

1783 The Haskalah begins in Germany with the founding of the Hebrew journal *Hame'asef*

Hebrew Haskalah (Enlightenment) marks a turning point in the history of the Jewish people and its culture and letters in modern times. It began in Germany in the 1780s as a group of aspiring Hebrew writers undertook a new and daring enterprise: the publication of an up-to-date monthly journal in the Hebrew language. *Hame'asef* (The gatherer), however, published during the periods 1783–96 and 1808–11, was more than just a literary journal patterned after the contemporary morality weeklies. The journal became the ideological mouthpiece of a literary and cultural movement that began a concerted effort to effect a cultural revolution among Jews in Germany and elsewhere. It also served as an organ that published the literary works produced by its circle of writers. Through their literary endeavor, these writers ushered in the modern era in Jewish history and started the modern trends in Hebrew letters.

From a historical perspective, Haskalah can be said to have emerged on the European scene as a reaction to both external and internal forces. Undoubtedly, it was a Jewish response to the new spirit generated by the European Enlightenment, yet it was certainly also an answer to a great need within the Jewish society for change. It came in the wake of inner strife within Jewish society resulting from messianic movements, a breakdown in the structure of the *Kehillah* (the organized Jewish community), and a decline in the authority of the rabbinate.

The ideas and ideals of Haskalah were neither totally innovative nor completely original. Drawing from European Enlightenment on the one hand and from medieval Jewish philosophy on the other, its ideology may be characterized as eclectic. Continuously in a state of formation, this ideology lacked a systematized code, and its proponents did not have a single, unified view on how to implement their goal. Nevertheless, they were united in their aim to enlighten their Jewish brethren and leaned heavily on Mendelssohn's definition of Judaism and its relations to the surrounding culture. Haskalah's facets, factions, and voices were many, and they varied from the extreme enlighteners to the more moderate ones. Regardless of their position on the Enlightenment scale, the Hebrew enlighteners—as distinguished from the German-Jewish enlighteners, who in general were more radical—had one thing in common: their desire to introduce changes in Jewish culture was coupled with loyalty to the Hebrew heritage.

The question of setting a date and place for the beginning of modern Hebrew literature is often discussed in this context. Haskalah scholars in both Hebrew literature and Jewish history have debated the criteria for discerning modernity and whether a certain writer, or group of writers, may be said to have started the modern trends in Hebrew letters. Two main theories on the beginning of modern Hebrew literature have emerged in the historiography of Haskalah. One stream has identified the beginnings with the German Hebrew Haskalah, which indeed is our approach, whereas the other

has found earlier phenomena in Italian Hebrew writing.

The latter position, advocated by the literary historian and critic Yeruham Fishel Lachover, has selected Moshe Hayim Luzzatto (1707–47), an Italian Hebrew poet, moralist, and kabbalist, as the starting point of modern Hebrew literature. The former, espoused by the literary historian Joseph Klausner, has chosen Naphtali Wessely (1725–1805), a poet, biblical commentator, grammarian, and one of the leading figures of the Hebrew Haskalah in Berlin, as the author who signals the beginning of modern Hebrew letters. A third approach suggested by another literary historian, Hayyim Nachmann Shapira, proposed the writers and editors of *Hame'asef* as his choice. Outside the literary spheres, the figure of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86) has been cited by historians such as Heinrich Graetz as the “father” of the Jewish Enlightenment and the person who signals the advent of modern times in the annals of Jewish history. Indeed, Mendelssohn had a seminal influence on these young Hebraists, who saw in him a model of Haskalah. He was thought to exemplify the symbiosis between Judaism and Enlightenment, adhering to both and allegedly making compromises to none. They recognized him as the initiator of a major Hebrew Enlightenment enterprise—namely, the commentary and translation of the Hebrew Bible into German—and as such, a figure to be emulated.

