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Reforming and Transforming – The German Maskilim's Perception of Haskalah Judaism

Haskalah in Germany as a Counter Culture

Hebrew Haskalah in Germany in the last quarter of the 18th century was, as this writer has demonstrated in past studies, a “cultural revolution”¹ – a notion that has been accepted in Haskalah scholarship.² This article intends to crystallize this thesis and argue that in effect Haskalah was a *counter-culture* intended to modify or replace the contemporary rabbinic cultural milieu, an effort that consequently ushered in the modern times to Judaism. The Maskilim did it in ways that will be explored in this article. Whether it was actually a cultural revolution or, perhaps, a cultural evolution, depends on what period of Haskalah and what locality we study. Methodologically, it also depends on how we approach the study of Haskalah, whom we select as its spokesmen, and what texts and actions we choose to represent our contention.

This entity, which is in the process of being formed or re-formed by the Maskilim, should be referred to as “Haskalah Judaism.”

The changes that the Maskilim wished – and actually began – to introduce into Haskalah Judaism fall under the following major classifications:

– Modernizing and re-organizing Jewish education by adding secular disciplines, such as sciences and languages – into the religious curriculum,

1 See Moshe Pelli, *Bema'avkei Temurah* [Struggle for Change], Tel Aviv 1988, 11, where the term has been used, and elsewhere in the book. See also the writer's other works: idem, *The Age of Haskalah*, Leiden 1979; idem, *1783 The Haskalah Begins in Germany with the Founding of the Hebrew Journal Hame'asef*, in: Sander L. Gilman/Jack Zipes (eds.), *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture 1096–1996*, New Haven/London 1997, 101–107; idem, *When Did Haskalah Begin? Establishing the Beginning of Haskalah and the Definition of 'Modernism'*, in: *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 44* (1999), 55–96.

2 See Shmuel Werses' assessment of Haskalah research in his *Megamot Vetzurot Besifrut Hahaskalah* [Trends and Forms in Haskalah Literature], Jerusalem 1990, 356–408; David Sorkin, *The Transformation of German Jewry 1780–1840*, New York 1987; and Shmuel Feiner's *Mahapechat Hane'orut* [Enlightenment Revolution], Jerusalem 2002, translated into English: *The Jewish Enlightenment*, Philadelphia 2004. The discussion below will concentrate on the primary sources within Haskalah proper to establish the main thesis of this article.

as was proposed in 1782 by Naphtali Herz Wessely in his educational treatise *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* [Words of Peace and Truth].³

- Rejuvenating Jewish culture by introducing elements of European culture, Western values, social customs and conventions into it, and by opening a new chapter in Hebrew letters.
- Alleviating the “yoke” of excessive religious ordinances, customs and practices.

The Maskilim endeavored to re-educate their fellow Jews to be members of enlightened society, ready to share the envisioned and much hoped for world of alleged wisdom, tolerance and freedom.

These changes came about as the Maskilim advocated and began to adopt some fundamental tenets of European Enlightenment. In general, these tenets were founded on the ideas of rationalism, skepticism, humanism and freedom, among others. Embracing these principles affected the Maskilim’s own perception and interpretation of Judaism.

By adopting these basic precepts of Enlightenment and applying them to their reinterpretation of traditional Judaism, the Maskilim affected the beginning of a major transformation within 18th-century Judaism, leading it to the threshold of modernism (a term that requires more discussion),⁴ and to some extent to the threshold of secularism.

The transformation undergone by Haskalah Judaism was manifested overtly and covertly in the writings of the Maskilim. This writer identified several emblematic criteria, which are indicative of these underlying changes.⁵ One such criterion identified symptomatic expressions representing the Maskilim’s own awareness of the so-called benevolent new times in Europe. Another criterion to mark the occurring changes examined the messianic terminology applied by the Maskilim to the envisioned new age, as well as their attempts to re-define Judaism and to revise the Judaic value system. Some of the other typical aspects of the transformation dwelled on the Maskilim’s new perception of Jewish history, of the Jewish calendar and of Jewish time. Their search for happiness *outside* of the Judaic parameters, and their questioning the need to observe the *mitzvot* while still retaining their Jewish allegiance and adhering to their Jewish identity were also significant indicators of the emerging Haskalah Judaism.

All indications are that the changes that Haskalah proposed were prompted by the Maskilim’s desire to resuscitate (traditional) Judaism and to reconstruct it from within. They were apprehensive that if they would not address what they considered to be pressing problems that confronted con-

3 Naphtali Herz Wessely, *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* [Words of Peace and Truth], Berlin 1782.

