10 Great Texts: 
Introduction to Divrei shalom v’emet (1782) 
by Naphtali Herz Wessely

Carole B. Balin, New York

Why this text?

Over the course of roughly a decade – from 1986 to 1997 – I attended two radically different graduate programs in succession: first, HUC-JIR’s Rabbinical School and then, immediately following, a doctoral program in history at Columbia University. After 11 years of training, I found myself as if situated in the overlapping area of a Venn diagram. While the pair of disparate spheres shares the goal of educating those seeking Jewish knowledge, each does so with various means and, ultimately, to various ends.

Of course, all alumni of the College know that HUC-JIR, like the movement that spawned it, is founded upon and devoted to critical approaches to the text (known in scholarly circles as Wissenschaft des Judentums, or the scientific study of Judaism). At the College, we teach students to incorporate the critical hermeneutics of scholarship, which came to us by way of the gentile, “outside” world of nineteenth-century pre-state Germany (i.e. Prussia), into the “inside” study of sources derived from centuries of internal discussion and thought among Jews, who likely perceived themselves as acting apart from the larger society. As every modern Jewish seminary from the nineteenth century onward, HUC-JIR requires matriculating students to have in hand an undergraduate degree. Yet, experience tells us that the College functions quite differently from a secular university. We are, after all, a seminary, and our work is to instill values while looking critically at the tradition. We balance ever so precariously on the edges of reason and faith. Not so Columbia.

Indeed, in the early 1990s, when as a newly-ordained rabbi who happened also to be a lowly-grad student, I was required to teach an undergraduate lecture on Martin Buber at a secular university, I felt, well, ill at ease. How does a rabbi negotiate the shoals of belief and unbelief in an academic setting that does not allow, and shouldn’t allow, proselytizing, let alone in-class conversations about personal faith? How does one teach Buber without personalizing his theology? The challenge confounded me, and when I spoke to my advisor about it, he, who had spent his professional life in academe, had no idea what I was asking. All those years of study had not prepared me for that challenge. In fact, the fact that I had had all those years of study was the very factor that triggered the problem. I was trained to be a rabbi, but educated to be a scholar. Could the two co-exist? Thankfully, as a member of the faculty of HUC-JIR, I am permitted and called upon to do both. But I continue to grapple, as do all of us, with the question of “what characterizes an educated Jew?”
Ironically, it was during a seminar at Columbia that I first became acquainted with an eighteenth-century text whose author responded to this very question. It is this text – *Divrei Shalom v’Emet* by Naphtali Herz Wessley – that I regard as a “Great Jewish Text.” Indeed, the issues it raises are timeless, impelling us in our own day to question our assumptions and approaches to educating Jews.

**Background to the Text**

In 1782, Naphtali Herz Wessely (pronounced Veseli in German and Visel in Hebrew) wrote, in effect, a blueprint for Jewish education in a document known as “Divrei shalom v’emet (Words of Peace and Truth).” Wessely crafted this open letter to every Jewish community in the Habsburg Empire in response to an edict issued on October 19, 1781 by Joseph II (1741-1790) known as the *Toleranzpatent* (Edict of Tolerance) [see READINGS].

Joseph II, the Holy Roman Emperor who ruled over the Habsburg Empire (Austrio-Hungary), fancied himself an enlightened ruler and sought to create consistent standards for his subjects in the hopes of breaking down local authority and equalizing populations whose increased productivity could be a valuable asset to his coffers. (For a snapshot of the historical milieu: think of the movie “Amadeus,” which accurately depicts the creation of official music in the Habsburg Empire via the services of court musician Amadeus Mozart.) Historians view the *Toleranzpatent* as the first guarantee of basic religious freedom, aimed as it was at non-Catholics in the empire. Issued largely for the sake of Protestants and Greek-Orthodox Christians, it stated as well that “We almost place the Jewish nation on an equal level with adherents of other religious associations in respect to trade and employment of civil and domestic facilities.” Indeed, with social and economic integration as its objective, it allowed Jews to send their children to public schools (Joseph’s mother, Empress Maria Theresa, had introduced compulsory education) and universities (despite inaccurate Jewish selective/collective memories to the contrary), and participate in all crafts and agriculture. In exchange, Joseph II outlawed the use of Hebrew and Yiddish in communal records of the Jews, abolished rabbinical juridical autonomy (1784), made Jews liable for military service (1787) and obliged them to adopt German-sounding personal and family names (1788).

