

CHAPTER 43

The Emergence of Jewish Thought in the Enlightenment

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

The development of the Jewish Enlightenment took place in Germany during the eighteenth century under the leadership of Moses Mendelssohn. Born in Dessau, Mendelssohn settled in Berlin where he engaged in secular as well as Jewish studies. Influenced by Gotthold Lessing, Mendelssohn published a number of theological works in which he argued for the existence of God and creation. Eventually he was challenged by a Christian apologist to explain why he remained faithful to the Jewish tradition. In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn criticized religious coercion. In his view, neither the Church nor the state has the right to impose its religious views on the public. In this work he went on to explain that Judaism does not coerce the mind through religious dogma. Rather, the Jewish people possess divine legislation. According to Mendelssohn, Jewish law does not empower religious authorities to persecute individuals for holding false opinions. Nonetheless, Jews should not absolve themselves from following God's commandments.

In order to modernize Jewish life, Mendelssohn translated the Torah into German so that German Jews would be able to learn the language of the country in which they lived. Further, he spearheaded a commentary on Scripture which combined Jewish learning with secular thought. Following Mendelssohn's example, proponents of the Jewish enlightenment encouraged Jews to abandon a medieval lifestyle and integrate into modern European society. In addition, the *maskilim* sought to expand Jewish education by including secular subjects into the school curriculum. The *maskilim* also produced the first Jewish literary magazine, *The Gatherer*, which contained poems and fables in Biblical Hebrew as well as studies of Biblical exegesis, Hebrew linguistics and Jewish history. By the beginning of the next century, a new journal, *First Fruits of the Times*, was published by proponents of the

Haskalah in Vienna; this was followed by a Hebrew journal, *Vineyard of Delight*, which was devoted to Jewish scholarship. By 1840 the *Haskalah* spread to Russia where writers made important contributions to Hebrew literature. In assessing the impact of the Enlightenment on Jewish life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, you should consider its far-reaching implications. The *maskilim* were determined to liberate Jews from the bonds of traditional Judaism. In their view, it was imperative that Jews accommodate themselves to modern life through education and assimilation. In this quest, they were highly critical of the tradition. Were they right to follow such a path? Did the *Haskalah* release Jews from the shackles of an outmoded existence? Or, has the Enlightenment undermined traditional Jewish values? Further, you should ask yourself whether you agree with the proponents of the Enlightenment who believed that Jews are able to integrate fully in the societies in which they live through a process of assimilation? Is this view correct? Or are Jews destined to be regarded as aliens no matter how much they conform to the values of the societies in which they live?

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google. Search for websites dealing with the *Haskalah*, such as www.us-israel.org/jsource/Judaism/Haskalah.html.
- Stay in Google. Click on images. Type in the names of figures connected with the Enlightenment, including Spinoza and Moses Mendelssohn.
- Go to Amazon.com. Search for books dealing with the *Haskalah*.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Stage a debate. One side should defend the views of the *maskilim*; the other side should adopt the view of Jewish traditionalists.
- Ask the students to imagine they are Moses Mendelssohn. They should write a letter to Orthodox critics of the Enlightenment explaining the virtues of modernizing Jewish life.