SOME NOTES ON THE NATURE OF 
SAUL BERLIN'S WRITINGS

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TO THIS DAY, SAUL BERLIN and his writings remain a riddle and a challenge for the student of Hebrew letters and modern Jewish history. One hundred and seventy six years after his death (1794), we still do not have a comprehensive study of him or of his writings. Furthermore, although several controversial books had been attributed to Saul Berlin, there has not been a thorough scientific study of the problem,¹ except for some attempts to touch upon the subject of his authorship of the works in question. One may assume that once such a study is conducted, we should have a better insight into the early Hebrew Haskalah in Germany in the last quarter of the 18th century, and a better idea of the role of Saul Berlin in spreading the ideas of Enlightenment among the Jews in Germany as well as of his share in the development of the religious reform movement.

A rabbi and a Maskil, writer of satires and responsa, Saul Berlin had been a controversial figure during his life, and has remained so after his death. Persecuted and criticized in his lifetime, Rabbi Saul Berlin, I think, has been misunderstood and misrepresented

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¹ Recently Moshe Samet published a comprehensive bibliographical list of the writings of Rabbi Saul Berlin and the works about him with an excellent introduction which brings into focus the problematical nature of the writings of Saul Berlin ("R. Saul Berlin and His Writings," Kirjath Sepher, XLIII [No. 3, 1968], pp. 429–441 [Hebrew]). The following studies have a direct bearing on the problem of Berlin's authorship of the works in question: Reuven Margaliot, "R. Shaul Levin the Forger of the Book 'Besamim Rosh'," 'Areshet (Jerusalem, 1944), pp. 411–417, Binyamin Klar, Mekkarim Vesayyaim (Tel Aviv, 1954), pp. 357–378. For a more detailed list consult Samet's article.
after his death by most of the scholars who dealt with the Hebrew Haskalah in Germany. I tend to believe that certain criticism leveled at Saul Berlin by his rabbinic contemporaries has been adopted by some students of the period without adequate investigation into the complex issues involved, and into the complicated figure and intricate predicament of Saul Berlin. It is for the purpose of clearing some misconceptions regarding Saul Berlin, that this writer proposes the following paper.

Scholars' views about Saul Berlin are quite critical. Simon Bernfeld considers him "וחרב ח.setTo" [a foolish scholar]; Mordecai Eliav accuses him of hypocrisy; others regarded him as a forger. It is my contention that these statements are erroneous; the first statement is completely out of place, considering the man and his literary and halachic writings; the second one, I think, is a generality which does not take into account Saul Berlin's predicament, and the third statement has yet to be proven.

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7 Simon Bernfeld, in his Dor Tahapuchot, II (Warsaw, 1914), pp. 68–77, portrays an almost completely negative image of Saul Berlin, the only credit being that he was "a foolish scholar" (see footnote 3); Bernfeld accuses him of being extremely light-minded, a hypocrite, and a person who loves deceit. Bernfeld regards Berlin's satire rather seriously, too seriously as a matter of fact, and thus concludes: "He was a fool in rhymes" (ibid., p. 75). Similar views are to be found in Zvi Graetz, Dibre Yemei Hayehudim, IX (Warsaw), pp. 111–112; Ben-Zion Katz, Rabanut, Hasidut, Haskolah, I (Tel Aviv, 1956), pp. 201 ff. ("hypocrite, fickleminded person"); Israel Zinberg, Toledot Sifrut Yisra'el, V (Merhavia, Israel, 1959), pp. 69, 122–128 ("deceit...bitter fighter...coward...masked...hidden and poisonous weapons...weak [softer] character and hesitant"); Joseph Klausner, Historia Shel Hasifrut Haivrit Hahadashah, I (Jerusalem, 1960); Asher Pritzker, Sefer Hame'alah (Tel Aviv, 1957), pp. 30–37, 41–53. A more favorable, and to my mind more objective, attitude toward Saul Berlin could be found in Raphael Mahler, Dibre Yemei Yisra'el, vol. I, book II (Merhavia, Israel, 1954), pp. 77–79, 180, 336–342; in Isaac Eisenstein-Barzilay, "The Treatment of the Jewish Religion in the Literature of the Berlin Haskalah", PAAJR, XXIX (1955), pp. 42–43, and in Samuel Joseph Fin, Kiryah Ne'emahah (Vilna, 1880), p. 296.

