



# Philosophical Vignettes from the Political Life of Moses Mendelssohn



by David Shavin

*To think the true, to love the good,  
to do the best.*

Moses Mendelssohn, July 6, 1776

*The happiness of the human race was  
Socrates' sole study.*

Moses Mendelssohn, 1769

How can the “temple of liberty, and beacon of hope” for the world be in mortal jeopardy of ending its days as a dumb, blind giant for the same British Empire families that we defeated? The methods by which evil has insinuated itself upon, and confounded, the good, are not unknowable. Moses Mendelssohn’s life, in thought and action, uniquely conveyed “the pursuit of happiness” in the two decades before, and one decade after, the Declaration of Independence, when that evil was defeated. The enemies whom he showed how to successfully wage war against are, today, those to whom we are in danger of succumbing. The episodes of his life encapsulate in the small what the American experiment is all about.

In an early dialogue, Moses Mendelssohn wrote:



[T]o you, immortal Leibniz, I set up an eternal memorial in my heart! Without your help I would have been lost for ever. I never met you in the flesh, yet your imperishable writings . . . have guided me to the firm path of the true philosophy, to the knowledge of myself and of my origin. They have engraved upon my soul the sacred truths on which my felicity is founded . . . [I]s there any slavery harder to bear than the one in which reason and heart are at loggerheads with one another?

The individual to whom Moses Mendelssohn gave his heartfelt gratitude for his emancipation was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Mendelssohn, a short, hunch-backed Jew, by mastering the higher unity of his heart and his mind, became the powerful, towering intellect of Western civilization during the seven decades between the figures of Leibniz and Friedrich Schiller. There is no other figure during this period who had so thoroughly delved into Leibniz’s thinking, or was so well-immunized against the deficiencies of the well-publicized British empiricism and French materialism.

MOSES MENDELSSOHN, born Sept. 6, 1729, grew up in a Dessau, Germany ghetto, in a time when Jewish communities were suffering from severe external limitations, but even more so, from the devastation that had swept across Europe during the irrationality of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Mysticism—specifically, cabbalism—had gripped an unhealthy percentage of the rural, peasant Jewish populations. Moses Mendelssohn found in the ancient writings of Judaism a place to fight for truth. A new edition of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* was produced in nearby Jessnitz, for the first time in almost two hundred years, in 1742, when Moses was thirteen. The next year, the *Nehmad Ve-Na' im*, an astronomical and geographical treatise by David Gans, a student of Mendelssohn's ancestor Rabbi Moses Isserles, was published. Gans also was an associate of Kepler and Tycho Brahe. Mendelssohn followed his rabbi, David Fraenkel, to Berlin in 1743, where he intensified his search for the truth of the heavens.

Mendelssohn's great-grandson, Wilhelm Hensel, the family biographer, described the situation: "The Christians of those times [1740's Berlin] considered the Jews as little their equals in mind and faculties as in our days [1869] the white inhabitants of America regard the Negroes." Jews were denied education, denied most occupations, denied citizen status, and were the first ones to be blamed for problems. However, Mendelssohn still took the sovereignty of his own mind as primary, and he found that astronomical events did not bend to backward political conditions.

He studied with Israel ben Moses Ha'Levi Samoszcz, who is described by Mendelssohn's biographer, Alexander Altmann,<sup>1</sup> as: "the last representative of the rabbinico-philosophical synthesis that had its heyday in medieval Spain. . . . [A] hostile attitude toward philosophy and secular learning had set in . . . due chiefly to the influence of Kabbala. . . . But Israel Samoszcz reincarnated the old spirit in a noble way . . . he treated mathematical and astronomical passages in the Talmud. . . . An astronomical treatise by him, entitled *Arubot Ha-Shamayim*, remains unpublished." Samoszcz wrote in his patron's house, that of Daniel Itzig, a banker for the Berlin Court. The Itzigs, like the Mendelssohns, were descendants of Rabbi Isserles of Cracow. The Itzigs and the Mendelssohns would prove to have a very fruitful partnership in years to come.

Schiller's beautiful description in *William Tell*, of snatching one's inalienable rights from the heavens, could have had no better exemplification in his day, than that of Moses Mendelssohn. Even Mendelssohn's acclaimed mastery of the "non-Jewish" languages was driven by his

pursuit of astronomy. A fellow student of Samoszcz, Aaron Gumpertz, brought the sixteen-year-old Moses with him to learn Latin, French, and English, in their quest for knowledge of the heavens in texts written in those languages.

Gumpertz was the model for the Jewish hero in *Die Juden* (1749), an early work by Mendelssohn's life-long collaborator Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. The twenty-year-old Lessing used humor to introduce a Jew, who is a man of culture and virtue. He saves a baron's life, who exclaims, "Oh, how worthy of esteem would the Jews be, if they resembled you!" The Jew, modeled upon Gumpertz, answers: "And how worthy of love would the Christians be, if they all possessed your qualities!" Mendelssohn began his collaboration with Lessing, from an introduction by Gumpertz in 1754. The story is that Mendelssohn was recommended to Lessing as a chess partner!

## Champions of Leibniz

THE PARTNERSHIP of Mendelssohn and Lessing was forged in battle, when the two twenty-five year olds found that the Berlin Academy, the last major holdout of Leibniz's influence in the academies of Europe, was being overwhelmed by ugly, thuggish operations. Leibniz had formed scientific academies as the center of nation-building in Berlin and St. Petersburg, and had made major interventions into similar institutions in Paris, Vienna, Rome, and elsewhere. The main outpost of the Venetian counter-intelligence against Leibniz, was based out of the British Royal Society, with virulent operations from the 1710's onwards. In 1740, the Berlin Academy was still accepting members with Leibnizian outlooks, e.g., Johann Suessmilch, who based upon his demographic study of the need for the state to promote population growth, explicitly upon the principle of Genesis, to be fruitful, and multiply, and have dominion over nature.

Beginning the early 1740's, the assault upon the Berlin Academy was conducted by such as Maupertuis, Euler, Voltaire, and Algarotti. In 1748, Maupertuis and Count



Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Dohna, in a political fix, awarded the prize essay against Leibniz's philosophy to von Justi, for (what Euler was to call) the "most complete refutation of the monadists." Most would-be defenders of Leibniz, probably including the nineteen-year-old Mendelssohn, expected Christian Wolff to defend Leibniz's monad philosophy. However, Wolff, who had sponsored Suessmilch's membership into the Academy a few years earlier, now yielded to political pressure. Euler's smug description in letters to Frederick



G.W. Leibniz

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the Great's daughter (1761) was: "[Wolff's] followers, who were then much more numerous and more formidable than at present, exclaimed in high terms against the partiality and injustice of the Academy; and their chief had well nigh proceeded to launch the thunder of a philosophical anathema against it. I do not

now recollect to whom we are indebted for the care of averting this disaster."

With this travesty established, Maupertuis felt emboldened to hijack Leibniz's development of the least action principle, and to trivialize it as an extension of Occam's razor. His 1750 work, *Cosmologie*, promoted a conception of physical action that minimized scalar values—the equivalent of "God, the Lazy Creator, as the Chief Cost Accountant." It took another two years, for the scientific community to accept this ugly butchery of the Academy.<sup>2</sup>

Mendelssohn and Lessing publicly intervened into the Academy in this increasingly insane situation. When the Academy announced in 1753 a new prize-competition for the next two years—which proposed treating Leibniz's "system of optimism" as equivalent to Alexander Pope's statement, "all is good"—Mendelssohn and Lessing collaborated on a diabolical attempt to restore sanity, satirizing the Academy in their "Pope, A Metaphysician!" Besides making clear that Leibniz's philosophy was a bit deeper than the didactic and simplistic Pope, and making fun of the attempt to compare the two, Mendelssohn also set a trap in the essay. He inserted a provably-false minor point about Leibniz, where the only way to prove it so would be to produce a suppressed letter by Leibniz, which Maupertuis' faction had taken great care not to have divulged.<sup>3</sup> Their essay was published

anonymously in 1755, undercutting Maupertuis' faction in their attempt to rub salt into the wounds of Leibniz, and making Mendelssohn and Lessing the proven leaders of science and culture, while in their mid-twenties.

## Freed from the Prison

MENDELSSOHN had worked diligently for years, and found that Leibniz had freed him from the prison where reason and heart are at constant loggerheads with each other. The essays that Mendelssohn composed in 1754, including "On the Sublime and Naive in the Sciences of Beauty," against Voltaire's influence, were the deepest studies of Leibniz since his death in 1716. It is here that Leibniz's character, Palemon, declaims the above-cited passage: ". . . to you, immortal Leibniz, I set up an eternal memorial in my heart! Without your help I would have been lost for ever. I never met you in the flesh, yet your imperishable writings . . . have guided me to the firm path of the true philosophy, to the knowledge of myself and of my origin. They have engraved upon my soul the sacred truths on which my felicity is founded. . . ."

