

Naphtali Herz Wessely's Attitude toward the Jewish
Religion as a Mirror of a Generation in Transition
(During the Early Period of Hebrew Haskalah in Germany)*

MOSHE PELLI

Of all the important Hebrew writers of the German Haskalah in the last quarter of the 18th century, Naphtali Herz Wessely is one of the most conservative in his attitude toward the Jewish religion. Nevertheless, he was selected by a scholar like Joseph Klausner to designate the beginning of modern Hebrew literature.¹ It is due mainly to four pamphlets which he had published between 1782 and 1785 that Wessely was so designated. *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* (Words of Peace and Truth) — the title of the first pamphlet, by which the other three pamphlets are also generally known — advocates major changes in Jewish education (or to be more exact: in religious education). These changes, to be sure, reflect the ideology of the contemporary Hebrew Haskalah, and are the

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¹ Joseph Klausner, *Historiah Shel Hasifrut Ha'ivrit Habadashah* [History of Modern Hebrew Literature] (Jerusalem, 1960) I, pp. 9—11. It should be pointed out that at times it seems as though Klausner's choice of Wessely is not conclusive. He first says "I begin this literature with the generation of the *Me'asfim* [writers of the *Me'asef* school], to be more exact — with the publication of the first pamphlet of *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* by Naphtali Herz Wessely (1781)." He then goes on to plead the case for Wessely alone. Moses Kleinman, in his *Demuyot Vekomot* [Portraits and Personalities] (London, 1928), pp. 13, 29, considers Wessely as the central figure of the Haskalah movement at the time and as "the first poet in our modern literature." Binyamin Shmueli, in his article "Naphtali Herz Wessely's Linguistic Method," *Leshonenu*, XIV (1946), p. 13 [Hebrew], accepts the view that Wessely opens a new period in Hebrew Literature, as is H. Bar-Dayyan, "On the Question of the Beginning of Our Modern Literature," [First] *World Congress of Jewish Studies*, (Jerusalem, 1952), I, pp. 302—306 [Hebrew]. Hayim Nahman Bialik regards Wessely as "one of the pioneers in the Haskalah generation," stressing the impact his writings have had on his contemporaries as well as on the following generations; however, Bialik does not see in him and in his writings the beginning of modern Hebrew literature. See his article on Wessely, published posthumously by M. Ungerfeld, in *Kneset* [New Series] (Jerusalem, 1960), pp. 262—264.

forerunners of similar demands by the Hebrew *maskilim* for a period of one hundred years to come. As such, these changes do indeed represent the *zeitgeist*. However, it is my contention that the choice of Wessely to signal the starting point of modern Hebrew literature merely because of the pamphlet *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* is rather simplistic; moreover, it leaves too many questions unanswered and too many problems unresolved. This choice does not take into account the nature of Wessely's overall work which is extremely conservative, and that work as such does not represent the general spirit of the Hebrew Haskalah.² Not only were the works he had published prior to *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* conservative, but furthermore, the works he has published concurrent with and subsequent to the said opus were typically (and problematically for some scholars) of a conservative nature.

In spite of Wessely's conservative attitude toward the Jewish religion in all his works with the exception of *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* (or, perhaps, because of the conservatism displayed in his writings) his works indeed are of utmost significance to the student of the period. The reason for his significance is not only the impact his works have had on the subsequent generations of *maskilim*, but more importantly it is his role as

Cj. Bialik's view in this subject, "Shiratenu Hatze'irah" [Our Young Poetry], *Kitvei H. N. Bialik*²² [The Writings of H. N. B.] (Tel Aviv, 1962), p. 246, and his essay on Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, *ibid.*, pp. 244—245.

Biographical sketches of Wessely, in English, could be found in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, XII (1916), pp. 506—507, and in Charles Ozer, "Jewish Education in the Transition From Ghetto to Emancipation," *Historia Judaica*, IX (1, April, 1947) pp. 75—78. In Hebrew: David Friedrichsfeld, *Zeher Tzadik* [Memory of A Righteous Man] (Amsterdam, 1809); Yahbik [Joseph Kera], "Toldot Rabbi Naphtali," *Hamagid*, I (1847—48), issues 26, 30, 33, 36, 37, 51; Solomon Mandelkern, "Toldot R. Naphtali . . .," *Ha'asif*, III (1887), pp. 404—417; Z. Fishman, "Naphtali Herz Weisel," *Ma'anit* (Jerusalem, 1926), pp. 17—20; Kalman Schulmann, "Toldot . . .," in his edition of Wessely's *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* (Warsaw, 1886), I, pp. 1—31; Klausner, *Historia*, I, pp. 103—120 (including an extensive bibliography). In German: Wolf A. Meisel, *Leben und Wirken Naphtali Hartwig Wessely's* (Breslau, 1841).

² Joseph Melkman, *David Franco Mendes* (Jerusalem, 1951), pp. 15—17, is also of the opinion that the selection of Wessely as the grand innovator is erroneous. However, Melkman's case is not only different but indeed antithetic to the one in this paper. According to Melkman, Wessely did not bring anything new for he was following the examples set already by the Sephardi communities of Europe, especially in Amsterdam. Thus Wessely is not an innovator, but a follower. Our contention is that Wessely was neither — on the basis of all of his writings with the exception of *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*. It is rather surprising that Melkman should utilize Wessely's defense against the rabbinic attacks, in his second pamphlet, as a bona fide source of proof, taking Wessely's word at face value (*ibid.*, pp. 13—15. Compare our discussion below in note 61.

the *maskil par excellence* in the eyes of the contemporary *maskilim*.³ One should note that Wessely's alleged conservatism does not stem from the fact that he had not been exposed to the writings and the ideology of European Enlightenment; on the contrary, it is abundantly clear that Wessely had been acquainted with the ideas and ideals of European Enlightenment.⁴ Unlike *maskilim* such as Isaac Satanow, Isaac Euchel, and Aaron Wolfsohn, Wessely seems to have rejected the fundamentals of Enlightenment, and to profess the values of traditional Judaism with almost no modifications—except in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*.

