Journal Title: The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents

Article Author: Moses Mendelssohn

Article Title: 'Jerusalem: Or, on Religious Power and and Judaism'

Volume:

Issue:

Month/Year: 2001

Pages: 208-219

Imprint:

Trans. #: 651715

Call #: CB411 .J327 2001

Location: Main Library

Item #:

CUSTOMER INFORMATION:

Stan Michael Landry
smlandry@email.arizona.edu

STATUS: Graduate

DEPT: History

University of Arizona Library
Document Delivery
1510 E. University Blvd.
Tucson, AZ 85721
(520) 621-6438
(520) 621-4619 (fax)
AskILL@u.library.arizona.edu

Paged by (Initials) 7/10

Reason Not Filled (check one):

☐ NOS ☐ NFAC (GIVE REASON)
☐ LACK VOL/ISSUE ☐ OVER 100 PAGES
☐ PAGES MISSING FROM VOLUME
goes even further: he knows that there is no danger in permitting his subjects to make public use of their reason and to publish their ideas concerning a better constitution, as well as candid criticism of existing basic laws. We already have a striking example [of such freedom], and no monarch can match the one whom we venerate.

But only the man who is himself enlightened, who is not afraid of shadows, and who commands at the same time a well-disciplined and numerous army as guarantor of public peace—only he can say what [the sovereign of] a free state cannot dare to say: “Argue as much as you like, and about what you like, but obey!” Thus we observe here as elsewhere in human affairs, in which almost everything is paradoxical, a surprising and unexpected course of events: a large degree of civic freedom appears to be of advantage to the intellectual freedom of the people, yet at the same time it establishes insurmountable barriers. A lesser degree of civic freedom, however, creates room to let that free spirit expand to the limits of its capacity. Nature, then, has carefully cultivated the seed within the hard core—namely, the urge for and the vocation of free thought. And this free thought gradually reacts back on the modes of thought of the people, and men become more and more capable of acting in freedom. At last free thought acts even on the fundamentals of government, and the state finds it agreeable to treat man, who is now more than a machine, in accord with his dignity.

9

MOSES MENDELSOHN

Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism
1783

Born into a poor family in Dessau, Germany, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) quickly exhibited his brilliance as a student of the Talmud. His fluency in both Hebrew and German gave him access to the secular world while he remained rooted in his religion—a believing Jew who

was also a freethinker, an advocate of toleration in a world where anti-Semitism flourished, especially among the enemies of the Enlightenment. Mendelssohn made a conscious effort not to dwell on the anti-Semitism of the established Christian churches. He also opposed the idea among Jewish reformers that if the Jews "modernized," the Prussian and Austrian states might treat them with more tolerance and grant them the rights they desired. Jews, like all peoples, have a natural right to freedom of religion and conscience and to the benevolence of the state, he said. If the state could not respect those rights, it must be changed. Mendelssohn also believed that Jews were exceptionally well suited to become model citizens. He based this belief on the fact that their religion was actually a body of law that prescribed actions and eschewed the doctrinal absolutism that led to persecution and dissension in the polity.

Mendelssohn's understanding of both Judaism and freedom of conscience can best be seen in Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism, which is the most imaginative eighteenth-century attempt to invent a religious enlightenment, once thought to be a contradiction in terms. In this selection, Mendelssohn advocates the creation of a state in which all religious minorities are full citizens and the government has no power over people's private beliefs.

State and religion—civil and ecclesiastical constitution—secular and churchly authority—how to oppose these pillars of social life to one another so that they are in balance and do not, instead, become burdens on social life, or weigh down its foundations more than they help to uphold it—this is one of the most difficult tasks of politics. For centuries, men have strived to solve it, and here and there enjoyed perhaps greater success in settling it practically than in resolving it in theory. Some thought it proper to separate these different relations of societal man into moral entities, and to assign to each a separate province, specific rights, duties, powers, and properties. But the extent of these different provinces and the boundaries dividing them have not yet been accurately fixed. Sometimes one sees the church move the boundary stone deep into the territory of the state; sometimes the state permits itself encroachments which, according to accepted standards, seem equally violent. Immeasurable evils have hitherto arisen, and still threaten to arise, from the dissension between these moral entities. When they take the field against each other, mankind is the victim of their discord; when they are in agreement, the noblest treasure of human felicity is lost; for they seldom agree but for the purpose of banishing from their realms
a third moral entity, *liberty of conscience*, which knows how to derive some advantage from their disunity.

