

**CAN YOU ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS?**

1. Describe the Haskalah movement.
2. Describe the Gaon of Vilna's attitude to secular studies.
3. Who is considered to be the "father" of the Haskalah?
4. Who is considered to be the "father" of Reform Judaism?
5. Describe *Wissenschaft des Judentums* - "The Science of Judaism".

This and much more will be addressed in the ninth lecture of this series:

**"The Secular Enlightenment"**

To derive maximum benefit from this lecture, keep these questions in mind as you listen to the lecture and read through the outline. Go back to these questions once again at the end of the lecture and see how well you answer them.

PLEASE NOTE: This outline and source book were designed as a powerful tool to help you appreciate and understand the basis of Jewish History. Although the lectures can be listened to without the use of the outline, we advise you to read the outline to enhance your comprehension. Use it, as well, as a handy reference guide and for quick review.

**This lecture is dedicated to the memory and *Li-ilui Nishmas***

**ר' חיים דוד בן הרב פרץ ע"ה**

**Mr. David Weiss of blessed memory.**

## THE EPIC OF THE ETERNAL PEOPLE

Presented by Rabbi Shmuel Irons

## SERIES XXIV: THE PANORAMA OF JEWISH HISTORY

## LECTURE IX: THE SECULAR ENLIGHTENMENT

## I. Torah and Piety in Germany in the Eighteenth Century

## A.

הנה האשכנזים שלימים וכן רבים, ת"ל כי בפראנקפורט לבדו יהיו בה כשלש מאות ת"ח בני הישיבה, ולב רחב להם להבין ולהשכיל. והנה הם מבלים ימיהם בפלפוליהם המהבילים וריח חסידות אין בהם, והלואי היה די בזה. ואם יש בכל מדינת אשכנז אשר עברתי בה ובכל מדינת הולנדה אשר אני יושב בקרבה אנשים חרדים אל דבר ד' ומבקשים לדעת ליראה את ד' ולאהבה אותו ולהתחסו עם קונם, ודאי נער יכתבם. איטליא, כבר ידעה הכ"ת יותר ממני. מכתב מהרמח"ל לרבו הרה"ג ר"י באסאן יום ה' ר"ח אלול תצ"ה

Behold the German Jews are fully committed to Judaism and are plentiful. Thank G-d, in Frankfurt, alone, there are some three hundred scholars, students in the yeshiva, with brilliant minds to plumb the depths of the Torah. They waste all of their time, however, on nonsensical pilpul and don't possess any of the spirit of true piety (*chasidus*). I wish that would be all. If there exists in all of the Germanic territories through which I have passed or in the entire province of Holland, [for that matter,] people that are trembling to fulfill G-d's directives and seek to know how to fear Hashem and to love Him and to develop a relationship with their Master, their numbers are so insignificant that even a small child could write them down. His honor, himself, knows better than I the situation as it is in Italy. **Letter from Ramchal to R. Yeshaya Bassan, Thursday, Rosh Chodesh Elul, 5495 (1735)**

B. About two centuries ago the study of the Talmud blossomed amongst German Jewry as perhaps never before. The communities of Germany, both large and small, were distinguished for their deep and upright piety. Yeshivoth were to be found in every city in which Jews dwelled, Prague, Fuerth, Frankfort-on-Main, Mainz, Worms, Mannheim, Karlsruhe, Berlin, Breslau, Frankfort-on-Oder, Halberstadt and innumerable smaller places to which youths eager for learning, streamed from all parts of Germany. Then there arose an unholy dispute which was directed particularly against the great Rav Yonoson Eybeshuetz. The damage caused by this dispute, and the extent to which it contributed towards **dissuading young people from studying Torah** and demoralizing the ranks of the G-d fearing, cannot be adequately described. We still had an opportunity to hear accounts of contemporaries who lived through the dispute. **Rabbi Marcus Lehmann, Chief Rabbi of Mainz, Germany, The Rabbi Lehmann Hagadah**

## C.

(1) תְּשִׁימֵנו מְדוּן לְשִׁכְנֵינוּ וְאֵיבֵינוּ יִלְעָגוּ-לָמוֹ: תהלים פ"ז

You make us a strife to our neighbors; and our enemies laugh [at us] among themselves. **Psalms 80:7**