His writings, then, are crucial to the understanding of the period for they reveal one aspect of Haskalah thought which is seldom discussed because of the temptation on the part of the students of Haskalah to portray rather the innovations of that literature.⁵ That often ignored aspect of Haskalah is the more traditionally oriented thought as is to be found in the writings of the moderate among the Hebrew writers of the Haskalah.⁶ If the above statements should be proven correct, at least with regard to the spokesman of the moderate line, namely Wessely (and I believe these statements to be correct), we may conclude the following: a. That the great forces of tradition have indeed had an enormous impact on the first Hebrew *maskilim* in Germany; b. And that as a result, their writings reflect the transitory and ephemeral nature of the philosophy of early Haskalah in Germany; Haskalah being both a movement and a literature in search of itself.

The first period of Wessely's literary work, until he came to Berlin in 1774, is characterized by an over-zealous and a non-compromising

³ In a letter to Wessely, which the editors of *Hame'asef* published in the journal's prospectus, *Nahal Habsor*, [The Brook 'Besor', or Good Tidings], these Hebrew *maskilim* consider Wessely as the first poet after the destruction (of the Temple and the land) who follows the footsteps of the great prophets of Israel (*Nahal Habsor* [1783], p. 4). It may be interesting to note that these editors selected, at least for public consumption, Wessely and not Mendelssohn as the accomplished authority on literature, that is, Hebrew literature.

⁴ Wessely lived in Amsterdam for a number of years and most probably was acquainted with the Enlightenment literature which has been coming out of the presses of Amsterdam.

⁵ See the following important articles by Isaac Eisenstein-Barzilay, "The Treatment of the Jewish Religion in the Literature of the Berlin Haskalah," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, XXIV (1955), pp. 39—68; "The Ideology of the Berlin Haskalah," *ibid.*, XXV (1956), pp. 1—35; "National and Anti-National Trends in the Berlin Haskalah," *Jewish Social Studies*, XXI (3, July, 1959), pp. 165—192.

⁶ See my article "The Stand of the Moderate Authors of the Hebrew Enlightenment with Regard to Religious Issues," *Abraham Golomb Jubilee Book* (Los Angeles, 1970), pp. 717—730 [Hebrew].

adherence to traditional Judaism. The fact that in his book *Levanon* Wessely has a lengthy discussion of the various forms and synonyms of the word *Hochmah* (wisdom) in the Bible should not mislead us to associate this book with the general trends of the Age of Reason.⁷ For one, a great part of the book is devoted to an exposition on *Taryag mitzvot* (the 613 precepts) which does not deviate on iota from the old school of thought in Judaism. More significant is Wessely's interpretation of the concept *Hochmah*. To him, *Hochmah* as found in the Bible denotes and connotes the observance of the laws of Torah. *Hachamim*, wise people, are those who observe these laws.⁸ By contrast, *Sichlut*, which is generally translated as foolishness, is said to be the violation of the *mitzvot*.⁹ There is no doubt in my mind that underlying the semantic and linguistic discussion there exists a clear *weltanschauung* which contradicts that of Enlightenment. *Hochmah* is not to be construed as human wisdom,¹⁰ or some form of a universal reason, by which the phenomena of life are evaluated — as suggested by the Enlightenment — but rather the old, familiar divine wisdom manifested in Judaism, according to Wessely, in the *mitzvot*.

That we are faced here with a pre-Haskalah thought is especially apparent from Wessely's attitude toward the Jewish tradition and his attitude to secular knowledge. Regarding the former, Wessely accepts uncritically both *Torah shebe'al peh*, the oral law, as well as *Torah shebichtav*, the written law, as God-given.¹¹ The authority of tradition

⁷ Shalom Spiegel seems to generalize about the relevance of Wessely's grammatical discussions to the contemporary scene and to Haskalah issues; see Spiegel's article "The Synonyms in Our Literature," *Leshonenu*, VII (1, Tishrei, 1935), pp. 24—25 [Hebrew]. Although I accept Spiegel's contention with regard *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, I tend to disagree with him in reference to the other works of Wessely, as I shall elaborate later in the paper.

⁸ Naphtali Herz Wessely, *Levanon* [Lebanon] (Wien, 1829 [first edition: 1765]), vol. I, pp. 4 a, 5 a: "... and the Laws of the Torah are the sole wisdom;" see also p. 47 a; "the word *Hachamim* is applicable only to those who practice the ways of the Torah and observe its *mitzvot*" (p. 10 a, introduction).

