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The Linguistic Condition of Moses Mendelssohn's Philosophy¹

The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning.²

Das Zeremonialgesetz selbst ist eine lebendige, Geist und Herz erweckende Art von Schrift, die bedeutungsvoll ist.³

The coherent and systematic features of Mendelssohn's philosophy are best demonstrated by taking his late opus magnum *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism* (1783) as the most comprehensive representation of his thought. Here, Mendelssohn interconnects the many different layers of his philosophy. Although Mendelssohn did not adhere to the widely accepted presumption that a coherent philosophy needs to demonstrate its perfection and quality by means of systematic representation, his thought, represented in two different languages, in various styles, texts, and forms of argumentation, follows strict logical principles. The concept *living script* (*lebendige Schrift*) is not only central to Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* but one of the most complex concepts developed throughout his work. It intertwines all dimensions of Mendelssohn's multilayered thought, which encompasses such different fields as philosophy, logic, semiotics, hermeneutics, ethics, politics, aesthetics, mathematics, science, theology, Jewish law, and mysticism. The analysis of the *living script* brings to light the two fundamental features and leading principles of his philosophy: 1) semiotics, and 2) the primacy of praxis. Both features are the direct outcome of the *conditio sine qua non* of his thought: The revelation of the Jewish law to Moses. This means that in order to fully understand the concept of the *living script* and its multi-dimensional meaning, it has to be analyzed in the context and framework of Mendelssohn's entire philosophical work. And, reversely, a precise analysis of the concept helps us to better understand the major principles that qualify his work as a unique philosophical position in the 18th century discussion and an important contribution to modern, critical thought.

I. Mendelssohn's agnostic approach to the language discussion

Mendelssohn's philosophical apology⁴ for the ceremonial law⁵ in the second part of *Jerusalem* begins with an investigation into the history of language and scripture. This investigation develops hypothetical speculations about the natural genesis of signs and language which Mendelssohn had begun to work out in earlier writings, especially in his critique of Rousseau "Sendschreiben an Lessing" (written around 1755), his unpublished draft "Über die Sprache" (1756), "Von dem von der Berlinischen Akademie ausgesetzten Preise, auf die Lehre von dem Einflusse der Meinungen in die Sprachen" (1759), the famous prize essay *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in Metaphysischen Wissenschaften* (1764), and the review "Herder und Tiedemann. Ursprung der Sprache" (1773). But only with *Jerusalem*, does the intrinsic nexus between Mendelssohn's aesthetics and his semiotic theory become obvious as the core of his philosophy. While in his earlier writings Mendelssohn had concentrated on the question of how sign production is interconnected with the process of cognition, *Jerusalem* takes these reflections a step further and asks about the anthropological, social, ethical, political, and religious conditions of sign and language production, language usage, and communication.⁶

Mendelssohn's outline of the history of language appears to be a paradox: Its very foundation is a critique of the evolutionary emergence of alphabetical language as such. However, his general skepticism of historical narration did not deter him from employing it as an analytical device. For him, historical narratives are hypothetical constructions with more or less persuasive power. As early as in 1759, Mendelssohn begins to ask for probable hypotheses that may explain the natural genesis of language:

Warum mag es doch so schwer seyn, über den Ursprung der Sprachen mit einiger Gründlichkeit zu philosophiren? Ich weis wohl, daß sich von geschehenen Dingen, davon wir keine urkundliche Nachrichten haben, selten mehr als Muthmassungen herausbringen lassen. Allein, warum will den Weltweisen auch keine Muthmassung, keine Hypothese glücken? Wenn sie uns nicht sagen können, wie die Sprachen wirklich entstanden, warum erklären sie uns nicht wenigstens, wie sie haben entstehen *können*?⁷

Why might it be so difficult, to philosophize profoundly about the origin of languages? I am aware of the fact that we might seldom be able to produce more than anything else but assumptions about things that happened in the past and of which we do not have any testified evidence. But why does the philosopher not even succeed with an assumption, with a hypothesis? If they cannot tell us how languages have emerged, why at least don't they explain to us, how they *might* have emerged?

Mendelssohn follows Pierre Louis de Maupertuis and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in pointing out the circular argument of thought and language that one enters when questioning the origin of language: *Language* was necessary for learning to think whereas *thought* was the very precondition for the invention of language. Mendelssohn takes Rousseau's rather historical insight to an epistemic level and defines the circular argument of language's origin as the skeptical foundation of language theory. From this very ground, the hypothetical character of all language theories is deduced as the inevitable precondition of language reasoning:

So wenig die Augen in ihrem natürlichen Zustande, das Werkzeug des Sehens, die Lichtstrahlen, deutlich wahrnehmen, eben so wenig mag vielleicht die Seele das Werkzeug ihrer Gedanken, die Sprache bis auf ihren Ursprung untersuchen können.⁸

Just as little as the eyes in their natural state are able to perceive their tool of seeing, i.e., light beams, may the soul perhaps not be able to explore the tool of its thoughts, i.e., language, up to its very origin.

To investigate the origin of language means to move along the edge of knowledge. The metaphor of vision and light, applied by Mendelssohn to illustrate his argument, brings into relief the linguistic nature of philosophy as well as the philosophical dimension of language production. As long as philosophy has not given the proof that language is not of human origin (and according to Mendelssohn, it will never be able to give such a proof, "because there is no proof for something that happened in the past")⁹, the philosopher has to adhere to the hypothesis that language has naturally emerged. Therefore, any historical outline of the natural emergence of language is built on the same shaky hypothetical ground and can, at most, be used to question the biblical narrative of language's divine origin but not replace it.

Mendelssohn's language philosophy is subject to the agnostic argument that there is no philosophical evidence for the fact of divine revelation¹⁰ but also no proof for the opposite.¹¹ Accordingly, he discusses the origin of language from two angles: in his German writings his language theory is based on the philosophic critique of revelation, in his Hebrew writings he acknowledges the divine origin¹² of language from a traditional point of view (elaborated from the critical investigation into medieval Jewish sources). In his unpublished draft *On Language* he puts the paradox in one sentence:

Was die Allmacht dem erschaffenen Menschen wunderthätig mittheilen kann, das kann sie ihm eben so gut bey der Hervorbringung anerschaffen haben.¹³

What the Almighty may have miraculously announced to the created human being, may have been primordially attributed to it via creation as well.

Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* has been explored extensively as a source, or more precisely, *the* source of his language theory.¹⁴ However, there has not been any attention given to the fact that only here Mendelssohn directly confronts the two viewpoints of the 18th century language discourse: the hypothesis of language's natural *versus* its divine origin.¹⁵

As already mentioned, Mendelssohn begins with an investigation into the natural emergence of language and script. Recent scholarship has emphasized Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's (1714–1780) influence on Mendelssohn's semiotics.¹⁶ Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) had in fact a strong impact on the whole discourse on language in the 18th century. Condillac has left his traces not only in Mendelssohn's writings but also in those of Rousseau, Diderot, d'Alembert, Maupertuis, and Herder. Condillac's narrative describes the emergence of language as a dialectical interaction between language and cognitive perception, the outcome of a long historical interplay between human sensations and sign production.¹⁷ The gradual transition from "natural" to arbitrary sign production, from a *langage d'action* to an abstract, rational *langage de calcul* seemed to present the plausible explanation that enlightenment discourse had eagerly longed for. And at first glance, Condillac's hypothesis seems in fact to also provide the foundation for Mendelssohn's argument that the *ceremonial law* (*halacha*) is a system of signs and 'a kind of script'.¹⁸ The emergence of our arbitrary languages out of a sensation-bounded language of physical action supposedly sets the ground to interpret the ceremonial law as a sort of language that reaches back to much earlier and more original stages of language production. But Mendelssohn's argument is far more complex, and a closer look reveals that the ceremonial law as 'a kind of script' has little in common with Condillac's concept of a *langage d'action*. Already in 1773, Mendelssohn exposed the inherent problem of Condillac's historical hypothesis as follows:

Die Sprache, die der Mensch als Thier hat, dies Geschrey, worinn sich jede lebhafte Empfindung ohne Absicht und ohne Willkühr äussert, muß mit der, die er als Mensch hat, nicht verwechselt werden. Vergeblich hat sich daher Condillac, nebst andern mehr bemühet, den Ursprung dieser aus jener herzuleiten.¹⁹

The language that the human being has as an animal, this screaming that expresses every *lively* sensation without intention and without arbitrariness, ought not to be mistaken for the language that he has as a human being. Therefore, Condillac and others have tried in vain to deduce the origin of the latter from the former.

Mendelssohn questions the gradual transition from natural, involuntary, and spontaneous sign production to the later state of our fully developed alphabetical languages that consist of both natural and arbitrary signs. "This transition", Mendelssohn argues, "seems to require a leap."²⁰ In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn closely interlinks the emergence of arbitrary signs with the development of scripture and fully elucidates the philosophical argument that underlies his critique of Condillac. The philosophical investigation of the paradigm shift that is marked by the transition from the system of visual, hieroglyphic signs to the new system of alphabetical signs, is crucial for Mendelssohn's theory of language and scripture. It is one of the most fascinating arguments in Mendelssohn's entire work that discloses the systematic features through which Mendelssohn's language theory is interlinked with his critical aesthetics, metaphysics, and politics.

II. Diversity as an anthropological condition: The human senses, their languages, and the invention of scripture

In 1784, one year after Mendelssohn had handed over to the public his major philosophic work, *Jerusalem*, he published the small but remarkable essay *Die Bildsäule: Ein psychologisch-allegorisches Traumgedicht* (*The Statue: A Psychological-Allegorical Dream Vision*).²¹ Here, in the framework of an allegoric dream the five personified senses and their sub-senses meet each other in a stage-like scenario. Mendelssohn introduces them as talking in different dialects²² and stresses their difficulties with mutual understanding. The hermeneutic effort to understand the meaning of each other's expressions provokes the desire for comparison and translation between the various dialects of the human body. This allegoric scene illustrates Mendelssohn's concept of diversity with an efficacious picture: human perception itself is divided into different personalities wherein each of the senses has invented its own language that is only of limited access to the other *dramatis personae* (i.e., the other human senses) *via* translation.²³ That means that the human subject is composed of separate perceptual categories which each is determined by its own faculties that

are captured through the qualities of another sense or, most probably, several other senses. Mendelssohn conceptualizes multilingual diversity as an anthropological condition and poses the strong claim that translation begins within ourselves. When this internal diversity is ignored and/or leveled, humankind is in danger. As is widely known, Mendelssohn's political plea for diversity is the grand finale of *Jerusalem*:

Brüder! [...] lasset uns keine Übereinstimmung lügen, wo Mannigfaltigkeit offenbar Plan und Endzweck der Vorsehung ist. Keiner von uns denkt und empfindet vollkommen so, wie sein Nebenmensch;²⁴

Brothers, [...] let us not feign agreement where diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of Providence. Not one of us thinks and feels exactly like his fellow man;²⁵

What philosophers and scholars have completely overlooked so far is the very fact that the political meaning of the concept is based on a thorough philosophical argument. This philosophical argument can only be found in explicit formulation in Mendelssohn's text *Die Bildsäule*, wrapped in an allegoric dream and written one year after *Jerusalem*.

