

### **Zusia 3:3: Haskalah and Secularism**

*I had a very burning desire to gain even more knowledge. But given my lack of guidance, of scholarly books, and of all the other necessary means, how could I achieve my goal? I thus had to content myself with proceeding randomly, without a plan. I had to content myself with making use of whatever knowledge I happened to pick up. The only way to satisfy my desire for scholarly knowledge was to study foreign languages. But how was I to begin? Studying Polish or Latin with a Catholic would have been impossible, for the prejudices of my own people prohibited the study of any language except Hebrew. The same prejudices also kept me from seeking out any scholarly knowledge and scientific learning that wasn't in the Talmud or the innumerable commentaries on it. The prejudices of the Catholics, for their part, were such that no Jew could be taught in their midst. Beyond all that, I had little free time. I had to support a whole family with my work as a schoolmaster, by proofreading copies of the Holy Scripture, and so on. For quite some time, I could only sigh over the frustrated state of my natural drive. Finally, a stroke of good luck came to my aid. I noticed that some very thick Hebrew books contained several different alphabets, and that they were so long that the number of pages exceeded the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Other characters in a second or third alphabet, generally Latin and German letters, had to be used for designating page numbers.... I surmised, though, that the characters placed next to one another represented equivalent letters, and because I had heard something about the order of the alphabets in question, I was able to deduce that, for example, the a next to the x had to be an alpha as well. In this way, I gradually learned the Latin and German alphabets. Through a kind of deciphering, I began to combine different German letters into words. Yet it remained an open question whether all my effort would be futile, for the German characters next to the Hebrew letters might well have been different from those letters. My doubts persisted until I had more good luck: Several pages from an old German book happened to fall into my hands. I started to read it, and how great was my joy and astonishment when I was able recognize from context that the meanings of the words completely matched the words I had already learned. There were quite a few words I was unable to translate into my native Yiddish, but even skipping those words, I was able to use the context to reach a plausible understanding of the whole.*

The above is a passage from Solomon Maimon's *Lebensgeschichte*, or Autobiography, an immensely popular 18th century work recounting his escape from traditional Jewish life and his life as a philosopher in Berlin. Maimon, who we will discuss more below, was one of a

generation of Jews whose interest in modernity, European culture, and freedom of thought would change the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds and begin the redefinition of what a Jew is.

### **What is a Jew?**

What is a Jew? For those who wrote the Hebrew Bible, the answer was simple: a Jew was someone who existed in a covenant with YHVH, obligated to follow the Torah. Someone who grievously broke the covenant was to be either cut off (*karet*) from the people (which may have meant banishment or excommunication) or executed by them for instance in cases of idolatry, violation of the Shabbat, or murder.

For the Rabbis of the Talmud, someone born a Jew can not become un-Jewish, but they can be a heretic- an *apikorus* who is not to be trusted or included in the community's religious obligations. What if they convert to another religion? Well, said the medieval halakhists, they were to be *persona non grata* until they repented and were accepted again into the community. Thus for the Talmudic Rabbis, a born Jew remained a Jew but could be excluded or shunned for heresy.

Both of these conceptions of Jewish identity are dependent on fidelity to the Jewish religion, but in the Talmudic definition one cannot un-Jew oneself, though one can be a Jew with severely diminished rights and standing. It was not until the 18th century that the nature of Jewish identity was questioned again by Jews who did not want to partake in the traditional Jewish life of the diaspora community, but rather to exist as Jews within wider European society. They came to redefine Jewish identity as a religious faith, as a culture, or as an intellectual heritage. Thus for the first time it was possible to be a Jew who did not understand their identity in terms of fidelity to the Torah as defined by traditional Rabbinic authorities.

### The Fragmentation of the Jewish People

The Rabbis of the Talmud had created a new form of Judaism between the 4th and the 7th century which swept the Jewish world, uniting the vast majority of Jews across the world by the

12th century. For the following six centuries, until the 18th, Jews all over the world were largely the same: they followed Rabbinic Judaism and had a similar understanding of who they were and what they were to do, despite differences in regional customs and philosophies [and with the exception of a few small communities who lived outside the sphere of Rabbinic Judaism].