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4 a—b.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 23 b—24 a, criticizing ancient Greek philosophers who rely only on their own understanding, and who would not believe anything which cannot be proven by their reason. F. Lahover also points out Wessely's concept of *Hochmah* as being different from the general Enlightenment concept; we do differ, however, in our interpretation of Wessely's concept of *Hochmah*, and as a result in our conclusion. See his article "Maimonides and the Early Hebrew Haskalah," *Moznayim*, III (1—6, 1938), pp. 542—544 [Hebrew], (see note 7).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, introduction, p. 4 a.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 3 b, 4 a (introduction), 32 b, 51 b (... "to this [very] day").

is not even questioned;¹² thus Wessely accepts the idea that God revealed *Sod ha'ibur* (the secrets of figuring the leap years) to Moses, "and that these secrets were transmitted by word of mouth ["'Ish mipi 'ish"] to this day."¹³ Concurrently, we find a completely negative attitude toward secular knowledge, the sciences, and toward Greek philosophy which is based on human reason.¹⁴ That human reason, states the enlightener *par excellence* of Hebrew letters at that time, is not to be relied upon because of its limitations.¹⁵ After having slighted the value of reason and secular knowledge, both the highwater marks of Enlightenment and Haskalah, Wessely comes out against another tenet of the Enlightenment, namely that of quest, search and investigation. This objection is clearly related at this juncture to his views of human reason and of tradition. Accordingly, the only possible quest is into things which are simple and uncomplicated from a religious point of view;¹⁶ undoubtedly Wessely abides fully by the adage "Bemufla mimcha 'al tidrosh"¹⁷ [you should not search into that which is unknown to you]. Although we find Enlightenment and Haskalah writers who put some limit on the capacity of human reason, yet Wessely's attitude, I think, goes back to the extremes of the old school of thought in Judaism.

In previous studies I have utilized another criterion to evaluate the standpoint of a given writer with regard to the ideas of Enlightenment. It is in one's interpretation of the controversial concepts *Yir' ah* and *Hochmah* [fear of god and wisdom, respectively], and their relationship to one another that we find some indication as to one's views regarding the contemporary Jewish religion.¹⁸ Now, since Wessely has already defined *Hochmah* as divine wisdom and/or the divine law, there is not here even a dichotomy between *Hochmah* and *Yir'ah*, as found with other Haskalah writers. Both *Hochmah* and *Yir'ah* are in the realm of the divine, and as such they are regarded by this *maskil* as complementing each other. However, as if to set the record straight as to where he stands should some echo of *Hochmah* in a more modern

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 51 b.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 105 a, vol. I, 23 b—24 a.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 23 b.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8a (introduction).

¹⁷ *Hagigah*, 13 a, citing Ben Sira.

¹⁸ See reference to this in my article "Intimations of Religious Reform in the German Hebräen Haskalah Literature." *Jewish Social Studies*, XXXII (1, January, 1970), p. 4. I developed this thesis in a paper which I read at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Professors of Hebrew, New York, October 27, 1970. The paper, entitled "Isaac Satanow's 'Mishlei Asaf' As Reflecting the Ideology of the German Haskalah," was published in the *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, XXV (3, 1973), pp. 225—242.

sense be heard, Wessely clearly subordinates *Hochmah* to *Yir'ah*, proclaiming the latter to be "‘Ikar hakol" [the essence of everything].¹⁹

This attitude toward Enlightenment is expressed in some obscure passages of his book *Levanon*; in them I have found Wessely's previously unrecognized reaction to the religious ideas of the Enlightenment. Against the background of Wessely's complete rejection of the fundamentals of the Enlightenment, as discussed above, one should not be surprised to face a blunt attack on the deists and of course on the atheists. Although his framework or context is the Bible, and despite the fact that he refers to them by the indefinite term "Mashhitim" [destroyers, destructionists, corrupters], there is ample evidence that Wessely indeed means the deists and the atheists.²⁰ In his rejection of their Bible-criticism as well as their critical scrutiny of Judaism, Wessely again is a traditionalist of the old school of thought in Judaism. It is characteristic of the traditionalists — both Christian and Jewish — to regard the critics of religion, namely the deists, as more of a menace to established religion than the atheists who were completely anti-religious.²¹ Wessely adopts this approach; however, his purpose extends beyond the anti-religious phenomena in the Enlightenment. For what he has in mind is actually to protect Judaism from the anti-religious overtones of the Enlightenment. Thus, whereas Mendelssohn, Satanow and other Hebrew and Jewish enlighteners have accepted many ideals of the Enlightenment and even adopted some of the deistic ideas which suited them (while rejecting others), Wessely, at this stage of his development, completely rejected the ideology of Enlightenment with its critical view of religion.

It is for this reason that some of the strictest rabbis of the time did not hesitate to give Wessely their approbations — *Haskamot* — to

¹⁹ *Levanon*, II, p. 105 a; I, p. 43 a: "The faer of God is the foundation of everything."

²⁰ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 44 b—45 a. In the pursuing discussion, Wessely does not limit himself to the biblical framework, and he comes out openly with contemporary comments without any biblical disguise about "people of knowledge and learning among the nations who are [!] ridiculing us and speaking rebelliously against the *mitzvot* and the religious injunctions" (p. 48 b). Wessely cites their views rejecting revelation, prophecy, providence, and the like (*ibid.*; also p. 54 a). Thus we may conclude that indeed Wessely means contemporary religious phenomena. In a letter to Moses Mendelssohn in 1768, Wessely explains that his attacks were against "the deniers of religion, those who blaspheme God, who rely only on their wandering [= erroneous, confused] reason, who say that human reason is wisdom, and who say to God leave us for we do not desire the knowledge of your ways" (Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften* [Berlin, 1929] XVI, p. 122).

²¹ *Levanon*, I, p. 48 b.

his early books.²² And on the other hand, it is for this reason that a *maskil* like Mendelssohn did hesitate to send his book *Phaedon* to Wessely. As he states in his letter to Wessely, Mendelssohn was apprehensive about Wessely's anti-Enlightenment stand, especially with regard to human reason.²³ Thus even Mendelssohn regarded him as representing the old school of thought.

