

Fiske Hall Graduate Seminar Award*

**Moses Mendelssohn's Approach to Jewish Integration
in Light of His Reconciliation of Traditional Judaism
and Enlightenment Rationalism**

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to the eighteenth century, European Jews lived in separate communal structures at the discretion of their host countries.¹ A very few found places of influence and wealth as “court Jews” and lived as aristocrats, but their acceptance in society was limited, subject to official approval, and came at a price.² There had always been opportunities for Jews to integrate into European society, albeit not without complication, via assimilation and conversion.³ But the ability to enter the social order *as Jews* and find a place to belong without rejecting their heritage and religion proved elusive. The emergence of modern Europe posed a threat to individuals of many religious traditions, not just Jews. The rise of Enlightenment rationalism struck at the foundation of all revealed religion. But Jews, being outside the ‘Christian’ consensus, faced especially difficult obstacles in navigating the currents of contemporary thought if they sought to integrate into European society. The first Jew to achieve success in large measure in this endeavor was Moses Mendelssohn.

As a Jew living in Germany, Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) stands at a pivotal point in the history of Jewish emancipation in Europe. There were Jews before him who had access to the corridors of power in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, but Mendelssohn represents the first to be socially accepted to a significant extent within enlightened German culture without converting. He not only conformed to the culture of the German Enlightenment in many ways, but also helped shape the culture through his philosophical contributions. At the same time, Mendelssohn refused to turn away from traditional Judaism. He attempted to become a full-fledged member of society during the emergence of modern Europe, while remaining a proponent of Judaism as a revealed religion. Moreover, he sought to use his place of influence to encourage Jewish acculturation in Germany and to speak on behalf of the emancipation of Jewish people. Mendelssohn’s approach to Jewish integration, however, was primarily social and individual, in keeping with how he reconciled traditional Judaism and the German Enlightenment.

* The Fiske Hall Graduate Seminar Award is given to the graduate student with the best paper in a seminar course.

¹ See Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto. The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770-1870*, Modern Jewish History Series (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973; Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); especially chapter II, “Ghetto Times.”

² *Ibid.* 15: “The court Jew became a ubiquitous figure in German principalities after the middle of the seventeenth century.”

³ *Ibid.* 105: “For the individual Jew, of course, there always remained one way of extricating himself from the Jewish predicament – by joining one of the Christian churches.”

MENDELSSOHN'S PUBLIC PROMINENCE

The traditional mentality of the European Jews prior to Mendelssohn's time included a kind of resignation to the incompatibility of Jewish learning and 'worldly' philosophy. This resignation contributed to Jewish cultural isolation. Alfred Jospé describes the conundrum in which a Jew found himself if he wished to enter the culture of the non-Jewish world: "The Jew could gain access to the culture of the world only by rebelling against the traditional repudiation of all mundane wisdom."⁴ It is just at this point that Mendelssohn broke the mold. He not only acquired modern German culture, but did so by means of his understanding of and contributions to the philosophy that shaped that culture. In his monumental biographical study, Alexander Altmann focuses as much on Mendelssohn's philosophy and his answers to contemporary critics as he does on the details of the events and influences of his life. Altmann states with appropriate admiration that, "Considering the state of degradation in which the Jewish population lived in eighteenth-century Germany . . . Mendelssohn's rise to fame and his acceptance into the republic of letters was an amazing feat of personal achievement."⁵ The amazing feature of Mendelssohn's achievement is that he accomplished it as an avowedly traditional Jew.

Mendelssohn has been rightly described as a rabbinic scholar, but he made his reputation in non-Jewish intellectual circles as a literary critic and philosopher. With regard to 'mundane wisdom' he was largely self-taught. He studied modern and classical languages along with mathematics, logic, and philosophy with the help of tutors while he was still a student in the yeshiva at Berlin. Later, with the help of both Gotthold Lessing and the Berlin publisher, Friedrich Nicolai, he was accepted into the inner circle of the Berlin Aufklärung. His essays, reviews, and translations earned him tremendous status among German intellectuals. According to Altmann, "The work that would establish Mendelssohn's world-wide renown and win him the title 'the German Socrates' was the dialogue [*Phaedon*], which was published in 1767."⁶ In this work, he presented Socratic wisdom from the mouth of the ancient philosopher, but in the language of the Enlightenment, that is in his own words as a modern philosopher. The work drew both praise and criticism, but was on the whole popular in intellectual circles. It demonstrates Mendelssohn's unique ability as a Jew to be comfortable in the realm of both classical and enlightened philosophy, not to mention languages. David Sorkin remarks, "What is ironic is that Mendelssohn was known and revered as much for the quality of his prose as for his thought."⁷

The favorable comparison made by Lessing between the quintessential German poet, Goethe, and Mendelssohn is a mark of the esteem in which he was held. "[Lessing] told Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi that once Goethe regained his reason, he would be hardly more than an ordinary man. At the very same time he said of Mendelssohn that he was the most lucid thinker, the most excellent philosopher, and the best literary critic of the century."⁸ While this is admittedly the opinion of an ally against a philosophical opponent, it represents nonetheless the

⁴ Alfred Jospé, Introduction to *Moses Mendelssohn, Selections from His Writings*. The Jewish Heritage Classics Series, ed. and trans. by Eva Jospé (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), p. 8.

