

The Legacy
Teachings for Life from
the Great Lithuanian Rabbis



Berel Wein
Warren Goldstein

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Maggid Books

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In memory of my parents

*Yosef Zvi ben Mordecai Halevi Weiss
who passed away on 12 Tishrei, 5754*

*and Miriam bas Elchanan (Liff) Weiss
who passed away on 29 Adar, 5745*

from Antwerp, Belgium

*Dedicated by their son Elchanan Weiss,
a graduate of Yeshivas Sha'arei Torah
Suffern, New York*



In memory of

*Captain Leo V. Berger
Shem Tov ben Yosef*

*Dedicated by the Leo V. Berger Fund
Harvey Schwartz, President
Sigmund Kassap, Vice President*

Dedicated to my Rebbi and Rosh Yeshiva

*Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein
of blessed memory*

*who bequeathed to me and all his students
the inspiring legacy of the great Lithuanian rabbis*

Warren Goldstein

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TRANSLATION: RABBI SHMUEL KAMENETSKY'S LETTER

August 29, 2012

To Rabbi Berel Wein שליט"א
and Rabbi Warren Goldstein שליט"א

I have gone over the manuscript of your book *The Legacy* and it finds favor in my eyes; I am Lithuanian and everything in it is true. I had already heard what is brought in the book in the name of the great Gaon Rosh Yeshiva of Ponivezh of blessed memory; also when I visited the city of Johannesburg I found the truth of these words and therefore I have seen the *ba'alei teshuvah* that are there, that they are *bnei aliyah*, people who are raising themselves spiritually and their source and all of their origins that they are the children of those who have come out of Lithuania.

Your hands should be strengthened to express the paths of Hashem, may He be blessed, and I pray that your words will enter the hearts of the Jewish people and they will know and recognize the origins of their families, how far back they reach, that they are the children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

May this book find favor in the eyes of all who read it. With blessings from the depth of the heart that you will continue to be counted amongst those who bring merit to the multitudes whose righteousness stands forever.

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Introduction

The Gemara describes numerous instances of a rabbi imparting his unique wisdom to his students toward the end of his life.¹ These sages could have simply told their disciples to do all the *mitzvos* and live a full Torah life, but instead they chose to pinpoint just a few concepts.² Following this approach, in every era, sages have taught us that we need to focus, in particular, on only a few central Torah values and principles and live by them with sincerity.

Many Torah sages achieved this through ethical wills – letters of guidance, inspiration, and instruction to their children and students. The letter of the Ramban to his son, one of the most famous in Jewish history, is a classic example of emphasis on specific Torah values. The letter could have been just an instruction to his son to do his best to keep all of the 613 *mitzvos*. Yet the Ramban didn't do that: instead, he chose to focus on key values, including humility, equality of all people before God, and fear of Heaven.

1. Megillah 27b and 28a.

2. For example, Rabbi Zeira answered his students, “In all my days I did not become angry [at the people] in my home; I did not walk in front of someone greater than me; I did not think [thoughts of Torah] in dirty alleyways; I did not walk four cubits without [learning] Torah and *tefillin*; I did not sleep in the *beis midrash*, neither a substantial sleep nor a nap; I did not rejoice in the downfall of my fellow; I did not call my fellow by a nick name.” Ibid., 28a.

The Vilna Gaon wrote to his wife and children when he was about to embark upon a long, arduous, and challenging journey to the Land of Israel. While his objective was to later bring his family and students to join him, he did not know how long he would be away. So he wrote a letter setting out the values that should permeate his home until the family would be reunited. That is what makes it such a fascinating document. In writing a letter of only a few pages, the Vilna Gaon had to evaluate which principles, ideas, thoughts, and moral instructions he would emphasize. He was not forced to do this. He, too, could have instructed that all of the *mitzvos* and values of the Torah were to be carefully observed, because that would have included everything. But like many of our sages, he knew that his disciples and children needed more direction. Among other values, the Vilna Gaon chose to focus on purity of speech, the importance of Torah study, and of pursuing peace in all interactions with others.

Obviously, in the message of focus, our sages were not advocating neglect of even one iota of the myriad details that comprise *halachah*. And they were certainly not advocating indifference to any *mitzvah*, as the Mishnah states, “Be careful with a light *mitzvah* as with a severe one, for you do not know the reward that is given for the *mitzvos*.”³ This is a blunt warning against prioritizing and treating with greater attention the *mitzvos* that appear to be stricter and carry more serious punishments than the *mitzvos* that seem to be less important. Torah is a holistic system that integrates all of its various parts into a whole: no one part can be separated from the system and elevated above the rest.

