Shaul Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century. Creating a Tradition of Learning*, Oxford-Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012. 416 p. ISBN 978-1906-764-60-9

The monograph ‘The Transformation of Lithuanian Yeshivas’¹ by Shaul Stampfer, published in 1995, about the genesis of the changes to this institution of traditional Jewish studies, was immediately perceived by readers as a cornerstone work on the education of East European Jews, and, more broadly, of research into the society of East European Jews. This is not because this sphere lacks published works: perhaps it can be said that there is even a certain excess, indicating that in Judaic studies, education occupies an especially significant place: from the four-volume collection of sources ‘Sources for the History of Jewish Education. From the Early Middle Ages to the Haskalah’² prepared by Simcha Asaf, which has become a classic of the genre, to the whole literature on the yeshivas of Europe (including Lithuania). This literature discussed the very notion of ‘Lithuanian’ scholarship, associated primarily not with Lithuania, but with the type of study (there had been ‘Lithuanian’ yeshivas in the territory comprising current Belarus, where in 1802 the first, at Volozhin, was established). However, the area of the history of Jewish education had a number of methodological problems relating to the fact that the development of education and its phenomena was perceived not only through a scholarly prism, but also through a value-based prism, as the highest achievement of Jewish spiritual culture. In addition, after the Second World War, which practically destroyed Jewish communal life in Eastern Europe, a new nostalgic tendency for glorifying and mourning the ‘golden age’ began to form, and it gave birth to texts making claims to belonging to the fields of memoir, biography or documentary, but essentially of a hagiographic nature. Starting in the 1990s, the works of proponents of new approaches to research in the history of Jewish education appeared, based on a critical new assessment of known sources, and the discovery of additional sources: in Israel by Immanuel Etkes, Shaul Stampfer and Mordechai Zalkin, and in the USA by David Roskies, Jack Kugelmass,

¹ S. Stampfer, *Ha-yeshiva ha-litait be-hithavata* (Jerusalem, 1995).

² S. Asaf, *Mekorot le-toldot ha-hinukh be-yisrael (mi-tkhillat yemey ha-beynayim ad tekufat ha-haskala)*, 1–4 (Tel Aviv, 1925–1943) and a number of later newly edited reissues (the last in 2006).

Jonathan Boyarin, Norman Lamm³ and others. They sought to restore carefully the demythologised Jewish educational system and its multifaceted links with the community structure, and the social, economic and everyday life of individual community members. An example of this trend is the commented collection of sources published in 2004 'The Yeshivas of Lithuania. Fragments of Memories',⁴ prepared by Immanuel Etkes and Shmuel Tikochinski, transferring material of 'post-Holocaust hagiography' to the realm of scholarly research, i.e. making it an academic subject. The mentioned 1995 monograph by Stampfer about three Lithuanian yeshivas, Volozhin, Telšiai and Slobodka, was one of the first to take this direction for analysing the history of Jewish education. Not only did it systematise for the first time the development of these training institutions and present important new facts, but it also became a new instance of conceptualisation, scholarly neutrality and critical historicism in research into Jewish education. In 2005, a second edited and expanded version⁵ was published, qualitatively supplemented thanks to newly discovered documents from the opened-up archives of the former USSR.

The 2012 English version *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century* is a book incorporating the latest research by Stampfer, which would be most useful and effective when read along with the author's collection *Families, Rabbis and Education*⁶ published in 2010. Together, these two studies provide an in-depth analysis of the role of educational institutions for the traditional community undergoing a process of modernisation, their actual and projected impact on members of the community, and their socio-cultural environment.

In addition to an analysis of the three yeshivas, the book has a chapter on the *Kolel haprushim* that operated in Kaunas from 1880, a study institution for married students, in which mature forms of learning dominated: independent individual studies, or work in small groups. The chapter analyses in detail the evolution, programmes of study, and the inner life of the institution. The part on the Volozhin yeshiva is supplemented by published documents of the tsarist administration relating to its activities. As the author wrote in the introduction to the 2005 Hebrew version, he sought to present the history of the yeshivas and *kolel*, rather than dwell on a specific type of study. Nevertheless, Stampfer's book lets the reader who is less acquainted with the course and objectives of such

³ His monograph, devoted to the development of the method of the Volozhin yeshiva studies: N. Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (New York, 1989).

⁴ *Yeshivot lita: pirkey zikhronot*, E. Etkes, S. Tikochinski, (eds.), (Jerusalem, 2000).

⁵ S. Stampfer, *Ha-yeshiva ha-litait. Mahadura murkhevet u-metukenet* (Jerusalem, 2005).

⁶ S. Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis and Education. Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe* (Oxford-Portland, 2010).

studies look at the learning process and understand the singularities of 'Lithuanian' scholarship: the broad erudition of the students that made it possible to include large amounts of text in the orbit of the studies, a deeper analysis of the text, an unrestricted heuristic search, and a critical attitude to authority.

The monograph shows that all of these institutions never existed in an artificial intellectual vacuum: the reader is able to compare their links with the surrounding society to the circulatory system of the body. Stampfer, however, stresses that during the course of the 19th century, the Lithuanian yeshivas had an ever bigger formative impact on the communities: the preservation and exaltation of traditional scholarship in conditions of modernisation became an incentive to Orthodox communities; on the other hand, the increased prestige and the elitism of scholarship attracted the wider public into its orbit through yeshivas.

Shaul Stampfer's book is undoubtedly an important tool for the researcher of the Jewish history and culture of Eastern Europe, and its appearance in the English language significantly broadens its audience.

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