⁵ Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1973), p. 194.

⁶ *Ibid.* 140.

⁷ David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. xx.

⁸ Altmann 73 cf. Jeffrey S. Librett, *The Rhetoric of Cultural Dialogue: Jews and Germans from Moses Mendelssohn to Richard Wagner and Beyond*, Cultural Memory in the Present Series (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 28. Librett describes Jacobi as "the irrationalist-empiricist opponent of Lessing and Mendelssohn."

standing that 'Moses of Dessau' was able to attain in eighteenth century Berlin. According to Sorkin, "Mendelssohn consequently became a landmark on Berlin's cultural landscape."⁹

MEDELSSOHN'S ENVIRONMENT OF TOLERATION AND ITS LIMITS

Mendelssohn's achievement could not have been possible without an environment that fostered some degree of religious toleration. Europe was dominantly 'Christian' in both thought and symbol in the eighteenth century, and Germany was no exception. As noted above, Jews lived under the protection of local authorities who permitted them residence. The Reformation, the devastation of the Thirty Years War, and most recently the rise of Enlightenment thinking had gone a long way, however, to loosening the grip of institutional Christianity on society. In the intellectual milieu of the German Enlightenment, Mendelssohn found sufficient toleration to achieve an unprecedented level of personal integration as a Jew.

Fritz Bamberger explains the intellectual roots of Enlightenment tolerance:

The philosophy of those [enlightened] men was rooted in their belief in the sovereignty of reason, that is to say, in the view that man can autonomously develop all notions of truth . . . for leading a rational and happy life. This fundamental capacity, possessed by all men, makes the demand for tolerance self-evident, and the fact that . . . man can arrive at a universal religion, through his own rather than through revealed ideas, makes the problem of particular religions, and of membership in them, irrelevant from the perspective of philosophy.¹⁰

Intellectuals of the German Enlightenment (especially in Berlin) formed a kind of social elite that prided itself in open-minded if spirited debate. They created socio-literary or socio-philosophic clubs (both formal and informal) and met in homes, coffeehouses, salons, and for some of Mendelssohn's closest friends, an inspiring garden in a private residence.¹¹ In such a climate, Mendelssohn's personable qualities enabled him to intermingle with his non-Jewish and even converted counterparts quite amiably. "It was this friendly, civilized tolerance of diversity that enabled Mendelssohn to feel at home and relaxed in the world of German letters."¹² He not only possessed an exceptional intellect as a philosopher, but was a sensitive social being as well. This combination seems incongruous with the common stereotype of those making up an intelligentsia, but Mendelssohn's sociability served him well in gaining acceptance among the German *literati*.

In fact, Mendelssohn was a model of toleration himself. He believed that "knowledge that promotes virtue and does not contradict the laws of nature or deny God's being is to be respected" regardless of the source (whether Christian, Jewish, or otherwise).¹³ He demonstrated this practically on numerous occasions. Two examples will suffice. In his autobiographical notes, Mendelssohn's close friend Nicolai recalls the "happy relations" the former enjoyed with one Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz, describing them as "intimate friends." Altmann points out, "The

⁹ Sorkin xx.

¹⁰ Fritz Bamberger, "Mendelssohn's Concept of Judaism," in *Studies in Jewish Thought, An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship*, ed. Alfred Jospe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), p. 346.

¹¹ Altmann 66, 74 cf. Katz 56.

¹² Altmann 199.