In the 18th century that changed. In today's class we will look at the early Haskalah, or Jewish enlightenment, which aimed to re-imagine Jewish life for a new time.

### **Early Haskalah**

Jewish life in 18th century Europe was a study in contradictions. On the one hand Jewish communities had higher literacy rates than surrounding communities; on the other hand they were dedicated to the study of Talmud and other religious literature alone and were permeated by superstition, including fear of demons, ghosts and the evil eye. Jewish communities had high degrees of solidarity and charity, yet also constituted what has been called a “super-exploited” mass, the poorest of the poor. Religion was often fervent, yet Hasidic courts could be authoritarian and full of political machinations and dishonesty. It was a world of intense social pressure and intimacy, a world of shared custom and shared understanding, yet also one of arranged marriages, rigid hierarchies, corruption, and frequent death and suffering; a world of spiritual illumination and joy as well as depression and repression. Male children whose families could afford *cheder* sent them to study for as much as 12 hours a day, while girls were generally schooled in domestic tasks alone. Melameds (Jewish teachers) used corporal punishment to keep the boys in line and were often feared characters who were themselves underpaid and little respected.

As the European Enlightenment spread, arguing for free thought and speech, religious toleration, and reform of education, government and the sciences, it was inevitable that these winds would blow into the Jewish community and provoke radical, widespread changes. Some Jews would leave Jewish areas to live in European society; others would attempt to bring the best of European culture into the shtetl. Both would attain only limited successes.

The Early Haskalah (Jewish enlightenment) emerged in Germany and spread to Galicia, Poland, Russia, and beyond. Although it had different forms in these different areas the thought of German Jews was important enough that Maskils were sometimes called “Berliners”, a title they saw as a compliment although it was intended as an insult. Urban Germany was one of the best possible places for Jews to be at that time, as it would be for almost two centuries until the 1930s and the destruction of it all.

An expression of the Berlin Haskalah can be found in *Divre shalom ve-emet* (Words of Peace and Truth; 1782) by Naftali Hertz Wessely. Wessely argued that there is a Torah of God and a Torah of Humanity. The Torah of God is divine revelation: it includes the commandments of the Torah and is intended only for Jews. The Torah of Humanity, by contrast, is derived from human reason; it is universal and includes all of philosophy and science. Wessely declared that Jews, too, must inquire into the Torah of Humanity and be partners in developing it. Moreover, a Jew who ignores or denies the Torah of Humanity is unfulfilled as a whole human being.

Wessely was convinced that the Torah of Humanity had always been an integral part of the Jewish tradition but Jews of his time had been cut off from worldly knowledge due to discrimination, segregation, and persecution. For Wessely and his colleagues, increasing political tolerance showed that a momentous change was taking place in the status of the Jews—and it was incumbent upon Jews to prove their willingness to integrate into the cultural, social, and economic life of their surroundings. To that end, an extensive reform of Jewish education was essential. As we’ll see below, some Maskils followed his footsteps and tried to reform the Jewish community.

The Berlin Haskalah, however, was center stage for Jews attempting to meaningfully enter European society. A brief look at three thinkers will map out the terrain: Moses Mendelssohn, Solomon Maimon, and Heinrich Heine.

### **Moses Mendelssohn**

Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) was a huge figure in the Berlin Haskalah. Born more than forty years before Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, Mendelssohn wrote *Netivot ha-shalom* (The Paths of Peace) a translation of the Chumash into German; as well as a classic of the European Enlightenment, “Jerusalem” which showcased many of his ideas and laid out his argument that Judaism was a rational faith which could be lived without contradiction by Jews who were patriotic and contributing members of the wider society.

