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Meaning and Translation: Mendelssohn's "Living Script"

In *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism* (1783), Mendelssohn introduces the notion of the "living script" to account for the particular way tradition and transmission of its teachings function in Judaism. However, Mendelssohn's theory of writing, text, and interpretation offers more than just an account of the operative features of Jewish tradition. With the case study of the modus operandi of Jewish tradition, *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism* formulates a theory of tradition that redefines the terms of the discourse of modernity and, as a result, reframes religious difference in a way that remains no longer hostage to the hegemonic, Christian-inflected discourse of the Enlightenment. Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, in other words, is the harbinger of a new thinking (to cite the title of a programmatic essay by Rosenzweig whose phrase is in this context felicitously apposite) that breaks ground for a vision of modernity that does not just plead for toleration of difference and diversity but highlights them as the grounds on which genuine intellectual and spiritual freedom, openness, and peace become possible in the first place.

Mendelssohn's notion of the "living script" serves as the conceptual linchpin for formulating a distinctly modern theory of the state, religion, and the different kinds of power that define them. Introduced a third of the way into Part Two, the theory of the "living script" presents the conceptual linchpin for the book's larger argument about civil freedom, self-determination, and diversity. *Jerusalem* performs the astonishing feat of resting its case on a theory of language and communication that comprehends meaning as arising from an act of interpretation, or translation, a process that as "living script" requires performative enactment to "make sense."

Theorizing cultural transmission in terms of translation as the site where meaning is produced, Mendelssohn's conception of the "living script" construes its function as the operative act that renders tradition and its transmission meaningful. Critical attention to Mendelssohn's theory of the "living script" further allows us to appreciate him as a philosopher who recognizes the act of translation to be more than just a means to disseminate and popularize what already has been thought, formulated, established,

and institutionalized. Rather, for Mendelssohn, philosophy, just like the various forms of religion, is in the final analysis another form of tradition whose praxis relies on – or rather consists in – translation. Translation here refers to a reappropriation by way of rethinking and reformulation that, on Mendelssohn's analysis, is the very condition of the possibility of philosophy or any other tradition. However, it is precisely the recognition of the disciplinary framework of conditionalities that defines philosophy as a form of tradition that turns the need for translation into its most creative and empowering moment.¹ As a further result, Mendelssohn's theory of translation implies among other things a rethinking of the relationship between theory and praxis.

In *Jerusalem*, the term "living script" serves to describe the way in which Jewish tradition continues to live on and flourish. It is, Mendelssohn argues, the praxis of the commandments or more precisely the mitzvoth, i.e., the biblical prescriptions of actions – which Mendelssohn calls the "ceremonial laws" (*Zeremonialgesetze*) – that safeguard the enduring character of Jewish tradition.² They pose a fundamental challenge to the customary hermeneutics that inform theology and philosophy in the age of Enlightenment and are defined by the Pauline distinction between letter and spirit.

While Christian-inflected approaches fixate on dogmas or various forms of doctrines as the fundament of religious tradition, Mendelssohn offers a view that allows religious tradition to be understood as a form of praxis irreducible to any shape or form of writ, text, law, or letter. For any attempt at reducing tradition to a set of propositional truths based on a particular body of Scripture rests on a hermeneutic that fails to attend to the substitutive function of the translation at the heart of its interpretation and understanding, that translation which makes its transmission possible in the first place.

Mendelssohn's approach challenges this reductive view of Judaism as a tradition and religion of law stuck to the letter by undoing the Pauline distinction on which this reduction rests. According to Mendelssohn, the commandments or mitzvoth are not the end and purpose but rather a means or medium that puts the continuity of the transmission of the teachings on a secure footing and protects it against corruption and idolatry. As a consequence, Mendelssohn presents scripture as a written record whose commandments serve as notational aid. Understood in such an auxiliary capacity as a means rather than an end, scripture, Mendelssohn suggests,

does not dictate a hermeneutic of submission but presents a call to action. But each and every time this call finds itself to be heard and acted on in a different context. Consequently, each new iteration becomes an act of interpretation that translates, as it were, a particular commandment into an instance of its fulfilment, an operation that each time marks the singularity of its iteration as a repetition with a difference. As a result, tradition comes into view as a site of continuous reiteration by way of a continuous reconfiguration of the non-identical. Upon closer examination, tradition is thus predicated on the discontinuity that makes acts of interpretation and the fulfilment of commandments possible.

