

Minhagei Lita

*Customs of
Lithuanian Jewry*

And a Litvishe Rav's Perspective
on Life and Halachah

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serve as an incentive for others who also remember *Litvishe* customs to come forward and help to fill in the gaps.

I would like to note that for the most part, I treat *Minhagei Lita* as a homogenous entity. Lithuania itself had several strains of *minhagim*, one of which was *Minhag Zamut*. (Zamut was a region of Lithuania, of which Telshe was the capital.) However, the differences between these *minhagim* were slight, almost negligible, even if they felt very real for the residents of different parts of Lithuania of the time.

Background

A commonly-held fallacy is that only within the geographical borders of today's Lithuania did the various

Jewish communities observe the Lithuanian customs. The truth is *Minhag Lita* prevailed throughout most of Eastern Europe, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, including



Belarusia (White Russia) and substantial sections of Poland. Later, Chassidic groups living in Poland adopted *Minhag Sfarad* to differentiate between themselves and the general

body of East European Jewry who were not Chassidim and who maintained the *minhag* and *nusach* of *Lita*. It is plainly obvious that *Minhag Lita* was one of the most widespread *minhagim* upheld by European Jewry.

Since the end of the Second World War, there have been numerous deviations from many of the authentic Lithuanian customs. This is largely because most of Lithuanian Jewry was annihilated or displaced during the war. Communities were disbanded, and there was no longer any continuity in practicing the traditions and customs constituting *Minhag Lita*.

Today, most people rely upon books to try to reconstruct the Lithuanian customs, because the living *mesorah* was unfortunately lost. As a result, what is now perceived as *Minhag Lita* contains many deviations from what Lithuanian Jewry had truly followed.

Ironically, one cause of confusion about *Minhagei Lita* was the Gaon of Vilna *zt"l*. His erudition was way beyond



The Telshe Yeshivah Building

anyone else's in his generation, and his prestige was overwhelming. Yet when his decisions and recommendations ran counter to the traditionally accepted *minhagim*, no one adopted them—not

even in his home town, Vilna. I will note some of these variances as we come across them.

Another cause of deviations from Lithuanian custom was the Chafetz Chaim *zt"l*, who included a number of decisions and recommendations in his *Mishnah Berurah* that were contrary to the prevailing custom, often without explicitly stating so. As long as there were Jews in Lithuania to provide a living example, this was not a problem. Today however, when these communities unfortunately no longer exist, people are unable to determine the original custom. During the fifty years after publication of the *Mishnah Berurah* until the destruction of Lithuanian Jewry, communities did not adopt those decisions and recommendations of the *Mishnah Berurah* that ran counter to the traditionally accepted *minhagim*. Not even in Radin, where the Chafetz Chaim had his Yeshivah, did the community change the traditional customs in favor of those urged by the Chafetz Chaim. Hence, many people today mistakenly assume that whatever the *Mishnah Berurah* recommended must have been the accepted custom in Lithuania. Again, I will point out some of these anomalies as we come upon them.

This teaches us how careful we must be in preserving Jewish customs. The Torah requires us to respect and maintain *minhagim* just as the earlier generations loved and cherished them. The fundamental principle of *Al titosh toras imecha*—Do not forsake the teachings of your mother³ was zealously upheld throughout the Jewish world.

³ *Mishlei* 1:8

Today's generation is confused, searching to find the real *Minhag Lita* from among the many existing customs. I hope I will be able to dispel some of this confusion by delineating the authentic Lithuanian customs regarding a number of select areas, the first of which will be *tefillah*.

Laws and Customs

A basic difference existed between the Jews of greater Lithuania and other European Jews which led to many differences in halachah and customs as I shall attempt to point out. This difference was caused by the European Jews reaction to two antithetical forces in Jewish life—the Reform movement on the one hand and the Chassidic movement on the other. The Lithuanian community however, did not undergo these pressures and the changes they engendered, as I will explain.

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The virulently militant Reform movements in Hungary, Germany, and Austria triggered a strong conservative Orthodox reaction in the Torah-true communities of those countries.

Note: Do not be confused by the use of the word “conservative.” It has nothing to do with the conservative Reform movement with which we are so familiar today that we call simply, Conservative. I am referring to a conservative *Orthodox* reaction to the liberal Reform, which we today call simply Reform.

