

By Zohar Shavit

"Mahapekhat hane'orut: Tenu'at hahaskalah hayehudit bame'a hash-moneh esrei" ("The Jewish Enlightenment in the 18th Century") by Shmuel Feiner, Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 459 pages, NIS 96.30

Shmuel Feiner's book on the Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah, is an exemplary work of historiography because of the broad picture it paints, because of the wide variety of subjects it deals with, because of its insights and innovative ideas, and because of the immense amount of research information he has invested in this study. But these are not the only reasons for regarding the book in such high esteem: In his clear, flowing style, Feiner has managed to turn his depiction of the period into a fascinating story, almost an absorbing mystery novel – which means pure joy for anyone interested in the pursuit of knowledge.

One of the passages of "The Enlightenment Revolution" describes the dispute over the issue of *halanat hamet* (delaying burial of the dead) which erupted in Jewish society during the last decade of the 18th century. This dispute pitted the modern concepts of medicine against the Jewish custom of premature burial. The supporters of the Haskalah movement advocated a change in this custom, arguing that the rabbinical leadership was an accessory to the burial of persons who were not yet dead. In the heat of this debate, in 1797, Aaron Halle-Wolfssohn – author of "Avtalion" and "On Silliness and Hypocrisy," appeared at a Purim dinner party hosted by the chief rabbi of Breslau. Halle-Wolfssohn donned the costume of a dead person who had emerged from the grave: "He was dressed up like a dead person wrapped in a shroud. He wore what looked like a death mask, which was covered with wounds and bruises and which bore the inscription 'I am A.B. I happened to faint and the members of the burial society quickly buried me in the ground and almost shed my blood in utter ruthlessness.'" Halle-Wolfssohn's appearance at the party immediately created a great commotion. The guests, including the members of said A.B.'s own family, were frightened "to death" and "they only calmed down after they had driven him out of their city and had made it quite clear to him that he was not to return."

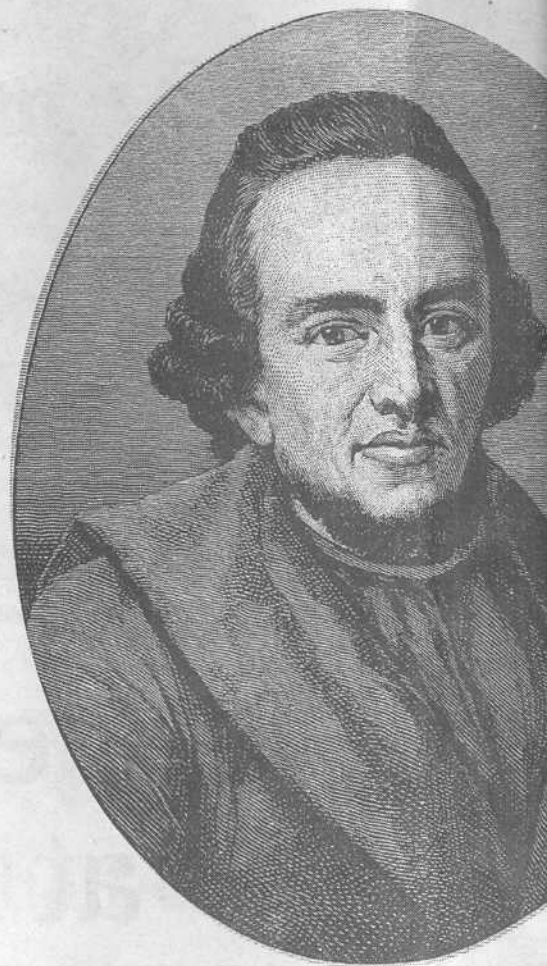
Jewish Enlightenment, a picture that also challenges certain old-new assumptions, such as the one concerning Moses Mendelssohn, who, according to Feiner, has been unjustifiably granted the status of the "founder of the Jewish Enlightenment." Feiner regards the Jewish Enlightenment as a movement that wanted to use modernization to bring about a revolution in Jewish society. The Haskalah's ideology was oriented toward the creation of a "new Jew" through a comprehensive change in the way of life of the Jewish community. One instrument for generating this change was the teaching of modern ideas to the younger generation within contemporary and properly managed educational contexts. The Haskalah's ideology was expressed, for example, through the appearance of a new figure in Jewish society: the modern Jewish writer who dares to voice criticism – at times, acerbic and provocative – of flaws in the way of life, thought and cultural world of the Jews of that era, and who is also prepared to challenge the authority of the traditional leaders of the Jewish community.

