

The Attitude of the First Maskilim in Germany towards the Talmud

BY MOSHÉ PELLI

One of the misconceptions prevailing in the study of the Hebrew *Haskalah* is that the *Maskilim* “hated the Talmud and the *Agadah*”.* It is, I believe, a statement that reflects the attitude of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditionalists toward their opponents, the *Maskilim*, rather than the actual state of affairs.¹ Somehow this notion penetrated into scholarly and semi-scholarly works on the Enlightenment to such an extent that it is treated as a historical truth which allegedly highlights the authentic attitude of the *Haskalah* and the *Maskilim* toward Judaism and its tradition.

This generalisation, which was originally voiced mostly at a later period of *Haskalah*, was nevertheless attributed in some scholarly and semi-scholarly works to an earlier period of Hebrew Enlightenment. In the same vein, certain generalisations which could have been justifiably applied to one group of enlighteners, the more radical German-Jewish *Maskilim*, who indeed had expressed a negative attitude toward the Talmud and its study, were superimposed on the more moderate Hebrew *Maskilim*. It was done without sufficient probing into the wide gulf that separated the two groups—some

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¹The attitude of the traditionalists toward the *Maskilim* in general, and their views of the latter's outlook regarding Judaism of the old order, Jewish tradition and the Talmud, merit a separate study. For our purpose it will suffice to cite a few examples, taken from contemporary traditionalist writings. In a sermon delivered on *Shabat Hagadol*, in 1782, Rabbi David Tevel (Tevele) of Lissa attacked Naphtali Herz Wessely (Weisel) and the pamphlet *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, which he had published. The rabbi charged that Wessely could not penetrate the depth of the Talmud and its early commentators. See L. Lewin, ‘Aus dem jüdischen Kulturkampfe’, *Jahrbuch der Jüdisch-Literarischen Gesellschaft*, XII (1918), p. 183. Tevele goes further to state that Wessely is utterly ignorant of the wisdom (or, knowledge) of the Talmud (pp. 186, 194), and that he is not a Talmudist (p. 188). In his sermon, he brands Wessely as heretic, stupid, wicked, hypocrite, instigator, and calls him similar such derogatory names (pp. 182–194).

Rabbi Elazar Flekels, who succeeded Rabbi Ezekiel Landau as Chief Rabbi in Prague, delivered a sermon in 1783 in which he rebuked those who probe and search (*hoqer, mehaqer*, i.e., those who probe the tradition) saying that they intend to break the fence which the ancient sages had erected, and that “they despise the *Agadot* and mock the sages [masters of] secrets”. See ‘*Olat Hodesh Hasheni*, ‘*Olat Zibur*, (Monthly Burnt-Offering, II, Public Burnt-Offering—Titles given in transliteration with their translation into English are in Hebrew—I, Prague 1787, p. 57a.

A few months earlier, in another sermon, Rabbi Pinhas Halevi 'Ish Hurwitz, claimed that the *Maskilim* were ridiculing the talmudic sages. Hurwitz refers to Wessely's *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*. Wessely is said to have suggested that the people accept his interpretation of the Torah “and that they throw away all the words of the talmudic sages, Gemara and Midrash”. See [Heinrich Graetz], ‘Wessely's Gegner’, *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, XX (1871) [1972 ed.] p. 467.

similarities notwithstanding—in their ideology with regard to the Jewish religion.²

Apart from this generality and apparent anachronism as found in the literature on the subject, one is aware of an inaccurate use of fundamental terminology which has led in effect to some ambiguities. The very word “Talmud” is used in a rather loose way. At times it seems to be the result of insufficient analysis of the original text, or the lack of textual treatment altogether.³ It is for these reasons that this writer has undertaken to examine the question of the attitude of the early Hebrew *Maskilim* toward the Talmud.

Limiting the scope of the study is both necessary and unavoidable. Thus I do not purport to examine the attitude of the *Maskilim* toward the talmudic *Halachah* in a legal context, for example. The attitude of the enlighteners toward the authority of *Torah Shebe'al Peh* is also not treated here. For I am basically concerned with the image of the Talmud as an embodiment of the Jewish civilisation, its thought and philosophy of life, and as a creative expression of the Jewish people. It is that image that the Hebrew *Maskilim*, in the beginning of the German Hebrew *Haskalah*, attempted to project for themselves as well as for their readers.

The assumption of this writer is that this image of the Talmud and its sages in effect reflects the image of the *Maskilim* themselves, their *Weltanschauung*, and their problems as innovators who indeed considered themselves as belonging to the traditionalist Jewish community.

The sources selected for this study were limited to the first seven volumes of *Hame'asef* (1783–1797), organ of the Hebrew *Haskalah* in Germany. In addition, special attention has been paid to the writings of some of the exponents of Hebrew *Haskalah*, such as Judah Ben Ze'ev, Saul Berlin, Isaac Euchel, Isaac Satanow, Naphtali Herz Wessely, and Aaron Wolfsohn, who concerned themselves with the question at hand. These sources represent the most important writings of the Hebrew *Haskalah* in Germany.

While this paper concentrates on the Hebrew *Maskilim*, mention should be made here of the role of Moses Mendelssohn in shaping and formulating some of their basic views via his own writings concerning the Talmud.⁴

Although originating with Delitzsch, it was Bernfeld who strongly supported the notion that the “generation of *Hame'asfim*” (the Hebrew *Maskilim* who

²A distinction should be made between the German-Jewish enlighteners and the Hebrew enlighteners. The first group includes David Friedländer, Lazarus Bendavid and Saul Ascher. They wrote mostly in German, and generally speaking their attitude toward the old order in Judaism tended to be rather negative. The Hebrew *Maskilim*, who are being discussed here, tended, in general, to be more conservative in their attitude toward tradition. It should be pointed out that there were some variations even within the Hebrew *Maskilim*; Saul Berlin and Aaron Wolfsohn expressed more extreme views than, say, Wessely. Herz Homburg, who wrote in Hebrew as well as in German, should be considered among the more extremist. On Bendavid's attitude toward the rabbinic literature see Max Wiener, *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation*, Berlin 1933, p. 42.

³The exceptions are found in the writings of Barzilay and Mahler (see notes 6, 8, 9, below), who do discuss the texts. However, they too held the view that the attitude of the Hebrew *Maskilim* toward the Talmud was negative.

⁴See discussion in my book, cited in note 7 below, and in notes 23, 30, and 56 below. There I show the positive attitude that Mendelssohn expressed toward the Talmud and the sages.

participated in *Hame'asef*) "hate[d] the Talmud and the *Agadah*".⁵ Similar views are found in the writings of other historians,⁶ and in some encyclopedias.⁷

More recently, Barzilay, in his important contribution to the study of the German *Haskalah*, takes the stand that "none of them, [namely, Euchel, Wolfssohn, Satanow, Homberg, Saul Levin (Berlin), and Ben Ze'ev] with the exception of ... Shelomo Maimon and ... Shelomo Loewisohn, showed the

⁵Franz Delitzsch, *Zur Geschichte der jüdischen Poesie*, Leipzig 1836, pp. 97–101; Simon Bernfeld, *Dor Tahapuchot* (A Froward Generation), I, Warsaw 1914, p. 111. Bernfeld cites Delitzsch as the originator of this view.

⁶Graetz depicts the young *Maskilim* as leaving altogether the books of the Talmud, discarding them completely, and, under the influence of Mendelssohn's *Be'ur*, turning to the scriptures (H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, XI, Leipzig 1900, p. 116. While there is undoubtedly some truth in these statements, the exaggerated tone implies that the *Maskilim* discarded the Talmud altogether, and certainly this is erroneous. The *Maskilim* in effect continue to exhibit their interest in the Talmud with the intention of enhancing their enlightenment ideology. See for example the many quotations from the talmudic literature in the burial-of-the-dead controversy (a list of the sources dealing with that controversy is found in my article 'Intimations of Religious Reform in the German Hebrew *Haskalah* Literature', *Jewish Social Studies*, XXXII, No. 1 (1970), p. 8, n. 30.

