

# Mysticism, Rationalism, and Criticism: Rabbi Jacob Emden as an Early Modern Critic and Printer\*

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## ■ Abstract:

Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1779) was an important rabbi and scholar in the area of Hamburg. One of his works, *Mitpahat Sefarim* (“Book Cloth,” Altona, 1768), is a critique of the *Zohar* (“Book of Splendor”), a canonical Jewish mystical text attributed to the ancient scholar Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai (ca. 2nd cent. CE). In *Mitpahat Sefarim*, Emden casts doubt upon the *Zohar*’s provenance, authorship, and age. This critique has led some to identify Emden with the early beginnings of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, as an opponent of mysticism. However, Emden took mystical sources very seriously, both in the spiritual realm, and, as this article shows, even in his writings on religious law. This article examines the perceived contradiction in Emden’s thinking, and proposes a view of Emden as an early modern printer and critic with a unique perspective, rather than a confused precursor of modern ideas.

## ■ Keywords

Emden, *Zohar*, Kabbalah, humanism, book history, print, criticism

\* This article had its beginnings in research carried out in 2013 for a graduate course at Harvard University with Professors Ann Blair and Leah Price. The author would like to thank them both for the valuable instruction they offered at those early stages. The author would also like to express her profound gratitude to Debra Glasberg, Yakov Z. Mayer, and the anonymous readers of this article for reading earlier drafts and providing constructive criticism and feedback.

## ■ Introduction

Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1776) stood at the very center of eighteenth-century Jewish history. He was the son of Rabbi Zevi Ashkenazi, known as Hakham Zvi (1656–1718), a prominent rabbi who traversed the geographical territory of early modern Jewry from Moravia through the Ottoman Empire to Amsterdam, ending his life in Poland. In his youth, Emden witnessed his father wage battle against the followers of Shabbetai Zevi, the self-proclaimed Jewish messiah who converted to Islam in 1666.<sup>1</sup> In the decades after Shabbetai Zevi's death in 1676, the esoteric antinomian theories developed to justify his conversion as necessary for hastening the messianic age had grown ever more intricate and subversive, sweeping along countless Jews.<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of his life, Emden saw the first stirrings of the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, and corresponded with its leading thinker, Moses Mendelssohn, the German Jewish philosopher who sought to harmonize Judaism with Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to writing influential works of religious scholarship and numerous responsa on matters of Jewish law, Emden zealously fought heterodox Jewish sects who based their antinomian beliefs on kabbalistic interpretations. Some of these sects openly advocated conversion to Islam or Christianity; others were outwardly traditional Jews who secretly clung to heretical ideas.<sup>4</sup> While many rabbis chose to ignore the latter groups,<sup>5</sup> Emden, who called himself “zealot, the son of a zealot,”<sup>6</sup> considered uncovering and fighting heretics one of his main responsibilities, inherited from his father who had also opposed those he suspected of Sabbateanism in his day. Emden's main weapons in this battle were pamphlets and booklets issued from his own printing press.

<sup>1</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah 1626–1676* (trans. Zvi Werblowski; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Elisheva Carlebach, *The Pursuit of Heresy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 8–10; Pawel Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) 4–10; Maoz Kahana, “The Allure of Forbidden Knowledge: The Temptation of Sabbatian Literature for Mainstream Rabbis in the Frankist Moment 1756–1761,” *JQR* 102 (2012) 589–616. Yaacob Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi: The Life of Jacob Sasportas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019) 324–65 compares Emden to Sasportas, the subject of Dweck's book.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob J. Schacter, *Rabbi Jacob Emden: Life and Major Works* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1988) 661–86; David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 91–108; Shmuel Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn: Sage of Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 107–52.

<sup>4</sup> On Dönme, see Cengiz Sisman, *The Burden of Silence: Sabbatai Sevi and the Evolution of the Ottoman-Turkish Dönmes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); on Frankism, see Maciejko, *Mixed Multitude*. See also Schacter, *Emden*, 412–25.

<sup>5</sup> On the idea that rabbis deliberately kept mum regarding concealed Sabbatean sympathizers, see Carlebach, *Pursuit*, 77–80; Maciejko, *Mixed Multitude*, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Emden, *Akizat Akrav* (Altona, 1752), title page (כקנאי בן קנאי). On the authorship of this pamphlet, see Shnayer Z. Leiman, “The Baal Teshuvah and the Emden-Eibeschutz Controversy,” *Judaic Studies* 1 (1985) 3–26, at 21.

Foremost among Emden's targets was Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschtütz (1690–1764), eminent religious scholar, chief rabbi of the Triple Community Altona-Hamburg-Wandsbeck, and purveyor of magical amulets.<sup>7</sup> Convinced that he had deciphered heretical meanings hidden in these amulets, Emden printed a booklet to publicize this fact, and to persuade Jewish leaders everywhere to reject Eibeschtütz.<sup>8</sup> This plan failed, and Eibeschtütz remained chief rabbi.

About a decade before his death, Emden wrote a work called *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* (Book-cloth; Altona, 1768), in which he called into question the ancient and exalted authorship of the *Zohar*, the literary masterpiece of kabbalah.<sup>9</sup> Given Emden's critique of kabbalah, it is perhaps not surprising that he has often been portrayed as a bridge to the Jewish Enlightenment, especially considering how integral the historical-critical perspective would eventually become to the self-identification of the various intellectual, philosophical, and religious movements that emerged from the *Haskalah*.<sup>10</sup> *Maskilim* (pl. of *maskil*, an adherent of the *Haskalah*) cited Emden's *Zohar* criticism and his battles against mysticism and superstition, claiming him as their own. Yet this common characterization does not square with the legacy of Emden as profoundly immersed in Jewish mysticism.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Emden's embrace

<sup>7</sup> On the controversy, see Mortimer J. Cohen, *Jacob Emden: A Man of Controversy* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1937); Gershom Scholem, review of *Jacob Emden: A Man of Controversy* by M. J. Cohen (Hebrew), in *Sabbateanism Studies* (ed. Yehuda Liebes; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1991) 665–80, including Scholem's own opinion on the nature of the amulets, which he thinks were filled with Sabbatean references; Gershom Scholem, "On an Amulet by R' Jonathan Eibeschtütz and his Interpretation thereof," in *Sabbateanism Studies*, 707–33; Gershom Scholem, *Index to the Writings of the Emden-Eibeschtütz Controversy* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006) (Hebrew). See also Yehezkel Duckesz, *The Sages of AH"V* (Hamburg: Goldschmidt Verlag, 1908) esp. 49–74 (Hebrew); Shmuel Ettinger, "The Emden-Eibeschtütz Controversy in Light of Jewish Historiography," *Kabbalah* 9 (2003) 329–92 (Hebrew); Yehuda Liebes, "Rabbi Jacob Emden's Messianism and His Relation to Sabbateanism," *Tarbiz* 49 (1980) 123–65 (Hebrew).

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Emden, *Sefat Emet* (Amsterdam, 1752). See Shnayer Z. Leiman, "When a Rabbi Is Accused of Heresy: R. Ezekiel Landau's Attitude toward R. Jonathan Eibeschtütz in the Emden-Eibeschtütz Controversy," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism* (4 vols.; ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Nahum M. Sarna; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 3:179–94; idem, "When a Rabbi Is Accused of Heresy: The Stance of Rabbi Jacob Joshua Falk in the Emden-Eibeschtütz Controversy," in *Rabbinic Culture and Its Critics: Jewish Authority, Dissent, and Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Times* (ed. Daniel Frank and Matt Goldish; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008) 435–56.

<sup>9</sup> For an introduction to the *Zohar*, see Isaiah Tishby, introduction to *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts* (ed. Isaiah Tishby and Yeruḥam Fishel Lachower; trans. David Goldstein; New York: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1989). See also idem, "The Controversy Concerning the Book of the *Zohar* in Sixteenth-century Italy," in *Perakim: Sefer ha-Shana shel Makhon Schocken le-mechkar ha-yehadut leyad bet hamidrash lerabanim be-Amerika* (ed. Eliezer Shimshon Rozental; Jerusalem, 1967) 1:131–82 (Hebrew).

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context* (Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry 19; Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> For instance, Jacob Emden, *Zizim u-Ferachim* (Altona, 1768), a kabbalistic dictionary and commentary. Emden's work on the prayer book is likewise suffused with mystical notions: idem, *Siddur Amudei Shamayim* (Altona, 1745–1748). Emden was also received as a mystic. For instance, the most popular edition of his prayer book, reedited and renamed *Bet Ya'acov* (House of Jacob),

of esotericism clearly included the *Zohar*, as repeated statements in his works make plain.<sup>12</sup> Nowhere is this enigma more pronounced than in *Mitpahat Sefarim*. On the one hand, Emden claims the *Zohar* to be inauthentic, and Emden's text was read as an attack on kabbalah and the dangers of irrational mysticism; on the other, he expresses nothing but reverence toward the *Zohar* and its mystical teachings.

Historians have noted the contradictions between Emden's apparently premodern mystical beliefs and the modern tenor of his critical spirit.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Emden has been described as, respectively, a believer in the *Zohar* who wrote an insincere critique of the book; an opponent of mysticism who sought to undo the *Zohar*; a figure torn between two historical periods and two types of thinking; a precursor—but not quite a member—of the Enlightenment; or a somewhat incoherent combination between medieval mystic and modern critic.<sup>14</sup> This article argues that while Emden subscribed to some aspects from both models, he can best be understood not as a figure torn between tradition and modernity, nor as an adherent of one position who was dissimulating and pretending to support the other side for whatever reasons, but as a late example of an early modern printer, scholar, and critic.

Practitioners of later forms of criticism were expected to be objective and to some extent even irreverent toward the sources they studied. But early modern humanist critics were unproblematically subjective, partial to their sources, and at the same time critical. Their critical scholarship was often related to the making of books, especially the publication of recently rediscovered ancient works. They harnessed philology to determine the authenticity of ancient texts, and to create print editions from manuscript copies. Emden, too, employed a critical attitude in analyzing the authenticity of an ancient text, but did so in a partial and reverent manner. Moreover, as historians have shown, printing was highly important for the *Zohar*'s popularity and reputation.<sup>15</sup> The current essay explores Emden's attitude vis-à-vis the *Zohar* and the goal of *Mitpahat Sefarim* through the lens of his preoccupation with print.

