

Intimations of Religious Reform in the German Hebrew Haskalah Literature

by Moshe Pelli

A study of the Hebrew Haskalah literature in Germany during the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first two decades of the nineteenth century reveals both covert and overt tendencies toward moderate reforms in the Jewish religion. Naturally, these tendencies are to be found among those *maskilim* whom we shall refer to as “moderate *maskilim*” in order to distinguish them from both the traditionalist *maskilim* such as Shlomo Papenheim, and their more extreme German-Jewish colleagues like David Friedlaender.¹ The moderate *maskilim*, who had as their goal the enlightening, updating, and Europeanization of their fellow Jews, differed from their orthodox, or traditionalist, peers in that the moderates also aspired to invigorate the Jewish people through the revitalization of the Jewish religion.² Unlike the extreme German-Jewish reformers such as Saul Ascher, Solomon Maimon, David Friedlaender and Lazarus Bendavid, the moderate Hebrew thinkers, in the main, functioned within the scope of traditional Judaism.³ Not only did they express their thoughts in a language which they shared with the

¹ Cf. Isaac E. Barzilay, “The Treatment of the Jewish Religion in the Literature of the Berlin Haskalah,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. xxiv (1955), p. 40; and his “National and Anti-National Trends in the Berlin Haskalah,” *JEWISH SOCIAL STUDIES*, vol. xxi (July 1959), pp. 167–168, with regard to the grouping of the *maskilim* in accordance with their language of writing. At times Barzilay seems hesitant about this distinction. See his views on Eichel and Satanow in “Jewish Religion . . .,” pp. 40–41.

² This is exemplified in Mendel Breslau’s article, “*Michtavim Shonim*” [“*Various Articles*”] in *Ha-Meassef*, vol. vi (1790), pp. 30ff.: “at the time of disorder in Israel, (“uvifro’a pera’ot beyisra’el”; the complexity of the verse in *Judges* 5:2, is acknowledged; it is translated here as fitting Breslau’s context); “is it not better that you, the chiefs of the House of Jacob, should gather together to speak to the people words of love and to relieve them of the additions [to the law]” (p. 310).

³ Some of the *maskilim* still resorted to the good offices of the rabbis for *haskamot* (approbations); these rabbinic approvals are to be found in all of Wessely’s books up until the controversy over his *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet* [*Words of Peace and Truth*] (Berlin 1782–1785), in Mendelsohn’s *Netivot Hashalom* [*Paths of Peace*], (Berlin 1780–1783), and as late as 1808 and 1815 in Homberg’s *Imrei Shefer* [*Goodly Words*] (Vienna 1808), and Shalom Hacohen’s *Shorshei ’Emunah* [*Roots of Faith*] (London 1815). Concurrently, the *haskamot* underwent a twofold change: pseudo-*haskamot*, like the ones which Isaac Satanow incorporated in his books, and the use of non-rabbinic authorities for *haskamot*, namely the *maskilim* themselves, as evident in Wolfsson’s *’Avtalion* (Prague 1806), Friedlaender’s “*haskamah*,” and Lindau’s *Reshit Limudim* [*Beginning of Learning*] (Berlin 1788). However, in their three forms the *haskamot* proved to be a device the *maskilim* borrowed to further their ideas. In addition, the *maskilim* sought rabbinic support for their views in controversies with the more extreme traditionalist rabbis, that is, *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet* and the first reform Temple controversies. Other aspects of the *maskilim*’s functioning within traditional Judaism are discussed below.

traditionalists, namely Hebrew, but they also borrowed their arguments for religious reforms from the halachah,⁴ and in general endeavored to keep in contact with the religious authorities of the time—the traditionalist rabbis.

Inspired directly and indirectly by the literature of the Enlightenment in general, and by the religious polemics of Deism in particular, the Hebrew Enlighteners individually and collectively concluded that religious reform was necessary for the survival of both the Jewish people and their religion. Very much like the general Enlightenment, the Hebrew Haskalah regarded human reason as almost the sole criterion for judging and evaluating the phenomena of life, inclusive of religion. Typically, *maskilim* like Mendel Breslau and Isaac Satanow among others, did not make use of the verse from Psalms “Reshit ḥochmah yir’at YHVH” [“The beginning of wisdom—is the fear of God”] (*Psalms* 111:10) but rather used the verse from *Proverbs* 1:7 “Yir’at YHVH reshit da’at” [“The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge”] as well as the verse from *Job* 28:28 (with a slight change) “Yir’at ’Adonai [hi] ḥochmah” [“The fear of God—is wisdom”].⁵ The emphasis is no doubt on wisdom and not on the fear of God. At this stage of development, attempts were made to reconcile the Jewish religion with reason and to show the compatibility of the two. In a manner reminiscent of the orthodox thinkers among the Christian Enlighteners in England,⁶ a Hebrew *maskil* wrote: “Torah (*i.e.*, religion) and wisdom (or: reason) are twin sisters.”⁷

The emphasis was put on knowledge—on secular studies—and on science.⁸ The credo of the European Enlightenment, enunciated by Alexander Pope in 1732—

⁴ In the period under study it seems that the Hebrew reformers tended to base their argumentation on the halachah more than did their extreme German counterparts.