¹³ Sorkin 59.

fact that Resewitz was the son of a baptized Jew apparently did not bother Mendelssohn.¹⁴ On a different level, Mendelssohn was known to express both objectivity and leniency with regard to those who evidenced obvious hostility toward the Jewish community. An example would be his repudiation of attacks against Olaf Gerhard Tychsen in a dispute over a collection of Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible in 1774. Mendelssohn validated Tychsen's critical review of the collection even though he knew well that only five years before the critic had sought punitive action by the state against the Jews of Altona for alleged "complicity in the defamation of Christian holidays."¹⁵

Mendelssohn, however, could not have been entirely at home in German society. Integration requires both individual efforts and acceptance (social) of which Mendelssohn is a fine example, and public efforts and acceptance (legal) of which he could not make the effect he desired. The majority of his life was lived in Berlin under the rule of Frederick the Great. This monarch "made Berlin the capital of the German Enlightenment" but had an "attitude toward the Jews [that] was anything but enlightened."¹⁶ When in 1771, Berlin's most famous Jew was recommended for membership as a philosopher by the Royal Academy, the King vetoed the appointment for no other reason than anti-Jewish sentiment. The Academy later omitted Mendelssohn from a replacement list of three names submitted. The post remained vacant for twelve years.¹⁷ Like other Jews in Germany, Mendelssohn had to appeal, sometimes through personal relationships with Gentiles like Thomas Abbt, for freedom of movement and settlement. He was constantly aware of his legal limitations as a Jew. When Johann Lavater publicly challenged him to either refute the superior rationality of Christianity or convert, he felt compelled to seek the Berlin consistory's permission before replying. Again, Altmann summarizes: "Well he knew that the liberal spirit was still a tender plant, that it had not really succeeded in dethologizing the intellectual atmosphere even of the Enlightenment."¹⁸

MENDELSSOHN'S RECONCILIATION OF TRADITIONAL JUDAISM & ENLIGHTENMENT RATIONALISM

The public challenge of Lavater in 1769 presented Mendelssohn with a dilemma. To this point, he had studiously avoided any direct expression of his religious convictions in German. Sorkin describes Mendelssohn's compartmentalization of philosophy in German and religion in Hebrew as "public dualism." This, he accurately states, "was the offspring of his parlous position as a Jew" and was not uncommon, since "[f]or centuries European Jews had maintained a clear division of language and style between apologetic works for non-Jews and those for fellow Jews."¹⁹ To break his silence now risked going beyond the limits of Enlightenment toleration, while refusing to answer Lavater would suggest that he was unable to defend himself.

Mendelssohn's reply was judicious, restrained and philosophical, rather than polemic. Briefly summarized, he framed his answer to Lavater in the categories of natural (rational) religion and Enlightenment toleration. He affirmed his personal commitment to Judaism as a revealed religion for the Jews, yet evaluated it in light of the principles of natural religion rather than comparison with Christianity. In this way, he maintained the sufficiency of reason without

¹⁴ Altmann 80-81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 286-87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 16 cf. Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew, Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749-1824* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), p. 23.

¹⁷ Altmann, 264-65.

¹⁸ Altmann 199 cf. Sorkin 29.

¹⁹ For this analysis of Mendelssohn's reply to Lavater, see Sorkin 26-28.

discarding the legitimacy of revelation. He argued that philosophy was indifferent to revealed or 'positive' religion. As to Lavater's challenge itself, Mendelssohn argued for the inherent tolerance found in Judaism in that it "possessed no conversionary impulse." Thus, he skirted the question of Christianity's superiority, affirmed the rationality of Judaism, and turned the tables on Lavater to admonish him to enlightened tolerance. Having observed the exchange, Nicolai wrote in a letter to Lavater: "You wished that he not remain a Jew; he had no objection to your remaining a Christian." Nicolai's comment is representative of the general response from enlightened intellectuals. Lavater's public challenge had provoked a reaction against his perceived intolerance and discourtesy regardless of the merits of his case. For Mendelssohn, the outcome was as good as could be expected, considering the tight spot in which the challenge had placed him at first. Still, the debate had taken its toll, physically and psychologically. As a result, Mendelssohn began a phase of life in which "grew the desire to serve his people" and during which he articulated more clearly his views on philosophy and religion.²⁰ He wrote an essay in Hebrew on the immortality of the soul in 1769. In the 1770s & 1780s, he translated and commented on a number of books of the Hebrew Bible, including the Pentateuch, and translated into German with an introduction a defense of the Jews originally composed in Latin in the 17th century. In 1783, he published *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism* in German. This was the most complete expression of his views on Judaism and rationalism.

It should be noted that pressure to convert was not incongruous with enlightened times. As Jospé concludes, "It was inevitable that the Jew began to question the value and meaningfulness of traditional Judaism" in a climate of optimistic and at times extreme rationalism.²¹ Mendelssohn's seemingly complete concurrence with the philosophy of rationalism quite naturally invited Christian rationalists to expect him to eventually convert.²² Yet, this was never an option for the Jewish philosopher. Rather, "Mendelssohn was one of those rare human beings who find it possible to combine a nearly all-embracing intellectual liberalism with an uncompromising religious traditionalism."²³ The attempt to understand these "two faces" of Mendelssohn has set the parameters for much of the historiography on his life.²⁴ Only a basic description of his reconciliation of the two is possible and needed here to lay a foundation for analyzing the social nature of his approach to Jewish integration.

