

**Willi Goetschel**

**Meaning and Translation: Mendelssohn's "Living Script"**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

held by singular actions at particular moments in time. Temporality thus informs the production of meaning in a decisive way for Mendelssohn, and it is worthwhile to examine the way temporality factors into the concept of the “living script.”

Conceived as performative link between the written Scripture and its oral teaching across time, the “living script” represents the site where transmission and translation is actuated. This action has a temporal dimension that is crucial to the conception of translation. Tradition can only be sustained by way of reiteration, i.e., by repetition with a difference. This condition is temporal; and this temporality is constitutive. Tradition is always already historical and as such it reflects the temporal difference of a before and after which structures its operation. But for Mendelssohn this historical aspect is not to be conceived as following a theological or teleological roadmap of a progressive history. Rather, temporal difference grants each iteration its unique singularity. Mendelssohn’s argument foreshadows a concept of afterwardness or *Nachträglichkeit* that figures meaning as an effect that follows practice, meaning which might be adumbrated by practice but never reduced to its action. As a result, meaning is contingent on the action that reproduces the indexicality that writing presupposes.

This explains, according to Mendelssohn’s analysis, the dynamic character that defines tradition as a creation of afterwardness. This is the reason why traditions are always already open to the change that makes them possible in the first place: because their continuation is contingent on the transformative moment of the reiteration that translation sustains. Traditions, in other words, are the function of the reforms that allow them to endure.

Of course, the “living script” itself requires, in turn, an act of reading and interpretation, and therefore translation in order to be examined. As a consequence, the notion of the “living script” spells out the act of translation in terms of an interpretative practice that is no longer understood as merely reproductive, repetitive, or restorative. Rather, Mendelssohn’s “living script” captures the hermeneutic act of interpretation as itself a performative act, highlighting translation as an operation that is both transactional and transformative, an operation that enacts a move from one scene of action to another. For Mendelssohn, this move marks a relocation from one system of signification to another. It is through this move that meaning is produced. This transition then, which the notion of the “living script” implies, suggests that meaning, i.e., the constitution of the meaning or the scene where meaning arises, is itself transformative.



To develop the fuller range of implications and consequences that Mendelssohn's concept of the "living script" entails we need to keep an eye firmly on the particular way in and through which Mendelssohn introduces this notion. Given its performative character, it remains imperative to attend to the performative aspects of the scene and context in which Mendelssohn launches the notion. Only if we attend to the rich, contextually situated pragmatics in which the concept of "living script" enters the scene, can we properly account for the fuller scope of the argument that Mendelssohn's intervention encompasses.

To achieve a better grasp of the magnitude of the implications that interconnect with Mendelssohn's paradigmatic move it is helpful to take the various contexts and concerns his argument addresses into account. Once we have reached a fuller picture of the interplay between the contexts in which Mendelssohn advances the concept of the "living script," the critical thrust of the conception comes into sharper relief.

### *1. Enlightenment and Philosophy of Culture and Education*

One of the basic tenets of the Enlightenment's critique of traditional forms of pedagogy and erudition was the diagnosis that the business of school and university education had a stifling effect on intellectual life if it did not extinguish it altogether. In the age of Enlightenment, the verdict that the archives of human wisdom had just desiccated into dead letter and that the "literati" or "men of letters" (104; *Buchstabenmenschen*, Jub A 170) had turned into effete creations of anachronistic study of textbook wisdom had become a popular indictment. Lessing's early 1747 comedy *The Young Scholar* is just a case in point that exposes prejudice as the product of a misguided notion of genuine education. Goethe offers a variation on the theme in a less conciliatory key whose critique of Enlightenment gives voice to a central motive that informs his writing from the early Storm and Stress period's poetry and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* to the late works such as *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Journeyman* and through the various versions of *Faust*. Two years before the publication of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, Schiller's 1781 drama *The Robbers* has its protagonist Karl von Moor exclaim in: "I am sick of this ink-splattering age [...]" ("Mir ekelt vor diesem tintenklecksenden Säkulum." Act 1, scene 2). Schiller will go on to sublimate – we could also say secularize – the problem into



one of aesthetics. What the religious commandments or mitzvoth presented for Mendelssohn will in Schiller be replaced by the characteristics of an aesthetic experience performed on the stage of the theater. With Schiller, Mendelssohn's critical move had become assimilated to the demands of the performance of an aesthetic program that would be no less supersessionist than the religious claims it sought to dethrone:

Just as visible representation has a more powerful effect than dead letter and cold narration, the theatrical stage has a more profound and enduring effect than laws and morals.

