

Judaic Studies Professor Moshe Pelli Published his New Book

Prof. Moshe Pelli, Abe and Tess Wise Endowed Professor of Judaic Studies and director of the UCF Interdisciplinary Program in Judaic Studies, has published his new book in Israel. Titled “Atarah Leyoshnah: Restore Judaism to Its Pristine Splendor,” the book deals with the struggle of the early Hebrew Maskilim (enlighteners) in Germany in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century to rejuvenate and redefine Judaism to be what this writer terms “the Haskalah (Enlightenment) Judaism.”

Those young Hebrew writers and educators argued that they wished to resuscitate Judaism and restore it to its pristine state while concurrently revitalize the Jewish people and its culture. The medium for this revival was the revived Hebrew language and its literature.

These Enlightenment writers and philosophers advocated major changes in the way of thinking, placing the emphasis on human reason rather than church or scriptural authority for evaluating all phenomena of life. They applied rational and critical thinking, based on scientific criteria and updated knowledge, to past traditions and accepted conventions.

These thinkers further undertook to promote tolerance, humanism and understanding, and to eradicate superstitions, ignorance and prejudices. They believed in freedom in all its manifestations – freedom of thought and of speech – having a strong belief in progress and in one’s ability to elevate himself through education and achieve a degree of perfection, for the benefit of the individual and society

One of the prime sources of influence on these trends in the Hebrew and Jewish Haskalah is attributed to the European Enlightenment and its thought, and the changes its pundits aspired to affect in society, culture and religion in Europe.

Within the domain of religion, it was Deism that is considered to exemplify the religious thought of the Enlightenment, although there were also phenomena of free-thinking, atheism and materialism prevalent as well in the Enlightenment.

The first three chapters, under the **general section** of ‘**The European Enlightenment: The Religion of the Enlightenment,**’ expound on major trends and prominent thinkers of early Deism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, France and Germany. Their work signaled a new direction in viewing and assessing established religion in the Age of Reason.

Some of the major English deistic thinkers were Lord Herbert of Cherbury, John Spencer; the French: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, and

Denis Diderot; and the German deists, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Herder, among others.

The **second section**, titled ‘**Haskalah Judaism: Restore Judaism to Its Pristine State**,’ contains twelve chapters devoted to the views of early Hebrew Haskalah writers in Germany on the issues of reforming Jewish education and rejuvenating Jewish religion by alleviating some religious restrictions and practices.

The efforts of some of the early Maskilim concentrated on an attempt to reconcile the ideas of the Enlightenment and Judaism by showing their compatibility, or by placing them on two different planes that allegedly would not clash. The Maskilim endeavored to explain Judaism and its commandments in a rational way, while arguing that Judaism has always been an enlightened religion.

Most of these Hebrew Maskilim envisioned the introduction of moderate reforms within the Jewish framework so as to create the ‘Religion of the Haskalah’ still within normative Judaism. For this reason, most of their ‘calls for action’ for reform were directed at the rabbis.

These Maskilim were: Isaac Euchel, the founder of the journal *Hame’asef* (1783–1811) and the leading figure of the group, Naphtali Herz Wessely, a poet, philologist, and an originator of a plan to introduce changes in Jewish education, Mendel Breslau, who proposed convening an assembly of rabbis to enact religious changes, Mordechai Schnaber, who set up a theory of religious changes based on Maimonides, as well as some of the other major Maskilim: Isaac Satanow, Saul Berlin, Aaron Wolfsohn, Herz Homberg, Juda Leib Ben Zeev, and Shalom Hacoheh. A chapter is also devoted to some of the other writers of the Haskalah at that time that did not exhibit any reform tendencies, but nevertheless advocated the general orientation of the Haskalah toward the Enlightenment.

The **third section** in the book, titled ‘**Pundits and Their Reforms**,’ deals with the more radical Jewish enlighteners in the 1790s, who wrote mainly in German and whose target audience was mostly outside the ranks the Hebrew Maskilim. They are: Saul Ascher, Solomon Maimon, Lazarus Bendavid, and David Friedländer.

The **fourth section**, ‘**Actual Reform**,’ addresses religious reforms and changes enacted by official bodies, such as the Great Paris Sanhedrin (1807) and its enactments, the Westphalia consistory and its religious reforms (around 1809), and finally the Temple reforms in Hamburg (1818).

The concluding chapter assesses the efforts of the Hebrew Maskilim, arguing in effect that even those who had advocated moderate reforms and who had developed theories that traditional Judaism provided the legal mechanism for enacting changes and updates – they all contributed to the

formation of the ideological groundwork for enacting religious reforms in Judaism in ways not envisioned by these moderate Hebrew thinkers.

The desire to re-form Haskalah Judaism in its pristine format and to create a moderate 'Judaism of the Haskalah' is indicative of modern trends in Judaism, but not of secularism. Its argumentations were religious, and its context as well was religious, not secular. However, as the traditional rabbis vehemently rejected all forms of changes, even of moderate customs, the more extreme demands for changes became more dominant, as exemplified in the Reform Temple controversy of 1818/19.

The book may be ordered through:

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Atarah Leyoshnah: Hama'avak Litzirat Yahadut Hahaskalah [Restore Judaism to Its Pristine Splendor: The Struggle to Establish 'Haskalah Judaism']. Hakibutz Hameuchad, Israel, 2012. 512 pp.; bibliography, index, English abstract.