The same attitude to the Jewish religion and to the fundamentals of the Enlightenment is to be found in Wessely's other writings prior to *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*. Significantly, even the form of his second book is a traditional one; for *Yen Levanon* is written as a traditional exegesis to *Masechet 'Avot — The Ethics of the Fathers*. Thus we find a unity of form and content — both exceptionally conservative. It should be noted that a traditional work such as *The Ethics of the Fathers* lends itself to traditional exposition. However, the form by itself should not be considered as the only reason for Wessely's conservative views. Suffice to mention what Isaac Satanow has done with the classical form of pseudo-biblical wisdom literature in *Mishlei 'Asaf*, or what another Hebrew *maskil*, rabbi Saul Berlin, has done with the traditional format of the responsa in his *Besamim Rosh*.²⁴ Indeed, the *maskilim* did borrow the traditional tools and used them for their Enlightenment purposes.²⁵ Wessely's conservatism, I think, is inherent in his thought as well as in his personality.

²² Rabbi Ezekiel Landau and Rabbi David Tevele Schiff; the former states clearly that he is writing the approbation to *Yen Levanon*, although he had not read it, on the basis of Wessely's previously published books and on the assumption that the author's new book had been written with the same religious spirit. See *Yen Levanon* [The Wine of Lebanon] (Warsaw, 1914 [first edition: 1775]). Both rabbis came out with vehement, at times personal, attack on Wessely in the *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* controversy. On this controversy consult: Klausner, *Historiah*, I, pp. 126—131; Ozer, "Jewish Education," pp. 137—145; and the recent article by Moshe Samet, "M. Mendelssohn, N. H. Weisel and the Rabbis of Their Time," *Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel* (Haifa, Israel, 1970), pp. 244—257 [Hebrew].

²³ Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, XVI, p. 118.

²⁴ On Satanow see my article mentioned in note 18 above and Shmuel Werses' article "On Isaac Satanow and His Work 'Mishlei Asaf,' *Tarbitz*, XXXII (4, 1963), pp. 370—392. On Saul Berlin see my articles: "Some Notes on the Nature of Saul Berlin's Writings," *Journal of Hebraic Studies*, I (2, 1970), pp. 47—61; and "The Religious Reforms of 'Traditionalist' Rabbi Saul Berlin (A Chapter in the History of the Struggle of Hebrew Haskalah in Germany for the Revival of Judaism)," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, XLII (1971) pp. 1—23 [Hebrew].

²⁵ For details see my article "The Methodology Employed by the Hebrew Reformers in the First Reform Temple Controversy (1818—1819)," *Studies in Jewish Bibliography History and Literature* (New York, 1971) pp. 381—397.

Again, Wessely reiterates his views as mentioned above with regard to wisdom, human reason, tradition, and the oral and written law. He continues to express his negative attitude toward Enlightenment in general, and in particular toward human quest into the unknown in matters religious.²⁶ His traditional stand regarding the religious decrees manifests his conservatism. The general trend among Haskalah writers has been to demand the alleviation of the excessive religious decrees that have accumulated throughout the ages in order to save Judaism and make it bearable for the modern Jew. By contrast, Wessely still adheres to the old school of thoughts as typified in his exegesis to "Va'asu syag latorah" [make a (legal) fence around the Torah]. It is his opinion that at time of religious decline, as was the period of Haskalah, the religious authorities should not make religious precepts and customs easier for the people to observe by introducing lenient modifications. Instead, they ought to be even more strict and institute new, stern and uncompromising religious decrees, writes Wessely.²⁷

In all fairness to Wessely, it should be noted that he was in no way unique among the Haskalah authors in his conservative attitude toward the religious precepts. An enlightener like Moses Mendelssohn, too, voiced similar views with regard to religious observance.²⁸ In this respect both Mendelssohn and Wessely represent a rather conservative element of Haskalah. More than anyone else among the *maskilim*, perhaps with the exception of Isaac Satanow, both Mendelssohn and Wessely represent in their writings as well as in their personalities the generation of transition — the generation in transition. Albeit the many distinct differences between them, both enlighteners attempted to preserve traditional Judaism in the face of Enlightenment.²⁹ Some of their contemporary *maskilim* do exhibit similar tendencies; yet these more progressive *maskilim* were facing forwards rather than backwards, while drawing on traditional Judaism.³⁰

In spite of Wessely's overall conservatism, we are able to detect some indications of change that took place in his thinking as expressed in *Yen Levanon*. It should be emphasized that this change is very, very modest, and could be discerned and becomes meaningful only when

²⁶ *Yen Levanon* pp. 13, 14, 20, 66, 74, 89, 121.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁸ Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings* (New York, 1969), pp. 104—105 (Alfred Jospe, trans. & ed.).

²⁹ I discuss Mendelssohn's work in my book *Moses Mendelssohn: Bonds of Tradition* (Tel Aviv, 1972) [Hebrew].

