



The Vilna Gaon Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720–1797)

On the obverse: the Litvak sign combining the two symbols that represent Lithuania's Jews – a menorah and the Columns of Gediminas, laconically expressing that Litvaks are an integral part of Lithuanian history.

On the reverse: a well-known Hebrew acronym of the Vilna Gaon – הגר"א / HA GR'A (HA GAON RABBI ELYAHU) inscribed in gold.

The gold character ש (Hebrew letter/ numeral *shin*) represents the number 300. ש is also written on *tefillin* that Jews wear on their heads during daily prayers (each year, excluding Shabbats, has 300 days for prayers). In portraits, the Vilna Gaon is also depicted wearing a *tefillin* marked with the letter ש.

ש is a crown-shaped letter. The crown is a particularly important symbol in the decor of Jewish relics. Historical coins of the Gaon's era often depicted a crown above the initials of the ruler.

The inscriptions on the coin are engraved in several languages, thus highlighting that the Vilna Gaon is a global figure, significant not only to Eastern Europe but to the international Jewish community as well.

Coins of the Gaon era with crowns on the top of their compositions



Coin of Paul I of Russia found by archaeologist Jon Selgman while excavating the site of the former Great Synagogue of Vilna



Denomination: €10		On the edge of the coin: JEI NORĖSI, IR TU TAPSI GENIJUM (IF YOU WILL IT, YOU TOO CAN BE A GENIUS) and the Yiddish translation of the phrase	
Silver Ag 925		Quality: proof	
Diameter: 34.00 mm		Weight: 23.30 g	
Mintage: 2,500 pcs		Designed by the creative group JUDVI&AŠ (Viktorija Sideraitė Alon, Jūratė Juozėnienė and Albinas Šimanauskas)	
Issued in 2020			



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Coins minted at the Lithuanian Mint
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Lithuanian Collector Coins
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Brochure designed by Liudas Parulskis
Photo credits: Office of the Chief Archivist of Lithuania, Wikimedia Commons, Money Museum of the Bank of Lithuania, Arūnas Baltėnas, Roman Yanushevsky (Adobe Stock), Viktorija Sideraitė Alon

Printed by UAB INDIGO print
www.indigoprint.lt
Published by the Bank of Lithuania
Gedimino pr. 6, LT-01103 Vilnius

Lithuanian Collector Coins

300th birth anniversary of the Vilna Gaon (Elijah ben Solomon Zalman)





The Great Synagogue of Vilna built on the foundation of the first synagogue in Lithuania (1572), photographed during World War I (1914–1918)

Vilna Gaon

Commemorating the 300th anniversary of one of the most famous figures in Lithuanian Jewish history – the Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman), the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania declared 2020 as the Year of the Vilna Gaon and the History of the Jews in Lithuania.

The activities of the Vilna Gaon, his intellectual heritage and the weight of his authority greatly influenced the development of the religious and cultural identity of the Lithuanian Jewish (Litvak) community.

The Vilna Gaon, one of the all-time famous exegetes of the Torah and Talmud, brought renown to the city of Vilnius, also known, thanks to the Gaon, as the Jerusalem of Lithuania. The erudition, intellect and deep insights of the Sage made Vilnius an important and world-famous spiritual centre for Eastern European Jews.

For the past 300 years, the Vilna Gaon has been and still is one of the most acclaimed religious authorities of the global Jewish community. In his own time, he gained exceptional recognition and fame, was considered a cult icon among his Jewish

contemporaries and later grew into a legendary, often even mystified, personality. The name of the Vilna Gaon is enveloped in colourful myths and stories about his life that have been passed down from generation to generation, reaching even the furthest reaches of the Litvak diaspora.

Elijah ben Solomon Zalman was born on 23 April 1720 in Sielec, Brest-Litovsk Voivodeship. The father of the future genius, Solomon Zalman (a descendant of Isaac Kremer, the famed Rabbi of Vilnius), was also an eminent expert on the Talmud. Even in early childhood Elijah stood out among his peers for his extraordinary talents. At the tender age of six, he read a homily at the Great Synagogue of Vilna, astounding everyone with his unchildlike knowledge of rabbinic literature. Even more incredible was the fact that the exceptionally talented boy had not yet begun attending *yeshiva* – he studied the Scripture and Talmud on his own. When the boy was seven years old, his father sent him to Kėdainiai, where he studied for half a year under the guidance of Rabbi Moses Margalioth. Having returned to Vilnius, Elijah continued his studies individually. In addition to studying the Torah and Talmud, he also delved into theoretical Kabbalah. Some researchers believe that the studies of Kabbalah strengthened Elijah's inclination towards seclusion, which already became apparent in his childhood.

Elijah ben Solomon Zalman married young and soon had children, yet since his early days he already knew his calling – to dedicate his life to studying the Scripture. At the age of twenty, having abandoned his wife and children in Vilnius, Elijah left to wander around the cities and towns of Poland and Germany. There are many legends from this period of his life, attesting to the Gaon's holiness and his universal knowledge, which amazed even the European intellectuals.

After five years of wandering, in 1745, the Gaon returned to Vilnius where he spent the rest of his life. The Sage demanded much of himself, living only for his work – studying the scriptures – and leading an ascetic life. This is why the Gaon distanced himself from family matters. Even his letter with instructions for his family (which still remains to this day) seems more like a scientific treatise on moral laws and philosophical canon. At the same time, the Vilna Gaon was also known for being a righteous man and a humanist sensitive to the needs of the poor.

