

Rabbi Simḥah Zissel Ziv and the Talmud Torah

In 1857, Israel Salanter left the Nevyozer *kloiz* and moved to Germany, and Simḥah Zissel began a period of wandering. He spent some time back in his hometown of Kelm, where he reportedly withdrew to a private room to immerse himself in musar study and meditation. He spent some time in Ruzhany, studying with his cousin Rabbi Mordekhai Gimpel Yaffe, a prominent exponent of “enlightened Orthodoxy.” He spent a short time serving as a bathhouse attendant in Palanga (Polangen) and as a teacher in nearby Kretinga. At one point, he was dispatched by Israel Salanter to the town of Zagare, to strengthen the “musar house” that had been founded there by another student of Salanter’s, the tea merchant Kalonymus Ze’ev Wissotzky. And when Wissotzky moved to Moscow at the end of the 1850s to pursue business interests, Simḥah Zissel is said to have joined him there on Salanter’s instruction to help ensure that Wissotzky would maintain his commitment to traditional Judaism.¹

By the mid-1860s Simḥah Zissel returned to Kelm, where his wife Sarah Leah and, now, his three children (Naḥum Ze’ev, Raḥel Gittel, and Neḥama Liba) had remained during the course of his travels. Sarah Leah worked full time at a grocery store, supporting her family as best she could. While Simḥah Zissel made some efforts to learn a profitable trade, occasionally engaging in bookbinding work, he was unwilling to take a well-paying position as a community rabbi. Simḥah Zissel may have viewed himself as unfit for such a job, perhaps believing that he could not withstand the moral dangers that accompany a position of great prestige and power, and perhaps also because of his more reticent personality.² Despite her difficulties in supporting the family, Sarah Leah is said to have supported her husband’s choice, following a widespread pattern among pious women in Lithuania who agreed to support their scholarly husbands.³

While mostly dedicating himself to private study, Simḥah Zissel did take on one public task upon his return to Kelm: he began to give regular Sabbath sermons at the major synagogue there. His sermons were in the spirit of musar, critiquing the moral deficiencies of the town's public institutions and its inhabitants, especially the wealthier among them; unsurprisingly, such preaching was not readily welcomed, and Simḥah Zissel (like Israel Salanter in Kovno) was barred from the pulpit. Some community members, no doubt, did not appreciate the emphasis on their flaws and the failures of established conventions. Some did not appreciate Simḥah Zissel's unfamiliar style of preaching, which, according to one testimony, was overly philosophical. Some—perhaps many—were opposed to giving a platform to the proponent of a new sect of Judaism, which seemed to resemble “a modern sort of Hasidism,” as the biographer Ya'akov Mark put it.⁴

Hasidism, which had spread rapidly throughout the rest of Eastern Europe during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, had been widely opposed by Lithuanian Jewry. The Mitnagdim, Lithuanian rabbis who opposed Hasidism, were especially offended by the movement's failure to embrace Talmud study as the supreme religious activity, its ecstatic, movement-filled mystical prayer practices, and its attempts to set up its own communal structures under the direction of charismatic leaders rather than joining with the wider Jewish community. Despite its many differences with Hasidism, the Musar movement seemed to present some of the same features. It encouraged other religious practices at the expense of Talmud study, including ecstatic chanting sometimes accompanied by movement. It also challenged established conventions, setting up institutions such as “musar houses” outside of accepted communal frameworks. The appearance of Salanter's Musar movement revived memories of the struggle against Hasidism, and Salanter's disciples were labeled scornfully as the “Hasidim of Zemet.” Like the Hasidim, they were condemned for their sectarianism and for their pretensions to higher levels of piety than other Jews.⁵

Some residents of Kelm were particularly concerned that the Musar movement's pietism disrespected the town's culture of Talmudic scholarship. One Kelm native named Eliezer Eliyahu Friedman, in his memoirs, accused Simḥah Zissel of setting himself up as a charismatic leader, a Hasidic-style “rebbe” who taught that “even if a person has learned little of Torah and hair-splitting dialectics . . . he will stand on a level above the level of the scholars”—if only he purifies his heart through musar. Such a perspective was anathema to Friedman, who took the conventional view that status should be determined by

scholarship, and who saw Kelm as a town where, historically, men of all social classes had devoted themselves to the study of Talmud and legal codes.⁶

Who, then, supported Simḥah Zissel's efforts in Kelm? Friedman describes a group of recent migrants to Kelm—merchants with a less scholarly bent who had come to Kelm to explore commercial opportunities there. These merchants were apparently not readily welcomed by the established community, but they found that Simḥah Zissel respected them. After Simḥah Zissel stopped preaching at the central synagogue, they formed the core of a group that began to meet at his house on Sabbath afternoons to study *musar*.⁷

Faced with the difficulties of changing the moral habits of adults, however, Simḥah Zissel came to focus on the education of youth. He followed the lead of Salanter, who had himself turned toward focusing on younger students (in their teens and twenties) while in Kovno. Simḥah Zissel, however, aimed to teach even younger students, and he developed plans for a primary school dedicated to cultivating moral discipline.⁸