Mendelssohn presented Judaism as a rational religion: Judaism had no tenets of faith that could not be arrived at through human reason. The practical commandments, revealed at Sinai, were given to the Jewish people so that they would offer the nations a living example of the pure consciousness of God. Hence, Jewish separatism and the Jews’ endeavor to retain their collective identity were intended to fulfill their universal mission for the sake of all peoples. Mendelssohn also argued that religious affiliation ought to be based on free intellectual persuasion without coercion. Accordingly, the Jewish community must give its own members freedom with regards to thought and action, and legal discrimination against Jews by Christians, likewise religious coercion, should cease. Mendelssohn’s ideas, minus the Orthodox religious observance, would have a huge influence on the worldview of Reform Judaism.

Above all, Mendelssohn contributed to Haskalah by embodying its ideals himself: he was a Jew who was learned in Jewish sources, scrupulous in his observance of the commandments, and active on behalf of his people while at the same time being widely recognized as a German philosopher and author and praised by prominent figures in the European Enlightenment, including Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), possibly the most important philosopher of the time. Mendelssohn was therefore a living symbol of the cultural and social ambitions of the Haskalah.

### **Solomon Maimon (1753-1800)**

More radical than Mendelssohn, Maimon has been called his “dark twin.” Maimon, born Shlomo ben Yehoshua in Lithuania, was recognized as an *ilui* (prodigy) as a child and by 14 was already married (since age 11) a father (!) and a Talmud teacher. After mastering the Talmud by the time

he was married, Maimon became interested in the Kabbalah. At first Maimon was thrilled by the rich thought world of the Kabbalah, but as he read he began to feel that portions of it were either nonsensical or were symbolic, with the true meanings of the symbols forgotten. As he wrote, “the Kabbalah [had] finally degenerated into the art of running wild with reason, or more precisely, into an art of building systematic knowledge on a foundation of idiosyncratic fantasies.” By his teen years Maimon was attempting to uncover the rational principles hidden in the Kabbalah, aided by some German books on philosophy and physics he had convinced a Rabbinic scholar to lend him. Soon he was on a rebellious quest to find truth outside of traditional Judaism. This would lead him to abandon the family he had been forced into as a child and to flee to Berlin, where he would enter Mendelssohn’s circle and write several books, including astute philosophical writings and an autobiography of his voyage from a traditional Jewish life to the “wide open spaces” (as it were) of enlightened Europe. Nearing the age of thirty, Maimon took his name to honour Maimonides, one of his main heroes and a source for his philosophical thought.

Maimon’s commentary on *Moreh Nevuchim* (The Guide For The Perplexed), *Giv’at ha-Moreh* (1791), was the first substantial work of modern philosophy written and published in Hebrew. A feature of Maimonides’ philosophy that deeply influenced Maimon was its respect for reason. In summarizing the last passages of the Guide, Maimon translates and quotes what one scholar calls “a subtly astonishing passage”: *The behavior of a man when he is alone with his family is very different from his behavior when he is in the presence of a great king. Whoever strives for perfection should know that the greatest of all kings, namely, the reason that God has given him, resides within him.* Maimonides would seem to be using the standard rabbinic metaphor that one should see his activities as taking place in the presence of the King, God, but, as Maimon noticed, his master had actually given the tradition a radical twist: “the greatest of all kings” here is not God but rather “the reason that God has given man.”

Despite his love of reason, Maimon was a wild character who came into conflict with other maskils over his personal behaviour (he was a drinker and known to visit brothels) perhaps as much as over his radical philosophy -he was openly a Spinozist, which was still a dangerous and

unacceptable thing to be. He was chronically unkempt, often drunk, and continued to speak German with a pronounced Yiddish accent while gesturing like a Lithuanian Talmudist (his friend Sabbattia Wolff fondly recalled him swaying and chanting over a mathematical treatise as though he were davening or chanting Talmud). Even his philosophical prose was constantly veering into a kind of rabbinic commentary and metacommentary.

