The period of Manasseh's life was a time of great political events: the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, the divisions of Poland and the emergence of Russia as a great power on the European scene. Manasseh was, no doubt, well aware of these events and developments. Indeed, he himself must have witnessed some. Yet, he never as much as even mentions any of them. On the other hand, and in opposition to his political reticence, he is rather outspoken and expansive in the expression of his social and cultural views which, directly or indirectly, reflect the prevalent notions of the Age of Enlightenment. Indeed, few of his contemporaries have given such an embracing and penetrating expression to the creeds and aspirations of that age as he. His praises of reason, mathematics and science, on the one hand, and his sharp criticism of the minhag (customs), on the other, are as fervent as those of the European leaders of the Enlightenment and the ardent Berlin maskilim (the enlightened). The outer transcendental wrappings of some of his views notwithstanding, his basic orientation remains mundane and his outlook on life and the world both positive and deeply optimistic.

Many of Manasseh's views and ideas, especially those dealing with the internal aspects of contemporary Jewry and Judaism, have been discussed by earlier students of Manasseh. They paid little or no attention at all, however, to the broader aspects of his thought and its connections with the European trends of his day. It is these aspects, unity, interdependence and humanitarianism, that will be discussed here.

A fundamental idea in Manasseh's writings, attributable to medieval as well as modern influences, is the idea of unity and interdependence. Both the universe and humanity, he writes, are united wholes in which everything and everyone are integrated and mutually interdependent. Obviously, this is not a startling idea, but one that is rather in harmony with sense perception and common views. Moreover, to a religious person believing in a God-Creator, the Father of all, such a view appears rather natural, supported by both the Bible and the vast literature that evolved from it. In modern times, this idea gained in strength, as a result of the great advances in science. The growing recognition of the uniformity of matter in the universe and the extension of natural law to ever new areas of being, tended to rather strengthen this idea and lend to it ever greater impetus. Furthermore, in consequence of the growth of knowledge about the earth and its peoples, the tendency toward a unified view of the world of man also intensified. The differences in laws and customs among humans notwithstanding, the intellectuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries observed and stressed the essential unity underlying the multiplicity of the human species. They spoke of man as belonging to the human race, everywhere endowed with the same power of reason, not to separate ethnic or national entities.
The theme of unity and interdependence is pervasive in all of Manasseh’s writings, assuming a variety of forms. Obviously, they are not new, but rather repeat prevalent old notions. He is least original in his utterances about universal unity. Thus—to give only a few examples—he writes: “All the universe is like one man composed of many parts, or like a huge structure, the image of which is in the mind of the architect”; or, reflecting a geocentric conception of the universe: “All created things, beginning from the supernal source down to the material center in the middle of the earth, are like one vessel, the many parts of which are interconnected”; or, in somewhat pantheistically tinged terms: “All the world is like one man . . . and the connection of God with it is like the connection between the soul and the body.”

One should not expect to find anything original in Manasseh’s writings pertaining to the idea of the unity of the human race and the interdependence of men in society. Man, he repeatedly points out, is unique among all living species by his inability to meet his needs by himself. While each creature of any species has been provided with the means of maintaining itself, means unique to the species as a whole, individual man has not been so provided. Apparently following Maimonides, he points out that the differences among humans are by far greater than those among the members of any other living species. Each individual person is distinguished by some quality or capacity that may not be found in other individuals. Thus, it is only in society, with each person performing the task for which he is best suited, that all the necessities of man are produced. The individual is therefore totally dependent on society, and only within it can he fully realize himself and unfold his capacities.

Obviously, similar to the idea of universal unity, this idea, too, is a rather ancient one. The social nature of man and his “not being self-sufficient when isolated” had been pointed out by Aristotle in his Politics. It had also been noticed by Ben Zoma in the Talmud, and centuries later indicated by Maimonides and elaborated upon by his commentator, R. Shem Tov. Indeed, Manasseh repeats almost verbatim Maimonides’ statement to the effect that even a life as long as Methuselah’s would not be long enough for an individual to meet all his needs by himself.