4 See Pelli, *When Did Haskalah Begin?*

5 *Ibid.*

temporary Judaism, it would not survive. This was implied by the Maskil Mendel Breslau's call to the rabbis, published in *Hame'asef* in 1790, to alleviate the burdensome secondary restrictions in the observance of customs.⁶ *Hame'asef*, of which Breslau was one of the founding editors and the author of an allegorical drama *Yaldut Uvaharut* [Childhood and Youth], was the mouthpiece of the German Maskilim, and was published from 1783 to 1797 and from 1809 to 1811.⁷ According to Breslau's line of thinking, the very existence of the Jewish people was in jeopardy. Stressing the need to introduce changes in Jewish education, the Italian Maskil Eliyahu Morpurgo, who published several educational articles in *Hame'asef*, urged rabbis and community leaders, in 1786, to adopt Haskalah and its plans for modern education, "before your children's light is extinguished and before your feet stumble upon the mountains of twilight."⁸

Haskalah – A Cultural Revolution Intended to Counteract Rabbinical Culture

Having a sense of urgency to act, and having received no positive response from the rabbis, many of the Maskilim intended to counteract the traditional rabbinical culture. In their attempt to revive the Jewish people and its culture, the Maskilim, in general, desired to create a new Jewish identity, cultivating a modern and updated Jewish orientation. As attested in the Hebrew texts reviewed below, their efforts followed the ideals advocated by European Enlightenment in counter-distinction from the traditional identity as adhered to by the rabbinic dictates and practice.

Most of the early Maskilim in Germany wanted – in the classical Hebrew phrase – "leahazir 'atarah leyoshnah," that is, to restore Judaism to its pristine splendor. Isaac Euchel, the editor of *Hame'asef* and one of the founders of Hebrew Haskalah, proclaimed that "our heritage is our faith, from which one cannot deviate, turning to the right or to the left." He then embraced the foundations of the Jewish faith, citing "torah min hashamayim" – namely,

6 Mendel Breslau, *El Rodefai Tzedek* [To the Seekers of Justice], *Hame'asef* 6 (1790), 301–314. See the chapter on Breslau in Pelli, *Bema'avkei Temurah*, 166–174, especially 171; Moshe Pelli, *The Age of Haskalah*, Leiden 1979, 47 n. 65f.; Aaron Chorin, *Igeret El Asaf* [A Letter to Asaf], Prague 1826, 32b.

7 See Moshe Pelli, *Shaar Lahaskalah* [The Gate to Haskalah: An Annotated Index to *Hame'asef*, the First Hebrew Journal], Jerusalem 2000.

8 [Eliyahu Morpurgo], *Divrei Hochmah Umusar* [Words of Wisdom and Ethics], *Hame'asef* 3 (1786), 131–137, especially 131, based on Jeremiah 13:16.

the divine origins of the Torah.⁹ Another central figure, Wessely, who advocated reform in Jewish education, argued that he only wanted to “restore the correct customs that had been practiced among us in ancient times and were forgotten as a result of the persecutions.”¹⁰ While we cannot ascertain what exactly did Euchel mean by the “divine origin of the Torah,” we definitely can accept Wessely’s statement at face value. At any rate, certainly, these Maskilim did not wish to destroy Judaism as such, and many of them did not even reject classical rabbinic Judaism.

What these Maskilim opposed to were the exclusive *contemporary* rabbinic interpretation and practice of Judaism and the excessive secondary restrictions. They searched and found in Judaism many aspects of the Enlightenment. Thus, they perceived and conceived Judaism in terms of the tenets of European Enlightenment, believing that original Judaism was an enlightened religion of tolerance, liberalism and wisdom. This is how Moses Mendelssohn portrayed ancient Judaism in *Jerusalem* as a rational and tolerant religion which is open to continuous change.¹¹ Isaac Satanow, for one, argued that wisdom prevailed in classical Judaism before it went into *galut*, exile.¹² Euchel, for his part, expressed his appreciation of the talmudic sages for their love of wisdom, knowledge and reason.¹³ Similarly, Wessely blamed the decline in knowledge and science among the Jews on their political and social conditions in the diaspora, having been persecuted and deprived of their rights.¹⁴

Moreover, many of the Maskilim thought of classical Judaism as containing, and definitely tolerating, a multiplicity of views of Halachah. To prove their view, Mendelssohn, Wessely, Mordechai Gumpel Schnaber, a physician and a Maskil who wrote several books in Hebrew,¹⁵ and others very eagerly quoted the talmudic proverbial solution to some halachic disputes, saying of the two opposite decrees: “Elu va’elu divrei elohim hayim”¹⁶ [(The utterances of) both (literally: these and these) are the words of a living god].

9 A. P. [Isaac Euchel], *Davar El Hakore Mito’elet Divrei Hayamim Hakadmonim* [A Word to the Reader about the Benefit of Ancient History], *Hame’asef* 1 (1783/84), 9–14, 25–30, especially 26f.

