Haskalah and Jewish Nationalism in the Late Ottoman Balkans

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- Abstract

In this paper, I have presented the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah (enlightenment) as a movement in which a distinct circle of maskilim took part in an age of fundamental change in the Ottoman Empire. My doctoral thesis is the first study that examines the maskilim of the Ottoman Empire as a distinct and comprehensive circle. The study exposes the dimensions of the circle of maskilim, the scope of their activities, and the fact that their center of gravity was in the Balkans, that is to say in Europe, rather than in Western Anatolia, that is to say in Asia. The members of the maskilic circle maintained widespread connections among themselves, as well as with members of European Jewish communities, mostly in the nearby Austro-Hungarian Empire. The paper explores these and other issues in greater depth, providing a basis for further discussion at my presentation on February 15th. In the presentation, I will seek to connect the subject of the Haskalah in the Balkans with the position of Sephardi Jews in the Jewish national movement in the nineteenth century, prior to the emergence of Zionism. This involvement begins with the thought and work of Rabbi Judah Alcalai in the Serbian principality, continues with those of Baruh Mitrani in the Balkans, and ends with the contacts between Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the ‘reviver of the Hebrew language,’ and the Sephardi Jews in Jerusalem at the Late Ottoman Period.

- Introduction

My doctoral thesis (Karkason 2018) examined the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) in the Ottoman Empire during the Tanzimat (1839-1876) and Hamidian (1876-1908) eras. The study focused on a circle of around ninety maskilim (Jewish enlighteners), most of them previously unknown, who were
active in four urban Jewish centers in Western Anatolia and the Southern Balkans (Southeastern Europe), as well as in the province of Jerusalem. This study defined, described, and analyzed the Ottoman-Jewish maskilic center that developed against the background of the political, economic, and cultural changes in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, as well as the maskilic centers in Europe.

The Ottoman-Jewish maskilim wrote primarily in two languages: Hebrew, the lingua franca of the Haskalah movement; and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), the Ottoman-Sephardi vernacular. Some also wrote in additional languages, particularly French and Ottoman Turkish. Three prominent maskilim are treated extensively: Judah Nehama of Salonica (1825-1899); Barukh Mitrani (1847-1919), who wandered around Europe and Asia; and Abraham Danon (1857-1925), who was active in Edirne, Istanbul, and Paris.

The three prominent Ottoman-Jewish maskilim

These and other maskilim published a wide variety of works, in Ladino as well as in Hebrew: collections of letters and egodocuments; sermons; philosophy; practical knowledge in the fields of science, mathematics, and geography; textbooks; poetry; historiography and biography; folklore and ethnography, and so forth (ibid., 297-305). The Ottoman-Jewish maskilim combined Jewish
solidarity with an affinity both to modernist trends of the surrounding local cultures and to Western modernism, and their main cultural and intellectual link was to the centers of Haskalah in Central and Eastern Europe.

In this paper, I would like to present my doctoral thesis by examining some of my main findings. I will open with an historical introduction on the Haskalah movement, as well as on the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century (para. 1). Later on, I will offer a portrait of the typical maskil: an upper-middle class male, with at least a basic rabbinic education and literate in Ladino and Hebrew, who participated in different maskilic activities (para. 2). Next, I will analyze the internal geography of the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah. I found that the maskilic activities on the Ottoman Balkans were far more intense than those in Western Anatolia (i.e. most of the territory of present-day Turkey), and I will explain the significance of these findings (para. 3). I will then analyze the contacts between the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah and the maskilic enters in Europe, specifically in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (para. 4). Lastly, I will conclude the discussion, and open a window for a future discussion at my presentation on February 15th on the connections between Haskalah and Jewish nationalism in the context of Ottoman Southeastern Europe (para. 5).

The paper includes a bibliography and a list for further reading (para. 6), as well as several appendixes: (1) Excerpts from Barukh Mitrani’s maskilic writings on the importance of education for girls; (2) The programmatic preface to Yosef Da’at (1888) – a historical periodical published by the maskilic association Dorshei ha-Haskalah; (3) The regulations of the maskilic association Sephat Emet (1890).

1. **Historical background**

Jews living in the major cities of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, in the provinces of Western Anatolia and the Balkans, were mostly descendants of immigrants who came to the Empire from Iberia (‘Sephardim’). Soon after their traumatic expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, they were perhaps
encouraged, by Sultan Bayezid II, to settle in the Ottoman Empire. With a varying degree of autonomy, the Ottoman sphere enabled the Jewish communities to preserve their unique Sephardi cultural heritage, including the Judeo-Spanish vernacular they spoke in their old homeland, Ladino (Hacker 1992; Ben-Naeh 2008). It were those Sephardi-Ottoman Jews, which after 350 years of diverse cultural and intellectual trends developed their own maskilic circle, which is at the center of my research.

The Haskalah movement appeared in Berlin in the second half of the eighteenth century, and Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) was the figure to whose its fundamental ideas are indebted. According to the definitions of Shmuel Feiner, the Maskilim joined together

in a unique Jewish enterprise of modernity and have considered themselves to be responsible to an unprecedented historic move [...] – the rehabilitation of traditional society in light of the values of enlightenment, distribution of broad general knowledge of the world of nature and human being, the education of the young generations for their integration in life as productive citizens that have access to the European society and culture [...]. And mostly, mental preparation for moving [...] from the “old world” to the modern age (Feiner 2010, 29-30).

The Berlin Haskalah, peaking during the last third of the eighteenth century, first spread all across German-speaking areas, including Austria. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the centers of Haskalah have moved to Galicia (in the Southeastern periphery of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), the Russian Empire, and Italy (Feiner 2001).

