Out of the Shtetl

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CHAPTER ONE
IN THE PODOLIAN STEPPE

The contents [of Mendel Lefin’s Der ertser khosed (The First Hasid)] are obvious from the title. It investigates the origins of Hasidism, which was rooted in the cities of Podolia from the very beginning. Who knows what we lack in losing this book? He undoubtedly informed us truthfully [about Hasidism] because he was its contemporary, both in time and place.\(^1\)

Abraham Baer Gottlober (1885)

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

In 1569, in an act of state known as the Union of Lublin, the Kingdom of Poland and the Duchy of Lithuania came together to form the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The new state was one of the largest in Continental Europe, stretching from the Dvina in the north to the Black Sea in the south and from beyond the Dniepr in the east to Silesia and West Prussia in the west. The two parts of the Commonwealth shared a common king, parliament (Sejm), political structure, and foreign policy, but had distinct law codes, armies, and administrations. The Commonwealth’s republicanism was unique in Europe, but severely delimited by the social structure of the state, the majority of whose denizens were peasants. Known as the “Noble Republic,” the Commonwealth boasted one of the largest noble classes in Europe. Free from taxation, with almost unrestrained power in the Polish Sejm to enact legislation and elect the king, the Polish szlachta (nobility) enjoyed a high level of political rights compared to their noble peers in the rest of Europe. The Polish nobility regarded itself as descendants of a race of “heroic Sarmatians” who had defeated Rome. Central to their identity was an assumption of national uniqueness; believing the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to be the apotheosis of liberty, the szlachta defined themselves in opposition to other European nobilities and stubbornly mythologized their liberties, privileges, religion, culture, and economic structure. They gave pride of place to their independence from the Polish king.\(^2\)

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2 The nobility alone had a voice in the Sejm; clergy, burghers, and peasants had no repre-
the nobility was similarly empowered, although the greatest wealth was concentrated in the hands of about twenty magnate families, and not distributed equally among the szlachta. For example, in the 1770s, 1.9 percent of the szlachta controlled 75 percent of the nobles’ wealth in Lithuania. The eastern lands of the Commonwealth, in Podolia, Volhynia, and Ukraine, were dominated economically by the huge latifundia (agricultural plantations) of a few magnate families.\(^3\)

Characteristic of the Commonwealth was its ethnic and religious heterogeneity. Home to Poles, Germans, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Belorussians, Ruthenians, Letts, Estonians, Turks, Armenians, Italians, Scots, and Jews, the Commonwealth tolerated Protestantism, Greek and Armenian Orthodoxy, Ukrainian Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism.\(^4\) This diversity was even more pronounced in the private cities of the eastern and southeastern part of the state. For example, in sixteenth-century Zamosć, Scots, Jews, Italians, Hungarians, Germans, Greek Orthodox, and Armenians comprised the forty-four home owners in the city.\(^5\) The childhood memoirs of Jacob Frank, the eighteenth-century messianic pretender, relate that when the shamash (beadle) of the Jewish community of Korolówka knocked on the doors of the Jews to rouse them for penitential prayers in the month before the New Year, he also knocked on the doors of Polish Christians and Armenians, attesting to the heterogeneity of the town.\(^6\) Yet, the implicit religious tolerance of the Commonwealth would be sorely tested, as with so much else, in the political crisis that began in the seventeenth century.\(^7\)

Poland suffered numerous foreign incursions and wars during the seventeenth century, including a series of Cossack rebellions (beginning in 1591 and culminating with the notorious Chmielnicki revolt in 1648–1649), the Northern War (1655–60), the invasion of Muscovy in 1654, the Turkish invasion of 1671, which resulted in the Ottoman acquisition of almost one-third of Commonwealth territory, and the wars with Sweden (1700–1721).

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\(^7\) In 1733, for example, non-Catholics were barred from civil office. See Lukowski, *Liberty’s Folly*, 22.
One Polish historian has argued that the ruin resulting from the wars of the mid-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century was “as devastating to Poland as the Black Death, which missed Poland, was for western Europe.” The unremitting assault on Poland’s sovereignty continued in the eighteenth century, culminating in the three partitions in 1772, 1793, and 1795 by Austria, Russia, and Prussia.

**Jewish Settlement in the Noble Republic**

All peoples tend to embellish the longevity of their settlement in a region, as if to secure their rightful claim of residence and belonging. The Jews of Poland were no different. The “Khazar theory of origins,” a Polish-Jewish etiology tale that gripped the imaginations of medieval and modern Jews alike, posited that the Khazar kingdom in the region of the Black Sea was the *Ur*-community of East European Jews. Pressure from the tenth-century Kievan state dissolved Khazaria, whose king and inhabitants had converted to Judaism in the middle of the eighth century, but its Jewish population remained in eastern Europe, the legend goes, settling communities throughout the Slavic world. There is little evidence to support this account as the basis of Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe. More credible is the analysis that the Jews of early modern Poland are the descendants of German Jews who migrated eastward, beginning in the eleventh century, and became a significant stream simultaneous with German migration to Poland in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. Because Muscovy and Prussia were barred to the Jews, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became the most important area of Jewish settlement in Europe. Immigration rose in the second half of the fifteenth century when Jews were expelled from the lands of Germany, Austria, Silesia, and Bohemia. By the end of the century, there were between 10,000 and 15,000 Jewish souls in Poland.

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8 Ibid., 14.
9 The most famous example is *Sefer hakuzari* (first printing, 1506) by the poet and philosopher Judah Halevi (before 1075–1141), in which the converted Khazar king conducts a philosophical religious dialogue with representatives of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Aristotelian philosophy. Modernizing Jews turned to Halevi’s work throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both as an expression of religious tolerance and ardor for Hebrew poetry. See Shmuel Werses, “Judah Halevi in the Mirror of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Megammot vetsurot besifrut hahaskalah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 50–89. Ovadiyah ben Pesakhiah, the protagonist of Joseph Perl’s satire, *Boh[en tsaddiq], relates with amazement the “truth” of the existence of the Jewish kingdom of Khazaria, which is confirmed during his travels to the region of the Caspian Sea. See [Joseph Perl], *Boh[en tsaddiq* (Prague, 1838), 89–90.
The Jewish population rose dramatically with the geographic expansion of Poland that took place after the Union of Lublin. The Commonwealth encompassed Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine (including Podolia and Volhynia), and Rus′ (Ruthenia or Red Rus′), the area that came to be called East Galicia (see map 1). These southeastern regions became particularly hospitable to Jewish settlement as a burgeoning economy based on grain grew with the expansion of noble holdings in the steppe. The vast plateau of the Ukraine, known for its mineral-rich, black soil, became the breadbasket of Europe as raw materials were shipped on Poland’s many rivers north and northwest. To maximize production, Polish magnates turned their estates into agricultural plantations, which, from the sixteenth century onward, were worked by enserfed peasants who were legally bound to the land and to weekly labor duties (corvée or robot). The magnates, who sought to exercise complete control over their estates and to restrict the privileges of the burghers, stunted urban development. Yet szlachta hostility to urban life created a huge obstacle to their desire for economic growth. They needed managers and administrators to oversee their affairs and hence turned to Jewish intermediaries to manage their holdings, in the process encouraging Jewish settlement in their towns. From the mid-sixteenth century onward, Jews were an essential component in the Polish colonization of the Ukrainian provinces of Volhynia, Podolia, Brać, and Kiev; indispensable to the management of the newly acquired magnate lands, the Jewish population of Ukraine increased thirteen-fold between 1569–1648. By 1765, more than half of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth’s Jewish population (750,000) lived in private, noble-owned towns. This economic interdependence between magnate and Jew had a portentous effect on the region in general and on the Jewish community in particular.

Although since the thirteenth century Jewish immigrants had been subject to the direct authority of the Polish king, by the mid-sixteenth century they became subject to the local lord. The Sejm of 1539 granted owners of private towns the exclusive right to place obligations on their Jewish populations, which, in turn, freed the Jews from royal authority and opened up enormous administrative and economic opportunities for them.\(^\text{15}\) Denied settlement in royal towns in the western part of the state, and subject to competition from Christian burghers and guilds, the Jewish community looked east toward the private towns of the Polish nobility, where they were welcomed with favorable privileges, including the right of municipal residency and self-government. In private Polish towns the Jewish community enjoyed a special economic relationship with the local lord, in contrast to the native townsmen, who were hampered in their efforts to encourage urban industry. For example, native burghers were forbidden to export any of Poland’s raw materials on the Wisła River, except for cattle and oxen, while Jewish middlemen virtually dominated all other commercial activity on the river.\(^\text{16}\) From the sixteenth century onward, the Jews of Poland were increasingly concentrated in noble lands and had turned away from collecting taxes for the king and toward a variety of economic roles associated with the nobles’ latifundia. Jews collected taxes on private estates, ran inns and taverns, extended credit, and were involved with both foreign and domestic trade.\(^\text{17}\)

The Jews were an essential feature of the landscape of southeastern early modern Poland. As William Coxe, an early nineteenth-century British traveller in the borderlands remarked, "In stating the different classes of inhabitants the Jews must not be omitted. This people date their introduction into Poland about the time of Casimir the Great, and as they enjoy privileges which they scarcely possess in any other country, excepting England and Holland, their numbers have surprisingly increased."\(^\text{18}\) So, too, were they an integral component of Polish urban life. At the time of the census of 1764, there were Jewish communities established in at least 823 private towns.\(^\text{19}\)


\(^{17}\) Judith Kalik, Ha’atsulah hapolaniy v’yehudeiyah bamamlakhet Polin-Litu be’eru ha’tehiqqah bat hazemen (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997) and Ettinger, “The Participation of the Jews in the Settlement of Ukraine (1569–1648).”


\(^{19}\) Lukowski, Liberty’s Folly, 77–80 and Artur Eisenbach, The Emancipation of the Jews in...
Concentrated in the private towns of the Polish nobility, the Jews were legally free, neither juridically bound by the authority of the Christian magistrates nor subject to municipal taxes. This singular status of Polish Jewry, which by the mid-eighteenth century constituted at least half of the Polish urban population and was the principal component of the middle class, engendered deep animosity on the part of the beleaguered native burgher class.  