⁵ In the age of reason, the Hebrew terminology concerning reason and wisdom and its relation to “the fear of god” is of utmost importance to the understanding of the Hebrew Haskalah in Germany. I intend to prepare a separate and detailed study on the subject. However, for the purpose of the present paper it will suffice to note that Naphtali Wessely, who marks the transition from the old to the new, still upholds the old view that wisdom is the fear of god. In long treatises in *Levanon* and in *Yen Levanon* [*Wine of Lebanon*] Wessely equates wisdom with the Mosaic laws and their observance (*Levanon*, vol. i [Vienna 1829], pp. 4a, 5a; vol. ii, introduction, p. 7b). To Wessely the basis and prerequisite of wisdom, that is, the *Torah*, is obviously the fear of god. See *Yen Levanon* (Warsaw 1914), pp. 20, 148, 151; *Levanon*, vol. ii, pp. 25b, 85a, 91a; *Sefer Hamidot* [Book of Ethics] (Berlin 1785?), p. 30a.

The other *maskilim*, however, in an attempt to break away from this traditional view, preferred to quote the verses from *Proverbs* 1:7, and *Job* 28:28, from which the Hebrew Enlighteners endeavored to point out that wisdom is a prerequisite to the fear of god and not vice versa. See Isaac Satanow, *Sefer Hamidot* (Berlin 1784), on the title page, and Mendel Breslau, *Yaldut Uvaharut* [*Childhood and Youth*] (Berlin 1786), in the introduction, p. 6 [my pagination].

⁶ Cf. Roland N. Stromberg, *Religious Liberalism in Eighteenth-Century England* (London 1954), p. 22.

⁷ Isaac Satanow, *Mishlei ’Asaf* [*Proverbs of ’Asaf*], vol. ii (Berlin 1792), p. 70a. See also his *Mishlei ’Asaf*, vol. i (Berlin 1789), p. 12a, and Wessely’s *Sefer Hamidot*, pp. 31b, 37a. Of importance is the change that we find in the beginning of the 19th century. Eliezer Liebermann equates Faith (“Emunah”—and not the *Torah*) with investigation (inquiry—“ḥakirah”) in *’Or Nogah* [*Shining Light*], vol. ii (Dessau 1818), p. 6.

⁸ See especially Wessely’s *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet* (Berlin 1782). Examples for the teaching of science are to be found in *Ha-Meassef*, vol. v (1789), pp. 234, 289—by Aaron Wolfsohn; *Ibid.*, pp. 88–92, 136–144—by Mendel Lefin of Satanow. See also Baruch Lindau’s *Reshit Limudim*. Isaac Satanow published a poem entitled “A Song for the First Day” in *Ha-Meassef*, vol. ii (1785), pp. 129–131, which has optics as its theme.

1734 as “the proper study of mankind is man,”⁹ was taken over by the Hebrew Enlightenment. As Isaac Euchel put it: “Yesod behinat ha’adam—ha’adam” [“The basis of the search (or study) of man—is man.”¹⁰] The *maskilim* borrowed scientific methods,¹¹—very much like their deistic counterparts— and attempted to apply them—though modestly in the beginning—to theology, the scriptures,¹² the history of religion¹³ and to worship.¹⁴ Discoveries in the study of comparative religion and biblical criticism exerted covertly as great an influence on Hebrew Haskalah as they did on European Enlightenment and on Deism. Consequently, the seeds of skepticism¹⁵ and of criticism¹⁶ were implanted, and were expressed in a two-fold tendency: an attitude of irreverence toward the past and its heritage,¹⁷

⁹ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man* (Dublin 1764), p. 18 [Epistle II]. The original version in the first edition (as cited in a note, *Ibid.*) reads: “The only science of Mankind is Man.” Cf. the seventh edition (London 1736), Epistle II, for the original version: “Know then Thyself, presume not God to scan; /The only Science of Mankind is Man.”

¹⁰ *Ha-Meassef*, vol. vi (1790), p. 176. A similar Hebrew rendering by an anonymous writer is found in the 1786 edition of the Hebrew periodical, p. 203: “The object of the search of man—is man” [“Tachlit hakirat ha’adam hu—ha’adam”].

¹¹ The following documentation is by no means complete; I intend to deal more fully with this subject in a separate study. One notes a growing demand on the part of the *maskilim* for exact definitions of scientific terms (see *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iii, [1786], p. 109, by L.B.D.) as well as those of logic (*Ibid.*, vol. ii [1785], p. 38), by Joel Löwe (Bril) for a definition of “Abstract”; for a distinction between scientific hypothesis and proven theory, and the necessity of scientific proof (*Ibid.*, vol. iii [1786], p. 109); for a critical approach to authorities in one field (for example, halachah) as far as their unauthoritative views in another field (for example, natural sciences; *Ibid.*, pp. 189, 191, against rabbis Ezekiel Landau and Jacob Emden respectively and *Ibid.*, p. 192—by an anonymous writer; and for the view that halachic matters which concern themselves with any of the sciences (for example, medicine) should be referred to the scientific experts (doctors) for decision (*Ibid.*, vol. ii [1785], pp. 6–7 [Abraham b. Shlomo], p. 171 [by Moses Mendelssohn] with regard to inoculation and the early-burial-of-the-dead controversy, respectively); for reliance on empiricism (*Ibid.*, vol. iii [1786], p. 192).

¹² See Joel Löwe (Bril) and Aaron Wolfsohn, “Davar Shenı ‘El Hamedabrim” [“A Second Word to the ‘Medabrim’”]; cf. definition of ‘Medabrim’ in Isaac Satanow’s edition of *Moreh Nevuchim*, vol. iii (Berlin 1796), p. 77b, *Ha-Meassef*, vol. v (1789), pp. 174ff., where it is held that the book of Esther had been written originally by Persians in their language, and later translated into Hebrew. This view, however, did not originate with the *maskilim*, yet it is indicative of their tendency to accept moderate biblical criticism views; also *Ibid.*, vol. vi (1790), pp. 50ff., for moderate biblical criticism by Joel Löwe (Bril); on Judah Ben-Ze’ev’s acceptance of biblical criticism see his *Mavo ‘El Mikra’ei Kodesh* [Introduction to the Holy Scriptures] (Vienna 1810), and M. Soloveitchik and S. Rubasheff, *Toldot Bikoret Hamikra* [The History of the Bible Criticism] (Berlin 1935), p. 144, and Re’uven Fahn, *Kitvei Re’uven Fahn* [The Writings of R.F.], vol. ii (Stanislawów 1937), pp. 35, 37.

