Between Two Worlds: 
Mendelssohn, Wessely and the Move Toward Modernity

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Abstract

With the advent of modernity in the eighteenth century, came an unprecedented acceptance of Jews into European political and social culture. The European Enlightenment offered the promise of intellectual exchange unburdened by religious zealotry. Jewish thinkers emerged, well versed in both Jewish and contemporary secular thought, who saw no difficulty in reconciling their faith and philosophy. Among them, Moses Mendelssohn, frequently cited as the founder of the Jewish Enlightenment, and Naphtali Herz Wessely. Though both of these thinkers remained steadfast in their observance of Jewish law, traditional rabbinic leaders responded to their writings with suspicion and hostility.

Mendelssohn frequently capitulated to rabbinic pressure, despite the fact that he conceptually rejected the coercive powers of religious authority, as he made clear in Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism, published in 1783. Naphtali Herz Wessely, an ardent admirer of Mendelssohn, and collaborator in the production of the Bi’ur, one of Mendelssohn’s more controversial undertakings, turned to the rabbinic leaders of Italy to spare his reputation when he came under rabbinic attack from figures
such as Ezekiel Landau and David Tavli, for his publication of *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet*, in 1782.

My thesis will explore the tense struggle for authority between the traditional rabbinic elite and the emerging maskilim. I will explore the strategies employed by both Mendelssohn and Wessely to maintain their credibility among those who labeled them as dangerous radicals and suggest possible explanations for their eagerness to remain a part of the traditional Jewish community. I will argue that the early haskalah, as defined by scholars such as David Sorkin, can be differentiated from the later haskalah, not only in terms of the maskilims’ topical concerns, but in their relationship to the rabbinic elite. I will also explain why Wessely, based in Berlin, turned to authorities in Trieste for support.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

The European Enlightenment offered the promise of unprecedented conditions of acceptance of Jews into European society and culture; a new world wherein intellectual exchange was unburdened by religious zealotry. Presented with a burgeoning atmosphere of tolerance, Jewish thinkers emerged, well versed in both Jewish and contemporary European thought, who sought to reconcile their philosophy and their faith. Moses Mendelssohn, commonly known as the father of the Haskalah, respected both within Jewish and general Enlightenment circles, sought to harmonize Judaism with modern philosophical, aesthetic, and rationalist sensibilities. Naphtali Herz Wessely, more a Hebrew grammarian than a philosopher, envisioned an educational curriculum that would prepare Jewish students for engagement with the modern world. Despite these figures’ steadfast observance of Jewish law, traditional rabbinic leaders responded to their writings with suspicion and hostility. More than once Mendelssohn was threatened with excommunication and Wessely found himself estranged from the traditional rabbinate after publishing his opinions concerning curricular reform. Though Mendelssohn famously rejected the power of religious authority to issue bans of excommunication, and Wessely wholeheartedly believed in the merits of his educational program, each struggled to remain within the bounds of the Jewish community.
What was it that the rabbis found so threatening about these characters? After all, both had extensive background in Torah study and remained observant of Jewish law. This study aims to demonstrate that the stakes were higher than simply disagreements concerning interpretation of halakah or the extent of the incorporation of non-Torah related fields of study into Jewish education—and the rabbis were well aware of this fact. Neither Mendelssohn nor Wessely held rabbinic credentials, yet each proposed normative reforms of Jewish life. Their arguments were not based (solely) on their command of religious precepts, but on the strength of their voices as men of reason and enlightenment. These figures were carving out a new sphere of authority within the Jewish world -- one distinct from the traditional rabbinate -- and it was against this that the rabbis reacted so virulently.

Mendelssohn and Wessely made concerted efforts to maintain their footing within the Jewish community and to avoid the stigma of the herem. For Mendelssohn this occasionally meant the involvement of government authorities to stymie the efforts of the rabbis, as in the case of his skillful maneuvering to ensure protection of the Bi’ur. 1 Wessely looked to rabbis of other communities more inclined toward his educational approach to bolster his position and to defend him in the face of attacks launched against him by rabbis in central Europe. Why these figures were determined to remain within the fold of the traditional Jewish community is a question with which this project must reckon. Furthermore, although they fashioned themselves members of the traditional

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Jewish community, their writings contained the seeds of reform that were to germinate in the ideas of later generations of maskilim.

Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem: Or On Religious Power and Authority*, published in 1783, makes clear his stance on the limits of the varieties of power religious leaders may exercise. In particular, he surmises that the capacity for coercion rests only within the sphere of the state, fundamentally undermining the strongest weapon in the rabbinic arsenal—the *herem*. Mendelssohn also argues that only divine legislation was revealed at Sinai; while severely limiting the scope of revelation, he maintains that these laws continue to be of import. *Jerusalem* provides the ideological platform from which Mendelssohn confronted rabbinic authority and therefore is central to this study.

In welcome response to the legislative measures enacted by Joseph II in 1782, that included calling for the re-working of Jewish school curricula, Naphtali Herz Wessely published *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet* (Words of Peace and Truth), encouraging the establishment of Jewish schools that paid serious attention to the study of non-Torah subjects. In this pamphlet Wessely differentiates between *Torat HaElohim*, those commandments explicitly stated in the Torah and preserved through the oral tradition, and *Torat HaAdam*, non-Torah subjects. Although Wessely argues that both are of divine origin, traditional rabbinic figures ostensibly feared the loss of Torah that would result from allotting time to the study of subjects such as German language, Hebrew grammar, geography, ethics, etc.

This piece reflects Wessely’s attitude toward the position Judaism should take with regard to a society increasingly willing to accept members of non-Christian faiths into its midst. The position that Italian rabbinic leaders took toward Wessely’s desperate
appeal to them reveals something about the nature of the controversy and the preoccupation of local rabbis with maintaining their authority. After all, the rabbis of Trieste saw no halakhic problem with the educational reforms suggested by Wessely. Italy comes to assume an idealized place in the imagination of later Jewish reformers who, as a result of the community’s response to Wessely in 1782, believe it to be a community supportive of reform in the shape it took in the 1800’s. Analysis of rabbinic responses from Italy to the innovations in Jewish practice implemented by later reformers in Germany, sheds light on the community’s stance with regard to the position of rabbinic authority.2

Others have attempted to tackle the subject of the implications of Mendelssohn’s Jerusalem for religious life. Notable among them, Kenneth Hart Green, who goes so far as to claim that Mendelssohn, in opposing the herem, revealed his desire to see the emergence of a new denomination in Judaism.3 Green selectively culls from a variety of academic sources—historical, philosophical, sociological, and political—carefully presenting the picture, as he would like it to be seen. According to Green, encouragement of denominationalism does not necessitate radical revision of religious law; the distinguishing mark of denominationalism is challenge of rabbinical authority. Mendelssohn’s continued observance does not serve as proof of his opposition to reform. The challenges he posed to rabbinic authority, in fact, prove the truth of Green’s assertion. Green, however, fails to account for the reality that Mendelssohn took pains to

2 For discussion of the Italian Jewish community I am indebted to Professor Lois Dubin for generously taking of her time to meet with me and sharing her vast knowledge of the subject. I would be remiss to not also note her help with other areas of this study, including piecing out the elements of secularism present in Divrei Shalom Ve’emet.

remain an enfranchised member of the traditional Jewish community, a fact that complicates his argument.

Green believes that denominationalism may not have conflicted with Mendelssohn’s conception of Jewish enlightenment; he may have favored transformation in Judaism so long as it did not affect ritual observance. Green here cites a passage from *Jerusalem*, in which he claims Mendelssohn speaks ambiguously concerning the reformation of Jewish law. When one turns to the passage, however, one sees that Mendelssohn only exaggerates his point regarding obedience to the Jewish law. He plainly states: “[…] So long as we can point to no such authentic exemption from the law [a second revelation from God and no less], no sophistry of ours can free us from the strict obedience we owe to the law.”\(^4\) Return to the primary source indicates that Green utilizes creative interpretation in his analysis.

Perhaps to buttress his reading of *Jerusalem*, Green claims Mendelssohn wrote with the utmost subtlety, “vindicat[ing] Jewish law in a projected liberal society with a quietly revolutionary ideological plan for changing the Jewish community and reorganizing it along denominational lines.”\(^5\) The argument from subtlety is wed to one from silence. Green claims that perhaps Mendelssohn’s lack of response to Dohm’s anticipation of the rise of denominationalism as a result of emancipation, suggests that Mendelssohn shared his view and “his silence signals a tacit endorsement.”\(^6\) An interesting theory, but one hardly supported by the evidence he provides.


\(^6\) Ibid p 48
Green portrays Mendelssohn as cloaking his true subversive opinions through cunning. Moses Mendelssohn’s opposition to rabbinical authority expressed itself in such “prudent” and “conservative” ways that the rabbis most likely missed the radical underside of many of his claims. On this point, as well as his overall presentation of the various conflicts between Mendelssohn and traditional Jewish authority, Green relies on Jacob Katz and Alexander Altmann. In this case, Green footnotes Altmann’s discussion of the conflict emerging surrounding Naphtali Herz Wessely’s publication of *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet* (Words of Peace and Truth) in 1782. Wessely, more than promoting educational reforms, fell in line with his contemporary, Mendelssohn, in calling for a reformulation of Jewish ideology, in which a Jew could be an individual, not bound by the laws of elitist Rabbis. It was the threat to their authority—that did not go unnoticed—that provoked rabbinic figures to respond with such venom.

Wessely, with Mendelssohn’s backing, composed letters, in response to the criticisms hurled against him by rabbinic leaders from their pulpits. Directed to rabbinic authorities in Trieste, Italy, these letters clarified Wessely’s educational stance and revealed his genuine surprise at having been condemned so vituperatively. These responses were familiar to local rabbinic authorities. Mendelssohn took part in Wessely’s defense. He attempted to revive Wessely’s reputation and had, in fact, been the one to send a copy of the original letter to Trieste. After communication with Trieste began, Mendelssohn joined with six other prominent Jewish figures of Berlin in

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7 Ibid p 54
authoring a public letter denouncing those rabbis who wished to see a ban placed on Wessely’s work.\textsuperscript{9}

Altmann and Katz, while they have contributed greatly to the study of Mendelssohn, occasionally miss the nuance of the controversies that arose between Mendelssohn, Wessely, and rabbinic leaders. In relying on their reading of these events, Green forfeits an interpretation of them that could well have strengthened his argument. If Mendelssohn had already begun to clash (more than subtly) with rabbinic authority, he prepared the groundwork-- both theoretical and actual-- for future, more flagrant, confrontation.

David Sorkin has tried to account for the glaring discrepancies between the relatively conservative program of figures such as Mendelssohn and Wessely and the radical reforms adopted by later generations of maskilim. He has called for a reassessment of the early Haskalah (pre-1770, by his reckoning), not as a pre-cursor of what came after it, but as a phenomenon in response to what preceded it, the Judaism of a pre-modern Europe.\textsuperscript{10} In this light, the early Haskalah emerges as a unique entity, with concerns different from its ideological heirs.