Traditional Ashkenazic Jewish Culture in the Eighteenth Century

The Jews of early modern Poland were Ashkenazim. This Hebrew term, appropriated by medieval Jews to designate the Jewish communities of northern Europe (France and German lands), came to include all of their descendants who had migrated eastward to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Ashkenazic Jews of early modern Poland shared a cultural world with their German and French ancestors, including a religious-legal culture centered around study of the Talmud, extensive adherence to customary law (minhag), as opposed to codified law (halakhah), and a language, medieval German, which later developed into what is commonly known as Yiddish. The world of Ashkenazic Jewry was not homogeneous; there were subdivisions between those communities that followed the liturgy of France and the Netherlands and those that followed the regional traditions of Bohemia and, later, Lithuania. Nonetheless, before the age of the Enlightenment, Polish Jews and German Jews were more similar to one another than to other Jewish subcultures. As with so many other aspects of Polish Jewish life, it was the eighteenth century that transformed what had been an unselfconscious bond between German Jews and Polish Jews into a complex, often ambivalent, relationship.


21 Hundert, “Some Basic Characteristics of Jewish Life in Poland,” 30. Today, the divide between the descendants of Iberian Jewry, the Sephardim, and the descendants of northern European Jewry, the Ashkenazim, still exists, although each group has spawned a transnational diaspora of its own.


23 Steven M. Lowenstein, “The Shifting Boundary Between Eastern and Western Jewry,” JSS (new series) 4, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 61–78; Israel Bartal, “The Image of Germany and
To speak of a normative traditional culture of early modern Polish Jewry is to risk oversimplification and generalization. Nonetheless, in order to understand what self-conscious modernizing Polish Jews like Mendel Lefin wanted to safeguard, we need to describe the contours of Polish rabbinic culture before the onslaught of Sabbatianism, Frankism, and Hasidism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Traditional Jewish religious thinking, both in the past and today, is fundamentally ahistorical. The rabbinic leadership of antiquity saw itself as the authoritative recipients of an unbroken chain of tradition leading back to the original Revelation at Sinai, a tradition whose authority and binding obligatory power is not subject to the vicissitudes of time. Rabbinic Jews see themselves as the “true” inheritors of Biblical Israel, the authoritative adjudicators of Jewish legal tradition. The biblical verse, “If there arise a matter too hard for you to judge, between blood and blood . . . [and there be] controversy within your gates: then you should arise and go up to the place that your God will choose, and you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge that shall be in those days, and inquire” (Deut 17:8–13), became the definitive proof of any given generation’s rabbinic leadership, from the earliest documented rabbinic texts, the Mishnah and the Talmuds, and is still adduced today. The teachings of the first generations of Mishnaic and Talmudic Sages were viewed as either a) encoded in the original biblical revelation and then transmitted by the Sages or b) an authoritative legal expression of divine intent. Rabbinic legislation, therefore, was viewed as immutable. Jews were obligated to obey the decisions of the Sages in perpetuity because God’s command is the locus of the Sages’ power.

The representatives of religious authority in medieval Ashkenaz were rabbis, or sages, learned men who were schooled in the vast corpus of Jewish religious texts and derived authority from their students and the larger Jewish community. The medieval rabbi had two central functions, a) heading an institution, or school, of higher learning (a yeshivah), and b) overseeing a rabbinical court, the locus for the adjudication of Jewish law. In medieval

German Jewry in East European Jewish Society During the Nineteenth Century,” in Danzig: Between East and West (ed. Isadore Twersky; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 1–17; Steven E. Aschheim, Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

24 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).
25 Emphasis is mine.
times, the rabbi, and his authority, was independent of the organized Jewish community; his authority derived not from appointment or salary, but from his ability to master, disseminate, and rule on the central texts of Jewish religious life. In order to be authoritative, the medieval Ashkenazic rabbi had to have students who viewed his credentials as impeccable.

The canonical corpus of rabbinic texts for adjudicating Jewish law in medieval Ashkenaz included the *Sefer mordekhai*, written by Mordechai ben Hillel ha-Kohen, a late thirteenth-century German scholar, *Sefer mitsvot hagadol*, by Moses of Coucy, a French Tosafist, *Sefer mitsvot haqatan*, by Isaac ben Joseph of Corbeil and *Pisqei harosh*, a code penned by Asher ben Yehiel (1250–1327, and known by his acronym as the “Rosh”) in the early fourteenth century. Asher’s third son, Jacob ben Asher, the *dayyan* (judge) of Toledo in the first half of the fourteenth century, organized his own code in four subcategories, which he called “columns” (*turim*), comprising the whole of Jewish life. This work, subsequently known as the *Arba’at haturim*, became so influential that it was the second Hebrew book to be printed (1475) after the commentary of Rashi on the Pentateuch.27 These texts were considered guides to the Babylonian Talmud, the original source of rabbinic law, which all learned sages and rabbinic figures had to master in order to execute Jewish jurisprudence.

Heir to the legal and cultural tradition of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry, Polish rabbinic culture began to distinguish itself from its French and German roots by the mid-sixteenth century, which, in turn, informed a change in the relationship of the Ashkenazic rabbi to the Jewish community. These changes were manifest both in terms of the library of traditional Ashkenazic Judaism, the texts considered to be the cultural inheritance of rabbinic Jewry, its institutions, i.e. how that culture was disseminated, and the relationship of the two to the thorny question of rabbinic authority. The sixteenth-century was marked by the introduction of Sephardic homiletic, exegetical, and legal texts into the canon of Ashkenazic Jewry, the efflorescence of codification, itself a product of the printing revolution, and the controversy over *pilpul* (from the Hebrew word for “pepper,” and meaning a sharp-witted method of argumentation), a method of Talmud instruction, and its role in the curriculum of the Ashkenazic yeshivah.28

The rise of *pilpul* as a central feature of yeshivah education as an end in itself, rather than as an intellectual means to prepare the elite rabbinic

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28 Ibid., 30 and 45.
student to use medieval guides and the Talmud to adjudicate law, sparked a controversy among prominent Ashkenazic rabbis in the sixteenth century. At the same time, the printing of the *Shulhan arukh* (*The Set Table*, 1564), which contained the exposition of the *Arba’at haturim* by Joseph Karo (1488–1575), a Spanish refugee, and the glosses of Moses Isserles (1525 or 1530–1572), a wealthy rabbinic figure from Cracow (Kraków in Polish), on Karo’s decisions, furthered the trend toward *pilpul*. Isserles’s “tablecloth” (*hamappah* in Hebrew), covering Karo’s “table”, made the *Shulhan arukh* a living code of Jewish law for East European Jewry. Able to rely on the decisions penned in the *Shulhan arukh* for the daily conundrums of Jewish life, yeshivah students in Poland bent their intellectual muscle not on investigating the sources of Jewish law, but on proving their scholarly breadth. Although study of the Talmud was still important, exploration and harmonization of the commentaries of the Tosafists increasingly preoccupied the sixteenth-century Polish yeshivah student.

Simultaneous with the growth of *pilpul* was the efflorescence and penetration of the study of the Jewish mystical tradition. Elite groups of devotees of Jewish mysticism joined *kloizim*, small voluntary groups devoted to the study of mystical texts. Less intellectually-inclined Jews were exposed to kabbalistic ideas through the popularization of the practical kabbalah. Books devoted to both the performance of the commandments and ethical behavior based on mystical techniques and ideas became an important staple of Polish Jewry’s library in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

It needs to be underscored that this description of traditional rabbinic Judaism as it was lived in early modern Poland was categorically male. Men were the figures of rabbinic authority, the audience to whom rabbinic and mystical texts were aimed, the adjudicators of rabbinic law, and they comprised the laity, who increasingly determined the life of the Jewish community. Jewish women had access to rabbinic spirituality and creativity through their husbands and fathers, and through the popularization of both rabbinic and mystical texts into Yiddish. While numerous women’s prayers, called

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tekhinës, are extant from early modern Poland, it is important to note that most, if not all, of them were written by men for women, and not authored by women themselves. So, too, many Yiddish texts — although introduced with the obligatory apology that the works were intended for women — were read avidly by men unlearned in Hebrew and the rabbinic corpus.32

This overview of early modern Polish rabbinic culture does not mean that Polish Jews of the eighteenth century were a homogeneous group. Within the parameters of traditional Ashkenazic Jewish culture, there was a rabbinic elite devoted to *pilpul*, Talmudic study, and esoteric mysticism; practitioners of practical kabbalah; rabbinic appointees to the leadership of the kahal (the administrative body of the Jewish community) whose authority derived not from erudition, but from political and economic connections to the magnate class; and popular preachers and makers of amulets, called *ba’alei shem*, who travelled the countryside in search of a clientele. Yet there was still a hegemony to rabbinic culture within early modern Polish Jewish life, one that has been characterized as “baroque,” valorizing the exclusive study of the Talmud and its commentators, disregarding the grammar and philology of the Hebrew language and distrusting non-Jewish sources of knowledge.33 By the mid-eighteenth century, however, several important controversies would shake the authority of the traditional rabbinate to its very core. In particular, the ground shifted in the southeastern borderlands.

**The Sabbatian and Frankist Challenge**

The region of Podolia, originally part of medieval Rus’ but annexed to Poland in the fifteenth century, and “Right Bank” Ukraine (the provinces of Kiev and Braclaw) fell to the Ottoman Empire in 1672 according to the terms of the Treaty of Buczacz. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth recovered Podolia, however, by the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699. Prior to the

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After the conclusion of the Turkish wars, the Podolian Jewish community gained its own independent regional administration, and in 1713 a regional rabbi was appointed in Satanów. Kamieniec Podolski, an island fortress, was Podolia’s capital city, but Jews living there were subject to frequent expulsions; settlement thus grew in the neighboring towns of Międzybóz and Satanów, private holdings of the Sieniawski-Czartoryski families. Although Podolia was hit particularly hard by the Chmielnicki revolt in 1648–1649, Podolia’s magnates managed to reconstitute their estates after the devastating effects of the constant warfare of the seventeenth century. Moshe Rosman argues, in fact, that Podolia was on a trajectory different from the rest of the country, and that the magnates’ profitable export of grain was not interrupted by the Northern War in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. The head tax calculated in 1577 for the Podolian Jewish communities show Międzybóz and Satanów among the top kahillot (communities) in southeastern Poland, with the former paying 230 zlotys and the latter ninety zlotys per year. By 1774, Międzybóz could be counted among one of the fifteen largest Jewish communities in the Commonwealth, and at the time of the census in 1764, the Jewish population in Podolia totalled 40,000, constituting six percent of the Jewish population of Poland, a figure that contradicts the regnant view of the severe depression characterizing Podolia’s kahillot in the eighteenth century. In that same year, the poll tax for Satanów was 1,369 zlotys.

