

How Benjamin Franklin Contributed to Jewish Practice

The American founding father helped Philadelphia's Jews and influenced Jewish religious practice, but has been a frequent target of antisemitic misappropriation

by [Shai Afsai](#) (July 2024)



Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Siffred Duplessis (1785)

As we shall see, lack of sufficient attribution is an important part of the story told in this article, so let me begin by clarifying that Jews have been writing (primarily in Hebrew) about Benjamin Franklin's influence on Judaism for

over 200 years. This impact is not an original discovery on my part.

Benjamin Franklin (January 17, 1706 – April 17, 1790) believed in self-improvement. He wrote about his efforts to improve himself, and his biographers have also focused on this aspect of his personality. In "[The Late Benjamin Franklin](#)," Mark Twain humorously bemoaned the effect Franklin's legacy of hard work and upward mobility had on generations of American boys' lives:

With a malevolence which is without parallel in history, he would work all day, and then sit up nights, and let on to be studying algebra by the light of a smoldering fire, so that all other boys might have to do that also, or else have Benjamin Franklin thrown up to them. Not satisfied with these proceedings, he had a fashion of living wholly on bread and water, and studying astronomy at meal-time—a thing which has brought affliction to millions of boys since, whose fathers had read Franklin's pernicious biography.

Indeed, in his famous autobiography Franklin wrote of how in his 20s he sought to break all his bad habits and acquire better ones. However, he quickly discovered (as do all people who seek to improve themselves) that wanting to change is seldom enough. In good Enlightenment fashion—if there is a problem facing humanity, invent a solution—Franklin then designed a character-improvement method to help him succeed. It centers on 13 desired behavioral traits, or "virtues":

1. Temperance: Eat not to Dullness. Drink not to Elevation.
2. Silence: Speak not but what may benefit others or

yourself. Avoid trifling Conversation.

3. Order: Let all your Things have their Places. Let each Part of your Business have its Time.
4. Resolution: Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve.
5. Frugality: Make no Expense but to do good to others or yourself: i.e. Waste nothing.
6. Industry: Lose no Time. Be always employ'd in something useful. Cut off all unnecessary Actions.
7. Sincerity: Use no hurtful Deceit. Think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. Justice: Wrong none, by doing Injuries or omitting the Benefits that are your Duty.
9. Moderation: Avoid Extremes. Forbear resenting Injuries so much as you think they deserve.
10. Cleanliness: Tolerate no Uncleaness in Body, Clothes or Habitation.
11. Tranquility: Be not disturbed at Trifles, or at Accidents common or unavoidable.
12. Chastity: Rarely use Venerly but for Health or Offspring; Never to Dullness, Weakness, or the Injury of your own or another's Peace or Reputation.
13. Humility: Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

In Franklin's method, each of the virtues, in succession, is allotted a week of special attention and reflection. He arranged the list cumulatively, with the idea that an improved command of certain behavioral traits might make it easier to master the rest: consuming less alcohol could help in resisting temptation and aid in controlling one's speech, etc. Progress and setbacks in taking up these behavioral traits are recorded on a grid chart having the seven days of the week running horizontally and the 13 traits running vertically. After 13 weeks the cycle begins again, so that over the course of a year each virtue receives four full weeks of close focus

and monitoring.

Franklin readily admitted in his autobiography that he never managed to fully alter his habits using this technique, and wrote that order and humility were especially challenging for him. When I give talks on this subject—as I have done in places such as Boston, Pittsburgh, and Belfast—someone in the audience can usually be counted on to point out the irony that Franklin, who has a pop culture reputation for womanizing, placed chastity on his list of virtues. Or else, given his eventual portliness, the emphasis on temperance is called into question. Franklin himself accepted that his diet and sedentary lifestyle contributed to his being afflicted with gout.

Even so, he thought that self-improvement had been well worth trying, and wrote in his autobiography: “But on the whole, tho’ I never arrived at the Perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was by the Endeavour a better and a happier Man than I otherwise should have been, if I had not attempted it...” Late in life, he desired that his descendants—and by extension the American people, who (as the young Samuel Clemens lamented) would also be heirs to his legacy—know of the method’s usefulness: “And it may be well my Posterity should be informed, that to this little Artifice, with the Blessing of God, their Ancestor ow’d the contestant Felicity of his Life down to his 79th Year in which this is written.”

