Was There an English Parallel to the German *Haskalah*?

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Abstract
Judging from recent work by Jewish historians of both Germany and England, the unequivocal response to the heuristic question posed in the title of my essay should be emphatically negative. If indeed the *Haskalah* was "a socio-cultural movement powerful enough to effect a major shift in consciousness"\(^1\) or "a new ideology to shape a new community ... a public social world informed with a new ideal of man",\(^2\) it could only have emerged within the particular political and cultural ambience of Germany. Despite Cecil Roth's relatively feeble attempt more than three decades ago to describe what he ambiguously called "an English *Haskalah*",\(^3\) such a notion has been generally dismissed. Michael Graetz, for example, echoes the strongly held views of Todd Endelman when he claims that a true *Haskalah* must be "more than a fleeting flare-up of ideas supported by a few isolated individuals".\(^4\)

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

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Judging from recent work by Jewish historians of both Germany and England, the unequivocal response to the heuristic question posed in the title of my essay should be emphatically negative. If indeed the *Haskalah* was "a socio-cultural movement powerful enough to effect a major shift in consciousness" or "a new ideology to shape a new community ... a public social world informed with a new ideal of man," it could only have emerged within the particular political and cultural ambience of Germany. Despite Cecil Roth's relatively feeble attempt more than three decades ago to describe what he ambiguously called "an English *Haskalah*", such a notion has been generally dismissed. Michael Graet, for example, echoes the strongly held views of Todd Endelman when he claims that a true *Haskalah* must be "more than a fleeting flare-up of ideas supported by a few isolated individuals".

There is a certain irony in the claim that the English (or the Dutch) had no *Haskalah* given the fact, pointed out by Graet, that Jews enjoyed greater freedom under the British constitution than in Germany and thus appeared to be more open to their environment and more receptive to its modernising influence. If British Jews, at least their Sephardic and Ashkenazi elites, were more acculturated and more socially accepted than their German counterparts, why did they not produce an intellectual life, a critical forum for self-reflection, a literary outpouring, in some way equivalent to or even more substantial than that of German Jewry, at least relative to

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4 Graetz, p. 263.

their numbers? Why was integration into English society primarily social and hardly cognitive?

Perhaps the best response to these questions is offered by David Sorkin in the weighty conclusion of his well-known study of the “transformation” of German Jewry. Sorkin persuasively points out that social integration was not the critical factor in the emergence of the Haskalah. What was more significant was a critical mass of Jews, especially those living under the norms of traditional Judaism with a concomitant Judaic literacy that could sustain a literary and ideological movement expressed in both Hebrew and German. As he points out, the difference between a German-Jewish community constituting 1% to 2% of the general population and an Anglo-Jewish one making up 0.01% of the general population is a most significant factor. Equally important were the German factors of incomplete emancipation and partial integration, and the discrepancy between German Jewry’s actual and idealised situation. Indeed, following this line of thought, Anglo-Jewry’s more successful integration, its lack of confrontation with an absolutist government, failed to elicit any creative tension with its environment. Unlike the Jews of England, who gradually assumed they were English and entitled to the rights and privileges of this status, German Jews were obliged to assert themselves constantly in demanding a status that seemed to elude them and to define themselves and the community to which they belonged by the standards of the universal enlightened ideals of German society. Their ideological reflections and their cultural fermentation were thus a product of their incomplete integration, the gap between their real status and their social aspirations. Haskalah could only emerge within conditions of political dissatisfaction and social inequality on the one hand, and a cohesive and literate community with respect to Jewish culture on the other. In England, both of these conditions were relatively absent.¹

Sorkin’s analysis, which rests heavily on Endelman’s findings for England, is quite useful in drawing a comparison between the two communities and their respective cultural responses to the Enlightenment. But it is hardly the last word on the subject. In making a powerful case for the unique evolution of the German Haskalah, it too quickly discounts the possibility that, despite the great strides in social integration in England, some English Jews remained in creative tension with their environment; that some were indeed self-reflective about their Jewish identity; and that

some were quite capable of articulating their profound thoughts on Judaism and the modern world in both Hebrew and English. In other words, creative tension with the environment was never the exclusive prerogative of German Jews. Some English Jews too, despite their relatively better social acceptance, continued to feel both overt and covert forms of social rejection and sought ways to overcome it. Indeed, creative tension with the environment, while clearly a condition of German Jewry, was also one shared by almost all Jews living in modernising societies.

I completely endorse, then, the meaningful comparison offered by Sorkin and I also fully appreciate the difference between a *Haskalah* as a political and cultural movement in Germany and “a fleeting flare-up of ideas supported by a few isolated individuals” in England, to restate Graetz’s felicitous phrase. But acknowledging the difference between the two communities should not allow us to dismiss completely the intellectual life of British Jewry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Despite the smaller number of participants, and its more limited impact on either British or other European Jews, it is of interest especially because of its uniquely English qualities. Cecil Roth was probably off the mark when he implied that Anglo-Jewish life in the era of Mendelssohn could boast a kind of *Haskalah*. But his initial description of a loose grouping of thinkers on English soil at least opened the question whether English Jews possessed an intellectual life, the product of a unique dialogue with their English environment, and whether their experience with modernity should be reduced exclusively to a mere social history of acculturation, of inarticulate and unconscious changing modes of life and behaviour.

In an effort to revisit the issue of Anglo-Jewish intellectual history in the second half of the eighteenth century, I have recently argued that at least five thinkers discussed by Roth were worthy of closer scrutiny; that their literary output both in English and Hebrew reflected a sophisticated awareness of Judaism and the dynamic intellectual world of England and represented a bold attempt to grapple with the relationship between the two; and finally, that this intellectual life emerged uniquely in England and had little to do with, and in some cases pre-dated, the intellectual developments of the German *Haskalah*. I will not review those initial find-

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8 See note 4.
ings here but will instead extend my analysis by offering several additional examples of the ambience of Anglo-Jewish intellectual life. These will, I hope, provide more colour and substance to my initial observations about the singularity and intrinsic value of Anglo-Jewish self-reflection; they might also provide a striking contrast to the German situation, thus further refining the comparison already articulated by Sorkin and others.

I.

Of the five thinkers I have mentioned, Abraham ben Naphtali Tang was, ironically, the least noticed but probably the most scholarly and original Anglo-Jewish thinker at the close of the eighteenth century. Most of his voluminous writings exist only in Hebrew manuscripts, including his encyclopedic but unfinished Behinat ha-Adam. Tang was the grandson of Abraham ben Moses Taussig Neugreschel (thus the acronym “Tang”), dayan of the lesser rabbinical court of Prague and the son of Naphtali, who left Prague and settled in London early in the eighteenth century. Abraham’s mother was the daughter of R. Nathan Apta of Opatow, rabbi of the Hambro synagogue, and his teacher was Moses Minsk, the preacher of a small congregation called Sha’are Zion. Given Tang’s traditional upbringing and Orthodox pedigree, it is surprising to discover his manifold and unconventional interests and views, ranging from his political analysis of rabbinic history to his Deistic reading of Avot, his intellectual excursions into comparative history and mythology, his citations from Voltaire, and his translation of Congrave into English. I will discuss only one of his many works, a small pamphlet written in English, recently discovered by Shmuel Feiner in the massive collection of Anglo-Judaica at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. The work, published in London in 1770, bears the ambiguous title A Discourse Addressed to the Minority. Without giving his name, Tang signs the work simply “By a primitive Ebrew”, exactly as he had issued his commentary on Avot, and probably other English works yet to be discovered.  

