

Article

“On Enlightenment in Religion”—Skepticism and Tolerance in Educational and Cultural Concepts within the Berlin and Breslau Haskalah

Uta Lohmann 

Institute for the History of the German Jews, 20144 Hamburg, Germany; uta.lohmann@igdj-hh.de

Abstract: Numerous discussions on religion were held within the communicative network among Jewish enlighteners in Berlin and Breslau. These discussions were characterized by a hitherto unknown form of skeptical and critical questioning of religious customs and practices of Ashkenazi Jewry. Moreover, they were characterized by an unprecedented skeptical questioning of religious customs and traditions of Ashkenazi Judaism. The places of these discussions were located where many different people gathered and contributed in their verbal exchanges to their mutual understanding. The experience of different opinions became the starting point for a self-reflective comparative review process of their own religious positioning and to their own stand on questions of an individual's education and development. These oral discourses in many ways found expression in written statements, as in introductions to German translations of Biblical books and liturgical texts, in school programs, journals and modern sermons.

Keywords: haskalah; school programs; Bible translation; Jewish education; religious positioning; cultural concepts



Citation: Lohmann, Uta. 2023. “On Enlightenment in Religion”—Skepticism and Tolerance in Educational and Cultural Concepts within the Berlin and Breslau Haskalah. *Religions* 14: 326. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030326>

Academic Editors: Ze'ev Strauss, Libera Pisano, Michah Gottlieb and José María Sánchez de León Serrano

Received: 27 January 2023

Revised: 15 February 2023

Accepted: 23 February 2023

Published: 28 February 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Research on the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah) of the late 18th and early 19th century has been placed on a new foundation in recent years, mainly thanks to the work of Shmuel Feiner, Christoph Schulte and David Sorkin, to name but a few (Feiner 2004; Pelli 1979; Schulte 2002; Sorkin 2000). While, for a long time, the focus of attention was solely on Moses Mendelssohn, attention has now shifted to those young men of the following generation who, following Mendelssohn, practically advanced the project of the Haskalah from the 1780s and 1790s onwards. The so-called Maskilim founded *HaMeassef*, the first journal of the Haskalah (Pelli 2000), and formed themselves as a movement in the service of a Jewish enlightenment that was to be effective in various fields from pedagogy to linguistic criticism and literature to biblical research and translation. The lives and work of some Maskilim have been researched in recent years. There are monographs on Saul Ascher, Peter Beer, Isaak Euchel, David Friedländer, Marcus Herz, Herz Homberg and Aaron Wolfsohn (Hiscott 2017; Fischer 2016; Hecht 2008; Kennecke 2007; Friedländer 2013; Davies 1995; Leder 2007; Sadowski 2010; Strauss 1994), as well as publications on specific areas in which Maskilim were active.¹ In addition, selected writings by Saul Ascher, Isaac Euchel, David Friedländer and Naphtali Herz Wessely have been edited (Ascher 2010; Kennecke 2001; Lohmann 2013, 2014). In a current project, a comprehensively annotated edition of the writings of Joel Bril (called Joel Löwe in his German publications), published in Breslau between 1791 and 1800, is also being compiled,² as well as an English translation of his three introductions to his edition of Mendelssohn's translation of the Psalms (Sela 2023). All these diverse actors of the Haskalah, with their different lives and activities, nevertheless had one thing in common: they aimed at changes in their political and social situation and at modernizations of Jewish education and religious practice.

Extensive fundamental research was and still is necessary in order to open up long-neglected historical constellation in terms of the history of ideas, social history, language and culture and to reconstruct the personal networks on which the Haskalah is based.

This is connected with considerable challenges, since the Maskilim acted in different places in several languages, media and in complex contexts. Contrary to French and English enlightenment, “religion” as part of German enlightenment was one of the most important factors for education and attaining the goal of achieving the perfection of man (Ciafardone 1990). Furthermore, unlike in other Haskalah centers, such as in Eastern Europe, numerous discussions on religion were held within the communicative network among Jewish enlighteners in Prussia.

This paper asks what means Mendelssohn and a certain group of younger Maskilim in Berlin and Breslau used to question Jewish traditions and customs within their communicative network and thus to promote a new, enlightened concept of Jewish religion. On the one hand, the importance of oral exchange will be emphasized, and on the other hand, it will be shown that the Maskilim sometimes employed skeptical strategies that were intended to subversively initiate reflections on established traditions and customs that would result in convincing people of the need for change in accordance with Jewish religious law. Thus, among the Maskilim, the relationship between religion, education and enlightenment was renegotiated.

Specific places of the Berlin and Breslau Jewish Enlightenment are examined, where skeptical reflections on religion and education occurred in oral exchanges between a wide variety of interlocutors or were conveyed in a rather subversive manner. Private homes, schools and reform synagogues can be identified as such places. However, the convictions acquired in oral debate were written down in various discursive places. These include enlightened writings, introductions to new publications of religious texts, journals and treatises accompanying school programmes.

1. Moses Mendelssohn’s Open House

One of the main places for skeptical cultural conversation in the late 18th century was undoubtedly the home of Fromet and Moses Mendelssohn. As early as the 1760s, they were the first Jewish couple to offer an “open house”, which guests visited nearly every day.³ Various groups gathered there at different times. Their son, Joseph Mendelssohn, spoke of a “gathering of young Jewish men” on Sabbath mornings and of evening social meetings, attended by “several friends of the family, several young learned men who were pursuing their studies in Berlin [. . .] and strangers who wanted to get to know Mendelssohn” (Mendelssohn 1843, pp. 44, 53). Among the regular guests were not only Jews but also Moses Mendelssohn’s closest Christian friends, including Johann Jakob Engel, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Karl Philipp Moritz, Friedrich Nicolai and many more.

David Friedländer, a younger enlightened Jew who exchanged views almost daily with Moses Mendelssohn (Lohmann 2011), reported on a meeting at the Mendelssohn home:

Towards evening, mainly on the Sabbath and on holidays, young men of his religious affiliation came to his home and came with the intention of gaining education and to teach. Older friends and young married men, who had acquired both a taste and love for the sciences, were not missing (Friedländer 1814, p. 144).

Friedländer emphasizes the considerable role Mendelssohn played “in enlightening and educating his fellow Jews”. He attributes this to Mendelssohn’s high degree of morality and learning, as well as to the lively degree of “oral instruction” held in Mendelssohn’s home, which was so very different than that of “cold book learning” (Friedländer 1814, p. 145). Young men especially flocked to Mendelssohn, “as otherwise to a famous rabbi” (Friedländer 1814, p. 146).

Friedländer further reports on the casual conversations held at the Mendelssohn’s, in which the topics of conversation developed spontaneously and without subject specifications, depending on the relevant wants and needs of the participants:

The discussion started off spontaneously, it was light, informal and straightforward.— For the most part, it dealt with morals and linguistics, Hebrew literature, the Jewish religion and its teachings [. . .]. Educational institutions formed the main object

of the discussions. Improvement of teaching and a German mother tongue recommendation [. . .]. (Friedländer 1814, p. 147)

According to Friedländer, Mendelssohn liked to have his young Jewish guests discuss these subjects. He called on them to dispute, but rarely “intervened with a decisive opinion”. Mendelssohn, as hardly anyone else, understood the art of “leading a discussion” (Friedländer 1814, p. 147). Friedländer describes in detail Mendelssohn’s questioning approach with which differentiation between appearance and reality and by which the critical examination of their standpoint was affected:

This world-wise man at times opened the discussion himself [. . .]. ‘Before you came’, he began, ‘a young man from our midst, it seems to me, made a witty remark, a fine observation—a good idea—he presented a sharp-witted objection to an opinion that appeared to be beyond all doubt. You may judge . . . ’ And he then recited the earlier mentioned remark with inimitable delight, accompanying it with so many explanatory additions (even if these actually belonged to a third person, and not to himself) and yet contained as many words as possible of the original speaker’s own words, so that this person gained courage to affirm this and to add new grounds to what had been presented. –When the wise man added: Well, what do you think of this statement? Our young friend seems to be right, the matter seems to be worth discussing on closer consideration; the signal was given, attention awakened, the said statement repeated and the contest began.—This is how Mendelssohn aroused thinking. (Friedländer 1814, pp. 149–50)