Discussion of modernism is more often than not relegated to the notion of secularism—that creeping change that is said to have affected the thinking, *Weltanschauung*, and behavior of young Jewish intellectuals known as *Maskilim* (Hebrew Enlighteners). Both modernism and secularism in our context are still a subject of continuous scholarly discussion, but are yet to be defined satisfactorily. Nevertheless, the contribution of the Hebrew journal *Hame'asef* and its writers to the growth of modern Hebrew literature by promoting both modernity and secularism (see below), has gained recognition in the past twenty-five years, as more scholars continued to produce critical assessments and analyses of literary works published by the Berlin Haskalah.

Haskalah scholarship has raised several meth-

odological questions regarding some of its own basic tenets. For one, should a literary discussion on Haskalah be based solely on literary grounds, or may it also incorporate current trends in Jewish social and intellectual history? And second, should we distinguish between the two aspects of Hebrew Haskalah, namely, Haskalah as a literary movement and Haskalah as a social and perhaps a cultural movement? The fact that the two questions are interconnected, however, especially during Haskalah's inception in Germany, does help us solve the latter issue for the time being. The first question is actually resolved by the prevailing practices of ideas continuously flowing from the spheres of social and intellectual histories to literary histories and criticism, and vice versa. This interdisciplinary trend in Haskalah scholarship had been questioned by Avraham Holtz, who demanded a more literary approach to the study of Haskalah.

The works of social historians Bernard Weinryb, Azriel Shohat, and Jacob Katz, to name a few, have contributed insights to the understanding of the Haskalah phenomena. They pointed out that certain aspects of modernism, manifestations of trends toward secularism in Jewish society, and the dawn of the Enlightenment could be found earlier in that century in Jewish circles in Holland and in Italy. Thus they suggested that the Haskalah began earlier than had previously been thought. But even if one is to accept the notion that there were several writers and even rabbis who are said to have heralded the Haskalah prior to the German phenomenon, or even that there had been previous phenomena of secularism, as suggested above, it will be difficult to argue against the unique thrust of German Haskalah. It emerged as a group and as a movement in its collective energy, its centrality, and more important, in its unified effort to disseminate the ideology of the Enlightenment. It is in the activities of this group of young Hebraists, consisting of writers, educators, and even rabbis, that modern Hebrew writing has been reborn and the new trends of modern Hebrew letters began.

This group and its writings represent the beginning of modernism, which I identify and define as a strong awareness of the changing times, a

desire to effect change, and a collaborative effort to disseminate ideas and establish tools for change. I have identified as modernism those subtle, covert signals in the writings of these Maskilim that are indicative of their sensitivities to the changes that were about to take place in Jewish society.

Hame'asef was not the first periodical to be published in Hebrew in that century. Thirty years earlier, in midcentury, Moses Mendelssohn initiated the budding of Haskalah by attempting to publish in about 1755 a Hebrew periodical entitled *Qobelet Musar* (Moral Ecclesiastes). He followed the trend of the morality weeklies that flourished in that century. His endeavor, however, was short-lived; only two issues of the periodical appeared. In spite of its brief appearance, the periodical signifies an important step toward the publication of a modern periodical in Hebrew. It is not insignificant that thirty years later, in the 1780s, the editors of *Hame'asef* republished the contents of one issue of *Qobelet Musar*. A religious periodical, *Pri Etz Hayim* (The fruit of the Tree of Life), had appeared in the 1720s, but it cannot be considered either modern or literary.

In advance of the publication of *Hame'asef*, the editors circulated a prospectus in 1783 entitled "Nahal Habesor" (The brook Besor; or Good tidings). In it, they outlined their plans for the new monthly periodical, by detailing its contents and literary and Enlightenment goals. It was an editorial statement that exposed their precarious predicament, which was characterized by a desire to advocate change, but it was disguised by their caution not to declare it in a provocative manner. In their desire not to alienate any of the rabbinic authorities or the moderate Maskilim, the editors maneuvered between hinting at their yearning for change and declaring their allegiance to traditional Judaism.

