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The Impact of Early Modern Jewish Thought on the Eighteenth Century: A Challenge to the Notion of the Sephardi Mystique

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Abstract

In one of the most dramatic introductions to an elementary manual on the natural sciences, Judah Loeb Margolioth (1747-1811) opens his *Or 'olam 'al hokhmat ha-teva'* (1782) with the provocative words of a woman in black personifying the science of nature. She proclaims:

Who will listen and pay attention to me? Wait. I am the science of nature who in the past was the cornerstone but now I have become like a lost vessel and like a rejected definition, abandoned and forgotten and forsaken. Canals run dry [Isa. 19:6] and there is no one on the earth who cures [or heals from my light and my precious lights. ... Why is philosophy open and uncovered, peering through the window [Judg. 5:28], saturating its plump furrows [after Ps. 65:11]... while I am estranged. ... I am astonished most of all by the officer of the Torah, the author of the *Guide* [Maimonides], notwithstanding the wonders he accomplished for the Torah and the law and the hidden lights his hand uncovered and the philosophy he seized with violent trembling [Gen. 27:33]. For from the time he wondrously made a praiseworthy name for it [philosophy], the task became onerous [echoing Exod. 5:9]. What perverseness did he find in the science of nature such that he left it bereaved and abandoned, proven displeasing by the fact that he did not designate her [see Exod. 21:8] because he went after philosophy whose buds are blown away like dust [Isa. 5:24].¹

Margolioth's open contempt for Maimonides' privileging metaphysics over physics might be meaningfully compared with another remarkable declaration composed some fifty years earlier by the Italian Jewish Kabbalist Solomon Aviad Sar-Shalom Basilea in his *Emunat hakhamim* (1730). In this passage, Basilea describes an old sage in Mantua who had apparently accumulated much 'old-fashioned' learning which rendered him incapable of having any new insight other than what he had previously learned. Basilea cleverly offered to perform an experiment on him using the eyeglasses on the bridge of his nose. He said to him: 'Master, the spectacles on your nose can make people appear so that their heads are below and their feet are above; that they can extend their heads to the ground and their lower extremities toward heaven, so that when a person walks to the east, it will appear to him that he goes to the west. So all things might appear to be opposite of what they actually are'. The old philosopher dismissed Basilea's offer as nonsensical and attempted to offer philosophical proofs demonstrating the impossibility of what he was claiming to accomplish.

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History | History of Religion | Intellectual History | Jewish Studies | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

[P]erhaps somewhat to the surprise of people who believe the eighteenth century to have been a harmonious, symmetrical, infinitely rational, elegant, glassy sort of century, a kind of peaceful mirror of human reason and human beauty not disturbed by anything deeper and darker, we find that never in the history of Europe had so many irrational persons wandered over its surface claiming adherence.¹⁸

Those who lived at the time knew that even better than we do. Voltaire, for example, perhaps the most fascinating figure of the eighteenth century, exposed the religious fanaticism of Catholicism as manifested in France in the 1760s in the trials and barbarous executions of Jean Calas and of the Chevalier de La Barre.¹⁹ Mendelssohn was skeptical about the possibility of combating prejudice and imbuing the masses with the principle of religious tolerance. In 1784, in his 'Was ist Aufklärung?' Immanuel Kant concluded that his was not an 'enlightened age'. At best, he maintained, it is an age in which there is 'Aufklärung'.²⁰

Even though he was more knowledgeable and cultured than many of his Jewish brethren, Naphtali Herz Wessely, with whom I began, was not acquainted with all the contradictory trends at work during his generation. He was, however, certainly aware of his own role in the cultural renaissance of the early Haskalah and believed that he himself was responsible for the breakthrough that produced the cultural shift in Ashkenazi Jewry. Nonetheless, to judge by his reactions during the 1782 *Kulturkampf* he instigated with the publication of *Divrei shalom ve-emet*, it is doubtful that he understood the revolutionary meaning of his challenge to the rabbinical elite and of his demand for a rethinking of all aspects of the social, economic, educational, and cultural life of the Jews. In any event, his request to be buried in the Sephardi section of the Altona cemetery is a historical episode that signifies the emergence of independent, individualistic thinking, critical audacity, and openness to innovative options of living. In this sense, his link to the Sephardi cultural model is emblematic of one of the most fascinating trends of the Jewish eighteenth century.

¹⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 1999), p. 47.

¹⁹ Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance and Other Writings*, ed. Simon Harvey, trans. Simon Harvey and Brian Masters (Cambridge and New York, 2000).

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?' *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 4 (1784): 481–94.