Naphtali Herz Wessely (1725-1805) greeted the Emperor’s Edict with gusto. A contemporary of Moses Mendelssohn and a participant with the former in translating the Hebrew Bible into German (known as the *Biur*), Wessely was a new kind of Jewish intellectual: a *maskil*. Born in Hamburg and raised in Copenhagen, he was accustomed to bourgeois standards of living that connoted not only financial stature but a respectability borne of education (*Bildung*, in German) that enabled any man to rise through the ranks of society by dint of his usefulness to the commonweal. *Bildung* for Wessely and his ilk signified a standard of humanity: the development of character, the establishment of morality and the creation of culture. He, and other *maskilim* like him, undertook to demonstrate that under proper pedagogical conditions the Jews could indeed be educated to be men, which in turn would make them suited for the Emancipation that was in the offing.
Within months of the promulgation of the Toleranzpatent, Wessely drafted a letter addressed to every Jewish community in the Habsburg Empire essentially championing the Emperor’s call for educational reform among the Jews. Regarded today as a manifesto of the early Haskalah and one of the first works of modern Hebrew literature, Divrei Shalom ve’Emet evinces the maskil’s rejection of the ideal of the talmid hacham in favor of a new formulation of the ideal man based on standards instead set by the West European Enlightenment. At the heart of the text is Wessely’s assertion of two distinct realms of knowledge: the particular and religious, or torat adonai (“teaching of God”) and the universal “torat ha-adam” (“teaching of man”). The valence that Wessely ascribes to each realm of knowledge gave rise to a controversy in his own day and persists to this day to needle those responsible for educating Jews.

The Document’s Relevance for Today
While not every historical document is necessarily studied for its application to contemporary circumstances, Divrei Shalom ve’Emet has particular relevance for today. I hope it will lead to asking broad questions that challenge basic assumptions, such as:

- What do Jews mean when they say that they “know” something?
- Which body of “knowledge” makes a Jew “in the know”?
- By which criteria is something defined as knowledge in the Jewish tradition? Are these criteria different for Jewish teachers (rabbis, cantors, educators) than their students (laypeople)?
- What makes something specifically “Jewish” knowledge? Is it the language in which it is expressed? its sacred quality? merely the origins of its author?
- How do we define the Jewish intellectual (talmid hacham, sage, rebbe, maskil, scholar)? What is his or her source of authority?
- And, of course, Wessely’s ground-breaking but persistent question: What is the relationship between torat adonai and torat ha-adam? Or, as articulated in “A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism” (1999): How can we educate Jews “to bring faith to [tradition] without sacrificing [the dictates of] critical scholarship?”
Specific Questions to Contemplate in Hevruta

While we will attempt during our group phone call to tackle some of the hard questions posed above, as you study this text in hevruta, please consider the following specific details that emerge from the document at hand:

- What does the title of this document have to do with its content?
- Who is Wessely’s audience? How do you know?
- How does Wessely characterize torat ha’adam and torat elohim?
- What hermeneutic does Wessely employ in the text? Is that surprising to you in any way?
- Do you agree with the valence Wessely gives to each sphere of knowledge?
- How is knowledge socially defined and conditioned by the historical circumstances of 18th-century Austrio-Hungary?
- What was the response to Wessely in his own day? [see additional readings]
- How do the social circumstances in which we Jews find ourselves in 21st-century America define and condition our own approach to Jewish education?
- How do our most successful day schools educate Jewish youth? How do our most successful religious schools educate Jewish youth?
- Who is an educated Jew today? What is his or her knowledge base?

READINGS (all will be provided on the course site during particular weeks):

Primary Sources
- Divrei shalom v’emet, Naphtali Herz Wessley, 1782, from an 1826 edition of Vienna, transcribed from Rashi script to ivrit merubbah
- Words of Peace and Truth, excerpted English translation of Divrei shalom v’emet, in Jew in the Modern World, eds. Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz
- Toleranzpatent [Edict of Tolerance], promulgated by Joseph II (1782), excerpted English translation from Jew in the Modern World
- Responses to Wessely, in JMW (2 texts following Divrei)

Secondary Sources
- EJ on Haskalah
- Paula E. Hyman, “Who is an Educated Jew?” Sh’ma (February 2002)