Deconstructing the Mystical: 
The Anti-Mystical Kabbalism in 
Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin’s 
_Nefesh Ha-Hayyim_*

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Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin (1749–1821) was head of the rabbinical academy in the city of Volozhin from 1802–1821 and a leading voice of non-Hasidic Lituanian Orthodoxy in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.¹ He is most well known for a treatise completed

¹The impact of the Volozhin Yeshiva on all of eastern European Orthodoxy can hardly be overestimated. The name of the Yeshiva was changed to _Etz Hayyim_ in honor of R. Hayyim after his death and trained a whole generation of scholars, some of whom, like R. Abraham Isaac Ha-Kohen Kook and Hayyim Nahman Bialik, became leading figures in early 20th century Jewry. Bialik called
around 1797 and posthumously published by his son R. Isaac in 1824. Entitled Neftsh Ha-Hayyim, the book quickly became popular, widely read among the yeshiva communities in the 19th and 20th centuries.² It wasn’t until recently, however, that Jewish scholarship has taken an interest in this work. In the past few decades Jewish philosophers, sociologists interested in the Hasidic-Mitnagdic debate in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and historians of eastern European Jewry have discovered that Neftsh Ha-Hayyim is in many respects the most sophisticated, systemic and comprehensive statement of Lithuanian Orthodoxy in its heyday.³

R. Hayyim’s teacher and mentor, R. Elijah ben Zalman (the Gaon of Vilna or GRA) (1720–1797), was the leading figure of

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²On the date and composition and the source of the name Neftsh Ha-Hayyim see Norman Lamm, Torah for Torah’s Sake (New York, 1989), pp. 59–61. Neftsh Ha-Hayyim was printed seven times from 1837–1867 a testament to its widespread popularity. The most widely used edition to date was the 1973 Jerusalem re-print of the 1837 Vilna edition. The newer Jerusalem edition includes Raah Hayyim, (the 1837 Vilna edition does not) R. Hayyim’s commentary to the Mishna tractate Pirke Avo and R. Hayyim’s Introduction to the GRA’s commentary to Sfer d’Znitiat, an important text devoted to R. Hayyim’s appraisal of his mentor as a Kabbalist as well as his own attitude toward Kabbala. The most recent edition, prepared by R. Yosekhar Dov Rubin (Bnei Brak, 1989) is vocalized and contains indexes, source references as well as two additional collections of R. Hayyim’s teachings, Derashot MoHaRan and Eiz Hayyim but does not include Raah Hayyim. All page references in this essay will be from the 1989 Bnei Brak edition.