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12 In The Sentences and Proverbs of the Ancient Fathers ... Written originally in Ebrew ... by ... R. Jehudah the Holy ..., now translated into the English language ... by a
The reader of Tang’s pamphlet who is familiar with the British political scene of 1770 cannot miss its context. It addresses the affair involving the infamous John Wilkes, the ambitious politician who had recklessly challenged the government of the Earl of Bute from the early 1760s and who had carried on a vicious press campaign against the government. Wilkes had been arrested and forced into exile in France, and had then returned to England to win re-election to Parliament despite strong opposition. He was again arrested on charges of blasphemy, despite legal protection from such action as a member of the House of Commons. To clear the way for his prosecution, government ministers manipulated the House into expelling him. The action soon precipitated a major assault from the press arguing the unconstitutionality of this expulsion, and its affront to liberty and to the independence of the House of Commons. In a period of growing conflict with the American colonies, many saw a common thread between the Wilkes affair and the constitutional rights of the Americans.\(^3\)

Wilkes seemed to be emboldened rather than subdued by this incident. For him, the issue at stake was no less than the future of democracy in England: “If ministers can once usurp the power of declaring who shall not be your representative, the next step is very easy, and will follow speedily. It is that of telling you whom you shall send to Parliament, and then the boasted Constitution of England will be entirely torn up by the roots.”\(^4\) Wilkes’ supporters were chiefly small merchants and craftsmen rather than the gentry and moneyed classes. While the Rockingham Whigs, the leading group within the Parliamentary opposition, initially supported Wilkes’ cause, they eventually distanced themselves from the more radical opposition connected with the Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights. In the same year that Tang published his own statement about the affair,

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\(^4\) Public Advertiser 4, 8th February 1769, quoted in Christie, p. 32.
Edmund Burke penned his partisan 'Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents', a Rockinghamite view of the politics of the 1760s which condemned the political corruption of an alleged secret cabal of government ministers which had undermined the system. Burke was in turn criticised for his limited view by the more radical group among the opposition led by the historian Catherine Macaulay and the London bookseller John Almon.\(^{15}\)

Almon had written his own version of the events leading up to Wilkes' expulsion as early as 1765 in a book entitled *History of the Late Minority*.\(^{16}\) In it he excoriated the Earl of Bute as the chief villain in the undermining of England's democracy. Lamenting the process by which the government fell into the hands of a leadership of privilege and corruption, he singled out the honest independence of the opposition, "the true friends of liberty"\(^{17}\) who had protested the illegality of arbitrary warrants and who had supported the just cause of John Wilkes. This "late minority", which had resisted the power of the Earl by opposing and censuring all the arbitrary violations of his ministers, had been crushed and "broken-hearted",\(^{18}\) but would receive a new lease of life only five years later when the Wilkites again challenged the unbridled power of the majority government.

Tang apparently meant the same minority that Almon had eulogised in his well-known book which, some five years later, returned to centre stage of the volatile political scene as a result of the removal of Wilkes from his elected seat in Parliament. For an obscure Jew, "a primitive Ebrew",\(^{19}\) to jump into the commotion of this national debate was not merely an act of daring: it suggested a sense of participation, of identification with England and its political traditions, unparalleled in the European Jewish world of

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\(^{16}\) John Almon, *The History of the Late Minority Exhibiting the Conduct, Principles and Views of That Party During the Years 1762, 1763, 1764 and 1765*, London 1765, repr. 1766. I have used a copy of the original edition in the Rare Book Collection at the University of Pennsylvania library.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 223.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 310.

\(^{19}\) Tang probably meant by this phrase both his humble status as an outsider and also his exotic ancestry, his nobility as a primitive ancient, and one who creatively employed biblical language, like the prophets of old.
1770. Tang opens his pamphlet in a cautionary tone that soon allows him to express his own political and religious credo:

"I pray that when you come to peruse this small pamphlet, that ye divest yourselves from all prejudices, a grand and necessary object in religion, as well as politics. I do openly avow that I have done the same; be not quick in judging that my intention was to raise a tumult or to censure particular people for the sake of calumniating them; let me therefore tell you my creed. I believe in the Omnipotent supreme being, that knoweth the secrets of the heart, and to him all mysteries is ever open. I pay a due respect to my country wherein I drew my breath, as far as consistent with nature, and justifiable by law; I revere the legislature of my country, I love the king, I pray earnestly that God may ever emit that pellucid ray of truth and justice on him ..."\(^\text{20}\)

While underscoring his supreme religious faith, he chooses to emphasise how religion should bind humankind rather than divide it: "I earnestly wish that the word religion may not be impiously and craftily converted to destroy the tranquillity of men. O Lord, with thy goodness, send forth to men that happy dawn of reason, that they may love and esteem each other without any distinction to mere terms of their several Faiths. O Lord, send forth thy calming spirit into this land, now so fomented, and let every man dwell again in peace upon his woolpack."\(^\text{21}\)

His ecumenical opening, however, is soon punctured by his piercing battle cry against the enemies of liberty:

"When the heavens tremble ... when laws are no farther observed than what will answer certain ends; when a good [kin]g is surrounded by deluded ghosts of M[inister]s who sheer off and strike at liberty, as at the Cry of the Cock: In a time when it is even dangerous to call the culprits to an account: when flattery seemeth to be the spreading genius of the great, and reason becomes a victim to the lewdness of the impious; when the laws of our ancestors are forgotten, and new ones take their place; when M[ini]ster[s] say to Magna Charta, 'begone from us, and your ways we see not!' When a nation is come to such a crisis, as to behold part of her friends betraying her ... when the common people are sacrificed to the caprice of a few tyrannical men, gratifying their own lusts at the expense of the juices of consumed Britons ... O! I lament for my people, I will mourn for her innocent youths that were slain. O! unhappy family of this island, it is high time that thy father, the [kin]g, whom God hath blessed with intellect and perspicuity, looketh forth from his window, and be roused from that opiate draught which the M[inister]s have given him to drink. The time is critical: they are, indeed Shakespeare saith, 'out of joint'."\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{20}\) Tang, *A Discourse Addressed to the Minority*, pp. v–vi: "To the Reader, the Man, and the Critick".

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. vii.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., pp. 1–4.
Conspicuously displaying his Jewish affiliation, Tang proceeds to offer an inventory of biblical citations in both Hebrew and English that highlight the crisis of moral authority and the compelling religious reasons for regal intervention.23 "It is even wrong in the eyes of Providence," he writes, to remove "a certain great L[egislato]r".24 Evoking Isaiah's testimony, Tang writes that even the government of Jerusalem was similarly guilty of removing honest judges and ministers. But at least there was a proper pretext for such a removal. In the case of Wilkes, there was no proper cause for his dismissal other than "the chimerical pleasure of M[inisters] to change".25 The ultimate issue was whether the British government was democratic or not; whether its representatives in the House of Commons truly represented the will of the people who elected them.