Despotism has the advantage of being consistent. However burdensome its demands may be to common sense, they are, nevertheless, coherent and systematic. It has a definite answer to every question. You need not trouble yourself any more about limits; for he who has everything no longer asks, “how much?” The same holds true for ecclesiastical government, according to Roman Catholic principles. It deals fully with every circumstance, and is, as it were, all of a piece. Grant it all its demands; you will at least know where you stand. Your structure is completely built, and perfect calm reigns in all its parts. To be sure, only that dreadful calm which, as Montesquieu says, prevails during the evening in a fortress which is to be taken by storm during the night. Yet he who considers tranquillity in doctrine and life to be felicity will find it nowhere better secured to him than under a Roman Catholic despot; or rather, since even in this case power is still too much divided, under the despotic rule of the church itself.

But as soon as liberty dares to move anything in this systematic structure, ruin immediately threatens on all sides; and in the end, one no longer knows what will remain standing. Hence the extraordinary confusion, the civil as well as ecclesiastical disturbances, during the early years of the Reformation, and the striking embarrassment on the part of the teachers and reformers themselves whenever they had occasion to settle the question of “how far?” in matters of right. Not only was it difficult, in practice, to keep the great multitude within proper bounds, once it was released from its fetters, but even in theory, one finds the writings of those times full of vague and wavering ideas whenever the definition of ecclesiastical power is discussed. The despotism of the Roman church was abolished—but what other form was to be introduced in its place? Even now, in our more enlightened times, the textbooks of ecclesiastical law could not be rid of this vagueness. The clergy will not or cannot give up all claims to a *constitution*, yet no one really knows in what it should consist. One wishes to settle doctrinal differences, without recognizing a Supreme Judge. One still continues to refer to an independent church, without knowing where it is to be found. One advances a claim to power and rights, yet one cannot state who should exercise them.

Thomas Hobbes lived at a time when fanaticism, combined with a disorderly sense of liberty, no longer knew any bounds and was ready to bring royal authority under its foot and subvert the entire constitution of the realm (as it eventually did). Weary of civil strife and by
nature inclined toward a quiet, speculative life, he regarded tranquillity and safety, no matter how they were obtained, as the greatest felicity; and these, he thought, were to be found only in the unity and indivisibility of the highest power in the state. He believed, therefore, that the public welfare would be best served if everything, even our judgment of right and wrong, were made subject to the supreme power of the civil authority. In order to do so more legitimately, he assumed that man is entitled by nature to everything it has endowed him with the ability to obtain. The state of nature is a state of tumult, a war of all against all, in which everyone may do what he can do; everything one has the power to do is right. This unfortunate condition lasted until men agreed to put an end to their misery, to renounce right and might, as far as public safety was concerned, and to place both in the hands of an established authority. Henceforth, whatever that authority ordered was right.

Hobbes either had no taste for civil liberty or wished to see it destroyed rather than have it thus abused. But in order to retain for himself the liberty of thought, of which he made more use than anyone else, he resorted to a subtle twist. According to his system, all right is grounded in power, and all obligation in fear. Since God is infinitely superior in power to any civil authority, the right of God is also infinitely superior to the right of the latter. Consequently, the fear of God obliges us to perform duties which must not yield to any fear of the civil authority. This, however, applies only to inward religion, which was the philosopher's sole concern. The outward [mode of] worship he subjected entirely to the dictates of the civil authority; every innovation in church matters without its sanction is not only high treason, but blasphemy as well. The collisions which are bound to ensue between inward and outward worship he sought to remove by means of the subllest distinctions; and although many gaps still remain, making the weakness of the accord quite evident, one cannot help admiring the ingenuity with which he sought to render his system coherent.