Subversive acts

There were many provocative acts of various kinds. Avraham Asch had no qualms about accusing those who based the education of their children on the Talmud of "preparing their children for slaughter, as sacrificing them, in a widely viewed spectacle, to Molekh." Saul Berlin used the old-new trick of a fake manuscript to present, under the guise of an ancient, authoritative work, his own book, "*Besamim Rosh*," written in the traditional style of rabbinical responsa. In his work, Berlin displays considerable expertise in rabbinical literature, but exploits that knowledge to present rabbinical culture as ridiculous or intolerant. Berlin even includes ideas that Feiner considers subversive and destructive from the standpoint of rabbinical literature because they call into question the need to obey some of Judaism's laws.

A war to the

The author presents a complex picture of the Jewish Enlightenment, which challenges certain old-new assumptions



Mendelssohn. Feiner challenges his status as the founder of the Jewish Enlightenment.

Haskalah's champions. This combative attitude has become one of the hallmarks of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community and its rabbinical leadership in the modern era.

Unfamiliar world

Who were the agents of the Jewish Enlightenment?

Thus, Feiner presents a complex picture of the Enlightenment as a whole, aware of many of the Enlightenment's contradictions and its man movement. In periodicals they less, Feiner calls

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the special interests of these Jews and their unique agenda, which was the result of several factors, one of which was prolonged neglect of what was relegated by pre-modern traditional Jewish culture to the sidelines as "external wisdom." The enlightened Jews were unique in the fact that they held meetings and operated as a separate group and not as part of the general Enlightenment movement, and that they operated solely within a Jewish context. One of their goals was to extend the boundaries of Hebrew literature as an important precondition for an overall cultural renaissance.

The Jewish Enlightenment reached its peak in the period between 1782 to 1797 (the Naftali Hertz Wessely affair and the closing down of the Hameassef periodical). This period was characterized not only by great intensity, but also by crises and a deep sense of failure among the movement's chief proponents. In 1800, Isaac Euchel – whom Feiner regards as the founder of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, as the person who charted its course and served as the architect of its vision – asserted that the entire Haskalah project had sunk into oblivion. The movement's formal frameworks had indeed disintegrated. The options it proposed were adopted by only a few individuals (surprisingly few, especially when one considers how many adopted the other processes of modernization), enlightened Jews had vanished from Berlin (the city that was the focal point of the Jewish Enlightenment), and some of the movement's members were prepared, as German-Jewish intellectuals, to go beyond the movement's demands and even to convert to Christianity in order to rid themselves of the restrictions imposed upon them as Jews.

Nonetheless, no other movement had so profound a formative impact on modern Jewry. With the rise of the Haskalah movement, a struggle developed between two rival elites: the traditional rabbinical leadership, and the enlightened, liberal

Jews. Although each elite was in itself variegated and multifaceted, the frictions between the elites determined the battle-lines in the Jewish culture war. The advent of Jewish Enlightenment meant both the end of the uniformity of pre-modern Jewish society and the beginning of the modern era in the history of Jewish culture – an era characterized by disputes, confrontations and rifts.

In the final analysis, the Enlightenment revolution in 18th-century Jewish society was a secular revolution. Although enlightened Jews did not declare a cultural war against religion, they did seek to create a Jewish culture that would be compatible with the general Enlightenment movement and which would stress moral values and rationality. They thus focused their debate on the Bible, on the Hebrew language and on Jewish philosophy. This was a secular revolution in terms of the overall historical process whereby the public status of both religion and the clergy was weakened, and whereby secular culture and institutions sprang up alongside – and in place of – the traditional religious establishments. In short, self-awareness, culture and society were, undergoing secularization.