Friedländer concluded: “This was how the German Socrates, like the Greek philosopher, blew life into the births of his school of thought” (Friedländer 1814, p. 150). This testimony is revealing in two respects. With his comparison to Socrates, he illustrates Mendelssohn’s skeptical approach to ascertaining the truth,⁴ with which, through skillful questioning, the student himself expresses his insights and who, at the same time, can be given support to become aware of erroneous ideas and give them up.⁵ Moreover, Friedländer speaks explicitly of a Mendelssohn “school” and herewith implies certain religious–philosophical doctrines, which Mendelssohn with his skeptical-questioning method of handling discussions wanted to bring to life or cognition. It becomes clear in the further course of Friedländer’s description of conversations held in Mendelssohn’s home that discussions centered around a religious system which was *not* accepted on “inherited faith”, but which rather resists “dictatorial sayings” and should be based on reason and conviction, on one’s “own judgment”. Emphasis was placed on tolerant discussions with different-minded persons to review the “principles of the true Jewish religion” by bringing these “before the Judge’s chair of common sense and advanced research”.⁶ This means that the principles should be able to resist both reason and the latest scientific findings. Friedländer called the doctrine of God the “cornerstone” of religion, “a sole, spiritual, intangible being, not to be sensed or perceived visually”. Referring to negative theory, as can be found in Moses Maimonides’ main religious–philosophical work *Moreh Nevuchim* (Guide to the Perplexed, written around 1200), Friedländer added that Jewish “world-wise men” described this doctrine as follows: “Deity is a being of whom the son of the earth knows this much: *what it is not*.”⁷

2. Modern Jewish Schools

Friedländer’s stated preference for oral discussion, for people speaking to one another and skeptical questioning, of such importance for the cognitive process, points to other locations of skeptical reflection, as were founded by the Berlin Haskalah: modern Jewish educational institutions, the establishment of which was a subject that, according to Friedländer, Mendelssohn especially liked to discuss with his young Jewish guests. With Mendelssohn’s intellectual support,⁸ David Friedländer and Isaak Daniel Itzig founded the Jewish *Freischule* (Free School) in Berlin in 1778, which Christian pupils, as well, were

welcome to attend. In its early years, instruction solely comprised secular subjects and languages as an additional offering to the courses of the traditional Talmud-Torah School. However, an early printed program provided by the *Freischule* in 1783 clearly revealed that this additional offer of afternoon instruction was by no means in accordance with the objectives of the school's founders (Itzig and Friedländer 2001, pp. 206–8). With their school pamphlet, they tried to gain financial support from community members, so as to be able to take over “the entire field of education” (Itzig and Friedländer 2001, p. 207) in order to include religious instruction in the Torah, “Fear of God”, morals and ethics in the school's curriculum. Instruction was to include traditional curricula, such as the Talmud and Halachic texts. These were to be instructed in limited selection and according to the pupils' comprehensive faculty and needs, and to be taught in a more structured and methodical way than in the past. Furthermore, the school administration explicitly placed greater value on the texts in the Hebrew Bible than was traditionally the case. Religious instruction was to take place in the morning, which implied that it was meant to replace attendance at the Talmud-Torah school. This teaching concept of the Jewish enlighteners intended complementary cooperation between secular subjects, languages and religious-moral instruction. Thus, it was in strong competition with traditional, purely religious Jewish educational institutions. Although the religious instruction was to be given and supervised by Berlin's chief rabbi Hirschel Levin, the publication of the informative school program did not lead to the desired financing of the program by the community. On the contrary, it attracted the attention of traditional rabbinical authorities, who felt threatened in their hitherto unrivaled leadership of Jewish schools. They opposed Mendelssohn's recently published translation of the Torah, which was not only meant for Bible exegesis, but above all to be used as a language textbook. Sources do not reveal an exact reconstruction of this conflict, yet it has been proven that there was no religious instruction given at the *Freischule* before 1800.⁹

The conflict over the first modern Jewish school in Berlin became increasingly apparent in Breslau, where, in 1790, based on the reorganization of the political status of the Breslau Jews, a second Prussian Haskalah school opened on 15 March 1791. The Royal *Wilhelmsschule* was the outcome of a state decree and in opposition to the existing autonomy of Jewish communities regarding educational matters (Dietrich 1778, pp. 189–98). Christian civil servants and schoolmen, prestigious members of Breslau's Jewish community and Jewish enlighteners were on the new school's board of directors. The first head teacher (Oberlehrer) was Joel Löwe (Bril), then Aaron Wolfsohn was appointed as second head teacher, two Maskilim and advocates of the Haskalah from Berlin, who considered themselves pupils of Mendelssohn and belonged to the group of young Jewish men who had frequented his “open house”. The conflict with the Breslau community leaders primarily revolved around the state-prescribed teaching of the Talmud (Dietrich 1778, pp. 192–94). According to the concept of the Prussian administration, “no scholars of the Scriptures were to be educated in the *Wilhelmsschule*, but only a basic concept of what the Talmud is and a few explanations on what everyone should actually know, since it is a main book of their religion”.¹⁰ This hardly substantial concept had nothing to do with the traditional teaching of Talmud-Torah and also did not comply to the Haskalah's idea of education, which aimed at achieving “happiness” (Glückseligkeit), which the pupils should gain through their steadily growing degree of perfection (Löwe 2005, p. 428). The “highest ideal of human development” could be achieved when:

“all physical and mental faculties, abilities and powers are not only developed and worked on, but are developed and formed in such a way that they stand on a level to be determined by reason, and mutually enhance and embellish each other”

as per Joel Löwe in his speech on the opening of the school (Löwe 2005, p. 429). Emphasizing rational training, Löwe stressed above all learning “to correctly differentiate and correctly judge” so as to be able to act in a (morally) good way. He, therefore, saw the school's main task in the “development of intellectual powers” in language instruction,

geography and natural history, in history, geometry and logics (Löwe 2005, p. 430). Along with advancing reason and the intellect, Löwe also envisaged the *Wilhelmsschule* as a place of enlightened religiosity. His goal was “warming a boy’s heart at an early age, so that he learns to do good and avoid evil by providing sensible and unfettered religious instruction for him” (Löwe 2005, p. 430). “Love of the good”, self-respect and the fear of God were “the highest goal that one should never wholly lose sight of”. Löwe was primarily interested in achieving the internalization of the religious concepts that he considered correct. Interaction between a knowledge of languages and secular subjects formed the basis of his concept:

Studying languages will expand and determine his [= the boy’s] ideas; geography, the study of nature and of history will offer him an educational field to enlighten his spirit, to increase his sum of knowledge; and to set it aright; geometry and logic will show him the proper use of his mind and make him a virtuous and also useful member of society. Thus prepared, the leading ideas of basic reason set deep roots, according to which the world was created and according to the wisest plan which also placed the happiness of all beings as its ultimate goal, the teachings of a deity able to see through to the innermost of the human heart and all acts of this world, to punish and award them in another life, to make the lasting impression that they must make, when they become the motives for a righteous world. (Löwe 2005, p. 431)

The education program Löwe conveyed here is based on the religious philosophy of the Berlin Haskalah, which, in turn, drew on the wellsprings of Judaism from the Torah and other writings of the Hebrew Bible, which Berlin Maskilim transferred into German, while also interpreting its teachings anew and attempting to bring about a new awareness of them.

3. Moses Mendelssohn’s Writings

The speech Löwe held at the opening of the *Wilhelmsschule* in Breslau can be considered a forerunner of further “speeches”, i.e., sermons, delivered at another place of religion in the Haskalah: in the Berlin “Reform Temple” of Israel Jacobsen. Even though it was only inaugurated in June 1815, this modern synagogue was undeniably guided by the religious philosophy of Jewish Enlightenment. This is clearly revealed by the sermons held here, called “speeches”, which are among the most striking discursive places of religion. As to their contents, these draw on works by Moses Mendelssohn, the basic, early and most central discursive place of the Berlin Haskalah, in which the meaningfulness of acquiring education by printed books is skeptically questioned (Strauss 2018).

In his book on law and religious philosophy, *Jerusalem oder religiöse Macht und Judentum* (Mendelssohn 1783), Mendelssohn regarded learning from books with decisive skepticism. In a passage that Friedländer quoted many years later in the above-mentioned description of discussions in Mendelssohn’s home (Friedländer 1814, pp. 145–46), Mendelssohn cast a critical eye on the printed word:

The diffusion of writing and books, which, through the invention of the printing press has been infinitely multiplied in our days, has transformed man. The great upheaval in the whole system of human knowledge and convictions which it produced has, indeed, had on the one hand advantageous consequences for the improvement of mankind [. . .]. However, like all good which can come to man here below, it has also had, incidentally, many an evil consequence [. . .]. We teach and instruct one another only through writings; we learn to know nature and man only from writings. We work and relax, edify and amuse ourselves through overmuch writing [. . .]. Hence, it has come to pass that man has almost lost his value for his fellow man. Intercourse with the wise man is not sought, for we find his wisdom in writings. [. . .] Our whole being depends on letters; and we can scarcely comprehend how a mortal man can educate and perfect himself without a *book*. This was not the case in the bygone days of ancient times.

