

The RYS Daily 1/1/07 Leaving Vilna II

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The rabbis and great Torah authorities, the eternal guardians of the authentic Judaism, gifted with healthy, historical intuition, discerned the connection with the German school of Haskalah, that pale reflection of European culture and the spirit of civilization and emancipation of the time which had led to the abandonment of Jewish religious values and promoted spiritual and national assimilation. They discovered glaring contradictions between this Haskalah and Judaism — the two were worlds apart and there was no possibility of reconciling them. Having the results of German assimilation before them, the rabbis foresaw disastrous consequences for such attempts. They fiercely opposed the founding of the seminaries, even though these were clothed in rabbinic aspect and provided with a curriculum of Jewish subjects. They realized that these "graduated" rabbis bearing their diplomas would not be Talmide Chachamim, and much less G-d fearing in character. Such leaders could well wreak havoc in Jewish life. And so a mighty struggle ensued, in speech and in writing, between the Maskilim, the so called "seekers of light and liberty" on the one hand and the rabbis, the standard-bearers of Torah on the other.

To the Maskilim, R. Israel appeared to be progressive in his outlook. They were aware of his trenchant criticism of the petrified Judaism of habit. He had propagated new ideas on the ethical content of mitzvot, on the profound logic of the Aggadot, and had called for a reawakening, for understanding and knowledge — in the sense of 'understanding and knowing' G-d — for spiritual advancement and character refinement. Consequently they believed that he was not averse to their aspirations to introduce the beauty of Japhet" in the form of European enlightenment, "into the tents of Shem." They approached R. Israel and explained to him that their sole interest was to promote Jewish spiritual and ethical progress and to help him spread his ideas.

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