Around 1770, before he left Jewish life for Berlin, Maimon visited the court of the Maggid of Mezritch, the Baal Shem Tov's chief disciple. Maimon's testimony, written later in German in his *Lebensgeschichte* is one of the very few external testimonies to early Hasidic life. Maimon was sympathetic to the teachings of the Maggid, which he was later to argue were similar to those of Spinoza's, and scholars have shown that his quotations of the Maggid are accurate. More on that below.

### **Maimon and Pantheism**

Maimon took part in the "Pantheism controversy" of the late 18th century. As more and more European thinkers were influenced by Spinoza and German Romanticism was getting off the ground, a growing number of thinkers were adopting what appeared to be pantheist perspectives which equated God with nature, often with a share of naturalist or scientific mysticism thrown in. For many "respectable" thinkers this was a step too far. Pantheism was unacceptable to the Jewish and Christian establishments; too radical. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1721-1789), a huge figure in the German literary world of the time, was a fan of Spinoza and was accused of pantheism. Lessing, who wrote an allegory about religious tolerance called *Nathan The Wise*, was a close friend of Mendelssohn's.

A conversation between the German philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and Lessing in 1780 led Jacobi to a study of Spinoza's works based on Lessing's defense of them, and inspired Jacobi to write a book length attack on Spinoza, arguing that Spinoza's pantheism leads to materialism and then to atheism. Mendelssohn defended Lessing and Spinoza while differentiating his own

views from those of Spinoza's (Mendelssohn was not a Pantheist). Maimon jumped into the fray to defend Spinoza, arguing that in fact Spinoza's system was the opposite of atheism and was in fact *acosmism*, or the teaching that only God exists and the cosmos is not real (a perspective held by the first Chabad Rebbe). Though this may seem academic to us, the "pantheism controversy" became a *cause celebre* and attracted the attention of many intellectuals of the time as well as the wider public. It has been pointed out that resistance to Pantheism is often rooted in a combination of moral and hierarchy anxiety- that boundaries between good and evil, man and woman, high and low, will be erased.

This was not the only pantheism controversy that took place in northern Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. At almost the same time, and about one thousand kilometers to the east, the Lithuanian Rabbinic establishment was attacking the emerging Hasidic movement for its supposed pantheism. Maimon stood in a unique place in this controversy due to his defense of both Hasidic and Spinozist acosmism, which he saw as being the same correct Jewish insight into reality. Speaking of his visit to the Maggid's court, he wrote:

*True divine worship, according to them, consists in performing devotional exercises with all one's strength, and in self-annihilation before God. For they asserted that, according to his vocation, man can achieve his highest perfection by doing nothing other than by regarding himself as an organ of God, and not as a being that exists and acts for himself. This, for them, is man's destiny. Thus they believed that the way to further their goal wasn't to spend their entire lives apart from the world, trying to suppress their natural feelings and kill off their vital powers. Rather, they should develop their natural feelings as much as possible, make use of their strengths, and try constantly to extend their influence.*

Maimon then goes so far as to identify Hosids as a kind of Maskil (enlightener):

*The enlighteners [Die Aufklärer], by contrast, insisted that a basic condition of true virtue is a cheerful soul, one open to all kinds of activity. They recommended – and didn't simply permit –*

*the moderate enjoyment of all kinds of pleasures as a means of achieving a cheerful soul. Their worship consisted in a voluntary disembodiment: that is, an abstracting of themselves from all things, even their own individual selves, and from all thoughts except that of God. Their worship also consisted in merging with God. The enlighteners thereby produced in themselves a kind of self-suppression – and thus they would ascribe the actions they performed in this state to God, rather than to themselves. Their worship was made up, then, of a kind of speculative prayer, for which they didn't need a particular time or set of formulations; rather, they left it up to each person to determine those things for himself, according with his level of knowledge. For the most part, however, people chose the times that had been established for public worship. During this public worship, they practiced the aforementioned disembodiment – that is, they immersed themselves so profoundly in the idea of divine perfection that they lost touch with all else, even their own bodies, to the point where, according to their own accounts, their bodies would be completely without sensations.*

