The Hague Dialogues

David B. Ruderman
University of Pennsylvania, ruderman@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract
Imagine the following scenario: A young scholar from Vilna, having wandered through several cities in Eastern Europe and Germany arrived in the city of the Hague at the close of the 1780s, enjoyed the material support of the richest family of Jewish merchants in the city, the Boaz family, and sought and gained the religious approval of the rabbi of the city, Judah Leib Mezerich. His name was Pinhas Elijah ben Meir Hurwitz (1765-1821) and he was about to complete the first draft of a manuscript of his soon-to-be published book, an encyclopedia of the sciences entitled *Sefer ha-Brit* (The Book of the Covenant).¹ The young Hurwitz soon learned of the presence of an aging sage who lived in the city, a rigorous philosopher and émigré from Mainz, Naphtali Herz Ulman (1731-87). Ulman had completed a multi-volume philosophic opus of which only the first volume, *Hokhmat ha-shorashim* [The Science of Roots or First Principles], had been published in 1781.² Hurwitz was hardly a philosopher in his own right; in fact he had been drawn to the study of the kabbalah. But he did share something in common with Ulman — an appreciation of the life of the mind and particularly a fascination for the natural world and the new sciences, and they were both Ashkenazic Jews with knowledge of the German language.³ It seemed natural that Hurwitz would seek out Ulman and converse with the major intellectual figure of Hague Jewry.

Disciplines
European History | History | Intellectual History | Jewish Studies

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THE HAGUE DIALOGUES*

IMAGINE THE FOLLOWING SCENARIO: A young scholar from Vilna, having wandered through several cities in Eastern Europe and Germany arrived in the city of the Hague at the close of the 1780s, enjoyed the material support of the richest family of Jewish merchants in the city, the Boaz family, and sought and gained the religious approval of the rabbi of the city, Judah Leib Mezerich. His name was Pinhas Elijah ben Meir Hurwitz (1765-1821) and he was about to complete the first draft of a manuscript of his soon-to-be-published book, an encyclopedia of the sciences entitled Sefer ha-Brit (The Book of the Covenant). The young Hurwitz soon learned of the presence of an aging sage who lived in the city, a rigorous philosopher and emigré from Mainz, Naphtali Herz Ulman (1731-87). Ulman had completed a multi-volume philosophic opus of which only the first volume, Hokhmat ha-shorashim [The Science of Roots or First Principles], had been published in 1781. Hurwitz


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It may have been a likely scenario but one that probably was never
realized. Despite his relatively young age, Ulman died in 1787 at the age
of 56. Hurwitz, according to the testimony of Mezerich was living in
The Hague in 1790 and had been residing there for at least a full year.
If indeed, he had arrived in 1789, he had missed his opportunity to
engage with the formidable philosopher who had resided in Holland for
more than fifteen years. If only they had had a chance to meet, one
might have imagined a lively, animated, and even contentious conver-
sation between the two. Ulman was thirty years older than Hurwitz and
that difference in age genuinely revealed an enormous generation gap in
their intellectual styles and in the values and aspirations they held for
themselves and their communities. The Sefer ha-Brit was first published
in 1797 in Brünn, only sixteen years after Ulman’s single Hebrew publi-
cation, but the difference in the two works—along with the numerous
volumes Ulman left in manuscript but never published—was astounding.
If one were to chart the transformation of Jewish thought from one
generation to another, these two thinkers would provide meaningful

3. Hurwitz’s knowledge of German, which he does not acknowledge, seems plausible because
of a recently discovered letter signed by Hurwitz to the well-known censor of Hebrew books, Karl
Fischer. Professor Michael Silber made the discovery and I thank him for sharing the letter with me.
Karl Fischer Archives, Epistolae rabbinorum aliorumque Hebraorum ab A. 5549 (1789) usque 5594 (1836)
ad me Carolum Fischer etc. National Library of the Czech Republic, Prague, Call No. XVIII.F.11,
fols 256-266.

4. He was buried on June 22, 1787, having died of a stroke. See Van Lieburg, ‘On Naphhtal
Herz’s Ulman’s Biography’, p. 61.

