

CAN YOU ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS?

1. Under which Rabbi did Moses Mendelssohn study Talmud?
2. Name four individuals who had a major influence upon Mendelssohn's life.
3. What was the name of his most celebrated work?
4. What was Mendelssohn's view regarding the use of the Rabbinic ban of excommunication (*cherem*)?
5. Describe Mendelssohn's attitude to the Book of Psalms.

This and much more will be addressed in the fifteenth lecture of this series: "Moses Mendelssohn and the Beginnings of the Haskalah Movement".

To derive maximum benefit from this lecture, keep these questions in mind, as you listen to the tape and read through the outline. Go back to these questions once again at the end of the lecture and see how well you answer them.

PLEASE NOTE: This outline and source book was designed as a powerful tool to help you appreciate and understand the basis of Jewish History. Although the lectures can be listened to without the use of the outline, we advise you to read the outline to enhance your comprehension. Use it, as well, as a handy reference guide and for quick review.

THE EPIC OF THE ETERNAL PEOPLE

Presented by Rabbi Shmuel Irons

Series IX Lecture #15

MOSES MENDELSSOHN AND THE BEGINNING OF THE HASKALAH MOVEMENT

I. The Centrality of the Oral Law and the Study of Torah for its Own Sake

A.

(1) אם בְּחַקְתִּי תֵלְכוּ וְאֶת מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם. וְנָתַתִּי גֶשְׁמִיכֶם בְּעֵתָם וְנָתַנְהָ הָאָרֶץ יְבוּלָה וְעֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה יִתֵּן פְּרִיּוֹ. . . . וְאִם בְּחַקְתִּי תִמָּאֲסוּ וְאִם אֶת מִשְׁפָּטַי תִּגְעַל נַפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי לְהַפְרֹכֶם אֶת בְּרִיתִי. אֲף אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה זֹאת לָכֶם וְהִפְקַדְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם בְּהִלָּה אֶת הַשְּׁחָפֶת וְאֶת הַקְּדִיחַת מְכַלּוֹת עֵינַיִם וּמְדִיבַת נֶפֶשׁ וְזָרְעֵתֶם לְרִיק וְזָרְעֵכֶם וְאֶכְלָהוּ אֵיבֵיכֶם: ויקרא כו:ג,ד,ט,טז

If you walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments and do them, I will then give you your rain in their season and the land shall yield her produce and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. . . . If you will not listen to Me and will not do all of these commandments and if you reject My statutes and your soul will abhor My ordinances so that you will not fulfill all of My commandments and you break My covenant, then I will do likewise and will make you subject to terror, consumption, and fever that makes the eyes pine [for relief] and the soul to languish and you will sow your seed in vain, for your enemies will eat it. . . . **Leviticus 26:3,4,15,16**

(2) אם בחקותי תלכו. יכול אילו המצות. כשהוא אומר ואת מצותי תשמרו ועשיתם אותם. הרי מצות אמורות. הא מה אני מקיים אם בחוקתי תלכו להיות עמילים בתורה. ספרא ריש פרשת בחקותי

If you walk in My statutes (Leviticus 26:3) I might have thought that this refers to the fulfillment of the commandments; but since it states, **"and keep My commandments and do them"** then the fulfillment of the commandments has already been stated. How, then, shall I explain, **"If you walk in My statutes"** ? [It means] that you shall toil in the study of Torah [using the methodology according to the rules that are outlined in the Oral Law. The statutes are referring to the Divine rules of hermeneutics.] **Sifra, Reish Parshas B'Chukosai**

(3) ואם לא תשמעו לי – להיות עמלים בתורה. ולדעת מדרש חכמים יכול לקיום המצות כשהוא אומר ולא תעשו וגו' הרי קיום מצות אמור הא מה אני מקיים ואם לא תשמעו לי להיות עמלים בתורה ומה ת"ל לי אין לי אלא זה המכיר את רבונו ומתכוין למרוד בו וכן בנמרוד (בראשית י) גבור ציד לפני ד' שמכירו ומתכוין למרוד בו וכן באנשי סדום (שם יג) רעים וחטאים לד' מאד מכירים את רבונו ומתכוונים למרוד בו. ולא תעשו – (ת"כ) משלא תלמדו לא תעשו הרי שתי עבירות. ואם בחקותי תמאסו – מואס באחרים העושים: משפטי