[. . .] Man was more necessary to man; teaching was more closely connected to life, contemplation more intimately bound up with action. The inexperienced man had to follow in the footsteps of the experienced, the student of those of his teacher; he had to seek his company, to observe him and, as it were, sound him out, if he wanted to satisfy his thirst for knowledge. (Mendelssohn 2011, pp. 92–93)

By describing general social changes that occurred over time, Mendelssohn here indirectly alludes to modifications in Jewish practices. Originally passed on by word of mouth, teachings were first written down during the Babylonian Exile. In later book-printing days, rabbinical literature based on these writings was distributed on a wide basis, thus, it could be taught with the help of books in traditional Jewish schools. This gave the printed word, the letter, more authority than it deserved. It also led to dogmatic codification. “According to the original constitution, however, it was not supposed to be like that”, asserted Mendelssohn (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 92). He believed that “ancient, original Judaism” comprised above all such “doctrines and laws” that had an effect on “convictions and actions” (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 91). The conclusion he drew from this is revealing:

Convictions and actions:

“were not to be connected to words or written characters which always remain the same, for all men and all times, amid all the revolutions of language, morals, manners, and conditions—words and characters which invariably present the same rigid forms, into which we cannot force our concepts without disfiguring them. They were entrusted to living, spiritual instruction, which can keep pace with all changes of time and circumstances, and can be varied and fashioned according to a pupil’s needs, ability, and power of comprehension”. (Mendelssohn 2011, pp. 91–92)

Mendelssohn added to this undogmatic understanding of Jewish teachings:

“It was, at first, expressly forbidden to write more about the law than God had caused Moses to record for the nation”. (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 92)

Friedländer emphasized, in the same vein:

“According to our original system, it was not allowed to write down regulations and rules that had been received orally, these should remain for very wise reasons *oral tradition*”. (Friedländer 1788a, p. 286, note 3)

Even if Mendelssohn himself defended traditional “ceremonial laws” of Judaism, one of the central concerns of the Berlin and Breslau Maskilim was to free Judaism from outer, no longer contemporary ceremonies, customs and later additions and to focus more on basic teachings. Tenets were questioned in lively conversation as to their veracity and power of persuasion, while Mendelssohn was urging a refinement of metaphysical and theological explanations of the law and customs. Not by chance, he chose, as the form of conversation for his text *Phädon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (1767), a philosophical line of reasoning. He explained that he considered “the method of Plato” best suited for metaphysical explanations (Mendelssohn 2007, p. 152).

The filtering out of originally understood Jewish teachings and the return to the basic principles of Judaism was a process Mendelssohn described as a painstaking epistemological process to “differentiate faith from conviction” (Mendelssohn 2007, p. 153). The principles were no longer to be accepted unquestioned on faith (Friedländer 1788b, p. 76, compare also pp. 70, 80), but would rather be the result of a collaborative exchange between individuals after having closely examined them as to their veracity. The individual should act on his own conviction when accepting the religious principles. The desired result was not merely understanding but gaining the *feeling* of truth: “Not reading and understanding but feeling and taking to heart” is how Friedländer formulated the main goal of the Haskalah’s educational concept which focused on internalization and active

involvement (Friedländer 1814, p. 146). Friedländer wrote, in his introduction to the fifth edition of *Phädon*, that this goal could only be attained by skeptical examination: “Doubting is the essential condition for moving forward, for all progress made by the mind, education, clarification” (Friedländer 1814). He strove to “once again circulate heart-raising eternal truths and to generally spread complaisant true religion” (Friedländer 1814, VIII; see also Lohmann 2015, pp. 45–77).

Other than the traditional authorities of their times, the Maskilim concentrated their research on the original teaching of Judaism on the Hebrew Bible, which in their eyes was a unique “source of knowledge of everything noble and good” (Friedländer 1817b, p. 426; Lohmann 2020, pp. 424–51). The Jewish enlighteners were motivated herein by their skepticism in view of the timeliness of several rabbinical schools of thought and towards the Talmud as the central object of Jewish education and mindset.¹¹ This skepticism was a result of their religious–philosophical conviction of man’s “designation” for the balanced perfection of his emotional, intellectual and ethical abilities. Joel Löwe called this “the lovely harmony” between the “formation of sensuous tools”, the “development of intelligence” and “the perfection of one’s moral character” (Löwe 2005, pp. 58, 60). The skeptical review of principles was ultimately aimed at a “young person” able to exercise his different abilities to compare the usefulness and the harmfulness, the right and the wrong of every school of thought with one another and also to compare one against the other, as Mendelssohn emphasized and, tolerantly, did not exclude Christian doctrines.¹²

The idea of the *Bestimmung des Menschen zur Vervollkommenung* (Designation of Man to Gain Perfection)—along with general “human reason”, a basic idea of German Enlightenment (compare Hinske 1990, p. 85)—was extended by the Maskilim for the claim of a comprehensive and never-ending self-education of the human being and the active participation in the education of others (see Lohmann 2020, pp. 29–38). They took this educational program as the central tenet of the books of the Hebrew Bible. In “the written book of the law and in the ceremonial acts which the adherents of Judaism had to observe incessantly” is found Mendelssohn’s reason for this instruction (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 92).

4. Introductory Literature on Translations of Religious Texts

Mendelssohn translated the Torah into German to provide Jews of his time, especially young Jews, with an introduction to Biblical writings. His extensive introduction to the translation of *Or li-Netivah* (1782/83) (Mendelssohn 2018, p. 276) clearly shows that he, similar to Ezra, wanted to teach the Bible, and he stressed to have it translated “in the articulate language that is current and familiar in our generation” (Mendelssohn 2018, p. 290). Mendelssohn methodically drew on language research based on grammar, language rules and language development as well as on the history of Jewish language research and Bible translations. The primary objective of his translations was to enable the reading and understanding of Biblical writings, as Joel Löwe and Aaron Wolfsohn emphasized with regard to Mendelssohn’s translation of the Song of Songs (Cf. Wolfsohn and Bril 1838, p. 806). With their new edition of the *Chamesh Megillot* (Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Esther, Ruth), to be used on the most important holidays, Löwe and Wolfsohn conformed to Mendelssohn’s method and described, in their introduction, the translation of the Lamentations’ five critical aids, which they had used to correct previous translations and to provide a better understanding of the original:

- (1) Logical grammar,
- (2) Strict observance of the Masora,
- (3) Conjectures in well-founded exception,
- (4) Older translations for comparison,
- (5) Derivatives from related “oriental” languages (Löwe and Wolfsohn 1790, pp. XCI–XXIV).

Their explanations make clear that Löwe and Wolfsohn associated a “philosophical spirit” with their translation, which was not only intended to appeal to the sentiments of the readers but also to the religious skeptics.¹³ They consciously accepted departing

significantly from the outer form of the original in favor of an esthetic “tone of Bible translations” (Löwe and Wolfssohn 1790, p. XI):

Indeed, such a translation had to be far more than any other to avoid the appearance of arbitrariness and the imprint of newness, as it far more and frequently abandoned the body, the shell, in order not to lose the core, the spirit. (Löwe and Wolfssohn 1790, p. X)

It was a central intention of the Jewish enlighteners to revive the original and in their eyes the “true” spirit of Judaism. That becomes especially clear in the introductions to liturgically relevant texts. With an appeal to “one’s own contemplation” (Friedländer 1786, p. 269), David Friedländer, in his preface to the German translation of the Jewish prayers, equated prayer with man’s self-examination. Self-examination prompts the human being “to reflect on all truths which can have an influence on his moral behavior; which teach him to know God, himself, and his fellow men more exactly, and from this self-examination then arises the natural consequence that he will faithfully follow, with genuine fear of God, the precepts which religion and reason prescribe for his true happiness”. (Friedländer 1786, p. 267)

The “conversation with God” would “expand, enlighten und correct the concepts of the unlimited divine attributes” (Friedländer 1786, p. 268). With his translation of prayers and sayings of the Fathers (*Pirkej Avot*), which he added to his prayer book edition, Friedländer wanted to “encourage further reflection” (Friedländer 1786, p. 269). He furthermore intended, with his translation of the *Haftarot* (Readings from the Prophets), “to give cause for further reflection” (Friedländer 1790, p. 8b). In his introduction to the Readings reading of the prophets on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), he is concerned with a close examination of the respective chapters and the verses of the Prophet Isaiah (see Friedländer 1788c, p. IV). Friedländer stresses:

In an address to hypocrites and the sanctimonious, God himself teaches what real and true worship is. [. . .] Its main content is that not self-chastening, flagellations of the body, outer signs of repentance or loud and incomprehensible praying can please the Eternal, [but rather] the active practice of moral duties towards our fellow men. (Friedländer 1788c, pp. V–VI)

The translations of basic religious texts of Judaism thus had a double function: on the one hand, they enabled a new content-related access to the texts and herewith to an understanding of the text for the many readers who did not understand Hebrew, and on the other hand, the translations led to a skeptical reflection on the religious meaning of textual contents, which in turn encouraged joint conversation about the meaning of religious acts. This holds especially true of Joel Löwe’s translation of the *Hagadah of Pessach*. In his introduction, which Löwe explicitly addresses to his “aspiring [female] readers” (Geneigte Leserinnen), he illustrates the central meaning of celebrating Passover and the ceremonies connected with it, which reminded one of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. With this historic event, Löwe wrote,

great perfection was reached, distanced from an ignoble idolatry of those times and brought closer to the service of a true and only God [. . .]. If now our state is destroyed and our civic happiness lost; if we come under the rule of other nations, who place considerable burdens on us: yet the great happiness remains that we are the servants of the only true God, whose commandments we keep and according to whose will we live. On this consideration alone, the liberation from Mizraim [Egypt] deserves our greatest attention and it is our duty to keep this great occurrence in constant remembrance. (Bril [Löwe] 1785, pp. 5–6)

Especially on the Seder evening, on Passover eve, the gathered festive group should discuss the outstanding event of introducing monotheism and “the real and true service that resulted from this”. His translation of the Passover Haggadah, Löwe added, “may give rise to some of these conversations” (Bril [Löwe] 1785, p. 7).