Actual documentation of the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah and its products only exists since 1850, but in fact we can date it about a decade or more back, around the beginning of the Tanzimat (Turkish: ordering, setting in order, regulating) Period – a period of legal and administrative reforms between 1839 and the First Constitutional Era in 1876. The Tanzimat era was characterized by various attempts to modernize the Ottoman Empire and to secure its territorial
integrity and its prosperity, against nationalist movements from within and aggressive powers from outside of the state. The political, economic and cultural penetration of the Western empires into the Ottoman Empire was deep even before the reforms, and was accelerated during the reform period. During this period, the use of advanced transportation means (steamboats, trains) and new communication means (post, telegraph) gradually expanded, and fortified the connections with Western Europe, enabling the rapid spread of ideas, knowledge and lifestyles, mostly in the large urban centers. Western penetration had a crucial influence on the Jewish education system starting with the beginning of the reform period. The internal educational shift had accelerated since 1865, with the opening of the first (among dozens) educational institutes of Alliance Israélite Universelle in the Ottoman Empire.¹

The Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah peaked in the first half of the Hamidian period – the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918), who ruled between 1876 and 1908. During that period, the above-described trends continued, and more and more citizens, including non-Muslim minorities, have started to identify themselves as ‘Ottomans’ (Cohen 2014). During the second half of the 1890s, the scope of activity of the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah has decreased, in a manner parallel to different developments in the Haskalah ‘republic of letters’ in Eastern and Central Europe (Feiner 2010, 298-335). Until the end of the 1900s, most maskilim born in the 1820s and 1830s had passed away. Others, born between the 1830s and 1850s, became older, and some of them suffered from deteriorating health. After the ‘Young Turks’ revolution (July 1908) we can no longer refer to an ‘Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah,’ but to other movements, such as Ottomanism and Zionism.

¹ The Alliance Israélite Universelle organization was established in 1860 by French Jewish elite, with the aspirations of ‘regeneration’ among Jewish communities its leaders perceived as ‘traditional’ – in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. The founders of the Alliance believed that in order to constitute a ‘rational’ and ‘progressive’ society, the members of these communities should be transformed into ‘useful’ citizens. The prominent mean for that end was the schools, meant to uproot the ‘rotten’ past of their students (Rodrigue 1990; 1993).
The Ottoman-Jewish *maskilim* constituted a significant sub-group within the Ottoman-Jewish intelligentsia, which was mapped and discussed by Julia Philips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (2010) in their formative article. This intelligentsia included two other sub-groups: the ‘*Westernizers*,’ who promoted ‘Westernization’ as a lifestyle in the spirit of the *Alliance* (Abrevaya Stein 2004); and the senior *rabbinical elite* of the period, which controlled the Chief Rabbinate and its provincial branches, and whose members published over two hundred Jewish religious works over the course of the nineteenth century (Borenstein-Makovetsky 2001). The main centers of both these circles were in Istanbul and Izmir, and to a lesser extent in Salonica.

Various studies have identified five principal characteristics that define the Jewish *maskil* in the Muslim countries. These characteristics are also confirmed by the findings of my study. The first characteristic is an insistence on a Jewish religious education ensuring literacy in the principles of the Jewish faith and in the Hebrew language. The second, as a clear derivative of the above, is the use of two languages: Hebrew, as the *lingua franca* of the Haskalah movement, and the local vernacular – Ladino, in the Ottoman-Sephardi instance. A third defining characteristic is contact with other *maskilim* in Europe and the Ottoman Empire, including correspondence, mutual references in the press, and personal meetings. A fourth characteristic is the publication of articles in maskilic journalistic and literary platforms. The fifth and final characteristic is participation in maskilic activities, such as associations and educational institutions.

It is worth emphasizing that the maskilic sub-group was not completely separate in ideological terms, and certainly not in social terms, from the other sub-groups that comprised the Ottoman-Jewish intelligentsia. The *maskilim* emerged from the intermediate echelon of the rabbinical elite. Some individuals, such as Saadi Halevy (1819-1903) of Salonica and David Fresco (1853-1933) of Istanbul, were able to move over the years between the maskilic group and the

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2 See, for example: Chetrit 1990, esp. 24-26.
Westernizers group. If so, all the members of the Ottoman-Jewish intelligentsia shared certain similarities, and almost all of them also participated in the extensive civil Ottoman discourse of the period (Cohen 2014). It can be suggested that the three sub-groups actually form points along a spectrum rather than distinct categories. Accordingly, my discussion of the maskilim reflects the adoption of an analytical category for research purposes, and does not claim to constitute an exclusive description of the reality during this period (Karkason 2018, 51-53). For illustration, see the next figure:

3. Why the Haskalah was stronger in the Balkans than in Western Anatolia?

My research findings show that the centers of the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah in the southern Balkans, that is to say in Southeastern Europe, were stronger and much better established than those in Western Anatolia, that is to say in Asia. Two thirds of the Ottoman-Jewish maskilim lived in Southeastern Europe, but only third in Asia. The following are some of the findings that indicate this strength of the Haskalah in the Balkans relative to Anatolia.
The main maskilic centers are circled (circles are added by author)

The first proof for the Balkan dominance over Western Anatolia is the extremely detailed list of active maskilim published by Barukh Mitrani\(^3\) in May 1880 in the Hebrew journal *Ha-Magid*, the first Hebrew newspaper (1856-1903) and the most important home of the ‘moderate maskilim’ of Eastern and Central Europe. Together with Mitrani himself, the list comprises 29 maskilim: 14 from the Ottoman Balkans, six from the post-Ottoman Balkans (such as Belgrade and Bucharest), and two from the Sephardi community in Vienna. By contrast, Mitrani named just four maskilim from Anatolia (Istanbul and Izmir), together with three from the Ottoman Middle East. Thus reflects the clear dominance of Ottoman-Sephardi maskilim in Europe over their peers in Asia (ibid., 81, 111, 289-292).