The History of the Talmud Torah

Sometime in the course of the 1860s, Simḥah Zissel established a school for boys in Kelm known as the Talmud Torah.⁹ A school called a "Talmud Torah" was usually a tuition-free school funded by the local Jewish community for orphans and impoverished children. A standard Talmud Torah taught the same subjects taught in *heder*s, the widespread private one-teacher schools that offered a basic Jewish education to all boys whose families could afford it, providing some familiarity with the prayer book, the Pentateuch, and Talmudic literature. Under the influence of the Haskalah, however, a number of Talmud Torah schools in nineteenth-century Russia also began to teach general studies of the sort taught in Russian elementary schools, particularly practical subjects such as Russian language and mathematics. These institutions became the only Jewish primary schools to combine traditional Jewish studies with general studies—a deeply attractive educational model for many parents, including some with greater financial resources. While some Talmud Torah schools, committed to their charitable mission, refused to accept students who were not poor or orphaned, others began to accept boys from wealthier families so long as these families paid full tuition. This arrangement improved the reputation of the schools while offering them greater

funding, and so a new model of Talmud Torah schools developed: schools that offered a “modern” education to students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.¹⁰

Simḥah Zissel’s Talmud Torah was of this reformed variety, as it taught general studies and accepted tuition-paying students. During the time that Simḥah Zissel directed it, however, the school does not seem to have received any public funding from the town of Kelm. It instead came to depend on private donations—among its most prominent supporters was Kalman Ze’ev Wissotzky—and on tuition dues.¹¹ Simḥah Zissel seems to have made substantial efforts to draw in students from wealthy families from throughout Zamet and the region to its north, Courland. Indeed, while it continued to teach poorer boys as well, the Talmud Torah’s student body came to be largely made up of the sons of successful businessmen.¹² This arrangement not only provided income for the Talmud Torah but allowed Simḥah Zissel to reach children who would be more likely to grow up to have substantial influence in their communities. Though Simḥah Zissel was seemingly committed to aiding the poor and other marginalized Jews, he was also interested in transforming Jewish culture as a whole, and so he sought to reach the children of an elite—not the scholarly elite, who disdained Simḥah Zissel’s vision, but the ranks of businessmen whose status was rising and whose children might grow up to change the nature of Jewish culture. Rather than focusing on influencing the parents, who were already set in their ways, Simḥah Zissel focused on their young children, who could be more easily persuaded to dedicate their lives to the work of musar.¹³

Within a number of years, however, the Talmud Torah expanded to accommodate older students as well, eventually constituting itself as a yeshiva—a more advanced academy dedicated to the study of Talmud—which served sixty or seventy students primarily between the ages of ten and seventeen.¹⁴ Like other Lithuanian yeshivas, the Talmud Torah devoted time to the Talmud and its commentaries, but it also set aside time for two untraditional areas of study. First, time was devoted to musar—to efforts at improving moral character—to an unprecedented degree. Second, the Talmud Torah was the first traditionalist yeshiva in Eastern Europe to set aside time for general studies—mathematics, geography, and Russian language, literature, and history. Both of these additions to the curriculum came at the expense of Talmud study, and most traditionalists saw Simḥah Zissel as impugning the honor of the Talmud.¹⁵

Simḥah Zissel’s efforts to reform traditional education and his continued criticism of established conventions seem to have made him

an unpopular figure in Kelm. Already by 1873, a newspaper article about the Talmud Torah referred to efforts by its opponents to close the school.¹⁶ The Talmud Torah did successfully gather the signatures of eight residents of Kelm who supported a petition for the school to be officially licensed by the Russian government, and in 1878, the school finally received its official license.¹⁷ Its opponents, however—perhaps in response to this recognition—apparently employed an old trick that had been used in many instances in the struggle against the Hasidic movement, informing governmental authorities that the Talmud Torah was in fact a center for fomenting rebellion against the czar. After government investigators arrived at the Talmud Torah, confiscating its books and records, Simḥah Zissel seems to have concluded that it was not possible to run his school in Kelm.¹⁸ He saw a more hospitable environment to the north in Courland (in modern-day Latvia), a region on the border of Germany where Jews imbibed both Lithuanian Jewish culture and German Jewish culture. Courland was an area where other Musar movement leaders had found little opposition, and it was at the same time a region that offered a greater openness to general studies.¹⁹ Moreover, Simḥah Zissel seems to have admired aspects of non-Jewish culture in Courland, which he described as reflecting the “moral decency” of German culture; in one later letter, for example, he declared that Jews should aspire to be like “the non-Jewish craftsmen in Courland who adopt the German ways of loving order and who understand the importance of honoring one’s promises.”²⁰

The Dessler family, Courland residents whose sons had been students at the Talmud Torah in Kelm, offered to fund the reestablishment of the school in the quiet Courland town of Grobin, and by 1880, Simḥah Zissel had reopened the Talmud Torah there.²¹ Presumably to change his fortune, he changed his name, adopting his mother’s family name, Ziv, in place of his father’s family name, Broida.²² He was found innocent of the charges brought against him in Kelm, and his efforts in Grobin had the full support of the Russian government.²³ The general structure of the curriculum in Grobin seems to have remained the same as in Kelm. As an 1882 newspaper article put it, the Talmud Torah “was established by the government to teach the children of Israel Torah, Wisdom, and Moral Decency [*Derekh Eretz*].” “Torah” here refers to the traditional study of the Talmud and its commentaries; “wisdom” refers to general studies; and the teaching of “moral decency” refers to the teaching of musar, to Simḥah Zissel’s efforts to cultivate the virtues among his students.²⁴