To view Emden as an early modern humanist critic can clarify apparently irreconcilable tensions in his approach to the *Zohar*. To read *Mitpahat Sefarim* in the context of early modern print is to understand the work not as discrediting Jewish mysticism or blindly accepting the *Zohar* wholesale, but as a critical commentary on

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features a title page (which already appeared on older editions) describing Emden as “the pious, the mystic”; idem, *Siddur Bet Ya'acov* (Zhitomir, 1889), title page.

<sup>12</sup> See n. 69 below, for instance.

<sup>13</sup> See Tishby, introduction, 40–42; Schachter, *Emden*, 499–591, describes Emden as, on the one hand, interested in non-Jewish wisdom and, on the other, opposed to philosophy, “confronting the modern era.”

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Shmuel Dotan, “Jacob Emden and His Generation,” *HCA* 47 (1976) 104–25 (Hebrew).

<sup>15</sup> See Daniel Abrams, “The Invention of the *Zohar* as a Book: On the Assumptions and Expectations of the Kabbalists and Modern Scholars,” *Kabbalah* 19 (2009) 7–142; Boaz Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky: Chapters in the Reception History of the Zohar and the Construction of Its Symbolic Value* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2008) 321–23 (Hebrew).

a canonical text. Through *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*, I argue, Emden reminded his readers that print does not neutrally copy and disseminate texts; in the process of putting together a book for print, it is changed. Indeed, the very act of printing a text can create a book where none existed before.

### ■ Emden as *Maskil*

*Mitpaḥat Sefarim* was seldom republished: once by eighteenth-century *maskilim*, and once in the mid-1990s by an anonymous publisher.<sup>16</sup> The work was first published on Emden's own press, "printed in the home of the author," as the title page proclaimed.<sup>17</sup> Its second printing came over a century later, in Lemberg. Michel Wolf, publisher of the second edition, preceded the work with a short biography of Emden, which describes how Emden stood up to save Jews in an era "during which the light of knowledge did not shine upon them, and the members of that sect [Sabbateans] hid their nets in order to trap these souls."<sup>18</sup> Wolf was referring to the kabbalistic beliefs of his eighteenth-century predecessors, which made them susceptible to the Sabbatean sects of the time. This narrative conforms to the general rationalist, anti-kabbalistic thrust of works that Wolf published, as is evident from the list appended to some copies of Wolf's edition of *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*.<sup>19</sup>

Like other proponents of the *Haskalah*, Wolf admired Emden as an ally in the battle against pernicious mysticism.<sup>20</sup> Wolf and his fellow *maskilim* devoted themselves to spreading the "light of knowledge" to their fellow Jews in the form of other works included in Wolf's book list: Mendelssohn's translation of the Bible into German (transliterated in Hebrew letters); guides to learning German; edifying literary works; Hebrew poetry; Jewish philosophical writings by figures such as religious philosopher Nachman Krochmal; and lighter works that mocked Hasidism, like Joseph Perl's *Megalleh Temirin*.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The Lemberg edition was reprinted identically (*Sifriyat Mekorot* [Jerusalem, 1970]). The publisher of the 1995 edition is identified only as "Orah ṣaddikim Institute," with a P.O. box. Strange rumors swirl around on Jewish ultra-Orthodox online forums, claiming that the editor and publisher of this edition died an untimely death due to illness because he published the work (see the discussion on *Behadrei Haredim* from 2008: [http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?topic\\_id=2443449&forum\\_id=19616](http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?topic_id=2443449&forum_id=19616)). Clearly, the work remains controversial in certain circles.

<sup>17</sup> Emden, *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* (Altona, 1768) (נדפס בבית המחבר).

<sup>18</sup> Emden, *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* (2nd ed.; Lemberg, 1873), introduction (וירופפו עמודי האמונה בימים וההם. אשר אור הדעת עוד לא נגה עליהם ובעלי הכת טמנו רשתם לצודד נפשות).

<sup>19</sup> Harvard's Houghton Library (Heb 41900.300) has such a list. Other copies, such as the two in YIVO's Rabbinic Collection (24 א9א-מ) and the one at the National Library of Israel (5251.2) do not seem to include the list. Since this list is a paratext that does not make up an integral part of the work, it could be added or removed without impacting the work. Additionally, its use is geographically and temporally limited (it is only relevant as long as the books can be bought from Wolf and for those who live in an area where they could get those books), so it is not surprising that it cannot be found in all copies. The list could also have been removed by a later owner.

<sup>20</sup> For more examples of Emden's popularity among *maskilim* such as Wolf and Yizhak Satanov, see Huss, *Like the Radiance*, 321–23.

<sup>21</sup> *Megalleh Temirin* (Revealer of secrets; Vienna, 1819) is an epistolary novel written by the

In the eyes of these *maskilim*, Emden had fought a similar unrelenting polemical battle against sects that thrived on ignorance and mysticism. Since Wolf considered Emden a pioneer of their own movement, his introduction fittingly positions Emden as a bridge between two figures: the medieval philosopher and poet Emmanuel of Rome (whose writings Wolf had recently published) and “the sage of our people, the great philosopher, Rabbi Moshe ben Menachem, also known as Mendelssohn,”<sup>22</sup> father of the Jewish Enlightenment. Wolf presents Emden’s correspondence with Mendelssohn as the capstone in Emden’s biography. Not only *maskilim* themselves perceived Emden as a harbinger of their own intellectual activities.<sup>23</sup> Some historians accepted this narrative too, portraying Emden as a precursor of the Jewish Enlightenment.<sup>24</sup>

This reception of Emden as an intellectual who deployed historical and textual criticism in his fight for the light of reason against the dark forces of esotericism has some legitimacy. *Mitpahat Sefarim* literally means “book-cloth,” and refers to cloths used as wrappings for sacred Torah scrolls.<sup>25</sup> When Emden had printed *Mitpahat Sefarim* in Altona, he played on this meaning on the book’s title page: “The book | *Mitpahat Sefarim* | part one | which was made so as not to hold a book naked, without knowing the source from where it stems.”<sup>26</sup> Emden presents his work as a cloth wrapped around the holy work it studies, the *Zohar*, so as not to leave that book “naked” of context or provenance.

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*maskil* Joseph Perl. The pseudonymous book, which some critics regard as the first Hebrew novel, imitates the *Epistolae obscurorum virorum* (Letters of obscure men; 1515) of Crotus Rubianus and satirizes Hasidim as abusing the superstitious mystical beliefs of their gullible coreligionists in order to defraud them, by, for instance, taking their money in exchange for promised miraculous recoveries. For a critical edition, see Joseph Perl, *Sefer Megale Temirin* (ed. Jonatan Meir; 2 vols. Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2013) (Hebrew). Wolf had planned to print the first series of “Great Hebrew Works” as part of his *maskilic* educational enterprise. He succeeded in printing only three books before running out of funds. See Avraham Yaari, “First Attempts at Collecting (Towards a History of Hebrew Publishing),” *Moznaim* 3.27 (1932) 1–12.

<sup>22</sup> Emden, *Mitpahat Sefarim* (Lemberg, 1873) 4.

<sup>23</sup> See Schacter, *Emden*, 717. As Schacter put it, *maskilim* “repeatedly invoked his name and opinions in support of their own positions and sometimes went so far as to claim him as one of their own.” Abraham Bick calls him “One of the first to pave the path of internal and historical criticism.” See Rabbi Jacob Emden: *Notes and Commentaries on Zohar* (ed. Abraham Bick; Jerusalem, 1975) 15. On the contradictions, see 16–17: Bick distinguishes Emden’s critical spirit from that of the “Renaissance iconoclasts,” (such as Delmedigo) as well as the “pioneers of *Haskalah*” (Shmuel David Luzzato). Bick considers Emden’s stance to be that the *Zohar* is the timeless truth, but its temporal revelation carries the markers of its place and time.

<sup>24</sup> See Shmuel Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment* (trans. Chaya Naor; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) 30–35, where Feiner discusses historians who viewed Emden as a “precursor” of *Haskalah*.

<sup>25</sup> *b. Meg.* 25b–26a. The halakic discussion in the Talmud considers whether the wrappings of Torah scrolls may be sold in order to purchase new scrolls.

<sup>26</sup> Emden, *Mitpahat Sefarim* (Altona, 1768), title page (not numbered; all page numbers refer to the first edition in the edition’s original foliation, and the section number is provided in parentheses where relevant. Punctuation is in the original unless otherwise mentioned) ( . . . ספר מטפחת ספרים . . . ).  
(העשוי שלא לאחוזו ספר ערום בלי דעת. מקור מוצאו.)

Emden's "wrapping cloth" aims at dissipating claims that had enshrouded the *Zohar's* origins. According to Emden, heretics could easily misuse a "naked" book to reinforce their subversive beliefs and to claim fictitious traditional sources for their heresies. In line with this concern, Emden fills the remainder of the title page with denunciations of heterodox sects that cite the *Zohar* and its presumed author, the mishnaic sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, as an authority for their heresies.

*Mitpaḥat Sefarim* instead sets out to "clothe" the *Zohar* in its historical context—or more precisely, its several contexts, corresponding to the different textual layers Emden identifies. In so doing, Emden follows in the footsteps of previous critics of the *Zohar*, such as Elijah Delmedigo (ca.1458–ca.1493) and Leone Modena (1571–1648). The philosopher Delmedigo criticized the kabbalah in *Behinat ha-Dat* (Examination of religion) in the late fifteenth century, but the work was printed only in 1629, when it was published by a younger relative, Joseph Delmedigo of Candia (1591–1655).<sup>27</sup> The Italian scholar Leone Modena attacked the *Zohar* in his 1639 book *Ari Nohem* (The lion roars). That polemic, too, circulated exclusively in manuscript and was first printed only in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Modena cites one of the most important external pieces of evidence against the *Zohar's* antiquity: the testimony of the early thirteenth-century kabbalist Isaac of Acre, published in Rabbi Abraham Zacuto's *Sefer Yuḥasin* (Constantinople, 1566).<sup>29</sup> Isaac of Acre relates that Moses de Leon, a kabbalist who was his contemporary, claimed to possess the *Zohar* and would transcribe parts of it for others. De Leon's wife, however, declared that her husband had authored these so-called excerpts himself. Isaac of Acre did not accuse de Leon of forgery; instead, he suggested that de Leon wrote these excerpts under the influence of divine revelation. Emden mentioned this testimony and noted the fact that later editions of *Sefer Yuḥasin* no longer contained this piece of evidence.<sup>30</sup>

Emden raises some objections that had appeared in his predecessors' critiques: the *Zohar* goes unmentioned in talmudic literature, for example, and, in fact, contains passages that contradict the Talmud. Yet in the thoroughness of its critique and in the methodical nature of its claims, Emden's treatise goes well beyond those two earlier works of *Zohar* criticism. It enumerates hundreds of particular cases of incongruity, itemized in the order in which they appear in the *Zohar*, as

<sup>27</sup> The younger Delmedigo accompanied the author's critique with a defense of the *Zohar* of his own writing, *Maẓref la-Hokhma* (Refiner for wisdom). See Yaacob Dweck, *The Scandal of Kabbalah: Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 79–86, esp. 82.