The second proof can be found in a corpus of six periodicals that appeared in Ladino or in bilingual form (Ladino and Hebrew) that I define in my study as ‘maskilic periodicals:’ Judah Nehama’s *El Lunar* (1864-1865); Yosef Da’at – *El Progreso* (1888-1889), published by the Dorshei Ha-Haskalah association in

\(^3\) On Mitrani, see Appendix 1.
Edirne and edited by Abraham Danon; and the surviving periodicals edited by Barukh Mitrani: *Karmi* (1881-1882), *Karmi Shelli* (1890-1891), *Ha-Osher* (1895), and *Ha-Shalom* (1906). Of these six, two appeared in the Ottoman Balkans (Salonica and Edirne), one in the post-Ottoman Balkans (Belgrade), two in the neighboring Austro-Hungarian Empire, and one in Jerusalem. As can be seen, not a single maskilic periodical appeared in Anatolia (ibid., 24, 209-211).

A third proof to the strength of the *Haskalah* on the Balkans relative to Anatolia is provided by the dominance of the Balkans in seventeen maskilic associations. These associations grouped together *maskilim* (usually a few dozen in each association), sometimes on a regular basis, and ran various activities, including the establishment of reading rooms, libraries, and even maskilic synagogues (ibid., 43, 225-226). The data for the distribution of the *maskilic* associations in the Balkans and in Anatolia are revealing: I found 11 associations in the Balkans, but only six in Anatolia (ibid., 257, 295-296).

Taken in isolation, each of these proofs might be subject to critical interpretation. However, the combination of these findings from diverse contexts clearly indicates that maskilic activities in the Ottoman Balkans were far more intense than those in Anatolia. Accordingly, we must now turn to examining why the *Haskalah* in the Balkans, that is to say in Southeastern Europe, was more successful than that in Anatolia, that is to say in Asia. I will propose several explanations for this phenomenon.

The Enlightenment is an inherently European movement, and it is no coincidence that its Jewish version, the *Haskalah*, is also essentially European, not least due to the demographic preponderance of European Jewry in the nineteenth century. However, a Ladino-speaking Ottoman Jew would encounter no obstacle in moving, for example, from the Asian side of Istanbul to Edirne, thereby 'crossing

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4 I will give just a small glimpse into the content of these maskilic journals: in the Salonican *El Lunar* we can find a report about Siamese twins and an in-depth article about the Ten Tribes. We also find a short article about the demerits of tobacco and a short summary of the history of the Jews of Istanbul. These and other articles found their way to *El Lunar* from *Ha-Maggid* in just a few months after their publication in Hebrew (and in some cases in less than a month!). They were adapted into Ladino with consideration for the intended audience of Nehama (Karkason 2018, 210-211).
the lines’ from Asia to Europe. Such a move would not necessarily require any substantive cultural change. Accordingly, we may dismiss explanations focusing on the borders of ‘Europeanism’ in the colonial era. Instead, we will turn to two historical and geographical explanations.

Firstly, the Balkans were closer to the centers of the *Haskalah* in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which lay in Eastern and Central Europe. By way of example, the distance between Edirne and Vilnius, an important maskilic center in the Russian Empire, is 500 kilometers less than that between Izmir and Vilnius. An even more important factor was the proximity of the Ottoman Balkans to the Austro-Hungarian maskilic centers, including Vienna – the Jewish publishing capital of the period. This proximity was accentuated following the inauguration of rail connections toward the end of the century.

Secondly, the greater strength of the *Haskalah* in the Balkans, relative to Anatolia, is parallel to stronger presence of nationalism in the Balkans, constituting a particularistic development of Enlightenment. The Serbian Uprisings and the Greek Revolt, during the first third of the nineteenth century, are two prominent examples of national revolts in Southeastern Europe, and they were followed by the emergence of numerous national movements. For various reasons that are beyond the scope of this article, the nationalist perceptions arrived in Anatolia later than in the Balkans. It was only in the 1880s that pan-Ottoman nationalist approaches began to gain significant exposure in Anatolia. As M. Şükrü Hanioğlu (2006) has shown, Turkish and pan-Turkic nationalism only really began to emerge in the 1890s.

Accordingly, the Jews of the Balkans had greater exposure – in terms of chronology, quantity, and quality – to particularistic national discourse, by comparison to their coreligionists in Anatolia. It is telling that I located evidence of contacts between maskilim in the Balkans and their Christian peers, from Bulgarian printers in Salonica in the 1860s to Greek Enlighteners in the early 1890s (Karkason 2018, 215-217, 248-252, 258). I find no evidence of such contacts in Anatolia, and certainly not with muslim Turkish *Garbcilar* (Westernizers) such as Abdullah Cevdet Bey (1869-1932) and others (Hanioğlu 2005).
Other factors also strengthened the Haskalah movement in the Balkans, and particularly in Salonica. The Jews had been the largest single ethnic group in the city for many years, and shortly before its transfer to Greek control (1912) they constituted a majority of its population. This unusual situation played a central role in the shaping of the Jewish community as ‘sivdad i madre de Israel’ (city and mother in Israel) a phenomenon recently analyzed by Devin E. Naar (2014).

The demographic reality in Salonica facilitated the consolidation of a strong Jewish public opinion, serving as a catalyst for the shaping of Jewish solidarity of a proto-national character, combined with ‘moderate Haskalah.’ This form of proto-nationalism was not separatist, of course, but positioned Sephardi communalism under the umbrella of the Ottoman Empire and the citizenship it granted. As Naar (2016) has recently shown, it was precisely the tolerant Ottoman framework that provided the Jewish community in Salonica with the sense of security and belonging that enabled them to develop something approaching a ‘Jewish republic.’ If so, there were a number of conditions that facilitated the greater strength of the Haskalah in the Balkans by comparison to Anatolia.

4. The affinity of the Ottoman-Jewish maskilim to the European centers

Now, I will discuss the contact between the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah and the maskilic centers in Europe. These contacts included the two-way flow of books, periodicals and manuscripts, as well as ideas, mutual assistance and personal friendships.