Podolia’s distinctiveness also lay in the affinity of its denizens, whether Polish, Ruthenian, or Jewish, for a popular mystical culture that assumed the existence and power of the supernatural world. Miracle workers were not unique to the Jewish population, but considered part of the general fabric of Podolian life. Major Balaban cites a Stephen Bonczewski who noted, “There is no people among whom magicians and witches have so multiplied as they have here in Poland, particularly in the mountains, in Rus’, in Lithuania, in Ukraine, [and] in the heart of Wallachia.” Sectarianism and mysticism of all kinds flourished in eighteenth-century Podolia, including the sect of Old Believers, a schismatic Russian-Orthodox group, and the Starchy sect.

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34 Major Balaban, Letoldot hatenu’ah hafranqit (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1934), 116–17.
35 Rosman, Founder of Hasidism, 53 and 61.
36 Balaban, Letoldot hatenu’ah hafranqit, 20.
39 Balaban, Letoldot hatenu’ah hafranqit, 90.
an offshoot of the Old Believers. Moreover, eighteenth-century Podolia was fertile ground for both Sabbatianism and Frankism, a heretical sectarian offshoot of the former that combined Christian, Muslim, and Jewish beliefs. Their legacy in Podolia had an enormous impact on the perceptions by maskilim and mitnaggedim (the rabbinic opponents of Hasidism) of the dangers of mysticism.

The emergence of Sabbatianism, belief in the messianic aspirant Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676) as a harbinger of the messianic era, spawned a tremendous penitential movement throughout the Jewish Diaspora in the mid-seventeenth century. Spurred on by the belief in the imminence of redemption, Jews in Italy, German lands, the Balkans, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth engaged in voluntary self-flagellations and other acts of penance; businessmen liquidated their enterprises in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah; women packed their bags and kept them on their beds in anticipation of being transported to the Land of Israel. The activism of Sabbatai Zevi’s messianic claim threatened the traditional rabbinate, whose worldview and liturgy encoded a quiescent hope for messianic redemption. Moreover, Sabbatai Zevi and his followers exhibited antinomian behavior, some of which was sexual, and also challenged the traditional rabbinic authorities by tampering with the Jewish calendar. Sabbatians regularly ate on fast days and many celebrated the Sabbath in the middle of the week. The overt flouting of Jewish law led to swift opposition on the part of the traditional rabbinic leadership, who placed Sabbatai and his followers in herem (excommunication). The rabbinic opponents of Sabbatianism were hopeful that Sabbatai’s imprisonment in Gallipoli in August 1666 and subsequent conversion to Islam in September of that year would end the episode of the false messiah, even though they knew that restoring the faith of the former believers could be a daunting task. After all, despair was a normal response to hopes thwarted. As the German-Jewish memorist, Glückl of Hameln, recalled:

> About this time people began to talk of Sabbatai Zevi. But “woe unto us that we have sinned” (Lam 5:16) and never lived to see what we had heard and nigh believed. When I think of the ‘repentence done’ by young and old my pen fails me — but the whole world knows of it! Oh Lord of All Worlds, hoping as we did that Thou hadst shown compassion on Israel and redeemed us, we were like a woman who sits in labour and suffers mighty pangs, and thinks once her suffering is over she shall be blessed with a child; but it was only hearkening after a wind. (Isa 26:18)42

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40 Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*, 58.
But rabbinic hopes for the restitution of traditional authority were dashed when the apostasy, justified as theologically necessary by Nathan of Gaza, Sabbatai’s prophet, engendered a clandestine heretical Sabbatian movement that remained a powerful force within Jewish society for the next two centuries. Many believers refused to accept the verdict of history, unwilling to admit that their faith had been an illusion, and continued to believe in Sabbatai even though he had donned the turban. Nathan of Gaza’s new theology, which was deeply indebted to the spread of kabbalistic ideas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, justified Sabbatai’s conversion as a necessary precondition to redemption. Sabbatai had entered the kabbalistic realm of the “husks” (qelippot) in order to reintegrate them into the realm of holiness. Antinomian behavior was thus a prerequisite for hastening the advent of the Messianic Age.43

The spread of heretical Sabbatianism to Poland is still a subject of scholarly dispute. We know that in 1722, four rabbinic figures, Issacar Ber ben Joshua Heschel of Cracow, Shmuel ben Zevi Hirsch of Cracow, Yitzhak Eisik ben Elazar of Lwów, and Mordecai ben Shemariyah Shmerl of Lublin, signed a writ of excommunication against Sabbatians that was binding throughout Podolia.44 Gershom Scholem, and others, argued that in the years 1725–1726, itinerant Sabbatians — often members of the “secondary intelligentsia,” preachers, peddlers, kosher slaughterers, and cantors — disseminated their views in southeastern Poland and Ukraine, which were geographically contiguous with Ottoman Turkey, and had been lost by the Poles in 1672. At the same time, radical Sabbatian followers of Baruchiah Russo, the leader of the Dönme sect in Salonika and Constantinople, created links with Sabbatians in Podolia, and sent emissaries to Prague, Fürth, Berlin, and Mannheim.45 Moses Hagiz (1671–1751), the most important protagonist in the eighteenth-century rabbinic anti-Sabbatian controversies, devoted his energies to gathering testimony against these itinerant Sabbatians and, in 1725, tried to convince the Council of Four Lands, the most prestigious rabbinic body in Poland, to enact a ban against them. This effort failed, but Hagiz did not waver in his pursuit of the suspected heretics, and in the 1730s


turned his attention to the vilification of Moses Hayim Luzzatto (1707–1747), a brilliant Italian kabbalist whom he suspected of harboring and teaching Sabbatian doctrine. In this later effort, Hagiz solicited the aid of Jacob Emden, whose father, Hakham Zevi, had supported Hagiz in his first controversy against Nehemiah Hayon in Amsterdam. Emden endorsed Hagiz’s bans against Luzzatto’s writings and then included the young Italian in his list of Sabbatian precursors in his anti-Sabbatian tract, *Torat haqena’ot* (*Scroll of Zeal*). Emden became a tireless anti-Sabbatian polemicist, publishing numerous tracts, many on his own printing press, to expose the dangers of the illicit sect. He became the central figure in the Sabbatian controversy with Jonathan Eybeschütz in 1750, an event that shook all of European Jewry and resulted in further undermining the status of the traditional rabbinate.46

Coupled with the anti-Sabbatian controversies of the early eighteenth century was the eruption in mid-century of the public disputation between Judaism and Frankism. Jacob Frank (1726–1791), the founder of the eponymous heretical movement, was born in a village called Berezanka or Berezana, and then moved with his family to Korolówka on the Polish-Turkish border, where, historians speculate, there were connections with members of the Dönme. On January 17, 1756, Frank attracted the attention of the Jewish authorities when he, along with a group of Jews in Lanckaron (Landskron), were arrested for crimes of a sexual and heretical nature. The rabbi of Lanckaroń turned to the rabbi in Satanów, who was the chief religious authority of the region of Podolia at that time, to investigate the charges. Due to the illness of the rabbinic head in Satanów, Eleazar Lipmann of Smoszczić, the son-in-law of the rabbi from Lanckaroń, carried out the investigation and forwarded the results to the regional rabbinic seat. Like many Podolian cities, Lanckaroń was under the authority of the Catholic bishop in Kamieniec Podolski, Mikołaj Dembowski. On February 5, 1756, Dembowski demanded a full report of what had occurred in Lanckaroń and set March 31, 1756 as the date to hear the evidence. The case never went to trial because none of the rabbinic authorities appeared. The Jewish super-

46 Elisha Carlebach, *The Pursuit of Heresy: Rabbi Moses Hagiz and the Sabbatian Controversies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 172, 191, and 245–51. Emden’s anti-Sabbatian oeuvre includes *Torat haqena’ot* (1752); *Sefat emet uleshon zehorot* (1752); *Aqizat aqrav* (1753); *Edut bey’aqov* (1756); *Shevirat buhat ha’even* (1756); *Pethah einayim* (1756); *Qitsur tsitat novel tsevi* (1757); *Sefer hashimush* (1758–1762); *Sefer hitavqot* (1762–69); *Mitpahat sefarim* (1768); *Megillat sefer* (first published only in 1896). See Jacob Joseph Schacter, “Rabbi Jacob Emden: Life and Major Works” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1988).

Debate continues to rage about the penetration of Sabbatianism in the seventeenth-century Commonwealth and there is still no consensus. Note Weinryb’s comments, “If we take literally the heresy-hunter Jacob Emden and those who follow his ‘conspiracy theory,’ most of Podolia and some other parts of Poland were supposedly infested with Sabbatians. But this is far from the truth.” Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland*, 234.
communal organization, the va’ad of the region of Lwów, meeting on May 10, 1756, then ordered the chief rabbi in Satanów to reinvestigate the incident. Only some of the participants appeared at the investigation, but the results spurred the members of the regional va’ad meeting in Brody and Konstantynów, including Hayim ha-Cohen Rapoport (1700–1771), an eminent figure within the rabbinic leadership of Polish Jewry who would be the central defender of Judaism in the 1759 disputation with the Frankists, to excommunicate the accused.47 The writ of excommunication was sent throughout Poland in June 1756 and affirmed in Lwów, Busk, Łuck, Lanckaroń, Jezierzany, and Ofoczna. Frank, who was considered a citizen of the Ottoman Empire, was never tried, but the other participants were sentenced to hard labor.48

Because the Frankists practiced an admixture of Judaism and Christianity, Catholic authorities, too, viewed the group with suspicion. Bishop Dembowski, who was personally hostile to rabbinic Judaism, compelled the Jewish community to debate the Frankists in a theological disputation in Kamieniec Podolski in June 1757 in order to clarify the doctrine of Frank and his followers. All of the leaders of Podolian Jewry were invited to participate, including individuals from Międzybóz, Bar, Satanów, Lanckaroń, Balin, Jezierzany, Husiatyn, and Jagielnica. The Frankists hailed from Satanów and Zbaraz, as well as from Busk. At the Satanów investigation, the Frankists had enumerated nine principles of their faith. The third principle directly attacked the authority and sanctity of the Oral Law; they claimed that the Talmud was riddled with lies and fundamentally opposed to Scripture. This charge struck a painful chord among the Jews present at the disputation because Polish hostility to the Talmud had been well attested in the previous century. The rabbinic participants of the investigation in Kamieniec Podolski therefore went to great lengths to show that the Talmudic category of akum (idolaters) only applied to the pagans of antiquity and not to eighteenth-century believers in the three monotheistic faiths. As they argued, the [monotheistic] Gentiles “believe in the creation of the world, in the exodus from Egypt, in God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and in the

47 Hayim ha-Cohen Rapoport established a study house in Shuck in his youth and was appointed to the rabbinate in Zitel in 1729. From 1730, he was the head of the rabbinical court in Shuck, and from 1740, head of the rabbinical court in Lwów; in 1763, Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski appointed Rapoport as chief rabbi of all of medinat rusiya, the most eastern regions of the Commonwealth. In 1761, he signed a ban against Jonathan Eybeschütz, but later repented of his action and refused involvement in the Eybeschütz affair. See Meir Wunder, Entisgolehdyah lehakkhei Galitshah (Jerusalem: Institute for Commemoration of Galician Jewry, 1986), 991–94. See, too, Solomon Buber, ed., Anshei shem: ge'onei yisra'el, adirei torah, rabbanim asher shimshu baqodesh ba’ir Lwów mishenat 1500 ve’ad 1890 (Cracow, 1895), 236–38.
power of God’s divine words. Thus, not only is it not forbidden to save them, but we must also pray to God for their wellbeing, etc.”