Talmud Study and Musar Study

The school day at the Talmud Torah began with a lengthy prayer service, followed by breakfast. Students then spent approximately three hours immersed in the study of Talmud, until it was time for afternoon prayers (preceded by five minutes of musar study) and lunch.²⁵ Spending three hours a day studying the Talmud is not insubstantial, but other yeshivas dedicated considerably more time to the study of Talmudic law. As a result, the Talmud Torah developed a reputation as an institution where—in the words of Ya’akov Mark, a keen observer of the era’s yeshiva culture—“they did not learn much Talmud” because “the essence of the learning was musar and character traits.”²⁶

Rabbi Dov Katz—whose father had studied with Simḥah Zissel, and who became the first chronicler of the Musar movement’s history—notes that, to the yeshiva’s credit, skills in understanding the dialectics of the Talmud mattered little in the assessments of students given by Simḥah Zissel and his fellow administrators: “At the Kelm Talmud Torah, they did not judge everyone based on their skills, as was customary at other yeshivas, but rather they first and foremost evaluated their character traits and the virtues of their souls.”²⁷ While the Talmud was viewed as the repository of God’s law and a source of great moral wisdom, focusing on the study of Talmudic law was seen as insufficient for the task of moral improvement. Musar literature, which generally expanded on the nonlegal portions of the Talmud, was seen as a necessary supplement. The Talmud Torah encouraged its students to give particular attention to the study of that literature and to various other practices of musar—various practices intended to build moral discipline.

The Talmud Torah schedule devoted time each evening to musar, generally beginning with a sermon from Simḥah Zissel. Sermons focused on the nature of moral excellence, the work of overcoming moral vice, the rewards and punishments associated with virtue and vice, and other musar themes—and they were sometimes sparked by particular moral failings within the Talmud Torah community. The sermons were intended, Simḥah Zissel said, “to renew the spirit” of each student, “and to place a new heart in him, that he might use reason, and do good, and love Torah and reverence and the words of the sages.”²⁸

Simḥah Zissel’s sermons seem to have had much in common with the musar sermons that he heard from Israel Salanter at the Nevyozer Kloiz in Kovno. But whereas Salanter allegedly preached on themes of musar on a weekly basis, Simḥah Zissel generally preached

daily, taking more time away from the study of Talmud. And whereas Salanter's students described their teacher's sermons as filled with fervent emotional outbursts, Simḥah Zissel reportedly did not adopt his teacher's style. According to Dov Katz, other Musar movement rabbis spoke "with overpowering words, causing excitement and enthusiasm," but Simḥah Zissel maintained a strikingly calm spirit and spoke with "words of logic and thoughtfulness." Even when he sometimes shook with excitement and awe, Katz reports, "this did not stem from emotional excitement, but from serious, reflective deliberation and penetrating moral accounting." Equanimity and self-control were virtues that Simḥah Zissel prized greatly, and he apparently did his best to harness the power of the emotions while remaining in control of them.²⁹

Even so, it seems that the sermons did create a highly emotionally charged atmosphere. After each sermon, there was a time for continued musar study, and while some reports describe a period of silent, reflective meditation, others speak of students and teachers sitting in the study hall chanting passages from musar literature to evocative melodies, seeking to move themselves toward repentance. One student recalled how, as the sun went down, the room was filled with sighs and quiet sobbing, gesticulating, fists beating on hearts, and the passionate chanting of Biblical and rabbinic passages.³⁰

Periods of extended musar meditation would also take place at other times during the day, especially during the morning, afternoon, and evening prayer services, which were considered not only times for supplication but times for cultivating virtues such as humility, reverence, equanimity, and lovingkindness. Simḥah Zissel urged his students to take their time with their prayers—for instance, to move very slowly through descriptions of God's moral goodness so that they could meditate on these ideals and consider their own personal potential for improvement. Prayer services were, consequently, quite lengthy; the standard morning service, for example, which might have lasted for half an hour in standard Lithuanian yeshivas, is said to have lasted an hour, or sometimes even two hours or longer, cutting further into the limited time for Talmud study. Talmud classes were occasionally canceled altogether, to allow for an extra chanting session following prayer, an extra musar lecture from Simḥah Zissel, or other sorts of musar activities.³¹

One additional practice was a sort of group therapy practice. Students would divide into "musar groups" (*kittot* or *va'adim*), often referred to as "reinforcement groups" or "encouragement groups" (groups for *hizzuk*), designed to provide mutual criticism and support. These groups met at least once a week, generally on Saturday

nights after the conclusion of the Sabbath. Some groups dedicated each week to focusing on a particular character trait, and spent the week engaging in exercises designed to strengthen that trait; when these groups met, a student appointed to lead each group would begin the group session by offering a sermon on the character trait in question, and students would then discuss their experiences with that trait. Other musar groups dedicated themselves to one particular issue or practice—one group focused on love for others, one focused on the observance of the Sabbath, and one committed to Simḥah Zissel’s personal practice of setting aside every tenth day as a special day for contemplation.³² Beyond these group sessions with their peers, students also received individual counseling from Simḥah Zissel and the staff of “spiritual supervisors” (*mashgiḥim*), former students who were in their twenties.³³