David B. Ruderman

The Impact of Early Modern Jewish Thought on the Eighteenth Century: A Challenge to the Notion of the Sephardi Mystique

In one of the most dramatic introductions to an elementary manual on the natural sciences, Judah Loeb Margolioth (1747–1811) opens his *Or 'olam 'al hokhmat ha-teva'* (1782) with the provocative words of a woman in black personifying the science of nature. She proclaims:

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¹ Judah Loeb Margolioth, *Sefer Or 'olam 'al hokhmat ha-teva'* (Warsaw, 1842), pp. 3a–3b. On Margolioth, see Shmuel Feiner, 'The Dragon Attached to the Beehive: Y. L. Margolioth and the Paradox of the Early Haskalah', (Hebrew) *Zion* 63 (1997/98): 39–74.

the west. So all things might appear to be opposite of what they actually are'. The old philosopher dismissed Basilea's offer as nonsensical and attempted to offer philosophical proofs demonstrating the impossibility of what he was claiming to accomplish. Basilea continues:

I then asked him to hand me his glasses and I placed them far from his eyes at the point where the image breaks up [the focal point] and beyond it. He then observed ... what was impossible for him to believe. This was because he had not studied the science of optics even though he was a great scholar, and he did not understand how the lens works and how the rays [entering] the eyes or any rays are bent. ... On the contrary, he always imagined the opposite to be the case, for with the spectacles on his nose he read a book and perceived everything to be in order. Maimonides' case is similar, since he learned only the doctrines of Aristotle in these matters and could not understand that our voice from below works above; thus he denied the power of using God's names.²

Reflecting on this fascinating passage, I once wrote:

Like the Mantuan scholar, Maimonides had understood the world through the lens of a scholastic conceptual scheme. Despite his intellectual accomplishments, Maimonides could not be expected to understand the cultural and scientific world of the eighteenth century, a world where the potency of forces not understood by the intellect was deemed possible and even regularly observed. It wasn't that 'the great eagle' was dead wrong; he was simply wearing the wrong lens.³

From Basilea's perspective, the empirical study of nature could now become a tool to subvert the rational orthodoxies of the medievals while reconfirming the previously discounted sapience of ancient rabbinic and kabbalistic traditions.

I began this essay by citing two eighteenth-century Hebrew writers, Margolioth and Basilea, to reflect on the Jewish intellectual world of their era from an apparently different vantage point than most of the essays in this volume. In focusing primarily on texts written on scientific and medical subjects, several of which reflect a kabbalistic bent as well, I am struck by how an expected appreciation and even veneration for the Jewish tradition of medieval philosophy, especially the vaunted Maimonides, had worn thin. Maimonides and his philosophical colleagues – Ibn Tibbon, Ibn Ezra, even Saadia – might be revered as cultural heroes; their Sephardi mystique might appear alluring to an intellectual community trying to balance the religious with the secular, the external with the internal. But as a source of real knowledge about the material, natural world, the medieval philosophers had become more liable to error and more vulnerable than ever before. Maimonides might still be embraced for his metaphysical insight and his legal brilliance, but he was painfully out of date in the light of new scientific information, and he was woefully myopic because he was wearing the wrong epistemological lens, to borrow Basilea's metaphor once more.

² Solomon Aviad Sar-Shalom Basilea, *Sefer Emunat hakhamim* (Mantua, 1730), p. 17a. The full passage is translated and discussed in David Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven, 1995; Detroit, 2001), p. 221.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

To a community of *maskilim* enamoured of the natural world, cautiously and timidly exploring the new emerging scientific literature of their day, the need to present science in a manner uncorrosive to Jewish faith was paramount. As Shmuel Feiner has pointed out, their enlightened positions would not be advanced by sacrificing Judaism. They sought a balance between the Torah of God and the knowledge of man, so their secularism was always limited, moderate, and controlled.⁴ To justify and legitimate the novelty of their new probings into the natural world and to argue that the latter were essential to the education of a new generation of Jewish students, they turned not to the Maimonidean corpus but to one more recent, more up-to-date, more in line with their own emerging epistemological positions: that of a group of thinkers and writers in early modern Europe, especially those trained in medicine and the new sciences in Italian universities. In their discovery of a group of authors who had already abandoned for the most part the presuppositions of medieval thought in favour of a new experimental philosophy of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries,⁵ they found a means of embracing the new without abandoning the old. Rather than invent a new tradition *ex nihilo* to pursue scientific knowledge, they found ready-made a literature of their most recent intellectual ancestors, composed in Hebrew, written from a respectable traditional pedigree, and insightful in addressing some of the same religious and intellectual issues the *maskilim* were now facing. Instead of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra, many of them would draw profit and inspiration instead from Joseph Delmedigo (Yashar mi-Candia), Tobias Cohen, David Gans, or Jacob Zahalon in the area of natural sciences. And in the not-unrelated area of history and historical scholarship, Solomon Ibn Verga, David Gans, Azariah de' Rossi, and Menasseh ben Israel would be consulted and cited, since, in many ways, their intellectual achievements were relevant to an age where science and history had been elevated to the highest level of human consciousness.