While Maimonides’ general influence on Manasseh is certain and well known, it is possible that in this particular instance, Manasseh may also have come under the influence of a more recent source, namely Adam Smith’s epoch-making Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations which first appeared in 1776. Indeed, a striking similarity is noticeable between some of Manasseh’s texts and those of Smith, especially parts of chapters one and two of Smith’s Book One. Thus, in the well-known passage, “of the Division of Labour,” Smith wrote:

The woolen-coat, for example, which covers the day-laborer, as coarse and rough as it may appear, is the produce of the joint labour of a great multitude of workmen. The shepherd, the sorter of the wool, the wool-comber or carder, the dyer, the scribbler, the spinner, the weaver, the fuller, the dresser, with many others, must all join their different arts in order to complete even this homely production. How many merchants and carriers, besides, must have been employed in transporting the materials from some of those workmen to the others who often live in a very distant part of the country! How many ship-builders, sailors, sailmakers, rope-makers, must have been employed in order to bring together the different drugs made use of by the dyer, which often come from the remotest corners of the world! What a variety of labour, too, is necessary in order to produce the tools of the meanest of those workmen! To say nothing of such complicated machines as the ship of the sailor, the mill of the fuller, or even the beam of the weaver, let us consider only what a variety of labour is required in order to form that very simple machine,
the shears with which the shepherd clips the wool. The miner, the builder of the furnaces for smelting the ore, the seller of the timber, the burner of the charcoal to be made use of in the smelting-house, the brick-layer, the workmen who attend the furnace, the millwright, the forger, the smith, must all of them join their different arts in order to produce them. Were we to examine, in the same manner, all the different parts of his dress and household furniture, the coarse linen shirt ... the shoes ... the bed ... the kitchen-grate ... all the furniture of his table, the knives and forks, the earthen or pewter plates ... the different hands employed in preparing his bread and his beer, the glass window which lets in heat and light ... together with the tools of all the different workmen employed in producing those different conveniences; if we examine, I say, all these things, and consider what a variety of labour is employed about each of them, we shall be sensible that, without the assistance and cooperation of many thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided, even according to what we very falsely imagine the easy ... manner in which he is commonly accommodated.15

Compare the above with the following passage of Manasseh’s *Samma d’Hayyei* (A Medicine for Life):

... How many thousands of people are required, for instance, for the preparation of food! How many trades are needed for it, beginning with ploughing and ending with the final product. ... Now, the tools that are required, for which iron is necessary. ... How many trades are required for the extraction of the iron from the ground and its transformation into tools. The same applies to garments, housing and many other things.16

Obviously, Manasseh’s passage is much shorter and less detailed than Smith’s on the same subject, but it is not difficult to explain. He is, as a rule, rather succinct in the expression of his thoughts. Besides, living in an economy that was rather primitive, lagging much behind that of England, Manasseh was far less acquainted than Smith with the more advanced system of the division of labor in the West. Nevertheless, the two passages are strikingly similar.

Further examples in support of Manasseh’s acquaintance with the work of Smith can be cited. Well-known, for instance, is Smith’s example of the pin-maker, in whose trade he found “eighteen distinct operations.”17 Manasseh adduces an almost identical instance, namely, the tailor’s needle, and his comment on it is similar to Smith’s comment on the pin-maker. Manasseh writes:

... The satisfaction of human needs is divided among myriads of people. While some minor things can be produced by one single individual in the course of a short time, the tools necessary for even such matters require the work of thousands. Take, for instance, the tailor’s work. One man can sew a whole garment in a day or two, but the tool he needs for it, namely the needle ... how many prior trades are necessary for the production of metal tools, beginning with the extraction of the metal from the earth and ending with the craftsman’s tool. The number of people required for it is endless.18