So gewiß sichtbare Darstellung mächtiger wirkt als toter Buchstabe und kalte Erzählung, so gewiß wirkt die Schaubühne tiefer und dauernder als Moral und Gesetze.<sup>5</sup>

And in 1792, a decade after Mendelssohn composed *Jerusalem*, another champion of the Enlightenment, Christian Garve, notes:

Script is a dead letter that only imagination and the understanding of the reading can bring to life.

Die Schrift ist ein toter Buchstabe, den nur die Einbildungskraft und der Verstand des Lesens beleben kann.<sup>6</sup>

The dialectics of dead letter and living spirit plays already an important role in Lessing and we can point to *Nathan the Wise* as a reference text that illustrates this point with a dramatically sharp edge. Nathan teaches by his actions, or more precisely, his teaching consists of his actions. He performs the pragmatic meaning of tradition by highlighting how tradition is not the knowledge about teaching but its embodied enactment.<sup>7</sup> While Nathan is not to be misunderstood as simply modelled on Mendelssohn's personality, Lessing's most eminent dramatic protagonist suggests a striking affinity with the author of *Jerusalem*, reflecting a deep understanding of the "living script."

With regard to the period's debate on the question "What is Enlightenment?", Mendelssohn's theory of the "living script" represents a resourceful intervention that invites us to understand Enlightenment as a continuous process of learning and teaching through action to which reason can only give rise but to which it cannot be reduced as a context-detached writing – or canned speech.

## 2. Pauline Theology

The distinction between dead letter and living spirit is of course Pauline. When Mendelssohn introduces the concept of spirit in the context of his political theory in *Jerusalem*, he pointedly casts the concept as a philosophical rather than a religious concept to capture the relationship between civil society and the state.<sup>8</sup> While the issues with Pauline theology are variegated, it suffices for my purpose here to limit the discussion by focusing on the key passage in 2 Corinthians 3:6, whose ominous line reads:

For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

In sum, one could say that Mendelssohn's "living script" is a subtle but effective answer to Pauline theology and its supersessionist claims. If we can speak of an apologetic thrust in Mendelssohn at all, it would only be insofar as he can be viewed in the great tradition of apologetics that instead of marking a retreat, responds by confronting its opponent in the guise of a defense. Be that as it may, he proposes a challenge so radical that it consists in nothing less than a complete reversal of the opponent's terms, or more provocatively, in their wholesale rejection, thereby creating a level playing field which redefines the very terms of the discourse on religion and tradition. One subtle way in which Mendelssohn forces the issue is by consistently using religion in the singular, which puts the diverse forms of religion on equal footing. Put differently, Mendelssohn's consistent use of religion in the singular emphasizes the universal features the different forms of religion share. By doing so, Mendelssohn does not proceed in the same way that majority discourses operate, privileging the dominant particular in the guise of the universal, but grants all forms of religion equal status a priori. Rather than a mere reversal, this approach replaces the dialectics of the universal with a discourse that operates comparatively rather than normatively.

## 3. Philosophy of Language and Theory of Signification

The discourse of the philosophy of language and the theory of signification represents a third context that gains renewed attention in the eighteenth century. In the context of the period's discussions concerning linguistic