8 Dor Tahapuchot, II, p. 74.


10 See Graetz, Fin, Katz, Bernfeld, Klausner, Zinberg, Pritzker, and Eliav, in their respective writings, as cited above, note 2.
Like many of his fellow-Maskilim, Saul Berlin was half heretic and half believer ["מוהי נפתלי מאמץ"], to use a phrase of the time. However, being a practicing rabbi in the Kehilah of Frankfurt, and the son of the respectable Zevi Hirsch Levin, rabbi of the city of Berlin, Saul Berlin undoubtedly was in a much different predicament from most of the other Maskilim. Though a believer in the ideas of Enlightenment, he could not express his views publicly under his own name. Neither could he enunciate his true religious profession, and openly preach reform of the Jewish religion. It is for this reason that all of Berlin's polemic writings were published anonymously. However, in this he was in no way an exception in Hebrew literature—nor in the European literature of the time. Almost all of the controversial writings in Hebrew at the time had been published under assumed names. Suffice it to mention Isaac Satanow, Aaron Wolfsohn, and David Caro, but then, in all fairness to the critics of Saul Berlin, it should be noted

6 Moses Mendelson [of Hamburg], Pnei Tefil (Amsterdam, 1872), p. 252, referring to Isaac Satanow.

7 Ktar Yosher [Berlin, 1794?] [composed by one of the men of excellence and of the great people of this generation (on the title page); Mitzpe Yokte'el (Berlin, 1789); Ovadya ben Baruch of Poland; Besamim Rosh (Berlin, 1793). Attributed in part to Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel and to other medieval rabbinic authorities, said to have been compiled by Isaac de Molina; of the two articles published in Hame'oof and attributed to Saul Berlin, "Vikuah Shnei Re'im" (Hame'oof, 1789, pp. 261–273) is signed by three asterisks, and the book review on Rabbi Hacohen's Marpe Lashon (ibid., 1790, pp. 362–380) is signed which as an abbreviation means.

8 By Isaac Satanow: The four volumes of Mishlei 'Asaf, I (Berlin, 1789); II (Berlin, 1792); III (Zemrout 'Asaf, Berlin, 1793); IV (Megilat Hasidim, Berlin, 1802). Satanow attributed these volumes to Asaf Ben Berechahu. Mishbet Bikkurim (Berlin, 1797)—Doctor Schonemann [his son's name]. Sefer Haetzavon (Berlin, 1775)—Ya'ir Hamidbari. By Aaron Wolfsohn: "Sihah Be'erez Ha'ahayyim," Hame'oof, VII, pp. 54 ff., 120 ff., 203 ff., 279 ff. This work was first attributed by Wolfsohn to 'A . . . L (ibid., p. 53), but later Wolfsohn admitted he himself had penned it (ibid., p. 300). By David Caro: Berit 'Emet (Dessau, 1820)—Amitai ben Avida Ahizedek.
that some of them apply similar criticism to Isaac Satanow for the same reason.\(^9\)

More serious is the accusation that Saul Berlin was a forger.\(^10\) This charge stems from his book Besamim Rosh\(^10\) (1793) which he had attributed partially to rabbi Asher ben Yehiel of the 13th and 14th centuries and to some other medieval rabbinic authorities. The contemporary rabbis decreed that the book was a forgery, and so did many scholars.\(^11\) However, it still has to be proven that the whole book is a fraud. As a matter of fact, it was suggested that parts of this book of responsa are indeed authentic.\(^12\) It seems that those who claimed that Saul Berlin had forged the book ignored a very important aspect of Berlin's literary activity and thus failed to comprehend his many-sided character.

One has to bear in mind that the first Hebrew Maskilim had been searching for literary vehicles as outlets for their creative urges and as tools for their ideas of Enlightenment. After reading the literature of the period, and especially the journal of the Haskalah, Hame’asef, one can point out the many experiments in literary forms and styles which typify the Hebrew Enlightenment: parables, closet drama, poetic drama, poetry, educational and ethical essays and the like.\(^13\) Saul Berlin, too, was searching for literary genres which would best fit his purpose, as was his fellow Maskil Isaac Satanow. The latter chose as one of his literary media the biblical form of the wisdom literature (the four volumes of Mishlei ‘Asaf).\(^14\)