The various sorts of musar activities occurred on Sabbaths and holidays as well as during the week. Simḥah Zissel apparently gave three musar sermons over the course of the Sabbath, and there was little time set aside for recreation or relaxation. Students and teachers alike felt compelled to actively focus themselves on the never-ending work of healing their souls—just as, during the week, students apparently chose to use much of their free time for musar study, meditation, chanting, and group work.³⁴ And they appear to have been, on the whole, proud of their school’s unprecedented commitment to the work of improving moral character. Other yeshivas may have studied more pages of Talmud, they thought, but they did not do the work necessary to impress the virtues on their souls. Even more so, they thought, supporters of the Haskalah missed the mark by encouraging Jews to attend Western universities, which surely did not attend to the work of musar. Indeed, the legend circled among Simḥah Zissel’s students that, during a conference of German university presidents, one admitted that there was one important subject that was not taught by professors in German universities. That subject, he said, was “the repair of human character traits” (*tikkun middot ha-adam*)—and in fact, the university president noted, the repair of human character traits was taught seriously in only one place in the world: at a Jewish school in the small Russian town of Kelm.³⁵

The Talmud Torah as a Total Institution

Shaul Stampfer, one of the only academic historians to have discussed Simḥah Zissel’s Talmud Torah, has astutely observed that the yeshiva

had some of the characteristics of what sociologists call a “total institution.”³⁶ Indeed, the Talmud Torah was a “total institution” in many respects.

Sociologist Erving Goffman coined the term “total institution” to describe an institution where “a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together, lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.” In such an institution, individuals live together in a highly scheduled, supervised, and regulated environment, cut off from social intercourse with the outside world. They participate in the same activities together, all of which fit into a “single rational plan” imposed from above by an authority figure. Commonly, the “encompassing or total character” of such institutions “is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls,” and the like. Among the many examples of total institutions that Goffman cites are boarding schools and “those establishments designed as retreats from the world even while serving also as training stations for the religious; examples are abbeys, monasteries, convents, and other cloisters.”³⁷

Simḥah Zissel’s Talmud Torah fits Goffman’s description to a significant degree in ways that other Jewish institutions in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe did not. For one thing, as Stampfer points out, it was a boarding school with a dormitory, an arrangement common in Christian communities but highly innovative for a traditionalist Jewish academy. The common model for advanced Jewish learning in Eastern Europe was that learning took place in a communal study hall, sponsored by the Jews of a given town. Students were integrated with the town in many respects, taking their meals with townspeople and sleeping in the communal hall; they were, at the same time, largely free to study independently, pursuing whatever Talmudic studies interested them. The nineteenth-century introduced an alternative arrangement, the model of the private yeshiva (pioneered in Volozhin) where studies were far more directed in accordance with a fixed schedule, and where the institution was funded by donors rather than being supported by the local community; but in this model, students continued to be integrated into the community, sharing their meals with local householders and renting rooms from them, which also gave students a fair amount of privacy.³⁸

At the Talmud Torah, by contrast, food and sleeping quarters were provided by the institution. This sort of arrangement seems to have been pioneered by Israel Salanter at the Nevyozer Kloiz, discussed above; building on this model, Simḥah Zissel made particular

efforts to isolate his students from the broader Jewish community, to regulate their lives, and to grant them little privacy. Though it was a “traditionalist” institution—ostensibly seeking to preserve past customs in the face of modernity—the Talmud Torah broke with traditional customs in a number of respects, including in its efforts to create such an insular total institution. With his efforts to shield students from the outside world and transform them through musar activities and through constant supervision, Simḥah Zissel created a distinctly modern school.

Like others in the Musar movement, Simḥah Zissel sought to defend Orthodox values in the face of liberalism and to defend his focus on musar in the face of widespread hostility to it. He bemoaned increasing laxity in traditional religious observance, increasing acceptance of a range of theological heresies, and increasing treatment of self-indulgence as a positive virtue. He bemoaned decreased faith in divine providence in this world and the next, decreased attention to those in need, and decreased interest in the work of musar, which, in his view, was once widely valued in the Jewish community. Simḥah Zissel seems to have envisioned creating a total institution that would shield his students from these sorts of influences and allow them to focus on the work of musar. His attempt to create an insular environment in Kelm had not succeeded, because the Kelm Talmud Torah was in the midst of a bustling town filled with those who condemned the school’s approach. Not only did Grobin provide a less hostile environment, but Simḥah Zissel was able to build an institution there surrounded by a tall fence, an insular yeshiva that was described by Dov Katz as “a world unto itself.”³⁹

Israel Isidore Elyashev, who later became the founder of Yiddish literary criticism, spent some years as a student at the Talmud Torah in Grobin—before he was expelled for his heretical tendencies—and he later recalled just how insular the yeshiva was. As Elyashev saw it, the Talmud Torah was an institution much like a Christian monastery, in which students renounced contact with the rest of the world and dedicated themselves to their spiritual work. They spent little time outside the walls of the institution, and they were discouraged from having too much contact with their families; instead, Elyashev noted, they came to regard Simḥah Zissel as a father figure. In general, Elyashev recalled how those who dedicated themselves to musar at the Talmud Torah saw themselves as spiritually superior to those beyond its walls. The Talmud Torah may have aimed at instilling the virtue of humility—one of the central virtues in Simḥah Zissel’s thought—but, in Elyashev’s account, it cultivated a sense of arrogance among its

students. Elyashev's account is colored by his eagerness to criticize the Talmud Torah, which he despised, but as is characteristic for students living in a "total institution," it would not be surprising if students at the Talmud Torah developed a strong sense of their own superiority. Simḥah Zissel himself seems to have thought that he was conveying essential moral teachings that were readily ignored by much of the Jewish community.⁴⁰