Thus their statement did not sound like a declaration of change and did not overtly propose too many new ideas. It openly declared the editors' choice of a general conservative (namely, traditional) attitude toward Judaism. Their announced plans for the contents and departments of the journal definitely show an inclination toward the new and contemporary scene, yet with a slant toward the conservative and traditional. The

journal, they wrote, would consist of five major departments: poetry; articles on language, Bible, knowledge and ethics, *Halakhah* (Jewish legal matters), and moral and physical education; biographies; news of contemporary events; and information about new books.

The editors seem to vacillate between the Bible and *Halakhah* on the one hand—ostensibly traditional subjects—and secular subjects like education and contemporary events on the other. At the same time, their aspiration to revive the Hebrew language and literature is manifested in their publishing of poetry and prose as well as articles on grammar and language.

The journal's launch was coupled with the formation of a new association, *Society for the Seekers of the Hebrew Language*, in keeping with the prospectus "Nahal Habesor." This cultural society proved to be quite enterprising. It founded a publishing house that had its own Hebrew and German typesetting and used the printing press of an established printer. Thus the new center for Hebrew literature was able to execute its cultural plans and disseminate its own books. Members were independent of the religious and the community authorities and thus were free to publish the literary production of Haskalah, including controversial books. One such book was Saul Berlin's *Besamim Rosh* (Incense of spices) in 1793. This was a pseudepigraphical work in the responsa genre, which the author attributed to Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The sum total of these publishing efforts is an impressive and diversified list of Hebrew books.

The emphasis that the authors of "Nahal Habesor" placed on the concept of establishing an active center of Hebrew literature and founding this society for Hebrew language is striking. To disarm any possible rabbinic attacks of this innovation "which is forbidden by the Torah" (*badash asur min batorah*), they quoted from the Hebraic sources the dictum that Torah may be studied only in groups. Obviously, the group was not formed to study Torah in the traditional sense—even though the authors were initially eager to describe themselves as educated both in Jewish and secular disciplines.

In addition to cultivating the cultural inclinations of Haskalah, the authors of "Nahal Habesor" also addressed certain social aspects of Jewish existence, such as Jews' attitude toward their host country and its citizens, their aim to become productive citizens of that country, and the like. And eventually they made an attempt to present an alternative to the existing structure of the Jewish *Kehillah* by establishing their own modern school and forming an "enlightened" burial society.

Visible manifestations of Enlightenment appeared in the pages of the journal. Overtly and covertly, the editors of *Hame'asef* endeavored to promote the ideology of the Enlightenment. Even in traditional topics such as the Bible and Halakhah, their position was far from traditional. Engaging in various Haskalah-related controversies, they advocated the positions held by Mendelssohn and Wessely in their respective social and cultural rifts with the traditionalist rabbis. They championed Wessely, for example, not only as the poet laureate of Haskalah, but also as an advocate of the modernization of Jewish education. The editors defended Wessely's position as expressed in his pamphlets, *Divrei Shalom Ve'emet* (Words of peace and truth; 1782–84). Following Wessely's dictate, they advocated the introduction of modern, secular education in Jewish schools.

In a like manner, the editors embraced the translation and commentary of the Hebrew Bible project, started by Mendelssohn and known as the *Be'ur* (The commentary on and translation of the Pentateuch). Advancing the cause of enlightened Judaism as they understood it they supported Mendelssohn's stand vis-à-vis the traditionalist rabbis in a halakhahic (pertaining to Jewish law) controversy concerning the Jewish custom of early and immediate burial of the dead. The German authorities demanded a modification of this Jewish custom, which the traditionalists could not accept. Mendelssohn was summoned by the Jewish community to intercede on its behalf, and in the process he endeavored to prove—using his typical rhetorical technique of tracing similar practices to talmudic sources—that there was nothing wrong with the suggested new burial practices. Thus the editors undertook to defend

both Wessely and Mendelssohn against the attacks of their Orthodox rivals.