First, one must recognize that Mendelssohn's commitment to traditional Judaism was unwavering. Throughout his career as a philosopher, he continued to write in Hebrew and publish hymns and sermons for use in Jewish synagogues. These were not entirely divorced from the German realm in which he moved. For example, when Prussia became embroiled in military conflict with Austria and Saxony, Mendelssohn composed in Hebrew and then translated into German a special prayer to be used daily by the Jews of Berlin.²⁵ Later that year, he wrote a sermon delivered by another and then translated it, too. It is considered the earliest known specimen of modern Jewish preaching in the German language. As early as 1755 he used his short-lived Hebrew weekly *Kohelet Mussar* (Preacher of Morals) to deplore the abandonment of Hebrew among Jews. Altmann notes, "It was characteristic of his loyalty to Jewish tradition that he advocated a return to biblical Hebrew precisely at the moment at which he had become a

²⁰ Altmann 268.

²¹ A. Jospé, *Selections* 10.

²² Alexander Altmann, Introduction to *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism* by Moses Mendelssohn, Allan Arkush, trans. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), p. 6.

²³ E. Jospé, *Selections* vii cf. A. Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 42. Eisen implies the struggle it entailed for Mendelssohn "to ensure space [for himself] in the modern world."

²⁴ Sorkin xvii.

²⁵ Altmann, *Biographical Study* 67 cf. Meyer 24.

full-fledged member of the circle of German literati.²⁶ Another example of Mendelssohn's convictions with regard to traditionalism is his fervor for strict adherence to the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible. This, asserts Sorkin, "testifies to the conservative nature of his exegesis."²⁷ Moreover, Mendelssohn stood "in principled opposition to the mainstream Enlightenment view of the Bible" when he defended all forms of traditional Jewish interpretation (hermeneutical methods).²⁸ His competence in and reliance on medieval Jewish exegesis marks him as a traditional Jew, and the Jewish community of his day accepted his standing among them. A testimony to this acceptance by the Jewish community of Berlin was the honor paid him in 1771 when he was made eligible for the honorary position of *parnass* (elder) by suspending in his case the strict rules governing the election of communal dignitaries.²⁹ The reluctance of later traditional Jews to embrace Mendelssohn as a historical representative of their position stands in contrast to his ability to personally ingratiate himself to contemporary traditionalists.

Second, one must accept that Mendelssohn saw no incompatibility between traditional Judaism and German Enlightenment philosophy.³⁰ There are a number of ways in which he reconciled the two. Mendelssohn thought that the ideas of a universal religion, in keeping with philosophy, could be found in Judaism, too. By recognizing such, Mendelssohn distinguished between religion and Judaism. "He equates Judaism with law, and demonstrates that Judaism's legislation, which is its essence, does not concern truths or convictions."³¹ Eternal truths are, on the contrary, the stock and trade of reason. "This [Sinaitic] revelation, he points out adds nothing to the sum total of natural religion insofar as truths are concerned." As a result, no conflict exists between revelation and reason. Revelation "is of a practical nature, is *Halakhah*, ordinances for conduct, not mysteries of the faith."³² This line of argument spawned numerous debates about Mendelssohn's meaning and accuracy. Regardless of one's view of the merits of this argument, Mendelssohn's view is essential for a proper understanding of his approach to Jewish integration. "The distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge here is of cardinal importance since it lays the foundation for universal belief in God."³³ Such universal belief is an important tenet in Mendelssohn's basis for Jewish integration into Europe's Christian society. There could be mutual respect and acceptance socially because "revealed laws" were only "binding upon the Jews" and Judaism recognized those who were "pious among the Gentiles."³⁴ Whereas Maimonides restricted this description only to those who acknowledged the Hebrew Scriptures, Mendelssohn disagreed. Natural religion based upon reason "sufficed for the ultimate happiness of all men."³⁵

This is not to say that Mendelssohn had any doubts concerning the reality of Hebrew revelation or of the significance of the expectations of the Mosaic Law. In spite of the attacks of contemporary historical-critical views of the Bible, Mendelssohn held that belief requires certainty, and he found such certainty in "the historical facts of the Exodus, the public revelation at Sinai, and the chosenness of Israel."³⁶ As Altmann puts it, "Mendelssohn's cast of mind was

²⁶ Altmann, *Biographical Study* 87-88 cf. 18.