If he thought that he possessed such teachings, though, why would Simḥah Zissel build a highly insular academy? Would he not want to spread his teachings to the broader world? Indeed, Simḥah Zissel's writings do reflect a strong sense of public-spiritedness that may be difficult to square with his yeshiva's insularity. He warned his students not to be recluses, exhorted them to care for the physical and spiritual needs of their broader communities (of non-Jews as well as Jews), and encouraged them to be involved in public life and commerce (activities made possible by the general studies curriculum). It seems likely that he viewed an insular environment as important to the training of such students, though. Elyashev suggested as much in one comment: Simḥah Zissel was interested in developing a spiritual elite, raised in an environment where they were shielded from negative influences; these students could effect change in the wider world only after having completed a substantial period of training under close supervision.⁴¹

Students at the Talmud Torah were certainly supervised, especially thanks to the "spiritual supervisors" who kept close watch on their moral development. Meritorious behavior was recorded in a white book, and demerits were recorded in a black book. These books would seem to resemble the sorts of ledgers in which, according to a classical mishnaic image offered by Rabbi Akiva, God records merits and demerits; Simḥah Zissel and the supervisors surely saw themselves as doing God's work in keeping such records and in calling students to task. On a monthly basis, they asked students to account for their behavior; this was the central monthly examination, an examination of a very different sort from the monthly test of Talmudic skills that was offered at the rival yeshiva in Kelm, led by Eliezer Gordon. The Talmud Torah seems to have created a culture in which moral excellence was indeed valued highly; students reportedly felt a good deal of shame to have their vices exposed, and the threat of shame had a positive effect on their behavior.⁴² Notably, contemporary newspaper articles on the Talmud Torah remarked that corporal punishment was never used there, a fact which might be taken as a sign of the Talmud Torah's modernity; whereas the value of the rod was upheld

throughout medieval musar literature, Haskalah reformers sought to do away with its use and to encourage educators to create school environments more along the lines of what Simḥah Zissel created.⁴³

The Talmud Torah proclaimed that it would only enroll “students of virtue, who possessed fine character traits and manners” and who were fully prepared to engage in the work of musar.⁴⁴ Students who might become negative influences on their peers were asked to leave the institution. Elyashev reported that he was expelled from the Talmud Torah on account of his strong doubts about divine providence.⁴⁵ For all that Simḥah Zissel encouraged introspective questioning of oneself, he did not support questioning of the dogmas which he saw as undoubtedly true and as necessary to proper moral formation. The Talmud Torah was a deeply orthodox institution which did not tolerate deviance; it mandated, like Goffman’s “total institution,” a significant degree of uniformity among its students.

Models of Authority

Elyashev described the students at the Talmud Torah as “hypnotized” by Simḥah Zissel’s personality, and the various reports gathered by Dov Katz indicate that he was certainly deeply revered by his students. Katz cites many testimonies of how Simḥah Zissel’s students viewed him as a saint—an exemplar of lovingkindness, thoughtfulness, and reverence. They were awed by the way he weighed each action he made, the way he saw God’s greatness everywhere, the way he kept his sleep to a minimum and dedicated himself with great concentration to the study of Torah and the work of musar.⁴⁶ They were also inspired by the way he expressed his gratitude: they told stories, for instance, of how he would come home on the eve of the Sabbath—after spending the week away at the Talmud Torah—and stop at the entrance of his home in joyous appreciation of his wife’s preparations for the holy day.⁴⁷ So too, they told stories of his empathy—for example how, while on the main road in Kelm, which was built by prison laborers, he would focus himself on the cruelty that such workers experienced. “How is it possible for people to walk with serenity in this place,” he asked, “when people suffered through such great hardships here, leaving behind their blood and sweat?”⁴⁸

But while Simḥah Zissel’s revered personality loomed large at the Talmud Torah, he was not always present there. Both in Kelm and Grobin, his office was located in the Talmud Torah’s attic, and he spent much of his time locked in the room, engaging in private study

and meditation.⁴⁹ As his health declined during the Grobin period, moreover, he began to spend increasing time in Kelm, though his absence did not seem to diminish his authority among his students in Grobin.⁵⁰ Strikingly, though, he did his best to downplay that authority. He refused to let his students rise when he entered the room, a traditional display of respect for teachers, and he refused to use the title of “rabbi,” even in formal contexts such as when called to the Torah in the synagogue. Seeking to cultivate the virtue of humility, he refused all titles and honorifics other than the title “Reb,” which was used by all Jewish men. Seeking another acceptable title that could convey their respect for him, his students eventually began to call him “Der Alter”—“the elder.”⁵¹

In another uncharacteristic move for a school director with a good deal of authority, Simḥah Zissel is said to have delighted in hearing criticism directed against him. His writings consistently stress the importance of accepting criticism, and while his delight doubtlessly had its limits, it seems to have been an ideal that he took seriously. According to student reports, for instance, Simḥah Zissel once fired a teacher at the Talmud Torah, and the teacher publicly decried his former employer as a wicked man, guilty of a variety of sins, who would have “no share in the world to come”; Simḥah Zissel calmly responded that all of the insults and accusations were true, welcoming the opportunity to embrace a posture of humility and equanimity and to focus on his faults.⁵² This sort of posture may not have been good for the reputation of the Talmud Torah or for Simḥah Zissel’s authority, but it did offer a model of how to value humility and self-improvement over power and prestige. Simḥah Zissel remained the powerful authority in his total institution, to be sure, but his authority was often not expressed in an authoritarian way.