¹³ On ancient religions see the following articles by Joseph B.R.A. B.R.N.: “The History of the Kingdom of Egypt,” *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iv (1788), pp. 382–384; “The Religions and Laws of Assyria, Media and Persia,” *Ibid.*, vol. v (1789), pp. 115–124; and “The History of Sicily,” on the oracle of Appolo at Delphi, *Ibid.*, pp. 203–205; on the priestcraft in ancient Egypt, Isaac Satanow, *Imrei Binah* [Words of Understanding], (Berlin 1784), p. 31a.

¹⁴ This is noted especially in the related controversy of the early burial of the dead—a historical probe into a quasi-religious custom. See the correspondence between Moses Mendelssohn and Rabbi Jacob Emden, and other writings on the subject in *Ha-Meassef*, vol. ii (1785), pp. 87ff., 152ff., 169ff., 178ff., and vol. iii (1786), pp. 78ff., 183ff., 202ff. See also the discussion of praying in the vernacular (V.A., “Review of New Books,” *Ibid.*, vol. iii [1786], pp. 138–139).

¹⁵ See Satanow’s *Imrei Binah*, in the introduction [my pagination], p. 1b: “the storm of confusion [*hamevuchot*] is coming down on the head of the enlightened [*hamaskilim*].”

¹⁶ See especially Saul Berlin’s *Ketav Yosher* [An Epistle of Righteousness] (Berlin 1795) and *Besamim Rosh* [Incense of Spices] (Berlin 1793).

¹⁷ See Elijah Morpurgo, “Words of Wisdom and Ethics,” *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iii (1786), p. 131: “Ha’omrim lara’ tov umahazikim ma’aseh avotehem bidehem, ve’en lahem ‘al mah

and a strong belief in progress.¹⁸ With this came the understanding of the relativity of all religions,¹⁹ that is to say, that no one religion has any exclusive right, or birthright, to the truth; this trend in the thought of the Enlightenment brought about demands for religious tolerance.²⁰

Having these vehicles of the Enlightenment, the Hebrew Haskalah began to consider and even to demand some reforms in the Jewish religion. As early as 1771, a *maskil* like Mordechai Schnaber (George Levison) wrote about the feasibility of reform in Jewish law;²¹ in the 90's Rabbi Saul Berlin proposed a series of actual reforms some of which he attributed [falsely—according to scholars] to the great rabbinic authority of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel.²² However, these phenomena were rather exceptional, and are

lehissha'en, ki 'im 'al 'avivhem 'asher yeladam, uche'ivrim yegasheshu kir, velo da'at velo tevunah . . ." [Those that call evil good, and good evil, and hold to the deed of their ancestors, and they do not have on what to rely but on their father who begot them, and like the blind they grope for the wall, neither is there knowledge or understanding. . . ."]; *Ibid.*, vol. ii (1785), pp. 152–153; *Ibid.*, vol. v (1789), p. 194. It should be noted, though, that simultaneously there was an attempt to go back to the original form of Judaism, that of the Bible and its development in the Talmud [!], before it was corrupted by the medieval rabbis. See *Ha-Meassef*, vol. ii (1785), pp. 88, 152, 154 [by an anonymous writer]; "Discussion of Two Friends" [anonymous; believed to have been written by Saul Berlin], *Ibid.*, vol. v (1789), p. 270.

¹⁸ It is manifested in the *maskilim's* repeated enunciations regarding the new times that the Jewish people are faced with as a result of the Enlightenment. See Isaac Euchel *et al.*, *Nahal Habesor* (1783), p. 11, quoting *Proverbs*: "Wisdom crieth without, she uttereth her voice in the streets, hurry up call her, hasten to bring her home"; *Ibid.*, p. 13: "The period of knowledge has arrived in all the peoples. . . . And we, why should we sit idle"; *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iii (1786), p. 68: "Not as the day of old is it now for the remnant of this people, for the seed of peace is giving its fruit . . . and the tree of knowledge is giving its fruits . . . and a clear wind has passed on the face of the world . . ."; *Ibid.*, p. 131: "Pay respect to the Lord your god now that the sun of wisdom has come out upon the earth in this wise generation"; *Ibid.*, vol. vi (1790), p. 301: "And in a little while wisdom and knowledge would be the faith [or: belief; Hebrew: 'Emunah] of the times. . . ." The *maskilim's* use of the talmudic saying "'Im harishonim kivnei 'adam 'ana'hu kahamorim" [If the first ones (forefathers) are like human beings we are likened to donkeys] is indicative of their attitude to both the past and the progressive times. Whereas a traditionalist *maskil* such as Wessely tends to accept this maxim at its face value (*Sefer Hamidot*, p. 75b—by inference), other *maskilim* like Wolfsohn (*Ha-Meassef*, vol. vii [No. 2, 1796?], pp. 127ff.), Isaac Satanow (*Sefer Hamidot*, pp. 34b–35a; *Mishlei 'Asaf*, vol. ii, p. 10a), and Saul Berlin (*Ketav Yosher*, p. 9b) either ridicule the phrase or else use it in various ways for their own Haskalah purposes.