Nahum Slouschz, in his *Qorot Hasifrut Ha'ivrit Hahadashah* (History of Modern Hebrew Literature), I, Warsaw 1906, p. 36, states that Isaac Euchel hated the rabbis and the sages of the Talmud. However, he offers no substantiation for this contention. In the course of this study I shall cite from Euchel's writings to disprove Slouschz's unfounded view. On Euchel's attitude toward Judaism, see my study 'Isaac Euchel: Tradition and Change in the First Generation *Haskalah* Literature in Germany', (I), *Journal of Jewish Studies*, XXVI, No. 1–2 (Spring-Autumn 1975), pp. 151–167, and part II of that study in vol. XXVII, No. 1 (Spring 1976), pp. 54–70.

Raphael Mahler discussed the research interests of the *Maskilim* who contributed to *Hame'asef*, and claims that they had limited their works to ancient Hebrew literature and to commentary alone "while they had not dealt at all with the talmudic and midrashic literature even from a historical point of view", *Divrei Yemei Yisra'el Dorot Aharonim*, II, Merhavayah²1954, p. 82). As I shall presently show, this statement is erroneous. Mahler elaborates on the attitude of Saul Berlin toward the Talmud in his satire *Ktav Yosher*: "The author pours a bitter irony also on the Talmud and also on the casuistry"; "while mocking casuistry ... he indirectly strikes at some of the statements of the Talmud" (p. 79). Like the other scholars, Mahler is insensitive to the distinction I shall make between the Talmud and the study of the Talmud, casuistry being one mode of its study. Mahler is of the opinion that Berlin expressed his denial of the Talmud and of *Torah Shebe'al Peh* (the oral law), p. 337. Since *Halachah*-related aspects of the Talmud were excluded from the present study, I shall not comment on this contention. See also note 32 below.

⁷*Ha'encyklopedyah Ha'ivrit* (*Hebrew Encyclopedia*), XV, Jerusalem–Tel-Aviv 1964, p. 538. Written by Azriel Shošet, this article on Hebrew *Haskalah* is comprehensive, and well balanced. However, with regard to the Talmud, we do encounter the same problem found basically in the writings of *Haskalah* scholars. Shošet writes: "Mendelssohn and Wessely did not doubt the sanctity and the authority of the Oral Law, but they strove, in principle, to demote the Talmud from its supreme position in education." It seems that the author of the article was aware of the ambiguity of the expression "to demote the Talmud". For in the translated (and abridged) version of that article, which appeared in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, VII, Jerusalem 1971, p. 1436, it reads: "they tried to demote the study of Talmud from its supreme position in Jewish education." The author of the Hebrew article believes that "an anti-talmudic state of mind was widespread among the *Maskilim* of Mendelssohn's generation" (*Hebrew Encyclopedia*, p. 538). No distinction is made between the moderate and the more extreme *Maskilim*. The English version is even shorter: "This anti-Talmudic mood was widespread" (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, p. 1436). Shošet is of the opinion that Mendelssohn did not attribute great value to the study of the Talmud (*Hebrew Encyclopedia*, p. 538). In my book *Moshe Mendelssohn: Bechavlei Masoret* (Moses Mendelssohn: Bonds of Tradition), Tel-Aviv 1972, pp. 83–84, I maintain that Mendelssohn's general attitude toward the Talmud was a positive one (see note 4 above). G. Kressel, in his *Cyclopedia of Modern Hebrew Literature*, I, Merhavayah 1965, p. 697, states that Wolfssohn, in his 'Sihah' (cited in note 28) expressed "extremely pungent words against the Talmud".

slightest appreciation for the Talmud".⁸

Barzilay, of course, is aware of the editors' proclamation in *Naḥal Habsor*, the prospectus of *Hame'asef*, of their intention to devote a section of the journal to the study of the Talmud. He writes: "Notwithstanding the original plan of the *Meassefim* 'to dispatch their intellectual streams into the Talmudic sea', no article dealing with the Talmud or its period ever appeared. Whenever mentioned in the *Meassef* or in other works of the period, it was criticized and derided." Mahler expresses the same views in his book.⁹

Furthermore, Barzilay notes a shift to an extreme position in their attitude toward the Talmud under the editorship of Wolfssohn (1794–1797). He remarks: "The cautious attitude of previous years finally gave way to an open derision and spiteful sarcasm of the Talmud, the rabbis, the Polish Melammedim and many customs which are still widely practiced by the bulk of Jewry."¹⁰

Since the contention that these Hebrew *Maskilim* displayed a negative attitude toward the Talmud was not founded on private correspondence, but in all likelihood was based on interpretation of published texts, it would be appropriate for me to do likewise. That is to say, due to the lack of unpublished material, which might have revealed new insights into the subject matter, I shall resort to a probe into the available, known texts.¹¹

Even a cursory examination of the texts should reveal that contrary to the prevailing notion, the Hebrew *Maskilim* express their great admiration for the Talmud, for the sages of the Talmud, and for their writings. General expressions of admiration in superlatives abound in the writings of the *Maskilim*. Three examples will suffice to illustrate this point: An anonymous writer in *Hame'asef* refers to the talmudic sages as "our holy fathers",¹² and we do not have any contextual reason or otherwise to doubt his sincerity. Even the controversial Aaron Wolfssohn, who is believed by some scholars to have been one of the more extreme among the Hebrew *Maskilim* in his anti-tradition views, and who expressed anti-talmudic views in his German book, does refer to the talmudic

⁸Isaac 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), p. 46. Barzilay documents his contention through primary and secondary sources. With the primary sources that have to do with the Hebrew *Maskilim* who contributed to *Hame'asef* (with the exception of Herz Homberg) I shall deal below. They are: Euchel, Wolfssohn, Wessely, Morpurgo, Satanow, and Ben-Ze'ev.

⁹*Ibid.* I believe that this view, which is shared also by Mahler (*Divrei Yemei Yisra'el*, p. 82), is erroneous. The sources in *Hame'asef* dealing with the Talmud and exhibiting a positive stand are listed below. Additional sources (with which I have not dealt in this study): *Hame'asef*, II (1785), pp. 24–26; III (1786), pp. 182–183; The burial-of-the-dead controversy is replete with talmudic matters (see for example, II (1785), pp. 88–89, 152–154); VI (1790), pp. 250–251.

¹⁰'The Treatment', p. 44. Barzilay is right in his observation regarding the growing discontent on the part of the *Maskilim* about the traditional institutions. Indeed, one notes some extreme expressions against the rabbis in these years.

¹¹Delitzsch, Bernfeld and Slouschz do not cite any text nor do they analyse any textual references. Methodologically, I shall resort to the primary sources to substantiate my theory. However, citations must be viewed in their context; fragmentary ideas within a given work must be examined against the total work. Similarly, ideas (on the Talmud) expressed in a literary work of fiction must be analysed within its context. I shall elaborate on this point, which seems to be ignored by the students of Hebrew *Haskalah*, below (see note 32).

¹²*Hame'asef*, IV (1788), p. 10.

sages as "very precious". They should serve as an example, according to Wolfssohn.¹³ Satanow compares the sages' words to the most precious possessions of kings.¹⁴ These rather florid statements reflect the deep-rooted, authentic feeling toward the Talmud which prevailed among the Hebrew *Maskilim*.

Contrary to the assertions by Barzilay and Mahler, the *Maskilim* did write about the Talmud and its sages in *Hame'asef*. They indeed discussed certain aspects of the Talmud and, as I shall presently prove, they generally had high regard for the rabbis of the Talmud and for its contents. A contemporary traditionalist *Maskil*, Naḥman of Berlin, testifies to this effect.¹⁵

There is a systematic attempt by the *Maskilim* to emphasise the interdependence between the Talmud and the secular disciplines, such as science and history. This approach to the Talmud should be viewed as the answer of Hebrew *Haskalah* to two long-held attitudes toward the Talmud. One is the traditional rabbinic attitude, treating the Talmud as a venerated text to be studied and discussed independently of the contextual literary, historical, cultural, scientific and social background. The *Maskilim* consider this approach as parochial. The second is the Gentile attitude as found in Christian writings and in European literature which allegedly exposed the Talmud as a biased, superstitious work of the Jewish people. This approach is held to be anti-Jewish, ignorant and malicious. The portrayal of the Talmud by the *Maskilim* must be

¹³Aaron Wolfssohn, 'Teshuvah Lehakotev' (An Answer to the Writer), *Hame'asef*, VII, No. 4 (1797), p. 311. However, in his German book *Jeschurun*, Breslau 1804, p. 129, he suggests that the Talmud be censored. Wolfssohn offers an example of the complexity of the attitude toward the Talmud as shown by the *Maskilim*. Although he expressed some positive views about the Talmud and its sages, even in his Hebrew writings, he is, at times, inclined to express some critical views about the *Agadah*, as we shall see below. However, in his German writings, he is extremely critical of the Talmud and its contents. It should be pointed out that these positive comments were not merely examples of lip service expressed by the *Maskilim* in a possible attempt to win over the traditionalists. The quotations, as cited at length in this paper, are indicative of the straight-forward, authentic intention of the *Maskilim* and the lack of any irony in their tone of writing.