The similarity goes further. Commenting on the exchange of goods among men, Smith points out that “the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” is probably the consequence “of the faculties of reason and speech.” This propensity “is common to all men, and to be found in no other race of animals, which seem to know neither this nor any other species of contracts.”19 Similarly, Manasseh indicated that it is primarily because of reason and speech that humans are able to exchange goods among themselves.20

Above all, however, it was Smith’s integrated concept of society, according to which none of its classes is entrusted with the task of solely keeping all the others alive, but this task is equally carried by all the productive members of society,21 which
may have influenced Manasseh most and affected his view on the essential equality of man, his social inequality notwithstanding. Neither Smith nor Manassah considered the social differences among men as rooted in nature, but rather as the outcome of social causes alone. Smith wrote:

The differences between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seem to arise not so much from nature as from habit, custom, and education. When they came into the world, and for the first six or eight years of their existence, they were perhaps very much alike. . . . About that age, or soon after, they came to be employed in very different occupations. The difference of talents comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at last the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarce any resemblance.22

It appears that Manasseh shared this view when he wrote that the difference between the "deprived and the ignorant" masses, on the one hand, and the rich and the learned, on the other, is only accidental, for "potentially, the former lack nothing . . . as there is no one among men who is unable to use his mind imaginatively . . . in every area . . . and thus raise himself to a higher level."23

Whatever the source, Manasseh seems to have arrived at his egalitarian convictions rather early. Already in Pesher Davar (The Reconcilor) (1807), he pointed out that, in view of men's social interdependence, there is no justification in glorifying one profession, such as that of the diamond cutter, for instance, and deprecating another, such as that of the tailor.24 Measured by its public utility, the less respected trade may be more important. Years later, in his Shekel ha-Kodesh (A Shekel of the Sanctuary) (1823), he extended his egalitarian outlook to include intellectual matters as well. The fact that one individual may be intellectually better endowed in a certain area than another, should be no reason for an attitude of conceit and contempt on his part vis-à-vis the less gifted individual. It is quite possible that the achievement of the less talented person in his own area of activity is superior and more beneficial to the public than the achievement of the more talented one in his area. Every action, skill, or knowledge, must be evaluated by the yardstick of its social usefulness.25 On the other hand, this egalitarianism does not reign supreme in Manasseh's thought on man, and it is neutralized to a great extent by his notions about the "select individuals," and what he calls the "qualitative majority."26

To resume the main theme of this essay, the idea of unity and interdependence, one must now turn attention to other forms that this idea assumed in the thought of Manasseh. One has in mind, first of all, what may best be described as the unity of wisdom, or the totality of knowledge. Manasseh thinks about knowledge in the same terms in which he thinks about the universe and humanity. Just as each fraction of being is only part of universal being, and as each human individual is merely a particle of humanity at large, so, too, each section of knowledge is only a fragment of the totality of knowledge. The realm of knowledge, he points out again and again, is as wide and diverse as the realm of human pursuits. Similar to the propensities of man in the sphere of daily activities which give rise to countless skills and occupations, man's varied intellectual endowments are also cause for an ever-expanding body of knowledge.

The various parts of any area of thought or activity are countless and cannot be the possession of only one person. Rather, they are distributed among many individuals, each of whom possesses a mind for only one kind of activity.27
Still,

each of the wise, in his own area of interest, is not pursuing something separate and independent of the pursuits of . . . others, but . . . is pursuing a mere section of a larger whole.28

Similar to the fragments of one receptacle, the parts of knowledge must be so united as to create an integrated whole.29 Only through the unification and the promulgation of the achievements of all of the wise will humanity be able to overcome its ills and shortcomings, and usher in a new era of well-being and prosperity. To this author's knowledge, and at least as far as the Hebrew literature of the time is concerned, Manasseh was the only author who gave expression to this rather advanced notion of what may be termed an international community of wisdom and the wise as a prerequisite for the solution of the ills of humanity.30