And yet, our great leaders over the generations have found it appropriate and helpful – indeed necessary – to give instruction, and even rebuke, by spotlighting certain central values and principles, while unequivocally committing to the integrity and binding nature of the entire system of *mitzvos* and *halachah*. In fact, every one of the *sifrei Mussar* is an exercise in focus and emphasis. No book can contain the entirety of all the important principles of philosophy and personal character development necessary to live as a Torah Jew.

One of the great challenges of coming to grips with Torah is that

3. Pirkei Avos 2:1.

it is the wisdom of Hashem and therefore unlimited in its breadth and depth. As mere mortals, we are confronted with how to understand it, where to channel our efforts, and how to view specifics in the context of the entire system. Through understanding what *Gedolei Yisrael* (the great sages of Israel) over the ages chose to emphasize, we get a better understanding of Torah itself. We are able to gain perspective and a context for understanding Torah Judaism, as well as a broad map for the direction of our lives. Limitations of the mental and emotional capacity of students, not to mention limitations of space and time, may have led our Torah sages to emphasize certain principles.

On a practical and strategic level, focusing on a few key objectives helps people to achieve success because the objectives are clear. This clarity prevents distraction and confusion and provides a clear framework of eternal principles in a changing world, to inspire strength and commitment.

And that is what this book is about. It is a presentation of a few key values of Torah thought and action, which we believe are crucial for this generation to explore and live by. Especially during times of confusion such as ours, we need to follow the advice of our sages and focus, as individuals and as *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people as a whole), on certain key Torah principles and develop them to the full extent that our minds, hearts, and energies will allow.

It is impossible, and it would be arrogant and a breach of basic integrity, for us to put forward our own choices of which central Torah values *Klal Yisrael* should focus upon in this generation. Therefore, we have dared to embark upon such a project based only on the *mesorah* (tradition) that we ourselves received.

In this book, we have sought to construct a virtual “letter” to this generation according to the teachings and worldview of the remarkable Torah sages of Lithuanian Jewry, as we received these teachings from our own *rebbeim* and mentors, *zt”l*, who were the disciples of these sages. Rabbi Berel Wein was a student of Rabbi Chaim Zvi Rubenstein, a student of Volozhin; Rabbi Zev Wein, a student of Rav Shimon Shkop; Rabbi Yisrael Mendel Kaplan, a student of Yeshivos Mir and Baranovitch; Rabbi Mordechai Rogow, a student of Mir; and Rabbi Chaim Kreisworth, a student of Slabodka. Rabbi Warren Goldstein was a student of his late

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Rosh Yeshiva and *rebbe*, Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein, who was a student of Rabbi Mordechai Gifter (late *Rosh Yeshiva* of Telz), who himself had learned from Rav Avraham Yitzchak Bloch, who was a student of Rav Yosef Yehudah Lev Bloch, a student of Rabbi Eliezer Gordon, the founder of Telz (from Telshe, Lithuania), who, in turn, was a student of Rav Yisrael Salanter, a student of Rav Zundel Salant, who was a student of Rav Chaim Volozhiner, who was a student of the great Vilna Gaon himself.

We attempted to identify some key Torah principles based on the teachings of these and other distinguished *Roshei Yeshiva* (heads of yeshivas) and rabbis of Lithuanian Jewry from the Vilna Gaon until the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust, and the first generation of survivors of that terrible catastrophe. So much of the modern Jewish world has the imprint of their vision and work. The names of the legendary Lithuanian yeshivas – Mir, Ponivezh, Telz, Slabodka, Brisk, and many others – sparkle across the landscape of the Jewish world, with their students teaching and providing leadership to Jews across many continents.

Of course, most of the material is comprised of classic Torah sources from all generations and places. But from our *mesorah*, we have learned to give certain values and mores special emphasis. We have tried to write this book in the spirit of the great *Mussar* Movement, which so permeated the philosophy, strategic vision, and way of life of so many scholars who form the foundation of our *mesorah*. The spirit of the *Mussar* writings is an unlikely combination of the philosophical, practical, psychological, and spiritual. More than anything, the *Mussar* Movement strived to change people, and thereby, change the world, in a profound and exciting way, bringing together thought, emotion, and action. In this spirit, this is a book of ideas and deeds, a book of values and action and of a strategic moral vision for the Jewish People.