5. See note 1 above.
markers of some continuity but more of radical change. Ulman’s cultural world was that of Leibnitz, Wolff, and Mendelssohn, the ambiance of the German Haskalah, with which he identified even from his self-imposed exile in far-away Holland. Hurwitz was of a different make-up. While he knew of Mendelssohn and his philosophical contemporaries, he had chosen an entirely different intellectual trajectory—a passion for Lurianic kabbalah merged with an appreciation and commitment to the study of the natural world. Not Wolff nor Leibnitz but Kant inspired him. And Maimonides, the quintessential medieval Jewish philosopher, excited him far less than his self-proclaimed spiritual mentors Isaac Luria and Hayyim Vital of Safed. The interval of a mere sixteen years had utterly altered the intellectual landscape of the Jewish cultural world judging from the fascinating intellectual products of these two Hebraic scholars who nearly encountered each other in the Jewish neighborhood of the Hague.

Historians should not engage in hypotheticals regarding what might have happened had two historical figures encountered each other. But in the case of Ulman and Hurwitz, two scholars who happened to reside in the same place nearly at the same time, the first for at least a decade and a half and the second for at least a year, their literary legacies offer ample information to reconstruct what a conversation between them might have sounded like. Far removed from the cultural centers of Berlin, Krakow, or Vilna, The Hague might appear an unlikely cultural setting in monitoring a critical transition in modern Jewish thought, an evolution one might label: from Wolffian metaphysics to Kabbalistic natural science. Neither Ulman nor Hurwitz ever attained the elite status of primary intellectual figures in the history of modern Jewish thought that would certainly include the likes of Mendelssohn, Maimon, and other important luminaries of the German Haskalah. But they remain fascinating secondary figures of Jewish self-reflection, and when considered together engaged in a ‘virtual’ conversation or, at least, when their intellectual postures are contrasted with each other, they help to illuminate seismic shifts in the cultural world of European Jewry at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While this transitional period is usually charted through Mendelssohn, his children and disciples and adversaries, primarily in Germany, an examination of the thinking of these less studied and admittedly more marginal figures of modern Jewish
intellectual history, might yet offer a meaningful indicator of how substantially Jewish cultural life was changing in this pivotal era. It also might properly set the stage to consider the content and impact of Hurwitz’s best-selling book on several generations of Jewish readers to follow. So I label this essay ‘The Hague Dialogues,’ a conversation that most likely never took place, although the following reconstruction of a meeting of the minds of these two thinkers seems quite plausible in the light of their extensive literary remains.

The Need for Rabbinic Approbations

We might begin our comparison of Ulman and his younger contemporary Hurwitz by perusing the openings of each of their published volumes. The title page of Hokhmat ha-shorashim, published by two local printers Loeb ben Moses Soesmans and J.H. Munnikhuisen, with the financial support of four local Jewish patrons,6 indicates immediately that wisdom of the roots of knowledge represents the first science of metaphysics and serves as an introduction to the volumes that follow: wisdom of the world, the soul, and finally the divine. Having prepared volumes on each of these topics as well as other works, Ulman had obviously imagined that this initial publication of 1781 would be followed by more. Perhaps one reason for the lack of the book’s financial success and his failure to publish any subsequent volumes can be found in this initial statement of the author:

I apologize in publishing this book for having abandoned the custom of most writers of our times in approaching the famous, brilliant, and wise rabbis who sit in learned counsel, teachers of the Torah in the land of Holland where I presently reside to seek their permission and approval of this publication. I justify this on two grounds. First, something that is made clear by decisive proof which is the case for all the studies discussed in this book is complete and self-evident truth and requires no formal approval. Would it not be ridiculous, for example, to declare that the three angles of a triangle represent more than two sides of a perpendicular just because a famous person gave his approval of this statement? Second, these rabbis who are famed

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throughout the land as our teachers and sages are so burdened with Torah and divine commandments and with their profound and expert investigations of heavenly law and religious observance that they have no spare time to contemplate the wonders of nature and the secrets of the divine through self-reflection. The only demonstrative proof for them is revealed tradition as it is for the majority of loyal and faithful Jews…?  

Ulman’s sarcastic and belligerent stance towards the rabbis of his generation in justifying his decision to ignore any rabbinic haskamah for his book could not have endeared him to them and their loyal constituencies who might have been potential purchasers of his Hebrew tome. On the contrary, he was both rejecting their authority in understanding the truth and he was also claiming that the study of nature had no place in their own curriculum of sacred study. In this he openly declared that the only authentic expositors of the truth were philosophers like himself, [Note his own self-designation from the opening title: ‘Torah scholar, naturalist [mehandes] and exalted philosopher’],8 and only such scholars were capable of leading the Jewish community in these confused and troubling times.