(2) הבט משמים וראה כי היינו לעג וקלס בגוים, נחשבנו כצאן לטבח יובל, להרג ולאבד ולמכה ולחרפה. ובכל זאת שמך לא שכחנו, נא אל תשכחנו. סידור

Look from heaven and see that we have become: an object of scorn and derision amongst the nations; we are regarded as sheep led to the slaughter, to be killed, destroyed, beaten, and

humiliated. But despite all this we have not forgotten Your Name —We beg of you: Please do not forget us. **Siddur**

D.

. . . [inasmuch] as the Merchants Guild [in Berlin] is to be composed of honest and honorable persons, the following must be barred from membership: Jews, homicides, murderers, thieves, perjurers, adulterers, or any other person afflicted with great public vices or sins. **Decree regulating the Merchant Guild in Berlin, issued in 1716 and still in force in 1802**

E. . . . It is mathematically impossible that a Jew could be a composer. **Official reason for the rejection of a Jewish applicant to the Berlin Academy of Music in 1795**

## II. The Gaon of Vilna and Secular Knowledge

A.

(1) אמר כל החכמות נצרכים לתורתנו הק' וכלולים בה וידעם כולם לתכליתם והזכירם חכמת אלגעברע ומשולשים והנדסה וחכמת מוסיקא ושיבחה הרבה הוא הי' אומר אז כי רוב טעמי תורה וסודות שירי הלויים וסודות תיקוני הזוהר א"א לידע בלעדה ועל ידה יכולים ב"א למות בכלות נפשם מנעימותי' ויכולים להחיות המתים בסודותה הגנוזים בתורה הוא אמר כמה ניגונים וכמה מדות הביא מרע"ה מהר סיני והשאר מורכבים וביאר איכות כל החכמות ואמר שהשיגם לתכליתם רק חכמת הרפואה ידע חכמת הניתוח והשייך אליה אך מעשה הסמים ומלאכתן למעשה רצה ללמד מרופאי הזמן וגזר עליו אביו הצדיק שלא ילמדנה כדי שלא יבטל מתורתו כשיצטרך ללכת להציל נפשות כשידע לגמרה וכן חכמת הכישוף אשר ידעוה הסנהדרין והתנאים והזהירו שצריך ללמודה כמוזכר בש"ס על ר"א ור"י בנטיעת קישואין ועקירתן וידעה רק היה חסר לו מעשה העשבין וכל גמר מעשי' מפני שהם ביד הגוים הכפרים לא היה יכול ללמוד גמר מעשי' מרוב מפנקותי' ועל חכמת פילוסופיא אמר שלמדה לתכליתה. ולא הוציא ממנה רק שני דברים טובים . . . הקדמה לס' פאת השולחן מהגאון ר' ישראל משקלאוו

He (the Gaon of Vilna) stated that all of the branches of knowledge are necessary to understand our holy Torah and are included in it and that he knew them thoroughly. He enumerated the science of algebra, trigonometry, geometry or engineering, and music. He had particular praise for the science of music and said that the bulk of the reasoning of the Torah, the secrets of the songs of the Levites, and the secrets of the Tikunei HaZohar are impossible to comprehend without it. Because of its sweetness, people could literally die as their souls leave their bodies [to embrace the spiritual world]. Through its secrets, which are embedded and hidden in the Torah, they could revive the dead. He said that Moshe brought down many melodies and many *midos* (meters) from Mount Sinai. The others are combinations. He (the Gaon) explained the nature of the various sciences and said that he thoroughly understood them in their totality. Regarding medicine, however, he stated that he knew anatomy and all that is related to it but he did not gain expertise in practical pharmacology because his saintly father of blessed memory forbade him to study under physicians to gain the requisite knowledge. He had argued that if he possessed such medical expertise, he would be duty bound to attend to the needs of critical patients and it would take him away from his Torah studies. Similarly, regarding sorcery, in which the Sanhedrin and the *tanaim* had gained expertise and had mandated that it should be studied, as it is mentioned in the Talmud regarding Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua and the planting and uprooting of cucumbers (Sanhedrin 68a), the Gaon was knowledgeable. He was only lacking in the knowledge of the practical preparation of herbal potions, as it was in the hands of Gentiles who lived in the villages, and, because of his personal sensitivity, he couldn't bear to study under

them. Regarding the study of philosophy, he said that he had gained total expertise but he was only able to extract two things of value. **R. Yisrael of Shklov, Preface to Paas HaShulchan**