Most Jews today have no idea how far the Reform movement strayed from Jewish tradition. The Reform denied the Divinity of Torah, as they still do, changed the day of rest from Shabbos to Sunday, abolished *bris milah*, and declared that they did not look forward to a return to *Eretz Yisrael*, to mention only a few of their doctrines. Later, they forced the

notoriously devastating alteration in the wording of the Balfour Declaration, changing Palestine from *the* National Jewish Homeland to *a* National Jewish Homeland. This seemingly minor modification has caused Jews the world over so much blood, tears, agony until this day. Had the wording remained “*the*,” no one else could have ventured to lay claim to the land. However, with the wording “*a*,” others had an excuse to assert their claims to it. The Reform cannot even begin to repent enough for this crime against the Jewish People. We do not condemn the common Reform Jew because he was misled; the condemnation applies to the movement’s so-called rabbis and leaders.

This radical Reform movement aroused the ire not only of the traditional Jews, but also even of many Reform Jews, and led to the establishment of a Conservative Reform movement.

The Chassidic movement on the other hand, deliberately introduced all kinds of not commonly followed stringencies in halachah to intensify what to them was ecstatic devotion and dedication.

Consequently, these two contradictory forces—the Reform movement and Chassidus—caused the development of a strong conservative counter-movement among the Orthodox in Western Europe. This counter-movement included the adoption of much excessive stringency that the Orthodox designed to protect themselves against the perilous influences of the times. Lithuania’s Orthodox communities, on the other hand, had no Reform movement to deal with, nor did they feel threatened by the Chassidic movement. The

Haskalah, which was present in Lithuania, was a secular movement that did not challenge the normal Jewish life on religious grounds, as did the Reform. Jewish life in Lithuania continued to develop in a relaxed atmosphere that did not demand a resort to uncommon stringencies and customs.

One example of the absence of unnecessary stringencies in Lithuania was in the area of kosher meat. The butchers in Lita were generally the most insistent in their demand that the Rabbi be a great scholar, because they knew the greater in scholarship he was, the greater would be his qualification to decide halachic questions more leniently. Such leniency directly affected their livelihoods. In fact, the term “*glatt kosher*” did not even exist in Lithuania. Meat was either kosher or non-kosher which, of course, is the correct approach. (For a more detailed discussion of *glatt kosher* meat, see page 68.) Even in those places where some people sought *glatt* and was available, by far most of the meat sold was simply kosher. In fact, in *Eretz Yisrael* as well, there never was an Ashkenazi community that maintained an exclusively *glatt kosher* standard until today.

The stringencies adopted by various European communities were continued and augmented in the United States after WWII. Traditionally, Jewish communities followed their established laws and customs. However, the Americas—particularly North America—had a large influx of Jews from various communities from around the world, and could not establish a uniform body of laws and customs. During the second half of the 20th century with the wonderful rise of the *ba'al teshuvah* movement, this lack of an established reli-

gious precedent became a problem. In the absence of established tradition, the Rabbis turned to the *Mishnah Berurah* as their guide on the assumption the Chafetz Chaim's decisions were in accord with the generally accepted Lithuanian customs. Unfortunately, this is not so. There are many instances where he recommends practices not in accord with *minhag Lita*, although he fails to state this. Consequently, the Rabbis today—without realizing they are doing so—advocate conduct not in accord with *Minhag Lita*.

In this section, I want to discuss several basic Jewish laws and customs, their roots in authentic Lithuanian practice, and the unfortunate deviations from authentic tradition evident in many of our present day Orthodox communities, most notably in the United States. My hope is that a clearer understanding of Lithuanian customs will propel a movement back to Orthodox practice that is fully resonant with the essence of authentic Torah-true traditions.

Proper Conduct

Before I deal with specific Jewish laws and customs, their authentic practice in Lithuania, and the subsequent aberrations in many Orthodox communities today, I want to bring up the Torah view of proper conduct in general. This discussion should serve to lay down basic guidelines for evaluating our approach to halachah and *minhag*, and shape our perspective of the chosen topics we will be highlighting.

What is the Torah view concerning the proper attitude for a person to adopt in their religious observance? Some people believe one should embrace every stringency (*chumrah*) in

of this caliber, they made distinctions. The gemara³⁵ relates how Mar Ukva declared “I am like ‘vinegar the son of wine’ when compared to his father, who observed such a great stringency concerning the separation between meat and milk. Mar Ukva himself did not follow this strict opinion, for which he labeled himself “vinegar.” An even more astounding example of refusing to follow stringency is the incident when a certain scholar, following a *chumrah*, ruled a food not kosher. When Rav *Hisda* discovered this, he ordered the food forced down that scholar’s throat.³⁶

The above examples demonstrate that many of the stringencies commonly advocated and observed today at the instigation of some rabbis are in violation of halachah due to their extreme nature. As we examine some customs, we will encounter several such examples of stringencies that are not only incorrect—they are antithetical to a Torah true perspective.

