעשבורג, לקחו אנשי לבב האגרת מיד השליח, ופתחוה ונמצא כתוב בה כענין הזה, שכותב לנאמן אוהבו ורעו כנפשו, שיוהר ויאמין בכל לבבו בש"ן שר"י שהוא משיח כו', כמו שהאמין בו רבו אייבשיצר שר"י אמונה שלימה כאשר ידוע ... אלה הדברים אשר נראו ונקראו באגרת הנ"ל בחדר הקהל בוילנא בפומבי, ונשאר התעוב על כך ולא יכול להכחיש עוד כי יבין שכתב ידו מעידו, שניכר לכל אדם שם, ואין מענה בפיו אלא כתוב יושר ואמת הוא, אך הוא אינו עובר עדי"ת ולא יכול אדם למצוא לו חטא כל עון, זה היה התנצלותו, ואז העבירוהו מן ההוראה, כך סיפר לנו ת"ח בר סמכא הנ"ל במילתא דעבידא לאגלויי, דלא שקרי בה אינשי, ולא בסתר דבר האיש המאורע הלו, אלא בקש מאתנו שנכתוב לשם ונוהיר את החסיד ר"א שם, שיעמוד על המשמר לשרש אחר תועב זה, שלא ישליל עוד רבים בתורה, מאחר שיש לו שם קרובים רבים בקהל המחפים עליו, כמו שארע עם אייבשיצר שר"י, אף הוא הגיד בשם החסיד מהר"א הלו, שצועק ככרוכיא על הרשע ההוא שמעון תר"ו, שהיה בעוכריו לבדות אגרת בשמו לסייע ידי אייבשיצר המקולע בכף הקלע, להכשיר מעשי ידי תועבותיו בקמיעותיו ואומרים ישר, והציג גם מאדם כשר צדיק ונקי הלו אגרת מצדקת אותו מכשרת כתיבותיו, והיא בדויה שם משמעון הארוך שכתבה בכל אות נפשו של אייבשיצר ע"ש ר"א הנזכר המכחישה בפה מלא ואמר שמיאן בו ולא רצה להיות לו עסק עמו כלל.

I will now provide another sample of the activities of those hypocrites, the disciples of Eibeschuetz, may the name of the wicked rot. I will present here the testimony of the rabbi of Druya, which he testified before me and in the presence of others, regarding what occurred this year in Vilna with Shimon Rogoler, may his name and memory be blotted out, the disciple of Eibeschuetz... It was around the time of the Shavuoth festival, in the year 5528 [1768], that Rogoler's agent went to deliver a letter to the postal officials. The letter was written by the one led astray [Rogoler] and was addressed to a colleague of his in Pressburg. Some brave souls intercepted the letter, grabbing it from the agent. They opened it and discovered that it contained the following message. Rogoler, writing to a close associate, urged him to believe that Shabbetai Zevi is

¹¹ *Hit'avkut*, Altona 1769, p. 152b (Lemberg 1877, pp. 83a and b).

the Messiah, just as his teacher Eibeschuetz had believed with perfect faith, as is well known.... The content of the letter was read publicly in the Jewish community hall in Vilna. The detested one [Rogoler] was asked about the content of the letter; he could not deny having written it, as his handwriting – known to all present – proved that he had written it. All he could say was that while it was an upright and truthful letter, in fact he never violated Torah law, and no one could prove otherwise. This was his justification of the letter. He was then deposed from membership on the rabbinic court in Vilna. So we were told by the trustworthy rabbinic scholar mentioned above. This is a matter which will become public knowledge, hence a matter about which people do not lie. Moreover, when he told us about this matter, he did not request confidentiality. Indeed, he urged us to write to Vilna in order to alert the pious R. Elijah, so that he could guard against this detestable person and prevent him from causing others to stumble. For Rogoler has many relatives in the Jewish community of Vilna who cover up his crimes, much like what happened with Eibeschuetz. He [the rabbi of Druya] also reported in the name of the pious R. Elijah, that he protests openly against the wicked Shimon, claiming that he forged a letter using his [Elijah's] name – in order to support the side of the sinners. As if to say, that he [R. Elijah] joined forces with the accursed sect that supports Eibeschuetz, the one flung from the hollow of a sling, and gave his approval to his abominable amulets, saying 'more power to you'. Indeed, he [Eibeschuetz] published a letter from this righteous and innocent person, vindicating him and his writings, when in fact it was forged by the accursed Shimon, who wrote it with the full approval of Eibeschuetz, using the name of the aforementioned R. Elijah. He [R. Elijah] denies vigorously that he wrote the letter, stating that he refused him and wanted nothing to do with him whatsoever.

