



Universität Hamburg

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ספקנות

Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies
JEWISH SCEPTICISM

ANNUAL LECTURE 2023

TUESDAY
24 OCTOBER 2023
18:00

***Selbstdenken!* Moritz Steinschneider's Pious Scepticism**

Irene Zwiép (University of Amsterdam)

Fact: Moritz Steinschneider (Prostejov 1816 – Berlin 1907) was an atheist. As far as he was concerned, God was a figment of the imagination and religion a psychological construct. At some point in their lives, he noticed, all human beings faced the limits of reason. In reaction, the wise reverted to scepticism, becoming what Ricoeur would later call “*maîtres du soupçon*.” The foolish, by contrast, adopted an easy *Autoritätsglauben*, meekly accepting religious fallacy as truth. A third category—the horror!—tried to merge theological dogma with scientific fact into religious apologetics. There is no need to stress here that Steinschneider sided with the sceptics. He rejected religion as a bogus knowledge system, stressed the incompatibility of *Glauben und Wissen*, and dismissed rabbinic seminaries as a threat to scholarship and dogmatic monotheism as hostile to humanity. For him, tolerant secularity was the default mode.

Fact: Moritz Steinschneider was a pious Jew. His marriage, domestic life, and habitus were Jewish, as was his professional routine. From 1869 to 1890, he earned a living by managing the *Jüdische Mädchen Schule* belonging to the Berlin Jewish community and teaching at the *Veitel-Heine Ephraim'sche Lehranstalt*, a former beth midrash.

In his later work, he argued that the highest form of morality was found in piety, a term which Grimm's lexicon identified with “loving awe for the numinous and the holy.” How then did Steinschneider, who had little affinity with the numinous and the awesome, define piety? How did it inspire his scholarship? And how could that pious Jewish *Wissenschaft* be squared with his legendary objectivity and universal humanism?

This lecture will try to determine precisely what Steinschneider meant by *Pietät*, trace the intellectual roots of his definition, and reconstruct how Jewish piety braced (rather than undermined) his passion for *Selbstdenken* and intellectual autonomy. This should help us to gain insight into Steinschneider's invisible religion (a term coined by Thomas Luckmann in the 1960s), and, no doubt, that of countless other “secular orthodox” Jews in late nineteenth-century Europe.

VENUE

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