תגעל נפשכם – שונא החכמים: לבלתי עשות – מונע את אחרים מעשות. את כל מצותי כופר שלא צויתים לכך נאמר את כל מצותי ולא נאמר את כל המצות. להפרכם את בריתי כופר בעיקר הרי שבע עבירות הראשונה גוררת השניה וכן עד השביעית ואלו הן. לא למד. ולא עשה. מואס באחרים העושים. שונא את החכמים. מונע את האחרים. כופר במצות. כופר בעיקר. רש"י בחקותי

If you will not listen to Me (Lev. 26:14) to toil in the study of Torah and know the interpretations of the Sages. I might have thought that this refers to the fulfillment of the commandments, but since it states, "and will not do all of these commandments", then the fulfillment of the commandments has already been stated. How, then, shall I explain, "If you will not listen to Me"? [It means] that if you will not listen to Me to toil in the study of Torah. What is meant by the the phrase, "to Me"? It is referring to someone who recognizes his Master and yet intends to rebel against Him. . . . **And will not do all of these commandments** Since you will not study, you will not do, thus, there are two transgressions. **And if you reject My statutes (Lev. 26:15)** (i.e.,) he rejects others who fulfill the commandments. **And your soul will abhor My ordinances** (i.e.,) he hates the Sages. **So that you will not fulfill** (i.e.,) he prevents others from doing them. **All of My commandments** he denies that I commanded them; for that reason it is stated, "all My commandments," and it is not stated, "all the commandments". **And you break My covenant** He denies the basic principles of religion (i.e., he denies the existence of a Providential Supreme Being). Thus, there are seven transgressions. The first generates the second and so on, until the seventh. And they are the following: He does not study [the Oral Law] and he does not fulfill the commandments, he rejects others that do, he hates the Sages, he prevents others from observing, he denies the Divine origin of the commandments, he denies the basic principles of the religion (i.e., he denies the existence of a Providential Supreme Being). **Rashi Parshas B'Chukosai, Lev. 26:14, Sifra**

(4) תניא אידך: כי דבר ד' בזה - זה האומר אין תורה מן השמים. ואפילו אמר: כל התורה כולה מן השמים, חוץ מפסוק זה שלא אמרו הקדוש ברוך הוא אלא משה מפי עצמו זהו כי דבר ד' בזה. ואפילו אמר: כל התורה כולה מן השמים, חוץ מדקדוק זה, מקל וחומר זה, מגזרה שוה זו זה הוא כי דבר ד' בזה. תניא, היה רבי מאיר אומר: הלומד תורה ואינו מלמדה זה הוא דבר ד' בזה. רבי נתן אומר: כל מי שאינו משגיח על המשנה. רבי נהוראי אומר: כל שאפשר לעסוק בתורה ואינו עוסק. סנהדרין צט.

Another [Baraita] taught: Because he hath despised the word of the L-rd, this refers to he who maintains that the Torah is not from Heaven. And even if he asserts that the whole Torah is from Heaven, excepting a particular verse, which [he maintains] was not uttered by G-d but by Moses himself, he is included in 'because he hath despised the word of the L-rd.' And even if he admits that the whole Torah is from Heaven, excepting a single point, a particular *kal v'chomer* deduction or a certain *gezerah shavah*, he is still included in 'because he hath despised the word of the L-rd'. It has been taught: R. Meir used to say: He who studies the Torah but does not teach it is alluded to in 'he hath despised the word of the L-rd'. R. Nathan said: [it refers to] whoever pays no heed to the Mishnah. R. Nehorai said: Whosoever can engage in the study of the Torah but fails to do so. **Sanhedrin 99a**

B.

א"ר יוחנן: לא כרת הקב"ה ברית עם ישראל אלא בשביל דברים שבעל פה, שנאמר: (שמות ל"ד) כי על פי הדברים האלה כרתי אתך ברית ואת ישראל. גיטין ס:

Rabbi Yochanan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, created a covenant with the people of Israel only because of the Oral Law . . . **Gittin 60b**

C.

רבי מאיר אומר כל העוסק בתורה לשמה זוכה לדברים הרבה ולא עוד אלא שכל העולם כלו כדאי הוא לו נקרא ריע אהוב אהב את המקום אוהב את הבריות משמח את המקום משמח את הבריות ומלבשתו ענוה ויראה ומכשרתו להיות צדיק וחסיד וישר ונאמן ומרחקתו מן החטא ומקרבתו לידי זכות ונהנין ממנה עצה ותושיה בינה וגבורה שנאמר לי עצה ותושיה אני בינה לי גבורה ונותנת לו מלכות וממשלה וחקור דין ומגלין לו רזי תורה ונעשה כמעין המתגבר וכנהר שאינו פוסק והוי צנוע וארך רוח ומוחל על עלבונו ומגדלתו ומרוממתו על כל המעשים. אבות פרק ו:א