Mendelssohn had developed elements of his argument earlier on. In his draft *On Language*, he evaluates the anthropological distinction between the five senses in relation to their function for the cognitive process. And, as it becomes unequivocally clear with his aesthetic writings and his prize essay *On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences*, Mendelssohn regards perception and cognition as inseparable from the process of sign production. Only on the basis of the assumptions made by Mendelssohn in these earlier texts can one comprehend the full extent of his theory and critique of scripture in *Jerusalem*. In what follows, I will reconstruct Mendelssohn's argument with an eye to his various texts to shed new light on the famous *Jerusalem* passage that deals with the history of scripture.

Mendelssohn evaluates the different senses and their respective languages as follows: *Taste* and *smell* are the senses with the least developed languages. They are the slowest and most confused senses and have therefore rarely contributed to the process of cognition. But they are relevant for another reason. The close proximity and similarity between the two may have indicated in the first place the idea of translating the languages of the senses into each other and led to the conclusion that the sensations of all senses might be comparable in several transcendental terms. The *sense of sight* is of outmost relevance for cognition (*deutliche Erkenntnis*).

It is the only sense which produces universal concepts synthetically.²⁶ Furthermore, it has – in collaboration with the sense of touch – developed a language of expression based on the concepts of extension and motion that is of utmost clarity, determinacy, and precision. It is for that reason, Mendelssohn argues, that geometry and the optical science became the driving force for the scientific revolution and the emergence of modern philosophy.²⁷ He differentiates two types of vision: the *sight of figures* and the *sight of colors*. In his essay, *Die Bildsäule*, he represents them as the two allegorical dream characters “Raumgesicht” (vision of space) and “Farbgesicht” (vision of color).²⁸ Comparing the capacity for *seeing colors* with that of *hearing sounds*, Mendelssohn argues that the eye can distinguish different colors side by side while the ear receives different sounds mainly in sequences. But on the other hand, the sense of hearing is superior to vision in terms of speed: the ear is able to comprehend and distinguish a much greater amount of sequent sounds than the eye can differentiate sequent colors in a given time. The ear's capacity to receive fast sequences of sensations makes it an excellent tool for comparison and, therefore, an important source for the production of universal concepts.²⁹ *Feeling*, or the *sense of touch*, is able to perceive several objects synchronically, and that is a clear advantage over *hearing*, *taste*, and *smell* which function – for the most part – diachronically. In contrast to *sight*, touch can only perceive a very limited quantity of objects at once, which makes it a very useful tool for comparison and separation. Therefore, the sense of touch supplements, corrects, and elucidates concepts that were generated by means of the visual sense.³⁰

Mendelssohn assumes that each of the five senses has generated its own independent system of signs and, overall, he favors the “seeing of figures” and “hearing of sounds” over the other human perceptual capabilities for the process of sign bounded cognition.³¹ Thus, it is not by accident that the seeing of figures and hearing of sounds are the aesthetic concepts which anticipate scripture, speech, and language. Mendelssohn's brief account of the emergence of scripture and language in *Jerusalem* narrates the aesthetic and epistemological propositions he had developed in his earlier texts. The account begins with the natural genesis of the first visible signs out of the things themselves, culminating in the invention of hieroglyphic signs and script, which are uncoupled from the things themselves:

Die ersten sichtbaren Zeichen, deren sich die Menschen zu Bezeichnung ihrer abgesonderten Begriffe bedient haben, werden vermuthlich die Dinge selbst gewesen seyn. Wie nämlich jedes Ding in der Natur einen eigenen Charakter hat, mit welchem es sich von allen übrigen Dingen auszeichnet; so wird der sinnliche Eindruck, den dieses Ding auf uns macht, unsere Aufmerksamkeit hauptsächlich auf dieses Unterscheidungszeichen lenken, die Idee desselben rege machen, und also zur Bezeichnung desselben gar füglich dienen können. [...] Mit der Zeit kann man es bequemer gefunden haben, anstatt der Dinge selbst, ihre Bildnisse in Körpern oder auf Flächen zu nehmen; endlich der Kürze halber sich der Umrisse zu bedienen, sodann einen Theil des Umrisses statt des Ganzen gelten zu lassen, und endlich aus heterogenen Theilen ein unförmliches, aber *bedeutungsvolles* Ganzes zusammzusetzen; und diese Bezeichnungsart ist die *Hieroglyphik*.³²

The first visible signs that men used to designate their abstract concepts were presumably the things themselves. Since everything in nature has a character of its own that distinguishes it from all other things, the sensual impression that this thing makes on us, will draw our attention chiefly to this distinctive feature, will excite the idea of it, and can therefore serve very well to designate it. [...] In the course of time, men may have found it more convenient to take images of the things, either in bodies or on surfaces, instead of the things themselves; Later, for the sake of brevity, to make use of outlines, and next, to let a part of the outline stand for the whole, and at last, to compose out of heterogeneous parts a shapeless but *meaningful* whole, and this mode of designation is called *hieroglyphics*.³³

Hieroglyphs are the language or sign system of the visual sense, while our alphabetical languages, Mendelssohn argues, depend on two different sign systems that fulfill different human needs: the system of sounds *and* the letters of the alphabet, i.e., a visual sign system that is different from hieroglyphs.³⁴ Whereas intersubjective communication relies primarily on temporary, audible signs, visual signs are a lasting and therefore indispensable tool for subjective memory and cognition. As already mentioned, Mendelssohn questions the linear, natural “transition” from hieroglyphs “to our script” and alphabetical signs:

Aber von der Hieroglyphik bis zu unserer alphabetischen Schrift – dieser Übergang scheint einen Sprung, und der Sprung mehr als gemeine Menschkräfte zu erfordern.³⁵

The transition from hieroglyphics to our alphabetical script seems to have required a leap, and the leap seems to have required more than ordinary human powers.³⁶

The challenge Mendelssohn faces is the philosophical problem that humans have “to conceive a deliberate plan” to designate “a multitude of concepts” that cannot be surveyed and comprehended “by means of a small number of elementary signs.”³⁷ Rather surprisingly at first glance

but entirely in agreement with his agnostic agenda, Mendelssohn goes on to disprove his own assumption and explains how this miraculous leap could have been made without supernatural intervention. He argues that alphabetic scripture and our lively developed languages have emerged, in between the system of audible and visible signs, through the mutual overlap of two sign systems:

Schrift in Rede und Rede in Schrift zu verwandeln, und also die hörbaren Zeichen mit den sichtbaren zu vergleichen; so kann man gar bald bemerkt haben, daß sowohl in der Redesprache dieselben Laute, als in verschiedenen hieroglyphischen Bildern dieselben Theile öfters wiederkommen, aber immer in anderer Verbindung, wodurch sie ihre Bedeutung vervielfältigen. Endlich wird man gewahr worden seyn, daß die Laute, die der Mensch hervorbringen und vernehmlich machen kann, so unendlich an der Zahl nicht sind, als die Dinge, welche durch sie bezeichnet werden;³⁸

Since one very often had occasion to transform script into speech and speech into script, and thus to compare audible and visible signs, one must soon have noticed that the same sounds often recur in the spoken language, as do the same parts in different hieroglyphic images, though always in different combinations, by means of which they multiply their meaning. In the end, one must have realized that the sounds that man can produce and render perceptible are not as infinite in number as the things denoted by them;³⁹

That is how the immeasurable quantity of hieroglyphic pictures and the infinite number of things they represent obtained a reduced structure through the systematic analogy between spoken (audible) language and written (visible) language. Thus, the amount of hieroglyphic pictures underwent a process of reduction from an incalculable amount of signs to a limited number of alphabetic letters. But the system of sounds also experienced a reduction since the alphabetic scripture is “by far not so manifold as speech.”⁴⁰ Therefore, alphabetical signs do not just depend on human perception and the objects they designate, but on two separate sign systems, the system of visual images and the system of sounds. The double relationship of the arbitrary sign is “one of the most glorious discoveries of the human spirit.” It demonstrates

wie die Menschen haben allmählig, ohne Flug der Erfindungskraft, darauf geführt werden können, sich das Unermeßliche als meßbar zu denken, gleichsam den gestirnten Himmel in Figuren abzutheilen, und so jedem Sterne seinen Ort anzuweisen, ohne die Anzahl der Sterne zu wissen.⁴¹

how men may have been led, step by step, without any flight of inventiveness, to think of the immeasurable as measurable, and to divide, so to speak, the starry firmament into figures, and thus to assign to every star its place, without knowing their number.⁴²

The image of the infinite firmament that Mendelssohn uses here to display the philosophic dimension implicated in the invention of alphabetical language is one of the central metaphors he employed when elaborating his concept of the sublime in his earlier aesthetic writings.⁴³ The firmament is, according to Mendelssohn, a poetic metaphor that aims to capture the infinite, the unknowable, the unmeasurable, that which is beyond human understanding. When applied to the origin of our alphabetical languages, it indicates that language is not only a tool for poetic expression but is itself poetic; and that language is not only a tool for philosophic reasoning but is itself philosophical. As elaborated in his earlier aesthetic writings, Mendelssohn understands the sublime as a cognitive and aesthetic procedure of representing the infinite by finite means, “to think of the immeasurable as measurable.” In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn demonstrates how alphabetic scripture follows the principles of sublime representation. Furthermore, the procedure “to think of the immeasurable as measurable” is also the leading principle that determines his metaphysics as distinctively semiotic.⁴⁴

To put it briefly, Mendelssohn makes a strong point here: alphabetic scripture consists of a finite number of arbitrary and symbolic signs that follow the anti-Spinozistic principle he had developed in his early philosophical writings:

Die Ordnung der Natur ist nicht die Ordnung unserer Methode im Denken.⁴⁵

The order of nature is not the order of our method of thinking.

This means that alphabetic scripture anticipates philosophy and is the first transcendent⁴⁶ tool of expression which humans have made use of; as such it determines the boundaries of both language and knowledge.

The abstraction involved in the invention of the alphabetic languages changes the patterns of language production not only quantitatively but qualitatively. Mendelssohn calls this new form of language generation a ‘leap’. As such it complements the natural procedure of mimetic sound and image production with a new quality of sign production. The arbitrary sign no longer resembles natural sounds and objects heard by the ear and seen by the eye but relates deliberately independent, or arbitrary signs to

objects and concepts. Thus, our alphabetic languages were born through the differentiation, interrelation, comparison, analogy, interference, transformation, and translation between two sign systems. The lively, reciprocal interaction between images and sounds, between script and speech, between scripture and orality led to the intrinsic interloop between the cognitive and communicative features that characterize the life of our languages. But the advantages go hand in hand with distinct disadvantages. The new, abstract level of language construction completely disconnects taste, smell, feeling and the sight of colors from sign production and cognition, and it restricts the multiplicity of audible and visual sign production to the small repertoire determined by the letters of the alphabet. Knowledge and scripture, so to speak, have outsourced the body and its different languages to a large extent. The vivid connection between perception, cognition, sign production, and communication, i.e., the natural interdependence between the individual human being and social interaction, entered a frozen state when the invention of literary languages widely succeeded in paving the way for an entire culture.