These “conversations” took place in the private homes of Jewish enlighteners and their families, in which Jewish feasts were celebrated and private religious services were held. These were places for skeptical reflections on religion as well as for communal education. With the inclusion of the women, to whom several translations were explicitly dedicated,¹⁴ family members and befriended dialogue participants verified the truth of religious teachings and the meaningfulness of Jewish religious practice in a joint oral exchange. Under the claim of everyone’s own reflection, religious principles were renegotiated together.

5. Programmatic Publications of Jewish Schools

On employing Salomon Jacob Cohen as a teacher for Hebrew, Religion and Morals, the Berlin *Freischule* in 1800 was once again able, after its failed attempt in 1783, to become a place of reflection on religion in the Haskalah. As early as the summer of 1802, Cohen presented a “*Plan zur Verbesserung des religiösen Unterrichts*” (Plan to Improve Religious Instruction), which was discussed by the school administration (see [Cohen 1802](#)). One year later, the long-standing principal of the *Freischule*, Isaak Daniel Itzig, introduced a school program in which he also gave account of the different subjects taught at the *Freischule*. He listed these as “Language Skills”, “Scientific Knowledge” and “Arts”. Instruction in “Religion and Morals” was taught as a scientific subject ([Itzig 1803](#), p. 396). Hebrew instruction was not meant to make them “perfect experts of the Hebrew language” ([Itzig 1803](#), p. 397), but above all to save them from prejudices in practicing their religion and provide protection “against a senseless babbling of prayers in religious services” ([Itzig 1803](#), p. 396). He also commented on Hebrew instruction:

The exegetics are taught according to the instructions in the Mendelssohn commentary and by other leading commentators. This instruction is at the same time connected to that in *Religion and Morals*. The teacher strives to introduce his students to the *fundamentals* of the Jewish religion, with the positive provisions of the *Ceremonial Law*, but above all with the teachings of purely reasonable ethics. ([Itzig 1803](#), pp. 397–98)

Whereas the director of the *Freischule* only started to publish school reports from the early 19th century on, Joel Löwe, head teacher and member of the directorship of the Breslau *Wilhelmsschule* provided annual programs starting with the founding of the school. Unlike in Berlin, Löwe added extensive academic essays to the very short announcements of the public school exams that were, for the most part, held by the students as “Socratic talks” or “speeches and conversations” ([Löwe 1793](#); [Löwe 1794](#)). Löwe published an essay entitled “Assaph über ächte und unächte Religiosität” in the school program, with a linguistic commentary on Psalm 50 for which he turned to Mendelssohn’s German translation of the Psalms ([Mendelssohn 1783](#)). In his introduction, he explained that this sublime psalm belonged to “the class of lyrical didactic poems, of which “the most enlightened times need not bear shame”. Psalm 50 provides “an unerring standard for the education of the higher Israelite classes of those times” and makes them more aware of “their ideas of religion and morals and especially of the Mosaic laws” ([Löwe 1796](#), p. 3). Löwe commented on the contents of the psalm:

The divine poet wants to teach his contemporaries that their religious service is not of the kind that could please the Highest Being; that even the pious among them miss the purpose even though they fulfill the Mosaic laws according to the letter, but are unwilling to recognize their spirit accordingly; that they merely want to hold on to the peel but throw away the core. In order to give his teachings more weight and prestige, he brings in God himself. [. . .]—The people are divided into two classes, to each of whom He speaks. The first is truly pious, means well with God and fellow creatures and wholeheartedly wants to do good; but it has such wrong, incorrect and such degrading ideas of deity, it is still so full of heathen prejudices in regard to religion, which the Mosaic laws should be trying to counteract, and is so attached to the external ceremonial laws, and above

all to the sacrificial service that they are often misled by this and involuntarily led away from the true good. The other class consists of evil-doers, who, as the poet expresses it, hate all discipline and morality, who use sanctity as a cover for their self-interest, and who only insist so much on the exercise of so-called duties towards God in order to be able to violate the duties towards their fellow human beings all the more safely and undisturbed ... (Löwe 1796, pp. 4–5)

Looking at the historical developments of Judaism and the history of the origins of monotheism, Löwe interpreted the main intention of law-giving at Sinai as having been to “work against the harmful ideas of idolatry and to strengthen the idea of the entity of God”, while the Israelites had to be gradually weaned from idolatry (Löwe 1796, pp. 28–29). In order to show that his interpretation was “not the birth of the new philosophy” (Löwe 1796, p. 29), Löwe referred to a passage of *Midrash Rabba* (WajR 22,8) and quoted the following passage on law in Maimonides’ “Guide to the Perplexed”:

If the laws were such that they could be rationally seen to disregard cause and ultimate objective, how then could other people live and act accordingly, and be held for wise and great? The opposite is undoubtedly intended so that without any exception, all ceremonial laws aim at either spreading a useful truth or banning a harmful prejudice, or to advancing justice, controlling injustice, to improving morals, or to disengage them from bad habits. Of outstanding importance to the laws are three main parts, namely knowledge, morals and civic virtue; they fall accordingly in regard to their purposes into three main sections, in which they either convey enlightenment or perfect moral sense, or should serve to maintain civic order.¹⁵

In closing, Löwe emphasized that this philosophical interpretation of the ceremonial laws was “entirely in the spirit of genuine, true *Rabbinism*”, which was guided by the principle that “*the spirit vivifies, the letter kills*” and had therefore “also adopted an oral interpretation of the written law, derived from Moses”, which should “only be passed on to teachers, as the enlightened part of the nation, and should therefore be left to them for purposeful use” (Löwe 1796, p. 35). With this interpretation of rabbinic Judaism, Löwe moved the neglected importance of oral religious teachings to the center of observation. He advanced the undogmatic concept of Jewish teachings and herewith strongly enhanced the position of the enlightened Jewish teacher.¹⁶

6. Jewish Journals

Even some twenty years later, the Jewish late-enlightener and pedagogue Jeremias Heinemann was led by the same religious–philosophic principles as Löwe. With his periodical, *Jedidja, eine religiöse, moralische und pädagogische Zeitschrift*, which he started to publish in 1817, Heinemann connected two discursive places of reflection on religion and education: the program description of his educational institutions for boys and girls was contained in the first part of the journal,¹⁷ whereas the second part provided seven sections on “general human development” (see Heinemann 1817a, pp. 3–4). Heinemann, who was not only a school principal but who also held “weekly talks on religion for adult men” of Jewish faith (Heinemann 1817b, p. 7), emphasized that, for young people, religion and morals are “the most important matter” of “the heart and life” (Heinemann 1817b, p. 7). In keeping with the Haskalah, he addressed the pupils in his inaugural speech on the opening of the boys’ school in November 1816:

There is no happiness to be had, no tranquility, no contentment, neither here on earth nor in heaven, without religion and without a morally good way of life. Therefore, have God always in your heart and in your mind’s eye, and beware that you do not agree to anything that is against his commandments and against duty and conscience. (Heinemann 1817b, p. 8)

Heinemann saw his school for boys above all to be “a school of religion and morals” (Heinemann 1817b, p. 11). Furthermore, he addressed “honorable women” in his “Announcement of Religious and Aesthetic Lectures for Girls” and proclaimed:

The holy purpose, the highest purpose of mankind is the religious-moral education of life; it is the basic condition of all earthly and eternal blessedness. Religion and morals are the first, the most important source of everything beautiful and good, from which man can draw his eternity, through which the Divine Spirit can once again see Himself and man as divine. (Ankündigung 1817, pp. 22–23)

Under the heading “Religion and Morals”, Heinemann published, in *Jedidja*, a large number of articles on religious themes. Among these were, to name only a few, poems in Hebrew and German entitled “An die Religion” by Lippmann Moses Büschenthal (see Büschenthal 1817), a “Predigt über Religiosität” by Leopold Zunz (see Zunz 1817, pp. 17–25), a “Rede über Psalm 19” by David Friedländer (Friedländer 1817a) as well as a collection of aphorisms. In one of these aphorisms, to note one example, a differentiation was made between “religions” that had changed during the course of time and the eternal, unchangeable “religion”:

Religions are merely forms that change and become obsolete, such as everything earthly; *Religion*, however, is eternal and forever. But the Eternal should once connect with the Finite according to human need. You should not be led astray by the different forms, not by their inconsistency, nor by their obsolescence: separate the robe from the spirit and you will recognize in all religions only *one eternal religion*.¹⁸

Once again, the undogmatic approach to religious customs and practices becomes clear, which, due to current circumstances, were seen as changeable externalities of the true religion, which was expressed only in the “spirit”.