How different was the strategy of Hurwitz’s Sefer ha-Brit! It would appear that Hurwitz went to great lengths to solicit seven rabbinic haskamot during the early 1790s, including four from Holland: Rabbi Saul Loewenstamm, rabbi of the Ashkenazic community of Amsterdam; Rabbi David Azevado, rabbi of the Sephardic community of the same city; Rabbi Aryeh Leib Breslaw, rabbi of Rotterdam; the aforementioned Rabbi Judah Leib Mezerich of the Hague; Rabbi Isaac ha-Levi of Lemberg, rabbi of Krakow; Rabbi Moses Mintz of Brod, rabbi of Oven (Ofen=Buda), and Rabbi Isaac Abraham the rabbi of Pintschov (Pinczow). Hurwitz had apparently lobbied hard for these rabbinic approbations. When approaching Rabbi Loewenstamm of Amsterdam, he brought with him a letter of introduction from the latter’s own brother, Rabbi Zevi Hirsch, the rabbi of Berlin. Rabbi Azevado surely knew of Rabbi

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8. Sefer Hokhmat ha-shorashim, title page.
Loewenstamm’s support for Hurwitz’ book as he mentioned that he was writing his own approbation during the mourning period for his recently deceased colleague who had just died on June 19, 1790. Rabbi Mezerich had been ordained by Rabbi Loewenstamm and was surely inclined to follow in his footsteps in writing this approbation. Rabbi Isaac ha-Levi of Krakow was the son-in-law of Rabbi Aryeh Leib Breslau of Rotterdam and was surely in contact with him. In short, Hurwitz had apparently chosen his seven rabbis carefully. Despite the distances from Eastern Europe to Holland, these were rabbis connected to each other and, at least in some cases, simply followed the lead of their associates in granting rabbinic approval of Hurwitz’s book.  

Hurwitz’s motivation in enlisting the support of these rabbinic authorities was surely related to their privileged place within traditional Jewish society. In contrast to Ulman, who consciously maligned these figures by making fun of their authority and knowledge, Hurwitz knew fully well that he needed haskamot to sell his book among traditional Jews. Furthermore, he assumed that if each of these rabbis would issue a warning prohibiting anyone from republishing the book for fifteen years without the permission of the author, he would be relatively protected to pursue his own publishing interests and reap any profits exclusively for himself. To his utter surprise, this expectation was not realized. Despite the rabbinic threats mentioned in the approbations, a pirated edition of Sefer ha-Brit appeared in 1801 and the publisher seemed to ignore the rabbis altogether, removing their approbations from his own edition. They were restored in Hurwitz’s new and expanded edition of his book in 1807 which included a new introduction in which Hurwitz expressed his utter disgust over the sheer disregard by the rogue publisher in ignoring these rabbis who had supported his publishing endeavor.  


10. Hurwitz discusses the whole sordid affair of the pirated edition (1801) of the publisher Joseph Rossmann and his plan to revise and expand the book in the introduction to the second
in the mind of Hurwitz, rabbinic approbations were still important in selling books, in both providing religious approval of his message and in protecting him from illicit publishing practices that would harm his authorial rights. When this proved not to be the case, Hurwitz not only excoriated the man who had stolen his book; he singled out this practice again at the end of Sefer ha-Brit in a broader social critique of the Jewish community of his day.11

On Metaphysics

In the same year that Ulman published his introduction to Jewish metaphysics or what he called “The Wisdom of that which is Beyond Nature”,12 Immanuel Kant published his Critique of Pure Reason [1781].13 Ironically, at the moment Ulman was conceiving his major project of a Jewish philosophy based on the principles of Leibnitz and Wolff, Kant had initiated a direct assault on the very core assumptions informing their philosophic project. Whether or not Ulman deviated from his mentors in some of his specific formulations, he was clearly indebted to their core ideas and viewed his enterprise as a specific Jewish adaptation of their vital contributions to philosophical thinking. Even a superficial perusal of his ambitious composition reveals both indebtedness to the overall structures of their works as well as a specific employment of their working hypotheses such as the principles of contradiction, of sufficient reason, of the best and most perfect worlds, as well as a description and defense of the existence of monads.14

