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Precursor to Emancipation: Constructions of Jewish Identity  
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## ABSTRACT

Precursor to Emancipation: Constructions of Jewish Identity and Tolerance in Lessing's *Die Juden*

By

Christopher A. La Cross

Tolerance, specifically as it related to the Jews was a central issue of the Enlightenment and remained a volatile issue with proponents on both sides. G. E. Lessing's *Die Juden* (1754) and *Nathan der Weise* (1779) moved the Jewish debate increasingly into the public conscience, thereby opening the way toward reform. *Die Juden* demonstrates the difficulty of presenting a positive representation of Jews in the face of prevailing prejudices. The play's striking honesty derives from reversing its audience's expectations of seeing Jews presented as objects of scorn, instead forcing an introspective reevaluation of their attitudes toward Jews. I focus on the Jewish situation of the time, the play's socio-political engagement with this, and its resulting impact on the Jewish question. *Die Juden*, although overshadowed by the later *Nathan* emerges as a milestone for Jewish rights long before it became fashionable for Enlightenment members to engage the topic.

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## Introduction

Regarded as the progenitor of the debate on Jewish emancipation in eighteenth century Germany, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) was the first to present a positive portrayal of a Jew on the German stage in *Die Juden* (1754). Lessing later returned to the subject matter with his more well-known *Nathan der Weise* (1779), whose protagonist was modeled on Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). This later work has come to symbolize religious equality and tolerance in the Enlightenment. The eighteenth century saw the formation of the Enlightenment which was largely an intellectual movement that sought to depart from established traditions, especially the dominant Christian tradition, as Europe was in the process of recovering from the previous century's religious wars that had wracked the continent. This movement was spearheaded by authors, philosophers, theologians, and politicians – in short “learned” men. This elite cadre of the learned, who disagreed with each other as much as they did with many of the established traditions and practices, didn't form a centralized movement working toward a clearly defined goal. In fact, many names associated with the Enlightenment such as Frederick the Great (1712-1786), Goethe (1749-1832), and Kant (1724-1804), as well as Voltaire (1694-1778) who wrote in praise of tolerance, all displayed anti-Jewish attitudes to varying degrees. One of the central tenets of the Enlightenment was religious tolerance, yet this became a complicated issue when related to the Jews as for centuries the Jews were relegated to a marginalized status within European society through stereotypes, taxes, and laws. Lacking most, or often any legal rights whatsoever, Jews were essentially defenseless and a people whose residency in the various German lands hinged on the whim of the ruling powers.

Along with a need to educate the masses, the proponents of the Enlightenment sought to 'educate' the Jews; only then would they be fit to enter society.

Lessing's play emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century during a period of increased restrictions placed against Jews living in Prussia. Frederick the Great (1712-1786), had passed the infamous Judenreglement in 1750 which further restricted the rights of Jews beyond the 1730 edict issued by his father Frederick William I (1688-1740). Lessing broke with the centuries old practice of portraying Jews on stage as objects of scorn and derision, offering instead a virtuous selfless Jew to confront the prevailing anti-Jewish stereotypes. This achievement is all the more remarkable as Lessing completed his play before he met Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). *Die Juden* belongs to the early comedies of Lessing's youth and while its subject matter separates it from the other works it exhibits a questioning of essentialism common to these early works. Of the early works it is perhaps most similar to *Der Freygeist* (1749) in that both works focus on marginalized groups within society at the time. The early comedies of Lessing are also characteristic in that they to certain degrees still follow the reforms established by Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700-1766). Gottsched's conceptions were the dominant paradigm for comedies until the middle of the century. During this time the genre of the *Verlachkomödie* was prominent. This genre was characterized by depraved characters whose moral and social foibles were exemplified for the laughter of the audience. In the 1740s the *rührende Komödie* expands the horizons of the genre. No longer are characters archetypal and purely objects of laughter, but individuals with their own characteristics allowing for a sympathetic connection with the audience.

With Lessing so-called 'mixed' characters come into being who have psychological and social motivations that determine their actions. Because of this the label of *ernsthafte*

*Komödie* has been applied to Lessing's comedies Lessing would further separate himself and the established paradigms of drama after his experiences with the short-lived German national theater in Hamburg from which emerged the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767). The advancement of the Enlightenment comedy would find its apotheosis in Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767) which marked a clear maturation from the earlier works. The comedies retained the requisite happy-end although *Die Juden* by necessity broke with this convention, as a happy ending would have gone against established laws and customs thereby appearing unrealistic. The play further breaks with tradition in that the audience's expectation of seeing Jews portrayed akin to the *Verlachkomödie* as the plural title suggests is disappointed when they find only a single atypical Jew. The plot of the *Die Juden* is fairly straightforward. The characters of the play are brought together by events occurring just before the play's beginning. A baron is attacked by two robbers in disguise along a road. The robbery is aborted when a mysterious traveler comes to the baron's rescue. The grateful baron seeks to reward his rescuer and eventually comes to offer his daughter in marriage. The expected happy ending is disrupted as the traveler reveals himself to be a Jew. The audience is forced to reevaluate its conception of Jews as the many different forms of anti-Jewish prejudice portrayed in the play fall flat against the virtuous Jewish protagonist.

Lessing's *Die Juden* has proven to be a provocative piece since it was first published. The play immediately caused controversy as the Jewish question moved into the public arena and the debate over whether or not Jews such as Lessing's Traveler existed became a central issue. A great deal of debate exists among Lessing's scholars as to the proper place of *Die Juden*, especially with regard to *Nathan der Weise*. Although both works approach the topic of the Jews they do so from different perspectives. Whereas *Nathan* approaches the

topic from a religious-philosophical standpoint, the early *Die Juden* engages the socio-political perspective long before this issue was taken up by other members of the Enlightenment; indeed it was largely influential in the development of the emancipation debate. Furthermore, the great distance between these works (thirty years), the great popularity of *Nathan*, and the status of *Die Juden* belonging to the early works of Lessing's youth has caused it to be overshadowed by the later work. Lessing's intention in writing the play as well as the manner in which the play's sole Jew was portrayed, and the significance of the play's ending are central issues when analyzing *Die Juden*.

## **Chapter 1        Methodology**

The concept of tolerance in the Enlightenment and its application to Jews was problematic for its proponents. The notion of "otherness" represented a large gap between two societies, cultures, and religions that was unable to find reconciliation in the movement for tolerance and emancipation. Tolerance itself implies an inequality in which the values of those granting tolerance by necessity subsume the values of those receiving tolerance. This latter group must change, that is, it must give up something of its characteristics in order to be treated with tolerance. In doing so the latter group becomes more palatable to the group giving tolerance that come to see their reflection in the transformed group. It is this notion of tolerance which Enlightenment authors took up in their literature regarding the Jews. The Enlightenment sought to lower the barriers between Jews and Christians by portraying the Jews in a manner which represented an image which was more familiar to them. This tolerance is indeed a double-edged sword and is instrumental in understanding the dynamics and development of German-Jewish relations from the eighteenth century onward. On the one hand it offered them a path into German society, on the hand it was at the cost of



precisely what made them distinct. The long and intimately related history between Germans and Jews is one that bears relevance to today's increasingly multi-cultural world as the relations between these groups are still evolving. Consequently it is worth examining the early phases of development of the movement for Jewish tolerance and emancipation in Germany, which due in large part to Lessing allowed the later political emancipation debate to emerge.

To facilitate this, I examine the period of time from approximately 1700 to 1779. I chose this span of years as both the Enlightenment and *Haskalah* begin to emerge around the beginning of the eighteenth century. A comparison between the two movements yields both similarities in goals and differences in the manner in which they developed. The final year marks the appearance of *Nathan* and furthermore indicates the shift in the emancipation debate firmly to the political realm. This time also denotes the mature *Haskalah* which by this time has an established literary body of work and is a flourishing movement especially in Berlin but in other cities outside of German territories as well. The debate over Jewish tolerance and emancipation was taken up mostly in the literary sphere. With Lessing, we must balance what we know of him and what action occurred on-stage in his plays. In my analysis I reflect on the Christian prejudice, Jewish identity, and the ideals of the emerging Enlightenment, that is the emerging Bourgeois values, tolerance, and natural religion. What is revealed is the inherently problematic portrayal of Jewish identity and tolerance presented in the play that offers both the opportunity for Jews to become accepted into society but at a high cost.

In analyzing Lessing and his two Jewish dramas a number of critics have tended to focus on his more famous *Nathan*. Studies that have taken into account his earlier comedy have

generally centered on its dramatic merits and its relation to *Nathan*. While acknowledging the historical aspects of *Die Juden* few studies have treated that aspect in its own right. Recently historical studies of this period have questioned the nature of Enlightenment tolerance. There is a renewed interest in the *Haskalah* and its relation to the Enlightenment. This is providing an interesting comparison and is forcing a reevaluation of established paradigms covering this historical epoch. My analysis differs from recent research regarding *Die Juden* in that I engage the Jewish perspective, specifically Jewish identity and the process of transformation it underwent both internally through the *Haskalah* and externally by the Enlightenment tolerance and emancipation literature. I engage both the Enlightenment and *Haskalah* as essentially similar historical phenomena that sought to provide an alternative explanation to traditional established religion which had come under scrutiny through the rise of scientific and philosophic discourse in the aftermath of devastating religious wars in the seventeenth century. Through this it is possible to achieve a better understanding of the historical forces that shaped the dialogue between a dominant and a minority culture.

## **Chapter 2      Lessing Scholarship**

Lessing scholarship is extensive, covering his life, ideas, and works. In conducting my research I found that there are a few broad tracks with regards to interpreting Lessing and his works: there is the research covering his plays from a dramatic perspective, the non-dramatic works which includes the religious and philosophical works, and lastly the research which engages his works within their historical context. I concern myself primarily with the research focusing on *Die Juden* in its historical context, although where relevant I do make use of sources dealing with the theatrical aspects of Lessing's dramas as well as his sources

concerning his religious views. I also draw upon research not specifically focused on Lessing but on the Enlightenment as it relates to Jews and religious tolerance.

Researching Lessing is a complicated affair due to the numerous controversies Lessing became involved in during his lifetime as well as a marked tendency toward contradiction in his writings. Many of Lessing's writings were polemical in nature where attacking and dismantling an opponent's arguments often overruled establishing a clear position of one's own. Early on Lessing took on the position of defending people and groups who had been shunned. This is evident in *Der Freygeist* (1749) and *Die Juden* (1749), but also in a type of writing characteristic for Lessing around this period known as *Rettungen* ("Vindications"). In these essays he defended Reformation-period writers Johannes Cochlaeus and Gerolamo Cardanus whom he believed had been wrongly persecuted. Especially regarding his religious beliefs, scholars tend to hold diametrically opposing views as Lessing never offered a definitive statement or position. This has prompted scholars to refer to the "riddle" or "mystery" of Lessing. Throughout his life Lessing's works aroused controversy not the least of which was the volatile *Goeze* affair. This controversy resulted from Lessing publishing fragments from the biblical scholar and critic H. S. Reimarus (1694-1768) under the title *Fragmente eines Ungenannten* (1774-1777). These publications were viewed as an attack on religious orthodoxy by theologians despite Lessing taking an arbitrating position toward the views of Reimarus. He soon became embroiled in fierce debates with the leader of the theologians, J. M. Goeze (1717-1786) from which emerged one of Lessing's most scathing polemical pieces *Anti-Goeze* (1778). There is enough empirical evidence however to reach a solid position regarding Lessing's religious views during his youth.