Mendelssohn thought that the French and the English suffered from their aversion to Leibniz. He criticized the French for being "too fickle to read through a systematic treatise with due effort." In reviewing Burke's work on the sublime and the beautiful, he notes: "It would be desirable that the English study our philosophy as profoundly as we consult their observations . . . the French philosophize with wit, the English with sentiment, and the Germans alone are sufficiently sober to philosophize with the intellect."

Mendelssohn's assessment of his world's culture, was that it was suffering from a retreat from the more powerful "*analysis situs*" method of Leibniz. Even the Wolff version of Leibniz's doctrines suffered from a lack of actual scientific practice. His first contribution to Friedrich Nicolai's journal *Literaturbriefe* (March 1, 1759), warned that science was being taught and accepted in much too easy a manner. Hence, previously discovered truths themselves would be held as a



Pierre-Louis de Maupertuis

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prejudice, and the power of Leibniz’s method would be lost. As a result of this mental vacuum, cold logic and out-of-control feeling states would alternate for possession of the victim—a condition of his world that Mendelssohn would never cease waging war upon.

Between 1757 and 1765, Mendelssohn composed for the journals of his collaborator Nicolai, twenty-one articles on science and art, and over 112 letters on literature. One of these letters reviewed Frederick the Great’s *Poesies diverses* (1760), citing the king for the shallowest of metaphysical systems, including the denial of the immortality of the soul. Further, Mendelssohn, writing in a journal dedicated to uplifting the German language, chided the king for his faddish addiction to French. The implications of a hunchback Jew defending German culture with a deeper and more literate German than the king, were not lost. Nicolai’s *Literaturbriefe* was put on the proscribed index, specifically for Mendelssohn’s “disrespect” to the king. The accuser was the king’s advisor, von Justi, the same, arranged winner of the 1747, anti-Leibniz essay contest renouncing monads.

In 1759, Voltaire published his sophomoric attack on Leibniz, *Candide*. Mendelssohn’s first book-length publication, *Philosophical Writings*, in 1761, turned Voltaire’s escalation into a rout against Voltaire. His character Kallisthen is asked, “Tell me the truth, as German and metaphysically minded as you are, did you not have to laugh?” To which he responds, “Who can deny a Voltaire laughter?” Then he explains Voltaire’s operation as being based upon the Greek sophist Gorgias, who “said, ‘One must destroy the laughable by the serious, and the serious by the laughable.’ . . . Since the time of Gorgias many a sophist has known how to make successful use of this device, at least the first half of it.” Mendelssohn makes clear that it is time for the type of powerful thinking that would effect the second half of the statement. For, “a joke that survives no serious investigation is surely false wit.”

Mendelssohn develops Leibniz’s “best of all possible

worlds” at some length. His honesty and humor in diagnosing the danger to Europe’s cultural life is refreshing. At one point, his dialogue reads:

PEOPLE AT the present time must have completely forgotten to consider metaphysics from this perspective [of profoundness and grace]. God, in what disdain it languishes. . . . I am flabbergasted and cannot find the reasons why it has sunk so low in the present day.

CANNOT FIND? And hence they must lie so hidden that one has to search for them? No, my dearest friend, no. You have undoubtedly overlooked a source from which we, unfortunately, must derive several evils. I have in mind our slavish imitation of a people that appears, as it were, made to seduce us. [The French party of Voltaire, Maupertuis, and Encyclopaedists] does not have a single metaphysical mind to show for it since P. Malebranche. . . . [They] saw that rigorous and fundamental matters are not its expertise. Hence, it made the stylishness of manners its sole concern, and made a practice of heaping the most biting sarcasm on those who indulged in profound meditations and did not know how to live in the society according to a certain exaggerated tenderness of taste. . . . They wrote works “pour les Dames” [e.g., Algarotti’s *Newton for Ladies*—DS] . . . and very wittily derided the gloomy heads whose writings continued to contain something more than the beautiful sex wanted to read.

And Germans, with the king in the lead, tailed after this: “Germans who would gladly give away half their intellect if the French would only concede to them that they know how to live.”

It was at this time (1760/1) that Euler was propagandizing the court with his attacks on Leibniz’s monads in his *Letters* . . . *Addressed to a German Princess*, using the excuse of writing to a female, to present a dumbed-down version of the issues. (Contrast this with Leibniz’s instructions to his royal, female students.) Mendelssohn certainly knew of the works, activities, and methods of Algarotti, Voltaire, and Euler, and had a pretty good handle on the problems around the court.

With his 1761 publication, Mendelssohn had seized the offensive. The Academy’s next prize-essay was more respectable: “Whether metaphysical truths . . . are susceptible of the same evidence as mathematical truths?” In May 1763, Mendelssohn’s essay, insisting upon the power of the mind to analyze concepts, and the



Frederick II,  
King of Prussia

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Voltaire

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Leonhard Euler

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common origin of competent metaphysical and mathematical reasoning, won first prize, over Immanuel Kant's essay. (Kant would always play second fiddle to Mendelssohn, only gaining acceptance upon Mendelssohn's death.) Mendelssohn's included argument—that we constantly train our morality in accordance with reason, until we can fulfill the moral law without any apparent effort, having created a second, and higher, nature—was an argument that would be further developed by Friedrich Schiller a generation later.

### *Phaedon, the 'Anti-Candide'*

DURING THIS same period, Mendelssohn translated part of Plato's *Republic* and all of his *Phaedo* dialogue. He had begun the study of Greek in 1759, reading Homer and Plato over the next two years. He announced his *Phaedo* project to Lessing as early as December 1760, even though *Phaedon* was not published until 1767. Mendelssohn's decision to present a translation of Plato's work on the immortality of the soul, strengthened by a Leibnizian re-working of Plato's arguments, was a project to deepen and widen his culture, and thus to inoculate it from the sophistries of Voltaire and Frederick.

Mendelssohn's attention, in 1760, had been drawn to the cynical and banal treatment of Plato by the anti-Leibniz school. Hamann's *Socratic Memorabilia for the Boredom of the Public* speaks for itself. Another item, Wegelin's *The Last Dialogues of Socrates and His Friends*, was panned by Mendelssohn as missing any actual Socratic dialogue: "All participants . . . speak in one voice; the characters are without life, their ideas without truth, and the speech they utter is unnatural." The biographer Altmann paraphrases Mendelssohn's critique: "The multitude of flowerets [by Wegelin], which robbed [Plato's] language of all naturalness, was the opposite of the spirited tongue of a philosopher enthused by the truth, whose powerful eloquence flowed from the heart and moved the heart."

Mendelssohn heard in Plato's dialogues, a depth of truth that required a multi-voiced structure to communicate the process and power of truth to the reader [see Box]. It is perhaps a not-unrelated matter that he had initiated keyboard instruction with Bach's student Kirnberger at this time. (Of course, Mendelssohn cannot simply immerse himself in Bach; he also writes his essay on constructing a well-tempered pianoforte at this time!) Clearly, Mendelssohn was fascinated with the power of Plato's compositions: "His prose, even where it becomes poetic, flows with such tranquil majesty that a non-expert might think the phrase had cost him no effort. I never read Plato without feeling ashamed at ever having

put pen to paper, for I have written enough in my life at least to be able to see the busy hand of the artist through the veil of naturalness."

A beautiful example of Mendelssohn's grasp of the truth and eloquence that flows from the heart, can be found in his description during this period to his good friend Thomas Abbt (to whom the *Phaedon* was dedicated). Written two weeks after his first child, Sara, passed away, it speaks to Mendelssohn's profound belief in this, the best of all possible worlds, and to his passionate, overwhelming grasp on the individuality of each monad:

Death has knocked at my door and robbed me of a child, which has lived but eleven innocent months; but God be praised, her short life was happy and full of bright promise. My friend, the dear child did not live these eleven months in vain. Her mind had even in that short time made quite an astonishing progress; from a little animal that wept and slept, she grew in to the bud of a reasoning creature. As the points of the young blades press through the hard earth in spring, one could see in her the breaking out of the first passions. She showed pity, hatred, love, and admiration, she

### 'Philosophy, the most excellent music'

*In Mendelssohn's Platonic dialogue "Phaedon," Socrates argues that man should take his cue from his Creator, who "implanted a rational soul" in humans, because the Supreme Being "must deny his own being, its self-subsisting goodness, if he could associate an evil intention with his own works; what god can renounce his own nature?" Philosophy aids man in carrying out the "sacred duty" to discern how his finite, mortal existence, is part of the Eternal Being's plan:*

For this reason, dear Cebes, I have said philosophy is the most excellent music, as it learns us to direct our thoughts and actions so as to make them accord as perfectly as possible with the views of our master. If music is a science which unites the weak with the strong, the harsh with the soft, the agreeable with the disagreeable in harmony, then certainly no music can be more admirable and excellent than philosophy, which teaches us not only to bring our thoughts and actions into perfect and wonderful harmony among themselves, but also to make the conduct of a finite accord with the views of an infinite being, and the ideas of the inhabitants of earth correspond with the sentiments of omniscience.

understood the language of those who spoke, and endeavored to make known her thoughts to them. Is no trace of all this left in the whole of nature? You will laugh at my simplicity, and see in this talk the weakness of a man who, seeking comfort, finds it nowhere but in his own imagination. It may be; I cannot believe that God has set us on His earth like the foam on the wave.