Leaving aside the intricacies of Ulman’s specific interpretations of Leibnitz and Wolff, I wish to stress in this context Ulman’s unwavering commitment to the enterprise of metaphysical thinking in general which he derived from his teachers. Right from the beginning of Hokhmat edition, Sefer ha-Brit ha-shalem, p. 18-20. This introduction first appeared in the Zokiew edition of 1806-07 of A. Meir Hapfer.
12. Ulman, Sefer Hokhmat ha-shorashin, title page.
13. Immanuel Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft (Riga 1781).
14. For a philosophical study of Ulman’s work in relation to the philosophies of Leibnitz and Wolff, see Even-Chen’s dissertation mentioned in note 2 above. Succinct summaries with up-to-date bibliographies of the two German philosophers can be found in on the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy edited by Edward N. Zalta.
ha-shorashim, he underscored the need for philosophical reflection in determining first principles and in organizing human knowledge. He was certainly aware of those detractors of philosophical metaphysics both from within the traditionalist as well as within the rational camps but aggressively sought to deflect their criticisms. For Ulman, metaphysics was fundamental to human understanding; faulty principles yield bad knowledge and ultimately harm society. Ulman readily conceded that Greek and Arabic philosophy from Plato and Aristotle had made invalid assumptions but nevertheless the search for meaning beyond and behind nature is still valid. Metaphysical thinking is neither impractical nor dry. Without a systematic undergirding of philosophical principles, human society is cast into doubt and heresy, and for Jews, the meaning of the Torah is put in jeopardy. What the Jewish community requires is a new paradigm of philosophical metaphysics based on Leibnitz and Wolff and a moral commitment to fathom the ontological basis of reality rigorously and sincerely. Sensory knowledge alone cannot sufficiently make sense of the infinite variety of things in nature without recourse to fundamental rational assumptions.\textsuperscript{15}

Hurwitz would have strongly objected to this line of thinking. He would have particularly found offensive Ulman’s declaration at the very beginning of Hokhmat ha-shorashim that anyone who assumes it is impossible to know truth except through prophecy and kabbalah is completely mistaken and relies only on the stubbornness of his views.\textsuperscript{16} The proofs of ‘science’ undermine his claims. For this indeed was the exact position Hurwitz came to champion. From the very beginning of his Hebrew writing, he saw the kabbalah as the ultimate source of all truth and the foundation of the Jewish faith and he saw his primary intellectual role as an expositor of the kabbalistic tradition. Indeed the Sefer ha-Brit was merely an elaborate extension of interpreting kabbalistic sapience for a wide Jewish readership. For Hurwitz, philosophy, both in the past and in his own times, generally lead to skepticism and heresy, denying the foundations of Jewish faith. Indeed for Hurwitz, only through faith, and not rational investigation can a Jew know God: ‘It is not God’s desire … that we will know the Lord our God through human

\textsuperscript{15}. Sefer Hokhmat ha-shorashim, p. 2a-17b.
\textsuperscript{16}. Ibid., p. 1b.
investigation and acquired proof … for God wants from his people that they believe in him based on our tradition from our forefathers, generation after generation back to those who stood on Mount Sinai.’ 17

In a move radically opposed to the position of Ulman, Hurwitz declared that the entire philosophical enterprise was antithetical to Judaism. Philosophy was the creation of the Greeks beginning with Solon, Socrates, and Aristotle. The Arabs then took this tradition and transmitted it to Christian Europe. From the Moslems and the Christians certain Jews mastered philosophy and wrapped themselves in ‘a stolen tallit’. 18 Despite the attraction of philosophy for some Jewish thinkers, most notably Maimonides, philosophical study was never incumbent upon Jews and does not lead to knowledge of God. The latter can only be reached, following the formulation of Judah ha-Levi, by the observance of the divine commandments and by experiencing the world to its fullest. Wisdom is not a function of rational investigation but faith and understanding and appreciating the natural world, the wondrous creations of the Divine: ‘A thing is more certain acquired through achievement and experience than one acquired through human investigation as the elder sages declare: “There is no wiser person than one of experience.”’ 19

In almost revelatory terms, Hurwitz dramatically announced the publication of Kant’s devastating critique of metaphysics in 1781. In Hurwitz’s words, the book appeared not only to undermine ancient philosophy but also ‘the most recent philosophers of this generation … and their theoretical proofs regarding the reality beyond nature called metaphysics.’ Furthermore, Kant explicitly pointed to ‘the books of the great philosopher Wolff and the famous philosopher Leibnitz who are the most publicized recent philosophers’ describing their intellectual systems as children’s toys made of paper and carton easily blown away in the wind. For Hurwitz, Kant’s challenge to metaphysics was devastating; all philosophical proofs are mere figments of thought and imagination unconnected to reality. Kant demonstrated unequivocally that human

