

Yale Companion  
to Jewish Writing  
and Thought in  
German Culture  
1096–1996

EDITED BY

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## 1779 David Friedländer and Moses Mendelssohn publish the *Lesebuch für jüdische Kinder*

It is notoriously difficult to identify a precise cultural turning point. In history there are neither events nor moments of dramatic change. Events are shaped by myriad occurrences that precede them and combine with others to confect the future. Given that "turning point" is understood as a metaphor, however—as a historical crossroad from which new processes can be clearly discerned and clearly distinguished—the publication in 1779 of *Lesebuch für jüdische Kinder* can be regarded as a turning point. The *Lesebuch* was edited by David Friedländer (though Friedländer's name does not appear on the title page), and it was partially translated and written by Moses Mendelssohn. Its importance was not its place in historical consciousness. Its publication was barely noticed during its day, and it neither reached a large reading public nor established a model for future Jewish children's texts to emulate. Indeed, within a short time, the *Lesebuch* had been all but forgotten. Its importance was primarily symbolic: for the first time in European Jewish culture, a book for a modern, nonreligious Jewish school was published. It concretely promoted the objectives of the Jewish Haskalah in Berlin and constituted a device for the actual implementation of Haskalah ideals rather than a mere intellectual airing of them. It also divulges to current readers the Haskalah's understanding of ideal relations between the German and Jewish cultures.

Although children were recognized as a discrete reading audience in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, this recognition did not become widespread until much later, at which point it prompted the large-scale production of books for children. Books that were written exclusively for Jewish children appeared even later. Only toward the end of the eighteenth century, almost a century after German culture began turning out such texts, did Jews do so themselves, and their production was episodic until the early nineteenth century. Since then, hundreds of books addressing Jewish children exclusively, written in Hebrew, German, and in a bilingual format, were published in German-speaking countries. This development played a major role in modernizing the Jewish community.

Clearly, children were used to reading nonreligious texts before the *Lesebuch's* appearance in 1779. Nevertheless, books that served as popular reading material for children, such as Volksbücher, were not published exclusively for children (see Shmeruk 1986 and Shavit 1986), but rather for women, children, and laymen. Books addressed solely to Jewish children during the eighteenth century were mainly catechisms, primers on morality, and books of etiquette. They were not intended to constitute secular schooling; they were meant to teach children appropriate behavior and the basic principles of Judaism. Thus, the distinctive nature of the *Lesebuch* was twofold: it was the first secular book that officially addressed Jewish children, and it was the first book compiled to provide reading material for a modern Jewish education.

Friedländer's *Lesebuch* was created in a new cultural context and acquired its

meaning from this context. These traits are reflected in its title: "For children" stemmed from the new awareness developing in western Europe since the seventeenth century of children as a separate reading public (Ariès 1962). The term *Lesebuch* indicates the newest permutation of the nonreligious textual model to emerge in Germany in the 1770s. It also implied that the purpose of the book was to serve the educational goals of the Jewish Haskalah in the new net of modern schools it founded in Germany (Büdinger 1831; Eliav 1960; Elboim-Dror 1986; Stern 1928; Wechsler 1846).

It is true that many Jews had given their children nontraditional educations. But those were specific cases affecting only individuals whose parents had made private decisions. The Haskalah, by contrast, promoted modern education for all Jews. Despite its failures in various cultural endeavors, the Haskalah did manage to change the structure of Jewish education in Germany, even among the Orthodox. In 1778 David Friedländer, together with his father-in-law, Isaac Daniel Itzig, founded in Berlin the *jüdische Freischule*, which was based on the philanthropist schooling philosophy (Eliav 1960, 73; Lowenstein 1994, 52; Simon 1953). The school opened officially in 1781. The founding of the school under the rubric of the Haskalah created a demand for specialized schoolbooks. The new books were expected to express the social and cultural ideals promulgated by David Friedländer and the Berlin circle (Sorkin 1987). Because of the importance attributed to texts for children and adolescents in the process of education and socialization as a German Jew, books like the *Lesebuch* provide a unique perspective for the study of German-Jewish culture. Indeed, the *Lesebuch* reflects the complicated ideology of the Berlin Haskalah at the end of the eighteenth century. From this vantage point, I will analyze the *Lesebuch*, focusing on the following two issues:

1. Friedländer's mode for creating a Jewish *Lesebuch* based on the German model(s).
2. Criteria for selection of segments of the German culture on the basis of aspects with which the Haskalah was acquainted.