Altmann notes that: “Sixteen years later [and after six living children] he still recalled this child’s memory amid tears,” in a letter to a friend.

Mendelssohn and Lessing had explicitly discussed countering Voltaire’s attack on Leibniz with an “Anti-Candide,” as later reported by Mendelssohn:

I recall that my late friend, soon after *Candide* appeared, had the passing idea of writing a counterpart to it, or rather a continuation of it, in which he meant to show by a sequel of events that all the evils that had been multiplied by Voltaire at the expense of a defamed Providence in the end turned out for the best and were found to be in accord with the most wise designs.

While Lessing never wrote this particular sequel, Mendelssohn chose, as Plato did, to focus on the immortality of the soul as the basis for uprooting the cynical disease of his society. Mendelssohn breathed new life into his world, with his Leibnizian treatment of Plato’s arguments.

A movement arose from the *Phaedon*. From its inception, May 1767, it went through multiple editions, reprints, and translations throughout Europe in Dutch, French, Italian, Danish, Russian, English, and Hebrew. Mozart was given his copy in 1781 by a friend of Mendelssohn, Fanny Itzig Arnstein. Goethe worked through his copy in 1770, distinguishing its Platonic and Mendelssohnian strains. Critics tried to dissect it as being neither Plato nor Leibniz, but it was phenomenally successful, as it made the most profound and impassioned truths respecting man and nature intimately accessible. Mendelssohn had vanquished the modern sophists, the French materialists, and cynics epitomized by Voltaire.

One particular response to the *Phaedon* was especially poignant. An eighty-two-year-old Jew named Raphael Levi opened discourse with Mendelssohn about his decision to make such deep philosophical issues available to the general reader. Levi, a mathematician and astronomer, had, as a young man, been Leibniz’s pupil and secretary, living for six years in Leibniz’s household. As Altmann describes, “He was the only mourner at Leibniz’s unceremonious funeral in 1716, and it was through him that the exact location of Leibniz’s grave could be established later.”

## The ‘Lavater Affair’

MENDELSSOHN’S success made him the central target of Venetian operations. The initial attack came, July 1767, from Duke Ludwig Eugen of Württemberg. Mendelssohn, in featuring Socrates’ love of virtue and obedience to the Creator’s laws, had written that Socrates had known the Creator “in the most vivid manner by the purest light of reason.” The Duke objected that Socrates, a pagan, could be capable of knowing God in a supreme way. Mendelssohn insisted upon the power of reason to lead men to virtue, and to a “love of the good and noble.” It was as clear to him as the eternal laws of God’s workings were from looking up at the heavens.

This argument did not get too far with Ludwig and his brother Karl. Ludwig had just failed in an attempt, with Prince Taxis and Prince von Fuerstenberg, to detour Leopold and Wolfgang Mozart to the Thurn und Taxis estate in Regensburg. Meanwhile, his brother Karl Eugen, deeply in debt to a usurer, was in Venice trying to gamble his way out. It may be poetic justice that the usurer who had Karl Eugen in his clutches was Voltaire himself. Karl would later make his name by imprisoning the pro-American Revolution activist, Christian Schubart, and also arresting Schubart’s young collaborator, Friedrich Schiller.<sup>4</sup> Karl Eugen and Ludwig Eugen retreated, however, from any further direct disputation with Mendelssohn.

But, beginning with the Swiss theologian Johann Caspar Lavater’s published challenge (August 1769) to Mendelssohn, to either refute Christianity, or convert, and continuing until his death, Mendelssohn would face hypocritical arguments of the form: “If you are right in your reasoning about universal truths, then you could not really be a Jew, or at least what we’ll have a Jew be; so, why don’t we drop the substance of your argument, and you be honest and convert.”

Lavater claimed that Socrates would have refuted Christianity or convert, and so should Mendelssohn—this despite Mendelssohn’s explicit argument that Socrates had refused to undermine the secondary aspects of another’s faith unless there was evil to be rooted out that was standing in the way of good to be accomplished. Mendelssohn held that proving there were imperfections



Johann Caspar Lavater

in others was simply a vain exercise for the ego.

Mendelssohn wrote to Lavater, Dec. 24, 1769, that he wouldn't engage in refuting Christianity, out of "my respect for the moral character of its founder." He had deliberately argued for the immortality of a "pagan," Socrates, because there was a "poisoning breath of hypocrisy and superstition" in religions as they exist, that had to be dealt with. "I could love and admire . . . a Confucius or Solon . . . according to the principles of my religion, without hitting upon the ridiculous idea of wanting to convert" him. "To contest such [religious] doctrines publicly because we regard them to be prejudices, is the same thing as undermining, without proper safeguards, the foundation of a building, in order to ascertain whether it is firm and secure. One who cares more about the welfare of men than about his own glory, will hesitate" on such matters. Two months later, he would write: "Believe me, Sir, it does not befit either of us . . . to give a malicious kind of joy to the enemies of all that is good. . . . First, let us wait till the truths we hold in common are sufficiently spread; then only . . . debate on the points that divide us."

The Göttingen physicist/astronomer Georg Lichtenberg commented: "Nothing antagonizes me more than to see a young, importunate, injudicious babbler like Lavater upset the peace of mind of a thinker like Mendelssohn in order to gain heaven. It is better to serve the world with one's hands and head, as Mendelssohn does, than to assail it with volumes of enthusiasm." Lichtenberg had researched Franklin's electrical experiments, and had some knowledge about serving "the world with one's hands and head." His magazine was a key source of reports on developments in America; later, he would be a tutor of Alexander von Humboldt.

Lavater was the proto-typical "enthusiast" ("Schwärmer") of the period. For almost two decades he would occasionally nag Mendelssohn, and then be profuse in his apologies. Lavater seemed to have

two known controllers: his Zurich theological school, and a Berlin group of theologians around Frederick the Great. His main point of control seems to be his indoctrination that his salvation personally, and the Second Coming in general, was contingent upon converting the Jews, Mendelssohn in particular. When Lavater yielded to Mendelssohn's peace proposal, the Zurich group egged him on; and, finally, when peace had been made, they caused to be published, anonymously, the "private" 1764 report the Zurich school had on file by then-theological candidates Lavater and Felix Hess. The students had interviewed Mendelssohn, and submitted the paranoid report: "[H]e is nevertheless so much surrounded by an impregnable custody and garrison as it were of prejudices against our divine religion," that only a miracle of God will convert him. Lavater was dealing with Berlin theologians who were already on the alert about Mendelssohn's victories (against the Academy, Euler, and Voltaire). The Court Chaplains Sack and Diterich were tracking Mendelssohn; evidently, they were trying to impose a covert ostracism of Mendelssohn: they had even warned the Christian theologian Johann Eberhard that he had been seen in Mendelssohn's company!

When Lavater admitted to Mendelssohn, March 1770, that he was wrong, and that he had desired to please his Swiss friends, others stepped forward. One, Kölbele, wrote two public attacks on Mendelssohn's "deism." Kölbele had earlier prepared an unpublished work called *Antiphaedon*, because, "Herr Mendelssohn furnishes an erroneous history of Socrates. . . . I know the soul's immortality from revelation. But Herr Mendelssohn? Let him reflect." Mendelssohn's challenge to go beyond "reflection" and to deliberate, to take up the Creator's divine gift of reason to do moral work, made some lazier minds nervous. The agitated Kölbele had been elected an honorary member of the British Royal Society in 1752, whence he explicitly thanked them with his dumbed-down exposition, *Outline of Religion* (1764), presented in the form of the "letters to a young girl" fad. Dealing with immortality by actually acting in this world, as Socrates had,



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"Lavater and Lessing Visit Moses Mendelssohn," engraving after the painting by Moritz Daniel Oppenheim (1856).

from the standpoint of eternity, was not in Kölbele's book.

At this time, 1770/1, Mendelssohn was heavily reworking his essay "On the Sublime and Naive" for a republication of his 1761 *Philosophical Writings*: "Grace, or the high degree of beauty in motion, is likewise allied to the naive . . . [T]he springs of the soul and the stirrings of the heart . . . operate in the same unforced manner, harmonize with each other in the same gentle way, and develop in the same unartificial fashion. Hence the ideas of innocence and moral naturalness are always allied to noble grace." It would be left to Friedrich Schiller to further develop these concepts; for Mendelssohn, the hunchback, the model of noble grace, did break under the massive pressures. In the early spring of 1771, Mendelssohn suffered a temporary paralysis, diagnosed then as a congestion of blood in his brain, for which he endured five years of treatments, and had to restrain himself from sustained intellectual concentration.