Someone familiar with Spinoza's writings will immediately recognize that Maimon is describing Hasidic doctrines through a Spinozist lens. His description is largely right, though Maimon gives the Hosids a more worldly emphasis than is accurate (though perhaps the common Hosid was interpreting things that way at the time). Maimon is impressed by the description of the free-form method of Hasidic midrash and asks for a sample:

*Because his description delighted me, I asked the stranger to share with me some of these divine teachings. He pressed his hand to his forehead, as though waiting for inspiration from the Holy Spirit. Then he turned to me, with a solemn expression and half-exposed arms...and began to speak as follows [...].*

“At this point, Maimon tells us, the emissary expounded a very original reading of a certain Biblical passage,” writes scholar Yitzhak Melamed. “We now know that the emissary was actually pretending to improvise the sermon on the spot, since the beautiful sermon is well documented in the writings of his teacher, R.Dov Ber of Mezerich.”

*Delighted by this helpful way of interpreting the Holy Scripture, I asked the stranger for more explanations of this kind. And so he continued, full of enthusiasm: "As the player (musician) played, the spirit of God came to him (II Book of Kings, 3:15). They interpret this in the following way: As long as a person shows himself to be autonomous, he won't be able to receive the Holy Spirit. To this end, he must act as though he is merely an instrument. Thus the meaning of the passage is: When the player (Ha-menagen) becomes identical to the instrument (Kli-nagen), the Holy Spirit will come to him.*

Despite Maimon's appreciation for Hasidic thought, he was also critical. Maimon noted that Hasidim would not engage in open philosophy, free thinking, or the study of nature, and thus claimed they could only have a limited and stagnant knowledge of the reality of God. He also felt that the Hosids used their doctrine to justify self-indulgences which were not really immersions in God (like drunken dancing and singing and feasting), thus echoing similar Litvak criticisms. He was also critical of the authority the Maggid had over his disciples, and worried about manipulation of Hosids by Rebbes.

Maimon was much less successful at finding a place for himself in European life than Mendelssohn. In German circles he was unable to "pass", writing that educated Germans considered him "an animal that had learned to talk." He tried to convert to Protestantism, but was rejected after admitting he did not actually believe in it. In an amusing passage where he writes to a priest about it, he says that "Judaism is the religion closer to reason, but Christianity excels in its practical application." Maimon was praised by many, including Kant, who wrote about a book Maimon had written criticizing Kant himself, "one glance at the work made me realize its excellence and that not only had none of my critics understood me and the main questions as well as Herr Maimon does but also very few men possess so much acumen for such deep investigations as he..." yet Maimon's life was one of struggle and maladaptation.

After being kicked out of Berlin by Mendelssohn for his radical ideas and behaviour, who saw them as a threat to the Jewish community in Berlin, he died at the age of 48 while living in a comfortable home provided for him by a patron, apparently of alcoholism. His body was

delivered to the nearby Jewish community of Glogau. He was, according to a local tradition, buried as a heretic. Children are said to have been encouraged to throw stones at the coffin while shouting “apiqores!” When Count Kalckreuth inquired about the funeral, he was, by one account, told that Maimon had been buried “in a special area marked traditionally for philosophers”, an ironic joke Maimon himself might have appreciated.

His *Lebensgeschichte* is considered one of the classics of 18th century literature and was admired by Goethe, Schiller, Kant, and Mendelssohn, as well as being loved in the 20th century by Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and others. Arendt, Benjamin, Scholem, and Leo Strauss all had their first serious exposure to Maimonidean philosophy in the pages of Maimon’s autobiography. When the Jewish loss-of-faith genre was Americanized by Chaim Potok in *The Chosen* (1967), he explicitly modeled his young Hasidic hero on Maimon. Potok had read the *Lebensgeschichte* as a young man and then gone on to write a dissertation on Maimon as a philosopher before turning to fiction.