Tang returns to the theme of religion, one that unites all creeds and is devoid of ceremony or dogma:

"Friends and countrymen, be not baffled or dwindled into fright ... Remember that men, be they as great in power as they can, are but men. I would now remind you, when you come to inquire into the character and conduct of your leaders, never to intermix religion therewith; look only whether the task he hath undertaken be just ... No, be not deceived with the naked word of religion; look out for the plain meaning man for your country; and know that God judges men simply, without ceremonial or dogmatical laws."26

Transiently vindicating his own intervention into politics, he clearly asks his reader to judge him not as a Jew but as one who speaks for the simple religion of all humankind. And as a way of bolstering his credibility, he casts aspersions on both atheists and Jesuits.27

But all this is merely a prelude to his gushing peroration on the glories of his English homeland:

"As directed chance hath given me my prima mobile in this blessed country; whose laws are founded on the basis of reason; That grand reason which sucked the milk of nature, formed by that stupendous hand; that glorious spot where her people will not suffer imposition; where the laws are equal to the native and the sojourner [i.e. the Christian and the Jew]; knowing that my country is armed with such noble weapons,

23 Ibid., pp. 4–6.
24 Ibid., p. 11.
26 Ibid., pp. 27–29
27 Ibid., pp. 28, 30.
makes me truly happy, and I say with the wise: Blessed are thou, O land, where the king is free, and thy princes eat in due season.”

Tang winds up in true homiletic form, drawing the direct parallel between Jeremiah’s cry for righteousness and his own: “The City of Jerusalem we are told was destroyed, because of no justice being rendered there: I hope we don’t labour under such circumstances. Jeremiah, who was present at the destruction of the Jews, did exhort them to be righteous, to keep to their Magna Charta…” The last words he ironically reserves for one of his favourites, “M. de Voltaire”, on the meaning of “Country.”

In a final outpouring of rallying cries, Tang finally evokes by name the victim he is championing—“Accept Wilkes’ Catechism”—as he closes with the words: “For every blessing must come authorized and manifested.”

It is hard to conceive of a similar work written by a Jew in Germany or elsewhere in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. Todd Endelman underscores the sense of identity many English Jews felt with their new homeland by the end of the eighteenth century. But he also reminds us that English Jews, “with a handful of exceptions, remained aloof from political activity throughout the turbulent years of the revolution.” Anglo-Jewish writers emphasised the loyalty and political quiescence of their co-religionists. Quoting David Levi, the outspoken critic of Priestley and Paine on religious matters, Endelman points out how even this courageous defender of Jewish interests insisted that Jews remain apolitical. He mentions a “minuscule number” of English Jews in politics, such as John King and Emanuel Nunes Carvalho, who left England for America in 1799, but his conclusion is unambiguous: “Further research might reveal another nine or ten similar examples, but even then such isolated instances hardly would permit one to speak of Jewish political activity.”

I am prepared to accept the judgment that Tang’s remarkable publication, his identification with the radical Wilkites, his forceful rhetoric on behalf of democratic principles, his articulation of a Deistic faith that

29 Ibid., pp. 33–34.
31 Tang, A Discourse Addressed to the Minority, pp. 35–36.
safeguards the rights and opinions of even "primitive Ebrews", and his emotional attachment to his British homeland, are one more isolated instance of little importance for assessing the mood of Anglo-Jewry as a whole. Nevertheless it demonstrates, at the very least, the radical potential of Anglo-Jewish self-consciousness. If it is unusual even for Anglo-Jewry, how much more singular does it appear from a continental perspective? Mendelssohn's public meekness and Tang's (as well as David Levi's) brazenness remain, in the end, dramatic studies contrasting the degree of confidence each Jew had in the goodwill of his government and political culture.

II.

In a provisional list of Jewish Freemasons in England during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century prepared by Morris Rosenbaum and eventually published in 1977 by John M. Shaftesley, the name "Abraham Abrahams" appears no less than five times. Abraham Abrahams was the name by which Abraham Tang was known in English society. Two of the entries—one listing Abrahams as a member of the Atholl Register Lodge No. 145 in 1766 and the other listing an Abrahams for the Fortitude lodge in 1771—conform precisely to the years in which Tang's literary career was in full bloom: the late 1760s and early 1770s. It is therefore plausible to suggest that Tang was a Freemason and that his notions of natural religion, of civic life and secular fraternity, and especially his commitment to democratic principles as exemplified by his support of John Wilkes, were shaped in no small measure by his involvement in these new enclaves of society that had emerged in England by the early eighteenth century.

Of course, Freemasonry and its role in absorbing Jews into European society is hardly a new story, at least since the pioneering work of Jacob

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Katz, first published in 1968. But Katz's book is primarily a history of the attitudes of German Freemasons to the Jews; the promise Freemasonry initially held for Jews seeking social acceptance; the obstacles constantly encountered in their struggles for civic emancipation in Germany; and, ultimately, the utter failure of these new social networks successfully to integrate their Jewish members. The primary message of Katz's research was that, despite its idealistic beginnings, in the end the principle of Christian exclusivity remained firmly entrenched in German Freemasonry.

Apart from a brief description of English Masonry, Katz did not concentrate on the British scene except to consider the impact of British policies on German lodges. Indeed, as he admitted, he could not even gain access to London's Grand Lodge and his sources were thus almost exclusively continental, reflecting a considerably different story than the English story, still to be fully told. The subject of English Freemasonry and its attitude to Jews during the Enlightenment and beyond provides yet another dimension of the uniqueness of the English ambience and its notable contrast with that of Germany. Furthermore, there is an acute difference in the relationship between Freemasonry and Jewish self-reflection in the two societies. As Katz clearly pointed out, no relationship ever existed between the Masonic lodges and Mendelssohn's circle. Mendelssohn was not only suspicious of Lessing's involvement with Masonry; he even taunted him about the alleged secrets it preserved. Mendelssohn's primary objection to Lessing's allegiance to Freemasonry was the presumption that the latter possessed a secret knowledge which he would not even share with his faithful ally in the search for truth. In striking contrast, Freemasonry in England appears to be an important factor in the shaping of Jewish self-consciousness. Among the Jewish thinkers I have identified in England at the end of the eighteenth century and beyond, almost all of them were active Freemasons or, at the very least, were connected to Freemasonry through close associates or relatives. I would therefore argue at least tentatively, on the basis of the limited evidence I now possess, that the new sociability afforded through English Freemasonry was not only important

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36 Ibid., p. 72.
37 Ibid., p. 6.
38 Ibid., p. 24.
as a factor in Jewish social acceptance; it also had an impact on the history of Anglo-Jewish thinking.

Margaret Jacob and others have eloquently argued for the critical role of English and Dutch Freemasonry in the formation of modern civil society.\textsuperscript{39} The lodges, together with the philosophical and scientific academies, became the underpinning for republican and democratic forms of government. The culture of Freemasonry, Jacob maintains, was unrelentingly secular, offered membership often to the least socially acceptable, and identified with the British tradition that merit and not birth constitutes the foundation of the social and political order. Especially in Britain, Masonic civic life and its organisational structure actually mirrored the wider political and constitutional order. The rhetoric of liberalism, as articulated in the lodges, came to bind men of diverse social rank and power, even in times of ideological tension such as that of the Wilkes affair. Along with notions of British constitutionalism, the Bill of Rights, majority rule, and representative government, Freemasonry displayed a peculiarly English religiosity, with its emphasis on natural religion, Lockeian psychology and Newtonian cosmology. This British colouring was often left behind as Freemasonry migrated from England to the Continent.\textsuperscript{40}

While Jacob has primarily emphasised the enlightened side of Masonry, others have focused more on its mysterious character, its syncretistic symbols, its hermeticism and kabbalism, and its preoccupation with ancient architecture, especially the Solomonic Temple. Perhaps its power lay in its remarkable blending of old and new meanings, its simultaneous embrace of ancient mysteries and modern science, and its uncanny ability to mediate between the traditional and the revolutionary, which, on the surface,


seemed to be rapidly diverging but which could be creatively linked in the Masonic universe of discourse.  