The “living script” is Mendelssohn’s answer to the question of what it means to be Jewish or continue to be Jewish: what does it mean to live according to the call of a tradition and its commandments and do so in modernity? And what does this mean hermeneutically? What does this mean with regard to the function and status of hermeneutics itself? For, according to Mendelssohn, the rethinking of the relationship between theory and praxis that his approach entails also reconfigures the epistemological underpinnings of hermeneutics. As a result, Mendelssohn allows us to expose and critically rethink the theological-political implications that inform the hermeneutics of religious as well as philosophical interpretation.

Mendelssohn’s answer is that Jewish tradition, like every other tradition, depends on the transformative act of translation as its central and foundational feature. To fulfill a commandment is not a trivial, continuous and self-identical affair. This operation defies the logic of identity. Fulfilling a commandment requires an interpretative act that turns the commandment into an action, i.e. sustains a practice by reiteration. This process operates as a translation from word into deed and is, as a result, transformative. In other words, a text’s meaning is constituted only through the act of interpretation it calls forth, an act that each time occurs in a moment singular to its instantiation.

The way Mendelssohn theorizes the model of the mitzvoth as the fundamental pivot of transmission in Jewish tradition highlights that tradition does not operate by mechanical rote, i.e., repetition of the identical. Rather, it consists in a play of difference as a key moment of its dynamics of continuity and transmission. Transmission always implies some kind of transposition and translation, transfer and transference – it is precisely this openness to change and innovation that makes its continuity possible. In other words, translation creates the effect of enduring stability and

continuity through a substitutive operation in which meaning arises as the site where the continuity and discontinuity of temporal difference are negotiated, an operation we now call tradition.

In *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism*, Mendelssohn introduces the "ceremonial law" as an alternative kind of script, which – in contrast to other forms of writing – lives up to the challenge to preserve and transmit the vibrant and renewing energy that defines the life of tradition:

The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation and to provide the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction.³

Das Zeremonialgesetz selbst ist eine lebendige, Geist und Herz erweckende Schrift, die bedeutungsvoll ist, und ohne Unterlaß zu Betrachtungen erweckt, und zum mündlichen Unterrichte Anlaß und Gelegenheit giebt.⁴

If "our alphabetical script," Mendelssohn observes, "makes man too speculative" (A 118; Jub A 8, 184), the ceremonial law, i.e., the commandments or mitzvot, offers a feasible alternative that other forms of writing that fixate the content they transmit unfortunately lack. By removing the writ from the scene of its enunciation the written becomes detached from the particular context in which the act of writing assumes its particular frame of reference that allows meaning to arise. The context that defined it is lost and the indexicality that sustains the act of writing dissolves:

We have seen how difficult it is to preserve the abstract ideas of religion among men by means of permanent signs. Images and hieroglyphics lead to superstition and idolatry, and our alphabetical script makes man too speculative. It displays the symbolic knowledge of things and their relations too openly on the surface; it spares us the effort of penetrating and searching, and creates too wide a division between doctrine and life. In order to remedy these defects the lawgiver of this nation gave the *ceremonial law*. Religious and moral teachings were to be connected with men's everyday activities. The law, to be sure, did not impel them to engage in reflection; it prescribed only actions, only doing and not doing. The great maxim of this constitution seems to have been: *Men must be impelled to perform actions and only induced to engage in reflection.* (A 118f.)

Wir haben gesehen, was für Schwierigkeit es hat, die abgesonderten Begriffe der Religion unter den Menschen durch fortdauernde Zeichen zu erhalten. Bilder und Bilderschrift führen zu Aberglauben und Götzendienst, und unsere alphabetische Schreiberey macht den Menschen zu spekulativ. Sie legt die symbolische Erkenntniß der Dinge und ihrer Verhältnisse gar zu offen auf der Oberfläche aus, überhebt uns der Mühe des Eindringens und Forschens, und macht zwischen Lehr und Leben eine gar zu weite Trennung. Diesen

Mängeln abzuhelpfen, gab der Gesetzgeber dieser Nation das *Zeremonialgesetz*. Mit dem alltäglichen Thun und Lassen der Menschen sollten religiöse [sic] und sittliche Erkenntnisse verbunden seyn. Das Gesetz trieb sie zwar nicht zum Nachdenken an, schrieb ihnen bloß Handlungen, bloß Thun und Lassen vor. Die große Maxime dieser Verfassung scheint gewesen zu seyn: *Die Menschen müssen zu Handlungen getrieben und zum Nachdenken nur veranlassen werden.* (Jub A 8, 184)

Calling forth and sustaining “actions and practices” (“Handlungen und Verrichtungen,” 119; Jub A 184) the ceremonial law represents a writing that, through the fulfilment of its commandment, produces the condition for an intergenerational communal practice of personalized oral teaching. As the link between the written and the oral, the ceremonial law’s “living script” provides the necessary framework for meaning to be reliably transmitted as the regenerative response of the dialogical impulse that sustains the reproduction of a tradition’s interpretative community.