Jedidja was not the first Haskalah journal to offer a discursive place for enlightened religious understanding. The Hebrew journal *HaMeassef* was its innovative predecessor, published by the Königsberg-Berlin Maskil Isaak Abraham Euchel towards the end of 1783, between 1794 and 1797 by Joel Löwe and Aaron Wolfsohn in Breslau, followed by Salomon Jacob Cohen, who published the journal from 1808 until 1811 in Berlin, Altona and Dessau. The second predecessor was the first German–Jewish periodical *Sulamith, Zeitschrift zur Beförderung der Kultur und Humanität unter der jüdischen Nation*, published by David Fränkel and Joseph Wolf in Leipzig and Dessau. The following was printed in the programmatic opening article of the first issue in 1806:

Sulamith wants reverence towards religion, i.e., towards those truths, which *alone* deserve the name religion, to awaken in the nation; it wants to revive the urgent need for religious feelings and concepts; at the same time it wants to show the wisdom contained in the Jewish religion, which do absolutely no harm to either the individual person or civil society; furthermore, it wants to lead the nation back to native learning, by demonstrating with irrefutable certainty that this primary learning is completely pure and that its religious concepts and teachings, as long as they are not flawed by superstitious additions, never tread the path of a political constitution, but join them partially and where no total unification can take place, at least join them in a brotherly fashion. Finally, *Sulamith* wants to wisely separate true from false, reality from deception, the useful from waste and *to enlighten the nation in its own self*.

A relevant call for religious enlightenment had been heard in many ways some twenty years earlier in *HaMeassef*. In 1787, Isaak Euchel underlined the journal’s “great achievement” in his preface to the fourth volume:

Difficult passages from the Bible and from the writings of our sages, of blessed memory, are explained herein, pure forms of expression in Hebrew printed so that suitable knowledge surrounding this language could be conveyed. Questions

on customs of Israel asked to verify the words of the early sages. We brought in it the 'History of the Great of the People', so that it could be a banner for the enlightened.

(Euchel 1787)

It becomes apparent here once again where the Jewish enlighteners placed priority in their skeptical reflection on education and religion: enlightened Bible exegesis, explanation of terms and language acquisition, review of customs and traditions, knowledge of historical models and, finally, a recourse to an original, undogmatic and tolerant understanding of religion.

7. German-Jewish Sermons

Finally, reference should be made to the early 19th century German sermons, called "speeches", which were written for services in the Reform synagogues. Alongside the introductions to the newly translated religious texts, the school program publications and journals, these sermons likewise represent discursive places for the Haskalah. They were either published as separate papers and in sermon collections or in the journals *Sulamith* and *Jedidja*. Among the earliest German sermons are those of Israel Jacobson in Seesen (Lohmann 2022), Josef Wolf in Dessau, David Friedländer in Berlin as well as Eduard Kley and Gotthold Salomon in Hamburg.

In the following, two "speeches" will be outlined as examples that David Friedländer wrote for the so called "Reform Temple" in Berlin, set up by Israel Jacobsen. They were published in a separate print in 1817, entitled "Religion and Reason" and "Enlightenment in Religion".

He differentiated between the religionless and the religiously indifferent.

The first sermon deals with the relationship between religion and reason. Friedländer explored the cause of the generally lamented absence of religion. He differentiated between the irreligious, the religiously indifferent, the religion-mockers and the religion skeptics. The irreligious person considers it irrelevant if he be "the creature more or less by *chance* or the creation of an understanding *artist*" (Friedländer 1817b; Lohmann 2020, p. 538). Friedländer considered this attitude a "sad digression of the human mind" (Friedländer 1817b; Lohmann 2020, p. 438), resulting out of inflated self-esteem and insensitivity. However, only a few people are without religion. The greater number are those who are convinced of God's existence but are indifferent to religious teachings. Friedländer sees the reason for this attitude in the parental home of the indifferent: religion "was not the fruit of reflection" and it was therefore "used to being placed in mindless customs and ceremonies" (Friedländer 1817b; Lohmann 2020, p. 439). The offspring of such parents merely consider religious rituals as bothersome, as a hindrance to business or against the customs and manners of their surroundings, open to mockery. This, in the end, leads to indifference towards religion.

The "sticking to the letter", the "inertia to penetrate the spirit of holy documents", had also produced "bloodthirsty fanatics" as well as "despisers of religion and mockers" (Friedländer 1817b; Lohmann 2020, p. 428). Instead of focusing on the matter and ideas, the fanatic adheres to images and writings: "With this view, he becomes a true idolator, for he worships the image of his imagination". However, religion is "*spirit, not letter*". Friedländer, therefore, criticized the zealot who gives "*his God not only physical characteristics but also human passions and weaknesses*" (Friedländer 1817b; Lohmann 2020, p. 428). Based on his false ideas of God, the zealot distinguishes himself through intolerance, by "the spirit of persecution towards people who think otherwise, the main source of common superstition" (Friedländer 1817b, p. 429). On the other hand, the mocker feels alienated from the images and figures of speech in the Bible. As he does not attempt to fathom their "spirit", he considers it all to be a fabrication of "lust for power and priestcraft", to rule over men. The Holy Scripture becomes a "target of mockery" (Friedländer 1817b, p. 429). The class of "Religion-Mockers" includes "gabblers" and "ignorant echoers" without profound knowledge but with worthless and unsubstantial learning: "Ridiculous conceit leads them

to make a show as if contempt of the Holy Scripture is the outcome of a spirit that has surpassed prejudice, they call themselves, arrogantly enough: the *Enlightened*", wrote Friedländer (Friedländer 1817b, p. 439). The means against the ignorance of the fanatics and mockers could lie in gaining knowledge of "*the language, the customs, the constitution, history, antiquity*" and the verification of this knowledge, whereby "false views and errors" could be avoided (Friedländer 1817b, p. 429). Not only do reason and the need of the human mind call for this examination, but the Holy Scripture as well, which urges "obedience towards their laws *only* after observing and considering the reasons" and to be "full of encouragement for thought" (Friedländer 1817b, p. 429). God calls for all people to give "acclaim and consent, not otherwise than after applying the rules of the mind, but on being convinced of their adequacy and wisdom" (Friedländer 1817b, p. 430). Friedländer, therefore, held religious skeptics to be a "nobler class" of persons who could give rational reasons for "their non-appreciation of religion" and could bring their conviction "before the judge's chair of reason" (Friedländer 1817b, p. 440). How could *indispensability* of religious tenets be proven and their *inappropriateness* refuted? (Friedländer 1817b, p. 440) In his answer to the questions raised by the skeptics, Friedländer pointed out that abuse of the Holy Scripture is based primarily on not knowing Hebrew and on false translations. The morals-building effect of the Bible alone proves its "charitable use sufficiently" and an "irreproachable transition before God, without the support of what is called religion" does not refute this. One cannot do without religion and religious teachings just as one cannot do without doctors and medicine, only because there are now and then "happily organised natures" who, through self-control and moderation, are "in no need of a doctor and of medicine" (Friedländer 1817b, p. 441).

In his second sermon, "On Enlightenment in Religion", Friedländer provided a definition of the term "Enlightenment" and reflected on the manifold achievements of human society through Enlightenment and especially on the positive changes in the understanding of religion by the enlightened person. Here is a central statement:

We Israelites are instructed by law-giver *Moses*, by all the prophets, speakers and singers, to develop mind and rationality, to use the documents as sources of insights for our improvement and thus comprehend the pure spirit of religion. (Friedländer 1817c; newly edited in Lohmann 2020, p. 543)

With this statement, Friedländer developed a definition of enlightenment as the result of "thinking and studying". An announcement of the results would "spread Enlightenment", whereas "effectuating Enlightenment" would mean nothing more than contributing to an explanation of the term, to combat prejudice and to gain knowledge (Friedländer 1817c; Lohmann 2020, p. 454). It could not be denied that Enlightenment is "favorable to true religion", as "in the first place, *Enlightenment* is the unavoidable condition of all progress in perfection" (Friedländer 1817c; Lohmann 2020, p. 454). The reflective person increases the "enjoyment of this world" through "enlightened terms, studies and knowledge of the arts". Enlightenment freed people of superstition and fear. Nevertheless, this does not hold true of the "human additions" to religion. Precisely these "human rules" (*Menschenatzungen*) are "in the way of the efficacy of true religion" (Friedländer 1817c, p. 460). The friend of truth and mankind strives to gain a critical investigation. Religion without "refined terms" is, therefore, nothing else than a "work of memory", "work sanctity" and "ceremonialism without sense or importance", or its "meaning and importance have been lost" (Friedländer 1817c, pp. 359–60). Immaturity, renunciation of thought, only leads to the "*lowest* definition of deity" and to "*false* ideas of customs and outer acts". The result of this is, on the one hand, the dogmatic observance of unimportant rules and, on the other hand, the neglect of important duties. Religion without enlightening examination brings about "slavish fear and vain hope, zeal without reason, faith without virtue, piety without philanthropy".