It is also a book of history. It provides a glimpse of a society – Lithuanian Jewry – where the *Mussar* Movement was born and which was so deeply influenced by its values. The history is important because it demonstrates how these values were lived and practiced – albeit with human imperfections and vulnerabilities, which are dealt with openly. It also demonstrates that the values and principles highlighted in this

book are not merely in the realm of theory and philosophy, but were the actual way of life of a real society and real people.

Of course, *Klal Yisrael* has been blessed with many noble and illustrious Torah traditions and communities, all expressing different facets of the “seventy faces” of the Torah. We encourage others to write and present to the Jewish world their own “letter” to the generation so that the entire *Klal Yisrael* can be strengthened and uplifted by the depth and beauty of their *mesorah*, and in so doing, bring out as much of the light of Hashem’s Torah as possible.

It goes without saying that what we present here is a mere fragment of what we received from our mentors. There were other values transmitted by our teachers, and we present but the few that stand out for us. As much as we tried to be completely faithful to our *mesorah*, the responsibility for what we have written must be shouldered by us alone.

The eternal values and principles we have crystallized in this book are aspects of the legacy from the great Lithuanian rabbis, and are vital to strengthening and uplifting *Klal Yisrael* in today’s times. It is our earnest hope that renewed understanding of and commitment to these central Torah values will inspire us all with a revitalized sense of mission, purpose, and responsibility for our God-given personal and collective Jewish destiny. May Hashem bring our destiny speedily to complete fruition with the Final Redemption.

Rabbi Berel Wein
Jerusalem, Israel

Rabbi Warren Goldstein
Johannesburg, South Africa

Kislev 5772/November 2012

The Legacy



Rabbi Mordechai Katz, Rabbi Aharon Kotler and Rabbi Yitzchak Ruderman at the opening of new Telz building in Wickliffe Ohio, 1955, accompanied by then-Telz yeshiva students, Rabbi Avraham Tanzer and Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein

A Word about Language

This book is written with numerous Hebrew words, as many of its readers are likely to appreciate this familiar terminology. A glossary of Hebrew terms and basic Jewish concepts, as well as a glossary of personalities, can be found after the last chapter. Please avail yourself of it liberally.

Chapter One

Seeking Paths of Pleasantness

Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah's goal, emphasized by many of the leading Lithuanian rabbis, is to create a deeply sensitive, caring, modest, introspective, and pleasant person. Pleasantness is not a surface characteristic, for it is cultivated within the inner recesses of each person.

It is generally accepted that concern for others is the key to being a good person. To the Jew, however, true concern is not expressed in random and sporadic acts of good – no matter how individually noble those acts may be – but in cultivating the governing characteristic and attitude of pleasantness. Good habits and good actions can become habitual, but the platform upon which all of this goodness is built is the individual's inner pleasantness and serenity of soul.

Is pleasantness inborn or the product of environmental or societal training? To answer that question, we must differentiate between politeness and pleasantness. There are many societies in our world that are very polite, but at the same time quite unpleasant. Politeness is only

a social norm, not necessarily a true character trait. Pleasantness, on the other hand, involves a deep caring and tolerance for others. Of course, politeness is stressed throughout Jewish and Talmudic works as a necessary and worthy attribute.¹ But to engender a climate of pleasantness, both the society and the individual have to develop a culture that fosters a pleasant outlook on life.

This value was not unique to Lithuanian Jews, of course, for it is deeply rooted in Torah sources. A verse in Proverbs states that the Torah's paths are paths of pleasantness and all of its ways lead to peace.² This is not to be understood merely as a pious platitude or an optimistic hope: it is a fundamental value of Judaism. In fact, Judaism can be described as a set of values that govern human behavior in personal, social, monetary, and ritual matters. Each of these values – in the abstract and isolated – is holy and true and governing. Yet, sometimes they can conflict with one another when applied in the real world of human and social life.

The primary example of this type of conflict is the one of peace versus truth. The Talmud in Kesubos³ raises the question of praise for a bride on her wedding day. The opinion of the House of Shammai was that the truth will out: words of praise must be accurate and specific to that particular bride. The House of Hillel was of the opinion that the praise should be lavish and standard for all brides, for the idea of peace and harmony should overcome that of absolute truth in such a circumstance. As in most instances, we rule according to the House of Hillel, and discretion wins over what could be hurtful truths.