theories, Mendelssohn's thoughts are not only original but shed new light on the problem of the constitution of meaning and the function of language, and they do so with crucial ramifications.<sup>9</sup> To sum it up briefly, Mendelssohn's theory of the "living script" redescribes the distinction between sign and signified in a new register. The moment of the production of meaning is thereby no longer an exclusively linguistic affair but comes now into focus as the performative aspect that determines praxis. In other words, meaning does not reside in what is transmitted by language only but in what is produced, at the moment of linguistic transmission and reception, i.e., as result of the movement of transposition and reconstitution that informs the act of translation. The theory of the "living script" suggests that the act of interpretation, i.e., translation, involves more than just a purely linguistic moment. Rather, meaning is constituted in the act of translation, the transformational process of transposition and transfer – an act whose transformational moment creates the condition for meaning to arise. This approach no longer relies on equivalence as a schema for interpretation but comprehends the production of meaning to be the result of the play of the difference of the non-equivalence of the terms that reference but don't constitute the meaning negotiated by supplementation of substitutive exchange. In remarkable ways, Mendelssohn's "living script" adumbrates Derrida's notion of "differance."<sup>10</sup> Tore Langholz has tracked the remarkable extent to which Derrida's approach to rethinking writing and the functioning of texts aligns with Mendelssohn's.<sup>11</sup> Just like Derrida, Mendelssohn consistently abstains from privileging writing over reading or text over speech. Both insist on the critical importance to recognize the interplay between speech and writing to be critical for navigating the pitfalls of metaphysics and ontologies of presence. In his lectures on Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, Derrida captures the salience of Mendelssohn's conception of "living script" describing it as "une écriture avant la lettre, si vous voulez."<sup>12</sup>

In his essay "The Statue: A Psychological-Allegorical Dream Vision," Mendelssohn offers a remarkable discussion of this issue in a different register that is suggestively resonant with what is at stake here. Exploring the problem of how to theorize the distinct and irreducible differences between the five senses, he observes that the synesthetic production of knowledge rests on the fact of the communication between the senses, and wonders on what grounds this communication operates. The essay offers a model for understanding this inter-sensual communication in terms of a

translation which relies on metaphors to articulate the knowledge of one given sense in the language of another. This model drives the point home that translation is a key operation in the process of knowledge production and thinking more generally.<sup>13</sup>

Just like translation within or from one language to another – itself an unstable act given the question of what a language exactly is, as Derrida reminds us<sup>14</sup> – the translation between the senses is a somewhat impossible operation for the simple reason that there is no metalanguage between them. This lack, on the other hand, is precisely what makes translation possible, as it requires dealing with nonequivalent values. Short-circuiting the scheme of equivalence by dealing with nonequivalence, translation of the irreducibly different lights the sparks that produces what we call “meaning.” We will return to the constitutive relationship between the “untranslatable” as condition for translation when we will look at a passage from Mendelssohn’s introduction to his translation of the Bible.

#### *4. Jewish Traditions*

The theory of the “living script” also addresses various aspects of the dynamic of internal differences in Jewish traditions (which for the purpose of accuracy are better thought of in the plural than the singular, which would suggest some sort of uniformity). This includes issues like the translation from biblical and Talmudic languages into the linguistic cultures that emerged in the Middle Ages and in modernity. The wealth of languages responsible for the rich linguistic fabric of Jewish tradition – ranging from the earliest Jewish traditions to Medieval Judeo-Arabic and its dialects, Yiddish, Ladino, Modern Hebrew and German – highlights that the privileging of any single language as the sole and exclusive source language for Jewish tradition presents a monolinguist impossibility. Such an approach is challenged in advance by the fact that the oldest biblical texts are shot through with traces of other languages that attest to the multiple linguistic traditions of the biblical Hebrew, vitally enriched from the beginning by the dynamics of loan words.

With regard to the relationship between law and commandment, Mendelssohn’s conception of the “living script” leads to a rethinking of the nature of law and tradition. Of course, the notion of the “living script” resonates much more closely with the idea of Torah as teaching and guiding