For English Jews, the lure of Freemasonry, as pointed out by Katz and others, was obvious. It offered the potential for meaningful relationships with non-Jews and for instant social prestige. It also offered intellectual stimulation as well as "an escape from the drudgery of everyday life into a glamorous world of exotic ritual," as Todd Endelman put it. Moreover, Jews could not help but be impressed by the smatterings of Jewish cultural artefacts located within the discourse and symbols of Freemasonry: Hebrew-sounding words, biblical references, obscure kabbalistic connections, and especially the lionisation of Solomon and his Temple of Perfection. When the Sephardic Jew Jacob Judah Leon of Amsterdam (1602–1675) produced a model of the Temple and a treatise on its specifications, it was eventually appropriated by Masonic circles and brought to London, where it was displayed as late as 1760, becoming an essential part of Masonic lore. Rabbi Leon, in the mind of Lawrence Dermott, the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of the Ancients in London, writing in 1764, was a true brother of the fraternity who had accurately described the origins of the coat of arms of the Grand Lodge. No doubt even the most assimilated Jewish member of a London lodge could not help but warm to the notion that the most prestigious symbol of Masonry was of Jewish pedigree.  

Of course, with the appearance of distinctly Jewish lodges by the mid-eighteenth century, the social and cultural utopian promise of Freemasonry had somewhat evaporated. Lodges catering to an exclusive clientele of Jewish shopkeepers and artisans, serving kosher meals and following the Jewish calendar, could never meet the expectations of those Jews who had dreamed of enhanced contacts with prominent members of London’s Christian social aristocracy. The adoption of Christian ritual and prayer by some lodges, and even occasional anti-Jewish resolutions, could also alienate potential Jewish members. Nevertheless, as John Shaftesley has already pointed out in his reaction to Jacob Katz’s book, the latter "had the

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41 On the more mysterious side of Freemasonry, see Stevenson, The Origins of Freemasonry, and the extensive bibliography therein; see also the review by N. Hampson of Jacob’s Living the Enlightenment, in Times Literary Supplement, 12th June 1992, and the useful discussion in Bullock, pp. 20–40.

42 See notes 33 and 34.


44 In addition to the two essays by Shaftesley cited in note 34, see A. L. Shane, ‘Jacob Judah Leon of Amsterdam (1602–1675) and his Models of the Temple of Solomon and the Tabernacle’, in Ars Quatuor Coronatorum 96 (1983), pp. 145–169.
effect of directing my attention to the differences between English and German Freemasonry.\textsuperscript{45} Despite occasional setbacks in engendering a true social mix between Christians and Jews in English Freemasonry, the experiment in England often worked. Jews and Christians could inhabit the same neutral social space and could realise to a great extent a new sociability unimagined in previous centuries. And the record of German failure at equal coexistence only leads to highlight further the incredible success of the English model. To the extent that English Freemasonry succeeded in establishing a place for Jews, it was acting out the political and social ideals embedded in the democratic vision of English society as a whole.

That so large a proportion of Jewish intellectuals—both the assimilated and the more traditional, both the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim—embraced Freemasonry provides ample testimony to the relative success of this social structure in enhancing social mobility and in providing intellectual stimulation. Notions of belonging to an elite which shared a concern for society as a whole appealed particularly to Jewish intellectuals with a cosmopolitan outlook and a social conscience. In many respects the new fraternities were only extensions of the traditions of social volunteerism embedded in the Jewish confraternities of the past. They represented the expansion of the notion of "brotherhood", an overcoming of a suffocating parochialism for the benefits of a restructured community increasingly universal in spirit if not always in practice. For in fact even the more segregationist Jewish lodges were in some form linked to a larger universal fraternity where "all Masons are as Brethren upon the same Level".\textsuperscript{46}

Rosenbaum's extensive list includes not only the name of Abraham Abrahams (Abraham Tang), but also those of David Levi and John Hart (Eliakim ben Abraham).\textsuperscript{47} Levi and Hart, in contrast to Tang, were both conservative and strong defenders of Jewish traditional values.\textsuperscript{48} Samuel Falk and Mordechai Schnaber Levison are not on the list but probably had connections with Freemason and Swedenborgian circles in London, as other historians have noted.\textsuperscript{49} David Nieto's grandson, Phinoas, was a

\textsuperscript{45} Shaftesley, 'Jews in English Freemasonry', p. 56.
\textsuperscript{46} The line is from the Constitution of 1723, quoted in Bullock, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{47} Shaftesley, 'Jews in English Regular Freemasonry', pp. 180, 182.
\textsuperscript{48} See Ruderman, 'Was There a Haskalah in England?', pp. 118–121, 126–128, and the literature cited there.
Freemason, as were Joshua Van Oven, Joseph Salvador, and Meyer, Isaac, and Ralph Schomberg. While Emanuel Mendes da Costa is not listed, many of his relatives, besides Salvador, are. Several relatives of Raphael Barukh, the Sephardic biblical scholar, are mentioned, although he is not. Many of the Jewish names are those of physicians—hardly unexpected for a fraternity that always boasted a high percentage of doctors in its ranks. In short, Freemasonry provided a stimulating cultural environment and hospitable social setting for a wide range of Jewish intellectual figures. It could offer them either an outlet to escape from the burdens of their ancestral tradition or simply a non-threatening ambience in which their Jewish identity was respected and could even be preserved intact.

III.

Freemasonry for Jews, then, was clearly one context for advancement and intellectual excitement; the literary and scientific societies of England were another. Todd Endelman, in his skilful account of the social integration of Anglo-Jewry, has already pointed out that not all assimilated Jews felt the need completely to renounce their links with Judaism and the Jewish community while pursuing their intellectual and social contacts with non-Jews. He singles out, in particular, educated Sephardic Jews who found their way into literary and scientific circles—"religiously neutral cultural spheres," as he calls them—where "their secular diversions took them into the non-Jewish world but their occupational concerns brought them back to the Jewish community". Endelman mentions in this regard the remarkable example of Emanuel Mendes da Costa (1717-1791), one of the most acclaimed natural historians, conchologists and mineralogists of his era, clerk and Fellow of the Royal Society, Fellow of the Society of Antiquarians, author of several important scientific texts and numerous published papers in the "Philosophical Transactions" of the Royal Society, and referred to by one of his Christian admirers as "le grand monarque des

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50 See Shaftesley, "Jews in English Regular Freemasonry", pp. 185, 186, 187, 188.
51 Ibid., p. 176
54 Endelman, Jews in Georgian England, pp. 262–263.
fossilistes". His brilliant career was severely damaged by his dishonesty in handling the Society's funds, which led to his dismissal from that body in 1767, his arrest, and his imprisonment in the King's Bench prison. Even with his reputation irreparably tarnished by his crimes, in his later years he continued to publish and to enjoy financial and moral support from his loyal academic colleagues and friends.

Endelman has considered the entire Mendes da Costa family as a prime example of radical assimilation and has also mentioned Emanuel and his close associations with fellow Jews and non-Jews in this context. I would like to look at Emanuel Mendes da Costa from a somewhat different perspective, that of Jewish intellectual history. Mendes da Costa, I shall argue, is important not only because of his extraordinary scientific achievements and his remarkable intellectual contacts with many of the major scientific figures of England and Europe throughout much of the eighteenth century, but also as an intellectual figure quite conscious of his Jewish identity, who attempted to navigate the complex byways of intense and intimate contact with non-Jewish scientists who clearly recognised him as a Jew and even came to value his Jewish affiliation. On the other hand, he maintained open and even warm relations with the leadership of the Jewish community and with individual Jews who took pride in his outstanding accomplishments and in the unusual social status he had attained.