A resolution of the conflict between these two values can be found in the Torah itself. When an angel told Sarah that she would give birth to a child, she laughed to herself saying, "Now that I am old and withered, will I again become fresh and young? And my master is very old!"⁴ But when communicating Sarah's wonder to Avraham, the Lord omits the comment that Sarah made about Avraham being old. The value of

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1. See, for example, Berachos 43b; Niddah 16b; Yerushalmi Kesubos 11:3; and many other such statements scattered throughout Talmudic and rabbinic writings.
 2. Proverbs 3:17.
 3. Kesubos 16b–17a.
 4. Genesis 18:12.

absolute truth and accuracy is compromised in favor of domestic harmony and household peace. It is a powerful teaching – an example of the Torah helping us understand its basic values and guiding us in determining which values are paramount when they conflict with each other.

Far from being a vague mandate for cordiality, the “paths of pleasantness” represent an absolute value in Jewish law and thought. We find its presence in halachic issues. When discussing the Four Species specified by the Torah to be taken on Sukkos, the Talmud determines that certain types of plants of those species may not be used because they are dangerous due to their thorns, or because they are poisonous – and therefore inconsistent with the value of pleasantness.⁵ One does not use threatening or offensive utensils when performing a *mitzvah*.

Moreover, the Torah does not ordain acts that are inconsistent with pleasantness. The concept of levirate marriage is tempered by dedication to this value.⁶ In his seminal work *Meshech Chochmah*, the great Lithuanian sage, Rabbi Meir Simchah of Dvinsk, states that the reason women are not included in the commandment to be fruitful and multiply is the danger and pain involved in childbirth.⁷ Though maternal instinct urges them to want to have children, the Torah does not command them to do so – for such a mandate would be a violation of the supreme value of pleasantness that underpins all Torah understanding and law.

Though the English term “pleasantness” has a benign tone, the concept is robust in Jewish life, and paramount in Torah law and behavior. In its broadest sense, it is the basis for many of the particular *mitzvos* and laws of the Torah. The Torah prohibits actions – stealing, murdering, slandering others, for example – that violate the essential principle of pleasantness, while positive commandments – such as hospitality, charity, caring for the sick, and comforting the bereaved – exemplify pleasantness in human affairs. The seven Noahide laws,⁸ which Judaism

5. Sukkah 32a.

6. Yevamos 87b. Also see Tosafos Yevamos 17b, the top Tosafos on the page.

7. Genesis 9:7.

8. As enumerated in Sanhedrin 56a, they are: prohibitions against paganism, blasphemy, stealing, murdering, sexual immorality, the mandate to establish a lawful and just society, and the prohibition against eating from an animal while it is still alive.

holds to be universal for all humankind, are basically laws of pleasantness that lead to a dignified and just society.

Because of this emphasis, a concept arose in Judaism that took on societal importance, though it was not codified in absolute law: one is prohibited from doing things that are not nice. Public opinion of the probity of a person's behavior was always to be taken into account.⁹ A good Jew was usually defined in Jewish life in terms of pleasantness and goodness toward others and not exclusively in terms of observance and piety. The common response of Lithuanian Jews regarding the *frumkeit* of a person was "*frum iz a galach*,"¹⁰ i.e., that superficial religiosity – exclusively concentrating on personal spirituality and punctilious observances of the law – is not the measure of a good Jew; it belongs to monks. A good Jew lives by the overall values of the Torah, including consideration and pleasantness in human affairs.

In the introduction to his monumental commentary to Torah, *Haamek Davar*, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (known by the acronym, Netziv) describes our ancestors in Genesis as *yesharim*: pleasant, straight, unbiased, righteous people. In a veiled criticism of attitudes that were already apparent in his time in Eastern European Jewish life, he points out that in Second Temple times, even though there was widespread observance of Torah laws, and there were many great *talmidei chachamim* (Torah scholars) within Jewish society, the Temple was destroyed because of unwarranted hatred, intolerance, and false condemnations of one another by different groupings within Jewish society.¹¹ Anyone who had different ideas or who deviated from what one group thought to be Jewishly correct, politically or socially, was immediately branded as an *apikores* (a non-believer and heretic). In that context, the Netziv points out that God is, so to speak, *Yashar* and therefore cannot abide "righteous" people who are not pleasant, straight, and tolerant in their dealings with other humans.¹² He concludes that the require-

9. See Avos 2:1, 2:13–14, and numerous other places in the Talmud.

10. My Lithuanian-born teachers in the yeshiva of my youth drummed this phrase into my mind.

11. Introduction to Genesis, *Haamek Davar*, Jerusalem, 1959, p. XIII.

12. Ibid.

ment of pleasantness, as set forth in the Torah, covers one's relationship with others, even those with whom one may disagree on the methods of serving God. Our father Avraham even attempted to convince God to save Sodom!