¹⁴Isaac Satanow, *Sefer Hamidot* (Book of Ethics), Berlin 1784, p. 40b.

¹⁵Naḥman bar Simḥah (BaRaSh), 'Et Ledaber (Time to Speak), Breslau? 1819?, pp. 24b-25a. Discussing the deterioration of the study of the Talmud during the period of the early *Maskilim*, this traditionalist *Maskil* maintains that almost all the personalities in the Berlin *Kehilah*, who had become successful in life, had been educated in the Talmud. The study of the Talmud, accordingly, had not hindered their success in secular disciplines. Among these *Maskilim* he cites Mendelssohn, Wessely, Euchel, Brill, and Wolfssohn. However, according to his report, the objection to the study of the Talmud came from some communal leaders and some parents. While Barash seems here to praise the early Hebrew *Maskilim* (significantly, he praises also Bloch, Marcus Herz, Shlomo [Maimon?], and Bendavid), in another work of his, 'Ein Mishpat (Fountain of Justice) Berlin 1796, he criticises the then editor of *Hame'asef*, Aaron Wolfssohn, whom he praised in the later book. Barash was at that time (1796) involved in a dispute with the editor of *Hame'asef* whom he accused of reversing the policy of the journal with regard to Jewish tradition. Speaking of the enlighteners in general, Barash writes that "they ridicule the words of the talmudic sages", although "they themselves testify and proclaim how beneficial were the sages [...] in their restrictions and prohibitions, in their warnings and in their strict decrees" (p. 10). It seems that while they are praising the sages, the *Maskilim*, according to Barash, are now manifesting their intention to institute religious reforms. See also note 9 above. A consensus of opinion, however, is not to be found among the traditionally orientated *Maskilim*. Tuvyah Feder, in his *Lahaḥ Haherev* (Flaming Sword), Vilna 1866 (first edition: 1804), criticises the new leaders of the *Maskilim* (probably, the new editors of *Hame'asef* in 1788, Wolfssohn and Brill) for "ridiculing the words of the sages" (p. 28).

viewed as defensive and apologetic in this regard. Their depiction of the Talmud as an enlightened work of the Hebrew mind is comparable to their conceptualisation of the Jewish religion *in toto*.¹⁶

It is against this background that we must examine the writings of the early Hebrew *Maskilim* about the Talmud.

One such instance is Euchel's advocacy of the study of history which should bring about, among other things, a better understanding of the wisdom of the Talmud and its sages. The first editor of *Hame'asef*, Euchel, published his article in the first issue of the journal in 1783, promulgating the importance of the knowledge of history. "Many of the passages of the talmudic sages", he writes, "of which the reader would not know their very meaning [or, intention], since they are founded on [secular and scientific] knowledge, would glow before you like the very purity of heaven, should you engage in the continuous study of the [secular, scientific] disciplines."¹⁷ It is Euchel's intention to bridge the alleged gap which some of the more extreme traditionalists were said to have found between the talmudic discipline and scientific, secular knowledge. Like the other *Maskilim*, Euchel sees no such gap, or dichotomy, between the Talmud and the sciences. As a matter of fact, he feels that the lack of knowledge in the various secular disciplines leads necessarily to a lack of understanding of the Talmud. Euchel, as well as the other *Maskilim*, in their endeavours to change the accepted image of the Talmud, portrayed it as an encyclopaedia of knowledge, and depicted the talmudic sages as being "full of knowledge and wisdom".¹⁸

Similarly, Saul Berlin, who is believed by some scholars to have been among those *Maskilim* who "hated the Talmud", stresses that the talmudic sages of yore

¹⁶The anti-talmudic book that gained notoriety was Johann Andreas Eisenmenger's *Entdecktes Judenthum*, Frankfurt a. Main 1700; Königsberg 1711. An English translation appeared four decades later: *The Tradition of the Jews: or, The Doctrines and Expositions Contain'd in The Talmud and Other Rabbinical Writings*, London 1742–1743. A negative attitude toward the Talmud occurs even among some of the more moderate Enlightenment writers. Michaelis, for example, believed that the Talmud contains many forgeries concerning the period of the second commonwealth. See Johann David Michaelis, 'Mosaisches Recht', *Sämtliche Werke*, Reutlingen 1785, IV, article 185, pp. 16ff. A discussion of the impact of European thought on the Hebrew *Maskilim* is found in my study 'The Impact of Deism on the Hebrew Literature of the Enlightenment in Germany', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, VI, No. 1 (Fall 1972), pp. 35–59; published also in the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, XXIV, No. 2 (Autumn 1973), pp. 127–146. See also Mendelssohn's interpretation of Judaism in European Enlightenment terminology in my book *Moshe Mendelssohn: Bechavlei Masoret*, pp. 78–87.

¹⁷Davar 'El Haqore Mito'elet Divrei Hayamim Haqadmonim' (A Word to the Reader Concerning the Benefit of Ancient History), *Hame'asef*, I (1783–1784), p. 27. Although the article, which serves as a preface to a series of biographies in the journal, does not bear Euchel's name, he testified to his authorship in his biography of Mendelssohn, *Rabenu Hehacham Moshe ben Menahem* (Our Rabbi the Sage M. b. M.), Berlin 1788, p. 13 (my pagination). Cf. my article 'Isaac Euchel: Tradition and Change', (I), p. 159, note 38.

¹⁸Davar 'El Haqore', p. 28. Euchel attempts to stress not only the compatibility of the various sciences and the Talmud, but also the great benefit that the Talmud and the sages are going to gain from one's knowledge in the sciences. If till now you have followed the sages, he writes, because you were fearful of the punishment, now, upon learning the sciences, you will respect the sages because of their scholarship and wisdom, and you will follow them even more than before. Certainly, Euchel does not anticipate any change in the positive attitude of the learned *Maskilim* toward traditional Judaism, or for that matter toward the Talmud, as a result of their knowledge of the sciences.

respected “the other disciplines” and studied them. Berlin, too, finds in the Talmud a testimony of the close relationship between *Halachah* and secular knowledge; in effect, he strongly believes that these scientific disciplines are integrated within the *Halachah*.¹⁹ I think that Saul Berlin, a master of the Talmud and late rabbinic literature, attempts to project a different image of the Talmud from the one held by the traditionalists. His is an image of a living, pulsating book of law, mirroring a down-to-earth, nature-orientated people and its living civilisation. The Talmud, therefore, must not be studied merely as a sacred book detached from its historical and cultural background.

Schnaber, too, stresses his view that the various external disciplines and philosophy are incorporated in the Talmud;²⁰ according to him, the sages did not prohibit the mastery of these disciplines.²¹

Satanow adopts the view expressed by medieval Jewish thinkers that the talmudic sages possessed all, or most, scientific knowledge; he believes that many of the modern-age inventions had been known to them. All this wisdom and knowledge, however, has been forgotten during exile in the Diaspora.²²

The data found in the Talmud is regarded by another *Maskil* as authentic, and

¹⁹E. M. T., believed to be Saul Berlin, in a review of the book *Marpe Lashon*, in *Hame'asef*, VI (1790), p. 370. Surely, it is Berlin's subtle implication that “the other disciplines” must be regarded as part and parcel of the *Halachah*. The talmudic sages are thus depicted as scholars having a wide range of knowledge. Berlin points out that it is only in the last two hundred years that the rabbis alienated themselves from the other disciplines.