Mendelson’s son, Felix (1809-1847) famously converted to Christianity. He has long been seen, fairly or unfairly, as emblematic of the fate of the early German-Jewish maskils. Many of them ended by assimilating into the wider culture, and Felix Mendelssohn was not the only one to convert to Christianity as a “passport” to European culture. The religious critics of the Maskils often used this as a weapon against them.

## **Spinoza Redux**

While Spinoza was largely *verboten* for both Jews and non-Jews during the German Enlightenment of the 18th century, his name alone being enough to provoke fireworks, he became a kind of cult hero to Jews during the first half of the nineteenth century, the period of Romanticism. Spinoza had equated God with Nature and presented the universe as the rational unfolding of God’s being according to its inherent laws. Human freedom lay in understanding and the cultivation of joy, reason, and democratic human collaboration. Spinoza would be the hero of the early Secular Jew as Marx or Herzl would be the heroes of later ones. Spinoza

represented a non-religious form of Jewish ethics and mysticism, one that could hold its head high in any company.

Berthold Auerbach (1812-1882) wrote a highly popular biographical novel about Spinoza which was first published in 1837 and republished at least four times in the 19th century. Moses Hess, the French-Jewish socialist and early Zionist, signed his first book in 1837 “a disciple of Spinoza.” The American Jewish poet Emma Lazarus (1849-1887), whose poetry adorns the Statue of Liberty, countered the new wave of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism by contrasting Spinoza with Shakespeare’s infamous moneylender, Shylock. Spinoza stood for all that was noble in the Jewish people, their rationalism, intellectualism, piety and ethics, versus the anti-Semitic stereotype of the greedy hustler. Notably her defense of Jews didn’t include the Jewish religion per se. This was a reflection of Lazarus’s own secularism. Another nineteenth-century admirer of Spinoza was Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). Of Spinoza, Heine wrote:

*When we read Spinoza, we have the feeling that we are looking at all-powerful Nature in liveliest repose—a forest of thoughts, high as heaven, with green tops ever in motion, while below the immovable trunks are deeply rooted in the eternal earth.*

Heine saw Spinoza as a descendant of the Hebrew prophets and labeled his life “as blameless, pure and spotless as that of his divine cousin, Jesus Christ.” He also wrote “only stupidity and malice could term this doctrine ‘atheism’.”

### **Heinrich Heine (1797-1856)**

One of Germany’s greatest poets, essayists, and critics of the Romantic age, Heine converted to Christianity in 1825 but famously denigrated his conversion as a mere “entrance card” to European society.

For Heine, the contribution of Jews was in the form of philosophy, ethics and cultural influence. As David Biale writes in his history of secular Judaism, *Not In Heaven*, “Heine was one of the key proponents of this secular, universalist ideal and indeed served as its exemplar for future generations of German and other European Jews. Despite his conversion, he never lost his interest in Jewish matters and wrote a number of historical poems and essays on Jewish subjects, many of which subversively celebrated the lives and customs of the folk as opposed to the rabbinic establishment. He had been briefly active in the Society for the Culture and Science of Judaism, which founded the historical study of Judaism and Jewish history. Heine also took a radical stance on the role of the Jews in European history, arguing that the Jews had influenced Europe in three ways: through their suffering, through Christianity as a product of Judaism, and through Jewish thinkers, such as Spinoza and Moses Mendelssohn. Taken together, Heine’s writings on the Jews may constitute the first coherent statement of Jewish secularism (as opposed to Maskilism).

Heine was not just the culmination of the secularization of the Jew, he was also a foreshadowing of the future for many Jews. Unlike Mendelssohn’s generation, who strove to create a reformed Judaism, or Maimon, who strove for a philosophical and mystical Judaism, many future Jews would abandon the Jewish religion and its theology entirely. Heine wrote:

*Our heart is full of a terrible pity. It is old Jehovah himself who is preparing for his death. We have known him so well from his cradle onwards, in Egypt, where he was brought up among divine calves.... We saw him say farewell to the playfellows of his childhood... in order to become a little god-king in Palestine to a tribe of poor shepherds.... We watched him emigrate to Rome, where he renounced all his national prejudices.... We watched him becoming yet more spiritualized.... [H]e became a loving Father, a friend of humanity... but nothing could save him. Do you hear the passing bell? Kneel down—they are bringing the sacrament to a dying God.*