The efforts of the rabbinic figures notwithstanding, the disputation resulted in a full exoneration of the Frankists and in a condemnation of the Talmud. The bishop’s ruling demanded that the Jewish community turn over all Jewish books forbidden by the Church, sentenced individual Jews to corporal punishment, and required that the rabbinic Jewish community compensate the exculpated Frankist Jews of Satanów and Lanckaron. Worried about the implications of this decision, the Jewish community notified both Hayim ha-Cohen Rapoport and Jacob Emden and inquired regarding the possibility of their interceding with the authorities in Warsaw and Amsterdam. Dembowski’s sudden death temporarily stayed the escalation of the crisis.

On June 16, 1758, Jacob Frank, who had fled to Turkey after the disputation, received a letter from the Polish King, August III, permitting him and his group to return to Poland. Soon thereafter, a group of these Frankists approached the Archbishop in Lwów with a request to convert to Christianity. The second public disputation between the Frankists and the Polish-Jewish rabbinical establishment was held in Lwów in the late summer of 1759. Once again, the Frankists enumerated a series of doctrinal beliefs outside the pale of traditional rabbinic culture, but they stunned their opponents by invoking the blood libel, the charge that Jewish law requires Christian blood for the preparation of unleavened bread on the holiday of Passover. A string of blood libels (1728, Lwów; 1722 and 1738, Gniszewo [Gniesen]; 1736–40, Poznań; 1747, Zasław; 1748, Dunajgród; 1753, Zytomierz [Zhitomir]; 1756, Jampol) voiced in eighteenth-century Poland made the traditional Jewish community particularly sensitive to charges of the Talmud’s alleged hostility to Christians. The Lwów disputation included seven public meetings, in which over thirty rabbinic Jews and ten Frankists participated. An eyewitness to the trial, Dov Ber of Bolechów (1723–1805), a prominent Polish-Jewish wine merchant renowned for his command of languages, was asked to be the Polish-Yiddish interpreter for the trials. His memoirs are valuable testimony to the spread of popular anti-Jewish views in the eighteenth-century Commonwealth:

The priest, Jacob Radliński, canon of Lublin, wrote much on this matter [the well-known Christian-Jewish debate over the meaning of the verse, “The sceptre shall not depart

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49 Cited in ibid., 144.
50 Ibid., 190–91.
from Judah . . . until Shiloh come,” (Gen 49:10)\textsuperscript{52} in a book, full of lies, entitled \textit{Rab Shemuel}, in Polish “Samuel Rabin.”\textsuperscript{53} This book abounds in mistakes and shameful falsehoods, which are not worth writing down or quoting to reasonable people. The third edition of it appeared at Lublin in 1753 of the Christian Era. In the same year it came into my hands, and I read it. Besides this book, “Samuel Rabin,” I read also some more of their theological writings dealing with the Jews, in which they malign and slander the Jewish people and our holy Oral Law, which we have by tradition. All these books I read with grief in my heart, but I acquired much knowledge of their doctrines. I discerned in their arguments great errors and obduracy. Moreover, I became acquainted with all the fables and miracles in which they believed, things which never really existed. The reward of my labour in that distasteful study was given to me and to the whole of Israel on the occasion of the great and famous dispute that took place in Lemberg between all Israel, on the one side, and the evil sect of the believers in Shabbetai Zebi, may his name be extinguished, on the other side.\textsuperscript{54}

Hayim ha-Cohen Rapoport, then the head of the rabbinical court in Lwów, became the leading voice on the side of the traditional Jewish community. The Frankists taunted him during the trial by alluding to the blood libel: “Hayim, here is ‘blood for blood’. You have spoken in a way that allows our blood to flow, so here is blood in exchange for blood.”\textsuperscript{55} Rapoport gave the concluding argument against the Frankist charges on August 28, 1759, in which he relied on the evidence adduced in a recent Catholic work surveying Scripture and the Talmud, Humphrey Prideaux’s \textit{The Old and New Testament connected in the history of the Jews and neighbouring nations, from the declension of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the time of Christ} (London, 1716–18), to show that there was no evidence for the blood libel in Jewish sources.\textsuperscript{56} Rapoport’s testimony conclusively refuted the blood libel charge, but this victory was

\textsuperscript{52}This verse was at the center of the Barcelona Disputation between Nachmanides and the apostate Pablo Christiani in 1263, in which Christiani adduced the Talmud to attest to Christ’s divinity and used Gen 49:10 to prove God’s abandonment of the Jews. See Hyam Maccoby, ed., \textit{Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages} (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1981).

\textsuperscript{53}Jacob Paul Radliński, priest, theological writer, poet and historian published \textit{Prawda chrześcijańska, to jest list Rabina Samuela do Rabina Izaka przekład z łacińskiego z dodatkami tłumacza}, which became an important source for anti-Jewish pamphleteers, in Lublin in 1732; a second and third edition were published in 1733 and 1753.


\textsuperscript{56}D. Valentin Ernst Loescher translated the English text into German, with the title \textit{Alt und Neu Testament in eine Connexion mit der Juden und benachbarten Völker Historie gebracht vom Verfall der Reiche Israel und Juda an bis auf Christi Himmelfahrt}, in 1726.
soon forgotten with the mass conversion to Christianity of Frank and one thousand of his followers.\footnote{Balaban, \textit{Letoldot hatenu'ah hafranqit}, 209–76.}

What had started as a sectarian offshoot of radical Sabbatianism ultimately resulted in a huge public renunciation of Judaism in the context of a Christian-Jewish polemic over the veracity of the Talmud. Despite Polish Jewry’s material security, it still harbored deep fears and insecurities about its place in Polish Christian society.\footnote{M. J. Rosman, “Jewish Perceptions of Insecurity and Powerlessness in 16th–18th Century Poland,” \textit{Polin} 1 (1986): 19–27.} The Frankists’ public embrace of Christianity and disparagement of Judaism, which was wrapped in the mystical vocabulary of heretical Sabbatianism, confirmed the worst fears of the traditional Jewish community still reeling from the Sabbatian controversies of the earlier part of the century. It is not surprising, therefore, that the traditional Jewish community in Podolia responded with swift denunciations of new forms of Jewish worship that appeared later in the century. As Elisheva Carlebach has argued, the rabbinic campaigns against crypto-Sabbatianism in the early eighteenth century, which embodied the effort to bolster the authority of the crisis-ridden traditional rabbinate, created the ideological framework, tactics, and vocabulary for the rabbinic polemics against Hasidism in the later part of the century. The \textit{mitnaggedim} drew a direct analogy between Sabbatianism and Hasidism, perceiving both as fundamental threats to traditional sources of authority in the Jewish community. Their anti-Hasidic tactics included writs of excommunication, gathering evidence, and efforts to prohibit the publication of kabbalistic works, the very same strategies employed by the opponents of Sabbatianism a half-century earlier.\footnote{Carlebach, \textit{The Pursuit of Heresy}, 277–78.}

An extensive body of scholarship has been devoted to describing and explaining the relationship between Sabbatianism and Hasidism, focusing on geographic, chronological, personal, literary, doctrinal, and sociological similarities between the two movements.\footnote{The classic accounts are Balaban, \textit{Letoldot hatenu'ah hafranqit}, 67–68; Benzion Dinur, \textit{Bemifneh hadorot} (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1955); Jacob Katz, “Regarding the Connection of Sabbatianism, Haskalah, and Reform,” in \textit{Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History} (ed. Siegfried Stein and Raphael Loewe; Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 85–101; Shimon Dubnow, \textit{Toldot habasidut} (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1930), 1:24–34; Heinrich Graetz, \textit{Geschichte der Juden} (Leipzig, 1900), 95–98; Yehudah Liebes, “New Light on the Matter of the Besht and Sabbatai Zevi,” \textit{Mezirevu yerushalayim benahashoet yisra'el} 3 (1983): 564–69; Scholern, “The Sabbatian Movement in Poland.” See, too, Michael Silber’s map of the spread of Hasidism in Eviatar Friesel, \textit{Atlas of Modern Jewish History} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 50.} Yet, what concerns us here is not whether or not there are Sabbatian foundations within Hasidism, or even whether there are individuals who might be linked with the two movements,
but rather how the Podolian legacy of Sabbatianism, and of Frankism in particular, affected the ways in which maskilim like Mendel Lefin perceived Hasidism.

By 1850 Hasidism was triumphant throughout most of Eastern Europe (save a small pocket in Lithuania) and had thoroughly transformed Polish-Jewish society, but its success was by no means assured in the eighteenth century. Although there were sporadic attempts to combat Hasidism in the early part of the century, a more concrete, centralized opposition only took shape when Hasidism began to infiltrate the northern regions of Poland in the 1770s. The years 1772–1815 were marked by the struggle between mitnaggedim and Hasidim.

The first official published record of the opponents of Hasidism was the publication of Zemir aritsim veharavot tsurim (The Song of Tyrants and Flint Knives) in 1772, although the community of Szkłów issued anti-Hasidic measures a year earlier. Throughout the seven documents that comprise Zemir aritsim veharavot tsurim charges recur against Hasidic practices, such as changing the time of established prayers, using polished knives for kosher slaughtering, and praying in small, separate prayer groups, which threatened the communal fabric of traditional Jewish society. Opponents of Hasidism were afraid that the renewal movement would cause an irreparable fissure in the Jewish community, as had the Karaites, or worse, could lead to the heresies of Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank. This connection appears in the h*rem (ban) issued by the community of Cracow in 1786: “And who knows whereto these things [Hasidic customs] will lead, or of the magnitude of the obstacle that is likely to derive from this, as has already happened in the world; many did as these people did, who by their own mouths were called Hasidim, and in the end they performed a deed like that of [the biblical figure] Zimri and became idolaters.”