There is, at bottom, a great deal of truth in all Hobbes's assertions. The absurd consequences to which they lead follow solely from the exaggeration with which he propounded them, whether out of a love of paradox or in compliance with the needs of his time. Moreover, in his day the concepts of natural law were, in part, still not sufficiently enlightened. In matters of moral philosophy Hobbes has the same merit as Spinoza has in metaphysics. His ingenious errors have occasioned inquiry. The ideas of right and duty, of power and obligation, have been better developed; one has learned to distinguish more
correctly between physical and moral ability, between might and right. These distinctions have become so intimately fused with our language that, nowadays, the refutation of Hobbes’s system seems to be a matter of common sense, and to be accomplished, as it were, by language itself. This is a distinctive feature of all moral truths. As soon as they are brought to light, they become so much a part of the spoken language and so connected with man’s everyday notions that they become evident even to ordinary minds; and now we wonder how man could ever have stumbled on so level a road. But we fail to consider the pains it cost to clear this path through the wilderness.

Hobbes himself must have been aware, in more ways than one, of the inadmissible results which necessarily followed from his exaggerated propositions. If men are not bound by nature to any duty, they do not even have a duty to keep their contracts. If there is, in the state of nature, no binding obligation other than that based upon fear and powerlessness, contracts will remain valid only as long as they are supported by fear and powerlessness. Thus, men, by their contracts, will not have come any step closer to their security, and will still find themselves in the primitive state of universal warfare. But if contracts are to remain valid, man must by nature, without contracts and agreements, lack the moral ability to act against a compact into which he has voluntarily entered; that is, he must not be permitted to do so, even if he can; he must not have the moral faculty, even though he may have the physical. Might and right are, therefore, different things; and in the state of nature, too, they were heterogeneous ideas. Moreover, Hobbes prescribes to the highest authority in the state strict laws not to command anything which would be contrary to its subjects’ welfare. For although that authority is not accountable to any man, it does owe an account to the Supreme Judge; and even though, according to his principles, it is not bound by the fear of any human power, it is still bound by the fear of the Omnipotent, who has made his will in this respect sufficiently known. Hobbes is very explicit on this point, and is, in fact, less indulgent to the gods of the earth than his system would lead one to expect. Yet this very fear of the Omnipotent, which should bind kings and princes to certain duties toward their subjects, can also become a source of obligation for every individual in the state of nature. And so we would once again have a solemn law of nature, even though Hobbes does not want to admit it. In this fashion, in our day, every student of natural law can gain a triumph over Thomas Hobbes, to whom, at bottom, he nevertheless owes this triumph.
Locke, who lived during the same period of deep confusion, sought to protect the liberty of conscience in another manner. In his letters concerning toleration he proceeds from the basic definition: *A state is a society of men who unite for the purpose of collectively promoting their temporal welfare.* From this it follows, quite naturally, that the state is not to concern itself at all with the citizens’ convictions regarding their eternal felicity, but is to tolerate everyone who conducts himself well as a citizen, that is, who does not interfere with the temporal felicity of his fellow citizens. The state as such is not to take notice of differences of religion, for religion as such has no necessary influence on temporal matters, and is linked to them solely through the arbitrary measures of men.

Very well! If the dispute allowed itself to be settled by a verbal definition, I would know of none that is more convenient; and if by this means one could have talked the agitated minds of his time out of their intolerance, it would not have been necessary for the good Locke himself to go into exile as often as he did. But what prevents us, they ask, from seeing to promote collectively our eternal welfare as well? And indeed, what reason do we have to restrict the purpose of society solely to the *temporal*? If men *can* promote their eternal felicity by public measures, it should be their natural duty to *do* so, their rational obligation to join forces for this purpose and to enter into social relations. If, however, this be the case, and the state as such be preoccupied solely with the temporal, a question arises: To whom are we to entrust the care for the eternal? To the church? Now we are, once again, back at our starting point. State and church—concern for the temporal and concern for the eternal—civil and ecclesiastical authority. The former relates to the latter as the importance of the temporal does to that of the eternal. The state is, therefore, subordinate to religion, and must give way whenever a collision arises....

