

Review Essay

The Jewish Enlightenment by Shmuel Feiner, translated by Chaya Naor, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia: 2004, 440 pp.

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The Enlightenment, which began during the eighteenth century in France, Britain and Germany, advocated reason as the primary basis of authority. Eventually Enlightenment ideals spread throughout Europe, then to Russia and the United States, where they influenced the American founding fathers and had a profound effect on the drafting of the Bill of Rights. Immanuel Kant summarized the philosophy of Enlightenment as follows:

“Enlightenment is man’s release from his self incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own reason!—that is the motto of enlightenment.”¹

Haskalah, the Jewish manifestation of the Enlightenment, came about in the wake of the external pressure of the European Enlightenment and internal strife brought about by the messianic and Hasidic movements. Together, these pressures led to a breakdown in the structure of the *Kehillah* and a decline in the authority of the rabbinate.

Shmuel Feiner’s book, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, discusses the original eighteenth-century Haskalah as manifested in Germany.² Unlike some other recent books that focus on a specific aspect of the

¹ *What is Enlightenment?* Trans. and ed. L. W. Beck, Chicago: 1955, p. 286.

² For information on the Eastern European Haskalah see for example, Jacob Raisin, *The Haskalah Movement in Russia*.

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Haskalah,³ Feiner's work presents the German Haskalah in all its rich detail.

How did the Haskalah affect the Jewish community? Lucy S. Dawidowicz, in her introduction to *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* (Beacon Press, Boston: 1968, pp. 16-17), writes:

“The rapid abandonment of Yiddish and then Hebrew, of belief in the Messiah's coming and in the unity of the Jewish people, did not guarantee entry into Christian society, for not enlightenment but apostasy was the right price of admission to gentile society... Many enlightened Berlin Jews had little difficulty paying that price. The Mendelssohnian Haskalah set off an epidemic of voluntary conversions unparalleled in Jewish history.

“Some Mendelssohnians, like David Friedländer (1750-1834), hesitated to plunge into the baptismal waters. Friedländer proposed in the name of Enlightenment, Reason, and Moral Feeling, their wholesale baptism and conversion on condition that they be excused from believing in [the] divinity [of the Christian Messiah]. The Protestants were not interested. Friedländer died a Jew, but all his children converted unconditionally.”

Berel Wein, in his *Survival: the Story of the Jews in the Modern Era 1650–1990* (Shaar Press, distributed by ArtScroll, Suffern: 1990, pp. 43–45), writes:

“All of the falseness of the Enlightenment and its “benefits” for Jewry would be mirrored in the story of Mendelssohn. He loosed forces that would be destructive to myriads of Jews individually and to the Jewish people as a whole. The harshness of Jewish history's judgment upon him is a reflection of the incipient disaster that he was so prominent in fashioning. He saw himself as a hero to his people. History would cast him differently.

“Yet Mendelssohn is viewed, and correctly so, as the father of Reform Judaism. Some of his own children became Christians. He opened the gates to the torrent of assimilation and intermarriage that characterized Western European Jewry in the eighteenth and

³ See for example, *The Berlin Haskalah and German Religious Thought: Orphans of Knowledge* by David Sorkin. Sorkin's main focus is to show that the Enlightenment posed a set of questions to which all major religions in the German state (i.e., Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism) found it necessary to provide answers.

nineteenth centuries. His name became a symbol of change and controversy, and eventually a cruel hoax.

“He was convinced that since he, Mendelssohn, could remain moderately observant and openly Jewish at the court of the Emperor and in the leading intellectual salons of Europe, all other Jews could and would do so as well. However, when the Enlightenment was loosed on the masses of Jewry, many of whom were ill prepared to deal with the new world unless they could discard their old one, it would have tragic consequences.”

That Mendelssohn was only “moderately observant”⁴ or that he was “the father of Reform Judaism”⁵ is an obvious inaccuracy, but what about the other assertions? Was Mendelssohn really responsible for “fashioning” the Haskalah? Did the Haskalah cause the “torrent of assimilation and intermarriage”? Both of those assumptions are firmly entrenched in Orthodox consciousness,⁶ and date back to the

⁴ “[Mendelssohn was] a strictly orthodox Jew, proficient in the law and observing its minutiae...” Eva Jospe, *Moses Mendelssohn: Selections from His Writing*, p. 4.

“He not only lived a meticulously observant, if unusual, Jewish life, but bravely and eloquently defended the principles of the Judaism of the Ages in the face of Christian challengers, and he did so with accuracy and finesse, and without apology or shame.” Avi Shafran, “The Enigma of Moses Mendelssohn,” *The Jewish Observer*, December 1986.

⁵ Mendelssohn, in *Bonnet's Palingenesis: A Counterinquiry*, writes, “As for the laws of Moses—we believe that they are absolutely binding on us as long as God Himself does not revoke them with the same kind of solemn and public declaration with which He once gave them to us... Man may change the laws of man in accordance with changing times and conditions. But the laws of God must remain unalterable until one can be absolutely sure that He Himself proclaims their modification” (Jospe 126).

⁶ For a good indication on how *haredi* Jews view Mendelssohn see Avi Shafran, “The Enigma of Moses Mendelssohn,” *The Jewish Observer* 19:9 (December, 1986, pp. 12–18) and the ensuing backlash to his article: “An Editorial Statement,” by Ernst Bodenheimer; a short response by R. Yaakov Perlow, *The Jewish Observer* 19:10 (January, 1987, p.13); and finally seven months later an article excerpted from R. Shimon Schwab, “To Distinguish Between Light and Darkness,” *The Jewish Observer* 20:5 (Summer 1987, pp. 21–23).

Avi Shafran in his article portrays the many facets of Mendelssohn’s character and tries to understand how a person who was fully obser-

dawn of the Haskalah. Sorkin, for example, (p. 170, n. 130) points out that Joseph Mendelssohn, in the biography of his father, portrays Moses Mendelssohn as the founder of the Haskalah. Feiner, in his introductory chapter, writes that the claim that the Haskalah led to assimilation and apostasy originated as soon as the Haskalah movement came into being. Are those long-established assertions true? Feiner believes they are not.⁷ To understand his reasoning it is neces-

vant could have children and disciples who became Christians. When angry letters criticizing Shafran's article began to arrive, the editors of *The Jewish Observer* realized they had made a mistake in publishing the article. Bodenheimer, writing for the editorial board, apologizes not so much for the content of the article, but for how it was interpreted: "The significance of the responses to the article brings us to reconsider the wisdom of our decision and we see that we were indeed in error in publishing an article on Mendelssohn... All the more we are pained by the indication from the responses that the article was interpreted as a watering down of the traditional opposition to Mendelssohn." R. Yaakov Perlow goes much further in his criticism of Mendelssohn and writes, "...wittingly or not, Mendelssohn was a *מַסִּית וּמְדִיחַ*, a bold symbol of that philosophy and lifestyle that were the prime causes of the rabid assimilation that followed in his wake. Small wonder, then, that his children, raised as performing Jews but cultural gentiles, later took the final convenient step to baptism." Finally, in an article excerpted from R. Simon Schwab we find, "... this man Mendelssohn has been treated with kid gloves too long and maybe the time has come to take off the gloves and put him in his place once and for all. While he was alive he appeared to many as a learned man, a practicing Torah Jew and his writings about Judaism were taken seriously... To Mendelssohn, only the commandments were inviolable. For the rest, all traditional Jewish convictions had to yield to subjective speculation influenced by the cultural trends which happened to be in vogue at the time."

⁷ Sorkin, in his closing paragraph (p. 129), expresses similar skepticism regarding the effect of the Haskalah: "The time has therefore come to cease using the Berlin Haskalah as the symbolic whipping boy for Jewish modernization. Its politicization in the closing decades of the century did implicate it in a fateful polarization of Jewish society which on the one hand contributed to the formation of the conventional view, and thus to our continued misunderstanding of the Haskalah itself, and on the other has endured in a variety of fateful permutations (orthodox vs. reform, nationalist vs. assimilationist, secular vs. religious) to the present time and incontrovertibly constitutes one of the hallmarks of Jewish modernity. Yet the Berlin Haskalah was responsible neither for

sary to review the history and dynamics of both the Enlightenment in general and the Haskalah in particular.

Jewish Life at the Dawn of the Haskalah

At the beginning of the eighteenth century most European Jews lived in restricted settlements and urban ghettos, isolated from the surrounding dominant Christian culture not only by law but also by language, custom, and dress.