Mendes da Costa was hardly a systematic Jewish thinker, but he thought about his Jewish identity, was knowledgeable in Hebrew and Jewish history, and took a certain pride in his Jewish expertise. David Katz has pointed out how he was perceived as a kind of specialist on Jewish affairs by his colleagues in the Royal Society. I will explore this role


more closely, in the hope of retrieving a deeper sense of his connection with Jewish intellectual life in eighteenth-century England. My starting point is the amazing font of da Costa’s scientific world, the mammoth correspondence—a collection of 2,487 letters in eleven folio volumes, held in the British Library, an additional volume designated as his “common-place book", and one more volume of specifically Jewish materials. The mere fact that a Jew maintained intellectual and social contact with some of the great scientific luminaries of England and Europe (including a large number of clergymen), visited their homes, and conversed with them on both scientific and personal matters in his official capacity as the Royal Society’s clerk but also unofficially, already defines da Costa’s unique position in this era. Doctoral research in progress examines his role as a disseminator of scientific knowledge in the eighteenth century. Within the context of Jewish history, I cannot think of any comparable eighteenth-century figure, including Mendelssohn, with such an international reputation and with so wide a network of associates. He corresponded with scholars in Russia and Eastern Europe, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and America, as well as those from England, in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Latin. He did not write in Hebrew but frequently used Hebrew words. Admittedly, much of the correspondence deals with fossils, but for the perceptive observer there are also nuggets of interest for Jewish cultural history to be gleaned from this massive written record.

David Katz has already described how, through da Costa’s efforts, the Royal Society became involved in a search for unidentified Chinese Jews. Da Costa agreed in 1760 to write to an unnamed correspondent familiar with Chinese matters and to pass on to him the official Hebrew letter of the Jewish community, signed by Hakham Isaac Nieto, in search of Chinese of Jewish extraction. Katz also lists several other occasions where Jewish subjects are raised in his letters which might be considered more closely. Note, for example, the erudite exchange between da Costa and William Stukeley, the well known antiquarian and Freemason, on the ori-

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58 They are listed in the British Library as Add. mss. 28534–44, and arranged in alphabetical order according to name of correspondent (a selection was published by J. Nichols in *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 4, London 1817); Add. ms. 29876 (selections published in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 83 [1812], 1, pp. 205–207, 513–517); Add. ms. 29868 (selections published in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 82 [1812] 2, pp. 329–331).

59 Dissertation in progress by Stefan Siemer, University of Bonn.

60 See note 57.
gin of an alleged Hebrew word, with citations from Targum Yonatan, the Talmud, Rashi, Buxdorf and Bochart. His letter to Lord Hugh Willoughby, the president of the Society of Antiquaries, reproduces a paper written together with a foreign clergyman (a rabbi?) on the derivation of the words Ammæa Dea, recently discovered on a Roman altar in England. Da Costa's erudite presentation of the Hebraic origin of the term is not only an impressive demonstration of his mastery of Hebrew and classical sources but also a subtle, or perhaps transparent, attempt to assert the priority of the Hebraic element of Western civilisation and to underscore the enduring legacy of Jewish culture in both Roman and English history. His translation from Hebrew of three thirteenth-century Jewish bonds is similarly intended to indicate the longevity and pride of ancestry of Jews living on English soil. Da Costa's message is clear: "We Jews are not newcomers; we derive from a culturally sophisticated legal culture of long duration; and, despite our medieval departure from England, our roots extend back to the formative period of English civilisation."

James Ducarel's letter to da Costa raises the potentially awkward question of whether it is appropriate to ask a Jew a question pertaining to his cultural background. Thus Ducarel timidly asks: "I hope you will not take it amiss if I desire your assistance ... ", to which da Costa graciously responded: "I shall at all times with great pleasure be very ready to solve any questions you may put to me relating to our religious ceremonies, customs, etc. as far as I am capable of doing." Ducaral's query concerns the unusual subject of whether the dress and arms of a Jewish soldier were the same as those of Roman soldiers. (The fact that Ducaral proposes the subject of a Jewish military man is interesting in its own right.) Da Costa's response is also revealing: he had checked all the books he knew but without success: "And not being wise, greatly conversant in Rabbinical learning, I desired a very learned and curious student of our nation to carefully peruse all the Rabbinical authors about it." He turned to a Sephardic rabbi, Isaac Mendes Belisario, who willingly accepted the role of research assistant and who definitively concluded that they wore no special dress. Da Costa finally cited several Christian authorities on ancient Jewish history, some of whom he had not been able to consult. Thus on a subject far removed from

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62 Nichols, Illustrations, 4, pp. 794–797.
63 Gentleman's Magazine 82 (1812), 2, pp. 329–331.
da Costa's scholarly expertise on fossils, his Christian interlocutor thought he might be an expert on ancient Jewish dress and rabbinic sources.

Despite the proper and even friendly tone with which da Costa related to his non-Jewish correspondents, neither he nor they were able to ignore his Jewish origin completely. Todd Endelman has quoted from a fascinating letter from Martin Folkes inviting da Costa to the home of the Duke of Richmond to see his fossil garden. Folkes, on more than one occasion, raised the issue of Jewish dietary laws and asked whether da Costa would be able to dine "without breach of the Law of Moses". It is difficult to imagine that da Costa observed kashrut at all, being married to a non-Jewish wife, and conducting his affairs, at least in one case, even on a Saturday morning. Nevertheless, Folkes assumes that food might present an obstacle to the visit. At the same time, one cannot miss a subtle note of disrespect in tempting da Costa with the non-kosher delicacies of the Duke's table: "... unless the lobsters of Chichester should be a temptation, by which a weaker man might be seduced." And one might sense even a touch of arrogant superiority when, after one more reference to barbecued 'shols', "and other abominations to your nation", Folkes concluded: "But we are all citizens of the world, and see different customs and different tastes without dislike or prejudice, as we do different names and colours." Da Costa, apparently because of the approaching High Holy Days, declined the invitation.

In a letter to James West, da Costa insinuated his Jewish identity with the following line: "wretch as I am for the sake of literature, I have even invaded the Holy Decalogue by not having a seventh day of rest, so strictly ordered by the Law of Moses." To Isaac Romilly of Fleet Street he wrote: "I wish you and yours many and happy festivals and other worldly joys and when our human race is run may we meet in the glories of Heaven through the mercy of our great Creator." And to Anthony Tilsington of Swenwick in Derbyshire, he launched still another subtle reminder of his particular identity: "Well at last my head is a little settled and I have entirely rid myself of the maggots in my brain of the gadding fit which pos-

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64 Nichols, Illustrations, 4, pp. 604–608.
66 In Add. ms. 28542, fol. 220r, da Costa mentions an appointment at 10a.m. on Saturday to view fossils.
67 Nichols, Illustrations, 4, pp. 635–637.
68 Ibid., 4, p. 792.
69 Add. ms. 28542, fol. 6r.
sessed me all the summer so that with propriety I might have been called a wandering Jew.”

There are several instances where either Da Costa or his correspondent acknowledge that his Jewish identity is a liability. Endelman has already referred to the letter from Thomas Birch, who admitted that “your religious profession may possibly be a prejudice to you with some persons”, but nevertheless encouraged him to present his candidacy for the librarianship of the Royal Society. On the same matter da Costa wrote to Dr. George Lavington, the Lord Bishop of Exeter, and to Thomas Knowlton, to whom he lamented the fact that he was passed over for someone less qualified as a natural historian since “alas not being of the established Religion of the country it was concluded I could not have a place ...” On yet another occasion, he was reminded by Edward Hasted that his desire to inspect a Hebrew inscription on the old walls of the Castle of Canterbury might be thwarted because “they [the authorities] would make great objections to admit a Stranger and a Jew to search for it”.