<sup>28</sup> Tishby, introduction, 31, explains that Elijah Delmedigo presented his critique of the *Zohar* as rooted in a general opposition to Kabbalah, which he claimed to share with "most of the followers of the Talmud, and also those who follow the plain [nonmystical] meaning, and the philosophers of our people" (the translation is Goldstein's). Elijah Delmedigo, *Behinat ha-Dat* (Basel, 1629) 5b (וכת רוב מהנמשכים אחרי דברי התלמוד כן, וגם כן בעלי הפשט וכת המתפלסים מאנשי אומתנו יתאמצו נגד אלה). Concerning Christian *Zohar*-criticism, see Huss, *Like the Radiance*, 298–312.

<sup>29</sup> For an English translation of the testimony, see Tishby, introduction, 13–15.

<sup>30</sup> Emden, *Mitpaḥat*, 2b, 5a.



a commentary or gloss would do. Emden points out three kinds of anachronism. First, linguistic anachronism, most famously the *Zohar's* description of the house of prayer as *esh-noga* (glowing fire) on the basis of the Spanish term for synagogue, *esnoga*.<sup>31</sup> Second, Emden highlights historical anachronisms, like the *Zohar's* references to talmudic sages who succeeded Rabbi Shimon and to the Muslim conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>32</sup> Third, Emden calls attention to instances of intellectual anachronism, showing that some of the *Zohar's* ideas draw on the Jewish medieval philosophical work *Kuzari*,<sup>33</sup> as well as on “words from philosophy and from the medical sciences.”<sup>34</sup> Emden enumerates countless cases in which opinions in the *Zohar* contradict, conflate, or misattribute Jewish laws and ideas, such as the laws concerning priestly service,<sup>35</sup> or the religious requirements regarding Jewish slaves.<sup>36</sup> Emden draws attention to misquoted scriptural passages<sup>37</sup> and to opinions that are factually wrong,<sup>38</sup> imprecise,<sup>39</sup> or theologically unacceptable (such as excessive praise of Rabbi Shimon that in Emden’s opinion borders on idolatry).<sup>40</sup> Emden considered these errors and problematic statements as proof that the work could not have been authored by Rabbi Shimon and that the work could not possibly be authentic. Concerning one such error, for instance, Emden observes: “This whole statement is entirely distorted, because it mixed two separate issues that are unrelated to one another, and he has thus ‘twisted the scriptures’ on us. . . . In any case it is clear to the eye that he placed forged additions here, and dressed them in secrets of kabbalah.”<sup>41</sup>

Emden concludes that some parts of the *Zohar* are—at the earliest—products of a late talmudic generation (the third-century *amoraim*, but perhaps as late as the tenth-century *geonim*), while others were added by a late thirteenth–early fourteenth-century Spanish sage. Still other passages, he contends, are obvious late forgeries. Emden identifies these different layers of the *Zohar* by their own

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 5b–6a.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 13a (§157).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 12b (§135), 13a (§152).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 16b (§2) (וכן נמצאו בו מלת פלוסופיות ושל חכמת הרפואה).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 12b (§130): The *Zohar* writes that unmarried priests were forbidden to work in the Temple, but this only applies to the high priest on the Day of Atonement.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 12a (§118–119): The *Zohar* implies that Jewish slaves are not required to keep halakha, which, Emden explains, confuses the laws of Jewish slaves with those of Canaanite slaves.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 11a (§86), points out that the copyist probably confused a passage from Ecclesiastes with a similar one from Ezekiel. Ibid., 11b (§102) (ואי אפשר לתלותו בטעות סופר ומעתיק כי עליו בנה יסוד) (סדר). This misquotation, Emden emphasizes, could not possibly be a late copyist’s error, since the subsequent teaching in the *Zohar* is based entirely on the misquoted word. Ibid., 13a (§163).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 11b (§110), concerning the timing of King David’s marriage to Bathsheba.

<sup>39</sup> For example, passages in which the *Zohar* seems to be confusing two different types of offerings: *ibid.*, 12a (§113–115).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 12b–13a (§127–128), for the notion that Rabbi Shimon merited divine revelation to which even Moses was not privy.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 11a (§89) (הגנה כל המאמר הלוה משובש מאוד כי ערבב שני ענינים נפרדים רהוקים זה מזה ועוות) (המקראות . . . עלינו הרי עכ”פ נראה לעין. כי השיית עלינו תוספות מזויפות אחד מן המשובשים והלבישם בסתרי קבלה).



subtitles and linguistic peculiarities. He writes that while he would have liked to imagine that the most ancient core of the *Zohar* was indeed authored by Rabbi Shimon, “my heart is divided on this issue, and I cannot entirely believe that even a part of it is from the words of the *tanna* known by the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai. . . . Therefore, because I am forced to, and purely as an assumption, I say that the Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai of the *Zohar* was another man at a later time.”<sup>42</sup>

Emden argues that in two parts of the *Zohar*, *Tikkunei Zohar* (Corrections of the *Zohar*) and *Ra'ayah Meheimana* (Faithful shepherd), “the author is clearly the same person, as I have shown previously, and their language testifies to this. . . . [Their author is] much, much later than the first author of the core of the *Zohar*.”<sup>43</sup> A third part, called *Midrash Hane'elam* (Secret midrash), is later even than the other two, Emden writes, and “its fake nature is recognizable from within,” both linguistically and based on “its issues.”<sup>44</sup> “From now on,” Emden concludes, “the sons of the covenant will have a general response” to any heretical claims based on the *Zohar*:

that we are not bound to all these good apocryphal books, and that the obligation to believe in all these strange things is not upon us, since they have not been transmitted to us by our forefathers and rabbis publicly, and who knows who truly gave birth to them or invented them, once it has become clear as day that unfamiliar mixtures have been found within it, added by unknown figures based on their own judgment and inventions.<sup>45</sup>

In exposing foreign additions to the *Zohar*, Emden’s critique releases readers from “the obligation to believe” in the work the way they would be duty-bound to believe it were it to be a canonical Jewish work. It is for this that *maskilim* hailed Emden as a hero, as a warrior for reason who used textual and historical criticism to undermine a book filled with dangerous irrationality and superstition. Some elements in this image of Emden as a critical-minded proto-Enlightenment figure, however, fail to add up.

## ■ Emden the Mystic

Notwithstanding the *maskilic* portrayal of Emden as a force against irrational beliefs, he in fact was profoundly engaged in the mystical dimensions of Judaism. In *Guide for the Perplexed*, the foremost medieval Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, had argued that *Ma'aseh Merkava* (The work of the chariot), a term associated with esoteric knowledge,<sup>46</sup> referred to rationalist philosophy. Emden was so offended

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 16a (כי אמנם לבי חלוק עלי בזה, ולא אוכל להאמין בהחלט, שיהא אפילו מקצתו מדברי התנא הידוע בשם) (רשב”י. . . . לכן על צד ההכרח ומאומדנא והשערה אני אומר שרשב”י דזוהר אדם אחר היה בזמן מאוחר).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 16b.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 17b (זיופן ניכר גם מאיכות הענינים).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 17b (כי אין אחריותם של הספרים החיצונים הטובים האלה עלינו ולא החיוב מוטל להאמין בכל אותן) (דברים זרים אחר שלא נמסרו לנו מאבותנו ורו”ל בפומבי מי היודע מולידם האמיתי והממציאם אחר שנתברר לעין השמש (שנמצאו בתוכן ערבוני דברים שלא נודע מי ומי שהוסיפם מדעתו ובדאם).

<sup>46</sup> See *b. Hag.* 14b.

by this notion that he suggested the *Guide* to have been falsely attributed to Maimonides.<sup>47</sup> To take another example, Emden's *Iggeret Bikkoret*, a responsum regarding a medical problem, evolved into a heated polemic about the validity of empirical science and medicine.<sup>48</sup> Yet in that debate, Emden did not take the side of science and reason. On the contrary, he listed a series of mysterious supernatural occurrences to show that reason fails to explain the world and its phenomena.<sup>49</sup>

Elsewhere, Emden strongly cautions against the reemergence of rationalist philosophy that accompanied the budding Enlightenment and confronts the challenges he felt it posed to tradition. In *Iggeret Purim*, he writes: "Verily, I am the man that has seen the affliction of his people in my time, when the heresy of philosophy has reasserted itself."<sup>50</sup> A parenthetical remark in the abovementioned responsum (*Iggeret Bikkoret*) occasions an attack on the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides's halakic code, in which Emden vilifies reason as a treacherous woman:

She [human intellect] has overstepped the bounds. Seething, she will step venomously and walk. An overly big step with a haughty air, she goes naked and barefoot, floating above the waters of inquiry, touching the accident [external phenomena] but not the essence and core of the thing. Therefore, the inquirer will eat the bread of his intellect with the sweat of his brow.<sup>51</sup>

Emden dismissed the idea that rational inquiry alone could explain everything, insisting on the existence of an esoteric dimension that the intellect was unable to access. His two-volume prayer book is replete with esoteric references.<sup>52</sup> His writings are not only filled with positive references to mysticism in general but

<sup>47</sup> Emden, *Mitpaḥat*, introduction (ספר) על כן אמרתי בחפזי. כל האדם הקורא בשם הר"מ על חיבור סמ"ג (ספר) Emden does not continue this line of thought. (מורה נבוכים). כוזב שאינו המחבר הגדול. בעל ספר היד החזקה. He may have gone back and forth on this hypothesis. On Emden's attitude toward Maimonides, see Schacter, *Emden*, 545–70.