Parading Piety

Our treatment of proper conduct leads naturally to the subject of parading piety—that manifestation of poor *middos* and which is often at the root of improper observance.

The faculty and students of the Talmud Torah of Kelm, the Yeshivah founded by Rav Simchah Zissel Ziv, the chief disciple of Rav Israel Salanter and undisputed heir to his position of the leader of the Mussar movement, would have

³⁵ *Chullin* 105a. The halachah requires one to wait six hours between eating meat and milk. Mar Ukvah’s father however, would wait until the next day.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 111a

been scandalized by the modern trend of parading piety. One of the few survivors of Kelm sadly remarked to me some forty years ago, “You are a Lithuanian Jew—you call this *Yiddishkeit*? Where is the admonition of the Prophets to walk humbly with G-d?” He was right. The ideals and character of Lithuanian Jewry in accord with Torah did not tolerate parading piety in public.

Chillul Hashem

The most grievous problem caused by parading piety is *chillul Hashem*. I must preface this section with the following clarification. The mitzvos of the Torah fall into two broad classifications:

- Those pertaining to man’s relations to G-d, his ritual obligations
- Those pertaining to man’s relations to his fellow man, his human obligations.

People generally judge piety by how scrupulous a person is in fulfilling his ritual obligations, even if he is lax in fulfilling his human obligations. *Chazal*, however, not only do not consider such a person pious, they severely condemn him, branding him as someone who causes people to hate G-d. Furthermore, the Torah teaches us that one who sins against a human being is a double sinner, because a sin against a human being is also a sin against G-d.

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Now, while I do not believe the *frum* community has a higher percentage of people who sin against their fellow man

than the non-religious community, it occasionally seems so for two reasons.

Firstly, when an ostensibly religious person sins publicly, it creates a terrible impression and becomes newsworthy. People expect more from someone who appears religious.

Secondly, even though no one is perfect, when a religious person sins even inadvertently, it becomes a choice news item and spreads like wildfire.

The same is true concerning the sin of intolerance. People expect the religious community to be above such behavior. I am convinced the intolerance expressed by the non-religious community toward observant Jews is greater than the intolerance of the religious toward the non-religious. Yet for the same aforementioned reasons, when the religious community expresses any intolerance, it quickly earns a place in the limelight.

This then is the situation today—the slightest infraction against one’s fellow man is so high profile that it could easily escalate to the stage of *chillul Hashem*. It follows that the members of the religious community are responsible to guard against any form of parading piety, of a “holier than thou” attitude, and conduct themselves modestly.

Tzitzis

We begin our discussion of specific laws and customs with the mitzvah of wearing tzitzis. The *Shulchan Aruch* rules one should wear the *tallis katan* on top of the clothes. The Ari, however, disagrees, maintaining one should wear it under his shirt. This was the custom not only in Lithuania,

including the yeshivos, but wherever *Minhag Lita* held sway, with the exception of some Chassidic groups. The Magen Avraham takes issue with the Ari's decision, and concludes that even the Ari agrees to expose the actual fringes. Although the *Mishnah Berurah* agrees with the Magen Avraham, he does not mention the prevailing custom in Lithuania does not follow the Magen Avraham. No one in Lithuania wore his tzitzis hanging out as people do today, not even the Rabbonim, not even in Radin.

Great scholars of earlier centuries have ably and adequately dealt with the Magen Avraham's difficulty with the Ari. However, I find it difficult to understand the Magen Avraham's position. According to him, the controversy between the *Shulchan Aruch* and the Ari centers around the garment rather than the tzitzis, since he states that even according to the Ari one must display his tzitzis. The question then is, where do we find anywhere in the Torah a requirement "to see" the actual garment (*tallis katan*) rather than the tzitzis? The only reference in the Torah to "seeing them" refers specifically to the tzitzis. Thus, the Ari must have been referring to the garment as well as to the tzitzis. It is impossible to argue that according to the Ari one must expose his tzitzis, contrary to the opinion of the Magen Avraham and the *Mishnah Berurah*. Apparently this is the reason for the custom in Lithuania not to show the tzitzis.³⁷

³⁷ *Shulchan Aruch* 555:1 states that on Tisha B'av one should wear the *tallis katan* under one's clothing. This indicates that the reference is to the tzitzis as well as the garment.