In 1702 a special permit was required for a Jew to study in a university in Germany. In that year only one Jewish student, Shmuel Shimon Ben-Yaacov from Poland, was enrolled at the University of Frankfurt-on-Order, and only a single Jewish student, Isaac Wallach of Koblenz, was enrolled in Halle University. In fact, from 1678 to 1730 only twenty-five Jews were enrolled in a total of five universities (Feiner 23).

A decree issued in Berlin in 1716 and still in force in 1802 stated that “as the Merchants Guild is to be composed of honest and honorable persons, the following must be barred from membership: Jews, homicides, murderers, thieves, perjurers, adulterers, or any other person afflicted with great public vices or sins” (Jospe 6).

Mendelssohn, in his preface to the German translation of Manasseh’s work (more on this later), expresses his frustration concerning the oppressive discrimination against Jews:

People continue to keep us away from every contact with the arts and sciences or from engaging in useful trades and occupation. They bar all roads leading to increased usefulness and then use our lack of culture to justify our continued oppression. They tie our hands and then reproach us for not using them. (Jospe 90)

The Enlightenment called for equal rights for the common man and for freedom from religious persecution. John Locke, for example, believed that religious coercion by the ruling authority has no validity. However, the call for rights and freedoms were not necessarily meant to include the Jewish population. Even when Jews were

the origins of that polarization nor for its continuation. It is time for historians of the Jewish experience finally to correct the category mistake of treating a symbol as a cause and to lay to rest the time-worn canard of the Berlin Haskalah as the origin and architect of Jewish modernity.”

included it was not without a price. Voltaire fought zealously against the misdeeds of the church but as far as the Jews were concerned he believed that their centuries-long corrupt character was irremediable and that the Jews possessed values that were diametrically opposed to those of the Enlightenment (Feiner 114).

In October 1781 Emperor Joseph II, from the court of Vienna, issued the *Edict of Tolerance toward the Jews of Bohemia*, and in January 1782 another *Edict of Tolerance toward the Jews of Austria* (Feiner 124). However, these edicts did not go far enough—restrictions against Jews in Vienna were not removed and the Emperor expressed the hope that the Jews would convert within two decades.

English deists⁸ constantly depicted Judaism in an unfavorable light as did Voltaire (Feiner 120). In contrast, German deists generally held more liberal views. For example, Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, author of *On the Civil Improvement of the Jews*, was a champion for Jewish tolerance and rights (Feiner 123).

Pre-Haskalah: Rabbinic Calls for Reform in Jewish Education and an Appreciation for the Sciences

Even before the age of enlightenment some rabbinic leaders called upon their communities to modify their educational curriculum. For example, the MaHaRaL (R. Judah ben Bezalel Loew, 1525–1609) had deep reservations about the curriculum of Ashkenazic Jews in central and eastern-Europe whose exclusive concentration on Talmud study was designed to turn every student into a *talmid hakham*. He believed that the curriculum should include Bible and Mishnah study, and toward that aim he prepared a Hebrew grammar book for children. He also took exception to the casuistic method of Talmud study (*pilpul*) because he thought it would compromise the truth and morality of the legal tradition (Sorkin 39). He acquired a significant knowledge of mathematics and the natural sciences and regarded astronomy as a “ladder on which to ascend to the wisdom of the Torah” (*Netivot Olam*, “Netiv ha-Torah,” ch. 14). He considered them divinely ordained bodies of knowledge to be treated as subordinate to Jewish studies, but nevertheless necessary for the proper study of Bible and Talmud (Sorkin 43).

⁸ Deists believe that God created the world but does not subsequently intervene.

When Benjamin Wolf Ginzberg, a medical student at Göttingen University, wrote in 1737 to R. Emden in Altona regarding the permissibility of observing an anatomy lesson on the Sabbath, the latter was unable to conceal his envy of the young student who was in the company of scholars, surrounded by books of science. He urged Ginzburg to find in academia answers to questions that had been troubling him. For example, how reliable was alchemy as an exact science? At the end of his long halakhic response R. Emden was unable to contain his own desire for knowledge:

“Like you, I also crave to enter into a covenant with the sciences and to cleave unto them with love; I long to delve into the depths of scientific research, to uncover its secrets, to quench my thirst and to take my pleasure. But the sciences have despised me and have not let me come into them after the manner of all flesh and have banished me, driving me away with both hands, as if I were a worthless person.”¹² (Feiner 36-37)

However, years later R. Emden wrote:

אחריו מיד מאנו בספר ההוא ולא (אבוא) [אבן] הלוך בדרכי אף אם גבהו עמקו מחשבותיו ולא נודעו לכל נתיבותיו ומהלכיו... ואמנם חכמת הטבע שאני. שהיא ודאי חכמה מותרת ומשובחת נצרכת להביט אל פועל ה' ומעשהו הגדול כי נורא, וביחוד החלק ממנה הנכלל במלאכת הרפואה. באשר היא חיי דברייא. והתורה העידה על מציאותה וציותה לעשותה. אף אם לפי המדומה אבדה אותה חכמה עכשיו מן העולם, אחר שדימו לעלות על במתי עב ע"י המצאות מחודדות. והתחכמו בענפים ותולדות, ונשתבשו בשרשים בכל עת דעות שונים מתחדשים על כן חזרו התחלותיה ויסודותיה להיות מסופקות. ותולדותיהן כיוצא בהן מפוקפקות. עכ"ז אפי' לא יעלה ביד החוקר בטבע רק מעט מזער בכמות. הנה הוא רק האיכות ושקול כהרבה בשאר חכמות. בפרטות אם יבואר הדבר בנסיון להועיל להטיב. הנה שכרו מרובה בזה ובבא, לכן מהראוי לטרוח אחריה. וכמו שידענו ביחוד משני גדולי עולם אנשי חמדות בתור' ובהוראה יסודות, ה"ה רמב"ם ורמב"ן ז"ל אשר יצא להם שם בגוים בחכמתן, והארץ האירה מכבודם ותורתן, מלבד הרבה גדולי דורות זולתן.... ומזקנים כהם ז"ל נתבונן שלא להניח ח"ו הלמוד החמוד הקדוש בשביל זה, אשרי שיאחז בזה וגם מזה אל ינח ידו לעשות כמותן. אך ללכת בדרך רחוקה למדרשיהם, אינו דבר ראוי לדעתי אף אם אין דינו כלומד מן המגוש, מ"מ אל תקרב אל פתח ביתה ואל תתאו להיות אתם בחדרי משכיתם, ולעמוד בחצריהם ובטירותם ללמוד מנהגיהם ונימוסיהם, והרבה גזרות גזרו חז"ל ותקנו תקנות שלא ידור אדם עם העכו"ם שלא ילמד ממעשיו. וברוך אשר בחר בנו והבדילנו מכל העמים לבלתי נלך בחוקותיהם אף כי לנטות אוהל לשכון ביניהם בקבע אינני רואה נכון. אע"פ שככה עשו כמה וכמה. לא ילפינו ממקלקלתא. מ"מ לאיש כמוך אמרתי אגלה אונך. כי תשמע לעצתי ותמעט כל האפשרי... (שו"ת שאילת יעבץ חלק א סימן מא)

¹²...נאם החושק כמוך לכרות ברית עם החכמות, מעודו בהם דבק לאהבה, גרסה נפשי לתאבה, לחקור משכיות לבבם, לחשוף מים חיים מגבם, לרוות צמאוני שובע שמחות נעימות, והם מאסו בי ולא נתנוני לבוא עליהם כדרך כל הארץ ויגרשוני מאתם וידיחוני מהסתפה בנחלתם דחפוני בשתי ידיהם כבזה נפש חדל אישים כלה לועג לי שבע כלימות... (שו"ת שאילת יעבץ חלק א סימן מא)

“Let thousands of such physicians and their words be set aside and vanish but not [to harm] a single letter of our Torah... Heaven forbid that our perfect Torah should be likened to their idle talk or that one should believe in their utterances and trust their wisdom. What is this wisdom of theirs, it cannot withstand the power of the wisdom of our rabbis of blessed memory, the sages of the truth.”
(Feiner 75)

Moses Mendelssohn¹³—the Icon of the Haskalah

There was no one in the history of modern Jewish thought quite like Moses Mendelssohn (R. Moses ben Menahem, acronym RaMbeMaN, or Moses of Dessau,¹⁴ 1729-86). His appearance would not be considered handsome¹⁵ but he won people over with his kindness, wit and modesty. As a student of R. David Frankel (the author of *Korban ha-Edab* on the *Yerushalmi*), he followed him from Dessau to Berlin, where he was tutored in philosophy by Israel Zamoscz (ca. 1700-1772) and Aaron Solomon Gumpertz (1723-1769). In Berlin, Mendelssohn became a tutor in the household of Isaac Bernhard. He would later become a bookkeeper in Bernhard’s silk factory and eventually its manager. Although mostly self-taught, Mendelssohn was unique in being the only important thinker to combine adherence to the rational philosophy of the German Enlightenment with loyalty to Judaism.

