

The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism
by Eliyahu Stern.
Yale University Press 2013.

The Genius is as fine a work of meticulously researched scholarship as one could wish to read. Its quality is not only evinced by the text, which comprises 171 pages, but by the combined notes and bibliography which comprise a further 137 pages!

Eliyahu Stern divides his work into six chapters, sandwiched between an Introduction and Conclusion: Elijah and Vilna in Historical Perspective; Elijah's Worldview; Elijah and the Enlightenment; the Gaon versus Hasidism; The Biur and the Yeshiva; The Genius.

As its subtitle makes clear, The Genius is not just another biography of Elijah but also significantly about the role that he played in the development of some key aspects of what we consider to be modern Judaism. Many general readers will come to this book with at least three perspectives on the Gaon, acquired over the years: his fierce opposition to Hasidism, his refusal to engage with the world at large, and the fact that he was a martinet in the family home.

Professor Stern takes issue with the opinion that classifies Elijah not just as an opponent of Hasidism, but also as an unyielding enemy of the Enlightenment and Haskalah thinking, and he persuasively demolishes them.

Instead he argues that Elijah, buoyed up by the fact that he lived in a place where Jews were the majority felt able to develop and was much more influential in developing literary heritage, language and political traditions for his community than is commonly perceived to be the case

Stern also explains and rebuts the long held opinions of some Jewish historians about the opposition of those Jews cast as 'traditional' towards modernity, arguing that the real situation was much more complex and much less clear cut than has been widely held to be the case.

The Genius tells the tale of a brilliant man who became and remains one of the most iconic figures in modern Jewish history, and leaves the reader with a truly rounded impression of Elijah and his legacy, not the least part of which was and is the modern yeshivah.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh