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David B. Ruderman: Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key

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Introduction

IN THE FIRST comprehensive effort to describe the emergence of Anglo-Jewish thought in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this book introduces the work of a dozen or so hitherto neglected Jewish thinkers who lived and worked in England during the era of the Enlightenment and who articulated their own Jewish identities through a lively encounter with English intellectual and religious currents of their day. As such, it offers a contribution to the history of Jewish culture in England and to Jewish thought during the Enlightenment.

By introducing this new portrait, however, this work aspires to do more: to reconsider the formative beginnings of modern European Jewish culture in general. It seeks to challenge the conventional ways of thinking about the first modern encounters between Jewish and European culture both on English soil and on the European continent as a whole. Its initial point of departure is the new emphasis among several historians who have recently questioned the long-standing assumption that the beginnings of modern Jewish consciousness are to be located exclusively in Germany within the circle of the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn and his disciples (generally called the *maskilim*).¹ Following this conventional approach, these German *maskilim* eventually inspired Jews elsewhere in the nineteenth century to follow their example by reformulating traditional Jewish thinking in the light of Enlightenment categories. By pointing to a stimulating intellectual encounter between Jewish and English thought manifestly unrelated and un-inspired by the better known German experience, I hope to problematize the notion that Jewish strategies of coping with modernity originated exclusively under the aegis and in the pattern of the Berlin *maskilim*. At the same time, by demonstrating the existence of a dynamic intellectual life among English Jews, I simultaneously question the standard account of Anglo-Jewry in this era, which has decisively claimed that Anglo-Jewry had no meaningful intellectual life nor any substantial Jewish thinkers who attempted to reformulate their own religious identity in the light of their exposure to modern English culture.² I shall elaborate on both points.

¹ The new emphasis is especially evident among several of the contributors in J. Katz, ed., *Toward Modernity: The European Jewish Model* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1987), and even more clearly in P. Birnbaum and I. Katznelson, eds., *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States and Citizenship* (Princeton, 1995). See also J. Frankel and S. Zipperstein, eds., *Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 1992).

² I mean especially T. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714–1830* (Philadelphia, 1979).

Almost from the beginnings of modern Jewish scholarship in nineteenth-century Germany, German Jewry has been deemed the locus of modern Jewish origins, and the German *Haskalah*, the primary paradigm for understanding the transformation of traditional European Jewish societies from the eighteenth century onward.³ The major exponent of this position in more recent times has been the late Israeli historian Jacob Katz whose classic *Out of the Ghetto* (1973) traced the origins of enlightenment, emancipation, and cultural assimilation to German Jewry and argued implicitly that the German model was the proper lens for viewing similar developments among other European Jewries.⁴ In a volume of essays, *Towards Modernity* (1987), meant to offer a more nuanced and refined understanding of Jewish modernity by comparing Jewish societies in Europe and North America, Jacob Katz, the editor, still revealed his own deep ambivalence regarding pluralistic models by upholding the centrality of the German one and inquiring how the German Jewish situation influenced what happened elsewhere.⁵

One of Katz's chief critics, both as a contributor to the aforementioned volume and as the author of several works on English Jewry, was Todd Endelman.⁶ In his pioneering history of early modern Anglo-Jewry, *The Jews of Georgian England* (1977 and 1999), Endelman challenged Katz's view that modern Jewish history began in Berlin and that it should primarily be focused on intellectuals as agents of change. In Endelman's fascinating portrait of a Jewish social world in England inhabited by assimilated aristocracy, middle-class businessmen, rag merchants, pickpockets, and pugilists, he left little room for Jewish intellectuals, either of the traditional or secular bent. In fact, Endelman strongly maintained that his lack of emphasis on the role of intellectuals in shaping Jewish patterns of acculturation reflected precisely the reality of the community he was studying. There were plainly no seminal figures in England—lay or rabbinic—who contributed to the development of modern Jewish thought or continued the scholarship of rabbinic Judaism. Moreover, those who left the Jewish fold rarely articulated their motives for doing so. Unlike their counter-

³ Two good examples of this dominant view are M. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749–1824* (Detroit, 1967); and G. Cohen, "German Jewry as Mirror of Modernity," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 20 (1975): ix–xxxii.

⁴ J. Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973).

⁵ Katz, *Toward Modernity*, introduction, pp. 1–12. This point is well developed by Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson in their opening essay, "Emancipation and the Liberal Offer," in Birnbaum and Katznelson, *Paths of Emancipation*, pp. 20–23.

⁶ T. Endelman, "The Englishness of Jewish Modernity in England," in Katz, *Toward Modernity*, pp. 225–46.

parts in Germany and in eastern Europe, the Jewish elite of England never created an ideology to justify or promote the modernization of Jewish life: “Well-to-do Jews who embraced the English way of life felt no need to appeal to a set of ideas to justify their actions. They showed little interest in the intellectual reconciliation of English culture and Jewish tradition. . . . Their unarticulated ideal was that of upper class gentility.”⁷

As Endelman later admitted, he was not merely offering an English alternative to the Germanocentric model. He was challenging Katz’s conviction that ideologically articulated shifts in conscious thought are the landmarks of historical change. In Endelman’s formulation, Katz had incorrectly privileged “self-reflective thought over unselfconscious behavior, intellectual life over social life, the educated and the wealthy over the humble and the unremarkable, and the exceptional over the unexceptional.”⁸ Not only was the German model irrelevant to England, Endelman claimed; it also distorted the German Jewish experience as well. For Endelman, a student of the new social history of the 1960s and 1970s, the modern transformation of the Jews was never exclusively a top-down process “initiated by an urban elite of publicists, reformers, educators, and magnates, who articulated a new vision of Judaism and then labored to convert less ‘enlightened’ Jews to their outlook.”⁹ Endelman particularly bridled at the assertion by Katz that intellectual articulation makes new behavior significant in historical terms and that nonreflective accommodation (as exemplified by the English experience) “does not count.”¹⁰ For Endelman, such a privileging of intellectual over social history, or of equating consciousness with reality, revealed Katz’s ideological bias in German idealism and the shortcomings of his historical judgment.¹¹

In this book, I attempt to stake out a position that concurs partially with both positions while arguing simultaneously with each of them. On the one hand, my claim for a Jewish Enlightenment among a small coterie of Anglo-Jews, the product of an intellectual style indigenous to England and independent of German developments, offers a new challenge to the

⁷ Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England*, p. 121.

⁸ T. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714–1830*, Ann Arbor Paperbacks Edition (Ann Arbor, 1999), p. xi.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xiv. Katz’s point is a bit more complex than Endelman allows. As Katz writes in his introduction to *Toward Modernity*, p. 3, it is not that nonreflective accommodation “does not count,” rather that “Factual, nonreflective accommodation, as exemplified by the English experience, is by nature locale-bound. Studied and reasoned change is prone to be mobile.” And later (p. 11), Katz adds: “Due to him [Mendelssohn], Jewish aspirations to have access to non-Jewish society were not simply displayed in practice, as in England, but carried out under the cover of intellectual vindication. . . . By virtue of intellectual articulation, the German-Jewish social experiment became mobile.”

Germanocentric model. If my argument is correct, the *Haskalah* was not conceived unilaterally in Berlin and Königsberg and needs to be studied regionally and pluralistically, always taking into account the enormous impact of specific social, political, and intellectual stimulants on Jewish cultural formation. On the other hand, the evidence of Jewish intellectual life in England in dialogue with English thought and society complicates the overly simple portrait of nonreflective Jewish modernization and acculturation painted by Endelman. Without privileging intellectual over social history, and without claiming that Anglo-Jewish intellectuals were the primary agents of social change, it is sufficient to argue that Endelman's social emphasis may be, in the end, as misleading as Katz's intellectual one.¹² Jewish modernization in England was never inarticulate or nonreflective. And this insight obliges us once again to rethink the role of ideas and intellectuals in the social and cultural history of modern Jewry. It was neither a "top-down" or a "bottom-up" process, but both—a constant negotiation and reciprocity between persons of variegated economic, social, and intellectual standing.

I

What uniquely marks the intellectual life of Anglo-Jewry in the modern era is the process of translation into the English language and, accordingly, the issue is given prominence throughout the book. English Jews living in the eighteenth century, increasingly native-born, felt the acute need of approaching the literary sources of their culture in the only language they eventually could understand, in English. With the relative decline of Hebrew, Spanish, Portuguese, and even Yiddish as Jewish spoken and written languages, Anglo-Jews, to a degree unprecedented in the rest of Europe, became monolingual. It is, of course, well known that the signature of the Berlin *Haskalah* was Mendelssohn's bold project of translating the Torah into German, albeit with Hebrew characters, for the use of Jews who had mastered or wished to master the German language. But the conditions that motivated Mendelssohn and his colleagues to undertake their translation were hardly similar to those prevailing in eighteenth-century England. Despite the proliferation of Jewish writing in the German language by the end of the eighteenth century, the German *Haskalah* remained both a Hebraic and German cultural movement. For the educational reformers among the later *maskilim*, Hebraic literacy still remained a primary educational goal, albeit with a focus on those ele-

¹² See Endelman's own comments in this regard in the Ann Arbor preface to *The Jews of Georgian England*, pp. xviii–xix.

ments of Hebrew culture that were more compatible to the ideals of integration and cultural renewal advocated by this group. In the *Haskalah* of eastern Europe, Hebrew literacy played an even more critical role in the construction of a new curriculum of Jewish and secular studies and in the new emerging republic of letters.

In England, the situation was radically different. In a society that allowed its Jewish minority a relatively higher degree of social integration than anywhere else in Europe, where many professional, educational, and social barriers had practically disappeared by the end of the eighteenth century, despite the failure of the Jew Bill of 1753 and despite a residue of public hostility to both the Jewish upper and lower classes,¹³ linguistic assimilation into the English language proceeded rapidly, in the course of one or two generations, across all classes of English Jewish society. The handful of Jewish educators attempting to offer their constituencies an essential textual knowledge of Judaism eventually succumbed for the most part to the weight of this pervasive diminution of Hebraic literacy. Their only recourse was to undertake a massive project of translating the primary sources of their tradition into the language Anglo-Jews could comprehend. Young Jewish students educated in the home, in the synagogue, and in Jewish schools were soon mastering their prayers, their Bible stories, their normative rules of Jewish conduct, and their smattering of rabbinic wisdom through English translations. By the end of the eighteenth century, most English Jews thought about their identity almost exclusively in non-Hebraic, English terms. And through the medium of English translation, their religious attitudes and behavior resembled to an unparalleled degree those of their English Protestant neighbors. Judaism as translated, modified, and glossed in English came to signify something quite different from that experienced by German or eastern European Jewries.

As Anglo-Jews sought to define their religious and cultural identity within a linguistic frame of reference, a kind of English playing field, so to speak, common to both Christians and Jews, the ultimate issues that concerned them, the way they reflected on themselves in relation to the other, and their social and religious aspirations were all thoroughly affected. In a society where the English Bible was central in defining the character of the nation as a whole, English Jews became indistinguishable from their Christian counterparts in learning to appreciate sacred scriptures through the agency of the official King James Version. But some

¹³ On this, see F. Felsenstein, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes: A Paradigm of Otherness in English Popular Culture, 1660–1830* (Baltimore and London, 1995), especially chap. 8, which takes issue with the earlier interpretation of T. W. Perry in *Public Opinion, Propaganda, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century England: A Study of the Jew Bill of 1753* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962). See Endelman's cautionary remarks about Felsenstein's approach in the Ann Arbor preface to *The Jews of Georgian England*, pp. xix–xxi.

soon discovered that the English Bible was not necessarily an authoritatively Jewish one, and that translation could often distort the original meaning of a text, blurring the traditional boundaries that had separated Jewish from Christian readers and believers. If the translation was inferior or theologically spurious, how could a Jew who knew better sit silently by without objecting to the obvious violation of the text and its originally assigned meaning? At the very least, the official English translation had previously been dependent on a traditionally Jewish Hebrew version, the Masoretic text. In an age where Christian clerics were mastering the Hebrew language in an effort to translate anew the original in order to bring it closer to its “authentic” Christian understanding, and when they even questioned the reliability of the Masoretic version, the matter became more complicated for Jewish rabbis and educators alike. Did Christians actually have the audacity to claim that they could understand the Hebrew text better than Jews, the original guardians of the text? If the Hebrew Bible could be made accessible to Jews and Christians alike in English translation, which translation was to be used? And who had the ultimate authority to determine the true meaning of the text in translation, to interpret the authentic words of God?

In the new intellectual world of Christian scholars and clerics armed not only with Hebraic knowledge but also with a new array of paleographical and linguistic methods of reading the text, it became increasingly difficult for the Jews of England, at least their most highly educated, to claim a commanding position as the proper transmitters and interpreters of the Holy Bible. In a Jewish community that had virtually translated itself into an English religious and cultural entity, the challenge of a new Christian ascendancy of master translators of the biblical text, along with their new prerogatives claiming exclusive Christian ownership of the text, was felt acutely and painfully by Jewish leaders and educators. German Jews were to experience a similar encounter with the new Christian biblical scholarship and its alarming claims to undermine the traditional Jewish hegemony over the Hebrew text. But English Jews encountered this threat more directly and more profoundly than others given their already considerable stake in reading and studying the Bible in English translation.

II

Thus, English Jews living at the end of the eighteenth century confronted educated Anglican and Dissenting clergy equipped with Hebrew knowledge and eager to engage in religious polemics and debate. At the same time, however, they stood with their Christian counterparts in facing an array of secularizing ideologies that threatened all religious orthodoxy:

atheism, deism, and Newtonianism, to name only the most obvious and persistent in Enlightenment England. By the time individual Jewish thinkers reflected on these formidable challenges to the foundations of Judaism, there had long developed an arsenal of arguments and strategies for refuting and taming their most lethal assaults within the Christian community. The Jewish response that eventually emerged drew heavily from these Christian arguments and adapted them creatively for Jewish usage. In other words, while similar challenges confronted Mendelssohn and his disciples in constructing a rational Jewish faith within the intellectual world they confronted, their Jewish counterparts in England faced freshly and directly the intellectual challenges of their environment without recourse to the German example and with minimal contact with German Jewish responses. English Jews read Locke, Newton, Stillingfleet, Cudworth, Bolingbroke, and even Voltaire (in English translation) in the original. They absorbed radical ideas about God, revelation, nature, and history from their firsthand engagement with books and conversations present in their own culture and society. Although Locke and the English deists and Newton and his varied interpreters eventually penetrated the German cultural world, German Jews such as Mendelssohn became aware of their impact only through the mediation of their German intellectual environment. For English Jews their contact with both the literature of the radical and religious Enlightenment in England was immediate and unmediated. Their formulation of Judaism against the backdrop of Locke and Newton offered a unique and original response to the secularizing forces of modernity in their own environment.

Along with the impact of new ideas was the formative encounter with novel social and political structures Jews had hardly encountered under absolutist regimes on the continent. With the relative diminution of rigid rules of social behavior isolating and alienating Jews from Christians, English Jews were offered unprecedented opportunities to forge new social relationships with their Christian neighbors. Initially an elite phenomenon involving primarily Jews of wealth, power, or intellect, it increasingly involved Jews of many social and economic levels. Scientific and intellectual societies of all types, Masonic lodges, taverns, and even activities within the home allowed individual English Jews the opportunity for new personal encounters that far surpassed similar opportunities on the continent. No doubt the “semineutral” spaces of German Christian and Jewish dialogue were repeated with greater regularity and with less self-consciousness and among more different kinds of social circles in an English context. And enhanced social contact often meant more intense intellectual contact and theological encounter as well, as the case of Jewish involvement in scientific societies and Freemasonry will make abundantly clear.

Furthermore, in a society whose democratic institutions of government represented a dramatic contrast to the absolutist regimes under which Jews lived in central and eastern Europe, the Jewish encounter with new theories of government, new attitudes about the authority of the state over its citizens, and the appropriateness of dissent and challenge to governmental policies was equally novel and unique. Jews had rarely had the opportunity to live under democratic regimes that treated them almost equally in practice if not in theory. Most English Jews instinctively supported unconditionally and sycophantly the royal family and prayed for its continued welfare. But in rare instances, Jews could also identify with their new form of government by dissenting against some of its policies and practices, a posture virtually impossible in a continental setting. And given the level of normalcy in which free speech was unfettered in the acrimonious public sphere of English culture, Jews could express themselves relatively openly about matters pertaining to Jewish rights and liabilities in a manner unlike that of any contemporary Jewish community throughout Europe.

Thus, under the unique circumstances of English life, a particular Jewish culture emerged shaped from specifically English ideas and English social and political organization, and especially from a culture that conversed and published almost exclusively in the English language. Ultimately, this rich blending of English elements with Jewish culture would create its special effect: the diminution of a separatist Jewish community and elite religious authority; the erosion of Jewish literacy and praxis to the lowest common denominator; the translation of Jewish belief into Protestant terms, with respect to both forms of worship and more personal expressions of religious faith. Those thinkers, publicists, and educators who were most aware of the opportunities and challenges of this new environment consciously responded to them with either enthusiasm or alarm or sometimes a mixture of both. Their response, unlike many of their less articulate coreligionists, was never unreflective or unconscious. Writing in Hebrew and in English, and publishing their work increasingly in the English language, they wrestled with the implications of their new surroundings for Jewish survival and renewal. It is their initial articulations of Jewish self-reflection in a modern English environment that this book sets out to document and analyze and to insert within the gamut of responses to modernity within European Jewish culture.

III

In light of the relative singularity of English Jewish thought in the era of the Enlightenment and its lack of connection with German Jewish culture,

should it be labeled a *Haskalah*? Certainly Cecil Roth considered it such in a provocative article he penned as early as 1967 called “The Haskalah in England.”¹⁴ Roth was the first to argue that English Jews had a *Haskalah*, although he problematized his case from the outset by the ambiguous manner in which he used the term. He indicated, quite unclearly, that he did not mean the movement for spreading European culture among Jews in central and eastern Europe, only more generally “the movement for the revitalization and modernization of Hebrew culture.” Roth admitted that in England as well as in Holland “the lines of this process were blurred” because of the presence of an influential sephardic element with strong interests in Hebrew and general culture long before the time of Mendelssohn.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he felt justified in offering a survey of Jewish writers in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, almost all of them ashkenazic Jews, who wrote primarily in Hebrew and shared common cultural and pedagogic concerns with the Jewish enlightenment of central and eastern Europe. Offering little more than a biographical and bibliographical survey of a handful of Jewish intellectuals and their writings, and providing only scanty evidence regarding the points of substantial intellectual contact with the larger European *Haskalah*, Roth remained considerably vague about the nature of the so-called *Haskalah* in England and its relative significance either for Anglo-Jewry or for modern Jewish thought in general. He also remained imprecise about the genesis of this awakening he had identified. Had it developed indigenously or was it simply the result of cultural contact with Jews from the European continent?

Already in his 1979 book Todd Endelman mentioned Roth’s article in passing and dismissed it out of hand.¹⁶ He later elaborated on this conclusion by arguing that the individuals discussed in the article were not communal leaders, did not create institutions to modernize Judaism, and did not constitute a cohesive circle of intellectuals committed to the transformation of the fundamental structure of Judaism.¹⁷ And even later he continued to maintain that Roth had “failed to show there was an ideological movement to modernize traditional Jewish life, which was the hallmark of Jewish enlightenment everywhere.”¹⁸

Endelman was right in underscoring Roth’s vague appropriation of the term *Haskalah* and in questioning its suitability for an English context.

¹⁴ C. Roth, “The Haskalah in England,” in *Essays Presented to Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, eds. H. J. Zimmels, J. Rabinowitz, and I. Finestein (London, 1967), pp. 365–76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

¹⁶ Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England*, p. 149.

¹⁷ Endelman, “The Englishness of Jewish Modernity,” pp. 228–29.

¹⁸ T. Endelman, “Writing English Jewish History,” *Albion* 27 (1995): 625, n. 3.

If one adopts the language of some recent historians of the German *Haskalah*, the latter was distinctly “a socio-cultural movement powerful enough to effect a major shift of consciousness . . . more than a fleeting flare-up of ideas supported by a few isolated individuals.”¹⁹ It was also “a new ideology to shape a new community . . . a public social world informed with a new ideal of man.”²⁰ By these definitions, an “English *Haskalah*” never came into being, and the implications of Roth’s essay that an ideological movement of some kind actually existed are clearly misconstrued.

Yet the term *Haskalah* is more ambiguous than these definitions seem to imply. As Uzi Shavit has argued, the term first emerged among eastern European Jews in the late nineteenth century as an equivalent to the German *Aufklärung*.²¹ It has generally been used to designate the specific cultural movement that emerged in Berlin and in Königsberg in the 1780s and 1790s, and later as the movement that took shape in eastern Europe in the 1820s. Despite this more limited usage, it has also been favored as a virtual equivalent for the process of modernization of European Jewry. Most recently, David Sorkin has argued that, more than an internal Jewish response to modernity, it was part of a larger development of religious enlightenment in western and eastern Europe—that is, part of a larger movement that employed enlightenment ideas in the service of revealed religion. By this latter definition, Mendelssohn’s rational interpretation of Judaism became the quintessential example of the Jewish version of religious enlightenment.²²

What is abundantly clear from all of these prior definitions of *Haskalah* from the nineteenth century through that of David Sorkin is their German provenance. Should one use the term only in reference to a paradigm of a cultural and pedagogic movement originating in Germany? Are there paradigms of the *Haskalah* other than the Mendelssohnian or that of its eastern European successors? By adopting the term and considering its applicability to England, are we not in danger of seeing the English case exclusively through the lens of the Germanocentric view of modern Jew-

¹⁹ M. Graetz, “The Jewish Enlightenment,” in *German-Jewish History in Modern Times*, vol. 1, *Tradition and Enlightenment, 1600–1780*, ed. M. A. Meyer (New York, 1996), p. 263.

²⁰ D. Sorkin, *The Transformation of German Jewry 1780–1840* (Oxford, 1987), p. 4.

²¹ U. Shavit, “What Is the Haskalah?” (Hebrew), *Mehkarei Yerushalayim be-Sifrut Ivrit* 12 (1990): 51–83.

²² See D. Sorkin, “Enlightenment and Emancipation: German Jewry’s Formative Age in Comparative Perspective,” in *Comparing Jewish Societies*, ed. T. Endelman (Ann Arbor, 1997), pp. 89–112, where he also discusses the previous usages of the term; his “From Context to Comparison: The German Haskalah and Reform Catholicism,” *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsch Geschichte* 22 (1991): 23–58; and his *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996). See also note 24 below.

ish history that we are trying to overcome, rather than viewing it in its own terms?

The problem is complicated even more by the recent work of Shmuel Feiner on what he calls “An Early *Haskalah*” and on the tenuous relation between Mendelssohn and his maskilic disciples.²³ For Feiner, and also for Sorkin,²⁴ it is useful to divide the history of eighteenth-century Jewish culture into two distinct periods: a period roughly falling between 1720 and 1770 called the early *Haskalah* and the *Haskalah* proper of the 1770s and 1780s. Feiner and Sorkin, while stressing different aspects in their separate analyses,²⁵ both concur that this earlier period had primarily a religious and intellectual coloring, whereas the later period focused more on reforming Jewish society through an emphasis on social and political issues. In Feiner’s characterization, the early *maskilim* were itinerant intellectuals, physicians, men of traditional Jewish learning primarily from Germany, Poland, and Lithuania, who devoted themselves to the construction of a rational view of Judaism grounded in humanism and an appreciation of the natural world. In their common agenda to expand the intellectual borders of Judaism without undermining traditional Jewish norms, they emerged as a new republic of letters, a secondary elite who, through the publication of their Hebrew works, contributed to the enlargement of Jewish cultural horizons and paved the way, while not being necessarily connected, to the later ideological movement of the 1770s and 1780s. Although Feiner includes in his analysis Jewish intellectuals from diverse origins including Holland, Italy, and eastern Europe—even Mordechai Schnaber Levison, whom I treat as a primarily English Jewish thinker—the focus of his remarks is still primarily Germanocentric. Even the key term of his analysis is borrowed from the German *Frühaufklärung*, as Feiner readily acknowledges.²⁶

Even more perplexing is Feiner’s perceptive analysis of the relationship between Moses Mendelssohn and his later so-called disciples. Feiner examines a field of some two hundred so-called *maskilim* who were active in Berlin, Königsberg, Frankfurt an der Oder, Breslau, Hamburg, Dessau, Hanover, Copenhagen, Prague, Vienna, Metz, Strasbourg, Shklov, and

²³ S. Feiner, “The Early Haskalah in Eighteenth-Century Judaism” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 67 (1997–98): 189–240, and his “Mendelssohn and ‘Mendelssohn’s Disciples’: A Re-examination,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 40 (1995): 133–67. See also his “The Dragon Attached to the Beehive: Y. L. Margalioth and the Paradox of the Early *Haskalah*” (Hebrew), *Zion* 63(1997–98): 39–74.

²⁴ David Sorkin “The Early Haskalah,” in *The Berlin Haskalah and German Religious Thought: Orphans of Knowledge* (London and Portland, Or., 2000), pp. 38–62.

²⁵ Sorkin elucidates the differences in their approach in “Enlightenment and Emancipation,” p. 109, n. 15.

²⁶ Feiner, “The Early Haskalah,” p. 203.

even Vilna by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He concludes that essentially two distinct groups loosely fit under the banner of the *Haskalah*: an assimilationist intelligentsia, writing in German for primarily non-Jewish audiences with radical and deistic beliefs that led them to abandon altogether Jewish particularism; and reformists who remained within the Jewish fold and wrote in Hebrew while hoping to renovate Jewish culture and society through new programs and institutions.²⁷ Although Mendelssohn represented a cultural hero to both groups, he had no interest or genuine involvement in the projects of the *maskilim* themselves. He was hardly a reformer but stood alone as a pessimistic philosopher considerably aloof from the enthusiasm of the reformist *maskilim*. Their active, enterprising sense of mission as ideological secular preachers seemed remarkably alien to his nature and his self-proclaimed task to demonstrate the reasonability of Judaism in the modern world. In other words, Mendelssohn himself was more a man of the Enlightenment than a true *maskil*. Men like Wessely, Euchel, Satanov, and the editors of the Hebrew journal *Ha-Me'asef* were the true founders of the *Haskalah*. They were responsible for promoting their own agenda through a Mendelssohnian myth of their construction, as distinct from the actual person.

Utilizing the clarifications of Feiner and Sorkin regarding an early *Haskalah* versus a *Haskalah* proper, and taking into consideration the nonreformist and intellectual persona of Mendelssohn in contrast to that of the later *maskilim*, one can reasonably draw a parallel between him and the English Jewish intellectuals. As men of letters interested in exploring Judaism's reasonability and in probing its relevance in relation to the simultaneous challenges of secularization and Christian assertiveness, the Anglo-Jewish group had much in common with such Jewish men of the Enlightenment as Mendelssohn himself, as well as Marcus Herz, Solomon Maimon, and other primarily intellectual figures who remained generally uninterested in the program of the *Haskalah*. We might conclude that the Anglo-Jewish thinkers considered here might be called "early *maskilim*," albeit with the proviso that they not be reduced to a mere subcategory or English analogue of the Berlin *Haskalah*. They still were different and distinct precisely because their thinking was shaped within an English and not a German environment. And, of course, English Jews did not produce in the end a cultural and pedagogic movement comparable with that of the German *maskilim*.

Whatever similarities can be discerned between the English and German contexts are far overshadowed, however, by the differences between

²⁷ He borrows the terms from Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (London, 1971), pp. 133–38, as cited in Feiner, "Mendelssohn and 'Mendelssohn's Disciples,'" p. 149.

the two. Under what conditions did the German *Haskalah* emerge and to what extent were these lacking in an English setting? On the surface, it might appear ironic that English (or Dutch) Jews experienced no *Haskalah* proper since they certainly enjoyed greater freedom under the English constitutional regime than in Germany and thus appeared to be more open to their environment and more receptive to its modernizing influence.²⁸ If English Jews, at least their sephardic and ashkenazic elites, were more acculturated and more accepted socially than their German counterparts, why did they not produce an educational and cultural movement in some way equivalent or even more substantial than that of German Jewry, at least relative to their numbers? And, if Endelman is right, why was integration into English society primarily social and legal-political rather than cognitive?

At the conclusion of his well-known study of the transformation of modern German Jewry, David Sorkin argues that social integration alone was not the critical factor in the emergence of the *Haskalah*. More significant was a critical mass of Jews, especially those living under the norms of traditional Judaism with a concomitant Judaic literacy that could sustain a literary and ideological movement expressed in both Hebrew and German. The German Jewish community constituted 1 or 2 percent of the general population and the English Jewish one just .01 percent, despite its relatively large size as a Jewish community. Equally important were the German factors of incomplete emancipation and partial integration, the discrepancy between German Jewry's actual and idealized situation. Indeed, following this line of thought, Anglo-Jewry's most successful integration, its lack of confrontation with an absolutist government, elicited relatively little creative tension with its environment. Unlike English Jews, who gradually assumed they were English and entitled to the rights and privileges of this status, German Jews were obliged to assert themselves constantly in demanding a status that seemed to elude them and to define themselves and the community to which they belonged by the standards of the universal enlightened ideals of German society. Their ideological reflections and their cultural fermentation were thus a product of their incomplete integration, the gap between their real status and their social aspirations. Their form of *Haskalah* then could only emerge within a condition of political dissatisfaction and social inequality, on the one hand, and a cohesive and Jewishly literate community, on the other. In England, both of these conditions were relatively absent.²⁹

²⁸ This is pointed out by Graetz, "The Jewish Enlightenment," p. 264.

²⁹ Sorkin, *The Transformation of German Jewry*, especially pp. 173–78. Compare also D. Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York, 1986), p. 102: "What is striking about the *Haskalah* is that it emerged only in absolutist states and not in democratic countries such as England or France. Only in those lands where emancipation was delayed

More recently, Sorkin has refined this analysis by describing the particular communities where the German *Haskalah* emerged, specifically Berlin and Königsberg, as new northern towns where Jews were first permitted to settle after the Peace of Westphalia. In these settings, the central European states attempted to graft unnaturally a mercantilist, commercial policy onto a primarily agrarian society. Under such circumstances, the Jews lived with a series of overt contradictions that enhanced the cultural tension with their environment: wealthy Jews were given new economic opportunities but suffered restrictive legislation, while poor Jews were excluded altogether. The German *Haskalah* was thus the product of the tensions inherent in an agrarian society in transition between an older way of life and a newer emerging one. In sharp contrast was the relative absence of tension and explicit *Haskalah* ideology among port Jews, Sorkin's term for Jews living in the relatively open port cities of the Mediterranean, the Atlantic seaboard, and the New World—in, for example, Trieste, Bordeaux, London, Amsterdam, Surinam, and Recife.³⁰

Sorkin's analysis makes a powerful case for the unique evolution of the *Haskalah* in Germany, and indirectly in eastern Europe as well, but does not provide a sufficient explanation of the English side of the comparison. Besides the obvious point of accepting too readily Endelman's strong conclusion that English Jews lacked a serious intellectual life, it fails to factor in the unique conditions of English culture that existed at the end of the eighteenth century (before one can consider whether English Jews had a *Haskalah*, one first needs to ascertain whether the English people had an "Enlightenment"), and it discounts too quickly the possibility that, despite the great strides in social integration Jews enjoyed in England, many still remained in creative tension with their environment. In an intellectual and political world still dominated by clerical leaders, as we shall soon see, the issues that traditionally separated Christians from Jews, specifically the right of Jews to preserve their own faith and practice their own religion with impunity, could still be called into question. Even in the relatively open climate of the early nineteenth century, some English Jews continued to feel both overt and covert forms of cultural and social rejection and sought ways to overcome it.

That Jews in England lacked a *Haskalah*, that is, an ideological movement for cultural and political reform, had more to do with the nature of

or incomplete, where the Jews were caught between the promise of individual freedom and the reality of continued group disabilities, did a specifically Jewish movement of enlightenment emerge."

³⁰ See Sorkin, "Enlightenment and Emancipation," pp. 104–6, and his "The Port Jew: Notes toward a Social Type," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50 (1999): 87–97, which relies on the insight of L. Dubin, *The Port Jews of Habsburg Trieste: Absolutist Politics and Enlightenment Culture* (Stanford, Calif., 1999).

English intellectual life in general than to any Jewish internal factor *per se*. While the full-fledged movements of *Eclaircissement* and *Aufklärung* were under way and winning intellectual and political victories in France and Germany, an “Enlightenment” movement was unknown in England. Even the widely discussed cluster of ideas known as deism hardly constituted an organized school of thought.³¹ Roy Porter’s characterization of the Enlightenment in England, written in 1981,³² comes as close as any in describing what is today a general consensus about England’s unique cultural ambience at the end of the eighteenth-century.

Porter begins with the remarkable paradox that while England, through its freethinking, empiricism, and utilitarianism, “irrigated enlightenments everywhere,”³³ it really never had its own. In England, formal and systematic thinking was relatively rare. The world of the writer and his audience in Georgian England had little patience for synthetic philosophy. Ideas were produced in the marketplace, in Masonic lodges, in taverns and coffeehouses, and friendly societies for large public audiences. As coffee table philosophers, English thinkers tended to be concrete, practical, and entertaining. Because most English thinkers easily combined their reasonable Enlightenment goals with their Christian piety, they saw no need to overthrow religion. There were no pope, no inquisition, and no Jesuits. The typical English intellectual was “the scientific parson of the Anglican Church,”³⁴ who was as fond of Locke or Newton as any French *philosophe*. Citing E. P. Thompson’s *The Poverty of Theory*, Porter underscores the lack of systematic thought in England: “Since few intellectuals were thrown into prominence in a conflict with authority, few felt the need to develop a systematic critique. They thought of themselves rather as exchanging specialized products in a market which was tolerably free and the sum of whose intellectual commodities made up the sum of knowledge.”³⁵

Taking this point one step further, Porter posits two typologies: the French and German philosophers, who painted the world in dualisms and contending opposites; and the English thinkers, who strove for comprehension and harmony in the cosmic and social orders. Porter enlists Locke as the quintessential English thinker exemplifying a shift from the ethic of a transcendental righteousness to “a selfhood which is psychological

³¹ On this, see, for example, E. C. Mossner, “Deism,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2 (New York and London, 1967), 327, 331.

³² R. Porter, “The Enlightenment in England,” in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. R. Porter and M. Teich (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 1–18.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6, n. 46.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6, n. 56, cites from E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London, 1978), p. 59.

and personal.”³⁶ Out of an emphasis on the individual comes a concern for sociability among rational gentlemen, or the “clubbability”³⁷ of English cultural life. Despite the social ruptures of class conflicts, the burgeoning of Evangelicalism, and the turmoil of the French Revolution at the end of the century, the English style of enlightenment remained relatively intact, at least through the eighteenth century.

Porter’s contrast of English intellectual life to that in France and Germany sounds remarkably similar to the comparison Sorkin has offered between German and English Jews. What Sorkin failed to stress in his comparison of Jewish creative tension with the larger environment in Germany and its relative absence in England was the simple fact that these two Jewish patterns essentially mirrored the larger societies as a whole. In the case of England, Jewish thinkers appear to have patterned their intellectual lives, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the mold of their Christian counterparts. They were clubbish (most belonged to Masonic lodges), individualistic, unsystematic, and eclectic in their interests, and they reflected on a variety of practical, moral, religious, and political issues from diverging points of view.

Yet English Jewish intellectuals deviated from the general pattern Porter describes in one fundamental way, a unique feature that obliges us to refine somewhat the stark lines of Sorkin’s contrast between a German Jewish minority in creative tension with its majority culture and an English one where the tension appears not to exist at all. I return to Porter’s evocative image of the “scientific parson of the Anglican Church.” As B. W. Young has most recently pointed out, the English clergy formed the greater part of the university-trained elite—or, as he puts it, the eighteenth-century university was “as much a seminary as it ever was a finishing school for the political elite.”³⁸ Young is just the latest of a long line of recent scholars, beginning with J.G.A. Pococke, who have argued that the English Enlightenment was decidedly clerical and intellectually conservative in nature. Reacting strongly to Peter Gay’s Gallocentric and highly secularized reading of the Enlightenment (“A troupeau des philosophes and their crusade against Christianity”), these English historians have tended to reinstate the significant place of religion in the culture of the Enlightenment by demonstrating especially how religion and political life remained thor-

³⁶ Porter, “The Enlightenment in England,” p. 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15, borrowing the term from Samuel Johnson. On this feature of English life, see S. Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago and London, 1994), and for the eighteenth-century and from differing perspectives, J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1997).

³⁸ B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford, 1998), p. 6.

oughly intertwined.³⁹ Young's focus on William Warburton, "the irascible English bishop" who commanded more attention in his age than David Hume, is as good an example as any of the recent historiographical emphasis on the religiosity of the Enlightenment in England.⁴⁰

Such a historiographic sea change has important implications for studying Jewish intellectual life in England. If religiosity, especially questions of biblical translation and interpretation, were at the very heart of English intellectual life in the period of the Enlightenment; and if such groups as the Hutchinsonians, Methodists, and Unitarians, or such individuals as George Horne, John Wesley, or Theophilus Lindsey played a more central role in shaping the social and religious norms of English culture, it seems more likely that traditional theological passions between Christians and Jews would not dissipate so easily on English soil. They might even flare up in ways unanticipated in the past. Indeed, this is one of the main conclusions of this work: the persistence of medieval Jewish-Christian polemic in a modern guise. In eighteenth-century England, English Protestants debated each other on questions of biblical authority and exegesis. But in discovering in their midst a small Jewish minority as familiar with the English Bible as they were, they constantly drew them into their oft-heated discussions. In so doing, they challenged the viability of Jewish readings of the Bible and concomitantly the nature of Jewish belief in general. Jewish intellectuals, despite their reticence in being drawn into potentially dangerous theological discussions, found themselves obliged to defend the validity of the Masoretic text of the Bible and its interpretive traditions, and to demonstrate anew the legitimacy of their cultural and social position in English society. And in light of the intimate connections between religion and politics in English society, Jewish participation in Christian theological debates had political ramifications as well. In short, in view of the religious coloring of English culture and society in the late

³⁹ See, for example, J.G.A. Pococke, "Post-Puritan England and the Problem of the Enlightenment in England," in *Culture and Politics from Puritanism to the Enlightenment*, ed. P. Zagorin (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 91–111 (the phrase "troupeau des philosophes . . ." is found on p. 92), and "Clergy and Commerce: The Conservative Enlightenment in England," *L'età dei lumi: Studi storici sul settecento europeo in onore di Franco Venturi*, ed. R. Ajello, E. Contese, and V. Piano (Naples, 1985), pp. 523–62; J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure, and Political Practice during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 1985); J. E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism: Non-Conformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1990); K. Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion in England: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1996), especially the introduction; R. Hole, *Pulpits, Politics, and Public Order in England, 1760–1832* (Cambridge, 1989); J. Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of Enlightenment: Science, Religion, and Politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1989); and Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*.

⁴⁰ Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*, pp. 167–212.

eighteenth century, one should not assume the absence of creative tension between Jews and their environment. In consequence of the often contentious religious climate in which they lived as a still conspicuous minority, English Jewish intellectuals were challenged to define themselves against the “other” at many levels and in manifold circumstances.

IV

This book then seeks to reclaim a place for a small group of Jewish intellectuals in England who have been generally neglected in the study of both modern Jewish history and in the history of Anglo-Jewry. It argues for the uniqueness of the English political and social climate in shaping a particular Jewish cultural response to modernity, one, in many ways, unlike those emerging in Germany or in eastern Europe. Wishing to underscore its Englishness, I have tried to point to the parallels of Anglo-Jewish thought with that of the early *Haskalah* and even Mendelssohn himself, while simultaneously delineating the more important differences. Whether one chooses to call the emergence of Jewish self-reflection in modern England an English *Haskalah* or not, there is no question regarding its autochthonous character. One need not assume that English Jews required either the cultural image or the philosophical ideas of Moses Mendelssohn and his followers to precipitate their own ruminations on Judaism and general culture.

The book modestly attempts to correct a certain imbalance in privileging social over intellectual or cultural history in recent Anglo-Jewish historiography.⁴¹ In highlighting the role of religious polemics and theology in both the internal and external intellectual world of Anglo-Jewry, it provides a unique vantage point to view the clerical nature of English cultural and political life in the period of the Enlightenment. In considering the radical nature of Jewish political thinking in England, it also explores an area of Jewish thinking hardly visible elsewhere in the same era, weighing especially how the image and the reality of the Jewish dissenter, as well as the rational and irrational dimensions of dissent in England, apparently converge. Finally, in stressing the role of the English language and the prominence of the English Bible in the shaping of Anglo-Jewish consciousness, it begins to chart a specific regional process—later to characterize not only Anglo-Jewry but American Jewry as well—of cultural develop-

⁴¹ On the flowering of Anglo-Jewish social history in recent years, see Endelman, “Writing English Jewish History,” pp. 634–35. For a listing of some of the key works, see p. 632, n. 16.

ment patently dissimilar from that of other Jewish communities of modern Europe.

The chapters that follow focus on these large themes by highlighting the careers and the literary output of several prominent figures in the Anglo-Jewish community in the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. David Levi and Abraham Tang appear and reappear throughout, given the prolific nature of their writing as well as the originality of their thinking. But the voices of other figures such as Abraham and Joshua Van Oven, Mordechai Schnaber Levison, Samuel Falk, Eliakim Hart, Raphael Baruh, Isaac Delgado, Solomon Bennett, Hyman Hurwitz, Isaac D'Israeli, Emanuel Mendes da Costa, and Ralph Schomberg are also given a hearing in the following pages. They represent a relatively heterogeneous configuration of individuals, ranging from traditionally conservative to religiously and politically radical, Jewishly observant to religiously assimilated, sephardic to ashkenazic, communal to isolated, immigrants to native-born, and older to younger. The one common denominator that unites them, beyond the fact that they thought and wrote, is their need to reflect in some way about their Jewish identity, whether it was the hundreds of manuscript pages of Tang or the few casual comments of da Costa and Schomberg.

The first two chapters of this work consider in depth one of the most formidable challenges some of these thinkers faced, already alluded to: the need to justify the traditional Hebrew text of the Bible as authentic in the face of a new community of Christian scholars who claimed that, through new “scientific” philological and paleographical methods, they could overcome their dependence on the Masoretic text and on traditional Jewish canons of scholarship. Benjamin Kennicott and the powerful bishop of London Robert Lowth brought with them formidable scholarly credentials in declaring they could reclaim the Old Testament as a Christian text. While Moses Mendelssohn and his colleagues quietly responded to this perceived Christian threat to the legitimacy of the Jewish Bible through their new German translation and commentary, a small group of English Jews found themselves even more entangled, forced to take public positions in the heated controversy over the Kennicott project and the “metrical” English translations of the Bible that emanated from the new Christian scholarship. Maneuvering between the Christian followers of Kennicott and Lowth and their religiously conservative opponents, the Hutchinsonians, they were obliged to insinuate themselves into the debate by defending the authenticity of the Masoretic consonants and points and the integrity of the Jewish tradition that rested on them. In this affair, David Levi was to assume the major role of presenting the Jewish position and upholding its authority.

Chapter 3 considers the role of deism in English Jewish thought, focusing especially on the large body of unpublished Hebrew writings of Abraham Tang. It considers the degree to which English thinking on God, nature, faith, and reason, particularly that saturated with Lockean empiricism, was absorbed by Jewish thinkers in England to a degree previously unknown or unappreciated. The radical nature of Anglo-Jewish thought was a result of the direct encounter with the English sources of Anglican and dissident thinking and appears to be totally independent of such expressions of radical Jewish thought in Germany or elsewhere.

Chapter 4 looks at the place of political radicalism in English Jewish thought. Despite the common assumption that Jews remained traditionally faithful to the monarchy and politically conservative as a vulnerable minority, this chapter considers a number of notable examples that challenge this assumption, including Abraham Tang's public support of John Wilkes, the conversion of Lord George Gordon to Judaism, and the bizarre cultural politics of the *Ba'al Shem* of London, Samuel Falk. Despite David Levi's ostensibly conservative instincts, it also considers his particular style as a form of political radicalism. The chapter both provides a rich example of the originality of English Jewish thinking and even suggests that the genesis of Jewish radical politics might in fact be situated in late eighteenth-century England.

Chapter 5 continues my previous work on the impact of Newtonianism and modern science on Jewish thought in considering, among others, the belated response of Eliakim Hart to Newton and his radical followers. It also considers the place of Judaism in the scientific writing of one of the most notable of scientific writers of the eighteenth century, Emanuel Mendes da Costa.

The final chapter shifts from the articulations of a few intellectuals to examine the more difficult question of the potential impact of these thinkers and their cultural agendas on a larger community and its existential concerns. In so doing, it treats broadly the question of translation—the reconfiguration and reformulation of Judaism in the English language. In returning to the question of the biblicism of English and English Jewish culture, it begins to assess how this critical component of Jewish intellectual life in England transformed both the medium and content of Jewish literacy in England and eventually throughout the English-speaking world.

I close with some brief observations about the legacy of Anglo-Jewish thinking in North America, followed by an appendix on the image of Mendelssohn in Anglo-Jewish culture, one initially of indifference and even disdain in the 1770s to one of adulation and lionization by the third decade of the nineteenth century. This appendix provides some further indication of the autonomy and independence of English Jewish self-reflection at least until the early part of the nineteenth century.