Rabbi Saul Berlin chose another literary medium which had

\(^9\) Dovei Yemei Hayehudim. IX, pp. 89–90; Toldot Sifrut Yisra’el. V, pp. 119–120, 122, 125.
\(^10\) Besamim Rosh (Berlin, 1793).
\(^11\) See footnotes 1 and 2.
\(^12\) Margaliyot, in his article (see note 1), p. 414.
\(^13\) Cf. Nahal Habnor, [bound with Hame’asef, 1783–4], pp. 1–3, the editors’ own proposed program. Experiments in literary forms and styles are to be found throughout the issues of Hame’asef; in the category of closet drama I include such works as Wolfsohn’s “Siḥah Be’ereg Hahayyim” (see note 8), and “Eldad Umedad” (ibid., 1785, pp. 114–116).
\(^14\) See footnote 8.
been prevalent in Hebrew history—the responsa. It was in the
responsa that Rabbi Saul Berlin was at his best. In the responsa
he was at home so to speak; he could show his great erudition
and mastery of talmudic and halachic literature. Here he was
able to communicate with the traditionalist rabbis in their own
language; he could expose their weaknesses and attack them on
their own ground.

I propose to evaluate Berlin’s writings on his own terms, that is,
from his own point of view. Thus, instead of grading Berlin by our
contemporary criteria and through our own perspectives, I shall
attempt to appraise his writings by considering his own motives
and his own predicament. I think that this approach to Berlin
would help us gain a better insight into the mind of 18th century
Hebrew Maskilim.

Being somewhat ahead of his contemporary Hebrew writers,
Rabbi Saul Berlin was fighting an all-out war against the rabbinic
authorities of his time. He was advocating alleviation of the burden
of the Mitzvot, the precepts, and introducing a few reforms in
Judaism. 15 In addition, he was defending the ideas and ideals of
the Hebrew Enlightenment. His satire, Ketab Yosher, which he
had written in 1784, and which was published only after his death, 16
is primarily a defense of Wessely’s Dibrei Shalom Ve’emet. The
latter book advocated reform in the religious education among the
Jews so as to enable them to become part of European culture and
European Enlightenment. 17 In addition to his defense, Berlin
launched a bitter campaign against superstitions, against the old
order in Jewish education and against the excessive number of

15 In his satire, Ketab Yosher, Saul Berlin criticizes the abundance of mitzvot
in Judaism (pp. 4a–5a, 9a–10a). He also ridicules the multiplicity of superstitious
customs (p. 3b). In Besamin Rosh Berlin advocates introducing reform in Judaism
(siman 251; details will follow).
16 Cf. Elsezer Landszeit. Toldot ‘Anshei Hashem Ufe‘ulatam Ba’adat Berlin,
17 Naphtali Herz Wessely, Dibrei Shalom Ve’emet (Berlin, 1782–1785).
out-dated precepts and customs in Judaism.\textsuperscript{18} The book circulated in manuscript form for over ten years. Saul Berlin did not have it published although the publishing house of the Maskilim would have gladly printed it. I believe he did not want to publish the book even under a pen name in order not to come out publicly against his father. Rabbi Zevi Hirsch Levin, his father, was persuaded by other rabbis to oppose Wessely's \textit{Dibrei Shalom Ve'emet}.\textsuperscript{19} It is inconceivable that Saul Berlin would even indirectly attack his own father;\textsuperscript{20} yet he did not avoid expressing his sympathy with Wessely without hurting his father. Zinberg's explanation that Saul Berlin did not have the courage to publish the book is thus to be rejected.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ketab Yosher}, p. 3b. Berlin cites a number of superstitious customs which he calls (with tongue in cheek) "good and righteous": The custom of Kaparot; making noise at the mention of the name of Haman; eating a lamb's head on Rosh Hashanah; the order of shaking the Lulab on Sukkot; putting on the right shoe first upon dressing, etc. Saul Berlin further criticizes the abundance of mitzvot (\textit{ibid.}, p. 4a). In chapter three of \textit{Ketab Yosher} Berlin deals with the old order in Jewish education, the customary beating of the pupils, the early teaching of difficult parts of the Talmud, etc.


\textsuperscript{20} Ben-Zion Katz is also of the opinion that Rabbi Saul Berlin did not intend to publish \textit{Ketab Yosher} in the first place. The only explanation Katz gives is that Berlin had written \textit{Ketab Yosher} just to satisfy his urge for writing, and that the manuscript was intended to be shown only to his close friends (\textit{Rabbanut, Hasidut, Haskalah}, I, p. 240). Yet this explanation is insufficient. Saul Berlin's attitude to his father in controversial matters involving the latter could be discerned in the only public announcement in which Berlin reversed himself. In \textit{Besamim Rosh} he tended to permit shaving on \textit{Hol Hame'ed} (siman 40, pp. 20a–b), seemingly favoring Rabbi Ezekiel Landau (\textit{Noda Bihudah}, I [Prague, 1776], siman 13, pp. 5a–b) rather than his father (cf. \textit{Toldot Anshei Hashem}, I, p. 86). However, Saul Berlin retracted his view out of respect for his father (\textit{ibid.}, p. 101).