This means that Mendelssohn's critique of culture does not imagine a state of nature "without language" à la Rousseau⁴⁷ but a state of language use that qualitatively differs from ours, in which the wide diversity of oral speech underwent a process of reduction, became rudimental and monotonous, as scripture became a tool of theory and speculation largely disconnected from practical life:⁴⁸

Bilder und Bilderschrift führen zu Aberglauben und Götzendienst, und unsere alphabetische Schreiberey macht den Menschen zu spekulativ. Sie legt die symbolische Erkenntnis 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.⁴⁹

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 teaching and life.⁵⁰

Thus – and here Mendelssohn agrees with Rousseau – the threat that our current culture experiences the most, is the temptation of alienation through abstract reason and theory.⁵¹ To avoid the danger of extensive isolated speculation, reflection, and theorizing, Mendelssohn stipulates that moral and religious teachings are "to be connected with men's everyday activities."⁵²

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.⁵³

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.⁵⁴

To counter the dangers of speculation with more theory, or with better theories, leads even deeper into cultural misery. Mendelssohn wants to rescue the theoretical potential of scripture and philosophy without conceding it hegemonic status.⁵⁵ In a nutshell: Mendelssohn wants to conceptualize praxis as the regulative for theory.⁵⁶ And it is here that his idealistic apology for the Jewish ceremonial law makes its appearance.

III. Mendelssohn's concept of the living script as theoretical defense of the primacy of praxis, and as a philosophical defense of the revealed law

The divinely revealed Jewish law receives its authority from the same oral and written testimonies considered the very sources for the divine origin of language and scripture. When Mendelssohn, in the second part of *Jerusalem*, vindicates and conceptualizes the Jewish ceremonial law as an alternative form of semiotics, he consciously leaves the ground of his, so to speak secular, "historical" argument. So far, he had played through entirely the possibility of a natural origin of language, specified the advantages and disadvantages of the presumed development, and concluded with a full affirmation of his hypothesis. When he henceforth defends the Jewish law as a sign system that obviates the drawbacks of both human linguistic inventions – the hieroglyphic system and alphabetic scripture – he confuses the reader heavily. Considering Mendelssohn's own axiom that the philosopher is obliged to stick to the hypothesis, that language has naturally emerged so long as philosophy has not given the proof for the opposite, the question is, what is going on here? The answer is simultaneously simple and confusing: Mendelssohn gives revelation a

philosophical meaning on the basis of its sacred, untouchable integrity. This interesting move is not an escape from skepticism but a product of the skeptical ground of Mendelssohn's thought.⁵⁷

Almost 150 years later, following Mendelssohn's agnostic argument, Leo Strauss challenged the autonomy of modern philosophy and claimed the authority of revelation against rationalism.⁵⁸ The key issue of the enlightenment discussion was, according to Strauss, the controversy between orthodoxy and enlightenment about the general possibility of revelation. Strauss adheres to the agnostic view that as a matter of principle the controversy cannot be decided. The enlightenment, as perceived in the 19th and 20th century, had ostensibly decided the controversy by stating the possibility of proving the impossibility of revelation, and therefore, the rational overcoming of religion. That is how and why, in Strauss' view, enlightenment ended up in self-deception and with a false notion of philosophy that generated the modern idea of progress as the kernel of its unstable foundation.⁵⁹ Against the whole variety of modern concepts that attempted to meet the epistemological challenge – among them the Kantian and neo-Kantian approach, Hegelianism, and existentialism, for example – Strauss poses a radical command: philosophy must accept the autonomy of revelation authorized by religious traditions. This command, in principle, determines all medieval patterns of philosophy. But whereas Strauss' claim that philosophy has to open up its doors for the fact of revelation remained a nearly empty promise, Mendelssohn's philosophy has to be understood as the first modern representation of the medieval paradigm of philosophy. Positioned against Spinoza's abandonment of Jewish and Christian religion, Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* defends the ceremonial law as a bulwark against the colonizing forces of doctrine and theory. The ceremonial law functions as the example par excellence for a strong, inextricable nexus between theory and praxis. The fact that the revealed law, its habits, customs and daily regulations of life are given by the authority of a particular tradition (to speak in secular terms) or by divine power (to speak in religious terms), provides a practice based counter-regulative to cultural, social, and political theory in desperate need to remain in contact with practical life. The sacred, untouchable authority of the Jewish law ensures the primacy of praxis and protects its particularity.

What Julius Guttmann once called "Mendelssohn's paradox theses of Judaism"⁶⁰ – that the Jewish law commands and proscribes customs, deeds, and actions to be carried out, not abstract teachings and doctrines

to be believed in – is the foundation of Mendelssohn’s halachic semiotics. This consists of a system of transitory signs related to the human body and to the whole variety of the human senses, their languages, expressions, and activities. Commandments, prescriptions, rules, and instructions organize and regulate the gamut of human practices ranging from “simple” procedures in daily life like preparing food, eating, sexual intercourse, keeping house and body clean, dressing, observing the prayer and holiday schedule, learning, and studying, to more complex juridical matters such as farming, property, engagement, marriage, divorce etc. Their fulfillment performs the detailed, verbal instructions as actions which are subject to perpetual gradual change. Mendelssohn understands deeds and actions as transitory signs that represent both the divine law and the limitations of its human representation. The law was given to Moses, the religious and political leader of the Jewish nation, in oral and in written form,⁶¹ and its practical fulfillment generates the ‘kind of script’ that mirrors the divine script, the word of God.

Mendelssohn does not explain in *Jerusalem* (or in any other German text, as far as I can see) what his concept of the word of God is. Only in *Kohelet Musar* (1755/58), the preface to the new edition of Maimonides’ treatise on logic, *Millot ha-Higgayon* (1763), his commentary to the biblical book of *Exodus* (*Bi’ur*), and his introduction to the *Pentateuch*-translation *Or la-Netiva* (1782) – which are all Hebrew texts – does he refer to the matter. Fully in accordance with the Jewish tradition, he emphasizes the singularity and uniqueness of the “*lashon ’eloqit habru’a*” – the creative language of God.⁶² Therein, Judah Halevi’s Aristotelian interpretation⁶³ of *Sefer Yetzira* (*Book of Creation*)⁶⁴ in chapter 4 of his major philosophical work *The Kuzari*⁶⁵ is the reference point for Mendelssohn’s concept of the holy language and scripture. The first lines of *Sefer Yetzira* relate the creation of the world to the creation of the letter and vice versa:

With 32 miraculous paths of Wisdom [=32 names] engraved God [...] his name and created his world through 3 *sefarim*: through *sefar*, *sippur*, and *sefer* [*be-sf”r ve-sf”r ve-sf”r*]. 10 *sefirot* of nothing, 22 foundation letters, 3 mothers, 7 doubles, and 12 elementaries.⁶⁶

Judah Halevi defines the divine speech act as the mutual interaction between *sefar*, the (divine) speculation, *sippur*, the (divine) speech, and *sefer*, the (divine) script.⁶⁷ In his interpretation, the creation of the world through the three *sefarim* merges with the threefold speech act in *Genesis* 1.3: “He said,

Be there light, and It was so.” Halevi applies the Aristotelian logical categories of *subject*, *act/predicate*, *object* to *Genesis* 1.3⁶⁸ which allows him to expose the fundamental difference between the divine and the human speech acts. While divine speech not only designates an object but also creates the object itself, logic provides us humans a tool to reflect this unity.⁶⁹ This act of cognitive reflection breaks apart the original and creative unit of signifier, act of signification, and the signified that characterizes divine speech. Based on the distinction that intellectual action, scripture, and the world are separate entities, signification is the main feature of human language. For Mendelssohn, the different empirical languages, including Hebrew as a vernacular and literary language, are equivalent epistemological formations in the face of the divine word.⁷⁰ The specific features of all human languages are signs and names, symbols, conventions, arbitrariness, and logic. The three elements of the speech act are the human distinctions that comprehend the incomprehensible and attempt to represent an inaccessible perfection. Thus, in Halevi and Mendelssohn's understanding the act of signification itself indicates the superiority, originality, and perfection of the holy language.

In *Sefer Yetzira* the un-vocalized *sf'r* occurs three times in a row and this points to the fact that divine speech is in all parts one and the same: *sf'r*, *sf'r*, and *sf'r*. As mentioned above, in Halevi's interpretation of the passage they are specified as *sefar*, *sippur*, and *sefer*. The divine speech act is an unified whole composed of projecting/conceptualizing (*sf'r*), speaking/acting (*sf'r*), and writing/creating (*sf'r*), while human perception fragments these into distinct spheres. Hence, divine scripture, *mikhtav 'elohim*,⁷¹ is all in one – concept, scripture, and world. And these remain separate entities only for the human being. We have access to the word of God *either* through its orally transmitted teachings from generation to generation, *or* through reading the scripture, *or* through perceiving the world (i.e., God's creation) as physical bodies.

When analyzing the drawbacks of alphabetical script, Mendelssohn diagnoses the same human dilemma. Respecting the authority of both reason and revelation, he approaches the matter of language from the two sides of the agnostic argument. Interestingly, both paths lead to the same conclusion, namely that humans are caught in an inner diremption when reduced to their intellectual faculties. This very diremption is the reason why Mendelssohn attributes a philosophical significance to the autonomy of the ceremonial law, i.e., the practical instructions how to conduct everyday life:

Diesen Mängeln abzuhelpfen, gab der Gesetzgeber dieser Nation [Moses] das Zeremonialgesetz. Mit dem alltäglichen Thun und Lassen der Menschen sollten religiöse und sittliche Erkenntnisse verbunden seyn: Die Menschen müssen zu Handlungen getrieben und zum Nachdenken nur veranlasst werden. Daher jede dieser vorgeschriebenen Handlungen, jeder Gebrauch, jede Zeremonie ihre Bedeutung, ihren gediegenen Sinn hatte, mit der spekulativen Erkenntniß der Religion und der Sittenlehre in genauer Verbindung stand, und dem Wahrheitsforscher eine Veranlassung war, über jene geheiligten Dinge selbst nachzudenken, oder von weisen Männern Unterricht einzuholen. Die zur Glückseligkeit der Nation sowohl als der einzelnen Glieder derselben nützlichen Wahrheiten sollten von alldem Bildlichen äußerst entfernt seyn; denn dieses war Hauptzweck, und Grundgesetz der Verfassung. An Handlungen und Verrichtungen sollten sie gebunden seyn, und diese ihnen statt der Zeichen dienen, ohne welche sie sich nicht erhalten lassen.⁷²

In order to remedy these effects the lawgiver of this nation [Moses] 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*. Therefore, each of these prescribed actions, each practice, each ceremony had its meaning, its valid significance, each was closely related to the speculative knowledge of man in search of truth to reflect on these sacred matters or to seek instruction from wise men. The truths useful for the felicity of the nation as well as of each of its individual members were to be utterly removed from all imagery; for this was the main purpose and the fundamental law of the constitution. They were to be connected with actions and practices, and these were to serve them in place of signs, without which they cannot be preserved.⁷³

The whole complex of *halachic* commandments and prescriptions unfolds within the matrix of two obligatory, corresponding, directive corpora. The Torah was given to Moses in oral and in written form and commanded deeds and actions whose practical fulfillment generates the kind of semiotics that Mendelssohn has named "a kind of living script." This semiotic system consists of activities that function as signs that represent the unity of the divine script as (wo)man's lively interaction with the material world, the written and the spoken word. Due to its perpetual involvement in the innumerable and unstable procedures of practical life, this alternative semiotics continuously reminds us of the finite nature of human comprehension. If the Torah primarily prescribes laws to be carried out as actions (and not dogmas to be believed in),⁷⁴ then adherence to the limitations of human language and its separation from divine language is anticipated by the ceremonial law itself. The Jew who performs the *halacha*, preserves the processual character of human representation. The meaningful sign language of the Jewish law, the *living script* that revives "mind and

heart", addresses the human being in its entire physical condition, in the multi-dimensional complexity of the senses, as well as the thinking soul. The (pre)script of activities, given and performed by the *halacha*, resembles the divine language as both cognitive concept and physical/material praxis. Mendelssohn poses the 'living sign' of the Jewish law against the shortcomings of the 'dead letter' of the alphabetic script.