¹⁹ See Satanow's *Imrei Binah*, p. 31b ". . . we know that corresponding as well as contradictory traditions are accepted by the various nations, each one of them prides itself on possessing the truth, while nevertheless one is a false tradition, but there is no one to decide." Satanow's *Megilat Hasidim* [*Scroll of the Pious*] (Berlin 1802), p. 20a–b.

²⁰ *Mishlei 'Asaf*, vol. ii, p. 47a: "(6) Love the people of your religion, and [but] you ought not hate those whose religions are different: (7) For one god created them, and to one god, in different names, they call." Cf. *Mishlei 'Asaf*, vol. i, p. 55b, verse 11, text and commentary.

²¹ Mordechai Gumpel [George Levison], *Ma'amar Hatorah Veha'ochmah* [*An Essay (on) the Torah and Wisdom*] (London 1771), p. 2.

²² Saul Berlin, *Besamim Rosh*. Regarding the *Besamim Rosh* controversy see Moshe Samet's article and bibliography on "Rabbi Saul Berlin and His Writings," *Kirjath Sepher*, vol. xliii (June 1968), no. 3, pp. 429–441. Reuven Margaliyot, "Rabbi Saul Levin the Forger of the Book 'Besamim Rosh,'" *Areshet* (Jerusalem 1944), pp. 357–358 [Hebrew], and my paper entitled "Some Remarks Concerning the Nature of Saul Berlin's Writings" scheduled to appear in *The Journal of Hebraic Studies*, 1970 issue. It should be noted that while no one doubts that Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel could not have written those answers which contain heresy or reflect religious liberality, there are some students of Saul Berlin who feel that it is possible that Berlin did use some medieval material while writing *Besamim Rosh*. Certainly,

to be considered as heralding a later development in the Hebrew Enlightenment. Thus the last decades of the eighteenth century were characterized by a new critical approach to the Jewish religion.

One of the main features of this critical approach was an attempt to wage a holy war against superstition similar in its nature and content to the ideas of the deists. Using satire effectively as a literary medium, the *maskilim* aspired to do to Judaism what Conyers Middleton, Pierre Bayle, Voltaire, and Balthasar Bekker had previously done to Christianity;²³ namely, to eradicate all religious customs which stemmed from superstition. Saul Berlin's pamphlet, *Ketav Yosher* [*An Epistle of Righteousness*], is most outstanding in this regard. A compiled list of superstitious customs which Berlin ridiculed might well serve as an example of similar anti-traditionalist writings in Hebrew literature during the following hundred years. The list includes for example, the custom of *Kapparot* on the eve of the Day of Atonement, the order of shaking the *Lulav* on Sukkot, the custom of putting on the right shoe first upon dressing, and noisemaking at the mention of the name Haman during the reading of the *Scroll of Esther*.²⁴

Concurrently there came a stronger and more intensified attack against those religious customs and ceremonies which the *maskilim* felt were not an integral part of true Judaism.²⁵ By singling out superstition and extraneous customs as their target, the *maskilim* could maintain their declared loyalty to both the Jewish religion as they understood it, and to the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment as well. They thought they were on safe ground since they called only for innovations in customs. It should be noted that whereas some *maskilim* saw these innovations as their ultimate goal in reforming the Jewish religion, there were others²⁶ for whom these were but a prelude for more extreme reform.

As early as 1772, Moses Mendelssohn came out against the traditional early and immediate burial of the dead, demanding the restoration of the *original* Jewish custom of delaying burial²⁷—the custom documented in the ancient literature.²⁸

a re-examination of the writings of Saul Berlin, as well the works that have been attributed to him, is greatly needed.

²³ Conyers Middleton, *A Letter From Rome, Shewing an Exact Conformity Between Popery and Paganism* (London 1729), pp. 69–70; Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical* (London 1734–1738 [second edition], vol. iii, pp. 744, 87; vol. i, p. 87 [First edition appeared in Rotterdam in 1697]; Voltaire, “A Philosophical Dictionary,” *The Works of Voltaire*, vol. vii (New York 1901–1903), part 2, pp. 17–24, 30–31 [First edition: 1764]; Balthasar Bekker, *The World Bewitched*, vol. i (London 1695), ch. xix, pp. 182ff., ch. xx, pp. 197ff., ch. xxiv, pp. 244ff. [First edition: 1691].

²⁴ *Ketav Yosher*, p. 3b. Cf. other attacks of the *maskilim* against superstition: *Ha-Meassef*, vol. ii (1785), pp. 14–15, 153, 165; vol. v (1789), p. 121; vol. vii (No. 2, 1796?), p. 123.

²⁵ See *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iii (1786), pp. 138ff. with regard to praying in the vernacular (“tefilah bechol lashon”); p. 205 concerning criticism of the *piyyutim* (by Euchel); p. 208, prayers and worship; vol ii (1785), p. 153, on correction of certain customs. Changes in the burial customs are discussed below.

²⁶ Such as Saul Berlin in the early period (the last two decades of the 18th century).

²⁷ Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. xvi (Berlin 1929), pp. 154ff.; *Ha-Meassef*, vol. ii (1785), pp. 169–174, 178–187.

²⁸ *Masechet Semahot* [*Evel Rabati*], chapter 8, 1: “Yotze'in leveit hakevarot ufokdin 'al hametim 'ad sheloshah yamim ve'en hosheshin mishum darchei ha'emori” [“One must go out to the cemetery and attend to the dead up to three days; one should not be deterred (apprehensive) because of the ways of the Amorite”].