Mendelssohn also attained great prominence outside the Jewish world and was widely known as “the German Socrates” (Arkush xi). He was a devoted disciple of the works of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716)¹⁶ and Christian Wolff (1679–1754) and was described by

¹³ I.e., Moshe, Mendel’s son.

¹⁴ On his maternal side, Mendelssohn was a descendant of R. Moshe Is-serles of Cracow, ca. 1520-1572 (Altmann 4).

¹⁵ Graetz, *History of the Jews*, JPS, Philadelphia: 1967, vol. 5, p. 292 describes Mendelssohn’s physical appearance, “...stunted in form, awkward, timid, stuttering, ugly, and repulsive in appearance.”

Mendelssohn would jokingly claim that he owed the curvature of his back to Rambam since his intensive study of the *Guide* had weakened the resistance of his body to the illness that caused the malformation (Altmann 12).

¹⁶ Mendelssohn complained that when Isaac Newton died he was accorded almost royal honors while Leibniz, who was at least his equal, was buried with little dignity (Altmann 31).

Kant as the “most perfect product” of that school. He followed his mentors in emphasizing the importance of rational proof for the existence of God, divine providence, and immortality of the human soul (Arkush 1).

Demeaning Prussian laws made life oppressive for the Jews and even Mendelssohn was not immune. Despite his great reputation, Frederick the Great refused to acknowledge Mendelssohn as a *bona fide* Prussian intellectual and blocked his appointment to the Academy of Sciences. Living in Berlin was also a problem. A long time passed before Mendelssohn was finally awarded a Prussian “Schutz-Jude” granting him immunity from deportation (Graetz, vol. viii, p. 304). In a letter to Benedictine Brother Maurus Winkopp, Mendelssohn relates how despite all his efforts the behavior of the gentile in the street seemed hardly to have changed:

Once in a while, I take an evening stroll with my wife and family. “Papa,” one of my children asks innocently, “what is that fellow over there yelling after us? And why do these people throw stones at us? What have we done to them?” “Yes, Papa dear,” another speaks up, “they always follow us in the street and call us names. They cry ‘Jews, Jews!’ Do they think it bad to be a Jew? Why else would they keep away from us?” Alas! Averting my eyes, I sigh to myself: “Man, oh, man, is this what you have finally accomplished?” (Jospe 99)

Although Mendelssohn was keenly aware of the anti-Semitism of his society, he never imagined the creation of a Jewish state as a solution to that problem. On two separate occasions he voiced his opposition to Zionism—once on religious grounds¹⁷ and the other time on

¹⁷ In a reply to Johann David Michaelis who accused the Jewish people of what we call today “dual loyalty” because of their thrice-daily yearning to return to Zion, Mendelssohn wrote: “Moreover, our Talmudic sages had the foresight to emphasize again and again the prohibition to return to Palestine on our own. They made it unmistakably clear that we must not take even a single step preparatory to return to Palestine, and a subsequent restoration of our nation there, unless and until the great miracles and extraordinary signs promised us in Scripture were to occur. And they substantiated that prohibition by citing the somewhat mystical yet truly captivating verses of the Song of Songs (2:7, 3:5) *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, By the gazelles, and by the hinds of the field, That ye awaken not, nor stir up love, Until it please* (Jospe 85).

practical considerations.¹⁸ That ambivalence toward Zionism would remain a hallmark of German Jewry for the following one hundred and seventy-five years.

From his first appearance in the public sphere until his dying day, his struggle for religious tolerance toward the Jews was foremost in his mind (Feiner 116). That struggle was more than just altruistic, as Mendelssohn himself was also subjected to religious intolerance. When Lavater, a supposed close friend, called upon Mendelssohn to either convert or refute the main tenets of Christianity, Mendelssohn was forced to defend his Jewish beliefs and he publicly declared that there was not even the slightest chance that he would abandon the faith of his forefathers (Feiner 117). Nevertheless, Mendelssohn did, to a large extent, enjoy religious toleration. He was a member of the popular Enlightenment clubs, and a close friend of some of their most important members (Feiner 115).

After collaborating with Christian Wilhelm Dohm (1751–1820) on a memorandum in support of the Jewish community of Alsace, Mendelssohn asked Dohm to prepare a general treatise on the Jews' legal status. Dohm's *On the Civic Amelioration of the Jews* (1781) stimulated the public discussion Mendelssohn desired. To reinforce the impact of Dohm's tract and Joseph II's edict for the Jews of Bohemia, Mendelssohn published a German re-translation of a pamphlet of Menasseh ben Israel, a seventeenth century Rabbi in Amsterdam, whose defense of the Jews helped them gain readmission to England. In his preamble Mendelssohn advocated civic acceptance for the Jews and argued to end the prejudice that impeded the granting of rights. He asserted that economic and civic freedom were inextricably linked, and declared that no religion should have the power to issue a

¹⁸ In a reply to "a man of high standing" who, shrouded in secrecy, sent a letter outlining his plan for a Jewish state, Mendelssohn on January 26, 1770 replied: "My people's character, as I see it, therefore constitutes the greatest obstacle in carrying out your project. We have not been sufficiently prepared to undertake anything of such magnitude. The oppression under which we have lived for so many centuries has drained our spirit of all its vigor... such a venture would require vast sums of money. Yet I know that my people's wealth consists more in credit extended than in actual capital... I think such a project could be realized only if all the great European powers were engaged in a war so that each of them would be preoccupied with its own affairs" (Jospe 83-84).

ban of excommunication, since religious opinions and beliefs were not subject to external authority (Sorkin 104-105).

Mendelssohn's *Phaedon, or the Immortality of the Soul* was a popular book offering a new doctrine of salvation for a Christian society that had been turning ever more secular. In *Phaedon*, his starting point for proving the immortality of the soul was his certainty of the existence of God. It was the most popular book in its time and in two years it ran through three editions. It was immediately translated into many European languages and also into Hebrew. Christian theologians, philosophers, artists and poets were enamored of it and they enthusiastically thanked the Jewish sage who had restored to them that comfort which Christianity no longer afforded them (Graetz vol. viii, p. 306-307). However, among Jewish sages, the praise was not as forthcoming. Mendelssohn had declared that he had found in Judaism certain human conditions and abuses that only served to diminish its splendor.¹⁹ That expression offended many and caused some to question his orthodoxy (Graetz 317).

Mendelssohn's first two Hebrew works were related to philosophy and logic. His first Hebrew work, *Kobelet Musar*, was the first modern journal in Hebrew, although only two issues were published. It addressed students of Talmud and those adept at Jewish learning in some of the same philosophic concepts he had previously addressed in his German works: nature as a source of enjoyment or belief; evil and misfortune in daily life; and the nature of relationships between man and man and between man and God (Sorkin, Yale 94).

Mendelssohn's second Hebrew work, written in 1760-61, was a commentary on Maimonides' *Milot Ha-Higayon*,²⁰ in which he attempted to put Maimonidean philosophical thought into Leibnizean-Wolffian terminology. He regarded logic as an instrument and not as an end in itself, and recommended that students study logic an hour or so each week (Sorkin 54-55).

In his commentary on Ecclesiastes (1770) Mendelssohn focused on the ideas of providence and immortality. He defended the tradi-

¹⁹ Mendelssohn, in a letter to Johann Caspar Lavater, writes, "I cannot deny, however, that I have discovered certain wholly human additions and abuses which, alas, badly tarnish my religion's original luster" (Jospe 133).

