In early November 1777, an emissary from the Jewish community of Hebron, Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai, circulated among several communities in southwestern France along the road northward from Bayonne to Bordeaux. As he neared Bordeaux, he was approached by two townspeople, “R[eb] Mordechai Tama and S[eñor] Binyamin Avraham.” While visiting Bordeaux, Azulai was exposed to cultural mindsets that were strange to him. Those who championed these mindsets, he discovered after the fact, included one of his escorts—Mordechai Tama, on whose journey, the physical one and the psychological one that accompanied it, this lecture will focus.

Mordechai Tama was born in Adrianople in 1739. His family migrated to Jerusalem when he was five years old and later moved to Hebron. In his twenties, Tama left Hebron for Europe for the purpose of publishing his grandfather’s Midrashic (interpretative) commentary on the Book of Exodus. Although he failed in his mission, this did not mark the end of his journey. In fact, he never returned to Hebron again. Apart from his stay in southwestern France in the autumn of 1777—about which, as stated above, Azulai testified—one can trace the course of his migrations in general terms. In 1765, he spent time in Amsterdam, where he published some responsa of Maimonides that he had translated from Arabic into Hebrew, titled *Pe’er Hador* (the glory of his time), and a book titled *Maskiyot Kessef* (silver lockets)—a glossary of homonyms by Shlomo ben Meshulam Dapeyro from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Spain.

By 1770, Tama had apparently established a reputation on the basis of his activity in the Amsterdam literary scene. *Pe’er Hador,* which he had translated and published, was given approbations by important rabbinical personalities. Indeed, at roughly that time he received several offers to serve in various community posts.

As stated, Azulai reports that Tama settled in Bordeaux in 1777. During his stay there, he probably established strong relations with members of the city’s Avignon community. Indeed, municipal records show that many Jewish families moved from Avignon to Bordeaux in the second half of the eighteenth century, and in 1783 Mordechai Tama was hired as a teacher in the community’s religious school for boys. We shall return to this institution later, in our discussion of Tama’s hybrid cultural world.

Another work that Mordechai Tama published is *Sefer haMevaqesh* [the book of the searcher], written by Rabbi Shemtov Ibn Falaquera in thirteenth-century Spain. In this philosophical composition, a young student approaches savants in various disciplines in search of the true path—and concludes that God’s wisdom is the ultimate truth. In his introductory remarks to the book, which he published in 1778 in The Hague, Tama assesses the nature and essence of this work:

*Sefer haMevaqesh* is a river with which to quench anyone who is thirsty with the golden waters of wisdom and science in the light of the Torah, to instruct Jews in what they should do and what path to glory they should choose. [The author] plunged into mighty waters and picked out nourishment sweeter than honey. Anyone searching for God should be pleased and content with having been created. How eloquent are the sayings of his golden tongue; his attire is as lovely as the white moon.

After this standard, conventional introduction, the book proper begins.

About a year later, however, Tama published another edition of the very same work, making one small but highly meaningful addition. In the very same edition, without even changing the year of publication that appears on the title page, Tama inserted a two-page dedication in French immediately after the approbations. The dedication is addressed to “three illustrious and esteemed lay leaders and trustees of the Sephardi community of Avignon that settled in Bordeaux” (*Tres illustres & Respectables Messieurs Les Parnasim & Sindics de la nation Espagnole d' Avignon Etabile a Bordeaux*).

Like the introduction of the work on the title page, the dedication to the leaders of the Avignon community in Bordeaux presents the work to the reader. However, whereas on the title page of the Hebrew text, Tama uses classical rabbinical literary conventions that emphasize the role of the book in its traditional setting—“the light of Torah”—“ to instruct Jews in what they should do and what path to glory they should choose”—in the French dedication Tama tailors his words and the nature of the description to a different cultural milieu, one that includes Jewish families of Spanish-Portuguese origin who went through significant acculturation and immersed themselves, to various degrees, in the Christian majority society. In these dedicatory remarks, the terminology is less typically Jewish and more universal. *Sefer haMevaqesh,* according to Tama’s introduction in French, is not meant to impart the values of the Torah to those seeking the God of Israel. Instead, it should give them “good morals” (bonne Morale). Hence it is fitting to dedicate the book to those who are known for their virtues and merits (*vertus et merites*).