Sorkin isolates four central elements of Medieval Judaism: Casuistic study of Talmud (\textit{pilpul}); rise of kabbalah; rejection of Medieval philosophy as well as Hebrew grammar and language in its own right and with reference to the Bible; cultural insularity that led to a neglect of subjects such as foreign languages and science. Early figures of

\textsuperscript{9} Shmuel Feiner, \textit{Mhaphechet haneurot: Tenuot hahaskalah hayehudit bameah ha-18}. (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar Letoldot Yisrael, 2002) p 175
the Haskalah aimed to refashion Judaism, attacking each one of these principles of pre-modern Jewish life. As Sorkin puts it so succinctly:

The early Haskalah was first and foremost an attempt to broaden the curriculum of Ashkenazi Jewry by reviving knowledge of neglected strands of the textual tradition while also engaging with the larger culture. A literal interpretation of the Bible was to replace casuistry as a method of study. Philosophy and biblical exegesis in Hebrew, alongside the study of Hebrew grammar and language, were to displace kabbalah as the major supporting disciplines. And the cultivation of science and knowledge of vernacular languages were to put an end to cultural insularity.\textsuperscript{11}

Sorkin understands this project not as an expression of the ideal of \textit{Bildung}, but rather as an attempt to harmonize Enlightenment culture and Judaism.

Primarily drawn to this pursuit were autodidacts, fluent in both Hebrew and secular texts, doctors with university training, and rabbis with a keen interest in science and language.\textsuperscript{12} Sorkin surveys a number of figures who fit this description, including: Rabbi Solomon Hanau, a self-educated man who focused his studies on Hebrew grammar; the physician, Asher Ansel Worms interested in sharing knowledge of non-Torah related subjects with his fellow Jews; Isaac Wetzlar, a merchant who critiqued contemporary Ashkenazi Jewry; Israel Zamosc, an autodidact who sought to reveal the compatibility of Jewish tradition with philosophy and science; and Aaron Solomon Gumpertz, a doctor who devoted himself to the study of Hebrew language, the sciences, and philosophy. Mendelssohn is counted among this group, although Sorkin does not detail his list of accomplishments. As this early phenomenon lacked any real organization, Sorkin is reluctant to classify it as a cultural movement. The question as to the impact of this early period on the movement that followed remains unresolved.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid p 10
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid p 10
I would like to suggest a different (though not incompatible) approach to differentiating between maskilic figures pre and post 1770: their personal position vis-à-vis traditional Judaism. Those of the generation active prior to 1770 (and who remained active continuing forward), such as Mendelssohn and Wessely, I would argue, understood themselves as firmly entrenched within the sphere of traditional Judaism. Their successors increasingly came to position themselves on the periphery of this community, in some cases, almost excising themselves entirely. Their areas of interest may have shifted, as Sorkin notes, but I would suggest that this move was reflective of their changing point of reference with regard to their footing within the traditional Jewish world. Ideas present in the works of Mendelssohn and Wessely, however, forged a path away from the center, regardless of the authors’ initial intent. This contention is further elucidated in the following chapters, particularly with reference to Wessely’s Divrei Shalom Ve-emet.

Shmuel Feiner has become increasingly interested in the emergence of secularism within European Jewry. He suggests the appearance of secular tendencies well before they are commonly noted, in the era of the Haskalah.\textsuperscript{13} He also points to what he calls an “internal schism” within the Haskalah between conservatives such as Mendelssohn and Wessely and radicals including David Friedlaender and Lazarus Bendavid.\textsuperscript{14} Feiner does not reference the generational gap between the former and the latter; perhaps what he points to is not a break, but an evolution of ideas, a theme central to this study.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid p 5
A more glaring shortcoming of Feiner’s recent work on secularization is his reliance on the writings and preaching of rabbinic figures. It is not unreasonable to imagine that religious figureheads, concerned with the spiritual wellbeing of their community, may have resorted to exaggeration in describing the behaviors of which they disapproved, both in their private writings and in speeches delivered from the pulpit. Feiner, however, understands these as reliable testimonies of the extent to which Jews indulged in secular activities. He brushes aside questions as to the authenticity of their claims: “The preachers of morals may have been excessive in their bitter rhetoric; nonetheless, from early in the century, increasingly louder voices were expressing feelings of unease and concern about the lack of stability, subversive trends, and a decline in the authority of the rabbinical elite.” Volume does not signify validity. Moreover, the majority of voices Feiner references are those of the rabbinical elites well aware of their waning power. Increasing railing against licentiousness may not prove its reality, but it may suggest a rabbinate trying to re-assert its dominance, as I shall suggest concerning some of the same figures’ response to the works of Mendelssohn and Wessely.

This thesis will explore the theological repercussions of changing political conditions as Jews entered the course of general history. Mendelssohn and Wessely, excited to embrace newfound opportunities for Jews, lacked the foresight to see the (perhaps inevitable) implications of the ideas and programs they envisioned. Traditional rabbis, however, understood that these maskilim were attempting to establish a balance

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15 See pp 38, 43, 46, 48, 49, 52, 64, 65 for a mere sampling of references to rabbinic diatribes on subjects ranging from immodesty to accusations of Sabbateanism.

16 Ibid p 32
between Judaism (as it had existed until that point) and European society that was not sustainable.
Chapter 2  
Moses Mendelssohn: Traditionalist Reformer  

Born in 1729 to a family lingering at the bottom of the social ladder, by age twelve Mendelssohn was already familiar with Moses Maimonides’ most esoteric work, the *Guide for the Perplexed*. In later years, it “served Mendelssohn as a bridge from Talmudic Judaism to the religion of reason.”\(^{17}\) Maimonides, condemned in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by traditional rabbis as Mendelssohn was in the eighteenth, attempted to prove the compatibility of philosophy and science with Torah. As a maskil, Mendelssohn attempted to use Maimonides as a medieval paradigm in his endeavor to forge a new elite, equally comfortable in the study of non-Torah subjects as with Talmud and halakha.\(^{18}\)

In 1743, Moses Mendelssohn followed his teacher, David Fränkel, to Berlin. Already an accomplished Torah student, he acquired the necessary language skills to provide him access to the cultural and social life in Berlin, and distinguished himself in intellectual circles. As he emerged as a prominent Jew with far-ranging connections, his writings were open to public scrutiny and affected the political standing of Jews in German-speaking lands. As one noted scholar has stated, Mendelssohn had two goals: “to end the cultural isolation and backwardness of the medieval ghetto and make the

culture of the world acceptable to the Jew,” and “to make Jews acceptable to Christians as their fellow citizens.” Despite pressure exerted on him to convert, Mendelssohn remained loyal to the Jewish tradition and interceded on behalf of respective Jewish communities, using his influence to persuade governments to extend rights to his coreligionists. Mendelssohn scholars have characterized his efforts as an attempt to harmonize Enlightenment thought and traditional Jewish belief. In the words of Simon Rawidowicz, Mendelssohn was, “in modern Jewish history and thought,” the “first bridge-builder between Judaism and non-Judaism.” Despite the sincerity of his efforts, Mendelssohn frequently found himself, as Maimonides before him (and Wessely after him), at odds with leaders of the traditional Jewish community.

In 1755, Mendelssohn, along with a colleague, Tobias Bock, launched the first issue of the Hebrew periodical, *Kohelet Musar*. The publication, targeted a scholarly Jewish audience and aimed to introduce Enlightenment ideas through a medium made popular in England and Germany, the “moral weekly.” In a society in which moral matters were generally the domain of rabbis and religious scholars, these maskilim were taking a decisive step toward asserting their own authority in this field. While they were well versed in Torah, what won them recognition was their philosophical prowess. The goal of the weekly mirrored the overarching goals of the Haskalah, at least in its earliest manifestation: “an enlightened understanding of Judaism and the renaissance of

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The articles that appeared in the publication were masked in traditional language, but Mendelssohn and Bock desired to use it as a medium through which “to disseminate modern values unfamiliar to Ashkenazi society of the time.”

God could be sought not only through Torah study, Mendelssohn tried to convey, but also through the natural sciences. In this too he shared a great deal in common with Moses Maimonides, who wrote of philosophy as a tool to achieve knowledge of the divine. The hope of *Kohelet Musar* was to appeal to a Jewish public whose opinion might combat those of the traditional rabbis, opposed to such ideology.

Mendelssohn’s involvement with the publication was only as an anonymous contributor. According to Alexander Altmann, his participation was not made known, because: “having made a name for himself in philosophy and literary criticism, he saw no need to publicize his authorship of essays that were, in a way, below standard, according to his own judgment.” After all, these were not pieces of the caliber of those that had established him as a leading figure of the Enlightenment; they were composed to achieve a specific aim within the Jewish world. Mendelssohn may, alternatively, have opted for anonymity because he could foresee the negative responses that would emerge from traditional rabbinic leaders. Whenever possible Mendelssohn sought to settle disputes with traditional leadership in haste and through the least public means possible. In this case, he may have decided not to engage this authority altogether.

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The publication did not survive past two issues; its audience was suspicious of the authors’ intentions. Despite its short life, this episode sets a precedent for the strategy Mendelssohn would adopt in future publications directed toward the Jewish community. Treading on the border between traditional and enlightened Judaism, Mendelssohn couched his more “radical” views in traditional Jewish language and media, hoping thereby to make them more palatable to his conservative Jewish audience.

Mendelssohn was already on the radar of the traditional rabbinic community for his involvement in the Enlightenment; confrontation between this modernizer and the guardians of tradition was inevitable. In April of 1772, concerned that individuals were inadvertently being buried alive, the duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin ordered that burial of the dead be delayed by three days. This law conflicted with Jewish practice that demanded that the dead be buried within a day of their passing. Hesitant to tamper with tradition, the Jews of the community petitioned Moses Mendelssohn to intercede on their behalf.

At their request, Mendelssohn wrote to the duke. In the event that the order would not be rescinded, Mendelssohn wrote a letter to the community in which he suggested innovative ways to navigate halakah in order to comport with the decree and expressed his own views on the matter of the community’s entreaty to him. “He came close to chiding them for what he considered an unwarranted reaction to the duke’s order […] There was no danger of burying a seemingly dead person in the ancient period, when the deceased were not interred but placed in caves and watched for three days.” 25 Similar exceptions could be made in the present day.

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25 Ibid p 289
Unbeknownst to Mendelssohn, the community had also sought the advice of Rabbi Jacob Emden, who had forbidden any change in burial practice. A correspondence between the rabbi and the maskil, followed. Wrote Mendelssohn to Emden: “I greatly desire to see my master and teacher’s responsum [so as to learn] how he justified the [prevalent] Jewish practice [of early burial] by true and irrefutable arguments. For I, in my ignorance do not know how to justify it and why we departed from the practice [of laying the deceased in caves] of our saintly forebears of blessed memory.”

Though Mendelssohn wrote with apparent deference to this rabbinic giant, referring to him as a master and teacher, his consternation is apparent, not far beneath the surface. What Mendelssohn requested from the rabbi was not the rhetoric of tradition but the hallmark of reason. Mendelssohn desired to see the strongest argument win as per the standard in Enlightenment circles. In response, Emden warned Mendelssohn: “He should know [...] as one who walks the line between the culture of the Enlightenment and that of the Jews, that some question his orthodoxy and loyalty to Judaism.”

Emden not only makes clear Mendelssohn’s precarious position within traditional Jewish circles, but indicates that, at least to his mind, the culture of the Enlightenment and the culture of the Jews are separate entities. It was this outlook, which enforced a separation between philosophy and faith, that Mendelssohn sought to revise within the Jewish community. Mendelssohn was to clash with traditional leaders on a number of significant issues, emphasizing the growing rift between the rabbinic elite and the emerging maskilim.

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26 Ibid p 290
The *Bi’ur*, published by Mendelssohn in 1783, aroused the ire of influential, traditional Jewish figures. The work, the product of a collaborative effort, was comprised of the five books of the Pentateuch translated into Judeo-German, with Hebrew commentary proffered by maskilic individuals, including Naphtali Herz Wessely. The project was motivated by a dual desire to produce a Bible translation devoid of Christian theological references or implications as well as to introduce high-German prose to Jewish communities within a familiar framework.\(^{28}\) A German version of the Bible offered an alternative to Yiddish, a language Mendelssohn regarded with disdain.\(^{29}\) Those who participated in the translation attached high hopes to the project. Indeed, they saw it as the first step toward the introduction of German culture into traditional Jewish circles.\(^{30}\) The *Bi’ur* subtly encouraged Jews to adopt elements of the surrounding culture, to gain the language skills needed to expand their educational opportunities and, in turn, to produce a culture uniquely their own, centered around the Hebrew language.\(^{31}\) The reception of the *Bi’ur* in the traditionalist world comes as no surprise, as in Shmuel Feiner’s view, this undertaking related directly to progressive Enlightenment thought.

Shortly after publication of the work, rumors reached Mendelssohn that Rabbi Ezekiel Landau of Prague desired to ban the *Bi’ur*. Confirmed reports then arrived that Rabbi Kohen of Altona, incensed by the work, wished to excommunicate its author and

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was seeking the support of fellow rabbis to issue a ban against the *Bi’ur*.\(^{32}\) “The more the *Bi’ur* was presented as a focus of elementary Jewish education, the more these rabbis feared that the study of the Bible would jeopardize the Talmud’s position of primacy.”\(^{33}\) Landau also raised the objection that too much time would be devoted to analyzing and understanding the German grammar, rather than the content of the work.

Moreover, Mendelssohn had also not sought a *haskamah* (a rabbinic approbation, or “stamp of approval”) to appear at the beginning of his work. *Haskamot* had allowed rabbis to maintain a certain degree of control over published works. Mendelssohn argued that his was a textbook, not Jewish literature and therefore did not need the customary rabbinic approval. Shmuel Feiner points to a more subversive motive at play: “His [Mendelssohn’s] intention was to draw a clear boundary between the rabbinical elite’s sphere of authority and the literary project of the Jewish maskilim.”\(^{34}\) The maskilim did not seek nor did they need rabbinic approval for their endeavor; they were entitled to produce writings on their own authority.

Mendelssohn responded to Kohen’s threat, not by engaging him directly, but by arranging, through an acquaintance, August Hennings, for Kohen’s sovereign, Christian VII, to obtain a subscriptio n of his translation. “Hennings' success in this endeavor greatly enhanced the prestige of the maskilic literary project and earned it a measure of immunity from its opponents' machinations.”\(^{35}\) Mendelssohn successfully arrested the developing crisis before it had a chance to come to a head. In a preface to the finished


\(^{34}\) Ibid p 128

\(^{35}\) Ibid p 128
product, perhaps in a concession to the rabbis or eager to re-assert his traditionalist leanings, Mendelssohn wrote of the continuing significance of the Jewish tradition, citing his preference for traditional interpretation of the Biblical language in the body of the work.\footnote{Ibid p 131} In asserting his authority, Mendelssohn did not seek the approval of rabbis, but went directly to the public with his ideas. Mendelssohn did not argue his case through engaging in ideological battles with the rabbinic elite; his works were directed to the Jewish public, intended to encourage public discourse. Enlightenment thinkers generally addressed more than an audience of one in their writings, hoping for public consumption of their works and individual digestion of their ideas. As with Kohelet Musar, Mendelssohn directed his work to the public, hoping to effect change within the Jewish community, “from the ground up.”

Mendelssohn’s more philosophical work, Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism, published in 1783, appeared as a response to an attack of his reconceived notion of the proper sphere of religion. In 1780, Mendelssohn had requested that Christian Wilhelm von Dohm (a scholar of law, statistics, and history, active in Enlightenment circles in Berlin, who later assumed a position in the Prussian Parliament)\footnote{The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) p 36} compose a memorandum in favor of the emancipation of the Jews. Although Dohm obliged, Mendelssohn was not fully satisfied with the work and penned his concerns in the introduction to a German rendition of Manasseh Ben Israel’s Vindiciae Judaeorum, a 1655 plea for permission of the entrance of Jews into England.\footnote{Ibid p 10} An anonymous critique of the introduction (later found to have been written by August Friedrich Cranz) claimed
that Mendelssohn had “undermined the authority of Judaism with his blanket critique of the legitimacy of any form of religious coercion.”

Mendelssohn was concerned not only that Christians accept Jews’ right to uphold their religion undisturbed by missionary activity and to engage in intellectual debates in a neutral sphere, but that Jews be accepted as fellow citizens. To accomplish this, Mendelssohn had to reasonably prove that religion was, appropriately, a matter of private concern and that Judaism and Jews were suited to citizenship. *Jerusalem*, written in German, a language with which only a minority of Jews had any familiarity, was intended primarily for a non-Jewish audience. In it, Mendelssohn first demarcates between the spheres of religion and the state, and then presents a re-formulation of Judaism such that it comports with reason and modern norms, paving the way toward the acceptability of Jewish citizenship.

Perhaps this accounts for the failure of Mendelssohn’s Judaism to remain of continued significance to future generations (even to his own children). To make Judaism tolerable as a faith and thereby make Jews tolerable as citizens, he had to strip Judaism of many of its traditional elements— to take but one example, commandments became simply divine legislation, tools to encourage higher rational thought. Concerned with Judaism in the present, Mendelssohn did not focus on Judaism of the future. His writings, therefore, were easily manipulated by future maskilim and reformers into defenses for their transformations of religion as they moved increasingly further from traditional Judaism.

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In Part I of *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn addresses the individual’s right to freedom of conscience. Man’s realization that he cannot “fulfill his duties toward himself and toward the author of his existence,”\(^{40}\) on his own, naturally results in the formation of societies, Mendelssohn writes. Here he offers a portrait of the generation of states, akin to the writings of philosophers such as Hobbes and Rousseau. But, he does more: Mendelssohn posits that society is a necessary condition for religious life. Mendelssohn attempted to restrict his religious practice to his private life, though he was frequently forced to discuss his faith in the public arena.

Within the private domain, others are needed to fulfill religious obligations. Judaism is a social practice, structured around its own set of rituals. These shared rituals are necessary to the preservation of the religion, as it was understood by Mendelssohn. Future Berlin reformers, eager to spiritualize religious life and declare ceremonial law irrelevant, would claim Mendelssohn as a precedent for their reformulation of Jewish life. In his discussion of the role of society and ultimately the state, Mendelssohn reveals a basic element of his religious philosophy, bespeaking the central role of ritual observance in his conception of Judaism. This underscores the intertwined nature of Mendelssohn’s political and religious thinking.

Mendelssohn clearly demarcates between the sphere of religion and the sphere of government: neither should impose on the other. The domains may be defined by the parties involved, “the relations of men to each other,” are the concern of the state, while “relations of men to their Creator and Keeper,” are relegated to religion, alone.\(^{41}\) Mendelssohn expects the state to act for the betterment of the people, but with due


\(^{41}\) Ibid p 41
recourse to knowledge and reason\textsuperscript{42} (as evidenced by his interactions with rabbinic authority, he expected religion to be conversant with these same elements). The state, however, is ultimately concerned with men’s outwardly directed actions, not their “inner felicity,” and this secures a power withheld from religion: “If the inner felicity of society cannot be entirely preserved, let at least outward peace and security be obtained, if need be, through coercion.”\textsuperscript{43} The state cares simply for the preservation of society, which entails that its citizens observe its laws. If need be, the state may resort to force to ensure that laws are upheld. Mendelssohn supports his contention that religion should not have recourse to this same power.

He firmly asserts that neither religion nor government has the power to coerce belief: “neither church nor state has a right to subject men’s principles and convictions to any coercion whatsoever.”\textsuperscript{44} The state may regulate action; human convictions, he argued, were to remain free from state or religious pressures. Excommunication, a tool of religious coercion would, therefore, extend beyond the powers permitted to religious authorities. Mendelssohn reiterated this point in no uncertain terms: “Excommunication and the right to banish […] are diametrically opposed to the spirit of religion,”\textsuperscript{45} which Mendelssohn imagined as nurturing the moral character of the state. Furthermore, Mendelssohn was concerned with reshaping Judaism in such a way that it was “devoid of illiberal doctrines and theocratic tendencies […] that would be capable of serving as a

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid p 43
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid p 44 emphasis in the translation
\textsuperscript{44} Moses Mendelssohn, Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism. Allan Arkush, translator. (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1983) p 70
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid p 73
civil religion." Mendelssohn couches his defense of this position in a conversation regarding perfect and imperfect rights. Perfect rights are equivalent to man’s natural rights, best understood within the state of nature: man’s “free use of his powers and capacities,” as well as “the free use of whatever he has produced by exercising them.” Imperfect rights belong to his fellow men who have “a right to petition” him for goods, but only he can transform their imperfect right into a perfect one, by extending the goods to them. Once theirs, the circumstances have been reversed: they now have a perfect right to them, and the original owner only an imperfect right. In Mendelssohn’s words: “My neighbor’s previously imperfect right must have become, through this transaction, a perfect right, just as my formerly perfect right must have been transformed into an imperfect right.” Man may cede his perfect rights to a government for the sake of the creation of a functional society; concerned only with equity in the dealings of men, the state may coerce action. “Not so the church!”

God has no need for the property or objects which man has through perfect rights. Moreover, the rights of God and man never conflict. “He wants only what is best for us, what is best for every single individual […]”. Therefore, there is no need to enter into a

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48 Ibid p 53
49 Ibid
50 Ibid p 57
51 Ibid p 59
contract with God of the sort man must enter into with his fellow man for the sake of an orderly society. It follows from this reasoning, that the church has no imperfect right to man’s property whether it be physical or spiritual. “The only rights possessed by the church are to admonish, to instruct, to fortify, and to comfort […] Nor has the church any right to reward or to punish actions […] religious actions, by their very nature, permit neither coercion or bribery.” Mendelssohn curtails the purview of religious authority. Coercion would be contrary to the nature of religious actions, which either: “flow from the free impulse of the soul, or they are an empty show and contrary to the free spirit of religion.” Religious actions are worthless if they do not stem immediately from man’s soul, without external motivation (such as the demands of the church). Mendelssohn reserves what he understands as the significance of ritual observance for the second part of his work.