²⁰ Mendelssohn's commentary on *Milot ba-Higayon* is available at <http://www.jnul.huji.ac.il/eng/digibook.html>.

tion of Jewish biblical exegesis that posited four possible modes of interpreting biblical text: literal, homiletic, allegorical and esoteric. He argued that the multiple meanings are inherent in the words, and he employed Maimonides' categories of "primary" and "secondary" intention to explain how that is possible (Sorkin, Yale 96).

Mendelssohn wrote his *Jerusalem or On Religious Power and Judaism* to explain how his political liberalism is compatible with his loyal adherence to Judaism. In *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn argued in favor of religious freedom—that the church/synagogue should not have any ecclesiastical powers to coerce its members, and for a strict separation of church and state. Mendelssohn then set out to show that Judaism is consistent with religious tolerance and that Judaism is a "natural" religion, i.e., that its religious and moral principles could be logically deduced without the need of revelation. He argued that, unlike Christianity,²¹ Judaism contains no revealed dogma, only revealed legislation. This he famously summed up as follows:

I believe that Judaism knows nothing of a revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a divine legislation—laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instructions in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal and eternal felicity. What was revealed to them through Moses were rules and precepts of this kind, not doctrine, saving truths, or universally valid propositions of reason. These the Eternal One reveals to us and all other men at all times through the nature of things but not through the spoken or written word [of revelation]. (Altmann 534-535)

Jerusalem concluded with a fervent appeal to his fellow Jews to remain loyal to the religion of their fathers—no matter what the cost. Better to forego the benefits of civil equality than to be disloyal to Judaism (Altmann 516).

²¹ In his draft outline for *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn wrote, "Christianity is a yoke in spirit and in truth. It has transformed thirty-nine corporal floggings into as many spiritual ones." This was an allusion to the thirty-nine articles of faith of the Anglican Church (Altmann 514). In the unpublished *Counterreflections* Mendelssohn writes similarly regarding the heavy burden of Christian dogma, "The more closely I look upon this religion [Christianity], which is so much recommended to me, the more repulsive it becomes to my reason."

In *The Book of the Paths of Peace*²² Mendelssohn translated the Pentateuch into German using Hebrew letters and wrote the introduction which he titled *Light for the Path*. From 1778 for 6 years, with a group of scholars, he worked on its Hebrew commentary which he called the *Bi'ur*. Part of that commentary he wrote himself and the balance he edited (Sorkin 96, Feiner 127). Mendelssohn believed that the Bible had been composed according to a set of principles that were known to the Jewish exegetical tradition. He also argued forcefully that the Torah was not, as claimed by others, knit together from different documents distinguishable by the various names of God.²³

²² *Netivot ha-Shalom* on *Devarim* is available for download at: http://books.google.com/books?q=netivot+ha-shalom&as_brr=1.

²³ Altmann too, p. 286, quotes a letter from Mendelssohn to a learned clergyman of high rank in which Mendelssohn shows his distaste for textual criticism of the Bible, “Indeed, who is supposed to buy a rabbinic commentary in our clever age, when every beginner in Hebrew is permitted to change the text at will? In case *le-fetah hatt’at rovets* [Gen 4:7: sin coucheth at the door] seems unintelligible, an English emendator is immediately at hand, who reads *le-fallot hata’ta revatz*; and rabbinic skills are no further needed. Is *esh dat lamo* [Deut. 33:2: a fiery law unto them] difficult to explain? No problem. Read ‘or instead of *dat* and everything is clear. I really fail to see where this recklessness is going to end.”

Various Orthodox Jewish writers have published works that attempt to reconcile Torah and science. The need for such works is obvious as many Orthodox Jews are well-read, pursue careers in the sciences and are aware of scientific claims. However, one such writer who dealt with this topic was recently condemned, almost unanimously, by the leading *hareidi* rabbis. The writer was to a large extent employing solutions that had been previously put forth by Rambam and other Jewish Sages. Their condemnation was unfortunate as it has the potential of forcing our most inquisitive and brightest to choose between reason and faith. Nevertheless, a troubled Orthodox Jew has a substantial body of Jewish literature to help him deal with this issue. Mendelssohn, however, as noted here, defended the Torah against biblical criticism. This is an area of study that began in the 1600s with Spinoza and others and that continues to this day. Other than Mendelssohn, only a handful of others have attempted to refute the anti-Torah claims of biblical criticism. Fortunately, this study does not usually generate headlines and is therefore not staring Orthodox Jews in the face. Recently, however, biblical criticism has been catapulted to the forefront by the publication of popular books that discuss this topic and are written for the layman. I thus wonder how much longer biblical criticism will remain a non-issue

Mendelssohn knew from the start that this publication would cause him much grief. In a letter to Avigdor Levi written in the summer or early fall of 1781 Mendelssohn writes:

As soon as I had permitted Rabbi Solomon [Dubno] to publish my translation, 'I put my life in my hand,' 'I lifted up mine eyes unto the mountains,' and 'I gave my back to the smiters.' Alas, I knew how much opposition, hatred, persecution, etc. is engendered among the public by the least innovation, no matter how important the improvement it seeks to foster. (Altmann 374)

The innovations to which he was referring were that he was translating the Bible into a pure and refined German, albeit in Hebrew characters, and that he was rendering the Tetragrammaton, the holiest name of God, as "the Eternal One" (*der Ewige*).

Mendelssohn gave different reasons for publishing *The Book of the Paths of Peace*. In a letter to Avigdor Levi of Prague in mid-1779 he wrote that:

"I translated the Bible into German, not out of pride in the task or to make a name for myself, but for my children that God has bestowed upon me... And here, by the will of God, there came to my acquaintance the learned Shlomo Dubno to whom I entrusted my son Joseph that he might take daily lessons from him in Hebrew. And when this Rabbi learned of my translation, it found favor in his eyes, and he urged me to publish it for the benefit of Jewish children, who had need of a biblical commentary and translation in German that would surpass and replace the misleading books of the Gentiles." (Feiner 127-128)

To August Hennings, a member of Danish government, Mendelssohn wrote that:

"This is the first step to culture from which, alas, my nation has held itself aloof that one might almost despair of any possibility of improvement" (Mendelssohn's letter to Hennings, June 29, 1779).²⁴

for Orthodox Jews. I surmise that our collective response to biblical criticism has been rather limited due to our fear of being condemned for even discussing it.

²⁴ Altmann p. 372 reconciles these two accounts as follows: "To start with, the need to teach Torah to his sons led Mendelssohn to translate selected passages. He found pleasure in the work and it occurred to him that a German version of the entire Pentateuch, if not of the Bible as a whole, would be very much in the interest of a growing sector of

Sorkin (98) claims that “The often misconstrued phrase that he saw his biblical translation and commentary as a ‘first step to culture’, i.e. German or European culture, in fact meant that he wished to direct his fellow Jews back to the Hebrew Bible.”²⁵

There was much interest for this work and it attracted about eight hundred subscribers (Altmann 373) from France, Italy, Austria, Bohemia, Holland, Denmark, England, and Poland-Austria (Feiner 129). *Alim Literufah*, a pamphlet describing the *Bi’ur*, and containing a sample translation and commentary, was circulated to raise interest and gain subscribers. It contained no rabbinical approbations and thus it aroused the suspicion of R. Yehezkl Landau of Prague (*ba-Noda bi-Yehudah*). To counter this Mendelssohn sent him a letter saying that the *Bi’ur* was different:

“We have never seen that the rabbinical authorities have taken an interest in a book written in Judeo-German, to agree to its printing, or to protest to its author... If I should ever write a work in Hebrew I shall surely ask the Sages of Israel and receive their permission and approbation, as I am obliged to do.”²⁶

Jewish youth. Therefore he applied himself vigorously to this task. After a time he came to realize that a bare translation without a commentary would not do. Only a combination of translation and commentary could open up and articulate the full meaning and beauty of the Hebrew text. To awaken in the more refined young people an awareness of the moral and aesthetic values of the Bible was in his view tantamount to a cultural rebirth. By “culture” he did not mean “enlightenment” in the purely intellectual sense; he meant moral and aesthetic refinement.”

²⁵ Altmann pp. 87-88 writes similarly, “Mendelssohn, who had only recently achieved a full mastery of literary German, was far from decriing the Jews’ study of the languages of their host countries. What he deplored was the lack of interest in biblical Hebrew. It was characteristic of his loyalty to Jewish tradition that he advocated a return to biblical Hebrew precisely at the moment at which he had become a full-fledged member of the circle of German literati. He felt that the beauty of the language of the Bible was equal, if not superior, to the finest products of world literature, and he wanted his fellow Jews, especially those impressed with German prose and poetry, to recapture a sense of pride in their own legacy.”