A negative portrayal of Berlin's attitude toward the Talmud appears in Mahler's work cited in note 6 above. On Saul Berlin's intentions in his satire, see my study ‘Saul Berlin's Ktav Yosher. The Beginning of Satire in Modern Hebrew Literature of the Haskalah in Germany’, in *LBI Year Book XX* (1975), pp. 109–127; Cf. my two articles on Saul Berlin listed in that article, Appendix II, bibliography, p. 127, Nos. 39, 41. See also my essay ‘Aspects of Hebrew Enlightenment Satire. Saul Berlin: Involvement and Detachment’, in *LBI Year Book XXII* (1977), pp. 93–107. See also note 32 below.

²⁰Mordechai Gumpel Schnaber, *Ma'amar Hatorah Veha'hochmah*, London 1771, p. 8. Cf. my study ‘Mordechai Gumpel Schnaber: The First Religious Reform Theoretician of the Hebrew Haskalah in Germany’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, LXIV, No. 4 (1974), pp. 289–313. Schnaber's attitude toward the Talmud is discussed there in detail (pp. 296–297).

²¹*Ma'amar Hatorah*, p. 8. According to Schnaber, the talmudic sages studied (or even taught) the various sciences and disciplines after they had mastered the study of ethics and the study of the Talmud.

²²Satanow, *Sefer Hamidot*, pp. 36a, 36b. Various examples are cited in pp. 37–38, while the reason for the disappearance of *hochmot*, the exile, is discussed in p. 38. A detailed analysis of Satanow's stand appears in my study ‘Isaac Satanow: A Heretic and a Believer in the Beginning of Hebrew Haskalah Literature in Germany’ (in Hebrew) scheduled for publication shortly. Parts of it appeared in *Hado'ar*, LVII, Nos. 21/22 (1978); *Bitzaron*, I, Nos. 3/4 (1980); and *Kiryat Sefer*, 54 (1979).

By attributing scientific knowledge to the sages, Satanow follows in the footsteps of early Jewish thinkers, notably Yehudah Halevi in *Hakuzari*, Berlin 1795, Ma'mar II, No. 34, p. 30a; English transl.: *The Kuzari*, New York 1964, Pt. II, No. 66, p. 124; Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, London–New York 2nd 1910, pp. 107–108; and perhaps also Yehudah Messer Leon's *Nofet Zufim*, Wien 1863, p. 47, and Azariah de Rossi's *Me'or 'Einayim*, Berlin 1794, Pt. I, pp. 4–14. Details on this topic will be included in my paper on Satanow which is cited above.

On Satanow see also Nehama Rezler-Bersohn, ‘Isaac Satanow. An Epitome of an Era’, in *LBI Year Book XXV* (1980), pp. 81–99.

in effect as more reliable than other external historical testimonies.²³ It is not the self-abnegation or self-abasement of a *Maskil vis-à-vis* the extra-Jewish civilisation and its truths, but rather self-respect for one's heritage that the anonymous *Maskil* is projecting.

The talmudic logic and empiricism are accentuated by Mendel Breslau, one of the editors of *Hame'asef*. While advocating the convening of a rabbinic assembly, in 1790, in order to institute religious changes in Judaism, Breslau commends the talmudic rabbis for the logical and empirical approach to the phenomena of life. "Indeed the sages of the Talmud should become paragons for us", exclaims the *Maskil*, "for they examined and experienced everything that they had said or heard in the crucible of their reason."²⁴ Undoubtedly, Breslau projects the image of the *Maskilim* onto his portrayal of the talmudic sages.

Truth, justice and wisdom are epitomised by Aaron Wolfssohn, who is said to have hated the Talmud, as the tenets of the Talmud and its sages. Wolfssohn further defends the Talmud against non-Jewish criticism.²⁵

In view of the general positive attitude of the early *Maskilim* toward the Talmud and its sages, as expressed in the literature of the time, on the one hand, and the claims of some students of the *Haskalah* that these writers manifested a negative viewpoint toward the Talmud, on the other, a question must be raised: how could these students of the *Haskalah* misread or else ignore these texts?

Unfortunately, these writers did not discuss the texts we have been using so far to prove our contention. Some scholars have certainly found several negative

²³Peli [Anonymous], 'Teshuvah Al She'elat Hasho'el' (An Answer to a Question), *Hame'asef*, IV (1788), pp. 9–10, 13. Significantly, the anonymous *Maskil* acknowledges the reliability of the talmudic sources, and the talmudic rabbis, *vis-à-vis* the Roman source. Mendelssohn, for example, accepts the *Masorah* of the sages, while rejecting any textual or interpretative deviation suggested by biblical criticism. See 'Or *Linivah* (Light unto A Path.), Berlin 1783, p. 51 [my pagination]; republished in Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, XIV, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1972, p. 243 [in Hebrew]. Facing an apparent contradiction between the sages' and the *Letter of Aristeas*'s accounts on the translation of the Pentateuch (namely, the Septuagint), Mendelssohn attempts to reconcile the two sources. Indeed, the talmudic source is held authentic by him, and he upholds the view of the sages ('Or *Linivah*, p. 43).

²⁴Mendel Breslau, 'El Rodfei Zedeq Vedorshai Shalom' (To the Seekers of Justice and the Searchers of Peace), *Hame'asef*, VI (1790), p. 311.

²⁵Wolfssohn, 'Teshuvah Lehakotev', p. 354. Cf. note 13 above. One suspects that, while arguing with his traditionalist opponent, Wolfssohn might have been carried away to the other extreme in presenting his case. Reb Berl, "in charge of the [ritual] slaughterers", accused him of treating the talmudic sages and the generations of antiquity rather lightly while esteeming the contemporary generations for their increased knowledge and wisdom. Nevertheless, upon checking the context of the dispute and Wolfssohn's overall message, one may conclude that Wolfssohn's general attitude toward the sages is extremely positive. It is not merely lip service, for that *Maskil* also makes some critical observations regarding the talmudic sages, as viewed historically against the background of the later generations' contribution to knowledge and science (see 'Teshuvah', p. 313). Thus Wolfssohn expresses a view that prevailed among most of the *Maskilim* that modern times and modern men, i.e., the contemporary period of the Enlightenment and the enlighteners, are much superior in knowledge and in science to their predecessors. To him, one aspect of the superiority of the talmudic sages in comparison with the contemporary generations is manifested in the former's moral integrity (p. 314). Wolfssohn's views of the talmudic sages assumes an air of historical and critical observation. They were knowledgeable and learned; however, not all of them knew everything. Yet they were numerous, and thus the Talmud, which reflects the sum total of their thoughts and knowledge, is highly learned (p. 311).

remarks concerning the Talmud in the writings of the *Maskilim*. Indeed these Hebrew enlighteners were at times quite vehement in their writings on Talmud-related subjects. But what were these subjects?

Let us examine some representative texts in this regard.

a) Discussing matters concerning religious education, an anonymous *Maskil* writes in the first volume of *Hame'asef*: "... for before the boy knew anything of the foundations of his religion and the roots of his faith, he would be brought to a foreigner's house, whose language he would not understand, and who would speak to him froward words, and he would teach him the words of our holy [talmudic] sages, may their memory be blessed, even before [the boy] knew who Moshe was, and what he had done for his people ..."²⁶

Is that *Maskil* criticising the Talmud or its sages?

b) Saul Berlin rebukes certain religious leaders "who devote their entire life to the study of the Talmud alone, while *Torah Shebichtav* itself is regarded by them as a closed book. For they say: What need do we have to study the Bible separately since the Talmud incorporates the Bible, the Mishnah and the Gemara, thus we fulfil our obligation [to study the Torah] by studying the Talmud alone."²⁷

Is Saul Berlin criticising the Talmud?

c) Wolfsohn comments in a footnote to a drama which he published in the journal of Hebrew *Haskalah* as follows: "In the days of the Talmud and during the days of the *Ge'onim* and the subsequent rabbis, casuistry and hair-splitting were not practised as they are practised nowadays."²⁸

Is he, too, opposing the Talmud?

d) The intention of the *Maskilim* could best be illustrated by a quotation from Wessely's pamphlet *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, in which he advocated reforms in Jewish education, as follows: "... we have a great impediment in our hands, in that we do not pay attention at all to the Bible ... for we enrol our son in school at five or six, and start to teach him *Gemara*. And as if this regrettable act were not enough, we immediately accustom him to casuistry, and every week we impose upon him the inquiry of special talmudic problem[s], things which can only confuse the young child's fragile brain."²⁹

It is quite obvious that the above mentioned *Maskilim* did not say anything derogatory either about the Talmud, as such, or about the talmudic sages. What they did criticise was the way their contemporary rabbis and teachers taught the Talmud. These *Maskilim* highly esteemed the Talmud as a source of knowledge and revered its sages as learned, open-minded and wise men; they objected to

²⁶***, 'Igeret 'Ish Nichbad 'El Re'ehu', (An Epistle of an Honourable Man to His Friend), *Hame'asef*, I (1783–1784), p. 37.