The *Lesebuch* did not arise in a vacuum. It had roots in the long tradition of contemporary German readers as well as in the Hebrew cultural heritage known to David Friedländer and Moses Mendelssohn, the mediators between the *Lesebuch* and both cultures. These scholars' perception of the desired relations between the German and the Jewish cultures determined which segments of the repertoire of both cultures would be included in the *Lesebuch*, and even more important, which would not. David Friedländer utilized various models of German readers, new and old, and thus created, perhaps unintentionally, a unique model of a reader. Unlike later Jewish authors, Friedländer endeavored to graft German culture onto the Jewish, thus Germanizing certain aspects of Jewish culture. This process of Germanization involved a reorganization of Jewish culture: substantial portions of it were given up, whereas some marginal components were revitalized. In addition, many parts were combined anew with the remaining components, which imparted them with new meanings and functions.

In implementing this program, Friedländer resuscitated forgotten elements. By loading them with functions borrowed from the German repertoire, he changed their original ones. For the most part, Friedländer identified in the traditional Jewish repertoire elements that resembled German components, stripped them of their original functions, and substituted new ones. Unlike later Hebrew readers, Friedländer's *Lesebuch* aimed to prove that one can find in the Jewish heritage the same elements that exist in the German. In this way, he drew parallels between the two and legitimized their interaction. To further this procedure, Friedländer appropriated non-German elements as well, drawing on Roman and Greek literature that was commonly included by the German readers. In his search for Jewish equivalents, Friedländer nearly exhausted those portions of the Jewish heritage that were ideologically amenable and with which he was acquainted.

The entire *Lesebuch* consists of only forty-six pages, but it still includes all the central components of German readers during this time. It is divided into eight units, the first of which contains a guide to the German alphabet, the vowels,

the Latin alphabet, numbers, a short reading exercise, the Hebrew alphabet, and the Shema Israel prayer rendered in German translation in Hebrew letters. The second unit introduces Maimonides' thirteen principles of Judaism, followed by the Ten Commandments. The third unit consists of six fables by Berechiah Ben Natronai Ha-Nakdan; the fourth, of two moral tales from the Talmud; the fifth presents four contemporary German lyric poems; the sixth comprises "a prayer exercise" (a text by Moses Mendelssohn on the nature of divinity) and a "preparatory prayer" taken from Juda Halevi's poetry (the first part of his poem "God Against You All My Passion"); and the seventh is made up of epigrams and proverbs from the Talmud, followed by Lichtwer's poem "Die Laster und die Strafe." Finally, the eighth unit offers a selection of moral tales and sayings appropriated from Sulzer's reader (*Vorübung zur Erweckung der Aufmerksamkeit und des Nachdenkens*, 1771).

The choice to open the *Lesebuch* with the alphabet was standard for more traditional German readers. The Latin alphabet, however, was usually included only in German readers tailored to middle- and upper-class children, which tells us either that Friedländer had hoped to attract such a student body or that perhaps he simply was inclined toward a specific German model that included the Latin letters. This second possibility seems more likely, because his school was attended primarily by children from low socioeconomic classes rather than by the offspring of the Berlin Haskalah circle. In addition, Moses Mendelssohn was particularly close to Basedow, whose reader (*Kleines Buch für Kinder aller Stände*, 1771) did list both the German and Latin alphabets.