²⁶ In a letter to Avigdor Levi of May 25, 1779 Mendelssohn gave two reasons why he did not ask R. Ezekiel Landau for his approbation. In addition to the reason cited above, Mendelssohn explained that he had no

After *Alim Literufab* was distributed, however, Shlomo Dubno (who authored the *Bi'ur* commentary on *Beresbit* except for the first chapter, which was written by Mendelssohn) did actually receive three approbations in 1778 but he printed those only after the *Bi'ur* was complete in 1783. R. Hirschel Lewin (1720–1800), the head of the Berlin community's court, provided an approbation in which he echoed a number of Mendelssohn's own justifications, including the inadequacy of the extant Yiddish translation, the need to avoid Christian ones, and the merit of having a reliable text with pious commentary (Sorkin 99). The second approbation was from R. Saul Berlin, Zevi Hirsch's son, who served as a rabbi of the Frankfurt-on-Order community, and the third was from the *bet din* of Berlin (Feiner 130).

After the *Bi'ur* was published, Mendelssohn heard rumors that R. Ezekiel Landau of Prague was furious and planned to ban it. Upon hearing this Mendelssohn wrote,

“What have they seen concerning this matter and what has come unto them when they sentenced me without a trial and lawful process?” (Feiner 131)

R. Raphael Kohen of Hamburg-Altona, however, was open with his criticism. Hennings, Mendelssohn's Danish friend, offered to involve the authorities to block by police measure what he perceived as religious fanaticism. Mendelssohn asked him to refrain—he believed the truth would win out. Mendelssohn did recommend, however, that subscriptions to the *Bi'ur* be taken out in the name of the Danish king, Christian VII, the heir to the throne and other state officials. This granted them a measure of immunity. In September 1779 Mendelssohn was able to inform Hennings:

“My rabbis have been rather quiet of late. What has caused this silence I do not know. It was surely not some better understanding on their part. Judging from a correspondence that came into my hands by chance they seemed to be rather determined not to change their mind. As for me I have no intention of either challenging or ridiculing them. After all, what would it profit me to put the scholars of my nation up to ridicule?” (Altmann 392)

financial interest in the project and hence he did not require the protection of copyright, “Why then, should I knock at the doors of the great leaders of Israel and petition their *haskama* or *berem* for an enterprise from which no material gain will accrue to me?” (Altmann 381)

The response of the rabbis to *The Book of the Paths of Peace* was hardly uniform, but a ban was not pronounced nor was it burnt. There is no historical evidence that the Vilna Gaon ever criticized Mendelssohn's Bible translation or the *Bi'ur*. In fact, most orders from Poland came from Vilna (Dawidowicz 19).

Initially, R. Ezekiel Landau (1713-93), perhaps the foremost rabbinic authority of his day, defended Mendelssohn's reputation,²⁷ and his son subscribed to the translation and recommended it (Sorkin 99). R. Landau's objection was only that the Bible translation should not be used for teaching Bible to Jewish children.²⁸ Only after the Haska-

²⁷ R. Yehezkl Landau's oldest son, R. Jacob of Brody wrote the following in the margin of the manuscript of his father's biography: "I remember that some thirty years ago I was called to come and see our father, and that I spent ten days with him. At that time the German translation of the Torah by the famous scholar, our teacher Rabbi Moses of Dessau of blessed memory, had just appeared. Many rabbis considered it an evil thing and "they looked [disapprovingly] after Moses," and they were ready to condemn his translation, particularly his rendition of the Holy Name. They derided him in an unbecoming fashion but "they were afraid to come nigh unto him" so long as they lacked support by the "powerful pillar" [viz. Chief Rabbi Landau]. They therefore addressed to my father and teacher (the memory of the righteous be for a blessing) an appeal written with "black fire" imploring him to kindle the fire of zealotry. Yet he placated their fierce spirit by gently replying: Stop imputing blemishes to the "fruit of the lips" of [a man of] understanding. I find nothing wrong in him, and why should we put a veil on the beams of glory" (Altmann 398).

²⁸ In his approbation to the *Five Books of the Torah* that Shlomo Dubno attempted to publish in 1783-84, R. Yehezkl Landau writes, "In that work [Mendelssohn's], the sacred and the secular were conjoined, since a commentary in a foreign tongue was appended to the Torah, which the author called a German translation, and we were fearful that this would create an obstacle for Jewish children and lead them to neglect their study of Torah" (Feiner p. 394, note 65).

In 1785 R. Yehezkl Landau, in a *haskama* for a Pentateuch translation by Sussman Glogau, writes: "It possibly was the author's [Mendelssohn's] intention to prevent a rush after [Christian] Bibles, and he may have intended to improve the situation. Yet we can see that in actual fact this offers no improvement... For the translator deeply immersed himself in the language using as he did an extremely difficult German that presupposes expertise in its grammar. Now since the children will find it hard to understand it, the teacher will have to spend most of the

lah went on the offensive (see the following section on Wessely) did R. Landau criticize Mendelssohn (Altmann 398.)

The Jewish people knew that Mendelssohn could be called upon when they were in danger or when their religious practices were being attacked by the authorities. In 1772 the community of Mecklenburg-Schwerin turned to Mendelssohn for help. The duke of that province had issued an edict that prohibited the accepted Jewish custom of burying the dead as soon as possible. Contemporary medical practice recommended a three-day waiting period to certify death. Mendelssohn succeeded in getting the order rescinded by suggesting a compromise—that the Jews continue the practice of early burial but first obtain medical certification, the assumption being that in most cases a few hours would be adequate to establish the fact of death (Sorkin 102).

time explaining German grammar... Moreover, the translation does not follow the text word by word but renders units of meaning... This would have been the right procedure had he made it clear that his version was meant for mature people at home in Bible and Mishnah. Seeing, however, that it is in demand by teachers of children, it induces the young to spend their time reading Gentile books in order to become sufficiently familiar with refined German to be able to understand this translation. Our Torah is thereby reduced to the role of maidservant to the German tongue... The intention of the translator may have been good, as I have said before. We have to assume this since we must “judge every man in the scale of merit,” especially one who is famous as a scholar. Yet we cannot rest satisfied with the intention that prompted him if the result of his action is so devastating.” (Altmann 383-383)

R. Yehezkl Landau also writes: רש"י ד"ה מההגיון. לא תרגילום במקרא יותר מדאי משום דמשכא: נלע"ד משום שלימוד המקרא גם האפיקורסים לומדים בשביל הלשון כמו שלומדים שאר לשונות, ואם לא תשגיח על בנך בילדותו רק על לימוד המקרא, יכול להיות שתקח לו מלמד אחר משלהם כי גם הם יודעים ללמדו, ומתוך כך בנך נמשך אחריהם גם בדיעות נפסדים. **ובפרט בזמנינו שנתפשט התרגום אשכנזי וזה מושך לקרות בספרי הגוים כדי להיות בקי בלשונם**, ולכן הזהיר מזה, אבל הנוך לנער על פי דרכי התורה והושיבום ביו ברכי תלמידי חכמים, גם בילדותם בלמדם מקרא קח לו מלמד תלמיד חכם וירגילו תיכף גם במשנה וגמרא. והרבה יש להוכיח על זה בדורינו שפשתה המספחת מאד, ומן השמים ירחמו. (ציון לנפש חיה על הש"ס, כרך א, ברכות דף כח עמוד ב, וגשל, ירושלים: תשנ"ה דף ק"י) “... Especially now that the German translation is widespread it causes people to read books of gentiles to become proficient in their language...”

Yet Mendelssohn also wrote a private rebuke to the leaders of the community arguing that he saw no reason to retain that custom. He asserted the convergence of contemporary medical knowledge with early Jewish ritual claiming that “the Sages and the doctors are of one mind.” Upon learning of Mendelssohn’s position, R. Emden, who had also been approached regarding this issue, accused him of twisting the meaning of the text and of employing *pilpul* to justify his position. While this disagreement made R. Emden warn Mendelssohn that some people were beginning to question his orthodoxy, it did not damage their relationship or have any further consequences, especially since Mendelssohn had successfully resolved the community’s problem and the disagreement remained a private matter. The disagreement became public knowledge only much later when an enterprising *maskil*, Isaac Euchel, published the correspondence in 1785 (Sorkin 102-103).