10 Wessely, *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet*, 32 [pagination added].

11 Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Hanover/London 1986, 99–103 (first edition Berlin 1783).

12 Isaac Satanow, *Sepher Hamidot* [Book of Ethics], Berlin 1884, 39–41. See Pelli, *Bema’avkei Temurah*, 108f.

13 [Euchel], *Davar El Hakore*, 28.

14 Pelli, *Bema’avkei Temurah*, 18.

15 See the chapter 7 on Schnaber in Pelli, *The Age of Haskalah*, 131–150.

16 Breslau, *El Rodefei Tzedek*, 301; see Pelli, *Bema’avkei Temurah*, 170; Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 101; Naphtali Herz Wessely, *Yen Levanon*, vol. 2, Vienna 1829, 26a–b; idem, *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet*, vol. 3, Berlin 1782–1785, 12a; idem, *Yen Levanon*, Warsaw edition, 1914,

Of course, at first these Maskilim did not express their anti-contemporary rabbinic culture openly so as not to alienate some moderate Maskilim or some rabbis. Thus, the editors of *Hame'asef* presented themselves in *Nahal Habesor*, the prospectus of the journal, as moderates, who were trained as talmudists and were able to discuss Halachah "according to the true *peshat*" – the straight-forward, common-sense interpretation of the text. However, this traditional term, *peshat*, for one mode of interpretation, turned out to be a code word for interpretation of the text according to the concepts of Haskalah.¹⁷

Haskalah's New Hebrew Culture Adopts Rabbinic Forms

Tracing the Maskilim's writings and actions in creating the new Hebrew culture, we note some very significant trends. It appears that the Maskilim emulated some of the existing structures, procedures and conventions in rabbinic Judaism and adopted them to their needs and goals. It was natural for them to do so, as many of them were brought up and educated in the rabbinic world. Yet, one should not ignore the fact that it was a good tactic to use the familiar format and easily recognized style in appealing to the moderate and to the unsuspecting among the neophytes. Whether it was habitual or tactical, this writer is inclined to believe that the Hebrew Maskilim were true to their intention to reinterpret and redefine Judaism while still embracing it and adhering to its essence. Breslau's above-mentioned call to the rabbis alludes, perhaps as a tactic, that halachic change should be enacted by the rabbis themselves. Similarly, Wessely's platform of educational reform in *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* was addressed to the rabbis.

Thus, the process of transformation to Haskalah Judaism went through some subtle changes. For example, the replacement of the authoritative figure of the rabbi with the figure of the *Hacham* – the writer-poet, or learned Maskil – as the exemplary personality, or the spiritual leader, in Haskalah Judaism. Maskilim were given rabbinic honorific titles. Moses Mendelssohn was titled "Moreinu Harav;" the acronym assigned to him was "Rambeman," "Rabeinu Moshe ben Menahem," a hybrid between "Rambam," the honorific abbreviation of Maimonides' name, and "Ramban" – Nachmanides. The ideal model to be emulated was no longer the rabbi or the yeshiva student engaged in the traditional study of Talmud, but the philoso-

14; Mordechai Schnaber, *Ma'amar Hatorah Vehahochmah* [An Essay of the Torah and Wisdom], London 1771, 6; see also Pelli, *The Age of Haskalah*, 46, n. 56.

17 *Nahal Habesor*, bound with *Hame'asef* 1 (1783/84), 3.

pher-scholar-writer Maskil, pursuing *Hochmah* – wisdom and knowledge – truth and human perfection, on the personal as well as on the societal level.

The rabbi was not eliminated in the envisioned Jewish Haskalah society, as perceived, for example, in Satanow's utopian sketch *Divrei Rivot* [Matters of Dispute] (published in 1793?).¹⁸ In it, the image of the rabbi began to take a drastic change. First, rabbis are elected by the people in this utopian Jewish society of Haskalah. In addition to their scholarship in Torah and religious laws, the rabbis must know languages, be cultured, erudite, and knowledgeable. Shaul Berlin, a rabbi turned Maskil, complained about the rabbis' lack of practical knowledge and their total ignorance in human relations and in day-to-day practical life.¹⁹ Their role, duties and responsibilities were continued to be discussed in Haskalah, for example by David Caro in *Techunat Harabanim* [Characteristics of the Rabbis] (published in 1820).²⁰