Much of da Costa’s correspondence is with fellow-Jews, especially Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam and elsewhere, such as his cousin Joseph Salvador, David da Fonseca, Mordecai Aboab, David Abenatar Pimentel, Isaac Belisario, Isaac da Pinto and Ives [sic] Rebello. There is clearly a different tone, a greater intimacy, and a playful exchange of Jewishly-coded messages, suggesting the relative absence of social barriers and cautious formality between correspondents. I conclude this section with two rich examples.

Emanuel’s exchange of letters with Dr. Ralph Schomberg has been mentioned at least twice previously by modern scholars. Schomberg is certainly an interesting figure in his own right, both because of the upbringing he received from his talented but contentious father, Dr. Meyer Schomberg, and because of his own literary career and cultural interests. In many respects, his intellectual world and attenuated, but still persisting, Jewish loyalties are analogous to those of Mendes da Costa and suggest why the two friends could fully appreciate each other. Meyer’s path from Judaism, his Hebrew articulation of his Deistic philosophy, and his com-

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70 Add. ms. 28543, fol. 243r.
71 Endelman, Jews of Georgian England, p. 264. See also Nichols, Illustrations, 4, p. 540.
72 Add. ms. 28540, fol. 46v.
73 Nichols, Illustrations, 4, p. 645.
plaints about the organised Jewish community have already been studied. His contest with the College of Physicians over his credentials for the practise of medicine, his remarkably successful practice, his affiliation with Freemasonry, and the English private education he offered his sons, Ralph and Isaac, who attended the Merchant Taylor’s school, have also been noted. Ralph’s development as an intellectual, and apparently as an unconverted Jew, despite his Christian wife and baptized children, remains unstudied. He was trained as a physician and received his medical degree from Aberdeen. Like Emanuel Mendes da Costa, he was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and also, like him, received notarial faculty. John Nichols appears to be the only scholar to examine his assorted writings on political, medical and classical subjects. He paints a most unflattering portrait of Schomberg’s work on Pindar and Horace, which appears to be completely plagiarised from a contemporary work in French. It would appear that da Costa and Schomberg had something else in common besides their intellectual interests, parallel careers and Christian families: a fatal proclivity for dishonest and deceitful behaviour.

Schomberg began to correspond with Mendes da Costa regarding his nomination of an old friend, John Stephen Bernard of Amsterdam, for Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries. Schomberg had also written to James Ducarel, da Costa’s colleague in the Society, about the same matter. In that letter, he offered several comments and corrections to a journal he had seen, indicating his interest in Hebrew and Aramaic words and revealing his expertise in both languages. The correspondence over the course of many months between da Costa, the Sephardic Jew in London, and Schomberg, the Ashkenazi Jew in Bath, has been preserved. Their initial formality eventually gives way to a warm intimacy: “Dear Sir” soon becomes “Dear Manny” [=Emanuel] and “Dear Ralph”. Emanuel spoke of an “esteem and friendship … inculcated in our tender years, and though we have been distant from each other for a long series of time, yet my heart ever wished you well, and joyed in your welfare …”; and Ralph re-

77 Nichols, Illustrations, 4, p. 763.
turned the affection. "Manny" sent regards to the family in one instance, requesting that he be sent a small pot (of about three or four pounds) of "sour crout", while Schomberg returned the warm regards from his wife and children, adding his own with the Hebrew words "amen ve-amen". The much-quoted line follows: "Bath is at present very full and brilliant ... I am not idle. We have a good many bni yisrael here." The Hebrew references, of course, express more than personal friendship; they suggest a distinct sense of Jewish self-awareness. In the relatively Christian space that both intellectuals inhabited, they still continued to see themselves as Jews. This is all the more remarkable because Da Costa asked Schomberg in his next letter to "tell your Lady from me, with my sincere respects, that I wish her a merry Christmas and happy new year", and followed this with a phrase strangely absent from the version published by John Nichols: "My compliments attend Miss Schomberg [apparently Ralph's recently engaged or married daughter] and the young gentleman and wish them the same and you my dear Ralph a good Rosasana." The last sentence provides ample proof that Ralph remained a Jew until the year of his death in 1761. But even more interesting is the matter-of-fact way in which both Jews acknowledged their complicated fate as spouses of Christian women with Christian offspring while at the same time adhering to their special bonds of "Jewish speech"—the Hebrew words and the Rosh Hashanah greetings—which define, no matter how faintly, who they are and what unites them as friends.78

A second example of da Costa's correspondence, though different, returns us directly to the comparison between Anglo- and German Jewry in the mid-eighteenth century. In 1759, writing from Paris, and then again in 1767, writing from Hamburg, Aron S. Gompertz, MD, as he signs himself, penned two letters to Mendes da Costa.79 Gompertz, of course, was none other than Mendelssohn's Jewish teacher. In 1751 he had received his medical degree from the University of Frankfurt an der Oder. For ten years he practised medicine in Berlin, but eventually took up residence in Hamburg, where he died in 1769. In addition to the critical impact he had on Mendelssohn, he is known for his Hebrew commentary on Abraham ibn Ezra and a short Hebrew treatise, *Ma'amor Ha-Maddah*, which was appended to the latter work.80

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78 *Ibid.*, 4, pp. 764–769. The additional line is found in Add. ms. 28542, fol. 162r.
79 Add. ms. 78537, fols. 434r–436r.
Rather remarkably, Gompertz wrote both letters in an adequate but somewhat unintelligible English to his scientific colleague. He might have written in German, the language of several other letters to da Costa, and he might have also written in Hebrew to a co-religionist who certainly understood the language. That he wrote in English suggests a lack of familiarity with his associate—in striking contrast to the Schomberg correspondence—despite the friendly tone and the fondness expressed for England and his English addressee. In fact, what is most strange about the letters is the distinct impression they convey that Gompertz did not consider his correspondent a Jew, or at the very least, that he was uncertain about his Jewish loyalties. At several points in his letter Gompertz openly acknowledged his own Jewish identity. In a sentence not fully comprehensible to me, he referred to “a newspaper of a witty member of my fraternity”, clearly meaning his Jewish community. Later on, he again displayed his Jewish affiliation when describing his meanderings in the Low Countries and the Netherlands: “But to the purpose, dear sir, I have rambled about, not unlike the everlasting Jew, through the low clammy countries and through the milky Dutch dominion.” In an ingratiating gesture to his English correspondent, he expressed his dislike for those countries in comparison to England “because of the sickening abundance of milk and the scarcity of roast beast”. Whether the meat he relished was kosher or not he did not say, but what seems oddly inexplicable about these benign pleasantries is that they could have easily been addressed to a non-Jew. It was Gompertz, like da Costa on numerous other occasions, who was “testing the waters” with his faint signals of Jewish identification, seemingly unsure how the clerk of the Royal Society and renowned English scientist might react. Unfortunately, none of da Costa's responses have survived by which one might examine this conjecture. A potential forum for a significant exchange of views between a distinguished Anglo-Jewish intellectual and his German counterpart never materialises. In the end, we are left with a rather stiff and unsuccessful attempt on the part of the German-Jewish doctor to establish a meaningful dialogue with his colleague.

IV.