Two months before Mendelssohn's paralysis, he had been proposed for membership in the Berlin Academy by Johann Sulzer, who was himself a student of Wolff and Baumgartner on aesthetics, and collaborator of J.S. Bach's student Kirnberger. Mendelssohn had carried on his cultural warfare for two decades, in the hours after managing a silk factory. A sane society would provide such a thinker a position that would allow him to carry on his society's work full-time. Frederick the Great delayed any action on Sulzer's proposal. After seven months of silence from Frederick, Sulzer's resolution was voted up a second time by the Academy. At that point, the Saxon cabinet minister, Baron von Fritsche, insisted on meeting with Mendelssohn at Frederick the Great's Potsdam palace, where Mendelssohn had never been allowed—thereby, forcing the issue. However, Frederick refused to accompany his guest for the meeting with Mendelssohn, and never did meet the greatest mind in his realm. The Academy took the hint, and never implemented their vote to re-submit Mendelssohn's name for the second time. Mendelssohn recovered from the episode; Frederick never did.

### The *Phaedon* Movement

THE PHAEDON had created a movement throughout Europe. The "German Socrates" was the living embodiment of several intersecting principles: the Creator's light of reason shone on every man, like the stars above; the path for any oppressed soul to gain freedom is through the best of culture; and, the "least action" pathway for the dominant culture to progress, is to search for its problem areas, its remaining unsolved problems, and come to a Socratic "self-

knowledge" of its previous limitations. Whether it be the Athenian stone-carver, Socrates, re-examining the received wisdom of the time, or Martin Luther King, declaiming "profound and impassioned ideas respecting man and nature," the unique capability to permanently alter history for the better is unmistakable.

Mendelssohn's first published work, four years after his 1771 medical attack, was occasioned by an admirer of his *Phaedon*. The former Danish royal governor of Oldenburg, Rochus Friedrich, requested Mendelssohn's thoughts on A. Crusius's explanation of the workings of a spiritualist named Schoepfer. Crusius's claim to fame was an early, 1745 attack on Leibniz on behalf of the Berlin Academy. In unpacking Crusius's straightforward reliance upon an eyewitness to Schoepfer's apparitions, Mendelssohn distinguished between the errors of eyewitnesses, the workings and failures of the human mind, and the optical illusions of "magic lanterns" and the like. (Both Schiller and Edgar Allan Poe would also have occasion to use popular delusions to make profound points about gaining control over one's mental and emotional processes.) The resulting essay, "Enthusiast, Visionary, Fanatic," distinguished among three different diseases the mind and heart are prey to; and it examined systematically the interaction between the overall geometry of our mental development, and the incidental particularities and moods we experience. His apposition of a healthy enthusiasm ("*Begeisterun*"), to a fanaticism ("*Schwärmerei*"), is developed here. His comment on Crusius's essay refers to "mysterious practices and rituals. Their entire soul is excited, as it were, to a high pitch of expectancy . . . the more amiable and benevolent. . . , the more chimerical the hopes by which they allow themselves to be deceived."

How much of Mendelssohn's work was studied directly by Friedrich Schiller is not known by this author. It would seem to have been quite extensive. Of note here, however, is that just prior to Schiller's novella *The Ghost-Seeer*, a friend and former schoolmate of Schiller's, C.P. Conz, produced one of the earliest biographies of Mendelssohn, a "lyric-didactic poem in four cantos." Also, during Schiller's studies as a medical student, Mendelssohn had published (March 1778) an essay on a new controversy created by Lavater, physiognomy. Mendelssohn was happily provoked on the subject of psycho-physical parallelism, and he thought there must be a correlation, but that the devil was in the details.<sup>5</sup> Instead of reading innate qualities from people's outer characteristics, he asked, how should we cultivate our faculties to refine our tastes, and what kind of education toward an appreciation of the sublime was necessary for a soul to achieve true happiness. The "*Schwärmer*" Lavater

## The Translation Project

had trouble refining his tastes. He waxed poetic on a profile of Mendelssohn included in his work, concluding his physiognomic analysis: “Yes, I see him . . . who some day, in unison with Plato and Moses, will recognize and worship the crucified Lord of Glory!”

Mendelssohn’s conviction that the Creator had equipped humans with the capacity to harmonize one’s mind and heart, was central to his optimism on forms of government, and his abhorrence of fundamentalism in both religious and political guises. The problem with “Lavater” types, “*Schwärmer*,” was reflected in the success of the American Revolution and the consequent Constitutional Convention of 1787, in comparison to the travesty of the French revolution, especially after whatever more moderate factions (e.g., Lafayette, the Girondists) were removed from the French scene (1791/2), and free reign was given to the passions of the manipulated mob. This would later become a central concern of Schiller’s statecraft.<sup>6</sup>

A true member of the *Phaedon* movement was August Hennings, who, in December, 1776, became a Justizrat in Denmark’s State Department of Economic Affairs, and inspector of the industrial enterprises in Copenhagen. Mendelssohn also helped to get Hennings’ treatise “On Reason” published (1778). When Hennings had been posted to Dresden, Mendelssohn visited him (August 1776), and Hennings introduced him to another admirer, the farmer/astronomer, J.G. Palitzsch. Through self-study, reading Wolff’s philosophy, the farmer had learned astronomy, and had built astronomical instruments for his use. He became a corresponding member of the St. Petersburg Academy.

Finally, Mendelssohn’s judgment was solicited on the treatise of another *Phaedon* admirer, Baron von Dalberg, the governor of Erfurt. His “Reflections on the Universe” (1777), presented his version of Leibniz and Plato. Mendelssohn explained to the governor that an undifferentiated love that assimilates all in nature, arrived at the universal too quickly, making all the same. Hence, it “cancels the manifold . . . [U]nity is the greater the more of the manifold is connected and the more intimately this is done. When this connection of the manifold is brought about in a harmonious fashion, unity passes into perfection.” Nature tends to, not “the obliteration of differences,” but, “the connection of the manifold.” This was also Mendelssohn’s thinking about physics, science, nations, and religions. As he would write in response to the next major “Lavater”-style attack, challenging him to merge into a “religious union” with Christianity: “Let us not falsely pretend to be in agreement, seeing that the manifold is obviously the plan and purpose of Providence.”

MENDELSSOHN’S prime activity from 1774 to 1782 was his Torah translation project, comprising a translation into German of the first five books of the Bible, together with extended commentary. His stated purpose was that Jews needed “a better translation and explanation of the holy scriptures than they had before. This is the first step toward culture, from which, alas, my nation is kept at such a distance that one might almost despair at the possibility of an improvement.” Mendelssohn did not despair. He challenged Jews to address their situation

openly, and realize that centuries of being subjugated had left them with polyglot, less-literate versions of Aramaic, Greek, Arabic, and German (Yiddish). In reality, in the process, they had lost an appreciation of the original Hebrew poetry, and the best method to regain that appreciation was to learn the highest quality of German. It was time to cease being second-class subjects, and to bring forth their submerged talents.



The Granger Collection

Title page, Mendelssohn’s German translation, *Book of Psalms* (1783).

Such a bold proposal was the work of the period of the American Revolution. Mendelssohn expected new troubles from Jews and non-Jews, and he expressed the fear that he felt: “I put my life in my hand. . . . ‘I gave my back to the smiters.’ Alas, I knew how much opposition, hatred, persecution, etc., is engendered among the public by the least innovation.” The sustained assaults of his last four years were yet to come.

The translation project created a core of collaborators around Mendelssohn. One was Hartwig Wessely, a rabbi who had approached Mendelssohn in 1768, inspired by the *Phaedon*, and wishing to translate it into Hebrew. He wrote a treatise in 1778 on the project in progress, which (in the biographer Altmann’s summary) made several points: live Hebrew had been destroyed by the Romans; Talmudic word-splitting was not a substitute; the clarity and beauty of the language and of the meaning were obscured; and both Hebrew and German would come to life by this project. Another of Mendelssohn’s key collab-

orators was David Friedländer, who ran another silk factory. He had married a daughter of Daniel Itzig, and together with his brother-in-law, Isaac Daniel Itzig, in 1778 he planned (and in 1781, established) the Berlin Jewish Freischule, where Hebrew, German, French, geography, and bookkeeping were taught.

### *Nathan the Wise*

BEFORE THIS project saw the light of day, Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise*, modelled upon his friend Moses, was published in 1779. Lessing had been living away from Mendelssohn's Berlin since 1760. In May of 1770, Lessing became librarian of the Bibliotheca Augusta in Wolfenbüttel. Between Wolfenbüttel and nearby Hanover, Lessing now had access to many of Leibniz's papers—most of which remain unpublished even today. When Lessing issued an edition of Leibniz's *Defense of the Trinity by Means of New Logical Inventions*, 1774, Mendelssohn provided Lessing with a better understanding of Leibniz's logical inventions, making for a better reading of the Trinity.

