

## **ABSTRACT**

The geopolitical conditions in Europe at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the transition from absolutist order to democratic systems, prompted a new cultural stream – the Enlightenment. Due to economic, social, and cultural changes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Jewish Enlightenment, the so called Haskalah, emerged as a movement that brought European Enlightenment into the Jewish world. The Haskalah was an ideological and social movement that began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and was active until the rise of the Jewish national movement in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In a sense, the Haskalah represented the spread of the 18<sup>th</sup> century European Enlightenment but mainly dealt with the political status of the Jews and their relationship to European culture. Essentially, the Haskalah sought to exploit the new possibilities of economic, social, and cultural integration that became available to Jews at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the elimination of legal discrimination.

Supporters of the movement - Maskilim worked in various fields: philosophy, education, culture, economy, politics, and religion. To promote Jewish emancipation in Europe, Maskilim caused a social upheaval, which resulted, among other things, in the disintegration of the traditional concept of the Kehilah and its theocratic organizational structure. Indeed, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional Jewish society underwent a cultural crisis caused by the process of fragmentation characterized by the decline of the rabbinic authority. An attempt to find answers to this crisis led to the emergence of various competing movements, for example to the Haskalah, Hasidism, and the Mitnagdim, opponents of the Hasidic

movement. The interaction of these movements is the main phenomenon of Jewish modernity.

However, this development did not only give rise to changes in the form of emancipation of European Judaism on a global level but the Haskalah also brought a radical change in the Jewish communal life. One of the many changes was a shift in the perception of Jewish women in terms of their position in society, community, and family.

The expansion of the Haskalah to Eastern Europe or to the Czech Lands, was preceded and influenced by two phenomena: the so-called early Haskalah and the Berlin Haskalah. The early Haskalah was a significant phenomenon itself considering both its geographic range and self-awareness of its followers. We are talking about dozens, if not hundreds, of individuals who have been scattered throughout Europe, but still have a close contact with each other. The original maskilim became a source of inspiration and legitimacy for their followers, and the early Haskalah created an alternative Hebrew library with works on philosophy, science, Hebrew grammar, and ethics.

The early Haskalah prepared the ideological basis and social infrastructure for the German or Berlin Haskalah, which appeared in the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) was its spiritual father.

One of his most important contributions was his own formulation of Judaism as a religion in compliance with wisdom: Judaism had no principles of faith that could not be reached via human thinking. Mendelssohn also claimed that religious affiliation should be based on free intellectual belief

without coercion. Accordingly, the Jewish community must give up the means of enforcement and punishments related to an individual's religious life. Legal discrimination against Jews is also a pursuit of religious coercion and should therefore cease.

Above all, Mendelssohn contributed to the Haskalah by embodying the perfect fulfillment of its ideals: he was a Jew with traditional Jewish education, conscientious in his observance of the commandments and active on behalf of his people, while being recognized as a German philosopher and author, and lauded by prominent figures in the European Enlightenment. Therefore, Mendelssohn was a living symbol of the cultural and social ambitions of the Haskalah and an irrefutable evidence that the ideals of the Haskalah can be achieved.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, there was a crisis in the Berlin Haskalah movement. Rich donors turned their attention to promoting their own political status and lost interest in transformation of the Jewish community. Simultaneously, many young Jews, often children, were increasingly deviating from Jewish tradition and culture. As a result, the organized institutions of the Haskalah gradually weakened.

Even though the Berlin Haskalah declined, the movement began to grow in Eastern Europe, especially in Galicia in the 1820's. The Galician Haskalah concentrated mainly in Brod, Lvov, and Ternopil where the Jewish economic and social elite was presented.

The prominent feature of the Haskalah in Galicia was the uncompromising struggle against the traditional directions of Judaism from the start. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Hasidism spread in Galicia and lured many young people into its ranks. Maskilim saw a significant obstacle to reform. Not only did they compile literary works in their attack on Hasidism but also tried to get the support of state authorities. In both these cases, their leader was Josef Perl (1773–1839).

Jewish merchants from Galicia spread the ideas of the Haskalah and its literature on their travels to the Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire. Another aspect of the expansion of the influence of Haskalah was the migration of Jews from Galicia to the Empire. One of the most prominent supporters of the Haskalah in Russia was Yitshak Beer Levinzon (1788–1860).

Despite its revolutionary elements, it is still appropriate to classify the Haskalah in Eastern Europe as moderate during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the reasons was that the Maskilim still accepted the principle of the divinely revealed Torah and supported the observance of the commandments. Many of them had traditional education and continued to study rabbinical literature. It can be easily understood if we notice that the influence of the Enlightenment itself - both in government circles and among the city classes - which has contributed to the growth of the Haskalah everywhere else in Europe, has been very limited in Russia.