²⁷ Sorkin 43.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 38 cf. 66, 77.

²⁹ Altmann, *Biographical Study* 272.

³⁰ Bamberger 347 cf. Sorkin 9. Librett agrees: "[...] in some of his earliest works in German . . . Mendelssohn attempts to demonstrate . . . that Judaism is compatible with rational spirit." Librett 31.

³¹ Bamberger 356.

³² Altmann, *Jerusalem* 19.

³³ Sorkin 59.

³⁴ Altmann, *Biographical Study* 294 cf. Meyer 38.

³⁵ Altmann 200.

³⁶ Sorkin 79.

strictly conservative, and he had no intention of twisting *Halakhah* to suit modern ideas.³⁷ For Mendelssohn, revealed wisdom surpassed and complimented philosophy. “He asserted that without Torah and tradition we are ‘like a blind man in the dark.’”³⁸ In other words, he saw limits to the usefulness of theoretical reason. Human philosophy presupposed divine revelation and thus depended on God; therefore, revelation demonstrated the limits of philosophy.

On the other hand, he depended upon his reason to guide him in determining which practical conduct is genuinely required by revelation. For example, Mendelssohn interceded on behalf of the Altona Jewish community in 1769 concerning the tradition of early burial that conflicted with enlightened practice and was thus threatened with abolishment by Duke Friedrich. While he successfully argued the case with the duke by showing that early burial could coincide with the dictates of reason, providing a medical certificate of death was obtained first, he also privately confronted the community leaders about the practice.³⁹ His dedication to Enlightenment philosophy caused him to sincerely question the conscientiousness of early burial. Moreover, he felt that a case could be made in Jewish tradition for delaying burial in obedience to a political sovereign’s edict. This points to one more important aspect of his reconciliation of Judaism and enlightened philosophy that applies to his approach to integration (and eventual emancipation). Revelation, while binding upon the individual Jew, did not apply to non-Jews. Thus, Mendelssohn’s acceptance of Hebrew revelation did not prevent him from building social bridges to non-Jews who did not follow Jewish regulations. Nor did he expect gentile governments among whom the Jewish ‘nation’ resided to conform to the standards of Hebrew revelation. Torah was utterly irrelevant to political matters as a result of the Jews’ dispersion. In declaring this, he was ‘privatizing’ Judaism as a religious tradition and denying any threat that Jews might be construed to pose to the state. “He thus renounced any presumption to Jewish political leadership, let alone sovereignty.”⁴⁰ Such a position on Hebrew revelation removed a potentially serious obstacle to Jewish emancipation.

MENDELSSOHN’S SOCIAL APPROACH TO INTEGRATION

Much has been made of the religion versus philosophy question in Mendelssohn’s reconciliation of revelation and reason, but not enough of its impact on his individual, social approach to validating his convictions as a conservative, traditional Jew. Even a cursory reading of Altmann’s biography of Mendelssohn yields the unmistakable impression that this man was very relationally oriented. But beyond mere personality, he obtained, refined, and defended his ideas in the context of intense and usually affectionate personal relationships. The extent of his emotional attachment to non-Jewish intellectual compatriots can be measured in the degree of loss he felt at the parting of their company, whether this be Lessing’s departure from Berlin or the “untimely death” of his friend, Abbt.⁴¹ Another measure is the way in which he handled the bitter disappointment of missing out on being appointed to membership in the Royal Academy in Berlin. His public response indicated that the most important thing to Mendelssohn was that the intellectual elite, with many of whom he had established personal as well as professional relationships, had elected him. His personal fulfillment in the knowledge of this acceptance was great.

³⁷ Altmann, *Biographical Study* 293.

³⁸ Sorkin 19 cf. 8.

³⁹ Altmann, *Biographical Study* 287-90. Compare Mendelssohn’s similar arguments put to the Mecklenburg-Schwerin community. Sorkin 95-98.

⁴⁰ Sorkin 96.

⁴¹ Altmann, *Biographical Study* 139-140.

Non-Jews also acknowledged his winsome personality. Altmann suggests that despite the remarkable acceptance afforded him as a Jew, “the practice of absolute tolerance vis-à-vis this outstanding and amiable man demanded no great effort.”⁴² In fact, following Mendelssohn’s departure from Königsberg after a brief visit in 1777 a “farewell greeting” was published in the local gazette describing him as “a profound philosopher” with “a good and noble heart capable of friendship and open to all gentle sentiments associated with it.”⁴³ As one reviews his successes and challenges in adopting German culture, a pattern emerges that indicates an individual, social approach to integration, based upon tolerance and virtue.