Mendelssohn’s disciples, more concerned than their teacher with advancing the cause of Jewish emancipation rather than with adherence to traditional Judaism, would offer radical solutions to make their coreligionists more palatable to the host society. To take but one example, David Friedlaender would offer an approach, offensive to Jews and Christians alike, that Jews undergo a so-called “dry baptism,” outwardly adopting Christian ritual, while retaining a Jewish identity. While he claimed to be carrying forth Mendelssohn’s ideology to its natural conclusion, he overlooked Mendelssohn’s statement concerning the fundamental nature of religious action. Ritual cannot be devoid

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52 Ibid p 60
53 Ibid
of spiritual substance; without that, ritual is meaningless. External action must reflect internal devotion.

In Part II of the work Mendelssohn responds to the critique that his interpretation of the sphere of religion contradicts the faith of his fathers and offers a more extensive interpretation of the essence of Jewish ritual observance. Mendelssohn poignantly writes that the accusation that he has deserted the Judaism of his ancestors: “cuts me to the heart.”\(^{55}\) He clarifies his position, while simultaneously radically redefining Judaism and defending his beliefs against his objectors. In line with Enlightenment thinking, that favored no religion over another nor extended the coercive power of excommunication to religious authorities, he accepted and propounded the notion that all religions may pave the way to temporal and eternal felicity. He writes that he believes in no eternal truths “other than those that are not merely comprehensible to human reason but can also be demonstrated and verified by human powers.”\(^{56}\) What Judaism professes that distinguishes it from Christianity, is:

A divine legislation—laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal and eternal felicity. Propositions and prescriptions of this kind were revealed to them by Moses in a miraculous and supernatural manner, but no doctrinal opinions, no saving truths, no universal propositions of reason. These the eternal reveals to us and to all other men, at all times, through nature and thing, but never through word and script.\(^{57}\)

Eternal truths are discovered through the application of the rational faculty to the workings of the world, not revealed by God to any man or nation at any time in history.

While upholding the traditional belief of a revelation at Sinai, Mendelssohn undermines

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\(^{55}\) Ibid p 85  
\(^{56}\) Ibid p 89 emphasis in the translation  
\(^{57}\) Ibid p 90 emphasis in the translation
the scope of that revelation. Jews possess no unique access to truth, only proscriptions dictating praxis. Moreover, this legislation is not the only tool for attaining personal felicity: “the means of attaining it are as widespread as mankind itself [...]”\(^{58}\) Having reduced Biblical commandments to mere legislation, Mendelssohn must offer reasons for their continued relevance.

Mendelssohn simultaneously affirms the continuing validity of Judaism and argues for equal standing for his coreligionists among their Christian neighbors. Mendelssohn proposes that although the divine law does not primarily consist of “rational truths,” they may be found within it, entwined with the legislation presented at Sinai.

Although the divine book that we received through Moses is, strictly speaking, meant to be a book of laws containing ordinances, rules of life and prescriptions, it also includes, as is well known, an inexhaustible treasure of rational truths and religious doctrines which are so intimately connected with the laws that they form but one entity.\(^{59}\)

Dismissal of the laws in favor of another means of achieving temporal and eternal felicity would entail the dismissal of a document known to contain eternal truths! Why shun a tradition that so seamlessly provides both the means of instruction towards felicity and ensures its attainment?

Furthermore, “Ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation and to provide the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction.”\(^{60}\) Ceremonial practices create “educational opportunities” for youth, during which they may learn from their elders. Mendelssohn stresses this point:

\(^{58}\) Ibid p 94
\(^{59}\) Ibid p 90
\(^{60}\) Ibid p 103
In everything a youth saw being done, in all public as well as private dealings, on all gates and on all doorposts, in whatever he turned his eyes or ears to, he found occasion for inquiring and reflecting, occasion to follow an older and wiser man at his every step, to observe his minutest actions and doings with childlike attentiveness and to imitate them with childlike docility, to inquire after the spirit and the purpose of those doings and to seek the instruction which his master considered him capable of absorbing and prepared to receive.  

Religious observance ensures a life of contemplation, in this configuration. Ceremonial law points the mind to higher truths that are attainable through human reason, and contribute to a life of inner felicity.

According to Mendelssohn, “truths” may be classified into two categories: eternal and historical. Eternal truths may be arrived at on the basis of reason, whereas historical truths may be verified only by those who experience them, “by means of the senses,” and accepted by others “on authority and testimony.” This is the case with regard to the revelation at Sinai which Mendelssohn deems a historical truth. Mendelssohn suggests the possibility of accepting something based on a foundation other than reason. Reason may lead one to accept another’s authority, but reason alone cannot prove the validity of a historical truth. In his argument for the evolution of individual man, (rather than mankind as a whole) Mendelssohn asserts: “Providence never misses its goal.” Here Mendelssohn recognizes a power that guides the overall machinations of mankind. Perhaps Mendelssohn would have argued for the maintenance of Jewish law on these grounds, dependent on faith. Man must accept the notion of a divine plan, or a “goal of Providence” that requires the Israelites and their descendants to remain loyal to the ceremonial observances presented to them at Sinai. At this point in the Enlightenment,

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61 Ibid p 119
62 Ibid p 93
63 Ibid p 96
the rationality of religious belief was not a question; the question was to which religion it made the most sense to adhere.

The Israelites were charged with divine legislation, from which they may not waver:

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, remained faithful to the Eternal, and sought to preserve among their families and descendants pure concepts of religion, far removed from all idolatry. And now their descendants were chosen by Providence to be a *priestly* nation: that is, a nation which, through its establishment and constitution, through its laws, actions, vicissitudes, and changes was continually to call attention to sound and unadulterated ideas of God and his attributes. It was incessantly to teach, to proclaim, and to endeavor to preserve these ideas among the nations, by means of its mere existence, as it were.⁶⁴

The Israelites, as well as their descendants, were singled out by Providence to be a nation of priests, who, through their very existence, would spread the notion of the one God among the other nations. God invested the Jews with a collective responsibility that they may not shed without divine permission. No matter if an individual Jew has found a new means to attain temporal and eternal felicity, he is still bound by the obligation to be part of a larger community charged with maintaining and proclaiming the acceptance of the one God. “What divine law commands, reason […] cannot abolish.”⁶⁵

The Jews maintain their own path toward achieving felicity in this world and the hereafter, at odds with no other means. Mendelssohn refuses to cede observance of divine legislation in return for emancipation (as were his successors): “We cannot in good conscience depart from the law […]”.⁶⁶ He pleads for the admittance of Jews into society, so that they may be shown the ways of “becoming better men and better fellow

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⁶⁴ Ibid p 118  
⁶⁵ Ibid p 130  
⁶⁶ Ibid p 135
inhabitants [...].” Mendelssohn internalized rhetoric, common in his day and projected by Dohm in his writings advocating change in the Jews’ civil status, that Jews have become unsuitable for citizenship because of their despised condition, maintained for generations by external forces. The extension of citizenship, or at very least the recognition of Jews as fellow inhabitants (a step in the direction of emancipation), would transform the Jews into productive members of society. In Jerusalem, Mendelssohn has attempted to reconfigure Judaism so as to make it acceptable to an enlightened audience.

This work provoked little response from the traditional Jewish community, despite its radical claims. Written in German, Jerusalem, aimed at an enlightened audience, was less accessible to the Jewish community than the Bi’ur, targeted primarily at a Jewish readership. In light of the limits Mendelssohn placed on religious authority in Jerusalem, one wonders why he chose to respond diplomatically to the threat of excommunication that his Bi’ur elicited. It is worthy of note that Mendelssohn did not publicly confront his opponents, instead opting to utilize his connections to resolve the matter before it developed into a crisis. This is a central question that has yet to receive adequate attention.

Mendelssohn devoted much of his writing on Jewish matters to an insistence on the synthesis between traditional Jewish belief and the philosophical trends of his day. Any fissure in his relationship with the Jewish community may have had a deleterious effect on the way in which the sovereigns of the German speaking lands--in which Mendelssohn was an influential and recognizable personality--viewed the Jewish

67 Ibid p 135
communities within their borders. After all, the Jews were treated as one group; any internal conflict may have had negative consequences on regulations relating to Jews. Against that backdrop, perhaps Mendelssohn acted on behalf of the greater Jewish good by silencing the call for his excommunication despite the fact that it ran contrary to his strongly formulated principle of the limits of the sphere of religious authority.

Some scholars have posited that Mendelssohn was unable to harmonize his religious convictions and his philosophical truths and that he maintained his commitment to Judaism solely on the basis of a connection to the religion that he developed during his childhood. Allan Arkush, for example, suggests that: “it does not, in the end, require any great leap of the imagination to conceive of Mendelssohn as a naturalist who was merely assuming the guise of a faithful Jew.” If Arkush’s conjecture is true and Mendelssohn’s adherence to Judaism rested solely on a feeling of sentimentality, it follows that Mendelssohn would have been horrified by the prospect of being severed from the community to which he felt so firmly bonded. If, however, Mendelssohn, as he claimed, remained an adherent of the Jewish faith, then his ideas marked the beginning of a “new Judaism,” and a reshaping of Jewish identity. If he wished that the ideology he espoused eventually influence the Jewish community it was crucial for him to remain an accepted member of that community and to lobby for change from within.

Many of Mendelssohn’s ideas, including his understanding of the deterioration of the Jewish condition, were echoed by Napthali Herz Wessely. The overarching concern of many of the maskilim was the amelioration of the political status of the Jews. To this

end, Mendelssohn understood and interpreted Judaism along rational lines, radically revising the way it had traditionally been understood. Wessely identified with this course, arguing in favor of Habsburg legislation dictating the revision of Jewish curriculum such that it included study of the vernacular and non-Torah subjects. Education in such subjects would protect the Jews against becoming objects of ridicule at the hand of their Christian hosts. Jews had to show willingness to adapt to modern society, in order to be welcomed politically, socially, and intellectually. Such education, Wessely argued, in no way conflicted with Jewish teaching.
Chapter 3

Divrei Shalom Ve-emet, From Berlin to Trieste

In late 1781, continuing into 1782, Joseph II promulgated a series of laws, known as the Edicts of Tolerance, intended to encourage the integration of Jews into the Habsburg Monarchy. Even contemporaries realized how extraordinary this policy aim was for a Christian European state. Unlike his mother, Maria Theresa, who was interested in advancing the Catholic cause, “Joseph saw the state as a purely civil entity.” He sought to harness the utility of his subjects to the benefit of his empire. Restrictions regulating Jewish participation in trade and crafts were rescinded. Most significant to a Hebrew grammarian residing in Prussia, His Majesty’s legislation extended to the realm of education:

As it is Our goal to make the Jewish nation useful and serviceable to the State, mainly through better education and enlightenment of its youth […] We hereby grant and order: Graciously that the tolerated Jews may send their children to the Christian primary and secondary schools so that they have at least the opportunity to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. And although they do not have in Our capital a real synagogue, We nonetheless allow them to establish for their children […] a school of their own, organized in the standard fashion with teachers of their own religion […] Their future primary school will be under the aforementioned administration like all local German primary schools […]

70 Ibid. p 68
By 1782, Naphtali Herz Wessely already had a list of accomplishments to his name. Born in 1725, in Hamburg, Wessely spent a large part of his childhood in Copenhagen. He received a religious education at the yeshiva of Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschuetz. Aside from his fluency in religious matters, Wessely read literature and scientific works in multiple European languages. He “accomplished a remarkable synthesis of rabbinic learning and pursuits in secular sciences. Versed in a number of modern languages, he was above all deeply in love with Biblical Hebrew, which he mastered in superb fashion.”