Regarding Lessing's early comedies, there has been a marked tendency in Lessing scholarship to by and large ignore these comedies viewing them as unripe and still following the established dramatic conventions of the day. Scholars have instead focused on the 'mature' works of Lessing as he began to establish his own dramatic conceptions. This separation begins with *Miß Sara Samson* (1755) the first *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* and the *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767). With *Sara* the members of the middle class experienced tragedy for the first time as opposed to the classic model wherein this was acted out by aristocratic characters. *Minna* stands as the first German comedy of lasting impact and marks a clear departure from previous comedic conventions. No longer are characters presented as "types" but as individuals with the own characteristics and values. Indeed the play further broke with convention in that Minna appears as smarter and more able to take control of her own destiny than the Prussian officer Tellheim.

Within the context of his pro-Jewish writings there has been the tendency of Lessing scholarship to analyze his early works, especially *Die Juden*, from the perspective of his later writings which has contributed to the play's relative obscurity. This leads one to a distorted perspective of the early Lessing. Lessing's major religious writings occurred during the last ten years of his life. The ideas put forth in these highly polemical writings are also applied to Lessing's early works, especially Lessing's view of religion and tolerance have been applied to *Die Juden*. The religious views of the young Lessing matured and developed from the appearance of *Die Juden* to the appearance of *Nathan* nearly thirty years later. Thus, the application of Lessing's later writings to understand his early position yields mixed, if not entirely misinterpreted results. Lessing scholarship has only recently rediscovered an interest in his early comedies analyzing them in their own right.

An analysis of *Die Juden* within a historical context must ask what dramatic tools Lessing had at his disposal to convey his story. One must also consider the characteristics of the comedy and the manner in which Lessing broke with many of the established traditions. It is also worth comparing his early works stylistically to reveal any recurring themes or characteristics. What functions does the comedy serve as opposed to the tragedy? Specifically in the case of *Die Juden* we must ask if the characters are meant as realistic representations or if they function as vehicles to convey? Lessing's own position within his works proves to be ambiguous and has caused no small debate among scholars. It remains with the audience to draw conclusions from his dramas. Scholars for the most part agree that one of Lessing's primary goals was to educate his audience, indeed to better humanity in general. Lessing firmly believed in the ability of humanity to better itself toward universal harmony. What is particularly interesting with Lessing is that he displayed these very humanistic, moralistic, and naturalistic ideals at an early age.

Schon den jungen Lessing kennzeichnet ein für jene Zeit ungewöhnliches Maß an Verständnis für Menschen anderer religiöse und weltanschaulicher Auffassungen und die „Rettung“ solcher Persönlichkeiten der eigenen und vergangenen Epochen, die vorschnell und mit vielen Vorurteilen von der Gelehrtenzeit verachtet und abgefertigt worden waren (Kopitzsch, 37).

We see this need of Lessing to defend marginalized and persecuted people of other beliefs and religions strongly evident in his early works. This is all the more surprising considering the strict orthodox Protestant upbringing under his parents especially his father. It seems likely that Lessing developed his strong sense of humanism, equality, and tolerance through his voracious studies during his student years as well as his befriending of Jews such as Aaron Gumpertz while in Berlin. In *Das Motiv der Rettung in Lessings Tragödie und 'ernster Komödie'* and *Die Rettung der Menschlichkeit* Albert M. Reh engages Lessing's works from this thematic standpoint. Reh defines the motif of “Rettung” as a key

feature which is representative of Lessing's desire to educate and better humanity. This position is particularly applicable to *Die Juden* in that the Traveler's physical "Rettung" of the Baron mirrors the symbolic "Rettung" of the Jews at the end of the play. The Baron's necessary reevaluation of the Jews in light of the Traveler's revelation is purposely placed at the very end of the play in order to stimulate a similar reevaluation in the audience. However the motif of the "Rettung" must be balanced against the fact that although Lessing was combating the varied forms of anti-Jewish prejudice as there are no specific 'good' qualities of Jews presented in the play. Lessing is more concerned with dispelling the prejudices that defined all Jews as corrupt, greedy, and evil. His Traveler points out that what makes a person good or bad isn't dependent on their race or religion but rather their character.

Returning to the specific dramatic aspects of *Die Juden*, Paul S. Guthke and Michael M. Metzger are key sources focusing on the genre-breaking aspects of the play and the language of Lessing's comedies respectively. Guthke analyzes *Die Juden* as a break from the reforms established by Gottsched and the previous comedic genres that featured characters belonging to general "types" whose follies were intended to make the audience laugh. The play is defined by Guthke as a "Problemkomödie" in which a contentious topic is presented. The play then seeks to overcome whichever problem is presented. Lessing's intent with the comedy genre is to strike an ideal balance between amusement and evoking emotional resonance among the audience. He made a clear distinction between humor and ridicule, placing a high value on the former, and seeking to avoid the latter. Lessing elucidates his position on comedy in two writings which I will quote here. The first is a letter to his friend C.F. Nicolai (1733-1811) dated November 13, 1756 while the second is an excerpt from the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767).

Auf gleiche Weise verfahre ich mit der Komödie. Sie soll uns zur Fertigkeit verhelfen, alle Arten des Lächerlichen leicht wahrzunehmen. Wer diese Fertigkeit besitzt, wird in seinem Betragen alle Arten des Lächerlichen zu vermeiden suchen, und eben dadurch der wohlgezogenste und gesittteste Mensch werden. (LM, XVII, 66-7).

This letter is particularly revealing of what Lessing sought to accomplish within the genre of the comedy. More specifically it reveals what the comedy should try to instill within the members of the audience. The purpose of the comedy according to Lessing is to help one to recognize discrepancies that appear as the ridiculous. With this ability one will recognize the *ridiculous* as such and to avoid it. In other words Lessing is arguing for an independence of thought and judgment which may conflict with established conventions and trends. The result of such independence is the betterment of one's character; in short one becomes a better person. Through recognition of the incongruous and ridiculous, laughter and comedy allow for a necessary separation from it. Comedy acts as a social and moral catharsis for the audience. This is directly applicable to *Die Juden* in that the various negative stereotypes against the Jews are presented as ridiculous by showing the incongruence between outward appearances (collective labels) and one's inner and moral character.

Die Komödie will durch Lachen bessern; aber nicht eben durch Verlachen; nicht gerade diejenigen Unarten, über die sie zu lachen macht, noch wenige bloß und allein die, an welchen sich diese lächerliche Unarten finden. Ihr wahrer allgemeiner Nutzen liegt in dem Lachen elbst; in der Uebung unserer Fähigkeit das Lächerliche zu bemerken; es unter allen Bemäntelungen der Leidenschaft und der Mode, es in allen Vermischungen mit noch schlimmern oder mit guten Eigenschaften, sogar in den Runzeln des feyerlichen Ernstes, leicht und geschwind zu bemerken (LM, IX, 303-4).

The excerpt from the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767) presents the same argument in greater detail and merits further scrutiny. Here Lessing more clearly defines his concept of comedy by making a distinction between 'laughter' and 'ridicule'. For Lessing it is the former that matters whereas the latter serves only to perpetuate the object of ridicule by

acknowledging it as such. Ridicule becomes a continuity of a negative disposition toward someone or something and does not lead to one's moral improvement. In the second sentence of the excerpt Lessing articulates the need to recognize the ridiculous in all forms and guises. This poses the challenge to more closely scrutinize established conventions and trends (by continuation to question established practices and attitudes towards groups of people). The ability of laughter and the recognition of the ridiculous which is intrinsically linked with it produce a reflection and reevaluation of all facets of life and hopefully offer a new perspective to the audience member. Thus, in this context the ending of *Die Juden* with its foiled *happy-end* (due to "die schimpfliche Unterdrückung, in welcher ein Volk seufzen muß" Lachmann Munker, V, 270) forces this reflection from its audience.

The major research regarding *Die Juden* comes from three of the major names in the field of Lessing scholarship: Wilfried Barner, Gunnar Och, Peter R. Ersparmer, and Ritchie Robertson. In both *Vorurteile, Empirie, Rettung: Der junge Lessing und die Juden*, and *Lessings Die Juden im Zusammenhang seines Frühwerks*, Barner also elucidates the empirical tendencies in Lessing's comedy, which reflected the realities of the day and age in which the piece was written. For Barner, *Die Juden* rests on solid empirical foundations reflecting the realities of the Jewish situation of the time. He posits that Lessing's combating of anti-Jewish prejudices serves as example for combating prejudices against discriminated minorities in general and draws the connection through Lessing's early works. Most importantly, Barner makes a clear distinction between Lessing's conceptions of tolerance in *Die Juden* compared to *Nathan der Weise* in that tolerance in the early comedy functions on the level of "des physischen Lebenslassens, des Arbeitenlassens" (Barner, *Vorurteile*, 67-68) as opposed to religious tolerance evidenced in the latter work. The religious aspects of the



Traveler are scarcely mentioned in the play. Instead the lack of the Traveler's religion further forces the moral defects of the Christians in the play with the exception of the Baron's daughter to the forefront. Barner's definition of the nature of Lessing's tolerance between his early and later pro-Jewish works is particularly useful in that it allows for an analysis of *Die Juden* free from the shadow of *Nathan der Weise*.

In Lessings Lustspiel "*Die Juden*" im 18. Jahrhundert – Rezeption und Reproduktion Gunnar Och traces the reception of *Die Juden* as well as the resulting emergence of other Jewish figures appearing in German drama following Lessing's play. Och sees the play as shaping the development of the debate for Jewish emancipation that coalesced toward the end of the eighteenth century. This begins with the immediate controversy the play aroused with the public debate initiated by the well-known scholar Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791). *Die Juden* provided the basis from which a slew of German dramas emerged that featured Jewish characters. Och provides an extensive list of these plays that occurred in the period between Lessing's two pro-Jewish works. Additionally Och traces the numerous productions of *Die Juden* proving that despite the controversial nature of its subject, it at least appeared to be a fairly popular play. Och does present an interesting angle to the influence of *Die Juden* on the emancipation debate, noting that aside from Michaelis' critique there is no more reference made to Lessing's play in relation to the emancipation debate throughout the rest of the eighteenth century. Although there are no more references to *Die Juden* the numerous dramas featuring Jews that made their way onto the German stage after its release, as well as the release of Lessing's *Nathan* in 1779 certainly contributed to increasing the overall presence of the subject in the public consciousness. The play also appears to have been received well among Jews. Och cites a theatrical critique

from 1771 by Marcus Herz (1747-1803), a student of Moses Mendelssohn in which Lessing's *Traveler* is highly praised. It must be noted that Mendelssohn and Herz belonged to the *Haskalah* which was a movement aimed at reforming the Jewish community and the acquiring of knowledge outside of the traditional teachings. This movement represented only a small percentage of the Jewish community. It seems unlikely that *Die Juden* found any resonance among the orthodox members of the Jewish Communities.