Newer German readers like those of Campe (1778) and Rochow (1776) did not usually include even the German alphabet. When they did, the readers appended illustrations, short texts, and exercises. Friedländer's *Lesebuch* offers just one exercise in the alphabet section. This typifies the book's entire tenor. Rules and generalizations abound, whereas exercises and examples are scarce.

What examples there are can be described as

abstract and formal rather than concrete and colorful, with no detailed description or simple tales. Given this disparity between the *Lesebuch* and the German readers it followed, one is tempted to conclude that the author of the *Lesebuch* was perhaps more conscious of its status as a symbol for adults of the revolution in Jewish education than determined to create a practical tool for conducting the change. In addition, the book's first unit keeps quite a sanitary distance from matters Jewish. In the first seven paragraphs of text, which present the various items to be learned, there is neither a Hebrew word nor any reference to Judaism or the Jewish people. Endeavoring to avoid any similarity to the traditional Jewish catechism, Friedländer did not use the opportunity to compose a text with Jewish meaning; he preferred instead to include some general instructions about good demeanor.

Between the seventh and eighth paragraphs, Friedländer inserts the Hebrew alphabet, the first and last time the children will encounter Hebrew letters in the reader. Not only does the Shema Israel prayer appear only in German translation; it also occupies precisely the spot reserved in German readers for the Vater Unser prayer, implying equivalence between the two. Other texts taken from the Jewish tradition likewise appear only in German translation, such as Maimonides' thirteen principles in the reader's second unit, translated by Mendelssohn, and the Ten Commandments.

Having followed the traditional model of German readers in the first two units—setting forth the alphabet and the fundamentals of religion—Friedländer employs fables in the third unit, which the advanced pedagogical circles of his day considered as the most appropriate means for teaching children. Fables appeared in popular advanced readers such as Sulzer's *Vorübung zur Erweckung der Aufmerksamkeit und des Nachdenkens* (1771) and Weisse's *Neues ABC-Buch* (1773). However, rather than borrow fables from such German readers or from Lessing (see Toury 1993), Friedländer sought a Hebrew equivalent, which he found in Moses Mendelssohn's translation of Berechiah Ben Natronai Ha-Nakdan, previously published in *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*

(Mendelssohn 1759, 186–98). The tenor of these fables, rather enigmatic and complicated because they had been written in the thirteenth century, fits with the abstract and formalistic reworking of German models in the book's first two units. A typical fable chosen by Friedländer, that of the wolf, involves a person "accustomed to steal and to rob" violently seizing the property of others. The moral provided is that even if such a person swears to abandon his wicked habits, his oath is of no value. Undoubtedly, German pedagogues would judge such a moral as unsuitable for children. Morals of the fables in German readers were simpler and less sarcastic. But Friedländer had another audience uppermost in his mind: German and Jewish adults, to whom Friedländer wished to prove that Jewish culture was commensurate to the German.

Another stock-in-trade of German readers for children was the moral tale. In unit four, Friedländer supplied comparable stories adapted from the Talmud. Later generations of the Haskalah came to regard the Talmud as the lamentable source of Jewish cultural deformation. Friedländer's treatment of his talmudic borrowings foreshadows this development. The tales Friedländer omitted were more "Jewish"—they highlighted Jewish cultural singularity and cultural conflict with dominant peoples—whereas those he included had a streak of universalism. Friedländer chose two of the seven moral tales Mendelssohn had translated from the Talmud for Johann Jacob Engel's 1787 collection, *Philosophen für die Welt*. Friedländer's criterion of selection was, once again, not suitability for children, but whether the tales enabled him to make his point about the correspondence of German and Jewish cultures. Friedländer ignored such tales as that of Rabbi Akiva's determination to persevere in teaching Torah despite the Roman ban, which, as is well-known, cost him his life. Such a moral tale did not conform to the ideal of the Haskalah in regard to harmonious coexistence with a foreign government. In contrast to such a story, the tale about Alexander the Great (Margulies 1993, 618–23) served as proof for the universal character of the Jewish sources, as did one about Rabbi Meir and his wife (Yalkut Shimoni, Prov. 31:964).