One might look elsewhere, however, to a more meaningful forum for the exchange of views between an Anglo-Jewish and German-Jewish thinker:

81 Add. ms.78537, fol. 436r.
this is the last of my examples and the final part of this paper. I refer to a thinker I have treated before, Mordechai Schnaber Levison (1741-1797), who has also been the subject of another recent study.\(^2\) Levison, strictly speaking, was not solely an English thinker. He was born in Germany and after a significant sojourn in London and Sweden, eventually returned to his homeland, where he practised medicine until his death. In fact, Michael Graetz, in his recent treatment of the German Haskalah, has identified him as one of its participants.\(^6\) While acknowledging the complexity of Levison’s thought and the multiple intellectual environments that nourished him, I would still argue vigorously that his primary intellectual debts were English, and that the bulk of his most significant work was produced either during or immediately after his highly stimulating encounter with Britain. This is not merely my own subjective impression; it is a sentiment Levison himself acknowledged both through the citation of his sources and in his constant references to this most formative period of his intellectual life.

In my earlier study, I sought to understand Levison’s thought as reflected in his two major tomes: the Ma’amor ha-Torah ve-ha-Hokhmah, published in London in 1771, and his later Shelosh Esrei Yesodei ha-Torah, probably published in Altona in 1792 but written much earlier. I neglected to consider a third work of equal importance, a commentary on Kohelet entitled Tokahhat Megillah, published in Hamburg in 1784 but written around the time of his departure from England around 1780. I would like to offer here some preliminary observations on this work because of its great relevance to our subject. Levison composed his commentary after acquiring Mendelssohn’s recent commentary on the same biblical book. Clearly dissatisfied with the German sage’s understanding of Kohelet, he decided on a work of his own. He had read Mendelssohn’s Phaedon, on the subject of the immortality of the soul, and was impressed by its execution. In his Shelosh Esrei Yesodei ha-Torah, Levison devoted a chapter to immortality in which he drew heavily from Mendelssohn’s work, although not without criticising it.\(^4\) This chapter, too, makes its way into Levison’s commentary, providing an extended reaction to Men-


\(^6\) Graetz, p. 303.

\(^4\) Levison, *Shelosh Esrei Yesodei ha-Torah*, pp. 95v–99v.
Was there an English Parallel to the German Haskalah?

delssohn’s early German and Hebrew writings. Recently, through the kindness of Dr. Shlomo Sprecher of Brooklyn, New York, who has republished several of Levison’s Hebrew writings, I have acquired a copy of the original text of Mendelssohn’s commentary owned by Levison with his extensive handwritten notes throughout. If there remains any doubt about the critical impact on him of his English education, these notes, written in Hebrew and in English, which include English translations of several biblical verses, suggest how natural it was for him, at least in this instance, to think and express himself in English. To my mind, Levison’s animadversions on Mendelssohn’s works, especially the Hebrew commentary, constitute a remarkable example of the dialogue between the two communities of thinkers, and provide a vantage point for pointing to some of the differences between these two prominent men, and particularly to some of the differences in the intellectual ambiances that nurtured them in the first place.

Levison’s dedication page sets the tone for the entire volume:

“When I heard when I was in London during the past six years that there was a scholar in the capital of Berlin who had written a commentary on this pleasant book [Kohelet], I hurried to acquire it to see what he had done with it. His words did not sit well with me and I saw the need to compose a good commentary a second time with God’s beneficent assistance.”

Levison added that he had consulted no commentary except that of Mendelssohn (whom he never mentions by name) and that he wrote it in fleeting moments “when I was travelling from place to place and from city to city and on a ship at sea”. In striking contrast to the simple manner in which he introduced Mendelssohn, he immodestly presented himself as a member “of the community of physicians and doctor of the hospital of the Duke of Portland [the position he had attained in London through the good services of his teacher Dr. John Hunter] and Professor [so designated by the monarch] to the King of Sweden Gustaf III”, to whom the volume is dedicated.

Before considering what displeased Levison about Mendelssohn’s commentary, it might be useful to compare his more generous presentation

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85 Levison, _Tokhahat Megillah_, pp. 22r–27r.
86 See S. Sprecher (ed.), _Mivhar Kitvei Moreinu ha-Ravi Mordechai Gumpel Schnapper Ha-Levi Levison_, Brooklyn, NY 1995, who prints the first page of Mendelssohn’s commentary with Levison’s notes towards the back of the volume. (There is no pagination in this section.)
87 Levison, _Tokhahat Megillah_, p. 1r.
of Mendelssohn in his chapter on immortality. In this case, he acknowl-
edges his indebtedness to the Phaedon, which represents for him an ex-
cellent digest of old and new opinions on the immortality of the soul
"collected by the renowned sage whose rabbinical name is our teacher and
rabbiff, Rabbi Moses of Dessau, in his book on the immortality of the soul
called the Phaedon which he translated from the Greek into German".
Levison claimed that his own summary of the first two dialogues amply
describe the book, although he has purposely omitted the third dialogue, to
which we shall return. The only difference from Mendelssohn’s own ver-

tion of the first two sections and Levison’s synopsis is that “you shall find
there more expansive words, flowery and pleasant language, eloquence, a
pleasant honeycomb [cf. Proverbs 16:24] for his speech is endowed with
grace [cf. Psalms 45:3] since this scholar is the head of those who speak in
a clear language in German”.* This second presentation of Mendelssohn
is more complimentary than the first, which had merely identified him as a
scholar from Berlin. In this instance, the emphasis is on his eloquence
and clarity of presentation in the German language. Whether Levison’s obvi-
ous restraint is motivated by professional jealousy or simply by a lack of
appreciation for Mendelssohn’s heroic image within German Jewry is hard
to say. Levison’s acquaintance with the philosopher’s work came at a
relatively early stage of Mendelssohn’s career and his impact on a Jew in
far-off England was clearly limited. Mendelssohn was no more or less than
a scholar from Berlin who wrote well in German and summarised (or
translated) well; he was therefore not above serious criticism of his work.

Mendelssohn’s commentary, as David Sorkin has recently written, was
finished in 1768 and published a year later. Its central themes on divine
providence and the immortality of the soul are clearly related to the treat-
ment of them in the Phaedon, which had been published two years earlier.
The commentary, written for Hebrew readers, is generally conservative in
format, emphasising practical knowledge. For Mendelssohn, immortality
was a cardinal principle of Judaism as understood in Kohelet, since it es-
tablished a foundation for morality and divine retribution. He believed the
soul was a simple, imperishable substance which defines the uniqueness of
man, whose quest for perfection could only be realised through a reasoned
belief in the soul’s immortality. Mendelssohn attempted to overcome the
challenge of the book’s many and seemingly contradictory voices on these
issues by assuming that Kohelet was actually a philosophical dialogue in
which a variety of speakers and viewpoints could be heard. By identifying

*88 Ibid., p. 22r.
larger units of speech, rather than merely focusing on the meaning of individual words, the reader could consider the conflicting opinions of the speakers before arriving at the correct view, the authentic voice of the Preacher fully endorsing the twin notions of providence and immortality.89

As Alexander Altmann and Allan Arkush have emphasised in their separate analyses of the Phaedon and its sources, Mendelssohn's overriding concern was to preserve the traditional notion of immortality against the assaults of the French materialists. Clearly acknowledging his debt to Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten and Reimarus, among others, Mendelssohn attempted to present a wholly rational proof of immortality, emphasising especially that the wise fulfilment of God's aims in creating the world requires an afterlife in which rational beings could continue to perfect themselves and carry out their Creator's design to the full. As Mendelssohn acknowledged, he had put his contemporary argument into the mouth of Socrates because he required a pagan to demonstrate that reason alone, without recourse to revelation, was sufficient to substantiate these essential notions. As Altmann points out, this exclusive reliance on reason was entirely in the spirit of the Enlightenment and was critical for Mendelssohn in deflecting the arguments of the sophists (read: materialists) of the eighteenth century.90