The venerated institution, or practice, of the traditional rabbinic approbations was likewise adopted and modified. Now the Maskilim began soliciting their own maskilic approvals from the leading pundits of Haskalah. Mendelssohn's *Be'ur*, the commentary and translation into German of the Pentateuch, was criticized in traditional circles because he did not solicit the proper approbations from the authoritative rabbis of the time (except Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Levin of Berlin, and his son the Maskil, Rabbi Shaul Berlin [Levin]). Instead, Wessely's maskilic approbation to Mendelssohn's *Netivot Hashalom* [Paths of Peace], namely the *Be'ur*, carried the dominant weight in tone, tenor and in 'tune,' adding a flowery maskilic poem to his modern approbation.²¹ Baruch Linda's elementary book on general sciences, *Reisheet Limudim* [Beginning of Studies], had approbations by the two doctors, Mordechai Bloch and Mordechai (Marcus) Herz, and by Wessely.²² Shaul Berlin's *Mitzpe Yokte'el* [Watchtower of Yokte'el] displayed an approbation by no other than David Friedländer.²³

More offensive was the Maskilim's invasion of the exclusive domain of the rabbis in the field of responsa as part of the formers' practice of Haskalah Judaism. This was exemplified first in the 1770s – and then in the 80s and 90s – in the case of the controversy of the burial of the dead; it continued to stay in the maskilic limelight for some time. This was a test case in

18 Anon. [Isaac Satanow], *Divrei Rivot* [Matters of Dispute], vol. 1, Berlin 1793?, 48a.

19 E.M.T [Shaul Berlin], [Review of Marpe Lashon by Rephael Hacoheh], *Hame'asef* 6 (1790), 362–380. See discussion below.

20 Pelli, *The Age of Haskalah*, 47, n. 321; [David Caro], *Techunat Harabanim* [Characteristics of the Rabbis], vol. 2 of *Brit Emet* [Covenant of Truth], [Dessau] 1820, 89–146.

21 *Netivot Hashalom* [Paths of Peace], *Sepher Breisheet* [Genesis], ed. by Moses Mendelssohn, vol. 1, Berlin 1783, titled "Me halel Re'a" [Praise of a Friend].

22 Baruch Linda, *Reisheet Limudim* [Beginning of Studies], Berlin 1789.

23 Shaul Berlin, *Mitzpe Yokte'el* [Watchtower of Yokte'el], Berlin 1789.

which the Maskilim tested their power in public – publishing their articles in *Hame'asef* – to intervene in halachic matters. Mendelssohn, Euchel, Joel Brill and Dr. Herz argued on behalf of Haskalah against the traditionalist rabbis.²⁴ Some of the Maskilim employed halachic argumentation, citing early talmudic sources as precedents. They very cleverly referred to the prevailing customs and conventions sanctified by the rabbis as actually *deviating* from the ancient Judaic norm. Thus, they implied that *they* represented original Judaism rather than their contemporary rabbis. Treading on rabbinic turf, the journal *Hame'asef* published a halachic discussion regarding the inoculations (sent to them by Mendelssohn),²⁵ while some Maskilim – Mendelssohn among them – questioned the rabbinic authority to excommunicate members of the community.²⁶

One such example of the use – some call it abuse²⁷ – of the sanctified rabbinic responsa for a maskilic-oriented purpose in deviation from the traditional use was made by Shaul Berlin in 1793. A practicing rabbi and a clandestinely professed Maskil, Berlin composed his own responsa book, *Besamim Rosh* [Incense of Spices], which he attributed to the medieval halachic authority ROSH, Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel. Utilized as a literary and a combative tool against the rabbis, this book of pseudo-responsa was used by Berlin to advocate religious reform while parodying the rabbinic mindset and style.²⁸

The New Haskalah Culture: Re-orienting Jewish Culture

In addition to adopting and revising existing rabbinic practices and conventions, the new Haskalah culture envisioned re-orienting Jewish creative energies and spiritual resources in a new direction along the lines of the Enlightenment. The thrust of this new culture aimed to revive the Hebrew language and to create a new and modern Hebrew literature. Both language and literature were to become the new media to cultivate aesthetic and imaginative appreciation, fostering a new path for the new Jew. While rabbinic Judaism concentrated on Halachah and legalism, Haskalah focused on

24 On the burial of the dead controversy, see Pelli, *The Age of Haskalah*, 207–211.

25 A. L., Teshuva Al Dvar Ha'inoculatzion [An Answer Concerning the Inoculation], *Hame'asef* 4 (1788), 2–9.

26 On the excommunication issue, see Moshe Pelli, *Moshe Mendelssohn. Bechavlei Masoret* [Moses Mendelssohn. Bonds of Tradition], Tel Aviv 1972, 52–56.

27 On the critical rabbinic reaction to S. Berlin's responsa see the chapters on Shaul Berlin in Pelli, *The Age of Haskalah*, 171–189, and in Pelli, *Bema'avkei Temurah*, 140–165.