³⁰ See my study "The Stand of the Moderate Authors of the Hebrew Enlightenment with Regard to Religious Issues," cited in note 6.

compared with his later views in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*. When examined closely, the alleged modification in attitude in *Yen Levanon* does not represent, to my mind, any definite break from the old school of thought, and does not mean necessarily the adoption of any new set of values. Thus it is very strange to find that there are those who believe that "it is in vain that the zealots accused him [Wessely] that in his proposals regarding the new order in education [in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*] he has forsaken his good [traditional] custom [habit] and turned into another man... for the truth of the matter is that all his program for the correction of the established order of teaching had been expressed mainly in his exegesis to Masechet 'Avot..., The writer goes on to say: "in this... [traditional] exegesis the whole revolution in the customs of the old-type education had been proposed...".³¹

The importance of this issue to the understanding of Wessely's thought merits a brief discussion. Commenting on Rabban Gamliel's saying "Yafeh talmud Torah 'im derech 'eretz" [Splendid is the study of Torah when combined with a worldly occupation]³², Wessely says that the study of Torah by itself is not enough; secular studies should complement the study of Torah.³³ Wessely reiterates this view in a number of places in his exegesis to *The Ethics of the Fathers*.³⁴ Now, I think there is nothing innovative about his interpretation in *Yen Levanon*. It may forecast his innovative ideas in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, but I think that in no way is his interpretation here identical with that in the latter book, as some scholars would have us believe.³⁵ The terminology may be related in some ways; thus the early expression *Derech 'Eretz* here might be identical with the later concept of *Torat Ha'adam*.³⁶ However, it would be rather superficial to assume that the terms by themselves are sufficient to denote as far-reaching a conclusion as proposed by some writers. It is essential to understand that there is a great difference between Wessely's two views as expressed in the two books. Obviously, in *Yen Levanon* Wessely still subordinates *Derech 'Eretz* to Torah; whatever is implied by and is included in the former term is un-

³¹ Spiegel, "The Synonyms," p. 23. See also Ozer, "Jewish Education," p. 89, note 21; Mordechai Eliav, *Jewish Education in Germany in the Period of Enlightenment and Emancipation* (Jerusalem, 1960—61), p. 41 [Hebrew].

³² Translation according to Judah Goldin's *The Living Talmud, The Wisdom of the Fathers* (New York, 1957), p. 80. Hebrew: *Pirkei Avot*, 2.

³³ *Yen Levanon*, pp. 65—67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 157, 158, 362.

³⁵ See note 31.

³⁶ "Torat Ha'adam," as Wessely has it in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, literally means "the law of man," which the author broadens to mean secular knowledge in general.

doubtedly subservient to Torah; it is for the sake of Torah that one should have *Derech 'Eretz*.³⁷ However in the first pamphlet of *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* we witness a completely different world-view, for there the Torah is dependent on *Torat Ha'adam*, or *Derech 'Eretz*. Thus, the broad and innovative implication of *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*: secular knowledge, or western culture, in effect forms the basis for *Torat Hashem*, or Judaism.³⁸

It should be noted that two other quotes which Wessely utilizes in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* to point out the necessity of secular knowledge do appear first in *Yen Levanon*. The quotes are: a. "Derech 'Eretz preceded the Torah by twenty-six generations";³⁹ b. "A scholar (Talmid Ḥacham) who has no knowledge, even a carcass is better than he."⁴⁰ One can understand the excitement of the scholars who found these three important quotes in *Yen Levanon*;⁴¹ however, their conclusion, mentioned above, is, I think, erroneous. For it is not the quotes by themselves which imply any change in Wessely's outlook. Both these quotes, it should be remembered, are taken from respected Hebrew sources. It is the interpretation of the quotes that makes the difference. In *Yen Levanon* these quotes are explained in a traditional way. Only in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* do we see that Wessely parts ways with traditional Judaism of his time — in the place and the role that he assigns to secular knowledge in relation to sacred knowledge and to Judaism in *toto*.

³⁷ *Yen Levanon*, p. 158: One should be versed in the sciences — Wessely writes — such as astronomy and geography so that he should be amazed at the creation by God, and as a result subordinate himself to the laws of the Torah. This view is evident especially in Wessely's exegesis to what appears to be an ambivalent verse in *The Ethics of the Fathers*, ch. 2, namely, "Im 'ein torah 'ein derech 'eretz, 'im 'ein derech 'eretz 'ein torah" [Where there is no Torah, there's no right conduct, where there is no right conduct, there's no Torah — *The Living Talmud* p. 147]. Whereas the traditional exegesis generally tends to show the interdependence of both Torah and *Derech 'Eretz*, Wessely completely subordinates *Derech 'Eretz* to Torah on either side of the verse.

³⁸ *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, (Berlin, 1782) I, pp. 1 b—4 a. Wessely states that the law of man precedes, in historical order, the divine law; the latter "is connected and glued" to the former (pp. 2 a—b), and that *Torat Ha'adam* is in effect a necessary, preparatory stage for the divine law (p. 4 a) [pagination is mine]. See our discussion below. From Wessely's definition of *Torat Ha'adam* it is abundantly clear that he means western culture; he includes in this term ethics, good [European?] manners, elegance of diction, customs of the country, etc. (*ibid.*, p. 1 b). I disagree with Klausner, *Historiah*, i, p. 125, who thinks that there was no innovation in Wessely's *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*.

³⁹ *Yen Levanon*, p. 148; *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, I, p. 2 a.

⁴⁰ *Yen Levanon*, p. 362; *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, I, p. 2 b.

⁴¹ See note 31.