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Toldot Sifrut Yisrael}, V, p. 122. In all fairness to Zinberg, it should be noted that he probably relied on the first reviewer of \textit{Ketab Yosher}, in \textit{Hame'asef}, who expressed his opinion that Saul Berlin had not published \textit{Ketab Yosher} for fear of another excommunication (\textit{Hame'asef}, VII, pp. 270–271). However, this does not answer the question why did he not publish the book between 1784 and 1789.
Another work of his, entitled *Mitzpe Yokte’el*, which attacks one of the opponents of the Haskalah, in effect heralded the Maskilim’s forthcoming campaign against religious authority in contemporary Judaism. In it, Berlin accuses rabbi Refael Hacohen, the ultra-orthodox religious leader of Hamburg, of a lenient attitude toward certain religious restrictions such as the dietary laws. Now this accusation was far from the truth, for Rabbi Hacohen was a strict observer of the Halachah. He was in effect the exact opposite of the religious heretic whom Saul Berlin had portrayed. No wonder then that the book evoked a furious reaction from traditionalist Jewry, brought upon the anonymous writer an excommunication, and eventually cost him his position as a rabbi of the Frankfurt Kehilah.

*Mitzpe Yokte’el*, to my mind, is to be considered in its overall implication as somewhat resembling a work of satire intended by

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22 The years 1789 and 1790 saw the publication of "Vikuah Shnei Re’im" and the review of *Marpe Lashon in Hame’asef*, both very critical of rabbinical authority, and both alleged to have been written by Saul Berlin. In volume VII (1794) of the Hebrew journal, Wolfsohn publishes a vehement attack against the rabbis and their superstitions (*Hame’asef*, VII, p. 16); he believes they desecrated the Torah (*ibid.*, p. 18), and he calls them "hamor hamoratayim" [two-fold donkey] (*ibid.*).

23 The extreme and pungent name-calling is matched with as extreme and pungent a presentation of the image of the rabbi in the same author’s drama-like work entitled “Sihah Be’ereq Hahayyim” (see note 8).

24 *Mitzpe Yokte’el*, pp. 4a, 38a.


26 *Dor Tahapuchot*, II, p. 76; Samet states that the reason for and the date of Berlin’s relinquishing the rabbinate at Frankfurt are unknown. The date, however, should be before 1792, at which time Berlin’s successor was selected rabbi of Frankfurt. See Samet’s article, p. 429. The *terminus ad quem* may be established also from the dating of *Arugot Habasam* (the prospectus of *Besamin Rosh*), namely, the 7th of the Hebrew month of *Iyyar*, 1792, in Berlin. We may assume that Saul Berlin did not leave Frankfurt before Sivan of 1790; in his second letter to Rabbi Moshe, Saul Berlin still bears the title—or at least considers himself as—"Ab bet din of Frankfurt". The reliability of the exact dates may be questioned, for the letter itself is published also in *Hame’asef* in the Nisan issue, that is, two months before the date stated in the letter. The version in *Hame’asef*, though, lacks any date.
Saul Berlin to attack Rabbi Hacohen, the symbol of religious fanaticism, and the symbol of religious authority which became the target of the Maskilim.26 By accusing Rabbi Hacohen of religious leniency, Saul Berlin actually was desirous of exposing his opponent as a religious fanatic. Saul Berlin writes: "I saw that truly it is a new Torah [i.e., the things which Rabbi Hacohen had written in his book Torat Yekuti'el] words which I did not believe would ever come out of the mouth of a Ḥacham, lenient practices [which Rabbi Hacohen is said to have advocated] which have never been heard [before], negligence in many dietary laws."27 What an irony! It is not a new Torah that Saul Berlin had found in the writings of Rabbi Hacohen, but rather the old tradition which had been overburdened by many additional restrictions throughout the ages; it is not lenient practices and disregard of restrictions, but rather an over-zealous attitude and an inflexibility in matters of Halachah—exaggerated stringency which the Maskilim attempted to eradicate.