<sup>48</sup> Maoz Kahana, "The Scientific Revolution and the Codification of Sources of Knowledge: Medicine, Halakah and Alchemy, Hamburg-Altona, 1736," *Tarbiz* 22 (2014) 165–212 (Hebrew); Maoz Kahana, *A Heartless Chicken: Religion and Science in Early Modern Rabbinic Culture* (Bialik: Jerusalem, 2021) (Hebrew). Kahana's book, published as the current article was being prepared for print, is further evidence that contextualizing Jewish history with developments in early modern intellectual and cultural history more generally immeasurably enriches the field of Jewish studies.

<sup>49</sup> Maoz Kahana, "An Esoteric Path to Modernity: Rabbi Jacob Emden's Alchemical Quest," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* (2013) 1–23.

<sup>50</sup> Jacob Emden, *Iggeret Purim*, excerpt published from manuscript in Jacob J. Schacter, "Rabbi Jacob Emden's *Iggeret Purim*," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature Volume II* (ed. Isadore Twersky; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) 445. Translation from Schacter, *Emden*, 567, and see n. 262, there. See also *ibid.*, 550: "together with Sabbatianism, he [Emden] considered the evils of philosophy to be one of the most dangerous features of the Jewish community of his times as he viewed it . . . he went so far as to consider philosophers to be of even greater danger to Jewish survival and continuity than Sabbatians!"

<sup>51</sup> Emden, *Iggeret Bikkoret*, 16a (השכל האנושי] . . . בזעם תצעד ארש ותפסיע. פסיעה גסה ברוח יתיר') על כן יאכל החוקר (יהיר') הלוק ערום ויחף מרחף על פני מי החקירה נוגע במקרים ואינו נוגע בעצם הדבר ומהותו. להם תבונתו בזעם אפו.

<sup>52</sup> See Schacter, *Emden*, 280.

also express admiration for the *Zohar* in particular.<sup>53</sup> His conscious and enthusiastic embrace of mysticism in general and the *Zohar* in particular as a central pillar of Jewish practice is strongly (albeit not most famously) expressed among his halakic writings and responsa.

One such responsum is perhaps more telling of Emden's true devotion to the *Zohar* than any of the better-known sources.<sup>54</sup> Emden's kabbalistic dictionary, his prayer book, and even *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* necessitated engagement with mystical sources by virtue of their topics and contents. Responsa, however, belong to the realm of Jewish law, a genre in which the esoteric dimension can typically be avoided without too much effort. The realm of halakah could easily be kept clear of any intrusions by the *Zohar*. Yet as the responsum below shows, Emden chose not to steer clear of the very work he knew to be so problematic. Indeed, he goes to great lengths to reconcile the law with a mystical reading explicitly associated with the *Zohar*, against the nonmystical mainstream interpretation. Ecstatic at having succeeded in doing so, he praises the *Zohar* to the skies. Clearly, Emden was more than simply not opposed or sympathetic to the *Zohar*. He actively sought to integrate it even in the realm of halakah.

In the course of a responsum printed in his *She'ilat Yavez* (Questions of Yavez; an acronym for Yacov ben Zvi), Emden goes to great lengths to salvage an interpretation drawn from the *Zohar*. He addresses a puzzling talmudic statement about the correct positioning of one's bed: "Abba Benjamin says, all my life I took great pains . . . that my bed should be placed between north and south. . . . For . . . he who places his bed between the north and the south will have male children."<sup>55</sup> For generations, many understood the issue as one of disrespect to the Temple, such as the interpretation presented by Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yizḥaki, 1040–1105) on this passage in the Talmud.<sup>56</sup> In the traditional interpretation, the preferable position for one's bed was in the north-south direction, so as not to engage in intercourse facing Jerusalem in the east.<sup>57</sup>

A mystical interpretation prescribed the diametrical—or, rather, perpendicular—opposite: the bed should be in the east-west direction, instead of pointing from north to south.<sup>58</sup> This opinion is related to the *Zohar*'s interpretation of biblical passages describing the formations in which the Israelites traveled in the desert, which mapped the divine presence onto the different compass points. If God's left is north and his right is south, pointing one's bed from east to west was meant to line up with the divine formation. The Dutch brothers who addressed this question to Emden distinctly remembered that when Emden's father had been the rabbi

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, nn. 69–70 below.

<sup>54</sup> See above, n. 11.

<sup>55</sup> *b. Ber.* 5b.

<sup>56</sup> Rashi in tractate *Berakhot* 5b on "North to south."

<sup>57</sup> This is the opinion presented in *Shulḥan Arukh*, *Orakh Hayim*, 3:7, in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Temple, 7:9, and other standard halakic works.

<sup>58</sup> *Zohar*, *Bamidbar*, 3:118b.

in Amsterdam, he had positioned his bed in line with the mystical interpretation. Given Ḥakham Zvi's assertion that in cases of conflict one must follow the halakic tradition over kabbalah, the questioners asked Emden for an explanation.<sup>59</sup>

After denying any knowledge of the position of his father's bed, Emden stipulates that in this matter there is no contradiction between mainstream halakah and kabbalah. The Talmud makes no explicit ruling on the matter, after all; it presents only a vague statement by one rabbi that could be interpreted to mean either direction for the bed's position. This in itself is a surprising contention. Though the Talmud's intention is less than clear, mainstream halakic tradition clearly prescribed the direction in a way that countered the *Zohar*. Having denied knowledge of his father's actions, Emden could simply have cited those sources and left the matter at that. Instead, he reopens a broader question: whether the passage in the Talmud has been correctly interpreted throughout the ages.

At this point, his response takes an even more surprising turn. Not only does Emden point out several problems with Rashi's interpretation, he enthusiastically advocates positioning one's bed according to the *Zohar*. Emden even adduces additional arguments for why such a practice rings true, including the talmudic interpretation of Lev 12:2, "A woman who seeds and gives birth to a male."<sup>60</sup> The Talmud takes this to mean that when a woman "seeds" (*tazria'*) first during intercourse, the offspring will be male.<sup>61</sup> Emden relates this interpretation to the issue of the bed, combining the ideas of east and west with concepts of sexuality, the attributes of God, and the masculine and feminine sides of the divine. Citing the *Zohar*, Emden discovers this idea hidden in the Song of Songs: "It says, 'his left is under my head' [2:6] and then only 'his right will embrace me' and so it also says 'arise in the north and come to the south' [Song 4:16]."<sup>62</sup> According to Emden, the fact that the *Zohar's* explanation resonates with passages from Scripture proves the truth and authenticity of the *Zohar's* take on the issue.

Emden ends the responsum with a triumphant exclamation: "And from here the wise will see how all the words of our sages in the *aggadot* [the narrative portions of the Talmud] are sweeter than honey and all fitting with one another. They are complete, interrelated, and pointing and hinting to one another."<sup>63</sup> The kabbalistic interpretation, in Emden's view, accords with the rabbinic truth and testifies to the completeness of the tradition. Years later, Emden added a postscript to the responsum, in which he expressed his joy at having discovered a work attributed

<sup>59</sup> Zvi Ashekanzi, *ShUT Ḥakham Zvi*, §36.

<sup>60</sup> "אשה כי תזריע וילדה זכר."

<sup>61</sup> *b. Nid.* 31a. Whether this refers to ovulation or some form of female arousal and natural lubrication is unclear.

<sup>62</sup> *ShUT She'ilat Yavez*, 1: §47 ("עורי צפון ובואי") (תימן" וגו').

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* ומכאן יראה למשכיל היאך כל דברי חז"ל באגדות מתוקים מדבש ומוטעמים יהו יהיו תמים נקשרים זה על זה. On Emden's belief in the interdependence of all the sacred books, see *Iggeret Bikkoret*, 16a (לכן כל ספרינו הקדושים צריכים זה לזה).

to Rashi's students. In that work, Rashi instructs grooms to position their beds in accordance with kabbalistic practice:

A long time after writing this, the book *Likkutei haPardes* attributed to Rashi came into my hands, and in it I found written that the head of the bed must be facing the east.<sup>64</sup> Here we can see then that even Rashi of blessed memory himself retracted his interpretation and thought like the kabbalists. . . . And here, my heart was very gladdened, and so was my spirit within me, when I saw and recognized, blessed are you and blessed is your flavor, it did not diminish and your scent did not weaken. . . . A pure heart God has given you [Ps 51:12] to learn from the words of piety.<sup>65</sup>

More surprising still, Emden accords the *Zohar*'s opinion (at the very least) equal weight to a minority talmudic opinion, for "it is as though the opinion in the *Zohar*—which is opposed to the Talmud—was said by Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, seeing as that sacred work is attributed to him."<sup>66</sup> In other words, Emden equates the kabbalistic source with a statement by a talmudic sage. Had his predecessors seen the *Zohar*, Emden claims, they doubtless would have accepted its interpretation.<sup>67</sup> A more emphatic endorsement of the *Zohar* as the work of Rabbi Shimon would be hard to imagine.

One might suggest that Emden composed this responsum at an early stage in his life, when he still believed in the sacred source of the *Zohar*, and that he was disabused of this notion later in life. But a comment in his introduction to *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* suggests otherwise. Emden writes that his skeptical views on the *Zohar* were "enclosed in the chambers of my heart about forty years."<sup>68</sup> The responsum in question is dated to 1728, exactly forty years prior to his printing of *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*, and the postscript was added much later.

Apparently, then, Emden had entertained doubts concerning the *Zohar* even as in his halakic writing he enthusiastically endorsed that same work. He emended traditional interpretations of the Talmud in order to make halakic decisions concur with the *Zohar* and jubilantly adduced evidence in favor of the *Zohar*'s

<sup>64</sup> *Likkutei ha Pardes* (attributed to Rashi) ("ד"א אמרו חכמים) . . . דין החתן כשהוא בשנה הראשונה: . . . (הרוצה לעשות כל בניו זכרים יבעול וישן ויהא ראש מטתו ופניו בעת שיבעול לצד מזרח. "Laws of the groom in his first year [of marriage]: . . . another thing, the Sages said, he who wants to make all his sons male, should have sex and sleep with the head of his bed and his face while he is having sex facing east.")