With the rise of secularization, which was an integral part of the Haskalah and was gaining a more open and distinctive expression, tensions, hostility, and opposition tendencies

against the Haskalah also increased. The dispute between the two camps broke out in the 1840's and was connected to a political incident known as Haskalah Mi-taam (Government-sponsored Haskalah). Russian Maskilim were convinced of the correctness of their program, and because they represented a minority, they could only implement their program with the support of the government. Moreover, Maskilim believed that the authorities were in favor of the values of the European Enlightenment and that they themselves were interested in improving the situation of the Jews in the spirit of these values. The government-sponsored Haskalah episode had far-reaching consequences for its expansion in Russia. Authority support provided people with the courage to publicly identify with this movement.

Contrary to all efforts to change the position of the society, discriminatory laws and economic constraints continued to apply to the Russian Jews. Despite their expectations, the Russian government repeatedly declared in the late 1870's that it did not intend to give Jews equal rights.

In the Czech lands, the cultural integration and emancipation of Czech Jewry predominated. In general, it was an attempt to raise self-esteem and restore awareness of national identity of the Czech Jewry through popularization of Jewish culture and history, and rehabilitation of Biblical Hebrew. Most of the Maskilim were supporters of the reforms of Jewish education promoted by the state.

The Patent of Toleration issued for Bohemia in 1781 and for Moravia in 1782 by Joseph II confirmed the principle of religious freedom, thereby promoting significant changes in the Jewish community. Imperial reforms affected social,

economic, and cultural areas. The largest changes did not take place in the economic area but rather in the field of culture and education. A comprehensive reform of elementary schools was conducted in the country, the government called on Jewish communities to establish their own schools with state supervision. Although a Maskil Petr Beer (ca. 1758–1838) initiated establishment of a German Jewish *Normalschule* in Prague at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, his initiative did not influence the development and emancipation which is visible among women in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Great emphasis was placed on abolishing traditional Jewish education in the sense of Heder and Yeshivah.

The Jewish society did not go only towards acculturation on a European scale but there was also a gradual inner development within the society. One of the most important factors was the change in the perception of the position of women in the society and family. Not only did the men's perception on women transformed but also the self-awareness of women, i.e. emancipation was raised.

The position of women within the Jewish community was always based on respect for her role as a wife and a mother and on the respect already enshrined in religious and legal regulations of the Old Testament. Thus, from biblical times onward, men and women were subjected to the same laws, religious regulations, and punishments.

For educated men, supporters of the Haskalah, the question of women's status was the cornerstone for confirming and consolidating their innovative view. Nonetheless, men were always regarded as an active element of society, and an

element of control and protection, while women's qualities were perceived and concentrated in household and family life.

One of the supporters of the Haskalah was a Russian Hebrew writer and poet Judah Leib Gordon (1831–1892) pointed out the ambiguity of Maskilim towards the so-called women question. From the 1870's, his readers, especially in the Pale of Settlement in Russia and students in various European cities, regarded him as one of a few enlightened people who showed exceptional sensitivity and empathy for the hardship of Jewish women. His radical protest poem, *Kotso Shel Yod*, was perceived as a lamentation of a woman at the mercy of heartless rabbis and deprived of the achievements of the Enlightenment and secular pleasures.

The woman's erudition thus changed the hierarchy of gender beyond the existing habits and enabled them to reach a new perspective on their own development and identity. Women who acted as intellectuals considered to be a problem not only by Enlightened Jewish men. Prominent supporters of the Haskalah emphasized great difficulties in breaking existing social norms and accepted gender patterns.

Following Jean Jacque Rousseau (1712–1778), representatives of the Enlightenment often held pseudo-scientific arguments to prove the social and intellectual inferiority of women. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) denied acceptance of women to an intellectual elite, portrayed educated women as an object of ridicule because their characteristic features opposed features appropriate to the gentle sex. The opinion of his contemporary Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn was not much different. When his fiancée, Fromet Gugenheim (1737–1812), told him

about the efforts she had made in her studies, he wrote her a letter in Yiddish expressing both contempt and concerns about the generally accepted gender order:

“You’re exaggerating your diligence in reading. [...] What do you want to get? Erudition? God save you! Moderate reading is appropriate for women, but not erudition. A young woman whose eyes are red from reading deserves to be ridiculed.”

The dispute of European Enlightenment culture on women’s education showed how split this culture was between the declared egalitarian tendencies and difficulties in transferring these absolute, noble principles to social groups that were defined as other and discriminated, such as the poor, slaves, blacks, Jews and women.

