In 1748/49, Isaac Wetzlar of Celle in Northern Germany completed *Libes Briv* (Love Letter), a Yiddish proposal for the improvement of Jewish society. Upon addressing his Jewish brothers and sisters with scathing ethical and religious criticism, Wetzlar articulates an urgent call for spiritual and social renewal by outlining a concrete, pragmatic proposal for a reform of Jewish education. Scholars have typically read this work in the context of Jewish ethical literature and as a document from the Early Haskalah. The presentation examines German Pietism and especially the Pietist mission as a previously unexplored, third major point of reference that can inform a more nuanced historical classification of this and similar works. I argue that German Pietism should be considered a significant factor for the question of change and continuity in the Jewish communities of the early eighteenth century.

In order to initiate exploration of the complex relationship between Central European Judaism and eighteenth-century Pietism selected sources are discussed that concentrate on the links between *Libes briv* and the contours of German Pietism. These sources demonstrate that Isaac Wetzlar’s *Love Letter* (edited and translated into English by M. Faierstein) substantially engages the concepts and initiatives encompassed by Pietist missionary efforts to Jews. The diaries of two travelling missionaries from the Institutum Judaicum in Halle who came to Celle several times in the 1730s as part of their quest to convert Jews document that Wetzlar engaged in theological discussions with at least one of them (cf. presentation by A. Siluk, source 1, “Travelling Journal of Johann Georg Widmann, 1732”). The missionaries’ diaries, housed today in the Archives of the Francke Foundation in Halle, also prove that Wetzlar owned and read several of the Pietist publications that were authored in Yiddish for a Jewish audience and distributed to Jews by missionaries. Among them were two commonly issued treatises by the Gotha pastor Johann Müller, *Mikhtav Ahavah* (1703, 1732 etc.; see source 1, “Diary of Johann Andreas Manitus, 1731“) and *Or le-Et Erev/Likht kegn Ovdzayt* (1728, 1731 etc.). Müller’s writings made a
lasting impression on the future author of *Libes briv* as its reading on the backdrop of Müller’s theological concepts shows. Müller’s major line of argument is the same in the two mentioned works as well as in his so-called „Minor Epistle“ (Kleines Sendschreiben, 1729). While the Yiddish original is lost, source 2 presents an unknown English translation by a certain Mr. Martini, enclosed with Manitius’s diary of March 28, 1735.

The sources introduce Isaak Wetzlar’s *Love Letter* as a calculated response to the challenge posed by Pietist missionaries and Christian critiques of Jewish life: Wetzlar’s call for religious and social renewal seems to compete with contemporaneous Christian Pietists over the preferable vision for eighteenth-century Central European Jewry.

Reading Isaak Wetzlar’s *Love Letter* as a product of Jewish-Pietist interaction and entanglement suggests that the quest for genuine piety represented a vital, hitherto largely unrecognized arena of Jewish-Christian encounter. Comparative analyses of *Libes Briv* and similar Jewish proposals for reform against the backdrop of Pietism have the potential to deepen our overall understanding of early eighteenth-century Jewish notions of change, religious renewal and social reform in a century when change and modernization were being promoted in both societies.

Select Bibliography


*Jewish History Quarterly* 4 (2006), Special Issue.


Striking a Pietist Chord: Isaac Wetzlar’s Proposal for the Improvement of Jewish Society
Rebekka Voß, Goethe University

*Diary of Johann Andreas Manitius about his stay in Danzig, his journey to Königsberg and Pomerania as well as to Franconia and Hesse* (November 12, 1731)

Archives of the Francke Foundation, Halle, box 52 (AFSt/H K 52)

Translated and annotated by R. Voß

…

**Fol. 260**: (Conversation with a certain Gottschalck about a Jewish printing house in Frankfurt/Oder, which he operated and where writings in both Hebrew and Yiddish were printed.)

**Fol. 261**: (It is reported that the Hebrew-German version of the New Testament by Johann Müller is largely bought by preachers, but but Jews did acquire it as well. Gottschalck, however, was skeptical about Müller’s missionary program. He said:)

[…] good Müller wants to convert the Jews, but it may not have been of much use.

(A conversation with a Studioso, a student, Mr. Prove. Mr. Prove showed to Manitius […])

[…] a Jewish Scriptum on a quarto sheet and reported that a Jew had sent it to him expressly. When his parents voluntarily gave him one or probably even two groschen, he left the house indignantly and grumbling, saying that if he were to sell everything like that, he would starve. He said he could not read it and I should have a look. The title was this:
Love Letter to all hoping prisoners of hope: To all the exiled sons of Israel who wait for redemption, written in loving kindness for Rosh Hashana 1703

Fol. 262: In the beginning, as I hadn't looked at the date, I thought it was a purely Jewish book, made in this new year, both invoked by and refuting our letter (i.e. the Minor Epistle), because it was alarming to me that a Jew had brought it to the house and given it expressly to a scholar. [...] 