<sup>65</sup> *ShUT She'ilat Yavez*, 1: §47 (ומצאתי) "אחר זמן רב שכתבתי זה. בא לידי ספר ליקוטי פרדס המיוחס לרש"י, ומצאתי) "בו שכתב שצריך שיהא ראש המטה פניו לצד מזרח. הרי א"כ גם רש"י ז"ל עצמו חזר בו מפירושו. וס"ל כפירוש המקובלים, ומ"ש למזרח, היינו משום שכונה בעמרב . . . והנה מה מאוד שמח לבי. אף רוחי בקרבי. ביודעי ומכירי ברוך אתה וברוך (טעמך לא פג . . . לב טהור נתן לך ה' לדקדק בכל מילי דחסידות.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* וכמו שתאמר שהדבר האמור בוזהר שלא כתלמוד שלנו. הוא מדברי רשב"י שהחבר הקדוש הוא מיוחס) (אחריו).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* ועוד שאותן מפרשים עצמן אלמלי ראו הוזהר אולי לא פירשו לנו כך. ולא עוד שאצלי אין ספק שהיו) (חוזרים מפרושם).

<sup>68</sup> Emden, *Mitpaḥat*, 6a (כי באמת על אפי ואל חמתי היתה לי זאת כאמור, כי על כן לא נתתיה לשאלה לאור) (עולם עד עתה היתה סגורה בחזרי לבבי כארבעים שנה . . . ולא רציתי לגלותה).

interpretations. In his halakic responsum, where he could easily have sidestepped the issue, he waxes poetic about the superiority of kabbalah and affirms Rabbi Shimon as the *Zohar*'s originator. Emden neither compartmentalizes legal thought from mysticism nor cordons off mysticism to an obscure corner of the Jewish faith. None of this, in short, squares with the image of Emden as the *maskilim* saw him, a figure wary of kabbalah and skeptical of the *Zohar*.

### ■ Emden the Enigma?

The opening sentence of *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* reads: “The entire essence of the book of the *Zohar* is as holy as that of the heavens is pure.”<sup>69</sup> Emden intersperses the book with similar praise for the *Zohar*. He writes, for instance, that “he who denies the tradition [lit. “kabbalah”] of the wisdom of truth is, in my eyes, an absolute heretic.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the very existence of *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* attests against the view of Emden as a *Zohar* opponent. As Isaiah Tishby notes, none of the numerous *Zohar* skeptics before Emden composed works like *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*, because “they did not have sufficiently high regard for it to study it and disprove its antiquity.”<sup>71</sup> The very decision to engage so closely with the work attests to a certain regard for it.

Earlier anti-*Zohar* polemics, such as Leone Modena’s critique, featured general attacks against mysticism but were devoid of close readings.<sup>72</sup> *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*, by contrast, can be read as a serious gloss of the *Zohar*. Boaz Huss contrasts Emden to “Delmedigo and Modena, who opposed the kabbalistic contents of the *Zohar* and rejected it from a rationalist anti-kabbalistic point of view.”<sup>73</sup> Tishby, too, compares Emden to Modena to highlight the complexity of *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*:

If Emden had been a man like Modena, a not-too-serious free-thinker who was not wholeheartedly committed to Judaism anyway and was positively antagonistic to kabbalah, his task would have been simple and straightforward. . . . But Emden’s position here was complex and difficult because he firmly believed in the truth of kabbalah as an ancient tradition that contained divine revelations about the mysteries of the true Jewish faith, and affirmation of the *Zohar*’s sanctity was deeply embedded in his soul. . . . However, once he had taken on the task of making a critical evaluation of the *Zohar*, he pursued it with great fidelity.<sup>74</sup>

One way of explaining the seeming contradiction in Emden’s position on the *Zohar* is to dismiss one of its sides as insincere. One might contend that Emden felt compelled to mask his opposition to such a central work of Jewish mysticism. In this view, Emden prefaced *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* with excessive proclamations of

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 [2a] (הנה כל עצם ספר הזוהר, קדוש הוא כעצם השמים לטוהר).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 42a (המכחיש קבלת חכמת האמת הוא בעיני מין ואפיקורס גמור).

<sup>71</sup> Tishby, introduction, 31.

<sup>72</sup> Dweck, *The Scandal*, 92. However, Dweck points out that Modena did believe the *Zohar* to have a legitimate place in the Jewish world as an edifying work (80).

<sup>73</sup> Huss, *Like the Radiance*, 316. See also Dotan, “Emden,” 119.

<sup>74</sup> Tishby, introduction, 40–41.

the *Zohar*'s sanctity while concealing his true opinion—that the *Zohar* was not a sacred work—between the lines. By the same token, one could just as well claim that Emden sincerely believed in the sanctity of the *Zohar* but was forced to criticize the work outwardly in response to the dangers of Sabbateanism.

Rabbi Ḥayim Joseph David Azulai (known by his acronym *Hida*), one of the most prolific of eighteenth-century rabbinic authors, takes the latter view. In his bibliography of Jewish books, *Shem ha-Gedolim* (The names of the great; Livorno, 1774), Azulai portrays Emden as a sincere adherent of the *Zohar*, who “truly and honestly knew the issue of the *Zohar*, but in his zealotry against the cursed sect,” he raised doubts about the work’s authenticity.<sup>75</sup> For Azulai, Emden criticized the *Zohar* merely as an emergency measure, intended purely for the sake of heaven. Still, the final words in Azulai’s description, “And may God in his mercy judge him favorably,”<sup>76</sup> suggest disapproval of Emden’s decision to write *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*, regardless of his good intentions.

The contradictions persist in a broadside Emden printed to promote his writings.<sup>77</sup> It lists eight folio works, nineteen quarto works, and eight octavo works written by Emden, with a short description of each. Emden describes *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* as follows: “(*Mitpaḥat Sefarim*) concerning the book of the *Zohar*, *Ra'aya Meheimana* and *Tikkunim*, in order to purify it and to refine it from distortions and errors that have fallen within them due to unknown copyists. . . . In the end it mentions some matters about Eibeschützer.”<sup>78</sup> *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* appears in this description as a work of scholarship concerned with polemics only as an afterthought.

The formats mentioned on Emden’s list, however, give a very different impression. The works were listed according to their format: octavo, folio, and quarto. The type of work in each of these categories is quite consistent, with each category containing types of texts roughly belonging to the same genre. The choice of format reflected a work’s practical function as well as its standing and level of

<sup>75</sup> Azulai, *Shem ha-Gedolim* pt. 2, 453 (1992 ed.) (עד שכתב) . . . עתה מקרוב בא לידי מטפחת ספרים . . . שאינו לתנא אלא לאחרון, ופקפק על הגדולות והנוראות אשר בוהר. ולפום ריהטא הייתי תמיה מאד על דבריו . . . ולכן נראה לי כי גם הרב ז"ל ידע באמת ובתמים ענין הזהר הקדוש. אך בקנאתו על כת הארורה . . . דתלו עצמם בלשונות (הזהר בדברי שוא ושקר, לכן הראה פנים לקעקע ביצתם ולומר משום עת לעשות פקוקים אלו. See also, Huss, *Like the Radianc*, 322. Rabbi Avraham Bombach, who published a recent edition of Emden’s corrections of the *Zohar* (from a notebook in manuscript as well as Emden’s marginalia in his copy of the *Zohar* [Amsterdam, 1705]) agrees with Azulai’s hypothesis. He concludes that, since the threat of Sabbateanism is no longer relevant today, there is no need to print any of Emden’s remarks from *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* that question the *Zohar*’s antiquity. See Avraham Bombach, introduction to Jacob Emden, *Niẓozzei Yaveẓ* (“Sparks of Yaveẓ”) (ed. Avraham Bombach; Jerusalem, 2017) introduction (n.p.).

<sup>76</sup> Azulai, *Shem ha-Gedolim*, pt. 2, 453. (וכונתו לשמים, וה' ברחמי ידינו לכף זכות).

<sup>77</sup> For a discussion and reproduction of the broadside from the National Library of Israel (NLI) collection, see Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi*, 338.

<sup>78</sup> Jacob Emden, *Reshima mi-Hibburei ha-Mefursam ba-Olam beShem ha-Rav Ja'acov Emden ve-Talmidav ha-Nidpasim* (Broadside, NLI Scholem Collection 5385.1 Altona, ca. 1760) [11 (מטפחת)]. על אודות ס"ה ר"מ ותקוניים זקוק' ולצרפם ממוקשי שיבושים שנפלו בהם בסבת מעתיקים בלתי נודעים. והיה [במחשך מעשיהם. בסופו נזכר קצת מענין אייבשציר].



importance. The prayer books are all printed in octavo, probably with portability and ease of use in mind. The works printed in the larger and more respectable (and expensive) folio format are, without exception, scholarly volumes: a gloss on an important halakic code, a commentary on the Mishnah, and Emden's collection of responsa. Seventeen out of the nineteen works listed in the more cheaply produced quarto format are wedding speeches, eulogies, sermons, or polemical pamphlets.<sup>79</sup> The choice of format signifies Emden's view of the latter as more ephemeral than his weightier rabbinic works.

Emden's broadside lists *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* with the other works in quarto format, among the polemical works. Moreover, although Emden's description in the broadside prioritized the scholarly aspect, with the polemics featuring only as an afterthought, the booklet's format and its title page characterize the work as aimed against the Sabbatean groups who sought to draw justification from the *Zohar*. Most of the partially rhymed text on the title page is taken up by vitriolic insults of his opponents that typify Emden's polemics.<sup>80</sup> Those of Emden's contemporaries familiar with his previous works could, at one glance, have classified—and perhaps dismissed—*Mitpaḥat Sefarim* as another of his polemical pamphlets rather than a serious work of scholarship.

In sum, readers have dismissed the work as either insincere criticism in the service of polemics or as a genuine anti-*Zohar* work concealed behind polemics. Emden has been portrayed either as a proto-Enlightenment rationalist or as a mystic who merely decided, as Azulai put it, to attack the *Zohar* as an emergency measure. Yet neither view does Emden full justice. The thoroughness and seriousness of Emden's critique in *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* cannot be understood as “mere apologetics”; as Tishby noted, Emden preempted almost all arguments that modern *Zohar* critics would advance.<sup>81</sup> The true nature of *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*—and of Emden's attitude to the *Zohar*—bears a more nuanced reading. It requires understanding Emden not as a conflicted figure caught between modernity and tradition, but as a full-fledged member of the pivotal period in between—the early modern period.