Although Mendelssohn anticipates crucial patterns that we find in Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Derrida, and others, his semiotics goes beyond the aim of philosophical hermeneutics. The infinite interplay of cognition, tradition, textual interpretation, and mutual understanding is a central ideal of Mendelssohn's semiotics that is given by a certain religious praxis and enabled by a particular way of life. Ways of life are – by definition – of particular nature. Universalizing a way of life, i.e., to conceive a concept of it, means to abandon its particularity and to replace it with an idea. Even Karl Marx could not entirely escape from this theoretical *aporia* since he needed to conceptualize what materialism is, praxis and theory, and so on.⁷⁵ There is no one, simple solution for the epistemic dilemma of the theory-praxis problem. Yet, Mendelssohn offers us a thorough and complex reflection on the matter that will hopefully receive more attention from philosophers in the future (and not merely from scholars in the different fields of Jewish studies).⁷⁶

IV. The mysterious living: When body and soul miraculously connect

In *Sefer Yetzirah*, the 'living God' (Elohim chayyim) creates the world as world *and* as scripture. As we have seen, Judah Halevi – and Mendelssohn in his footsteps – stipulates from here the limitations of human power as a given. The unity of world and letter characterizes the *living* God's creative work while their diremption characterizes human's limitations. The adjective *living* always describes a divine quality in the Jewish tradition.⁷⁷ When Mendelssohn designates the ceremonial law, the *halacha*, as "a kind of living script", he asserts the divine origin of its commandments and acknowledges that the law obeying Jew participates in God's living reality. As we know, *Jerusalem* is a philosophical text. The question therefore is: how can Mendelssohn justify the introduction of a concept taken from the Jewish and Hebrew context into the domain of philosophy and the German language?

Due to the praxis-boundedness of Mendelssohn's semiotic concept *living script*, the adjective *living* has often been taken as a feature of *halachic* praxis posed against the obstacles of idolatry, belief, speculation, theology, and theory.⁷⁸ While such an understanding is not completely wrong, it misses the core of Mendelssohn's concept that determines the *living* as a divine quality; as something that humans can only comprehend by means of logic. Accordingly, Mendelssohn defines the attribute *living* as a quality that emerges from the relation between two variables: ceremonial law *and* speculative thought. Mendelssohn specifies this relationship by comparing the law-thought relation to the most discussed pair of concepts in the 17th and 18th century – the body-soul relation:

Alle Gesetze beziehen, oder gründen sich auf ewige Vernunftwahrheiten, oder erinnern und erwecken zum Nachdenken über dieselben; so daß unsere Rabbinen mit Recht sagen: die Gesetze und Lehren verhalten sich gegen einander, wie Körper und Seele.⁷⁹

All laws refer to, or are based upon, eternal truths of reason, or remind us of them, and rouse us to think about them. Hence, our rabbis rightly say: the laws and doctrines are related to each other, like body and soul.⁸⁰

Mendelssohn discusses the mind-body problem in various places throughout his corpus. In *Philosophical Dialogues* (1755) he exposes the problems of Spinoza's monistic interpretation of body and soul as distinguished attributes of the same substance; and he criticizes Leibniz' concept of the pre-established harmony between body and soul chiefly because, he argues, it culminates in a panlogism anticipated by Spinoza's system.⁸¹ Mendelssohn's critique of Leibniz and Spinoza reveals little of his own position, which remains hidden in between the lines of the dialogue between the two philosopher protagonists, Neophil and Philipon. One needs to revisit Mendelssohn's Hebrew texts to specify his view. And specifying this view does not merely lead us to a better understanding of Mendelssohn's concept of the *living script*, but has far-reaching conceptual importance. From it the question emerges: is a formulation of the body-mind perception imaginable that ensures the autonomy of human action on the one hand and avoids the "division between doctrine and life" on the other?

Mendelssohn extensively explores the matter in his *Bi'ur* to Maimonides' *Millot ha-Higgayon*. Within the context of examining the psychophysiological foundations of logic, Mendelssohn analyzes the Hebrew term *higgayon* as an equivalent to the Greek *logos* and points to the fact that

logic itself is determined as both language and thought, matter and intellect, *physis* and *metaphysis*. The *Tanakh* recognizes two different meanings of the Hebrew root *hg''h*: 1.) meditation or inner, intellectual speech (innere, gedankliche Rede); 2.) external, spoken speech (äußere, gesprochene Rede).⁸² In his translation of *Exodus* 3.15 Mendelssohn invents the new German expression “Denkwort” (“think-word”) for the tetragrammaton, i.e., the four letters that designate God: *yod-he-waw-he*.⁸³ The terminus “Denkwort” signifies the immanent duality not only of the name of God but of any other concept. Every human thought comes dressed in the form of a word, and every word transmits at least one concept. Accordingly, Mendelssohn writes in his preface to Maimonides’ *Treatise of Logic*:

We use one word [*higgayon*] for these two meanings because of the inner connection that exists between them: linguistic expression and thought are tightly connected to each other like body and soul. When the soul separates from the body, the body remains as lifeless as a stone, and the soul would be veiled and hidden from our eyes if not clothed by a body. Accordingly, the soul can be recognized by humans (as long as they live) only through its actions. The same can be said about speech and thought. Speech without intention of the heart and intellectual thought is nothing but mere idle words, in the same manner as the sound of thunder and an earthquake are not the voice of words. The subtle inner thought may not be recognized, revealed [*yitgale*], and leave an impression in the outside world, unless clothed with corporal garments by physical movement. This happens in a manner that the thought goes out from the soul into the brain, and from there to the limbs of which the speech organs are a part of, from there to the air where various movements are generated, from the air to the ear of the listener until the listener understands the intention of the speaker. The bond between the intellect and the body is a rather miraculous thing. Because of it, we speak every day the blessing ‘... and acts wondrously’, as R. Moshe Isserles says in *Orach Chayim* VI, I (cf. *ibid.*). Every investigation will tire in exploring its final cause, i.e., to understand how the physical motion in the brain transmutes itself into something intellectual, namely into the perception and sensation of the soul, and how, vice versa, the imagination [*geistige Vorstellung*] creates a physical motion in the brain.”⁸⁴

The transition between the intellect and the body marks the moment in which the human being participates in the *living* reality by means of the soul in action. The *living* reality is not only an attribute of God but comes into being when soul and body come miraculously in touch.⁸⁵ Neither the realm of ideas, nor the material world alone have access to this *living* reality – like a body without a soul, or ceremonial law without teachings, alone they remain as lifeless as a stone. Logic, understood as both thought and language, is conceptualized by Mendelssohn as the most abstract representation of the mind-body relation. This means that the main phil-

osophical tool we have at our disposal for analyzing the mind-body relation is itself a representation of it. Therefore, logic cannot be a sufficient tool to explore how and when body/law/praxis and soul/thought/theory affect each other, come to life, and become *living* reality. Mendelssohn's analysis does not make theory dispensable or ancillary, it only defines its limits. These limits are the skeptical premise that determines the method of Mendelssohn's metaphysics in a similar way as Ludwig Wittgenstein specifies the linguistic boundaries of philosophy.⁸⁶ Here, Mendelssohn appears to be much closer to the early Wittgenstein than usually thought.

V. The Temptation of Theory: Mendelssohn's Semiotic Apology for Metaphysics

Only in retrospect, based on the complex and coherent account of his thought presented in *Jerusalem*, does it become unequivocally clear that Mendelssohn's metaphysics is only one side of the coin – while the other is the Jewish law revealed to Moses. More precisely, Jewish law, understood as a praxis that rules and structures daily life, precedes and determines Mendelssohn's notion of philosophy and metaphysics. In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn demonstrates that mere reason cannot be the exclusive authority to judge and criticize reason itself, and that it can neither be the exclusive authority to rule the domain of praxis.⁸⁷ On Mendelssohn's account, reason alone has no access to life. He avoids the use of the term *philosophy* and speaks instead about eternal truths of reason, modes of reflecting, as well as the handling and processing these truths in relation to our daily life. Activities such as thinking, commemorating, and teaching accompany the habits and customs inherited through the authority of religious tradition. Crucially, these intellectual activities do not claim to replace the authority of *revelation* with the new domain of *modern philosophy*. With this basic assumption Mendelssohn is at odds with Kant's idealistic project and its Copernican turn. The problem is that the latter was not only the theory which has shaped the way we see modernity and modern philosophical understanding but also our hermeneutical efforts to find new meaning in religious traditions. This is a problem because we are encumbered by a Kantian approach when we try to understand Mendelssohn. Therefore, it is high time to acknowledge that Mendelssohn's metaphysics answers very different questions than Kant's philosophy and to appreciate these questi-

ons on a theoretical level: How must a theory be designed if the primacy of a particular praxis is its *conditio sine qua non*? What is praxis, what is life, external to its determination by reason, and by which means can it be described? What does a philosophy look like that is able to preserve the performative character of human representation in order to ensure its connection to our activities, to our living reality, to our daily praxis? These are some of the questions Mendelssohn's metaphysics addresses and answers.

It was in the *Essay on the Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences* (1763/64) that the young Mendelssohn developed the semiotic foundation of his metaphysics. The prize question, posed by the Prussian Academy of Sciences, asked whether the certainty of mathematics could be applied to metaphysics or not. Since Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza, and others, the emergent enlightenment philosophy had struggled to systematize metaphysics by means of the geometrical method. The deductive procedure seemed not only to systematize physical chaos by scientific means but also to deliver a sufficient tool to bring structure into the world beyond physics and nature. Mendelssohn's critique of the geometrical method as a philosophic tool does not aim to destroy but to improve it by integrating the limits of the method into the procedure itself. He demonstrates that only ordinary mathematics is able to provide the certainty, explicitness, and accurateness for which the scientific method is celebrated in general. Here, the relation between different signs mirrors the relation between different concepts one to one and is based by definition on their perfect congruence. But when it comes to higher mathematics, this clarity vanishes. When it attempts to measure infinitesimal quantities and when logic turns into probabilistic procedures, mathematics itself needs to learn to measure things qualitatively. Therefore, Mendelssohn asks to apply to metaphysics concepts of higher mathematics as probability logic⁸⁸ and infinitesimal calculus⁸⁹, including their signification procedures.