His authority was, however, institutionalized in the many rules that governed life at the Talmud Torah. Rules were often designed to build a sense of unity, love, and respect. The regulations governing musar group meetings, for example, included the following:

- [Students] are obligated to act with moral decency [*derekh eretz*] and in [a spirit of] unity, so that there can be consensus among everyone.
- One should not interrupt the words of his fellow, and there is double value in this: first, as this is part of the laws of proper moral decency; and, second, so that each may hear the words of his fellow and move toward consensus with them, and so the intended goal of the session can be achieved well.

- One who is late to three sessions will no longer participate in the sessions, as it will be apparent that he is not seeking the good of the community and that he is not habituating himself to negating his will in deference to the will of others.
- No one has permission to say to his fellow: “accept my opinion.” Rather, the matter should be decided according to the majority opinion.
- They are obligated to hold sessions each week.
- One should not seek to justify oneself during the session.
- Before the session, everyone needs to think about the significance and value of the session.
- One should not say something during the session unless one has weighed it on the scales of one’s reason.
- When they need to offer reproof to someone who is in the session, one should not offer reproof unless it is done with respect.
- One should not speak words that will not have value for supporting the group’s ordinances.⁵³

These rules were designed to support the introspection and criticism that these musar group sessions encouraged, and to create an atmosphere of care, respect, and solidarity. The stress on overcoming divisiveness and fostering like-mindedness within the group is rather pronounced, revealing a hope for a group united by bonds of love. Love, in this vision, required respectful criticism of one’s fellows, and so required a willingness to disagree with them. But love also required seeking common ground with one’s fellow—accepting another’s criticism or withdrawing one’s critique—and respecting the consensus of the group. Similar regulations regarding respect also governed other activities at the Talmud Torah—and certain Jewish customs could even be abrogated for the sake of respect, as when, out of respect for the Russian teacher who taught general studies at the Talmud Torah, students were required to take off the hats that they otherwise wore.⁵⁴

Other rules aimed to establish order and cleanliness at the Talmud Torah. Students had to keep their possessions in their rooms and throughout the building in orderly fashion, and they were required to keep their clothes and their bodies clean. They were prohibited from extinguishing the flame lit at the end of the Sabbath inside the building, lest it leave a bad odor. They were required to be careful when using the samovar at the Talmud Torah, ensuring that it not drip on the floor. Simḥah Zissel was sometimes mocked by outsiders for taking matters of external order a bit too seriously—one

visitor reportedly mistook a talk that he gave about disordered student boots for a eulogy, as it was delivered in a tone of such solemnity. But Simḥah Zissel insisted that developing habits of order was a serious matter, essential for the moral growth of his students. How his students took care of their boots, he insisted, affected their souls. Those who developed habits of keeping their surroundings and possessions clean were better equipped to keep their souls clean as well.⁵⁵

Dov Katz recounts that the Talmud Torah did not hire a custodian. Instead, selected students were honored with the opportunity to carry out cleaning and maintenance work, which was seen as an honor—seemingly a prime opportunity to serve the community and to cultivate virtues of beneficence, humility, alacrity, and order within one’s soul. Legend has it that one wealthy student’s mother was horrified when she discovered that her son was in charge of sweeping floors at the Talmud Torah in Grobin, and she complained to Simḥah Zissel: “Are you turning my son into a housecleaner?” Simḥah Zissel responded that he was, playing with the Yiddish verb *kern*, which can mean both “to sweep” and “to transform.” “One who sweeps [*kert*] here,” he explained, “transforms [*kert*] the world.” Sweeping the floors in Grobin was seen as a practice of *musar*, a form of discipline for the soul that could help to transform human character and, ultimately, transform the world.⁵⁶

Simḥah Zissel and the Haskalah

Creating a “total institution” was a distinctively modern enterprise; there is little precedent for Simḥah Zissel’s efforts to build a school that would be a bastion of virtue, separated from the wider world and even from the local townspeople. Like many of the institutions designed by those who came to be known as Orthodox Jews, the Talmud Torah was a traditionalist institution, but its fierce defense of “tradition” required breaking with tradition and introducing new reforms into Jewish schooling. With its *musar* groups and its chanting sessions and its dormitory and its system of supervision, the Talmud Torah was offering a distinctively modern vision of how to preserve classical Jewish virtues. In an era in which rabbinic authority was waning and the vision of the Haskalah was seen as encroaching on more traditional values, Simḥah Zissel introduced a series of reforms designed to strengthen those values.

But the story of Simḥah Zissel’s modernism is considerably more complicated than this. Simḥah Zissel adopted a traditionalist posture,

but at the same time he subscribed to many of the values of the Haskalah. He built an institution which closed itself off from the wider world, but the ethical vision that he nurtured there engaged with untraditional subjects and sources. He sought to isolate his students from liberalizing trends in Judaism and in the wider world, but he also sought to isolate them from the narrow-minded Talmudism that dominated Lithuanian Orthodoxy. Indeed, the Haskalah had critiqued traditional educational institutions for being too focused on Talmudic law and for their insufficient focus on general studies, ethical values, rational thinking, and decorum, and Simḥah Zissel echoed precisely these critiques in building his Talmud Torah. Unsurprisingly, a number of his contemporaries viewed him as an “Orthodox *Maskil*,” an “enlightened” Orthodox Jew, a rabbi who combined his commitment to tradition with the values of the Haskalah in developing a new model for Jewish education.