In addition, Mendelssohn's views and actions against the rabbinical practice of excommunication²⁹ are well known. The *maskilim* regarded both the excommunication and the burial issues as test-cases symbolic of the victory of Enlightenment over traditional, ossified Judaism. For some three decades the *maskilim* dealt with these problems in their journal, *Ha-Meassef* [*The Collector*], as well as in other writings.³⁰ Even as late as 1820, the Hebrew reformer David Caro cited the burial-of-the-dead controversy as one of the issues in which the traditionalist rabbis had to correct a harmful and legally baseless custom.³¹

Undoubtedly the *maskilim* had Mendelssohn's two-fold goal in mind: restoring the original, true customs, and presenting the Jewish religion as enlightened and humane to the outside world. However, caution should be exercised with regard to the intentions of the *maskilim*. Certainly most of them used these mild reforms as a lever for more advanced and more daring religious reforms, exploiting the authority of Mendelssohn. Underlying the controversy of the burial of the dead is the legal interpretation of the admonition "uvehukoteihem lo telechu"³² ["Neither shall ye walk in their ordinances"] as is evident in the correspondence between Mendelssohn and Rabbi Jacob Emden,³³ and in other writings on the subject. To the broader implication of the admonition, namely that the halachah tends to forbid cultural and social imitation of the gentiles—the Hebrew Enlighteners as such obviously could not consent. This attitude is exemplified by the question of a liberal Italian rabbi during the first Temple-controversy in 1818: "Shall we not do all that the gentiles do?"³⁴

Yet when it came to criticizing an established custom, a *maskil* like Euchel had no hesitation in implying that certain accepted rituals had their origin in Christianity,³⁵ leaving the reader to conclude "Uvehukoteihem lo telechu." Euchel

²⁹ Moses Mendelssohn, "Hakdamah Liteshu'at Yisra'el" [*Introduction to 'Teshu'at Yisra'el'*], *Ketavim Ketanim* (Tel Aviv 1947), pp. 163ff.; *Ibid.*, *Yerushalayim*, p. 62 [Hebrew].

³⁰ *Ha-Meassef*, vol. i (1784), p. 15 [German section]; vol. ii (1785), pp. 87ff., 152ff., 154, 169–174, 178–187; vol. iii (1786), pp. 78ff., 183ff., 202ff.; vol. iv (1788), p. 226; vol. vii (No. 4, 1797), pp. 347–360, 361ff.; Marcus Herz, *Michtav 'El Mehabrei Hame'asef* [*A Letter to the Authors of Hame'asef*] (Berlin 1789), translated into Hebrew by Isaac Euchel; *Besamim Rosh*, siman 64; Abraham Ash [Eshkoli], *Torah Kulah 'Al Regel 'Ahat* [*The Whole of Torah On One Foot*] (Berlin 1796), pp. 28–60. Cf. Moses Mendelsohn [of Hamburg], *Penei Tevel* [*The Face of the World*] (Amsterdam 1872), p. 234. Tuvyahu Feder, *Kol Mehatzetzim* [*Voice of the Archers*, cf. *Judges* 5:11; translation according to Feder's remarks on the title page] (Lemberg 1853), p. 30 (same as *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iv [1788], p. 226); see also Isaac Satanow's interpretation of *Sefer Hagedarim* [*Book of Definitions*] (Berlin 1798) by Menaḥem ben Abraham of Perpignan, pp. 74a-b.

³¹ 'Amitai ben 'Avida Aḥitzedek [David Caro], *Berit 'Emet* [*A Covenant of Truth*], vol. ii (Dessau 1820), p. 114.

³² *Leviticus*, 18:3.

³³ Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. xvi, p. 162.

³⁴ *Nogah' Hatzedek* [*Light of Justice*] (Dessau 1818), p. 4 (Rabbi Shem Tov Samun of Livorno).

³⁵ "Igot Meshulam ben 'Uriyah Ha'eshtamo'i," ["The Letters of Meshulam..."] *Ha-Meassef*, vol. vi (1790), p. 45: "... and I saw them [the Christians] observing customs like the customs of Israel: they say *tefilat hashkavah* [footnote: this is how the prayer of *hazkarat neshamot* is called among the Spaniards] and they light candles for the souls of the dead. I did not know whether they had seen the custom of Israel and did [theirs] like it, or [that] these customs came to us while we were in exile among them; for I did not know whether any such custom is mentioned in either the Jerusalem or the Babylonian Talmud."

was also among the first *maskilim* to express his criticism—though cautiously—against the traditional *piyyutim*, which later became a focal point of attack by the Hebraists with reform inclinations.³⁶ As early as 1786, another *maskil* advocated praying in German.³⁷ The language of the prayers later became an issue of extreme importance in Germany.³⁸ More than mere criticism of customs is to be found in Saul Berlin's *Besamim Rosh* [*Incense of Spices*]; it has pseudo-authoritative decrees—some of which are attributed to Rabbi Asher—favoring reform.

