

BY-PATHS IN HEBRAIC BOOKLAND

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PHILADELPHIA

THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY OF AMERICA

1920



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MENDELSSOHN'S "JERUSALEM"

Of a hundred who discuss Moses Mendelssohn's conception of Judaism, perhaps barely five have read *Jerusalem*, the book in which that conception is most lucidly expressed. It is a common fate with certain literary masterpieces that they are read in their own day and talked about by posterity. The fame of Mendelssohn, moreover, underwent something like an eclipse during the last generation. To paraphrase what Antony said of Cæsar, but yesterday his word might have stood against the world; now, none so poor as to do him reverence.

The depreciation of Mendelssohn was due to two opposite reasons. For some time, though most Jews were unconscious of it, it was becoming obvious that there were two, and only two, thoroughgoing solutions of the Jewish problem for the modern age. The one may be termed religious liberalism, the other territorial nationalism. Now, Mendelssohn's views are in accord with neither of these tendencies. He was so far from being a territorialist—and I use that term in the widest sense—that he has been acclaimed and denounced as the father of assimilation. He was so remote from liberalism, that he has been acclaimed and de-

nounced as the founder of neo-orthodoxy. His theory of life was that the emancipated Jew could and must go on obeying under the new environment the *whole* of the olden Jewish law. This is not possible! cry both the liberal and the nationalist. Hence the liberal asserts one-half, the nationalist the other half of the Mendelssohnian theory. The liberal would modify the law, the nationalist would change the environment. In other words, instead of holding Mendelssohn in low esteem, both sides ought to recognize that they each derive half their inspiration from him.

And it is fortunate that Jews are, at this juncture, coming to appreciate Mendelssohn all over again. Our German brethren have just initiated a capital series of little books which cost less than a shilling each. The first of these "Monuments of the Jewish Spirit" contains the *Jerusalem*, and much else of Mendelssohn's work. Here one reads again the words first penned by the Berlin Socrates in 1783: Judaism knows nothing of a revealed religion, Israel possessed a divine legislation. "Thought is free," we can hear Mendelssohn thundering—if so harsh a verb can be applied to so gentle a spirit—"let no Government interfere with men's mode of conceiving God and truth."

State and religion are separated as wide as the poles. Israel has its own code, which in no way conflicts with the State; still less does Israel seek to impose that code on the State. Mendelssohn did not believe that all men were destined to attain to truth by the road of Judaism. "Judaism boasts of no exclusive revelation of immutable truths indispensable to salvation." Hence, too, "Judaism has no articles of faith." It follows that not unbelief was punished under the Jewish *régime*, but contumacious disobedience. The Jew was never commanded: believe this, disbelieve that; but do this, and leave that undone. Judaism is the Jew's way of attaining goodness, other people can attain it in other ways. Not consonance but manifoldness is the design and end of Providence. "Religious union is not toleration, it is diametrically opposed to it." Toleration consists rather in this: "Reward and punish no doctrine; hold out no allurements or bribes for the adoption of theological opinions." How far in advance of his age Mendelssohn was! It took a full century after his *Jerusalem* for England to abolish theological tests at the universities, tests which indeed did "reward and punish" doctrines. Mendelssohn goes on: "Let everyone who does not disturb public happi-

ness, who is obedient to the civil government, who acts righteously towards his fellow-man, be allowed to speak as he thinks, to pray to God after his own fashion, or after the fashion of his fathers, and to seek eternal salvation where he thinks he may find it." No one, unless it be that earlier Jewish philosopher Spinoza, had ever put the case for toleration so cogently. Whether Mendelssohn's own principles are consistent with his further conclusion that once a Jew always a Jew, will ever be doubted. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 44a) had said: An Israelite, though he sin, remains an Israelite. Mendelssohn rather said: An Israelite has no right to sin. True, the world need not accept Judaism, but the Jew may never reject it. "I do not see," cries Mendelssohn, "how those who were born in the house of Jacob can, in any conscientious manner, disencumber themselves of the law. We are allowed to think about the law, to inquire into its spirit but all our fine reasoning cannot exonerate us from the strict obedience we owe to it." I am not now criticising Mendelssohn. I am trying to expound him. To live under the law of the State and at the same time to remain loyal to the law of Judaism is hard. But Mendelssohn went on: *Bear both burdens.* That assuredly is a counsel

which should be inscribed in golden letters over the portal of Judaism now, even though we may interpret the burdens differently in our different circumstances.

Mendelssohn's masterpiece includes much else. But what precedes ought to be enough to whet readers' appetites for the whole meal. On an occasion when I had a long talk with William James, I spoke to him of Mendelssohn, and he admitted that his own Pragmatic theories were paralleled by the *Jerusalem*. He promised to write on the subject, but death claimed him all too soon. Whether we agree with Mendelssohn or not, let us at least agree in appreciation of his genius. What he did, and what we do not do, is to face unflinchingly the discussion of fundamentals. Reading Mendelssohn is to breathe the fresh air. But there's the rub! *Read Mendelssohn?* How, if we know no German? It is deplorable that the *Jerusalem* is no longer accessible in English. I say no longer, because once it was accessible. And not once only, but twice.

In 1852, Isaac Leeser published an English version in Philadelphia. No wonder our American brothers still hold Leeser in such reverent esteem. He deserved well of the Jewry of his land. But

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Leeser's was not the first English translation of *Jerusalem*. In 1838, M. Samuels issued in two volumes an English version in London; it was dedicated to Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, and contained much besides the *Jerusalem*. I know nothing of the translator except one thing that he was not, and another thing that he was. He was not a native Englishman, and he was a good scholar. About a dozen years earlier (1825) he had produced a volume, entitled "Memoirs of Moses Mendelssohn" (what a pitfall that double *s* is to printers! Throughout M. Samuels' earlier book an *s* is missing in the name; in the later publication it has been recovered). Samuels asserts himself a "disciple of the leading system of the work"; perhaps this accounts for his enthusiasm, shown in his conscientious annotations, which are fragrant with genuine Jewish thought. With very slight furbishing up, Samuels' rendering could be re-printed to-day. One of the most urgent needs of our age in English-speaking lands is that Jews should once more become familiar with the thought of the eighteenth century, and particularly of Mendelssohn. Like many another of my generation, I was brought up rather to decry him. I have learned better now, and would fain urge others to a like reconsideration.