Some of the contemporary accounts that describe the Talmud Torah as a Haskalah-influenced institution focus on the outward signs of acculturation that Simḥah Zissel promoted. Simḥah Zissel admired European notions of decorum, dress, and hairstyling; following the lead of the Haskalah, and the example of Israel Salanter as well, he advocated that men cut their sidelocks and wear short, modern jackets rather than long coats. He appears to have felt that European styles were neat and orderly, such that adopting them could help to inculcate traits of order, modesty, and moderation. Simḥah Zissel himself was strikingly Western in his own appearance; Israel Elyashev describes him, with his trimmed beard, shiny shoes, German-style clothes, and white collar, as looking “like a Protestant minister”—a style that had also been adapted by leaders of the Haskalah-influenced “neo-Orthodox” movement in Germany.⁵⁷ As Eliezer Eliyahu Friedman recalls, the Talmud Torah in Kelm was also strikingly Western in appearance, with its spacious rooms, high windows, and general cleanliness. Friedman suggests that Simḥah Zissel’s interest in the Haskalah was mostly superficial—like many nineteenth-century Russian Jews, he admired the “gleam, sparkle, and beauty” associated with European culture, but had little of the Haskalah’s intellectual engagement with modern European ideas.⁵⁸

On the other hand, many of the ideas of the Haskalah are also present in Simḥah Zissel’s writings. Like Israel Salanter, and in keeping with the ideals of the Haskalah, Simḥah Zissel favored a naturalistic accounting of human psychology, giving little attention to metaphysical and Kabbalistic speculation. He adopted a generally rationalist tone, keeping with the spirit of the medieval rationalist philosophy

that the Haskalah sought to revive while also, in line with Haskalah ideals, keeping his thought focused on morality and the social good. His effort to revive the study of virtue-centered medieval musar literature, while cautioning against extreme asceticism, was also in line with the efforts of many *Maskilim*, as was his limited interest in the complex legal dialectics of the Talmud. And many of the themes of Simḥah Zissel's writings that will be explored in the following chapters also echo major themes of Haskalah writings—themes such as the gradual nature of moral change, the importance of integrity and trustworthiness, the value of productive labor, a relatively benevolent view of political authority, and an interest in improving Jewish attitudes toward the non-Jewish world.

Simḥah Zissel's most pronounced adoption of Haskalah values came with his decision to teach general studies alongside Jewish studies at the Talmud Torah. As noted above, one of the central goals of the Russian Haskalah in the mid-nineteenth century was to introduce subjects such as mathematics and Russian into Jewish schools, a goal opposed by a wide range of traditionalists, including most figures associated with the emerging Musar movement. Salanter was among those who opposed the teaching of general studies in yeshivas, which he saw as detracting from the honor of the Talmud. His disciple Simḥah Zissel, by contrast, took a very different path, building an institution which saw general education as an important part of its mission.

Just as the Talmud Torah dedicated three hours in the morning to Talmud study, it typically dedicated three hours in the afternoon to general studies—or, as Israel Elyashev described it, “Haskalah studies.”⁵⁹ The teachers were Christians, who seem to have also taught in Russian government schools.⁶⁰ At the Talmud Torah in Kelm, they taught mathematics and Russian language, and the study of Russian exposed students to geography and to Russian and world history and literature. When the Talmud Torah moved to Grobin, the general studies curriculum expanded to also include bookkeeping, physical education, science, and an additional language that was common in Courland—German.⁶¹ All of these subjects challenged the norms of what should be taught in an Orthodox institution in Eastern Europe. German instruction was particularly frowned on by Eastern European Jewish traditionalists, who noted that German provided easy access to the heretical views of German-speaking Jews.⁶²

From one perspective, there was nothing revolutionary about Simḥah Zissel's efforts to teach general studies. Throughout the course of Jewish history, deeply traditional Jews often learned fluency in the vernacular, pursued vocational studies of all sorts, and

studied mathematics, science, history, and geography at a much higher level than what was taught at the Talmud Torah. In Simḥah Zissel's own day, neo-Orthodox institutions on the other side of the German border encouraged a deep knowledge of general German culture with far more enthusiasm than Simḥah Zissel himself mustered.