In the following decades up to the first Temple-controversy of 1818, the Hebrew reformers became bolder and more explicit in their unequivocal demand for changes in Jewish customs and rituals which they considered to be either contrary to the spirit of ancient, true Judaism, as they understood it, or else unimportant and damaging to the Jewish community. Meir Israel Bresselau, Eliezer Liebermann and David Caro are representative examples.³⁹ Their colleague-in-arms, Aaron Chorin, owing to his position as a practicing rabbi, even put some of the changes which he had preached into practice.⁴⁰

There was also a trend in the German Hebrew Haskalah literature of the late eighteenth century towards a rational explanation of the various commandments, or precepts, known in Hebrew as *Ta'amei Hamitzvot* [Reasons for Precepts]. To apply rationalism to the mitzvot was inescapable in the atmosphere of the Enlightenment. Thus Isaac Satanow advocated discussion of *Ta'amei Hamitzvot*, while other writers in *Ha-Meassef* were actually discussing the problem openly.⁴¹ By applying reason, or rather rationalization, the *maskilim* followed the man they termed "the light of our generation,"⁴² namely Mendelssohn. The consequences, however, went far beyond Mendelssohn's views concerning the mitzvot.⁴³ Writers such as Schnaber and Berlin saw in the mitzvot only a means to an end: a reminder of one of the fundamentals of religion—doing that which is good and

³⁶ See note 28; Isaac Satanow, a *paytan* [poet] himself, seems to disagree with the general attitude of the *maskilim* toward the *piyyutim* in his introduction to his edition of *Seder Selihah* (Berlin 1785). He comes out, however, against the corrupted *selihot* (*Ibid.*). Cf. J.B.L.'s [Joel Brill] critical review of Satanow's book in *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iii (1786), p. 48. For later criticism of *piyyutim* see Caro, *Berit 'Emet*, vol. ii, p. 112; Mendel Steinhart, *Divrei 'Igeret* [*Words of An Epistle*] (Rödelheim 1812), pp. 11a–b. The opposition to the *piyyutim* was in no way limited to the Hebraist reformers.

³⁷ *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iii (1786), pp. 138ff.

³⁸ The Temple controversy of 1818; see especially *'Eleh Divrei Haberit* [*These Are the Words of the Covenant*] (Altona 1819); *Nogah Hatzedek*; Meir I. Bresselau, *Herev Nokemet Nekam Berit* [*A Sword Avenging the Vengeance of Covenant*] (Dessau 1819), p. 12. I deal extensively with the subject in my article "The Methodology Employed by the Hebrew Reformers in the First Reform Temple Controversy (1818–1819)" to be published in the *Kiev Festschrift* later this year.

³⁹ In *Herev Nokemet Nekam Berit*, *'Or Nogah* [*Shining Light*] (Dessau 1818), and *Berit 'Emet*, respectively.

⁴⁰ Aaron Chorin, *'Imrei No'am* [*Pleasant Words*] (Prague 1798), p. 5; *Nogah Hatzedek*, p. 24. See my study of Chorin, "Milhamto Hara'ayonit Ve'hahalachit Shel Harav Aaron Chorin Be'ad Reformah Ratit Bayahadut" ["The Ideological and Legal Struggle of Aaron Chorin for Religious Reform in Judaism"], *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. xxxix (1968), pp. 63ff. [Hebrew Section].

⁴¹ Satanow's *'Imrei Binah*, p. 12a; *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iii (1786), pp. 165ff. The anonymous writer in *Ha-Meassef* is cautious, however, not to attach any definitiveness to his rational explanations.

⁴² *Ha-Meassef*, vol. ii (1785), p. 81; "Ner dorenu."

⁴³ *Yerushalayim*, p. 137.

righteous.⁴⁴ Whereas this assumption is not necessarily anti-traditionalist, the conclusion of some of the *maskilim* (for example, Schnaber) undoubtedly was anti-traditionalist. Thus Schnaber declared that should these goals be achieved without the mitzvot—perhaps the mitzvot ought to be eliminated completely.⁴⁵

It was only natural then that the Enlighteners began to criticize the mitzvot directly. Further they felt that the great number of mitzvot was an unjustified yoke which the Jews had to bear. It is not my intention here to imply that the criticism of the mitzvot came only as a result of the discussion concerning *Ta'amei Hamitzvot*, for though the latter had an impact on the former, there were instances where the two took place concurrently.

Satanow, Berlin, Breslau, Wolfssohn,⁴⁶ and others, each in his own way, criticized the mitzvot as a burden. Their criticism may be summarized by typical phrases from Rabbi Berlin's *Ketav Yosher*, as follows: "They [the Jews] are burdened from birth with mitzvot and customs by the thousands and tens of thousands, each and every step has a mitzvah and a restriction, and no one does as much as winking with one's eye, without having . . . some law as to whether one does the right thing or not."⁴⁷

It stands to reason that demands to alleviate the harsh yoke of the mitzvot followed. Characteristically, the Hebrew reformers attempted to justify the religious changes on the basis of the traditional halachah. One should bear in mind that at this stage the Hebrew *maskilim* still had some hope for rapport with the traditionalist rabbis.⁴⁸ Whether they really believed they could persuade these rabbis to enact any of their proposed reforms may be debated. No doubt the *maskilim* did not have any hope for extremely orthodox rabbis such as Rabbi Refa'el Hacohen of Hamburg; otherwise they would not have chosen him as a symbol in their attacks.⁴⁹ However, even if they lost hope from the very beginning—which

⁴⁴ Mordecai Gumpel Schnaber [George Levison], *Tochahat Megilah [A Rebuke of (on) the Megilah (Ecclesiastes)]* (Hamburg 1784), p. 9b; Saul Berlin, *Besamim Rosh*, siman 251 pp. 77a-b.

⁴⁵ *Tochahat Megilah*, p. 9b: "And if people should be able to remember god always, day and night, and to love goodness and reject evil without performing any deeds which should remind them of the fundamentals, perhaps there should not be any [entrance, influence, action; Hebrew: "mavo"] to all the mitzvot" [" . . . 'Ulay lo tihye mavo lechol hamitzvot"].

⁴⁶ See Satanow, *Sefer Hamidot*, pp. 34b-35a; Menahem Mendel Breslau, *Yaldut Uva-harut*, introduction, p. 9 [my pagination]; and *Ha-Meassef*, vol. vii (No. 4, 1797), p. 352.

