

MENDELSSOHN'S *GESAMMELTE SCHRIFTEN*
REPUBLISHED

THE REPUBLICATION of volumes fourteen and nineteen (formerly, sixteen) of Mendelssohn's *Gesammelte Schriften* should be welcomed by any student of modern Jewish history or modern Hebrew literature. The growing interest in Moses Mendelssohn in recent years, which culminated in the monumental biographical work by Alexander Altmann (reviewed recently in JQR, LXVII) indeed necessitated the availability of the source material for students and scholars alike. While the other volumes of the *Schriften* could be found in a few well-established libraries which acquired them in the 1920s and 30s, volume 14 became a rarity. It was published in 1938, but was not distributed because of the war and was confiscated by the Gestapo. Only a very few copies (three or four, according to Klausner, *Historiyah Shel Hasifrut Ha'ivrit Ha'hadashah*, I, 64) survived.

The volume contains Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings: *Qohelet Musar*, the first Hebrew periodical which Mendelssohn published in 1758; *Be'ur Millot Hahigayon*, 1765; *Hanefesh*, 1787; Introduction and commentary to *Megillat Qohelet*, 1770; *'Or Linetivah*, 1782/3, the introduction to the commentary and translation of the Pentateuch, *Netivot Hashalom*; and miscellaneous other writings.

Of these Hebrew writings of Mendelssohn, only *Qohelet Musar* has been published in 1927 (by Yisachar Edelstein), and recently in two university editions in 1972 (by the undersigned) and in 1973 (by Reuven Mirkin); *'Or Linetivah* was published in 1967 (by G. Kressel).

While some later editions of the other works do exist, and are available in some libraries, it is the advantage of the current edition that it is an excellent attempt at a scholarly and authentic reproduction of the first editions of these writings.

Through an elaborate apparatus of notes the editor refers to existing rare copies, such as those of *Qohelet Musar*, and endeavors to point out the variations among them. He further sheds light on related bibliographical problems, and supplies references to classical, medieval, and contemporary works and authors. These notes are indeed very helpful to the understanding of Mendelssohn's Hebrew works.

Only in a few minor cases did this reviewer find slight deviations from the original texts. There are a few insignificant changes in

punctuation and a few changes in the customary abbreviation of certain words (ספרים instead of ספרי; הקדושים = הקדושי; הבגדים = הבגדי found in *Or Linetivah*); however, these variations are minor indeed. The editor's careful and thorough treatment of the texts in this volume is admirable.

More problematic are the changes introduced into the poem "Zikhron Yedidut" (pp. 283, CI-CII), which is alleged to have been written by Mendelssohn. Published anonymously in *Hame'assef*, I (1784), 130-32, it was republished, with changes, by Shalom Hakohen in *Bikkure Ha'ittim*, II (1822), 82-84, and by Letteris in his second edition of *Hame'assef* (1862), pp. 150-51. Apparently the editor of this volume relied on the later editions of the poem rather than on the original one as he included changes found in these later editions. See the discussion of this topic, and of how it is related to the question of the alleged Mendelssohn authorship of the poem, in my book *Bekhave Masoret* (1972), pp. 101-02.

One can only regret that full benefit from such an edition cannot be achieved because the publishing house has not updated the notes; fifty years of research on Mendelssohn and the Haskalah remained unfortunately untapped.

In a way, this volume of Hebrew works may serve as a microcosm of Mendelssohn's contribution both to Hebrew and German literature. The reader is presented with the first endeavor on the part of modern Jews to express themselves through a literary journal, emulating the prevailing practice in Germany and England. This endeavor, which did not last beyond two issues, was duplicated some 25 years later in the more successful issuance of *Hame'assef*. While Mendelssohn was not directly involved with the new enterprise, he was indeed the major force behind the scene.

As early as in mid-century, these journal pieces are already heralding the budding of the Hebrew Haskalah that flourished in Germany some thirty years later. Certain tendencies of the Hebrew Enlightenment are noticeable in these writings: a tone of optimism prevails; religious sentimentalism dominates; the centrality of man is emphasized (anthropocentricity, rather than theocentricity); there is a growing interest and pride in the Hebrew language, and an attempt to experiment with it as a means of modern expression. There is also a desire to use Hebrew in its refined form, such as is found in the Bible, rather than the kind of Hebrew used in Rabbinic writings, which was considered by the *maskilim* (the enlightened) ungrammatical, unclear, and faulty. Yet non-Biblical Talmudic Aramaic is employed as well. Not only Talmudic language but also Talmudic concepts are embraced as befitting the age of Haskalah. This dual attitude

toward the Bible and the Talmud is not always understood by students of the Hebrew Enlightenment.

The significance of the text lies in that it reflects the new attitude of the modern Jew toward himself, toward his existence, and toward the world about him. There is the transitory blending of the old and the new, of the religious and the secular, as exemplified in this volume of Moses Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings.