To draw unambiguous conclusions from the vast literary output of European Jewish writers who wrote in the eighteenth century is most hazardous. Because I have utilized only some dozen authors who focused primarily on theological and scientific issues, including several German Jews as well as Jews on the margins of Ashkenazi Jewish culture such as those in Italy and England, my very tentative impressions are subject to careful scrutiny and evaluation. I do not mean to suggest the medieval writers did not occupy a significant role in eighteenth-century Jewish thought. I only wish to indicate by my limited probings that both medieval *and* early modern authorities were consulted seriously in this century; that both Italy as well as Sepharad caught the serious attention of the *maskilim*; and that the impact of pre-modern Jewish thought was not limited to rational and philosophical writing. Kabbalistic sources and ideas are not lacking even among the most rational and secularized writers well into the nineteenth century.

On the basis of my small sampling of authors and their writing, let me suggest four possible relations that emerge between the medieval/early modern authorities and their eighteenth-century interlocutors and illustrate them with several examples.

⁴ Shmuel Feiner, 'Towards a Historical Definition of the Haskalah', in *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*, ed. Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin (London, 2001), pp. 206–19.

In the first case, I would suggest that several eighteenth-century Jewish writers openly cite medieval authors, even writing commentaries on their work, but ultimately challenge their assumptions, significantly update their knowledge, and subvert the actual meaning of the texts they are using for their own purposes. Israel of Zamość's commentary on Judah Ibn Tibbon's *Ruah hen*, published in 1744, is a case in point. One of its overriding themes is to demonstrate how modern knowledge has outstripped that of the ancients, through its reliance on the most advanced philosophies of nature challenging longstanding Aristotelian notions, and through its use of modern instruments such as the microscope and air-pump.⁵ Even more devastating is Mordecai Schnaber Levisohn's commentary on Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith. Only the bare skeleton of thirteen subsections remains to remind the reader that Levisohn is indeed commenting on Maimonides' conceptions. Beyond this, the reader enters the world of Locke and Linnaeus and their epistemological categories, underscoring Levisohn's commitment to the fashionable physico-theology of the eighteenth century. When Levisohn does mention Maimonides, he almost always challenges or dismisses his antiquated notions. More useful to him is an array of kabbalistic sources that can be more easily conjoined to his modernist conclusions.⁷

More common than subverting the medieval authorities is citing them – not as the last word, but rather together with more updated and informative early modern sources.

Aaron Gumpertz' highly moving introduction to *Megalleh sod*, his supercommentary on Ibn Ezra's commentary on the five scrolls, acknowledges from the beginning the author's indebtedness to Maimonides and Joseph Delmedigo.⁸ His genealogy of 'geonim' who have pursued medicine and science before him begin with the medievals – Saadia, Maimonides, Ibn Ezra, Gersonides – but concludes with those closer to his own generation – Arama, Abravanel, Isserles, Mordecai Jaffe, and again closing with Delmedigo.⁹ Levisohn's aforementioned treatise on the thirteen principles is not adverse to citing such medieval luminaries as Bahya Ibn Paquda, Joseph Albo, and Judah Halevi, but the number of early modern authorities – Moses Isserles, Isaiah Horowitz, Eliezer Ashkenazi, Abraham Bibago, Joseph Delmedigo, Jacob Emden, and more – far outweighs the earlier thinkers. And most revealing in a thinker who reads Locke seriously is the ample citation of kabbalistic sages, from the *Zohar* and Gikatilla to Mattathias Delacrut and Immanuel Hai Ricchi.¹⁰ Similarly, the

⁵ These thinkers are treated in Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*; see also David Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

⁶ Israel ben Moses ha-Levi of Zamość, *Sefer Ruah hen* (Warsaw, 1826; repr. Jerusalem, 1970, originally published in Jessnitz, 1744). For a discussion of this text and early bibliography, see Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, pp. 332–4, 341–3.

⁷ Mordecai Gumpel Schnaber Levisohn, *Shelosh 'esreh yesodei ha-torah* (Altona[?], 1792). The work is discussed in Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, pp. 345–68. For examples of his dismissive attitude towards Maimonides, see pp. 8a, 14a, 21a, 44b.

⁸ Aaron Salomon Gumpertz, *Sefer Megalleh sod* (Lemberg, 1910; originally published in Hamburg, 1765), p. 3a. On Gumpertz, see Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, pp. 334–5, 343–4.

⁹ Gumpertz, *Sefer Megalleh sod*, p. 3b.