Saul Berlin also uses some arguments employed by the traditionalist rabbis against the Maskilim, e.g., that Rabbi Hacohen had not sought to solicit Haskamot [introductory notes of approval] from rabbinic authorities.28 It should be remembered that Moses Mendelssohn expressed his suspicion that his translation and commentary of the Torah did meet the opposition of some traditionalist rabbis because he had not solicited the approval of the rabbis.29

At times, however, Berlin does not use satire and irony as his weapon and does not draw a caricature of Rabbi Refael Hacohen, but rather prefers the direct attack. Thus Berlin reveals his goal: Hacohen tends to be strict where the Shulhan ‘Aruk and its fol-

26 It is believed that “ploni,” the fanatic rabbi who is the adversary of both Mendelssohn and Maimonides in Wolfsohn’s “Sihah Be‘ereẓ Habayyim,” (see note 8) is no other than Rabbi Hacohen (others think that Wolfsohn had Rabbi Ezekiel Landau in mind. Cf. Bernard D. Weinryb, “Aaron Wolfsohn’s Dramatic Writings in their Historical Setting,” JQR, XLVIII (July, 1957), p. 45).
27 Mitze Yokte’el, in the unpaginated introduction.
28 ibid.
lowers are lenient;30 Hacohen’s book is found to be wanting of any reasonable proof, it is rather meager, and is completely nonsensical and verbose.31 Since the book is misleading as are many other similar works—Saul Berlin states—his criticism is intended to stop the influx of unwarranted halachic books of a strictly legal nature which had been published by anyone who saw fit to do so.32 This is one of the reasons, says Berlin, that the nation of Israel is not able to rise from its low position. However, Berlin believes that the truth has begun to prevail over those who lead the people astray, namely, the rabbis, and has started to remove the yoke from the people.33

That Mitzpe Yokte’el was intended to be more than just an attack—some believed it to be a personal attack34—against Rabbi Refael Hacohen of Hamburg is obvious from the introduction written by Isaac Yaffe and David Friedländer. They request of the rabbis not to attack men of wisdom and god-fearing, namely, the Maskilim themselves, who publish in their books views which the rabbis think are contrary to their accepted way. Both Yaffe and Friedländer advise the rabbis that they should not cause any clashes in vain, for first they have to have their own house in order so to speak. They appeal to the rabbis to let every one, meaning the Maskilim, write as he wishes.35

It is not important then that “Rabbi Saul [Berlin] pretended in this book of his to be zealous about [the Jewish] religion,” as Ben-Zion Katz would have us believe,36 neither was his intention to appear in the eyes of the readers as god-fearing, as proposed by Bernfeld.37 It is the overall view of Berlin’s writings, and the consideration of the objectives of the Hebrew Enlightenment in

30 Mitzpe Yokte’el, in the unpaginated introduction.
31 ibid.
32 ibid.
33 ibid.
34 Toldot Sifrut Yisra’el, V, p. 125.
35 Mitzpe Yokte’el, in the unpaginated introduction by the publishers.
36 Rabanut, Hasidut, Haskalah, I, p. 203.
37 Dor Tahapuchot, II, p. 74.
Germany, that give us an explanation of this extraordinary character called Rabbi Saul Berlin.

I should add in passing that Saul Berlin did not limit his attack against Rabbi Refael Hacohen to one instance. *Hame'asef* prints in 1790, a year after the publication of *Mitzpe Yokte’el*, another attack against Hacohen in the form of a critical review of the rabbi’s other book entitled *Marpe Lashon*. ⁹⁸ Although published anonymously, the review is believed to have been penned by Saul Berlin. ⁹⁹ As in the case of *Mitzpe Yokte’el*, the review is merely an excuse to lash out at the traditionalist rabbis in general. ⁴⁰

Berlin’s most controversial work is *Besamin Rosh*, a collection of 392 responsa said by the compiler to have been written by medieval rabbis. ⁴¹ To these Saul Berlin added his own annotations which he called אֲשֵׁרֵי קַלָּקֵל. ⁴² If we judge by Berlin’s own explanation in the introduction as to why he had published the

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⁴¹ Saul Berlin criticizes the rabbis for neglecting the study of the Torah and for substituting the Talmud for it under the pretext that the Talmud contains the Torah anyway, and by studying the former one fulfills the obligation to study the latter (*Hame’asef*, 1790, p. 369). The rabbis’ negligence in studying the Torah, which is a fault in itself, led also to the rabbinic contempt for Hebrew grammar. Like his fellow Maskilim, Berlin is very eager to cite cases where this disregard for grammar brought about a misunderstanding of sacred text and a corrupt use of it. Saul Berlin goes on to accuse the Jewish leaders, i.e., the rabbis, for the low spiritual and intellectual state of the Jews (*ibid.*, p. 378). The critical review of Rabbi Hacohen’s book occupies only a small portion of the article.