The more the number of independent intellectual and erudite women grew, the more turbulent the subject was and the more it caused disagreements in the Enlightenment society. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, an English writer Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) pointed to the questionable nature of the Enlightenment approach to women and the lack of coherence in it. Both men and women participated in the struggle for gender equality and the recognition of their intellectual abilities in England, France, and Germany.

Nearly a hundred years after Mary Wollstonecraft’s death, a Jewish supporter of reforms Isaac Wetzlar (?1680–1751) strongly and publicly demanded the participation of women in intellectual life and literature. But even among the advocates of the early stage of the Enlightenment, who pointed out defects and deficiencies in contemporary Jewish society, there



were only a few representatives who criticized the position of women in Jewish culture.

The work of Isaac Wetzlar pointed to the deliberate exclusion of women from an elite scientific culture in which most of the texts were written in Hebrew. According to the author, following translations of the texts into Yiddish digressed from their original meaning and therefore, distorted religious values. It was unthinkable that Hebrew, the native language of the Jews, was inaccessible to Jewish young girls.

It was therefore to be expected that the Haskalah movement would encourage this critical look for change. However, from its inception to almost the last years of its existence, it was exclusively a male movement. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Enlightenment revolution was initiated by young men in their twenties and thirties, who never reckoned that women could complement their ranks. Unlike a man who was guided by wisdom, women were perceived stereotypically as being driven by emotion and desire, and were considered not to be equal to men.

The dissociation of Jewish women within the traditional setting, their illiteracy of religious texts and their exclusion from higher education institutions prevented them from sharing a common cultural language with Maskilim. Since women were not in contact with Hebrew in their childhood, they were unable to participate in literary production in Hebrew, and only a few of them could read Hebrew texts. For young girls from wealthy families in Germany who were educated in bourgeois salons, German and French were the languages of literature and culture. The bourgeois ideal which predetermined women to be wives, housewives, hostesses,

and mothers, left them no place in the public space created by the Maskilim. This value has also been taken over in new Haskalah centers in Eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

However, it did not mean that women's education should be neglected. Various teachers have highlighted women who have taken the initiative to gain education, and some of them have even set up the first organized teaching concepts for girls at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Still, the aim of such bourgeois education always was to prepare women for the role of housewives with some of the other cultural superstructures necessary for the hostess role. Though, the boundaries of education were very clear and firmly set.

The situation in Eastern Europe differed. The relatively slow and limited pace of modernization in Poland, Lithuania, and Russia, along with the lower standard of living and the socio-cultural separation of Jews in the environment, did not allow the same level of acculturation compared to advanced acculturation in Central and Western Europe. The demographic concentration of Jews led to an increase of religious and community life comparably to the world of Hasidism and Yeshivot. Until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish life consisted primarily of Hebrew culture. The traditional religious direction, despite the tension exerted by Haskalah, has retained the status given by the interpretation of traditional texts. Women were excluded from this culture and they could not get involved in the public sphere.

However, since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were significant changes in the status of women. More and more of them achieved economic independence, refused to enter into

arranged marriages and did not allow parents to force them to marry before reaching physical and economic maturity. Young women in Eastern European cities, the so-called young ladies of the new generation, found work in shops and factories, became financially independent, and looked for their husbands without any intervention of their families.

Maskilim were stunned by the modernization of women, had difficulties to understand them, and were very critical, if not even hostile, to them. This led to an ambiguity regarding the women's question. At one end of the spectrum, they were radical maskilim who professed positivism and perceived the female question as part of the emancipation of modern human society.

Radical Maskilim devoted to positivism, who perceived the women's question to be an inseparable part of the modern society emancipation, were interested in women's education. In their opinion, the lack of women's education was not caused by their lower social status but it was necessary to create a supportive environment which would help them to improve their knowledge.

On the other hand, many Maskilim showed a real interest in women's education. In their view, this issue was not a problem of a lower social status that could only be remedied by revolution but a problem that required therapy by improving and expanding the environment in which women could acquire knowledge and good qualities. However, when they discovered the actual depth of female acculturation, the attitude of the maskilim became very critical and conservative. This was not the Haskalah they hoped for. Young Russian-speaking women, reading French novels

dressing according to the latest fashion, represented in their opinion a kind of "fake Haskalah", threatened the Jewish family, and represented the potential for assimilation and conversion. One must not neglect the education of women, but in the end, women have to work in the home and family environment, Maskilim have declared. If not, they will become an extremely dangerous secularizing element.