¹⁰ See Levisohn, *Shelosh 'esreh yesodei ha-torah*, for example, pp. 2a (Albo); 3a (Bahya); 33b (Pseudo-Ravad and *Ma'arekhet ha-elohut*); 39a (Gikatilla, Isserles, Isaiah Horowitz, Eliezer Ashke-

nazi); 43b (Abravanel, Eliezer Ashkenazi); 44b (Bibago); 45b (Kabbalists cited); 74a and 76a (Joseph Delmedigo); 87b (Immanuel Hai Ricchi); 97a (Delacrut); and 101a (Jacob Emden).

more recent ones such as Abravanel, Ibn Verga, Sforino, de' Rossi, Menasseh ben Israel, and others.¹³ Sorkin's emphasis on the medieval foundations of Mendelssohn's thinking clearly understates the significant impact of these later thinkers of the Jewish tradition on his Hebrew commentaries.

In a few cases, a medieval thinker might serve as a bridge in asserting a thoroughly modern position. Take the interesting example of Israel of Zamość's use of Judah Halevi in *Ruah hen*. Halevi's brief remarks questioning the validity of Aristotle's four elements offer him a pretext to adopt the new scheme of five elements advocated by the chemical philosophers.¹⁴ In an even larger sense, David Nieto's *Kuzari sheni* is simply a convenient way of offering a new philosophy for his age, utilizing the structure of Halevi's classic work to rethink the meaning of the Jewish faith in the context of an intellectual climate radically transformed by the new philosophies of Descartes, Newton, Boyle, and Gassendi.¹⁵

Most common of all, at least among the eighteenth-century writers on nature and science, is a clear recognition, as in the case of Margolioth and Basilea, that the Jewish tradition of early modern writers is more usable and relevant than that of their medieval predecessors. The former not only supersedes the latter in the accuracy and expansiveness of its formulations; it is closer to the scientific assumptions shared by most eighteenth-century Jewish writers. One might even argue that the excessive reliance on these authors of the preceding generation or two hampered their quest to investigate more modern and up-to-date sources. In comparison with the early modern authors themselves, eighteenth-century writers on scientific matters are less informed and less up-to-date. They know more about the scientific discoveries of the seventeenth century than their own century, in revealing contrast to several early modern thinkers like Tobias Cohen and Joseph Delmedigo, who were remarkably up-to-date.

Like Basilea, his early eighteenth-century Jewish contemporaries Tobias Cohen and David Nieto are enamoured of contemporary philosophy and science. In a real sense, they have distanced themselves almost completely from medieval philosophi-

nazi); 43b (Abravanel, Eliezer Ashkenazi); 44b (Bibago); 45b (Kabbalists cited); 74a and 76a (Joseph Delmedigo); 87b (Immanuel Hai Ricchi); 97a (Delacrut); and 101a (Jacob Emden).

¹¹ See Margolioth, *Or 'olam*, e.g., 4a (Jaffe); 4b (Arama); 6a (Delmedigo, Jaffe); 6b (Delmedigo); 7b (Saadia); 8a (Bibago); 9a (Jaffe); 11a (Isserles); 14a (Delmedigo); 18b (Delmedigo); 19b (Jaffe, Israel of Zamość); 22a and 23a–23b (Saadia); 22b (Israel of Zamość).

¹² David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 1996), especially pp. xxii–xxiii; Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University of Alabama, 1973).

¹³ See Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, pp. 76–7 (on de' Rossi, Sforino, and Abravanel); Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, pp. 463–74 (on Menasseh ben Israel); 575–7 (on Ibn Verga). See also Rivka Horwitz, 'Kabbalah in the Writings of Mendelssohn and the Berlin Circle of Maskilim', *Leo Baeck Year Book* 45 (2000): 3–24.

¹⁴ Israel of Zamość, *Sefer Ruah hen*, p. 3a, citing *Kuzari* 5:14.

¹⁵ On Nieto, see Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, pp. 310–31.

cal authorities whom they consider unreliable and incomplete.¹⁶ The late eighteenth-century authors on science who follow them, Judah Loeb Margoliotz and Baruch Lindau, continue the process of liberating themselves from the hegemony of Maimonides and medieval philosophy in favour of early modern authorities. Lindau's *Reshit limmudim* (1789) is a more comprehensive and informed view of the sciences than Margoliotz's more amateurish *Or 'olam*, published only seven years earlier. It relies almost exclusively on contemporary authorities, both Jews such as Marcus Herz and Marcus Bloch and non-Jews like Buffon, Newton, and Andreas Bünger. It is a clear statement that when it comes to science, Jews have much to learn from contemporary authorities, not medieval or even early modern ones.¹⁷