In 1765, motivated by the desire to resurrect the study of Biblical Hebrew, and concerned that his co-religionists properly understand the original text of Scripture, Wessely published *Gan Naul* (A Locked Garden), intended to acquaint its reader with the roots of Hebrew words. Wessely was convinced that a proper reading of the text would prove the accuracy of rabbinic exegesis. Moreover, true appreciation for midrashic or Talmudic texts could only be achieved, according to Wessely, by those who had a thorough understanding of the language of the Bible. Wessely’s Hebrew prowess manifested itself in others of his works, including *Yein Levanon* (Wine of Lebanon), published a decade later, a commentary on the mishnaic tract, *Avot*, with a strong linguistic focus.

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Business took Wessely to Berlin where he made the acquaintance of Mendelssohn and collaborated with him in producing the *Bi’ur*, penning a commentary on Leviticus. Shortly after its appearance, in 1782, Wessely published “*Mehalal Reah*” (Praise of a Friend), in which he lauded Mendelssohn for his newly published translation and introduced ideas that were to form the basis of his later work, *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet*. Wessely was primarily known as a poet; the most well known of his poetic works, *Shirei Tiferet* (Songs of Glory) details the life of Moses and the Israelites’ Exodus from Egypt. In extolling the ancestral Jewish leader, known in Hebrew as *Moshe Rabeinu* (Moses our teacher), Wessely more than likely had in mind the man whom he considered the “modern Moses,” Moses Mendelssohn.

Wessely was a strong advocate and defender of rabbinic tradition. His diatribes against those who sought to undermine its authenticity have been described as betraying a “deep seated hostility born of anxious concern.” As a maskil, familiar with Enlightenment culture, he was not unaware of those who negated the veracity of rabbinic tradition. “Clearly he saw his work […] as supporting a neglected body of learning that could serve to bolster traditional strictures and defend rabbinic Judaism […] In Wessely’s mind, the need to defend Jewish traditions had become paramount.” Surely Wessely was not one who wanted to see the collapse of rabbinic authority.

78 Ibid
80 Ibid p 36
Although he remained an observant Jew, he read modern newspapers and philosophical works, and adopted the common style of dress of his day. Wessely attempted to live in two worlds at once: the Jewish world and the world of the Enlightenment. According to Jacob Katz, he was “an example of a divided orientation that resulted from the penetration of Enlightenment into the closed Jewish world […]”

Wessely attempted to push the boundaries of the “closed Jewish world” and to incorporate it into the larger, surrounding world of secular thought.

In response to the reforms of Joseph II, Wessely urged the traditionalist Jewish community to reform its instructional curriculum. He encouraged, in Divrei Shalom Ve-emet, the incorporation of subjects such as philosophy, mathematics, and geography, among others, into a curriculum that concerned itself solely with Torah-related instruction. As he wrote to Mendelssohn, “All the words of truth are the sons of one God, belief, Torah, the true tradition, nature, appropriate intellectual investigation, all are from one Shepherd given from the Lord, the true God, and happy is the one who strengthens his faith with intellectual wonders.” Wessely desired to see the creation of an ideal, intellectual Jewish culture in which the individual Jew would be learned, well mannered, and a rationalist thinker; these qualities served as markers of success, in Wessely’s opinion, for a Jew in the modern world.

Divrei Shalom Ve-emet, written as a pamphlet, was circulated as an open letter, intended to inspire discussion about the state of Jewish education and to call for its

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81 Shmuel Feiner, Mhaphechet haneurot: Tenuot hahaskalah hayehudit bameah ha-18 (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar Letoldot Yisrael, 2002) p 127
83 Shmuel Feiner, Mhaphechet haneurot: Tenuot hahaskalah hayehudit bameah ha-18 (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar Letoldot Yisrael, 2002) p 45
84 Ibid p 158
reform. Wessely favored the educational program of Joseph II, “provided it could be reconciled with a thoroughgoing education in Hebrew culture.” Written in Hebrew with numerous references to Biblical passages, the work was intended for a Jewish audience, though not an exclusively rabbinic one. Wessely was not a philosopher of Mendelssohn’s caliber and his publication focused more on the creation of a new program of religious education than the formulation of philosophical principles.

The short work opens with a quotation from the book of Proverbs, traditionally ascribed to King Solomon: “Said the wisest of all men: educate the child according to his way (path), and even when he grows old, he will not deviate from it.” Wessely immediately positions himself within the traditional world and grounds his assertions in a Biblical proof-text. Only a few paragraphs later, he makes a radical distinction, foreign to the traditional mindset, between Torat HaElohim, those commandments explicitly stated in the Torah and preserved through the oral tradition, and Torat HaAdam, non-Torah subjects. Under the latter he subsumes such subjects as history, arithmetic, astronomy, as well as knowledge of the workings of the world, and understanding of human machinations.

Torat HaAdam may be deciphered through the power of human reason, without divine intervention. In fact, this understanding explains the rabbinic dictum: “Derek eretz kadmah l’Torah,” literally the ways of the land preceded the Torah. In Wessely’s historical calculations, from the creation of the first man until Moses revealed divine legislation, human beings were governed solely by Torat HaAdam, the seven Noahide

85 Alexander Altmann, Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1973) p 479
86 Naphtali Herz Wessely, Divrei Shalom Ve-emet, p 1
87 Ibid pp 3-4
88 Ibid p 2
laws and their ilk. The significance of these varied disciplines is reinforced by reference to them as Torah, a term generally designated for the Pentateuch. Furthermore, through an internalization of Torat HaAdam a person may arrive at a better understanding of Torat HaElohim. For Wessely, one who lacks knowledge of Torat HaElohim, but is well versed in Torat HaAdam may be of benefit to others; however the opposite does not hold true. One who only possesses knowledge of Torat HaElohim without grounding in Torat HaAdam, is despised.

This distinction between Torat HaAdam, and Torat HaElohim, betrays the influence of what might be called secularism in Wessely’s thinking. Traditionally, the Torah was understood as encompassing both sorts of knowledge, wisdom divined through reason as well as divine legislation. To take a medieval example, Moses Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher and exegete, was keen to show the compatibility of Torah with accepted scientific principles. In Maimonides’ day, this meant an Aristotelian understanding of the nature of the universe, however, his writings leave unanswered, questions relating to the creation and eternity of the world. Significant for Maimonides was the grounding of all scientific reasoning within the words of Scripture. Maimonides suggests that scientific knowledge may be discerned through careful and studied reading of the Bible. To impose Wessely’s categorization, Torat HaAdam is encompassed within Torat HaElohim if only through intimation; the two spheres of knowledge overlap.

Wessely, interested in incorporation of contemporary ideas within traditional Judaism, a project similar to that of Maimonides in certain ways, separates these
intellectual spheres: Torat HaAdam, the universal sphere of natural reason and Torat HaElohim, the sphere of knowledge particular to Judaism. Figures such as Mendelssohn and Wessely straddled both spheres of knowledge; although without rabbinic credentials they drew their authority as public figures from the realm of Torat HaAdam. As Wessely contends, even those Jews, inheritors of both spheres of knowledge, who only achieve mastery of Torat HaAdam, are praiseworthy and benefit not only their spiritual nation, but the nation within which they reside.

Wessely’s emphasis on the origin of both spheres of knowledge from God reflects his similarity to other early maskilim, who aligned themselves more closely with traditional Judaism than did the generations that followed. While Wessely demarcated between the two spheres, he ultimately joined them to the divine, from whom all knowledge emanates. Although a distinction is introduced, “into the hitherto seamless unity of the Jewish religious sources […] all of it-- including the ‘law of man’ -- is the command of God; ostensibly, therefore Wessely said nothing new, nothing that was not rooted in the Law.”

Increasingly, this conjunction of the two spheres, in maskilic writings, diminished. Maskilim who originally situated themselves with a foot in both worlds, who called for recognition of traditional authority, became less interested in association with or approval from rabbinic leaders. Torat HaAdam became increasingly secular with little or no reference to its corresponding sphere. Torat HaElohim became the sole domain of rabbis. It is unclear whether Wessely, so committed to his cause and perhaps

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92 Ibid p 9
unaware of the radical nature of his claims, recognized the implications of his defining of
two distinct intellectual spheres. Whether or not Divrei Shalom Ve-emet served to further
the cause of later maskilim who anchored Torat HaAdam, entirely in reason, it reveals a
shift in contemplation of the association of the two types of knowledge to one another,
which played itself out in later generations.

Wessely, after defining the particulars of the two spheres, offers a portrait of their
flourishing and ultimate decay within the history of Jewish education. Original Jewish
settlement in the Land of Israel, in Wessely’s imagination, involved education of children
in both domains of knowledge-- Torat HaAdam and Torat HaElohim-- and the structure
of community life around God’s law.\textsuperscript{94} Wessely chastises the contemporary reader for
neglecting the study of Torat HaAdam in the present age, focusing attention solely on
those commandments explicitly stated in the Torah or preserved as part of the oral law.
Wessely, however, pardons his audience, claiming that the neglect of Torat HaAdam has
been due, in part, to the hardships that Jews endured in exile. Their embittered condition
fostered a mentality of despair; Jews abandoned the study of those matters dealing with
the affairs of state, as they regarded their rulers as oppressors.\textsuperscript{95}

After painting a moribund portrait of Jewish life since the dispersal of the Jewish
people unto the ends of the earth, Wessely writes enthusiastically of the then current
situation of the Jews. He praises the “great Kaiser Joseph II” who has not forgotten a
long-ignored people and has provided them with a host of new opportunities, including
the ability to enter into professions of their choosing. This new situation has emphasized

\begin{footnotes}
\item[94] Naphtali Herz Wessely, Divrei Shalom Ve-emet, p 8
\item[95] Ibid pp 11-12
\end{footnotes}
the embarrassing inability of the majority of Jews to speak the language of the land in which they reside, a deficiency impeding interaction with their fellow countrymen.96

Wessely does not miss an opportunity to praise Moses Mendelssohn for providing modern Jews with a Bible in clear, intelligible German, 97 a translation that provides an essential learning tool for Jewish youth, who, from an early age, can become accustomed to the German language.98 The Hebrew of Scripture cannot properly be understood by students unless they have reference to the vernacular (in which they should be fluent). Students educated in German from a young age will be in a better position to master the Hebrew of the Bible.99 The danger implicit in misunderstanding of the Hebrew is the strength of the pull to hedonism, if students are not properly grounded in the ways of Torah.100