²⁷E.M.T. [Saul Berlin], *Hame'asef*, VI (1790), p. 369. Wessely, too, in his *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, rejects the prevailing notion that whosoever studies the Talmud does not have to study the Bible and Mishnah, for everything is incorporated within the Talmud (p. 12b). As a matter of fact, the reverse is advocated by Wessely, for in the study of the biblical text, one must incorporate the study of Mishnah and Gemara; in other words, the later interpretations of the early biblical texts (p. 14a).

²⁸[Aaron Wolfsohn], 'Siḥah Be'erez Haḥayim' (A Conversation in the Land of the Living [=the Dead]), *Hame'asef*, VII (No. 1, 1794), p. 59.

²⁹Naphtali Herz Wessely, *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* (Words of Peace and Truth), II, Berlin 1782?, p. 12a. See also Judah Loeb Ben-Ze'ev, *Bet Hasefer* (The School), I, Wien 1811, p. 4 (my pagination).

what they thought was an unenlightened approach to the Talmud which typified the traditionalist circles. These *Maskilim* objected to the method in which the Talmud was studied: the “pilpul”, casuistry, the hair-splitting dialectics, and speculations.³⁰ They rejected the general inclination among the contemporary talmudic scholars to show-off erudition, sharpness of the mind, and their expert knowledge in the minutiae and trivialities of the Talmud as ends in themselves and not as tools for a better understanding of the Talmud.³¹ The *Maskilim* further criticised the teaching of the Talmud, in the manner cited, to small children, and objected to having it studied prior to the Bible.

From the above it is quite clear that the *Maskilim* did have a different view of the Talmud than the one held by most of the contemporary traditionalists. It is also apparent that they assigned a different role to the Talmud and to its study from the one designated by the rabbis. The rabbis were aware of the meaning of that difference, and its significance to Judaism. They understood that it signifies a shift in emphasis from the traditionally orientated milieu to an open, European-orientated one. They also realised that, to some of the *Maskilim*, the concept of the Talmud as the *Torah Shebe'al Peh* which is God-given, contemporaneous with *Torah Shebichtav*, was no longer valid in the traditional way.³² It is in this context that we must view the traditionalists' accusations that the *Maskilim* “ridiculed the Talmud”.³³

It must be pointed out that the *Maskilim* were not original in their objection to this system of talmudic scholarship. For even prior to the Enlightenment, there were a number of traditionalist rabbis who opposed the talmudic casuistry. Let it

³⁰“*Sevara*” could refer also to rational argument. Wolfssohn, in his drama *Sifah Be'erez Hahayim*, has Mendelssohn express his objection to the manner in which the Talmud has been taught (*Hame'asef*, VII, No. 4 [1797], pp. 295–296). Indeed, Mendelssohn was actually favourable toward the Talmud, while he criticised the “pilpul”. The latter appears in his correspondence with Rabbi Emden. See *Gesammelte Schriften*, XIX, 1974; vol. XVI, 1929 ed., p. 131. Another *Maskil*, a biblical scholar and a grammarian, Judah Loeb Ben-Ze'ev, also criticised this phenomenon in his books. See his *Ozar Hashorashim* (Treasure of Roots), I, Wien 1807, p. 16 (my pagination), and *Bet Hasefer*, I, p. 4 (my pagination).

³¹It should be pointed out that the *Maskilim* were not inclined to search in the Talmud itself for evidence of these tendencies, for they were rather eager to attribute them to late rabbis and particularly to their contemporaries. Cf. Ephraim E. Urbach, *Hazal-Pirgei 'Emunot Vede'ot*, Jerusalem, 1969, p. 557 [in Hebrew], and in the English translation, *The Sages—Their Concepts and Beliefs*, I, Jerusalem 1975, p. 620.

³²The writings of Saul Berlin contain many references to the Talmud; however, one cannot overstress the caution that should be exercised in dealing with them. Generalisation, which is practised by most scholars in this regard, is indeed leading to erroneous results. Using quotations out of context does not present us with an authentic picture of Berlin's view either. Extra caution must be employed when quoting from a work of satire which presents a number of viewpoints, some of which are intended to characterise the figures, and do not necessarily reflect the author's authentic point of view even when a reversed interpretation is applied.

In Berlin's *Besamim Rosh* (Incense of Spices), Berlin 1793, siman 251, p. 76b, there are utterances to the effect that the oral law is subject to change. See my discussion of the subject in ‘Some Notes on the Nature of Saul Berlin's Writings’, *The Journal of Hebraic Studies*, I, No. 2 (1970), p. 60, notes 53–54 and their related text.

Rabbi Tevel accuses Wessely of adopting and preaching “foreign [or, strange] ideas” similar to the “naturalist” (Lewin, ‘Aus dem jüdischen Kulturkampfe’, *loc. cit.*, p. 188). See also Flekels, ‘*Olat Zibur*, I, pp. 98b–99a.

³³See Rabbi Tevel's sermon and the writings of Rabbi Flekels, cited in note 1 above.

suffice to mention in this regard the educational preaching of the *MaHaRaL* of Prague.³⁴ Significantly, the *Maskilim* did not pretend to have originated these ideas. They deliberately cited the sources from the traditional literature, at times going back to the Talmud itself, so as to fortify and support their position.³⁵

Some of the students of the *Haskalah* apparently did not pay enough attention to the distinction in the writings of the *Maskilim* between the Talmud and the study of the Talmud, between the talmudic sages and the contemporary rabbis. Mistakenly, these writers have taken objections to the contemporary manner of teaching the Talmud for an objection to the Talmud itself. Similarly, they have considered criticism against the rabbis and the teachers of the Talmud as criticism of the talmudic sages. This was never the intention of any of the Hebrew *Maskilim* who contributed to *Hame'asef*.³⁶

Another notion regarding the study of the Talmud, which is also found in the writings about the *Haskalah*, must be thoroughly examined in the source materials. This notion suggests that the Hebrew *Maskilim* attempted to eliminate the study of the Talmud from the curricula which they proposed for Jewish education, as promulgated in their educational essays.³⁷

It was Wessely who started the controversy concerning Jewish education: the curriculum, the pedagogy of teaching as well as the textbooks and the teachers. Even though Wessely represents the more traditionally orientated *Maskilim*, his educational theories and his attitude towards the study of the Talmud represent,

³⁴Judah Livah ben Bezalel, known as *MaHaRaL*. Citations from his writings regarding the proper study of the Talmud are quoted in Simḥah Asaf, *Megorot Letoldot Haḥinuch Beyisra'el* (Sources for the History of Education in Israel), I, Tel-Aviv 1925, pp. 47–51. Citations from the writings of Solomon Ephraim Luntschitz (of Lencziza) against casuistry, pp. 61–63. See also Isaiah Horowitz, *Shnei Luḥot Habrit* (The Two Tablets of the Covenant), II, Jerusalem 1968–1969, pp. 89b–90b. His son, Shabtai Sheftel Horowitz, expresses his great admiration for the orderly fashion of Jewish education which he saw among the Sephardi community in Amsterdam. He suggests that Jewish leaders ought to assemble in order to institute changes in the teaching of Torah, Mishnah and Gemara ('Vavei Ha'amudim' [The Hooks of the Pillars], in *Shnei Luḥot Habrit*, III, Jerusalem 1968–1969), p. 9b); on his objection to casuistry and dialectics see p. 10a. Cf. similar views by Isaiah Horowitz, Asaf's *Megorot*, I, pp. 65–67; his son's: pp. 69–72. An example of a late-*Haskalah* criticism of the old way of teaching the Talmud by a modern Orthodox writer may be found in the writings of Yeḥiel Michal Pines. See his article 'Darchei Haḥinuch Leyaldei Bnei 'Amenu' (Ways of Education for the Children of Our People), *Hameliz*, VII, No. 35 (1876), pp. 269–270.