Pinchas Hurwitz's unusual compendium of Kabbalah and science, *Sefer ha-Berit* (1797), strongly privileges early modern authorities over medieval ones. Hurwitz transparently felt the need to justify his forays into science by using Jewish authorities who wrote in Hebrew. An index of his citations through the large encyclopaedia testifies to his wide and extensive knowledge of early modern and contemporary Jewish literature and his heavy reliance on more recent authorities in creating his massive tome. He cites, for example the following authors: Azariah de' Rossi, Baruch Lindau, Nathan Spira, Isaac Satanow, Moses Mendelssohn, Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, Yair Bacharach, Solomon Maimon, Joseph Ergas, David Gans, Joseph Delmedigo, Moses Isserles, Tobias Cohen, Eliakim Hart, Sar-Shalom Basilea, Jacob Emden, Moses Cordovero, Mordecai Schnaber Levisohn, Israel of Zamość, Moses Hefetz Gentili, Abraham Herrera, Eliezer Ashkenazi, and others.¹⁸ Hurwitz's work underscores, more than any other, both the interesting dialectic between early modern thinking and that of the later eighteenth century and the fascinating juxtaposition of kabbalistic and Enlightenment thought.¹⁹

One final example of this last category of privileging early modern over medieval thought is the emergence of commentaries or editions of early modern works published by eighteenth-century Jewish authors. Mendelssohn's edition of Menasseh ben Israel's *Vindiciae Judaearum* is the most prominent example of this new genre.²⁰ We might also mention two other more obscure but nevertheless unusual cases of the eighteenth century's fascination with its most immediate past. My first example is the publication of Yohanan Alemanno's *Sha'ar ha-hesheq* by Jacob Baruch in Livorno in 1790. Alemanno's important role as the teacher of Pico della Mirandola and his critical place in the history of Christian Kabbalah and Renaissance thinking

¹⁶ On Tobias Cohen and his sources, see *ibid.*, pp. 229–55.

¹⁷ I have used the 1821 Cracow edition of Baruch Lindau, *Reshit limmudim*. The contemporary authorities are cited in his introduction, and see the approbations of Herz, Bloch, and Wessely.

¹⁸ Pinchas Hurwitz, *Sefer ha-Berit ha-shalem* (Jerusalem, 1989/90), pp. 157 (de' Rossi); 199, 222, 223 (Lindau); 205 (Spira); 358 (Satanow); 471 (Mendelssohn); 435 (Luzzatto); 6, 15 (Bacharach); 41, 189, 362, 392 (Maimon); 45, 340, 498, 504 (Ergas); 47, 157, 159, 504–5 (Gans); 47, 299, 314 (Delmedigo); 47 (Isserles); 54, 89, 91, 92, 183, 290, 484 (Cohen); 56, 156, 193, 252 (Hart); 70, 71 (Basilea); 71, 95, 232, 377, 499, 502, 541 (Emden); 75 (Cordovero); 88 (Levisohn); 104, 109, 119, 204 (Israel of Zamość); 131, 154, 239 (Gentili); 141, 143 (Herrera); 143 (Ashkenazi).

¹⁹ On Hurwitz, see David Ruderman, 'Some Jewish Responses to Smallpox Prevention in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries: A New Perspective on the Modernization of European Jewry', *Aleph* 2 (2002): 111–44, where previous works are cited.

²⁰ On this, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, pp. 463–74.

has been grasped only by recent scholarship.²¹ Baruch not only rescued him from oblivion in 1790, he also argued for the relevance of his syncretistic philosophy for his own day. Similarly unique is the brief compendium of Eliakim ben Abraham Hart, *Suf novelot*, a brief anthology of the writing of Joseph Delmedigo. Hart, an English Jew and close associate of Pinchas Hurwitz, initiated an ambitious publishing program of brief and accessible anthologies on a wide array of subjects from messianic prophecies, to Gikatilla, to Hebrew grammar. The project was apparently aborted but his edition of Delmedigo was published.²² Given the many examples we have already seen of citations from Delmedigo's writing, this 'portable' Yashar might not seem so remarkable for a late eighteenth-century Jew. It underscored yet again the esteem acquired by this complex, restless, and hardly understood seventeenth-century thinker a century after his death.

Another way of capturing the significant impact of early modern Jewish writers on their counterparts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is to consider the career of several seminal and repercussive early modern texts during these two centuries. In considering the impact of my modest list of eight 'best-sellers', it is important to consider an enlarged readership of Christians as well as Jews. While no one, to my knowledge, has studied the issue carefully, it stands to reason that the popularity of a Hebrew text with Christian readers might enhance its popularity among Jews. Indeed, one of the goals of our collective probings in this volume should be a consideration of how the eighteenth-century Christian reading public was aware of and appreciative of medieval and early modern Hebrew works and how this correlates with the Jewish reading public. Certainly by the eighteenth century, if not earlier, enlightened Christians' significant interest in Hebraica had created a market quite independent of though not unrelated to that available to Jewish readers. If my modest exploration of Anglo-Jewish thinkers at the end of the eighteenth century is any indication, Jews were also consulting works by Christian Hebraists as authorities on their own Jewish history and culture.²³ If one can then make a case that Christian reading tastes could influence those of Jews in the eighteenth century, then the 'best-sellers' I am mentioning were most likely prominent not only because Jews were reading them, but Christians as well.