Wessely attempts to strengthen his case by suggesting, as he has previously, that knowledge of the ways of the world enhances understanding of the divine law. Here Wessely does not merely argue a theory, but provides practical examples. Knowledge of the general operations of a government as well as an understanding of the history of territorial conquests aids in understanding those passages in the Bible that deal with the original settlement of the Land of Israel by the liberated Israelites. Once a person has grasped the workings of the nations related in the Bible, he urges, it becomes clear for what reasons they turned their backs on the Divine (this, in keeping with traditional Jewish understanding that humankind initially recognized the One God), leading God to

96 Ibid p 16
97 Ibid p 18
98 Ibid p 24
99 Ibid p 23
100 Ibid p 24
enter into a covenant with Abraham and ultimately, all of Israel. For Wessely, as for Mendelssohn, the laws presented to Abraham’s descendants at Sinai are the distinguishing mark of God’s chosen people.\textsuperscript{101}

The quotation with which Wessely opens the work, serves not only to qualify him as a master of Biblical texts, but to introduce a revolutionary theory of pedagogy. “Educate the child according to his way,” according to Wessely, should be understood to mean that every child must be educated according to his level of understanding. No child may advance in his learning, without mastering the preceding lesson. Wessely offers but a glimpse of a spiral curriculum, each subject intended to enhance understanding of the next: reading and grammar to be followed by study of Torah, faith, and some ethics, graduating to Mishnah and Bereitot, culminating in the study of Talmud.\textsuperscript{102} No child, in Wessely’s opinion, should be forced to study subjects that do not appeal to him, but should instead be encouraged in those areas for which he shows an aptitude.\textsuperscript{103} After all, “Not all of us were created to be masters of Talmud […] God has differentiated between souls, and has given to each its [unique] strength from the time of its creation, and each one will continue its education according to its interest and its strength.”\textsuperscript{104} This marked a radical departure from the prevailing traditional educational system that placed significant emphasis on mastery of different, specified elements of Torah learning, particularly Talmud.

Wessely employs a number of strategies intended to couch his radical ideas within the realm of accepted Jewish thinking. In choosing to write in the first person, he places

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid p 19
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid p 32
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid p 34
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid pp 32-33
himself within the community he addresses.\textsuperscript{105} He frequently invokes the image of the
Israelites, in their state, functioning according to the laws of Torat HaAdam, lending
historical validity to his construction of the existence of such a sphere. Wessely was
careful to choose language that would evoke Biblical references, adding weight to his
argument that his proposed reforms were anything but radical. Many times this language
is subtle, recognizable only to one with considerable Jewish textual knowledge. In
chapter eight, to cite but one example, he counsels his reader that the task of introducing
new materials into the traditional curriculum will prove challenging. However, he adds:
“there is reward for your toil” (ki yesh sachar l’peuloteichem)\textsuperscript{106} echoing the passage in
Jeremiah (31:16) in which God comforts Rachel. When the Jewish matriarch cries to
God upon “seeing” her children sent into exile, God assures her that her crying has not
been for naught, there will be a reward for her effort (ki yesh sachar le-peuloteich), as the
Jewish people will return from the lands of their enemies.

In attempting to place his new educational philosophy within the realm of Torah
and historical Israel, Wessely took a path followed by thinkers before him, most notably,
Moses Maimonides, to whom a comparison has already been drawn. The works of both
figures were to share a similar fate. Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed (begun in 1178
and finished in approximately 1191) became the center of heated debate and controversy,
in the Jewish world, soon after its release and in the centuries thereafter. Though
Maimonides’ intention in authoring the Guide was to reconcile religion and philosophy
for those who had begun to question their faith, his work was attacked on the grounds
that his philosophical rationale was incompatible with Judaism. The function of The

\textsuperscript{105} Shmuel Feiner, Mhaphechet haneurot: Tenuot hahaskalah hayehudit bameah ha-18 (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar Letoldot Yisrael, 2002) p 128
\textsuperscript{106} Naphtali Herz Wessely, Divrei Shalom Ve-emet, p 32
Guide for the Perplexed was: to “harmonize faith and reason, religion and science, physics and metaphysics.”

Maimonides desired to: “provide ‘the key to understanding everything that the prophets have said’ and resolve ‘most of the difficulties’ that a ‘man of intelligence’ encounters in Scripture.”

In his writing, Maimonides was careful to position himself within Jewish tradition, repeatedly emphasizing the compatibility of Scripture with scientific claims. The “Maimonidean Controversy” reached its apex in 1232, when the Guide was condemned to the flames in Montpellier, France. Wessely’s efforts to assuage the suspicions of traditionalist figures also proved to have been in vain.

On the Shabbat before the Holiday of Passover in the year 1782, in response to the publication of Divrei Shalom Ve-emet in the winter of that same year, David Tavli, the rabbi of a congregation in western Poland, publicly denounced Wessely. Trembling with rage, Tavli described Wessely as: “damned, cursed, and separated from the congregation of Israel.”

Three months later, a copy of Tavli’s speech reached the hands of Rabbi Pinchas HaLevi Horowitz. On the eve of the Jewish month of Tamuz, Rabbi Horowitz delivered a similar speech in front of his congregation in Frankfurt. Perhaps the most pernicious response to Wessely came from Rabbi Ezekiel Landau (commonly referred to as the Noda B’Yehuda, after the most famous of his works) of Prague. In January of 1782, shortly after Wessely’s publication appeared, Landau already was speaking of him as an enemy of Israel. Landau not only preached of Wessely’s heresy to

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110 Shmuel Feiner, Mhaphechet haneurot: Tenuot hahaskalah hayehudit bameah ha-18 (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar Letoldot Yisrael, 2002) p 113
111 Ibid p 114
his own congregation, but also penned a letter to the rabbis of Vienna warning them that no member of their congregation should show kindness to the “evil and heretical” Wessely.112 In Landau’s opinion, Wessely showed no regard for the written or oral law; *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet* had revealed him as an atheist.113

Landau understood that his congregation was not well versed in the German language and could not evade the instructions of Kaiser Joseph II that called for such basic education. However, he foresaw an unavoidable danger in the introduction of the study of German into Jewish schools. He believed that such a program would set off a chain of events, the ultimate result of which would be the adoption of atheism. Once Jews had become familiar with German, Landau feared, they would desire to read works produced in the German language that expressed ideas that ran counter to those of traditional Judaism. He admonished the members of his congregation and reiterated the basic tenets of the Jewish faith: belief in creation, divine providence, reward and punishment, and the written and oral laws that were given to Moses on Sinai. He stressed that faith, not intellectualism, was most essential for the Jew.114

Rabbis in the traditional Jewish world ostensibly understood Wessely’s educational reforms as had Landau, as “a treacherous attack upon the very citadel of the faith, viz. the future of Jewish religious education, which had already been placed in jeopardy by the Austrian secular-reform measures.”115 Tavli worried that Wessely’s educational program posed a threat to the relationship that existed between rabbis and their students, and feared that Torah scholarship would become just one among a number

112 Ibid p 114
113 Ibid p 115
114 Ibid p 166
of courses of study. And, in fact, his suspicions in this regard may have been well grounded. In *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet* Wessely advocated an educational system that recognized and fostered individual students’ potential. He wanted to see the establishment of Jewish schools that would prepare their students for a variety of occupations.\(^{116}\) With the introduction of non-Jewish texts into the Jewish school system, Wessely hoped to see the disintegration of Jewish exclusivity, while preserving Jewish particularity.\(^{117}\)

This reconceived notion of the function of Jewish schools posed a serious threat to the existing relationship between Jews and the surrounding culture and deeply upset the traditionalist rabbis’ worldview. Wessely’s publication, they suspected, not only set out a new educational agenda but also revealed Wesseley’s radical attitude. The changing times, Wessely believed, called for the re-formulation of Jewish ideology, in which a Jew could be an individual, not bound by the laws of elitist Rabbis. Upon reading *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet*, “the leadership saw itself as attacked and threatened.”\(^{118}\) Not only was Wessely challenging the rabbinical leaders, but his authority to do so came not from his rabbinical status, but from his fluency in Enlightenment thought and his honed skills of reasoning.

News of the rabbinic responses to *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet* reached Moses Mendelssohn. In a letter he sent to David Friedlaender in April, Moses Mendelssohn revealed his concerns about the matter. Mendelssohn worried that this new chapter in the internal Jewish struggle between the modernist and traditionalist camps would only have

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\(^{116}\) Ibid p 118  
\(^{117}\) Ibid p 120  
detrimental consequences with respect to the religious tolerance of the Jews. In his letter to Friedlaender he recalled that in the case of the Lavater incident, only ten years prior, “he had been treated [courteously] by the Berlin consistory when […] ‘he had dared to come up against the Christian faith.’”\textsuperscript{119} He wondered how “the Jews [could] stop the publication of an author who merely criticized our methods of teaching and education.”\textsuperscript{120}

By May, Wessely was aware of the traditionalist reaction to his publication and wished to defend himself against his detractors. At this time he looked for encouragement not only from like-minded thinkers in Berlin, but also from the leaders and members of congregations in northern Italy, specifically those in the city of Trieste. Mendelssohn sent this community a copy of \textit{Divrei Shalom Ve-emet}. Before the community had had a chance to respond to the publication, Wessely set about composing a second letter, \textit{Rav Tuv Levet Yisrael} (Abundant Goodness to the House of Israel) directed to the community of Trieste, assuming his arguments would fall on sympathetic ears. While Italy would come to assume a position of prominence in the imagination of later generations of maskilim and Enlightenment thinkers more generally who sought to achieve the level of edification their historical memory bestowed upon Renaissance intellectuals, but Wessely’s turn to Italy was most likely of a practical nature. Wessely surely knew the relatively open character of the unique Trieste Jewish community--embedded in the surrounding economic culture, which had already established schools in line with Wessely’s educational program. His letter was intended to bolster support, but as he had not yet made contact with the community of Trieste, he could not be sure of

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid
their support. Wessely would later beg forgiveness from the Italian community for having taken the liberty of composing his second letter, acknowledging their support, before it had been extended.

Trieste came under the control of the Habsburg Empire as early as the fourteenth century. Because of their economic utility, religious and ethnic minorities (not only Jews) were tolerated in this significant port city. Maria Theresa, remembered in history for her intolerance of those not-Catholic, was the one who set the groundwork for the formation of a “multireligious, polyethnic, cosmopolitan merchant class in Trieste.”

The diverse Trieste population swelled with “Italians, Germans, French, English, Dutch,” as well as individuals from “the Balkans, and the Levant.” The Jewish community, though comprised of members from different countries of origin, retained an Italian character. Those who wished to participate in Jewish community life had to learn the native language. The Jews of Trieste enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, and the increase in Jewish population, is reflected in the creation of new positions within Jewish self-government. Only in 1746, did the community develop a public house of worship and appoint an official rabbi. These rabbis were “always subject to strong lay control;” a situation quite different from the one in central and eastern Europe in which rabbinic

121 Lois Dubin has referred to his letter to Trieste as a “hail-Mary pass,” in conversation held on March 15, 2011, Cambridge, MA.
123 Ibid p 14
124 Ibid p 16
125 Ibid p 22
126 Ibid p 23
127 Ibid p 23
128 Ibid p 23
leaders were outspoken figures within their respective Jewish communities. Rabbinic opinions generally reflected the tone set by the community, perhaps a significant factor in the almost seamless transformation of the Jewish community in Trieste in accord with Habsburg decree, later in the century.