But when I read it and saw that Isaiah chap. 53 explains about the Messiah, very strongly emphasizing sacrifice and atonement, and when I found in the conclusion (of the book): ‘You beloved sons of Israel, I beg you, don’t take my humble writing amiss; I wrote to you in cordial love and I don’t wish to mislead you to do, God forbid, idol worship or become uncircumcised (Christians), but only you should do true penitence and receive forgiveness so salvation will come to Israel, speedily in our days, amen.’ I did not know how to interpret it. But I later read it carefully in its entirety together with Mr. Widmann and we realized that almost the same arguments and style were found here as in A Light in the Evening and the letter. Therefore and because we took into account the date 1703, we thought that it stemmed from the same Mr. Müller who had made the rest. As I had heard from Mr. Prove that the Rabbi who had previously been chased away from Berlin upon interpreting Isaiah 53 with reference to the Messiah had come here, we soon entertained the idea that it was him who had edited it, with a different date. In a word, we did not know how to handle it. On Tuesday, Mr. Widmann took it among the Jews. He met an old Jewish typesetter who

1 Zechariah 9:12
2 [Johann Müller], Mikhtav Ahavah ... an Ale Bene Goles Yisroel... (Frankfurt/Oder, 1703). Starting in 1732, it was reprinted many times by the Institutum Judaicum in Halle. In contrast to Müller’s so-called “Minor Epistle,” Mikhtav Ahavah was dubbed the “Major Epistle” (Großes Sendschreiben). Cf. below fn 4.
3 Yochanan Kimhi [Johann Müller], Or le-Et Erev..., 2nd ed. (Halle: Institutum Judaicum, 1731). Or le-Et Erev was reprinted numerous times in Halle starting with its first edition in 1728.
4 The reference is to the “Minor Epistle,” printed in 1729. While the Yiddish original is now lost, an English translation from 1735 is extant in the Archives of the Francke Foundation in Halle, AFSt/H K 52 (source 2).
claimed he knew the typeface and that it had been printed here, since he had seen them help (with it) (?). It surprises us that the book is (still) being sold today. Today (Wednesday) as I am drafting this, we meanwhile intend to inquire about it at the printing house. As I am finally sending this letter back, the beloved and valued brother told me about a new and good example of a baptized Jew (in) Doebiz, 9 miles from here on the road to Berlin, where also several Jews live.

**Fol. 267:** (Gottschalck tells about Aaron Margalitha, who had been baptized 24 years before and had become a university professor. He uses the very same references “from the rabbis” for his dissertation and argumentation “that our letter and *Or Le-et Erev* contain, too.”)

[…]

EMW 2015

133
Striking a Pietist Chord: Isaac Wetzlar’s Proposal for the Improvement of Jewish Society
Rebekka Voß, Goethe University

Tagebuch von Johann Andreas Manitius über seinen Aufenthalt in Danzig, seine Reise nach Königsberg und Pommern sowie nach Franken und Hessen (November 12, 1731)

Archives of the Francke Foundation, Halle, box 52 (AFSt/H K 52)

Transcribed by A. Siluk, annotated by R. Voß

[⋯]

Fol. 260: (Conversation with a certain Gottschalck about a Jewish printing house in Frankfurt/Oder, which he operated and where writings in both Hebrew and Yiddish were printed.)

Fol. 261: (It is reported that the Hebrew-German version of the New Testament by Johann Müller is largely bought by preachers, but but Jews did acquire it as well. Gottschalck, however, was skeptical about Müller’s missionary program. He said:)

[⋯] der gute Müller wolle die Juden bekehren, aber es mag wenig genutzt haben.

(A conversation with a Studioso, a student, Mr. Prove. Mr. Prove showed to Manitius [...])

[⋯] ein jüdisch Scriptum auf einen Quart-bogen und referirte, daß solchen ein Jude express zu ihm herauf geschickt habe, und als ihm seine Eltern einen oder wol gar zwey groschen frey willig gegeben, sey er unwillig und murrend(?) aus dem Hause gegangen, und habe gesagt: ,wenn er alles so
hätte verkaufen sollen, so würde er haben Hungern müßen. Er könne es
nicht lesen, ich möchte es doch ansehen, der Titul lautet also:

Mikhtav Ahavah... an Ale Bene Goles Yisroel... (Frankfurt/Oder, 1703). Starting in
1732, it was reprinted many times by the Institutum Judaicum in Halle. In contrast to Müller’s so-called
“Minor Epistle,” Mikhtav Ahavah was dubbed the “Major Epistle” (Großes Sendschreiben). Cf. below fn 4.

1 Zechariah 9:12
2 [Johann Müller], Mikhtav Ahavah... an Ale Bene Goles Yisroel... (Frankfurt/Oder, 1703). Starting in
1732, it was reprinted many times by the Institutum Judaicum in Halle. In contrast to Müller’s so-called
“Minor Epistle,” Mikhtav Ahavah was dubbed the “Major Epistle” (Großes Sendschreiben). Cf. below fn 4.
3 Yochanan Kimhi [Johann Müller], Or le-Et Erev... 2nd ed. (Halle: Institutum Judaicum, 1731). Or le-Et
Erev was reprinted numerous times in Halle starting with its first edition in 1728.
4 The reference is to the “Minor Epistle,” printed in 1729. While the Yiddish original is now lost, an
English translation from 1735 is extant in the Archives of the Francke Foundation in Halle, AFS/H K 52
(source 2).

**Bl.267:** Gottschalck erzählt von einem vor 24 Jahren getauften Juden, der ein Professor auf der Academie war, namens Aaron Margalitha. Dessen Dissertation und Argumentation weisen die gleichen Stellen „aus den Rabbinen“ auf, „die eben auch also unser brief und OR LEET EREF [Licht am Abend] hat.“

[…]

EMW 2015 136