The editors were tenacious in publishing articles, fables, poems, and satiric pieces in support of their Enlightenment agenda. They disseminated their ideology by educating their public through variegated articles on natural sciences, world history, education, and biographies of meritorious personalities. They urged their readers to widen their horizons by becoming Maskilim in their world outlook, their conduct, and in their manners. All in all, the tenor of Haskalah was that of the Enlightenment: to learn, explore, doubt, question, and probe.

The contribution of this group of Haskalah writers to the rebirth of Hebrew language and Hebrew culture may be considered in a few major areas of endeavor, beginning with the use of the Hebrew language. In no other realm of their Enlightenment enterprise did the Maskilim face as difficult a task as in the area of language. They had to cope with the existing classical structures, forms, and idioms of historical Hebrew that were used continuously prior to the period of the Enlightenment in rabbinic responsa, halakhahic writings, philosophical, historical, and grammatical treatises, as well as in belles lettres.

The Haskalah was innovative in its concept of language and its approach to the use of Hebrew. First and foremost, writers who were a part of this movement expressed a strong pride in the Hebrew language and in its aesthetic qualities. They further emphasized their strong belief in its potential to be used for modern purposes. Thus they undertook to explore the modern linguistic capabilities inherent in that ancient language, although they still referred to it by the traditional term "the holy tongue."

In keeping with the prevailing notion of language and its effect on thought and morality, the Maskilim rejected Yiddish, which they considered a "corrupted language." Instead, they preferred either the "purity" of German as their vernacular and literary expression, or the revived form of Hebrew. They rejected the contemporary rabbinic idiom and its careless use of grammar. This rejection, however, was easier said than done. Many of them still resorted to the old rab-

binic stylistic practices to which they were accustomed. Other writers rejected the rabbinic euphuism, a high lofty use of Hebrew, for yet another type of euphuism based on the Hebrew Bible.

These writers' first inclination was indeed to use the biblical idiom, which they considered to be the epitome of linguistic purity. Although they could employ the biblical idiom in timely poetry and in poetic drama, however, it lacked the vocabulary and linguistic forms adequate for philosophical or linguistic treatises, let alone for contemporary issues and modern ideas in secular subjects such as education, history, and the sciences. Trained in the medieval works of Jewish philosophy and theology (as autodidacts, to be sure), the Maskilim's natural inclination was to turn to medieval Hebrew for their nonbelles-tristic writings.

Reviewing some other literary traditions in the medieval Hebrew corpus, many of these Hebrew writers rejected the *piyyut* (liturgy) and its style of Hebrew. They could not accept the *paytanim*'s excessive use of poetic license in innovating new forms in Hebrew for the sheer need of a rhyme or for other aesthetic purposes. Their linguistic freedom in coining new words, regardless of grammatical rules, was severely criticized by the Maskilim.

As part of their concentration on the Hebrew language, they began to probe the historical and linguistic aspects of Hebrew and published voluminous works on Hebrew grammar. Many of their grammatical and biblical studies involving commentaries on the meaning of synonyms and obscure words in the Bible were published in *Hame'asef*.

The linguistic tension between biblical Hebrew, talmudic idiom, and medieval usage continued to be felt throughout the Haskalah period. It was finally synthesized by Mendele Mocher Sfarim (Shalom Yaakov Abramowitz, 1835/36–1917) in the latter period of Hebrew Enlightenment, toward the end of the nineteenth century.

Simultaneous with its effort to revive the Hebrew language, the Haskalah launched a major drive to revive Hebrew culture and Hebrew literature. This literary endeavor was expressed in a

number of areas of creativity in both the classical and contemporary spheres. It was published in *Hame'asef* and in separate books printed by the Maskilim's publishing house.