In 1775, when the authorities of two Swiss villages denied their Jewish inhabitants the right to marry, Mendelssohn enlisted the help of Johann Casper Lavatar, a Swiss clergyman, to have the ban rescinded.

When hundreds of Jewish families were threatened with expulsion from Dresden in 1777, Mendelssohn was able to secure the withdrawal of the edict through his close friendship with a leading official of Saxony. In the same year the Jewish community of Königsberg appealed to him to refute the accusation that the prayer *Aleinu* was anti-Christian. Mendelssohn presented written evidence to the contrary and as a result the royal order requiring the presence of a government official in the synagogue during worship was rescinded (Jospe 11).

Naftali Herz Wessely—The Challenge of the Haskalah and the Rabbinic Reaction

Naftali Herz Wessely (1725–1805), a younger contemporary of Mendelssohn, clearly belongs to the first generation of *maskilim*. He worked with a group who saw themselves as *maskilim* and actively challenged the authority of the rabbinic elite.

In 1782 Wessely wrote a pamphlet, *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet* to boost Jewish support for Joseph II’s educational reforms. In this eight-page open letter Wessely called for radical changes in Jewish society and education. Man, claimed Wessely, is endowed with reason and capa-

ble of constructing his own world without dependence on heavenly instruction. He acquires knowledge, develops science, builds states, improves the economy and invents. Wessely was dissatisfied that for generations Jews had been isolating themselves from society. In the distant past the Jews lived like other nations and maintained their state. However, their long exile distanced them from normal life and plunged them into darkness. Wessely placed the blame on the rulers of Europe who humiliated the Jews, oppressed their spirit and excluded them from politics, science and culture.

However, Wessely continued, in the late eighteenth century, the leaders of the Ashkenazi rabbinical elite share in the blame, particularly at a time when the spirit of tolerance was growing in Europe. Moreover, he argued, as a result of educational reforms, religious studies would regain a status of respect, and young Jewish businessmen would be less inclined to show indifference to religious obligations and leave Judaism. Wessely described how the very first encounter of these uneducated Jews with European culture threw them straight into the open arms of atheism and into the bosom of the “Society of those who have forgotten God” (Feiner 97-98).

Wessely argued that people are created with different talents and abilities and that not all Jews were meant to be Talmudic scholars. In fact, only a few students actually realized the ideal of Talmudic scholarship but any other occupation was recognized as a necessity only after the fact (Feiner 91-92). Wessely was now trying to turn the reality that existed after the fact into one that was desirable from the outset. He thus proposed a new curriculum that would include a foreign language, science, history, mathematics and geography. Wessely urged the Jews of Europe to oust the Polish teachers, “who speak in a poor tongue and have taught us rude and common phrases” and perpetuated ignorance and isolation. He urged them to shun the Yiddish language, which exacerbated their segregation, and to adopt the language of the land (Feiner 98).

Wessely included two statements that were sure to incur the wrath of the rabbis. He wrote that:

“A child should not leave the class in which he learns the reading and grammar of languages for the class in which the Torah and the

faith as well as some of the moral doctrines are taught, before he has been examined and found to have completed his course.”²⁹

This, of course, was preposterous. Why should a child be barred from the study of Torah before he had passed an examination in grammar of languages? In his zeal, Wessely also included the aphorism:

The Sages said (*Midrash Rabbah*, Leviticus, chapter 1) “A *talmid hakham* (one who knows the laws of God and his Torah) who has no *dei’ab* (manners and *derekh erez*)—a carcass is better than him.”... For one who has no *dei’ab* will provide pleasure neither to the Jewish Sages nor to the wise of other nations for he denigrates the Torah and is repulsive to people.³⁰

Not only was Wessely advocating a radical change in Jewish education but he was viewed as insulting those Sages who were ignorant of the natural sciences.³¹

The rabbis reacted swiftly to Wessely’s attack. R. David Tevele (born in Brody, died in 1792), the rabbi of the Lissa community in Western Poland, interpreted Wessely’s open letter as a threat to the supreme value of Torah study. Permitting students to choose between various tracks in Jewish education posed a grave danger. In

²⁹ ושלא יצא התינוק מחדרו שלומד בו קריאת הלשונות ודקדוקיהן, אל החדר שבו ילמדו עמו התורה והאמונה וקצת המוסרים, עד שיבדקוהו הראשים וישפטו עליו אם השלים חקו בחדר הראשון אם לא (נפתלי הירץ ויזל, דברי שלום ואמת, פרק ח', ברלין תקמ"ב).

³⁰ וכן אמרו חכמים (מ"ר ויקרא פרשה א') כל תלמיד חכם (שהוא היודע חקי אלהים ותורותיו) שאין בו דיעה (נמוסיות ודרך ארץ) נבלה טובה ממנו... וזה שאין בו דיעה לא יהנו ממנו חכמי ישראל ולא חכמי שאר העמים, כי הוא מבזה את תורתו, ונמאס על הבריות. (נפתלי הירץ ויזל, דברי שלום ואמת, סוף פרק א', ברלין תקמ"ב).

³¹ When the midrash states that “A *talmid hakham* who has no *dei’ab*—a carcass is better than him,” the word *dei’ab* does indeed refer, as Wessely states, to *derekh erez*, i.e., manners. However, just before quoting this midrash Wessely associates with *derekh erez* the knowledge of history, geography, political science, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, botany, anatomy, medicine and chemistry. ובכלל תורת האדם הן הידיעות הנגימוסיות, דרכי המוסר והמדות הטובות ודרך ארץ ולכלכל דבריו בדברי הן ולשון צחות... וכן לדעת קורות הדורות (היסטוריע) וצורת הארצות והימים (גיאוגראפיע), ומנהגי המדינות ומשפטי המלכים וכיוצא באלה, וכן כוללת החכמות הלמודיות כמו חכמת המספר (אריטמעטיק), וחכמת המדידה (גיאומעטריא), וחכמת תכונת השמים (אסטראנאמיע) וכיוצא בהן... חכמת הכרת הצמחים (בוטאניא), וחכמת הנתוח (אנאטמיע), וחכמת הרפואה (מעדיציען), וחכמת הכימיע וכיוצא... (נפתלי הירץ ויזל, דברי שלום ואמת, פרק א', ברלין תקמ"ב).

1782 on *Shabbat ha-Gadol* he rose to the pulpit of the great synagogue to deliver a scathing sermon (Feiner 87-89).

“Who are you Wessely?... Who are you, a man poor in knowledge, the worst kind of layman, who has offered hasty counsel to innocent, wise and intelligent men as if you were an eminent scholar? Who appointed you spokesman for the Jews?... He has no part or share in the profundities of the Talmud, the early commentaries or the Oral Law... How does he have the audacity to say, ‘I shall offer counsel? ... How does this man who does not possess any of the foundations of wisdom come forth to teach us the [proper] curriculum and to instruct this people in the ways of God?’” (Feiner 99)

“I deplore the act of this man, a hypocrite and evildoer, a boor, the worst kind of layman, by the name of Herz Wessely from Berlin... Proud and haughty is this enemy of the Jews who is a threat to our very lives... He is excommunicated, banned, and cursed with a blowing of the *shofar* and the extinguishing of candles, for he is accursed and damned, cut off from the Congregation of Israel (Feiner 87). He has no part or share in the God of Israel... He adheres to alien views like those of the naturalists.³²” (Feiner 95)

This last accusation was groundless and certainly could not be deduced from anything in Wessely’s work. R. Tevele did not develop it further beyond this single sentence (Feiner 95).

R. Tevele had previously written an approbation for a grammar book written by Wessely and he was now determined to deny him that legitimacy and to disassociate himself from the intellectual elite. He had relented and agreed to grant the approbation only after other rabbis in Lissa had urged him to do so, claiming that there was no cause for concern, since Wessely’s grammar book was not a halakhic work. Of course in hindsight R. Tevele very much regretted giving his approbation, and now announced that he was rescinding it (Feiner 99-100).

According to rumors that reached R. Tevele, in the community of Vilna they burned Wessely’s open letter in the city streets, and at first hung it by an iron chain in the courtyard of the synagogue. *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet* was burned as a heretical book just as ten years earlier,

³² “Naturalists” believe in a religion that is based solely on what can be deduced by reason and from the study of nature.

the writings of the Hasidim were burned and ridiculed in ceremonies under the supervision of the Gr"za (Feiner 88).