Mendelssohn did not draw back from expressing his Jewishness in what could be a very hostile environment for Jews. For example, “he did not hesitate to refer to his observance of Jewish laws and customs” when relating to non-Jews, “but he did so with grace and, sometimes with a light touch of humor so as to avoid any embarrassment.”⁴⁴ Embarrassment, that is, of non-Jewish Germans who would regard Jewish distinctiveness with discomfort. In this way Mendelssohn utilized his social skills to make a place for himself as a Jew in German society. He handled conflict with similar deftness socially. Upon hearing that he had won the Royal Academy’s prize for his essay in 1763 (Kant took a close second), Mendelssohn penned a letter to his friend, Abbt, who also competed for the prize with arguments contrary to Mendelssohn’s on the same subject and lost. In it he wrote, “We have to settle the dispute between ourselves. If I fail to convince you it will be sufficient proof that my arguments lack the evidence desired.”⁴⁵ This shows a remarkable sensitivity to his friend in the midst of the victory of his own ideas. In the discussion with leaders of the Altona Jewish community on the advisability of resisting change in burial traditions, Mendelssohn was rebuked sharply by a prominent Talmudic scholar (Rabbi Jacob Emden). Following an exchange of letters on the subject in which neither side convinced the other, Mendelssohn had succeeded in maintaining his “personal relationship” with his opponent. It was subsequently clear that the earlier disagreement had left no hard feelings.⁴⁶ Likewise, commenting on Mendelssohn’s letter of reply to the Crown Prince of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel in 1770, Michael Meyer concludes that he “succeeded in expressing his true point of view [critiquing Christianity] without antagonizing the prince. Thereafter the friendship between them continued and even grew stronger.”⁴⁷ Again, Mendelssohn’s social approach to bridging the gap between Judaism and enlightened German culture proved effective.

The social element in Mendelssohn’s personal integration with German culture was in keeping with his reconciliation of religion and philosophy. That man is a social being is actually an important theme of his commentary on the Pentateuch. Mendelssohn also emphasized man’s freedom in his writings. “Freedom required man to act ethically, which meant to strive for perfection in imitation of God.”⁴⁸ This is significant, because Mendelssohn also held that “In solitude man can fulfill his obligations neither to God nor to his fellowmen; sociability is essential to the development of the faculties [...].”⁴⁹ His application of this principle was involved in his efforts to speak to the ‘Jewish question.’ He gave a glimpse into his approach to Jewish integration when he wrote, “I hoped to refute the contempt in which the Jews are held not through polemics but through virtue.”⁵⁰ The impact of virtue is only efficacious on a personal,

⁴² Ibid. 195.

⁴³ Cited in Altmann, *Biographical Study* 307.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 195.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Ibid. 117.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 292.

⁴⁷ Meyer 36-37.

⁴⁸ Sorkin 10 cf. 61.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 121.

⁵⁰ Mendelssohn, cited in Ibid. 26.

relational level. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that Mendelssohn intended the display of personal virtue to be a method by which other Jews might seek to become full-fledged members of European society. Meyer argues that Mendelssohn wanted to prove most of all that “a Jew could be virtuous.”⁵¹

MENDELSSOHN'S ADVOCACY FOR JEWS AND JEWISH EMANCIPATION

Understanding that Mendelssohn's approach to integration was social rather than programmatic helps explain why this great model of Jewish integration entered the broader debate about the place of Jews in society only reluctantly. Bamberger observes, “Until Lavater's attempt to convert him, apologetic considerations . . . play no role in his writings.”⁵² The general politicization of German life in the 1770s and 1780s was instrumental in drawing Mendelssohn to contribute to the political debate concerning Jewish rights. Before this, his efforts had been limited to periodic advocacy on behalf of Jewish communities before Gentile rulers and to attempts to persuade Jews to end their cultural isolation and enter modernity.

Mention has already been made of Jewish communities that sought Mendelssohn's aid in legal disputes.⁵³ He did so using Enlightenment ideas. In this sense, “Mendelssohn's ability to intercede was unprecedented, since it rested on his prominence as a philosopher and a man of letters. The authority he brought to his office was intellectual and moral, and from the start he employed Enlightenment categories.”⁵⁴ More significant, however, was his attempt to close the divide between modern German culture and the Jewish ghetto. In his Hebrew writings (obviously directed toward a Jewish audience), Mendelssohn sought “to make the culture of the modern world accessible and acceptable to the Jews.”⁵⁵