Manasseh propagated the idea of intellectual unity and cooperation not only in the area of secular learning, but in that of Jewish learning as well. Already in Pesher Davar he urged that “the great ones and the sages of the time assemble once a year for a month or two” to exchange views and opinions on the problems of Jewish life and lore. Such assemblies, he noted, have not taken place since the days of the Tosafists.31 In more personal and strictly scholastic terms he repeated this suggestion many years later in his Shekel ha-Kodesh, where he wrote:

My soul strongly desires to join eminent and famous scholars, whose number should at least be ten, and to set aside a few hours daily for an in-depth study, in order to make known my thought and my methods of study.32

The Talmud, he felt, though voluminous, is nevertheless a mere outline, the elaboration and elucidation of which require the collective effort of both sages and students. He therefore resented the growing tendency among Jewish scholars of recent times to be isolated, “everyone with his own book . . . in the privacy of his own study.”33

Directly related to the idea of unity and interdependence is another outstanding characteristic of Manasseh's thought: its deep humanitarianism. If, indeed, the human race constitutes one whole, and men are interdependent and essentially equal, it ought to follow that love and respect for all men become a general postulate and yardstick of ethical behavior. This is especially imperative in view of Manasseh's conviction—a conviction he unknowingly shared with many thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) down to Lamettrie (1709–1751), Helvetius (1715–1771) and others—that man is essentially an egoistic creature, self-centered, and solely motivated by self-love. “There is no purpose men set for themselves in this world,” he writes, “which in the final analysis is not rooted in self-gratification.”34 The demand for altruism as a guiding principle of ethical behavior is therefore a demand for the rule of reason, to overcome petty instinct, to extend the scope of one's love and compassion beyond the pale of the biological “I” and to embrace not only those related by flesh and blood, but also all humanity at large. In this vein, Manasseh interprets the comments of the Talmud on the words of Isaiah: “Rejoice ye with Jerusalem and be glad with her, all ye that love her; rejoice for joy with her all ye that mourn for her.”335 The sages commented: “From this [i.e., these words, you learn] that whoever mourns for Jerusalem merits to see her rejoicing, but whoever does not mourn for Jerusalem will not see her rejoicing.”336 These words, Manasseh explains, must not be understood in terms of reward or punishment, but as a comment on
human nature. People differ in the degree of their concern for their fellowmen. Some—very few, indeed—are only concerned with themselves and do not even care for the lot of their own sons and daughters. Others—the vast majority—are concerned with the lot of their children and families. Still others are also anxious about the welfare of their relatives and friends.

But the *maskil* who has a clear perception of the joys of the good life and knows how painful suffering and sorrow are, he desires that well-being and pleasure become the lot of all living things. . . . Thus, a person only concerned with himself, after all his needs have been satisfied—what further good can he expect? But a person who is also concerned with the welfare of his children—his good is greatly enhanced, when they too prosper. By the same token, a person who desires the good of all living things—his reward will be manifestly greater, when all the world will be set straight, with everyone sharing in its good. The joy of such a person would be immeasurable.37

It is in this sense, Manasseh indicates, that the words of the sages of the Talmud must be understood. Only people endowed with a capacity of love and compassion for those beyond their biological pale, are assured greater joy and satisfaction both when they envision the future and when they see it become a reality.

Humanitarianism, often described in terms of brotherhood of man, was one of the leading ideas of the age, and was strongly reflected in both the general as well as the Hebrew letters of the time;38 few, however, expressed it with greater fervor and emotion than Manasseh. As an example, a passage from his introduction to the unpublished *Ha'amek She'elah* (Asking in Depth) is cited:

> My main desire has always been one and the same, namely, to eliminate evil and to attain good. I never devoted any thought of my own affairs and personal good, but concentrated on the general problem, what is the cause of evil and corruption in the world? I wanted to devise some means for improvement. I said to myself: “what am I and what is my value in comparison with the multiplicity of living things in the world, both animals and humans?” Assuming that the Creator, blessed be He, would one day place me, my family, and my beloved ones and relatives in a state of everlasting well-being, but there would still remain evil in the world afflicting some living creatures, especially human beings, I surely would not choose to enjoy such a lot. . . . What difference is there between me and all other creatures? All are His handiwork. As long as there still remains even one living creature that has not attained its relative perfection . . . it certainly is impossible to think that the final goal of a better world has been reached.39

