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Moses Mendelssohn: the Modern Jew that Did Not Start It All

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1) Kammerdiener.....Moses Mendelssohn.....	3
2) Koziolk.....Toward a Virtue of Irresolution.....	9
3) Vacherot.....Cornaro Chapel.....	20
4) Landau.....Place through Archaeoastronomy.....	25
5) Guerrero.....France, mere des arts.....	83
6) Greeson.....Solidarity: Born of Polish Tradition.....	86
7) Tucker.....Nietzsche: Raider of the Lost Arc.....	93
8) Wolford.....Aratus: The Reverent.....	97
9) Jimah.....Role of the Family in Denmark.....	120
10) Cahill.....Macroinvertebrates' Response to calcium.....	129
11) Kelly.....To be Black and an American Citizen.....	146
12) Sansone.....Resurrecting the Dead.....	150
13) Collins.....Trace Metal Trends in Payne Creek.....	159

Moses Mendelssohn

The Modern Jew That Did Not Start it All

Jason Kammerdiener '10

HIST 270

Moses Mendelssohn is commonly cited as the Jew that instigated the development of modern Jewry, but this paper contests some of these traditional perceptions. While it is acknowledged that Mendelssohn was a unique figure in modern Jewish history, his role as the originator of a modern movement is brought into question. Evidence focuses on groups and individuals that entered the modern age both socially and intellectually prior to Mendelssohn, and it also questions just how much modern Jewry has used Mendelssohn's life and work as an example and inspiration. The bigger issue called into question, beyond Mendelssohn, is that of whether it is possible to identify an individual's life as the beginning of an era.

In historiography there is a tendency to group years and designate them as particular eras in order to make the study of history simpler. The reality, however, is that history does not come prepackaged in these convenient segments; it is a continual flow of time in which most change occurs over an extended period. Jewish History in particular is hard to segment in the typical fashion because the Diaspora means that there is no single history of the Jewish nation. It is therefore nearly impossible to define when an era of Jewish history begins or ends although there are some that argue a modern Jewish era began with the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn, almost without a doubt, can be classified as a modern Jew for his uncommon accomplishments within both Jewish and Gentile society. It would be inappropriate, however, to mark his life as the definitive beginning of the modern Jewish era, or as that of the first modern Jew. Examples of groups and individuals

that could be considered 'modern' can be found prior to Mendelssohn and those that came after him failed to follow his example.

Whether or not Mendelssohn was the first modern Jew, it can not be disputed that he stood out among his peers, and the debate of his significance can not take place until it is understood why. Mendelssohn was born and spent his life in the German states during the eighteenth century. Europe, at the time, was undergoing a transformation in thought that would ultimately result in the abandonment of many of Europe's remaining medieval institutions and practices. It was an exciting time for Christian Europeans, but the Jewish community was excluded for the most part. Jewish exclusion was hardly a recent development; rather it was a continuation of practices and barriers that had been in place for almost two millennia. Mendelssohn, however, through his unusual intellect and drive was able to

break into Berlin's exclusive intellectual circles.¹

After gaining entry with these elites Mendelssohn became one of the most influential scholars of his age. His philosophies and thoughts were revolutionary, though perhaps not as revolutionary as his actions. Throughout his life Mendelssohn would not only wholeheartedly identify himself with the Jewish community, but he would defend it and its often criticized beliefs from Gentile denigration. This can be seen as a departure from the path of many Jews before him, who chose to follow the path of least resistance, conversion, as they strove to merge with the larger society.² By refusing to convert, and finding success regardless, Mendelssohn's life was proof that the retention of a Jewish lifestyle was indeed possible while interacting outside of the Jewish community.

Mendelssohn did more than refuse to convert; he also struggled with myths concerning Judaism that oftentimes hindered Jewish interaction with the Gentile community. For instance, some at the time argued that Jews could not integrate into normal society due to their emphasis on Judaism as an infallible, revealed religion. It was understood by Gentiles that this belief would make allegiance to the regional or state ruler a secondary concern to the Jews. Mendelssohn asserted that although the Jewish faith appeared to focus significantly on this point, it was a mistaken interpretation of Judaism. He felt that it was completely possible for him to enter into common society adhering

¹ Dan Schwartz; "Moses Mendelssohn and the Jewish Enlightenment," 6 February 2007, Class Lecture.

² Dan Schwartz; "Early Modern Trends," 30 January 2007, Class Lecture.

both to Judaism and a loyalty to the state. In 1783 he wrote:

It is true that I recognize no eternal truths other than those that are not merely comprehensible to human reason but can also be demonstrated and verified by human powers... Judaism knows of no revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a divine *legislation*.