R. Meir said: Whoever engages in Torah study for its own sake merits the acquisition of many things; furthermore, the existence of the whole world is considered worthwhile solely for his sake. He is called a friend, [and] a beloved, [of G-d]. He develops a love of the Omnipresent and a love of His creatures. He brings joy to the Omnipresent and he brings joy to His creatures. [The Torah] clothes him with humility and fear [of G-d]; it makes him fit to be righteous, pious, upright, and faithful. It makes him become distant from sin and brings him near to meritorious conduct. From him, people enjoy counsel and wisdom, understanding and strength, as it is stated in Scripture (Proverbs 8:14), "Counsel is mine (referring to Torah); I am understanding, strength is mine." [The Torah] gives him sovereignty and dominion and the faculty of analytical judgment; the secrets of the Torah are revealed to him and he is made as a fountain that ever gathers force and like a stream that never ceases. He becomes truly modest, patient, and forgiving of insult towards himself. [The Torah] makes him great and exalts him above all things. **Avos 6:1**

II. Moses Mendelssohn - His Early Years

A. . . . [inasmuch] as the Merchants Guild [in Berlin] is to be composed of honest and honorable persons, the following must be barred from membership: Jews, homicides, murderers, thieves, perjurers, adulterers, or any other person afflicted with great public vices or sins. **Decree regulating the Merchant Guild in Berlin, issued in 1716 and still in force in 1802**

. . . It is mathematically impossible that a Jew could be a composer. **Official reason for the rejection of a Jewish applicant to the Berlin Academy of Music in 1795**

B. I cannot promise your readers that the circumstances of my life, which really are of little consequence, will prove particularly entertaining to them. My biographical data

have actually always seemed so unimportant to me that I never bothered to keep a record of them. . . . The main facts I can recall offhand are approximately as follows: I was born in the year 1729 (the twelfth of Elul, 5489, according to the Jewish calendar) in Dessau, where my father was a teacher and Torah scribe, or *sofer*. I studied Talmud under Rabbi [David] Fraenkel, who was then the chief rabbi [*Oberrabbiner*] of Dessau. Around 1743, this learned rabbi, who had gained great fame among the Jewish people because of his commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud, was called to Berlin, where I followed him that same year. There, I developed a taste for the arts and sciences as a result of my acquaintance with, as well as some instruction by, Mr. Aron Gumperts (who later became a doctor of medicine; he died a few years ago in Hamburg). Eventually, I became, first, a tutor in the house of a rich Jew [Isaak Bernhard], later on his bookkeeper, and, finally, the manager of his silk factory, a position I am still holding. I was married in my thirty-third year and sired seven children, of whom five survive. Incidentally, I never attended a university, nor did I ever listen to an academic lecture. This [lack of formal education] constituted one of my greatest difficulties, for it meant a real struggle to get an education solely by my own effort and diligence. In fact, I overdid it, and the overzealousness with which I pursued my studies brought on a nervous weakness that renders me all but incapable of any scholarly occupation. . . . **Moses Mendelssohn, Letter to Johann Jacob Spiess, pastor, librarian, and supervisor of the mint in Ansbach, who had a medal struck in Mendelssohn's honor, 1779**

C. Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his capacity to use his reason without outside direction. Self-incurred is this tutelage when it is caused not by inability (to employ our faculty to use our reason) but by a lack of resolution and of courage to use it without outside direction. *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own reason - that is the motto of Enlightenment. **Immanuel Kant**

D. [Moses Mendelssohn's] integrity and philosophical mind make me anticipate in him a second Spinoza, lacking only his errors to be his equal. **Letter written by Mendelssohn's friend and admirer, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing**

III. The Jewish Plato

A. I place my full and unreserved trust in G-d, who, in His omnipotence, *could* endow man with the faculty to discover for himself, independent of the dictum of the authority, those truths that constitute the basis for human salvation. And I feel a child's confidence in Him who, in His lovingkindness, *would* endow man with this faculty. Fortified by this unfaltering faith, I seek enlightenment, and through it [a reasoned] conviction, wherever I may find them. And - praised be my Creator's saving grace and goodness! - I think I have found both. Moreover, I am sure that any man can find them if only he undertakes his search with open eyes instead of shielding them from all rays of light. **Mendelssohn, pamphlet written shortly before his death entitled, Lessing's Friends**