⁴² *Arugat Habosem*, p. 1 (my pagination); *Besamin Rosh*, in the unpaginated introduction.

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⁴⁰ is some kind of food prepared from fish, according to Rashi’s interpretation in *Beshah*, pp. 16a–b. *Avodah Zarah*, p. 38a. Saul Berlin explains the strange title of his annotations to allude to the talmudic exegesis of מַעַרְרֵי צוּר, רָפָא צוּר (Shabbat, p. 89b, has מַעַרְרֵי צוּר, רָפָא צוּר מַעַרְרֵי צוּר). He, too, is faced with the hatred (תָּשָׁבֵע) of his enemies. Beyond the author’s own interpretation, one can detect the allusion that “hair sinai,” symbol of the Torah and Jewish law, is the cause of the hatred between between Israel and the nations. That the mitzvot which distinguish between the Jews and the gentiles were in effect the cause for the hatred of the Jews—is a deistic
book, I think we would not get a satisfactory answer. Berlin says that he published the book in an attempt to cause his opponents to change their hatred of him into love.\(^{43}\) He did not elaborate for obvious reasons; yet some of the students of Saul Berlin—Landshuth and Samet\(^{44}\)—found this explanation sufficient. The question still remains: how would he gain the rabbis' sympathy by the publication of a responsa book which in effect preaches religious reform? If his intention were merely to appease the rabbis, he could easily change their views of him by reversing his attack on Rabbi Refael Hacohen. It seems to me that Berlin did not have the slightest intention of reversing himself, or of withdrawing from his campaign of Enlightenment. On the surface he wanted it to appear as if his reform views were based on the authority of medieval scholars and had the same value. Thus the contemporary rabbis must accept divergence of opinion as valid in Judaism, and should not persecute the Maskilim. Did he really expect the contemporary rabbis to accept the book at its face value? I tend to doubt it very much. Any rabbinic scholar would reject the authenticity of these responsa. Neither was Berlin so naive as to believe that the rabbis would accept the book as it was.

idea which seemed to have penetrated into Berlin's writings. See, for example, Thomas Morgan, [The] Moral Philosopher (London, 1738 [second edition]), pp. 27–29: "... Thus it is evident, that the People of Israel, upon the very Constitution of the Law and fundamental Principles of Moses, were not to maintain any Peace or Amity with any other Nation or People. ..." Also, Watteau Tindal, Christianity as Old as the Creation, 1 (London, 1730), p. 134, regarding the hatred caused by the Jewish priests, guardians of the law.

In addition, the meaning of הָדַּרְדָּרִישׁ as explained above, has a humorous connotation in the context of serious legal matter. Furthermore, מָצַר has the Hebrew root מָצַר, meaning destroy, which might allude to the intentions of Saul Berlin with regard to the Halachah. Note that the verb מָצַר is used twice in the instruction to Moses to stop the people from ascending Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:21, 24).

\(^{43}\) Besamun Rosh, in the introduction.

\(^{44}\) Landshuth, Toldot 'Anshei Hashem, 1, p. 100: "... thus spoke this man who endeavored with all his power to justify himself in the eyes of the rabbis and their group, and made efforts to change their hatred into great love." Samet, "R. Saul Berlin and His Writings," pp. 430–431.
I think that Berlin had other objectives in mind. *Besamim Rosh* is a continuation of Berlin's early work, indeed the climax of his lifework. It is his goal to preach and teach religious reform. He selected the most suitable, yet cunning, subtle, and intriguing medium and form to achieve his purpose. A sample list of some of the reforms advocated in *Besamim Rosh* would show a great resemblance to the religious reforms which Saul Berlin's fellow-Maskilim have been fighting for at the time. There was hardly a subject dealt with by the Maskilim which Berlin does not mention in his book. Such are the subjects of excommunication and religious coercion discussed by Mendelssohn and other Hebrew Maskilim,\(^ {45}\) and the controversial issue of the burial-of-the-dead, which occupied the Hebrew Haskalah in Germany for a few decades and became a test-case of the authority of the rabbis.\(^ {46}\) Other items found both in *Besamim Rosh* and in the writings of the Hebrew Enlighteners are the question of the authority of rabbinic legisla-

\(^{45}\) *Besamim Rosh*, siman 25, p. 12b. The excommunication controversy is to be found in the following writings: Moses Mendelssohn, *Yerushalayim* (Tel Aviv, 1947), p. 62; ibid., "Hakdamah Liteshu'at Yisra'el", pp. 163, 164, 167. Mendel Breslau, in his important call to the rabbis for alleviation of the burden of the mitzvot, does not neglect to attack the rabbis for this ill-practice (*Hame'asef*, 1790, pp. 310, 313). That issue is still in vogue some thirty years later although the practice had been restricted by the authorities (Amid ben Avida Ahizadek [David Caro], *Beri Talmud*, or, *Tuchonat Harabanim*, vol. 11 of *Beri Emet*, p. 136).