17. Sefer ha-Brit ha-shalem, p. 324.
18. Ibid., p. 330. On the powerful tradition in Jewish thought Hurwitz was emphatically undermining, see Abraham Melamed, The Myth of the Jewish Origins of Science and Philosophy (Jerusalem 2010).
19. Sefer ha-Brit ha-shalem, p. 344.
beings lack the means to know, based on either the senses or rational investigation, what is beyond nature.20

Hurwitz added that the attempt of the contemporary Jewish philosopher Salomon Maimon to defend the foundations of philosophy was for naught. Hurwitz associated Maimon’s defense with a justification of Leibnitz’s theory of monads which have no basis in reality and were invented in Leibnitz’s mind. Hurwitz acknowledged the many followers of Leibniz but considered Kant’s disbelief as the ultimate vindication that such metaphysical assumptions were nothing more than deceptive vanities. With the shattering of the truth claims of the school of Leibnitz and Wolff, the door was open to embrace a metaphysics based on kabbalistic assumptions constituting the true faith of Judaism, one philosophically informed by Kant’s latest critique and aligned with an empiricist appreciation of nature and the physical world known through human experience.21

The explicit reference by Hurwitz to Kant’s challenge to Leibnitz and Wolff underscores the widening gulf between Ulman and Hurwitz. While Ulman suffered the fate of defending an epistemological system already under siege by the time he had completed most of his writing, Hurwitz greatly benefited by the timeliness of Kant’s challenge to metaphysics and his attempt to limit human investigation to the natural world. Through Kant, Hurwitz had discovered a convincing strategy of combining natural philosophy with kabbalistic metaphysics. In this vital conflict over the place of philosophy in Judaism, Hurwitz had found a remarkably effective ally from within the very cohorts of recent philosophy from whom he intended to distance himself.

On Interpreting the Wonders of Nature

In one of his many compositions left in manuscript, Naphtali Ulman described an incredible invention in the home of an affluent Jew from Amsterdam named Jacob Heimfeld. The invention was an elaborate

20. Ibid., p. 360-361.
clock which he called a horologe. From it a sculpted figure would emerge every half hour accompanied by music. The music was so accurate that it was indistinguishable from that of a live musician. Similarly, Ulman reported on other such clocks where figures of stone or wood emerged on the hour hitting a stick to indicate the precise time; with each appearance a door would open and then shut as the figure entered and exited.

Ulman remarked that such an incredible sight could easily be perceived as a miracle of nature but in fact represents a daily natural occurrence happening with growing regularity in the author’s age. In fact, such phenomena are also recorded regularly in history books and testify to the fact that what many people perceive to be miracles are actually based on natural causation. Ulman was aware of those who would challenge this position claiming that biblical miracles were often intended to punish the wicked and reward the righteous and that nature never distinguishes between right and wrong and privileges one group of people over another. But this view, argued Ulman, can actually be refuted by several historical examples. In 1349, the Jews were less victimized by the black plague than Christians. At other times, women perished more than men in times of war. One also finds remarkable parallels between supposed biblical miracles such as the crossing of the sea of reeds, Sarah’s pregnancy in old age, the rapid rise in Israel’s population in Egypt and more. Such occurrences do not happen often and when they do occur often astonish human observers, but they are still natural in origin. Just because one is unfamiliar with such phenomena does not entitle him to label them as miraculous. Scripture accordingly does not record irrational and illogical things. A good natural philosopher aware of the limitless possibilities within nature can ultimately explain and interpret all of the so-called miracles recorded therein.

Ulman’s strong claim was directed against the traditionalist rabbis of his generation who assumed that every naturalist was an unbeliever and that the only strategy to challenge those who denied the miraculous was to retreat into a biblical literalism and fundamentalism. Ulman offered an alternative to reconcile God, providence and nature. The naturalist

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23. Ibid., fols 147b-153b.
does not deny miracles; he simply tries to understand them within a naturalistic context. The comet was often perceived as a miracle by those who had not studied the laws of astronomy but the scientist knows that they are part of nature. The philosophers like him are actually true believers-opposed to charlatans within the Jewish community who deceive and manipulate the masses with their pretentious claims to be miracle workers, on the one hand, and to deist and atheist philosophers who deny the veracity of Holy Scripture, on the other.24