B. To be sure, the soul cannot form a true image of a Being higher than itself, nor even of one possessing greater capabilities. Yet, it can conceive of the possibility that something exists which has more substance and is less deficient, something, in short, more perfect than the soul itself. To put it differently, the soul cannot see more than a glimmer of the most supreme Being or highest perfection, for it cannot fully comprehend that Being's true nature. By contemplating that which is true, good, and perfect in its own nature, and separating this from the deficient and unessential elements with which it is intermingled, the soul can conceive of a Being that is pure essence, pure truth, pure goodness and perfection. . . . As long as it inhabits the body, the soul, we must assume, cannot discern truth. Given this assumption, I can see only two possibilities: either we shall never know truth, or we shall know it only after death. . . . "The separation of body and soul is called death; is that right?" asked Socrates. "Right." "Doesn't it follow, then, that genuine lovers of wisdom must bend every effort to come closer to [an understanding] of death - to learn, that is, how to die?" "It would seem so." "Would it, then, not be highly irrational, indeed downright ridiculous, if a man, having spent his entire life learning how to die, were sad at the approach of death?" "That is beyond argument." "Actually, then, death can never hold any terror for the genuine philosopher but must always be welcome to him. . . ." "We stated that our spirit cannot be destroyed by nature. Consequently, the soul's possible destruction offers no way out of our predicament, and we must turn back: the soul cannot perish. It must endure after the body's death, must act, react, and form concepts. . . ." "We therefore have every reason to assume that this striving for perfection, this growing in inner excellence, constitutes the destiny of rational beings, hence also the end purpose of all creation. We may safely say that this cosmic structure, great beyond measure, was created so that rational beings, progressing step by step in moral and spiritual awareness, may gradually become more perfect, finding their happiness in their inner growth. It is inconceivable that the ultimate Being should have devised a cosmic plan that would allow the progression of those who strive for perfection to come to a halt; or worse still, that they should suddenly be pushed back into the abyss, losing the fruits of their labor. . . . To deny the soul's immortality," Socrates added, "means, among other things, also to deny G-d's Providence. . . . For all the reasons we have enumerated, we may be absolutely sure that there is a life to come, and our hearts and minds may be at peace." **Mendelssohn, Phaedon, 1767**

C. Those who feel that things are badly arranged in this life and in disarray [with regard to Divine justice] do not realize that along with the kind of [mechanistic] order they would like to see in this world would go the disappearance of all moral values, all virtue and righteousness. In a world where everything would be meticulously arranged according to their notions of [Divine] justice, all virtue would be rewarded, and every act that is morally good would *have to* result in some corresponding material good. Virtue would *never suffer*, vice never triumph. But in such a world there would be no opportunity to show pity, patience, generosity, or steadfastness, or to engage in the protection and delivery of the virtuous, or in a fight to the death for friends or country. And whatever virtue might still be pursued would be neither noble nor lovable; nor would vice be ignoble and repulsive. For the former would have become profitable, the latter harmful, and anything one might say about virtue would appear as no more than part of the [Divine] economy. . . **Mendelssohn, comments on his correspondence with Thomas Abbt, professor at the University of Frankfurt, Fall 1781.**

IV. Spokesman for his People

A. Expulsion constitutes the worst punishment for a Jew. It means not only being driven out of this or that country. It means, as it were, to be wiped off the face of G-d's earth. For there is no country whose borders are not barred against him by the iron clad hand of prejudice. And this harshest of punishments is to be endured by human beings not because they are guilty of some transgression but simply because they cling to their distinct religious beliefs and have the misfortune to have lost their money. . . . For it is just not possible that under the reign of the best, the most charitable prince and under the administration of wise and sympathetic men such punishment could be meted out to people who have committed no crime. Nor can I believe that the guiltless and poverty stricken - regardless of their appearance or religious beliefs and practices - will be denied the fire of a hearth, or water and shelter. . . . **Mendelssohn, Letter to Geheimer Kammerrat (Privy Councilor) Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Ferber, a high official in Dresden, Nov. 19, 1777**