Friedländer defined religion as a "bundle of *tenets*" based on the knowledge of God and His will. They determined the relationship of man to God and referred to man's obligation to follow God's commandments. The truths of these tenets served as the basis of

“the entire wisdom of God, of all religion” and were only bound to conviction and not to authority. In his sermons (or speeches), “Religion und Vernunft” and “Über Aufklärung in der Religion”, Friedländer made clear that Jews were called upon by the Biblical Scriptures to support and carry out their human reasonability.

From his reflections, he remarkably concluded that “this contemplation and exploration is called *enlightenment* in modern times”. With this notion of enlightenment and the connection he made to the Hebrew Bible, he ultimately expressed that a skeptical claim to enlightenment was already immanent in original Judaism, and therefore, Jewish religion, enlightenment and skeptical reflection essentially belong together.

8. Concluding Observations

Numerous discussions took place at different places of religion in the Berlin Haskalah, in which the dogmatic definition of traditional Jewish religious practice was jointly questioned from a fundamentally basic skeptical perspective. The herewith implied criticism of traditional Judaism at that time was expressed in a rather subversive way at the religious discourses of the Jewish Enlighteners.¹⁹ Offensive accusations of contemporary Jewish Enlighteners can be found, if at all, as a reaction to attacks by traditionalists.²⁰ And yet, the critical questioning of the rabbinical authorities was explicit and, in the end, implies an indirect accusation of heresy (see [Rebiger 2017](#), pp. 63–64). This affected not only the doubts of Jewish Enlighteners as to the correctness of the common rabbinical practice of the synagogal service but, above all, the traditional Jewish educational system. This by no means corresponded to the educational concepts of a provision for man to gain the greatest possible degree of perfection in regard to his emotional, intellectual and moral abilities and, herewith, be able to gain individual happiness.

The skeptical view of the Maskilim becomes especially apparent in their frequently repeated emphasis on true religion becoming visible in the “spirit” and not by a strict interpretation of the written word.

With their preference of oral “conversation” and dialogical learning, as well as with their permanent appeal to each individual for rational reflection, for the systematic questioning and examination of the meaningfulness of religious rules, the Jewish Enlighteners above all opposed dogmatic codifications. In their search for religious truth and gaining knowledge, the skeptical strategies they employed included both the disclosure and clarification of the content of religious teachings through the translation of application-oriented and liturgically relevant scriptures and the historicization of later additions to the ceremonial laws, “human rules” (*Menschsatzungen*), which, in their eyes, had become meaningless in the course of time. In the tradition of the skepticism of Socratic–Platonic philosophy, the Haskalah encouraged active thinking and joint questioning. It was aimed at the critical reflection of dogmatic positions to tolerant comparison with other religions and, connected with this, to detachment from deadlocked power structures as well as the liberation from religiously anchored prejudices and superstitions. Only based on this undogmatic-tolerant approach can true knowledge be gained, thus, the conviction of the Jewish Enlighteners.

In the process of gaining knowledge it was—analogue to Plato—a matter of skeptically questioning traditionally accepted ideas about desirable knowledge and right action and making one aware of its inadequacy or incorrectness. The Maskilim were convinced that religious truth was not bound to sensually perceptible characters. They, therefore, connected “eternal truths” with only a few basic principles: monotheism, incorporeality of the soul, immortality of the soul and the realization of reward and punishment in a future life (see, e.g., [Friedländer 1799](#); [Lohmann 2013](#), pp. 191–92). This corresponded to the “eternal truths” that Moses Mendelssohn had examined metaphysically in *Phädon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* in the form of dialogues and Socratic talks.

The Maskilim saw their goal in the general expansion and institutionalization of a modernized Jewish education. This “archetype”, as Josef Wolf called it in the journal *Sulamith*,²¹ was to be based on the original religious teachings of the Hebrew Bible. This

implied encouraging the learning of several languages and openness to the latest scientific knowledge. The modern Jewish schools and reformed synagogues became the main places at which the educational concept of the Haskalah took effect institutionally. While, above all, Jewish boys and adults were reached at the public places of the schools and reformed synagogues, the private locations of open Jewish homes, with their family-friendly community, played a major role in the religious education of Jewish women. These formed the very specific places of Jewish enlightenment, where Jews, both men and women, could acquire general humanistic knowledge in shared discussions and in exchanges of ideas with Christian guests. In this way, they followed their religious conviction of the *Determination of Man to Perfection* and thus gained “happiness”. The Haskalah’s skeptical culture of communication was based on the awareness of differing opinions, on the searching and comparing of thoughts on other opinions, the tolerant acceptance of opinions differing from one’s own and, finally, on the self-forming correction of one’s own position in exchange with others. In regard to his reflections of how Socrates would have proceeded to differentiate between faith and rational conviction, Mendelssohn described the tolerant attitude needed by the discussion participants as follows:

A friend of reason, as he was, would most certainly have gratefully accepted from other philosophers, what in their doctrine is founded on reason, regardless of what country, or religious party they might belong to. Regarding the truths of reason, one can agree with someone, and nevertheless find various things unbelievable, which that person accepts on faith. Since the brotherly tolerance of the political world is praised so much today; the friends of truth must first foster brotherly tolerance among themselves. What concerns faith, we want to leave to the conscience and peace of mind of each individual, without appointing ourselves as judges on that point. Out of true charity, we don’t want to argue, where the heart speaks louder than reason; and we have confidence in the All-Merciful God that He will justify anything, if our conscience justifies it to us. But we want to share in the truths of reason in a more than fraternal fashion, we want to enjoy them collectively, like the light of the sun. [. . .] Wisdom knows a universal fatherland, a universal religion, and even if it tolerates different beliefs, it doesn’t sanction the hostility and misanthropy of these differences, which you have laid as the foundation of your political institutions.—Thus, I think, a man like Socrates would think in our days, and seen from this viewpoint, the mantle of modern philosophy, which I hang on him, may not appear so unseemly. (Mendelssohn 2007, pp. 153–54)

With this Socratic attitude, Mendelssohn indirectly sketched the Haskalah’s skeptical culture of communication. It was characterized by the shared search for truth, doubts about any form of authority, the pursuit of practical applicability and the cautious avoidance of dogmatic judgments and commitments.

Funding: This research was funded by the Maimonides Center for Advanced Studies, University of Hamburg.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Suzan Meves for the help in translation, and the translation was funded by the “Institute for the History of the German Jews”.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ Cf. For example Grill (2018) and Ruderman (2000).

² Cf. the present edition and research project “Joel Bril Löwe: Die Breslauer Schulschriften im Kontext (1791–1801)”, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) and headed by Uta Lohmann and Kathrin Wittler.

³ Cf. Mendelssohn (1843, p. 48). Comparable circles were only held by the enlightener and Hebrew poet Hartwig Wessely (Naphtali Herz Weisel), who moved to Berlin in 1773/74. Cf. also Behm (2002b, pp. 144–54).