A notable feature of Franklin’s method is that he expressly designed it to be compatible with different faiths. As Franklin, whose own religious beliefs may be described as deistic, explained: “being fully persuaded of the Utility and Excellency of my Method, and that it might be serviceable to People in all Religions, and intending some time or other to publish it, I would not have any thing in it that should prejudice any one of any Sect against it.” Elaborating on the method, and printing this elaboration as a full book to be

titled "the ART of Virtue," was part of what Franklin described as "a *great and extensive Project*." He envisioned forming an international secret fraternity and mutual-aid society, called "the Society of the *Free and Easy*," whose members would follow "the Thirteen Weeks Examination and Practice of the Virtues." Initiates were to profess that God governs the world and ought to be worshiped, and "that the most acceptable Service of God is doing Good to Man." This non-sectarian brotherhood, "begun & spread at first among young and single Men only," was meant to eventually develop into a global "united Party for Virtue" that would transform society.

In 1788, after difficult economic conditions and the expenses involved in constructing its synagogue (the first such building in the city) plunged Philadelphia's Congregation Mikveh Israel into debt, the members turned to their neighbors, "worthy fellow Citizens of every religious Denomination," for assistance. Franklin, who had never been hostile to Jews, led by example in the city and donated five pounds to help ensure the continued presence of Philadelphia's oldest formal Jewish congregation.

Due to his many other private and public concerns, the American founding father passed away in 1790 without having written a book expounding his Art of Virtue and without laying the groundwork for an international fraternity. Nevertheless, since he had described it in some detail in his popular autobiography, people interested in character improvement still had access to Franklin's technique. One such person was Rabbi Menahem Mendel Lefin of Satanów (1749 – 1826), an early Eastern European *maskil*, or proponent of the Haskalah—the Jewish Enlightenment. As with other Haskalah proponents, Lefin was concerned with exposing Jews to potentially beneficial scientific, medical, and philosophical developments in the non-Jewish world. Lefin's interests also included *musar*—practical Jewish moral discipline and ethical

refinement—which began solidifying as a literary genre in the 11th century.

Nearly 20 years after Franklin's death, Lefin completed and published a Hebrew text elaborating on Franklin's character-improvement method. First published anonymously in 1808, Lefin's *Sefer Heshbon Ha-nefesh* (Book of Spiritual Accounting, or Accounting of the Soul) was not, however, designed to "be serviceable to People in all Religions," but instead written for the spiritual and moral edification of his fellow Jews, and to assist them in the project of subordinating the Animal Soul to the Divine Soul.

Lefin stated outright that he did not invent the method underlying his book. Yet he neglected to name Franklin or to cite Franklin's autobiography in *Heshbon Ha-nefesh*. Instead, he wrote elusively that "a few years ago a new technique was discovered, and it is a wonderful innovation in this work [of subordinating the Animal Soul], and it seems, God willing, that its impact will spread quickly, as with the invention of the printing press that brought light to the world."

This omission of Franklin's name and of Franklin's autobiography (though Lefin acknowledged both elsewhere) has led to much [confusion in Jewish scholarship](#) about Lefin's source. The Hebrew-English edition of *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh* produced by Feldheim Publishers in 1995, for example, is entirely silent about Franklin's influence. And while Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, et al.'s *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land—The Hebrew Bible in the United States: A Sourcebook* (2019) contains a lengthy excerpt (pp. 64–70) from Franklin's autobiography about virtue and his self-improvement method—thus suggesting that these were principally inspired by Jewish scripture—it altogether ignores Franklin's direct influence on Jewish texts. Franklin specialists, for their part, have been largely oblivious to the subject.

Though basing himself on Franklin's new technique for

character improvement, including the use of grid charts, Lefin diverged from it in several ways. Because Franklin had envisioned his method as universally applicable and as forming the basis for a global “united Party for Virtue,” he wanted a fixed set of 13 virtues that could be focused on by all prospective members. Lefin did not share this concern. Following Franklin, he detailed an initial list of 13 behavioral traits, but Lefin—while making it clear he thought this was an especially effective list, whose individual traits reinforced one another—stressed that these were only examples of what readers might choose to concentrate on. In later pages of *Heshbon Ha-nefesh*, he offered five additional suggestions, including modesty, trust, and generosity. Taking these 18 traits together, one finds that Lefin reproduced all the autobiography’s 13 virtues—though, for example, mention of Socrates and Jesus, whom Franklin presented as models of the virtue of humility, is absent from *Heshbon Ha-nefesh*.