The infinitesimal calculus, invented for and applied to higher analysis in mathematics and physics, operates with infinitely small, unextended, intensive quantities summed up to certain limit values, and as such it demonstrates the limits of the mathematical method itself. Thus, mathematics itself gives proof that there is no escape from the limitations of the human mind, and how these limitations may become the source of new inventions. The infinitesimal calculus shakes the evidence of traditional mathematics on a profound level, and as a consequence, questions the scientific/geometrical method as the model for philosophical argumen-

tation. If mathematics deals with infinitesimally small or immeasurable entities, then it gets involved in the same problems as metaphysics, and cannot do without procedures of representation and symbolic signs. Thus, the procedure of the infinitesimal calculus demonstrates how the quantitative and qualitative method merge with each other when dealing with the incomprehensible. Higher mathematics uses symbolic signs to represent infinitesimal magnitudes. Thus, arbitrary but meaningful signs produce a kind of operative “certainty” that can be taken as a paradigm for metaphysics, ethics, and politics how to approximate qualities by quantitative inquiry. The relation between signs and concepts are grounded in logical procedures and conventions which trace back to certain traditions of knowledge and revelation. Agreement and convention are the ground for metaphysical reasoning, for cognition, for language generation and development, as well as for communication and understanding.

Mendelssohn’s scrutiny and openness to the new field of higher mathematics enabled him to adhere to the mathematical method and to think in terms of ratios as limit values. Therein, every definition consists of relations and functions: x is a function of y and y is a function of x , the soul is a function of the body, philosophy is a function of praxis and the other way around, etc. Unknowingly, Mendelssohn posed his metaphysical semiotics against Kant’s groundbreaking but problematic differentiation between the synthetic and analytic method, which he outlined in his own prize essay of the very same year, 1764. When Newton invented his method of fluxions (i.e., the differential/infinitesimal calculus) he was not able to decide for a few years whether the procedure was synthetical or analytical.⁹⁰ That is because the method of higher mathematics can be understood as a combination of both the synthetic and analytic which, in the end, dissolves the difference between humanities and sciences in terms of method. Mendelssohn’s critique of the demonstrative philosophy is not, as Strauss puts it, a “retreat to commonsense”⁹¹ but rather started out from it and is indeed “the expression of [...] the knowledge that modern metaphysics’ attempts at justifying belief’s concept of God by means of unbelieving speculation have collapsed.”⁹² Accordingly, Mendelssohn distinguishes mathematics and metaphysics not according to the applied method but according to the respective aims of each discipline. And here, Mendelssohn is very clear about the goal of metaphysics’ inquiry into the first causes of nature, the world, and the knowledge of God: Metaphysics’ interest is in reality, our everyday reality. Therefore, philosophical speculation is

never self-sufficient, never endlessly empty reasoning, but shall enable lively, effective, and ethical actions. As distinguished from mathematics, metaphysics calls for a kind of knowledge that is relevant for our concrete, individual actions in social and political praxis.

V. Critique and Conclusion

Mendelssohn's categorical and methodological skepticism in philosophy and *theory* defines the epistemological ground for the acceptance of its authority. This paradox is accompanied by a profound, almost natural trust in life and *praxis*. *Jerusalem* opens with a general statement about the matter. The *theoretical* investigation of the problem of how to find a balance between state and religion in politics is introduced by a vigorous advocacy for *praxis*:

[...] dieses ist in der Politik eine der schwersten Aufgaben, die man seit Jahrhunderten schon aufzulösen bemühet ist, und hie und da vielleicht glücklicher praktisch beygelegt, als theoretisch aufgelöset hat.⁹³

[...] this is one of the most difficult tasks of politics. For centuries, men have strived to solve [the problem], and here and there enjoyed perhaps greater success in settling it *practically* than in resolving it in *theory*.⁹⁴

Jerusalem performs, as a text, Mendelssohn's paradoxical approach to philosophy: it presents a theoretical solution to a problem that will, according to the presented theory, most likely never be solved theoretically but rather practically. Judaism, primarily understood by Mendelssohn as a discursive and living praxis, serves as a paradigm of a religion whose priorities and inner structure are based on the same paradox. A complex system of beliefs – one may call it theology but Mendelssohn does not use the term – is kept alive through an even more complex order in praxis. The ideas of God, of the creation and genesis of our world, of revelation, history, and tradition are not exclusively bound to symbols and words but handed down through a performative set of laws that stem from a canon of authoritative scriptures. For Mendelssohn, the praxis boundedness of Jewish thought safeguards Judaism's undogmatic character and ensures that Rabbinic Judaism, as a religious institution, will not claim state power, i.e., does not aim to establish a theocratic government.⁹⁵ It is noteworthy that

it was a secular Jewish movement that had left traditional Judaism behind which eventually resurrected the idea of a Jewish state.

Empirical evidence that ceremonial law can also be subjected to grave misuse indicates the elephant in the room of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*. Mendelssohn has described in depth the epistemic, cultural, and political transgressions mankind had to experience due to the misuse of signs, scripture and language. He has shown how the desire to bridge the gap between letter and world has led to idolatry, pantheism, linguistic ontology, theocracy, despotism, and tyranny. And he has stressed how our obsession with the written letter, with scripture, and literature widened this gap and elicited our alienation from every day, practical life. But if there is a danger with the 'dead letter', there also looms the threat of 'dead action'. Mendelssohn's defense of the ceremonial law as *living script* addresses the dead and empty halachic customs common at the time which had caused him to teach his own children not the Talmud but the Torah. In a revealing letter to Herz Homberg he claimed:

Unsere Bemühung sollte eigentlich nur dahin gehen, den eingerissenen Mißbrauch abzuschaffen, und den Ceremonien ächte, gediegene Bedeutung unterzulegen; die Schrift wieder leserlich und verständlich zu machen, die durch Heuchelei und Pfaffenlist unverständlich geworden ist.⁹⁶

Our efforts should actually be bent only on abolishing the prevailing abuse and imbuing the ceremonies with real, genuine significance, once again making legible and intelligible the script that has become unintelligible through hypocrisy and priestly cunning.⁹⁷

Hence, Mendelssohn's idealistic picture of the *halacha* has to be seen not only as a response to Christian polemics against the statutory, ceremonial law. Rather, it must also be seen as implicating a harsh critique of contemporary Jewish habits and customs which Mendelssohn intended to reform without publicly jeopardizing the Jewish minority. However, although the second and third generation of *Maskilim* would follow Mendelssohn in criticizing the condition of Judaism, they would not follow him in his reform of the *halacha* but rather made every effort to abandon the (in their view, corrupted) law and replace it with moral teachings.⁹⁸

This is not the only problem that Mendelssohn's argument addresses. When he introduces the semiotics of the ceremonial law as a remedy to meet the obstacles of sign-bound human cognition and representation, he

interprets the *halacha* in universal terms, in terms that rationalize a certain praxis and its particularity. That Mendelssohn attributes universal meaning to the *halacha* while acknowledging its divine origin that ensures its particularity can be described as a paradox. But it is exactly this paradox which ensures that praxis does not resolve into theory, since the autonomy of praxis is only guaranteed when its particularity remains protected. In the case of the Jewish law which is featured by Mendelssohn as the ideal paradigm for the equilibrium between praxis and theory, this protection is ensured by the long-lasting, divinely authorized revelation narrative. Mendelssohn's ideal semiotics are deduced from a specific praxis that cannot be abandoned without losing the ideal itself. In the same letter to Homberg quoted above, Mendelssohn explores the possibility of preserving the ideal by abandoning the ceremonies, and rejects it:

Über die Notwendigkeit der Ritualgesetze sind wir nicht einer Meinung, wenn auch ihre Bedeutung als Schriftart oder Zeichensprache ihren Nutzen verloren hätte, so hört doch ihre Notwendigkeit als Band der Vereinigung nicht auf; und diese Vereinigung selbst wird in dem Plane der Vorsehung nach meiner Meinung so lange erhalten werden müssen, so lange noch Polytheismus, Anthropomorphismus und religiöse Usurpation den Erdball beherrschen. So lange diese Plagegeister der Vernunft vereinigt sind, müssen auch die ächten Theisten eine Arte von Verbindung unter sich stattfinden lassen, wenn jene nicht alles unter den Fuß bringen sollen. Und worin soll diese Verbindung bestehen? In Grundsätzen und Meinungen? Da haben wir Glaubensartikel, Symbole, Formeln, die Vernunft in Fesseln. Also Handlungen, und zwar bedeutende Handlungen – d.i. Ceremonien.⁹⁹

We are not of the same opinion regarding the necessity of ritual laws. Even if their significance as a kind of script or sign language were to lose their usefulness, their necessity as unifying bond would not come to an end. And, in my opinion, this union itself will have to be preserved by the plans of providence as long as polytheism, anthropomorphism, and religious usurpation dominate the world. As long as these tormentors of reason are unified, genuine [ächte] theists must also develop some kind of connection among themselves if these tormentors are not to trample everything underfoot. And what should this bond consist of? Principles and opinions? Articles of faith, symbols, and formulas keep reason in chains. Therefore, actions, that is, ceremonies.¹⁰⁰

When Mendelssohn suggests that true theists must also create some kind of unifying bond among themselves, it is made clear that the community he imagines is not exclusively Jewish but follows the same utopian vision of the ideal human society which Lessing had envisioned in *Ernst and Falk*.¹⁰¹ Mendelssohn sees no other way to assure the autonomy and freedom of thought than through adherence to the ceremonial law, i.e., to

praxis, to particularity, and to diversity. The problem is, while the particular *halachic* customs point to the universal need to balance theoretical speculation through praxis and seem to provide a wise procedure, they are not accessible for non-Jews (except those who convert to Judaism). But, when Mendelssohn refers to Jesus as a teacher in *Jerusalem*, he gives a hint towards how the problem of theory and praxis could be approached from a Christian perspective.¹⁰² In fact, this challenge for philosophers situated within the Christian tradition was taken up and further developed by Kant¹⁰³ and hence heavily influenced the tradition of German idealism and modern, protestant theology.¹⁰⁴ It is only when the Young Hegelians started to completely banish religion from philosophical discourse and Karl Marx systematically included the political ideal of a just society as a practical program of revolution and reform into philosophy, that a radical new ground for the discussion was established. While Marx' radical atheistic critique entirely abandons religion, Mendelssohn refuses to envision a society beyond religion. Both thinkers have good reasons to do so.

For Mendelssohn, traditional Jewish praxis functions as a means for keeping alive the divine legacy of the Mosaic constitution in which state and religion formed a primordial natural unity. Just as the holy language of creation and revelation is not fully accessible to human beings,¹⁰⁵ this constitution that existed only once in time is withdrawn from human's direct access. It functions as a heavenly ideal for present earthly politics.¹⁰⁶ While Mendelssohn idealizes traditional Jewish praxis as a reminder of a divine past and the limitations of human power, Marx's revolutionary theory projects the utopian ideal of a just praxis and society that has abolished the political misuse of power into a future to come.¹⁰⁷ Maybe we should allow both to guide us in the present.

Notes

- 1 The idea of this article emerged from the lively discussions following an unforgettable Mendelssohn workshop in Toronto in 2014, held and organized by Willi Goetschel. The generous invitation to a Senior fellowship, which I received from the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies (MCAS) Hamburg last year, gave me the opportunity to write this article. I am very grateful to Willi Goetschel and Giuseppe Veltri. My thank goes also to Dustin Atlas who did the proofread of an earlier version.
- 2 Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*. Transl. by Allan Arkush, (Hanover/London: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 102. References to this translation are Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.) followed by page number.