We do discern in *Yen Levanon* some development in Wessely's thought, — his views on education in the making. He does suggest mildly, rather academically — unlike the tone of demand in his later educational thesis — that the teaching of *Derech 'Eretz* and the teaching of *Mikra*, the Bible, should precede that of *Mishnah*. Although this curriculum does deviate from the accepted traditional order, it is not his own revolutionary curriculum yet; in it he follows the text of *Pirkei 'Avot*: "Beyishuv, bemikra, bemishnah." The center of gravity is still the Torah, and for its sake the changes are proposed. However, in his emphasis on grammar with regard to the study of the Bible we do see a reflection of *Haskalah*.⁴²

There is yet some internal evidence that Wessely at this point (1775) is still fluctuating between *Haskalah* and traditional Judaism, leaning heavily toward the latter. In his exegesis to the above mentioned verse of *Pirkei 'Avot*, Wessely mentions twice the desirability and perhaps the need to publish a book which should reproach traditional Jewry for the improprieties of its religious education. However, he notes — rather strangely for an author who within seven years was to become the warrior number one of Hebrew *Haskalah* — that he is not worthy of such a task because his own deficiencies are much greater than those of others.⁴³ Even if we accept this remark as a form of literary modesty and the customary humility, we are still faced with the fact that Wessely is not ready yet for any active struggle on behalf of and for *Haskalah*, nor is he willing to wage any war against the educational phenomena in traditional Judaism. For if he were, why can we not discern any such tendency in this book? Yet on the other hand: if he were only fearful of the rabbis, how come he dared to publish any form of criticism against traditional Judaism and against the religious authority? The inescapable conclusion is that Wessely was, at this time, far from possessing one of the characteristics of the Hebrew *maskilim*: the burning desire to fight for their cause.⁴⁴ The image that we have of him as a fighting *maskil* had been formed on the basis of his later works, namely the pamphlets *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*. There, too, this image of him had been inflated mainly as a result of the rabbinic attack against him.⁴⁵ This attack in turn became a controversy which the other

⁴² *Yen Levanon*, p. 362.

⁴³ *Ibid.*: " 'Aval 'ani 'eini kedai, ki mi 'ani vehesroni gadol mehesronam."

⁴⁴ Compare, for example, the demanding, at times almost militant, tone in Mendel Breslau's article, *Hame'asef*, VI (1790), pp. 301—314.

⁴⁵ Although the controversy was indeed a major one; see Samet's article (cited in note 22), pp. 244—257.

maskilim utilized — surprisingly in a rather moderate way — to enhance their Enlightenment objectives.⁴⁶

Wessely's next book, in the order of publication (1780), is his translation to and the exegesis of *Hochmat Shlomo* [Wisdom of Solomon]. His traditional viewpoint is again discernable in this book as well. His apologetic remarks in the introduction betray in a way his apprehensions that the traditionalists would regard his translation as an act of blasphemy. He explains that if he had found anything in the book inconsistent with the faith, he would not have translated the book. However, he writes emphatically, it has been found to consist from cover to cover only of *Yir'at shamayim* [fear of heaven].⁴⁷ From the totality of his writings we may deduce that these words were not merely lip service to the traditionalists. This utterance reflects Wessely's strong ties with traditional Judaism and his adherence to its accepted values.

In spite of these ties, or perhaps because of them, Wessely is seen in this book, too, discussing the topic of the religious education in Judaism.⁴⁸ Although his discussion reflects some of the contemporary Enlightenment views with regard to religious education, it is to be regarded as a mild — very mild — declaration of Haskalah. It is a far cry from his own views as enunciated in his later educational pamphlets. The similarities which could be shown between his pedagogic viewpoints here and in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* are on the surface only.

⁴⁶ The major reaction in a literary form was Saul Berlin's *Ketav Yosher* [An Epistle of Righteousness] (Berlin, 1794), a defense of Wessely's book, which is said to have been circulating in manuscript form before its publication in 1794; its controversial tone implies that it had been written close to the *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* dispute. The editors of *Hame'asef* apparently preferred to remain silent. Aside from cursory, non-committal remarks (see *Nahal Habsor*, p. 4), the only direct, lengthy discussion on the controversy appears some twelve years after the beginning of the dispute (*Hame'asef*, VII [1794], pp. 158—160). However, subtle references indicative of the impact of *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* on the *maskilim* do appear in *Hame'asef*. See for example Breslau's discussion of "A scholar who has no knowledge, even a carcass is better than he" (*Hame'asef*, VI [1790], pp. 310—311); also: Abraham Asch's use of the same saying in his *Torah Kulah 'Al Regel 'Apat* [The Whole Torah on One Foot], (Berlin, 1796), p. 27; and compare Wessely's use in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, I, p. 2 b. On the *maskilim*'s public actions on Wessely's defense see Klausner, *Historiah*, I, pp. 130 ff.

⁴⁷ *Hochmat Shlomo* (Berlin, 1780), first introduction [no pagination]. Wessely wrote it in his youth.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28 a. Wessely cites three prerequisites which a teacher must possess: good schooling in traditional, authoritative, religious studies as well as in natural and mathematical sciences; the ability to teach not only that which he had learned from his own teachers, but to be able to grow and learn on his own; the ability to teach and the professional skill to educate.

The underlying philosophy behind his educational views in *Hochmat Shlomo* stresses accepting the heritage of the past. This complete dependence on tradition, interestingly enough, is applicable to both sacred as well as to secular knowledge.⁴⁹ Other pedagogic comments by Wessely reflect the demands of Haskalah for a more modern approach to education, yet they are not in any way contradictory to Judaism. They are: the educator's professional ability to teach children, gradation in the material taught, and the adjusting of this material to the individual needs of each student.⁵⁰