B. It is strange to observe what different garb prejudice puts on throughout the ages in order to oppress us, and to raise objections to our admission as citizens [to any given country]. At a time when superstition was rampant, we were accused of wantonly desecrating holy places; of piercing crucifixes and making them bleed; of feasting our eyes on children we had first circumcised by stealth and then torn apart; of using the blood of Christians for our Passover celebrations; of poisoning public wells, etc. We were declared guilty of heresy and obduracy and were said to practice occult arts and black magic. For all that, we were tortured, robbed of our fortunes, driven into exile, and even put to death. Now that times have changed, these calumnies no longer have the desired effect. Now we are being reproached for our superstition and backwardness, our lack of moral sensitivity, discriminating taste, and refinement. We are judged incapable of pursuing the arts and sciences or plying a useful trade. Above all, we are rejected as unsuited to serve in the army or hold government offices, owing to our imputedly uncontrollable penchant for cheating, usury, and lawlessness. These more recent charges have now taken the place of those earlier and cruder accusations as justification for our exclusion from the ranks of useful citizens and our expulsion from the womb of the state. Formerly, every conceivable effort was made and all sorts of measures were taken to make us not into useful citizens but into Christians. But the fact that we were too stiff-necked and obdurate to let ourselves be converted was reason enough to regard us as superfluous ballast on this earth, and to attribute to us, depraved monsters that we are, any abomination that might expose us to the hatred and contempt of all mankind. Now that this zeal to convert us has abated, we are being treated with utter superciliousness. People continue to keep us away from every contact with the arts and sciences or from engaging in useful trades and occupations. They bar all roads leading to increased usefulness and then use our lack of culture to justify our continued oppression. They tie our hands and then reproach us for not using them. **Mendelssohn, Preface to Dr. Marcus Hertz's translation of Menashe ben Israel's work, Vindiciae Judaeorum (Vindication of the Jews)**

C. . . . I should, however, not at all like to see a legal authorization of the Jewish German dialect [*Judendeutsch*], nor a mixture of Hebrew and German as suggested by Mr. Fraenkel (Rabbi Yosef Yonah Fraenkel (1721-1793) of Breslau). I am afraid this jargon has contributed more than a little to the uncivilized bearing of the common man. In contrast, it seems to me that the recent usage of pure German among my brethren promises to have a most beneficial effect on them. It would vex me greatly, therefore, if even the law of the land were to promote, so to speak, the abuse of either language. It would be much better if Mr Fraenkel tried to put the entire admonition into pure Hebrew so that it could be read in either pure German or pure Hebrew, or possibly in both, whichever might be best under the circumstances. Anything at all rather than a mish-mash of languages! **Mendelssohn, Letter to Ernst Ferdinand Klein, Assistant Councilor of Law in Breslau, August 29, 1782**

V. An "Enlightened" World View

A. . . . I am sure that you will treat the Psalms as poetry and not pay attention to the prophetic and mystical elements which Christian as well as Jewish interpreters have found in them only because they searched for these elements, having searched for these elements only because they were neither philosophers nor literary critics. **Mendelssohn to Hofrat Michaelis of Goettingen, Gessamelte Schriften Vol. V p. 505**

B. But as regards a great many of the psalms, I must admit that I simply do not understand them. The ones I find easiest to understand include many which I must class as very mediocre pieces of poetry, incoherent verses, repetitions of the same idea *ad nauseum*, and abrupt transitions and modulations which no amount of inspiration could justify. . . . The character of some difficult psalms is such that you can read into them whatever you like, presumably because we do not know the events that inspired their composition, because the author, the time and circumstances of their origin are not known, or because some of the passages in the text have been corrupted, etc. I could cite for you two psalms which commentators of both nations interpret as Messianic prophecies. I, for my part, have subjected them to more thorough study and have arrived at the conclusion that the one is a satire on avarice and the other (i.e. Ps. 110) is a piece of flattery composed by a court poet in honor of King David when the king's armies laid siege to Rabbah. So much for that. **Moses Mendelssohn, Ungedrucktes und Unbekanntes von ihm, ed M. Kayserling, Leipzig, 1883, p. 11, Letter to John Zimmerman, court physician, Hanover.**

C. . . . notwithstanding his speculative doctrine, Spinoza could have remained an Orthodox Jew if he had not removed himself from the Law. **Gessamelte Schriften Vol. III p. 5**

D. If you but knew that we have just had eight holidays during which, as you know, one does not feel inclined to do anything except to be depressed. . . . **Letter to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Berlin. April 29, 1757, Gessamelte Schriften Vol. V p. 89**

E. . . . My son Joseph has all but given up his Hebrew studies. Immediately following your tutelage, he unfortunately fell into the hands of a scholar who proved to be a hollow *baal pilpul* (dialectician); and as much as Joseph loves intellectual acuity and scholarly disputation, he lacks a sense for real *pilpul*. As you know, it takes a very special kind of instruction to develop a taste for this sort of mental exercise. And though both you and I underwent this training, [you will recall that] we agreed Joseph's mind should rather remain a little duller than be sharpened in so sterile a manner.