As a consequence, praxis presents a striking alternative to safeguard against the exposure to corruption that comes with any form of scriptural fixation of meaning and sense:

Man’s actions are transitory; there is nothing lasting, nothing enduring about them that, like hieroglyphic script, could lead to idolatry through abuse or misunderstanding. But they also have the advantage over alphabetical signs of not isolating man, of not making him to be a solitary creature poring over writings and books. They impel him rather to social intercourse, to imitation, and to oral living instruction. For this reason, there were but a few written laws, and even these were not entirely comprehensible without oral instruction and tradition; and it was forbidden to write more about them. But the unwritten laws, the oral tradition, the living instruction from man to man, from mouth to heart, were to explain, enlarge, limit, and define more precisely what, for wise intentions and with wise moderation, remained undetermined in the written law. (A 119)

Die Handlungen der Menschen sind vorübergehend, haben nichts Bleibendes, nichts Fortdauerndes, das, so wie die Bilderschrift, durch Mißbrauch oder Mißverstand zur Abgötterey führen kann. Sie haben aber auch den Vorzug vor Buchstabenzeichen, daß sie den Menschen nicht isolieren, nicht zum einsamen, über Schriften und Bücher brütenden Geschöpfe machen. Sie treiben vielmehr zum Umgange, zur Nachahmung und zum mündlichen, lebendigen Unterricht. Daher waren der geschriebenen Gesetze nur wenig, und auch diese ohne mündlichen Unterricht und Überlieferung nicht ganz verständlich, und es war verboten, über dieselbe mehr zu schreiben. Die ungeschriebenen Gesetze aber, die mündliche Überlieferung, der lebendige Unterricht von Mensch zu Mensch, von Mund ins Herz, sollte erklären, erweitern, einschränken, und näher bestimmen, was in den geschriebenen Gesetzen, aus weisen Absichten, und mit weiser Mäßigung unbestimmt geblieben ist. (Jub A 8, 184f.)

Ceremonial law, in other words, is a form of writing that demands fulfillment of its precept as a form of practice that combines action with oral intergenerational dialogue. It thus creates out of writing, speech, and action an evolving continuum that is maintained by the continuous interplay of the written, the oral, and performative practice.

While *Jerusalem* makes clear how vital intergenerational transmission of teachings are "from man to man, from mouth to heart" ("von Mensch zu Mensch, von Mund ins Herz," A 119; Jub A 185), Mendelssohn leaves no doubt that the letter of the tradition plays an equally crucial role in the process of transmission. The term "living script" captures this idea by characterizing this particular kind of script as distinctly *living* while still invoking the notational aspect of writing that imparts its lessons only to those who understand that reading the "living script" means to translate it into action, i.e., to realize that the written and spoken mutually constitute each other's transmission through the response the living script calls forth.

Dialogical in character, this approach casts translation as integral to tradition and interpretation. Only with this final step of doing what the commandment prescribes does tradition continue beyond the moment of the imagined foundational act, assuming continuity only through reiteration. Tradition then comes into view as a translational project whose hermeneutics cannot be reduced to either written or oral transmission but depends on the conjunction of both. To these two aspects Mendelssohn adds as third a form of interpretation that stabilizes meaning by way of extra-linguistic reference: it is only through enactment of commandments that one becomes an agent of tradition, i.e., through a praxis that actuates the written through the oral by way of action. Remarkably, meaning arises through the transformative and translational move that constitutes the transmission of tradition.

Because meaning springs forth from performing the law rather than from mere hermeneutic exercise of the law, the letter itself is not and need not be where change occurs. As the fulcrum for translation into action, the written word is the necessary condition on which the change each iteration presents can occur. Without the fixation of the letter, interpretation and translation is impossible. Mendelssohn's intergenerational model maps this dynamic of continuity and discontinuity onto a temporality that includes oral transmission as fundamental to the process of tradition. But it is only the enactment of the commandments that presents the final stage that sustains tradition by translating commandments into the specificity