According to the Privileges of 1771, enacted under the supervision of Maria Theresa, the “parity of Jewish individuals qua individuals with all other Habsburg subjects, in other words, with Habsburg Catholics,” was established.\textsuperscript{129} This status was extraordinary considering the position of Jews, not only under the domain of other powers, but in other areas of Habsburg control. The Privileges of 1771 also touched on matters relating to Jewish education. “As part of its drive to make its subjects more productive and disciplined,” in 1774, the Habsburg Monarchy “establish[ed] universal compulsory elementary education.”\textsuperscript{130} “Systematic concern” for Jewish education did not emerge until Joseph II, but as of the 1770s, the Jews of Trieste were familiar with government involvement in education, which was no longer an internal matter.\textsuperscript{131}

The Trieste community began a chain of communication with Berlin. The Habsburgs had required that morality be included in the curriculum of Jewish education. Seeking to uphold this law, the Italians wrote to Mendelssohn, in 1782, requesting information regarding “appropriate” extant books on the subject. It was in this context that Mendelssohn passed along Wessely’s \textit{Divrei Shalom Ve-emet}.\textsuperscript{132} The Italian Jewish community did not question the propriety of the Habsburg edicts in their letter, but rather

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid p 49
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid p 52
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid p 53
they expressed their desire to comply with the decrees. In writing to Mendelssohn, the community signaled that it regarded him as a significant authority. Trieste did not endeavor to secure similar information from a rabbinic figure, but instead from a maskil, a man famous for his command of reason.

The Edicts of Tolerance, intended to turn the Jews into more useful Habsburg subjects, as Dubin point out, “simply did not fit the situation of the Jews of Trieste,” whose economic productivity had gained them extensive privileges.\(^{133}\) With regard to the clause necessitating the implementation of the use of the vernacular within the next two to three years, in the drawing up of contracts, a government official inquired whether the timeline could be shortened with regard to the Trieste Jewish community, as “all the Jews here know the language of the country.”\(^{134}\) Many of the enactments foreign to communities in central Europe, reflected accepted norms in Trieste.

The letter Wessely formulated in search of advocates in his defense continued the correspondence between Berlin and Trieste, the main focus of which was the question of a new Jewish education. In his letter, he adopted two tones of address: the first, one of an apologist who was unsure of his crime, the second the militant voice of a maskil.\(^{135}\) Wessely opens his letter to Trieste, by justifying his position with regard to the legislation passed by Joseph II. “I composed [*Divrei Shalom Ve-emet*] to awaken the heart of our brethren, the children of Israel, who reside under the governing hand of the wise Kaiser, to pay heed to the legislation he sends forth, for it is a good thing for the children of Israel, and all he requests of them will be for their benefit, *if* it [matters of education] is

\(^{133}\) Ibid p 75  
\(^{134}\) Ibid p 74  
given over to clerks and teachers who are God-fearing men of truth.”136 All that Joseph II has decreed is for the advantage of the Jewish people, provided that matters of education are conducted under the auspices of those with an appropriate fear of the Almighty. Again, Wessely reveals himself as torn between two worlds-- in favor of the incorporation of the study of non-Torah subjects, but still bowing to traditional concerns.

Wessely quickly moves from approbation of the Kaiser to condemnation of those who received his edicts with trepidation. He targets his co-religionists who reacted to “the command of the Kaiser that they learn to speak German as if he had decreed that they were to abandon the Torah of God and His commandments.”137 While he reproaches Jews in Ashkenazic lands, he praises those Jews who have learned the vernacular of their native lands. In “Syria, Armenia, Eretz Yisrael, Ashur and Bavel (Biblical names for the modern countries of Iraq and Iran) […] from Egypt to Tunesia, to Algiers, to the edge of the west, the lands of Morocco, the majority of them [resident Jews] speak proper Spanish or Turkish.”138

With reference to the reaction elicited by his original publication, Wessely writes: “There were to be found men […] whose mouths,” in response to his work, “widened with vanities, and they spoke of me as of a scoundrel, as if I had written-forbid!-intransigent and warped things.”140 Wessely immediately dismisses rabbinic objections, claiming that all authors expect a certain degree of animosity to greet their ideas.

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136 Naphtali Herz Wessely, Rav Tuv Levet Yisrael, p 1, emphasis my own
137 Ibid p 3
138 The Hebrew word Wessely uses here for proper is נומנה. The sentence may also be translated as a normative statement of the behavior of the Jews in these areas: they speak the vernacular, as well they should. Wessely, a master of Hebrew, likely was using wordplay here.
139 Ibid p 4
140 Ibid p 6
His impassioned, repetitive style betrays him. His is the writing of one moved to composition by genuine surprise at the response his short work, perhaps written with the most innocent of intentions, elicited from local rabbis. He moves from this statement to a defense of his God-fearing nature, cultivated from his youth, a clear response to those such as Landau who accused him of atheism. He cites his other works, *Gan Naul* and *Yein Levanon*, among them, as attempts to enrich Torah study. All of his projects, he avers, including *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet* were undertaken for the sake of Heaven.

Wessely defends his educational program as outlined in *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet*. Education in Hebrew grammar and the vernacular were to facilitate thorough understanding of Biblical texts, “and also if they [students] do not succeed in Torah [study] they will have a knowledge of proper German to use in business and in dealings in which respected men are involved, so that in speaking with them, they will not appear shameful.” Wessely hearkens back to a theme on which he dwelt in *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet*: not every child is destined to become a Talmudic prodigy. Those, whose talents take them on a different path, should be properly prepared for the demands of their future careers. Furthermore, as a man who has ventured into the world of the Enlightenment, Wessely is concerned with the image of his fellow Jews in the eyes of Gentiles, an anxiety that carries over into his writings. Jewish youth should be instructed so as to reflect positively on their culture and their faith.

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141 Ibid p 7
142 Ibid p 8
To these suggestions, the communities in central Europe reacted “as if-God forbid!- I had burned the entirety of the Torah in a fire,”\textsuperscript{143} and to this offense they responded with fiery vitriol. Wessely reveals his opinion concerning his detractors:

Who has heard of such a thing that a man becomes so arrogant as to declare: “I am your arbiter, I am your judge, I will determine for you the law, and I will direct the \textit{beit din} to spill your blood,” without hearing the man’s arguments [defense]? And how many times have the rabbis warned the wise to “restrain themselves in judgment” (Avot) and all the more so for a single judge, as they taught: “do not be a sole judge, for there is no single judge but [the] One” (Avot). And if all of this [is said] in regard to monetary cases, all the more so [it applies] to capital crimes as in this case, for all who cause the face of a person to pale in public [i.e., cause someone to blush in shame, to publicly humiliate them] it is as if they have spilled his blood […] and all this was done with regard to a letter [\textit{Divrei Shalom Ve-emet}] […]\textsuperscript{144}

Wessely’s critique of his treatment at the hands of traditional leaders is meticulously couched in rabbinic quotations. His anger is justified in reference to those sources, texts that ostensibly elucidate Scripture. In ignoring these dicta, the rabbis acted unjustly, a point Wessely makes clear only a few sentences later.\textsuperscript{145} Not only does this passage speak to the misdeeds of his outspoken critics, but it underscores Wessely’s fluency in rabbinic literature. One can imagine Wessely had these quotations at his fingertips; the overall tone of the letter does not suggest a piece written upon reflection, but one penned in the heat of the moment.

Wessely’s reference to the One Judge, in comparison to whom all others’ judgments appear as trivial, is a traditional trope, although, in this context, with a radical new tune. The rabbis may rant and rail, but ultimately what they say is of little

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid p 9 the punctuation is my own, inserted for the sake of clarity
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid p 10
significance. Men may reason for themselves, unfettered by the opinions of the rabbinic elite. The only one to whom they must bow, is the Sole Judge, the Almighty. This bespeaks Wessely’s ultimate vision for the functioning of the Jewish community: rabbinic leaders are not to issue verdicts, but to offer suggestions; their opinions may be considered among others, including those of maskilim. Ultimately, each individual must decide his own course of action, based on his own reasoned consideration.

Wessely mocks those who mistakenly interpreted his proposition that a certain mastery of *Torat HaAdam* be achieved before embarking on the study of *Torat HaElohim*. They have exaggerated his claim, presenting it as if “all of the nation of Israel before learning mishnah, are obligated to become doctors, apothecaries […] is this not a joke to all who hear it?” Wessely is not intimidated by his adversaries; he is entitled not only to defend his position, but to take the offensive. What he critiques is the rabbis’ lack of reason, the very quality that forms the basis of his own authority. By pointing to their shortcoming, he highlights his competence, implicitly stating his superiority (at least in this field).

Wessely elucidates the progression of his curriculum, a matter only hinted to in *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet*. A child should be educated in Hebrew language and grammar and at age five should enter school to begin study of the Pentateuch. Instruction should be delivered in a clear manner, and in the vernacular of the locale, so as to illuminate the true meaning of the text. Each word should be translated, and only then should passages be reviewed. At age seven, the teacher should begin outlining the laws of the Torah, in explicit language, engaging the student with questions. Wessely emphasizes that each

\[146\] Ibid p 15
child must progress at his own pace and not all are made to make a profession of Talmud study. Talmud study should not even be introduced until a child has reached at least the age of fourteen. Even once Talmud study has commenced, time must be made for matters such as the study of the vernacular and geography, subjects that enhance a student’s understanding of Scripture.\textsuperscript{147} Wessely introduces non-Torah subjects, justifying this revolution by construing them as the handmaidens of Torah study. Perhaps Wessely genuinely felt this to be the purpose of the study of non-Torah subjects; in any event, his arguments are presented in such a way as to make them tolerable to his audience.

Always concerned with finding Biblical precedent for his assertions, assuring his reader that he is not a revolutionary, Wessely conjures up an interesting portrayal of the Biblical narrative of Daniel, Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. In the book of Daniel, these characters refuse the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar when he commands that they worship a foreign religion. Infuriated, the emperor sends them to their deaths in a lion’s den, but they are saved through divine intervention. In traditional Jewish memory, they are honorable martyrs who never had to suffer the penalty of death. Wessely adds another layer to the traditional tale. In his version, Nebuchadnezzar required that these four figures learn Babylonian language and literature; they acquiesced. Moreover, God granted them the intellect to understand the books they read and the wisdom contained therein. When it came to matters of faith, they were willing to sacrifice their lives. Who are we, Wessely asks his contemporaries, to imagine ourselves as superior to these

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid pp 27-35
Biblical figures? Essentially, if non-Torah studies were suitable to them, men who took their faith so seriously they were willing to die for it, they should be acceptable to modern individuals.

Wessely tends to verbosity, and much of what he writes (including his fourth and final letter) is simply a repetition, in different (sometimes even the same) words of his basic stance and supporting arguments, generally originating in reason and substantiated by Scriptural quotations. Jews have suffered, but the times have changed, political circumstances have evolved and they must adapt to the modern world that has become increasingly welcoming to them. Wessely seizes on the opportunity this second letter provides to reformulate his arguments in light of the condemnations central European rabbis did not hesitate to direct toward him.