It was only in 1778 that we are able to discern a typical Haskalah tone in his writing. In *Mehalel Re'a* [Praise of a Friend], a poem with an introduction published in conjunction with Mendelssohn's *Netivot Hashalom*, the translation into German of the Torah and its exegesis, his views of the contemporary educational system among traditional Jews are quite critical. Here Wessely is lashing at the inability of the teachers to teach, and at the improper material which is being taught. Characteristically, Wessely blames the rabbis in part for the inappropriate way they themselves conduct their own teaching — the old way of preaching which ignores the *Pshat* of the text. The rabbis are held responsible for the low ebb of Jewish education. Further, the deterioration of the religious education among the Jews is believed by this *maskil* to be the cause for the religious deterioration in general among German Jewry. Thus, according to Wessely's allegations, the rabbis are to blame for the decline in religious observance.⁵¹ By so doing Wessely now embraces the official line, as it were, of the more extremists among the Hebrew writers of the German Haskalah. We can see here the development that took place in his thinking. Not only is he aware of the difficulties resulting from the confrontation between the old and the new, but he is also beginning to criticize the religious establishment, namely, the religious teachers and the rabbis, and to demand that changes be made.⁵² The religious authorities are no longer infallible in the eyes of this conservative *maskil*, now that he has been in Berlin, center of Hebrew Haskalah for a number of years, and has begun to collaborate with Mendelssohn in the preparation of the *magnum opus* of the Hebrew

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28 a; the key word is *Kabalah*, meaning receiving, that is tradition — in both religious and secular studies.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ "Mehalel Re'a," *Netivot Hashalom* [Paths of Peace]; (Vilna, 1849), pp. LVIII—LXIV. Wessely's use of the word "Rav" [rabbi] is ambivalent, for he employs it to mean teacher as well as rabbi.

⁵² His demands for changes are in the realm of the practical, for he cites the availability of Mendelssohn's translation as the most needed tool for the change.

Enlightenment. Thus Wessely's more progressive views are understandable. Moreover, it should be remembered that *Mehalel Re'a* has been written for the sole purpose of praising this work of Mendelssohn *et al* as one of the Enlightenment tools for the improvement of both the religious education and the religious situation among the Jews. Nevertheless, the prime mover of this *makil*, it seem, is not so much Enlightenment for Enlightenment's sake as Enlightenment for Torah's sake.⁵³ The proper education, which is the obligation of every rabbi, writes Wessely, is to plant in his students "the seed of holiness, the fear of God, the purity of faith and the dignity of Torah."⁵⁴ Equipped with the fundamentals of faith and with the dignity of the Torah, the students, according to Wessely, would be able and willing to come out and fight the war of Torah.⁵⁵ Since he is talking about youngsters of ten, the fight of the Torah is no other than the study of the Torah.

I think it is safe to conclude that although Wessely uses some of the utterances of Haskalah, such as the introduction of modern education, and although he attacks the rabbis and/or teachers, he still adheres to the old values of traditional Judaism even at this juncture in his work.

It should be emphasized that the above quotes from Wessely's writings as well as the material on which I base my study are taken generally at their face value. It would be far-fetched to conclude that "the seed of holiness, the fear of God, the purity of faith and the dignity of Torah" are anything else but what they sound. For we do not find in Wessely's writings so far subtleties such as are found in the writings of some of his contemporaries. In this respect, too, this *maskil* is very much part of the old school of thought.

All of this has changed, however, upon the publication of *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* in 1782. Although a detailed analysis of this work is beyond the scope of the present study, a few remarks pertaining to the subject matter are in place.

The first pamphlet proposes the reforming of Jewish education and offers the pedagogic as well as the ideological reasoning for the proposed change. It appeared in conjunction with the Tolerance Edict of Joseph II. Even the cursory reader is impressed by the deviation of this work of Wessely from his previous works. It is no longer a work which is dependent on a sacred or semi-sacred text, as were most of his previous major works. No longer do we have an exegetical style and contents here. The expository, albeit argumentative, style is dominant. However,

⁵³ "Mehalel Re'a," p. LIX: As a result of the old way of religious education — Wessely writes — the students have no Torah nor the foundation of the faith of Israel.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. LX. See note 51. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

the tone, style, and content of the first pamphlet are but a reflection of a more meaningful deviation in Wessely's thought. It is not the proposed reform in religious education *per sé* which is the essence of Wessely's deviation, for we have seen some of his educational theories in their development in his previously discussed works. It is, I think, the status and the role that Wessely assigns to *Torat Ha'adam*, with its many denotations and connotations, in relation to *Torat Hashem*, which bear the signs of a sudden change in this *maskil's* point of view. It is abundantly clear that in the first pamphlet of *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* Wessely makes an about-face and subordinates *Torat Hashem*, the laws of God, i.e., Judaism, to *Torat Ha'adam* — namely, to secular knowledge, to natural religion and natural laws, and to western civilization.⁵⁶ Not only is *Torat Hashem* subordinated to *Torat Ha'adam* in Wessely's new philosophy, but it is significantly completely dependent on it.⁵⁷ Thus we note a drastic change in values, for Wessely says in effect that Judaism in the modern times is subservient to western civilization, and it could not exist as an entity by itself; Judaism is no longer self-sufficient as it has been till the age of Enlightenment. His anti-theoretical declaration could be summarized as follows: whereas a Jew who violates the laws of God yet knows [and probably adheres to] *Torat Ha'adam*, could be beneficial to the rest of humanity, he who knows violates and does not adhere to *Torat Ha'adam*, even though he [and probably observes] the laws of God, he could satisfy neither the Jews nor the rest of humanity.⁵⁸ In other words, a Jew could be a man, that is to say, part of humanity, if he lacks Judaism yet adheres to western civilization; however, a Jew could not be regarded as a Jew if he does not have secular knowledge even though he fully adheres to Judaism.

