Introduction

The second half of the eighteenth century was a period of profound change for the Jews of Western and Eastern Europe. The emergence of Haskalah in the West and Hasidism in the East dramatically changed the social and religious structure of European Jewry. The "origins of modernity" continues to be a central issue for Jewish historiography.  

The most recent debate on this question began with Jacob Katz's *Tradition and Crisis* and Azriel Schohat's *With the Change of Epochs: Beginnings of the Haskalah Among German Jewry.* Both authors attempted to provide a comprehensive picture of the period immediately preceding emancipation in order to provide an explanation for the origins of modernity.

Katz approached this period with a sociologically based methodology which presented a static picture of a society observed at a particular moment in time. His picture was further skewed by his over reliance on "establishment" rabbinic sources, such as responsa and the writings of major rabbinic figures. Missing from Katz's work are other sources, such as popular Jewish literature or Christian writings which contain valuable observations about contemporary Jewish society which might have added more diverse perspectives. The result was that Katz argued that the Jewish community retained its traditional social and cultural isolation from the outside world until changes in German society in the 1770's made possible the emergence of the Haskalah and modern

---

2Originally published in Hebrew as *Mesorah u-Mashber* (Jerusalem, 1959). It was translated into English in 1961. It was retranslated by Bernard Cooperman in 1992.
3*Im Hilufei Tekufot* (Jerusalem, 1960). It was never translated into English.
Jewish society. More recently, Katz has acknowledged that there is validity to Schohat's description of Jewish society and that the breakdown of traditional norms of behavior and social institutions had begun somewhat before the onset of modernity.

Schohat, on the other hand, utilized many of the sources neglected by Katz and tried to view German-Jewish society as it evolved over the century leading up to the major changes which occurred at the end of the eighteenth century. He found a much more complex and diverse Jewish society than the monolithic, pious and insulated society envisioned by Katz. Isaac Wetzlar's *Libes Briv* was an important source for Schohat and he quoted from it extensively. Schohat concluded that Haskalah and modernity were the end products of a century of Jewish social and religious decay and disaffection combined with changes in German society. More recent scholarship has tended to find a middle ground between the original positions of Katz and Schohat.

The purpose of this study is to make available, Isaac Wetzlar's *Libes Briv*, an important manuscript which sheds light on the socio-religious situation of German Jewry on the eve of its transition to modernity. Its author was a wealthy merchant from Celle, Germany who spent many years reflecting on the socio-religious circumstances of German-Jewish society. He saw it as a society in crisis and sought to understand the reasons for this situation. Not content with merely describing the situation he found, Wetzlar offers suggestions which he felt would improve the spiritual and material situation of his fellow Jews. In addition to editing and translating the text of the *Libes Briv*, I have endeavored to put Wetzlar's views in the context of his contemporaries. I tried to show in the Introduction where his ideas are in accordance with and where they differed from other contemporaneous or near contemporaneous authors who addressed similar concerns. The *Libes*

---


7Sorkin, *Transformation*, chap. 2 and C. Abramsky "The Crisis of Authority within European Jewry in the Eighteenth Century" *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann* ed. S. Stein and R. Loewie (University, Alabama, 1979), pp. 13-28, are examples. H. Pollack's *Jewish Folkways in Germanic Lands (1648-1806)*, (Cambridge, 1972) is a treasure trove of source material. However, the material is not adequately analyzed nor is it put into a larger context.

8Celle is between Hamburg and Hannover.
Briv is a significant piece of evidence in the quest for understanding the changes which took place in eighteenth century German-Jewish society. However, much research remains to be done before one can reach definitive conclusions about the developments which shaped Jewish society in this period.

**Previous Studies of the Libes Briv**

Modern scholarship first became acquainted with the Libes Briv in 1932 through J. Meitlis' article in Yivo Bleter. Meitlis considered Wetzlar as a proto-maskil and saw his discussions of educational and other reforms as a precursor of the Mendelssohnian Haskalah. He approached the work from his own perspective as a secular Yiddishist and his conclusions reflected this predisposition. The following year, I. Rivkind published a short article in Zukunft which suggested that Meitlis' conclusions were incorrect, without adducing significant additional evidence. He also added some bibliographical data about the author and mentioned the existence of several manuscripts of the Libes Briv unknown to Meitlis. S. Assaf published a lengthy extract from the Libes Briv in his Mekorot le-Toldot ha-Hinukh be-Yisrael. He also noted the importance of the manuscript and recommended its complete publication. My article in the Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute is the most recent study of the Libes Briv.

**The Author**

Isaac Wetzlar's name appears as author on the title pages of two manuscripts of the Libes Briv. Some earlier scholars have erroneously attributed its authorship to persons other than Isaac Wetzlar. Though

---

9"Der Bodleianer Ketav Yad Libes Briv, a Far-Haskolediker Reform Shrift" Yivo Bleter 2 (1931), pp. 308-333.

10"Der Libes Briv un sein Mekhaber" Zukunft 37 (1932), pp. 306-309.


13British Library Or. 10668 (Gaster Ms., 117) and B.L. Or. 10086/2 (Gaster Ms., 509). M. Steinschneider, Ozarot Hayyim (Hamburg, 1848), no. 365, attributed the authorship to Isaac Wetzlar on the basis of an oral tradition. I. Zinberg, A History of Jewish Literature (New York-Cleveland, 1972-1979), Vol. 7, p. 355, n. 21 suggests the possibility that Solomon Wetzlar, author of the moralistic work, Hakirat ha-Lev, was the father of Isaac Wetzlar. This is not the case. The title page of the Hakirat ha-Lev indicates that its author died young and never married. Furthermore, the Hakirat ha-Lev is cited in the Libes Briv, p. 52a, and Wetzlar makes no mention of a familial connection.

14Authorship of the Libes Briv was erroneously attributed to Issac Hecksher by I. Ben Jacob, Ozar ha-Sefarim (Vilna, 1880), p. 261, no. 192. This attribution was
not intended to be autobiographical, there are sufficient references in the work to give us a picture of Wetzlar's life. Additional information from archival sources in Celle and Hannover confirms the evidence found in the Libes Briv and adds significantly to our knowledge of his biography.

Isaac Wetzlar was born approximately 1680-1690. He relates that he came from a poor background, but managed to obtain an excellent rabbinic education and spent four years at the Yeshiva of Rabbi Abraham Broda in Prague. He mentions that Rabbi Broda did not take a penny from him during the years he studied in Prague and was concerned that he have sufficient funds for his journey home.

He presents himself in the Libes Briv as a successful businessman who was respected both in the Jewish community and by the Christian nobility with whom he was in frequent contact. He disclaims any pretense to being a scholar and constantly refers to himself as a common man. Yet, he assures his readers at the beginning of the Libes Briv that he studied many years in Yeshivas and afterwards studied many holy books, including some not normally studied. This apparent ambiguity may be explained by a quotation from R. Sheftel Horowitz which Wetzlar cites approvingly.

Throughout his work Wetzlar seeks to dissociate himself from professional scholars, rabbis and the social elite. As we shall see below, professional scholars are for him one of the two primary culprits who must take the blame for the problems which he sees confronting the Jewish community. The others are the communal leaders. The only positive reference to communal leaders in the Libes Briv occurs in the context of his praise of those few communal leaders who had risen from


15This dating is based on the fact that Rabbi Abraham Broda left Prague in 1709. I am assuming that Wetzlar was about 14-16 years of age when he came to the yeshiva.

16Libes Briv, p. 53a. (Hereafter referred to as L.B. The page citations are to the manuscript page numbers found in both the Yiddish and English texts.

17L.B., pp. 17a-b, 27b-28a.

18L.B., pp. 27b-28a.

19Wetzlar's relation to Christians will be discussed below.

20L.B., pp. 2b, 20b. See the Appendix for a list of books cited by Wetzlar in the Libes Briv.

21Rabbi Sheftel says at the end of his Introduction to the Shefa Tal: "'Disciples of the wise increase peace in the world (B. Berakhot, 64a).’ This is to be understood as meaning. Those disciples of scholars who do not consider themselves rabbis, wise men or scholars increase peace and do not initiate disputes.” L.B., p. 3a.
poverty and had not forgotten their roots. Perhaps this reference was obliquely autobiographical.

Wetzlar’s knowledge of medieval philosophical and ethical works was extensive. The Libes Brev includes citations from an unusually wide range of works. Among the works he cites are several that must have been quite rare, having been published only in the sixteenth century. The three books that had the greatest influence on him and cited most often are Bahya ibn Pakuda’s Hovot ha-Levavot, Joseph Albo’s Sefer Ikkarim, and Isaac Arama’s Akedat Yizhak. His scientific knowledge was also noteworthy. Discussing a talmudic passage which alludes to the sun and moon, he rejects the explanation of Rashi and presents the eighteenth century scientific explanation for the astronomical phenomena being discussed. In contrast, his famous contemporary Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschuetz, for example, “showed a remarkable lack of elementary scientific knowledge.” Wetzlar also mentions the purchase of books and a visit to Rabbi David Oppenheim’s library.

Wetzlar not only read very widely, but probably was a bibliophile. The Bodleian Library in Oxford contains a volume in which several

22L.B., p. 47a.
23See the Appendix for the books cited by Wetzlar. Bibliographical data can be found there.
24R. Hayyim Yair Bacharach reports that, “In former generations – according to what I have heard – they would listen to and study the book Akedah, the Ikkarim, the Kuzari, and the like... Some of them would also study the Hovot ha-Levavot” (Havvat Yair, responsum no. 123). Quoted in H.H. Ben Sasson, “Jewish-Christian Humanism and Reformation in the German Empire” Harvard Theological Review 59 (1966), p. 371. On the influence of these works see also, J. Elbaum, “Hashpaot Tarbut Yehudei Sefarad al Yehudei Ashkenaz u-Polin be-Meot ha-15-16” Tarbut ve-Historia: Le-Zikhro Prof. Ino Shaki, ed. J. Dan (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 95-120. How is Wetzlar’s interest to be explained. Was there a living tradition that continued or is he a unique case? More work must be done before this question can be answered.
25L.B., p. 30b.
27L.B., p. 59b-60a.
manuscripts have been bound together.\textsuperscript{29} Included in this collection is a book on Hebrew accents copied by Suesskind Alexander of Metz in Wetzlar’s house in Celle. In the colophon of this manuscript, copied in 1716, the copyist thanks the wealthy and learned householder Isaac Wetzlar for his help in obtaining the book from the head of the local church.\textsuperscript{30} Another manuscript in this volume is a copy of \textit{Sefer Ruah Hen}\textsuperscript{31} which was copied in 1730 by Isaac ben Ezra of Hotzenplotz, “teacher of Isaac Wetzlar’s children.” The third manuscript in this volume is a grammatical work by Zalman Hanau which is mentioned and praised in the \textit{Libes Briv}.\textsuperscript{32} It would be reasonable to conjecture that these three manuscripts may have been owned by Wetzlar.

The first archival references to Wetzlar are an interesting group of four documents from 1717. He had been involved in resolving certain problems arising from the partition of the estate of Leffman Behrens, an important Court Jew in Hannover, who also had significant assets in Celle.\textsuperscript{33} In the first document, written to the commission of royal and ducal counselors set up to oversee this partition, he claims to have spent much time and effort in the performance of his duties. However, those who were involved in the partition were using various pretexts to deprive him of his rightful fee. The second letter is from the commission supporting his claim. From the third letter it appears that Serche, the widow of Naphtali Hertz Behrens of Hannover had produced a letter, supposedly written by Wetzlar, absolving her of any claims. Wetzlar argued that this letter is a forgery, written by his enemies. He is certain that Serche had no knowledge of this, as she was a pious and god fearing woman who would certainly pay the moderate sum of 100 Ducats. In the fourth document, the commission shares his hopes that the matter will be resolved.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{29}A.D. Neubauer, \textit{Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library} (Oxford, 1886), No. 1501, p. 530. Unfortunately, I do not know when or by whom these manuscripts were bound together.

\textsuperscript{30}The text of this colophon is printed in Neubauer, op. cit., p. 1145.