Rabbi Berlin's attitude was typical of the rabbinic leadership of Lithuania, where the sharp divisions within nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eastern European Jewish life were clearly present, but without the venom and violence that often marked these disputes in other places. It was not that the leaders of Lithuanian Orthodoxy were more compromising in their opposition to secularism, Marxism, nationalism, and the other panaceas that swept through the streets of Eastern European Jewry. On the contrary, they were the leading opponents, both intellectually and practically, of these false gods. But even in the midst of their struggle to stem the tide of assimilation, they never lost sight of the value of respect and pleasantness in dealing with other people. Observing how they reacted to this challenge, we see continual striving for pleasantness in their personal and communal lives.

Pleasantness is one of the central values of the *Mussar* Movement,¹³ founded in Lithuania by Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant. (The unique and far-reaching *Mussar* phenomenon will be discussed in Chapter Four.) Rabbi Salant once described an encounter he experienced on his way to the synagogue on Yom Kippur eve: A well-known, God-fearing man passed near him on the street. The man was weeping and trembling in anticipation of the holy Day of Judgment. Rabbi Yisrael stopped and asked him for some information that he needed. The man completely ignored Rabbi Yisrael and made no response to his request; he simply walked away. Although Rabbi Yisrael forgave the man his rudeness, he nevertheless remarked to his disciple, Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer, "When he hurried away I thought to myself: Why should I be victimized by that person's fervor to prepare himself for Yom Kippur? What does his con-

13. For a thorough review of the *Mussar* Movement, its philosophies and personalities, see *Tnuas Hamussar* by Rabbi Dov Katz. The primary source on the movement and on its founder, Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant, is the book *Ohr Yisrael* by Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer (Peterburger) published in Vilna in 1900.

cern regarding the Day of Judgment have to do with me? He is obligated to answer me courteously, *for that is the way of pleasantness and grace.*"¹⁴

Another example of this rule of pleasantness as developed by the great Lithuanian masters of *Mussar* is found in a letter written by Rabbi Simchah Zissel Ziev, the "Alter" of Kelm. He writes, "How great is the requirement that a person care about the feelings of others, that they should not be pained by him! We see that the prophet Jeremiah, while in great personal mental agony over the prophecy of the impending destruction of the Temple, nevertheless did not forget to greet and bless others whom he chanced to meet on the way."¹⁵ In short, the Alter states, "Concern about the welfare of others is in reality the ultimate concern regarding one's own self and one's own soul."¹⁶

The *Alter* was differentiating between courtesy – manners that are learned and superficial (and often a manifestation of innate smugness and self-aggrandizement) – and sincere concern for others, which is rooted in true pleasantness of character. That trait, in essence, is a characteristic of one's soul, revealing itself in every venue and interplay with others. It rests upon a feeling about one's self, about others, about the world generally; and it stems from the recognition that everything God created in our universe is very good. Character traits of appreciation and thankfulness are developed, as well as a sense of satisfaction with one's lot in life. In that sense, concern for others is a product of one's own relationship with God, a pleasantness that is nourished by deep spiritual roots.

The renowned spiritual counselor Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, *Mashgiach* of the Yeshiva of Mir in the 1920s and early 1930s, pointed out that pleasantness is the key to justice. The attitude of two people who enter a case in a rabbinic court should not be "What can I gain from the other person?" but rather "How can I rid myself of the doubt that I may have in my possession wealth or objects that are 'stolen' in that they are not really mine?"¹⁷ The key to pleasantness, and hence to

14. *Ohr Yisrael*, p. 118.

15. *Chochmah U'Mussar*, Brooklyn, 1957, p. 13.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

17. *Da'as Chochmah U'Mussar*, vol. 1, Brooklyn, 1966, p. 254, et al.

justice and fairness in life, is judging one's own behavior in the light of how it affects others. Justice is found only in the ability to glimpse the other person's plight, needs, and opinions.

Inner serenity derives from consistent pleasantness in demeanor, behavior, and character. The prophet Yishayahu stated that "evildoers rage like [the waves of] the sea."¹⁸ Beset by jealousy of others, unsatiated desires, and overwhelming frustrations, the evildoer is not a pleasant person and therefore will never achieve inner serenity.