Another instance, of a rather trivial nature but nevertheless indicative of Manasseh’s universal approach, is to be found in one aspect of his political thought. Similar to all other *maskilim*, until the 1860s, politically Manasseh was a conservative man. He believed in the positive and significant role of authoritative rulers and praised them not only for securing the peace and the safety of life and property, but, more specifically, for the support they were rendering to scholars and scholarship as well. He wrote: “If it were not for the kings . . . who uphold wisdom and the wise, providing the wise a comfortable existence, all knowledge would long have perished.”40 He went further, also endorsing all other activities of kings as prompted by a concern for the public good. It is not Manasseh’s political views in themselves, however, that are of interest in this context, but the fact that he treated the obligation of the Jews toward the government on a par with their obligations toward their own authorities. The Jew, he insisted, must contribute to the general public good—each one according to his means—in the same way that he must contribute to the parochial Jewish good.
Manasseh of Ilya

Just as it is incumbent upon him to provide a comfortable living for the Jewish spiritual leadership—the rabbis, the judges and the teachers—he must also, for the sake of a proper administration of the state, help maintain the governmental bureaucracy, providing its members with a decent standard of living. The juxtaposition of the two and the equal treatment he accorded to both show that he was not thinking about the Jewish community alone, but rather about society as a whole.

NOTES


2. See, for instance, Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind, being a posthumous work of the late M. de Condorcet (London, 1795), passim; Preserved Smith, A History of Modern Culture, II, The Enlightenment 1687–1776 (New York, 1934), passim.

3. Alfei Manasseh [the Teachings of Manasseh] (Wilno, 1822), ch. 77, p. 27 (hereafter cited as AM, II). The first part of this quotation is taken directly from the Moreh, [Guide of the Perplexed] I, 72 (beg.), where Maimonides presents a lucid and exhaustive description of this view.


5. AM, ch. 158, p. 62b; Shekel ha-Kodesh [A Shekel of the Sanctuary] (1823), p. 2; see also AM, chaps. 85, 174, 181 and more.


9. “Ben Zoma once saw a crowd on one of the steps of the Temple Mount. He said ... blessed is He who has created all these to serve me. [For] he used to say: what labors Adam had to carry out before he obtained bread to eat! He ploughed, he sowed, he reaped, he bound [the sheaves], he threshed and winnowed and selected the ears, he ground [them], and sifted [the flour], he kneaded and baked, and then at last he ate; whereas I get up, and find all those things done for me. And how many labors Adam had to carry out before he obtained a garment to wear! He had to shear, wash [the wool], comb it, spin it and weave it, and then at last he obtained a garment to wear; whereas I get up and find all these things done for me. All kinds of craftsmen come early to the door of my house and I rise in the morning and find all these before me,” Babylonian Talmud (B.T.), Berakhot (hereafter called Ber.) 58a, as translated by Maurice Simon.

10. Moreh, II, 40; see also, Maimonides; Hakdamah to Seder Zera’im [Foreword to the Order of Seats] in his commentary on the Mishnah, section preceding the one beginning with “Va’asher Kera’ani l’habber zeh ha-hibbur (what led me to write this book ...),” etc., in B.T., Ber.

11. AM, ch. 169, p. 66b.

12. Hakdamah to the Mishnah, Seder Zera’im.

13. Plungian, Manasseh’s biographer, writes: “At Vyasyn ... the Moreh and its commentators flowed from his lips and he did not let the book out of his hand,” Ben Porath (Wilno, 1858), pp. 66–67.