Well, the distaste he felt for his teacher's instruction has made him reject all Hebrew studies. He is, however, making good progress in the natural sciences. . . . Right now, it might therefore be best to let him study whatever he wants or feels inclined to. This would, to say the least, not be detrimental to him if he were indeed to become a businessman. Or he could, if need be, do what his father had to do: muddle through, now as a scholar, now as a businessman - though this carries with it the danger that one ends up not being really either . . . **Mendelssohn, Letter to Herz Homberg, October 4, 1783, Gessamelte Schriften V pp. 670-672**

F. In matters of fundamental religious or ethical convictions, I am a dogmatist. That is to say, I have made my decision and firmly stand on the ground where, I believe, I can find the greatest measure of truth. But when it comes to judging my neighbor, I am a skeptic. That is to say, I have my doubts; for I greatly distrust my ability to convince any man of the truth of my own convictions, the more so since I grant him the same right I claim for myself - the right of free religious choice. **Letter to Johann Caspar Lavater, Dec. 12, 1769, Gessamelte Schriften Jubiläums Ausgabe VII p. 103-105**

G. . . . I recognize no eternal verities but those that can be grasped by the human reason and demonstrated as well as validated by the human intellect. . . . In Judaism there is no conflict between religion and reason, no revolt of natural cognition against suppression by faith. Judaism has no revealed religion in the Christian interpretation of the term. It has Divine laws, commandments, precepts, maxims, instructions about the will of G-d, but it has no dogmas, no doctrines, no universal truths. These the Eternal revealed to the Israelites in the same manner as He does to all other men - by nature and fact, never by word or letter. **Gessamelte Schriften Vol. III p. 164**

H. I cannot deny, however, that I have discovered certain wholly human additions and abuses which, alas, badly tarnish the original luster of my religion. . . . all of us who, in our search for truth, wish we could wipe out such poisonous accretions without doing damage to all that is authentic and good in our religion. **Letter to Lavater, Dec. 12, 1769, Gessamelte Schriften Vol. III p. 41**

I. For this reason, all our endeavors should have only one goal: to do away with misuses that have crept into these ceremonies and to infuse them with a genuine and authentic meaning. In this way the original script, blurred beyond recognition by hypocrisy and clerical ruse, might become legible and intelligible once again. **Gessamelte Schriften V p. 669**

J. Are we to assume that all the inhabitants of the earth, from sunrise to sunset, are condemned to perdition if they do not believe in the Torah, which has been granted solely as the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob? . . . What then are those peoples to do that are not reached by the radiant rays of the Torah? . . . Does G-d act like a tyrant when he deals with his creatures, destroying them and extirpating their name, even though they have done no wrong? **Moses Mendelssohn, Letter to HaRav HaGaon R. Yaakov Emden, Gesammelte Schriften Jubilaum Ausgabe Vol. XVI p. 178**

VI. Mendelssohn's Circle

A. I also compared these new metaphysical doctrines, [of the German Enlightenment philosopher Christian Wolff] with those of Maimonides, or rather of Aristotle, which were already known to me; and I could not reconcile them. I therefore resolved to set these doubts forth in Hebrew and to send what I wrote to Herr Mendelssohn, of whom I had already heard so much. When he received my communication, he was not a little astonished at it. He replied at once that my doubts were in fact well-founded, that I should nevertheless not allow them to discourage me, but continue to study with the zeal with which I had begun. **Thus encouraged, I wrote a Hebrew dissertation in which I questioned the foundations of Revealed as well as of Natural Theology. All the thirteen articles of faith laid down by Maimonides, I attacked with philosophical arguments, with the exception of one, namely that on reward and punishment, to which I conceded philosophical relevance as the necessary consequence of free will.** I sent this dissertation to Mendelssohn, who was quite amazed that a Polish Jew who had scarcely got as far as seeing Wolff's *Metaphysics* was so soon able to penetrate into their depths to the point of questioning their conclusions by means of a correct ontology. He invited me to call, and I accepted his invitation. But I was shy, and the manners and customs of the Berliners were strange to me, and it was with trepidation and embarrassment that I ventured to enter a fashionable house. When I opened Mendelssohn's door, and saw him and other gentle-folk there, as well as the beautiful rooms and elegant furniture, I shrank back, closed the door, and had a mind not to go in. But Mendelssohn had noticed me. He came out and spoke to me very kindly, led me into his room, placed himself beside me at the window, and paid me many compliments about my writing. He assured me that if I persisted, I should in a short time make great progress in metaphysics; and he promised to resolve my doubts. Not satisfied with this, the worthy man looked after my maintenance also, recommended me to the most eminent, enlightened, and wealthy Jews of Berlin, who made provision for my board and other wants. I was given the freedom of their tables, and their libraries were open to my use. **Solomon Maimon, Autobiography Chapter 19**