Ties of solidarity between Jews in the Diaspora had strengthened considerably since the mid-seventeenth century, and were further intensified following the Damascus Blood Libel of 1840. This formative event was followed in the 1850s and 1860s by the Crimean War (1853-1856), the appearance of the first weekly journals in Hebrew (since 1856), and the founding of the Alliance Israélite Universelle with its network of schools (Rodrigue 1993, Ch. 1).
From as early as the late eighteenth century, the outlines of a dichotomous division between ‘East’ and ‘West’ is already apparent, leaving its mark on the history of the period. This dichotomy also led to the emergence of what Yaron Tsur (2007, 264) has termed ‘internal Orientalism,’ a phenomenon that had an integrative and unifying pole, as well as a patronizing and reserved one.\(^5\) Aron Rodrigue also discussed this phenomenon, noting that the trend to regeneration spearheaded by the Alliance “was motivated by defensive reasons over the embarrassment caused by ‘backward’ Jews to the acculturated elite, as well as by strong sense of solidarity with fellow Jews in political and social distress” (Rodrigue 1990, 24).

One of the prominent *maskilim* who reflected on the question of ‘internal Jewish solidarity,’ and put it into practice, was Judah ben Jacob Nehama, who was born in Salonica in 1825 to an affluent merchant family. In the 1840s, he was introduced to *maskilic* literature; serving as an agent for European commercial companies in Salonica, Nehama also made his living as a bookseller. In 1885, Nehama published a programmatic essay entitled *Zekher Tzadik*, in which he argued that the Hebrew language was the foundation for solidarity among Jews from different regions. Drawing on the philosophy of the *maskil* Rabbi Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788-1860), Nehama was written:

> And what is the central bolt that links together this people [...] across all corners of Earth? This is only the *Torah*, which is written in Hebrew. It encourages them [=the Jews] and unites them to this day. If he wanders across the plains of Asia in the sandy desert, in a place where no-one has crossed, how will a Jew recognize his fellow if not by the words *Shema Yisrael*? [...] These Hebrew words are like a conductor that conveys the

\(^5\) In Tsur’s words: “Since pan-Jewish contacts expanded in the modern period prior to the rise of Zionism, intercommunal identity tensions between European and non-European Jews did not first spring up in the Zionist Yishuv or the State of Israel. Rather, they can be traced back to the end of the eighteenth century (under the impact of the Western Enlightenment and imperialism), outside of the Zionist context of the boundaries of the Land of Israel. I therefore suggest that the problem be viewed as a special – internal – case of orientalism in which the orientalist dichotomy must square up to contradictory influences. In this view, Israel’s ethnic problem is merely the latest, most intensive form of the basic problem of Jewish dispersion” (Tsur 2007, 246).
heat of electricity through distant cooper pens connected only by a single wire – the Hebrew language. It is not dead! (Karkason 2018, 160-161).

Nehama here likens the words ‘Shema Yisrael’ to the working of the telegraph: the Jewish people is akin to a telegraphic electric circuit in which Hebrew serves as the ultimate conductor. The Hebrew language indeed served as the conductor through which Nehama exchanged hundreds of letters with maskilim and exponents of the Wissenschaft des Judentums (Hochmat Israel) in Europe. In one chapter of my thesis, I used these letters to explore the affinity between the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah and the European centers (ibid., 154-204).

Many of Nehama’s correspondences, dated between 1850 and 1895, have been preserved in his printed collection of letters, published in two volumes, entitled Mikhtevei Dodim mi-Yayin (‘Letters More Delightful than Wine’). The first volume was published in Salonica, on Nehama’s own initiative, in 1893. The second volume, only partially edited, was published four decades after his death, in 1939. By publishing his letters after decades of extensive intellectual activity, Nehama apparently hoped to display his maskilic enterprise to his counterparts, and particularly to his Jewish peers in Europe. Publishing the edited letters might have helped him accrue great ‘symbolic capital’ and honor, as an Ottoman Jew strongly connected to the Haskalah ‘republic of letters.’ The two volumes together contain 315 letters, many of them exchanged with luminaries such as Yom-Tov (Leopold) Zunz (1794-1886) of Berlin, Shmuel David Luzzatto (Shadal, 1800-1865) of Padua, Solomon Judah Rapoport (Shir, 1790-1867) of Prague, and Meyer Kayserling (1829-1905) of Budapest, the forefather of the discipline of ‘Sephardi Studies.’

I will now map Nehama’s exchange of correspondence in order to illustrate the geographical dispersion of the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah and offer a profile of the relations between maskilim and their European peers. However, I must emphasize that the historical analysis of Nehama’s letters reflects, primarily, his own personal network and cannot necessarily provide an accurate picture of the
broader contacts of the Ottoman-Jewish *maskilim*. Moreover, the preserved letters represent only a portion of Nehama’s own contacts.

In order to map the correspondence, I combined the number of authors and recipients of the letters and examined the geographical location of 630 [1] correspondents. Almost two-thirds of this total number originate from the Ottoman Empire, as shown in the next figure:

![pie chart](chart.png)

However, most of the counts for the Ottoman Empire are the result of Nehama’s own presence in the correspondence: the fact that he was either the author or the recipient of almost all the letters.