The true hero is what Ulman calls ‘the Torah philosopher’ who acknowledges revelation about nature but tries to offer a rational hypothesis as close to the truth as possible. In this respect, Ulman mentions the well-publicized debate between Pierre Bayle and Gottfried Leibniz. The former had firmly distinguished between a truth of nature from that of Scripture, divorcing one from the other and thus legitimating all faith claims through this epistemological fire wall. Siding with his mentor Leibniz, Ulman argued that reason and faith ultimately do not contradict each other; rather they complement each other since God is the source of both. The implications for the Jewish community are thus clear: ‘Every wise Jew must attempt to understand through truthful reasoning all the biblical passages in the Holy Books, to interpret them so they do not appear irrational and accordingly seem possible and truthful, or at least it is his obligation to exert himself to understand from his intelligence that there is no real contradiction embedded in them.’25

Proving that the Bible is a repository of natural phenomena, that miracles don’t exist and can be explained rationally, and that the role of ‘the Torah philosopher’ is to reconcile the scientific and the sacred were objectives Hurwitz would have found disconcerting. At first glance this might appear odd to the casual observer of Hurwitz’s massive encyclopedia of the sciences, offering a comprehensive view of astronomy, the earth sciences, and human biology. Had not Hurwitz promoted his project of

24. These themes are developed in Ulman’s *Hokhmat ha-olam*, Ms. Leiden Hebrew 87a, especially fols 143a-147b.
pious science to integrate knowledge of the natural world with divine revelation? Why would he object to Ulman’s ideal that all the narratives of the Torah can be interpreted to demonstrate the regularity and rationality of nature and support a scientific understanding of divine creation? But indeed Hurwitz’s motivation in teaching science to pious Jews was not identical to that of Ulman.

In the first place, there was only one source of truth for Hurwitz and that was the revelation at Sinai and specifically its deeper meaning as revealed in the kabbalah. Human beings unaided by divine revelation are in no position of knowing the truth through their own devices. This is especially the case for metaphysical knowledge, as we have seen, but it is also true for knowledge of the natural world. Natural philosophers could certainly provide a general orientation on how to understand the universe and God’s creation, but their understanding was incomplete and tentative. They could never understand all the secrets of nature which are revealed over time and constantly challenge and overturn the rational paradigms that philosophers had previously held in explaining the natural world.

What was the ultimate meaning of recent scientific discoveries such as the helium balloon, the barometer, or the divers’ bell that Hurwitz presented to his readers in the pages of *Sefer ha-Brit*? On the one hand, they convey a sense of wonderment, majesty, and inspiration in the beneficence of God’s presence in the world, echoing the biblical sentiments of how the heavens declare God’s glory or how from human flesh, God is revealed. But they accomplish something else as well for Hurwitz. They upset and destabilize the orderly systems of human knowledge based on long-standing rational assumptions and intense human scrutiny of nature. In the chance occurrences in which nature operates and in its seeming indifference to supposed rules and norms by which it is expected to function according to human calculation, it ultimately undermines the assumption that humans can fully understand anything and that human knowledge can reliably fathom God’s handiwork.

At several points in his text, Hurwitz paused to take account of the utter confusion scientific discoveries often render. One such example was the seemingly unwavering assumptions that the earth was composed of four elements but more recently challenged by the chemical philosophers who insisted that there were five. It is not that the later scientists
were smarter than the earlier ones, Hurwitz claimed, only ‘that experience came and denied their words and overturned their opinions. What happened to these earlier scholars will also happen to later ones of this generation who will not be happy. Thus in the end of days discoveries will be revealed that are now hidden even though recent instruments are available to make these new discoveries and they will ultimately overturn the views of the scholars of this generation...And in another generation, all that was assumed will be erased for their children will arise after them who will discover wonderful and clearer instruments and discoveries which will deny their [parents’] words. Everything they agreed on will be destroyed with arguments based on philosophical logic built on wings of human speculation. All the external sciences serve divine religion and are slaves to the divine Torah and one should not have faith in slaves ... So all the external sciences are distant from truth except mathematics and geometry and all the rest are swept away in a wind of vanity and lack the vitality to approach the truth.’

In contrast to the emphatic assumption of Ulman that philosophers can establish a relatively stable and reliable system of metaphysical and physical truth and that this can be made compatible with the utterances of the Torah, Hurwitz saw the study of nature from an entirely different vantage point. The more one learns of nature and the ways scientists work, the more one realizes how tentative and fallible human knowledge and experience are. Empiricism reveals the severe limitations of human understanding and bolsters the sense of awe and bewilderment critical to an unquestioning faith in God. Even the vaunted Maimonides in his depiction of Moses as a prophet who had supposedly acquired all knowledge had gotten it wrong according to Hurwitz. There is no end to knowledge since ‘in every generation new wisdom and understanding is revealed which were unknown to earlier scholars’. Thus the designation ‘wise man’ is only relative pertaining to the knowledge accumulated in a particular era and not in general. In the end, science demonstrates neither the mastery of nature by humans nor the veracity of their rational investigations but the opposite. The more discoveries science uncovers, the more mysterious the divine handiwork appears. The more we think we understand about the world, the more we appreciate how much we

do not know. Scientific discoveries accordingly serve to make human beings more uncertain about their own capacities and more dependent on divine providence and on the faith of their ancestors.  