\textsuperscript{31}Wetzlar mentions this work, L.B., p. 69a. Interest in this work was not restricted to Wetzlar. Israel Zamosc, one of Moses Mendelssohn’s mentors, reprinted the \textit{Ruah Hen} with his own commentary in 1744. Cf., A. Altmann, \textit{Moses Mendelssohn – A Biographical Study} (Philadelphia, 1973), p. 21f.

\textsuperscript{32}L.B., p. 48b.

\textsuperscript{33}Behrens and his activities are discussed at length in S. Stern, \textit{The Court Jew} (Philadelphia, 1950), s.v., index, Behrens. See also the recent study by B. Schedlitz, \textit{Leffman Behrens. Untersuchungen zum Hofjudentum im Zeitalter des Absolutismus} (Hildesheim, 1984).

\textsuperscript{34}The documents are in the Niedersachsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv in Hannover, Cal. Br. 15, Nr. 4385. My thanks to Prof. H.M. Graupe for bringing these
In 1730, Wetzlar received the concession to deal in jewelry and bills of exchange. During the 1730's Wetzlar was also mentioned as owner of the Fortuna tobacco factory, which had been founded by Leffman Behrens. Ownership had passed to Salomon Gans, Behren’s relative and Wetzlar’s father-in-law, who died in 1733. This factory, along with the Loewen tobacco factory, were the economic basis of the Celle Jewish community.

In 1738 the Jewish community issued a new Synagogue Ordinance. Not only was Wetzlar one of the signatories, but his name also appears on two lists which show the financial obligations of communal members for various charitable purposes. Wetzlar is the second wealthiest member of the community in both lists. The same year, the Electorate of Hannover issued a new decree pertaining to Jewish marriages. According to a document in the Celle city archives, the leaders of the Celle Jewish community were officially notified of this new decree. One of the three leaders of the Jewish community named in this document was Isaac Wetzlar.

According to a list of Jewish residents in Celle, Wetzlar lived in Im Kreise 13, from 1741-1749. From 1760-1785, his son, Joseph Wetzlar lived there. Isaac Wetzlar died on 28 Tevet 5511 (January 25, 1751) and was laid to rest in the Jewish cemetery of Celle, where his tombstone stands to this day. Wetzlar’s wife Brendelchen died on 25 Nissan 5401 (April 10, 1741). It is noteworthy that Wetzlar is referred to on both tombstones with the titles normally accorded only to rabbis.

The external sources confirm and supplement the biographical references in the Libes Briv. The only discrepancy, and it is a very significant one, is Wetzlar’s constant refrain that he is only a common

documents to my attention and to Herr M. Maier for his help in obtaining them. I would also like to thank Dr. S. Rohrbacher for his help in translating them.


37“Rechtliche Verordnung von der saemtlichen Judenschaft zu Zelle, so geschehen den 2 September 1738” Celle, pp. 135f., 140.

38Aktenbestand 23, Burgvogtei Nr. A 28, Stadtarchiv Celle. My thanks to Dr. Guenter of the Stadtarchiv Celle for providing this information.


41Ibid., p. 91 no. 110. At the top of her tombstone is a goose, the heraldic emblem of the Gans family.

42On his tombstone he called “Morenu ha-Rav Rabbi (MVH”R) and on his wife’s he is called, “Ha-Hakham ha-Gadol (H’H) Morenu ha-Rav (MV”H) and Shli’ta is appended to his name.
man writing for his fellows. The evidence clearly indicates otherwise. Wetzlar was a member of both the socio-economic and intellectual elites that he criticizes throughout the *Libes Briv*. There is no reason to doubt his statements concerning his impoverished youth. The likeliest explanation for Wetzlar’s rapid socio-economic rise is an advantageous marriage, which he clearly made. Young scholars, even from poor backgrounds were often favored as marriage partners by wealthy families.  

The Manuscripts  

Eight manuscripts of the *Libes Briv* survive from the second half of the eighteenth century. Those manuscripts which have a colophon and indicate where they were written are concentrated around Hamburg. I was only able to personally examine the two Jewish Theological Seminary manuscripts. The other manuscripts were examined via microfilm or xerox copies. Printed catalogs were also relied upon where indicated. The manuscripts are:

1. Jewish Theological Seminary Ms. 2333.1. Rivkind considered this manuscript to be an autograph. He does not cite any specific reasons for his assertion. There are no erasures or corrections that one would normally expect in an autograph manuscript. The text is complete except for one page between folios 21 and 22. N. Porges inserted the missing material from JTS Ms. 2256. The title *Amudei Olam* appears at the top of the title page, though it is partially erased.

2. Jewish Theological Seminary Ms. 2256. This Manuscript is missing the title page and part of the Introduction. The text has had significant liberties taken with it. The language has been Germanized, and Hebraisms, traditional honorifics and encomia have been deleted. The text has also been shortened. The deleted material consists primarily of discussions of a purely religious nature. The copying was completed on 15 Tammuz 5553 (25 June 1793), according to a colophon at the end of the manuscript.

---

44Rivkind, *Der Libes Briv*, p. 306.  
45I would like to thank Dr. A. David for this observation.  
46Porges sold the manuscript to JTS. See, Rivkind, op. cit., p. 306.  
47Title page refers to page 1a of the text.
3. Ms. Michael 297 (Bodleian Library, Oxford). It is described in Neubauer, Catalogue, No. 743. This manuscript is written by the same hand as JTS Ms. 2333. It is missing the title page.

4. Ms. Michael 182 (Bodleian Library, Oxford). It is described in Neubauer, Catalogue, No. 1420. M. Steinschneider in Ozarot Hayyim, No. 365, indicates that this manuscript was owned by Rabbi Jacob Emden.

5. Ms. Sassoon 930. This manuscript is described in Ohel David, No. 930, which erroneously ascribes the authorship to Isaac Hecksher. It is missing the title page and begins with the introduction.

6. Ms. Jewish National and University Library 8° 1167 (Jerusalem). The title page has a decorated border and the text of the title page is written in the style of printed Yiddish books, the so-called vayber shrift. There is an inscription in Yiddish which reads, "This book belongs to the worthy woman, Hitzel, the wife of Jacob ben Lipmann, of blessed memory, Heilbut."

7. Ms. British Library Or. 10668 (Gaster 117). The manuscript has a highly decorated title page done in pen and ink. The title page decoration is copied from the Amsterdam, 1675 edition of Abraham Jagel's Lekah Tov. It has the title Amudei Olam at the top. At the bottom of the title page it says:

   "This book is the biography of the great in his generation, the worthy and famous, the praiseworthy and great scholar, the wealthy and pious, Rabbi Isaac Wetzlar, of blessed memory, which was written in the year, 1749."

   "This book was written for the noble woman, praised with many praises, 'A capable wife is a crown for her husband' [Proverbs 12:4], 'Most blessed of women in tents' [Judges 5:24], Gimbah (the name is not clear), wife of the very wealthy and greatly learned, Getshlig (the name is not clear), written in the month of Second Adar, 5537 (1777)." At the end of the manuscript it says: "Written by the humble Solomon Zalman son of R. Jacob Eshve, of blessed memory, in the month of Second Adar, 5537 (1777)."

8. Ms. British Library Or. 10086/2 (Gaster 509). Fol. 1-62b of this manuscript consists of comments on the laws of Niddah by Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschuetz. The Libes Briv begins on fol. 63a and continues to fol. 67b, containing approximately the first five chapters of the Libes Briv. The manuscript then has blank pages.

---

48Hamburg, 1848. This is the catalog of the Heimann Michael collection.
49See above, note 14 for the source of this error.
50It is noteworthy that he was rabbi of Hamburg from 1750-1764.
and picks up again at fol. 100a with an entirely different text. The first page of the Libes Briv section states: "This book is the biography of the great in his generation, the worthy and famous, the praiseworthy and great scholar, the wealthy and pious, Rabbi Isaac Wetzlar, of blessed memory, which was written in the year, 1749, as can be seen from his own words." The inside cover of the manuscript contains a statement in both Hebrew and German: "This book belongs to Michael, son of Wolf Speyer of Hamburg, 1767."

**Literary Genre**

The Libes Briv is stylistically unusual. It resembles autobiographies in its use of first person narrative and I. Rivkind called it "a publicistic-memoiristic work."\(^{51}\) There are several contemporary autobiographies and memoirs to which it may be compared.\(^{52}\) However, there are significant differences between them and the Libes Briv. The primary concern of the authors of these memoirs is with their own lives and experiences. They do not have a larger social agenda as does Wetzlar. In his case, the autobiographical element is secondary and is only used to present the author's credentials or as illustrative material.

The Libes Briv is more closely related to a genre of religio-ethical (musar) literature which developed in the early modern period.\(^{53}\) This musar literature, written in both Hebrew and Yiddish, was concerned primarily with the social and religious state of Jewish society. It differed from its more classical predecessors in several important ways. First and foremost it was primarily concerned with contemporary social realities. It

---

\(^{51}\) Rivkind, *Der Mekhaber*, p. 306.


\(^{53}\) Parallels between the Libes Briv and this type of musar literature are found throughout this Introduction. The popular musar has not adequately studied. Zinberg, *History*, Vol. 7, chaps. 6, 8, and 13 is an early attempt that is seriously flawed by his secularist Yiddishist bias. Zinberg even refers to some of this literature as obscurantist and benighted. Other studies are, N. Minkoff and Y. Yoffe, "Musar Tekufeh" *Algemeine Encyclopedie* (New York, 1942), Yidn Vol. 3, pp. 30-64; S. Freehof, "Devotional Literature in the Vernacular (Judeo-German) prior to the Reform Movement" *CCAR Yearbook* 33 (1923), pp. 375-415. Aspects of this literature have also been studied by Z. Gries, *Sifrut ha-Hanhanot* (Jerusalem, 1989), chaps. 1-2.
not only spoke of problems, but also offered concrete programs to solve them. Much of this literature was also written for a broader audience attempting to reach not only scholars, but also householders, students and women. Most of the authors of this literature were rabbis in smaller communities or secondary religious functionaries.\footnote{This covers a variety of professions including preachers, both stable and itinerant, ritual slaughterers, teachers and synagogue beadles.}

Wetzlar’s relationship to this literature is interesting. He is clearly aware of it, mentioning a number of the classics of this genre and recommending them to his readers.\footnote{L.B., p. 52a.} However, when one looks at the works that he cites as sources and influences, it is almost exclusively the classics of the more elitist and medieval \textit{musar}\footnote{See the Appendix for a list of works cited in the \textit{Libes Briv} and their frequency of citation.} tradition. He is aware of the apparent contradiction and indirectly deals with it in his defense of his choice of Yiddish as opposed to Hebrew as the linguistic medium of his work.