If so, only ten percent of the total number of correspondents were Ottoman Jews, if we exclude Nehama himself. Accordingly, the letters preserved in these volumes are of limited importance in terms of the internal mapping of the circle of Ottoman-Jewish *maskilim*, which I analyzed mainly on the basis of journalistic sources (see above, para. 3). That being the case, over 80 percent of Nehama’s correspondents outside the Ottoman and post-Ottoman domain were based in Austria-Hungary, as shown in the next figure:
Thus, based on the published letters, almost half of Nehama’s exchanges of correspondence were with peers living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Jews of this empire thus constituted his principle reference group, at least as this is reflected in his printed output. These correspondents came from all corners of the expansive Austro-Hungarian Empire, as you can see in the next figure and the tentative map:
Almost 90 percent of the letters from Austria-Hungary were sent from Vienna, Galicia, and the Italian domains – regions that formed the heartland of the Haskalah and the Wissenschaft in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. We can illustrate this phenomenon by reference to the periodical Bikurei ha-’Itim, which was published in Vienna in the period 1820-1831. Moshe Pelli (2010) has shown that the appearance of this periodical marked the shifting of the center of gravity of the maskilic literature and the revival of Hebrew from the German-speaking lands to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This area was home to a large Jewish population that had not yet undergone intensive secularization and which was gradually exposed to the ideas of the Haskalah. Bikurei ha-’Itim was edited by maskilim who lived mainly in Galicia and Italy, as did the majority of the writers whose articles appeared in the publication.
In the spirit of the methodology of ‘entangled histories,’ I will now seek to offer a very concise portrait of the historical background that facilitated these contacts between Nehama and his Austro-Hungarian peers. The Balkans – Southeastern Europe – has since ancient times served as bridge between Central Europe and the Aegean and Anatolia. Moreover, from the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire controlled almost all of the Balkans, which served as a buffer zone with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As a crossroads between ‘East’ and ‘West,’ the Balkans also constituted a transitional zone between cultures.

Certain social and ideological similarities can also be seen between the maskilim in the two empires. They tended to come from a Jewish religious background, and most of them continued to observe the commandments even after adopting the scholastic methods of the Wissenschaft, profoundly challenging traditional Jewish exegesis. Eliezer Malachi stated that most of the Austro-Hungarian maskilim ‘were religious and spent their youth learning Torah and attending yeshivot [...], and they worked hard to acquire wisdom and knowledge. They were autodidacts, but they were among the leaders of Hochmat Israel in their generation [...]’ (Karkason 2018, 185). In accordance with the findings of Abrevaya Stein and Cohen (2010, 367), Malachi’s comments regarding the Austro-Hungarian maskilim could equally well have been made about their Ottoman peers. Accordingly, it would appear that the similar background and the social and ideological affinity drew the two circles together. Thus the close ties between the Ottoman Nehama and his Austro-Hungarian counterparts were facilitated by and developed against the background of the ‘entangled histories’ of the two empires and their Jewish populations.7

In my thesis, I described the relationship between Nehama and the European maskilim through a comprehensive description of three analytical categories of relationships that emerge from the letters: the categories I called ‘informant,’ the ‘instrumental,’ and the ‘friendly’ (Karkason 2018, 192-204). I

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6 See, for instance: Werner and Zimmermann 2006.

7 These bonds are particularly notable given the relative dearth of contacts with other maskilic centers, such as the Russian Empire (Karkason 2018, 186-189).
would like to expand a little on the ‘informant’ category. Several exponents of the Wissenschaft in Europe, such as Zunz, Luzzatto, and Rapoport, developed ties with their peers in the Ottoman Empire with the goal of securing rare manuscripts and books concerning Ottoman Jewry in order to clarify aspects concerning the history, language, and liturgy of the Ottoman-Jewish communities. In the 1850s and 1860s, these individuals regarded maskilim such as Nehama as ‘suppliers of knowledge’ rather than as equal partners in discourse.

However, Nehama’s standing in the world of the Haskalah rose steadily, and accordingly his relationship in the 1880s and 1890s with exponents of the Wissenschaft who required his assistance, such as his contemporaries Meyer Kayserling and Abraham Berliner (1833-1915), was much more equal. During this period, Nehama gained greater recognition as a maskil and a scholar following the publication of his collection of correspondence. He served as a supporter of East European maskilim, and one Hungarian maskil even sought to publish a short biography about Nehama. This Salonican maskil also held face-to-face meetings with a number of European maskilim, some of which are documented in his letters.

During the last decade of his life, Nehama significantly enhanced his standing within the Haskalah movement and the Wissenschaft in Central Europe. If the ‘Oriental Jew’ entered into the Republic of maskilim in the 1850s, by the 1890s he had already carved out a place for himself. During this period, Nehama used various ruses to prevent the removal of rare books from Salonica. In 1894, Berliner asked Nehama in a letter from Berlin: “If there are various valuable printed books there [in Salonica], [please] inform me in a list so that I can choose which ones to take” (ibid., 195). Nehama swiftly responded: “The Europeans have barely left any valuable books from sundry printing houses in Salonica, for they purchased them at a high price (be-damim yekarim), and accordingly, I cannot serve you in this matter and must beg your forgiveness.” (ibid., 196). In reality, however, “valuable books” certainly remained in Salonica, since in the 1917 fire important additional libraries were burned, while further material was lost during the Holocaust. Gradually, Nehama appears to have become aware of the value of rare books and manuscripts, and accordingly he became more cautious and selective in sending these treasures away from Salonica.
Thus, my study has found a profound affinity between Ottoman-Jewish maskilim and their European peers, particularly those from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Ottoman participants in these contacts were part of the Jewish enlightenment, which thereby gained a foothold in the Ottoman periphery of the Jewish world. Nehama’s letters constitute the main findings testifying to these contacts, although similar materials can be found relating other maskilim, such as Barukh Mitrani, Abraham Danon, Isaac Eliyahu Navon (1859-1952), and others.