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63 The title is a combination of Isa 25:5 and Josh 5:2.
64 Wilensky, Hasidism umitnagedim, 1:63.
65 Published in ibid., 1:138. On Zimri, see 1 Kgs 17:9–20.
Hasidism is likewise reflected in the edicts of the community of Mohylew, Lithuania, against the Hasidim, which were promulgated roughly around 1778. A direct connection, not merely a metaphorical one, appears in a document composed in 1800 by Avigdor of Pinsk and presented to Tsar Paul I, in which the author named three heirs of Sabbatianism: Israel of Miedzyboz (Medzibozh), Dov Ber of Miedzyrzec (Mezhirech), and Jacob Joseph of Polonna (Polonnayo). David of Maków (1741–1814/5), the zealous anti-Hasidic publicist, saw Hasidism as another link in the chain of a heretical past leading back to the Zadokites of the Second Temple period. Even German rabbis, such as Joseph Steinhart, the rabbi of Fürth, saw a direct connection between Hasidism and Sabbatianism after receiving the anti-Hasidic pamphlet, Zemir aritsim.

An itinerary of Mendel Lefin’s life shows that he lived in proximity to the important centers of Hasidism in Podolia. His knowledge of Hasidism was thus due to close contact with the new form of spirituality, rather than to rumor or second-hand accounts. Acutely aware of both the Frankist debacle and of the efflorescence of Hasidism, Lefin’s self-understanding as a maskil was a product of the region in which he matured and lived for most of his

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67 Documentary evidence corroborates Lefin’s itinerary as follows: 1791, Miedzyboz (see Abraham Baer Gottlober, Zikkaron umasabot [ed. Reuben Goldberg; Jerusalem: The Balik Institute, 1976], 174–75 and Israel Halpern, “R. Levi Isaac of Berdyczov and the Decrees of the Government in His Time,” in Yehudim ve-hahadut bemizraḥ: mehizarim betoldoteihem [ed. Israel Halpern; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1963], 344–45); 1788–1792, Warsaw, (see Materiały do dziejów Sejmu Czteroletniego); 1794, Sieniawa, (see manuscript 2253, the Czartoryski Library, Cracow and Israel Weinlos, “Mendel Lefin of Satanów: A Biographical Study from Manuscript Material,” YIVO bleter 1 [1931]: 348); 1797, Sieniawa, (see Major Balaban, “Mendel Lewin i książę Adam Czartoryski,” Chwila, no. 5313–14 [7–8 stycznia 1934]: 10–12); 1803–4, St. Petersburg, (see Czartoryski MS EW 3267, Adam Jerzy Czartoryski to Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski, 10 August 1803, the Czartoryski Library, Cracow); 1805, Mikokajow, (see the Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4° 1153/8); 1806–8, Mikokajow, with a trip to Annopol, (see the Abraham Schwadron Collection, and the Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4° 1153/appendix); 1815, Sieniawa, (see the Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4° 1153/appendix); 1817, Tarnopol, (see Franz Kohler, Jüdische Geschicette in Briefen aus Ost und West [Vienna: Im Saturn-Verlag, 1938], 147–48 and the Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4° 1153/129); 1818, Tarnopol, (see the Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4° 1153/2 and 4° 1153/6); 1821–1825, Tarnopol, (see the N. M. Gelber Archive, letters from Sheindel Pineles to Moses Inländer, July 17, 1821; July 21, 1822; February 19, 1824; September 30, 1824; February 3; and March 3, 1825, The Central Archives of the Jewish People). I am grateful to Tamar Schechter, author of a master’s essay at Bar-Ilan University on Sheindel Pineles, Joseph Perl’s daughter, for sharing these letters with me. The only evidence for Lefin’s stay on the estate of Joshua Zeitlin is S. J. Fuenn’s account; see Samuel Joseph Fuenn, Qiryah se’emanah (Vilna, 1860), 272. In 1808, Lefin was still in Podolia; we cannot be precise as to when he settled in Brody.
like the *mitnaggedim* who were his contemporaries, Lefin, too, believed there was a direct link connecting Sabbatianism, Frankism, and Hasidism.68

*The Heartland of Hasidism*

From its beginnings, Podolia was the hub of Hasidism, with Międzybóz as its epicenter. Born in 1700 in Okopy, a small town in Podolia, Israel ben Eliezer Ba’al Shem Tov, the man later called the “Besht,” moved to Międzybóz, Podolia in 1740, and remained there until his death in 1760. In Międzybóz, the Besht attracted a group of followers, including Jacob Joseph of Nemirov (later called Jacob Joseph of Polonna [Polonnoye]), Judah Leib, the mohkiah [preacher] of Polonna, Nahman Kosover, Isaac of Drohobycz, Wolf Kozis, David Purkes, and Dov Ber of Międzyrzec (Mezherich). Międzybóz was one of the largest cities in the Ukraine, more than half the size of neighboring Bar, and an important link in the trade routes leading to Volhynia and Kiev. The city’s Polish magnate owners, the Czartoryskis, built a castle in its center. There was also a garrison of soldiers stationed there, helping to ensure the security of merchants doing business between the West and East. One of the fifteen wealthiest Jewish communities in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Międzybóz did not suffer under the burden of enormous communal debt in the 1730s and 1740s that plagued many kehillot. It appears that the Besht moved to Międzybóz precisely because of its prosperity, lived in a house owned by the Jewish communal administration next to the synagogue, and was thoroughly integrated into the fabric of the communal life of the city.69 After the Besht’s death, Międzybóz declined both economically and as a Hasidic center, and the movement shifted to new centers in Volhynia, which influenced Reisen (the region of Szkłów) and Lithuania.70 Later in the eighteenth century, Międzybóz would regain some of its original importance under the domineering personality of the Besht’s grandson, Barukh of Międzybóz (Medzibozh).

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70 Dubnow, *Toldot hab hassidut*, 1:77. In the spring of 1772, the ga’on of Vilna signed a ban against the Hasidim under pressure from the community of Szkłów, which felt under siege both by the penetration of Hasidism and by the first partition of Poland, which severed the community from the central Jewish institutions in Poland. In 1787, a regional meeting of communal leaders and rabbis was held in Szkłów and a series of edicts were passed against the Hasidim. David E. Fishman, *Russia’s First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 11–15.
The first stage in the emergence of Hasidism coincides with the earliest years of Mendel Lefin’s life, from his birth in Satanów in 1749 to his trip to Berlin in 1780, underscoring the specific Podolian context for both his turn to and shaping of the Jewish Enlightenment. Unfortunately, we have almost no documentary evidence to shed light on these formative years, but we do know that Lefin’s father was born in Zbaraz, a town to the northwest of Satanów. Zbaraz already had a Jewish presence at the end of the fifteenth century and, typical of the towns in the region, was administered by Jewish arrendators. Suffering during both the Chmielnicki revolt in the mid-seventeenth century and from the attacks of the Haidamaks in the eighteenth, Zbaraz’s Jewish population nonetheless continued to grow. The city was known for its prominent rabbinate and, as we saw above, was also home to the Frankist heresy. Until his trip to Berlin in 1780, we hear nothing of Lefin, and in his numerous writings he provides little personal information about those years. Even Abraham Baer Gottlober, the Russian maskil who is the source of most of the biographical information that we have about Lefin, complained about the difficulty in correctly assessing his date of birth. In his memoirs, Gottlober does not provide any substantial biographical information about Lefin’s early years, but describes him, in classic maskilic fashion, as a Talmudic protegé who fortuitously discovered the world beyond traditional Jewish study through a classic work of seventeenth-century Jewish science, Joseph Solomon Delmedigo’s Sefer elim. In Gottlober’s view, Lefin

71 Jacob Samuel Bik, one of Lefin’s disciples, remarked in an outline for his biography of Lefin: “His father was a learned man, fluent in gemara (Talmud), and his mother was very chaste. They educated him with their knowledge until he became an expert.” Cited in A. M. Haberman, “Toward a History of Menachem Mendel Lefin of Satanów,” in Sefer Klausner (Tel Aviv: The Jubilee Committee and the Society “Omanut”, 1937), 461.


73 I assume that Lefin remained in Satanów prior to his trip to Berlin in 1780, thus coming of age simultaneously with the efflorescence of Hasidism in Podolia. Mahler reports that Lefin moved to Mikołów after his marriage and prior to his trip to Berlin. Raphael Mahler, Divrei yemei yisra’el (Rehavia: Worker’s Library, 1956), 1:72.

74 Abraham Baer Gottlober, “Russia,” Hamaggid 17 (1873): 348. Reading Sefer elim undoubtedly galvanized the young Lefin to see the possibility of harmonizing secular learning with rabbinic Judaism in his own time. Moreover, Delmedigo’s critique of his Polish-Jewish contemporaries’ all-embracing commitment to Talmudic casuistry, which he observed while living in Poland from 1620–1624/5, making them “enemies of rational learning. . . . God, they say, has no need of. . . . grammarians, rhetoricians and logicians, nor of mathematicians or astronomers . . . all [of] their wisdom . . . [is] foreign and drawn from impure sources,” surely resonated with Lefin’s historical experience. Cited in Isaac Barzilay, Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo (Yashar of Candia): His Life, Works and Times (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 67. See, too, the influence of Sefer elim on the Russian maskil, Mordecai Aharon Günzberg, in Israel Bartal, “Mordecai Aaron Günzberg: A Lithuanian Maskil Faces...
was so intoxicated with this new world that he devoured whatever secular books he could find in the study house and, in the process, damaged his eyes. Lefin’s ostensible curative journey to Berlin, the center of the Jewish Enlightenment at the end of the eighteenth century, is thus cast as a happy coincidence born of illness. This reading of Lefin’s journey to Berlin as an explanation for his commitment to the Haskalah is not sufficient.