⁴⁷ *Ketav Yosher*, pp. 4a (cf. Caro's *Berit 'Emet*, vol. ii, p. 110, quote from *Metzoref Hadat [Refining Pot of Religion]*), 9a.

⁴⁸ See *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iii (1786), p. 131; vol. vi (1790), pp. 301, 310 (Breslau's call to the rabbis for certain religious reforms). It seems that Wessely also expected the rabbis to accept his challenge and explain their attacks on his *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* ("Rav Tuv Levat Yisra'el" [Great Goodness Toward the House of Israel]) *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, vol. ii (Berlin 1782), pp. 39a-b.

⁴⁹ 'Ovadhiah ben Baruch [Saul Berlin], *Mitzpeh Yokte'el [Watchtower of Yokte'el]* (Berlin 1789), an attack on Rabbi Refa'el Hacohen's *Torat Yekuti'el*; 'Emet [Saul Berlin?], A critical review of *Marpe Lashon* (by Rabbi Hacohen), *Ha-Meassef*, vol. vi (1790), pp. 362-380; [Saul Berlin?], "Viku'ah Shnei Re'im" ["Discussion of Two Friends"], *Ibid.*, vol. v (1789), pp. 261-273—discussion on the *Mitzpeh Yokte'el* controversy; Wolfssohn's "Sihah Be'eretz Hahayim" ["A Conversation in the Land of the Living" (= The World to Come: Afterlife)], *Ibid.*, vol. vii (No. 1-4, 1794-1797), has as one of its characters a fanatical rabbi named "ploni," believed to represent rabbi Refa'el Hacohen. (Some think that Wolfssohn

I do not believe to be the case—they did communicate with those whom they considered to be “unenlightened orthodox” in order to reach the moderate traditionalists who at least were not anti-Haskalah.

The reform argumentation which was based on the halachah concentrated on a few important legal precedents. Some Hebrew reformers demanded change on the basis of the passage “’Et la’asot le-YHVH heferu toratecha” [Should it be necessary—for the sake of preserving the Jewish religion—even biblical laws may be temporarily changed].⁵⁰ Behind the argument was the idea that reforms were always enacted in Judaism by the religious authorities in times of necessity. Similarly, modern times required, according to these Enlighteners, that reforms be made in order that Judaism survive.⁵¹

The talmudic legal term “’Ein gozrin gezerah ’al hatzibur ’ela ’im ken rov tzibur yecholin la’amod bah” [We should not impose a restriction upon the community unless the majority of the community will be able to stand it]⁵²—was used by a writer in *Ha-Meassef* to explain some enactment of old.⁵³ In a subtle way the term implied that many a religious precept was in practice a decree which the public could not observe, and therefore should be abolished. Characteristic of the religious deterioration among the Jews in Germany during the first Temple-controversy was the argument “Shekvar pashat haminhag [Because the (wrong) custom is prevalent].⁵⁴ This legal argument demanded, in effect, authoritative rabbinic consent to reforms that had already taken place.

Other arguments were not necessarily purely legal, although taken from the world of the halachah. The passage “’Elu ve’elu divrei ’elohim hayim” [(The utterances of) both (literally: these and these) are the words of the living God]⁵⁵ was adduced. The line of argument it implied was very popular among the *maskilim* in their attempt to prove that not only were they not wrong, but that indeed they were right.⁵⁶ Worthy of note also is the discussion among the *maskilim* regarding

had Rabbi Ezekiel Landau in mind. Cf. Bernard D. Weinryb, “Aaron Wolfsohn’s Dramatic Writings in Their Historical Setting,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. xlviii [July, 1957], p. 45).

⁵⁰ *Psalms* 119:126; cf. *Gitin*, 60a.

⁵¹ *Ha-Meassef*, vol. ii (1785), p. 88: “It is time for thee, Lord, to work [= it is time that *WE* should act for the sake of god] to remove the disgrace from Israel” (concerning the burial of the dead controversy); Saul Berlin’s *Besamim Rosh*, siman 251, p. 76b: each generation should act accordingly (in religious reform); *Ibid.*, p. 77a: “and if, god forbid, we could imagine that there be a time when the laws of the Torah and its commandments would cause disaster on our nation, on the whole of the nation in definite, or even if there only be some ground to imagine that they [the laws and commandments of the Torah] would not bring any happiness under any circumstance, then we should unload its [the Torah’s] yoke from our throat [shoulder].” For a later use of the term (1818) see Aaron Chorin’s argument in *Nogah Hatzedek*, p. 23, and Mendelssohn’s use of it in *Yerushalayim*, p. 105.

⁵² *Baba Kama*, 79b.

⁵³ *Ha-Meassef*, vol. iii (1786), p. 167.

⁵⁴ *Nogah Hatzedek*, p. 28—by rabbi Moshe Kunitz.

⁵⁵ *Eruvin*, p. 13b.

⁵⁶ Mendelssohn, *Yerushalayim*, p. 104; *Idem*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. v (Leipzig 1844), p. 603; Schnaber, *Ma’amar Hatorah Vehahochmah*, p. 6; *Ha-Meassef*, vol. i (1784), p. 186 (by Schnaber); vol. ii (1785), p. 24; vol. v (1789), p. 184; vol. vi (1790), p. 311 (by Breslau); Wessely, *Levanon*, vol. ii, pp. 26a–b; *Idem*, *Yen Levanon*, p. 14; *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet*, vol. iii, p. 12a. Mendelssohn combined this quote with another one: “’Af pi she’elu ’osrin ve’elu

the passage "mitzvot betelot le'atid lavo" [The commandments (or precepts) will be abolished in the Hereafter].⁵⁷ The *maskilim* assumed that the mitzvot are temporal and not eternal. Since they are dependent on time and place, the mitzvot are subject to change.⁵⁸ Later on, during the Temple controversy, the argumentation of the *maskilim* assumed the form of demanding reforms which were compelled by need.⁵⁹ Though still based on the halachah, their arguments became more practical.