These dedicatory remarks to the lay leaders of the Avignon community in Bordeaux may be seen as something more than a quest for cultural belonging; they may be manipulative and meant to satisfy livelihood needs. Indeed, Tama notes that this dedication is, for him, an opportunity to express appreciation for the assistance that he received, in the hope that the community leaders would continue to demonstrate their respect for him (*la Continuation de votre estime*).
The different methods of introduction in French and in Hebrew, however, are not unique to this book. By examining Tama’s doings and activities in Western Europe, we find further evidence of his attraction to the culture that he encountered among his Jewish and Iberian hosts and his gradual tilt toward it.

Something similar is evident in the very first work that Tama published: *Pe’er haDor,* in 1765. Like *Sefer haMevaqesh,* this halakhic work is presented in two ways: a traditional rabbinical introduction in Hebrew on the title page and a two-page dedication in Hebrew, with a dedicatory introduction in Spanish between them. Here again, in Hebrew Tama introduces the book by employing classical traditional literary conventions. He describes it by using the rabbinical expression *hemda genuza,* a hidden delight. He calls its author, Maimonides, “our great and lustrous rabbi,” who “sits and interprets” and “executes our judgment.” He uses the term *ha-ish Moshe,* “the man Moses”—an expression taken from the Book of Numbers, in reference to Moses Maimonides. He depicts the author of the manuscript as a Tsaddiq (a righteous man) who has a *hakham levav* (a wise heart) and likens his home to Jerusalem by saying “For there God sent forth the blessing like dew from Mount Hermon.” This is an allusion to Psalm 133:3: “[It is like the dew](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2919.htm) [of Hermon](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2768.htm) [falling](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3381.htm) [on](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5921.htm) [of Zion](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6726.htm), the place where God [bestowed](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6680.htm) [the blessing](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/1293.htm) [of life](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2416.htm) eternally[.](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5704.htm)” Tama also uses classical literary conventions in the preface when he thanks those who helped him with his work. Examples are “May the Lord remunerate him for his deed” and “May God bestow blessing upon him.” He them lists their virtues, including “pleasant of speech,” “trustful in God,” “guilelessly righteous,” and so on.

When Tama introduces the book to readers of Spanish by means of a letter of dedication to its author, however, he switches to a different terminology. As in the French dedication to *Sefer haMevaqesh*, the Spanish introduction to *Pe’er haDor* gives off a universalistic fragrance intended for readers who have been acculturated into general society and are no strangers to the values of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Instead of stressing his assistants’ religious virtues and closeness to God, Tama emphasizes the author’s “luster of nobility and personal virtues” (*lustre de la nobleza y el resplandor del ilustre de los merecimientos propios*). Instead of the traditional rabbinical accolades, the author is now termed “illustrious and magnificent” (*ilustrísimo y magnifico señor*). In the Hebrew introduction, the work is described as important because it is a rabbinical treatise; rabbinical terms such “a hidden delight” are used to make the point. In the Spanish, the halakhic work is described as “scientific questions and answers” (*cientificas consultas y repuestas*); it deserves to be translated and published, Tama writes, not because it spreads the luster of Torah among the Jewish people but because it will privilege the world with “the splendor of beams from a hidden sun in the mystery of a foreign language” (*para que el mundo lograrse los refulgentes rayos del Sol escondido debaxo de las antipodas de una lengua estranja*).

Maimonides, too, after being described in the Hebrew text as a giant in Torah, is depicted differently in Spanish. Now he is “the most renowned hero” (*el mas famozo heroe*), the doctor, and “the offspring of the most enlightened and noble of ancient Spain” (*los más esclarecidos en la antigüedad en España*).