The Orthodoxy which emerged in Russia during the same period, however, was of a very different sort. An overwhelming majority of traditionalist Jews within the Russian Empire opposed any efforts to encourage these sorts of studies. They saw a commitment to non-Jewish learning as implying that there was truth to be found beyond the Jewish tradition, an idea that they feared would lead to the abandonment of that tradition, and they saw the Russian government's encouragement to study Russian as a tool to encourage assimilation and apostasy. Among Eastern European traditionalists, Hasidic Jews were especially vehement in their opposition to general studies, but Lithuanian traditionalists maintained a fierce opposition as well, convinced that the study of Talmud needed no supplement.⁶³

With newly emerging commercial opportunities, however, interest in general studies grew steadily. Liberal reforms introduced by Czar Alexander II in the 1860s, seeking to integrate Jews into Russian society, opened up new professional possibilities and educational opportunities. In response, Jews flocked to Russian-language schools of all sorts during the 1860s and 1870s. The study of Russian itself opened up new economic possibilities, technical schools emerged that would train Jews for newly opened fields, and gymnasia would prepare them for universities and prestigious professional careers. The Jewish passion for gymnasia and universities was also nurtured by the emerging sense that higher education would, as one student put it, "raise a person to a higher moral level."⁶⁴

Educational institutions run by traditionalists—the *heder* for elementary school students, the *beit midrash* or yeshiva for more advanced students—responded to the growing enthusiasm for general studies by affirming the dangers of such studies.⁶⁵ The only older institutions that did experience some change were a number of communal Talmud Torah schools designed for poor children, which, as discussed above, began to include general studies in their curriculum. Simḥah Zissel's original Talmud Torah in Kelm was built on this model. When it developed into a yeshiva focused on secondary education, it became the first yeshiva in the Russian Empire to teach general studies. Simḥah Zissel's decision to innovate in this way was probably spurred along by economic and political factors, by the desire to gain new

applicants for the Talmud Torah, and by his sense that general studies could contribute to the moral formation of his students.

It would seem likely, first of all, that Simḥah Zissel viewed Russian, mathematics, and related subjects as valuable because of the economic and professional opportunities that they made possible. The subjects taught at the Talmud Torah were subjects that had clear economic utility. And unlike other yeshiva directors who only praised the life of scholarship, Simḥah Zissel considered commerce to be a worthy endeavor. In fact, he saw commercial activity as an arena in which lovingkindness could thrive, as I will discuss further in chapter 5. He seems to have encouraged his students to pursue commercial careers with sufficient force that some of his closest disciples—including his own son, Naḥum Ze'ev Ziv—spent much of their lives engaged in commerce.

Introducing a general studies program would have also had political benefits. Traditionalist Jewish leaders in the Russian Empire—including Israel Salanter—had been criticized throughout the nineteenth century for not studying the language necessary for communicating with Russian government officials.⁶⁶ As Mordekhai Gimpel Yaffe noted in one 1873 newspaper article, Simḥah Zissel's decision to teach Russian at the Talmud Torah was creating a group of traditionally minded Jews who would be able to communicate with their political leaders.⁶⁷ Simḥah Zissel's move would have also created a favorable impression with the Russian government, and it may have come to serve his students particularly well after an 1874 government reform reduced military service obligations for Jewish students who had studied Russian. But, along with being politically expedient, teaching general studies might also have reflected a heartfelt concern, visible in Simḥah Zissel's writings, for engagement with political life and respect toward the government, themes that I will also discuss further in chapter 5.

Supporting general studies—and designing an institution marked by European notions of decorum—may have also been an effective means of outreach to the growing number of traditionally inclined Jews who supported various ideals of the Haskalah, whether those ideals were intellectual or more superficial. Numerous sources suggest that the Talmud Torah was perceived as providing a unique and attractive way to combine the world of the yeshiva and the world of the gymnasium—“to unite Haskalah with the fear of heaven,” as Israel Elyashev put it. In an era when Jewish parents were increasingly sending their children to schools that taught general studies but no Jewish studies, Simḥah Zissel may well have been appealing to those

parents who wanted their sons to study Russian and mathematics, and to dress like modern Europeans—but in a traditionalist Jewish institution where Talmud and Jewish moral values would also be taught.⁶⁸

The potential for general studies to entice such families into a Musar-movement institution might explain Israel Salanter's cautious support of the Talmud Torah's general studies program. Salanter generally opposed general education—even publically condemning his son, at one point, for his pursuit of secular studies. He was deeply troubled by the efforts in Germany, under the guidance of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, to develop neo-Orthodox institutions that taught general studies. But he conceded that a general studies curriculum could be acceptable insofar as it might appeal to modernizing German Jews—and thereby draw them into Orthodox institutions that they would otherwise avoid. Salanter also cautiously endorsed Simḥah Zissel's program, so long as Simḥah Zissel was in charge of it, and it seems likely that he viewed it as he viewed Hirsch's program—as a sort of concession that could be part of an effective outreach strategy. And he would have presumably admired how Simḥah Zissel was enticing assimilating families to affiliate with an institution that was not only "Orthodox" but that was committed to the Musar movement.⁶⁹

But Simḥah Zissel, while he doubtlessly saw himself as doing outreach work, seems to have viewed general studies as more than just attractive bait for unsuspecting parents. When he outlined the mission of the Talmud Torah in the 1870's, for example, he described the general studies program in strikingly positive terms, as one of the three foundational pillars of the yeshiva alongside Talmud study and musar study. In this passage—parts of which have been excised from later Haredi editions of his writings—he describes general studies as entailing the study of

the laws of the way of moral decency [*derekh erez*] in accordance with the spirit of the age, that one may behave [well] with people in speech and behavior, and understand the subtleties of language. But know, and let it be known, that *all these studies are grounded in the path of reverence, the fulfillment of the Torah*—and this is done very wisely and carefully.

The way of moral decency is not only what is all over scripture, but that one should "keep *the way* of the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24)—as the midrash teaches, *the way* is "the way of moral decency" that precedes Torah. It also includes the art of writing, studying the language of the state, studying mathematics and knowing geography, as is taught in this