³⁵Wessely, *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, I, p. 17a.

³⁶As mentioned before (note 2), I excluded David Friedländer who, although contributing to the Hebrew journal, should be considered a German-Jewish *Maskil*, and not a Hebrew *Maskil*. Similarly, I did not discuss the writings of Herz Homberg who must be regarded separately.

It should be noted that the *Maskilim* themselves were not careful to designate special terms for the talmudic sages as distinguished from the contemporary rabbis who studied and taught the Talmud. The term "hatalmudiyim" is used interchangeably for both talmudic sages and contemporary rabbis. See, for example, *Hame'asef*, VII, No. 1 (1794), pp. 62, 67, 123, 225; "hatalmudim", pp. 138, 284. Other terms clearly refer to the talmudic sages: "ḥachameinu hatalmudiyim", pp. 66, 225, 280; "ḥachmei hatalmudim", pp. 126, 294; "ba'alei hatalmud", pp. 312, 322, 353; "ba'alei hashas", p. 312; "ḥachmei hatalmud", pp. 122, 311.

³⁷See notes 6–9 above. One student of Jewish education, Zvi Scharfstein, observes correctly that the *Maskilim* demanded (to) "delay the study of the Talmud to adolescence". See his article 'Sifrei Limud Uzeramim Hevratyiyim' (Textbooks and Social Currents), *Sefer Hashanah Lihudei America*, New York 1939, p. 262. The question whether the *Maskilim* did include the teaching of the Talmud in their curriculum in practice is not as simple as it may look. Mordechai Eliav, a historian of Jewish

in my opinion, the point-of-view of most of the Hebrew *Maskilim*. Wessely attempts to present a system of graded education geared to the capacity of the student within his age group and to his talents as an individual. He insists that the order of priorities be based upon the original mishnaic paradigm set forth in *Pirquei Avot*: Miqra, Mishnah, Talmud.³⁸ His starting point, in religious education, is the study of Bible. Having completed this phase of his education, the student would be tested on his knowledge of the finished area of studies and on his capability of proceeding to the next phase of his education, namely, the study of the Mishnah. Upon completing this phase, the student should undergo a similar testing to make sure that he is ready to proceed to the higher division, that of the Talmud. Concurrently, the student is exposed also to the study of secular disciplines, the vernacular and customs. Indeed, Wessely includes the study of Talmud within his proposal of the revised educational curriculum. Yet he was fully aware of the fact that most students would not be capable of engaging in a successful study of the Talmud. He therefore limits the study of Talmud to the very few, and regards this course of studies as leading eventually to the rabbinate, or to teaching.³⁹

In his enthusiasm, Wessely utters another of his catch phrases which enraged the traditionalist rabbis. He exclaims unhesitatingly: "Not all of us were destined to become Talmudists, to engage in the depths of the [religious] laws, and to instruct [authoritatively in them]. For God did make distinctions among souls, and provided each one with its capabilities from its very creation."⁴⁰ Again, Wessely in no way degrades the Talmud, its sages or even its study. On the contrary: his high esteem for the Talmud coupled with a realistic evaluation of the capabilities of young children to grasp the complexities of talmudic teaching made him limit the study of the Talmud to an élite, to the very few. Those who would be intellectually unable to pursue the course of study of the Mishnah and the Talmud would be instructed in some profession or a trade.⁴¹

It is apparent that Wessely does not feel that his proposals are contrary to the

education in Germany, describes the developments in his book *Jewish Education in Germany in the Period of Enlightenment and Emancipation*, Jerusalem 1961 [in Hebrew]. As early as 1772, Joseph Levin included the study of the Talmud in his curriculum (p. 23); Levi Benjamin Dohm included a delayed study of the Talmud in his curriculum proposal for the new school in Breslau. However, as a result of inner conflict within the *Kehillah*, the Talmud had not been taught there. As an indication of the complexity of the subject, one should note that the traditionalists in Breslau opposed the introduction of the study of the Talmud into the new school, for they wanted it to remain within the *hadarim*, the old-type, traditional schools. Whereas the *Maskilim* expressed their wish to include the study of the Talmud in their revised curriculum, for they desired to take this subject from the hands of the traditionalists so as to have control over it (pp. 82–87). The new school in Dessau included the study of the Talmud in 1799; yet it was revised and eliminated in 1809, and restored again in 1825 (pp. 89–93). See also note 54 below.

³⁸ *Avot*, 5, 21; *Qidushin*, 30a.

³⁹ *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, I, pp. 16b; II, pp. 17a–b.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I, p. 16b.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 11a–b, 16b. Wessely's esteem for the Talmud and the sages is noted especially in his introduction to the "be'ur" to Leviticus ("Haqdamat Hameva'er"). He asserts a close relation between Leviticus and the Talmud (p. 2); to him, the tradition of the sages is founded on the literal sense of the biblical text (*Sefer Netivot Hashalom* (The Book of the Paths of Peace), III, Berlin 1783, p. 4).

spirit of traditional Judaism. Not only does he base his curriculum on the ancient traditional sources, but he includes in the study of the Talmud its accepted, traditional components (such as Rashi and Tosafot). The only deviation from the accepted traditional norms is his insistence that casuistry and far-fetched homilies be substituted by the straight, simple, and common-sense interpretation of the text.⁴²

Another *Maskil* is said to have been opposed to the study of the Talmud. "Like many other *Maskilim*", Barzilay writes, "Satanow was also very critical of the excessive devotion of the Jews to the Talmud and its study. This he believed to have been the source of a great many evils in Jewish life. When he therefore suggested his plan for a reformed Jewish education, he excluded the Talmud altogether from the curriculum of studies."⁴³

Barzilay bases his conclusion on Satanow's *Divrei Rivot*. It is a "drama of ideas", patterned after *Hakuzari*. Since, by its very nature, a drama of ideas presents a variety of viewpoints, at times contrasting and conflicting, through the *dramatis personae*, it is up to the reader to find out the point of view of the author, if one is to reach any conclusion. Satanow's point of view is represented by the philosopher⁴⁴ who appears in one of the chapters; however, he does not concern himself with the question of Jewish education. There is no doubt that Satanow is sympathetic toward the king, who is portrayed as an enlightened ruler. Nevertheless, one can hardly expect that the modern king would adopt Judaism as did the medieval king of Kuzar. The king is instituting, in this work of fiction, certain changes in Jewish education as well as in the structure of the Jewish *Kehilah*, so as to bring about the cessation of "religious hatred", and in order that "there should be no difference at all between a Jew and a Christian."⁴⁵ In as much as this visionary plan would bring about the emancipation of the Jews, it seems that Satanow, as author, would sympathise with this plan. However, in our context, it is not a convincing, exclusive proof that Satanow excluded the Talmud altogether from the curriculum of studies. For in the second volume of *Divrei Rivot*, the two sons of the king convert to Judaism, and both practise the study of the Talmud, in the order suggested by Wessely and the other *Maskilim*: Miqra, Mishnah, Talmud. Significantly, Satanow presents the reader with two ways of studying the Talmud. One is the old traditional way, as taught by an extreme traditionalist. The other way is a synthesis between the traditional method and the more modern, enlightened method. Namely, a study of Talmud based on *Hochmah*, wisdom, on reason, and on *Mehqar*, meaning free investigation.⁴⁶

The study of the Talmud is also included in Schnaber's treatise which he first discussed in his book in 1771, and which he later reiterated in an article in

⁴²*Ibid.*, II, pp. 17a-b.

⁴³Barzilay, 'The Treatment of the Jewish Religion', p. 42.

⁴⁴[Isaac Satanow], *Divrei Rivot* (Words of Dispute), I, Constantinople-Berlin? 1793?, p. 29b. Cf. my forthcoming study on Satanow, cited in note 22 above, note 200, and its related text.

⁴⁵*Divrei Rivot*, I, pp. 47a-b. The king does not include the study of the Talmud in his proposed revised curriculum. The king's expressed goal is enunciated in p. 48b.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, II p. 17b.