Microscopic group

Although Feiner describes the Haskalah as a social movement that was active for a brief period and was supported by a tiny, almost microscopic, group of individuals, it is a widely held assumption that modern Jewry is a product of that movement. The enlightened Jews managed to achieve their revolution, not just in Berlin and not just in Germany. Their intellectual heirs continued the work of the movement's founders in various cities throughout Europe.

There were several attempts in the early 19th century to revive Hameassef and to create societies along the lines of the Champions of Good and Resourcefulness. In Eastern Europe, the Haskalah enjoyed a longevity that lasted the entire 19th century. The movement's values, especially in their more moderate format, became part of the discourse in Jewish society and led to a weakening of the rabbinical leadership as the source of authority in Jewish society.

The Haskalah's calling into question of the values of traditional Judaism has continued to this very day and the

Continued on page B10

frightened "to death" and "they only calmed down after they had driven him out of their city and had made it quite clear to him that he was never to return."

This episode, one of many in Feiner's book, which has been published in Hebrew, testifies to the nature of the battle for enlightenment in Jewish society in the late 18th century and to the immense power wielded by the two warring parties: the rabbinical leaders and the champions of the Haskalah. Each side was willing to stoop to any means and showed not the slightest respect for its rival.

However, the importance of Feiner's book lies not only in its wealth of episodes and details, but in its comprehensive presentation of the history of the Jewish Enlightenment and its depiction of that movement from a variety of perspectives. "The Enlightenment Revolution," which focuses on the 18th century, studies the movement's development in two contexts: the various Enlightenment movements throughout Europe and the changes that Jewish society was undergoing during that period.

Feiner considers the Haskalah not just as a phenomenon that unfolded in the midst of German Jewry or from the perspective of that movement, but also from the standpoint of the development of an Orthodox attitude toward the Haskalah. Furthermore, he examines the movement within the context of attitudes of the enlightened members of German society and within the context of issues that, over the past decade, have concerned scholars who have been researching the Enlightenment in Europe (for example, the studies of Robert Darn-ton, Martin L. Davis, Anthony Grafton and Elizabeth Eisenstein).

Emotional world and experiences

In his study of the Jewish Enlightenment, Feiner merges the history of ideas and social history; thus, he emphasizes the activities of the champions of the Jewish Enlightenment in the public arena and focuses on various episodes in which they were involved, while giving far less weight to an analysis of the texts they produced. He studies the proponents of the Haskalah movement from various angles: their self-awareness and the world of their experiences, the way they were perceived by their rivals and the testimonies of observers who were not part of Jewish society.

Feiner does not restrict himself to well-known texts or to famous personalities. He also includes many secondary figures who were pushed into the sidelines or who were not at all famous: For example, he describes the members of the Society of the Champions of the Hebrew Language. Nor does he restrict himself to the usual literary sources; he also studied primary sources such as letters, items from the contemporary press, documentary material published in a periodical like *Hame-assef*, previously unknown manuscripts and forgotten essays.

In connection with the latter point, readers may find particular interest in the author's analysis of the rhetoric of the Jewish Enlightenment. This analysis enables him to deal not just with the socioeconomic status and geography of the supporters of the Haskalah movement, but also with their emotional world and their experiences.

The result is a complex picture of the

from the standpoint of rabbinical literature because they call into question the need to obey some of Judaism's laws.

At times, the supporters of the Haskalah movement would taunt the leaders of the rabbinical elite with a particularly revolutionary and subversive act. For example, in 1789, the managers of the *Hinuch Ne'arim* (Juvenile Education) press sent Berlin's book to the chief rabbis of that time – the most prominent being the Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu, the "Genius of Vilna") – which severely undermined the authority of the rabbi of the communities of Altuna and Hamburg. In addition to this, Berlin demanded that the rabbis deal with the criticism of the proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment in

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the public arena of Jewish readers. The rabbinical leadership's response was swift and harsh. He was forced to leave Berlin and he spent the remainder of his life in London, defeated and ill.