I have not done exhaustive bibliographical research on any of these books. Nevertheless, it would be safe to say, on the basis of what I have already mentioned, that Joseph Delmedigo was well read and cited by the late eighteenth century, at least his scientific work *Sefer Elim*. Even the cursory list I have compiled of authors who cite him – Aaron Gumpertz, Mordecai Schnaber Levisohn, Judah Margoliotz, Pinchas Hurwitz, Baruch Lindau, and Eliakim Hart – suggests his prominent place among the *maskilim* as a trusted authority on the natural world.²⁴ I find fewer references to

²¹ See Fabrizio Lelli, 'Alemanno, Yohanan ben Isaac', *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance* (New York, 1999), 1: 40–2, and the bibliography cited there.

²² On Hart and his publications, see David Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key: Anglo-Jewry's Construction of Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, 2000), pp. 188–200.

²³ *Ibid.* See, for example, Emanuel Mendes da Costa's citations of Christian authorities (p. 207) or David Levi's citations of Humphrey Prideaux (pp. 245, 248) as well as many other Christian authors.

²⁴ I have already cited these references in earlier notes under the relevant authors.

Tobias Cohen's *Ma'aseh Tuviyyah* in these same authors; but its five separate editions in the eighteenth century testify to its usefulness and circulation as a handbook of medical information.²⁵

The creativity of early modern Jewish authors in medicine and science represented only one avenue of influence on their eighteenth-century readers. History, antiquarianism, and apologetics, pioneered by early modern Jews in Italy and Holland, also resonated deeply among a later generation of enlightened readers. Hardly a best-seller, given its vast erudition and complexity, Azariah de' Rossi's *Me'or 'enayim*, was well known, quoted, and deeply admired by Jewish and Christian writers well into the nineteenth century. Cited by Christian authors from as early as the sixteenth century, here is a good example of how a Hebrew text crossed over into the Christian world and then eventually stimulated a Jewish scholarly readership as well. Jewish readers of de' Rossi begin with Menasseh ben Israel and Joseph Delmedigo of the seventeenth century and then include, Raphael Levi Hannover, Zalman Hanau, Isaiah Bassani, Isaac Lampronti, Asher Anshel Worms, Malachi ha-Kohen, Menachem Novara, Naphtali Herz Wessely, Moses Mendelssohn, Saul Berlin, Pinchas Hurwitz, Judah Margolioth, Eliezer Fleckeles, and more.²⁶

Solomon Ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah*, first printed in the middle of the sixteenth century, was republished often in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in its original Hebrew as well as in Yiddish, Spanish, and Latin. While in the eighteenth century the book was especially well known in Yiddish, by the next century the book regained its popularity among Hebrew readers, with fifteen separate editions.²⁷ Michael Stanislawski has recently delineated the significant differences between the Hebrew and Yiddish editions and their different audiences.²⁸ From the perspective of the Haskalah, however, Ibn Verga's meditations on Jewish-Christian relations and on the causes of Jew-hatred, and even his implicit criticisms of his co-religionists were apparently noticed and appreciated. A more careful study of the uses of Ibn Verga's powerful narrative, especially the seventh chapter, would be useful in understanding more clearly how the critical mindset of a sixteenth-century Jewish author was received several hundred years later in Western and Eastern Europe.

Shmuel Feiner has already pointed out the remarkable publishing history of other sixteenth-century historical works in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Gedaliah Ibn Yahya's *Shalshet ha-qabbalah*, David Gans' *Semah David*, and Yehiel Heilprin's later *Seder ha-dorot*. Editions of all these works multiply as the nineteenth century unfolds. As was the case in the sixteenth century, *Sefer Yosippon* retained its primary place as the most widely read account of the ancient Jewish

²⁵ He is amply cited by Pinchas Hurwitz, who also cites Gans' astronomical work *Nehmad ve-na'im*. See n. 19 above. His book was published in Venice in 1707, 1715, 1728, 1769, and 1850 and in Jessnitz in 1721.

²⁶ This information is gleaned from Joanna Weinberg's edition of Azariah de' Rossi, *The Light of the Eyes* (New Haven, 2001), introduction, pp. xx–xxii.

²⁷ See Shmuel Feiner, *Haskalah ve-historiyah* (Jerusalem, 1995), p. 277.