What most irked Levison about Mendelssohn's commentary was precisely this point, and the implication that the philosopher's rational proofs of immortality were in fact synonymous with the actual position of Kohelet. What seems to be at the heart of his passionate attack, as I understand it, is the essential difference between Locke's understanding of the relation between faith and reason, as adopted by Levison, and that of Leibniz and Wolff, as adopted by Mendelssohn. Levison's objection to Mendelssohn's position can best be understood by consulting his carefully constructed chapters on "truth" and "faith" in his own Shelosh Esre Y'esodei ha-Torah. In these chapters, he relies heavily on Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding in adopting a sensationalist epistemology, rejecting innate ideas, and assuming that all human knowledge rests on probabilities. For Levison, again following Locke, faith is a kind of trust, not contradicted by reason, which emerges within the human condition, where knowledge of the entire truth is unattainable. We can investi-

90 Altmann, pp. 147–158; Allan Arkush, Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment, Albany 1994, pp. 45–64.
gate only what our senses and human experience allow us to know and we should “believe only what is beyond our intelligence and what the angels of God and his prophets have related”.

Levison opens his commentary with a two-pronged critique of Mendelssohn’s approach: the first deals with his view of the structure of Kohelet; the second with the substance of what the book actually says. On the first point, we recall, Mendelssohn had maintained that it constituted a conversation between many speakers upholding differing viewpoints until the correct view was spelled out by the Preacher himself. Not so for Levison. Kohelet rather “wanders in his examination of the issue, once approving and once disapproving, since the sage will speak according to his opinion as both a scholar and thinker who believes in God”. In Levison’s view, Kohelet chooses the experimental method of the scientific laboratory. He explores all options, considers one view and then its contradiction, and articulates the virtues of each position while viewing its limitation. In the end, he is led to the realisation that reason alone cannot offer him a definitive answer to the questions of providence and the immortality of the soul. At that point he concludes his investigation, abandons all the theories he has investigated, and accepts the true tradition as a matter of faith.

This leads to Levison’s second criticism. Commenting on Mendelssohn’s understanding of Kohelet 4:1 (“I saw the tears of the oppressors...”) both in his hand-written notes on Mendelssohn and in the printed introduction to his own work, Levison protests against Mendelssohn’s understanding of Kohelet’s position. He was not saying, pace Mendelssohn, that because the oppressed presently suffer, there should be a reward for them in the next world. On the contrary, Kohelet had no intention of proving immortality, nor of complaining about oppression. He understood that this question was beyond the capacity of any human being to know, and the only way to attain a certain resolution of the issue is through a belief in the Torah. In other words, what Mendelssohn presumed could be eventually proved by reason is ultimately unprovable. Immortality is only comprehensible through faith.

To be sure, Levison was not fully consistent in his Lockean sensationalism and his convenient fideism. Indeed, by summarising the first two

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91 The quotation is from Shelosh Esre Yesodei ha-Torah, p. 13v. Levison’s views on this are expounded in Ruderman, Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery, pp. 353–357.
92 Levison, Tokhahat Megillah, pp. 1r–1v.
93 Ibid., p. 1v; compare also his statement on p. 40v.
dialogues of the *Phaedon*, he considered directly rational proofs of the soul's existence and of its immortality. Moreover, in suppressing the third dialogue, in which he refuted Mendelssohn's argument "from the collision of duties", he appears to have violated his own warning not to argue rationally over matters incapable of a rational resolution. In this case, Mendelssohn had offered his own argument that when the soul is not deemed immortal, the preservation of life becomes the exclusive concern of every person. One would then have the right to neglect all moral duties involving the welfare of the community in order to protect oneself. The notion of immorality is thus critical in allowing human beings to worry about a collective good greater than their own self-preservation, that is, the moral obligations of society as a whole. For Levison, who was not alone in such criticism, the argument was weak on the grounds that even without a notion of immortality, it would still be appropriate, he maintained, to punish murderers in order to protect the public from further crimes. But Levison had already vigorously claimed that such arguments—for or against—were beside the point. Ultimately they established nothing except their utter inability to establish the truth, which is unattainable except through faith.  

Levison’s other disagreements with Mendelssohn are less important but fill out a portrait of a distinct style of rationality that each man had staked out for himself. As we might expect, Levison took a more open view of the Masoretic text of the Bible, which Mendelssohn maintained was inviolable and not subject to emendations. Despite his familiarity with the English work of Raphael Barukh, his Sephardic friend from London, who had publicly defended the Masoretic text against the variants published by Kennicott, Levison was willing to consider modest emendations of the biblical text. In contrast to Mendelssohn’s uncompromising traditionalism, Levison quietly reveals throughout his commentary his less-than-firm commitment to ritual law and *mitzvot* in favour of a universal ethic.

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95 Levison, *Tokhahat Megillah*, p. 1b. He mentions his friendship with Raphael Barukh, who published his *Critica Sacra* in London in 1775, on p. 2b. One interesting comparison yet to be made is the way in which Kennicott’s treatment of the biblical text was received by both English and German Jews, and the stake of each community in biblical translation. I hope to consider this issue more deeply in future studies of Raphael Barukh and David Levi.
founded on the knowledge of one God and love of all humankind. Levison the physician also periodically inserts his vast medical knowledge (he devotes an entire section to excoriating Jews for their excessive eating on the Sabbath and their overindulgence in meat), as well as his ecological concerns. He is quick to point out Mendelssohn’s error in claiming that Solomon discovered the circulation of blood; in fact, he points out, the real discoverers of circulation were Michael Servetus and William Harvey.

In the end, Levison appears to accept, at least tacitly, many of Mendelssohn’s conventional interpretations, or passes over them without comment. His sharp critique is reserved primarily for the issues I have raised. Surely one could also find a common universe of discourse in the parallel search of these two scholars to reconcile faith and reason, notwithstanding their different styles of rational discourse. But Levison did attack the great Mendelssohn, in no small measure because of the relative differences in their respective philosophical and scientific backgrounds, and in their diverging intellectual journeys: that of Mendelssohn from Dessau to Berlin, and that of Levison from Berlin to London to Stockholm and back to Hamburg.

Levison’s challenge to Mendelssohn, together with the other snapshots of Anglo-Jewish intellectual life I have presented—the political dissent of Tang, the Masonic dimension of Anglo-Jewish thought, the partial and tentative articulations of Jewish identity of Emanuel Mendes da Costa—hardly demonstrate an English Haskalah. They do suggest, however, the fascination Jewish self-reflection in eighteenth-century England might hold for historians of Anglo-Jewry, even those who might have previously considered England to be a Jewish intellectual wasteland. They may even present an interesting vantage point for German-Jewish historians from which to view German intellectual developments, assuming they do not take to heart any English disrespect for their vaunted Moses Mendelssohn.

96 See, for example, Levison’s criticism of Mendelssohn’s reading of Kohelet 4:17 in Tokhahat Megillah, p. 1b. Compare also his discussion on pp. 9v–10r, and his final discussion on p. 40b, in which he criticises both unbelieving rationalists and silly literalists.

97 Ibid., pp. 10r–10v, 12v–14a; see also Ruderman, Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery, pp. 357–365.

98 Levison, Tokhahat Megillah, pp. 36v–37v.
Two Nations

British and German Jews in Comparative Perspective

edited by

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and David Rechter

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