(2) אמרו עליו כי חכמי אקדמיה בברלין הציעו לפניו שאלות קשות ועמוקות בחכמת תשבורת ונחה דעתם מתשובתו. ר' משה מנדלסון מהמבורג בס' פני תבל, אמסטרדם תרל"ב הובא בס' "הגאון"

The story is told that the scholars of the Academy in Berlin presented before the [Gaon] difficult and profound questions in the field of mathematics and they were put at ease by his answers. **R. Moshe Mendelsohn of Hamburg, Sefer Pnai Tevel**

B.

והנה בהיותי בוילנא המעטירה אצל הרב המאור הגאון הגדול מו"ר מאור עיני הגולה החסיד המפורסם כמוהר"ר אליהו נר"ו בחדש טבת תקל"ח שמעתי מפי קדוש כי כפי מה שיחסרו לאדם ידיעות משארי חכמות לעמת זה יחסר לו מאה ידות בחכמת התורה כי התורה והחכמה נצמדים יחד וכו' וצוה להעתיק מה שאפשר ללשונו הקדושה מחכמות . . . וישוטטו רבים ותרבה הדעת בין עמנו ישראל ותסור כו' לשון לאומים אשר כשאון מים רבים ישאון לעומתנו איפה חכמתם ונמצא שם שמים מתחלל. ר' ברוך שיק משקלאוו, דיין במינסק ותלמיד הגר"א בהקדמתו להעתקת ספר אוקלידוס

Behold, when I was in the magnificent city of Vilna by the brilliant and extraordinary Gaon, my master and teacher, who enlightened the eyes of the Diaspora, the famed *chasid*, R. Eliyahu, may Hashem protect him, in the month of Teves, 5538 (1778), I heard directly from his holy mouth that to the extent that a person is deficient in the other branches of wisdom, he will be deficient a hundred fold in the wisdom of Torah, for the Torah and science are intertwined together. . . . He instructed me to translate into Hebrew as many works of wisdom (mathematics and science) as possible, . . . in order that the members of our people Israel shall . . . gain wisdom [from sources that are now only available] in a foreign tongue, for the nations rage against us like a great torrent of water, [and ask,] "Where is their wisdom?" and it leads to the desecration of the Name of Heaven. **R. Baruch Shik of Shklov, a dayan in Minsk, and a disciple of the Gaon. Preface to his translation of Euclid**

III. Moses Mendelssohn and his World View

A. I cannot promise your readers that the circumstances of my life, which really are of little consequence, will prove particularly entertaining to them. My biographical data have actually always seemed so unimportant to me that I never bothered to keep a record of them. . . . The main facts I can recall offhand are approximately as follows: I was born in the year 1729 (the twelfth of Elul, 5489, according to the Jewish calendar) in Dessau, where my father was a teacher and Torah scribe, or *sofer*. I studied Talmud under Rabbi [David] Fraenkel, who was then the chief rabbi [*Oberrabbiner*] of Dessau. Around 1743, this learned rabbi, who had gained great fame among the Jewish people because of his commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud, was called to Berlin, where I followed him that same year. There, I developed a taste for the arts and sciences as a result of my acquaintance with, as well as some instruction by, Mr. Aron Gumperts (who later became a doctor of medicine; he died a few years ago in Hamburg). Eventually, I became, first, a tutor in the house of a rich Jew [Isaak Bernhard], later on his bookkeeper, and, finally, the manager of his silk factory, a position I am still holding. I was married in my thirty-third year and sired seven children, of whom five survive. Incidentally, I

never attended a university, nor did I ever listen to an academic lecture. This [lack of formal education] constituted one of my greatest difficulties, for it meant a real struggle to get an education solely by my own effort and diligence. In fact, I overdid it, and the overzealousness with which I pursued my studies brought on a nervous weakness that renders me all but incapable of any scholarly occupation. . . . **Moses Mendelssohn, Letter to Johann Jacob Spiess, pastor, librarian, and supervisor of the mint in Ansbach, who had a medal struck in Mendelssohn's honor, 1779**