In describing the provocative behavior of the supporters of the Jewish Enlightenment and the response of the religious leadership, Feiner notes the tension that characterized the Jewish Enlightenment from the very beginning. On the one hand, the movement promised an overall change in the conditions under which the Jews at that time lived – namely, the possibility of leaving the ghetto and of receiving civil rights. However, on the other hand, inherent in this promise was a threat to the cultural and religious legacy of the Jewish community, because the granting of civil rights was made conditional upon the removal of obstacles that prevented Jews from integrating into gentile society.

The struggle for Jewish Enlightenment was fought between those who regarded enlightenment as the sole chance for the survival of Jewish society in Europe, and those who considered it a threat to that society's existence. When it became clear that the Jewish Enlightenment's supporters were demanding an independent status as molders of culture and were taking up fundamental positions on the burning issues of the day, they were vigorously opposed by the rabbis, who wanted to maintain the existing traditional order in the Jewish community. The rabbis were keenly aware of the threat that enlightenment posed for the quintessential values of traditional Jewish society, for its way of life, and for the sources of its rabbinical leadership's authority.

The ideological debates were translated into questions concerning daily existence, such as child-rearing and burial customs. The Orthodox leadership believed that it had no choice but to wage an uncompromising war against the

Who were the agents of the Jewish Enlightenment in Germany? They were a small group of young men who wanted to carry out a drastic change in the private and public lives of the Jews of that period. The members of this group frequently operated in isolation although, at times, they were linked to each other by bonds of friendship in the best tradition of 18th-century Germany. They abandoned a world with which they were very familiar and exchanged it for another that was totally unfamiliar and which generally speaking, they were unable to completely internalize. They were driven by an almost erotic lust for knowledge, a lust that necessitated not only the crossing of certain boundaries, but also what Feiner calls "cultural apostasy," which was not too far a cry from religious apostasy.

This group of enlightened Jews was small, in terms of the number of members who were especially active in the group, and was especially small in comparison with the increasingly strong Hasidic movement. The enlightened Jews were not content with living within a tiny, secluded world, but instead, considered it their goal to make their voices heard in as wide a segment of Jewish society as possible. Nonetheless, initially, the movement made very few inroads in Jewish society, although it attracted the attention of two elites: members of the "German literary republic" and major Jewish financiers.

Some of the members of the German Enlightenment's literary republic provided enlightened Jews with a forum where they could air their views, while the elite of major Jewish financiers had vested interests that were served by this group (as noted by scholars such as Steven Lowenstein and Miriam Bodian): The Jewish financiers wanted and needed exposure to European culture. This elite helped enlightened Jews to turn their cultural projects into reality – whether by creating a printing press or a modern school for the children of poor Jews, or by hiring enlightened Jews as tutors in the financiers' own homes. The financiers also supported distribution of their essays – the chief vehicles for the dissemination of Enlightenment ideas – especially through the purchase of these works in advance.

To what extent were the Jews partners in the immensely important historical process of the Enlightenment in the 18th century? According to Feiner, enlightened Jews adopted many of the values of the general Enlightenment movement as well as the patterns of both its organization and its activities. The enlightened Jews' battle against the punitive authority of the rabbinical leadership, against excommunications, and for the internalization of religious tolerance and its application in Jewish society, was but one front in the overall struggle in 18th-century Europe for recognition of the rights of the individual and for freedom of conscience. Similarly, the proposal of an alternative to the religious elite with regard to control of both the keys to and the dissemination of knowledge – the alternative being a group of intellectuals with independent ideas who controlled new channels of communication, such as the press – was integrally linked with the processes that characterized the Enlightenment movement in Europe in general.