Ritchie Robertson analyzes the ambiguities of tolerance presented in Lessing's two pro-Jewish dramas. For Robertson the very nature of tolerance itself is questioned as the term is rather ambiguous by definition. The difficulty of tolerance lies in the universal humanism and natural religion shared by many proponents of the Enlightenment. The form of tolerance resulting from this bypasses the differences among people toward a common ground. Robertson argues that "this conception is a pseudo-tolerance that tolerates different beliefs only on the assumption that they are not really different; masquerading as toleration of others, it actually makes the implicit claim that its own values are universal and unchallengeable" (Robertson, *Ambiguities of Toleration*, 109). This precludes acknowledging the beliefs and values that form the identifying characteristics of an individual or an entire culture preventing coexistence as equals. Robertson sees this tolerance manifest in *Gellert* and continuing through Lessing's two pro-Jewish dramas, arguing that the apparent Philo-Semitism of these works actually confirms and perpetuates the anti-Jewish prejudices. The Jewish figures are presented as exceptions, proving that 'good' Jews can exist. However, the singular appearance of the 'good' Jew confirms that such Jews are rare.

### **Chapter 3      Interpretation of *Die Juden***

### **3.1 The Conditions of the Jews from the Middle Ages to the Early Enlightenment**

Before discussing Lessing's *Die Juden* it is worth considering the historical context of the Jews in the centuries before this. Although the Jews have been persecuted throughout history, a noteworthy starting point for our discussion begins during the Crusades. Anti-Jewish attitudes during this period in history are propagated primarily for religious reasons and include a host of accusations against the Jews. The Jews were regarded as bearing responsibility for the death of Christ and as the First Crusade began its journey to the Holy Land massacres of Jews were committed in Worms, Cologne, Mainz, and Würzburg to avenge the death of Christ (Berghahn 12-13). Pogroms against the Jews were fairly commonplace often occurring during times of crisis. Lacking any legal rights and often barely tolerated, Jews provided a convenient scapegoat for societal problems. The Jewish position as scapegoats became part of Jewish existence and would be repeated continually throughout the following centuries. The church during the Middle Ages espoused religious anti-Judaism based upon the gospels. The air of legitimacy lent this doctrine by such a focal institution of life in these times provided a root cause from which a catechism of further accusations developed, and as Klaus L. Berghahn correctly notes, this form of anti-Jewish sentiment was the most deeply rooted and wide spread of all. In addition to being labeled as responsible for the death of Christ, Jews were further accused of "Hostienschändung", ritual-murder, the poisoning of wells and other water supplies in the years of the Great Plague from 1346-49. These accusations fostered the idea that Jews weren't really human but so-called "Untermenschen" which became a component of racial anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century (Saur 72). As a degree of fear of Jews already existed, coupling this fear

with religious justification proved to be a powerful force capable of influencing public opinion.

In addition to the religious intolerance of Jews, there were also the economic factors which caused further fear and hatred of them among Germans. The association between Jews and money would in fact remain a pervasive stereotype. “Die Geldleihe ist im historischen Bewußtsein Europas eng mit Juden verbunden so weit, dass sie als integraler Bestandteil nicht nur jüdischer Existenz, sondern auch des Wesens des Judentum angesehen wurde“ (Saur 85). Placing the blame on the Jews acted as a vent for society’s anger and was encouraged by the ruling powers to divest attention from underlying problems, lest the frustrations of the citizens be directed against them. This creates a bond between the lower and upper classes as they have a common enemy. The occasional manifestation of anger toward the Jews served the dual purpose allowing the lower classes to exercise a degree of retributive power while maintaining obedience to those in power (Ersparmer, Introduction, 11). The Jews came to be viewed as a pariah caste occupying the bottom tier of society. Since the Jews held different religious beliefs and represented a fundamentally different social and cultural structure they were naturally regarded as outsiders to be distrusted. As Peter R. Ersparmer notes, these group identifications caused the Jews to be “thought of as being a homogenous group that is categorically different from the dominant group” which doesn’t allow for any individual distinctions thereby creating the projection of anti-Jewish attitudes against any and all Jews (Ersparmer, Introduction, 8). In other words stereotypes against Jews were all encompassing, with all Jews burdened by labels such as being avaricious, degenerate, and inferior.

The Jews were feared economically, being viewed as competitors by those of the lower classes whose own condition was unstable at best, especially by those who depended upon the land which they worked. Thus, whenever economic crises arose, such as a bad harvest, famine, plague, or anything else which disrupted the small degree of certitude existing in their lives the group mentality came to the forefront. "They [the ingroup] there believe that they ought to be superior in power and status, and when they sense that their status is undermined, they perceive that they are being victimized or persecuted" (Ersparmer, Introduction, 9). Those affected by hardship rallied as a group directing their anger towards what to them represented the origin of their misfortunes. This anger often found physical manifestation through pogroms but also through further taxes and laws against the Jews as well as periods of lengthy expulsion from the territory in which the economic problems arose. Of peculiar interest is the notion that such actions were justified as self-defense. It seems highly improbable that the Jews constituted any real economic threat as they were prohibited from nearly every avenue of economic enterprise. Instead the associations of Jews with money stems largely from money-lending, as Christians were forbidden from engaging in this activity. As they provided a service which no one else could fulfill thereby excelling in this area, Jews were regarded with a measure of distrust and jealousy. Jews were also effective at trade maintaining extensive networks of contacts and were able to acquire goods not available elsewhere. Jewish puissance at trade in turn earned the enmity of guilds and Christian traders who couldn't compete. As such, they were commonly accused of unfair business practices with Christians. Whether or not this was actually the case it further reinforced the negative image of the Jews.

Jewish life during the Middle Ages through to the Enlightenment was characterized by segregation. Jews possessed few if any legal rights and their social and cultural values differed greatly from their Christian neighbors. A majority of Jews were forced to live in ghettos and were relatively free to practice their religion within. The ghettos created a physical barrier which naturally separated Jews and Christians. This separation of the Jews created a strong sense of identity in the Jewish community which would prove resistant to internal as well as external change, especially the proselytizing tendencies of people such as Martin Luther. From a religious standpoint, Christianity could ill afford to coexist with an alternate spiritual conception of the world. The Jewish exclusivity of regarding themselves as the “chosen people” aroused religious enmity and was regarded as arrogance. Earlier in his life, Luther showed none of the rabid anti-Jewish zeal which marks his later years. Luther’s interest in Jews was missionary in nature, seeking to convert them to Christianity in order to gain follows for his movement. When the Jews proved resistant to conversion, Luther’s position became radically anti-Jewish, using every opportunity to disparage them.

The formation of the so-called “Jewish” identity emerged from a combination of factors. As Peter R. Ersparmer notes, Jean-Paul Sartre in his 1948 study *Anti-Semite and Jew* posits that those with anti-Jewish attitudes require the existence of Jews in order to provide to sustenance to their position. Without an easily targeted and defenseless group their anger and frustration might turn towards governing powers. Jewish identity was one that was by and large placed on Jews through the stereotypes of the Christian majority. Stereotypes encompassed all Jews creating a strong group identity which fostered strong cooperation within the community as to a degree cooperation ensured survival. Individual Jews were far more vulnerable as opposed to an entire community although entire communities of Jews

were often banished from a territory only to be recalled once their economic benefits became desirable again. The restriction of the Jews to ghettos only served to increase group identity and cohesiveness, effectively perpetuating Jewish obstinacy toward reforming their community as well as emancipation.

Internal factors also contributed to the sense of Jewish identity. For centuries Jews migrated mostly eastward leading to the stereotype of the eternally wandering Jew. Those Jews who managed to settle in territories gradually developed ties to the areas in which they settled. Particularly the Jews who became important traders attained a degree of influence with the ruler of the territory in which they lived. These Jews often helped fund their ruler's wars and procured the necessary materiel and were highly valued. These wealthier Jews became increasingly assimilated. The process of migration reversed around the middle of the seventeenth century as Jews began migrating westward to escape persecution and improve their economic situation. Ersparmer posits that this influx of eastern European Jews "exercised a Judaizing influence on their more assimilated fellow Jews" that in turn "aroused anti-Jewish feeling, which resulted in a further strengthening of Jewish identity" (Ersparmer, Introduction, 10). During this time Europe began the process of recovering from the religious wars which had devastated the continent. The influx of these eastern Jews reinforced traditional values and strengthened Jewish communal identity which regarded interaction with European culture as dangerous; a threat to the values and traditions which had for centuries sustained the Jewish communities.

As the eighteenth century neared, attitudes towards the Jews began to shift as the recovering European nations sought the economic benefits Jewish settlement brought with it. Particularly in Prussia the Jews played a major role in the economic structure of the state.

This period also saw the rise of a new intellectual movement known as the Aufklärung which sought to challenge the dominant Christian position as well as the established feudal order. A key concept of this movement was the toleration of religious minorities yet this issued became complicated when related to the Jews. The notion of universal humanism during this time viewed humanity as interrelated and so it was argued that Jews being humans deserved tolerance as well. The form that tolerance should take was greatly debated, yet it was certain that any change in the conditions of the Jews would need to be accompanied by a change in the Jews as well. The form of tolerance advocated is precisely what Peter R. Ersparmer and Ritchie Robertson question with regard to Lessing and the Enlightenment. They see the tolerance of Lessing and others as a component of the overall Enlightenment criticism against the Church and the aristocracy. In presenting an image of universal humanity which sought to move away from a position of one religion holding absolute truth, Lessing and others who advocated tolerance and emancipation for the Jews inadvertently replaced the previously dominant Christian values with the values of the emerging bourgeois class and the Enlightenment. This created an image of Jews reflecting these values. By necessity a byproduct of this requires the constriction of the characteristics which differentiated the Jews from others.