It was, no doubt, this new view of Judaism that infuriated the traditionalist rabbis.⁵⁹ For when put in the context of Jewish education, as

⁵⁶ Wessely defines *Torat Ha'adam* two ways: a. As secular studies including the social sciences, mathematical sciences and natural sciences (*Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, I, p. 1 b); b. "The seven *mitzvot*," namely, the seven Noahide laws, "which have the consensus of the majority of *Hachamim* [scholars, wise people]" (*Ibid.*, p. 2 a). The latter definition of *Torat Ha'adam* as the seven Noahide laws, or the natural religion, which is clearly stated by the author, escaped all scholars dealing with the subject matter.

⁵⁷ See note 38.

⁵⁸ *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, I, pp. 2 a—b.

⁵⁹ J. Tzevi Zehavi, in *Tenu'at Habitbolelut Beyisra'el* [The Assimilation Movement in Israel] (Tel Aviv, 1943), p. 23 [Hebrew], is of the same opinion. The rabbis' reaction should be viewed against their high esteem of Wessely prior to the controversy.

indeed was the explicit intention of the author, Wessely's proposed reform meant a complete break from traditional Judaism not only in theory but actually in practice. True, there are many pronouncements in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* as to the superiority of *Torat Hashem* over *Torat Ha'adam*, which would tend to contradict our discussion above.⁶⁰ Yet there is also enough support for our contention as previously discussed. This seeming inconsistency warrants a careful examination which I do not purport to do in this study. Nevertheless, I would like to present a notion that I have concerning Wessely in this regard. I would not be surprised if a further study into his writings would result in a conclusion that this *maskil* did not fully comprehend the meaning and the implication of what he has written concerning Judaism. Nothing in his writing up to this point would lead to — or even suggest — this new and revolutionary view about Judaism and its relation to European culture. One should note that in the three pamphlets that followed *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, Wessely retreats almost completely from his revolutionary view, or at least appears to be endeavoring to do that.⁶¹ Significantly, his continued literary work does not reveal any change whatsoever that has taken place in Wessely's thought.⁶² In the middle of the *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* controversy, in 1783, Wessely writes editorial advice solicited by some Hebrew *maskilim*, editors of *Hame'asef*. Published in the prospectus, *Nahal Habsor*, his advice

⁶⁰ *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, I, p. 2 a: "The laws of God and his Torot [teachings] are superior to the law of man;" see also: pp. 3 b, 4 a, 6 a, 6 b.

⁶¹ In the second volume of *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, p. 13 a, Wessely limits the contents of *Torat Ha'adam* to the framework of Judaism alone, to "mitzvot sichliyot" [rational commandments], as opposed to "mitzvot shim'ivot" [commandments which do not have an apparent rationale] which are in the domain of *Torat Hashem*. The former *mitzvot*, according to Wessely's second version, are to be taught prior to the teaching of Mishnah and Talmud. No doubt this is an about face. Simon Bernfeld considers this change as a hypocrisy (*Dor Tahapuchot* [A Froward Generation] [Warsaw, 1914] I, p. 106); Max Erik explains the change in Wessely in his realization that he had gone too far, farther than he intended to go (*Etuden zu der Geschichte von der Haskole* [1789—1881] [Minsk, 1934] pp. 89—90 [Yiddish]).

⁶² Although we do find him supporting the translation of the prayers into German (*Hame'asef*, III [1786], pp. 129—130). However, it was considered by him as part of enlightenment of the Jews, part of the Haskalah activities; furthermore, his positive attitude toward the translation of the Bible is well known (*Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, I, ch. 7, pp. 11b—15 a). It should be remembered that the translation of the prayers into German has not been institutionalized as yet as was the case during the reform controversy of 1818. It is safe to assume that Wessely would have objected to the actual introduction of the translated prayers into the services.

is characterized by ultra-conservatism and strict adherence to traditional Judaism.⁶³ And so are his *Sefer Hamidot* (1785), *Ma'amar Hikur Hadin*, published in *Hame'asef* (1788), and the many other timely verses which he has published in that journal;⁶⁴ his *Shirei Tiferet*, too, is not different in this regard.

In summary, we have seen that the writings of one of the major authors of the early Haskalah in Germany, namely, Wessely, is more traditionally oriented than Enlightenment oriented. Moreover, there is a clear anti-Enlightenment tendency in his works. Yet he has been regarded by his contemporary *maskilim* (as well as by later scholars) as representing Haskalah. Possibly, his fellow *maskilim* saw in him more than he has seen in himself: a literary figure that achieved one of the ideals of Hebrew Haskalah, namely, bridging the gap between Enlightenment and Judaism. Whether Wessely himself consciously desired this task is rather doubtful as I have tried to prove from his major works. Nevertheless, there is no doubt in my mind that Naphtali Herz Wessely represents that period in Jewish history — that specific generation in Germany which underwent the change from the old to the new in his attitude toward the Jewish religion. He represents the conservative element of the Hebrew Haskalah which endeavored to preserve traditional Judaism. However, in his educational reform Wessely reflects the ideas of the more progressive element of Haskalah. Thus the ambivalence that we find in Wessely's writings as well as in the writings of his colleagues. It is apparent that in the power-play between the ideas and ideals of European Enlightenment and the values of traditional Judaism the latter played an important role in shaping the world-view of the Hebrew Haskalah in Germany.

⁶³ *Nahal Habsor*, p. 7.

⁶⁴ "Ma'amar Hikur Hadin" [An essay (on) Search of Justice], *Hame'asef*, IV (1788), pp. 97, 98. The article was published also as a book in a few editions; *Sefer Hamidot* [Book of Ethics] was published in Berlin in 1785; *Shirei Tiferet* [Songs of Glory], the first part of which was published in 1789.