B. [Moses Mendelssohn's] integrity and philosophical mind make me anticipate in him a second Spinoza, lacking only his errors to be his equal. **Letter written by Mendelssohn's friend and admirer, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing**

C. I place my full and unreserved trust in G-d, who, in His omnipotence, *could* endow man with the faculty to discover for himself, independent of the dictum of the authority, those truths that constitute the basis for human salvation. And I feel a child's confidence in Him who, in His lovingkindness, *would* endow man with this faculty. Fortified by this unfaltering faith, I seek enlightenment, and through it [a reasoned] conviction, wherever I may find them. And - praised be my Creator's saving grace and goodness! - I think I have found both. Moreover, I am sure that any man can find them if only he undertakes his search with open eyes instead of shielding them from all rays of light. **Mendelssohn, pamphlet written shortly before his death entitled, Lessing's Friends**

D. . . I am sure that you will treat the Psalms as poetry and not pay attention to the prophetic and mystical elements which Christian as well as Jewish interpreters have found in them only because they searched for these elements, having searched for these elements only because they were neither philosophers nor literary critics. **Mendelssohn to Hofrat Michaelis of Goettingen, Gessamelte Schriften Vol. V p. 505**

E. . . . notwithstanding his speculative doctrine, Spinoza could have remained an Orthodox Jew if he had not removed himself from the Law. **Gessamelte Schriften Vol. III p. 5**

F. If you but knew that we have just had eight holidays during which, as you know, one does not feel inclined to do anything except to be depressed. . . . **Letter to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Berlin. April 29, 1757, Gessamelte Schriften Vol. V p. 89**

G. . . . My son Joseph has all but given up his Hebrew studies. Immediately following your tutelage, he unfortunately fell into the hands of a scholar who proved to be a hollow *baal pilpul* (dialectician); and as much as Joseph loves intellectual acuity and scholarly disputation, he lacks a sense for real *pilpul*. As you know, it takes a very special kind of instruction to develop a taste for this sort of mental exercise. And though both you and I underwent this training, [you will recall that] **we agreed Joseph's mind should rather remain a little duller than be sharpened in so sterile a manner.** - Well, the distaste he felt for his teacher's instruction has made him reject all Hebrew studies. He is, however, making good progress in the natural sciences. . . . Right now, it might therefore be best to let him study whatever he wants or feels inclined to. This would, to say the least, not be detrimental to him if he were indeed to become a businessman. Or he could, if need be, do what his father had to do: muddle through, now as a scholar, now as a businessman - though this carries with it the danger that one ends up not being really either . . . **Mendelssohn, Letter to Herz Homberg, October 4, 1783, Gessamelte Schriften V pp. 670-672**

H. . . . **I recognize no eternal verities but those that can be grasped by the human reason and demonstrated as well as validated by the human intellect.** . . . In Judaism there is

no conflict between religion and reason, no revolt of natural cognition against suppression by faith. Judaism has no revealed religion in the Christian interpretation of the term. It has Divine laws, commandments, precepts, maxims, instructions about the will of G-d, but it has no dogmas, no doctrines, no universal truths. These the Eternal revealed to the Israelites in the same manner as He does to all other men - **by nature and fact**, never by word or letter. **Gessamelte Schriften Vol. III p. 164**

I. I cannot deny, however, that I have discovered certain wholly human additions and abuses which, alas, badly tarnish the original luster of my religion. . . . all of us who, in our search for truth, wish we could wipe out such poisonous accretions without doing damage to all that is authentic and good in our religion. **Letter to Lavater, Dec. 12, 1769, Gessamelte Schriften Vol. III p. 41**

J. For this reason, all our endeavors should have only one goal: to do away with misuses that have crept into these ceremonies and to infuse them with a genuine and authentic meaning. In this way the original script, blurred beyond recognition by hypocrisy and clerical ruse, might become legible and intelligible once again. **Gessamelte Schriften V p. 669**