In 1776, Lessing had taken on a wife, Eva König, and also plunged into a fight to the finish with the hypocritical theologians. Mendelssohn would write (to Hennings): "One has to be a hardened fighter like Lessing to be able to stand [the theologians]. I for one would be patient and steady enough to protect my skin against a furious swarm of bees rather than against these bellicose apostles of peace." In December 1777, when Mendelssohn visited, in what would be the last meetings of the two "brothers-in-Leibniz" (vide *Morgenstunden*), much was discussed of which we can only surmise. Mendelssohn had concerns about Lessing's choices that only personal deliberations could address. Four years earlier, he had remonstrated with Lessing about his decision to organize within the Freemasons: "From our early youth we have been seeking the truth. Ever since we became friends we have sought it jointly, with all the faithfulness it wants to be pursued. Now there might be truths that Lessing swore in the most solemn fashion not to reveal to his friend of twenty-five years standing." And in November 1777, on the way to their meeting: "I have read your *Dialogues on Freemasonry*. . . . I am convinced that what men conceal from men is rarely worth being searched for. . . . [However, your work has produced] more proper ideas about an institution that for some time past had begun to appear almost contemptible to me."

Mendelssohn took leave just before Christmas, 1777. On Christmas Day, Lessing's first child was born, but this child died two days later, and his only bride never regained consciousness, dying after two weeks. Lessing never recovered.

In July 1778, Lessing's pen was censored, and, when his battle with the theologians was ended, *Nathan the Wise* was put on paper. Lessing wrote to his brother Karl in Berlin, "I suggest that if you and Moses would like to be acquainted with [the new play], you look up Boccaccio's *Decameron* [on the story of the three rings]. I think that I have invented a very interesting episode for it, that it will read very well, and that I shall, no doubt, thereby play the theologians a trick worse than ten more fragments." And later: "It will be as moving a piece as any I have made, and Herr Moses was perfectly right, in his judgment that derision and laughter would not fit" [SEE Box].

Lessing knew that his play violated his own precepts about the reasoning of comedy, or the passion of tragedy, and so he called it a "dramatic poem." (Schiller would later critique Lessing on this point.) Notwithstanding its dramatic weakness, however, *Nathan* proved so powerful that, in 1779, it was not being performed anywhere, and

### The 'Parable of the Rings' from *Nathan the Wise*

The conflict among Jews, Christians, and Muslims is addressed in a parable re-told in Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, a drama set in Jerusalem at the time of the Crusades. According to the parable, a loving father, unable to choose which amongst his three sons should receive the prized bequest of a most precious ring, has copies made, presenting one to each, so all three think themselves the favored ("chosen") one. Later, the sons quarrel as to who has the father's true inheritance, and the judge protests an insoluble riddle.

Lessing develops the story further than traditional Christian and Jewish versions leave it. Lessing's judge realizes that, since the genuine ring bestows upon the wearer the love of God and of men, none of the three quarreling sons can truly be in possession. He exhorts them:

. . . And know:

That you, all three, he loved; and loved alike;  
Since two of you he'd not humiliate to favor one.

They should reflect upon their father's love for all three, and act so as to bring into being that which they sought from the ring. This is the ecumenical lesson Lessing delivers to the warring children of the God of Abraham.

‘The Spirit of 1776’  
—America, Berlin, Vienna

banned outright in Vienna! It was even rumored there that Jews had paid Lessing 1,000 ducats for his fight with the theologians, and his stepson, Theodor König of Vienna, had to publish a refutation. Given this environment, it is no surprise that Mozart would encounter such hostilities when he created a *Nathan*-like transformation in his *Abduction from the Seraglio* in 1782.<sup>7</sup> Lessing’s description suffices: “Should one say: this play teaches . . . there have been people among diverse nations who disregarded all revealed religion and were good people nevertheless; should one add that it had obviously been my intention to present people of this kind as less repulsive than vulgar Christians generally consider them: I shall have little to object.” Mozart’s circles (e.g., Baron von Gemmingen at Countess Thun’s) would soon entertain themselves with recitations of *Nathan*.

Mendelssohn, as usual, would put it best, in his *Morgenstunden*:

How dearly our immortal friend had to pay for this magnificent poem in praise of Providence . . . ! Alas, it embittered his last days, and it may well be the case that it shortened his precious life. . . . [I]ntrigue penetrated from studies and bookstores into the private homes of his friends and acquaintances and whispered into every one’s ear that Lessing had insulted Christianity. . . . In reality, his *Nathan*, let us admit it, redounds to the honor of Christendom. The degree of enlightenment and education attained by a people must be high indeed if one of its members can soar to such sublimity of sentiment. . . . It is strange: among the superstitious French, *Candide* did not have, by a long way, the evil consequences for Voltaire . . . that Lessing incurred by his *Nathan* among the most enlightened Germans [in his last twenty months], and the results this produced in his mind were sad.

Lessing’s last year was increasingly isolated. He died Feb. 15, 1781, just barely fifty-two. Mendelssohn would later write: “For as long as I knew him . . . Lessing had never complained of his contemporaries’ ingratitude, of not being treated justly. . . . At all times he was the friend who offered, but did not seek, comfort.” His letter to Lessing’s brother Karl read: “I render thanks to Providence for the blessing it conferred upon me by introducing me so early in life . . . to a man who formed my soul.”

But Nathan, the dramatic character invented by Lessing, lived on. In Vienna, among the Mendelssohn/Mozart circles, the geologist Georg Forster described the group that gathered at Countess Thun’s—including Mozart, Joseph von Sonnenfels,<sup>8</sup> and Baron von Gemmingen—as “the kind of human beings about whom Nathan says ‘it is enough for them to be human.’ . . . [They] did not ask me if I was learned and wise, but only if I was happy, and if I knew what was necessary for happiness!”

The pursuit of happiness, Leibniz’s concept,<sup>9</sup> and actual humans free of feudal social restrictions—this volatile combination had been set loose in America, and among Mendelssohn’s circles in Berlin and Vienna. From the spring of 1781 to the spring of 1782, the world turned upside down on the British Empire. In America, the 1781 campaign by Washington’s forces on land in concert with the French naval forces, trapped Cornwallis’s army at Yorktown. The story in Berlin and Vienna is equally amazing.

That spring, Mendelssohn arranged for a young ministerial councillor, Christian Wilhelm Dohm, to compose a treatise on citizenship for Jews. In 1776, Dohm was a founder of a journal, *Deutsches Museum*, whose objective was “to make Germany better acquainted with herself and more alert to her various constitutions; to arouse among us a sense of public spirit; and to offer political and statistical data and inquiries.” A 1778 essay promoted the concept of natural law, while criticizing the limitations of the physiocratic movement. Dohm had supported Mauvillon in his 1776 fight against a propagandizer for the British Lord North, who had slandered the American Revolution; and he moved to Kassel, where his fellow cameralist Mauvillon worked. Dohm also served as a political correspondent for Wieland’s *Deutscher Merkur* in Weimar. Dohm championed destruction of the British monopoly on trade, leading to the expansion of trade and industry overall. His appointment in 1779 as a councillor in the department of foreign affairs, and as the registrar of the secret archives, is indicative of an extensive pro-American faction.

He worked on the treatise with Mendelssohn during the summer of 1781. At one point, he requested Mendelssohn to provide him the “report on the outstanding bravery shown by a Sephardic Jew,” in the Dutch battle against the British. Whether Jews could violate their Sabbath in their service in the military had been one of the objections to their citizenship. The chief rabbi of Amsterdam had given blessings for Dutch Jews to volunteer for the naval fights against the British. Dohm’s “On the Civil Improvement of the Jews” was finished that fall, at which point Mendelssohn plunged into a deep study of natural law. Immediately, a French translation of Dohm’s essay was prepared by the mathematician Jean Bernoulli—although, ironically, the 600 French copies would later be burned in the Bastille!

Meanwhile, in Vienna, Joseph II had requested, in May 1781, that the Council of State deliberate on proposals for allowing Jews to pursue normal economic activities, including learning a trade or a craft. On Oct. 19,

1781—the same day that Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown!—Joseph II issued the Patent of Tolerance (first in Bohemia, then on Jan. 2, 1782 in Austria). It called for “better instruction and enlightenment of its youth, and its employment in the sciences, arts, and crafts.” Attendance in schools was made mandatory, and Jews could run their own schools as long as they met state standards, including German, grammar, geography, history, and geometry. Dohm wrote that Joseph II believed that “the only means toward [Jews] gradual improvement consisted in offering [them] the enjoyment of the rights of citizens on condition that the duties of citizens be fulfilled.”

Mendelssohn would compose a beautiful work that winter, both as a supplement to Dohm’s treatise, and as a preface to an historical treatise on rights for Jews. It was published in April 1782, when a new spring had blossomed for the world: “Thanks be rendered to a kind Providence for having allowed me to reach, at the end of my days, this happy season in which a beginning has been made to consider human rights from a truly universal aspect.” He wrote that the Edict of Toleration was a magnanimous gesture; that Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise* and Dohm’s treatise (in Alexander Altmann’s paraphrase) “had given thought to ‘the great purpose of Providence,’ which embraced the prerogatives of humanity as a whole, and ‘an admirable monarch’ had commenced to implement them.” Mendelssohn insisted that Dohm’s work wasn’t a plea for Jews, but for all humanity, deriving the rights of Jews from the rights of any individual human being. To those that objected on grounds of Jews being culturally backward, Mendelssohn responded that the denial of economic and cultural access had left his people backward; but that shouldn’t be used as a reason to deny the access. His pithy summary: “Our hands are tied—and we are reproached for not using them.”