Still, while he discarded Franklin’s ideas of a global “united Party for Virtue,” Lefin did not consider character improvement to be solely a private endeavor. He counseled fathers to monitor their sons’ characters with grid charts for five years—beginning at age 13 (when a boy becomes a *bar mitzvah*) and continuing to age 18 (the age of greater independence)—after which time the sons, aided by their fathers’ observations of their adolescent behavior and of what most needed correction, could embark on their own self-examinations. Lefin also advised that husbands and wives embark on character refinement together; that two friends form character-study partnerships; and that men seek out different teachers who exemplified specific character traits they yearned for, and whom they could emulate.

As Nancy Sinkoff has noted in her excellent article [“Benjamin Franklin in Jewish Eastern Europe: Cultural Appropriation in the Age of the Enlightenment,”](#) Lefin was drawn to Franklin’s method for the same reason that Franklin had been compelled to

devise it. Both had “come to the conclusion that a practical program of behavior modification was necessary to effect individual change” and “that self-improvement required a structured plan of behavior modification.” Because of Franklin’s approach to virtue and religion, Lefin was easily able to adapt the method and make its use part of Jewish practice. Franklin had wanted his system for character improvement to be universally accessible, and there were no obstacles preventing its subsequent incorporation into Judaism. *Heshbon Ha-nefesh* received the approbation of prominent rabbis, was later embraced by the Musar movement—which concentrated on Jewish moral discipline and ethical refinement—and has become one of the many Hebrew texts still studied in *yeshivot*, furthering Franklin’s initial goal of having his invention “be serviceable to People in all Religions.”

At the same time, those who study *Heshbon Ha-nefesh* may not appreciate its connection to Franklin’s autobiography or realize its author was an early *maskil*. The book has been reprinted many times and in many places since 1808, but as far as I know only the 2015 edition put out by Jerusalem’s Mossad Harav Kook has contained any acknowledgment of Franklin. Readers picking up other available editions have needed external information to make the link between Franklin and *Heshbon Ha-nefesh*. And even that edition is unwilling to concede Lefin’s affiliation with the Haskalah, a movement that has accrued vastly negative associations in Orthodox Jewish circles, among which the book is most studied.

Oddly, since the 1930s Franklin has also been the subject of a still-popular antisemitic deception. The myth of his antisemitism first emerged 90 years ago—144 years after his passing—with the appearance of a fraudulent and repeatedly discredited text commonly known as the “[Franklin Prophecy](#).” On February 3, 1934, William Dudley Pelley, the occultist head of the pro-Nazi Silver Legion of America and publisher and editor

of the fascist *Liberation*, ran an article titled “Did Benjamin Franklin Say this about the Hebrews?” It contained a supposed excerpt from the previously unknown diary of Charles Coatesworth Pinckney, South Carolina’s delegate to the Constitutional Convention. As presented by Pelley, the “Private Diary of Charles Pinckney” or “Charles Pinckney’s Diary” recorded a lengthy diatribe against Jews during the Convention, with Franklin describing them as “a great danger for the United States of America” and as “vampires,” and with his calling for the Constitution to bar and expel them from the country, lest in the future they adversely change its form of government. By August 1934, Pelley’s “Franklin Prophecy” was already being republished in Nazi Germany. Nazi leaders and sympathizers helped disseminate the fraud in German, French, and English, and in Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. The “Franklin Prophecy” shows no signs of going away; it is too useful for those who want to hate.

By now, it seems that whatever earlier terror Franklin held for boys in America—who, were it not for Franklin’s impossible model for emulation, “might otherwise have been happy” and enjoyed their “natural rest,” as Twain wrote—has dissipated. Perhaps his standing as an American role model has diminished too. Yet, over 230 years after his death, Franklin’s legacy of character development endures in Jewish thought and practice, even if the fact of this influence is not always understood.

[Table of Contents](#)

Shai Afsai’s articles, short stories, poems, book reviews, and photographs have been published in *Anthropology Today*, *Haaretz*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *Journal of the American Revolution*, *New English Review*, *The Providence Journal*, *Reading Religion*, *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, *Shofar:*

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