The ideas espoused by members of the Enlightenment were viewed as a dangerous assault on the foundation of both the Church as well as an attack against the aristocracy. Opposition against the ideals of the Enlightenment, especially the tolerance of Jews was remained prevalent throughout the eighteenth century. It is an example of such anti-Judaism to which I would like to briefly turn. The anti-Jewish attitudes of Johannes Andreas Eisenmenger (1654- 1704 ) expressed in his massive tome *Entdecktes Judenthum* (1700)



helped mark the transition from purely religious anti-Judaism to intellectual anti-Judaism. This tome contains a lengthy subtitle (Berghahn 15-16) which is simply too long to list here, yet it leaves no doubt as to the purpose of the work. Eisenmenger spent nearly twenty years studying Talmudic literature under rabbinical tutelage under the pretext of wanting to convert to Judaism; instead he sought to “expose the allegedly secret and blasphemous opinions of the Jews regarding Christianity” (Beck 63 and Berghahn 14). Eisenmenger’s attacks within *Entdecktes Judenthum* dealt with the so-called ‘Haß der Juden auf andere Religionen’, which he believed revealed darker intentions beneath a façade of docility. In an extreme interpretation of Jewish laws and traditions, Eisenmenger views the “chosen people” as avoiding contact with non-Jews to preserve their purity and exceptional nature as a people. This secret hatred of the Jews purportedly compelled Jews to swindle, rob, and even murder Christians. The legal situation and destitute state Jews lived in were not viewed as the cause of their unfair trading practices, but rather as a product of their nature.

The work of Eisenmenger was particularly dangerous for the Jews as it was written in German as opposed to Latin; its message could therefore spread rapidly and rouse anti-Jewish feeling. Immediately upon its completion *Entdecktes Judenthum* aroused controversy as the work would only inflame anti-Jewish attitudes which European monarchs were reluctant to incite due to the intimate link between the Jews and the state’s financial welfare. The book remained unpublished during Eisenmenger’s lifetime being banned from publication in Austria due to the intervention of court Jews with Kaiser Leopold I (1640-1705 ) who further prohibited the sale of copies already in existence. In Prussia the book was also officially banned but nevertheless secretly saw publication under Frederick I. (1657-1713 ) by publicly listing the city of publication as Königsberg although in reality it

was produced in Berlin (Berghahn 14-15). Relatively little attention was paid to *Entdecktes Judenthum* as it was regarded as an antiquated rehashing of religious stereotypes against the Jews under the rationalism of the emerging Enlightenment. It nonetheless underlines continued presence of anti-Jewish during the eighteenth century.

Returning to the changing attitudes toward the Jews we see early advocates for Jewish tolerance as early as Rabbi Mannaseh Ben Israel's (1604-1657) 1656 *Rettung der Juden* which appeared in London. Indeed many of the early voices in favor of Jewish toleration came from England. In his *Letter Concerning Toleration* of 1689 John Locke (1632-1704) argued for the separation of church and government as well as toleration of Jews by the state. Locke argued that one's religion should be a private matter without any official state religion. In 1714 John Toland produced the essay *Naturalizing the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland* (Neuhaus-Koch 195). In Toland we can see the type of tolerance toward the Jews which would by and large characterize the eighteenth century. Toland, much like Dohm (1751-1820) would later, argued for the economic usefulness of allowing the Jews further rights and making them a part of society. These early advocates for tolerance and emancipation of Jews failed to bring about any sweeping changes as Europe was still recovering from the religious wars which had wracked the continent. In the German territories, specifically Prussia, the time was unripe for such ideas. It is to the conditions of the Jews in Prussia during the first half of the eighteenth century that I would briefly like to turn to in order to provide a historical context for Lessing's *Die Juden*.

In general the Jews living in Europe had few if any legal rights and were subjected to a host of taxes, restrictions, and laws targeted specifically to them. Towards the end of the seventeenth century we see the emergence of the absolute monarchical state from the feudal

system and concurrently a changing economic model from that of the feudalistic guild-based system to the mercantilist system with increasing privatization of resources (Munck 163-199). European nations were rebuilding after the ravages of the Thirty Years War. Brandenburg in particular had been severely devastated which in conjunction with a lack of national unity and a stagnant economy left it behind other European powers who were able to more readily rebuild due to the influx of wealth from their colonial assets. The change in Brandenburg's status coincided with the reintroduction of Jews to the land in 1671 by Friedrich Wilhelm (1620-1688), who selected fifty of the wealthiest Jewish families from Vienna as Jews had recently been expelled there and made them settle in Berlin. This action was purely for financial reasons as the Great Elector provided the Jews with protection and remittance of taxes in exchange for their financial services. This marks the beginning of a stable period for the Jews free of pogroms and expulsions. The useful position of the Jews within the state allowed them a relative degree of prosperity bringing the hitherto segregated Jews increasingly into contact with European culture.

The rights and privileges afforded to these "useful" Jews extended only to this upper tier of Jews and not the numerous poor Jews scraping out a living as peddlers and beggars, moving from place to place. The wealthy Jews constituted an elite sphere with several distinct sub-classes of varying privileges. The top Jews were known as *Hoffjuden* who served as advisors at court and enjoyed the largest degree of freedom. The other class of note was the *Schutzjuden* of which there were two varieties: the *ordentliche Schutzjuden* who enjoyed protection by the state which extended to the offspring and the *außerordentliche Schutzjuden* whose privileges did not extend to any offspring. These privileges were counterbalanced by the restrictions placed on Jews which limited their economic activities to

banking, money lending, and trade in limited types of goods such as cloth. Jews were forbidden from owning land as well as engaging in agriculture. The heavy taxes and fines Jews were subject to were often paid for collectively by the community as the poorer families and individual Jews were hardly able to pay. This in turn forced Jewish traders, bankers, and money-lenders to increase their prices in order to recoup their losses. The general mistrust of the Jews combined with feeling of unfair Jewish business practices and a general lack of knowledge in such matters by the people with whom Jews traded and lent money from ensured that *Geld* and *Handel* became synonymous with Jews.

The position of the Jews rested with the will of the monarch. Rights and privileges enjoyed under one monarch could be erased under the reign of a new ruler, necessitating the periodic renewal of the laws regarding Jews. Any benevolence toward Jews on the part of the monarch was calculated in terms proportional to the benefit they could be to the state. The year 1730 marked a turning point in official policy toward the Jews as Friedrich Wilhelm I. (1688-1740) issued an edict which severely decreased the freedoms Jews had been enjoying since 1671. This edict was aimed at limiting Jewish influence and to protect Christian businessmen and citizens from the “ungemeinen Schaden und Bedrückung” of the Jews. It did so by limiting the number of families to one hundred and imposing drastic increases in the annual “protection money” the Jewish community paid, as well as a host of fees from services ranging from firefighting to the obtaining of marriage licenses (Berghahn 27). These restrictive policies would only be added on to with the rule of Frederick the Great (1712-1786) who’s ‘Judenreglment’ of 1750 contains a long list of limitations intended to hinder the economic activity of the Jewish population as well as further limit the population.

Frederick's openly anti-Jewish attitude stands in stark contrast to his reputation for supporting his subject's rights to free worship.

The disparity between Frederick's attitude general participation in the Enlightenment dialectic of tolerance and his attitude toward the Jews is characteristic of many proponents of the Enlightenment. This is especially true for Voltaire (1694-1778) but also included other famous names such Goethe (1749-1832), Kant (1724-1804), and Herder (1744-1803) among others. While critiquing the abuses of the church on one hand, Voltaire was incisive in his criticism of the Jews. Rather than religiously based attacks Voltaire employed rationalistic and secular arguments (in good Enlightenment form) which provided opponents of tolerance and the Jews with new vitriol (Feiner 14). Indeed those Enlightenment authors who were favorably disposed to the Jews found themselves facing determined opposition. Lessing in particular would bear the brunt of the anti-Jewish criticism in his heated debates with Michaelis and especially later with the pastor J. M. Goeze.

I would like to briefly come back to the Jewish identity during this period before moving on to my analysis of *Die Juden*. The *Haskalah* much like the Enlightenment sought to challenge established norms and conventions. In that regard the two movements were similar. Both shared a goal of education and a desire to confront established traditions and the theological hold on the domain of knowledge. However, unlike the Enlightenment's challenge to Christianity, the *Haskalah* did not seek to challenge the validity of Judaism, but rather renew and revise Judaism to restore prestige to it. As mentioned above, Jewish communities had for centuries existed to a large degree in isolation characterized by a disinterest in learning new languages and an intense disapproval of scientific pursuits, especially philosophy. Emphasis on study of the Talmud pervaded Jewish life. The increase

of scientific study with the coming of the Enlightenment attracted young Jews eager to reacquire this “new” knowledge in order to renew and promote Judaism. While the Enlightenment certainly influenced the development of the *Haskalah* to a certain degree, this relationship was not reciprocal. As the movements developed during roughly the same time period a comparison is warranted. One must ask in what ways were Enlightenment ideals taken up by the Jewish community. What social and cultural changes did this signify and how did such changes affect Jewish identity, both as a community and on the individual level? In *The Jewish Enlightenment* (2004), Shmuel Feiner extensively treats the topic in its own right as he traces the origins, characteristics, personalities, conflicts, contradictions, and effects of this movement on Jewish society and culture within the process of modernization. Feiner is able to break from previous conceptions of the *Haskalah* which have tended to place it within primarily within Germany with Mendelssohn as its figurehead which invariably brought with it a focus on the relationship to Lessing (Feiner, Preface, xi). In fact, the movement is revealed to be far more multifaceted and diverse than previous research has allowed for. The *Haskalah* is engaged as a transformative movement concomitant with the Enlightenment seeking to provide an alternative discourse to the serious threats to religious scripture through science, philosophy, and natural religion. The development and both internal and external changes of this movement throughout the 1700s precipitated Jewish *Kulturkampf* at the end of the century as clear separations occurred in Jewish society. The conservative elements of Jewish society openly opposed the intellectual, social, and cultural challenges posed by the *Haskalah*, shattering the hitherto strong unity of this society.

A complete analysis of the *Haskalah* is beyond the scope of the present study. However, a brief analysis of the characteristics and development of the early *Haskalah* through to the

appearance of Lessing's *Die Juden* is in order, to contextualize the play in the Jewish debate of the eighteenth century. The definite beginnings of the intellectual trend which marked the start of the *Haskalah* are difficult to define precisely as the movement lacked unity and did not develop rectilinearly with clearly defined dates demarking its phases. One cannot speak of the *Haskalah* as a purely German phenomenon despite Berlin developing as the major focal point as the movement flourished later in the eighteenth century. It existed throughout Europe, from London and Amsterdam to Russia. The movements within each of these countries also developed at a different pace, in other words *Haskalah* movements developed relatively independent of one another. The movement was primarily Askenazi in composition although some Sephardic Jews were considered as belonging to it. Shmuel Feiner notes a tendency to evaluate the "early *Haskalah*" through the more easily defined attributes of the later *Haskalah*. Such an analysis of the developing stages of the movement fails to take into account the major differences between these two periods (Feiner 31). The later *Haskalah* is marked by politicization and a clear cultural divide between the carriers of the movement, the maskilim, and the traditional orthodox rabbinate. One also cannot render out the influence of Lessing's *Nathan* (1779) and Christian Wilhelm von Dohm's (1751-1820) *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (1781) on the debate for Jewish emancipation. These were in particular were viewed by many maskilim as proof of the compatibility of Germans and Jews. Conversely, these works were subject to the acrimony of those in opposition to Jews, tolerance, and emancipation.