K. I also compared these new metaphysical doctrines, [of the German Enlightenment philosopher Christian Wolff] with those of Maimonides, or rather of Aristotle, which were already known to me; and I could not reconcile them. I therefore resolved to set these doubts forth in Hebrew and to send what I wrote to Herr Mendelssohn, of whom I had already heard so much. When he received my communication, he was not a little astonished at it. He replied at once that my doubts were in fact well-founded, that I should nevertheless not allow them to discourage me, but continue to study with the zeal with which I had begun. **Thus encouraged, I wrote a Hebrew dissertation in which I questioned the foundations of Revealed as well as of Natural Theology. All the thirteen articles of faith laid down by Maimonides, I attacked with philosophical arguments, with the exception of one, namely that on reward and punishment, to which I conceded philosophical relevance as the necessary consequence of free will.** I sent this dissertation to Mendelssohn, who was quite amazed that a Polish Jew who had scarcely got as far as seeing Wolff's *Metaphysics* was so soon able to penetrate into their depths to the point of questioning their conclusions by means of a correct ontology. He invited me to call, and I accepted his invitation. But I was shy, and the manners and customs of the Berliners were strange to me, and it was with trepidation and embarrassment that I ventured to enter a fashionable house. When I opened Mendelssohn's door, and saw him and other gentle-folk there, as well as the beautiful rooms and elegant furniture, I shrank back, closed the door, and had a mind not to go in. But Mendelssohn had noticed me. He came out and spoke to me very kindly, led me into his room, placed himself beside me at the window, and paid me many compliments about my writing. He assured me that if I persisted, I should in a short time make great progress in metaphysics; and he promised to resolve my doubts. Not satisfied with this, the worthy man looked after my maintenance also, recommended me to the most eminent, enlightened, and wealthy Jews of Berlin, who made provision for my board and other wants. I was given the freedom of their tables, and their libraries were open to my use. **Solomon Maimon, Autobiography Chapter 19**

IV. Mendelssohn's Circle

A. A number of young Jews from all parts of Germany had united, during Mendelssohn's lifetime, to form a society under the designation, *Society for Research into the Hebrew Language*. **They correctly observed that the evil condition of our people, morally as well as**

**politically, has its source in their religious prejudices, in their want of a rational exposition of the Holy Scriptures, and in the arbitrary exposition to which the rabbis are led by their ignorance of the Hebrew language.** Accordingly, the object of their society was to remove these deficiencies, to study the Hebrew language at its sources, and by that means to introduce a rational exegesis. For this purpose they resolved to publish a monthly periodical in Hebrew under the title of *Hameassef* ("The Collector"), which was to present expositions of difficult passages in Scripture, Hebrew poems, prose, essays, translations from useful works, and the like. [The periodical appeared from 1783 until 1797, first in Koenigsberg, then in Berlin, and lastly in Breslau. Later a new *Hameassef* appeared between the years 1809 and 1811.] **Solomon Maimon, Autobiography Chap. 23**

B.

תורת האדם קודמת בזמן לחוקי הא-לוהים העליונים . . . תורת האדם תכין את הנפש שתשתלם באחרית גם בלימודים העליונים . . . חוקי הא-לוהים ותורותיו נעלים מאוד מתורת האדם . . . ובמקום שתכלה תורת האדם תתחיל התורה הא-לוהית ותגד לנו דברים שאין בכוח שום אדם להשיגם. נפתלי הירץ וויזל, דברי שלו' ואמת עמ' 62 9, 5

The *Toras HaAdam* (the study of the "Torah" common for all humanity i.e. general studies) takes precedence in time to the [study of] the higher Divine statutes . . . The [study of] *Toras HaAdam* will prepare the person to eventually excel in the higher [Torah] studies . . . The Divine statutes and His Torah are much loftier than the *Toras HaAdam*. . . . Where the *Toras HaAdam* ends does the Divine Torah begin. It informs us of matters which are not within the grasp of any human. **Naftali Hertz (Hartwig) Wessely, Divrei Shalom V'Emess pp. 5, 9, 62**