²⁸ Michael Stanislawski, 'The Yiddish *Shevet Yehudah*: A Study in the "Ashkenization" of a Spanish-Jewish Classic', in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach, John Efron, and David Myers (Hanover, N.H., 1998), pp. 134–49.

past.²⁹ Nevertheless, it was read together with the rest of the library of early modern works, not instead of them. If the Haskalah discovered the uses of the study of the past as a dimension of modern Jewish consciousness, it was facilitated in this discovery by these writings of its early modern ancestors. History as a resource for modern Jewish self-definition cannot be fully comprehended without a recognition of the place of de' Rossi, Gans, Ibn Verga, and Ibn Yahya in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The beginnings of Jewish apologetic works, manuals of instruction, and even catechisms, both in Hebrew and in Western languages, can be located in the seventeenth century in Italy and Amsterdam. I refer especially to the writings of Leone Modena and Menasseh ben Israel, but the list of such books could be amplified. The well-known dissemination of Modena's *Historia dei riti ebraici* includes several English editions and its inclusion in the first volume of Bernard Picart's *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses* (1733). The history of this book alone is a study of the self-presentation of Judaism to a learned Christian audience, first in Italy and then throughout Western Europe. By the late eighteenth century, the work becomes a model for the production of similar manuals summarizing the Jewish faith in England, written for both Jewish and Christian consumption. In a similar manner, Menasseh ben Israel's apologetic writings left their mark on subsequent readers in both the Jewish and Christian communities. The proliferation of compendia, religious guides, and catechisms in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for Jewish and Christian usage, should be seen as the culmination of a process initiated in Venice and Amsterdam 150 years earlier.³⁰

One final subject that requires attention here is the impact of kabbalistic texts on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Conventional wisdom views the Haskalah as a repudiation of kabbalistic and hasidic sapience. The hasidic *rebbe* epitomizes the dark, irrational, and contemptible aspects of Jewish spirituality and cultural backwardness, to be overcome by the new rationality and its accompanying pedagogic reform. Yet recent scholarship has not sustained this impression. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries mark the age of a remarkable creativity in kabbalistic thinking, culminating in the great thinkers of the first generations of Hasidic writers. And the impact of the Kabbalah on the Gaon Elijah of Vilna and his disciples has long been documented.³¹ More recently, we have become aware of the impact of kabbalistic ideas and praxis on the enlightened rabbi of Prague, Ezekiel Landau.³²

²⁹ Feiner, *Haskalah ve-historiyah*, pp. 277–8.

³⁰ See Mark R. Cohen, 'Leone da Modena's *Riti*: A Seventeenth Century Plea for Social Toleration of Jews', *Jewish Social Studies* 34 (1972): 287–321; repr. in David Ruderman, ed., *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (New York, 1992), pp. 429–73. See also: Richard Cohen, *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley, 1998), pp. 10–67; Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment*, pp. 240–60; Jacob Petuchowski, 'Manuals and Catechisms of the Jewish Religion in the Early Period of Emancipation', in *Studies in Nineteenth-Century Jewish Intellectual History*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), pp. 47–64.

³¹ See Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, 'The Personality of the Gra and his Historical Influence', (Heb.) *Zion* 31 (1965/66): 39–86, 197–216; Emanuel Etkes, *Yahid be-doro: Ha-ga'on mi-Vilna, demut ve-dimmui* (Jerusalem, 1998).

³² See Sharon Flatto's recent Yale dissertation on Landau's attitude to the Kabbalah.

More difficult to reconcile with our own preconceptions of Jewish enlightenment figures is their continued interest in and citation of kabbalistic authorities. Rivka Horwitz and Moshe Idel, among others, have noticed the Kabbalah's place in the thinking of several enlightened figures, including Moses Mendelssohn. Horwitz rightly contends that attacks on the Frankists – or in Mendelssohn's case, on Spinoza – should not be mistaken for attacks on kabbalistic lore as a whole. In his multiple citations of kabbalistic writers, Mendelssohn shared an appreciation in common with Jacob Emden, but also with Salomon Maimon, Nahman Krochmal, Isaac Satanow, and Mordecai Schnaber Levisohn. He was especially attracted to the writing of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto. In the case of Maimon, his interest in Kabbalah was no doubt stimulated by kabbalist elements in the thought of Leibniz, which in turn drew on the still powerful currents of Christian kabbalistic writers from Pico and Reuchlin though Knorr von Rosenroth. Maimon composed an entire book on Kabbalah, associating it with science.³³

Rivka Horwitz also discusses the impact of Menasseh ben Israel's *Nishmat hayyim*, a work infused with kabbalistic doctrines on the immortality of the soul, transposed into a neoplatonic key, on Mendelssohn.³⁴ This should remind us again of the indebtedness of the eighteenth century to Jewish thinkers, this time kabbalistic ones, of the early modern period. I refer not only to the references to Luria and Cordovero but also to the particular merger of kabbalah and philosophy, especially natural philosophy, in such Jewish thinkers as Yohanan Alemanno, Abraham Jagel, Joseph Delmedigo, Abraham Herrera, and Menasseh ben Israel from the late fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries.³⁵ Surely the repercussions of this integration of Kabbalah and science left their mark on subsequent Jewish and Christian thought. The belated influence of this approach to knowledge can be traced not only to Mendelssohn, but certainly to Basilea, to Maimon, and even to Pinchas Hurwitz's strange amalgamation of the Kabbalah and natural science. Despite the decline of Hermeticism and the occult by the late eighteenth century, kabbalistic modes of thinking were never absent from modern Jewish thought in the period we are considering. Moreover, the particular systems of kabbalistic thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were themselves directly shaped by the creative thinking of early modern Kabbalists, particularly those filtered through the unique ambience of Italian Jewish culture in the preceding centuries.