Thus, during the lifetime of the Gaon, Eibeschuetz published a letter in the Gaon's name that clearly vindicated Eibeschuetz, while Emden published an account that claimed that the Gaon's letter was forged by R. Shimon Rogoler (d. 1786), *moreh zedek* of Vilna, and that the Gaon openly and unabashedly pronounced it a forgery!

Previous attempts to solve this puzzle have not been persuasive. Graetz, who viewed the Gaon's letter as genuine, seems to have been

unaware of Emden's claim of forgery.¹² Dismissing the Gaon's letter as a 'polite demurrer' of no real import, Graetz made no attempt to account for the phrases 'פירושי אמיחי' and 'אשר יסודתי בהררי קודש' in the Gaon's letter.¹³ Kahana sided with Emden and declared the Gaon's letter a forgery, in part because the letter contains the phrase 'ספר תורה שרורי בצער'. Since the same phrase appears in earlier letters defending Eibeschuetz, Kahana concluded that it was a stock phrase used by the pro-Eibeschuetz forces – and did not emanate from the hand of the Gaon.¹⁴ Katz,¹⁵ Greenwald,¹⁶ and Plotzki¹⁷ were quick to demolish Kahana's argument, but could offer no persuasive explanation of the Gaon's strong defense of Eibeschuetz' amulets, despite the pronouncements of Falk and Landau.

Still another piece of evidence that needs to be taken into account is a letter by R. Yissakhar Baer (d. 1807), a younger brother of the Gaon, addressed to R. Saul, Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam (d. 1790), and dated Tishre 1775. R. Saul of Amsterdam was a nephew of R. Jacob Emden. The Gaon added a postscript to the letter; it reads in part:¹⁸

גם אני אומר שלום רב לכבוד אהי מחו' הרב הגאון הגדול שמו נודע בשערים שער בת רבים לתפארת ולתהלה כ"ש מפארים כהו"ר שאול נ"י. וביחוד לדודו הישיש והזקן זה קנה חכמה

¹² H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, X, p. 383.

¹³ See the critique of Graetz in J. Cohn, 'Ehrenrettung des R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz,' *Blätter aus der Michael-Davidschen Stiftung in Hanover*, Hanover 1870, pp. 58–59. Cf. S. P. Rabbinowitz' note in H. Graetz (above, n. 2), VIII, p. 492.

¹⁴ J. Emden, *Megillat Sefer*, ed. by D. Kahana, Warsaw 1897, p. 182, n. 2.

¹⁵ B. Z. Katz, 'Rabbi Ya'aqov Emden u-Tekhnato', *Ha-Shiloah*, 4 (1898), p. 455, n. 31.

¹⁶ L. J. Greenwald (above, n. 2), p. 75, n. 21.