than the idea of an iron, immutable law or *nomos* whose dictate demands unconditional compliance as if such a thing were possible. The critical thrust of Mendelssohn's modern conception of Judaism receives its full force from the way that the "living script" gives the distinction between law and *torah* an unexpected turn, one that recovers the critical edge of Judaism's unwavering insistence on the decisive significance of its tradition. Viewed with an eye on the theory of the "living script," Mendelssohn emerges less as a reformer – to which he still continues to be reduced – but, in light of the creative meaning that translation gains in his thought, as a translator. In his own view, Mendelssohn did anything but change or reform the fixed contents of tradition. Rather, he sought to spell out the underlying rationale that calls for the fulfilment of the ceremonial law, a project feasible only by way of a translation and transposition, i.e., through practice. According to his own view, therefore, Mendelssohn was no reformer but a champion for a vision of a life of praxis that comprehends its actualization as a form of a transposition for which the moment of mediation is its condition of possibility. As a result, Mendelssohn was able to affirm the particularity of Jewish tradition as a genuinely empowering feature rather than an obstacle. This approach allowed him to effectively reject a view of tradition that mistakes it for a mere repetition of the same. For such a view is grounded on the assumption that tradition rests on a fundamentalist, or as Mendelssohn would have it, "fanatical" basis, a view that mistakes tradition for a lifeless self-identical complex of doctrines rather than as the continual renegotiation of an afterward effect that constitutes it.<sup>15</sup>

### 5. *Tradition and Innovation*

In a more general context, the theory of the "living script" presents a critical intervention in the discussion about the function and purpose of tradition in modernity. How does the process of transmission and preservation condition the continuity of tradition when innovation and adaptation are recognized as foundational moments of this process? How do tradition and innovation, repetition and change, reproduction and production interrelate and constitute each other? Is continuity without a moment of discontinuity and rupture possible at all or are they mutually constitutive aspects and as such the condition for the possibility of tradition in the first place? If transmission and reception of tradition hinge on its appropriation, adapta-

tion, and transformation, modernity emerges as profoundly contingent on tradition. Rather than being a matter of reforming or changing tradition, for Mendelssohn the issue is how to meaningfully engage with what we necessarily rely on to be, i.e., become and remain, who we are.

### 6. *Theory and Praxis*

Another context intimately linked to the concept of the "living script" and thanks to which Mendelssohn's theory receives new impulses is the theory-praxis problem, an issue that the theory of "living script" rethinks along with the others addressed above. For, if meaning arises only in the course of translation as an act of interpretation, the result is a model that defines the relationship between thought and action in a new manner. Translation is then no longer merely the result of a cognitive act but already itself a moment of lived praxis and one that proves necessary for the theoretical process of thinking as such. To be more precise, thinking is always already a form of translation and self-translation that points beyond self-identity. A remark by Wittgenstein suggests so much. He notes that thinking itself represents a kind of translation and that there is no such thing like a pristine form of self-identical thought that could possibly be reduced to any definitive form of meaning:

[S]o we often think as if our thinking were founded on a thought-schema: as if we were translating from a more primitive mode of thought into ours.<sup>16</sup>

[S]o denken wir oft, als läge unserm Denken ein Denkschema zu Grunde; als übersetzten wir aus einer primitiveren Denkweise in die unsre.<sup>17</sup>

For such an ultimate schema – in thought or in writing (or speech for that matter) – must remain ever elusive. Thought gains meaning only in translation. Similarly, for Mendelssohn, the Scripture's meaning becomes apparent not by way of study and hermeneutic exercise alone but by the actions it commands.

### 7. *Interpretation and Translation*

A seventh context, intersecting with the other six but weaving through Mendelssohn's text as a distinctive thread, is the issue of interpretation

and translation. While the theme of interpretation and translation informs *Jerusalem* like a basso continuo from the spheres of politics and religion, law and education to knowledge and belief, speech and writing, this theme builds up to an argument of its own. It is an argument that captures the hermeneutic exercise of interpretation as an act of translation, a practice of analogy whose operation is based on the difference of the terms it substitutes or exchanges as it translates.