The beginnings of the *Haskalah* are represented in the desire to acquire knowledge outside of the traditional Talmudic study, especially in the scientific and philosophical disciplines in order to renew Judaism and actively promote the study of the Hebrew

language. At the beginning of the eighteenth century it is impossible to speak of intellectual Jewish elite in the Enlightenment sense as Jews had been banned from attending universities. In 1702 however, we see the first Jews attending universities although in very small numbers. The challenges these early maskilim faced cannot be underestimated as they had to overcome language barriers as well as social and cultural norms while at the same time fearing to subvert their religious faith. Already at this early state one must note a serious conflict of identity which these Jews faced as they were torn between the acquisitions of “new” knowledge while trying to remain true to their traditions. It was “necessary to legitimate the acquisition of general knowledge which seemed to contradict the ideal of total dedication to Torah study” (Feiner 34). Many of these early maskilim retained their positions within the community while in pursuit of knowledge making any exterior distinctions difficult to note. This “new” knowledge was viewed as seductive and rivaling the Torah’s place in the life of a Jew. As such, it is possible to note an undercurrent of timidity and great care in regarding to matters beyond the traditional sphere linking the early maskilim.

This was particularly the case with Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776), whose openness to acquiring knowledge was tempered by a firm commitment to Jewish tradition. In his writings Emden often remarked on the conflict he experienced between “both worlds” which led him to restrain his enthusiasm for the “new” knowledge since he regarded science, enlightenment, and especially philosophy as threats to tradition (Feiner 32). The early *Haskalah* was not interested in cultural assimilation. Indeed in their desire to renew Judaism and restore prestige to it, the early maskilim can be seen as promoting the unity of their community. The advocacy for broad social reforms characteristic of the later *Haskalah* is



absent during the early period. During this early phase of the *Haskalah* one cannot speak of Jews who completely abandoned their traditions in favor of their intellectual pursuits although a few achieved a large degree of autonomy. Any completely autonomous Jew would be outside of the vital communal bonds which held the Jewish community together. However, the need of the early maskilim to define and rationalize their intellectual pursuits, their increasing self-awareness, and the influence of the wealthy Jewish *Hofjuden* and *Schutzjuden* classes as well as Enlightenment emancipation literature began to separate them from the traditional intellectual elite as the *Haskalah* gradually developed into a cohesive movement with its own literary discourse. A very small number of these early maskilim attained relative autonomy such as Raphael Levi of Hanover (1685-1779) who was able to study under Leibniz for a period of time. The most famous example of course is Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). The success of Mendelssohn is extremely rare however, as he was able to enter into non-Jewish intellectual circles and attain recognition.

It is misleading to think that all early maskilim were successful in gaining acceptance in the non-Jewish intellectual sphere. One such maskil was Shlomo Dubno, a contemporary of Mendelssohn who came to Berlin from Poland. Dubno dedicated himself solely to writing and marks a sharp contrast to Mendelssohn as he lived in virtual poverty. Indeed it is interesting to note the correlation between the wealthier and poorer maskilim. The wealthier maskilim such as Mendelssohn and Gumpertz seem to have found easier acceptance into extra-Jewish society whereas the poorer maskilim remained more marginalized. This is in line with the concept of tolerance in the Enlightenment as the Jews who were willing to integrate themselves into European society were looked upon more favorably than those who remained with the traditional ways. It is to the literary level of the tolerance and

emancipation debate that I now turn to in order to shape the framework of Lessing's *Die Juden* within this discourse.

The literary tolerance of the Enlightenment existed as a means of reconciling the differences between the dominant culture and minorities such as the Jews. The concept of "otherness" represented by these minorities prevented any sort of equal coexistence in their present state. Lessing and other writers of similar disposition sympathized with these "outsiders", and "came to conceptualize and portray the Jews in terms of an image to which they themselves could relate" (Erspamer 38). This image reflected the bourgeois, naturalistic, and humanistic values of Lessing and like minded contemporaries who sought not so much a religious as a cultural integration. Natural religion and humanistic ideals were universally applicable to all of humanity and were of secondary concern as the Judaism and Christianity shared common ancestry. This explains the particular notion of Frederick the Great's tolerance as citizens were allowed to freely practice their religion. Thus the various sects of Christianity were all tolerated and were not subject to the conditions of the Jews because they were virtually indistinguishable on the social and cultural level. They spoke the same language, lived and worked, and intermingled freely. The cultural differences between Christians and Jews ran deeper and needed to be ameliorated as they represented the major obstacle toward emancipation. By rendering the "other" culturally similar through the nascent bourgeois values the proponents of Jewish tolerance offered an inroad into societal acceptance from their value system.

Before the appearance of literature aimed at Jewish tolerance, the Enlightenment had already taken up such a conception on the literary level through the figure of the "noble savage". This was due to the colonialism of the European states in the new world. Books

such as Daniel Defoe's (1660-1731) *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) aroused great interest. These "noble savages" presented challenges to Europe and Christianity in that they presented people unencumbered by established religion and they furthermore dispelled the notion that Europe and Christianity defined existence. John Toland (1670-1722) created the so-called "Indian test" to examine the "validity of the religious truth of Christianity" (Feiner 52). In other words this acted as a litmus test of an Indian's ability to understand the concepts of Christianity with his 'natural' ratiocinative faculties.

This concept was represented domestically in the debate of the "Verbesserung" of Jews later in the eighteenth century. It also found literary expression in the early *Haskalah* in *Amduei bet Yehudah* by Judah Hurwitz (17?-1796) which was published in 1766, twelve years after the appearance of *Die Juden*. Although Hurwitz sought to defend the Torah, his writings created the opposite effect by exposing Jewish readers to Enlightenment skepticism and rationalization of religion (Feiner 51). In the book, a "savage" is transformed not only into an educated man, but also a Jew. The central character Ira Ha Ye'ari, proves the possibility of educating a man through knowledge and reason which creates a utopian model of a Jew as is the case with *Die Juden* (Feiner 53). In contrast to the protagonist of *Die Juden* however, Ira Ha Ye'ari has maintained his 'natural' appearance upon entering Jewish society. He serves as an agent giving voice to the arguments of religious skeptics.

Inadvertently he performs his own "Indian test" in relation to Jewish society. Hurwitz has his character pose the question of what sort of fate awaits those who have not been given a 'revelation' by God. Hurwitz's answer reveals the limit to the degree of assimilation possible in Enlightenment culture. The "savage is ultimately irredeemable (denied an afterlife) due to his natural corruption, only being able to enter society upon converting to a

revelatory religion (Feiner 57). Concomitantly, the only way that Jews were to be acceptable to enter into European and Enlightenment society would be by divesting themselves of their “Jewish” character. The “savage” is bettered by being transformed into a Jew while the “noble Jew” is bettered by converting to Christianity.

The utopian Jew presented in Enlightenment literature, Lessing in particular, is a created figure who shares very little with Jews in reality. These ‘good’ or ‘ideal’ Jews reveal the ignorance of Enlightenment thinkers as relates to the Jews. The Jews, who became autonomous and to varying degrees assimilated, exemplified the transformative success of the Enlightenment to better the “noble save”. The Jew in German literature began his own transformation in the Enlightenment moving from an object of scorn and stereotypical representation to a Jew embodying ‘noble’ qualities. Undoubtedly written with good intentions Lessing’s *Die Juden* presents a Jew of utmost virtue who has completely taken up European culture. Although the protagonist’s striving toward gaining acceptance in extra-Jewish society is in line with the tendencies of some early maskilim, it is unrepresentative for the entire *Haskalah* let alone Jewish society as a whole. As I have shown, many maskilim remained true to their religion and traditions and wanted nothing to do with Enlightenment designs on integrating them into Christian and European society. Enlightenment intentions toward the Jews did not necessarily coincide with Jewish reality.

### **3.2 The Young Lessing, Gellert, and Influences for *Die Juden***

A discussion of the tolerance presented by Lessing in his two Jewish dramas must ask where and when this value originated. Lessing’s influences for writing *Die Juden* provide further insight into the type of tolerance presented in the play. Lessing grew up in the strict orthodox Protestant belief of his parents, specifically the authoritarian religious dedication

of his father, who as Wilfried Barner notes would be the least likely to have instilled in Lessing humanistic and tolerant views toward Jews (Vorurteile, Empirie, Rettung, 61). Lessing's early childhood years therefore cannot be the root cause of Lessing's tolerance toward other religions and beliefs. It is instead once Lessing leaves the yoke of control and influence of his parents during the years as a student in Leipzig as well as the Berlin years that the formative Jewish experiences occur. Furthermore, until his time in Leipzig and subsequently Berlin, Lessing would have had virtually no contact with Jews as Saxony, which included Lessing's hometown as well as Meißen, enforced particularly restrictive laws towards Jews (Robertson, Ambiguities of Toleration, 110 and Barner, Vorurteile, 61-62). Indeed, they were prohibited from permanent residency, only being allowed entry into cities and villages to peddle their wares, for which they paid heavy additional fines. Lessing's first contact with Jews likely occurred during the period spent studying at the University of Leipzig. There seems to be some contention over this experience. Ritchie Robertson argues that it was mostly wealthy Jewish merchants who attended the fairs and not poorer Jews who peddled their wares (Robertson, Ambiguities, 110). In contrast, Wilfried Barner persuasively argues that this is precisely where Lessing encountered these so-called 'Meßjuden', the poor peddling "mittelöstliche Judentum, aus der Distanz wohl als Exoticum erlebt" which would have proven quite the contrast to his previous experiences (Vorurteile, 62). It would appear that Barner's assessment is correct as Lessing references this experience with the 'Meßjuden' in the second scene of *Die Juden* through Martin Krumm.

Lessing's experiences in Berlin appear to be the propelling factor in influencing Lessing to write *Die Juden*. Moses Mendelssohn has been wrongly labeled as the inspiration for the

Traveler, since Lessing first met Mendelssohn in 1754, five years after he had originally completed the play (Carmely 181 and Barner, Lessing *Die Juden*, 193). Reasons for this misconception most likely stem from Lessing's introduction of Mendelssohn's letter in the debate with Michaelis as well as the tendency to view *Die Juden* as the prequel to *Nathan der Weise* (1779) for which Mendelssohn was most certainly the inspiration (Guthke, 126). While working as Voltaire's (1694-1778) secretary in 1751 in Berlin, Lessing met and befriended Aaron Gumpertz along with Salomon Maimonides who introduced Lessing into the Jewish Voltaire is further significant at this stage because of the Hirsch affair in which Voltaire became engaged in a financial dispute with Abraham Hirsch, a Jew, who had loaned him money. Incensed at the treatment Hirsch suffered, Lessing penned an infamous poem satirizing Voltaire. In this poem Lessing employs common prejudices of the Jews implicating their avarice and greed (Barner, *Vorurteile*, 60-61). In his need to criticize Voltaire, Lessing may not have considered the manner in which he wrote all too closely. Additionally, as Barner argues, this may be indicative of Lessing's relative lack of interaction with Jews at this point. Lessing's reaction to both the Hirsch dispute as well as Frederick's *Judenreglement* of 1750 likely resulted in the gap between the completion and publication of *Die Juden*. During the five years from 1749-1754 Lessing surely made changes in addition to changing the title to the now familiar plural *Die Juden*.