Rabbi Levovitz stresses that that this serenity is a spiritual accomplishment, approaching Godliness itself, which is the ultimate goal. "Serenity of the spirit is the crown and sum of all positive traits and accomplishments. The opposite of this, the *lack* of inner serenity, contains all of the character defects of a person. From a lack of serenity, negative traits such as anger and irascibility emerge. It also causes failure in achieving proper intent during prayer and lack of devotion to Torah study."

The mindset that the Torah is not a burden on Jews – but rather a privilege and a badge of honor – permeated Lithuanian Jewry and is found in every vibrant Torah personality and community. Our leaders generally strived to make living a halachic life in the midst of an often hostile non-Jewish society a pleasant and attainable goal. For example, Lithuanian rabbis were in the forefront of finding ways to free women who were *agunos* (women who were trapped in a limbo of distress because their husbands had disappeared and they had no knowledge of their whereabouts, nor a divorce). The learned responsa of the Lithuanian rabbis on this matter always show their compassion and ways of pleasantness as a guiding lodestar in these efforts.¹⁹

These rabbis did not search out defects in others; and in their rational view of the world, they tolerated different views and approaches to Jewish life. As mentioned previously, traditional Jewry fought and

18. Isaiah 57:20.

19. See, for example, the responsa of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, *Chut Hameshulash*, section eight; the responsa of Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, *Be'er Yitzchak*; Rabbi Isaac Halevy Herzog in his responsa on *Even Haezer*; and the works of many other Lithuanian sages over the centuries.

opposed Jewish secularism and the Marxist ideas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet even in regard to these critical issues, the battle was fought with less personal acrimony and lasting bitterness in Lithuania.²⁰

There were historical exceptions to the idea of conducting a “pleasant” struggle between vastly conflicting and opposing streams in Jewish Lithuanian society. Many of the bitter struggles regarding eighteenth-century Jewish life in Lithuania were marked by bans, excommunications, betrayal to the Czarist authorities, and even physical violence. Yet after the initial decades of strife, the “ways of pleasantness” in Lithuanian Jewry reasserted itself. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the dispute between Chasidim and Misnagdim – though always simmering beneath the surface – was removed from the public life of Lithuanian Jews. In the mid-nineteenth century, Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin, the titular head of non-Chasidic Lithuanian Jewry, cooperated openly and sincerely with the Lubavitcher Rebbe of his time on matters of mutual interest and public benefit.

There were strong, though small, pockets of Chasidim scattered throughout Lithuania in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Chasidic life there closely mirrored this way of pleasantness that was the overall direction of both the rabbinic and Chasidic leadership. In general, there was a great deal of cooperation and mutual respect between the different Jewish religious groupings in Lita (Lithuania).

The attitude of rabbinic Lithuanian leadership on the whole was moderate and thoughtful, not given to extremism and fanaticism. In the world of ideas and political action in general at that time, there were many competing groups – yeshivas, secularists, Marxists, “enlightened ones,” Zionists and anti-Zionists, followers of *Mussar* and anti-*Mussar* scholars – but their ideological struggles were conducted in the public

20. It is important to note that the Lithuanian rabbinic leadership was almost totally wiped out in the Holocaust. Because of this, those who embodied this idea of pleasantness and its value system – and had been in the forefront of its dissemination in the wider Jewish world – virtually disappeared from the Jewish scene. Certainly, their presence and influence are still sorely missed.

arena in a much more muted, scholarly, and intellectual fashion than in other countries.

With the rise of Communism in the twentieth century, this began to change slowly. The ruthlessness and violence practiced by the extreme Left victimized the Jewish community in new and shocking ways. Despite their penchant for moderation, rabbinic Lithuanian leaders were forced to take a more militant attitude to counter dire threats.

An age of brutality was ushered in. By the atrocities of Hitler and Stalin, Lithuanian Jewry was destroyed. But its spirit, legacy, and values remain vital in Jewish life in Israel and the Diaspora until today.

The great Rav of Ponivezh, Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, told me in 1964, “The Jews of South Africa are in the main Litvaks. Many have forgotten observances and Torah learning. But still they have retained the good character traits and ways of pleasantness which were so characteristic of Lithuanian Jewry. Because of this, the Lord will help them find their way back to Torah observance and study as well.” The rabbis taught us that “a wise man [in his foresight] is even greater than a pure prophet.”²¹ In large measure, the Rav’s prediction has come to fruition in South African Jewry. One should never underestimate the spiritual and historical power of the ways of pleasantness in Jewish society.

21. Bava Basra 12a.