In order to grasp the full implication of this work for the understanding of the image of Mendelssohn, one should turn to Altmann's excellent observation: "It was characteristic of his loyalty to Jewish tradition that he advocated a return to biblical Hebrew precisely at the moment at which he had become a full-fledged member of the circle of German literati. He felt that the beauty of the language of the Bible was equal, if not superior, to the finest products of world literature, and he wanted his fellow Jews, especially those impressed with German prose and poetry, to recapture a sense of pride in their own legacy" (*Moses Mendelssohn*, pp. 87-88).

The second major text which is now available to the reader is that of the introduction to the most important enterprise of the Hebrew Haskalah in Germany, namely, the *Be'ur*, the translation of, and commentary to, the Five Books of Moses and later the entire Bible. *Or Linetivah*, like *Qohelet Musar*, is somewhat of a manifesto of the Hebrew Haskalah. It reflects the desire on the part of the *maskilim* to express their national identity and cultural loyalty through a modern interpretation of the classical sources. Thus the *maskilim* are seen not as rejecting the tenets of traditional Judaism, but rather as embracing them in a renewed format.

Mendelssohn emerges from this text as the intellectual guide of his people, as the title clearly shows, *A torchlight for their path*. This enterprise was intended to educate the Jewish people from within by enriching their knowledge of their classical sources and by strengthening their ties to their roots. It was also intended as a showcase for the outside European culture and Enlightenment, a presentation of the modern, yet Jewish, viewpoint on the Bible. Both goals may be summarized in Mendelssohn's own words, in a letter to Hennings: "This is the first step toward culture". The ambiguity of this phrase is well known among students of Mendelssohn.

The emphasis of the *maskilim* on aesthetics, on the *Peshaṭ* (the literal interpretation of the Biblical text), and on grammar is already foreshadowed by this work of Mendelssohn's.

Mendelssohn's commentary on Maimonides *Millot Hahigayon* signals another aspect of the Hebrew Haskalah: the impact which medieval philosophers, notably Maimonides, have exerted on the

Haskalah ideology, and the impetus which they have given to the *maskilim's* search for new ways to give expression to their Jewish existence in the changing times. As is apparent in the later periods of the Haskalah, it was Maimonides' writings which began the process of enlightenment of these young writers (Ginsburg and Lilienblum, for example).

Volume nineteen (formerly sixteen, in the 1929 edition) consists of Mendelssohn's Hebrew and Judeo-German letters. Many of these letters have been published previously in various journals and books in the last two hundred years, but their collection into a single volume provides the student of Mendelssohn with a very handy tool. One should note that not all of the letters included in this volume have been transcribed from the original manuscript letters; thus the editor had to rely on such secondary sources as *Hame'assef* (where the correspondence with Rabbi Jacob Emden concerning the burial-of-the-dead controversy was originally published), or Avigdor Levi's (ALM) two pamphlets. The notes are very helpful in enlightening the reader about personalities, books, and events cited in the letters. Corrections are made and noted, and so are the sources of these letters. The several indices are also quite useful.

One may gain some insight into the phenomenon of Moses Mendelssohn from his letters to his bride, colleagues, and followers, as well as to Rabbis, authors, and leaders of the Jewish community. Some of the controversies in which Mendelssohn was involved unfold before the reader: the burial-of-the-dead issue, in which Mendelssohn argued with Rabbi Emden on halakhic grounds, is presented through these documents, from the call to Mendelssohn to act in behalf of the Schwerin Jewish community, to the arguments between Mendelssohn and Emden which cite the Rabbinic and Talmudic sources. Similar appeals to Mendelssohn to act as a *shtadlan* came from the Jewish communities of Altona and Dresden.

Some of the other topics are: approbations; discussion on the immortality of the soul; Mendelssohn's stand regarding Wessely's *Divre Shalom We'emet* controversy; the seven Noahide laws; and many others. Not only Mendelssohn the philosopher, the teacher, and the leader is revealed in this correspondence—one gets a glimpse also into his habits, his religious practices, and his personality and characteristics.

The letters offer, in addition, a look at some of the people who were associated with Mendelssohn, their attitude toward him, and their admiration of him.

One can only regret, as did Laḥover in his review of this volume

published close to half a century ago (*Moznayim*, January 10, 1930), that the letters written by Mendelssohn in Hebrew are very few, compared with the ones written in Judeo-German. But of course one should not blame the editors for Mendelssohn's letter-writing practices. Laḥover made an interesting observation about Mendelssohn's correspondence in the three languages: in his German correspondence Mendelssohn projects himself as a writer; his Judeo-German letters reveal Mendelssohn as a merchant or as a family man; the Hebrew correspondence shows him attired in the historical garb of the Jewish *Talmid Ḥakham*.

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