Lessing's religious views complicate the evaluation of his pro-Jewish sentiments as he never systematically defined his position. Lessing's Protestant upbringing remained a strong influence throughout his life. This was tempered by the Enlightenment ideals of natural and rational religion. As I have discussed above, Lessing's conceptualization of tolerance toward Jews exhibited the ideals of the emerging middle class within an implicitly Christian

framework. Although a later view of religions as relative to one another as steps along humanity's educational process, Lessing nevertheless viewed Judaism as an early stage ("Kindesalter") in this process (Berghahn 66). Thus, Lessing's tolerance carried with it the prerequisite of a transformation for those "exceptional few who can "rise above" their own traditional roots" (Thiemann 409-410). A religious motivation underpinning to *Die Juden* appears unlikely as I have discussed above. Furthermore, this is supported in the text as the Traveler's religious practices are only mentioned once. The play is actually bereft of theological debate. Rather it is more appropriate to view it within the context of combating the prevalent stereotypes against the Jews.

Lessing was the first to present a positive portrayal of Jews on the German stage, although he was preceded by two prose works which were the first positive examples of Jews in German literature. These are worth briefly discussing here as they provide a marked contrast to Lessing and demonstrate that Lessing's "ernsthafte Betrachtung" went beyond Schnabel and Gellert's earlier conception. The first positive Jews appear in a tale by Johann Gottfried Schnabel (1692-1752) written around 1731, although the Jews in this play retained the stereotype of greed as they asked for money after their services (Poliakov 162). Of more importance is Christian Fürchtegott Gellert's (1715-1769) *Leben der Schwedischen Gräfin von G\*\*\*\** (1747), as for the first time an unselfish Jew was presented. Gellert's conception was a moralistic portrayal is best summed from the text itself:

Der rechtschaffene Mann! Vielleicht würden viele von diesem Volke beßre Herzen ahben, wenn wir sie nicht durch Verachtung und listige Gewaltätigkeitne niederträchtig und betrügerisch in ihren Handlungen machten und sie nicht oft durch unsere Aufführung nötigten, unsere Religion zu hassen (Gellert 88).

In this way Gellert viewed the causes of the current state of Jewish depredation as resulting from the conditions in which they were forced to exist. We can see Lessing's continuation of

this in the Traveler's soliloquy in scene three of *Die Juden*. Lessing knew Gellert's work and parallels are often drawn between the two characters. However Lessing's "exceptional" protagonist goes beyond the already virtuous Polish Jew of Gellert's novel. Gellert's portrayal suffers from a critical flaw much as Lessing's *Die Juden* does in that in order to make the case for a "good Jew" the authors necessarily had to present a lone figure. Several educated and cultured Jews would have lessened the believability of such characters as there were very few Jews matching the criteria at the time. Thus, the notion that good Jews, although exceptional, do exist inadvertently confirms the prejudice that most Jews are indeed deceitful and greedy.

Lessing's primary intention in writing *Die Juden* was to combat the prejudice which defined all Jews as bad. In doing so he would confront his audience with their own prejudices to demonstrate that one could find virtue where it was least expected. It has been debated as to whether Lessing was interested in individual emancipation or speaking for all Jews. Despite the Traveler being the only Jew in the play, he speaks in terms of his "Volk" throughout the play which suggests Lessing intended to include all Jews. Furthermore, in his introduction to *Die Juden*, Lessing offers a clear synopsis of his purpose in writing the play which is given here in its entirety.

Das zweyte Lustspiel, welches man in dem vierten Theile finden wird, heißt die Juden. Es war das Resultat einer sehr ernsthaften Betrachtung über die schimpfliche Unterdrückung, in welcher ein Volk seufzen muß, das ein Christ, sollte ich meinen, nicht ohne eine Art von Ehrerbietung betrachten kann. Aus ihm, dachte ich, sind ehemals so viel Helden und Propheten aufgestanden, und jetzo zweifelt man, ob ein ehrlicher Mann unter ihm anzutreffen sey? Meine Lust zum Theater war damals so groß, daß sich alles, was mir in den Kopf kam, in eine Komödie verwandelte. Ich bekam also gar bald den Einfall, zu versuchen, was es für eine Wirkung auf der Bühne haben werden, wenn man dem Volke die Tugend da zeigte, wo es sie ganz und gar nicht vermuthet. Ich bin begierig mein Urtheil zu hören (Lachmann Munker, V, 270).



Lessing was clearly interested in showing his audience that honest and virtuous Jews existed as there were „ehedem so viel Helden und Propheten“ among them. At the beginning he speaks of the degradation in which “ein Volk” is currently existing. Clearly he is speaking of all Jews here although there is only the Traveler in the play. It is this seeming discrepancy about which some scholars disagree. The same dialectic which Gellert presented also qualifies for *Die Juden*, that is the exceptional, wealthy, learned, and traveled Jews is the only one fit to enter gentile society (Robertson, *Ambiguities of Toleration* 109-110). It would have been unthinkable of granting all Jews emancipation in their current state due to the political, religious, and social realities of the time. The state could hardly tolerate a separate ‘state’ within the state, nor could the Church allow a second religious group equal status, especially as both apparatuses of Church and State were intimately linked. Socially and culturally, the Jews were still distrusted and feared by the majority of society. Throughout the play the Traveler is accepted by those around him, only upon revealing his identity do the cultural barriers arise once again.

Although the Jews lived in degradation, for Lessing it was men like Aaron Gumpertz and other early maskilim who represented the ideal to which Jews could strive for and not the ‘swarms’ of Jews he encountered in Leipzig. Unlike most of his contemporaries, the young Lessing did not regard the Jews as inherently corrupt as he recognized that the various laws and regulations imposed upon them were the cause of their current state. He was hoping to show that one’s religion did not determine whether a person was good or bad, but what one does in life. His Traveler notes that “es unter allen Nationen gute und böse Seelen geben könne“ (Lachmann Munke, I, 386). Lessing’s Traveler has been criticized as exhibiting no positive Jewish qualities of his own. This begs the question as to precisely what positive

qualities are specifically “Jewish”. For Lessing, the values of education and humanism (“allgemeine Menschenliebe”) are ideals that transcend barriers of society and culture. This “good” Jew as presented in the play only represented an extremely small number of Jews.

#### **IV.3 Tolerance and Identity in *Die Juden***

The title *Die Juden* is intentionally misleading, already part of Lessing’s stratagem of confronting his audience with their own prejudices. This play stands as the first positive representation of Jews on the German stage and along with Gellert’s novel marks the Enlightenment’s literary engagement with the Enlightenment thematic of tolerance. The expected objects of mockery, the “Jews”, are nowhere to be found, rather it is the audience who are worthy of laughter as they embody the very prejudices they project on to the Jews. Through uncovering the various causes of anti-Jewish prejudices and those responsible for propagating them, Lessing attacked the ingrained notions that collectively labeled all Jews as bad. The lone figure of the Jew intentionally works provocatively to show its audiences “die Tugend, woe s sie ganz und gar nicht vermuthet” (Lachmann Muncker, V, 270).

Although a comedy, it marks Lessing’s expansion of the genre into more serious themes as the comic elements of the play are entirely secondary to the primary development, serving instead to underscore the stupidity of the prejudices. Lessing expresses an identification with the “other” which is part of the larger dialectic of the Enlightenment challenge to the pre-existing hierarchies of Church and State. Through the figure of the Traveler Lessing argues that the very conditions in which the Jews are forced to exist actually promotes the “slyness, avarice, clannishness, and degeneracy which are commonly held to be the permanent, God-given features of the Jewish race” (Batley 117). This Enlightenment humanism and bourgeois perspective embodied in the Traveler the very set of characteristics which were

valued in extra-Jewish society. Through this Lessing also sought to dispel the synonymy between Christianity and morality. The unexpected virtue found in the Traveler demonstrated that one's morals and character were not contingent upon one's religion.

In analyzing *Die Juden* one must remain cognizant of both the author's intent and what is seen on-stage. The play, like any piece of literature has its triumphs and flaws. The form of characterization presented in *Die Juden* is inherently problematic as it created a Jew which did not correspond to reality. The expected happy-end of the comedy cannot occur by the very nature of its content. Rather than feeling happy and satisfied at the end, the audience is required to ponder the unresolved ending, hopefully no longer being so quick to issue judgment on individuals as well as entire groups of people. The pervasiveness of anti-Jewish prejudices spans the entire social spectrum from the lowest hooligan to the nobility. Through the various manifestations Lessing shows the interconnectedness of these prejudices, how they are passed on from the nobility to the commoners who needed to be given a readily available vent for their anger lest it be directed toward those in power.

The dialogue in the opening scene of the play between Michel Stich and Martin Krumm reveals the language and mannerisms, but above all the "Dummheit" of the *Pöbel*. Their machinations further reflect the tradition of making the Jews scapegoats for society's failings (Reh, *Rettung der Menschlichkeit*, 136). All characters in the play save for the Baron's daughter is quick to pass their judgment over the Jews whereas the Traveler is characterized by his restraint in passing judgment of any kind. The apparent harmony between the characters is starkly contrasted to the prevailing anti-Jewish sentiment. Lessing buttresses these quick judgments with empirical examples that reflect the prevailing stereotypes of Jews. The viciousness of Krumm is quite clear and he bases his prejudice on

previous experiences with the Jews citing the events in Breslau and the 'Meßjuden'. In Krumm's own words "ich dürfte nicht König sein, ich ließ keinen, keinen Einzigen am Leben" and "so möchte ich gleich die verdammten Juden alle auf einmal mit Gift vergeben" (LM, I, 378-79). The Traveler's hope that „das nur die Sprache des Pöbels wäre!“ (LM, I, 379) is frustrated as he soon thereafter finds the very same sentiments expressed by the Baron.