B. A number of young Jews from all parts of Germany had united, during Mendelssohn's lifetime, to form a society under the designation, *Society for Research into the Hebrew Language*. **They correctly observed that the evil condition of our people, morally as well as politically, has its source in their religious prejudices, in their want of a rational exposition of the Holy Scriptures, and in the arbitrary exposition to which the rabbis are led by their ignorance of the Hebrew language.** Accordingly, the object of their society was to remove these deficiencies, to study the Hebrew language at its sources, and by that means to introduce a rational exegesis. For

this purpose they resolved to publish a monthly periodical in Hebrew under the title of *Hameassef* ("The Collector"), which was to present expositions of difficult passages in Scripture, Hebrew poems, prose, essays, translations from useful works, and the like. [The periodical appeared from 1783 until 1797, first in Koenigsberg, then in Berlin, and last in Breslau.] **Solomon Maimon, Autobiography Chap. 23**

VII. Law and Doctrine, in Defence of Judaism

A. Clearly, ecclesiastical law armed with coercive power has always been one of the cornerstones of the Jewish religion of your fathers. How then can you, my dear Herr Mendelssohn, continue to abide by the faith of your fathers and, by removing the cornerstone, shake the whole edifice, contesting the system of law that was given by Moses, claiming the authority of Divine Revelation. If it is possible . . . to abolish ecclesiastical privilege (cherem), which is based upon positive Mosaic laws, why should it be impossible to cancel, for the nation's benefit, mere rabbinic measures of late vintage which create such detrimental barriers between Jews and Christians? . . . Yet you, my most worthy Herr Mendelsohn, have abandoned the faith of your fathers. One more step, and you have become one of us. **Pamphlet published anonymously in 1782 presumably by either the Viennese apostate Josef von Sonnenfels or by August Friedrich Craz, a Christian writer and pamphleteer**

B. [Religion] must have no relation to properties and possessions. . . . Under no circumstances may it resort to the methods of compulsion. Nor may its members exert compulsion within the church. All its judgments and concerns can only consist of inspiring, teaching, fortifying and consoling . . . Either the activities of the church issue out of the free will of the soul or they amount to nothing at all. . . . for it is impossible for men to possess the right to govern the thoughts of others, as if they belonged within my private domain. . . . Let every man who does not disturb the public welfare, who obeys the law, acts righteously toward you and his fellow men, be allowed to speak as he thinks, to pray to G-d after his own fashion or after that of his fathers, and to seek eternal salvation where he thinks he may find it. **Mendelssohn, Jerusalem Volume I**

C. [Atheism, for instance, constitutes a danger to the state precisely because] without belief in G-d, Providence, and a future life, happiness is a mere dream, virtue ceases to be virtue, the love of humanity becomes a mere weakness, and benevolence is little more than folly. **Mendelssohn, Jerusalem Volume I**

D. This state existed only once in the world. Call it the Mosaic society, by its proper name. It has already disappeared from the earth. Only G-d knows in which people and at which time we shall again see a similar situation. **Mendelssohn, Jerusalem Volume II**

E. Among all the precepts and ordinances of the Mosaic Law there is no single injunction saying, "Thou shalt believe or not believe." Rather they all say, "Thou shalt do or not do." Belief is not commanded, for it accepts no orders other than those coming by way of conviction. All the commandments of the Divine Law are directed to the will, to the energy of man. . . . Where the eternal truths of religion are concerned it is not spoken

of as believing but as discerning and knowing. That you may know the Eternal is the true G-d and apart from Him there is no other. . . . "Know, therefore, and take to heart that the L-rd alone is G-d in heaven above and on earth below; there is none else."

Mendelssohn, Jerusalem II p. 430

F. No individual capable of happiness is predestined; no citizen in the state of G-d is condemned to eternal sorrow. Everyone pursues his way, going through a series of determinations and reaching from level to level, toward that degree of happiness that is suitable for him. **Gesammelte Schriften Vol. II p. 432**

G. What people require as people, G-d has given to all; what they require as certain people, he has given to certain people [i.e. for example, to Jews, the Torah]. **Gesammelte Schriften Vol. V p. 497**

H. [Jews were chosen by Providence] to be a priestly nation, i.e. a nation which through its constitution and institutions, through its laws and actions and throughout the vicissitudes of destiny was always to point to wholesome, unadulterated notions of G-d and His attributes, continually teaching, preaching and seeking to maintain these notions among the nations through its mere existence. **Mendelssohn, Jerusalem Volume II**

I. All the Biblical laws refer to, or are based upon, eternal truths of reason or else, reminding us of them, they induce us to reflect on them, so that our rabbis rightly say, "The laws and doctrines act reciprocally, as do body and soul." **Mendelssohn, Jerusalem II p. 430**