As mentioned before, I should emphasize that the affinity between the Ottoman-Jewish maskilim and their European peers exited alongside another network of contacts I also described in my study: contacts between these maskilim and Greek and Bulgarian Orthodox-Christians fellows in their immediate environs. Within the multiethnic and inherently pluralistic Ottoman domain, all such contacts could flourish safely.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah as a movement in which a distinct circle of maskilim took part in an age of fundamental change in the Ottoman Empire. My doctoral thesis is the first study that examines the maskilim of the Ottoman Empire as a distinct and comprehensive circle. The study exposes the dimensions of the circle of maskilim, the scope of their activities, and the fact that their center of gravity was in the Balkans rather than in Western Anatolia. The members of the maskilic circle maintained widespread connections among themselves, as well as with members of European Jewish communities, mostly in the nearby Austro-Hungarian Empire. In November 1860, Judah Nehama wrote a reply to a European Jewish friend whose name does not appear in the letter. The friend had suggested that Nehama should prepare a new Ladino translation of the Bible “suitable for the members of our generation,” along the lines of Mendelssohn’s famous Commentary (ha-Beur) a century before. Nehama replied that he could not assume such a task, modestly observing that “while you may consider me a Mendelssohn
from Turkey, I am well aware of my low value and limited knowledge” (ibid., 61). This same Nehama, the ‘Mendelssohn from Turkey,’ played an important role – alongside others, naturally – in the Ottoman-Jewish Haskalah center in the Balkans and Anatolia – the center I characterize, define, and analyze in my thesis. My findings from the Balkans thus highlight the largely ‘European’ nature of the Haskalah movement among Ottoman Sephardim. Yet, even as they suggest the limits of maskilic influence beyond Europe, they also expand the boundaries of what we regard as Europe, by focusing on the Sephardi culture-sphere of the Ottoman Balkans, rather than the more commonly-explored Jewish centers of West, Central, and Eastern Europe. And so this Sephardi culture-sphere also had its own ‘Mendelssohns.’

Other findings I have presented confirm the prevailing perception in the literature regarding the strengthening from the 1840s onwards of ties of solidarity between Jews in the Islamic and Balkan countries, on the one hand, and those in Christian Europe, on the other. These contacts are discussed here for the first time in detail with regard to the Haskalah, painting a picture of a ‘Trans-Jewish Enlightenment’ in which Ottoman Jews played a prominent role.

It would, of course, be wrong to imply that all the maskilim who were active from the 1870s onward, in Europe or elsewhere, supported the Jewish national movement. However, it is impossible to imagine the emergence of Jewish nationalism without its maskilic roots. To a large extent, the ‘Trans-Jewish Enlightenment’ predated the later Sephardi-Ashkenazi encounter in the Yishuv and in the State of Israel, with its patterns of religious, cultural, and linguistic solidarity among Jews from ‘East’ and ‘West,’ alongside manifestations of Orientalism, patronization, and the usurping of cultural assets. I would like to elaborate more on this theme during my presentation on February 15th.

6. Bibliography and further reading


Appendixes:

(1) Barukh Mitrani on the importance of education for girls:

Rabbi Barukh ben Yitzhak Mitrani, nicknamed *Banim* (acronym of his name), was born in 1847 in Kirk Kilise (present-day Kırklareli), about 65 kilometers from Edirne. His father has taught his son Hebrew, bible and Talmud since his early childhood. In the course of his days, Mitrani has travelled between several cities in Europe and Asia, including Vienna, Jerusalem and many cities in present-day Bulgaria and Serbia. Mitrani made a hard living as teacher, *darshan*, and bookseller. After extended years of travelling, he returned to Edirne, and since then suffered from clinical depression, and remained closed in his home. He died in 1919, after many years of suffering.

On January 1867, young Mitrani, while sitting in Edirne, has concluded the composition of a comprehensive paper, which was published in serial form in *Ha-Magid*, between March and July 1867, under the title *Masa Turkiya ha-Eiropit* (European Turkey's Burden). In this paper, Mitrani described in depth the state of the Jewish communities in Southeastern Europe, the processes of modernization and the educational transformations among them. By this, Mitrani served as mediator of the cultural and intellectual world of these communities for the Hebrew press readers, most of them Eastern and Central European Ashkenazi Jews. Below is a short excerpt translated from his paper, on the importance of education for girls:

`[...] The state of education of the girls is very bad, because all the women and girls in our city [=Edirne] are like the beasts in the forest, to the disgrace for humankind. [They] do not know how to write and read at all, and they have no wisdom! Oh! Our laziness caused this [...] and has caused`
to our women in our land [=the Ottoman Balkans] this state of ignorance and stupidity [...]!

Oh! Why should the girls be less than the boys? Were they not created in the shape of God also? Do they not carry the name “human”? Why should they be ignorant like beasts in the forest? Therefore, I call upon you, the educated of my people in our land, I shout at you, please hurry to bring help and civility also to your daughters! Remove the shame of their ignorance from them and you, and from your sons... Open their ears to ethics, religion and knowledge, have mercy on them and on their takers [=husbands] and pave paths for education in their hearts [...]! (Karkason 2018, 74-75).

(2) The programmatic preface of Yosef Da’at:

_Dorshei ha-Haskalah_ (‘Seekers of the Enlightenment’), which was found in Edirne in 1879, was the most significant and influential _maskilic_ association in the Ottoman Empire. In 1879, a handful of young Jewish enlighteners gathered in Edirne under the leadership of Abraham Danon. Born and raised in Ottoman Edirne, Danon was a committed Jewish enlightener, rabbi, and scholar who had a command of 15 languages. Danon published articles in most of these languages, mainly exploring the history, language, folklore, and ethnography of the Ottoman Jews and the Sabbatean believers (_Dönme_) in Salonica.⁹

The ‘Seekers of the Enlightenment’ association’s regulations, which were printed in Ladino in a bulletin (1888), declared: “The association proposes to realize its goal (1) by establishing a library (2) by conferences (3) by publications it will initiate (4) by the study of vocations” (ibid., 226). In order to realize its goals, the association gradually established several subsidiaries, including _Ha-Peulah_ (‘The Action’), which was devoted to the teaching of various vocations to boys from poor backgrounds so that they could make an honorable living, and _Yesod ha-

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⁹ See Karkason 2016, 135-136.
Peulah ('The Foundation of Action'), which sought to integrate the Jews of Edirne in local agriculture.