A look at Mendelssohn's introduction to the translation of the Pentateuch he initiated shows how the nexus of interpretation and translation, so fundamental to his concept of the "living script," surfaces as interlinked in the question of how to translate. As Mendelssohn explains in the Hebrew introduction to his German translation of the Bible "Or Li-Netivah" ("A Light for the Path"), every language has its own manner of speech, or as he formulates it, its own "ways" with "particular qualities" of self-expression. Neither a word for word translation nor one that seeks to identify a sense that it then carries over like cargo from one language into another will do. For the latter would only preserve a sense that it first would have to invent; translation always rides on substitution. For Mendelssohn, translation is the operation that replaces the particular "ways" of one language with the ways of another, supplementing one mode of expression by another. This means that the translator ultimately must comprehend that in order to remain true to a text they must, at the same time, betray it. Remarkably, Mendelssohn finds the point of the Italian proverb about the translator as a traitor (*traduttore, traditore*) prefigured in a Rabbinic discussion in the Talmud:

Likewise, each language differs from others in the manner of its style, each one having unique qualities that are absent in the others. Consequently, if you translate a passage word for word and particle for particle into another language, an adept of that language will not understand it at all. And even if he grasps the essential meaning, he will have no sense of the pleasing effect of the style and the *grace of its arrangements* (Job 41:4) as it is in the language from which it was translated.

[...]

Here you see that the reliable translator must sometimes alter [the text], adding or removing [words], or changing the [word] order of the passage in order to convey the intended meaning of the speaker. No one distorts or destroys the intended meaning more than one who preserves the [original] words, or one who translates word for word and particle for particle, even though at first glance it appears that he is more faithful and diligent in his craft. It was for this reason that in a number of instances the Sages censured one who interprets Scripture in its outward form, meaning one who preserves the words and translates



or explains word for word without any change or divergence whatsoever, even where the conventions of the language should compel him to preserve the meanings and abandon the words. One who translates in this manner is called a deceiver for he appears to be a reliable translator in that he did not fail to translate every word; but he misleads because the sense was lost and the intended meaning was confused. This is what the Sages said in the second chapter of Quiddushin and the end of Tosefta Megillah, "One who translates a verse in its outward form – he is a deceiver."<sup>18</sup>

Und so unterscheiden sich alle Sprachen in den Wegen des Ausdruckes, und jede von ihnen hat besondere Eigenschaften, die eine andere nicht hat. Deshalb, wenn man einen Text wörtlich, ein Wort nach dem anderen überträgt, versteht ihn der Sprecher jener Sprache überhaupt nicht. Selbst wenn vielleicht die Hauptabsicht erfaßt, wird er darin nicht die Angenehmheit des Ausdrucks und die Anmut der Anordnung der ursprünglichen Sprache fühlen, aus der sie übersetzt war. (Jub A 9.1, 37)

[...] daß der wahre Übersetzer oft ändern, zufügen, weglassen und die Ordnung des Textes vertauschen muß, um die Absicht des ursprünglichen Sprechers wiederzugeben. Niemand verdirbt die Bedeutung mehr und stiftet mehr Schaden, als einer der Wörter bewahrt, der wörtlich Wort für Wort übersetzt, auch wenn er auf den ersten Blick, scheinbar, der getreueste und eifrigste Arbeiter ist.

Einen solchen rügten unsere Weisen, ihr Andenken sei zum Segen, an vielen Stellen [nämlich] einen, der den Vers [genau] nach seiner Form auslegt, womit sie jemanden meinen, der die Wörter bewahrt und Wort für Wort übersetzt oder erklärt, ohne irgendeine Veränderung oder Vertauschung, selbst an Stellen, wo die Wege der Sprache ihn zwingen, die Akzente zu bewahren und die Wörter zu verlassen. Und ein Übersetzer dieser Art wird ein Lügner genannt, denn er gibt den Anschein eines getreuen Übersetzers, er läßt kein Wort aus, im Sinne, daß er es nicht übersetzt, doch lügt er, denn hierdurch geht der Inhalt verloren und die Absicht ist verwirrt. So sagen denn auch unsere Rabbinen [...] im Kapitel "der Mann heiligt [heiratet]" (Kidduschin 49a), und am Ende von Tosefta Megillah: "Wer einen Vers nach seiner Form [d.h. mechanisch Wort für Wort] übersetzt, ist ein Betrüger." (Jub A 9.1, 39)

What Mendelssohn describes here as a problem of interlingual translation could be rephrased as a logic of substitution whose success requires breaking free from the source language to do its work in the target language. Similarly, the "living script" operates on a logic of translation that is no less substitutive and generative.