\textbf{The Language}

In early modern Jewish literature, the language of a work was intimately associated with its intended audience. Hebrew was the language of scholars and intellectuals, while the traditional audience for Yiddish literature was “women, girls, and ignorant men.” The two literatures, though written in Hebrew characters, developed their own distinctive typefaces for printed books. Hebrew books were printed in either “square” characters or in “Rashi script,” while Yiddish books were printed in a typeface which developed from the “Rashi script” and came to be known as “\textit{vayber shrift}” (women’s script).\footnote{For the origins and history of this typeface see, H. Zafren, “Early Yiddish Typography” \textit{Jewish Book Annual} 44 (1986-87), pp. 106-119; Idem., “Variety in the Typography of Yiddish 1535-1635” \textit{Hebrew Union College Annual} 53 (1982), pp. 137-163.} It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that Yiddish books began to be printed in “square” characters.\footnote{Weinreich, M. \textit{Geshikhte fun der Yidisher Shprakh} (New York, 1973), Vol. 3, p. 275.} A noteworthy exception is Aaron ben Samuel of Hengershausen’s \textit{Liebliche Tefilloh},\footnote{Frankfurt a.M., 1709.} which was printed in “square” characters. In the early nineteenth century, hundreds of copies of the \textit{Liebliche Tefilloh} were found in the attic of a synagogue. The reason for this fate are unclear. To what extent, if any, did its being printed in
“square characters” affect its fate remains a tantalizing but unanswered question.60

The difference in typeface was more than a historical accident; it served to underscore the differences between the two literatures. The typeface was a means of identifying the intended audience for any given book. The attitude of rabbis and scholars toward the translation of halakhic or philosophical works into Yiddish was one of extreme wariness. They feared that halakhic works in Yiddish would be used by laymen to circumvent the authority of the rabbi or might lead to laymen making halakhic decisions on their own in areas beyond their competence.61 Rabbi Jehiel Michal Epstein’s Kizur Shaloh provides an interesting illustration of this sensitivity. Though the work was written in Hebrew, Epstein makes it clear in his introduction that the work was only intended for Jews living in small villages who did not have ready access to a rabbi. He opposed the translation of philosophical works on the grounds that they contained “holy and deep” secrets which might be misunderstood by ignorant persons, with disastrous results.62

Wetzlar is aware of this negative attitude towards Yiddish among scholars. He begins his introduction with three reasons to explain why he wrote in Yiddish.63 His first reason is that he is not a scholar and he feels his knowledge of Hebrew and especially Hebrew grammar is inadequate. He does not want to expose the weakness of his knowledge. This reason does not make sense. Wetzlar is far from hesitant in displaying his knowledge of Hebrew and Hebrew grammar several times in the Libes Briv.64 In addition, he had received an education which should have given him sufficient linguistic facility in Hebrew. The linguistic deficiencies of his audience were a more important factor. Later in the Libes Briv, he mentions that he wrote it in Yiddish so that every honest Jew would be able to read it.65

His second reason is his comparison of his work to a newspaper. Newspapers were normally in the vernacular. Interestingly, he reminds

61 Zinberg, History, Vol. 7, pp. 217-227; Gries, Hanhagot, p. 60. Rabbi Jacob Moellin (Maharil) was one of the most influential opponents of the translation of halakhic works into Yiddish. I.J. Yuval, Hakhamim be-Doram (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 311-318.
63 L.B., p. 2a f.
64 L.B., pp. 30bf., 49a-50a, 68b-71a. It is also noteworthy that one of the works in Neubauer, Catalogue, No. 1501, which was copied for Wetzlar was a grammatical work and two others in the same volume, which may have been owned by Wetzlar, were also grammatical works.
65 L.B., p. 46b.
his readers that even scholars and rabbis read newspapers or have them read to them. Wetzlar asks his readers, "think of it as a newspaper. The finest and most important experts, scholars and rabbis, read them or have them read to them." Though there were no Jewish newspapers in Germany during this period, Jews did read general newspapers.

His third reason is the most interesting and instructive. He reminds his readers that many of the classics of medieval Jewish thought were originally written in the vernacular of their day, Arabic, and only later translated into Hebrew. The vernacular was not always looked down upon by scholars. Wetzlar may be reflecting a changing attitude toward Yiddish which seems to appear at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when it begins to acquire some legitimacy as an acceptable language for the translation of serious intellectual works. A significant example is the publication of dual language (Hebrew, Yiddish) editions of religio-ethical works such as Hovot ha-Levavot and Menorat ha-Maor which are much more theologically sophisticated than the earlier Yiddish

66L.B., p. 2a.
68Rabbi Jacob Emden discusses whether it is permitted to read newspapers on the Sabbath, in a responsa. It seems that Jews would read the newspapers and run to the Bourse to transact business on the Sabbath. Cf., She'elat Ya'avetz (Altona, 1738), Vol. 1, responsum 162.
69L.B., p. 2b.
ethical works. Rabbi Moses Dayan of Frankfurt justified his translation of the *Menorat ha-Maor* with arguments very similar to those of Wetzlar. He writes:

I have heard that some scholars feel it is not proper that such books [as the *Menorat ha-Maor*] are translated into Yiddish and that one reveals to all people things which are found in *Midrashim* and the Talmud. Therefore I have demonstrated [in an earlier part of the introduction] for them that it is the opposite. It is a *mitzvah* to translate books into all languages. He who cannot study in Hebrew should study in his own language, and his reward is the same as if he had studied in Hebrew. The pious Rabbi Isaiah [Horowitz] writes similarly in his *Sheni Lulhot ha-Berit*. I have also shown that Rabbi Isaac Aboab wrote his book [the *Menorat ha-Maor*] in Spanish.72

Moses Dayan of Frankfurt further states that throughout Jewish history religious works were written in the vernacular. He points out that the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the *Targumim*, and even the *Zohar*73 were all written in the vernacular of their day. The great medieval authorities wrote in the vernacular “so that every person should see the wisdom of the *Torah* and through this serve God properly.”74

Hebrew-Yiddish dual language books, that is books in which the Hebrew and Yiddish text was published in the same book already existed in the seventeenth century. However, these dual language editions consisted primarily of poems, songs and similar genres which were aimed at a popular audience. In addition, one finds that the two versions would not always be identical. The Hebrew versions often attempted to relate themselves to the Hebrew literary tradition and demonstrate the scholarship of the author. The Yiddish version, on the other hand, dealt with personal experience and was more grounded in contemporary reality.75

---

71 *Menorat ha-Maor* (Amsterdam, 1722), trans. by R. Moses Dayan of Frankfurt. *Hovot ha-Levavot* (Amsterdam, 1716), trans. by R. Samuel of Posen. There may be other works of this type. This subject needs further study.

72 *Menorat ha-Maor* (Amsterdam, 1722), translator’s Introduction. R. Samuel of Posen make a similar argument in his introduction to his translation of the *Hovot ha-Levavot* (Amsterdam, 1716).

73 Moses Dayan assumed that Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, a second century tanna, was the author of the *Zohar*.

74 Cf., above note 72.

The Audience

A closely related question is, who was Wetzlar’s intended audience for the Libes Briv? The initial impulse might be to suggest the very fact that it was written in Yiddish points to “women, girls and ignorant men” who were traditionally seen as the primary audience for Yiddish literature. The scholarly elite were uncomfortable with works in Yiddish, especially those of a philosophical or halakhic nature. However, a more careful study of early Yiddish literature shows that its audience was wider than has been commonly supposed. In addition, we have seen that the intellectual climate with regard to the vernacular was moving in a more positive direction at the beginning of the eighteenth century. A related datum is M. Erik’s observation that the beginning of the eighteenth century was a turning point in the development of Yiddish musar literature. The older Yiddish musar works began to lose popularity and were being replaced by translations of classic Hebrew musar works.

Wetzlar tried to reach out to the widest possible audience, even addressing a special plea to scholars, in the introduction, that they not dismiss his work merely because it is in Yiddish. In light of the changing attitudes towards Yiddish, Wetzlar’s plea is not merely rhetorical, but must be taken at face value.

Structure and Purpose of the Libes Briv

The Libes Briv is divided into two parts. The first part comprises the first eight chapters and relates Wetzlar’s early attempts to analyze how to fulfill the commandment to “Love your fellow as yourself.” His failure to adequately deal with this question led him to the vexing question of the sad state of the exile, i.e., the condition of the Jewish community, a subject that had concerned him for many years.

Inspired by Bahya ibn Pakuda’s Hovot ha-Levavot and Ephraim Lunshits’ Olelat Ephraim, Wetzlar shifted the focus of his efforts from attempting to explain the concept of “Love your fellow as yourself” to the more practical concern of how to implement this central commandment in his own life. He would fulfill this commandment by reminding his brothers and sisters of the reasons for the sad state of the exile in order that they might make improvements and thereby bring the redemption closer.

---

76 Gries, Hanhagot, pp. 59-61.
77 Turniansky, Sefer Masah u-Meribah, p. 132f.
79 L.B., p. 15b f.
He cites approvingly a parable from the writings of R. Ephraim Lunshits who compares Jews who are not concerned about the sad state of the exile to drunkards who sit in their house happily getting drunk while the house is burning down around them. They go on drinking as if nothing is happening.\(^8^0\) His purpose in trying to rouse his fellow Jews out of what he perceives as their drunken stupor is not to chastise them, but to help them by indicating the shortcomings of society and recommending improvements which he thinks will lead to the shortening of the exile.\(^8^1\)

Lunshits may also have been the inspiration for Wetzlar's thematic division of the second part of the *Libes Briv*, which begins with chapter 11, into sections titled *Torah, Avodah* and *Gemilut Hasadim*. The fourth part of Lunshits' *Olelat Ephraim* is divided into these three subdivisions and the whole section is titled *Amudei Olam*. This is also the title given to the whole *Libes Briv* work in three of the manuscripts.\(^8^2\) Wetzlar does not credit Lunshits but merely cites the original Rabbinic source, *Pirke Avot* 1:2, "the world stands on three things, *Torah, Avodah*, and *Gemilut Hasadim.*" His method will be to examine the ways in which these three pillars are treated in his community and to offer suggestions for improvement in these three fundamental areas which he believes will lead to the redemption of the people.

Wetzlar emphasizes that what he is writing is based on his own experience and is not merely repeating conventional pieties. There is no reason to doubt Wetzlar's statement, "I only want to write about what I have actually seen, heard, and experienced in our times."\(^8^3\) However, it is only the experience of one person in one place. In addition, Wetzlar is by no means the first author to deal with these issues, nor are his criticisms and suggestions always original. He is part of a long and venerable tradition, as he himself points out at every opportunity. I shall attempt to provide the views of other authors in the early modern period on the themes discussed which support Wetzlar or present differing perspectives.

**Torah**

The first pillar, *Torah*, encompasses both the study of *Torah*, i.e. Jewish education on all levels, from the most elementary to the most advanced, and how that education is put to use. His analysis of the pillar of *Torah* may be divided into six areas: 1) elementary education; 2) adult

---

\(^8^0\)L.B., p. 44a f. The parable is found in *Siftei Da'at*, Introduction.

\(^8^1\)L.B., p. 18a.

\(^8^2\)JTS Ms. 2333; B.L. Or. 10668 (Gaster 117); B.L. Or. 10086/2 (Gaster 509).

\(^8^3\)L.B., p. 21a.
education of householders; 3) professional scholars; 4) the study of Kabbalah 5) the study of philosophy; 6) the education of women.

1. Elementary Education

Wetzlar begins his critique of elementary education with the plight of poor Jews living in the countryside and small villages who cannot afford to hire tutors for their children. These people are grateful when their children able to pray, read and write. They have a simple faith in God, but know virtually nothing about Jewish belief and practice. He places the blame for this deplorable condition squarely at the feet of the communal and national leaders whose only interest in ordinary people are the taxes that can be extracted from them. The rabbis are also partially to blame, according to Wetzlar. Many of them are insufficiently concerned with the education of children. They are concerned only with activities which generate income, such as performing weddings. They are also very diligent in examining ritual slaughterers and collecting fees for their certification, but are unconcerned with examining the competence of elementary teachers or raising funds to support the teaching of Torah. He also castigates wealthy members of the community who can afford to help others pay for their children’s education, but refuse to do so, even when approached for aid. R. Jacob Emden, his contemporary, shares Wetzlar’s negative view of Jewish communal leadership. He refers to them as, “the insolent wealthy of the generation, the leaders of Sodom who rule over a poor people.”

R. Elhanan Kirchan and R. Joseph Stadthagen, writing a generation before Wetzlar, also deplored the poor educational level of Jews living in villages. However, they placed the blame on the villagers themselves, who were not interested in teaching their children more than the basics.