14. The first, to my knowledge, who made such an assumption was Samuel Rosenfeld in his essay, “R’Manasseh Ilyer (Ben Porath),” Hatekufah, 2 (1918), in which he wrote that Manasseh drew some of the evidence for his view regarding man’s social dependence “from the books of economists, like Adam Smith and others,” ibid., p. 282. He failed to indicate, however, any particular source or basis for this assumption. During Manasseh’s lifetime, Smith’s book did not exist in either Russian or Polish translations. It was first translated into Russian in 1866; see Malaya Sovetskaya Encyclopediya (3rd ed., 1960), VIII, 619. The book, however, was translated into French in 1778–79, and into German in 1794–96; see Meyers Enzyklopädisches Lexikon (Mannheim, 1977), XXI, 833. Columbia University library has a German translation in 4 vols. of the years 1796–1799 (catal. nu. 330. Sm. 523). If Manasseh read Smith, I presume it must have been in a German translation.


18. AM, ch. 169, p. 66.
20. Samma D’Hayyei in Raisin, Fun Mendelson, pp. 200–201. The idea that speech constitutes the unique quality of man and the basis of society and ethics is traceable to Aristotle. See Politics, 1253a.
23. AM, ch. 110, p. 41b.
25. Shekel ha-Kodesh, 2b.
27. AM, II, ch. 25, p. 34.
28. AM, ch. 181, p. 76b. Around that time, the interdependence of the sciences was also stressed by M. de Condorcet, one of the outstanding intellectuals of the French Revolution; see his Outlines (Note 2 above), p. 296.
29. AM, II, ch. 16, p. 27.
30. In European literature of the eighteenth century, this idea was clearly put forth—though with lesser emphasis—by Diderot as the major task of the Encyclopedia: “En effet, le but d’une Encyclopédie est de rassembler les connaissances éparses sur la surface de la terre; d’en exposer le système général aux hommes avec qui nous vivons et de la transmettre aux hommes qui viendront après nous, afin, que les travaux des siècles passés n’aient pas été des travaux inutiles pour les siècles qui succéderont; que nos neveux devenant plus instruits deviennent en même temps plus vertueux et plus heureux et que nous ne mourrions pas sans avoir bien mérité du genre humain.” See “Encyclopédie,” in Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers (Lausanne, 1782), XII, 341–88; above quote: p. 341.
32. Shekel ha-Kodesh, 4a.
33. AM, ch. 178, p. 74a. Although group-study was a practice of long standing in Judaism (for some talmudic references on the subject, see Pinhas b. Yehudah of Polotsk, Keter Torah [The Crown of Torah] [Shklov, 1788; Jerusalem, 1965], pp. 13–14), Manasseh’s defense of it may have been a reaction to its neglect among the Hasidim of his day. The tendency to study in isolation had already gained adherents among the earlier Kabbalists (see B. Z. Dinur, “The Beginning of Hasidism” [Hebrew] in his B’mifneh Hadorot [At the Crossroads of Generations] [Jerusalem, 1955], p. 161); however, it became more widespread among the Hasidim. There apparently was a direct link between their aspiration after devekut (union with God) and study in seclusion. A “clinging” unto God, it was often pointed out, cannot be achieved by group-study in the bet ha-midrash (the house of study), where ambition and competition often prevail, but only in the privacy of one’s own study. Therefore, “one should rather study at home, in a hidden place and in seclusion, where nobody sees him” (Keter Torah, p. 13a). On the other hand, Manasseh’s emphasis on the elitist character of his projected study-group, especially as defined in Shekel ha-Kodesh, points, no doubt, to other sources for this notion. The eighteenth century was a time when scholarly societies and Academies, mainly devoted to the fostering and propagation of mathematics and science, were established in many European countries (Preserved Smith, History of Modern Culture, II, The Enlightenment [New York, 1953], ch. IV, 2; R. R. Palmer, A History of the Modern World, [New York, 1950], p. 261), and it probably was an institution of this kind that Manasseh meant for the higher study of Judaism.
34. AM, ch. 148, p. 59a; AM, II, chaps. 40, 41, p. 57.