One can’t help but hear foreshadowing of a later German, Nietzsche, who declared the death of God. Another writing continues in the same vein of black humour:

*Perhaps the old Baron of Mt. Sinai and Autocrat of Judea has also become enlightened, has cast off national sentiment and given up his claims and adherents in favor of some vague cosmopolitanism? I'm afraid the Old Gentleman has lost his head, and the petit juif d'Amsterdam ["little Jew of Amsterdam", i.e., Spinoza] may with some reason whisper in his ear: "Entre nous, Monsieur, vous n'existez pas" [Between us, Sir, you don't exist].*

In Eastern Europe (Galicia, Poland, Russia, etc) Jews were less integrated into the surrounding culture and Hasidism was dominant. As a result, Maskilim there tended to be more radical in their criticism of Hasidic Jewish leaders, and there was less middle ground. Over time, it would be in those areas that Maskilim would shift into radical rationalist and atheist critiques of Judaism, whereas in the German sphere Jewish intellectuals (like Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, and others) combined radical politics with Jewish thought.

At first the *maskilim* of Eastern Europe did not regard themselves as uprooting Jewish tradition. On the contrary, they believed that their conceptions of Judaism represented the tradition in its purest form. This attitude is clear in Yitshak Ber Levinzon's *Te'udah be-Yisra'el* (A Warning to Israel), published in Vilna in 1828, regarded as the first literary expression of the Haskalah in Russia. Most of the book is dedicated to the presentation of many hundreds of proofs and arguments supporting the conclusion that the Haskalah program did not contradict the values of the tradition, but in fact came from them.

Relations between the *maskilim* and the Misnagdim were complex. On the one hand, the two groups shared the struggle against Hasidism and many *maskilim* respected Torah study and those learned in Torah. The Misnagdim were open, to a degree, to the ideas of Haskalah—as long as the concepts appeared moderate. Between Maskilim and Hosids there was more intense animosity from the beginning, though there were exceptions. Both Simcha Bunim of Pshishk and Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, in the early 18th century, were known to play chess or card games with Maskils, shocking some. Both teachers explained their actions as a gentle way to reach out to these “errant children.”

Nevertheless, tension and animosity arose as secularization took on more open and pronounced expression. Opposition between these two camps broke out in full force in the 1840s as a result of Haskalah mi-Ta'am (government-sponsored Haskalah)

### **Government-Sponsored Haskalah.**

In addition to engaging in literary activity, Russian *maskilim* called upon the government to institute reform in Jewish life. The *maskilim* believed that the authorities identified with the values of the European Enlightenment, and that they themselves were interested in improving the situation of the Jews in the spirit of those values.

In 1840, Serge Uvarov, who had served as minister of education in the government of Nicholas I, proposed that modern Jewish schools be established in Russia. Uvarov wished to reform Jews by bringing them more in harmony with their surrounding society; at the same time, he sought to free Jews from what he called "the damaging influence of the Talmud."

Traditionalists resisted, while *maskilim* developed elaborate plans for far-reaching reform. Among other things, they proposed the establishment of government-sponsored rabbinical seminaries to develop a type of *maskil* rabbi who would replace the traditional rabbi. In addition, the local community organization would be replaced by a central administrative organization supervised by the government. Uvarov enlisted Max Lilienthal, a young *maskil* from Germany and assigned him to prepare a detailed plan for the reform of Jewish education and to compile a list of candidates for teaching positions in the proposed educational system. Lilienthal believed that if the Jews of Russia responded positively to the government's initiative, they would benefit from a significant improvement in their legal status as well.

Lilienthal was driven out of Minsk; and in Vilna, where *maskilim* were more numerous, he was nevertheless unable to gain support for the program. When he returned months later, now with the status of an official government representative, he was to locate rabbis willing to participate

in a council of rabbis to be held in Saint Petersburg. This time, the response was more courteous, probably because traditionalists feared the repercussions of failing to cooperate.