Hame'asef.⁴⁷ Like the other *Maskilim*, Schnaber rejects the old way of studying the Talmud which is based on casuistry. Instead, it should be based on the simple, straightforward, common-sense understanding of the talmudic text, which, he believes, was the original way the sages taught it.⁴⁸

Schnaber was innovative in his approach to the study of the Talmud in that he proposed that an introduction to the Talmud be taught prior to the actual study of the talmudic text. In it, the logic of the Talmud was to be explained.⁴⁹

Also Eliyahu Morpurgo, an Italian supporter of Wessely in his educational dispute, and an active contributor to *Hame'asef*, incorporated the study of the Talmud into his curriculum. However, he delays its study to the age of fourteen, and limits it only to excellent students who would continue their education beyond the age of *Bar Mizvah*. He warns against an early start in the study of the Talmud without the prerequisites of *Miqra*, *Dinim* (religious ordinances) and *Musar* (ethics). Significantly, his proposal incorporates the traditional commentaries of Rashi, *Tosafot*, and other accepted commentators of the *Mishnah* and the Talmud.⁵⁰ Wessely's influence on his proposal is obvious.

It is abundantly clear that the very study of the Talmud is taken for granted by most of the early Hebrew *Maskilim*. They have strong reservations, however, regarding the method of study of the Talmud, the age of the students, and the selected contents. It should be noted that most of the Hebrew *Maskilim* were educators themselves, who were fully aware of the problems related to the teaching of the Talmud.⁵¹ Thus one of the *Maskilim* suggested in 1789 that it is improper to start with *Qidushin*, *Ketubot*, or *Giṭin*; instead, the first *Masechet* should be *Baba Mezi'a* which deals with everyday, ordinary "human matters [not related to matrimony], and it will be easy for the teacher to make interesting analogies which are apparent to the child".⁵²

Another proposal – which is indicative of the same trend – was published in the *Haskalah* journal. It stresses talmudic stories with morals which should prove beneficial to the students. With the fullest blessing of the editors, the writers published a series of such stories adapted and geared to students.⁵³

It is my conclusion, then, that in theory the Talmud was indeed part of the Hebrew *Haskalah* proposed curriculum of religious education. In practice, however, the situation was quite different. The reins of the newly established modern schools were more often in the hands of the rich leaders of the *Kehilah* who exhibited anti-traditional tendencies. These leaders, as related by a traditionalist

⁴⁷Schnaber, *Ma'amar Hatorah*, pp. 8–9. His article, 'Michtav Leḥevrat Dorshei Leshon 'Ever' (A Letter to the Society of the Seekers of the Hebrew Language), appeared in *Hame'asef*, I (1784), pp. 183–186.

⁴⁸*Ma'amar Hatorah*, p. 6. Cf. Schnaber, 'Michtav', *Hame'asef*, I (1784), p. 186. See also *Ma'amar Hatorah*, p. 8, and 'Michtav', p. 185.

⁴⁹*Ma'amar Hatorah*, p. 6; 'Michtav', pp. 185–186.

⁵⁰Eliyahu Morpurgo, 'Michtav Me'elياهو', *Hame'asef*, III (1786), p. 75.

⁵¹They were tutors, teachers, principals, and educators. See Eliav, *Jewish Education in Germany*, pp. 52–102.

⁵²Josel Rochnove, 'Hinuch Ne'arim', *Hame'asef*, V (1789), p. 184.

⁵³*Hame'asef*, VII, No. 1 (1794), pp. 26–33, 196–203. The writer, Meir Semnitz, prepared the material on behalf of Loeb von Hoenigsberg.

Maskil, Nahman of Berlin, were opposed to the study of the Talmud.⁵⁴

Another misconception with regard to the stand of the *Maskilim* in talmudic matters has to do with their attitude toward the *Agadah*. As stated previously, Bernfeld suggests that the *Maskilim* “hated” the *Agadah*.⁵⁵ Our probe reveals otherwise.

The general attitude of the *Maskilim* toward the *Agadah*, or *Hagadah*, is a positive one indeed. Some of their expressions may indicate this attitude: Morpurgo regards the *Agadot* as “precious”;⁵⁶ one, Loeb Edler von Hoenigsberg, finds in them “gold and pearls . . . a treasure of wisdom and precious ideas”.⁵⁷ Wolfssohn regards some of the *Agadot* to be “full of beauty and morality”.⁵⁸

More importantly, the *Maskilim* are preoccupied in their writings with the nature of the *Agadah* in general; with the problem of explaining the “strange”, or mystical and imaginative *Agadah*; with the possible obligation that one should, or should not have to accept its contents as authentic; and finally, with the question as to who may, or should, learn the *Agadah*.

They are aware of the great dangers that lie ahead in the misinterpretation of the *Agadah*. Those who understood it in a straight-forward, simplistic fashion, misunderstood the nature of *Agadah*, and thus their superficial reaction is in the form of ridicule. Morpurgo would eliminate the study of *Agadah* for children who are not capable of understanding its meaning. Even with adults, the *Agadah* could be understood only by the select few, for it has to do with “*Nistarot*”, concealed, secretive, perhaps mystical subjects. One may find “secrets of Torah” in them, he writes.⁵⁹

In order to present an enlightened model for the explanation of the nature of *Agadah* as conceptualised by an enlightened student, Morpurgo composed an educational dialogue between a teacher and his students. One discerns an earnest attempt on the part of the Hebrew *Maskil* to cope with the phenomena of the so-called strange *Agadot* in *maskilic* terms. The enlightened student knows his lesson quite well. He repeats what the teacher has taught him, namely, that strange stories and exaggerated tales in the Talmud are but parables. This genre is not to be construed as being typically talmudic, for similar stories occur in other

⁵⁴Nahman bar Simḥah, ‘*Et Ledaber*, pp. 22b–23a. It should be noted, though, that the leaders of the new modern schools did announce in public their intention to teach “talmudic laws”. See *Hame’asef*, I (1783–1784), pp. 44–45, note. One wonders whether they actually meant the study of the Talmud.

⁵⁵See note 4 above.

⁵⁶*Hame’asef*, III (1786), p. 77. (By so doing, the *Maskilim* were probably adopting the position of both Mendelsohn and Wessely. To the former, the “*Peshaṭ*”, the literal meaning of the text, is a preliminary and essential step before the study of Midrash (‘*Or Linetivah*, p. 90 [my pagination]). Similarly, Wessely does not see any contradiction between the “*Peshaṭ*” and the Midrash; he conceives the Midrash as an in-depth elaboration of the “*Peshaṭ*” (‘*Haqdamat Hameva’er*, *Nativot Hashalom*, III, p. 2).

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, VII, No. 1 (1794), p. 23. Although the writer exhibits traditional tendencies, the editors of the journal encouraged him in his “sacred undertaking to interpret the *Agadot* of *Hazal* in a pure and pleasant way” (p. 22).

⁵⁸Wolfssohn, ‘*Sihah Be’erez Hahayim*’, *Hame’asef*, VII, No. 2 (1796?), p. 126.

⁵⁹*Hame’asef*, III (1786), pp. 76–77. According to this *Maskil*, *Hazal* intentionally concealed within the *Agadot* those things that they did not want to be understood by everyone; those are “*sitrei torah*”. This term appears in the Talmud (Yerushalmi, *Ketubot*, V, 29d; *Hagigah*, 13); Maimonides employs the term too (*Moreh Nevuchim*, I, ch. 34, pp. 158–159).

literatures of that time. The student warns that the *Agadot* may not be understood literally. The talmudic sages used these *Agadot* in a sophisticated way, as they purposely concealed their true intention. It is therefore inadvisable either to explain the nature of the *Agadot* to the multitude or even to teach them the *Agadot*.⁶⁰

Similarly, Satanow explains the strange *Agadot* as resulting from the concerted efforts of the *Hachamim* to conceal their wisdom and scientific knowledge. The sages were apprehensive lest their knowledge be abused, according to this theory.⁶¹

It is of utmost importance to note that the general trend among the *Maskilim* is that of acceptance of the *Agadot* as part of the literature of the Jewish people. One notices that among the Hebrew *Maskilim* there is no total rejection of this talmudic phenomenon. However, it should be stressed that a total acceptance of the *Agadah* as understood and taught by the traditionalists is not to be found in their writings. Hoenigsberg, a tradition-orientated *Maskil*, advocated leaving out all “*Agadot setumot*”, those inexplicable *Agadot*. The writer is thus acknowledging his limitations and his inability to cope with the problem.⁶²