<sup>79</sup> The *quartos* count: 11 controversy-related pamphlets (not necessarily about Eibeschtütz), 5 speeches, sermons, or eulogies, and *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*. The exceptions are *Zizim u-Ferahin*, an alphabetically-arranged booklet with kabbalistic interpretations based upon a seventeenth-century work and *Ez Avot*, a commentary on the *mishnaic* section *Ethics of the Fathers* (the first book listed under the “quarto” heading). Perhaps this format reflects the subject of the *Ethics of the Fathers* which, while scholarly, is nevertheless lighter and more popular fare than, say, halakic writings. *Zizim u-Ferahin* is likewise said to treat “hints” and numerology (*gematria*), which are more piecemeal, rather than containing a larger kabbalistic commentary or philosophical inquiry (especially given their alphabetical arrangement).

<sup>80</sup> Emden, *Mitpaḥat*, title page.

<sup>81</sup> Tishby, introduction, 42; Huss, *Like the Radiance*, 314–15.

## ■ Emden the Printer

The first edition of *Mitpahat Sefarim* was printed, as its title page announces, “in the home of the author” in Altona (then under the authority of the Danish monarchy). In 1743, Emden sought permission from King Christian VI of Denmark to operate a Hebrew printing press. In requesting a royal privilege, Emden mentions the desire to work “without anybody’s interference.”<sup>82</sup> Despite opposition by local Christian printers, the king granted the privilege. Emden employed an experienced typesetter named Aharon son of Eliyah.<sup>83</sup> In Emden’s autobiography, *Megillat Sefer* (Book-scroll), he mentions acquiring cursive type and commissioning expensive new “square letters” and cantillation and vocalization points in Amsterdam.<sup>84</sup> The first work to come off Emden’s press was his prayer book *Amudei Shamayim* (Heavenly pillars), which he commenced in 1744.<sup>85</sup> From then until a year before his death in 1776, Emden’s press continued with only a single interruption: in 1751, his condemnation of Eibeschütz so aggravated local Jewish leaders that they forcibly closed the press.

During those decades, Emden printed only his own works, rather than the usual fare of Bibles, almanacs, and more popular—and profitable—books usually favored by printing houses. Amid the long series of failed business ventures listed in *Megillat Sefer*, Emden’s press stands out as the one enterprise that he viewed not as an ill-fated attempt at making money, which he tended to describe with some distaste, but as a holy labor blessed by God, which he did not pursue for profit.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Bernhard Brilling, “Die Privilegien der Hebräischen Buchdruckereien in Altona (1726–1836): Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des hebräischen Buchdruckes in Altona,” *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 9 (1971) 153–66. For the formulation of the privilege request, see *ibid.*, 160: “und sich solchergestalt dadurch ohne jemandes Beeinträchtigung ehrlich zu ernahren suchen möge”; and Arthur Arnheim, “Hebrew Prints and Censorship in Altona,” *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 21 (2001) 3–9. Arnheim considers this need for independence to stem from an episode in 1740, when Emden asked for permission to publish a book and was told that he must sign a promise not to criticize local leaders. Emden refused, and postponed the book’s publication.

<sup>83</sup> Bernhard Friedberg, *History of Hebrew Typography of the Following Cities in Central Europe: Altona, Augsburg, Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt M., Frankfurt O., Fürth, Hamburg [and Others] from Its Beginning in the Year 1513* (Antwerp, 1935) 76–77; Moritz Steinschneider, “Hebräische Drucke in Deutschland (Fortsetzung) 5. Altona,” *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland 1* (Braunschweig, 1887) 281–82.

<sup>84</sup> Jacob Emden, *Megillat Sefer* (Warsaw, 1896) 167.

<sup>85</sup> Schacter, *Emden*, 256, 305; vol. 1 was completed in 1746, vol. 2 in 1747.

<sup>86</sup> For examples of his (mostly failed) ventures in trade and lending, see Emden, *Megillat Sefer*, 71–77, 56–84, 94, 104, 147–48, 157, 166, 181. By contrast, see, for instance, *ibid.*, 174–75. After summarizing yet another failed venture with the hope that God will repay his loss (המקום ימלא חסרוני), Emden continues: “Despite this, I did not retreat from the *mitzvah* (good deed/commandment) that I commenced, and I did not abandon the labor of the Lord, as long as I still had money in my possession to spend on the labor of print . . . I did not hold back even for a moment from teaching Torah to the People of Israel, in this way that benefits those near and far”—by which he means print. He then lists the work that he printed already and how he quickly moved to print ever more writings (עניינך ידי משכתי ידי ממצוה שהתחלתי בה, ולא עזבתי מלאכת ה', כל זמן שהיו בידי מעות להוציא [על] מלאכת הדפוס . . . לא מנעתי עצמי שעה אחת מלהרביץ תורה בישראל, בדרך זו שיוכח בה קרובים ורחוקים, ותיכף אחר

Emden considered print a divine tool for spreading truth and a valuable weapon in his anti-Sabbatean arsenal. He referred to printing as sacred labor and interpreted the successes of his press as signs of divine approval.<sup>87</sup> Emden regarded his role as a printer as an extension of his rabbinic and scholarly role.

Emden's role as a printer aids our understanding of *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* in another way. Historians have remarked upon the importance of print for establishing the credibility and cultural capital of the *Zohar*.<sup>88</sup> Beyond broad dissemination, the very process of publishing a work in print rather than manuscript—especially a work as fragmented and heterogeneous as the *Zohar*—has effects more far-reaching than simply the technical ability to copy texts more efficiently. Printing shapes the basic awareness of what makes a book, what it means to say that a book is authentic or a forgery, and what authorship implies—a notion that consumers of printed books take more literally than those familiar with the world of manuscripts and the mechanics of preparing manuscripts for print. As both a printer and an editor, roles that often intersected in the early modern period, Emden was keenly aware of these processes. In *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*, he draws on this knowledge in order to criticize the *Zohar*'s origins while upholding its sanctity.

Emden's critiques in *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* often attack the *Zohar* from the perspective of copyists' errors and printers' mistakes. Emden employs the well-used "erring copyist" trope in a very particular way. He opens his work by explaining that he "will organize [his] irrefutable proofs before everyone who knows the ways of books and the law of compositions."<sup>89</sup> In the process, Emden explicitly links the *Zohar*'s errors to the printed book: "in this book *that is in print*, there is wheat and chaff mixed together."<sup>90</sup> The title page draws attention to the transmission of the copyists: the work will inquire "whether those who shook it (who emptied it from one vessel into another) were careful to refrain from the sin of addition and subtraction."<sup>91</sup> The broadside describes *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* as a work "concerning the book of the *Zohar* . . . to purify it and refine it from the pitfalls and errors that have fallen within them *due to unknown copyists*."<sup>92</sup> Emden refers throughout to "hands of erring copyists" that inserted various mistakes. On encountering a word that clearly does not belong in a certain sentence, Emden explains that "the printer did not understand, and inserted everything inside, within the language[/statement]

. . . (גמר הסדר תפלה שנת תק"ח, התחלתי במלאכה הצריכה אחריה . . .)

<sup>87</sup> On the Emden-Eibeschütz controversy, print, and newspapers, see Pawel Maciejko, "The Jews' Entry into the Public Sphere: The Emden-Eibeschütz Controversy Reconsidered," *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 6 (2007) 135–54.

<sup>88</sup> Huss, *Like the Radiance*, 127–134. Huss's book studies the way in which Rabbi Shimon is positioned as an alternative source of authority to Moses and the processes by which the *Zohar* accrued legitimacy, using Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. See also Abrams, "Zohar."

<sup>89</sup> Emden, *Mitpaḥat*, 3a (ואערנך ראייתי העצומות לפני כל יודעי דת הספרים ודין החיבורים).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 5a (emphasis added) (אך יש בספר הלז שבדפוס, בר ותבן מעורב בו).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, title page (ואם נשמרו המנערים (ומוריקים אותו מכלי אל כלי) אך מאשם תוספת ומגרעת. או אם הלז) (בו ידי מעתיק שוגג).

<sup>92</sup> See n. 78 (emphasis added).

of the *Zohar*.<sup>93</sup> Rather than cast aspersions on the text itself, he often blames printers and copyists as the culprits for the *Zohar*'s problematic nature.<sup>94</sup>

Before the *Zohar* was printed, kabbalists did not regard it as a unified book. Daniel Abrams and Boaz Huss have shown that amorphous clusters of kabbalistic ideas vaguely related to Rabbi Shimon evolved into zoharic texts attributed to the *tanna*; only much later did these texts coalesce into “the book of the *Zohar*,” said to be authored verbatim by Rabbi Shimon. Thus, the idea of Rabbi Shimon as the author of the *Zohar* evolved in tandem with the idea of the *Zohar* as a book. Once printed, the *Zohar* looked like an unproblematic, unified text, especially to readers unfamiliar with the realities of printing from manuscripts. This false impression only increased as time went on; readers forgot its origins and came to think of the *Zohar* as a printed work, not a manuscript collection that had been recently assembled and printed.