To act on the "living script" means to enact a praxis of translation that envisions the practitioner as him- or herself a product of that translation process, one whose dynamics render the schema of assimilation obsolete. For an individual's identity to flourish through the enactment of tradition means, in this context, to negotiate one's identity through reflection on the difference on which translation is predicated. It is through this process of creative renegotiation that translation reimagines tradition as meaningful,

as a meaning-producing form of continuity based on ever new iterations of negotiating meaning anew. For Mendelssohn, then, the meaning of Jewish tradition and Jewish life is to lead a life in and through translation, a life of ever anew translation of oneself to oneself and to others.

If the concept of the “living script” implies a continuing praxis of translating oneself by translating the commandments, a continual process of transposition and transaction, this represents a striking alternative to the distinction between assimilation and authenticity as model for self-identical forms of preservation. With Mendelssohn it becomes possible to understand how the model of assimilation leads to a distorted view of the experience of Jewish or, for that matter, any other modernity. Emancipation, theorized according to Mendelssohn’s terms, can then no longer be reduced to a formulaic legal-political process of embourgeoisement or even enfranchisement. Rather, viewed with the notion of the “living script” in mind, Mendelssohn’s conception of emancipation and the politics that inform it are a resolute move to a critical vision of self-empowerment.

As a consequence, the notion of the “living script” recasts Jewish identity and identity in general as a practice of self-translation. Identity, Mendelssohn’s take on the “living script” suggests, represents an engagement with tradition as a translation that is, upon closer examination, a form of self-translation. In other words, identity is the process in which an individual or collective, a person or group, fashion their selves, an operation that negotiates its defining features translationally and therefore relationally. In doing so, this self-fashioning operates in a context of self-finding – that can range from self-clarification to self-mythologization – whose hermeneutic practice is engaged in an interpretative act that can be described as a self-translation. For Mendelssohn, we are who we are, or maybe more precisely, we become who we are, as we translate traditions by ever newly negotiating their reiteration. We are who we are as a result of how we perform this act of translation, i.e., how we project or imagine ourselves as we translate the traditions we embrace. In this process we define ourselves as who we are in and through the practice of translation, a practice whose substitutive play of difference is constitutive for the ultimately interminable operation we call identity.

Rather than a recovery of a pristine core of properties, identity comes into view as a continuous process of reiteration whose continuity is paradoxically put on secure footing thanks to its transitory and evanescent character. Or, in Mendelssohn’s words, identity’s character is not one

that is “lasting” nor “enduring” which could “lead to idolatry through abuse or misunderstanding” (119, Jub A 184 quoted above in full [p. 52]). Mendelssohn’s concepts of tradition and identity are performative, they are not written in stone but continually rewritten in the actions we perform in the course of interpreting these concepts through translation, and self-translation. Transactional and transpositional, this performative act of self-determination is necessarily transformative. As the change and difference it performs constitutes the necessary condition for continuity and identity, the dynamics of the empowerment of the self imply for Mendelssohn also the empowerment of the other. This liberating moment informs the emancipatory thrust of Mendelssohn’s unassuming re-vision of tradition. Reasserting tradition, in other words, is for Mendelssohn an act of innovation. Or, to put it differently, we can only keep traditions alive by translating them into the new contexts in which we continue to live them. This condition holds the key to the emancipatory and liberating potential that defines tradition in Mendelssohn’s view.

Let us conclude by looking at the implications of Mendelssohn’s theory of the “living script” and the theory of translation and self-translation it entails with regard to Mendelssohn’s own self-understanding. A striking consequence of this is that while Mendelssohn’s project argues that not only are Jewish concerns compatible with philosophical reasoning but that they have central importance for philosophy; his own philosophical project serves as a case in point of a translation of critical concerns into the idiom of philosophy. Seen this way, two aspects deserve, in conclusion, critical attention:

1. We can now appreciate Mendelssohn as a philosopher who seeks to translate his critical questions into the discourse of philosophy in order to be understood; a translation effort whose interventionist impulse engages with the project of philosophy in a critically emancipatory manner. As a consequence, Mendelssohn’s own trajectory as a philosopher emerges in sharper contours as itself a work of translation, i.e., as an independent adoption, adaptation, and transposition that does not blindly follow the tradition of philosophical thought but takes it on creatively on its own terms. In other words, Mendelssohn translates himself into the language and discourse of philosophy without submitting or forsaking himself to any kind of a priori accepted norm or dictate. Quite to the contrary, by translating the various idioms of philosophy (Greek, Latin, Arabic Jewish, Christian-inflected sources of multiple European varieties) into his own

lively mode of writing, Mendelssohn intervenes with the transformative power of a voice of his own, giving his own concerns a voice in the idiom of philosophy. This intervention reclaims the terms of philosophy by rewriting it in a form that reflects the project of reiteration as generative, a reiteration that writes itself as difference.

Too often reduced to the role of a derivative popularizer of philosophy, the deeper critical import of Mendelssohn's work of translation is overlooked and misunderstood as long as his fundamental point about language as itself a metaphorical (or in Latinate parlance 'translational') operation is ignored, a point he reiterates beyond the figure of the "living script" in his remarks on the Bible translation as well as in his examination of the different languages of the senses.

It is unfortunate that the resistance to a more attentive appreciation of Mendelssohn's thought has made it difficult for it to reach those who could benefit from a more differentiated understanding of the tradition they follow. The unexamined loyalty of those who follow the dominant historiographies of philosophy keeps them under the tutelage of the Kantian verdicts relegating Mendelssohn to the pre- and uncritical, i.e., pre-Kantian purgatory to which they ultimately commit themselves uncritically. Attention to Mendelssohn's liberating move to rethink translation as a praxis of self-translation might instead help us recover the emancipatory thrust of the project of a philosopher who Kant, after all, held in high esteem (albeit with a similarly uneasy ambivalence towards Mendelssohn he shared with Hegel).

2. We now find ourselves compelled to extend the question Mendelssohn allows us to ask to the project of philosophy itself. Philosophy thus comes into view as a continual translation project that operates under the assumption of a universal language that, upon closer examination, is a continually newly generated frame of reference. While philosophy's claim to represent a universal language remains elusive, the imposition of its truth as universal is maintained through the institution of its discipline. Certainly, one might wish to argue that the system of reference of a universal language is continually "reproduced," but such reproduction is itself a form of translation of a production process that can only be imagined in terms of complete identity if one is prepared to commit to dubious metaphysical assumptions that Mendelssohn, for one, would not have been prepared to accept. Even an unthinking adoption of one or another form of universalism is ultimately nothing but a translation – albeit unknowingly – that

invents its version of universalism in its own unexamined image. Against the presumption of the self-identical uniformity of tradition, Mendelssohn reminds us, revolts the play of difference. As the concluding words of *Jerusalem* suggest – themselves a reference to Zechariah's prophetic version of universalism – the promise for truth and peace resides in universalism's openness to embrace diversity.<sup>19</sup>

Seen this way, Mendelssohn's theory of the "living script" assumes more distinct contours as a critical concept. If meaning is a product of interpretation, or translation, the substitutive work it performs distinguishes it not only as a protection against corruption and idolatry but as initiating a paradigm shift in the way we understand tradition as a practice of translation. Rather than merely an exercise in the apology of Judaism, Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* presents a philosophically profound intervention that goes beyond an appeal for tolerance. A powerful, eloquent call for openness and diversity, *Jerusalem* offers an approach to rethinking modernity as a project that is no longer merely imagined as a departure from tradition but as a reappropriation of it, as an operation whose "living script" allows for meaning to arise: in the act of translation.