The question of communal support and supervision of education raised by Wetzlar is complicated and it is difficult to decide whose perception is the more accurate. There are communal ordinances which

---

84 Cf. Schohat, Hilufei, p. 101f. for several contemporaries who support Wetzlar’s views. One notable example cited by Schohat is R. Ezekiel Katzenellenbogen who said about himself that the primary aspect of his rabbinate is not the spread of Torah.
85 L.B., p. 21Aa.
88 In his book Divrei Zikkaron. Quoted in S. Assaf, Mekorot, Vol. 1 pp. 169-173. This is an important source which deserves further study.
make the community responsible for the education of all children. The ordinances of Worms, Frankfurt am Main, and Metz are examples. Similarly, there are communal and organizational ordinances which prescribe the supervision of elementary teachers by rabbis and communal leaders. However, there are several issues that must be considered. First, these ordinances apply to specific communities and different communities and regions had different practices. Secondly, the economic decline of the early eighteenth century made it more difficult to maintain these services. The sense of economic difficulty and decline was felt by contemporary Jews. Christian missionaries report that Jews told them that in previous generations Jews had studied Torah, but now earning a living was very difficult and there was no time to study. Additionally, the existence of ordinances tells us little about whether they were enforced in any given time or place. Thus, Wetzlar’s critique cannot be dismissed. His observations may be an accurate reflection of conditions in his area. A significant contemporary support for Wetzlar’s position is the statement by R. Judah ben Ezekiel Katz who lived in Altona in the 1740’s that the communal leaders did not watch over the education of the children of the poor.

Wetzlar also criticizes many people, in all social classes and communities, who can afford to hire teachers for their children, but who choose to have them taught only the most basic Jewish skills in the belief that this is sufficient. Here too, he finds the cause of the problem to be a failure of leadership, as in the previous case.

Other authors present a somewhat different picture. R. Jehiel Michael Epstein lamented that many people did not want to teach their children more than the basic Jewish skills, because they felt it was more important to teach children practical skills which would enable them to earn a living. Learning French or German was a higher priority than studying Torah. It is also noteworthy that Epstein found it necessary to defend the study of Torah against the charge that scholars are poor and given little respect. R. Zevi Hirsch Koidanover also spoke about the neglect of

90Ibid., p. 64f.
91Ibid., p. ix.
92Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 189-191.
93Ibid., Vol. 4, p. viii.
94H. Pollack, *Folkways*, p. 66 n. 113, cites a number of sources which speak of a decline in support for education.
96Schohat, *Hilufei*, p. 129.
97L.B., p. 21Ab.
98*Derekh ha-Yashar le-Olam ha-Ba* (Frankfurt a.M., 1704), pp. 4b-6b.
Torah study in favor of the study of French and German. R. Joseph Stadthagen pointed to the emphasis on business skills as a reason for the neglect of Torah study. It is possible to cite other examples which indicate that in this case Wetzlar was overly one sided in ascribing blame for this problem to a failure of leadership.

Another of Wetzlar's concerns is the educational curriculum of children who are not destined to become scholars. After completing the basic curriculum of humash with Rashi's commentary, reading the prayerbook, and writing, it was common to teach children Ein Ya'akov. He finds that the teacher usually knows little more than the literal meaning of the text which he transmits in a similarly literal manner to the students. Wetzlar is strongly opposed to the teaching of Ein Ya'akov for two reasons. First, he indicates that the aggadah contains many "secrets of the Torah," i.e., esoteric matters which cannot be understood literally. This leads to a misunderstanding of the aggadah and a distorted view of Judaism. His second reason is related to this misunderstanding. He tells that he has often heard Christian scholars and nobles mock and ridicule Jewish beliefs. When he tried to defend Judaism he was told that they heard these absurd things from Jews, even citing the Jews by name from whom they heard these stories.

Both Yekutiel Blitz and Joseph Witzenhausen, each of whom published a Yiddish translation of the Bible in Amsterdam in 1679, express concerns similar to Wetzlar. Both write about the reasons which led them to translate the Bible into Yiddish without midrashic embellishment in their respective introductions. They specifically mention the Ze'enah u-Re'enah as the best known example of a translation with midrashic embellishment and the confusion it causes through its indiscriminate mixing of biblical text with rabbinic aggadah and midrash. More unusual and interesting is their concern with Christian reactions. Blitz complains that Christians make fun of Jews and their knowledge of the Bible, while Witzenhausen argues that as a result of teaching the

---

99Kav ha-Yashar (Frankfurt a.M., 1705), chap. 82.
100Schohat, Hilufei, p. 61.
101Schohat, Hilufei, pp. 124-128.
102Wetzlar repeats many of the same arguments and illustrates his point with a concrete example in his discussion of the Ze'enah u-Re'enah, in the section on the education of women.
103L.B., p. 22a f.
104For the background to these two translations see, L. Fuks, "Ha-Reka ha-Hevrati veka-Kalkali le-Hadpasat Shnei Turgumei Tanakh be-Yiddish be-Amsterdam Samukh le-Shenat 1680" Gal-Ed 1 (1973), pp. 31-50; M. Aptroot, "Blitz und Witzenhausen: Naye Aspecten fun an Alten Konflikt" Oksforder Yidish 1 (1990), pp. 3-38.
biblical text through the filter of midrash Christians laugh at Jews and are assured that Jews falsify the Torah.\textsuperscript{106} Christian reactions to Judaism and Christian-Jewish relations are an important theme in the \textit{Libes Briv} and will be discussed at greater length below.

Wetzlar does not merely criticize the existing educational system, but presents positive alternative suggestions to reform Jewish education. He suggests that elementary teachers read the text of the \textit{humash} with their students and translate the words before dealing with the concepts. This way the students will learn the meaning of specific words and it will also aid the understanding not only of the \textit{humash}, but also the prayers and other things they will study later. He assures his readers that he has had much personal experience with this method and it is quite successful.\textsuperscript{107}

His second suggestion is the teaching of \textit{Mishnah} in place of \textit{Ein Ya'akov}. He particularly recommends those tractates which relate to daily life and practice, such as \textit{Berakhot} and \textit{Shabbat}. He argues that as a minimum the student will learn many useful laws and become a better Jew.\textsuperscript{108}

The first two proposals are in keeping with suggestions made by many educational reformers prior to Wetzlar. His third recommendation is more novel. He urges the study of Maimonides' thirteen articles of faith. He mentions Abraham Jagel's catechism \textit{Lekah Tov}\textsuperscript{109} as a most suitable work to study the thirteen principles and asks his brothers to insure that every child learn this book by heart in order that they know what they are supposed to believe. Here too, his motivation is the response of Christians to Jewish presentations of their beliefs.\textsuperscript{110}

Wetzlar then turns to the education of the potential scholar. Children who show scholarly potential are rushed through the basic curriculum,

\textsuperscript{106}Zinberg, \textit{History}, Vol. 6, p. 131.
\textsuperscript{107}L.B., p. 48a.
\textsuperscript{108}L.B., p. 51b f.
\textsuperscript{109}Abraham Jagel’s \textit{Lekah Tov} is a fascinating work. It is the first Jewish book written in the form of catechism, i.e., in question and answer format, using Maimonides' thirteen articles of faith as the underlying text. It was first published in Venice, 1595 and was conceptually based on the Catholic catechism of Peter Canisius. Between 1595 and 1749, when the \textit{Libes Briv} was written, it went through 17 editions and was translated into Yiddish, German, Latin and English. Many editions were bilingual. It is noteworthy that two of the editions mentioned by Wetzlar were by Christian scholars.

The basic study of the \textit{Lekah Tov} is S. Maybaum, “Abraham Jagel’s Katechismus \textit{Lekach Tob}” Zehnter Bericht ueber die Lehranstalt fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin (Berlin, 1892), pp. 1-18. Maybaum demonstrates Jagel's dependence on Canisius, but does not deal with the subsequent history of the work. The most recent study of Jagel is D. Ruderman, \textit{Kabbalah, Magic and Science} (Cambridge, 1988). However, Ruderman has no significant discussion of the \textit{Lekah Tov}.
\textsuperscript{110}L.B., p. 52b.
given a brief introduction to Mishnah and pushed to the study of Talmud as quickly as possible. The rationalization is that the child can study Bible, Mishnah, and other genres of religious literature later, at their leisure. His only suggestion is for these students to first study those tractates which relate to Shulhan Arukh, Oreh Hayyim. He also mentions approvingly the educational proposals made by R. Hayyim Yair Bacharach a generation earlier.\footnote{Havvat Yair, responsum 123.} He is aware of the long standing opposition to the study of hillukim,\footnote{Cf., H.Z. Dimitrovsky, “Al Derekh ha-Pilpul” Salo Baron Jubilee Volume (Jerusalem, 1975) Vol. 3 (Hebrew Volume), pp. 111-181. He discusses the history of the controversy at length.} but does not want to enter the fray on this issue. He mentions his own positive experience during his studies at the yeshiva of Prague under R. Abrahaabroda, and that he found it useful. He does indicate that the study of hillukim was not central and was studied only during the first part of the semester.\footnote{L.B., p. 53a.}

Wetzlar’s educational reforms are an integral part of a history of educational reform and social criticism which begins with the Maharal of Prague and continues through several generations of significant figures associated with Prague.\footnote{See below for a discussion of the influence of the Prague school on Wetzlar.} Many other rabbis and scholars also expressed concern and suggested reforms, but they do not seem to been effective in reforming the educational system.\footnote{Much material on educational reform in this period has been collected. S. Assaf Mekorot, Vols. 1 and 4 and M. Guedemann, Quellenschriften zur Geschichte des Unterrichts und der Erziehung bei den deutschen Juden (Berlin, 1891) are valuable anthologies of source material. See also, I. Fishman, The History of Jewish Education in Central Europe from the End of the Sixteenth to the End of the Eighteenth Century (London, 1944). Fishman tends toward the apologetic. He only cites positive information about Jewish education. Negative data is not cited.} The comment of R. Joseph Yuspa Hahn is indicative. He writes, “The Maharal writes about educational reforms in his book Gur Arye, but I have not seen anyone who follows them.”\footnote{Yosef Omez (Frankfurt a.M., 1928), p. 284.}

2. Householders

Wetzlar’s critique of education extends to graduates of yeshivas and the continuing education of adults. The graduates of yeshivas may be divided into two categories, those who use their learning professionally and those who earn their living in other ways. He finds that the curriculum of the yeshiva is designed to produce professional scholars and rabbis. He has no objection to this since there is a need for rabbis, judges, and heads of yeshivas. However, he finds there is insufficient
concern with the continuing education of those yeshiva graduates who do not become professional scholars.\textsuperscript{117}

The yeshiva graduates who do not use their learning to earn a living can be divided into two basic categories. As Wetzlar puts it, those who give their wife a *ketubah* and a divorce to the Torah and those who try to continue their studies after marriage and entry into business. He finds that the first group has no carryover from their studies into their life. They forget everything they learned. They are the most arrogant people, concerned only with their own enrichment. They are unethical in their business dealings and if successful, become the most corrupt members of the community.\textsuperscript{118} Should they fail in business, they see no alternative but to flee from their debts. Wetzlar places part of the blame for this situation on the general economic climate, which he believes has declined significantly in his day.\textsuperscript{119} He contrasts this deplorable situation to that of the Sephardi Jews whose educational curriculum is much more positive and whose economic situation is similarly better.\textsuperscript{120}

The situation of those householders who continue their studies after marriage is better, but still far from ideal. They make an effort, but Wetzlar questions the efficacy of their study. He emphasizes that his remarks are based on personal observation and experience. The young householder who wishes to continue his studies is advised to study Talmud and many larger communities established societies for the study of Talmud (*Hevra Shas*).\textsuperscript{121} Wetzlar questions whether this is indeed the best subject for study. He tells of friends who were members of such societies. It was his experience that they could not read Hebrew properly, but mumbled their prayers and grace after meals. They spent many hours engaged in casuistic Talmudic argument, but nothing came of their study. He tells of asking his friends about the benefits of their studies. The questions are a reflection of his own agenda. What repair did they find for their souls? What laws did they learn in order to fulfill the commandments of the Torah? What ethics did they learn? Could they defend the faith of Judaism in their relations with Christian nobles and

\textsuperscript{117}L.B., p. 24b-25b.

\textsuperscript{118}R. Ephraim Lunshits' critique of the wealthy oligarchy is even harsher than Wetzlar's. It is also noteworthy that Lunshits, like Wetzlar, came from a poor background and later became successful. See, H.H. Ben Sasson, "Osher ve-Oni be-Mishnato ha-Mokhiah R. Ephraim Ish Lunshits" *Zion* 19 (1954), pp. 142-166.