- Wolfgang H. Pleger describes Socrates' skepticism as follows: "The conviction not to already possess truth, is the Socratic form of skepticism. But this skepticism does not become a clot in a dogmatic thesis on the indiscernibility of being, but becomes a methodically fruitful motif in the joint search for truth"; Cf. Pleger (1991, p. 167). Cf. also Leonard (2012, pp. 17–64).
- With regard to Socrates, this method is called midwifery, maieutics.
- Cf. Friedländer (1818, pp. 153–56), here also the quotes.
- Friedländer (1818, p. 157). Cursive in the original. For a critical view of Maimonides' view on negative theology, cf. Stern (2019, pp. 116–19).
- On Mendelssohn's participation see (Behm 2002a, pp. 107–35).
- On religious instruction at the *Freischule* (cf. Lohmann 2002, pp. 137–65).
- Statement by Friedrich Albert Zimmer, responsible civil servant for the Breslau Jewish community; quote by Freudenthal (1893, p. 335).
- This skepticism is derived indirectly but is yet clear, such as is expressed in the program of the Jewish *Freischule* in 1788, in which the subjects of a traditional curriculum are listed. It is apparent that this instruction material is only available in selection, more structured than usual and is to be taught by another method. See (Itzig and Friedländer 2001, pp. 206, 208).
- (Mendelssohn 1782, pp. 27–65). David Friedländer comments on the *Anmerkungen*: "They were the results of his serious contemplations and investigations since his early youth; the guiding principle of his whole life; his unfeigned religious confession" (Friedländer 1814, XVII).
- The pondering reader ("der grübelnde Leser"), (Löwe and Wolfssohn 1790, p. IX).
- Löwe's Pessach Haggada (Bril [Löwe] 1785) and David Friedländer and Isaak Euchel's (1785/86) translations of prayers are dedicated to Jewish women from their own family and communicative environment; see (Lohmann 2017).
- Moses Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* (late 12th century), Part 3, Cap. 31; quoted acc. to Löwe (1796, pp. 31–32).—The Jewish enlightener Isaak A. Euchel, a close friend of Joel Löwe, shortly before published a new edition of *Moreh Nevuchim* in the Berlin *Orientalische Buchdruckerei* (Chevrat Chinuch Ne'arim). The first volume appeared in 1791 with a commentary by Moses Narboni (14th century) *Giv'at haMoreh* by Salomon Maimon. The second and third volumes were published in 1795, along with a commentary by Isaac Satanow.
- This reveals a parallel to Plato: see inter alia (Gaiser 1998; Reale 2000).
- On Heinemann's school, see Fehrs (1993, pp. 48–52).
- Schlachter (1818, p. 44). Georg Joachim Schlachter (1785–1860) was a Christian country schoolteacher. The interdenominational exchange is characteristic of the Haskalah's skeptical conversation culture.
- For the method inventory of cultural scepticism see (Rebiger 2017).
- Rabbinical authorities voiced threats against the German translations of Biblical writings and of Jewish prayers as well as against the modern Jewish educational concept; see (Lohmann 2014).
- See above, FN 91.

References

- Ankündigung religiöser und ästhetischer Vorträge von J. Heinemann und H. Winter für gebildete Israelitinnen in Berlin. 1817. *Jedidja* 1: 22–30.
- Ascher, Saul. 2010. *Ausgewählte Werke*. Edited by Renate Best. Köln, Weimar and Wien: Böhlau.
- Behm, Britta L. 2002a. Moses Mendelssohns Stellung in der Haskala. In *Jüdische Erziehung und aufklärerische Schulreform. Analysen zum späten 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*. Edited by Britta L. Behm, Uta Lohmann and Ingrid Lohmann. Münster, New York, München and Berlin: Waxmann.
- Behm, Britta L. 2002b. *Moses Mendelssohn und die Transformation der jüdischen Erziehung in Berlin*. Münster, New York, München and Berlin: Waxmann, pp. 144–54.
- Bril [Löwe], Joel. 1785. Geneigte Leserinnen. In *Sefer Hagadah Shel Pessach*. Berlin: Chevrat Chinuch Ne'arim, pp. 5–8.
- Büschantal, Lippmann Moses. 1817. An die Religion. In *Jedidja: Eine Religiöse, Moralische und Pädagogische Zeitschrift*. Berlin: Maurer, pp. 3–16, 34–37.
- Ciafardone, Raffaele. 1990. *Die Philosophie der deutschen Aufklärung*. Stuttgart: Reclam, p. 13.
- Cohen, Salomon Jacob Cohen. 1802. Plan to improve religious instruction. 390–91.
- Davies, Martin L. 1995. *Identity or History? Marcus Herz and the End of the Enlightenment*. Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press.
- Dietrich, Peter. 1778. Die Rolle des preußischen Staates bei der Reform des jüdischen Schulwesens. Handlungsstrategien der preußischen Verwaltung gegenüber der jüdischen Freischule in Berlin (1778–1825) und der Königlichen Wilhelmsschule in Breslau (1791–1848). In *Jüdische Erziehung und aufklärerische Schulreform. Analysen zum späten 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*. Edited by Britta L. Behm, Uta Lohmann and Ingrid Lohmann. Münster, New York, München and Berlin: Waxmann, pp. 167–212.
- Euchel, Isaak. 1787. Preface. *HaMeassef* 4. [CrossRef]
- Fehrs, Jörg H. 1993. *Von der Heidereutergasse zum Roseneck. Jüdische Schulen in Berlin 1712–1942*. Berlin: Edition Hentrich, pp. 48–52.
- Feiner, Shmuel. 2004. *The Jewish Enlightenment*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.

- Fischer, Bernd. 2016. *Ein anderer Blick: Saul Aschers politische Schriften*. Wien, Köln and Weimar: Böhlau.
- Freudenthal, Max. 1893. Die ersten Emancipationsbestrebungen der Juden in Breslau. Nach archivalischen und anderen Quellen dargestellt. *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 37: 335.
- Friedländer, David. 1786. Vorerinnerung. In *Gebete der Juden auf das ganze Jahr*. Berlin: Chevrat Chinuch Ne'arim, pp. 267–70.
- Friedländer, David. 1788a. *Schreiben an meine Mit-Brüder in Deutschland, eine in hebräischer Sprache gedruckte moralische Rede betreffend*. Berlin: Waxmann, pp. 278–92.
- Friedländer, David. 1788b. Über den besten Gebrauch der h. Schrift, in pädagogischer Rücksicht. In *Der Prediger*. Berlin: Friedrich Maurer, pp. 61–81.
- Friedländer, David. 1788c. *Haftarah leShacherit Jom haKipurim*. Berlin: Chevrat Chinuch Ne'arim.
- Friedländer, David. 1790. *Haftarot mikol haShanah*. Berlin: Chevrat Chinuch Ne'arim.
- Friedländer, David. 1799. *Sendschreiben an Seine Hochwürden, Herrn Oberconsistorialrath und Probst Teller zu Berlin, von einigen Hausvätern jüdischer Religion*. Berlin: August Mylius.
- Friedländer, David. 1814. Einleitung. In *Moses Mendelssohn: Phädon Oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele*, 5th ed. Berlin: Nicolai, p. X.
- Friedländer, David. 1817a. Rede über Psalm 19. *Jedidja* 1: 373–383.
- Friedländer, David. 1817b. *Religion und Vernunft*. Berlin: C.A. Stuhr.
- Friedländer, David. 1817c. *Über Aufklärung in der Religion*. Berlin: C.A. Stuhr.
- Friedländer, David. 1818. Unterhaltung mit Mendelssohn, aus der Erinnerung nieder geschrieben. *Jedidja* 2: 143–76.
- Friedländer, David. 2013. *Ausgewählte Werke*. Edited by Uta Lohmann. Köln, Weimar and Wien: Böhlau.
- Gaiser, Konrad. 1998. *Platos ungeschriebene Lehre. Studien zur systematischen und geschichtlichen Begründung der Wissenschaften in der Platonischen Schule*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Grill, Tobias, ed. 2018. *Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe. Shared and Comparative Histories*. Berlin, München and Boston: De Gruyter-De Gruyter Oldenbourg.
- Hecht, Louise. 2008. *Ein jüdischer Aufklärer in Böhmen. Der Pädagoge und Reformers Peter Beer (1758–1838)*. Wien, Köln and Weimar: Böhlau.
- Heinemann, Jeremias. 1817a. Einleitung. *Jedidja* 1: 1–4.
- Heinemann, Jeremias. 1817b. Nachricht von einer unter höherer Auctorität [!] zu errichtenden neuen Erziehungs- und Lehranstalt für israelitische Knaben. *Jedidja* 1: 5–22.
- Hinske, Norbert. 1990. Die tragenden Grundideen der deutschen Aufklärung. Versuch einer Typologie. In *Aufklärung und Haskala in jüdischer und nichtjüdischer Sicht*. Edited by Karlfried Gründer and Nathan Rotenstreich. Heidelberg: Schneider, pp. 67–100.
- Hiscott, William. 2017. *Saul Ascher. Berliner Aufklärer. Eine philosophiehistorische Darstellung*. Hannover: Wehrhahn.
- Itzig, Isaak Daniel, and David Friedländer. 2001. Programm der Freischule von 1783. In *Chevrat Chinuch Nearim. Die jüdische Freischule in Berlin (1788–1825) im Umfeld preußischer Bildungspolitik und jüdischer Kulturreform*. Edited by Ingrid Lohmann. Münster, New York, München and Berlin: Waxmann.
- Itzig, Isaak Daniel. 1803. *Nachricht von dem gegenwärtigen Zustande der jüdischen Freischule in Berlin*. Berlin: Joh. Wilh. Schmidt, pp. 392–402.
- Kennecke, Andreas, ed. 2001. *Isaak Euchel. Vom Nutzen der Aufklärung. Schriften zur Haskala*. Düsseldorf: Parerga.
- Kennecke, Andreas. 2007. *Isaac Euchel. Architekt der Haskala*. Göttingen: Wallstein.
- Leder, Christoph Maria. 2007. *Die Grenzgänge des Marcus Herz. Beruf, Haltung und Identität eines jüdischen Arztes gegen Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Münster: Waxmann.
- Leonard, Miriam. 2012. *Socrates and the Jews. Hellenism and Hebraism from Moses Mendelssohn to Sigmund Freud*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, pp. 17–64.
- Lohmann, Uta. 2002. 'Auf den Namen einer Bürgerschule Ansprüche machen'—Religionsunterricht und staatliche Klassifizierung der Berliner Freischule. In *Jüdische Erziehung und aufklärerische Schulreform. Analysen zum späten 18. Und frühen 19. Jahrhundert*. Edited by Britta L. Behm, Uta Lohmann and Ingrid Lohmann. Münster, New York, München and Berlin: Waxmann, pp. 137–65.
- Lohmann, Uta. 2011. David Friedländer und Moses Mendelssohn. Eine Freundschaft zwischen äußeren Erwartungen und innerer Überzeugung. *Mendelssohn Studien* 17: 71–98.
- Lohmann, Uta. 2013. *David Friedländer. Reformpolitik im Zeichen von Aufklärung und Emanzipation—Kontexte des preußischen Judenedikts vom 11. März 1812*. Hannover: Wehrhahn.
- Lohmann, Ingrid, ed. 2014. *Naphtali Herz Wessely. Worte des Friedens und der Wahrheit. Dokumente einer Kontroverse über Erziehung in der europäischen Spätaufklärung*. Münster and New York: Waxmann.
- Lohmann, Uta. 2015. 'Dem Wahrheitsforcher zur Belehrung'. Die Herausgaben von Moses Mendelssohns Ha-nefesh (1787) und Phädon (1814–1821) durch David Friedländer: Kontexte, Adressaten, Intentionen. *Mendelssohn Studien* 19: 45–77.
- Lohmann, Uta. 2017. 'edle Frauen, zärtliche Gattinnen, verständige Mütter und kluge Hauswirtinnen'—zum Weiblichkeitsideal der Berliner Haskala. In *Die Kommunikations-, Wissens- und Handlungsräume der Henriette Herz (1764–1847)*. Edited by Hannah Lotte Lund, Ulrike Schneider and Ulrike Wels. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp. 71–86.
- Lohmann, Uta. 2020. *Haskala und allgemeine Menschenbildung. David Friedländer und Wilhelm von Humboldt im Gespräch: Zur Wechselwirkung zwischen jüdischer Aufklärung und neuhumanistischer Bildungstheorie*. Münster and New York: Waxmann, pp. 424–51.