- 3 Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*, in: Mendelssohn: *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, Ismar Elbogen et al. (ed.) (continued by Alexander Altmann/Eva Engel) in collaboration with Fritz Bamberger et al., (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1929-2022), vol. 8, 169. In what follows, references to this edition are Jub A, followed by volume and page number.
- 4 Plato's Socratic dialogue *The Apology* left many discernable traces in Mendelssohn's work. One of them is the form of apology itself, i.e. the development of a philosophical argument in a rhetoric of defense. To choose the perspective of justification, vindication, plea, apology, and defense, was, besides *dialogue*, *commentary*, and *translation*, another way for him to represent thought as discourse. Like his friend Lessing, he sees in *apology* the always present counterpart to *critique*. If philosophy and logic are offended by the rabbinical tradition, Mendelssohn defends them against the prejudice; if religion and revelation are under attack by enlightenment philosophy, Mendelssohn vindicates the Jewish law in philosophical terms. This non-Kantian approach acknowledges both the authority of critique and the authority of its suspension. In this context are to be prominently mentioned, beyond Mendelssohn's defense of the Jewish law in *Jerusalem*, his *apology* for philosophy and logic in his preface and commentary to *Millot ha-Higgayon* (1761/64); his *apology* for the immortality of the soul in his free adaption of Platon's *Phaedon* (1767); and his *apology* for the utility of the Jews in his preface to Markus Herz' German translation of Menasseh ben Israel's *Vindiciae Judaeorum* (1782). I have dealt more extensively with Mendelssohn's preference for this form of representation in my article "Philosophie und Gesetz. Moses Mendelssohn in Leo Strauss' Wissenschaftsprogramm", in *Mendelssohnstudien* 15 (2007), 73-106, passim; and in: *Moses Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik*, (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), esp. in the chapter "Mendelssohn's Apology of Hebrew and German" (ibid. 69f).
- 5 The German notion "Zeremonialgesetz" used by Mendelssohn goes back to Thomas Aquinas' "caeremonialia". The latter evaluated the Jewish law according to Christian hermeneutics and typology. Later on, in the early modern period, Protestant ethnographers adapted the notion to describe other, foreign, non-Christian religions and cultures. With Josef Albo (*Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, 1485) began the Jewish discussion of the Christian concept. Simone Luzzatto (*Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei et in particolare dimoranti nell'inclita Città di Venetia*, 1638) and Spinoza (*Tractatus theologico-politicus*, 1670) carried on with the discussion, and with *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism* (1783), Mendelssohn joined in, bringing it into the German context for the very first time. Cf. Giuseppe Veltri, "Geborgte Identität im Zerrspiegel: 'Jüdische Riten' aus philosophisch-politischer Perspektive", in: *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 33 (2006), 111-129; Yaacov Deutsch, "A View of Jewish Religion: Conceptions of Jewish Practice and Ritual in Early Modern Europe", in: *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 3 (2000), 273-295; Daniel Krochmalnik, "Mendelssohns Begriff 'Zeremonialgesetz' und der europäische Antizeremonialismus. Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung", in Ulrich Kronauer/Jörn Garber (ed.), *Recht und Sprache in der deutschen Aufklärung*, (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2001), 128-160.
- 6 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 171, 173.
- 7 Mendelssohn, Von dem von der Berlinischen Akademie ausgesetzten Preise, auf die Lehre von dem Einflusse der Meinungen in die Sprachen, i.e. Mendelssohn's review

- of Johann David Michaelis' price essay „Ueber den Einfluß der Sprachen in die Meinungen und der Meinungen in die Sprachen“, cf. Jub A 5.1, 105-107, 105.
- 8 Mendelssohn, Von dem von der Berlinischen Akademie ausgesetzten Preise, Jub A 5.1, 105.
 - 9 Cf. here Mendelssohn's commentary to ch. 7, in his publication of Maimonides' *Millot ha-Higgayon* (Jub A 20.1, 96): “Who asks for strict evidence of its [the revelation, G.S.] truth, is nothing than one who is errant, since there is no proof for something that has past.”
 - 10 Mendelssohn points to the fact that any philosophical proof given to demonstrate the truths of revelation undermines the authority of revelation itself since this very authority stems from a source beyond philosophy, cf. *Gegenbetrachtungen*, Jub A 7, 73: „I have always held proofs for [verifying] the necessity of revelation to be very dangerous, which are more general than the revelation itself”; cf. Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity. Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 125.
 - 11 Cf. the same argument in Leo Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz. Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer*, (Berlin: Schocken, 1935), 18f (cf. here Schorch, *Philosophie und Gesetz*, note 4).
 - 12 See Mendelssohn's clear statement in his Hebrew Introduction to the *Pentateuch*-translation, cf. *Or la-Netivah*, Jub A 14, 214: “The holy language, in which are written the 24 books [of the Bible] that are in our hands today, this is the language in which God – be he blessed – spoke to the first man, to Cain, to Noah, and to the holy fathers [patriarchs], and in which he let the ten commandments be heard at the Mount Sinai, and [in which] were written the tablets [of the covenant], in which he spoke with Moshe and with his prophets. And because it has priority, superiority [Erhabenheit], and glory over all languages, it is called the holy language.”
 - 13 In Mendelssohn, *Über die Sprache*, Jub A 6.2, 5-23, 7.
 - 14 See Ulrich Ricken, “Mendelssohn und die Sprachtheorien der Aufklärung” in Michael Albrecht and Eva J. Engel (ed.), *Moses Mendelssohn im Spannungsfeld der Aufklärung* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Fromman-Holzboog, 2000), 195-241; Carola Hilfrich, „Lebendig Schrift“: *Repräsentation und Idolatrie in Moses Mendelssohns Philosophie und Exegese des Judentums* (Munich: Fink, 2000); Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*; Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2007); Andrea Schatz, *Sprache in der Zerstreuung: Die Säkularisierung des Hebräischen im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009); Gideon Freudenthal, *No Religion Without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). Ricken was the first to address Mendelssohn's language theory as a feature that characterizes his entire oeuvre.
 - 15 But cf. Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 162f.
 - 16 Cf. Ricken, “Mendelssohn und die Sprachtheorien der Aufklärung”; Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 161f.; Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony*, 61f.; Schatz, *Sprache in der Zerstreuung*, 222-225; Anne Pollock, *Facetten des Menschen: Zur Anthropologie Moses Mendelssohns* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2010), 359-363.
 - 17 Cf. Cordula Neis: *Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts: Die Berliner Preisfrage nach dem Ursprung der Sprache (1771)* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2003), 52.

- 18 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 102.
- 19 Mendelssohn, Herder und Tiedemann. Ursprung der Sprache, Jub A 5.2, 177.
- 20 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 171; *ibid.* (Arkush transl.), 108.
- 21 Mendelssohn, "Die Bildsäule: Ein psychologisch-allegorisches Traumgedicht", Jub A 6.1, 74-87; cf. also the English translation in this issue: "The Statue: A Psychological-Allegorical Dream Vision," 98-111. In the following quoted as Mendelssohn, "Die Bildsäule," resp. "The Statue".
- 22 At first Mendelssohn talks about the "languages of the senses" in *Über die Sprache*, Jub A 6.2, 5-23; Mendelssohn calls them dialects in "Die Bildsäule", Jub A 6.1, 77f, 83, 85/"The Statue", 100f, 107f (note 21).
- 23 "Die Bildsäule", Jub A 6.1, 77, 83-86, esp. 85/"The Statue", 100, 106-109, esp. 108 (note 21).
- 24 *Jerusalem* Jub A 8, 202.
- 25 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 138.
- 26 Cf. Mendelssohn, "Über die Sprache", Jub A 6.2, 19: "Er [der Gesichtssinn] zählet uns [...] die Merkmale gleichsam einzeln zu; zeigt uns zuerst die Materie, so denn Aussenlinien der Figur, hierauf Bewegung des Ganzen, deren Farbe, und endlich Lage und Bewegung der Theile. Alles dieses giebt er uns aus demselben Gesichtspunkte, in verschiedenen Standorten zu erkennen. Verändern wir den Gesichtspunkt, so bekommen wir an demselben Gegenstande andere Seiten der Figur und eine andere Abwechslung von Licht und Schatten zu sehen."
- 27 Mendelssohn discusses the difficulties to subsume all the senses "under mathematical concepts" since they are "not easy to determine according to mass, number and weight, because their properties merge, so to speak, into one another and cannot be separated into discrete entities" (Mendelssohn, "Die Bildsäule", Jub A 6.1, 82/"The Statue", 106). He takes the discussion to a level where he criticizes not only the geometrical method as a sufficient philosophical method but also the application of Newton's mechanics to metaphysical matters: "By reducing the remaining sensual modifications to their attendant modifications in the visible and tactile realms, lines and surfaces and numbers were applied where one could speak only of strength and weakness. – This clever idea made a good deal of sense and had its use. Yet [...] such reduction is merely a tool and does not provide a real explanation. Explaining the sensations of sound, smell, color, and those of hunger and pain by reference to matter and motion means: trying to see sound [cf. Ex 20.15], hear colors, or grasp hunger with one's fingers. Since the elements of the remaining senses are not made up of elements of matter and motion, they also cannot be broken down into these elements, which is to say they cannot be explained in terms of matter and motion. Whenever this happens, it is merely a tool of the art of invention [Hilfsmittel der Erfindungskunst] in order to compare unextended quantities, which cannot be measured in and of themselves, with extended quantities and to thereby subsume them under mathematical measurements. But it truly is an abuse of this method if one believes one can make color, taste, smell, hunger, pain, and so on comprehensible by reference to lines and angles, space, resistance, and motion. Each sense has, as it were, its own dialect. These concepts of extension and motion are borrowed from the language of Touch and Sight. You are permitted, for the purpose of your inventions, to translate, as it were, from the dialect of the other senses into

- that of Touch and Sight. But you are deluding yourself if you believe you are thereby making those heterogeneous tongues intelligible” (ibid., 83/106f); cf. also ibid., 76f, 79f/100-102; Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Hobbes, Spinoza and others have dealt extensively with optics and started to use the mathematical and geometrical method to explore philosophical matters and grant philosophical demonstration the same degree of certainty ascribed to the New Sciences, cf. Kepler, *Astronomiae Pars Optica* (1604); Galileo, *The Assayer* (1618); Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode* (1637); Thomas Hobbes, *Tractatus Opticus* (1644); Spinoza, *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (1677); Newton, *Opticks* (1704).
- 28 Cf. Mendelssohn, “Die Bildsäule”, ibid.
- 29 Mendelssohn, “Über die Sprache”, Jub A 6.2, 20.
- 30 Ibid., 19.
- 31 Ibid., 20.
- 32 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 173.
- 33 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 96.
- 34 Mendelssohn argues vehemently against Condillac’s assumption that our alphabetic languages would have emerged merely from a sound related language of action (Geschrey): “The opinion of some that our alphabetical script consists merely of signs of sounds, is, to be sure, completely without foundation. Admittedly, script reminds us, who have a more lively conception of audible signs, first of all of perceptible words. For us, therefore is, the road from script to things leads across and through speech; but there is no reason why it should be necessarily so” (Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* [Arkush transl.], 108).
- 35 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 175.
- 36 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 108.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 174f.
- 39 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 109.
- 40 Ibid. (transl. slightly modified).
- 41 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 175.
- 42 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 109.
- 43 Cf. Mendelssohn’s review *Robert Lowth. De sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* (1757), Jub A 4, 20-62; his essay *Betrachtungen über das Erhabene und Naive in den schönen Wissenschaften* (1758/1771), Jub A 1, 191-218; 453-494; Mendelssohn’s review to Edmund Burke: *A philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1758), Jub A 4, 216-236; *Rhapsodie oder Zusätze zu den Briefen über die Empfindungen* (1761), Jub A 1, 381-424; Robert Lowth. *De sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* (1757), Jub A 4, 20-62; cf. Grit Schorch, “Schönes und Erhabenes – Affekttheorie als Erkenntnistheorie”, in: Schorch, *Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik*, 111-136.
- 44 S. below in this article; cf. also “Zeichensprache in Mathematik und Metaphysik” (in Schorch, *Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik*, 141-184) where I deal extensively with the matter.
- 45 Mendelssohn, “Über die Sprache”, Jub A 6.2, 22; Mendelssohn, *Philosophische Gespräche* (2. Fassung), Jub A 1, 353; Spinoza, *Ethica* II.7: “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things”; and in Mendelssohn’s