¹⁷ M. D. Plotzki (above, n. 10), p. 193. Plotzki argued that Emden was blinded by hate, prone to exaggeration, and generally unreliable in matters relating to Eibeschuetz. Regarding Emden's claims about the Gaon's letter, Plotzki claimed that they were fabricated by the Emden forces, and that he (Plotzki) could prove that this was so. According to the account published by Emden, R. Shimon Rogoler was forced to resign, in disgrace, from his post as *moreh zedek* in 1768. But Plotzki found a passage in the published writings of R. Abraham Danzig (d. 1820) where Danzig indicates that he consulted with R. Shimon, the *moreh zedek* of Vilna, in 1810. Thus, R. Shimon was alive, and was serving as *moreh zedek*, and was still in good standing in 1810, since he was cited approvingly by none other than R. Abraham Danzig. Alas, it appears that Plotzki erred. Clearly, there were at least two R. Shimons who served as *moreh zedek* in Vilna. The first, R. Shimon Rogoler, was a disciple of R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz who served as *moreh zedek* in the 1760s and perhaps in the 1770s. He died in 1777 and was buried with honors in the rabbinic section of the Shnipishok cemetery in Vilna. Obviously, the *moreh zedek* R. Shimon who met with Danzig in 1810 was another R. Shimon whose existence, in fact, is attested elsewhere. See A. Danzig, *Hokhmat Adam*, Jerusalem 1958, introduction, p. 3; S. J. Fuenn (above, n. 1), p. 172; and H. N. Steinschneider, *Ir Vilna*, Vilna 1900, p. 102, n. 1.

¹⁸ Z. H. Horowitz, *Kitvei ha-Geonim*, Piotrkow 1928, p. 9.

קנה בינה לתורה ולתעודה בישישים חכמה, כ"ש מפארים כמוהר"ר יעקב נ"י, המקום יאריך ימיו ושניו בטוב ובנעימים...הכ"ר מחו' הדוש"ת אלי' במהרש"ז זלה"ה.

I too send warm greetings to my beloved relative, the Rabbi and great Gaon, his beautiful and praiseworthy name is known at all public gates where Torah is taught, all render honor to his name, our Teacher and Rabbi R. Saul, may his lamp glow. Special warm greetings to your 'elderly' uncle, 'elderly' means one who has acquired wisdom and understanding of Torah, wisdom rests with the elderly, all render honor to his name, the honorable Teacher and Rabbi, R. Jacob, may his lamp glow. May the Lord grant him length of days and years blessed with good and pleasantness... These are the words of your relative who seeks your well-being, Elijah b. R. Solomon Zalman of blessed memory.

Clearly, the Gaon of Vilna held Emden in the highest regard, and this despite what Emden had written about him in 1756.

The evidence seems intractable, and – at this late date, with much of the evidence destroyed – there may be no real solution available to us. Nonetheless, we shall offer two possible solutions in order to advance discussion.

Solution I:

Where one can test the documents published in *Luhot 'Edut* against originals or manuscript copies, they are published accurately with the occasional addition or omission of a word or two.¹⁹ These additions or omissions, usually adjectives or adverbs, almost always enhance the position of R. Jonathan. No letter published by Eibeschuetz has been proven to be a forgery. In light of the above, it appears likely that Eibeschuetz turned to the Gaon, perhaps through his disciple R. Shimon Rogoler, for a letter of support. The Gaon responded with a diplomatic letter. R. Shimon Rogoler, or an editor, or Eibeschuetz himself, in order to enhance the letter, added one word in line 1 (אמיתיים) and four words at the end of line 1 and the beginning of line 2 (אשר יסדתם בהררי קודש). If one removes these five words, the letter becomes a perfect, non-committal, diplomatic letter. The Gaon, at age 35, was not about to

¹⁹ See my forthcoming publication of the full text of R. Ezekiel Landau's *Letter of Conciliation*, i.e., his valiant but failed attempt to bring the Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy to a close. The essay includes an analysis of Eibeschuetz' (and Emden's) published version of Landau's letter.

take sides in a dispute that involved the greatest sages of the 18th century, and that neither the *P'nei Yehoshu'a* nor the *Noda' Bi-Yehudah* had been able to resolve. Now it becomes clear why he had to apologize. He had not come to the support of, arguably, the greatest *rosh yeshivah* and *marbiz Torah* of the 18th century. This solution accounts for the letter in *Luhot 'Edut*; on the other hand, it allows for the report of forgery in Emden's *Hita'v'kut*. The Gaon may very well have protested that the letter, as printed, was not precisely what he wrote.