The Scholar and the Community

In one important respect, Ulman and Hurwitz shared one common characteristic: a deep and passionate concern for the welfare of their community and an abiding sense of their capabilities as educators to lead their constituencies in the right intellectual and spiritual direction. But despite this shared concern, the results of their concerted efforts to influence their communities, even to be noticed at all, are conspicuously different. Ulman died a lonely and embittered intellectual, feeling ignored and ineffectual in shaping a meaningful cultural agenda for the Jewish community. Hurwitz died a best-selling author whose aggressive marketing of his book solidly paid off. Despite his modest origins, his encyclopedia became one of the most popular books among traditional Jewish readers, especially in Eastern Europe. He had connected to a readership Ulman never dreamed of reaching. Their reflections on Jewish communal life, their self-image as Jewish educators, and the ultimate impact of their writing offer a final insight into this collective portrait of these two thinkers who almost met each other.

Naphtali Ulman’s writings, especially those in manuscript reveal an arrogant and sour temperament. His provocative justification of omitting rabbinic approbations to his book is only one small indicator of his condescending tone. In various places in his writing, he complains about the poor rabbinic leadership of the community and its ignorance which make Jews look stupid in the eyes of non-Jews. These leaders are ‘children with respect to their intelligence and grown-up with respect to doing evil, always ready to harm good people among us to the extent they are able. They enjoy this role and they consider this a way of enhancing their worship of the almighty God.’ In contrast Ulman strived from his early youth, so he claimed, to do the right thing and to lead people in the proper direction based on sound principles of reason.

27. Sefer ha-Brit ha-shalem, p. 463.
He acknowledged the earlier contributions of Sephardic scholars who wrote philosophy but unlike the philosophers of his day, their work remains obscure and incomplete and thus Ulman decided to undertake a mission to finish their work. But his message was ignored or rebuffed and these terrible leaders exiled such rational learning from the community so that the Jewish people have become an embarrassment before the world. Publishing a book in Dutch as well, Ulman attempted to defend philosophical study among his people based on traditional texts and philosophical analysis. But his challenge to the communal leadership went unanswered and no one even acknowledged his singular contribution.

The major targets of Ulman’s stinging barbs were the Hasidim of his generation who obscured the teachings of the Torah in their riddles and metaphors, hinting to hidden secrets which never existed. Their emotional piety has replaced serious rational inquiry and they were dangerous to Judaism since piety without honest investigation is not piety at all, claimed Ulman. His most biting and sarcastic observations of these and other Jewish leaders is found in a small composition called *Maaseh Tartuffe*, whose title was obviously borrowed from Molière’s play.

The manuscript, copied by a person who had listened to an oral presentation of Ulman, offers a large inventory of alleged hypocrites among the Jewish people. They include men who make spectacles of themselves, wearing larger prayer shawls, praying with their eyes closed, and raising their voices in prayer so that they might be noticed. After prayer, they read from a kabbalistic book, making scary sounds and motions while recounting ridiculous stories and dream visions. They reveal excessive concern for halakhic minutia while ignoring the serious Torah scholar. They are arrogant, bad-mouthed, and run after money, food, and drink. They honor only the rich and ignore the poor. They hide their ignorance by responding to their critics with aggressiveness and anger just as Catholic priests act in vilifying Jews. Ulman’s enemies surely included more than Hasidim – they comprise all leaders who were illiterate, immoral and displayed their bad qualities in destroying the social fabric of Jewish society.

29. Ibid., fols 4a-6b; Ms. Leiden Heb. 126, fols 5a-5b. On Ulman’s Dutch book, see the essay by Van Lieburg mentioned above in note 2.