\textsuperscript{119}See above, n. 95.

\textsuperscript{120}L.B., p. 24a.

\textsuperscript{121}On the history of study groups, see A. Schohat, "ָּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּּ
scholars? He relates that the only answer he received to his inquiries was silence.\textsuperscript{122} Wetzlar’s contemporaries, R. Jacob Emden and R. Jonathan Eybeschuetz, expressed similar concerns.\textsuperscript{123}

Relying on two responsa by R. Hayyim Yair Bacharach,\textsuperscript{124} Wetzlar recommends a program of Talmud study which emphasizes the study of those tractates which have practical application in conjunction with the relevant sections of the	extit{ Shulhan Arukh}. He emphasizes the study of practical halakhah which will help one live as a religious Jew. His stance in this area is conservative. He urges the study of halakhah, even Yoreh Deah, and mentions how he found it helpful on a number of occasions. Yet, he urges householders not to decide halakhic questions on their own, unless it is absolutely necessary because no rabbi is available. Wetzlar himself boasts that he never decided even the most obvious halakhic questions. He implies that he had the knowledge, but chose not to decide, because he saw himself as a householder and not a rabbi.\textsuperscript{125}

He also recommends the study of grammar and ethical works, mentioning the	extit{ Hovot ha-Levavot} as particularly worthy of study. Here too, he buttresses his recommendation with citations from earlier authorities.\textsuperscript{126} Wetzlar mentions the earlier existence of a society in Frankfurt which studied the meaning of the prayerbook, and recommends the revival of this custom.\textsuperscript{127}

Wetzlar admits that while some people were swayed by his arguments, many others were not. They quoted at him the Talmudic statements, “Whoever studies halakhot every day is assured that he has a share in the world to come”\textsuperscript{128} and “God has only the four ells of halakhah in this world.”\textsuperscript{129} This mechanistic understanding of Torah study led to a situation where these people, believing themselves certain of their share in the world to come, would violate and disregard the other commandments thereby bringing the Torah into disrepute among common people.

\textsuperscript{122}L.B., p. 26a.
\textsuperscript{123}Schohat, “Hevrot”, p. 236f.
\textsuperscript{124}\textit{Havvat Yair}, responsa 123 and 124.
\textsuperscript{125}L.B., p. 54b.
\textsuperscript{126}L.B., pp. 26a, 56b f. R. Manoah Hendel (late 16th cent.) mentions in his commentary to the	extit{ Hovot ha-Levavot} that he led a study group which studied this work. Cf., J. Elbaum, \textit{Petihot}, p. 146 n. 199.
\textsuperscript{127}L.B., p. 48a. The study group to which he alludes was started by Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz and continued by his son, R. Sheftel Horowitz. Cf., \textit{Vavo ha-Amudim} (Amsterdam, 1698), chap. 10. On the study groups in Frankfurt see also, Schohat, “Hevrot”, p. 220f.
\textsuperscript{128}B. \textit{Niddah}, 73a.
\textsuperscript{129}B. \textit{Shabbat}, 98b.
Common people also had their parallel argument. They quoted the statement, “Everyone who reads *Pereq Shirah* every day is assured a place in the world to come.”\(^{130}\) Wetzlar points out that this was not the original meaning of this passage. The tone of his rebuke to the common people is much gentler than his response to the scholars. The common people only misled themselves, but the scholars misled both themselves and others.\(^{131}\)

3. Professional Scholars

The pillar of Torah is also undermined by many of the scholars who misuse their learning to earn a living. Wetzlar divides this group into four broad categories. The first category is scholars who specialize in the study of the talmudic tractates and halakhic works relating to *Hoshen Mishpat*, the section of the *Shulhan Arukh* which deals with torts and business law. They justify this interest by citing the talmudic passage, “He who wishes to become wise should occupy himself with the laws relating to monetary matters.”\(^{132}\) However, their real reason is not wisdom, but clients. The would hire themselves out as advocates or “lawyers” to wealthy people involved in legal disputes before Jewish courts. Wetzlar relates an incident in which he was peripherally involved where one of the litigants brought in such an advocate who tried to pervert justice to benefit his client.

Wetzlar refers his readers to the important discussion of this problem by R. Hayyim Yair Bacharach in his *Havvat Yair*.\(^{133}\) The low level of Jewish courts and judges during this period were also criticized by a number of Wetzlar’s contemporaries, among them R. Jonathan Eybeschuetz who criticizes advocates who defend their clients, regardless of whether they are right or wrong.\(^{134}\)

The second category are those young scholars who have parents or in-laws rich enough to purchase a rabbinical position for them. He does not want to write about this abuse in detail because it is so widespread and well known that he can add little to the discussion. Furthermore, he finds the problem so personally painful that he can barely bring himself

\(^{130}\)This statement is quoted in J. Albo, *Sefer Ikkarim*, Book 3, Chap. 1. I. Husik, in his edition of the *Sefer Ikkarim* (Philadelphia, 1929), Vol. 3, p. 9 n. 1, cites S. Baer *Seder Avodat Israel* (Roedelheim, 1868), p. 574 n, that there is no such statement in Talmud or Midrash. Baer cites this passage in *Sefer Ikkarim* as the earliest reference to this statement. *Pereq Shirah* is a short anonymous tract containing a collection of hymnic sayings in praise of the creator.

\(^{131}\)L.B., p. 26a f.

\(^{132}\)B. *Baba Bathra*, 175b.


\(^{134}\)Schohat, *Hilufei*, pp. 73f., 102.
to write about it, not even to write lamentations. He adds as a postscript that these young rabbis so blind the communal leaders, with their arrogance and insolence, that if an honest scholar should venture to protest he would be dismissed as old fashioned and even branded an ignoramus.\textsuperscript{135}

Wetzlar follows up this discussion with a long digression, an analysis of a Talmudic passage which is a further indictment of these arrogant young rabbis.\textsuperscript{136} The time and effort that Wetzlar devotes to this issue leads me to suspect that the "honest scholar" whose shabby treatment Wetzlar laments may be himself. The purchase of rabbinical office or the procurement of rabbinical office through nepotism was a widespread and longstanding problem in both Germany and Eastern Europe. It was commented upon by many of Wetzlar's predecessors and contemporaries.\textsuperscript{137}

Many of those who did not have the financial resources or family connections to obtain a rabbinical position became tutors or private spiritual advisors to wealthy individuals. Wetzlar's concern is that many of these tutors and advisors decided halakhic questions which were beyond their competence, leading others astray.\textsuperscript{138} Wetzlar's contemporary, R. Jacob Emden, had problems with such a "private rabbi" when he was the rabbi in Emden.\textsuperscript{139} R. Joseph Stadthaghen and R. Jehiel Michal Epstein both report that teachers in smaller communities often assumed rabbinic responsibilities including deciding halakhic questions, some voluntarily and others at the insistence of their employers.\textsuperscript{140}

Wetzlar's critique is not entirely negative. He does not condemn all scholars nor does he see all learning as leading to abuse. He writes with great sympathy about the poor honest scholars who must give lessons and teach in a less than ideal situation because of their own poverty.\textsuperscript{141} R. Jacob Emden expresses similar sentiments with regard to the honest scholars who must earn their living in this manner.\textsuperscript{142}

Financial need as a mitigating factor occurs several times in the \textit{Libes Briv} and plays a role in Wetzlar's discussion of the fourth group of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[135]L.B., p. 29b f.
\item[136]L.B., p. 31a.
\item[138]L.B., p. 28b.
\item[139]Schohat, \textit{Hilufei}, p. 97.
\item[141]L.B., p. 27a.
\end{footnotes}
scholars, those who try to earn a living through the sale of books they have written. This category is divided into two groups. The first merely publish books that are not necessary, since they are overly advanced for ordinary readers, but are of little benefit to scholars. He has a measure of sympathy for those who do this out of financial need.\textsuperscript{143} R. Jacob Emden had a somewhat harsher view of authors who try to earn a living from their books. They lower their honor and that of the Torah. They seek rich patrons and many approbations to increase their own pride and to generate publicity. For Emden, they aspire to the crown of Torah which they do not deserve.\textsuperscript{144}

The second group of scholars, those who publish books which contain lies and falsehoods are a more serious concern. He is also very critical of the rabbis who give approbations to these harmful books, apparently without carefully examining them. He does not want to cite specific examples out of respect for the rabbis who were deceived into giving their approbation.\textsuperscript{145} He cites one specific example of a Kabbalistic book which received approbations from several of the greatest rabbis of the day, which, according to Wetzlar, was a Sabbatean tract. He cites specific pages in which it explicitly says that Sabbatai Sevi was the Messiah. Again, out of respect for the rabbis involved he does not want to name the book.\textsuperscript{146}

4. Kabbalists

The last group of scholars Wetzlar considers are the kabbalists. The book he cited which named Sabbatai Sevi as the Messiah was an example of the problems surrounding the study of Kabbalah. He blames the whole Sabbatean episode on the “modern kabbalists,” young men and unmarried youths who studied Kabbalah without proper preparation and without teachers. He warns his fellows to beware of people who call themselves kabbalists. His reticence with regard to Kabbalah is fully understandable in light of the controversies surrounding Kabbalah and Sabbatianism in the first half of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{147}

Wetzlar is not opposed to the study of Kabbalah in principle. He agrees with R. Isaiah Horowitz, his son R. Sheftel Horowitz, and R. Joseph Delmedigo of Candia who recommended the study of Kabbalah.

\textsuperscript{143}L.B., p. 29a.
\textsuperscript{144}Schohat, \textit{Hilufei}, p. 233.
\textsuperscript{145}L.B., p. 29a. The practice of giving approbations without carefully examining the book involved was widespread during the eighteenth century. Cf., E. Carlebach, \textit{The Pursuit of Heresy} (New York, 1990), pp. 190, 267f.
\textsuperscript{146}L.B., p. 32a.
\textsuperscript{147}On the Sabbatean controversy during the first half of the eighteenth century, see Carlebach, \textit{Pursuit}. 
However, he is careful to mention that these authorities insist on a number of prerequisites for the potential student of Kabbalah. It is difficult for the ordinary person to meet the intellectual prerequisites and even more difficult to find a proper teacher. Therefore, the best advice for an ordinary person is to abstain from the study of Kabbalah. Similar sentiments were expressed by R. Jehiel Michal Epstein in his edition of the prayerbook. He recommends throughout his commentary that the kabbalistic prayers be recited only by scholars and kabbalists and urges ordinary people to abstain from reciting these prayers.

Wetzlar cites R. Hayyim Yair Bacharach, a great scholar who was clearly versed in Kabbalah, but who publicly disavowed his knowledge as an exemplar. He mentions Bacharach’s important responsum on the recitation of the kabbalistic formula, “For the sake of the unification of the Blessed One,” where Bacharach denied knowing the meaning of this formula and disavowed knowledge of Kabbalah. He also cites R. Isaac Arama as an earlier example of an authority who disavowed knowledge of Kabbalah, but whose writings belie this disavowal. Wetzlar’s attitude toward Kabbalah was typical of his period.