I have sought, through the following considerations, to clarify for my own benefit the ideas of state and religion, of their limits and their influence on each other as well as upon [the state of] felicity in civil life. As soon as man recognizes that outside of society he can fulfill his duties toward himself and toward the author of his existence as poorly as he can fulfill his duties toward his neighbor, and, hence, can no longer remain in his solitary condition without a sense of wretchedness, he is obliged to leave that condition and to enter into society with those in a like situation in order to satisfy their needs through mutual aid and to promote their common good by common measures.
Their common good, however, includes the present as well as the future, the spiritual as well as the earthly. One is inseparable from the other. Unless we fulfill our obligations, we can expect felicity neither here nor there, neither on earth nor in heaven. Now, two things belong to the true fulfillment of our duties: action and conviction. Action accomplishes what duty demands, and conviction causes that action to proceed from the proper source, that is, from pure motives.

Hence actions and convictions belong to the perfection of man, and society should, as far as possible, take care of both by collective efforts, that is, it should direct the actions of its members toward the common good, and cause convictions which lead to these actions. The one is the government, the other the education of societal man. To both man is led by reasons; to actions by reasons that motivate the will, and to convictions by reasons that persuade by their truth. Society should therefore establish both through public institutions in such a way that they will be in accord with the common good.

The reasons which lead men to rational actions and convictions rest partly on the relations of men to each other, partly on the relations of men to their Creator and Keeper. The former are the province of the state, the latter that of religion. Insofar as men’s actions and convictions can be made to serve the common weal through reasons arising from their relations to each other, they are a matter for the civil constitution; but insofar as the relations between man and God can be seen as their source, they belong to the church, the synagogue, or the mosque. In a good many textbooks of the so-called ecclesiastical law one reads serious inquiries as to whether Jews, heretics, and heterodox believers can also have a church. In view of the immeasurable privileges which the church so-called is in the habit of arrogating to itself, the question is not as absurd as it must appear to an unbiased reader. To me, however, as it can be easily imagined, the difference of nomenclature is of no consequence. Public institutions for the formation [Bildung] of man that concern his relations with God I call church; those that concern his relations with man I call state. By the formation of man I understand the effort to arrange both actions and convictions in such a way that they will be in accord with his felicity; that they will educate and govern men.

Blessed be the state which succeeds in governing the nation by education itself; that is, by infusing it with such morals and convictions as will of themselves tend to produce actions conducive to the common weal, and need not be constantly urged on by the spur of the law. In social life, man must renounce certain of his rights for the common
good or as one may say, he must very often sacrifice his own advan-
tage to benevolence. He will be happy if this sacrifice is made on his
own prompting and when he realizes, in each instance, that he acted
solely for the sake of benevolence. Benevolence, in reality, makes us
happier than selfishness; but we must, while exercising it, be aware that
it springs from ourselves and is the display of our powers. Not, as
some sophists* interpret it, because everything in man proceeds from
self-love; but because benevolence is no longer benevolence, and has
neither value nor merit if it does not flow from the free impulse of the
benevolent individual.

This will perhaps enable us to give a satisfactory answer to the well-
known question: Which form of government is the best? This question
has hitherto received contradictory answers, all of them having the
same appearance of truth. It is, in reality, too vague a question, almost
as vague as a similar one in medicine: Which food is the most whole-
some? Every complexion, every climate, every age, sex, and mode of
life, etc., requires a different answer. The same is true with regard to
our politico-philosophical problem. For every people, at every level of
culture at which it finds itself, a different form of government will be
the best. Certain despotically ruled nations would be extremely miser-
able if they were left to govern themselves, as miserable as certain
free-spirited republicans if they were subjected to the rule of a monarch.
Indeed, many a nation will alter its form of government as often as
changes take place in its culture, way of life, and convictions, and, in
the course of centuries, will pass through the whole cycle of forms of
government, in all their shades and combinations, from anarchy to
despotism; yet it will always be found to have chosen the form of gov-
ernment which was best for it under existing circumstances.