28 *Ibid.*

reviving the artistic creativity, which they found in the early Hebrew creative output, namely, in the Hebrew Bible.

Revival of Hebrew in Haskalah (one hundred years before Eliezer Ben Yehuda) has to be examined vis-à-vis the general concept of language as perceived during the Enlightenment. Language was deemed to be reflective of the spiritual and ethical condition of the person who speaks it. Following Leibnitz, the enlighteners considered language to be a “mirror of the soul”²⁹ and thus reflective of one’s culture and the culture of his people. Juda Leib Ben-Zeev asserted that the beauty of a given language and its state of perfection serve as proof for the perfection of the people who speak the language.³⁰

This was one of the reasons why the Maskilim were criticizing the use of Yiddish, which they associated with the traditional Polish rabbis and Melamdim’s milieu imported from Eastern Europe. To the German Maskilim, Yiddish was “a corrupt language,” when compared to the purity of the German language.³¹

In their approach to the use of language, the Maskilim attempted to adhere tenaciously to the principles of their new culture. First and foremost, the new Hebrew culture demanded linguistic purity, in opposition to the rabbinic style that incorporated a mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew. Shaul Berlin, for example, lashed out against rabbi Rephael Hacoheh’s book, *Marpe Lashon* [Curing Language], in *Hame’asef*, for his awkward, incoherent and confounding style.³² Instead, the Maskilim endeavored to use biblical Hebrew for creative writing and medieval Hebrew for philosophy and essays. Correct use of grammar was also advocated to counteract the disregard of grammar in some, but not all, contemporary rabbinic circles. While florid language was definitely desired, the Hebrew enlighteners opposed the rabbinic idiom made of esoteric and mixed *Melitzah* – euphuism. Rather, they preferred a grandiloquent, sublime and poetical language, which was more modern at the time.

By rejecting the traditional use of language in rabbinic writings and introducing their concept of “modern” Hebrew language, the Maskilim manifested their self-image and distinctive role as innovators vis-à-vis the traditional elements of the Jewish establishment. (The secularization of the lan-

29 Eric A. Blackall, *The Emergence of German as a Literary Language 1700–1775*, Cambridge 1959, 4f. See discussion in Moshe Pelli, *Dor Hameasfim Beshahar Hahaskalah* [The Generation of the Me’asef Writers at the Dawn of Haskalah], Israel 2001, 185, n. 25.

30 Juda Leib Ben-Zeev, *Hakdamah* [Introduction], in: *Talmud Lashon Ivri* [Learning the Hebrew Language], Vienna 1827, 3b; Pelli, *Bema’avkei Temurah*, 40.

31 See Moses Mendelssohn, *Or Linetivah* [Light to the Path], Berlin 1783, 50 (pagination added). See Pelli, *The Age of Haskalah*, 78, n. 17.

32 E.M.T. [Shaul Berlin], [Review of *Marpe Lashon* by Rephael Hacoheh], esp. 371, 379.

guage begins to emerge as well, as Hebrew borrows terms from the sacred texts and uses them in modern contexts; but this is another topic).³³ To them, language meant identity, and modern Hebrew signified their identity as Maskilim – Maskilim yet as an adjective; as they would describe themselves, *Ahuzat mere'im maskilim* – a group of maskilic friends.³⁴

Revival of the language was manifested by a multiplicity of articles and books about Hebrew grammar and synonyms by many of the Maskilim, such as Naphtali Herz Wessely, Hayim Keslin, Juda Leib Ben-Zeev, Joel Brill, and many others. They scrutinized biblical texts from a new, updated linguistic angle, which was quite distinguished from the rabbinic way.³⁵

Renewal of Hebrew Letters: Examining the Classical Literature

Rejuvenating the Hebrew language was an enormous undertaking by itself, but for the Maskilim it was emblematic of a related, yet more significant, revival. It was the revival and renewal of Hebrew literature as a modern medium of expression serving and contributing to the newly envisioned Hebrew culture. Facing the impressive literary and creative output of the German *Aufklärung* and the European Enlightenment, the leaders of Hebrew Haskalah were desirous of renewal and creativity in their own revived culture.³⁶ Schnaber, a Maskil and a physician by profession, refers to the need to expand Hebrew culture, saying that “the nations around us [...] would not rest from making books without end. Each one speaks and composes in the language of his people in order to expand it; and why [...] [do we] forsake our holy tongue?”³⁷

Concurrent with, and perhaps even as a pre-requisite to, creating a new literature, Hebrew writers and critics undertook to examine and reinterpret the classical works of Jewish heritage. They paid special attention to those writings in the Jewish corpus that were known to, and even venerated by, Western culture, especially the Hebrew Scriptures. As proclaimed by the editors of *Hame'asef*, it was their intention to “expand the knowledge of our

33 See discussion in Pelli, *Dor Hameasfim Beshahar Hahaskalah*, chapter on Hebrew, 177–195; idem, *The Age of Haskalah*, chapter on Hebrew, 73–90; for examples of the secularization of Hebrew by Shaul Berlin, see Pelli, *Sugot Vesugyot Besifrut Hahaskalah Haivrit* [Kinds of Genres in Haskalah Literature: Types and Topics], Tel Aviv 1999, 157–160.