One way in which Mendelssohn worked toward that end was by encouraging Jews to use proper Hebrew and proper German rather than Yiddish, which made them appear to fit the negative European stereotype of Jews. “The Judeo-German jargon symbolized for Mendelssohn . . . that foreignness and illegitimacy which is the sad mark of the pariah.”⁵⁶ He rightly determined that language was critical to the acquisition of culture, and he applied that to both the reform of traditional Jewish culture (Hebrew) and the adoption of modern European culture (German). He also sought to use his writings to introduce Jews to philosophy. This required a more delicate approach than he employed in exhorting the study of language, for he had to suit his methods to his audience in order to succeed. Among his earliest attempts to inform Jewish readers was the Hebrew weekly, *Kohelet Mussar*. “This example . . . demonstrates how Mendelssohn transformed the genre to suit his own purposes: whereas the German moral weekly purveyed natural philosophy, Mendelssohn used this forum to offer a revealed, if entirely reasonable, Judaism.”⁵⁷ One can see the subtlety and restraint with which he began to introduce philosophic ideas to a traditional Jewish readership. Later he used the traditional Jewish format of commentary to convey Enlightenment ideas. These he placed alongside new translations of the Bible into German for new Jewish-German readers. This had the additional import of

⁵¹ Meyer 18 cf. 39: Meyer recognizes Mendelssohn's intention of setting an example when he says that the Lavater affair “forced him to realize the insufficiency of merely setting an example.”

⁵² Bamberger 345 cf. Sorkin 46.

⁵³ To the previous examples could be added his appeal to the king “asking exemption from a duty [billeting] that had become irksome to many Berlin residents.” Altmann 158.

⁵⁴ Sorkin 95. See also Eisen 42 and Altmann, *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1981), pp. 155ff.

⁵⁵ A. Jospé, *Selections* 3.

⁵⁶ Meyer 44.

⁵⁷ Sorkin 16.

reintroducing the study of the Bible into traditional Jewish scholarship. “Mendelssohn felt a new translation was needed to lead his people back to the sources of their inspiration, to reacquaint them with the Bible’s moral vision, and challenge them with its ethical demands in order to help elevate their moral tone and spiritual level.”⁵⁸ This does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Mendelssohn advocated a “regeneration for rights” strategy of emancipation. His primary concern throughout most of his life was that Jews be accepted socially on the basis of individual virtue, not that they be accepted legally in reward for some corporate transformation. That strategy came only later and the idea of such an approach was clearly rejected by Mendelssohn and contrary to his approach to integration.⁵⁹

Notwithstanding his efforts to convey Enlightenment ideas to Jewish readers, Mendelssohn never published a specifically philosophical work in the Hebrew language during his lifetime. In 1767 he expressed the need for such a work in a letter to Raphael Levi, but the question at hand involved translating his *Phaedon* and Mendelssohn believed “it would no longer be intelligible in a Hebrew version.”⁶⁰ Two years later he wrote a philosophical treatise in Hebrew on the immortality of the soul. *The Book of the Soul* (Sefer HaNefesh) is made up of “two systematic expositions” in contrast to his other works in Hebrew that take the form of commentary.⁶¹ Though he had opportunity, Mendelssohn did not submit it for publication. It may be significant that Mendelssohn’s only “direct philosophical exposition” in Hebrew was withheld from publication until after his death. Could it be evidence that Mendelssohn was reluctant to interject philosophy into Judaism too directly? Sorkin notes the importance of this work, calling it “the exception [to commentary as the standard Jewish form employed by Mendelssohn] that proves the rule.” Why was it withheld by the author? It could be construed as evidence of insincerity in Mendelssohn’s commitment to traditional Judaism – that his general use of commentary was only a ploy to introduce to traditional Jews a destructive rationalism for which he had truest affinity. But this is untenable. It might also be suggested that the author’s reluctance to publish sprung from fear of antagonizing Jewish conservatives, among whose number he wished to be counted. This is possible, but again unlikely. He often displayed a willingness to risk the disdain of traditionalists for the sake of advancing Judaism into the modern world as a reasonable religion.⁶² Rather, Mendelssohn’s decision to delay publication seems to have resulted from a wise assessment of the book’s Jewish ‘audience’ and the most acceptable and effective means to his goal. He proceeded as a social being rather than as an ideologue, sensitive to the feelings of others rather than focused on his agenda alone. This explanation is confirmed by Sorkin:

However appropriate Mendelssohn thought the contents were for his fellow Jews, the form of the works assumed an audience for philosophy in Hebrew which simply did not exist in the 1760s. Whatever Mendelssohn’s reasons for withholding *The*

⁵⁸ A. Jospe, *Selections* 15 cf. Sorkin 33: “From as early as the sixteenth century the Bible had disappeared as an independent subject from the curriculum of baroque Judaism [...]”