Under all circumstances and conditions, however, I consider the
infallible measure of the excellence of a form of government to lie in
the degree to which it achieves its purposes by morals and convic-
tions; in the degree, therefore, to which government is by education
itself. In other words, in the degree to which the citizen is given the
opportunity to understand vividly (anschauend) that he has to renounce
some of his rights only for the common good; that he has to sacrifice
some of his own advantage only for the sake of benevolence; and that
he therefore gains as much, on the one hand, through a display of
benevolence as he loses, on the other, by sacrifice. Indeed, that by
means of sacrifice itself he greatly adds to his inner felicity, since it

*professional teachers of philosophy
enhances the merit and the worth of the benevolent act and therefore also the true perfection of the benevolent individual. It is, for example, not advisable for the state to assume all the duties of love for our fellow man down to the distribution of alms, and to transform them into public institutions. Man is conscious of his own worth when he performs charitable acts, when he vividly (anschauend) perceives how he alleviates the distress of his fellow man by his gift; when he gives because he wants to give. But if he gives because he must, he feels only his fetters.

Hence, one of the state's principal efforts must be to govern men through morals and convictions. Now, there is no other way of improving the convictions, and thereby the morals, of men than through persuasion. Laws do not alter convictions; arbitrary punishments and rewards produce no principles, refine no morals. Fear and hope are no criteria of truth. Knowledge, reasoning, and persuasion alone can bring forth principles which, with the help of authority and example, can pass into morals. And it is here that religion should come to the aid of the state, and the church should become a pillar of civil felicity. It is the business of the church to convince people, in the most emphatic manner, of the truth of noble principles and convictions; to show them that duties toward men are also duties toward God, the violation of which is in itself the greatest misery; that serving the state is true service of God; that charity is his most sacred will; and that true knowledge of the Creator cannot leave behind in the soul any hatred for men. To teach this is the business, duty, and vocation of religion; to preach it, the business and duty of its ministers. How, then, could it ever have occurred to men to permit religion to teach and its ministers to preach exactly the opposite?

But if the character of a nation, the level of culture to which it has ascended, the increase in population which has accompanied the nation's prosperity, the greater complexity of relations and connections, excessive luxury, and other causes make it impossible to govern the nation by convictions alone, the state will have to resort to public measures, coercive laws, punishments of crime, and rewards of merit. If a citizen is unwilling to defend the fatherland from an inner sense of duty, let him be tempted by rewards or compelled by force. If men no longer have any sense of the intrinsic value of justice, if they no longer realize that honesty in trade and traffic is true felicity, let injustice be chastised and fraud be punished. Admittedly, in this manner the state attains the ultimate aim of society only by half. External motivations do not make a man happy, even though they have an effect on him.
The man who avoids deception because he loves honesty is happier than one who is merely afraid of the arbitrary punishments the state linked with fraud. But to his fellow man it does not matter what motives cause the wrong to remain undone, or by what means his rights and property are safeguarded. The fatherland is defended, regardless of whether the citizens fight for it out of love or out of fear of positive punishment, even though the defenders themselves will be happy in the former and unhappy in the latter case. If the inner felicity of society cannot be entirely preserved, let at least outward peace and security be obtained, if need be, through coercion.

The state will therefore be content, if need be, with mechanical deeds, with works without spirit, with conformity of action without conformity in thought. Even the man who does not believe in laws must obey them, once they have received official sanction. The state may grant the individual citizen the right to pass judgment on the laws, but not the right to act in accordance with his judgment. This right he had to renounce as a member of society, for without this renunciation civil society is a chimera. Not so with religion! It knows no act without conviction, no work without spirit, no conformity in deed without conformity in the mind. Religious actions without religious thoughts are mere puppetry, not service of God. They themselves must therefore proceed from the spirit, and can neither be purchased by reward nor compelled by punishment. But religion withdraws its support also from civil actions, insofar as they are not produced by conviction, but by force. Nor can the state expect any further help from religion, once it can act only by means of rewards and punishments; for insofar as this is the case, man's duties toward God no longer enter into consideration, and the relations between man and his Creator are without effect. The only aid religion can render to the state consists in teaching and consoling; that is, in imparting to the citizens, through its divine doctrines, such convictions as are conducive to the public weal, and in uplifting with its otherworldly consolations the poor wretch who has been condemned to death as a sacrifice for the common good.