Wessely placed his fate in the hands of the Italian Jewish community and his gamble paid off. Wessely’s message spread from Trieste to other Italian Jewish communities: Ferrara, Venice, Ancona, Reggio, Gorizia, and Modena. Italian rabbis, including Formiggini of Trieste, Samuel Yedidiah Ben-Eleazar Norzi of Ferrara, Simhah Ben-Abraham Calimani, Abraham Hayim Ben-Menahem Cracovia, Abraham Ben-Isaac Pacifico, Hayim Abraham Israel of Ancona, and Israel Benjamin Bassan of Reggio, composed endorsements of *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet* and *Michtav Sheni*, that were published as a third letter, *Ein Mishpat* (Fountain of Judgment) in 1784. Some of these responses, while they supported much of what Wessely wrote, took issue with his conception of *Torat HaAdam*, arguing instead the traditional position that *Torat

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148 Ibid pp 40-41

HaElohim encompassed all varieties of wisdom. “Delve into [the Torah] again and again ‘for all is contained within it’ [Avot].”

Even Jewish communities as welcoming of the enactments of Joseph II as those in Italy, believed Wessely had gone a step too far in defining two spheres of knowledge. Singular circumstances had extended the Italian Jewish traditional sphere; Italian Jews were not radical reformers. “The Italians rose to Wessely’s defense because they considered his program compatible with their own experience and values […].”

As a result of the Italian outpouring of support for Wessely in 1782, future Berlin reformers turned to the community for its support regarding their far more radical programs. These reformers, however, ignored a crucial fact: in 1782, the rabbinic leaders of Italy “were in effect merely restating the premises of their own tradition rather than approving innovation […].” In 1816, Isaac Herz Beer, a wealthy Berliner and supporter of the reform of traditional Judaism, wrote to Italy seeking support for the introduction of the organ in synagogue services. The Italian community understood Beer’s letter as a request for information concerning practice among Italian Jews. Most of the responses approved of the use of the organ, but never on the Sabbath or holidays. “The Italian rabbis did not knowingly support religious and ideological change in Berlin.”

As in the case of educational curricula in decades prior, extraordinary conditions had resulted in the expansion of Italian Jewish tradition beyond the framework of Jewish communities of central Europe. Italian rabbis simply related their customs to

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150 Ibid p 197 (excerpt from Formiggini)
151 Ibid p 200
153 Ibid p 276
154 Ibid p 279
Berlin reformers. When they were made aware of the intentions of German reformers, “like the Ashkenazic traditionalists, they spared no words in charging the reformers with rebellion […]”

155 Times had changed since Wessely’s plea for assistance. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Italian Jewish communities presented themselves as outliers, with traditional practices outside of the mainstream. To preserve Judaism, as they understood it, they threw their support behind the rabbis of Ashkenaz. This episode underscores the conservative elements at play within Italy.

The Wessely affair ultimately came to a close, in central Europe, through Mendelssohn’s intervention. After communication began with Trieste, Mendelssohn joined with six other prominent Jewish figures of Berlin (among them David Friedlaender) in authoring a public letter denouncing those rabbis who wished to see a ban placed on Wessely’s work.

156 Mendelssohn’s acquaintance, the highly respected Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Levin, rabbi of the Berlin Jewish community, was caught up in the struggle between the traditionalist figures and the maskilim surrounding the publication of and responses to Divrei Shalom Ve-emet, and was pressured by both sides to offer his support. Shortly after the Ninth of Av he secretly left Berlin.

157 When his wife made known his whereabouts his congregation posted a letter pleading for his return. Levin agreed to return on the condition that no more letters appear disgracing God and devaluing Torah, by condemning its scholars. Following the return of Levin to his congregation in Berlin, the polemics subsided.

155 Ibid p 281
156 Shmuel Feiner, Mhaphechet haneurot: Tenuot hahaskalah hayehudit bameah ha-18 (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar Letoldot Yisrael, 2002) p 175
157 Ibid p 184
158 Ibid p 187
Wessely tried to accomplish a total overhaul of traditional learning. Though the edict came from Joseph II, Wessely emerged as its sponsor within the Jewish world. Under the guise of or perhaps with honest reference to traditional Jewish texts, he pushed an Enlightenment agenda. Wessely was not a rabbi, nor was he sanctioned by one to compose *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet*. His intellect drove him into the Enlightenment arena and his reason reconciled the kaiser’s decree with his traditionalist orientation. When the rabbis raged against him he did not back down, but defended his cause, calling on other communities to lend credence to his voice. He did not bend to traditionalist authority, but argued with it, an authority in his own right.

Wessely chose not to directly confront those who denigrated him, but instead turned to Trieste to offer his defense. One may argue that he was dismissing the power of the rabbis altogether, thumbing his nose at their attacks, but it is clear that he internalized their critiques and, moreover, turned to other rabbinic figures for support. What is more likely is that Wessely was trying to prevent a rift between himself (and the maskilim of which he was representative) and the traditional rabbinate, not further the rupture his letter had caused. Like Mendelssohn, Wessely could not imagine being cut off from the community of which he felt so firmly a part and whose legitimacy he had attempted to safeguard in prior works. And, like Mendelssohn, he sough discreet means to settle his affairs.

The endorsement of Wessely’s arguments, by rabbinic leaders of Trieste, could not only fortify them, but enter them into the realm of internal rabbinic discourse. No longer would the disagreements exist between “Enlighteners” and rabbis, but between rabbis of different communities. In this way, Wessely could hope to effect change not
enforced from without, but generated from within the Jewish world. Maskilim deserved a voice in the Jewish world, but perhaps they could only be heard if they enlisted a rabbinic patron. This strategy would also serve to assuage the concerns of Mendelssohn, as he related to Friedlaender, that the discord would reflect poorly on the Jewish community. By enlisting the rabbis of Trieste, the disagreement would become entirely an internal affair, not a matter of public concern. The participants would not be acting in the public sphere, as did those who participated in the Enlightenment, and their affairs would be shielded from prying eyes. Wessely was not interested in founding a new denomination within Judaism, but with transforming the traditional Jewish world, in line with contemporary mores.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

Many Jewish Enlightenment thinkers came to dispense with the ritual observances of their forefathers, opting instead for a universal “religion of reason,” with no need for continued observance of ceremonial law. Moses Mendelssohn and Naphtali Herz Wessely maintained ceremonial practices and sought to remain a part of the Jewish community, while advocating change, leading their coreligionists into the modern age. The ideas they expressed in writing, however, elicited antagonism from traditional Jewish leadership, in some cases widening the gap between traditionalists and maskilim. When confronted by rabbinic authority, threatening their standing within the religious community, these figures chose the path of avoidance or appeasement, averting the most severe punishment at the disposal of traditional leadership, excommunication.

Although Mendelssohn argued against the coercive power of religious authority in Jerusalem, he yielded to the pressure imposed on him by traditional rabbis. Wessely, after the publication of Divrei Shalom Ve-emet, found himself in much the same situation as his teacher in the aftermath of the appearance of the Bi’ur. Wessely’s primary objective was to reform the Jewish educational system; he could not hope to effect any change, ostracized from the Jewish community. Moses Mendelssohn, concerned with the repercussions that might result from promulgation of the traditionalist response among the general populace, interceded on Wessely’s behalf. Both Mendelssohn and Wessely
took great care to ensure that the controversy surrounding *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet* came
to a close without resulting in a complete break from traditional Jewish society.

Unlike Mendelssohn, Wessely could not rely on a behind the scenes silencing of
his critics. Instead, *Divrei Shalom Ve-emet* became the subject of much tension between
the traditionalist Jewish leadership and Jewish Enlightenment thinkers. Wessely was not
held to the same degree of scrutiny as Mendelssohn, an important figure in both the
Jewish and the German speaking worlds. Negative reception of his work within the
Jewish community may therefore have affected the overall standing of Jews within
general society less adversely, than hostile reaction to a work produced by Mendelssohn.

Long after Mendelssohn’s death, a great number of Jewish thinkers claimed that
his ideas formed the basis of their theories of Judaism. Even in his own day, younger
Jews, followers of Mendelssohn, “tolerated rather than emulated his attitude toward the
[Jewish] tradition.”¹⁵⁹ David Friedlaender, who since his arrival in Berlin, in 1771,
maintained a close relationship with Mendelssohn and claimed to be Mendelssohn’s
successor, deviated substantially from Mendelssohn’s thinking. “He denied the claim of
a revealed ceremonial law […] and he strove to extend the cultural emancipation of the
Jews actively into the political sphere.”¹⁶⁰ Friedlaender, who has attracted scholarly
attention over the years, became ever more estranged from Judaism, throughout the
course of his life.

Wessely, a controversial figure of his time, has received little attention in
contemporary scholarship. Perhaps because he contributed little in the area of
philosophy, he has been neglected in present day accounts of Jewish figures of the

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¹⁶⁰ Ibid p 59
Enlightenment period. Wessely, as Mendelssohn, tried to make Judaism more amenable to modern society from within a traditional framework.

Figures such as Friedlaender no longer functioned within the sphere of the traditional Jewish world. Classical reformers, who emerged in the nineteenth century, ready to abandon Jewish ritual, also understood themselves as part of a tradition of integration originating with Mendelssohn. While Mendelssohn’s re-formulations of traditional belief did leave open a Pandora’s box of radical change, examination of his work reveals his traditional sentiment that ceremonial law may not be abrogated.

In the shadow of Jewish religious reformers, Wessely hardly appears as a controversial personality. The identity of these later reformers, as of Friedlaender before them, was first and foremost as individuals of the modern world, and only secondarily as Jews. Mendelssohn and Wessely had worked toward constructing a new Jewish identity from within the Jewish community. They were prepared to tone down their positions or submit to the occasional sacrifice of principle in order for their objectives to be realized.

Mendelssohn remained a proponent of the Haskalah until his untimely death. Wessely, however, as he became increasingly aware of the reforms of traditional Judaism that were taking place during his lifetime, shied away from the maskilic program. After publication of Divrei Shalom Ve-emet, in Wessely’s own words: “the traditionalists distrusted me for being a modernizer, and the modernizers distrusted me for being a traditionalist.”

Wessely was relatively alone in his vision of the Jewish future. “The realities shaping the culture of eighteenth-century German Jewry,” including the increased radicalism of those who advocated for change within the Jewish world and the

conservatism of the traditional leadership, “effectively denied him his vision of a broadly integrated and unified Jewish culture.”\textsuperscript{162} Increasingly estranged from the rabbinate, Wessely was “also becoming increasingly alienated from some of the maskilim who no longer shared his deeply rooted religious commitments.”\textsuperscript{163} What Mendelssohn and Wessely worked to create seemed destined to fail. The Haskalah, at least in western Europe, was to become progressively less interested in maintaining the good will of traditional Jewish leaders. The cases of Mendelssohn and Wessely, taken together, offer insight into the Haskalah, in its earliest stages, and the direction these nascent maskilim hoped it might take.

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid p 41
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid p 46
Bibliography