In terms of classical writings, the republication effort of the Maskilim emphasized a new edition of the latter books of the Bible and new editions of medieval works. Joel Brill, Isaac Euchel, and Aaron Wolfsohn published new editions of the biblical books (Brill, *Psalms*, 1785; Euchel, *Mishlei*, 1790; Wolfsohn and Brill, *The Five Scrolls*, 1807) with introductions, new commentaries, and translations into German. This project emanated from Mendelssohn's school of the *Be'ur*. Another Maskil, Juda Leib Ben-Zeev, published his *Introduction to the Scripture* (1810). Many pages of *Hame'asef* were devoted to reviews and assessment of the new translations, as well as to polemics in defense of Mendelssohn's enterprise and his followers.

Another major undertaking was the republication of medieval philosophical works, such as Judah Halevi's *Hakuzari* (by Isaac Satanow, 1795) and Maimonides' *Moreh Nevuchim* (Guide for the perplexed; 1796) with new, up-to-date commentaries written by the Maskilim. Similarly, they republished the inaccessible belletristic tome of Immanuel Haromi, *Mabberot Immanuel* (also published by Satanow, 1796). This creative Maskil, Isaac Satanow (1732–1804), was very active in the publication of other traditional books, such as the Book of Psalms (1794), the Book of Job (1799), and Passover *Haggadot* (1785). He also published Aristotle's *Ethics* (1790) in Hebrew. It was a modest beginning of a Jewish publication project that was to be proposed in the twentieth century by Hayim Nachman Bialik as the library of classical Jewish sources.

Another principal characteristic of Haskalah as a modern, up-to-date literature was manifested in its writers experimenting with a variety of new or revived literary genres. These genres were taken from the classical Hebraic corpus and from the surrounding European literatures. It was Isaac Satanow who undertook the task of reviving some classical Hebrew genres with a modern slant. He selected the genre of biblical wisdom writing as a

model and patterned his *Mishlei Asaf* (Proverbs of Asaf; 1789–1802) on this classical form. Emulating the traditional façade of a published biblical text, he added his own commentaries below the core text, and to make things more attractive, he attributed the text to an ancient Levite. Satanow also revived the medieval genre of the religious disputation and composed a contemporary story, *Divrei Rivot* (Words of dispute; ca. 1800), patterned on *Hakuzari*, which he had published previously.

As another means of bringing Hebrew literature up to date, writers of the Hebrew Enlightenment emulated contemporary European literary genres and modes such as epistolary writing, travelogues, utopia, satire, biography, autobiography, and dialogues of the dead. Isaac Euchel (1756–1804), a prolific writer and editor of *Hame'asef*, is credited with introducing a number of European literary genres. He was indeed one of the literary innovators and a bridge builder between cultures. Following the pattern of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, he composed an original epistolary writing entitled "Igroṭ Meshulam" (The letters of Meshulam; 1790), which was published serially in *Hame'asef*. This is not the only early modern satiric piece in Haskalah literature, but it may be considered uniquely utopian in its portrayal of an ideal picture of a Jewish society of the past. Mixing genres was common in European literature of that century. Similarly, Satanow's religious disputation piece, *Divrei Rivot*, mentioned above, also contains a section with a utopian element. In it, the author envisions the righteous and enlightened king helping to build an ideal Jewish society that, guided by the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment, achieves both cultural and social emancipation.

Another Maskil, Saul Berlin (1740–94), also wrote a satiric masterpiece, *Ktav Yosher* (An epistle of righteousness; 1795). He wrote it in defense of another Haskalah writer, Naphtali Wessely, who was engaged in a dispute with traditional rabbis concerning educational reforms. This satire contains some of the most bitter and critical remarks about contemporary Judaism and Jews.

