shmuil 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 that Halle-Wolfssohn would never be seen again.”

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, “Besamin 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. 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? They were the Haskalah's champions. Thus, Feiner calls one aspect of the Enlightenment periodicals the “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.
the death of the Jewish Enlightenment that also challenged his status.

Thus, Feiner considers the Haskalah one aspect of the Enlightenment in Europe as a whole. Enlightened Jews were aware of many of the ideas and slogans of the Enlightenment, especially the German movement with whose books and periodicals they were familiar. Nonetheless, Feiner calls the reader's attention to the special interests of these Jews and their unique agenda, which was the result of several factors, one of which was the 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
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 met in Berlin, and at first, 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 into the 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 means of expression, and to the extent 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 who supported the enlightened Jews also supported distribution of their essays—the chief vehicles for the dissemination of Enlightenment ideas—especially through the purchase of these works in advance.

In his study of the Jewish Enlightenment, Feiner integrates 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 manifested their ideas, 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 perceived 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 the subject of detailed studies. 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 correspondence, press, documentary material published in the 20th century, like Honsel, 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 religious leaders. This analysis enables him to deal not just with the socio-economic 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

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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 school for the children of poor Jews, or by hiring [them] as tutors.