- translation: "Die Ordnung und die Verknüpfung der Begriffe ist mit der Ordnung und der Verknüpfung der Dinge einerlei" (Jub A 1, 345). As I have argued earlier, Mendelssohn's critique of Spinoza is, in the first instance, a critique of Leibniz' system (cf. Schorch, *Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik*, 162-180).
- 46 Mendelssohn's usage of the term "transcendent" goes back to the mathematical transcendent and Leibniz' designation of the infinitesimal calculus as „verum Algebrae supplementum pro transcendentibus“ (cf. Herbert Breger, Leibniz' Einführung des Transzendenten, in: Albert Heinekamp (ed.), *300 Jahre "Nova methodus" von G.W. Leibniz (1684-1984)*, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1986), 119-132). When Mendelssohn mentions the notions "transcendent", "fluxional", "Erfindungskunst", or "Erfindungskunstgriff", "Erfindungskraft", often a hint is given to the signification procedure of the calculus; the three notions designate the transmission of outer signs to the perceptions of the inner sense, or, the application of quantities to qualities, or, the transmission from one sign system to another (cf. Mendelssohn, "Von Herrn Eulers Entscheidung des Streits von der Erfindung der Differentialrechnung", in: *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 134. Brief (1760), 327-331; vgl. auch: Jub A 5.1, 307f; *Abhandlung über die Evidenz* (preface), Jub A 2, 271; "Über die Sprache", Jub A 6.2., 20f; *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 175/*Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 109.
- 47 Rousseau's state of nature is designed according to a new secular longing for the paradise (cf. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* [New York: Harper and Brothers]). For Rousseau, civil society comes into being only when reason, consciousness, language, morality, culture, and property emerge. Against Hobbes' *bellum omnia contra omnes*, he claimed a non-civilized state of equality, peace, love, harmony, independency, and self-sufficiency. Mendelssohn's translation of Jean Jaques Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), *Abhandlung von dem Ursprunge der Ungleichheit unter den Menschen, und worauf sie sich gründet*, ins Deutsche übersetzt mit einem Schreiben an den Herrn Magister Leßing und einem Briefe Voltaires an den Verfasser vermehret (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Voß, 1756), is quoted according to Jub A 6.2, 61-202, here: 120, passim.
- 48 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 175f.
- 49 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 184. Cf. here the striking similarities to the critique of scripture in Platon's *Phaedros*.
- 50 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 118.
- 51 Rousseau's argument is different from Mendelssohn's and even more radical: "Die Vernunft hat die Eigenliebe gezeuget, und die Überlegung hat ihr Nahrung und Stärke gegeben. Sie hat den Menschen in sich selbst eingehüllet; sie hat ihn von allem entfernt, was ihm Zwang anthun, oder beleidigen kann. Die Weltweißheit hat ihn gleichsam einzeln dahin gestellet. Sie hat ihn gelehret, bey der Erblickung eines Leidenden heimlich zu sagen: stirb immer hin, wenn du willst; ich bin in Sicherheit. Nur solche Gefahren, die der ganzen Gesellschaft drohen, können den ruhigen Schlaf eines Weltweisen stöhren, und ihn aus seinem Bette reißen. Man kann unbestraft seines Gleichen unter seinem Fenster erwürgen, er brauchet nur den Finger in das Ohr zu stecken und ein wenig Vernunftschlüsse zu machen, so kann er die Natur unterdrücken, die sich in ihm empöret, und ihn antreibet, sich selbst, als die Person zu betrachten, die man erdrosselt. Der Wilde weiß von dieser bewundernswürdigen Geschicklichkeit nichts,

- und er überläßt sich dem ersten Eindrücke der Menschlichkeit; weil er weder Vernunft, noch Weißheit, besitzt“ (Rousseau, *Abhandlung von dem Ursprunge der Ungleichheit* (Mendelssohn transl.), Jub A 6.2, 116); cf. also Sally Howard Campbell, *Rousseau and the Paradox of Alienation*, (Lanham: Lexington, 2012), 17. For Mendelssohn’s concern regarding the temptation of idolatry cf. Gideon Freudenthal’s central thesis in *No Religion without Idolatry*.
- 52 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 184.
- 53 Ibid., Jub A 8, 184.
- 54 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 119.
- 55 Cf. also the introductory passage to *Jerusalem*: Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 103; ibid. (Arkush transl.), 33; s. below in detail, 33-36.
- 56 Mendelssohn finds the regulative for “religious and moral teachings” (“religiöse und sittliche Erkenntnisse”) in “men’s everyday activity” (“dem alltäglichen Thun und Lassen der Menschen”) (Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 118; Jub A 8, 184).
- 57 For my evaluation of Mendelssohn’s Socratic skepsis, cf. Schorch, *Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik*, 146-183, passim.
- 58 Cf. Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz*.
- 59 Cf. my article “Philosophie und Gesetz” (note 4) where I discuss Leo Strauss’ and Karl Löwith’s critique of the history of progress in Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz* (1935); Löwith, *The Meaning of History* (1949)/*Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1953); for a discussion of Lessing, Koselleck, and Strauss in this context, s. Grit Schorch, “‘Die Menschen sind nur durch Trennung zu vereinigen!’ Mendelssohn and Lessing on Language, Religion, and Politics”, in *Lessing Yearbook XXXIX* (2010/2011), 69-87.
- 60 Julius Guttmann, *Philosophie des Judentums* (München: E. Reinhardt, 1933), 303.
- 61 Torah she be-al-peh, Torah she-bi-khtav.
- 62 With *Kohelet Musar*, the first Hebrew periodical, Mendelssohn develops a secular, national language concept for the Hebrew idiom that is supported by thorough philosophical reflection. The profane use of the holy language is legitimized in Judah Halevi’s discussion of the language question in *The Kuzari*. Halevi and Mendelssohn assume the superiority of the Hebrew language based on its divine origin. In *Kohelet Musar* Mendelssohn argues as follows (Jub A 14, 3): “Is she not the chosen among the languages? The word of God [directed] to his servants, the prophets, happened to be in the Hebrew tongue. And through her, God perceived and formed his world, as is said in the Kuzari, in part 4, ch. 25, in his explanation to Sefer Yetzirah, I quote: ‘The divine, created language’, (because all [other] tongues humans have agreed upon by convention after the earth was divided [after the Noachian flood] but the holy language was created by God. On the day he made heaven and earth, the Kuzari called her, ‘the created’) that was taught to man by God and put on his tongue and in his heart. She is, without doubt, the most perfect among the languages and more convenient for designation than all [the others]”. Also in his commentary to Maimonides’ preface to *Millot ha-Higgayon*, where logic is introduced as a philosophical tool based on convention, Mendelssohn makes clear that his language concept differs from Maimonides’, i.e., that his understanding of a Hebrew logic is built on the ground of Halevi’s language concept: “Even though

- the holy language calls everything by its appropriate name and according to its nature, hence it is the true language, as the author of the Kuzari says, there is no other way than convention in regard to the art of logic (Mendelssohn, *Bi'ur Millot ha-Higgayon*, Jub A 14, 33). For Mendelssohn, as for Halevi, linguistic convention is determined by the superiority and singularity of the holy language itself, while for Maimonides language theory and semiotics are not part of philosophy in a strict sense, cf. "Logik und heilige Sprache?" in Schorch, *Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik*, 187-206, and "Konvention und Tradition im System der Logik" (ibid., 207-214), where I discuss these matters at length.
- 63 Cf. Raphael Jospe's Aristotelian analysis of Judah Halevi's language philosophy in "The Superiority of Oral vs. Written Communication: Judah Ha-Levi's Kuzari and Modern Jewish Thought", in Jacob Neusner (ed.), *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism. Intellect in Quest of Understanding. Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, vol. IV, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 127-156, esp. 131-133. Jospe discusses Halevi's influence on Mendelssohn, esp. in *Or La-Netivah*, *Bi'ur* to Exodus, and *Jerusalem* (ibid. 129-151). Stressing the superiority of the Hebrew language, he dismisses the philosophical and epistemological layers of Mendelssohn's reception of Halevi, to be found in *Kohelet Musar* and in the preface and commentary to his publication of Maimonides' *Treatise of Logic*, *Millot ha-Higgayon*; cf. the Hebrew original of Mendelssohn's preface to *Millot ha-Higgayon* in Jub A 14, 25-31; cf. also Leo Strauss' partial German translation in Jub A 2, 206f; Rainer Wenzel's translation in Jub A 20.1, 37-46; for a new selective English transl. s. Edward Breuer/David Sorkin (ed.), *Moses Mendelssohn's Hebrew Writings*, transl. by Edward Breuer, introduced and annotated by Breuer and Sorkin (New Haven/London: Yale Univ. Press, 2018), 66-106. Their introduction in the text follows to a large extent my own in-depth inquiry, given in ch. V of my book, under the title "Logos und Offenbarung" (Schorch, *Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik*, 185-218).
- 64 This early medieval book presents itself as a commentary to *Genesis* and conceptualizes an entire cosmology developed out of the Hebrew letters and numbers on the basis of the first book of the Bible. It became one of the primary texts of the Jewish mystical tradition. Neither Judah Halevi nor Moses Mendelssohn are very much interested in cosmology as such, but rather in the linguistic epistemology that underlies cosmology.
- 65 *The Book of Kuzari*, written by Judah Halevi in Arabic in the middle of the 12th century, is one of the classic philosophical texts of the Jewish middle ages. Influenced by the Italian-Jewish renaissance, a new interest in the book emerged in the 18th century, esp. within the Jewish enlightenment circles around Moses Mendelssohn in Berlin. Mendelssohn's teacher, Israel Zamość, had written a new commentary to the book *ha-Kuzari* in 1766, *Otzar Nechmad*, published posthumously in Vienna by Yerucham Issachar Beer in 1795/96. Mendelssohn copied Zamość's commentary into his exemplar of the Buxtorf-Edition of *The Kuzari* (Basel 1660). The manuscript is not preserved as a whole. Parts of it are in the Jewish Theological Seminary, N.Y., and in the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw. Cf. Gad Freudenthal, "Jewish Traditionalism and Early Modern Science: Rabbi Israel Zamosc's Dialectic of Enlightenment (Berlin, 1744)" in David Biale/Robert S. Westman (ed.), *Thinking Impossibilities: The Intellectual Legacy of Amos Funkenstein*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 68, 90; and Adam Shear "The Creation of an Enlightenment *Kuzari*" in *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167-1900*, (Cambridge/N.Y.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 209-246.