## Notes

- 1 For a discussion of philosophy as a discipline defined by its own tradition and the challenge of Jewish philosophers to maintain their independence against the pressures of philosophy's exclusive claim to universalism see Willi Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought* (Fordham: New York, 2013).
- 2 For the history of the concept of ceremonial law and its connotations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century see Daniel Krochmalnik, "Das Zeremoniell als Zeichensprache. Moses Mendelssohns Apologie des Judentums im Rahmen der aufklärerischen Semiotik" in *Fremde Vernunft: Zeichen und Interpretation IV*, ed. Josef Simon und Werner Stegmaier (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), 238-285.
- 3 Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover and London: University of New England Press, 1983), 102f. References to this edition will be A followed by page number.
- 4 Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. in association with Fritz Bamberger, Haim Borodianksi, Simon Rawidowicz, Bruno Strauß, Leo Strauß, started by Ismar Elbogen, Julius Guttmann, Eugen Mittwoch, and continued by Alexander Altmann with Haim Bar-Dayyan, Eva J. Engel, Leo Strauß, Werner Weinberg (Berlin 1929-32, Breslau 1938. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann-Günther Holzboog, 1974-2022), vol. 8, 169. References to this edition will be Jub A followed by volume and page number.

- 5 Friedrich Schiller, "Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken?" in Friedrich Schiller, *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Herbert Göpfert and Gerhard Fricke (München: Hanser, 1966), vol. 1, 719-729, 723. For the theater as secular equivalent of religion see *ibid.*, 722.
- 6 Christian Garve, "Über Gesellschaft und Einsamkeit" in *Garve, Versuche über verschiedene Gegenstände aus der Moral, der Litteratur und dem gesellschaftlichen Leben*, Dritter Theil (Breslau: Korn, 1797), 23.
- 7 For Nathan as a thoughtful reader of Spinoza see Willi Goetschel, "Inszenierungen einer Figur: Lessing und die jüdische Spinozarezeption" in *Lessing Year Book 2012* (39), 139-154.
- 8 Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 155f.
- 9 For Mendelssohn's thoughts on the philosophy of language see in addition to Krochmalnik, "Das Zeremoniell als Zeichensprache" especially Carola Hilfrich, "Lebendige Schrift": *Repräsentation und Idolatrie in Moses Mendelssohns Philosophie und Exegese des Judentums* (München: Fink, 2000); Anne Pollok, *Facetten des Menschen: Zur Anthropologie Moses Mendelssohns* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2010), and the outstanding study by Grit Schorch, *Moses Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik* (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), as well as Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 160-166.
- 10 For a discussion of this point in Spinoza, whose ideas related to the philosophy of language anticipate many aspects later developed in Mendelssohn see Willi Goetschel, "Translation and the Text's Alterity: Spinoza to Derrida" in *Un/Translatables: New Maps for Germanic Literatures*, ed. Catriona MacLeod and Bethany Wiggin (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 63-77. See also Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 226 and Hilfrich, "Lebendige Schrift." For the most relevant and sustained discussion of the striking affinities between Mendelssohn and Derrida see Tore Langholz, *Das Problem des "immer schon" in Derridas Schriftphilosophie* (Vienna: Passagen, 2016), 95-136.
- 11 Langholz, *Das Problem des "immer schon" in Derridas Schriftphilosophie*, 95-136.
- 12 Jacques Derrida, "A Kind of Writing Avant la Lettre: A Lecture on Mendelssohn," in this issue 112-131, 126.
- 13 For a translation of the essay see this issue 98-111 and my introduction, 91-97.
- 14 For an illuminating treatment of this point see Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1998.
- 15 Jub A 8, 179; A 113. Mendelssohn's critical stance with regard to fundamentalist attitudes corresponds with Lessing's unmasking of fundamentalist pretention as self-undermining logic. See Lessing, "Duplik" in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke*, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert (Munich: Hanser, 1979), vol. 8, 30-101, 39 and Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 201-203. Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* remains of course the notorious reference text, where the false logic of fundamentalist rigorism is mercilessly exposed to the critique of the audience as tradition is staged as praxis of transmission by translation. A case in point is the key scene in act 4, scene 7, when in Job-like manner Nathan's struggling with God has reason return, and with it faith.

- 16 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1963), § 597, 156.
- 17 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* in Wittgenstein, *Schriften*, Bd. 1 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1960), § 597, 466.
- 18 *Moses Mendelssohn's Hebrew Writings*, trans. Edward Breuer, introduced Edward Breuer and David Sorkin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 273-74. Mendelssohn refers to Quidd. 49a and T. Meg. 3:41.
- 19 See for an incisive discussion of the problem of universals Étienne Balibar, *On Universals: Constructing and Deconstructing Community*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).