5. The Study of Philosophy

Wetzlar was very much in favor of the study of medieval philosophical and ethical literature. The works most often cited and recommended by Wetzlar are the Hovot ha-Levavot, Sefer Ikkarim, and Akedat Yizhak. He is careful to indicate that the study of one or more of these works was recommended by important authorities like Maimonides, R. Isaac Luria, and R. Isaiah Horowitz. R. Zevi Ashkenazi, R. Jacob Emden’s father, also recommended the study of the same three works. He mentions that many people were opposed to the study of philosophy, but dismisses them as not truly understanding the nature of philosophy. The strictures of R. Hayyim Yair Bacharach are explained away as referring only to youths who have not “filled their bellies” with Talmud and codes. However, householders who have mastered these

148Seder Telilloh Derekh Yesharah (Frankfurt, a.M., 1697).
152Assaf, Mekorot, Vol. 1, p. 211.
153L.B., p. 60a.
fundamental texts could do no better than study philosophical and ethical works.\textsuperscript{154}

Wetzlar’s strong defense of philosophy and its importance in strengthening Jewish faith is in sharp contrast to the views of his contemporary R. Jacob Emden who saw philosophy as a stumbling block to faith. Emden warned people not to be deceived by the evil inclination who entices people by wrapping himself in the *talit* of the pious scholar, for man will not attain fear of heaven through the study of philosophy.\textsuperscript{155} R. Jehiel Michal Epstein also recommended staying away from philosophy in his *Kizur Shaloh*.\textsuperscript{156} The study of philosophy was at the center of a major controversy at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, the period of the so called “Ashkenazi Renaissance.”\textsuperscript{157} It is noteworthy that J. Elbaum concludes that the primary sources for the dissemination of philosophical ideas in the period after the controversy, when the study of philosophy was suppressed, were the works of R. Joseph Albo and R. Isaac Arama,\textsuperscript{158} both of which were central for Wetzlar. While Epstein and Emden were more in line with the dominant mood of traditional society, Wetzlar’s attitude also had its adherents. With regard to this issue Wetzlar was closer to proto-maskilim like Israel Zamosc.\textsuperscript{159} The publication of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* in 1742, the first time in almost two centuries, was in many respects a watershed in the renewed interest in medieval philosophy.

6. Education of Women

Wetzlar is very concerned about the lack of Jewish educational opportunities for women and girls. The text most often cited as justification for not teaching Torah to women and girls was the Talmudic passage, “Whoever teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he taught her *tiflus*.”\textsuperscript{160} He devotes several pages to a detailed analysis of the word *tiflus* and its use in the Bible to demonstrate that it does not mean what is implied to it. His second argument is that the “Torah” referred to in this Talmudic passage is the “Oral Torah” and not the “written Torah,” buttressing his view with Ben Azzai’s statement in the same Talmudic

\textsuperscript{154}L.B., p. 58b; Twersky, “Law and Spirituality”, op.cit.


\textsuperscript{156}Amsterdam, 1722, p. 82b.

\textsuperscript{157}For the history of the controversy, see Elbaum, Petihot, pp. 154-182.

\textsuperscript{158}Ibid., p. 182 n. 115.


\textsuperscript{160}B. *Sotah*, 20a. Cf., Assaf, *Mekorot*, Index, s.v. daughters, education of, for a list of authors who base themselves on this Talmudic passage.
discussion, "One is required to teach one’s daughter Torah." His last argument is logical. How can women refrain from transgressing the negative commandments, which all authorities agree they are obligated to do, if they do not know what they are? Ideally, Wetzlar would like to see women being taught the Oral Torah but will settle for the teaching of the written Torah.

He concludes his thoughts on the teaching of Torah to women with a sharp polemic against scholars who will not allow women and girls to learn Hebrew but do allow the teaching of foreign languages, such as French and Italian, which leads to greater intimacy with gentiles. Wetzlar is happy that he had found an ally in R. Jacob Emden who made a similar argument about the education of women in his prayerbook which was published as Wetzlar was writing the Libes Brito.

Was the situation as bleak as Wetzlar describes? There is evidence that the education of women is a more complicated question than Wetzlar would lead us to believe. The most famous example which would seem to contradict Wetzlar is Glueckel of Hameln. She mentions in her Memoirs that her father taught his children both religious and secular subjects. However, S. Schechter comments on this, "We may also assume that she knew sufficient Hebrew to read her daily prayers and to understand various familiar phrases and terms, which became almost a part of the Judengasse. But we doubt whether she was ever able to read a Hebrew book with ease." H. Pollack cites a number of primary and secondary sources which suggest that women had more educational opportunities than is commonly assumed. As with many other issues raised by Wetzlar, the important question of women's education in this period must await more detailed study before any conclusions can be reached. Wetzlar is describing his own experience, but in this case we cannot say that it reflects the condition of Jewish society as a whole.

161B. Sotah, 20a.
162R. Zvi Hirsch Koidanover, in his Kav ha-Yashar, chap. 82, also polemizes against the teaching of foreign languages. R. Jacob Emden was also opposed to teaching foreign languages, cf., Assaf Mekorot Vol. 1, p. 208.
163Siddur Shaarey Shamayim (Altona, 1747).
164L.B., p. 50a f.
165Though she is the most famous woman author during the early modern period, she is not the only one. Cf., S. Niger, "Di Yidishe Literatur un di Lezerin" Bleter Geshikhtefun der Yidisher Literatur (New York, 1959), pp. 81-92, gives a list of known female authors.
167Folkways, pp., 63f., 242f. nn. 87-93.
As a corollary to his discussion of the education of women, Wetzlar criticizes the continued popularity of the Ze’enah u-Reenah, the Yiddish translation of the Torah which intermingles rabbinic material into the text. In place of the Ze’enah u-Reenah Wetzlar recommends the biblical translation of R. Yekutiel Blitz, a translation which has no rabbinic elaborations. The Blitz translation and that of R. Joseph Witzenhausen which follows the same philosophy, were both produced as a direct response to critiques of the Ze’enah u-Reenah similar to Wetzlar’s.\textsuperscript{168} Despite many critiques, the Ze’enah u-Reenah remained the most popular work written in Yiddish. Over 210 editions have appeared from the first edition until the present.\textsuperscript{169} On the other hand, the Blitz translation was published only once in its entirety.\textsuperscript{170} The Witzenhausen translation was reprinted once in a Christian multilingual Bible.\textsuperscript{171}

**Avodah**

The second pillar is *Avodah*, divine service. Wetzlar begins his analysis with a statement that serving God is mandated in the Bible and the accepted form of service is through prayer. This concept is so universally accepted in Judaism that Wetzlar feels no need to prove this assertion with Rabbinic proof texts. However, he finds it necessary to refute the assertion made by some Christians that divine service means animal sacrifice. The need for this digression was not theoretical, but was based on Wetzlar’s own experience of having been often asked by Christians how Jews worshipped God in the absence of the Temple and animal sacrifices. The remainder of his discussion is devoted to the behavior of Jews during prayer in the synagogue and at home, and prayer in the vernacular. Later in the *Libes Briv*, he adds a long discussion of why the *Shir ha-Yihud* is not recited in many communities, a subject about which he has strong feelings.

Wetzlar’s first concern is how Jews pray. He finds that Jews behave in a deplorable manner when they pray, both at home and in the synagogue. It is striking that the central motivation underlying this discussion is the negative response of Christians who had visited synagogues. Wetzlar writes that he heard hundreds of times from

\textsuperscript{169} Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem, 1970), 16:967.
\textsuperscript{170} It was never reprinted under Blitz’s name. However, H. Liberman has discovered that Blitz’s translation of the Prophets and Writings were reprinted twice, in 1798 and 1814 under the name *Ha-Maggid*, which is also the name of another early Yiddish Bible translation. Cf., “Di Zvei Iberdruk fn Blitz’s Tanakh Iberzetsung in Schmidt’s Viener Drukeri” *Ohel RH*”L, Vol. 2, pp. 248-256.
\textsuperscript{171} *Biblia Pentapla* (Wandsbeck, 1711).
Christians about the negative things they witnessed in their visits to synagogues.\footnote{Christian visits to the Jewish ghetto and synagogues were quite common during the eighteenth century. A fascinating example is the excerpt about a visit to a synagogue from Goethe's autobiography quoted in Pollack, \textit{Folkways}, p. 12. Another interesting source are the eighteen travel reports by Swedish Christians in the 17th-18th centuries which mention visits to Jewish communities, collected by H.J. Schoeps. All of them mention visits to the synagogue to attend services or other religious ceremonies. Cf., \textit{Philosemitismus im Barock} (Tuebingen, 1952), pp. 170-210.} Similarly, his brief discussion of how Jews behave when they pray at home was occasioned by the comments he read in a German-Yiddish missionary tract written by a priest in Prague.\footnote{This is probably a reference to Franciscus Haslbauer S.J., \textit{Gruendlicher Bericht Von dem Christenthum} (Prague, 1720-1722). For full bibliographical details, see O. Muneles, \textit{Bibliographical Survey of Jewish Prague} (Prague, 1952), p. 68f., no. 237.} Wetzlar is troubled that he cannot refute these accusations, but must agree that their negative comments are indeed correct. He castigates his fellow Jews and asks whether there can be a greater desecration of the Divine Name. He points out that this stands in sharp contrast to the behavior of Christians. He can only report on behavior in churches from hearsay, but has personally observed how Christians recite grace in a dignified and pious manner when they eat in inns and other public places.\footnote{L.B., p. 37a.}

Wetzlar’s critique of synagogue behavior is echoed by other authors. Aaron Samuel of Hergershausen states that \textit{Tisha B'Av} is observed in the synagogue as if it were \textit{Simhat Torah}.\footnote{Stein, “\l{T}ebilloh\”, p. 59.} R. Jehiel Michal Epstein, expressing similar concerns, writes that Jews behave frivolously in the synagogue and forget that they are in the presence of the \textit{Shekhinah}. He also echoes Wetzlar’s concern about the negative impression made on Christians who visit the synagogue. It is a desecration of the Divine Name and leads Christians to say that Judaism is a religion without substance.\footnote{\textit{Kizur Shaloh}, p. 62a.} R. Elhanan Kirchan writes, “Most individuals attending the synagogue on the Sabbath also engage in discussing nonsensical matters and business affairs.”\footnote{\textit{Simhat ha-Nefesh}, Part 2, p. 17b (Shatzky ed.).} Many more examples can be cited of contemporary authors and communal ordinances which decry frivolous and negative behavior in synagogues.\footnote{Pollack, \textit{Folkways}, p. 150ff.}

According to Wetzlar, one of the primary causes for negative behavior in synagogues is that very few Jews know what they are praying. He asks, “whether there are three people out of a thousand who

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[172] Christian visits to the Jewish ghetto and synagogues were quite common during the eighteenth century. A fascinating example is the excerpt about a visit to a synagogue from Goethe’s autobiography quoted in Pollack, \textit{Folkways}, p. 12. Another interesting source are the eighteen travel reports by Swedish Christians in the 17th-18th centuries which mention visits to Jewish communities, collected by H.J. Schoeps. All of them mention visits to the synagogue to attend services or other religious ceremonies. Cf., \textit{Philosemitismus im Barock} (Tuebingen, 1952), pp. 170-210.
\item[174] L.B., p. 37a.
\item[175] Stein, “\l{T}ebilloh\”, p. 59.
\item[176] \textit{Kizur Shaloh}, p. 62a.
\item[177] \textit{Simhat ha-Nefesh}, Part 2, p. 17b (Shatzky ed.).
\item[178] Pollack, \textit{Folkways}, p. 150ff.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
know what they are praying? I do not want to write about women or girls, but men." He solution to this problem is educational reform. His role model are the Spanish and Portuguese Jews and he cites R. Sheftel Horowitz and R. Shabbetai Bass as authorities who buttress his views.

The educational reform Wetzlar advocates is a simple one. He recommends the adoption of the Sephardi practice of teaching children the translation of the prayers as an integral part of their elementary education. In addition, he reminds his readers of his earlier suggestion regarding greater emphasis on the study of the Hebrew language and grammar. If these reforms were instituted, they would lead to a better understanding of the prayers and more meaningful worship.

His second suggestion concerns prayer in the vernacular for those who do not understand Hebrew. He finds that people are not allowed to pray in Yiddish, even if they do not understand Hebrew. The reason he was given is a Talmudic statement, "He who prays in Aramaic is not helped." He dismisses this as ludicrous, for how can one say that God only understands one language, Hebrew. He argues the contrary, that many authorities forbid prayer in a language one does not understand. Again, he cites the Spanish and Portuguese Jews as a suitable role model. Not only did they allow people to pray in Spanish or Portuguese, but prayerbooks were published in these languages.