Solution II:

We know that Eibeschuetz sent copies of his interpretation of the Metz amulets to hundreds of rabbis, soliciting their support in the controversy. R. Isaac Zelig Kara (d. 1755), Chief Rabbi of Hanover and an avid supporter of Emden, was won over by Eibeschuetz' letter, and in a letter of resignation to the Emden forces, wrote as follows:²⁰

באתי לערוך מערכה ההיא ולהתוכח אתו, על אשר זה ימים אין בהם חפץ...ומעלתו הרבה עלי דברים לצאת נגד הגאון מאור הגולה מוהר"ר נ"י בדברי ריבות אשר בשער, ומשכתי ידי מזה עד אשר שלח אלי הקמיעות, ובו ראיתי כי נלכד בפח יקוש, צבי שבור שחיק סמיא, נפשו יקלענה בתוך כף הקלע, אמרתי קנאת ד' צבאות תעשה זאת, והחזקתי ידכם. אמנם אחרי רואי נחמתי, והרעותי אשר עשיתי, כי הגאון הקדוש מאור הגולה מוהר"ר יהונתן נ"י שלח אלי מכתב ארוך, אשר מלאך אל יענה ברוך, בה הראה ידו הגדולה בנגלה ובנסתר, עמוק עמוק מי ימצאנה, והוא אחד בדורו. שלח אלי הקמיעות האמיתות, ופירושיהם יסודתם בהררי קודש, ונחצבו ממרומים מים זכים, מים חיים, היוצאים מבית ד', ושמחתי כעל כל הן.

I have come to engage in a battle and in a dispute with you. Several years ago, at a time I no longer care to remember, you urged me to come out against the Gaon, light of the exile, our Teacher and Rabbi, R. Jonathan, may his lamp glow, in a public controversy. I refrained from doing so until you sent me copies of the amulets. Upon examining them, I realized that he was caught in the trap of the maimed gazelle, may his bones be ground to dust, may his life be flung by the hollow of the sling. I said: zeal for the Lord of Hosts requires action, and I supported your efforts.

But upon further reflection, I regretted my decision to support you. What I did was wrong. For the holy Gaon, light of the exile, our Rabbi and Teacher R. Jonathan, may his lamp glow, sent me a lengthy letter. Angels of God would recite blessings upon reading

²⁰ H. Y. N. Silberberg, *Darkhei Hayim*, Piotrkow 1931, p. 82.

such a letter! In it, he displayed his mastery of the revealed and hidden Torah. Exceptionally profound, who can fathom his wisdom? He is unique in this generation. *He sent me the true amulets, with their interpretations, whose foundations rest on the holy mountains.* They were hewn on high from the pure and living waters that flow from the temple of the Lord. I rejoiced as one would over all riches.

The parallels between the Gaon's letter and the letter just quoted are striking. One suspects that the opening line of Eibeschutz's letter to every rabbi was: Enclosed are פירושים אמתיים on the amulets that I wrote אשר יסודתם בהררי קודש. The Gaon simply wrote back: I received your letter entitled פירושים אמתיים on the amulets קודש אשר יסודתם בהררי קודש. R. Jonathan understood, of course, that this was simply an echo of the terms he had used himself. This solution accounts for the Gaon's terminology and its relative meaninglessness in context. Note too that the words ובקש ממני in the second line of the Gaon's letter appear *after* the seemingly judgmental words פירושים אמתיים and אשר יסודתם בהררי קודש in the first line! Clearly, the seemingly judgmental phrases did not originate with the Gaon.²¹ Moreover, this solution, unlike the first solution offered, assumes that the Gaon's letter in its present form is entirely authentic. The claim in Emden's *Hita'vku* that the Gaon's letter was forged is dismissed out of hand. The following arguments can be marshalled in favor of this view:

1. It is surprising that Emden didn't write the Gaon, asking for an open letter that would prove once and for all that Eibeschutz' *Luhot 'Edut* was a collection of forgeries. Indeed, if Emden did solicit such a letter from the Gaon, it clearly was not forthcoming.