The change in attitude of the traditional camp toward Lilienthal took place following his meeting with Yitshak of Volozhin, head of the Volozhin yeshiva founded by the Nefesh HaChayyim, and regarded as the leader of the Lithuanian community. Yitshak decided to take part in the rabbinical council primarily because he feared the response of authorities if the initiative were rejected; he also hoped that his participation would enable him to influence the character of the reform. Menahem Mendel Shneerson, the third leader of Lubavitch Hasidism (also known as the Tsemeh Tzedek), also cooperated with Lilienthal for the same reasons.

The episode had far-reaching consequences for the Haskalah in Russia. The support of the authorities encouraged people to express their identification with that movement publicly. While *maskilim* remained a small minority, their self-confidence grew and they became more aggressive, knowing that the government would defend them when necessary. Moreover, as many *maskilim* took up teaching positions in the government schools, their dependence on the Jewish majority diminished.

The image of Haskalah and of the *maskilim* in the eyes of traditional Jewish society was also affected. *Maskilim* had been perceived as a fringe devoid of influence. Now, having become government allies, they appeared dangerous and threatening. The struggle between *maskilim* and traditionalists left a powerful residue in both camps: the social gap between them grew deeper, and the collective identity of each camp grew sharper.

### **Radical Haskalah**

The most prominent expression of the change in the character of Haskalah during the 1860s and 1870s was the emergence of a radical form. Its proponents typically had traditional educations and were from Lithuania and Belarus; they included authors like Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh

(Mendele Moykher-Sforim), a hero of later Yiddish authors like Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz. The revolution in their worldview took place following their exposure to new trends of thought like empiricism, early socialism, and materialism. Radical *maskilim* continued to foster literary creativity in Hebrew; but now the distress of the masses of Russian Jews was central to their concerns. From this point of view, they harshly criticized the *maskilim* of the previous generation, whose intellectual preoccupations they regarded as lacking any connection with the vital problems of the Jews of Russia.

The genre frequently used by Haskalah authors to express social criticism was the novel. Their novels were represented as reflecting Jewish life in Russia; but in fact they had repetitive, polemical structures. According to YIVO, “The *melamed* (traditional schoolteacher) was always described as an ignorant and coarse man; the community functionary was aggressive and violent; and the rabbi a fanatic who tended to issue inappropriately severe rulings. In contrast to these negative figures, the novels presented a series of positive figures: the brilliant young man whose soul yearned for Haskalah; the delicate and diligent young woman whose parents had married her off, against her will, to an ignorant, unsuccessful man; and, of course, the *maskil*, who successfully integrates into Russian society and the new economic activity.”

In the 1860s and 1870s, however, calls for reform of tradition began to fade. The Rabbinic establishment made it clear that *halakha* was divine and could not be “evolved” or “changed” to suit the times; those who did not agree began to abandon religious Judaism altogether. At the same time anti-Semitism was increasing in Europe and the mass of Jews continued to live in poverty and discrimination. The early Haskalah and its Hebrew pamphlets and novels began to seem ineffectual at improving Jewish life in Europe.

Two solutions would come out of this situation. On the one hand, some Jewish intellectuals would dedicate themselves not to reforming the Jewish community but to remaking the world around them into a more just place where Jews and others could live in freedom and dignity. These joined the growing movements of anarchism, socialism, communism and liberalism in droves, creating the Jewish *bund* (Jewish socialism) and other radical groups and having an

impressive influence on radical and progressive political thought in Europe and America. We will dedicate a class to the bund and their radical cousins, but next week we will first look at the second response: Jewish Nationalism, or Zionism, which advocated for Jews to form their own country where they could ensure they would be able to live in freedom and dignity for themselves. Early Zionism stirred fierce controversy within the Jewish community and outside of it, and we will look at this internal controversy and its reasons, as well as how pre-state Zionism took shape in Palestine.