What does Wetzlar mean when he speaks of prayer in the vernacular? The extent to which Jews prayed in the vernacular has long been the subject of controversy. Yiddishist scholars beginning with I. Zinberg argued that Yiddish occupied a more central place in religious life than has been generally accepted. Other scholars have argued that the evidence has been misinterpreted by these scholars for modern ideological reasons. There are a significant number of Yiddish translations of siddurim and mahzorim, both printed and in manuscript, going back to the fifteenth century. In addition, there is the whole corpus of Tekhina literature, Yiddish prayers composed primarily for women. The Yiddishists point to the existence of these translations and

179 L.B., p. 37b.
180 Ibid.
181 Ibid., p. 38a.
182 A paraphrase of B. Shabbat, 12b.
183 An early example of using Sephardim as a role model to advocate prayer in Yiddish is R. Isaac Sulkis's Sefer Shir ha-Shirim (Cracow, 1579). He argues that women should be allowed to pray in Yiddish and cites the practice of Sephardi Jews as an example. See, Shmeruk, Perokim, p. 53 n. 8.
184 See above n. 70.
185 For a bibliography of these Yiddish translations see, H. Dinse, Die Entwicklung des jiddischen Schriftums im deutschen Sprachgebiet (Stuttgart, 1974), pp. 184-190. See also the sources cited in Weinreich, Geshikhte, Vol., 3, p. 271f.
Introduction

tekhinot as evidence that people prayed in Yiddish. M. Weinreich, the most recent advocate of this position, suggests that at least some congregants would pray in Yiddish while the congregation as a whole prayed in Hebrew.\(^{186}\) In contrast, C. Shmeruk has argued that the evidence indicates that these translations were for personal study and were not used liturgically.\(^{187}\) The fact that the collections of tekhinot were organized thematically and did not follow the order of the prayerbook is noteworthy and further supports Shmeruk’s argument.\(^{188}\)

The Yiddishists cite a second piece of evidence on behalf of their argument. There is a venerable tradition going back to the Talmud\(^{189}\) which is reiterated by major medieval authorities that one should only pray in the language one understands.\(^{190}\) R. Jehiel Michal Epstein was also concerned with this problem and spoke about it a number of times in his writings.\(^{191}\)

H. Liberman offers an explanation in his analysis of Epstein’s teachings. He indicates that there are two types of prayer, the liturgically ordained prayers of the prayerbook and personal prayers of petition. The classical rabbinic discussions of prayer in the vernacular relate to the second type of prayer and not the first type. All authorities agree that the liturgically ordained prayers must be recited in Hebrew. The argument is only concerning the second type, prayers of personal petition. The authorities who allowed prayer in the vernacular were talking about the second type of prayer.\(^{192}\) The structure of the tekhinot collections and the anecdotal evidence of their role in Jewish life also support this argument.\(^{193}\) In addition, an examination of the Yiddish prayers which are found in some siddurim and mahzorim shows that they are all prayers of personal petition inserted in specific points of the service like the taking out of the Torah, the priestly blessing, or preparations for blowing the shofar, all considered auspicious moments for personal petition.

The most recent review of this question by David E. Fishman\(^{194}\) also reaches no clear conclusion. It is possible to find sources, both medieval and early modern, which point to a variety of possible conclusions. The

---

\(^{186}\) Weinreich, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 264.

\(^{187}\) Shmeruk, Perokim, p. 53.


\(^{189}\) E.g., B. Sotah, 33a.

\(^{190}\) E.g., Sefer Hasidim, (Wistinetzki ed.), para. 11, 1590; Mishne Torah, Hilkhot Berakhot, 1:6; Shulhan Arukh, Oreh Hayyim, 101:4.

\(^{191}\) E.g., Kzzur Shaloh, pp. 43b, 53d-54a; Derekh ha-Yashar le-Olam haBa, chap. 31.

\(^{192}\) “Bamerkungen”, pp. 201-205.

\(^{193}\) Cf., Weissler, “Traditional Piety”.

extent to which people prayed in the vernacular and the circumstances in which this occurred needs further study. Wetzlar's position is that people who do not understand Hebrew should be encouraged to pray in Yiddish or any language the person understands. However, it would seem that this only refers to individuals and not to public communal prayer. Contrary to the arguments of the Yiddishists, there is no evidence in the sources for public communal prayer in any language other than Hebrew.

Wetzlar makes two additional suggestions to improve the pillar of *Avodah*. He asks the rabbis, communal leaders, and synagogue wardens to insure that order is maintained in the synagogue. Here, his argument is not based on his concern with Christian reaction. Instead, he points out that the great tumult which is characteristic of most synagogues does not allow for prayer with the proper spiritual intention (*kavannah*). Even the cantor who leads prayers becomes confused by the loud prayers of those who come in the middle of the service and begin their prayers from the beginning.\(^{195}\)

His second suggestion concerns the recitation of the *Shir ha-Yiḥud*. The *Shir ha-Yiḥud*, an anonymous medieval poem divided into seven parts, one for each day of the week, was recited in many communities at the end of the morning service. After a long preamble which seeks to establish the integral nature of song as a component of worship, both in the Temple and the synagogue, he begins a lengthy polemic about the *Shir ha-Yiḥud* and why it is not recited in many communities.\(^{196}\) He blames the rabbis for setting a poor example. Not only do they not order the cantor to recite this song, but often they do not participate in its recitation even when it is recited in the synagogue.

The recitation of the *Shir ha-Yiḥud* had been the subject of a long standing controversy.\(^{197}\) R. Jacob Moellin (Maharil) the leading rabbinic authority in 15th century Germany opposed the Yiddish rhymed poetic translations of the *Shir ha-Yiḥud* because he felt that ignorant people thought they would fulfill their religious obligations through the recitation of these poems and were lax in the observance of other commandments.\(^{198}\) A century and a half later, R. Moses Isserles (Ramoh) was opposed not only to the *Shir ha-Yiḥud*, but also *Yigdal, Ani Ma'amin* and similar statements of the articles of faith because he was opposed to the whole concept. His opposition was part of a larger controversy over

\(^{195}\)L.B., p. 64b.  
\(^{196}\)L.B., pp. 66a-71b.  
\(^{197}\)A. Berliner, "Shir ha-Yiḥud" Ketavim Nivharim (Jerusalem, 1969), pp. 155-158. Berliner concludes that there never was a uniform custom concerning the recitation of the *Shir ha-Yiḥud*.  
\(^{198}\)Sefer Maharil ed. S.Y. Spitzer (Jerusalem, 1989), Likkutim no. 59, p. 626.
Maimonides' philosophical writings and the study of philosophy.\textsuperscript{199} Wetzlar himself mentions that R. Solomon Luria (Maharshal) abrogated the recitation of \textit{Shir ha-Yihud} in all the communities where he was rabbi and cites a number of other authorities who discussed this controversial question.\textsuperscript{200}

**Gemilut Ḥasadim**

The third pillar, \textit{gemilut hasadim}, does not have a clear, generally accepted definition as do the first two pillars. Much of Wetzlar's discussion of this theme concerns his lengthy and unsuccessful search for an understanding of the meaning of \textit{gemilut hasadim}. He describes this quest in great detail.

Wetzlar's final understanding of \textit{gemilut hesed} is that \textit{hesed} resides with God. "He is one who does \textit{hesed} and what he gives is out of pure \textit{hesed}."\textsuperscript{201} Man must requite this \textit{hesed} to his fellow man who has not been so blessed. The wise man, the strong man and the wealthy man must all requite God by using their gifts in the service of their fellow man and their community. He does not offer concrete suggestions which will lead to the strengthening of this pillar as he did with the two previous pillars. His reason is that to do so would put him in the category of the preachers of rebuke, a task for which he feels unqualified.

Nonetheless, he does offer one rebuke. He suggests that \textit{hesed} is more beloved among the other nations than it is among his fellow Jews. Christians hear words of \textit{musar} from their preachers on Sundays and if their preachers see something negative in the community, they do not protect anyone but preach about it publicly.\textsuperscript{202} The task he had set for himself was to seek the reasons for the length of the exile. His conclusion is that the three basic pillars are not being adequately observed and maintained. Where does ultimate responsibility lie for the deplorable situation which he has described? His answer is a failure of leadership.

**Critique of Leadership**

Wetzlar does not directly accuse the communal leaders (\textit{parnasim}) and to a lesser extent the rabbis of being responsible for the deplorable state of the community until the last part of the \textit{Libes Briv}. He does it, even then, with marked hesitation. Earlier, he had cited R. Ephraim Lunshits who also criticized the rabbis and communal leaders as being a cause of

\textsuperscript{199}Elbaum, \textit{Petihot}, p. 157 n. 8. On the larger controversy, see infra., pp. 156-182.
\textsuperscript{200}L.B., p. 67b.
\textsuperscript{201}Ibid., p. 45b.
\textsuperscript{202}Ibid., p. 73a.
the length of the exile. However, it is interesting that in this section, unlike the rest of the *Libes Briv*, Wetzlar does not cite Lunshits or the other ethical and philosophical works he normally relied on to butress his arguments, but reverts to biblical verses for prooftexts to support his statements.

Wetzlar bases his critique on Isaiah 53:6 where the Jews are compared to a flock of sheep that has gone astray. When a flock goes astray, he reasons, it is the shepherd who is at fault. The communal leaders and rabbis are the shepherds who have let the Jewish people go astray. The Jews are still God's children and his flock. Jews are not raised like sheep who are guarded by their shepherds; they are raised like wild animals. The people are not ultimately at fault, only their leaders.

His greatest hostility is vented against the communal leaders. The rabbis are treated somewhat more evenhandedly. The verses Wetzlar cites, Ezekiel chapter 34, Jeremiah 23:1-2, and Zechariah 11:17, which prophesy the downfall and punishment of the bad shepherds of Israel are aimed more at the communal leaders than the rabbis. The ultimate responsibility lies with them. The rabbi is an employee of the community. It is the responsibility of the communal leaders to ensure that he performs his duties properly. Wetzlar's uncompromisingly harsh judgment of the communal leaders stands in sharp contrast to the very positive comments of S. Stern in her evaluation of the role of Court Jews within the Jewish community. Court Jews certainly comprised an important element in the Jewish communal leadership and many of them functioned as *parnasim*. As has been noted above, Wetzlar had a negative personal experience with the family of Leffman Behrens, an important Court Jew. His evaluation must be tempered in light of this personal experience. Stern's evaluation is probably overly positive while Wetzlar is overly negative. It is also dangerous to generalize about the situation of all Jewish communities in Germany.

Wetzlar cites "the pious Rabbi Abraham, of blessed memory, rabbi of Halberstadt and Amsterdam" as an example of what a rabbi should be. He kept his community together and taught a class in *musar* literature every evening. There are others like him who will, if necessary, deliver a sermon in the middle of the year and rebuke those deserving it without worrying about alienating the rich and powerful. Unfortunately most rabbis do not meet these standards. They do not establish *yeshivot*,

---

203 Ibid., p. 43b f.
204 Ibid., p. 73a.
205 Ibid., p. 75b f.
207 The prevailing custom was that the Rabbi delivered two sermons on *Shabbat ha-Gadol* and *Shabbat Shuvah*. Cf. Assaf, "Korot ha-Rabbanut", p. 52.
serve as judges, or even concern themselves with the problems of the community. Twice a year they deliver a sermon in which they display their erudition and intellectual acumen. The rest of the year they devote themselves to financially remunerative matters, such as performing marriages or examining ritual slaughterers.208

Wetzlar finds a traditional consolation for the sad state of affairs he has found in the Talmudic statement, “the Son of David will not come until the generation is completely evil or completely good.”209 His critique of the state of his society has found a positive resonance in modern scholarship. According to C. Abramsky, “One of the most important characteristic features of the history of the Jews in eighteenth-century Europe is the growing criticism of rabbis and communal leadership. The division between the leaders – whether elected or self-appointed – and the led seems to have been acute, with a wide gulf separating them.”210

**Spanish and Portuguese Jews**

Wetzlar mentions Spanish and Portuguese Jews (*Sephardim*) several times in the *Libes Briv*. In each case the *Sephardim* and their practices are held up as positive role models for their *Ashkenazi* brethren. The *Sephardi* educational system with its emphasis on the study of Bible, Hebrew language and grammar is what God desires, according to Wetzlar. He is careful to indicate that this is not only his opinion but the view of R. Sheftel Horowitz.211 He also cites R. Shabbetai Bass who praised the *Sephardi* order of study.212 The *Sephardim* are also praised for their manner of prayer. They pray with the proper *kavvanah* because they know what they are saying. The third *Sephardi* practice which Wetzlar praises is prayer in the vernacular by men and women who do not know Hebrew.213

In all three cases Wetzlar holds up the *Sephardi* practices as the proper way in contrast to the prevailing *Ashkenazi* practices which are found to be deficient. The practical result, according to Wetzlar, is that business and wealth have permanence among the *Sephardim*, while among the *Ashkenazim* business and wealth are very unstable and contribute to the precarious social and religious situation which Wetzlar

---

208 L.B., p. 73b.
209 B. Sanhedrin, 98b.
212 Ibid., p. 38a f.
213 Ibid., p. 38b.
has described.\textsuperscript{214} Though he cites Horowitz and Bass as authorities, there can be little doubt that Wetzlar's knowledge of Sephardi practices was based on his own experiences as is the rest of the \textit{Libes Brivo}. There was a significant Sephardi community in Hamburg,\textsuperscript{215} which he mentions having visited many times.