30. Naphtali Herz Ulman, *Ma’aseh ha-Tartuffe be-lashon Ivrit*, Ms. New York JTSA 10169. This short pamphlet was copied in The Hague in 1776 by Israel ben Samuel Falk after hearing this
By composing such a diatribe against members of the Jewish community, Ulman openly displayed his anger and utter frustration for the intellectual and social morass he imagined into which the Jewish community had fallen. But there was more to his critique that mere vituperation. For Ulman there was a way out if only the community would embrace him and philosophers like him, community-minded and morally conscious who cared genuinely about the fate of his people. What leaders required at this moment of crisis, Ulman contended, were intellectuals armed with knowledge of philosophy and history as well as the medieval philosophers. Only they could face up to the intellectual challenges of their day both within the Jewish community and beyond it. Ulman saw himself a champion of the Jews similar to the tenth-century Saadia who successfully combated the Karaites, the enemies of rabbinic Judaism. Philosophy, he finally pleaded, was not the enemy of the Jewish community but immoral behavior and bad character were. The sermon copied in 1776 in The Hague closes with the following: ‘These are the words of the bitter and sad… Naphtali called Herz Ulman of Mainz.’

Pinhas Hurwitz also had his enemies and was not reluctant to castigate them in print beginning with the publisher who had released a pirated edition of his book. He also attacked deists and atheists such as Voltaire and Spinoza and he was particularly enraged by such radical maskilim, especially Saul Berlin and Isaac Satanov, who masked their heretical views in traditionally sounding rabbinic writing, misleading and confusing a naïve community of readers.\(^{31}\) Hurwitz did not openly attack the Hasidim but only the followers of Shabbetai Zevi and its leaders Abraham Cardoso, Nehemiah Hayon, and Berakhiah Russo, who undermined the very foundations of the Jewish faith and sullied the good name of the Jewish community among their neighbors. Furthermore, the Sabbateans had given a bad odor to the kabbalah itself, confusing a pure and sacred lore with their heretical notions.\(^{32}\)

Hurwitz, like Ulman, also offered his own social criticism against certain practices he personally observed in the community. He decried those Jews who refused to teach their children an honest living and

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\(^{31}\) See, for example, *Sefer ha-Brit ha-shalem*, p. 52, 358, 360.

\(^{32}\) See, for example, *Sefer ha-Brit ha-shalem*, p. 76, 375, and 520.
expected them to study the Torah alone. He was offended by the class of lazy itinerant and penniless scholars who refused to involve themselves in productive labor. He also criticized the rich for their ostentation and for ignoring their social responsibilities. He offered a catalogue of moral excesses of his day including jealousy, lust, frivolous conversation, and pride, but especially singling out the senseless hatred between Ashkenazim and Sephardim.33

The apparent similarities between Ulman and Hurwitz regarding their visions of Jewish life are obvious. Both displayed a strong impulse to address social ills and to provide moral leadership to their communities. They were also alike in their mission to inculcate a new intellectual agenda through their books and teaching – in the case of Ulman, a new metaphysics and in the case of Hurwitz, a fresh accounting of natural philosophy and scientific discoveries. But in the end, they remained worlds apart. Ulman departed the earth ‘a bitter and sad’ man, frustrated by the gap between his high expectations of himself and his inability to impact the community he wished to educate. In the end, he suffered his own marginalization and alienation from the community by lashing out at his supposed enemies through bitter sarcasm and castigation of its spiritual and political leaders. In contrast, Hurwitz constructed a message that was uplifting, personal, and spiritual. The style of Sefer ha-Brit was engaging and charming. He invited his readers in to experience both a journey through the wonders of nature as well as an ascent to the mysteries of encountering the divine spirit itself. Along the way, he addressed them directly, encouraged them to read his book in the proper order, patiently leading them from point to point, from subject to subject. In the end, the encounter with the outside world was skillfully conjoined with a mystical and moral aura. Natural philosophy was wrapped in the garments of Torah and all led to the ultimate revelation of the divine which was the culmination of prophecy itself. Ulman hated the Hasidim while Hurwitz never mentioned them explicitly. And ironically his book was received with great passion by Hasidim and Mitnagdim alike. It became a kind of holy book embedded within the traditionalist camp rather than outside it. In the final analysis, it was not only Ulman’s metaphysical assumptions that were out of style with a new age; it was

also his rage, his impatience with displays of piety, and his indifference to the spiritual needs of those he wished to serve that left his intellectual project almost totally forgotten in the end. Ulman’s works, unread and unpublished, provide clear testimony to his failure as an educator and writer. And Hurwitz, the consummate salesman and entrepreneur, better understood his role: to entertain and to inspire in providing a powerful bridge between natural philosophy and *musar*, between intellectual edification and moral and spiritual improvement. The combination proved to be his greatest success.