\(^{46}\) *Besamim Rosh*, siman 64, p. 26b. Saul Berlin alludes to the controversy of the burial of the dead by asking in tongue-in-cheek fashion: "...he who is utterly wicked all his life, is he to be buried on the day of his death? or not..." In 1792, the Maskilim form an association, "Gesellschaft der Freunde," in Berlin, one of whose aims was to delay the burial of their deceased members, thus putting into practice one of the declared goals of the Haskalah in Germany (Graetz, *Dibre Yemei Hayehudim*, 1X, p. 113; Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis* [Jerusalem, 1963], p. 301 [Hebrew]). A list of sources where the issue is discussed by the Maskilim is found in my article "Intimations of Religious Reform in the German Hebrew Haskalah Literature," *Jewish Social Studies*, XXXII (Jan. 1970), p. 8, notes 30, 31.
nature, reforming the prayers, the question of Ta'amēi Hamitzvot [Reasons for Precepts] and the elimination of Piyyyutim and Selihot from the services. Another reform of his would allow

47 Besamim Rosh, siman 212, p. 71a: Berlin attempts to abolish the authority of religious legislating by his contemporary rabbis saying that the body of religious law in his day and age has become corrupted and uncertain “due to our many transgressions.” Even great and learned rabbinic scholars are not able to produce clear cut answers to religious commandments in question. Things that were considered certain at one time turned out to be the reverse. There are religious judges who have a crooked and stubborn mind; thus it is much safer, maintains the Hebrew reformer, not to institute any religious decrees. Concurrently, Berlin does not hesitate—when it serves his purpose—to argue that each generation may, and should, do what the talmudic sages had done with regard to the Torah, namely, to change it and substitute new laws for it.* * * (ibid., siman 251, p. 76b; this responsum is attributed to Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel, as marked at the end by the abbreviation: אֲשֶׁרֶךְ—(Asher ben Rav Rabbi Yehiel). Regarding the issue of rabbinic authority in the writings of the German Haskalah, see my above-mentioned article (note 46), p. 12.

48 Besamim Rosh, siman 19, p. 10b. Berlin touches upon the problem of eliminating certain prayers, understanding the prayers, and “kavanah,” i.e., intention and devotion in praying, which is related to the controversy of praying in the vernacular. The question of the prayers became acute in the first part of the 19th century [see my article “The Methodology Employed by the Hebrew Reformers in the First Reform Temple Controversy (1818–1819)” to be published in the Kev Festschrift]. See also Hame’asef, 1786, pp. 138–139 (praying in the vernacular), pp. 71–72 (Elijah Mepurgo’s criticism of the disorder at the services) pp. 205–209 (similar criticism by Isaac Eichel).

49 Besamim Rosh, siman 251, pp. 77a–b: Berlin saw in the mitzvot only a means to an end—to remind one of the fundamentals of religion, that is doing that which is good and righteous. A similar view was expressed by Mordecai Gumpel Schnaiber in Tochhat Megilah (Gamburg, 1784), p. 96. See also Mendelssohn’s views on “Ta’amēi Hamitzvot” (Yerushalaim, p. 137); Isaac Satavan, Imrei Binah (Berlin, 1784), p. 12a; Hame’asef, 1786, pp. 165ff. The anonymous writer is cautious not to attach any definitiveness to his rational explanations.

50 Besamim Rosh, siman 71, p. 28a. It should be noted that in many controversial matters Berlin does not deal with the issues in a direct way, but rather alludes to them, as in this case. For an excellent study on the methodology and techniques of Saul Berlin, see Mahler, Dihevi Yemei Yisra’el, vol. I, book II, pp. 336–342. Cf. the attitude of the Maskilim to the Piyyyutim in my above-mentioned article (note 46), p. 9, note 36.
riding a carriage on Sabbath.\(^\text{51}\) Berlin also raises a question which is discussed in *Hame'asef* as to whether or not the majority could force its will on the minority\(^\text{52}\)—the majority and the minority being the traditionalist rabbis and the Maskilim respectively. Obviously, Saul Berlin sides with the Maskilim.

