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.\textsuperscript{1} Strangely, no one has attempted a comprehensive study of the Gaon of Vilna’s stance in the controversy.\textsuperscript{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 yahrzeit 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, so be it.


In a series of pamphlets and broadsides that began to appear in 1752, the anti-Eibeschuetz forces charged Eibeschatz with being a closet Sabbatian. 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 Sabbathian 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:

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 not 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?

Apparantly, 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 Lohot ‘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.
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 (יהי שומע קולם) and find favor favorably (יהי שומע קולם). 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 erroneous and regarding the amulets themselves improper. 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. Eibenschutz claimed the coded words were Divine names and could not be read as a connected text. The anti-Eibenschutz forces claimed that the coded words decoded as a connected text which took the form of a prayer to Shabbetai Zevi. However one chose to read it, it was clearly a kabbalistic text.

1. R. Jacob Joshua Falk testified:

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 [Eibenschutz] 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:

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 Eibenschutz for the text of the letter. Since Eibenschutz 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

6. See ibid., introduction (no pagination), second page, לְרַחֲצָא. Cf. ibid., p. 73b.
7. Sfat Emet (above, n. 3), passim.
8. Ibid., Jerusalem 1971, p. 57.
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

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 as if they were incantations, 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 is astonishing.

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

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’avor, 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 [Rogol] 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 Rogol 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 protested 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 Rogol (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. Dismissing the Gaon’s letter as a ‘polite demurrrer’ of no real import, Graetz made no attempt to account for the phrases דוד דוד רבה רשב”ת חכם and רשב”ת חכם in the Gaon’s letter. Kahana sided with Emden and declared the Gaon’s letter a forgery, in part because the letter contains the phrase כותב הראות שלה. 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. Katz, Greenwald, and Plotzki 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:"

ןג תמאת שלמה רבי חכם אהרן י子ど תמים כלכח גרש בר כריך הלוחמה בכם ממסאי לדཧ"ב שאלא ני תבות חדיר ורשיה והוקם הזק הנכבד

12 H. Graetz, Geschichte der Juden, X, p. 383.
14 J. Emden, Megillat Sefer, ed. by D. Kahana, Warsaw 1897, p. 182, n. 2.
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 Rogol 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 Rogol, 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 Shaposhnik 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, Hokmat Adam, Jerusalem 1958, introduction, p. 3; S. J. Fuemm (above, n. 1), p. 172; and H. N. Steinschneider, ‘Ir ha-Vilna, Vilna 1900, p. 102, n. 1.
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. 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 and four words at the end of line 1 and the beginning of line 2. If one removes these five words, the letter becomes a perfect, non-committal, diplomatic letter. The Gaon, at age 35, was not about to take sides in a dispute that involved the greatest sages of the 18th century, and that neither the P’nei Yehoshua’s 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’kvut. 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:

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 hallow 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

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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 Eibeschuetz’s letter to every rabbi was: Enclosed are מפרשים אמנים on the amulets that I wrote ראה שמוחת רוח רוח. The Gaon simply wrote back: I received your letter entitled ראה שמוחת רוח רוח on the amulets מפרשים אמנים. 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 בעש מתן ולץ אשר ממיה ב in the second line of the Gaon’s letter appear after the seemingly judgmental words ראה שמוחת רוח רוח 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 הראה חק 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 Eibeschuetz’ Lubot ‘Edut was a collection of forgeries. Indeed, if Emden did sollic 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 Lubot ‘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


24 I am deeply grateful to Rabbi Kalman Redish 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 Yitzhak Twersky.
ME’AH SHE’ARIM

STUDIES
IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH SPIRITUAL LIFE
IN MEMORY OF
ISADORE TwerSKy

EDITED BY
Ezra Fleischer, Gerald Blidstein
Carmi Horowitz, Bernard Septimus

2001

The Hebrew University Magnes Press, Jerusalem