J. The ceremonies constitute a living kind of script, which quicken heart and spirit, which is deeply meaningful and inspiring, standing in the closest possible relation to the speculative truths of religion and the teachings of ethics. . . . Weak and nearsighted is the eye of man! Who can say, I have entered into His holiness and have pierced through the whole design, so that I can now tell the measure, purpose and limit of all things . . . Because of its extra rational character, the Way is impervious to the incursions of historical changes or to the attempts at reform. Other nations can alter their laws in conformity with the changing times, conditions, and needs; but for me, the Creator Himself has ordained laws and how can I, a frail creature, venture to change these Divine laws according to the limitations (lit. darkness) of my understanding? **Mendelssohn, Jerusalem II**

K. As for the laws of Moses - we believe that they are absolutely binding on us as long as G-d Himself does not revoke them with the same kind of solemn and public declaration with which He once gave them to us. You say we no longer know the purpose of some of them? Very well. But wherever did the Legislator declare them to be valid only as long as we are aware of their purpose? And in the absence of such a declaration, what mortal dares to delimit their validity? Man may change the laws of man in accordance with changing times and conditions. But the laws of G-d must remain unalterable until one can be absolutely sure that He Himself proclaims modification. Will these laws ever be changed by G-d? Here, our scholars' opinions are divided. Some regard them as absolutely immutable, making this view an article of faith. Others, however, do not think it improbable that - at the time of some future, miraculous

restoration of the Jewish nation - the most sublime Lawgiver might decide on a second public legislative act. . . . Our customs and ceremonies serve to remind us that G-d is the One who has created the world, ruling it with wisdom. And they are to impress upon us the fact that this One G-d is the absolute L-rd over all nature; that He liberated the Jewish people, by extraordinary acts, from Egyptian oppression; that He gave them laws et cetera. This is the intent and purpose of our customs, which must necessarily appear to be superfluous, burdensome, and ridiculous to anyone lacking an insight into their true nature. **Mendelssohn, Bonnet's Palingenesis: A Counterinquiry**

L. Polytheism, anthropomorphism and religious usurpation still rule the earth . . . As long as these troubling spirits are united against reason, the genuine theists must also provide for a kind of union among themselves if the former are not to trample everything underfoot. And wherein shall this union consist? In principles and beliefs? Then you have dogmas, symbols, formulas, reason that is fettered. Therefore, in acts, meaningful acts - i.e. in ceremonies. **Mendelssohn, Gesammelte Schriften Vol. V p. 669**

VIII. In the Final Analysis

When the external yoke began to grow lighter, and the spirit felt freer, there arose again a brilliant personality who inspired great respect. This was Moses Mendelssohn who, by his commanding influence, has led the later development up to this very day. **This commanding individual, who had not drawn his mental development from the wellsprings of Judaism, was great chiefly in philosophical disciplines, in metaphysics and aesthetics.** He studied the Bible only from the philological and aesthetic point of view; he did not build up Judaism as a science from within itself, but merely defended it against political stupidity and pietistic Christian insinuations. **Personally an observant Jew, Mendelssohn showed the world and his brethren that it was possible to be a strictly religious Jew and yet to shine forth as a German Plato.** The words, "and yet," were decisive. His followers contented themselves with developing the study of the Bible in the philological-aesthetic sense, with studying the *Moreh, and yet pursuing* and spreading the humanities. But Judaism, Bible and Talmud were neglected. Even the most zealous study of the Bible was of no avail for the proper understanding of Judaism, because it was not treated as the authoritative source of doctrine and instruction, but only as a beautiful poetic storehouse from which to draw rich supplies for the imagination. With the Talmud thus neglected, and practical Judaism thus completely uncomprehended, it was but natural that the former symbolizing and abstract interpretation of Judaism, which had for a time been in the background, again became prevalent, and was carried to an extreme which threatened to destroy all of Judaism. . . . people should have asked themselves, **"Is Moses the son of Maimon, or Moses the son of Mendel, really identical with Moses the son of Amram?"** . . . There must be sense in all the commandments, in particular as regards those which declare themselves as being instructive, which call themselves "testimony" "memorial" and "symbol". It must be possible to find the spirit inherent in them. This attempt was never made. Moreover, many did not wish to make the attempt, or to attain the result. **For a spirit had come from the West which mocked everything holy** , and knew no greater pleasure than to make them sound ridiculous. Together with it, there entered a longing for sensual enjoyment, which eagerly embraced the opportunity to rid itself so easily of burdensome restrictions. Those motives combined to induce people to tear down the barriers erected by the Law, until human conduct became one dead, dull level. **Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch, Nineteen Letters, Letter Eighteen, pub. 1836**