Here we already see an essential difference between state and religion. The state gives orders and coerces, religion teaches and persuades. The state prescribes laws, religion commandments. The state has physical power and uses it when necessary; the power of religion is love and beneficence. The one abandons the disobedient and expels him; the other receives him in its bosom and seeks to instruct, or at least to console him, even during the last moments of his earthly life,
and not entirely in vain. In one word: civil society, viewed as a moral person, can have the right of coercion, and, in fact, has actually obtained this right through the social contract. Religious society lays no claim to the right of coercion, and cannot obtain it by any possible contract. The state possesses perfect, the church only imperfect rights. . . .

These are, in my opinion, the boundaries between state and church, insofar as they have an influence upon the actions of men. In respect to convictions, state and church come somewhat closer to each other; for here the state has no other means of acting effectively than the church has. Both must teach, instruct, encourage, motivate. But neither may reward or punish, compel or bribe; for the state, too, cannot have acquired by means of any contract the slightest compulsory right over our convictions. In general, men’s convictions pay no heed to benevolence, and are not amenable to any coercion. I cannot renounce any of my convictions, as a conviction, out of love for my neighbor; nor can I cede and relinquish to him, out of benevolence, any part of my own power of judgment. I am likewise in no position to arrogate to myself or in any way acquire a right over my neighbor’s convictions. The right to our own convictions is inalienable, and cannot pass from person to person; for it neither gives nor takes away any claim to property, goods and liberty.

Hence, the smallest privilege which you publicly grant to those who share your religion and convictions is to be called an indirect bribe, and the smallest liberty you withhold from dissidents an indirect punishment. They have, at bottom, the same effect as a direct reward for agreement, and a direct punishment for opposition. It is a paltry delusion when the distinction between reward and privilege, between punishment and restriction, is so much insisted upon in some text books of ecclesiastical law. To the linguist, such a notation may be useful, but to the poor wretch who must do without his rights as a man because he cannot say: I believe, when he does not believe, who will not be a Moslem with his lips and a Christian at heart, this distinction brings only a sorry consolation. And what are the limits of privilege, on the one hand, and of restriction, on the other? With a moderate gift for dialectics, one amplifies these concepts and goes on extending them until they become civil felicity, on the one hand, and oppression, exile, and misery on the other.

Fear and hope act upon men’s appetitive urge, rational arguments on their cognitive faculty. You lay hold of the wrong means when you seek to induce men, through fear and hope, to accept or reject certain propositions. Indeed, even if this is not altogether your object, you still
impede your better intentions if you do not try to keep fear and hope out of view as far as possible. You bribe and deceive your own heart, or your heart has deceived you, if you believe that examining the truth is feasible and that freedom of inquiry remains inviolate, when status and dignity await the inquirer if he arrives at one conclusion, and contempt and indigence if he arrives at another. Notions of good and evil are instruments for [directing] the will, those of truth and untruth for [directing] the intellect. Whoever wants to act upon the intellect must first of all lay aside the former instruments; otherwise he is in danger of proceeding contrary to his own intention. He may smooth over where he should cut right through, and fix where he should demolish.

What form of government is therefore advisable for the church? None! Who is to be the arbiter if disputes arise over religious matters? He to whom God has given the ability to convince others. For what can be the use of a government where there is nothing to govern? What use are authorities where no one is to be a subject? What good is a judiciary where there are no rights and claims to be adjudicated? Neither state nor church is authorized to judge in religious matters; for the members of society could not have granted that right to them by any contract whatsoever. The state, to be sure, is to see to it from afar that no doctrines are propagated which are inconsistent with the public welfare; doctrines which, like atheism and Epicureanism, undermine the foundation on which the felicity of social life is based. Let Plutarch and Bayle* inquire ever so much whether a state might not be better off with atheism than with superstition. Let them count and compare ever so much the afflictions which have hitherto befallen and still threaten to befall the human race from these sources of misery. At bottom, this is nothing else than inquiring whether a slow fever is more fatal than a sudden one. No one would wish either upon his friends. Hence, every civil society would do well to let neither of them, neither fanaticism nor atheism, take root and spread. The body politic becomes sick and miserable, whether it is worn down by cancer or consumed by fever.

*Plutarch, an ancient Greek historian; Pierre Bayle, a seventeenth-century French philosopher who supported religious tolerance