The wish to strengthen the presence of the Jewish tradition was conditional upon the Jewish repertoire's capacity to supply equivalent components. When they were deemed absent, Friedländer refused to include Jewish elements. Thus, unit five consists of four German lyric poems rather than a translation of Hebrew poems. Both Friedländer and Mendelssohn apparently felt that the available medieval Jewish poetry, especially the piyyut and Shirat Kodesh, were too heavily burdened by religious baggage. Mendelssohn deigned to include in the *Lesebuch* only one Juda Halevi poem he had translated, which was incorporated into another section, and even there it was presented as a prayer and not as a poem.

The German poems that compose this section, "Auf einen Feldbrunnen" by Johann Nicolas Götz, "Der Vorwitz das künftige zu wissen" by Christian Felix Weisse, "Der Schäfer zu dem Bürger" by Johann Joachim Ewald, and "Die Grossmuth" (anonymous), were all lifted from a popular contemporary anthology, *Blumenlese*, which was edited by Ramler. Mendelssohn had printed a complimentary evaluation of Ramler's gifts as an editor (Mendelssohn 1759, 267–324), and Ramler composed an ode to Mendelssohn upon his passing (Zeitlin 1891–95, 399). It thus seems possible that collegial considerations and respect, in tandem with the aforementioned dismissal of Hebrew poetry, helped relegate the agenda of promoting Jewish culture in this unit.

In unit six, entitled "Andachtsübung eines Weltweisen" (a prayer exercise), Mendelssohn proffered his vision of maskilic Judaism. Emphasizing the universal nature of divinity in Judaism, he went on to give it a secular legitimation by describing religion as the fount of all branches of knowledge. Such a rendering of religion can be found in the German readers of Campe, Rochow, and Basedow. Indeed, Mendelssohn does not even refer to the Jewish religion or people by name. As might well be expected, the major difference between the German readers and Friedländer's *Lesebuch* lies in their implied assumptions about the addressee. Seen from the point of view of German pedagogical thought of the time, the Germans' treatment of religion is more rudimentary and lucid, and suits the juvenile addressees—unlike

Mendelssohn's text, which addresses an adult audience.

The next unit adduces concrete Judaic corroboration for Mendelssohn's deracinated apologetics: a poem by Juda Halevi framed as a "preparatory prayer." Originally, Mendelssohn translated some of Juda Halevi's poems for the periodical *Beschäftigungen des Geistes und des Herzens* (1755–56). Of the poems, including "Zion dost thou not ask for the peace of thy captives?" Friedländer chose the one that could pass as a prayer belonging to any religion. It deals only with the general relations between the divine being and the individual, especially divine omniscience and human fallibility.

The seventh unit most explicitly advances the *Lesebuch's* project of proving that Jewish culture meets German standards, in that it crops maxims and proverbs from the two traditions together as if they were seamlessly one. The Jewish snippets come from the Talmud, with each passage presenting a widely held humanistic value. These are woven around a fable from Lichtwer (whose fables were praised by Mendelssohn in *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften* [Mendelssohn 1762, 2:57–73]).

The pedagogic goal of this unit, like the corresponding units in German readers, is to instruct about the proper relations among individuals, between subjects and state, and between man and God. The ideological goal of this unit, however—to evince Jewish cultural affinity with Germans—generates a tone quite unlike that in the parallel German texts. In a typical saying borrowed from the Talmud toward this end, this part of the text seems to advocate "either companionship or death" (Babylon Talmud, Taanit, 23a). The difference between the *Lesebuch* and the counterpart German readers lies in the arcane aspect of many of the Jewish citations. Once again, Friedländer seems more preoccupied with convincing other adults of the sincerity of the universality of Jewish sources than with imbuing children with it.