Lessing is able to tie the anti-Jewish prejudices of the commoners (*Pöbel*) to those of the nobility by showing that it is really the same prejudice and discrimination. It combines as Wilfried Barner states "den 'Dummen', Einfältigen mit dem Hochgestellten" (Lessings *Die Juden*, 198). This is to demonstrate that the prejudices of the *Pöbel* are equally dangerous as those from the wealthy, educated aristocracy (and by extension we can include the State as well). The Traveler's own words draw a connection to this: "ja, man ist schon so weit darin gekommen, daß man Dummheit, Grobheit, und Natur für gleichviel bedeutende Worte halt" (LM, I, 384). The critiques of Krumm and the Baron are combined in the statement that all Jews are "Betrüger, Diebe, und Straßenräuber" (LM, I, 378). Furthermore both label the robbers (Jews) as "Spitzbuben". The appearance of these scenes so close to one another suggests they occur intentionally so in order to underscore this connection. The Baron however is able to go into greater detail than the simplistic Vogt by empirically supporting his arguments, citing his past soldiering days wherein a negative experience with Jews now informs his current view of Jews that "es sind die allerboshaftesten niederträchtigsten Leute" (LM, I, 386). The invectives of the Baron provide a contrast to those of the *Pöbel*. The prejudice is transferred from the educated aristocracy to the poor commoners who actively act out their frustrations against the Jews. It should be noted that Stich and Krumm were in

league with the Baron's *Kutscher* who is only mentioned and never appears on-stage. A common enemy or common cause united the commoners. In this case their frustration is ironically vented upwards to the nobility.

The 'appearance' of the Jews, another recurring theme, is characterized in this early scene by the beards of the would-be robbers Krumm and Stich had employed. Through this the use of Jews as scapegoats for robbery became apparent, for the Traveler so readily points out "denn ich begreife nicht, wie Juden die Straßen sollten können unsicher machen, da doch in diesem Lande so wenige geduldet werden" (LM, I, 378). It is furthermore unlikely that the robbers were Jews since they spoke German ("die ordentliche hiesige Bauernsprache" (LM, I, 378)). The correlation between Jewish appearance and their degeneracy is deepened from the beards employed by Krumm and Stich to the Baron's greater "experience". He is known as "ein großer kenner der Physiognomie" (LM, I, 386) who is able to ascertain the negative Jewish qualities based on their physical appearance. The facial features of the Jews reveals "das Tückische, das Ungewissenhafte, das Eigennützig, Betrug und Meineid" in their character (LM, I, 386). Ironically of course the Baron is unaware of the Traveler's identity at this point.

The appearance, manner, and identity of the Traveler are indeed at the heart of Lessing's social critique. As Wilfried Barner notes, since anti-Jewish prejudices existed on all levels of society an "Ausnahme-Konstellation" was required to reveal the depth of these prejudices (Lessing's *Die Juden*, 199-200). This exception required a Jew who did not correspond to the preconceived stereotypes, rather he is: educated, traveled, wealthy, speaks German, is virtuous to a fault, dresses according to fashion, presumably does not have the characteristic beard, is reserved in passing "allgemeine Urtheile" (LM, I, 386) – in short he is

unrecognizable as a Jew. The only noticeable things we learn are that he did not eat pork as well as the other “Alfanzereyen” (LM, I, 410). The Traveler does not reveal his identity because of being ashamed of his religion, but instead because he realized that one has “Neigung zu mir, aber Abneigung zu meiner Nation” (LM, I, 410). He recognizes that in order to be accepted into society he first must acculturate himself into its norms and values. Albert M. Reh’s assessment of the Traveler’s mannerism and appearance as that of someone standing “auf der anderen Seite der Sündenbockpsychologie” (Rettung der Menschlichkeit 137) are incorrect as the Traveler is acting out of his own motivations. Unlike the Traveler, a person acting out of this view would be ashamed of his religion and possibly want to convert. Furthermore, the Traveler acted unselfishly to save the Baron’s life while risking his own, and then demands nothing in return. He acts from “allgemeine Menschenliebe” (LM, I, 377) and not a desire to be praised. The Traveler does not reveal his identity because of the very real persecution against Jews which forced him to leave Hamburg. He is loath to quickly judge as he has known the effects such general conclusions have. His “menschenfreundlichen, philanthropischen Wesensart” (Barner, Lessing *Die Juden*, 200) is fully in line with the universal humanism espoused by Lessing and the Enlightenment.

The Traveler’s identity and appearance have further been criticized for their lack of “Jewishness”. This begs the question as to what precisely a “Jewish” identity is. Lessing’s argumentation suggests that there is no “Jewish” identity for the Traveler to have as he is a person like everyone else; the Traveler is human before he is a Jew. His identity (the minority identity of the “Jews”) has been imposed on him by the dominant group (majority culture). “Die Juden” are the stereotypes of the Christians in the play; indeed these very stereotypes ascribed to the Jews are in actuality practiced by the Christians. “Die Juden”

have been created by the laws which forced the Jews into their current position but also by the mutual mistrust and segregation between these two peoples and religions. Therein we also find the inherent problem of Lessing's advocacy. In combating the pervasive stereotypes against the Jews and their position in society, Lessing replaces these with the values of the emerging middle class, universal humanism, and natural religion of the Enlightenment. As mentioned the Traveler embodies the qualities of an 'enlightened' human being and is not ashamed of himself or his people (LM, I, 410), rather he acts beyond lines of race and religion as he values friendship above all (LM, I, 410). The religion of the Traveler hardly comes in to question as Lessing places it largely into the background. Religion is not the originator of morality. Thus, although the Enlightenment argued for religious tolerance of the Jews before it became a political emancipation debate, Lessing's goal of eliminating the latent tension between the majority culture and the minority "other" rested upon removal of the social and cultural divide separating them.

The Enlightenment challenged the religious hegemony of the Church, especially its manifestations in the State. Religion was to be a private matter and not an official position of the State. The Enlightenment discourse of espousing natural religion would eliminate the religious justification of anti-Judaism and the prevention of their inclusion into society on these grounds (Ersparmer 27). The cultural and social differences were to be overcome on the literary level by presenting a Jew who would be acceptable in society as he embodied values which were universally acceptable. Although Lessing certainly deserves praise for arguing on behalf of the Jews, especially at such young age and in the social and political climate, his tolerance comes at the cost of their necessary change.

The budding friendship between the Traveler and the Baron comes to an impasse after the snuffbox subplot resolves as reality reveals the limit of acceptance for Jews. The earlier statement by the Baron, “O! daß ich nicht längst einen Freund Ihresgleichen gehabt habe!” (LM, I, 384), is stymied by the Traveler’s revelation. The laws or “der Himmel”, prevent the Baron from showing his gratitude to the enigmatic Traveler who has turned out to be a Jew. Thus the Traveler’s reservations “findet im nachhinein ihre Bestätigung” (Barner, Lessings *Die Juden*, 201). The traveler already noticed that the Baron showed “Neigung zu mir, aber Abneigung zu meiner Nation” (LM, I, 410). As he cannot offer his daughter, the Baron freely offers his fortune to which the Traveler responds that his religion has provided him with more than he needs (LM, I, 410). There is however a deeper reason for his refusal of the reward, for if he accepts the money it would only reconfirm the long-standing prejudice which linked Jews with greed. The Baron’s prejudice remains although he is at least ashamed of his actions. He sentences Stich and Krumm thereby symbolically passing judgment over their anti-Jewish prejudice which the Baron had shared (Harth 42). This is only a superficial judgment though, as their crime was against the Baron and not any Jews, therefore prejudice is not being punished. The Baron’s tolerance also only extends to the Traveler and not his ‘Nation’ as revealed in his final statement. It is through the Traveler’s earlier statement that there are good and bad people in every nation (by extension every religion) that his final parallel sentence gains greater depth. Through the conclusion that “und wie liebenswürdig die Christen, wenn sie all Ihre Eigenschaften besäßen!” (LM, I, 411) that Lessing’s moral reaches the forefront. Tolerance is not dependent upon the morality of one’s people (Guthke 141). Rather it is the “allgemeine Menschenliebe” (LM, I,



378) from which a person should act. By placing this at the end, Lessing leaves the audience to ponder its disposition toward the Jews.

As we have noted earlier, the presentation of such an assimilated Jew is problematic in that it does not represent the reality of the Jewish situation at the time. This has furthermore given rise to the debate among Lessing scholars as to whether an individual emancipation or general emancipation is to be taken from the play. The Traveler as Wilfried Barner states is “Exempel einer realistisch gemeinten Demonstration schlechter Wirklichkeit” (Vorurteile, Empirie, Rettung, 70). The terrible reality he demonstrates is that such Jews are indeed seldom but not through their own doing. Because of the dramatic requirements as well as the nature of the content the Traveler’s specific Jewish qualities cannot be portrayed. The Traveler hopes to be regarded as an individual free of “allgemeine Urtheile” (LM, I, 386), thereby erasing the myth that all Jews are bad. The scarcity of his character is not due to the ‘defects’ of the Jews but to the Laws which have forced their current state upon them. The parallel sentences at the end further signify the rarity of such a character among any people. Lessing says as much in his “Abhandlung” over the play: “Ich sage es gerade heraus: noch alsdenn, wenn mein Reisender ein Christ wäre, würde sein Charakter sehr selten seyn“ (LM, VI, 161). The bluntness of Christoph is poignantly apt: “ein Christ hätte mir einen Fuß in die Rippen gegeben, und keine Dose!“ (LM, I, 411). With the revelation of the Traveler’s Jewishness, reality encroaches once again as the requisite happy-end is frustrated. Only the Baron’s daughter remains free of society’s prejudices although we are left to think that she will learn soon enough.

The rarity of such a character among any group begs the question if Lessing could have achieved similar results with a “Christian” protagonist as well. Such a character would be

inherently problematic for several reasons. As I have discussed above, there was a wide disparity between the situation of the Jews and that of Christians at the time. Whereas Jews were universally subject to a variety of laws, fees, and taxes imposed on them just for being Jewish, Christians in all denominations were more or less equally tolerated. We must also remain cognizant of the great cultural divide that separated Christians and Jews which only made differences among the two all the more distinct. A “Christian” would have no need to hide his identity nor would he be prevented from either accepting the marriage to the Baron’s daughter or his fortune. For a member of the majority culture there would be nothing to integrate into. Christians already possessed rights beyond any Jew. Instead, only a member of a minority culture could illuminate the incongruence of the situation in which they lived.

It is clear that Lessing wanted recognition of the Jews and their human rights, but what this often overlooked passage reveals is that Lessing, along with the maskilim and wealthy “Oberschicht” of Jews recognized that the Jewish ‘Nation’ would need to change to fit in with the times. As I have discussed above, modernization was inevitably forcing these two entities closer together. Karl S. Guthke refutes the notion that Lessing was arguing for emancipation solely of individual wealthy Jews in that virtuous and educated Jews such as Mendelssohn and Gumpertz could exist without prior wealth or outside guidance respectively (Guthke 128). Guthke’s statement belies the fact that Jews such as Mendelssohn and Gumpertz constituted an extreme minority at the time. As Lessing suggests in the play (scene 3) and again later in his response to Michaelis, the laws themselves prevent the likelihood of such Jews. By eliminating the causes, changing the laws, such Jews as the Traveler can exist.