That same year R. Yehezkel Landau delivered a sermon applauding the Edict of Tolerance issued by the Emperor Joseph II. He too denounced *Divrie Shalom Ve'emet* and its author:

“An evil man has arisen from our own people and brazenly asserted that the Torah is not all important, that an animal carcass is worth more than Talmudic scholars, that etiquette is more vital than the Torah... He is worse than an animal carcass, and in the end his corpse will lie like dung upon the field!” (Saperstein, Yale 86)

He asked other rabbis to “publicize the wickedness of the wicked Herz Wessely, may his name be publicly damned.” However, he did endorse the principal of “normal schools” in which Jews would learn a general curriculum from teachers not trained in Talmud. Such teachers must not, however, transmit any criticism of the Jewish tradition (Feiner 141).

In response to the attacks against him, Wessely published a second version of his pamphlet which he titled *Rav Tuv Livnei Israel*. In that second version he spoke in contradictory voices. On the one hand he was apologetic, claiming that he is a God-fearing Jew and that he was misunderstood and misjudged by his opponents. On the other hand he did not hesitate to proclaim his autonomy of thought and right to freely and openly express his views, and he declared that he was not subject to the will of the rabbis. He also quoted from the preface to Mendelssohn's *Bi'ur* in which Mendelssohn called for the rabbis to voluntarily forbear using their power of excommunication.³³ After reading this R. Landau wrote:

³³ “Divine religion... does not prod men with an iron rod: it guides them “with bands of love.” It draws no avenging sword, dispenses no worldly goods, arrogates unto itself no right to earthly possessions, and usurps no external power over any person's mind. Its sole weapons are reason and persuasion; its strength is the divine power of truth. The punishment it threatens, as well as the reward it promises, are but manifestations of love—salutary and beneficial to the person who receives them. It is by these signs that I recognize you, daughter of God, religion, who alone, in truth, are all-saving on earth as well as in heaven!” (Altmann 531)

“Now I see that every offense we have found him [Mendelssohn] to be guilty of was all true. He has declared himself that he has no share in the God of Israel nor in His Torah, and that every man may do as his heart desires. Moreover, he has printed his words in a foreign tongue, and to the monarchs he has spoken ill of the Sages of Israel.”³⁴ (Feiner 150)

R. Landau was upset not only because Wessely was refusing to bend to the will of the rabbis, but also because Mendelssohn had written his preface in German and it looked as if he was informing on the rabbis and showing his contempt for them (Feiner 150).

The story of Wessely continued with some interesting turns of events. I will leave those for the reader to discover.

Ha-Me'asef

The Haskalah began, according to Moshe Pelli, when a group of aspiring Hebrew writers undertook a new and daring enterprise, the publication of an up-to-date Hebrew journal, *Ha-Me'asef*³⁵ (the gatherer).³⁶ It appeared monthly during the period 1783-96³⁷ and served as the mouthpiece for a movement that made a concerted effort to change the nature of Jewish society in Germany. The stated aim of the journal was to publish articles in five categories: poetry; articles on language, Bible, knowledge and ethics, halakhah, and moral and physical education; biographies; news of contemporary events; and information about new books. These writers, who became known as the *Hame'asefim*, did not have a unified, well-developed ideology. They were, however, united in their aim to enlighten the Jewish people about the surrounding culture and the sciences and revive the Hebrew language, while remaining faithful and loyal to Judaism.

The journal's launch was coupled with the formation of a new association, *Society for the Seekers of the Hebrew Language*. This cultural so-

³⁴ Feiner, p. 397, no. 24 quotes this from “Yehezkel Landau's letter from Prague to Rabbi Zevi Hirsch Levin in Berlin, June, 1782, was published in Heschel, “The View of the Great Rabbis,” 123-24.”

³⁵ For a detailed study of *Ha-Me'asef* see המודרני הראשון בעברית by צמח צמריון, University Publishing, Tel Aviv: 1988.

³⁶ The first modern Hebrew journal entitled *Kobelet Musar* was actually published by Moses Mendelssohn in about 1755. In 1780 the editors of *Ha-Me'asef* republished the contents of one issue of *Kobelet Musar*.

³⁷ *Ha-Me'asef* was resurrected again in 1808 and lasted until 1811.

ciety founded a publishing house that managed to print an impressive number of Hebrew books on a variety of topics.

There was great disappointment among the *maskilim* when *Ha-Me'asef* ceased publishing due to a lack of public interest. Euchel in 1800 bemoaned the changing times that had caused its demise: “The days of love have passed, gone are the days of the covenant between [the Hebrew language] and the children of Israel...They have run away, and they have gone” (Pelli 107).

Conclusion

No two *maskilim* were alike, and the nature of the Haskalah varied over time and from one geographic location to another. While most of the earlier *maskilim* were God-fearing people who wanted reform within the framework of halakhah, others were far more radical. But did the Haskalah itself lead to massive assimilation and apostasy?

The prevailing popular belief is that, yes, the *maskilim* and their Haskalah caused assimilation and apostasy. However, both Sorkin and Feiner argue emphatically that this is not the case. The Haskalah was not the cause but the effect. In many geographic areas the Jewish communal structure and the authority of the rabbinate were weakened by internal strife brought about by the messianic and Hasidic movements.³⁸ As the Enlightenment swept through Europe, many

³⁸ Prof. Shnayer Z. Leimam in *Judaic Studies*, no. 5, Fall 2007, “Rabbinic Responses to Modernity” pp. 20-21 writes, “While all this [i.e., the Enlightenment] was taking place, rabbinic authority was engaged in an act of self-distruction... In 1751, a distinguished rabbinic scholar, R. Jacob Emden (d. 1776), accused one of the leading rabbinic authorities of his generation, R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz (d. 1764), of being a secret believer in Sabbatai Zevi. The controversy that ensued—the Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy—would pit rabbi against rabbi in Jewish communities throughout Europe. During the first half of the eighteenth century, R. Israel Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760) would lay the foundation for a new populist Jewish mystical movement, Hasidism. Not suprisingly, it met with stiff opposition from the rabbinic establishment. The Sabbatian debacle, the Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy, and the struggle against incipient Hasidism left rabbinic authority largely in disarray. Thus, for example, the ultimate symbol, if not expression, of rabbinic power was the ban. During the Emden-Eibeschuetz controversy, Emden and his supporters placed all rabbinic supporters of

economic and social barriers that separated Jews from the surrounding culture were removed by government edict and new opportunities were now available to the Jews. How was the Jewish community to respond to these changes? Should the status quo be retained³⁹ with the hope that the opportunities and freedoms brought about by the Enlightenment would be ignored by the masses, or should changes be implemented to address the new reality? According to Feiner the rabbinic elite was content to leave things as they were while the *maskilim* called for radical changes in Jewish education.

While the rabbinic elite and the *maskilim* were busy fighting each other, the walls to the ghetto were crumbling. Many Jews saw no reason to voluntarily remain within what would now be a self-imposed ghetto. The first thing people now wanted was not a different or better education but freedom—freedom from their own religion and freedom to explore the world and do as they wished. They were quick to abandon their Judaism because in the new alluring world of excitement and opportunity Judaism seemed to be offering only self-imposed isolation and poverty.

Had the demands of the *maskilim* been taken seriously, and had the Jewish community built many sophisticated educational institutions for Jews to receive instruction in the beauty of their own religion along with a quality secular education, could the great outflux of Jews been avoided? We will never know, but we do know that the educational institutions that the *maskilim* demanded, at least those of the early *maskilim* in Germany, are very similar to many American Orthodox Yeshivot. The vast majority of Orthodox Jews in the United States today are more educated and have more economic opportunity than what was envisioned by the early German *maskilim*. Undoubtedly, the members of the early Haskalah would have been delighted with the education of today's American Yeshiva student

Eibeschetz under the ban. Eibeschetz and his supporters placed all rabbinic supporters of Emden under the ban. Since virtually every major rabbinic figure alive at that time took sides in the controversy, everyone was under the ban, which, of course, rendered the ban meaningless... Rabbinic authority would never again regain the stature it held in the premodern period.”

³⁹ The battle cry of those determined to preserve the status quo would eventually become, “*ḥadash asur min ha-Torah*” that the Torah forbids any innovations.

and amazed with the education level of the many Orthodox Jews who continue their secular studies in universities across the country.

