

THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN JEWS:
JEWISH IDENTITY
AND EUROPEAN CULTURE IN GERMANY, 1749-1824,

BY MICHAEL A. MEYER, (Wayne State University Press; Detroit,
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DESPITE THE ABUNDANCE OF MATERIAL written about it, the Berlin Haskalah still remains a puzzling topic, attracting the attention of scholars both here and in Israel. No doubt there are quite a number of questions that have not been answered concerning the Berlin Haskalah; yet it seems that some essential questions have not even been asked. It is heartening, therefore, to read a thorough study such as Michael A. Meyer's.

"This historical study," to state Meyer's objective, "presents an analysis of the question of Jewish identity as it manifested itself initially within German Jewry. . . . My central concern has been to probe the reactions of individual Jews . . . to the circumstance of their Jewishness. Thus I continually applied a single question to a wide variety of source materials: What does being a Jew mean to this individual?" (pp. 8-9).

To Mendelssohn being a Jew meant, as Meyer points out, an almost complete adherence to the Jewish law. Mendelssohn attempted a synthesis between Judaism and the philosophy of the Enlightenment in order to show the compatibility of the former with the philosophy of reason. To Friedländer, being a Jew meant an adherence to the ideas and ideals of natural, universal religion as found in the original sources of ancient Israel. To lose his identity as a Jew was not an unacceptable proposition to Friedländer as long as the elements of natural religion remained intact. Some of Mendelssohn's descendants, Henriette Herz and Rahel Varnhagen succeeded in doing what Friedländer had attempted—converting to the Christian church. In between the extreme position of conversion and that of tradition, the Maskilim stood as mediators. Their answer to the Jewish identification problem had been to de-nationalize Judaism, a program which had been put into practice by the religious reformers. However, this answer did not bring the expected solution to German Jewry's search for its Jewish identity. It

remained for the Society for Culture and Science of the Jews, associated with Leopold Zunz, to formulate its version of the meaning of Judaism. However the Society, too, "had failed to find any significance in continued Jewish existence. Beginning with emotional attachments, loyalties to families, and personal honor, it provided no further reason to resist external pressures." (p. 180).

Meyer's contribution to the understanding of the Berlin Haskalah, I think, lies not so much in his exposition of the various solutions to the question of Jewish identity, but rather in his scholarly explanation as to why these solutions had not worked out. With regard to Mendelssohn's "ephemeral solution" the author states that "the Christian view of the temporary character of the Mosaic law crept into Jewish circles. . . ." To be more exact, it was the deistic criticism waged against the Jewish law, the Jewish religion, and the Christian religion that finally began to have its impact on the enlightened Jews. Mendelssohn's solution was actually an anachronism. Nevertheless, it is a truism that Mendelssohn was a symbol for the Hebrew maskilim and their journal *ha-Me'asef*. Immediately after his death the maskilim promised "to walk in his (Mendelssohn's) footsteps, to observe the lesson which he put in our mouth (*i.e.*, which he taught us) in accordance with the Torah and worship ("al ha-Torah w'al ha-Abodah") in the true religion" (*ha-Me'asef*, 1786, p. 66). However, their continued attacks against the rabbinic authorities and their covert and overt attempts to bring about some reforms in the Jewish religion are in effect steps in an opposite direction from those which they proposed to take. Though Meyer does not discuss this problem directly, he states correctly that the younger generation which gathered around Mendelssohn, admired, honored, and respected him, "but they tolerated rather than emulated his attitude toward the tradition" (p. 51). It appears that the maskilim realized by then that Mendelssohn's solution did not work: the expected emancipation had not been granted, and traditional Jewry was not willing to concede a single iota. The maskilim, then, continued to remain loyal to Mendelssohn's ideals as long as it served their purposes, but at the same time they continued to pursue their own course.

Friedländer's solution to the problem of Jewish identity was to convert to Christianity, or at least to come as close as one could get to conversion. His attempt to solve the problem proved less than valid for him as well as for the rest of German Jewry. His proposition was rejected by Teller, by the Jewish salon ladies, and by the traditionalists and the

Hebrew maskilim as well. Meyer puts forth a hypothesis, which he explains but does not fully document, that the two generations of German Jews under discussion persisted in their adherence to rationalism at the time that romanticism was in vogue. He correctly attributes Jewish preference for philosophical rationalism to the Jewish conviction "that political emancipation could come only from a universalistic Weltanschauung, one that stressed the inherent similarity of men rather than their differences" (p. 86). Most of the maskilim adopted Mendelssohn's view of Judaism as a code of laws. But they adopted it with Bendavid's emendation, or expectation, that eventually the Jews would abandon the Jewish law and adopt the religion of nature in the Kantian form. The result was an alienation of the German Jews from their own religion and, more important to them, an estrangement from the general culture and from acceptance into the German society. Friedländer and his followers failed in their attempt to re-define their Jewishness, and their solutions too were anachronistic.

