What is Enlightenment? Whatever it is, it includes the advancement of scientific knowledge and critiques of myth and superstition. In the following, I wish to follow one thin thread of enlightenment that runs from Israel Halevy Zamosc, studied by Gad Freudenthal, to Berlin and Jerusalem.

What is Enlightenment? The question was asked with practical intentions in the 1780s in Mendelssohn’s circle in Berlin. Different answers were given.

One thought that the history of the Jewish nation would be most serviceable for the purpose, inasmuch as the people would discover in it the origin of their religious doctrines and of the subsequent corruption which these had undergone. They would also come to understand that the fall of the Jewish state, as well as all the subsequent persecution and oppression which the Jews had suffered, had arisen from their own ignorance and opposition to all rational planning. … But one of our friends thought that we ought to begin with something on natural religion and rational morality, inasmuch as this is the object of all enlightenment. … For my part, I believe … that it would be best to make a beginning with some science which, besides being most favorable for the development of the mind, is also self-evident, and stands in no connection with any religious opinions. Of this sort are the mathematical sciences; and therefore with this object in view I am willing to write a mathematical textbook in Hebrew.1

The writer of these lines is Salomon Maimon. “Enlightenment” means here a critique of the “corruption” of the Mosaic religion by rabbinical

Judaism and the distribution of scientific knowledge. Maimon believed that some scientific knowledge is not overtly opposed to religious opinions. This should be formulated more precisely. A conflict does not arise between “science” and “religion” as such but can arise between specific criteria of truth or assertions of either religion or philosophy with those of the counterpart. Such conflict may be resolved by changes on either side, or both. Neither religion nor science is a clearly circumscribed unchanging entity. Both are complex systems of propositions and social institutions, and both change with time and culture. Maimon, however, also believed that there are core-issues over which a conflict is inevitable, e.g. over the basic religious belief in the physical efficacy of a non-material entity. The common notion of “God” in Europe at the time meant, inter alia, a non-material, unw worldly, personal entity which nevertheless acts physically in the world. His most conspicuous actions are miracles. Once this notion of God is critiqued, worldly events may not be explained with reference to this transcendent being. In a recent paper, Gad Freudenthal also takes the position that under certain conditions a conflict between science and religion may arise. I will now turn to a case in which Zamosc produced with the intention of enlightenment such a conflict. He introduced scientific knowledge into a commentary on a Biblical verse in which he also referred to a miracle so that science and the miracle appeared side by side in the same paragraph. In the next step of enlightenment, Mendelssohn removed this inconsistency and also explained scientifically the case that was first “explained” by a miracle.

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2 Maimon draws radical consequences: “The so-called harmony between faith and (theoretical) reason is according to him [Maimon speaks of himself in the third person here—G.F] nothing else than the complete abolition of the former by the latter.” (Verra, ed., Gesammelte Werke, 7:640).