The Book of Kuzari is quoted here according to the Hebrew and Engl. transl. from the Arabic source text by Hartwig Hirschfeld (ed.), Judah Halevi, *Kitab al Khazari*, (London/N.Y.: G. Routledge, 1905), open for online access at: https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_Yetzirah.

- 66 Cf. *Sefer Yetzirah* (https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_Yetzirah.1.1).
- 67 In Jewish tradition there are to be found a variety of vocalizations and accordingly a multitude of sayings how to interpret the three *sefarim*.
- 68 Jospe, *The Superiority of Oral vs. Written Communication*, 132f.
- 69 Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, 4.25 (<https://www.sefaria.org/Kuzari.4.25>).
- 70 Cf. also Mendelssohn, *Or la-Netivah*, Jub A 14, 209-268, *passim*.
- 71 That is the terminus Judah Halevi uses, s. *The Kuzari*, ch. 4.25; *mikhtav 'elohim* is translated by Mendelssohn as “Urschrift” (“original scripture”) and introduced into the German enlightenment discussion. It appears in reference to seemingly different topics, as the original unity of body and soul that is only partly accessible to the soul and calls for translation, explanation, and interpretation (cf. *Morgenstunden*, Jub A 3.2, 162f); it also appears prominently in “Die Bildsäule”, referring to the original script that underlies the languages of the different senses, whose expressions always appear as a translation of the (non-accessible) “Urschrift”, being as such a mirror and representation of the overall “Urschrift”, the divinely created script of the world (cf. “Die Bildsäule”, Jub A 6.1, 85f; “The Statue” (s. in this issue) 108f. Mendelssohn’s self-understanding as a philosopher/translator and his recurring insistence on perceiving philosophy as a sign-bounded discourse originate in Judah Halevi’s interpretation of *Sefer Yetzira*. For a discussion of Mendelssohn’s “Urschrift” as a philosophic term, without any reference to Jewish sources, s. Joachim Gessinger, “Mendelssohn: Urschrift und Übersetzung”, in: *Auge und Ohr. Studien zur Erforschung der Sprache am Menschen, 1700-1850*, (Berlin/N.Y.: De Gruyter, 1994), 97-114.
- 72 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 184.
- 73 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 118f.
- 74 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 157; *ibid.* (Arkush transl.), 90: “Propositions and prescriptions of this kind were revealed to them by Moses in a miraculous and supernatural manner, but no doctrinal opinions, no saving truths, no universal propositions of reasons. These the Eternal reveals to us and to all other men, at all times, through *nature* and *thing*, but never through *word* and *script*.”
- 75 Therefore, Martina Thom points to the perpetual need for the adaption, actualization, and concretization of the theory of historical materialism according to praxis, cf. “Philosophiehistorische Forschung und historischer Materialismus – Prüfung eines Konzepts der Bewußtseinsanalyse” in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 39.1 (1991), 124–137, esp. 124, 127–129; cf. in this context Mendelssohn’s critique of the ruling concepts that determine materialism, in: “Die Bildsäule”, Jub A 6.1, 74-87, *passim* / “The Statue”, 98-111, *passim* (see note 21).
- 76 But see Amos Funkenstein’s discussion of Mendelssohn and Marx in regard to the Jewish question, cf. the chapter “The Threshold of Modernity” in *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley et al.: Univ. of California Press, 1993), 220-234.
- 77 In addition to the “living God”, s. the “tree of life”, the “land of life” etc.
- 78 Cf. Hilfrich, Mufti, Gottlieb (note 83), Freudenthal.

- 79 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 166.
- 80 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl., translation modified), 99.
- 81 In order to verify his thesis, Mendelssohn has Neophil quote Spinoza's famous key proposition from the *Ethics*: „The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (Spinoza, E2P7). Cf. here my interpretation of the *Dialogues* in: Schorch, *Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik*, 175-179; cf. also Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 31.
- 82 Mendelssohn quotes *Jos* 1.8, *Ps* 77.13, and *Ps* 143.5 as examples of the use of *hg''h* as meditation; references for *hg''h*, as expression for „speaking with the lips”, are: *Hiob* 27.4, *Ps* 37.30, *Jes* 59.3, *Ps* 115.7 and *Hiob* 37.2.; cf. for the Hebr. Mendelssohn's preface to his *Bi'ur Millot ha-Higgayon* in Jub A 14, 25; for German translations, s. Leo Strauss in Jub A 2, 199; and Rainer Wenzel in Jub A 20.1, 38; for Engl. Breuer/Sorkin, *Mendelssohn's Hebrew Writings*, 66 (note 63); s. for a more comprehensive analysis Schorch, *Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik*, 190f. The *Mishna* (*mSanh* 10.1) calls somebody who pronounces/articulates the name of God, “*ha-hoge et ha-shem be-'otiotav*”; German transl. by Strauss: “der die Buchstaben des Gottesnamens über seine Lippen bringt” (ibid.).
- 83 Cf. Mendelssohn, *Bi'ur ve-Targum Ashkenasi, Ex* 3.15 (Mendelssohn's Hebrew commentary and German transl. of *Exodus*), in Jub A 16, 27; cf. the Engl. transl. of the whole passage (*Ex* 3.13-15), including the *Bi'ur*, from Elias Sacks in Michah Gottlieb, *Moses Mendelssohn. Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis Univ. Press, 2011), 216-220.
- 84 Mendelssohn, *Bi'ur Millot ha-Higgayon*, Jub A 14, 25; Leo Strauss' German translation in Jub A 2, 199f; and Rainer Wenzel's German transl. in Jub A 20.1, 38; cf. a thorough analysis of the passage in Schorch, *Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik*, 190-194. Mendelssohn refers here to Moses ben Israel Isserles' *Darkei Moshe ha-Arokh*, the influential Ashkenazic glosses to the Sephardic *Shulchan Arukh*, the ruling Jewish law codex since the 16th century, compiled by Joseph Karo. *Orach Chaim* (“Way of Life”, *Ps* 16:11). It discusses daily ritual observance, as prayer, Tefillin, Tzitzit, Shabbat, and holidays. *Orach Chayim* was newly published in Fürth in 1760 (*EJ*, vol. 9, 1083). Mendelssohn's reference cites Moses Isserles' gloss to *Asher Yatzar* which is a blessing that is traditionally recited after any act of excretion but in many Jewish traditions also part of the daily prayer, followed by *Birkat ha-Shachar* (cf. also bBer 60b), it says: “Another explanation is that ‘does wondrous things’ refers to [the fact] that [God] keeps the spirit of man within his body and binds something spiritual to something physical, and all this [is possible] because He is the healer of all flesh, because then man stays healthy, and his soul is maintained within his body” (cf. https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukha_Orach_Chayim).
- 85 The influence of Kabbalistic language theories on Mendelssohn's language philosophy cannot be overseen and has been discussed earlier; cf. Rivka Horwitz, Kabbalah in: The Writings of Mendelssohn and the Berlin Circle of Maskilim, in *LBIYB* 45.1 (2000), 3-24; cf. also Gershon Scholem who had no interest in Mendelssohn due to political prejudice but the material speaks for itself, esp. in “Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala”, in *Judaica* 3, *Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), 7-70, 56.

- 86 The parallels between Mendelssohn and Wittgenstein are far reaching although only interesting in face of the differences between the two linguistic philosophies. Certainly, Mendelssohn's introduction of the infinitesimal procedure into metaphysics is a major difference between the two (s. above). I have explored the matter in various conference papers, the results will be published separately.
- 87 This is clearly a critical response to Kant's first Critique.
- 88 Cf. Mendelssohn, "Gedanken von der Wahrscheinlichkeit" (1757), Jub A 1, 149-164; *Abhandlung über die Evidenz*, Jub A 2, 312-330.
- 89 Cf. Mendelssohn, *Abhandlung über die Evidenz*, Jub A 2, 271, esp. 277-285.
- 90 Cf. Thomas Sturm, "Analytic and Synthetic Method in the Human Sciences: A Hope that Failed", in Tamás Demeter et al. (ed.), *Conflicting Values of Inquiry: Ideologies of Epistemology in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 275-305, 280.
- 91 Strauss, Introduction to *Morgenstunden* and *An die Freunde Lessings* in Jub A 3.2, LXXVI (in the German original it says "Rückzug auf den gesunden Menschenverstand"); for a new account of Mendelssohn's common sense philosophy s. Jeremy Fogel's article: Scepticism of Scepticism: On Mendelssohn's Philosophy of Common Sense, in *Melilah* 12 (2015), 53-69 (special issue on Atheism, Scepticism, and Challenges to Monotheism).
- 92 Strauss, *ibid.*; Engl. transl. in Martin D. Jaffe (ed., transl.), *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), 126.
- 93 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 103.
- 94 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), 33.
- 95 Gideon Freudenthal has dealt with the matter in his Mendelssohn book and uncovered its nowadays uncompromising political relevance.
- 96 Mendelssohn to Herz Homberg, Sept 22, 1783, Jub A 13, 134.
- 97 Mendelssohn to Herz Homberg, Sept 22, 1783, Engl. transl. Elias Sacks, in: Gottlieb, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism*, 124 (see note 83).
- 98 Cf. Homberg, Friedländer, Beer, Herz, and other Maskilim who paved the way for the intellectual Jewish reform movement "Wissenschaft des Judentums" in the 19th century.
- 99 Mendelssohn to Herz Homberg, Sept 22, 1783, Jub A 13, 134.
- 100 Mendelssohn to Herz Homberg (Sacks transl.), Sept 22, 1783, 124 (see note 97).
- 101 Cf. my article "Mendelssohn and Lessing on Language, Religion, and Politics" (see note 59).
- 102 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush transl.), esp. 132-137.
- 103 See Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793).
- 104 Most prominent in Adolph von Harnack's *The Essence of Christianity* (1900).
- 105 Mendelssohn's complementary vision of heavenly and earthly politics corresponds to his and Judah Halevi's understanding of the reciprocal correlation between holy and human language (s. above, 24f).
- 106 Cf. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Jub A 8, 196f; s. *ibid.* (Arkush transl., transl. slightly modified), 131f: "Judaism was a hierocracy, an ecclesiastical government, a priestly state, a theocracy, if you will. We already know the presumptions which such a constitution permits itself. [...] This constitution existed only once; call it the *Mosaic constitution*, by its proper name. It has disappeared, and only the Omniscient knows

among what people and in what century something similar will again be seen. [...] Just as, according to Plato, there is an earthly and also a heavenly Eros, there is also, one might say, an earthly and a heavenly politics. Take a fickle adventurer, a conqueror of hearts, such as are met in the streets of every metropolis, and speak to him of Salomon's Song of Songs, or of the love of erstwhile innocence in Paradise, as Milton describes it. He will believe that you are raving, or that you wish to rehearse your lesson as to how to overwhelm the heart of a prude by means of Platonic caresses. Just as little will a politician à la mode understand you if you speak to him of the simplicity and moral grandeur of that original constitution. As the former knows nothing of love but the satisfaction of base lasciviousness, the latter speaks, when statesmanship is the subject, only of power, the circulation of money, commerce, the balance of power and population; and religion is to him a means which the lawgiver uses to keep the unruly man in check, and the priest – to suck him dry and consume his marrow. [...] If we look at it directly, we shall see in true politics, as a philosopher said of the sun, a deity, where ordinary eyes see a stone."

107 Karl Marx, *Thesen über Feuerbach* (1845).