In 1558, the *Zohar* was printed in two editions, in Cremona and Mantua. While earlier manuscript collections varied widely, the editors in both cities consciously created almost identical printed editions.<sup>95</sup> The Mantua edition contains the following comment before a section titled *Zohar Ruth*:

So said the editors, from the language [of this passage] it is clear that this is not from the book of the *Zohar* . . . and those who wanted to be clever and praise themselves said it was authentic . . . for they did not know and did not understand how to arrange language properly . . . and we would

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 9a (§43) (והמדפיס לא הבין והכניס הכל בפנים תוך לשון הזהר). See also *ibid.*, 9b: “it seems that the mistake originated here, and those who added to the *Zohar* switched it, and with good intentions they exchanged the wrong for the right.” Ibid., 9b (§58): “who would not be shocked at this [mistake, contradiction of Talmud] . . . there is no doubt that a mistaken student wrote this” (מי לא ישתומם על זה, הלא אין ספק שתלמיד טועה כתב זה). Ibid., 11a (§86): “and it seems to me that the copier exchanged the words.” (נ”ל שנחלף לו למעתיק הלשון בכתוב). Ibid., 17a (§2): “In any case, he has mixed in many of his own things also within the body of the book of the *Zohar*, bitter weeds and twisted *novellae* have also doubtlessly been brought forth in it, and we do not know who is their inventor, whether they were added by copyists or as a mistake.” ועכ”פ הוא ערבב הרבה דברים משלו גם בתוך גוף ספר הזהר גם עלו בו עשבים מרים וחדושים משובשים בלי ספק ולא ידענא מנו הממציא אם נוספו ע”י סופרים מעתיקים (או היו כשגגה שיוצא מתחת יד השליט. Ibid., 11b (§111): “a remark and addition from a ‘heart-less’ [unintelligent] copyist.” (הגהה ותוספת ממעתיק חסר לב). Ibid., 12b: “this is a scribal error” (הוא.

<sup>94</sup> The erring printer is a general trope almost as soon as print started and is similar to the trope of the erring scribe in the case of manuscript copies. Apart from reflecting a plausible realistic scenario, this was also a useful mechanism for dealing with problematic elements of a text without having to dismantle the text as a whole or casting aspersions on the author. See, for instance, Brian Richardson, *Print Culture in Renaissance Italy: The Editor and the Vernacular Text, 1470–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Ann Blair, “Erasmus and His Amanuenses,” *Erasmus Studies* 39 (2019) 34–38.

<sup>95</sup> While the consensus seems to be that the Mantua edition was preferable, Daniel Abrams has pointed out that the Mantua edition exhibits a heavier hand in forcibly creating a smooth, unified edition, whereas Cremona more faithfully reflects earlier, more fluid, textual traditions surrounding the *Zohar*. See Daniel Abrams, “The Printing of the *Zohar* in Mantua: The Self-Awareness of the Printers in Producing a Standardized Text,” conference paper posted online: <https://beithazohar.com/the-printing-of-the-zohar-in-mantua/?lang=en>.

already have omitted it, for we have not found it in the copy that came from Safed . . . however, to prevent them from aggrandizing themselves at our expense, saying that our work is lacking, we printed it “as is” [meaning, without omitting the questionable sections] and we do not have the power to correct that which they ruined.<sup>96</sup>

Due to this rivalry, both editions were printed to be as inclusive, and therefore as similar, as possible. This despite the fact that the Mantua editors were certain that this section was not part of the *Zohar*. They based this insight both on linguistic considerations and on the fact that the passages did not appear in the oldest manuscript copy that they consulted, a manuscript from Safed which they held in particular esteem.<sup>97</sup> The similarity of the editions compounded the perception of the readers of both editions that this printed book represented the “original” *Zohar*—after all, the work was now one unit, with a title and an author. This notion, tenuous at first, solidified as the book was printed and reprinted, and as translations, summaries, commentaries, and abridgments all treated the *Zohar* as a book authored by Rabbi Shimon.

The notion of a book as a defined and unified work, rather than a loose and varied collection of excerpts, evokes a much stricter idea of authorship. A loose collection of excerpts that vary from copy to copy seems intuitively closer to traditions that were transmitted orally and occasionally written down by various individuals, but not necessarily written by one author. The more defined, stable, and unified a book, the more one tends to imagine it as having been authored by one person at one point in time and transmitted by means of complete and accurate copies. Printing a book from a fragmented manuscript tradition requires editing, selecting fragments, determining the book’s boundaries, and stabilizing its contents. These actions, in addition to the fact that printing disseminates so many (near) identical copies of the work, have the power to perform a major leap in presenting pieces of writing as a book in this stronger sense. This leap is even greater for a work like the *Zohar*, which had not circulated as a unified book prior to being printed. The editors set out actively to collect textual excerpts, creating what became known as the book of the *Zohar*.

<sup>96</sup> *Zohar Vayehi* (Mantua, 1558) 211b (מתוך) נכר שאינו מספי הזהר והאור נכר מתוך) 211b . . . והמתחכמים להתהלל שנו שפת אמת . . . כי לא ידעו ולא הבינו לעשות הלשון על מתכנתו והנה יהיה בעיני כל מעיין כדברי הספר החתום וכבר היינו משמיטין אותו כי בהעתקה שבא (!) מצפת תובי”ב לא מצאנו אותו . . . אלא (מפני הרואים שלא יתפארו עלינו לאמר כי מלאכתנו חסרה, הדפסנו אותו כאשר הו’. ואין כח בידינו לתקן את אשר עותו. For more on the competing editions, on editorial remarks in the Mantua edition such as this one, and on substantial differences within the Mantua edition from one copy to another, see Abrams, “The Printing.”

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, introduction (n.p.): “In addition to the other copies which are spread throughout the province of Italy. Yet our minds did not rest before we found another, very old copy, that came from Safed [may it be rebuilt speedily, in our days], and usually we relied on that one and we purified and studied its language as one would purify gold to fix our edition” (נוסף על יתר ההעתקות המפורזות) “בכל זאת לא נחה דעתנו עד שמצאנו העתקה אחרת ישנה באה מצפית תובי”ב ורבו עליה דידיה סמכנו בכל גליל אטליאה. בכל זאת לא נחה דעתנו עד שמצאנו העתקה אחרת ישנה באה מצפית תובי”ב ורבו עליה דידיה סמכנו (וצרפנו ובחננו הלשון כבחון את הזהב לתקן הגרס’).

A printed book also establishes a markedly different relationship between book and text. Consumers of printed books take the notion that a book is “written by” a certain author more literally than those familiar with the mechanics of preparing a manuscript for print. Anyone familiar with scribal copying was cognizant of scribal error, the fragility of authorship, and the inevitable fluidity of manuscripts, but only those who entered a print shop would be fully aware of the extent to which the book is no less an imperfect product. The printing of the *Zohar* solidified the notion that the work was authored, and not merely inspired, by Rabbi Shimon—not least by promoting the notion that the *Zohar* was a book in the first place. The *Zohar* born on the presses in Mantua and Cremona reinforced both that the *Zohar* was a book and that Rabbi Shimon was the author in its simplistic sense, thus establishing the authority of all of its contents in an undifferentiated manner.

Emden was acutely familiar with the mechanics of print, especially with regard to first editions of ancient writings that had hitherto circulated only in excerpts, as was the case for so many of the early modern works that humanists studied. Angelo Poliziano (d. 1494) was one of the earliest proponents of using scholarly methods to analyze and recover the original ancient texts behind the corrupted manuscript copies. The Italian printer Aldus Manutius (d. 1515) introduced such ideas to the print shop by collecting various manuscripts and comparing them, so as to prepare printed works that were, as he claimed, more faithful to the ancient original than corrupted medieval manuscript copies.<sup>98</sup> As Yakov Mayer has recently shown, Venetian printers of Jewish books, such as the editors of Daniel Bomberg’s Hebrew press, shared similar attitudes.<sup>99</sup> Elchanan Reiner has pointed out that the textual criticism pervading Manutius’s printerly enterprise and reflected among Bomberg’s editors formed the roots of a critical approach to traditional Jewish texts that historians would later (mistakenly) identify as modern and *maskilic*.<sup>100</sup> These early modern printing presses were preoccupied with fashioning an ancient book where none had existed before. We can thus say that the sixteenth-century editors and printers of the *Zohar* were the forgers of the book, in the sense of “forging” that implies both the making of the book and the sense of unity and authorship accompanying it.

Emden’s awareness of what took place behind the scenes of a print shop allowed him to critique the *Zohar* while preserving its sanctity. Concerning the earlier reception of the *Zohar* at the time of its first printing, he wrote: “For in the time when the *Zohar* was printed for the first time, prosecutors stood up against it, to argue and say, who knows who is its author, and who is the master of the book

<sup>98</sup> Anthony Grafton, “On the Scholarship of Politian and Its Context,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 40 (1977) 150–88; Martin Lowry, *The World of Aldus Manutius: Business and Scholarship in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).

<sup>99</sup> Yakov Z. Mayer, “From Manuscript Culture to Print Culture: The 1523 Venice Edition of the Palestinian Talmud” (PhD diss., Tel-Aviv University, 2018) 38–112.

<sup>100</sup> Elchanan Reiner, “Beyond the Realm of the Haskalah: Changing Learning Patterns in Jewish Traditional Society,” *Jahrbuch des Simon Dubnow Instituts* 6 (2007) 123–33, at 130.

of the *Zohar* that we must worship him?!<sup>101</sup> By the time Emden wrote *Mitpahaṭ Sefarim*, however, the *Zohar* had for centuries been treated as a book. Its readers had become unaware of the vagaries of copying and the active role of editors in creating editions of ancient texts for publication. As printing became cheaper and more ubiquitous, books were taken for granted, and readers simply assumed that books authentically represent the texts they embody. They assumed that if there is a “book of the *Zohar*,” it must have existed in this form, and been transmitted in this manner, ever since Rabbi Shimon committed it to paper. In his many comments mentioning printers and copyists, Emden highlights the process of creating the physical object of the printed book, as though he wished to remind his readers that books are highly imperfect creations.

Some have depicted the distinction between text and book as “platonic,”<sup>102</sup> the book representing the body to the text’s soul, the imperfect physical existence to the text’s pure idealist essence. Emden seems to be making a similar distinction when he writes that “the essence of the *Zohar* is pure . . . but in this book that is in print, there is wheat and chaff mixed together.”<sup>103</sup> By differentiating text from book, Emden was able to fulfill the nuanced tendencies of his attitude toward the *Zohar*. On the one hand, he affirmed that the wisdom of the *Zohar* emanated in some way or another from Rabbi Shimon’s teachings. On the other hand, he was disturbed by its more problematic and erroneous contents, as well as its role in legitimizing heresies. By destabilizing the *Zohar* as a book—by attacking the work (in practice) while maintaining its sanctity (in theory)—he could critique its text and question its authorship without entirely dismantling its authority. By blaming the printed work, Emden could neutralize passages that struck him as dangerous (such as passages contradicting the Talmud) by explaining that “their interpretation is unnecessary, and they exaggerated to ascribe to the *Zohar* something it never intended.”<sup>104</sup>

Emden had been preparing his own edition of the *Zohar* for publication, complete with corrections and emendations. Towards the end of *Mitpahaṭ Sefarim*, he indicates his plans to “publish also glosses and emendations with some commentary on the book of the *Zohar*.”<sup>105</sup> Vice versa, in the manuscript notes for that work (which he did not ultimately print) there are frequent references to *Mitpahaṭ Sefarim*. The reciprocity indicates that the intellectual activity behind both works—sharp criticism and sincere commentary—were one and the same. We cannot help but wonder about the format Emden would have used for printing his *Zohar*. Would

<sup>101</sup> Emden, *Mitpahaṭ*, 12–13 [5a] (שבזמן שהוא שיצא לדפוס בראשונה ספר זה עמדו כנגדו מקטרגים לטעון) (כנגדו ולומר מי יודע מנו המחבר ומי בעל ספר הזוהר כי נעבדנו).