The play's open ending has been regarded as both optimistic and pessimistic. The pessimistic aspects, as I have shown, reflect the empirical reality of the play and the thereby prevented happy ending. It shows that the relations between Christians and Jews are far from equal. Moreover, none of the characters are convinced that anti-Jewish prejudices are wrong. Only the Traveler is the exception to their experiences. Lessing was well aware of just how ingrained Jewish discrimination was and that these prejudices are filtered down from the elite, the nobility, State, and Church to the commoners. These prejudices act as control mechanism for society, masking its flaws, and provide an outlet for anger which otherwise might be directed at the State by providing convenient scapegoats. Lessing does offer some optimistic hope for the future in the form of the Baron's daughter. She alone is free of prejudice as she is "die liebenswürdigste Unschuld" (LM, I, 384) who has not been exposed to society's influence yet. She innocently inquires after the Traveler's revelation "Ei, was thut das?" (LM, I, 410). By this Lessing seems to suggest that sooner or later one must take a stance on the issue. Naivety is not necessarily positive. In fact, it can be as dangerous as the prejudice itself, for the naïve are easily influenced and will therefore readily absorb the ideals of their elders or superiors. Thus Lessing's hope for the young is limited for they are without power as the Baron's servant "will es ihnen hernach sagen, was das thut" (LM, I, 410). We (the audience) are left to ponder which course the Baron's daughter will take.

Ultimately we return to Lessing's conception of the comedic genre and its purpose. As I argued earlier, a means of recognizing the ridiculous as such and achieving catharsis from it are two key aspects of comedy for Lessing. Through this one comes to be a better and more virtuous person. Does this make *Die Juden* primarily a morality play? We must balance Lessing's dramatic ideals with what is presented on-stage. As such, the play's socio-political

aspects coincide with its moral thematic. By demonstrating that Jews too were capable of virtue, Lessing separated virtue from the hegemony of one's religion. Through the comedic elements of the play the audience can laugh at the utter stupidity (and ridiculous nature) of figures such as Stich and Krumm and thereby also laugh at the prejudices of the *Pöbel*. The unresolved ending and the concept of the virtuous Jew force the audience to lose the naivety and reflect on their disposition toward the Jews. The social and political ramifications of such Lessing's argument are quite clear. The manner of appearance of the lone Jew both serves the purpose of fulfilling the moral precept of the play. However, it also demonstrates the only way Jews would become acceptable in Enlightenment society. In the end Lessing is unable to definitively provide the next step or solution to the problem, at least one that allowed for Jews to be treated equally. He could only offer suggestions through his Traveler of the necessity for social reform.

### **3.4 The Effect of *Die Juden* on Jewish Tolerance and Emancipation**

The effect of *Die Juden* on the development of the Jewish debate in the eighteenth century and the portrayal of Jews in German literature is extensive. Immediately upon its publishing in 1754 in the second of Lessing's *Schriften* the play aroused controversy. Two reviews appeared of which the one by the well-known orientalist Johann David Michaelis (1717-91) in the *Göttingischen gelehrten Anzeigen* on June 13th 1754 is of central importance. Michaelis' critique directly questions the possibility of such a Jew's existence, positing that he appeared "too good" and "too cultured" and "all too unlikely" (Carmely 181, Kopitzsch 38, and Altenhofer 210). He bases his argument partially on the economic realities of the Jews and their unfair business practices when dealing with Christians. Lessing's defense posits that if the reasons or causes of Jewish repression were removed it

would lead to the improvement of the Jews as occurs in his play (Och, *Juden und Judentum*, 84). In seeking an example of a Jew such as the Traveler's existence Lessing attached a letter by a hitherto unknown Jew in his reply. Moses Mendelssohn who was shocked by Michaelis' critique stated that he expected such negative words from Christians, but that from "gelehrten Leuten erwarte ich etwas billigere Beurtheilung" (Och, "Die Juden" im 18. Jhrdt, 47). Mendelssohn's rebuke not only presents an educated Jew but also one standing up for his people. In presenting Mendelssohn, Lessing confirms his status as an exception along with Aaron Gumpertz and a few others. Presenting only positive stereotypes can be as harmful as presenting their opposite. This debate occurred during a period of increased anti-Jewish restrictions with the Judenreglement of 1750. One must rightly praise Lessing's bravery in publicly arguing for the Jews. Although both learned men, Michaelis' reputation and position lent credibility to his argument as opposed to Lessing the playwright, a profession none too highly regarded.

The immediate reception of the play makes it difficult to assess the direct impact of *Die Juden*. The almost reticence with which the play was initially received is indicative of the controversial nature of its subject and that Lessing's position was not widely held. As the play emerged during a period of increased anti-Jewish regulations it seems normal that the time was unripe to produce the play. Klaus L. Berghahn strongly argues that *Die Juden* and Gellert's *schwedische Gräfin von G\*\*\*\** represent only a „eindringlichen Mahnung an das Publikum“, which he goes on to say hardly constitutes the formation of the emancipation movement of the Jews in Germany (Berghahn 81). If viewed in the short-term this statement bears some weight, as neither changes in the political climate nor any lessening of anti-Jewish restrictions are directly attributable to *Die Juden*. However, this view seems to ignore

the play's role in providing the literary model from which myriad dramas by other Enlightenment authors featuring Jews appeared. Additionally, Lessing's early play allowed for the later *Nathan*.

If these early works by Gellert and Lessing barely made an impression on the public conscience then it is worth briefly examining the audience of the time. As discussed above, Lessing wanted to confront his audience with their own prejudices. Was Lessing's audience prepared for or even interested in a 'learning experience' toward the betterment of this long scorned minority? The theater was a major avenue of entertainment and the emerging *Bürgertum* wanted to see the familiar, wanted to see itself on –stage. The audience did not want to see “Indianer, Chinesen, Mohren, Türken, die alle noch als Exoten zum Fundus des Barock-Theaters gehörten. Zu den Verwandten und Bekannten gehörten also keine keine Fremden, also auch keine Juden” (Buck 26). If there were Jews then it was expected that they would fill the requisite role as object of derision and mockery. It is also important here to point out the solitude of Lessing's Traveler on the literary landscape. This character represented a break from century's old portrayals of Jews as greedy, covetous, and licentious. Regardless, the play would not be performed until twelve years after its publication. The outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756 ensured that the Jewish debate was far removed from the public discourse. The emerging middle class was also coming into its own, looking for a social identity. It could hardly accept Jews en masse as Jews were often competition in the economic sphere; the myriad other stereotypes notwithstanding. In contrast to its lackluster reception in the short-term the play's first production in Nürnberg in 1766 marked a period of increased productions and newfound popularity of the play. Additional productions of the play occurred in 1771 with an increasing number of

performances during the 1780s throughout German lands as the tolerance debate gained momentum (Kopitzsch 41). Unfortunately there appear to be no references which provide reviews or audience reactions of the play.

Although Gellert's and Lessing's work did not immediately create a public discourse over the Jews they set the trend for future representations of 'noble Jews' in German literature and spawned numerous plays featuring positively portrayed Jews, although they lacked the depth and significance of Lessing's creation. Gunnar Och provides an extensive list of dramas featuring Jewish figures from 1754-1778 (Lessings Lessings Lustspiel "Die Juden" 59-60). In defining the characteristics of his Traveler, Lessing creates parameters for such a character that limit the degree of variation possible with this character idea. Only Lessing's second Jewish work *Nathan der Weise* (1779) would arouse not only controversy but also bring the debate over Jews to the forefront of Enlightenment thought. During this time the *Haskalah* had become a very political movement with a concentration of its members located in Berlin. However, the combination of the numerous positive portrayals in these intermittent years, as well as *Nathan* and the changing political climate led to a nationalistic character in German lands. The revived anti-Judaism also revived the traditional stage Jew of the past.

A direct impact of *Die Juden* was the introduction of Moses Mendelssohn into the ensuing debate with Michaelis. Mendelssohn became representative of the "educated" and "cultured" Jew and was accepted into Jewish intellectual circles through his contact with Lessing and others. He identified with Lessing's Traveler "in der er das eigene Ideal des weltlich gebildeten Juden verkörpert sieht" (Och, Lessings Lustspiel, 46). Mendelssohn was far from the typical Jew and he would engender a dual sense of illusion for many Jews of

less fortunate means: that they could achieve a status similar to Mendelssohn's and that they could find broad acceptance, for as Mendelssohn experienced, his position as a Jew in society was still volatile.

## **Conclusion**

This study has hopefully demonstrated the problematic nature of the concept of tolerance as related to minorities such as Jews during the Enlightenment, specifically that of G. E. Lessing in his early comedy *Die Juden*. The Enlightenment and thereby its proponents struggled to reconcile their beliefs in the universal goodness of humanity and religious tolerance with Jews. The advancement of scientific and philosophical discourse marking the beginning of the period around the turn of the eighteenth century marked an attack on established religion and an emerging middle class sought to legitimate itself through authors and thinkers who criticized the traditional aristocratic dominion over power and values. Such a movement to renew and reform traditional institutions developed concurrently in the *Haskalah* movement. German-Jewish relations at this time existed within the context of a dominant versus minority culture. Enlightenment emancipation literature (Lessing), the *Haskalah*, and modernization played a major role in shaping the development of the Jews throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. For the Jews emancipation and tolerance were inexorably determinate upon their change. The methods and purpose for this between the Enlightenment and the *Haskalah* were often incongruous. These movements faced enemies both within and without. The complex interrelationship between the various social strata and the questioning of fundamental aspects of society ensured that true achievements were difficult to come by.



This study provides a base from which to further explore the subject. Additional fruitful research would involve an examination of the “noble savage” phenomenon developed in the eighteenth century through the comparison of that genre’s literature. It would further prove pertinent to examine the numerous pieces of literature containing Jews which came into being in the second half of the eighteenth century and their manner of portrayal.

Additionally, an examination into the reasons why the *Haskalah* dissolved at the very time it was gaining momentum and acceptance at the end of the eighteenth century would provide a bridge from the Enlightenment Jewish debate to the political emancipation debate and the rise of anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century.

Although Lessing was an early advocate for Jewish rights, and the first to positively portray them on the German stage, he was nevertheless limited by the framework from within which he argued. His dramatic experiment which broke with established tradition presents a limited form of tolerance defined through the lens of cultural diversity. Lessing’s sharp social critique and insight into the foundation of this problem is balanced by the harsh reality of the time in which it occurred, to which the play as a result cannot provide a solution. Lessing nevertheless must be praised for taking on this task respective of the risk such a position entailed. Lessing does offer a possible solution by suggesting changes in the current state of the Jews that would allow for their improvement. As I have discussed, such changes would be contingent upon its usefulness for the State. Moreover, this presupposes the notion that all Jews wanted to be improved. Lessing’s “exceptional” Jewish Traveler reflects Lessing’s concept of tolerance in that Jews could better themselves through education and interacting with society. Although arguing that the Jews as a distinct group should be treated with the basic human dignity they deserve, Lessing’s humanism precludes

a coexistence of both groups on equal terms. It should be noted that even in today's age equal coexistence between differing cultures and religions often remains a tenuous situation. For Lessing equality is attained through the ideals of education and rational, natural morality inherent to the 'enlightened' human being.

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