⁵⁹ Altmann, *Essays* 163-64: “...Mendelssohn saw no incompatibility between civil admission and the preservation of the Jews’ separate identity as a nation.” See also Sorkin 149-50. Meyer seems to present an opposing view, but without convincing argument. Meyer 46.

⁶⁰ Altmann, *Biographical Study* 179.

⁶¹ See Sorkin 15-22.

⁶² E.g. Mendelssohn is warned by Emden that if he persists in defending a change in burial tradition he will suffer “derision” from the Jewish community. Altmann, *Biographical Study* 292-93.

Book of the Soul from publication, then, the fact that he did so fully accorded with the pattern of his published work in Hebrew.⁶³

Eventually, Mendelssohn did contribute to the political debate concerning Jewish rights. When he did so, it was with characteristic influence. Sorkin represents the majority opinion that it was Mendelssohn's realization of the "promise of a new relationship with the absolutist state" that brought him into the discussion on emancipation and "away from his original agenda of intellectual renewal of Judaism."⁶⁴ While this undoubtedly contributed to his shift into the broader public arena, it seems an insufficient explanation. Mendelssohn did directly advocate the acceptance of Jews in society and the granting of rights in *Jerusalem*, but even here his views were not expressed voluntarily, as it were, and he stopped short of direct argument in favor of emancipation.⁶⁵ On the contrary, both the impulse and the structure of his work were in response to a pamphlet by August Cranz. In it, Cranz challenged Mendelssohn, once again, to convert or state his views in defense of Judaism. Thus, one sees that Mendelssohn's approach was motivated by *relational* concerns.⁶⁶ He used the opportunity to articulate a case for a radical change in the relationship between Jews and the state. Again, there are indications that his focus on renewal without departing from traditional Judaism was a factor in his work. Librett notes that between 1770 and 1830 German Jews experienced a virtual epidemic of conversions. The highest rate of increase came during the time that Mendelssohn wrote his *Jerusalem*. With insightful analysis, he concludes: "if Mendelssohn argues in *Jerusalem* both that orthodox [sic] Judaism is utterly compatible with rationality and that Jews should not have the right to excommunicate other Jews, then he is clearly countering tendencies toward assimilation and conversion [...]."⁶⁷ In other words, Mendelssohn may not have seen his move into the political debate as such a stark contrast to his earlier agenda of affecting "inner liberation through cultural integration."⁶⁸ By denying Judaism's traditional right to excommunicate he sought to address two needs without sacrificing either his commitment to Judaism or modern philosophy. His affirmation of powers to the state served to entice approval of Jewish emancipation without the demand of conversion. His affirmation of individual rights served to encourage integration without having to deny Judaism through radical assimilation.

CONCLUSION

Mendelssohn's attempt to synthesize the worlds of traditional Judaism and Enlightenment rationalism is illustrative of Jewish efforts to deal with the convergence of their religion and the Enlightenment as they sought to enter modern society. Coming from an extremely traditional and marginalized segment of society, their path was especially difficult. His monumental efforts to both pull and push for Jewish entry into modernity and their limited effectiveness in securing true integration for Jews other than himself serve as a measure of the degree of this difficulty.⁶⁹

⁶³ Sorkin 24.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 146.

⁶⁵ Altmann, *Essays* 159: "While leaving no doubt that he considered discrimination . . . to be void of all legality, he was content to state his view without pleading the case of civil admission. It was an attitude worthy of a philosopher."

⁶⁶ Librett 32 cf. Sorkin 120.

⁶⁷ Librett 44-45.

⁶⁸ A. Jospé, *Selections* 3.

⁶⁹ Eisen 48. Mendelssohn's efforts were unsuccessful according to Eisen's analysis of "Jewish practice in all the theories of modernity" throughout the 19th century and "to a remarkable and disturbing degree" in 20th century theories.

Nevertheless, Mendelssohn's model of integration should not be viewed as obsolete. On the contrary, his individual and social approach to integration, while maintaining a strong anchor in traditional Judaism was the only 'reasonable' path for proponents of revealed religion. Legal emancipation cannot precede social integration, lest the progress of integration be stunted and suffer along a difficult path. This is exactly the pattern that emerged for Jews on the continent in contrast to the experience of English Jewry.⁷⁰ And, whatever the criticism of an individual social approach to integration, every critic must overcome one tremendous defense of Mendelssohn's method: his own amazing success.⁷¹

⁷⁰ See Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714-1830; Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

⁷¹ Sorkin 149: "Mendelssohn was not only German Jewry's 'patron saint' but also the 'ideal figure' of its subculture" (cf. A. Jospe, *Selections* 5).