In addition, Berlin preaches general ideas of religious reform regarding changes that might take place even in the written law and in the principles of Judaism,\(^\text{53}\) he maintains that the oral law is subject to change,\(^\text{54}\) and that the primary aim of the Torah laws is to bring happiness to the Jews;\(^\text{55}\) in matters of beliefs everybody is permitted to express his views regardless of the dominant opinion and practice.\(^\text{56}\) Thus his work is seen as an integral part of the Hebrew Haskalah, and it has to be evaluated as such.

It seems to me that Saul Berlin also intended the book to implant the seeds of skepticism in the reader. By the use of certain techniques, a detailed study of which goes beyond the scope of the present paper, Berlin attempts to undermine the old, accepted


\(^{52}\) *Ibid.*, siman 225, pp. 73a–b. Typically, Berlin writes at the outset: “Certainly the majority can force the minority to conduct itself like the majority.” However, in his following discussion he reverses himself completely. Cf. *Hame’asef*, 1789, pp. 311–312, regarding “Aharei rabbim lehatot.”

\(^{53}\) *Besamim Rosh*, siman 251, p. 77a. Berlin discusses a “hypothesis”: should the Torah, its laws and commandments cause misfortune [ra’ah] to our nation—the totality of the nation—or if the laws and commandments would not bring happiness [’osher] whatsoever, we should then remove its yoke from our shoulders. The principles of Judaism, too, are subject to change, claims Berlin, and have been changing in the past. This Maskil cites the principle of “B’at hamashi'ah” (the coming of the Messiah) which prevails now, yet was unknown in the days of David and Solomon, whereas another principle prevailing in the days of Solomon, namely, the Temple sacrifice, is no more part of the principles of the Jewish religion (*ibid.*, p. 76b).

\(^{54}\) *Ibid.* The sages composed the Talmud “תלמוד *כדי להורות*” (*ibid.*, p. 76b) and each successive generation should do the same with regard to the talmudic decrees, namely, the oral law, as well as with any previous religious decrees and commandments.

\(^{55}\) *Ibid.*, pp. 76b–77a. Happiness was considered by Enlightenment and Deism, as well as by the Maskilim, as the prime goal of human life.

\(^{56}\) *Ibid.*, p. 76b. Not only is it permitted, but indeed, it is an obligation and a great mitzvah to do so [*“דוקא וחייב אותו* הימצוה עלייה*”].
values, the venerated tradition, and the infallible authority of the rabbis. His techniques as well as his objective are reminiscent of Pierre Bayle, the French skeptic, and his renowned dictionary.57

There were still other objectives set forth by Saul Berlin: to ridicule the pilpulistic fashion used by the rabbis to decree new restrictions, and to criticize the abundance of such unfounded restrictions. Using the style of the old school of thought, Berlin attempts to advocate the ideas of the Enlightenment, and thus he creates a black and white contrast of the opposites—the caricature. In a take-off of rabbinic style and idioms, Berlin discusses in sixteen double-column folio-size pages the question of whether the marriage of a eunuch is binding.58 His discussion of this case, as well as of many other humorous instances,59 is extremely serious, thus pointing out the futility and the absurdity of similar treatment of like subjects in the rabbinic literature. Is there any wonder that a contemporary, traditionalist rabbi remarked bitterly: “He [Saul Berlin] hardly left any transgression which he did not permit.”60 Indeed, this was the intention of “the Jewish Voltaire sitting on the rabbinic chair,” as Mahler calls him.61 Thus the “forgery” is actually a take-off; the religious reforms which he advocates are attributed to medieval rabbinic authorities, but they are really Berlin’s own suggestions as part of the reforms proposed by the Hebrew Maskilim in Germany in the last quarter of the 18th century.62

59 Ibid., siman 240, p. 75a: The question whether a Megilah written by a scribe who when drunk on Purim uttered some heretical words from philosophical books of other nations—is considered fit [נמזש] to be read in the synagogue; ibid., siman 43, p. 21a: A sick person, permitted to eat non-kosher food, should say the blessing before and after eating; ibid., siman 320, p. 93b: A Torah scroll made of pig skin could have been used were it not for the verse “למה תייחו תורתי אוונא בклассה” (so that the Torah should be in your mouth) . . .
61 Dilav Yemey Yisra’el, book II, p. 79.