2. Apparently, none of the Gaon's disciples knew of such a forgery. Quite the opposite, the collectors of traditions about the Gaon, including his biographers, point with pride to the Gaon's letter in *Luhot 'Edut*.²²

3. In a bibliographical manuscript emanating from the circles of R. Abraham b. ha-Gra (d. 1808), and written in Vilna between 1781 and 1791, the following entry appears:²³

²¹ I am indebted to Alan Nadler for this insight.

²² See, e.g., the letter of R. Judah Leib of Lvov, *Shnot Eliyahu*, Lemberg 1799, introductory pages (reissued in J. Scult, *Zikbron Eliyahu*, Bnei Brak 1991, pp. 60–64); R. Israel of Shklov, *Pe'at ha-Shulhan*, ed. A. M. Luncz, Jerusalem 1911, p. 5b; J. H. Levin, *Aliyot Eliyahu*, pp. 54–55; and Fuenn (above, n. 1), p. 145.

²³ See M. Bet-Arié, 'Sefatayim Dovevot', *Kiryat Sefer*, 40 (1964), pp. 124–132. The

לוחות עדות, הגאון מופת הדור מ' ינתן ז"ל עדות מרוב גאוני הדור שחף הוא מפשע ולעז אשר הוציאו עליו אנשי ריבו ומנגדו ר"ע שלא להחזיק ידיהם ושלא להוציאו מחוקת כשרותו, ד[פוס] אלטונא.

Luhot 'Edut by the Gaon, the wonder of his generation, our Teacher Jonathan of blessed memory. It contains the testimony of the majority of the Geonim of his generation, who vindicated him of sin and of the calumny spread by his enemies and by his rival R. Jacob Emden, and who ruled that they [Eibeschutz' enemies] not be supported, and that his presumption of innocence be maintained. It was printed in Altona.

It would appear that the circle of R. Abraham b. ha-Gra was not clued in to the claim that the Gaon's letter was forged.

In sum, the Gaon of Vilna realized that at age 35 nothing he could say would resolve the standoff between Emden and Eibeschutz. In any event, the center of gravity of this controversy was in Germany, Bohemia, and Moravia, where the Gaon wielded no political influence. This was a battle that others would have to wage. Wisdom dictated that he remain on the sidelines. And so he composed a diplomatic response that neither supported nor offended any of the parties in the dispute. A smart general chooses the time and place of the battle he wishes to engage in. In a later period, when the mantle of leadership fell on his shoulders, and when the arena would be his home court – Eastern Europe – the Gaon of Vilna would enter the fray of a controversy with a vengeance. But that was a different time, a different place, and a different controversy.²⁴

manuscript contains bibliographical entries from the hand of R. Abraham b. ha-Gra. It is unclear, however, whether this particular entry is from his hand. For samples of R. Abraham b. ha-Gra's handwriting, see his *Rav Pe'alim*, ed. J. Landau, Tel Aviv 1967, introductory page; cf. D. Kamenetzky and S. Gottesman, 'Kuntras Hokhmat Avraham: Kitvei Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Gra', *Yeshurun*, 4 (1998), pp. 123–254, esp. pp. 132, 148, 150, 152, 218, 234, and 254. D. Kamenetzky, op. cit., pp. 250–252, is persuaded that this particular entry is from the hand of R. Abraham b. ha-Gra.

²⁴ I am deeply grateful to Rabbi Kalman Redisch for bringing to my attention several of the references cited in notes 22 and 23. This paper was first read on January 1, 1998 at the International Conference on the Gaon of Vilna and his Historical Influence, which was sponsored by the Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History and convened in Jerusalem. The conference was dedicated to the memory of Professor Yizhak Twersky.

ME'AH SHE'ARIM

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IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH SPIRITUAL LIFE
IN MEMORY OF
ISADORE TWERSKY

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