These differences reflect Tama’s awareness that his new milieu, West European Jewish society, has various cultural circles and that alongside classical traditional Judaism there are no few Jews, affiliated with the Western Sephardi diaspora, who have undergone significant acculturation and take interest in the ideas of the Enlightenment. He realizes that both are potential readers of the works that he publishes.

In the early 1780s, Tama’s self-advocacy paid off: The lay leaders of the Avignon community in Bordeaux hired him to teach in the boys’ school of the organized Bordeaux community. Back in 1777, Azulai described this educational institution as follows: “At the boys’ school, all they learn is Bible and Rashi’s commentary. They don’t want them to learn according to the Sages’ interpretations and commentaries, and they don’t even want Maimonides. How it pains the eyes to observe it; may the sinners vanish.” However, Tama’s tilt in the direction of the Western Sephardi cultural circle did not end there. While visiting Paris that year, Azulai, basing himself on remarks by a member of the local community, added that certain things had been discovered about Tama during Azulai’s stay in that city: “He studied Voltaire’s books and became a nihilist, and so on. […] He would accompany him to an inn owned by goyim and drink, doing so several times.”

According to another rumor about Tama, set in motion by a Jew who had returned from the British colonies in North America, “There Hakham Mordechai Tama took a mulatta, a non-Jew born of a black woman and a white man, as a concubine, and had a son by her.”

It seems that from his very first days in Western Europe, Tama aspired to belong to two cultural circles—the traditional one, probably representing the city where he was raised, Jerusalem, and the “enlightened” circle, representing the Western Sephardi society in Bordeaux, where he lived, and in the other cities of Western Europe. His use of two voices and two languages in the prefaces to the works that he published indicates that he belonged to both cultural circles together. As he spent more and more time in West European society, however, his acculturation in that society evolved and his affinity for this cultural circle came at the expense of the other. The change was reflected both in growing religious laxity and in his areas of literary interest.

In his early years in Western Europe, Tama’s literary activity, as stated, included the goals of publishing a Midrashic commentary and translating and publishing Maimonides’ halakhic responsa. He also took an interest in Hebrew grammar and poetry; in 1765, this was reflected, as stated, in his publishing *Maskiyot Kessef* by Shlomo ben Meshulam Dapeyro, which includes poetic correspondence among Jewish poets, even though he did not know who the author was.

Later in his stay with the Western Sephardi diaspora—in the 1770s and the 1780s—Tama seems to have stopped dealing with halakhic and Midrashic literature. Now he was in touch with the playwright David Franco-Mendes, to whom he even dedicated a poem that was inserted into the preface to the printed edition of Franco-Mendes’ play *Gemul ‘Ataliya* (Amsterdam, 1770). Tama’s literary and business purview now included editing and publishing the philosophical work *Sefer haMevaqesh* and collecting medieval scientific texts such as Abraham Ibn Ezra’s works on astronomy works, which he brought together in 1782.

The man who had translated and published a halakhic work by Maimonides at the outset of his stay in Europe went through a complex process. About a decade and a half after he had arrived, he was hired to teach at a boys’ school that chose not to include that author’s works in its curriculum. The person who had set out from the Land of Israel to publish a Midrashic commentary became a man who would serve as an educator at a school that rejected that genre. During that time, too, Tama turned in the direction of acculturation and studied deist philosophical works. Rumors about his permissive and non-halakhic way of life began to crop up.

In his physical and psychological transition from the traditional parochial sphere of the Land of Israel to the cultural milieu of the Western Sephardi diaspora, Tama reshaped his traditional world by aligning it with the new value system of modernity. He combined forays into religious skepticism and halakhic laxity with diverse and changing forms of Jewish literary and educational activity. By assessing Tama’s perspective on the world that he encountered when he left the traditional cultural milieu behind, we are given an opportunity to examine various complex effects of modernity and enlightenment within the Jewish world that may lie outside the artificial binary of tradition versus modernity.