In the same vein, the maskilim—educators, preachers, and religious reformers alike—failed to give a meaningful, contemporary definition of their Jewishness. To be a Jew would conflict with being a German, a concept then thought of as including citizenship, culture, and religion. Ideas of the Enlightenment still taught and preached in the Jewish catechisms and sermons became outdated and impractical. Lastly, the Society for Culture and Science of the Jews, though a product of romanticism, failed too. Meyer traces its failure to three factors: the deteriorating status of the Jew in Germany, the lack of support by the Jewish community, amounting to complete indifference, and the Society's own ideology. Thus the writer concludes his study. Lavater's question, "Why should a man of European culture remain a Jew" did not find a convincing answer.

Meyer's work sheds light on a problem which extends beyond the immediate scope of his study and which is of importance to the understanding of the Haskalah literature in Germany: the cessation of Hebrew literature in the third decade of the 19th century. The explanation of this phenomenon should be obvious to the reader of *The Origins of the Modern Jew*.

One would wish to have had a detailed chapter devoted to the Hebrew maskilim such as Isaac Euchel, Isaac Satanow, Rabbi Saul Berlin, Aaron Wolfsohn, David Caro and Eliezer Liebermann, to mention a few. Though not as great or well-known as Mendelssohn, a study of these

maskilim is nevertheless essential to those who wish to comprehend the Berlin Haskalah. If Mendelssohn is the symbol of that period, they actually were the ones who "produced" that period. True, most of them were mediocre thinkers; none was a match for Mendelssohn. However, in a way they typify German Jewry more than Mendelssohn. Even a maskil like Naphtali Wessely, who was closer to the Jew of the old order than he was to the modern Jew, should have been given more attention for the very reason that he indeed characterizes that period of transition.

One of Meyer's explanations as to why Mendelssohn adhered to the Jewish law is that the philosopher was acting out of practical considerations: "It must have been clear to Mendelssohn that he would have lost all effectiveness as an educator and cultural reformer of his people had he freed himself from the law" (p. 51). Meyer's contention is not documented and must remain a hypothesis. I, for one, am inclined to think that Meyer is wrong. The many utterances by Mendelssohn, in public and in private (his letters to Homberg and Sophie Becker), seem to prove the opposite.

The author also claims that *ha-Me'asef* was "dedicated to extension of Jewish enlightenment in the tradition of Mendelssohn" (p. 58). While the phrase "in the tradition of Mendelssohn" warrants further explanation, our previous remark with regard to the attitude of the writers of *ha-Me'asef* toward Mendelssohn should be borne in mind. Meyer further believes that the maskilim avoided controversial issues (p. 116). Even in the early period of the German Haskalah, however, there were some controversial issues raised by the maskilim. In addition to the issues in which they followed Mendelssohn, such as the translation of the Bible into German and the early burial of the dead, mentioned by Meyer, there was also the issue of excommunication. There were also controversies concerning secular education which were started, although unintentionally, by Wessely; his defense of himself as well as the defense by Rabbi Saul Berlin in *Ketab Yosher* are well known. The latter's attack against the man who became in the eyes of the maskilim the symbol of religious fanaticism, Rabbi Refa'el Hacohen of Hamburg, went far beyond the personal realm; it is believed by some that the nameless rabbi in Wolfssohn's "Siḥah be-Erez ha-Ḥayyim" (*ha-Me'asef*, 1794-1797) is no other than Rabbi Hacohen.

Meyer is puzzled by the identity of a "Dr. Schönemann of the Jewish nation" (p. 78) who published the first response by an avowed Jew to Friedländer's epistle to Teller. Meyer states that he has not been able to

learn anything about Dr. Schönemann except that he lived in Driesen and that he contributed a translated excerpt from an allegorical Hebrew drama to the *Neue Berlinische Monatsschrift*, (p. 200, note 65).

Dr. Schönemann was Isaac Satanow's son. The latter published a refutation of criticism (printed in *ha-Me'asef* in the review of Satanow's *Mishle Asaf*) entitled *Minḥat Bikḥurim* (מנחת בקורים, Berlin 1797) under the name "הדאקטור שענעמאן" (the doctor Schönemann). It is believed that Satanow himself was the author of that book, which he attributed to his son. According to Graetz, this son did not know Hebrew (cf. *Dibre Yeme ha-Yehudim*, vol. IX, pp. 89-90). That Satanow's Schönemann also lived in Driesen is evident from the heading of a letter published in *Minḥat Bikḥurim*, p. 3b. It seems that the two "Yoseph ben Shime'on", as it were, are actually the same person. However, it should be worth while investigating the matter in order to find what share, if any, Satanow himself had in the polemical writing against Friedländer.

Meyer's mastery of the primary as well as of the secondary sources, his erudition and his insight make his study a delight to the student of Jewish history in general, and to the student of the Berlin Haskalah in particular. His work presents an excellent survey of the intellectual history of important figures in German Jewry. His probe into the minds of the Berlin salon ladies of the Jewish faith reads almost like a love story, which it is. Fortunately Meyer has not capitulated to the notion that scholarly writings have to be presented in a dry manner, and for this he is to be commended.

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