34 Nahal Habesor, 3.

35 See the discussion on the revival of Hebrew during the Haskalah in Pelli, *Dor Hameasfim Beshahar Hahaskalah*, chapter on Hebrew, 177–195; idem, *The Age of Haskalah*, chapter on Hebrew, 73–90.

36 Schnaber, *Ma'amar Hatorah Vehahochmah*, 5.

37 Ibid.

holy tongue within the people of God and to show its beauty to all the nations."³⁸

This new approach to the Hebrew Bible was the major incentive behind the *Be'ur*, initiated by Mendelssohn and continued by his followers. The keen observer Solomon Maimon identified this goal of *Hevrat Dorshei Leshon Ever* – the Society of the Seekers of Hebrew, the group of Maskilim around *Hame'asef* – by saying that they undertook to replace “the twisted rabbinic commentary of the Scriptures” and “to introduce a rational exegesis.”³⁹

Likewise, another observer of and active participant in Haskalah, Shaul Berlin, complained about rabbis who distort the biblical text because they abhor grammar.⁴⁰ The *Be'ur* by Mendelssohn and several of his followers was a deviation from the rabbinic approach to the Bible, even though it still cited traditional commentaries. Mendelssohn's introduction to the *Be'ur* highlighted the traditions concerning the writing of the Torah, its past translations into various languages, and presented a thorough analysis of biblical Hebrew grammar and syntax. Even though Mendelssohn professed his faith in the divine origins of the Torah, his translation was nevertheless innovative in its orientation, tenor and methodology, when compared to the rabbinic approach.

And another note about the *Be'ur*: Instead of the rabbinic traditional use of Aramaic to engage in studying and understanding the Torah, known as “*Shnayim mikra ve'ehad targum*” [(read) the Bible twice (in Hebrew) and once in translation (Aramaic)], namely, the obligation, or custom, to read the portion of the week on the Sabbath, reciting the Hebrew text twice and once in Aramaic, now the Maskilim offered their competitive version of study through translation.⁴¹ The *Be'ur*'s translation into German in Hebrew characters was intended to be used by the reading public and students in order to understand the full and correct meaning of the text, although not as a religious obligation. Rabbi Yehezkel Landau, who did not object to Susmann Glogau's Yiddish translation (saying that “it was not that deep and everyone could understand it”), opposed the German translation because he thought it was a tool to teach German rather than Torah.⁴² Consequently, the

38 Nahal Habesor, 5.

39 Shlomo Maimon, *Hayei Shlomo Maimon*, Tel Aviv 1953, 229; Solomon Maimon, *An Autobiography*, London 1888, 285.

40 E.M.T [Berlin], [Review of Marpe Lashon], 370.

41 Brachot 8a; Shulhan Aruch Orah Hayim, part 3, item 285.

42 Hame'asef 3 (1786), 143: “The German is very profound to such an extent that only experts in German grammar are accustomed to.” Thus, he wrote, the time is spent mostly on the German language and the student will not learn Torah. Consequently, “our Torah will serve as a handmaid for the study of German and [the students] would not have the knowledge of the Hebrew text.”

Be'ur paved the way to a modern, up-to-date approach to the study of the Bible among the Maskilim.

The new treatment of the Bible highlighted the aesthetics and beauty of biblical poetry, exemplified in Mendelssohn's discussion and commentary on *Shirat hayam* – Moses's Song – in Exodus.

While traditional commentaries were not oblivious to the literary and poetical qualities of the Hebrew Bible, Mendelssohn's poetics was not based on traditional discussion but relies on his own insights as an aesthete and on contemporary German *Aufklärung* writing, such as Herder's treatise on biblical poetry, *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poësie*.

Following in Mendelssohn's footsteps, Maskilim such as Juda Leib Ben-Zeev and Shlomo Loewisohn deviated from the rabbinic approach to the study of the Bible. Ben-Zeev's *Mavo El Mikra'ei Kodesh* [Introduction of the Holy Scriptures] and Loewisohn's *Melitzat Yeshurun* [The Rhetorics of Israel] are based on historical, literary, aesthetic and grammatical discussion and analysis in a modern, timely, organized and scholarly manner.⁴³

This approach to the Hebrew Bible follows the same maskilic pattern of selecting an existing rabbinic format and replacing it with its modern, maskilic counterpart.