On May 25, 1782, the Prussian high chancellor, Count von Carmer, instructed E.F. Klein, the Ministry of Justice counselor, to secure Mendelssohn’s working paper on how to proceed in Berlin. Mendelssohn would work (successfully) to win Klein over to the bi-lingual program of Jews learning the best of both languages, saying about a proposed compromise: “How annoying to me it would be

*Finale from Mozart’s ecumenical opera, “The Abduction from the Seraglio.”*

for the law of the land to speak in favor, as it were, of the misuse of both languages!” (Klein would shortly become a tutor for the Humboldt brothers.) Three days after Mendelssohn’s submission, Klein put four documents before the king, suggesting to educate the Jews, along the lines Joseph II had initiated.

In Vienna, that spring of 1782, the two men responsible for the Edict of Tolerance were involved in aggressive projects. Joseph von Sonnenfels was the chief advisor to Joseph II on these matters. Like Mendelssohn, Sonnenfels judged that the world had turned upside-down on the British Empire, and all sorts of possibilities should be pressed that spring. His response to a nasty pamphlet (“What is the Pope?”) attacking the visit of Pius VI as a conspiracy against Joseph II, was a brochure (“On the Arrival of Pius VI in Vienna”) taking the high road. Though he suffered much bad will from Pius VI’s networks, he declared the pamphleteer to have disregarded the particular circumstances of the time. The world’s geometry had shifted. What they were doing with Joseph II was making history. Hence, Sonnenfels dared to assert “. . . [S]tarting from the time of [the Pope’s] journey, the system of the Roman cabinet will be transformed.”

The man who actually composed the Edict of Tolerance, and who had the closest working relationship with Joseph II, Johann Valentin Gunther, was arranging that spring of 1782 with Wolfgang Mozart to have an opera with a *Nathan the Wise*-twist presented, to win the hearts and minds of the population. Mozart’s *Abduction from the Seraglio* was his premiere attempt in the new German-language National Theater that Joseph II had created, based upon Lessing’s ideas.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Mendelssohn’s collaborator on the Bible



Corbis/Beitmann

translation project, Hartwig Wessely, issued a pamphlet in March (“Words of Peace and Truth”), strongly supporting Joseph’s Edict of Tolerance, and to allay the fears of the rabbis. “The human law prepares the soul for its eventual perfection by the higher studies” of divine matters. The “refinement of morals” now includes the secular culture of “moral, mathematical, and physical sciences.” Mastering German, as Mendelssohn had intended, would uplift Hebrew learning. It would be Mendelssohn’s Bible translation team that would be decisive in the attempt to set up Joseph II’s schools for Jews throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Another of Mendelssohn’s collaborators, Herz Homberg, deployed to Vienna late that spring, and wrote to Mendelssohn that Sonnenfels would arrange for him to work in the Imperial Library.

However, rumors, gossip, and attacks broke out throughout the spring among Jewish communities in Europe. Mendelssohn, Daniel Itzig, and David Friedländer in Berlin were involved in helping the Chief Rabbi of Berlin, Lewin, to resist the cries for action against Wessely. Then, on June 12, the Chief Rabbi of Frankfurt attacked Wessely and his whole gang, who had “written a new commentary on the Torah” that wasn’t Jewish, but was “fantasy” and “nonsense.” Further, Mendelssohn’s association was an ugly thing, and it needed to be dispersed.

The actual author of the Edict of Toleration, Johann Gunther, was arrested in Vienna on the morning of June 28, charged with being a Prussian spy. The evening before, he had dined and strategized with Mozart over the impending opera. Political warfare had been waged over whether the opera was to be performed. Simultaneously, Schiller was arrested in Württemberg, by Karl Eugen, the brother of the very Ludwig Eugen who had first attacked Mendelssohn’s *Phaedon*.<sup>11</sup>

Gunther was arrested along with his mistress, Eleonore Eskeles. Eskeles, who shared the cost of a box at the National Theatre with Mozart’s patron, and landlord, Baron Raimund Wetzlar (after whom Mozart named his first child), belonged to the Mendelssohn/Itzig family network. She was the sister of Vienna’s Bernhard Eskeles, the business partner of Nathan Arnstein. Nathan brought Mendelssohn’s works into Vienna and circulated them, along with his wife, Fanny Itzig Arnstein, who was the likely source of Mozart’s copy of the *Phaedon*, when Mozart was living next door to them. As Nathan had married Fanny Itzig, Bernhard had married her sister, Caecilia Itzig. The Arnstein-Eskeles banking house was key to Joseph II’s plans (and would be a pro-development bank for railroad projects and the like, before being pushed aside, circa 1820, by the Rothschilds).

While Gunther and Eskeles were under arrest, a par-

allel operation was launched against Mendelssohn. He was publicly challenged, that the proper conclusion to his efforts to win Jews the right of citizenship, should be for him to convert to Christianity! A hired writer named Cranz, with connections to Frederick the Great, wrote the anonymous attack on Mendelssohn, but made it appear to originate with Sonnenfels, Mendelssohn’s remaining link to Joseph II’s efforts. Cranz wrote:

[A] great revolution has started for your nation’s benefit. . . . You rejoice that at the end of your days you have reached a time when some of the Christians who rule over your nation have begun to become human beings and to recognize the Jews as human beings, [in particular, where Jews] have found a father in the enterprising Joseph, who accords to them too a portion and an inheritance in his country by placing them on the same level of humanity with the rest of his subjects. . . .

One more step and you have become one of us. . . . [N]othing should prevent you from revealing your total conviction. Having forced the iron gate of churchly power, what can hinder you from entering into the realm of truth?

Thinking this a response from Sonnenfels and Joseph II, Mendelssohn was compelled to respond. Which he did, by writing the historic *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*.

### *Jerusalem vs. the ‘Schwärmers’*

MENDELSSOHN’S book *Jerusalem* was written over the fall and winter of 1782/3. He first discusses the common welfare of governments, the pursuit of happiness. Only then, does he allow himself to deal with the specific “Jewish” question. After reviewing the evil and/or simplistic formulations of Hobbes and Locke in setting up state-versus-Church problems, Mendelssohn develops the issue. There is no such pretended absolute separation of Church and state, as the common welfare encompasses spiritual and temporal concerns. Man’s happiness comes from his need to fulfill duty to God, and engage in his society. The interaction of Church and state is as natural as the necessary interaction of “right-mindedness and action” (in Altmann’s paraphrases) needed to do one’s duty. Hence, the state has a role in institutions to promote the common good, including educational agencies for forming good character. The state is happier if it governs through the impact of education for the promotion of the common weal.

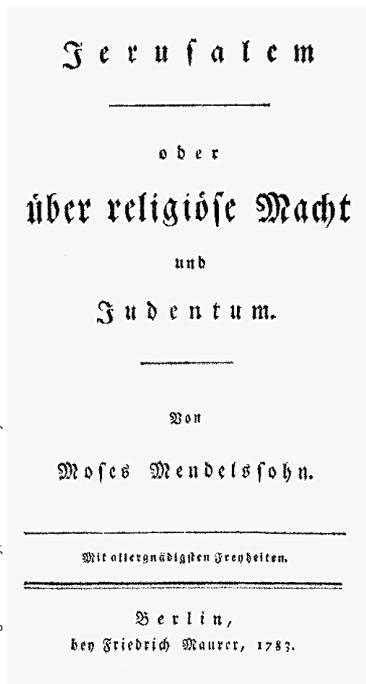
Further, Mendelssohn argues that man has a moral right to use certain goods for the promotion of his happiness, but that this right also includes duties to do what laws of wisdom and goodness demand with his goods. Since he cannot perfect himself without his fellow man,

he is “obligated to use for the benefit of his fellowmen as much of his property as he can spare without detriment to his own well-being.” Man must exercise his freedom in judging how to benefit others.

On the accusation that he was a Deist, Mendelssohn followed Leibniz in his thinking on reason and miracles: “It is true that I recognize no eternal truths other than those that are not only comprehensible to human reason but also demonstrable and verifiable by it. . . . I do not believe that human reason in incapable of perceiving those eternal truths that are indispensable to man’s happiness, and that God had therefore to reveal these truths in a supernatural way.” To the argument that revelation was needed for those among humans that were deficient in reason, Mendelssohn countered that the less sophisticated

hear and see the all-pervading power of the Deity “in every sunrise, in every rainfall, in every flower.” God has already created beauty to help spur on reason. The only revelation worth giving attention to, is that which came after driving reason as far as man’s present culture could accommodate—never as a substitute for work. Miracles of God are not a means to fill up a lack in reason, but the grace of God certainly has been evidenced in the miracles of, e.g., the Mosaic law at Sinai, and the construction of the heavens, and the magnificent poetic power of the Hebrew language.