“The Seekers of the Enlightenment” had a larger and broader audience than any other Ottoman-Jewish maskilic association. We do not know the precise number of members, but I found that at least one in every 16 Jewish men in Edirne was connected in some way with the ‘Seekers of the Enlightenment’ (ibid., 226-227) – an impressive figure that testifies to the association’s influence in the community.

Aware that Ottoman Jews had not properly documented their history and that valuable material had been lost forever, Dorshei ha-Haskalah members, headed by Danon, sought to establish a historical journal in Hebrew and Ladino called Yosef Da’at. The journal would include articles “about the history of the Jewish diaspora in Turkey, and all that happens to our people living under the gracious rule of the Ottoman sultans.”

I believe that Yosef Da’at marks the first institutionalized manifestation of “documentation awareness” in Ottoman Jewry: an internal awareness regarding the importance of documentation and of archiving materials concerning the history of Ottoman Jewry, which was perceived as part of both Jewish history and Ottoman history (ibid., 237-238). In 1888-1889, 21 issues of the journal appeared. The Hebrew section was devoted to original sources that had hitherto remained unknown or unresearched. Danon urged his readers: “Let our wise men rise up, let each one search in his own place or town or residence for the memories of his brothers and neighbors.” The journal enabled the members of Dorshei ha-Haskalah to spread the message of documentation among a broad circle of their friends and the readers of Yosef Da’at.

that they had never seen such a thing and that this rite is no longer practiced anywhere.

And now, may God bless you, make me rejoice in your letters, either as a respondent or as an inquirer, and may God bless you with everything you do and may you know only happiness, along with your family and the household of your glorious and wise father-in-law, may he live long, and your soul as well, and the soul of the signatory here today in Padua, 12 Av 5681 [August 10, 1851].

Your friend, Shadal


138. THE FIRST JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE SEPHERDI PAST APPEARS IN EDIRNE (1888)

Born and raised in Ottoman Edirne, Abraham Danon (1857–1925) was a committed Jewish enlightener, rabbi, and scholar. Trained in Hebrew and Aramaic, he taught himself French, German, Greek, Latin, Ottoman Turkish, Persian, and Arabic, and published extensively in French, Hebrew, and Ladino. What follows is Danon's Hebrew introduction to a scholarly bilingual Hebrew-Ladino journal he founded in 1888 under the title Yosef Da'at/El Progreso. Although the publication was short-lived, Danon remained intellectually active throughout his life. In 1891 he established a modern rabbinical seminary in Edirne, which he transferred to Istanbul in 1908. After the revolution of 1908 displaced octogenarian Chief Rabbi Moshe Halevi (ca. 1827–1910) Danon competed for the position, which he lost to his son-in-law Haim Nahum. (On Halevi see source 43; on Nahum see sources 43, 44, 53, 75, 115, and 117.) Danon stayed on in his capacity as head of the Istanbul Jewish seminary until it closed in the midst of the First World War. He subsequently moved to Paris, where he became a professor of Hebrew at the École Normale Israélite Orientale. Danon’s call for the collection and preservation of rare documents of the Ladino-speaking world resonates with parallel developments among Yiddish-speaking Eastern European intellectuals of the same period.

For the past six years I have yearned for and dedicated myself to one great passion and desire, devoting to it all my youthful efforts. And now at last, in spite of all obstacles in its path, it has arrived. Never had we dared hope to see Hebrew letters in our city, but here they are, brought here by the Ottomans, who founded in Edirne a Jewish community with the intention to settle the whole Sephardi world in Asia Minor and all that part of Europe then under Turkish rule, with thorough and fertile means. The journal would prove even if only a single step toward the survival of the Jewish people, at least in this corner of Asia Minor. The reports and articles of our Jewish Almanack are not known here, nor will they be known in the Near East. And the reports in the journal would fill the gap in our knowledge of the community, which has been forgotten.

I will now present the first issue as a guide to the history of the community and of the Sephardi world, in a wise manner that will give evidence to the Sephardi world. This is a journal that will be read, even if only for a moment.
brought here by the Society of the Proponents of Wisdom that was founded in Adrianople [Edirne], the offspring of the Society of the Seekers of Enlightenment. In keeping with the society’s goals, it is my intention to publish a bimonthly journal, half of it in Hebrew and the other in Spanish, about the history of the Jewish diaspora in Turkey, and all that happens to our people living under the gracious rule of the Ottoman sultans. Our nation’s history is a neglected field, overgrown with thorns and thistles, but within its sphere we have chosen this fertile and fruitful corner, which we will cultivate and protect. And even if our hands may recoil at times from unearthing dark mysteries, at the very least we can hope to gather together these fragmented reports and distribute them among our brethren living in the land of Turkey. I believe they have much to gain from this effort, since in the vineyard of our Oriental histories, precious treasures lay hidden: we do not know much of the habits and traditions of the various communities, nor of their relations with the venerated government and with the other nations living under its protection. If we tend to this vineyard with the plough of inquiry, many questions that have gone unnoticed would find an answer. There are ever so many manuscripts, books and documents, lying hidden among people’s possessions, or buried in the communities’ archives. These texts could shine a light on issues long forgotten. The riddles of the past would be elucidated.

I will not talk excessively about the nature of our revolution—this first issue and the articles it features will exemplify the new spirit animating our endeavor. The educated will see that truth and science guide our way. The daily news or spiteful quarrels among writers will not enter this house. But its doors stand open for any eloquent article, in Hebrew or in Spanish that sheds light on one of the corners of our history or destroys the shroud that covers the face of a man, a community, or a book, and conceals from us their habits and ways. Let our wise men rise up, let each one search in his own place or town of residence for the memories of his brothers and neighbors. Let them call to the hidden manuscripts: come out! And to our ancient Turkish histories: reveal yourselves! They should send the fruits of their research to this journal, which will gratefully circulate them among the people.