Revival of Modern Hebrew Letters

The Maskilim proceeded to introduce new concepts of Hebrew letters, which were based on the literary aesthetics and poetics of the Bible and on contemporary European literatures. They envisioned the creation of a new type of literature, which we now call modern Hebrew literature. Their efforts toward renewal of *belles lettres* were channeled in two ways. First, they undertook upon themselves to introduce new types of literary genres and modes of writing, emulating those that were in vogue in contemporary European literatures. Second, they undertook to re-introduce existing modes in the corpus of classical Hebrew literature re-represented in their modern ways. In so doing, they charted a new way for their creative writing.

While re-forming their new concept of literature, the Maskilim evaluated existing forms of traditional writings. Consequently, they rejected several historical belletristic genres of literature of yore, which they deemed unfit to their revised concept of language and literature. One such example is the Maskilim's rejection of the *piyutim* – the medieval liturgical poetry – which

43 Juda Leib Ben-Zeev, *Mavo El Mikra'ei Kodesh* [Introduction of the Holy Scriptures], Vienna 1810; Shlomo Loewisohn, *Melitzat Yeshurun* [the Rhetorics of Israel], Vienna 1816.

were part and parcel of rabbinic Judaism and occupied an important place in the prayerbooks and *Mahzorim*, the High Holy Days prayerbooks.

The dismissal of the *piyutim* by the Maskilim as a viable genre, which is used in prayers, or even as a historical genre, was a significant step because it reflected their position in the newly cultivated aesthetics of poetry, which was deemed to be “God’s gift implanted in man’s soul” – to use Wessely’s words – a concept that was also suggested by Herder.⁴⁴

A New Approach to Judaic Sources: Study of Torah or Talmud

This trend of Hebrew Haskalah in forming its new culture marked a new approach to Judaic textual sources. It indicated a shift from the study of the Talmud, as practiced traditionally in rabbinic Judaism, to a concentration on the Hebrew Bible. Shaul Berlin, for one, criticized those rabbinic scholars “who study only the Talmud all their life, while the written Torah is a sealed book for them.”⁴⁵ Wessely, too, criticized the notion expressed in some rabbinic circles that “whosoever studies Talmud does not need to study the Bible, [and] Mishnah [...] because all is included in the Talmud.”⁴⁶ The traditional study of the Talmud with emphasis on *pilpul*, casuistry, was to be revised, and a new, organized and gradual curriculum was proposed, for example, by Wessely in his *Words of Peace and Truth*. It followed the original mishnaic order of religious instruction: “*Bemikra, bemishnah, betalmud*” – first study Bible, then Mishnah and only then Talmud.⁴⁷ And even in the study of the Talmud, maskilic educators were extracting moral and ethical elements from the Talmud – rather than halachic – which were fitting the spiritual climate of Enlightenment. Accordingly, the pages of Hebrew textbooks and readers were full of talmudic moral stories, midrashic agadot, and maxims of the rabbis. Several sections of *Bikurei*

44 Naphtali Herz Wessely, *Petihat Hameshorer* [Poet’s Preface], *Shirei Tiferet* [Songs of Glory], Prague 1809 (first edition 1789), 5 (pagination added). See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie*, vol. 2, Gotha 1890, 3, 23f.

45 E.M.T. [Berlin], [Review of Marpe Lashon], 369: “[...] for they say, what do we have to do with the Bible, since the Talmud is a mixture of Bible, Mishna and Gemara, and we fulfill our duty by studying the Talmud alone.”

46 Wessely, *Rav Tuv Leveit Yisrael* [Great Goodness for the House of Israel], vol. 2 of *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet*, Berlin ²1785, 12b.

47 Wessely, *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet*, vol. 1, 34; *Rav Tuv Leveit Yisrael*, 14a: refers to Mikra, Mishnah, Talmud as “the triple cord that would not tear”; *Rehovot* [Streets], *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet*, vol. 4, 21a: citing *Kidushin*, 30a: “Shlish bemikra, shlish bemishnah, shlish betalmud” [One third Bible, one third Mishnah, one third Talmud].