Mendelssohn permitted himself an hypothesis regarding his idea of the special role of Judaism. Without doing full justice to it here, he begins by asserting that the miracle of human mentation, and of language, is constantly undermined by the sensible images that we must attach to our thoughts to deal with their elusiveness. This is the source of idolatry, and the undermining of societies and cultures. To the extent that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, “sought to preserve pure religious concepts free of all idolatry . . . these descendants were chosen by Providence to be . . . a nation that through its constitution and institutions, through its laws and conduct, and through-



Title page, “Jerusalem” (1783).

out all vicissitudes and changes of life, was to point out continually wholesome and unadulterated ideas of God and his attributes—and to teach, preach, and preserve these ideas among the nations by virtue of its mere existence, as it were.” Human action, oriented around God, “the spirit of the living dialogue,” was the only corrective to the necessary confusions of the “dead letter.”

Thus, we have Mendelssohn’s concluding advice to one and all:

Brothers, if you care for true piety, let us not feign agreement where diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of Providence. . . . Rulers of the Earth! If it be permitted to an insignificant fellow inhabitant thereof to lift up his voice to you: do not trust the counselors who wish to mislead you by smooth words to so harmful an undertaking. They are either blind themselves, and do not see the enemy of mankind lurking in ambush, or they seek to blind you. Our noblest treasure, the liberty to think, will be forfeited if you listen to them. For the sake of your felicity and ours . . . do not use your powerful authority to transform some eternal truth, without which civil felicity can exist, into a law, some religious opinion . . . into an ordinance of the land! Pay heed to the [right] conduct of men; upon this bring to bear the tribunal of wise laws, and leave us thought and speech which the Father of us all assigned to us as an inalienable heritage and granted to us as an immutable right. . . . Reward and punish no doctrine, tempt and bribe no one to adopt any religious opinion! Let everyone be permitted to speak as he thinks, to invoke God after his own manner. . . . If we render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, then do you yourselves render unto God what is God’s! Love truth! Love peace!<sup>12</sup>

*Jerusalem* appeared in April 1783. Immanuel Kant’s friend in Königsburg, J.G. Hamann, attacked its author in his *Golgotha* as, “a circumcised fellow-believer in the spirit and essence of pagan, naturalistic, atheistic fanaticism.” On the other side, Mendelssohn was attacked by one J.H. Schulz for being too religious, and for allowing his Jewish fanaticism and intolerance to attack atheism. Moses, privately, described the situation as being “in the position of a husband whose wife accused him of impotence and whose maid charged him with having made her pregnant.”

From June 1783, until his sudden death in January 1786, Mendelssohn was to be the target of a coordinated assault of “schwärmers.” The key figure was an F.H. Jacobi, whose basic tenet was that reason was “bad faith,” to be pursued only so as to force one to a blind leap to God. He had first approached Dohm and Mendelssohn in 1781, when they were formulating the proposal for Jewish citizenship, and submitted to them his political writings. Mendelssohn critiqued them as suffering from the Hobbes disease: Jacobi thought society was a

“machine of compulsion” that “had for its sole object the negative function of holding off damage” (in Altmann’s paraphrasing). Hence, Jacobi, in an argument already defeated by the American Declaration of Independence,<sup>13</sup> demanded “the state’s power restricted to preventing infringement of citizen’s property rights” and allow total freedom for the passions. Mendelssohn concluded that Jacobi’s “arguments for government by the people are rather exaggerated and are merely intended to tilt the balance from one extreme to the other. . . . He has to look for distinct and pure concepts, and he has to adhere to them.”

Jacobi, rather than listening to such advice, launched the most personally hurtful attack of Mendelssohn’s life. Starting in the summer of 1783, after Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* had successfully disposed of Craz’s fraud, Jacobi claimed secret knowledge, from a visit to Lessing in his last year, that Lessing: embraced Jacobi over Mendelssohn; maintained that Mendelssohn never really understood him; and was really a Spinozan atheist. Jacobi acted in concert with Lavater and Hamann on their anti-Mendelssohn gossip, with Hamann reporting to Kant.

Meanwhile, in 1783/4, *Jerusalem* ignited more serious deliberations over government and the nature of man. To Selle’s formulation of the preferred form of government—“the monarchical, if the ruler were a wise man”—Mendelssohn responded, “the republican, if the people were wise.” In 1783, the “Freunde der Aufklärung” (“Friends of Enlightenment”) was formed in Berlin, where Mendelssohn’s republican group of Dohm, Nicolai, and E.F. Klein was included. Among the twenty-four members were the jurist K.G. Suarez, the economist Karl August von Struensee, and the king’s personal physician Moehsen. Here, Mendelssohn argued that man should pursue truth regardless; that the Creator had organized creation to reward such behavior: “The discovery by Montgolfier [who investigated the atmosphere with heated air balloons in June 1783–DS] will probably lead to great revolutions. Whether they will be for the good of human society nobody will as yet dare to decide. But who will on this account hesitate to promote progress? The discovery of eternal truths is as such good; it is for Providence to take care of them in the right direction.”

He also addressed this group in the summer of 1784 on



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the connection of the “*Schwärmer*” problem to the group’s own “Enlightenment” problem.<sup>14</sup> Arguing that simply satirizing or ridiculing the “enthusiasts” was the hallmark of a “sham enlightenment . . . [with] stale wisdom,” having only energy for deriding the prejudices of others, Mendelssohn echoed his 1759 critique of the Wolffians’ too easy claim to scientific truths. Instead, Mendelssohn’s analysis was that the “*Schwärmer*s” were a symptom of a culture with a too-shallow philosophy. Instead of “giving currency to the idle talk of French philosophes,” they must (in Altmann’s paraphrase) “revive German philosophy to the level of the beginning of the century,” that is, Leibniz. Characteristically, about the same time, Mendelssohn chose to confront a Jewish audience, with a paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of Leibniz’s explanation of the existence of evil in his *Theodicy*. In Mendelssohn’s “*Causa Dei*,” or *Providence Defended*, he used Hebraic examples to illustrate Leibniz’s argument.

That September (1784), Sonnenfels launched in Vienna a similar group, called the “Private Association of Men of the Sciences.” That December, from the circle of Sonnenfels, Mozart, and Homberg, came J.B. von Alxinger to visit Mendelssohn for two months. Alxinger, whom Mozart called “an excellent poet” with whom he wished to work, was part of the German language project in Vienna of Joseph II and Sonnenfels.

That winter, Mendelssohn was intensely occupied with his last major work, *Morgenstunden*, or “Morning Hours,” so named for the dialogues he conducted in the mornings with his oldest son, Joseph, and including his son-in-law Veit and Wessely’s brother, Bernhard, a composer. The Humboldt brothers, who shared a mathematics tutor with Joseph Mendelssohn, may also have attended. Mendelssohn re-examines “a rational knowledge of God” for his son, defends his friend Lessing, and upholds the standard of Leibniz yet again. A projected second part to *Morgenstunden*, was (in Altmann’s paraphrase of Nicolai) “to apply the concept of God [thus far developed] in its significance for human society, i.e., to show the relevance of the concept for natural law and morality.

The rights and duties of men were in his view related to the divine perfection.” Nicolai said that Mendelssohn had discussed details of this idea many times.

M e n d e l s s o h n



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The young von Humboldt brothers: Alexander (far right) and Wilhelm (right).

importantly restated his lifelong concern: that Leibniz's reputation had declined during the period of Wolff's school, and that this had caused an increasing trend toward materialism and *Schwärmerei*; in Altmann's paraphrase, "one either denied the reality of the invisible and untouchable, or else sought to touch and visualize (through the mystical experience) what by its very nature could not become an object of sense perception. . . . The time was ripe to reverse this trend." Mendelssohn challenged the "all-crushing Kant" to shoulder the task of "rebuilding with the same mind with which he had torn down."

Kant's 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* had not, as of 1785, made much of a mark. Mendelssohn's critique of the *Critique* was: "It is therefore a welcome thought to me that I do not miss too much if I leave this world without having understood this work." He could not fathom a mind trying to prove that it did not exist. Mendelssohn suspected the role of Kant behind the "*Schwärmer*," and attempted to smoke him out. He sent a copy of *Morgenstunden* to Kant, saying: "I know . . . that we disagree in principles. . . [However, Jacobi] retreats in the end to the canon of faith, and finds salvation and security in a bastion of the soul-saving Lavater. . . . I cannot put up with this conduct, and would like to know what righteous men think of it. I am afraid that philosophy has its '*Schwärmer*' who persecute others as violently, and are bent upon proselytizing even more, than the '*Schwärmer*' of positive religion." Kant never acknowledged the book, nor the comments. Nor did he respond to Mendelssohn's friend, Biester, the Court librarian, when he wrote to urge Kant to take a stand against the "philosophical fanaticism" of Jacobi *et al.*

That same month of October 1785, Jacobi published his attack on Lessing and Mendelssohn, *On Spinoza's System, in Letters to Moses Mendelssohn*. Hamann reported to Jacobi that "Kant is very satisfied with your presentation." Kant next gave Hamann the letter that Mendelssohn had sent him, to further instigate his fellow "*Schwärmer*" Jacobi. Meanwhile, Hamann assured Jacobi that "Kant intends to contest Mendelssohn's views in the coolest fashion."