(3) *Sephat Emet’s Regulations:*

*Sephat Emet* ("Language of Truth") association was founded in Salonica in 1890. It provided a meeting place for members of a certain circle among the growing Salonican-Jewish bourgeoisie, while promoting their Jewish heritage and Hebrew tongue. The *Sephat Emet* regulations survived due to the request of one of Judah Nehama’s correspondents, David Menachem Deinard (1848-1933), to notify him "of the great and wonderful deeds he made with respect to our association," as Nehama promised him when they parted ways. In response, Nehama sent him the "regulations of the association established after your departure out of here."

Presumably, Deinard shared the idea of establishing the *Sephat Emet* association but left Salonica before its establishment. The correspondence between Deinard and Nehama indicates that Nehama participated in the association’s establishment. We have no information about the identity of the other members of the association; it is likely that in addition to Nehama, the core circle of Salonican *maskilim* were members (ibid., 88). We do not know how long the association lasted since we are currently unable to locate additional documentation of it; we can carefully speculate that its effect was not far-reaching. Nevertheless, these regulations are one of a kind in the Salonican *Haskalah*, and one of only three in the whole Ottoman-Jewish *Haskalah* (ibid., 26, 226). This is the reason why they are so historically significant.

Following *Sephat Emet’s* regulations delivery to Deinard, they were preserved in Nehama’s collections and survived when printed, later on, in the second volume of *Mikhtevei Dodim mi-Yayin* (1939).

Please find attached the regulations, which were translated into English for the first time.
The Hebrew Association *Sephat Emet*

*May it be established in righteousness*\(^{10}\)

Founded on the month of Kislev 5651 [December 1890]

[Preface] We, signed below, seeing that our holy language, Hebrew, had been forsaken, and slumbering like a bereaved mother, as it ceased to be spoken by its children the men of Israel, and no longer prevalent neither at home nor outside\(^{11}\) – have been awakened with a renewed spirit, and a great desire to revive and raise it once more. After much inquiry, we have made up our minds to establish an association and found it on these conditions, which – God willing – we shall elaborate in the following:

1. The association shall be called *Sephat Emet* ("The Language of Truth"),\(^{12}\) for our holy tongue is true, a plain and clear language (*safa brura ve-nekiyah*); it excels in virtues above all other tongues, and strength and kingship were bestowed upon it to govern all others. For it was in Hebrew the Lord has chosen to give us his commandments and laws – the true *Torah* passed on to us by Moses on Mount Sinai.

2. The purpose of the association shall be to revive the Hebrew language by the means at our disposal – that is: to study and read, comprehend and converse, and correctly write in the language, as befits any Jewish man.

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\(^{10}\) After Prob. 25:5.

\(^{11}\) After Gen. 39:5.

\(^{12}\) After Prob. 12:19: "The lip [=language] of truth shall be established for ever; but a lying tongue is but for a moment."
We, the founders of the association, have taken upon ourselves to furnish the treasury of the association with the preliminary sum of half a silver Mejid [=Mecidiye],\(^{13}\) and pay a monthly fee of five golden Grush [=Kuruş].\(^{14}\)

Any member who wishes to join our association must pay the initial fee as determined by the board committee, which will consist of no less than one Mejid, as well as a monthly sum of five golden Grush.

All members will be required to bring the fee to the house of study, and pass it to the treasurer or one of the other members of the board committee.

The monthly fee will be collected in the first week of each month. A member who falls behind said date will be fined by the sum of one golden Grush; any member who intentionally misses the payment for two consecutive months shall be removed from our association and have no claim of it.

The collected funds will be allocated to cover the expenses of the association – that is: to pay for the lease of the house, and for the purchase of books and periodicals required for our end. Should the need arise, they will be used to finance the salary of tutors and teachers.

All members will be required to come to the house of study at those dates and hours set by the board committee. Any member, who intentionally misses three consecutive meetings, will be fined by the sum of two golden Grush.

The curriculum will consist of studying the Bible and Hebrew grammar, as well as Haskalah periodicals and books. The orders and methods of study will be determined by the board committee.

Any member who wishes to dedicate a book to the house of the association will be listed and recognized in the scroll of contributors.

No member will be permitted to remove or take any of the books or other belongings found in the house of the association without the permission of the board committee. The board committee will not be permitted to allow any man

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\(^{13}\) One silver Mecidiye = 1/5 Turkish Lira.

\(^{14}\) One golden Kuruş = 1/100 Turkish Lira.
outside of the association to borrow any book – only to members who must deposit a collateral greater than its worth.

12. Any member who leaves the association shall have no claim for the sums, books or donations he had given.

13. The members of the association will elect five men among them, to serve as the board committee and manage all the affairs of the association: a president, a vice-president, a treasurer, a secretary and an advisor.

14. The election of the board committee will be made by a majority vote of the members, and those members elected must accept the appointment without any refusal.

15. The board committee will be required to oversee all the affairs and needs of the association, and they will be given a mandate to conduct the affairs of the association as they see fit.

16. When the board committee is required to conduct any of the business of the association, the treasurer must call an assembly and notify the board committee on the date and time of the meeting, to be held outside the hours of study.

17. A general gathering of all the members shall be held every Passover and Sukkot, during the weekdays of the holiday. The board committee will be required then to present them with a clear account of the association's revenues and expenses. The members will also be permitted to elect a new board committee by a majority vote.

18. Within three months of the founding of the association, members will not be permitted to converse in any other language in the house of study but for the holy tongue [=Hebrew]; any member found violating this shall be fined.

19. The association will only be dissolved by a decision of the majority of the members. Any funds or valuables found then in the treasury of the association will be distributed equally among current members. Any members who had left the association prior shall have no claim over them, as noted in section 12.