The most recent work on the origins of the Haskalah has looked at eighteenth-century figures, such as Ezekiel Feivel of Palanga (1756–1834), Israel Zamość (c. 1700–1772), and Barukh Schick (1740–1812), an enlightened rabbinic Jew from Szkłów, as Jewish representatives of the “early Enlightenment.” Shmuel Feiner, for example, has defined a type of maskil, which included Jewish medical students who travelled to Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, merchants, rabbinic figures, and autodidacts, who were all deeply rooted in traditional Jewish culture. These individuals sought to expand its horizons through actively pursuing all branches of knowledge, studying and publishing in the fields of Hebrew grammar and language, reviving the medieval philosophic tradition, and cultivating new aesthetic values while emphasizing God’s role as master of a creative and purposeful world. The dominant features of their ideology were common to the European Frühaufklärung. As a disparate group, with slim, but discernible contacts with one another, these men were suspicious of both atheism and pietism. What distinguished them from the previously hegemonic rabbinic elite was the creation of a new social type: the secular intellectual. This view of the maskil was already


76 While agreeing with Feiner on many points regarding the origins and radicalization of the Haskalah, David Sorkin nonetheless asserts that the Haskalah’s essential feature was not the creation of a secular intellectual. His work, in fact, defines the Jewish Enlightenment within the European “Religious Enlightenment,” thereby minimizing its transformative break with traditional Jewish life. Radicalization, when it occurred, was not inherent to the Haskalah, which had focused on transforming Judaism. Rather, it was the addition of a social agenda that emphasized transforming the Jews themselves that transfigured the ideology of the early maskilim. Seeing the shift in generational terms, Sorkin argues that the
suggested many years ago by Jacob Katz, although he defined himself as a social historian and focused on the economic and political changes in European and Jewish society that gave rise to the new social types rather than on the cultural-intellectual features of their new conception of the world.77 Feiner’s work aptly describes a kind of eighteenth-century Jew and his modern intellectual and cultural predilections, but what is more difficult to ascertain is the cause of the shift in these individuals’ consciousness and self-definition. In other words, Lefin fits the category of the early maskil, but we still lack a precipitous cause for his journey to Berlin.

What were the events or trends in late eighteenth-century Polish-Jewish life that spurred individuals to look toward the West and to justify their appetite for its ideas in the Jewish medieval rationalist tradition? In the case of many of these early figures the appearance of a bold new piety that did not seek validation by the traditional power structure in the Jewish community — what came to be known first as Beshitianism and then as Hasidism — in the heartland of Ashkenazic Jewry, the Polish-Jewish Commonwealth, was a sufficient cause for many of them to turn toward the Enlightenment as a means of saving traditional rabbinic culture. Several additional factors specific to Podolian Jewish society in the eighteenth century, including the openness of Polish society to West European intellectual and cultural currents, the Frankist legacy, and the penetration of Jacob Emden’s anti-Sabbatian polemics created the context in which a small group of traditional rabbinic Polish Jews forged a new vision of Jewish identity that they called the Haskalah.

The dearth of information about the first forty years of Lefin’s life (the pre-Berlin years and those immediately after) begs the question of what


compelled him to go to Berlin. Unfortunately, we lack documents penned by Lefin before his sojourn in Berlin, so we cannot compare, as David Fishman has done in the case of Barukh Schick, Lefin’s pre- and post-Berlin years.78 Surely, as Gottlober argued, Lefin’s lifelong struggle with eye disease, which gave special meaning to the well-worn Enlightenment metaphor of bringing the light of reason to the darkness of fanaticism and irrationality, was, in part, the impetus for his pilgrimage in Berlin in 1780. So, too, knowledge of the intellectual vitality of Berlin, elements of which had already permeated a thin stratum of Polish-Jewish society,79 must have provided an equally strong magnet for an individual of Lefin’s temperament. Contrary to the image of backward eighteenth-century Poland in general and the region of Podolia in particular, not all of its towns were tiny, parochial enclaves impenetrable to the influence of new ideas. Although Mędybóź was the largest kehillah (Jewish community) in the region, with approximately 2039 Jews in 1766, Lefin’s birthplace, Satanów, home to 1625 Jews in that same year, was an important economic center in eighteenth century Podolia, and served, as did other border towns, as a point of contact for merchants travelling between the West and the East, and as a conduit for the spread of ideas.80 Merchants in Satanów exported lumber and grain to Danzig and had contact with their counterparts bringing goods from the fairs in Leipzig and Frankfurt-on-the-Oder.81 Satanów’s centrality also lay in its having served as the seat of the regional rabbinate of Podolia since 1713. By the mid-eighteenth century, Satanów was hardly impervious to western influences.82

In fact, Isaac Satanów (1732–1804), the maskil whose surname derived from his place of birth, preceded Lefin’s journey to Berlin by nine years.  

Settling in the Prussian capital in 1771 or 1772, Isaac Satanów wrote numerous maskilic works and was director of the printing press of the Berlin Freischule, called the “Society for the Education of Youth,” from its founding in 1783 until 1788. An important institution for the dissemination of Enlightenment publications, the press issued Lefin’s first major publication, the pamphlet Moda levinah (Insight to Understanding, Berlin, 1789), which contained examples from his Iggerot hahokhmah (Letters of Wisdom, in Hame’assef, 5, 1789) and Sefer refu’at ha’am (The Book of Popular Healing, Żółkiew, 1794).

Lefin clearly believed that there was an audience among the traditional Jews in Satanów and other towns in Podolia for his Enlightenment works, for he informed the readers of Moda levinah that to assure receipt of his new works they could send advance subscriptions to Lesznio, “where there are merchants from Międzyrzecz,” to Satanów, or to Międzybóz and Berdyczów, “where there are merchants from Międzybóz and Satanów.”

Lefin also suggested to those readers who wanted to purchase Sefer refu’at ha’am to contact a Meir of Satanów. Later in the century, other maskilic works attracted subscribers from Satanów, including three for Besamim rosh (The Best Spices), two for Sefer hamiddot (Ethics), one for Melekhet mahashewet hahodesh (Tool for Calculating the Cycles of the Moon), three for Mishlei assaf (Collected Fables), and one for Te’udah beyisra’el (Testimony in Israel).

The rabbinical establishment in late eighteenth-century Satanów, too, was open to the ideals of the early Haskalah. In 1788 Lefin received an approbation from Alexander Sender (Zevi) Margoliot (1720–1802), the head of the rabbinical court in Satanów and the former head of the rabbinical court in Zbaraz, for his Yiddish translation of Ecclesiastes. Margoliot also gave his approval to Lefin’s Moda levinah in 1789 and to the 1794 publication of Sefer refu’at ha’am. Lefin also turned to other members of the rabbinical establishment in Satanów, such as Mordecai Margoliot (1752/8–1818), Alexander Sender’s son, who had replaced his father as the head of the rabbinical court, and to Joshua Zelig Bloch, the dayyan of the community, when he sought an approbation in 1808 for his book, Sefer hesbon hanefesh (Moral Accounting). Mordecai Margoliot also gave his approval to Lefin’s Yiddish translation of Proverbs, which appeared in 1814.

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83 The two maskilim from Satanów must have known each other, sharing both Berlin as a destination and David Friedländer as a friend. On Isaac Satanów and the Freischule press, see Alexander Altmann, Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1973), 351–54.
84 Mendel Lefin, Moda levinah (Berlin, 1789).
86 Lefin’s translation of and commentary to Ecclesiastes will be discussed in Chapter Four.
87 [Lefin], Sefer mishle shelomo im perush qatsar ve’ha’ataqah hadashah bishon Ashkenaz leto’elet aheinu b’ei yisra’el be’avtces Poln (Tarnopol, 1814).
living in eighteenth-century Satanów who were interested in the literary products of the European Enlightenment could thus acquire books and Enlightenment writings at fairs or through other mercantile routes, and at the same time garner intellectual nourishment from the medieval Jewish rationalist tradition.

As we have explored above, the Frankist legacy in Podolia had a profound effect on traditional rabbinic Jews and on their perception of the vulnerability of traditional rabbinic authority and life in early modern Poland. While the Frankist debacle and the efflorescence of Hasidism in Podolia did not necessarily propel Lefin toward the Haskalah, these forces certainly made a decisive stamp on the moderate shading of his program, just as similar expressions of enthusiasm within Christian circles had spurred a turn toward rational and critical rethinking of Christian religious tradition. Michael Heyd has argued that Protestant ministers in England and on the Continent, threatened by enthusiasts and Deists, incorporated the new Science and the faculty of human reason into their study of Scripture.88 Shmuel Feiner has demonstrated that early maskilim, such as Shelomo Chełm, Yehudah Horowitz, Barukh Schick, and Yehudah Leib Margoliot, among others, reacting negatively to the spread of pietistic behavior among eighteenth-century Jews, showed interest in the medieval rationalist tradition and the world of contemporary Enlightenment thought in order to bolster traditional rabbinic authority.89 The power of enthusiastic pietism to wreak havoc on the traditional Jewish community was felt acutely in southeastern Poland, where the rabbinic authorities already felt vulnerable. The geographic and historical proximity of the Frankist disputations, the burning of the Talmud, and the mass conversion of Frank’s followers planted profound doubts in the mind of a Podolian maskil like Mendel Lefin regarding the nature of Hasidism. As well, Lefin imbibed the anti-Sabbatian polemics of Moses Hagiz and Jacob Emden and adduced from them the analogies between the perils of Sabbatianism and Frankism and those of Hasidism.90

One of the essential features of Lefin’s critique of Hasidism was the deviance the new pietists displayed, in his view, regarding age-old Ashkenazic

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90 It is not surprising that Emden’s works were seen as authoritative by Polish Jews. He had intimate family ties to Poland in general and to the southeastern borderlands in particular. Two of his sons lived in Poland and were part of the rabbinical establishment. The first, Meir, was the head of the rabbinical court in Stary Konstantynów from 1759–1780, and the younger, Meshullam Zalman, was the head of the rabbinical court in Podhajce, and then in Brody. His daughters, too, were well-connected to Polish rabbinical families. See Dinur, Bemifneh hadorot, 85, footnote 10.
custom.91 Within the cultural world of Polish Jewry, customary law had always had preeminent authority. Hasidism, with its myriad new rituals and customs, threatened the known fabric of Jewish religious practice in Poland. In light of the Sabbatian and Frankist flaunting of rabbinic law, the proliferation of Hasidic customs — even if they accompanied the fulfillment of traditional commandments — appeared to be dangerously deviant, and mitnaggedim and maskilim alike recoiled from them. Regarding the Hasidic custom of celebrating the third meal of the Sabbath with extended singing and eating, Lefin immediately drew an analogy to both Sabbatianism and Frankism, and looked toward the tactics of his rabbinic precursors to combat the new movement:

[Jacob] Frank, may his name be blotted out, also began his sect with joyous activities, such as dancing and songs at the third meal of the Sabbath, which led to carnal acts performed according to the secret (sod) (perhaps he revealed the meaning of the phrase “in her foundation” that is in the Sabbath eve song, “I Will Sing with Praises,” to them).92 We are all obligated to thank and praise God, may he be blessed, that their doings swiftly and publicly became hamets [prohibited leavening] . . . and that the sages of that generation denounced them quickly, cleansing Israel of their [the Frankists’] evil with much less damage than that which Sabbatai Zevi caused. May God, blessed be he, protect us once more. They hastened again (through the zeal of our teacher, the great R. Moses Hagiz) to suppress R. Moses Hayim Luzzatto’s sect, which began to spread through kabbalistic works and through his new Zohar [Zohar tinyana] that had already led many astray, even his teacher, R. Isaiah Bassan,93 because in his time the damage [caused by] Sabbatai Zevi was not yet forgotten.94

91 The seemingly endless explosion of Hasidic custom that diverged from traditional Jewish law as it had been practiced in Poland alarmed subsequent generations of maskilim in Eastern Europe, including Lefin’s disciple, Joseph Perl, and members of his circle in Tarnopol. See Chapter Five.
92 Although Lefin does not mention the Hasidim by name in this section of the manuscript, he used the example of the Frankists’ licentiousness, which he believed they had justified based on the phrase wosoda dilah (“in her [the female aspect of the Divine’s] foundation”) of the kabbalistic poem, “I Will Sing with Praises,” in which the union between God and the Divine Presence (shekhinah) is described with sexual imagery, as proof of the dangers inherent in the popularization and spread of kabbalistic teachings. Joseph Perl knowingly translated this line in a coarse, explicit manner devoid of symbolism in his German anti-Hasidic pamphlet, Über das Wesen der Sekte Chassidim (Regarding the Essence of the Hasidic Sect), in an effort to discredit the Hasidim. See [Joseph Perl], Über das Wesen, 44, footnote 50.
93 Isaiah ben Israel Hezekiah Bassan (died 1739), one of eighteenth-century Italy’s most eminent rabbincic figures, instructed Moses Hayim Luzzatto in his youth and ardently defended him against Moses Hagiz’s accusations of the kabbalist’s alleged Sabbatianism. Lefin may have read about Hagiz’s pursuit and Bassan’s defense of Luzzatto in Jacob Emden’s Torat haqena’ot, in which Luzzatto was listed as one of the most significant forerunners of Jonathan Eybeschütz’s Sabbatianism. Carlebach, The Pursuit of Heresy, 217–51.
94 The Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4° 1153/72, 1b, and published in N. M. Gelber, “Mendel Lefin of Satanów’s Proposals for the Improvement of Jewish Community Life presented
Mendel Lefin was well acquainted with anti-Sabbatian rabbinic writings and frequently mentioned Emden’s work as a source for his own perspective on the links between the dating of the Zohar (The Book of Splendor), the spread of Sabbatianism, the eruption of Frankism, and the emergence of Hasidism. In the same manuscript, he evoked Emden and warned about the dangers of popularizing the esoteric mystical tradition:

God chose us due to the merit of our holy ancestors and distinguished us from those who err. He gave us the holy Torah with an explicit revelation, as it is written: “From the beginning, I have not spoken in secret,” (Isa 48:16) a revealed Torah with a clear explanation “that is not in Heaven” (b. Eruvin 55a). [It is] explained for all who seek it. Its secrets and allusions were only transmitted secretly to designated men. Therefore, several hundred years passed in which they kept the Zohar hidden . . . and they forbade showing it even to the great men of Israel of antiquity, may their memories be blessed. We saw what happened afterwards when the manuscript of the Zohar was revealed in the time of R. Isaac of Acco, and after R. [Isaac] Delattes was permitted to print it. Barely a few years passed when, due to our many sins, the actions of Satan succeeded in misleading several thousands in Israel and capturing them in the webs of secrets (sodot)


96 The only evidence of the publication of the Zohar comes from the diary of Isaac of Acco that was printed in Abraham Zacuto’s Sefer yuhasim. A kabbalist and author of Me’arat enayim, a commentary on Nahmanides, Isaac of Acco tells of seeing the Zohar in Spain at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Tishby, The Wisdom of the Zohar, 1:13–17.

97 Isaac Delattes supervised the printing of one part of the Zohar, to which he appended an introduction, in Mantua in 1558.
in which the evildoers of Israel, Sabbatai Zevi, [Nehemiah] Hayon, etc. had steeped their venom. Indeed, now, in our generation, they have flourished and flooded the country. Their books are widely disseminated, filling the houses of villagers and commoners. They have betrayed “the secret (sod) of God to those who fear him” (Ps 25:14), openly sharing the [esoteric] books with Gentiles. I, myself, have seen the books of *Ets hayim* (Tree of Life),98 *Pardes rimonim* (Orchard of Pomegranates),99 *Berit menuḥah* (Covenant of Repose),100 *Zohar* etc. in Gentile homes, some of whom study them with the heretics of Israel, due to our many sins.101 They [the Gentiles] seek the secrets (sodot) of their own faith in them and connect [the esoteric exegeses], as well, to the abominations of the idolatrous secrets of the Persians and Greeks. . . . R. Jacob Emden did a wonderful job of investigating that then (in R. Shimon bar Yochai’s period), no book was called by the term *hibbur* (publication) until many generations after the Talmud (and certainly [the terms] “forewords” (*hapetih*) and “introductions” (*hahaqdamot*) were only innovated in the period . . . after the “Rif”.102 may his memory be blessed). . . . [But,] his [Emden’s] proof regarding the profligacy of the generation who spent so much money copying these secrets, and his other suggestions regarding the style of concretizing kabbalistic secrets, made no difference.103

Lefin relied on Emden’s research in *Mitpahat sefarim* (Covering of the Scrolls of the Law), which attacked the antiquity of the *Zohar*, for his own purposes. Emden’s attack on the *Zohar* was ambivalent. His zealous pursuit of Sabbatianism forced him to impugn a book whose sanctity — as well as that of the kabbalistic tradition as a whole — he affirmed.104 Lefin showed no respect for the *Zohar* and discredited the mystical work because of his campaign

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98 *Ets hayim* was one of the most important kabbalistic works of the great Kabbalist, Hayim b. Joseph Vital (1542–1620); it contained most of his writings elaborating on the teachings of Isaac Luria and circulated in manuscript form until the late eighteenth century.

99 *Pardes rimonim* was written by Moses b. Jacob Cordovero (1522–1570), the most important kabbalist in Safed prior to Isaac Luria.

100 Attributed to Abraham Sephardi of the fourteenth century, *Berit menuḥah* was first published in 1648.

101 In 1819, Jacob Samuel Bik wrote to Lefin regarding a Polish translation of *In Praise of the Ba’al Shem Tov* that was causing a stir in Polish noble homes. There is no evidence of a Polish version of *Shivḥei haBesht*. Moshe Rosman, and others, speculate that Bik’s letter to Lefin, written when Bik still considered himself a maskil, was a deliberate parody alluding to the plot line of Perl’s *Megalleh temirin* (1819), which revolved around the Polish nobility’s reading of an exposé of Hasidism. For Bik’s letter to Lefin, see Philip Friedman, “The First Battles between the Haskalah and Hasidism,” *Fun noentn ovar* 4 (1937): 260–61. See, too, Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*, 210.

102 Isaac b. Jacob Alfasi (1013–1103), known by the acronym Rif, was the author of the most important code of Jewish law, *Sefer hahalakhot*, prior to Maimonides’s *Mishneh torah*.

103 The Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4° 1153/72, 1a and 2a.

against mysticism in general. Lefin also believed that the Zohar provided
dangerous fodder for contemporary mystical movements (the Hasidim) and
for Christian anti-Jewish polemics. In the manuscript cited above, as well as
in his anonymously published French pamphlet, Essai d’un plan de réforme
ayant pour objet d’éclairer la Nation juive en Pologne et de redresser par là ses moeurs
[1791], Lefin turned to unilateral censorship of kabbalistic works, targeting
the Zohar in particular, as a means of stemming the spread of Hasidism.

Taken together, therefore, the Frankist legacy, the impact of Emden’s
anti-Sabbatian polemics, and the direct contact with Beshtian Hasidism
created the context for the response of a small group of traditional rabbinic
Jews in Podolia to seek solutions to what they perceived to be insidious and
dangerous changes occurring in Polish Jewish society. Mendel Lefin was not
alone among his generation to feel that Hasidism would lead Polish Jewry
down the inexorable path of heresy and conversion.105 The letters of Lefin’s
correspondents, including Israel Bodek, Meir ha-Cohen Reich, and Hayim
Malaga, attest to their shared perception of Hasidism’s perils.106 Already
critical of the “baroqueness” of early modern Ashkenazic Jewish culture,
Lefin believed that the insularity of the new pietists was deepening the
subversion of historical Ashkenazic Jewish piety. Polish Jews were increasingly
living in a circumscribed world in which “the study of wisdom and science
and the rest of the sciences is considered apostasy.”107 Lefin’s childhood and
maturation in Podolia prior to 1780 thus prompted him to journey to Berlin
and informed his response to the Berlin Haskalah. This response, in turn,
helped to shape the parameters of the maskilic program that he brought
back to Podolia and then to Austrian Galicia. Despite the partitions, the

105 Certainly Lefin’s mitnaggedic contemporaries held such suspicions. Even bearing in
mind the polemical context of his words and, thus, their hyperbole, David of Maków, citing
the ga’on of Vilna, argued that the Maggid of Kozienice’s custom of mediating the prayers of
his Hasidim was “complete idolatry.” Cited in Wilensky, Hasidim umitnaggedim, 2:44–45.
106 The Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4° 1153/8, 4° 1153/70, 4° 1153/129, 4° 1153/130,
and 4° 1153/135. Abraham Schwadron Collection of Jewish Autographs and Portraits,
JNULA, Mendel Lefin papers. See, too, Meir ha-Cohen Reich’s letter to his son, Benjamin
Reich, in the personal diary of Jacob Samuel Bik, 39b. This manuscript belongs to the muni-
cipal library in Frankfurt-on-the-Main, Bibliotheca Merzbacheriana Monacensis, 64. Ms.
Hebrew folio 11; a microfilm is available in the Department of Microfilmed Hebrew Manu-
scripts, JNULA, film number 26448. Lefin was, however, acutely aware that he and his
maskilic friends were a tiny minority among Eastern European Jewry. Writing from Austrian
Galicia in the second decade of the nineteenth century, he remarked, “A small group of
enlightened men still lives here. Scorned and hated by the mob of course, they are still
tolerated as writers and copyists for all legal matters, such as for the promissory and
settlement notes presented to all the German authorities.” Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4°
1153/134a, 5b.
107 Lefin’s comment was published in his Liqqutei kelalim (Selections of Rules) in Gelber,
“Mendel Lefin of Satanów’s Proposals,” 300.
economic and political reality of Polish Jewry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries remained shaped by the political and economic life of the Commonwealth, and provided the context for Lefin’s commitment to a moderate program of Haskalah. Selective appropriation of the ideas of the West European Enlightenment and the Berlin Haskalah, and their seamless adaptation into a program of moderate Enlightenment especially constructed for Polish Jewry, became Lefin’s lifework.