C. I am far from reacting as favorably as you to the mood of tolerance so prevalent in all our newspapers. As long as the proponents of a unification system continue to lurk in the background, this falsely glittering, tinsel tolerance seems to me more dangerous than open persecution. Unless I am mistaken, the devious notion that kindness and tolerance rather than harshness and persecution constitute the best means to achieve conversion has already been mentioned in Montesquieu's "Lettres Persanes". And it is my impression that our time is dominated by this principle rather than by wisdom and brotherly love. . . . **Moses Mendelssohn, Letter to Herz Homberg March 1, 1784, Gesammelte Schriften Volume III p. 361**

D.

היהדות התקיימה שנות אלפים בלי ספר "פידון" בהוכחת מציאות הנפש והשארתה אחרי מות האדם בעוד כי ימי דור אחד של ההשכלה הספיקו לערער את חומות היהדות, נפתלי הירץ וויזל, מובא ב"משה מנדלסון" מצמח צמריון עמ' 111

Judaism survived for thousands of years without having to come on to [Mendelssohn's] work, *Phaedon*, to prove the existence of the soul and its survival after death, while just one generation of "Haskalah" (Enlightenment) was enough to undermine the bulwark of Judaism. **Naftali Tzvi (Hartwig) Wessely**

E.

ואם לא תשמעו לי – להיות עמלים בתורה. ולדעת מדרש חכמים יכול לקיום המצות כשהוא אומר ולא תעשו וגו' הרי קיום מצות אמור הא מה אני מקיים ואם לא תשמעו לי להיות עמלים בתורה ומה ת"ל לי אין לי אלא זה המכיר את רבונו ומתכוין למרוד בו וכן בנמרוד (בראשית י) גבור ציד לפני ד' שמכירו ומתכוין למרוד בו וכן באנשי סדום (שם יג) רעים וחטאים לד' מאד מכירים את רבונו ומתכוונים למרוד בו. ולא תעשו – (ת"כ) משלא תלמדו לא תעשו הרי שתי עבירות. ואם בחקתי תמאסו – מואס באחרים העושים: משפטי תגעל נפשכם – שונא החכמים: לבלתי עשות – מונע את אחרים מעשות. את כל מצותי כופר שלא צויתים לכך נאמר את כל מצותי ולא נאמר את כל המצות. להפרכם את בריתי כופר בעיקר הרי שבע עבירות הראשונה גוררת השנייה וכן עד השביעית ואלו הן. לא למד. ולא עשה. מואס באחרים העושים. שונא את החכמים. מונע את האחרים. כופר במצות. כופר בעיקר. רש"י בחקותי

**If you will not listen to Me (Lev. 26:14)** to toil in the study of Torah and know the interpretations of the Sages. I might have thought that this refers to the fulfillment of the commandments, but since it states, "and will not do all of these commandments", then the fulfillment of the commandments has already been stated. How, then, shall I explain, "If you will not listen to Me"? [It means] that if you will not listen to Me to toil in the study of Torah. What is meant by the the phrase, "to Me"? It is referring to someone who recognizes his Master and yet intends to rebel against Him. . . . **And will not do all of these commandments** Since you will not study, you will not do, thus, there are two transgressions. **And if you reject My statutes (Lev. 26:15)** (i.e.,) he rejects others who fulfill the commandments. **And your soul will abhor My ordinances** (i.e.,) he hates the Sages. **So that you will not fulfill** (i.e.,) he prevents others from doing them. **All of My commandments** he denies that I commanded them; for that reason it is stated, "all My commandments," and it is not stated, "all the commandments". **And you break My covenant** He denies the basic principles of religion (i.e., he denies the existence of a Providential Supreme Being). Thus, there are seven transgressions. The first generates the second and so on, until the seventh. And they are the following: He does not study [the Oral Law] and he does not fulfill the commandments, he rejects others that do, he hates the Sages, he prevents others from observing, he denies the Divine origin of the commandments, he denies the basic principles of the religion (i.e., he denies the existence of a Providential Supreme Being). **Rashi Parshas B'Chukosai, Lev. 26:14, Sifra**