Both Feiner and Sorkin argue further that Mendelssohn was not the founder of the Haskalah. Mendelssohn, of course, did not cause the Enlightenment and neither did he cause the Haskalah. As we have seen, yearning for knowledge of the natural sciences, advocating changes in Jewish education, and championing Jewish civil rights did not necessarily make one a *maskil*. A *maskil* saw himself as being part of a group, and acted as part of that group to challenge the rabbinic establishment and call for changes in Jewish education and society. The *maskilim* saw themselves as an alternate intellectual group in competition with the rabbinic elite for leadership of the Jewish community. Mendelssohn does not fit that profile. Although he was definitely very educated and intelligent, he did not focus on challenging the authority of the rabbinic establishment. His personal quest was for knowledge of philosophy, to counteract the disruptive influence of the Berlin Enlightenment,⁴⁰ to defend Judaism, and to reconcile it with philosophy. His political goal was to achieve civil rights on behalf of the Jewish people. It was the younger contemporary generation of Mendelssohn—the generation that created the literary journal *Ha-Me'assef*,⁴¹ that created the printing press of the Haskalah, and who challenged the rabbinic elite—who were the true founders of the Haskalah. What we can say about Mendelssohn is that once the Haskalah began he was held up as its icon—as the ultimate educated and enlightened Jew who fought for Jewish rights.

There is an ironic side note to the Haskalah. Originally, Lithuanian Jews turned to their coreligionists in Germany, and asked for their assistance to eradicate, or at least suppress, the threatened inva-

⁴⁰ “What motivated Mendelssohn and his friend [the co-editor of *Kobelet Mussar*] was the urge to counteract the disruptive influence of the Berlin Enlightenment upon young Jews and, at the same time, a desire to make them share their own enthusiasm for the beauty of the Hebrew language, especially of biblical Hebrew” (Altmann 84).

⁴¹ Altmann p. 83 writes, “In the year 1758 Mendelssohn and a young friend decided to edit a Hebrew Weekly called *Kobelet Mussar*... Yet there was a marked difference between the Haskalah and the earlier effort [i.e., *Kobelet Mussar*]. In 1783, when the first number of *Ha-Me'assef*, the organ of the Maskilim, appeared, the contours of an emerging opposition to strict orthodoxy were clearly visible. In 1758 no antagonism to tradition was consciously implied...”

sion of Hasidism. The great learning and literary ability of the “divine philosopher, Rabbi Moses ben Menahem” was appealed to for help. Not a stone was left unturned to crush the new sect. However, the Hasidim and Mitnaggedim soon discovered that while they were busy fighting each other, a common enemy was undermining the ground on which they stood. The Haskalah was steadily drawing recruits from both, and it threatened ultimately to become more dangerous to both than they were to each other. It was the Haskalah, according to this view, that caused Hasidim and Mitnaggedim to lay down their arms and make peace with each other (Raisin 75-76).

The Book

Feiner’s book is rich in detail and well researched. The translation from the Hebrew is smooth and the underlying original Hebrew is not detectable. One problem with the book, however, is that in many places the details in one chapter appear again in another. For example, although the entire Wessely affair is fully documented in chapter 4, many of the same details appear again in chapter 6 where Feiner discusses the rabbinic response to the Haskalah. Since his book is arranged not chronologically but topically, I am not sure that this is totally avoidable—but it is definitely disconcerting.

There are occasional typos. On page 3, Feiner quotes Immanuel Kant: “Self-incurred in this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another.” I was baffled by that sentence until I realized that “in” should have been “is.”

A gross mistake, however, appears on pages 36-37. Feiner writes, regarding the oft-cited question that was posed to R. Emden, that he “gave the student permission to observe an anatomy lesson on the Sabbath...” The actual responsa text (which Sorkin (56) reads correctly) shows that the opposite is indeed the case.


“Stand aside⁴² and do not sit with those who are involved with the autopsy on the holy day of Sabbath. For even in this, due of the es-

⁴² Perhaps Feiner read only the beginning of R. Emden’s response and read עמוד מנגד ואל תשב literally to mean that he was being told that he was not allowed to sit at the lecture, only to stand. From the balance of the response it is clear, however, that this is not the intent.

sence of the day, there is a definite prohibition as you have begun to notice with your own eyes. Do not search for a false justification but for truth. It is not that I am going beyond the norm and prohibiting people from merely looking, to stand near the surgeons to observe in a pleasurable manner as when people observe something new—for this surely I would not prohibit. On the contrary I would not object at all for this is not what I learned from my teachers. It is not usual for me to be stringent regarding that for which there is no clear-cut prohibition—provided that it would not lead to a catastrophe. However, although everyone else would be permitted [to observe the autopsy] you may not, since it is your intent to learn from this observation and to acquire through it knowledge of your profession. Such is definitely prohibited for the reasons I mentioned above... Please remember what Rambam z'l wrote, that it is forbidden to learn on the Sabbath even books of the wise except for the Torah of God. It is thus without any doubt surely prohibited to learn about actions that are themselves prohibited [on the Sabbath]." (*Shielat Yavetz* 1:41)⁴³

Finally, I found it odd that Feiner's work contains no bibliography. Yet, despite the above annoyances Feiner's is an enjoyable, detailed, well-researched and interesting book. While there are other

⁴³ לכן אהו' כבני אם לי אתה ולקולי תשמע. עמוד מנגד ואל תשב אצל העוסקים במלאכת הניתוח ביום ש"ק. כי אפי' בזה יש איסור גמור מחמת עצמו ועיצומו של יום. כאשר הראת לדעת אם עיניך יפות. ולא תבקש מכסה כזב על האמת לחפות, ולא שאני מפריז על המדה לאסור לכל אדם אף ראייה בעלמא, ולעמוד שם אצל המנתחים להביט במלאכתם דרך תענוג וטיול, כדרך בני אדם הנהגים לראות דבר חדש, כי בזה ודאי לא די שאיני מחליטו לאיסור. אדרב' לא הייתי מוחה כלל, כי לא כך למדתי מרבתי. ואין דרכי להחמיר להמון העם בדבר שאין איסורו ברור ולא נפיק מניה חורבא, אלא לכ"ע שרי, ולדידך אסור. אחר שכוונתך ללמוד בזה ההסתכלות והעיון, ולהשיג ע"י כך ידיעת אותה אומנות דבר זה איסור מוחלט הוא בעיני מטעמים הנ"ל. ועוד שיש בו משום גזרה שמא יבא הדבר לידי חילול שבת במלאכה גמורה ג"כ. כיוצא בו אמרו לא יאכל הזב עם הזבה כו'. וכן אותה ששנינו לא יצא הבלבל עם חשכה. וכמו שמצינו שגזרו כמה גזרות כדומה לזו שמא יעלה ויתלוש שמא יתקן כלי שיר כלי שיט ודומיהם רבים. עם היות עשייתן קשה, ורחוק' היא מאדם ההמוני שאינו אומן ובלי כלי אומנות, כ"ש שיש לחוש כאן שהיא מוכנת ומזומנת לפניו. שיבוא ויעשנה מתחלה עד סוף ולא ירגיש, מתוך חשק הלמוד ישכח קדושת שבת לגמרי, או יקל בעיניו. אימר עביד ולא אדעתיה. וסחור סחור לכרמא לא תקרב, אם בעל נפש אתה ונפשך חביבה בעיניך, ושמת סכין (הנתוח) בלועך, ביום קודש פרוש, ולא תעשה כמעשיהם ולא תדרוש, וזכור נא מ"ש הרמב"ם ז"ל שאסור ללמוד בשבת אפי' בספרי חכמ' כי אם בתורת ד' כל היום. ק"ו להתלמד במלאכה האסור' בו בלי שום ספק בעולם (שו"ת שאילת יעבץ חלק א סימן מא).

books, such as Altmann's,⁴⁴ that provide more detail on the life of Mendelssohn, no other book provides such a wealth of information on the German Haskalah in general.⁴⁵ 

⁴⁴ Altmann's book also provides more elaborate quotes from Mendelssohn's writings and Altmann often goes to great lengths to justify his own conclusions.

⁴⁵ I would like to thank my son Meir Zelcer for reviewing and commenting on an earlier draft of this article. Any mistakes or shortcomings in this review essay, however, are solely my own.

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For additional works on Mendelssohn and the Haskalah, and for collections containing Mendelssohn's writings see Altmann's appendix, pp. 760-763.