- Lohmann, Uta. 2022. "Gottesverehrung im Tempel der Israeliten". Israel Jacobsons Interaktion mit der (Berliner) Haskala und die Genese der emotionalen religiösen Rede. In *Jews and Citizens – Juden und Bürger. Beiträge zur internationalen Konferenz zum 250. Geburtstag von Israel Jacobson*. Edited by Cord-Friedrich Berghahn, Mirko Przystawik, Katrin Keßler and Ulrich Knufinke. Göttingen: Wallstein, pp. 131–53.
- Löwe, Joel. 1793. *Einige Bemerkungen über Zeitwörter, vorzüglich Seyn, Haben u. Werden*. Breslau: Graßische Stadt-Buchdruckerei, p. 55.
- Löwe, Joel. 1794. *Etwas über Chronologie zur Jüdischen Geschichte*. Breslau: Graßische Stadt-Buchdruckerei, p. 42.
- Löwe, Joel. 1796. *Assaph über ächte und unächte Religiosität*. Breslau: Graßische Stadt-Buchdruckerei, p. 3.
- Löwe, Joel. 2005. Eröffnungsrede. In *Nachricht, von dem, unter dem Namen Wilhelms-Schule, zu Breslau errichteten Institut, zu einer verbesserten Unterweisung der Kinder dasiger Juden-Gemeinde*. Newly edited in "Lerne Vernunft!" *Jüdische Erziehungsprogramme zwischen Tradition und Modernisierung. Quellentexte aus der Zeit der Haskala, 1760–1811*. Edited by Uta Lohmann and Ingrid Lohmann. Münster, München and Berlin: Waxmann, pp. 428–31.
- Löwe, Joel, and Aaron Wolfsohn. 1790. Vorrede. In *Jeremiahs Klagegesänge*. Berlin: Maurer, pp. III–XXIV.
- Mendelssohn, Joseph. 1843. *Moses Mendelssohn's Lebensgeschichte*. Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, p. 48.
- Mendelssohn, Moses. 1782. *Anmerkungen zu Abbt's freundschaftlicher Correspondenz*. Edited in *Moses Mendelssohn: Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*. Berlin: Bey Friedrich Nicolai, vol. 6.1, pp. 27–65.
- Mendelssohn, Moses. 1783. *Die Psalmen*. Berlin: Maurer.
- Mendelssohn, Moses. 2007. Appendix to the Third Edition of Phädon, 1769. In *Phädon or On the Immortality of the Soul*. Translated by Patricia Noble. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, p. 152.
- Mendelssohn, Moses. 2011. Jerusalem or On Religious Power and Judaism. In *Moses Mendelssohn. Writings on Judaism, Christianity & the Bible*. Edited by Michah Gottlieb. Translated by Allan Arkush. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, pp. 92–93.
- Mendelssohn, Moses. 2018. *Or Li-Netivah, in: Moses Mendelssohn's Hebrew Writings*. Translated by Edward Breuer. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 276.
- Pelli, Moshe. 1979. *The Age of Haskalah. Studies in Hebrew Literature of the Enlightenment in Germany*. Leiden: Brill.
- Pelli, Moshe. 2000. *The Gate to Haskalah*. Hebrew: Jerusalem.
- Pleger, Wolfgang H. 1991. *Der Vorsokratiker*. Stuttgart: Metzler, p. 167.
- Reale, Giovanni. 2000. *Zu einer neuen Interpretation Platons. Eine Auslegung der Metaphysik der großen Dialoge im Lichte der "ungeschriebenen Lehren"*. Paderborn, München, Wien and Zürich: Schöningh.
- Rebiger, Bill. 2017. Sceptical Strategies in Simone Luzzano's Presentation of the Kabbalists in his Discorso. *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies* 2: 51–69.
- Ruderman, David B. 2000. *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sadowski, Dirk. 2010. *Haskala und Lebenswelt. Herz Homberg und die jüdischen deutschen Schulen in Galizien 1782–1806*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Schlachter, Georg Joachim. 1818. Lückenbüßer. *Jedidja* 1: 44–47.
- Schulte, Christoph. 2002. *Die jüdische Aufklärung. Philosophie, Religion, Geschichte*. München: Beck.
- Sela, Yael. 2023. *Songs of the Nation: Sefer Zemirot Yisra'el by Joel Bril (Berlin, 1791)*. A Bilingual Edition with Commentary. Boston and Leiden: Brill.
- Sorkin, David. 2000. *The Berlin Haskalah and German Religious Thought. Orphans of Knowledge*. London and Portland: Vallentine Mitchell.
- Stern, Josef. 2019. What is Maimonidean Scepticism? In *Sceptical Paths. Enquiry and Doubts from Antiquity to the Present*. Edited by Giuseppe Veltri, Rachel Haliva, Emidio Spinelli and Stephan Schmid. Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, pp. 97–125.
- Strauss, Jutta. 1994. Aaron Halle-Wolfsohn: A Trilingual Life. An Exemplary Life for the Interplay of Hebrew, German and Yiddish among 18th Century German Jewry. Doctoral dissertation, Bodleian Library Oxford, Oxford, UK.
- Strauss, Ze'ev. 2018. The Ground Floor of Judaism: Scepticism and Certainty in Moses Mendelssohn's Jerusalem. *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies* 3: 179–206.
- Wolf, Joseph. 1806a. Inhalt, Zweck und Titel dieser Zeitschrift. *Sulamith. Eine Zeitschrift zur Beförderung der Cultur und Humanität unter den Israeliten* 1: 1–11.
- Wolf, Joseph. 1806b. Über das Wesen, den Charakter und die Nothwendigkeit der Religion. *Sulamith* 1: 207–14.
- Wolfsohn, Aaron, and Joel Bril. 1838. Vorbericht der jüdischen Herausgeber. In *Moses Mendelssohn's sämtliche Werke*. Ausgabe in einem Bande als National-Denkmal. Wien: Schmidt und Klang.
- Zunz, Leopold. 1817. Predigt über Religiosität, gehalten in dem Kreise einiger Freunde. *Jedidja* 1: 17–25.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.