Wetzlar's positive allusions to Sephardim and his favorable comparison of them in relation to Ashkenazim is a theme that can be found among many authors in the early modern period. As early as 1579 Isaac Sulkis praised the Sephardim for allowing women and men who did not understand Hebrew to pray in the vernacular.\textsuperscript{216} Numerous authors in addition to R. Shchelet Horowitz and R. Shabbtaï Bass praised the Sephardi educational system and urged Ashkenazim to reform the educational system following the Sephardi model. Among these authors are R. Yehiel Mikheïl Epstein,\textsuperscript{217} Aaron Samuel of Hengershausen,\textsuperscript{218} R. Judah Leib Pochowitz,\textsuperscript{219} R. Joseph Teumim,\textsuperscript{220} and R. Jacob Emden.\textsuperscript{221} R. Yekutiel Blitz, in the introduction to his Bible translation praises the Sephardi educational system and sees it as a role model which he follows in his translation of the Bible which was characterized by a complete lack of midrashic embellishment. The relation of Sephardi society in Western Europe to modernity\textsuperscript{222} and its influence on Ashkenazi Jewry in the early modern period deserves more study.\textsuperscript{223}

\textbf{Christians and Jews}

Christian-Jewish relations is a theme that Wetzlar addresses in a variety of contexts in the \textit{Libes Brivo}. He is concerned with how Christians perceive Jews and Judaism and with Christian-Jewish interaction. One of the reasons he gives for not teaching \textit{Ein Ya'akov} in his discussion of

\textsuperscript{214}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 24a, 38a.
\textsuperscript{216}C. Shmeruk, \textit{Perokim}, p. 53 n. 8.
\textsuperscript{217}Noble, "Epstein", p. 126.
\textsuperscript{218}Assaf, \textit{Mekorot}, Vol. 1, p. 175.
\textsuperscript{219}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 164.
\textsuperscript{220}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 216.
\textsuperscript{222}Yosef Kaplan has begun to explore this issue in his articles, "Netivah shel ha-Yahadut ha-Sefardit ha-Ma'aravit el ha-Modernah" \textit{Pa'amim} 48 (1991) pp. 85-103; "Die portugiesischen Juden und die Modernisierung" \textit{Juedische Lebenswelten - Essays} ed. A. Nechama et. al, (Berlin, 1991), pp. 303-317.
educational reform is that Jews understand these *midrashim* in their most literal sense and relate these ideas to Christians. He mentions that he was often reproached by Christians for the strange things that Jews believe. When he protested, he was told that they had heard these things from Jews.\footnote{L.B., p. 22a.} He is also concerned with the poor impression negative Jewish behavior in the synagogue makes on visiting Christians. He had read about it and also heard about it personally. These were not isolated instances, but a common experience.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 35a-36a.}

Wetzlar may have been influenced by the Pauline concept of grace in his discussion of the definition of *hesed*. He twice mentions that he heard from Christians that *gnad* (grace, *hesed*) is a gift from God and is not something that we sinful people have. Wetzlar’s final definition of *hesed* as something that God gives us out of pure *hesed* sounds very similar to the definition he has heard from the Christians. He cites several medieval Jewish sources to support his definition, but this is the only place where he introduces Christian theological concepts. Though it is impossible to prove that his conversations with Christians were the decisive influence on him, it is certain that Wetzlar engaged in theological discussions with Christians. The extent to which he may have been influenced by them remains speculative.\footnote{Ibid., p. 40b, 42a f.}

An unexpected question Wetzlar raises is whether Jews are equipped to defend the beliefs of Judaism in conversations with Christians.\footnote{Ibid., p. 26a.} He also asks whether Jews understand Maimonides’ thirteen articles of faith and do they know what they should believe? Wetzlar urges that all children be taught Maimonides’ thirteen articles of faith and recommends the study of Abraham Jagel’s *Lekah Tov*.\footnote{See above n. 109.} His motivation is the negative impression made on Christian nobles and scholars by Jews who could not discuss their faith intelligently.\footnote{L.B., p. 52a f.}

Even formal disputations between Jews and Christians were not unheard of during this period. Wetzlar’s older contemporary, R. Joseph Stadthagen was invited to the royal court of Hannover to debate with a Jewish apostate in 1704.\footnote{A. Berliner ed., *Religionsgesprache Gehalten am Kurfuerstlichen Hofe zu Hannover 1704* (Berlin, 1914).} Wetzlar’s apparent openness to dialogue with Christians was not unique, but reflected the changing attitude of the Jewish community. J. Katz writes, “Rabbi Yair Hayyim Bacharach and Rabbi Jacob Emden were the outstanding Jewish personalities of their
times. They and their circles reacted to their environment by stressing the common religious heritage of Judaism and Christianity."\textsuperscript{231} There are also examples of intellectual contacts between Christian Hebraists and Jewish scholars. For example, R. Joseph Stadthagen maintained contact with professors from the nearby university of Rinteln. R. David Oppenheim and R. Jonathan Eybeschuetz were in contact with Christian clergy in Prague.\textsuperscript{232} A. Schohat has collected a variety of examples of Jewish interaction with the Christian community in the early eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{233}

The new style of Christian missionary activity to the Jews which sought to convert the Jews with the carrot rather than the stick, exemplified by J.H. Callenberg's Institutum Judaicum in Halle and other Pietist institutions is an important aspect of Jewish-Christian relations which deserves study.\textsuperscript{234} The example and/or influence of the Pietist movement on the Jews is also deserving of further investigation. For example, there was a debate in Germany in the 1730's over whether learned books should be in written in German or Latin as had been the custom. Does this have any impact on the newfound respectability of Yiddish? K. Pinson, writing about the Pietist critique of the establishment clergy says, "with their emphasis on the true doctrine, on learning, on Latin, and on disputation they had little to offer the lower classes and by their cringing servility to the upper classes they only worked all the more for the widening of the gap between the various elements of the population."\textsuperscript{235} Wetzlar would have felt quite comfortable with this statement as a critique of the rabbinate.

The Influence of the Prague School

Wetzlar and his ideas were an integral part of an important intellectual tradition which had its foundations in the thought of Rabbi Judah Loew (Maharal) of Prague.\textsuperscript{236} The Maharal was an important

\textsuperscript{233} "The German Jews' Integration within their non-Jewish Environment in the first half of the Eighteenth Century (Hebrew)" Zion 21 (1956), pp. 207-235.
\textsuperscript{234} Two recent studies are, U. Arnoldi, Pro Iudaes: Die Gutachten der hallischen Theologen im 18. Jahrhundert zu Fragen der Judentoleranz (Studien zu Kirche und Israel 14; Berlin, 1993) and M. Jung, Die wuerttbergusche Kirche und die Juden in der Zeit des Pietismus (1675-1780) (Studien zu Kirche und Israel 13; Berlin, 1992). My thanks to B. Gerlach for bringing these sources to my attention.
\textsuperscript{235} K. Pinson, "German Pietism and the Jews" Freedom and Reason, Essays in Memory of M.R. Cohen ed. S.W. Baron et.al., (Glencoe, 1951), pp. 397-412.
\textsuperscript{236} On the educational theories of the Maharal see, A.P. Kleinberger, Ha-Mahshavah ha-Pedagogit shel ha-Maharal mi-Prague (Jerusalem, 1962). On his social
Introduction

social critic and religious reformer. H.H. Ben Sasson has suggested that he and his followers are among the most important intellectual precursors of modernity. His teachings not only influenced his immediate disciples, but a long list of important figures who were associated with Prague, whether as students in its Yeshiva or as rabbinic functionaries. It is possible to speak of a “Prague school” of social and religious renewal which begins with the Maharal and continues into the eighteenth century.

My concept of the Prague school as an ongoing and influential tradition is not entirely original. S. Assaf has already demonstrated the existence of this school and its influence in the area of educational reform. My work on the Libes Briv has convinced me that Assaf’s original insight should be extended to encompass a comprehensive program of social and religious reform which was integral to the teachings of important rabbis and scholars who were associated with the Prague school. The history of this school and its teachings will illuminate many important aspects of Jewish social and religious history in the early modern period in western and central Europe. A comprehensive study of this school, which is beyond the scope of this study remains an important desideratum.

The influence of the Prague school on Wetzlar and the Libes Briv is central. Starting with Wetzlar himself, we find that he studied at the Yeshiva of Prague under R. Abraham Broda. If one looks at the figures who most influenced Wetzlar and whom he cites as authorities for his religious and social views, one finds Prague to be a common denominator. Among the important influences on Wetzlar are R. Ephraim Lunshits, R. Isaiah Horowitz, his son R. Sheftel Horowitz, R. Hayyim Yair Bacharach, and Wetzlar’s teacher R. Abraham Broda. Other figures contemporary with Wetzlar whose views are close to his and who can be considered part of the Prague school are R. David Oppenheim, and R. Jonathan Eybeschuetz. All of the above mentioned were either rabbis in Prague or studied in Prague. They all share certain basic ideas about Jewish society and religion which can be traced back to the Maharal and his teachings.

---


The Translation

This translation is based on JTS Manuscript 2333. I have compared the text with the other manuscripts and found no significant variations, with the exception of JTS Ms. 2256 which has been significantly altered, as has been noted in my description of the manuscripts above. There are orthographic differences among the manuscripts, but as Yiddish of this period has no standard orthography, it would not be profitable to catalog these differences. My choice of this manuscript was originally influenced by I. Rivkind's opinion that it was an autograph. A second reason was that I had access to the original manuscript, which was helpful on a number of occasions when the xerox copy was not clear. The Yiddish text is a faithful transcription of this manuscript. I have not "corrected" the Yiddish text in any way. In a few cases where biblical verses were incorrectly cited, I have given the correct citation in the translation, but have left the Yiddish text intact.

All translations in the text are my own with the exception of the biblical verses which are based on the new JPS translation with occasional variances when demanded by the context or Wetzlar's interpretative translations. Spellings of names, places and transliterations of Hebrew and Yiddish words follow the *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

Wetzlar was quite traditional and always added the encomium "Blessed be He and Blessed be His Name" whenever he mentions the name of God. He also adds the traditional encomia when mentioning religious figures. I have deleted these encomia in the translation.

Biblical verses or rabbinic passages are often quoted in Hebrew and then followed with a Yiddish translation. In the majority of cases the translation is faithful to the original and I have indicated that a Yiddish translation follows a Hebrew passage with [trans.]. Where the Yiddish translation differs from the Hebrew text, I have translated both.

JTS Ms. 2333 is missing one leaf. N. Porge copied the missing material from JTS Ms. 2256 and inserted a page into the manuscript. I have taken the missing material from Ms. Michael 297, Neubauer no. 743 which was written by the same hand as JTS Ms. 2333. The Yiddish text is a transcription of JTS Ms. 2333.

I have tried to be faithful to the authors style and syntax. Paragraph divisions were added by myself as was all information in square brackets [ ]. The page numbers in square brackets refer to the page numbers of the Yiddish text.