<sup>102</sup> David Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 117.

<sup>103</sup> Emden, *Mitpahaṭ*, 5a (אך יש בספר הלו שבדפוס, בר ותבן מעורב בו).

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 33 (§63) [10a], סותר לתלמוד . . . אמנם לדעתי אין הכרח להבנתם והפריזו על המדה לייחס לספר, (Ibid., 34 (§66) [10a]: “and he has falsified/forged the Torah of our mothers, to ascribe a mistake to Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, God forbid, this is a humiliation for us” (ווייף תורת אמנו ולתלות בוקי סריקי ברשב”י ח”ו הלא הרפה הוא לנו).

<sup>105</sup> Emden, *Mitpahaṭ*, 42a (אוציא לאור עולם גם הגהות ותיקונים עם קצת פירוש בספר הזוהר).



it have been printed in folio, the scholarly tome to *Mitpahat Sefarim*'s polemical pamphlet? Whatever the answer, the polemical and the scholarly aspects were clearly fueled by the same conceptualization. Emden could conceive of the *book* of the *Zohar* as an imperfect material representation of the true and elusive *text*. He could attribute problematic elements to the erroneous scribes, copyists, and printers involved in its transmission, while the ideal text remained pristine and unblemished.

### ■ Conclusion: Emden as an Early Modern Scholar

How could the very author who wrote arguably the most penetrating critique of the *Zohar* at the same time enthusiastically endorse that work's mystical ideas? Viewing Emden as an early modern humanist printer can help.

As I have suggested here, Emden has too often been portrayed as either premodern or modern, either an enthusiastic mystic or an antimystical critic. Yet any attempt to peg Emden as a rationalist critic of kabbalah soon runs aground on contradictory evidence. As a result, some dismissed Emden's criticism as insincere or merely polemical. In this interpretation, Emden was required to sacrifice the *Zohar* in order to fight heterodoxy, even though he was not in the least convinced of the *Zohar*'s falsehood. If his reception history is to be believed, the options are limited: Emden is either a serious critic who pays lip service to the sanctity of the *Zohar*, an insincere critic who merely attacked the work for polemical reasons, or a torn soul.

Historians, too, have struggled to place Emden. Some describe him as only half-belonging to the modern era.<sup>106</sup> Shmuel Feiner disagrees with the characterization of Emden as a precursor of the *Haskalah*, as Wolf and other *maskilim* understood him—instead, he suggests the term “early *maskil*” (a Jewish equivalent of *Frühaufklärung*). This explanation encourages a more nuanced understanding of the *Haskalah*, the purpose of Feiner's study. However, the portrayal of Emden remains a disunified and uncertain accumulation of traits, part modern, part traditional. Emden is still portrayed as torn between tradition and Enlightenment, someone who “suppressed his desire for enlightenment,” ashamed of his attraction to the new ideas, rather than receiving a unified depiction.<sup>107</sup> To truly understand Emden in all his complexity, he has to be placed firmly in the early modern period. The past decades have seen increasing recognition of the intellectual and cultural richness of the early modern period as a separate period in its own right. Jewish history has gradually adopted this frame, with promising results.<sup>108</sup> It is only by understanding rabbinic history from this time period as equally part of the early

<sup>106</sup> Dotan, “Emden.”

<sup>107</sup> Feiner, *Jewish Enlightenment*, 32–33.

<sup>108</sup> The work that best summarizes and analyzes the findings of the many specific studies carried out in the first decades of this field is David Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

modern world that we can accurately appreciate figures such as Emden with the appropriate nuance and specificity.<sup>109</sup>

If we firmly place Emden in his “early modern” context, we can make sense of his particular combination of sensibilities and can see him not as an outlier, a “precursor” of the Enlightenment, or a medieval figure who still believed in mystical ideas, but as a humanist critic and printer, not unlike Manutius or Poliziano. Early modern humanist scholars and printers considered manuscripts and different editions of books, and used their knowledge of ancient languages, history, geography and chronology to determine the best edition for a text’s publication. Emden, not unlike these humanists, drew upon linguistic and philological learning, historical awareness, geographical knowledge, and context from other manuscripts and printed books, bringing these to bear upon the text he was printing.<sup>110</sup>

Convinced of the *Zohar*’s authenticity and sanctity, Emden was simultaneously all too aware of the corruption of the work and the dangers it posed. Placing Emden in the context of early modern humanist scholarship and publishing helps us understand how he dismantles the *Zohar*’s authority in precisely the manner required by his complex beliefs. Viewing him as an early modern printer sheds light on elements of Emden’s stance—and his reception history—that at first glance appear contradictory. For early modern scholars, a combination of historical criticism and reverence was unproblematic. Modern historians, by contrast, often assume that a critical attitude to sources from the past implies dismantling their sanctity in order to view them objectively. Nineteenth-century scholars of German scientific historical study, or *Wissenschaft*, propagated the idea that textual criticism and philology are modern products of objective scientific inquiry and could thus not have been held by premodern scholars. These positivist scholars believed that history must be studied objectively, like a science, free of ideology or personal opinion. Even in our day, historians consider critiquing texts from a historical perspective as fundamentally different from earlier scholarship. Anthony Grafton observes:

The higher criticism, the form of criticism that identifies works as authentic or inauthentic, has seemed a modern German specialty, and even a German invention . . . impl[y]ing that the criticism now practiced differs fundamentally from that known before the last centuries. He [Speyer] suggests that criticism has become in modern times an objective study applied to all sources; criticism in antiquity was a subjective study applied to sources one wished to attack. The one forms part of philology, the other part of rhetoric;

<sup>109</sup> Maoz Kahana’s recent book on religion and science in 18th-cent. rabbinic writing is an example of the value of such an approach and confirms this article’s thesis about the need to reevaluate Emden from an early modern perspective. Kahana’s attention to the importance of alchemy in the world of early modern science provides an original framework for Emden’s textual criticism as a form of “philological alchemy.” See Kahana, *Heartless Chicken*, esp. 236–254. It briefly mentions humanism and Emden’s exposure to philology; see *ibid.*, 238 n.70.

<sup>110</sup> For instances of linguistic and historical knowledge, as well as information from other manuscripts and printed books, see nn. 30–34, above. One example of geography is his discussion of where the azure color of the ritual fringes can be found; see *Mitpaḥat* 9a.

the one takes an impartial and exhaustive approach, the other a subjective and erratic one.<sup>111</sup>

Long before *Wissenschaft*, as Grafton has shown, early modern scholars engaged in inquiries not altogether different from those of modern historians: “If one goes back through the dark forests of early modern learning . . . one discovers that many of the apparently innovative and apparently sophisticated debates over the nature and authorship of forged and pseudepigraphical texts actually reenacted scripts already written.”<sup>112</sup> Emden’s inquiries into the authenticity of the *Zohar* can be numbered among these scripts.

However, as Grafton remarks, these earlier generations of critics “were more modest than their own later historians. . . . They saw themselves as practicing a traditional, not a novel, art.”<sup>113</sup> Modern scholars have tended to interpret Emden’s work through the lens of nineteenth-century historicism as a work of objective criticism that punctured the halo of a revered work. Yet on his own terms, Emden viewed his enterprise not as an irreverent critique, but as a traditional work of textual scholarship.

If *Wissenschaftler* saw themselves as objective scientists, humanist scholars admitted their subjective opinions and believed that this very subjectivity, far from deterring scholarship, could in fact nourish it. In the context of early modern textual criticism, the partiality of polemics and the objectivity of criticism need not be opposed. “The earlier critics,” Grafton concludes, “were both, in a sense, doing only what came naturally: attacking a text that contained not only technical flaws that irritated their sensibilities but also heresies that offended their deepest convictions . . . they assumed these principles, which in turn both inspired and shaped their attacks on texts that violated them.”<sup>114</sup> Before “proper” historical criticism was understood, by definition, to require the exclusion of religious and philosophical ideas, humanists saw no problem with mixing religious opinions and sectarian polemics with critical historical inquiry. On the contrary, they often served as complementary parts of a single enterprise.

A historian once described Emden as awkwardly positioned between the Middle Ages and the modern period: “one of his feet is placed in the past and his other foot is thrust forward.”<sup>115</sup> Since the writing of that article, however, a more complex

<sup>111</sup> Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 70–71. “He” refers to Wolfgang Speyer, who wrote *Die literarische Fälschung im Heidenischen und Christlichen Altertum* (Munich: Beck, 1971).

<sup>112</sup> Grafton, *Forgers*, 71. See also, Jay R. Berkovitz, “Rabbinic Antecedents and Parallels to *Wissenschaft des Judentums*,” in *Jewish Historiography Between Past and Future: 200 Years of Wissenschaft des Judentums* (ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, Rachel Livneh-Freudenthal and Guy Miron; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019) 8–24, assumes a similar bifurcation between critical thought and pre-modern approaches for Jewish scholars.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>115</sup> Dotan, “Emden,” 121–23.

picture of this period between medieval and modern times has freed us of the necessity of classifying him either as a critic whose exoteric polemics concealed esoteric doubts about mysticism, or, conversely, a mystic merely pretending to critique a sacred book. Nor are we required to dismiss him as a “split personality.” Rather, as an early modern scholar with both a critical sensibility and sensitivity for anachronism, Emden was informed by a consciousness of the dynamics of print and was moved by inclinations both scholarly and polemical. Historical context was crucial for scholars in the early modern period. It also helps us, in our present day, to understand these scholars in their full complexity.