

# ***Noda BiYehuda: Posek in an Age of Revolution***

## **Lecture 1: The Last of the Old, the First of the New**

Was Rabbi Ezekiel Landau the last great rabbi of the old world, or the first major posek of the modern age? This opening lecture explores the life and times of R. Yehezkel Landau, the Noda BiYehuda, tracing his journey from the autonomous Jewish communities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the bustling metropolis of Prague, one of the largest Jewish centers in Europe. A master of the pilpulistic learning that had dominated Ashkenazic *yeshivot* for generations, R. Landau was deeply rooted in the intellectual and social world of early modern Jewry. Yet he found himself confronting unprecedented challenges: the rise of new forms of religious dissent, the weakening of communal authority, and the political transformations that reshaped Jewish life across Europe. Through the story of his life and leadership, we will examine how the Noda BiYehuda stood at the crossroads of two eras—preserving inherited traditions while adapting to a rapidly changing world.

## **Lecture 2: Heresy, Enlightenment, and Empire**

Within the Jewish community, the lingering specter of Sabbateanism and the rise of the Frankist movement threatened the foundations of traditional belief, while the spread of kabbalistic ideas blurred the boundaries between accepted mysticism and dangerous innovation. At the same time, the early Enlightenment introduced new intellectual currents—from rationalism and deism to the emerging Haskalah—that questioned inherited religious authority and communal structures. Beyond the Jewish community, rulers increasingly viewed corporate bodies and autonomous communities with suspicion, even as they offered Jews unprecedented opportunities for integration into broader society. This lecture examines how R. Ezekiel Landau navigated these intellectual and political upheavals through his interventions in the Emden–Eybeschütz controversy, his nuanced engagement with Moses Mendelssohn’s Haskalah, his fierce opposition to Sabbatean and Frankist influences, and his dealings with the courts of Maria Theresa and Joseph II. Again and again, his judgment, political skill, and intellectual clarity enabled him to meet the challenges of his age. Yet the greatest transformation of all—the dismantling of Jewish communal autonomy under Joseph II—proved unstoppable, marking the end of the world that had shaped both R. Landau and generations of rabbinic leadership before him.

## **Lecture 3: Ethics, Empiricism, and Umbrellas: Landmark Rulings of the *Noda BiYehuda* and their Legacy**

The Noda BiYehuda was one of the most influential halakhic decisors in Jewish history. This lecture examines four of his most consequential rulings and the world from which they emerged. We begin with his famous discussion of ritual measurements (*shiurim*), where a striking tension emerges between his practical rulings and the more stringent personal practice he revealed in his Talmudic works. We will situate this debate within the broader contemporary movement toward standardizing weights and measures and also turn back to R. Landau's peers from his years in the Brody *kloyz*. We then turn to his landmark responsum on autopsies, where the rise of empirical science forced rabbinic authorities to assess the costs and benefits of expanding human knowledge. Next, we examine his celebrated responsum on hunting, which reveals his moral ambivalence about the Jewish encounter with aristocratic European leisure culture and helped shape traditional Jewish ethical attitudes for generations. Finally, we consider his surprisingly strict ruling about opening and carrying umbrellas on Shabbat, exploring whether his concerns stemmed from the function of the device, its newness, or broader social questions, comparing his position with those of his contemporaries. Together, these rulings reveal a *posek* grappling with new inventions, discoveries, and ways of thinking, whose attitudes left a lasting imprint on Jewish law and practice.

#### **Lecture 4: 1776: Founding an Empire of Words**

In 1776, as political revolutions were transforming Europe and North America, Rabbi Ezekiel Landau published the first volume of *Noda BiYehuda*, his magnum opus and one of the greatest halakhic works of all time. This lecture explores the circumstances surrounding the publication of the book, the significance of its evocative title, and the features that distinguished it from many earlier responsa collections. More than a repository of legal rulings, *Noda BiYehuda* presents a model of rabbinic authority suited to an age in which influence would increasingly flow through the printed page rather than through the coercive powers of autonomous Jewish communities. Building on themes developed throughout this series, we will examine how the erosion of communal self-government and traditional structures of authority created both a crisis and an opportunity for rabbinic leadership. We will trace how *Noda BiYehuda* helped inaugurate an extraordinary flourishing of responsa literature throughout the Habsburg Empire and beyond, shaping the way halakhic works would be written, organized, and received for generations. While not a radical departure from earlier responsa collections, *Noda BiYehuda* stands as a masterful expression of the genre at a pivotal historical moment: the dawn of an age in which Jewish law would increasingly govern through persuasion, scholarship, and reputation rather than through legal autonomy and police power. In that sense, the publication of *Noda BiYehuda* marked the founding of an empire of words that, in a sense, we continue to inhabit today.