Legends have it that the Gaon worked with no rest and never slept for more than 2 hours and longer than 30 minutes at a time, i.e. once during the daytime and three times a night. To



New Year greeting card with a 100-rouble credit ticket featuring an image of the Vilna Gaon. Vilnius, 1907



Yad – a Jewish ritual pointer

stay sharp-minded, he kept a bowl of ice water under his desk to dip his feet in whenever he felt his eyes drooping. Deeply immersed in his work, the Sage, as described in stories, would completely lose track of time and sometimes ate the food he was served when it had already spoiled ("flavours matter not – the taste of life is in learning"). Despite such a strict routine and constant work, the Vilna Gaon passed away at the ripe old age of 77 (on 9 October 1797).

The works of Elijah ben Solomon Zalman were published only after his death. The main part of the creative legacy of the Vilna Gaon consists of commentary on the Torah, Talmud, Midrash and mystic texts of Kabbalah, which he would write in the margins of the books. His goal was to make it easier to understand the sacred texts for those Jews who used Yiddish in their daily lives, which is why he wrote a Hebrew grammar. The Vilna Gaon also wrote many valuable treatises on geometry, astronomy, medicine and natural sciences.

As Leonardo da Vinci is commonly referred to as the symbol of the Renaissance, so too the Vilna Gaon is often proclaimed as one of the greatest minds of his era. Rabbi Elijah, a true 18th-century genius, noted the importance of scientific thought in a person's spiritual development. He advocated a conscious study of scriptural truths based on a broad spectrum of sciences.

The ideas of the Jewish Enlightenment, known as the *Haskalah*, emerged in Germany and spread to Eastern Europe in the 1770s. At around that time, the first *maskilim* (*Haskalah* activists) appeared in Lithuania as well. Although as a representative of the rabbinic elite the Gaon saw the *Haskalah* ideas of secular modernisation in a negative light and considered them a threat to the Jewish worldview and the purity of the faith, he nevertheless appreciated scientific knowledge and actively advocated for books of "supplementary science" to be translated into Hebrew.

Prior to the Gaon of Vilnius, rabbis tended to claim that the Scripture had to be simply learnt by heart, while its truths were to be followed unquestionably. The Vilna Gaon was firmly convinced that people first had to understand the sacred texts and realise what they

believed in – this required additional knowledge of different languages, history, natural sciences, astronomy and even mathematics. Rabbi Elijah claimed that zealous studies of the Scripture are the true religion, while the cult rituals are merely secondary. The Sage criticised the blind dogmatic repetition of irrelevant ideas, as it did not in any way change one's relationship with God.

The Vilna Gaon's personality, his intellectual rabbinism, which through the Sage's students and numerous followers had a decisive influence on the development of the *Haskalah* ideas in Lithuania, eventually became the foundation for the mature and distinctive modern Litvak culture.

In the 18th century, Eastern Europe's Jewish communities saw the rise of a new religious movement known as *Hasidism*. *Hasids* declared a rejection of the orthodox asceticism; their belief in mysticism trumped any studies of the Scripture. The new worldview rapidly evolved, with the growing number of followers in *Lite* (the historical lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania), and inevitably approached Vilnius – the fortress of conservative Judaism in Eastern Europe.

During the Age of Enlightenment in the non-Jewish world, science was invoked to break the conservative traditions, thus it is paradoxical that a deeply scientific viewpoint and critical thinking was the most important weapon for the Vilna Gaon and his followers in fighting for the preservation of conservative rabbinic Judaism. Ironclad logic and undeniable arguments were what the Vilna Gaon used to skilfully defend his statements, which made him an insurmountable obstacle to the domination of the Hasidic movement in Lithuania. At the age of 40, the Vilna Gaon was already the spiritual leader of Jews in the region of Vilnius. The charismatic Rabbi Elijah swiftly brought together all of the most talented, educated and truly devoted researchers of the Scripture. The Vilna Gaon, together with his students, initiated the *Misnagdim* (opponent) movement, which gave birth to a whole group of followers, the most famous of which was Chaim ben Yitzchok of Volozhin who later established the famous Volozhin Yeshiva in present-day Belarus.

The name of the Vilna Gaon's followers – the *misnagdim* – who found themselves in the middle of a battle between two religious groups declaring different values, quickly became the word to define the currents of confessional. "gaonically" rational and conservative Judaism, and a well-known synonym for Litvaks.

The exceptional recognition of the Vilna Gaon can be evidenced by the fact that with the death of Rabbi Elijah, even his most ardent opponents from the Hasidic movement came to pay their respects.

Although Rabbi Elijah was a humble man, he was a very popular figure among Lithuania's Jews. Almost every Jewish family in the country had a portrait of the Vilna Gaon, while Jewish mothers would motivate their children to aim higher by showing them the Gaon's portrait and quoting: *Vil nor Goen* (if you will it, you too can be a genius).

For his insights in studying the meanings of the Scripture, the Vilna Gaon is the first Jew in history to earn the honorary title of Genius (*Gaon* in Hebrew).

Today, it would be difficult to find a religious practising Jew who would not know the meaning of *Ha Gaon me Vilna* or what the acronym HA GR'A stands for.

For the world, *Ha Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu* means Vilnius and, hence, Lithuania.

Albinas Šimanauskas