Quite an opposite approach is taken by a more “progressive” *Maskil* like Wolfssohn. In his discussion of the authority of the *Agadah*, Wolfssohn cites talmudic and post-talmudic sources to the effect that one “should not rely on the *Agadah*” as an authoritative source.⁶³ In a *maskilic* fashion, Wolfssohn summarises his view on the *Agadah* as follows: “Every *Maskil* must distinguish between the various kinds of *Agadot*.” There are *Agadot* which could be accepted and should be followed, and there are those which are contrary to human reason. Wolfssohn proposes two explanations for the latter phenomenon; either the writer had some special intention which is now hidden from us, or else he erred. Either way, one should disregard them completely.⁶⁴

Wolfssohn employs the authoritative figure of Maimonides to present his *Haskalah* stand regarding the *Agadot*, footnoted from Maimonides’s own writings. On the opposite side is the fanatical rabbi, *Ploni* (i.e., Mr. So-and-so), who cites a given *Agadah* and accepts it as authentic, authoritative, as well as obligatory. Yet the great Enlightenment-adopted figure of Maimonides rejects his stand altogether. Maimonides has three contentions, which represent the attitude of the *Maskilim* toward the talmudic and midrashic *Agadah*. *Agadah* in general is not to be relied on; *Agadah* which is attributed to a single talmudic sage may not be relied upon; The infallibility of the *Agadah* is completely rejected.⁶⁵

Wolfssohn – through the figure of Maimonides – epitomises the Enlightenment acceptance of traditional texts as man-made, and thus as being prone to human

⁶⁰[Elijah Morpurgo], ‘Divrei Hochmah Umusar’ (Words of Wisdom and Ethics), *Hame’asef*, III (1786), pp. 174–175 [pages misnumbered].

⁶¹Satanow, *Sefer Hamidot*, p. 36.

⁶²Hoenigsberg, ‘Igroi Hochmah’ (Letters of Wisdom), *Hame’asef*, VII, No. 1 (1794), p. 24.

⁶³Wolfssohn, ‘Sihah’, *Hame’asef*, VII, No. 2 (1796?), p. 126.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 124–125. On the attitude of the sages themselves toward the *Agadah*, see Isaak Heinemann, *Darchei Ha’agadah* (The Ways of *Agadah*), (Giv’atayim 1970), p. 187.

error.⁶⁶ The talmudic sages, while respected and esteemed by the *Maskilim* for their scholarship and wisdom, are nevertheless regarded as mortals, who should be viewed in the context of their time, and not as divine carriers of tradition. Practising what they preached, the *Maskilim* applied their ultimate criterion, namely, human reason, for the evaluation of life and human endeavour. It is reflected in their attitude toward the Talmud and its sages.⁶⁷

When viewed against the background of some accepted notions in the European Enlightenment literature—and needless to say, in Christian writings—regarding the Talmud, which generally speaking were negative, one is impressed by the commitment of the Hebrew enlighteners to their own culture and its values. It is a defence of Judaism—in our context, the Talmud—that we find in their writings, and not the accepted derogatory notions of Judaism as found in the writings of European Enlightenment. In this regard, it seems that the *Maskilim* considered themselves primarily as Jews, and only secondarily as adherents of European Enlightenment. To be more exact, they did not believe there was any dichotomy between Judaism and Enlightenment, for they searched, and found, the tenets of Enlightenment within Judaism, enlightened Judaism, as they conceptualised their civilisation.

Their criticism of the teaching of the Talmud, as practised in their times, is part and parcel of their desire to revitalise Jewish education so as to resuscitate and invigorate the Jewish people. In the same vein, I believe that the *Maskilim*'s glorification of the talmudic sages of yore is intrinsically related to their negative appraisal of their contemporary rabbis. The *Maskilim* regarded these rabbis as responsible for the poor state of culture among the Jews, and consequently for the low state of the Jews in Europe. They regarded the rabbis as incapable of leading the Jews out of their physical and spiritual *Galut* condition into modern, enlightened Europe. A new image of the rabbi is being sought by the *Maskilim*,⁶⁸ the rabbis of talmudic times serving as models. The *Maskilim* constantly contrast their contemporary rabbis with the talmudic rabbis.⁶⁹ The question must be raised as to whether their positive portrayal of the talmudic sages is authentic, reflecting their true esteem of them, and is not dictated solely by their very desire to downgrade their contemporary rabbis. A detailed discussion of this problem is

⁶⁶*Hame'asef*, VII, pp. 124–125, 127–131, 147; VII, No. 3 (1796), pp. 227–228. In the play, Maimonides cites talmudic and post-talmudic sources to support his stand. He states that the talmudic sages “were human like ourselves” (p. 125), and that even Moses was in error (p. 131). Wolfssohn summarises his *Haskalah* viewpoint by advising his opponent not to deal with things which are beyond his comprehension (VII, No. 4 [1797], p. 332).

⁶⁷Cf. my book *Moshe Mendelssohn: Bechavlei Masoret*, p. 75, and article ‘The Impact of Deism on the Hebrew Literature of the Enlightenment in Germany’, p. 53. Emphasis on the application of reason, common sense and wisdom to the Talmud are found in the following sources: ‘Naḥal Habsor’ (The Brook of ‘Besor,’ or, Good Tidings), *Hame'asef*, I (1783), p. 2; VII, No. 3 (1796), pp. 208, 226; VII, No. 4 (1797), p. 314.

⁶⁸Amitai ben ‘Avida’ Ahizedeq [David Caro], *Brit 'Emet* (A Covenant of Truth), Constantinople (Dessau) 1820. Volume two, entitled *Techumat Harabanim* (Characteristic(s) of the Rabbis), deals with this issue.

⁶⁹Saul Berlin, *Hame'asef*, VI (1790), p. 374. Berlin is of the opinion that the talmudic sages (and previously the prophets) rebuked the people out of their inner conviction whereas the contemporary rabbis do it for money.

beyond the scope of the present paper for it must analyse the complete canvas of relationship of the *Maskilim* to their contemporary rabbis. However, it is my belief that their portrayal of the Talmud and its sages stems from their deep conviction of their merit and from their overall concept of the Talmud, its literature, its language,⁷⁰ and their significance. For, as we have seen, the *Maskilim* seem to have found in the talmudic sages a reflection of themselves, namely, wisdom, scholarship, erudition, science, openness, and understanding. In other words: Enlightenment; that enlightenment which, they thought, was wanting among their contemporary rabbis.⁷¹

⁷⁰Hayim Keslin advocates the expansion of the Hebrew language by introducing *mishnaic* and talmudic forms into Hebrew. The dichotomy between biblical and *mishnaic* Hebrew is seen as erroneous. Keslin views Hebrew language and literature, in their various stages, as one unit (*Hame'asef*, III [1786], pp. 51–60). On the expansion of Hebrew, by the inclusion of *mishnaic* and talmudic Hebrew, see my article 'The Attitude of the First *Maskilim* to the Hebrew Language', *Bulletin of the Institute of Jewish Studies*, II, London 1974, pp. 93–94.

⁷¹It should be noted that the attitude of the later *Maskilim* toward the Talmud becomes a more acute, and a more complicated subject, in the development of Hebrew *Haskalah* in the nineteenth century. It should be studied within the complex subject of the conflict between the *Maskilim* and the traditionalists. One is faced with various phenomena, which deserve, and require, special treatment. On the one hand, we encounter the defence of the Talmud in the writings of Isaac Baer Levensohn (Rival). On the other hand, however, a critical approach occurs in the writings of Yehoshua Heschel Schorr, Abraham Krochmal, and Moshe Leib Lilienblum. It should be stressed though that their attitude toward the sages, their tone of expression as well as their goals, were not always identical. A literary treatment of the subject is found in many *Haskalah* stories and novels. Noted among them is Reuven Asher Braudes' *Hadat Vehayyim* (Religion and Life). In it, the *Maskil* protagonist is versed in the Talmud, and as a matter of fact he is an ordained, though not a practising, rabbi. He demands a return to the original talmudic ordinances, and he considers the Talmud to be his sole guide. His attitude toward the Talmud is indeed a highly positive one.