Simultaneously most of the Hebrew reformers dealt with the question of authority. It is important to note that the great majority of them left the authority to change the mitzvot, rituals, and customs in the hand of the rabbis.⁶⁰ Some use the synonym "Ḥacham,"⁶¹ which may refer also to a wise and learned man, namely the *maskil* himself. Indeed, this was exactly what David Caro suggested in 1820.⁶² They assumed that mitzvot were always in a constant state of change to which the Talmud is a living testimony.⁶³ The more extreme among the *maskilim* further stated openly that there could be nothing in law that stayed intact forever, that even *Torah Shebichtav*—the written law—was subject to change, and that so too were the fundamental principles of the Jewish religion.⁶⁴

It was in 1790 that the first call for convening an assembly of rabbis was voiced. Its sole purpose was to reform what the *maskilim* regarded as the exces-

matirin, 'elu ve'elu divrei 'elohim ḥayim" [Though these forbade what the others permitted, and these regard as ineligible what the others declared eligible, both (these and these) are the words of the living god"].

The first part is from Mishnah *Yevamot*, a, 4 (Gemara *Yevamot*, p. 13b). It is interesting to note that some *maskilim* followed Mendelssohn's pattern (in *Yerushalayim*, p. 104) as if it were one single quote. See *Ha-Meassef*, vol. ii (1785), p. 24 (the writer, Dov Ber b. Arye Leib Halevi, is cognizant of Mendelssohn's use and interpretation of the quote), and Friedlaender's "Letter to Teller."

⁵⁷ *Nidah*, p. 61b. Mendelssohn alluded to this in *Yerushalayim*, p. 137, and so did Schnaber in *Tohachau Megilah*, p. 9b.

⁵⁸ Saul Berlin, *Besamim Rosh*, siman 251, p. 77a: The Torah itself is subject to change, and so are the principles of Judaism (p. 76b) and the oral law (p. 71a); Satanow, *Megilat Ḥasidim*, pp. 20 a–b; Wolfssohn, "Sihah Be'erezet Haḥayim," *Ha-Meassef*, vol. vii (no. 2, 1796?), p. 146: the written laws are dependent on time and place.

⁵⁹ Eliezer Lieberman, *'Or Nogah*, vol. i (Dessau 1818), p. 8: the need to pray in the vernacular because some people, women and children do not understand Hebrew. Liebermann also mentions the need for a change because of the deterioration of religious practices and observance, and because of the conversion tendencies (*Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 7); Meir I. Bresselau, *Ḥerev Nokemet Nekam Berit*, p. 5.

⁶⁰ *Ha-Meassef*, vol. vi (1790), pp. 301, 310 (Mendel Breslau); Caro, *Berit 'Emet*, p. 110: "and it is in the hands of the rabbis to abolish them [wrong rituals, religious customs] without destroying, god forbid, a single little stone in the beams [= fundamentals] of religion"; Aaron Chorin, *'Igeret 'El 'Asaf* [*An Epistle to 'Asaf*] (Prague 1826), p. 32b; Liebermann, *'Or Nogah*, vol. i, p. 22.

⁶¹ *'Or Nogah*, vol. ii, pp. 37–38: "The Torah is given in the hands of the contemporary wise men (*ḥachmei hazeman*) to make [it] easier or more strict, to forbid or to permit, according to contemporary interest, and sometimes even against the very words of the Torah." This use is also found in earlier writing, for example, in the last two decades of the 18th century: Saul Berlin, *Besamim Rosh*, siman 251, p. 66b; Schnaber, *Ma'amar Hatorah Vehachochmah*, p. 2.

⁶² *Berit 'Emet*, vol. ii, p. 142.

⁶³ *Besamim Rosh*, siman 251, p. 66b; Judah Leib Ben-Ze'ev, *Yesodei Hadat* [*The Foundations of Religion*] (Vienna 1823), p. 3 [my pagination]; Meir I. Bresselau, *Ḥerev Nokemet Nekam Berit*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ See note 51 regarding Saul Berlin.

sively burdensome Jewish law. The author of the call was Mendel Breslau, an editor of *Ha-Meassef*, in whose pages it was published.⁶⁵ Other calls came in subsequent years.⁶⁶

When the traditionalist rabbis failed to respond to Breslau's call, the *maskilim* changed their tactics. They waged a vehement attack against the rabbis and their religious authority in the 90's. This was followed in 1818 by similar attacks from the pens of Liebermann, M. I. Bresselau, and Caro.

The initial calls for religious reforms in the Hebrew Enlightenment literature are important harbingers of the rise of a full-fledged reform movement in Germany. Most of the Hebrew *maskilim* apparently believed that religious changes would be instituted by the traditionalist rabbis who, they maintained, had the authority to enact reforms. I tend to think that the *maskilim* in general wished to remain within the framework of traditional Judaism. However, it seems that the refusal of the orthodox rabbis to cooperate with the moderate Hebrew reformers accounts, in large part, not only for the creation of the reform movement but also for the extremity and intensity of its religious reforms as well.

⁶⁵ *Ha-Meassef*, vol. vi (1790), pp. 301-314.

⁶⁶ Chorin, *'Igeret 'El 'Asaf*, p. 32b.