East Meets West: Mendel Lefin’s Encounter with the Berlin Haskalah

For a period of two to four years, Lefin lived in Berlin where he befriended Moses Mendelssohn, David Friedländer (1750–1834), and Simon Veit, Mendelssohn’s son-in-law, and was welcomed by a broad circle of maskilim. In Gottlober’s words, “When Mendelssohn heard about him [Lefin], he welcomed him with open arms and was his dear friend for the entire time he stayed in Berlin. Lefin stayed in Berlin for two years and his soul, too, cleaved to that of Mendelssohn, until he [Lefin] felt that he [Mendelssohn] had become his rabbi and teacher.” Unlike Isaac Satanów and Solomon Maimon, two other Polish Jews who had made the pilgrimage to Berlin, Lefin did not settle there permanently. He returned to his native land, bringing with him a singular program of Haskalah that was not only a product of what he had encountered in Berlin, but also an active creation of his own views of the best way to enlighten traditional Polish Jewry.

Lefin left Berlin sometime in 1784, returned to Podolia, and soon settled in Mikolajów, a private town between Międzybóz and Satanów. He never explained his reasons for leaving Berlin when he did, but his disciples clearly believed, projecting backwards, that the rapid pace of change occurring in the Prussian capital after the deaths of Moses Mendelssohn and Frederick the Great in 1786 were decisive in compelling Lefin to depart. As Abraham Baer Gottlober conjectured:

Mendel Lefin also settled in Berlin, where his soul was filled with wisdom, reason, and pleasant thoughts, which he heard from Mendelssohn’s noble mouth, but the great and

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108 Gottlober, “Russia,” Hamaggid 17 (1873): 348. Other accounts of Lefin’s life mention his staying in Berlin for three or four years, until 1783 or 1784, but we have no evidence to corroborate fully when he left German lands. See N. M. Gelber, Aus zwei Jahrhunderten (Vienna: R. Löwit, 1924), 41, who says that Lefin returned to Poland in 1783 and Raphael Mahler, Divrei yemei yisra‘el, 1:72, for the four-year account.

109 Lefin signed his 1789 contribution to Hame'assef “Mendel of Satanów,” which may indicate either that he had returned to his place of birth or that he was already living in Mikolajów, but referring to himself by his place of birth.

110 On the rapid change of Jewish life in Berlin at the end of the eighteenth century, see Lowenstein, The Berlin Jewish Community.
The historical conditions that made Berlin a center of the Enlightenment, both Jewish and general, after the Seven Years War, and produced an accelerated modernization among its Jewish elite have been studied by Steven Lowenstein. The consequences of this rapid modernization included an increase in out-of-wedlock births, conversions, and public denunciations of rabbinic culture and authority. Between 1790–1794, the Haskalah journal, *Hame’assef* (The Gatherer), which had begun publication in 1783 under the stewardship of Isaac Satanów, published Aaron Wolfsohn-Halle’s *Sihah be’erets hahoyim (Dialogue in the Afterlife)*, a fierce attack on rabbinic Judaism that so alienated its readership that the journal completely lost its audience and stopped publishing. This event was universally decried by maskilim like Lefin, who defined the Haskalah as an intellectual movement distinct from the social processes of modernization. Yet, in the 1780s, Lefin continued to contribute to *Hame’assef*, published *Moda levinah* under the auspices of the “Society for the Education of Youth” and *Sefer refu’at ha’am* with approbations from Mendelssohn and Dr. Marcus Herz (1747–1803), and maintained personal ties with David Friedländer. Perhaps Gottlober and Jacob Samuel Bik (1770–1831) — the latter from personal contact — knew that Lefin was already privately dismayed with behavior he had witnessed in Berlin upon his departure, even though he may have been reluctant to put his grievances into print. In an unpublished poem that Lefin sent to David Friedländer after the appearance of *Moda levinah* in 1789, he attested to his continued loyalty to Friedländer and to the hostility that erupted after Friedländer’s support of the anonymous publication of *Mitspeh yofte’el* (Berlin, 1789) by the Prussian maskil Saul Berlin (1740–1794). Berlin’s work, which mercilessly attacked the glosses of Raphael Cohen (1722–1803), rabbi of the united communities of Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbeck, to the *Shulhan aruakh*, immediately set off a controversy within Berlin Jewry about the boundaries of acceptable criticism of rabbinic culture. The first stanza of Lefin’s poem intoned, “Noble Friedländer! Everyone thanks you; Although they curse you publicly, within the recesses of their hearts they are jealous of you; To their distress, you exist; they will not seek you in vain; You deserve honor for your deeds and the beauty of your wisdom.”


113 Published in Haberman, “Toward a History of Menachem Mendel Lefin of Satanów,” 463.
While Lefin may have brought a distrust and distaste for religious extremism to Berlin with him, he began to express his disenchantment with the Berlin Haskalah only with the publication of the 1791 French pamphlet that he wrote for the Four-Year Sejm (1788-1792):

Mendelssohn defined an era in Berlin. He cleared the path indicated by Maimonides, and trained children according to the ideas that [Maimonides] had of the ceremonial law in order to educate them to become enlightened and honest men. He published a beautiful translation of the Five Books of Moses and of the Psalms for their use. He soon found imitators who put him in fashion; soon, other translations were issued, even of the prayerbook. They began to work on useful journals, but those who continued them believed that they were more enlightened [than their predecessors] yet their were deficient in their own personal conduct, publicly attacking the backwardness of the rabbis in their journal. (This journal finally degenerated altogether). They soon incurred the general contempt of the people through this [behavior]. In the end, they became more intolerant than the ordinary devoted people whom they vilified.\(^{114}\)

In a later manuscript Lefin reflected on the rapidity of change that had occurred in Jewish Berlin once ignorance of German no longer posed a barrier to acculturation, “Now, however, since this past [prejudice] has been dispelled, everything proceeds very quickly. Advance subscribers and helpful hands in the group [of maskilim] were immediately found for everything that they wanted to undertake solely for the benefit of the Enlightenment. No wonder that they soon became dizzy from this haste.”\(^{115}\)

The distinguishing feature of Lefin’s conception of the Jewish Enlightenment was its moderation. Despite his critique of the radicalization of the Berlin Haskalah, Lefin never wavered in his commitment to a moderate Jewish Enlightenment as an antidote to the extreme poles of Hasidism on the one hand and to the radical acculturation, what many maskilim referred to as the “false” Enlightenment, taken up by a segment of Berlin Jewry, on the other.\(^{116}\) In a letter to Israel Bodek, Lefin admitted that “the sickness of the imagination of a falsely enlightened (allzu aufgeklärten) friend here, together with the untimely efforts of petty opportunities to prepare eulogies for the former [the Enlightenment] there, could have easily instilled some bitterness in me,” but in fact had not.\(^{117}\) Lefin believed that a moderate Haskalah

\(^{114}\) See [Lefin], “Essai d’un plan de réforme,” 413.

\(^{115}\) The Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4° 1153/134a, 4b–5a.

\(^{116}\) See Lowenstein, The Berlin Jewish Community, 72, on the concern among some maskilim about what they called the “superficial” or “false” Enlightenment among their fellow Berliners who “misinterpreted” the liberation of new thinking to mean personal license. See, too, Shmuel Feiner, “The Pseudo-Enlightenment and the Question of Jewish Modernization,” JSS (new series) 3, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 62-86.

\(^{117}\) Unsigned and undated letter to (Friend) Bodek, the Joseph Perl Archive, JNULA, 4° 1153/6, 1a. The original is “Die Imaginationskrankheit eines allzu aufgeklärten Freunds hier, nebst der unzeitigen Bemühungen kleinlichen gelegenheiten Lobreden anzudichten jenes dort: könnten mir
could balance between what he perceived to be two corrosive forces — mysticism and atheism — and steer Polish Jewry back to the rational tradition embodied by the work of the medieval Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides. Maimonides’s famous harmonization of the Aristotelian “golden mean” with a life lived by the dictates of the Torah served as an exemplary construct for Lefin’s conception of a moderate, authentic Jewish Enlightenment.

Lefin’s Enlightenment commitments to transform the particular culture of Polish Jewry did not emerge in a hermetically-sealed Jewish context. Born in the mid-eighteenth century, his turn to the Jewish Enlightenment was shaped by Jewish life in Podolia and by the political events rocking Poland and Europe at the end of the century. Just as his cultural program of the Haskalah was deeply informed by the turmoil within the Podolian-Jewish community, so, too, Lefin’s politics were shaped by pre-absolutist political configurations of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Lefin’s lifelong relationship with the Polish magnate Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski, one of the most powerful representatives of the pre-partitioned Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was a crucial influence on both Lefin’s specific suggestions for reforming the Jews of Poland and his practical ability to write and publish works of the Haskalah. The impact of this formative relationship in Lefin’s life underscores the importance of analyzing rigorously the specific historical circumstances in which the Haskalah emerged and the ways in which those circumstances shaped its development. While depictions of Lefin as an important “forerunner” of the Haskalah movement in Russia, or as the “Father of the Galician Haskalah” may be historically true, these ex post facto evaluations of Lefin’s contribution to the dissemination of the Jewish Enlightenment in Eastern Europe disregard the specific historical context in which his commitment to the Haskalah developed. Unlike later generations of maskilim in Eastern Europe, whose politics and cultural programs were intimately related to the emergence of the centralized, enlightened absolutist state, Lefin remained oriented toward the Polish variety of the traditional conception of the “royal alliance,” appealing to his magnate patron,

vielleicht einige Bitterkeit abgenötigt haben.” I attribute this unsigned document to Lefin because of its explicit moderation and its citing of Claude-Adrien Helvétius, the French psychologist whom Lefin quoted in several other writings. See Chapter Three.


Raphael Mahler advanced the most extensive argument for the intrinsic link between absolutism and the Haskalah. See Chapter Five.
rather than to the absolutist state, throughout his life. Lefin brought his traditionalist politics to the debates about reforms of the Jewish community that took place during the fateful last years of the Commonwealth’s independent existence (1772–1795) and to the negotiations that produced the 1804 Edicts on Jewish status in Russia.