The "*Schwärmer*" were in fine form. Hamann's summary for Jacobi was: "Perhaps I was the first who caused Rabbi Moses to take the jump in coming out with his [*Morgenstunden*] lectures. . . . The job of cleansing his dead friend [Lessing] of the suspicion of Spinozism was made easier. . . . Now he makes his entry into his Berlin-Jerusalem with two palm branches, and celebrates his triumph over both of us." Jacobi would go further. Shortly after Mendelssohn had died, Jacobi published his "Against Mendelssohn's Accusations . . .," which suggested that Mendelssohn had

died from lying: "I shall nowhere fail to show the sacred seal of truth, the clear imprint of which caused my adversary to blush and turn so pale." His work concluded: "Let this treatise too be sealed with words of Lavater (my fellow-thief on the cross). . . . 'There are unconquitable, utterly deformed characters. . . . Never believe that you may win them over by simplicity and sincerity. They know only deformity. They are true visionaries of all that is crooked and ignoble.'" Jacobi, now reduced to attacking a hunchback, was employing

quotations from a work that moved him mightily, Lavater's *Pontius Pilate*.

In the summer of 1786, after the "*Schwärmer*" had taken up with Pontius Pilate, and slandered the "crooked, deformed, and ignoble" Mendelssohn, Kant made good on his calculated promise



Immanuel Kant

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to Hamann and Jacobi of contesting Mendelssohn in the "coolest fashion." Mendelssohn had explained in a late essay (Aug. 15, 1785) called "Are There Natural Dispositions to Vice?," that one's mental habits had to be cultivated and worked upon, in order that future Nathans, actual humans, may practice reason. It wasn't simply a politically correct position: "The ability to dissolve sentiments into rational deliberation and to make rational concepts sensual," is the key to virtue, and is how Mendelssohn described his own internal habit of working.

The cold-blooded Kant had no compunction about banalizing this. After the ravings of Jacobi, he would enter the scene with the voice of "reason": his "What Does it Mean: To Orient Oneself in Thinking?," bent Mendelssohn's "maxim of the necessity to orient himself in the speculative use of reason . . . with the help of a certain directive called by him *sensus communis* or sound reason or simple common sense." Kant would reduce Mendelssohn's non-abstract mental process, to a call for common sense. Kant's notoriety and fame began as the calm, cool "dumbed-down" compromise version of Mendelssohn, after his "*Schwärmer*" friends had scorched the area.

When Mendelssohn died on Jan. 4, 1786, his friend Dr. Herz reported: "There he lay without any prior death-rattle, without convulsion, with his usual friendliness on his lips as if an angel had taken him with a kiss from the earth." Even here, Kant displayed his unique

ability to turn sublime matters into dross. Hamann related Kant's reaction to Mendelssohn's death to Jacobi: "Kant thinks that the Christians have lost nothing, while [Mendelssohn's] own nation sustained an all the greater loss, since he is said to have been a great asset to them in commercial matters and public concerns owing to his sound practical judgment." Dare the reader count the number of sins Kant commits in one sentence? Who is insulted more: Christians, Jews, Mendelssohn . . . or Kant and his theory of practical judgment?



1. Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973). In the following, I rely considerably on Altmann's paraphrases of the original Mendelssohn source documents.
2. Samuel König published (March 1751, *Leipzig Acta*) a work criticizing Maupertuis' account of the principle of "least action," as put forward in Maupertuis' (1750) *Cosmologie*. Maupertuis would not tolerate such a challenge to his authority, and it was decided to make an example out of König. In October 1751, Maupertuis sought sanctions against König. The ugly and naked power play was meant to finish off the Berlin Academy.

In the late 1730's, König, who had been a student of Christian von Wolff, had been recruited by Maupertuis to what was probably offered as a high-level study project. Maupertuis was working with Voltaire and his mistress, Emilie du Chatelet, at her estate in Cirey, France, studying Leibniz and Newton, trying to prepare the Newtonian assault on the Berlin Academy. König arrived in 1739, thinking that he was to tutor Emilie on Leibnizian philosophy. He left over a fight, evidently, on the question of the nature of the infinitely small. Whatever he was told to induce his participation, it became clear to him before long that this wasn't a scientific project. Voltaire would later publish her French translation of Newton's *Principia*. Maupertuis' "God As a Cost Accountant" version of Leibniz's "least action" conception was cooked up by the Voltaire/du Chatelet/Maupertuis group, and brought to the Berlin Academy in the mid-1740's.

So, when König arrived in Berlin to show Maupertuis his manuscript that suggested *Cosmologie* was not a fair extension of Leibniz's ideas, Maupertuis cut off discussions. When König proceeded to publish (March 1751), Maupertuis pursued a pre-arranged course. He accused König of forgery, challenging him to produce a letter of Leibniz to which he had referred. However, König only had a copy, and the Bern, Switzerland oligarchy had possession of the original. On July 4, 1749, they had executed a former friend of König's, a Captain Samuel Henzi, and seized all of his vast library, including several original Leibniz letters. König had obtained his copies from Henzi (and had himself been banished from Bern in 1744 for a petition he had signed, regarding revising the constitution). Maupertuis' offensive strategy strongly suggests that he knew his friends in Bern would not allow the original letter to be produced.

The Swiss never produced the letter for König, even though, subsequently, it was shown the Leibniz letter, and more, were in their possession. On April 13, 1752, Leonhard Euler had the honor of reading the official finding of the august Academy on König's forgery case: ". . . it is assuredly manifest that his cause is one of the worst, and that this Fragment has been forged. . . . And the Academy, all things being duly considered, will not hesitate to declare it false, and thereby deprive it of all authority which may have been ascribed to it." Euler's blatantly lying action crowned

Mendelssohn had written a friend a year before his death, "I wish some blessed child of Providence were to attack . . . atheism, which is both the precursor and successor of enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*]. It would have to be a man in control of the sublime seriousness of reason as well as the most tender warmth of sentiment, and of all the gentleness of a rich, though not luxuriant imagination." Mendelssohn's wish could not have been more richly fulfilled than by the twenty-five year old genius, Friedrich Schiller.

- several years of progressive, forced public humiliations, from which he never recovered. Trained originally by the Bernoullis, collaborators of Leibniz, Euler's humiliation must have served as a moral tale for the twenty-two-year-old Mendelssohn.
3. See footnote 2.
4. See David Shavin, "Mozart and the American Revolutionary Upsurge," *Fidelio*, Winter 1992 (Vol. I, No. 4).
5. Cf. Friedrich Schiller's medical dissertation, "The Philosophy of Physiology (1779)," trans. by Anita Gallagher, *Fidelio*, Fall 1998 (Vol. VII, No. 3), especially on the question of psycho-physical parallelism.
6. Schiller first notably brought up the "schwärmer" problem in the mid-1780's, in his play *Don Carlos*—where the manipulated idealist Marquis of Posa is labelled a "peculiar *Schwärmer*"—and the accompanying "Letters on *Don Carlos*." After the senseless Jacobin violence got the upper hand in France, he took it upon himself as a priority to address this strategic disaster in such works as the *Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Man*.
7. See Shavin, *op. cit.*
8. Josef von Sonnenfels was the closest thing to a "Moses Mendelssohn" in Vienna. Sonnenfels' grandfather, Michel Hasid, was the Chief Rabbi of Berlin (1714-1728), and was the teacher of Moses Mendelssohn's teacher, David Fraenkel! Sonnenfels was a cameralist, dedicated to population growth, cultural enrichment, and development of an educated middle class. He was the chief advocate of anti-usury laws, of anti-capital punishment, and of restrictions on the increasing secret police of Count Pergen. He was the contact in 1774 for the mysterious month-long visit of Beaumarchais to Vienna, just prior to the American Revolution, and was key to developing the National Theatre that Mozart came to Vienna to work with. (Mozart was to keep the collected works of Sonnenfels in his library.) Relations between Sonnenfels and Mendelssohn would later become strained, as a result of the intrigue engineered by Cranz's "anonymous" attack on Mendelssohn.
9. See Robert Trout, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: How the Natural Law Concept of G.W. Leibniz Inspired America's Founding Fathers," *Fidelio*, Spring 1997 (Vol. VI, No. 1).
10. See Shavin, *op. cit.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Cf. George Washington's reply to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, August 1790: "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy."
13. Trout, *op. cit.*
14. See footnote 6 above.