Borrowing a popular genre from European lit-

erature, Aaron Wolfssohn introduced the dialogues of the dead to Hebrew literature. In his "Sihah Be'ereṭz Hahayim" (Dialogue in the land of the living; 1794–97), he enlisted the figures of Maimonides and the deceased Mendelssohn to argue with a fanatic rabbi and defend the ideals of Haskalah. This piece was serialized in *Hame'asef*. Another Hebrew Maskil, Tuvyah Feder (ca. 1760–1817), used the genre of the dialogue of the dead in his piece, *Qol Mehazezim* (Voices of the archers; 1853, written in 1813), as an invective against another Haskalah writer, Menahem Mendel Lefin (1749–1826), for his translation of *Mishlei* (Proverbs) to allegedly Yiddish-like German. Many other writers also published regular dialogues and didactic dialogue, which were used for educational purposes, as was customary at the time.

Another European literary genre, the travelogue, served the Italian Maskil Shmuel Romanelli (1757–1814) in depicting Jewish society in Morocco in the 1780s in his *Masa Ba'rav* (Travel in an Arab land; 1793). *Hame'asef* published a shorter travelogue by Euchel that described a trip back to his birthplace in Copenhagen. It was Euchel who contributed to the modern biography in his book-length portrayal of Moses Mendelssohn. This genre, too, served the purpose of Haskalah because it promoted the figure of the "Jewish Socrates," as Mendelssohn was called. Other biographies of Jewish luminaries, such as Isaac Abravanel and Moses Maimonides, were published in *Hame'asef*, which also serialized Euchel's biography. These personalities were selected for a biographical sketch because their philosophy was thought to have adhered to and supported Haskalah ideology. Their portrayal, too, served to exemplify the typology of an enlightened and open-minded spiritual leader who is loyal to Jewish tradition.

Resorting to another popular genre, the enlighteners, some of them following contemporary European writers and others in the footsteps of the best of Jewish tradition, published hundreds of fables.

Needless to say, Hebrew writers also expressed their creative energy through some other types of writings concurrent with the above; some of them

wrote allegorical dramas, biblical dramas, and biblical epics. The Hebrew novel is a phenomenon that was to appear only years later, in 1853, with the historical novel by Abraham Mapu, *Ahavat Zion* (The love of Zion). The short story, too, emerges in the second half of the nineteenth century, although some initial attempts may be found earlier.

The efforts of Hebrew Haskalah in Germany were geared toward reviving Hebrew culture. The major thrust of its activities was reorienting modern Hebrew culture toward the secular and the mundane, highlighting the utilitarian and practical, and emphasizing aesthetic values that were based on contemporary European standards. Revival of Hebrew was part of the Maskilim's attempt to revive the people and resuscitate the Hebrew culture. There was no conflict with their German orientation, and their adherence to Hebrew culture exemplified their perception that their Jewish identity could be presented in terms acceptable to their fellow German enlighteners.

Education was deemed by the Haskalah to be the most important tool for changing Jewish society. In their published essays on modern education, pedagogy, and curriculum, the Maskilim advocated introducing a modern secular curriculum and a revised religious teaching into the educational system. Toward this end, they published catechisms and numerous textbooks for use in Jewish schools. Informal education was also on their agenda, and they produced lengthy articles on world history, the history of other religions and cultures, science, nature, psychology, and ethics.

Hebrew Haskalah in Germany was short-lived. *Hame'asef* ceased publication in 1797 and resumed its appearance in 1808–9, only to shut down three years later. There had been great expectations upon its foundation in 1783, and a bitter desperation at its end. It was Euchel who in 1800 bemoaned the changing times in his florid style: "I have also tasted the dregs of the cup of trembling which came on the nation of Judea and its enlighteners. The days of love have passed,

gone are the days of the covenant between me [or: between it, namely the Hebrew language] and the children of Israel. . . . They have run away, and they have gone!" The activities of *Hame'asef*, and this group's initial struggle for Haskalah, were continued, however, as other centers of Hebrew literature came into being in Eastern Europe.

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