When we recall the high days of Maskilic warfare against Hasidism, we are bound to think of nineteenth century Galicia and Russia, where, though with varying emphasis on the supposed goodwill of the imagined Mitnaggedic and government allies, the struggle against the hated foe was fought with utmost bitterness. The classical Maskilic warriors, especially those in Galicia, could, however, find an inspiring example in Menakhem Mendel Lefin's Essai d'un plan de reforme ayant pour objet d'éclairer la nation Juive en Pologne & de redresser par la ses moeurs, that was published in 1791.

The particular background for the publication of the Essai, was formed by the vulnerable, last phase of existence of Poland, before the Second and Third Polish Division. During this period a last attempt was made to strengthen the country against its neighbours' aspirations to expand. Modernization and internal reform of the backward Polish State seemed inevitable. In order to discuss how this Polish national revival could be realized, the Seym initiated a broad debate, where the position of Poland's large Jewish population became an important issue. Several prominent Polish Jews were invited to participate in the debate and present their views to the Seym. At the request of his Maecenas Prince Czartorisky, Menakhem Mendel Lefin took part in the discussion. His contribution stands out for the analysis of the causes of what he conceived as a crisis in Jewish religious and social life in Poland, and for the uniqueness of its reform proposals. In 1791, Lefin anonymously

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2 Y. Weinlez, 'R. Menachem Mendel Lefin of Satanov', *ha-Olam* (1925) 799 (in Hebrew). Weinlez maintained that Lefin wrote his Essai in French because he did not know Polish well enough and the German language was hated by the Poles. However, N.M. Gelber, who found the French memorandum in 1912 in the Czartorisky Library, gives a quotation from Lefin where he both explains his anonymity and his use of French:

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published his views in the *Essai*, which was presented one year later as a memorandum to the National Educational Commission of the Seym.

As the full title of the *Essai* clearly implies, the Jewish Nation in Poland not only had to be enlightened but, according to Lefin, also needed to reform its morals. However, before the author elaborates his views on the causes of the presumed Jewish ignorance and immorality, he takes a decisive stand. Any political reformer has to understand that the Talmud, with its basic Codes of Law and its reflections on morality, is the fundament of Judaism in all its religious and existential aspects. He then, immediately, explains how this remark has to be understood. As a true Maskil, Lefin claims that the development of Judaism has rationalism as its true basis. Indeed, the Talmud has to be regarded as the fundament of Judaism, but the author connects his unconditional declaration in favour of the Talmud in one and the same breath with the interpretations of the 'great teacher' Maimonides: 'Il développe (in *Morenebochim*) les fondements les plus raisonnables de la plupart de cérémonies et des interprétations allégoriques de plusieurs paradox du Talmud (...).'

Provided with an acceptable Talmud, with its inner contradictions leveled out through the rationalistic prisma of Maimonides, Lefin subsequently posits mysticism as the other, regrettable trend within Judaism. Every now and then, mystical tendencies disturb the proper rationalistic development of Judaism. This mystical trend in Judaism philosophy and its present day representatives, the Hasidim, are the main enemy of any form of enlightenment. Inspired by the Kabbalah, Lefin maintains, these new 'zélateurs' are the main cause for the miserable position of the Jews in Poland, who are steeped in foolishness and ignorance. Hasidism attracts the poor, who follow their leaders like meek sheep, while the leaders prevent them from using their senses and enrich themselves at the

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1 The memorandum consists of one hundred and six clauses and fourteen footnotes that elaborate some of the clauses. At the end of the memorandum Lefin included fragments from Montesquieu and Voltaire.

4 Lefin, *Essai*, nos 1-5. In his 'Note d' to these clauses Lefin emphasizes that the Laws of God were not to be changed, only 'les moeurs & les manières'.

5 Ibid., nos 7-9.