Ha'itim, the Haskalah journal published in Vienna in the 1820s, too, featured moral stories from the Talmud.⁴⁸

Haskalah Judaism on Ethics and Morality, Tenets of Judaism

Removing ethics from the exclusive realm of religion, Haskalah – very much like the Enlightenment – adopted morality and ethics as its own guidepost. Wessely, Satanow and others published their *Sepher Hamidot* – book of ethics – highlighting the ideal moral attributes of man, and concentrating on those precepts that showed Judaic morality, humanism, and brotherhood of man, rather than other aspects of traditional Judaism. Wessely, for one, recommended that books on morality be written and be taught in *Beit hamidrash*, the house of learning.⁴⁹

Another area where Haskalah Judaism is highly noticeable is in the Maskilim's discussion about the tenets of Judaism. Following Wessely's proposal to write books on "*Emunot vede'ot*," beliefs and opinions,⁵⁰ Haskalah writers published textbooks of modern and traditional texts, which were in effect introductions to Judaism, emphasizing the tenets of Judaism. Faith was cultivated rather than precepts – in counter-distinction to rabbinic Judaism.

An important deviation from the rabbinic practice was initiated by several Maskilim with regard to the traditional prayer book. Euchel and Friedländer, for example, translated the prayers into German in order to make them accessible and understood by all. Their arguments were based on the halachic phrase: "*Shema – bechol lashon she'atah shome'a*," namely, Hear (O Israel) [may be said] in any language that one uses; others employed the dictum, "*Tefilah bechol lashon*" – a prayer may be said in other languages,⁵¹ implying that one can pray in any language.

The results of the Maskilim intellectual efforts to define and form its own concept of modern Judaism, were noticed on the Jewish bookshelf. One of the main objectives of Hebrew Haskalah was to re-shuffle the books

48 For example, *Bikurei Ha'itim* 1 (1820/21), 27–30.

49 *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet*, vol. 1, 22.

50 *Ibid.*, 21.

51 *Brachot* 13; *Sota* 32b, 33a. Eliezer Liebermann, *Or Nogah* [Light of Splendor], vol. 1, Dessau 1818, 8f. He quotes Maimonides: "All blessings may be said in the language which one understands" – *ibid.*, 5; Meir Israel Bresslau, *Herev Nokemet Nekam Brit* [A Sword Avenging the Vengeance of Covenant], [Dessau 1819], 12: "*Shema Israel, bechol lashon she'atah shome'a*."

on the Jewish bookshelf – which has recently become a popular term in Israel, known as “*Aron hasefarim hayehudi*.”

The publishing house of the Maskilim in Berlin, *Defus Hevrat Hinuch Ne'arim*, undertook to publish original creative works, republish classical and medieval works of primary texts and philosophy with their modern commentaries, and books on contemporary issues.⁵² A list of their published books, attached to the book *Ein Mishpat* (1796),⁵³ is quite impressive, and is indicative of their new orientation.

In conclusion, the transformation of Rabbinic Judaism to Haskalah Judaism was a long and complicated process. At times, the struggle for change appeared as a *Kulturkampf*, whereupon some Maskilim would wage attacks on the rabbis and vice versa. Euchel vehemently exclaimed in 1786 that “not everyone who grows a beard is god-fearing, and not everyone who leans over books is a lover of Torah.”⁵⁴ Wolfssohn, even more of a foe of contemporary rabbis, lashed out acrimoniously in 1794 against those who observe nonsensical and superstitious customs, and refers to them by the derogatory term *Hamor Hamortayim* – two-fold donkey.⁵⁵

The 18th-century German Haskalah set the tone and gave the cue to the other centers of Haskalah in Central and Eastern Europe in the 19th century to follow, implement, revise or even reject the initial suggestions of German Haskalah. This process of adopting, revising and re-forming existing conventions and forms in rabbinic Judaism, modernizing and updating them – led eventually, generally speaking, to secularization in Judaism, yet also to alternatives to rabbinic Judaism, such as reform Judaism.

Joel Brill's epigrammatic observation regarding the old and the new – tradition and modernity – reverberates now as it did some two hundred years ago:

Do not cast your eye upon the glass whether it is new or old
Set your eye at the wine itself
For there is new [glass] full of old
Yet also an old [glass], where there is no drink at all.⁵⁶

52 See B. Friedberg, *Toldot Hadevus Ha'ivri* [History of Hebrew Typography], Antwerp 1935, 96. See also, Pelli, *Bema'avkei Temurah*, 27f.; Feiner, *Mahapechat Hane'orut*, 274–282; idem, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, 243–251.

53 Nahman ben Simhah, *Ein Mishpat* [Fountain of Justice], Berlin 1796.

54 Isaac Euchel, *Davar El Hamedabrim* [A Word to the 'Medabrim'], *Hame'asef* 3 (1786), 205–210, especially 209. See definition of 'Medabrim' in Isaac Satanow's edition of *Moreh Nevuchim* [Guide for the Perplexed], vol. 3, Berlin 1796, 77b.

55 *Hame'asef* 7 (1794), no. 1, 18.

56 J-L [Joel Brill], *Al Na Bakos...* [Don't Look at the Cup], *Hame'asef* 4 (1789), 1.