As a paradox, the same revolutionaries of the Haskalah who criticized the society and represented the Jewish social revolution were the ones who tried to alleviate the possible emancipation of Jewish women and even limit their culture to modernization.

However, more and more women were brought up in a modern approach. They received education, read foreign literature, and began publishing themselves. They received ambitions of higher education, wanted to become doctors and lawyers.

Maskilim of all types throughout the ideological spectrum were concerned about what they perceived as a loss of control over the modernization process. What was the vision of a new era that emerged? Would it be an alternative to the debilitating rabbinic culture of a hedonistic life in the city with all its attractions? Would it be an alternative to linguistic, social and cultural assimilation? In this context, the modernization of women was considered positive because it violated the traditional patterns and authority of those who, according to the Jewish tradition, had power. However, it was also perceived as problematic because in addition to the threat to the family and male identity, modernization was

perceived as threatening Hebrew culture and continuity of Jewish society.

The new phenomenon of female authors reached its peak in the 1860's, when some women began to demand the right to equal education and social recognition in the public sphere of the Haskalah. In 1879, the first Jewish follower of Mary Wollstonecraft, came to speak. *Ha-Ivri*, a Galician magazine, has published in several editions an essay entitled *The Hebrew Woman Question* by Taube Segal, a 20-year-old woman from Vilnius. It was the first feminist essay written in Hebrew about the efforts of a woman who declared a "women's war" against attempts to block their way into the heart of the Haskalah movement.

Maskilim had already begun to perceive that their own view of women did not correspond to the reality because they were no longer just fashionable urban women or women who read foreign literature but educated women who were involved in modern culture created by Maskilim themselves.

As women, during the dramatic changes accompanying the entire period of the Haskalah, gained a more equal footing with men in education and economic autonomy, this transformation has also become an integral part of ordinary civic life. As the rabbinical municipal authority gradually weakened, it became home to the center of Jewish identity, and the woman in this house gained more prominent role.

Despite the Enlightenment ideology, traditional engagement and marriage remained common in most of the Jewish communities of Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although assimilation and marriage outside the community threatened

old habits and enlightened secular Jews were more reluctant to change, the changes were too slow. The process of change has started in Western Europe and has progressed towards the eastern countries. In England, the traditional arranged marriages were gradually replaced by courting and agreement between partners. The old traditions were kept in Germany for a long time but it was not possible to prevent changes forever. In Eastern Europe, pre-arranged marriages remained until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

While many young women have now lived in environments that have allowed them a greater choice of education and more opportunities to participate in activities outside the home, their roles have remained similar to those of their mothers and grandmothers. Writing *Ten rules for a Jewish Woman* written in Yiddish by an anonymous author in 1620 remained the standard among the more educated women and was merely adapted later.

The weakening of the traditional Jewish community was both an advantage and a disadvantage for women. Women, rarely financially independent, were often forced by circumstances to remain in an unhappy marriage. For those who were able to leave the community, it was easier than ever to sever their ties with the community, and to apply for a divorce with or without spouse's consent. But women who still wanted to respect tradition and get legal Jewish divorce sometimes faced even more obstacles than before. If the husband no longer cared about the Jewish tradition, the Jewish court would not have a real power to force him to divorce. If he decided, he could constantly refuse to release his wife and keep her in the position of Agunah, an abandoned woman who could never marry again.

Many women, influenced by changes in the society, never acted as a coherent group but they were united by bonds of friendships, common background, and similar models of acculturation - namely - radical assimilation and often marriage to non-Jewish partners. Most of them came from thriving and intellectual families that began to assert themselves in the society firstly in the last third of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Berlin and then in other European cities. These young women were very soon in touch with non-Jewish culture and society. Their families were influenced by trends of secularization that appeared in their immediate surroundings and encouraged them to a new lifestyle.

The turbulent 19<sup>th</sup> century, during which all Jews in Europe dealt with the challenges of modernity, also granted education to Jewish women as one of the ways to modernize. The educated Jewish woman drew most of her knowledge from educated Maskilim but she always retained gender consciousness, and sometimes, like Taube Segal, even angrily erupted against maskilim for their discrimination against women, demanding that they treat women's equality in accordance with the ideas of the Enlightenment. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when this phenomenon became increasingly important despite its relatively limited scope, there were significant changes in the ideological background as well as in the areas of politics, demography and the economy. The Haskalah movement has virtually reached its end and has paved the way for critical post-Maskilic ideas. The enlightened discourse on the Haskalah in Eastern Europe was largely directed towards a new nationalist approach that included the question of women. Since then, Jewish women who have participated in a public debate in Hebrew have demanded an

active role in the national movement and offered their help in building a nation - a project that has gradually replaced the Enlightenment.