In the light of the above, we might summarize our conclusions as follows:

1. While the eighteenth century paid homage to Jewish medieval thinkers like Maimonides and Ibn Ezra, in many respects they were proving inadequate as sources of knowledge and insight. In the area of natural philosophy they were obsolete. In search of a traditional pedigree for their strong scientific proclivities, eighteenth-century writers on nature turned to the early modern writers

³³ Horwitz, 'Kabbalah in the Writings of Mendelssohn'; Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (New York, 1995), pp. 37–43, cites Maimon's kabbalistic work in manuscript, *Hesheq Shelomo*.

³⁴ Horwitz, 'Kabbalah in the Writings of Mendelssohn', pp. 18–24.

³⁵ See Moshe Idel, 'Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah between 1560 and 1660', in Ruderman, *Essential Papers*, pp. 346–67.

whose physics had already been divorced from an outdated and repudiated Aristotelian metaphysics.

2. Similarly, in the areas of history and apologetics, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jewish thinkers read with great interest the literary creations of their early modern ancestors. As in the case of science, their own interests coincided more directly with the latter, whose social and cultural concerns were indeed closer.
3. For some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers, kabbalistic thinking was compatible with modernity, certainly more so than medieval philosophy. Although anchored in a remote past, its epistemological pliability and its correlations with other philosophies, ancient and modern, allowed for a creative dialogue between the Jewish tradition and modernist thinking. In this respect, the creative merger of Kabbalah and science in Maimon, Hurwitz, Schick,³⁶ and others was a direct continuation of similar efforts by Jewish (and Christian) writers in the preceding centuries.
4. Medieval Sephardi thinkers become more important as cultural icons for modern Jewish thinkers than as actual sources of knowledge and insight. At least with respect to science, history, apologetics, and Kabbalah, early modern Jewish thought, especially in Italy, leaves a more significant mark on their thinking.
5. The dialogue I am describing between early modern and modern Jewish thought was also shaped in the context of a new factor relevant to both periods: Christian Hebraism. With an increasing awareness of the 'other', Jewish ideas circulated widely between the two communities. It is not uncommon to witness the impact of an early Jewish idea on a later Jewish thinker through the mediation of a Christian author. This is dramatically illustrated in the case of the highly assimilated and intellectually open Jewish community of England in the late eighteenth century.

I would like to add one final thought, which perhaps transcends the particular agenda of this volume but seems somehow to follow from the observations made here. If I am correct in calling for a re-evaluation of the impact of early modern Jewish thought on the eighteenth century and beyond, perhaps such a re-evaluation also calls into question the originality and the overall intellectual creativity usually associated with the Haskalah in Jewish historiography. Here I am asking, rather insolently, a question only an early modern intellectual historian could ask: So what's new here?! Why is the ideational world of the Haskalah traditionally perceived as a radical break from the past, iconoclastically shaping a new secular consciousness, a new intellectual elite, and a new construction of Jewish identity? How novel, how revolutionary was its intellectual production? From the perspective of the dynamic intellectual universe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the eighteenth century in Jewish thought seems rather unspectacular in the novelty of its formulations regarding the modern age. Its significance lies rather in its radical impact within the politi-

³⁶ On him, see David Fishman, *Russia's First Modern Jews* (New York, 1995).

cal, social, and cultural spheres, and not necessarily the intellectual, even when one considers such exceptional thinkers as Mendelssohn or Maimon. In the fields I have discussed in this essay – natural philosophy, Kabbalah, history, and apologetics – the seeds of much of what emerges in Jewish writing in this era can be located centuries earlier. If one compares how thoroughly up-to-date and how genuinely aware such writers as Delmedigo, Cohen, and de' Rossi were of their immediate intellectual surroundings with the limited cognisance of their counterparts some 150 years later, the contrast is truly striking. With the weight of several centuries of relative intellectual isolation from the centres of European culture on their shoulders, Ashkenazi *maskilim* were struggling to keep up, to regain what their ancestors had achieved, especially in Italy, centuries before. One of the best means at their disposal was to read and absorb some of the earlier insights of their remarkably precocious early modern ancestors.

Tangible and intangible transmissions