The eighth and last unit is the only one that appropriates directly from a German reader, Sulzer's *Vorübungen zur Erweckung der Aufmerksamkeit und des Nachdenkens* (1768, 1771, and in 1780–82 a revised edition in collaboration with Meier-

otto). The reasons for Friedländer's appreciation of Sulzer's reader are clear. Sulzer and his collaborator Meierotto were intent on creating the quintessential humanistic and universalist reader. Friedländer borrowed from it two chapters especially cooptable for his own project, both of which strictly complied with John Locke's pedagogic theory stressing "example" (*Beispiel*) and "virtue" (*Tugend*).

The extraction of passages from these sections served two purposes: Friedländer could indicate his concurrence with Locke's methodology, which boosted his reader's universalist credentials, and he could easily exploit Sulzer's culling of passages from multifarious sources in Sulzer's own effort to demonstrate a common ethical thread. In addition, Mendelssohn and Sulzer were professionally close, and Sulzer had nominated Mendelssohn to an appointment to the Royal Academy in Berlin in 1771 (vetoed by Frederick the Great on account of Mendelssohn's religion), which implies that in this second unit of the *Lesebuch* to exclude Jewish material collegial concerns again seem to have outweighed the agenda of showcasing the parity of Jewish texts with their counterparts in German *Lesebücher*. Out of the copious passages in Sulzer, Friedländer had to limit himself to a select few, and naturally opted for those most congenial for his purposes. Out of sixty-one texts comprising the third chapter "Beispiele von Tugenden und Lastern," Friedländer chose only six; out of sixty-one short tales of the fourth, "Verstand und Unverstand," he chose just four. To further ecumenicize his *Lesebuch*, he preferred passages from the classical Greek tradition over German or French examples (with the exception of the tale of Ludwig XIV), and as usual preferred abstract passages to concrete ones. Thus, right to the end, Friedländer's work reads more like a manifesto of the Berlin Haskalah written in *Lesebuch* conventions than a practical *Lesebuch* for actual classroom use. But it is precisely in the text's awkward suspension between German and Jewish cultures—its ambivalent valorization of religious particularism, national integration, and universal aspirations—that Friedländer's *Lesebuch* marks a milestone in the evolution of German-Jewish identity.

As a working model, the text was a failure. Its reading public was not yet in existence, and could not be created at the time. Despite its historical significance and its revolutionary nature (or maybe due to it), the *Lesebuch* had a rather unfortunate history, in contrast to the popularity of the Hebrew readers that followed. Its anonymous publication, quite out of keeping with the practice of the Berlin Maskilim, adumbrates its swift relegation to oblivion. Historiographies of German readers stated at a rather early stage that they could not get hold of the book (Bünger 1898; Fechner 1882; Gutmann 1926). Even Heinrich Ritter, David Friedländer's biographer, related that he was unable to locate a copy of the book as early as 1861 (Ritter 1861, 46). On the other hand, the *Lesebuch* was already reprinted in Prague in 1781 by Johann Ferdinand von Schönfeld. Why a second edition was needed remains unclear.

Regardless of how it was received by contemporaries, its analysis provides us with a unique opportunity to reconstruct a cultural puzzle comprising the various parts of the Jewish maskilic world in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century. Despite its fragmentary character, this puzzle furnishes us with a unique picture of an attempt to tailor Jewish culture to the German by filtering it through the strainer of German culture. It discloses the actual agents and channels whereby the relations between the German and the Jewish cultures were made possible and materialized. It tells us about the nature of the Jewish acquaintance with the German: partial, filtered via several agents, eclectic, and to a certain degree also anachronistic.

The *Lesebuch*, like other texts for Jewish children and young people, played a leading role in the interaction between German and Jewish-Hebrew culture at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Friedländer and Mendelssohn contrived in the *Lesebuch* the various cultural options that were later engaged more systematically. Friedländer's attempt to draw from the two cultures simultaneously and his refusal to decide in favor of one of them might account for the text's failure to be a practical document impinging directly on the

cultural life of German Jews. With all of its conflicting tendencies, the *Lesebuch* could never have served as the paradigm for a specific stream of Haskalah. As a collection of cultural prototypes its significance as an agent of cultural change cannot be overstated.

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