-Moses Mendelssohn³

Mendelssohn claims here that Jews believe it is only their *law* that is divine. Divine law, however, does not constitute a monopoly on truth or undermine the legitimacy of the state. In fact, later in the same piece Mendelssohn writes, "*eternal truths... are not forced upon the faith of the nation... but... recommended to rational acknowledgement.*"⁴ Because eternal truths are left to human rationality to determine, Jews are just as capable of being citizens under a non-Jewish government as any Christian.

Learning this of Mendelssohn one might be confused as to how he can be considered anything *but* the first modern Jew. The issue is obviously not with Mendelssohn's accomplishments, intellect or abilities; these speak for themselves. Instead, the problem lies in the title "first modern Jew." It carries with it two assumptions: first, that Mendelssohn was the first man to achieve the status of 'modern Jewry,' and second, that others followed Mendelssohn's path to modernity. After all, if there was a first

³ Moses Mendelssohn, "Judaism as Revealed Legislation (1783)," in *The Jew In the Modern World*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (New York: Oxford U., 1995), 97-98.

⁴ Mendelssohn, 98.

modern Jew then there necessarily must have been a second and third modern Jew, and so forth. These assumptions, however, are unfounded, for there were men and women prior to Mendelssohn that could be considered modern, and those that came after him largely did not follow his example. A thorough consideration of these issues leads to the conclusion that Mendelssohn can not be classified as the world's first modern Jew.

Those opposed to Mendelssohn's designation as the first modern Jew might look to the last years of the fourteenth century to find alternative candidates for the title, the New Christians. Also called Marranos, these were Spanish and Portuguese Sephardic Jews forced to convert to Christianity due to Gentile hostility towards Jews on the Iberian Peninsula. The conversion, however, was normally made only out of necessity rather than sincerity, and Marranos would continue to practice Judaism in secret. Despite social unrest in the fifteenth century culminating with the Inquisition, Marranism survived and many Marranos were dispersed throughout the rest of Western Europe when Jews were expelled from the peninsula at century's end.⁵ For much of the 1500s, these displaced Marranos constituted the 'Jewish' population of Western Europe, and as time wore on their Christian façade wore away, leaving them once again as Jews. These were not typical Jews, however, for they had experienced life as a part of Gentile society, accustoming both themselves and Gentiles to their presence. The acceptance they achieved, though not perfect, was more than their Ashkenzi counterparts would experience for years to come.⁶ As the first significant population of Jews to

⁵ "Marrano," *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2007, <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9051075>> (26 February 2007).

⁶ Schwartz, "Early Modern."

be limitedly integrated into common society, aren't these men and women the first modern Jews? Surely an entire population of Jews achieving some acceptance into Gentile society does more for the cause of Jewish modernity than Moses Mendelssohn, who despite his intellect was only a single man.

If one considers intellectual enlightenment a requirement of modern Jewry, however, then Marranos don't necessarily fit the bill. There are certain individuals prior to Moses Mendelssohn who do, though. During Mendelssohn's time, intellectual status was measured by one's acceptance in the elite Enlightenment societies. Mendelssohn was widely accepted throughout these Enlightenment age think tanks, but Jacob Katz writes, "To be sure, Mendelssohn was neither the only nor the first Jew to achieve this status in Berlin."⁷ In fact, if one looks to the seventeenth century, one hundred years prior to Mendelssohn's emergence, he or she will find the example of Benedict Spinoza. Spinoza was also able to infiltrate the upper echelons of European thought, but many object to his designation as the first modern Jew because of his tumultuous relationship with the Judaic community. Spinoza was indeed excommunicated from Jewish society, but he also refused to convert to Christianity, leaving him without an official religious designation. It is foolish to reject Spinoza's status as a modern Jew because of his renegade status, for it would be holding him to a standard most Christian thinkers of his time are not subjected to. The general trend of Enlightenment thinkers was to abandon traditional Christian faiths and to follow a form of Deism.⁸ It is not disputed that

⁷ Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto* (Syracuse: Syracuse U., 1973), 49.

⁸ Schwartz, "Mendelssohn and Enlightenment."

these men represent Enlightened Christian society, so why doesn't Spinoza represent Enlightened Jewish society?

If Spinoza is still not a convincing enough example, then Katz offers one that is less controversial: Mendelssohn's friend, Aron Gumperz. Gumperz not only preceded Mendelssohn by breaking into and contributing to Berlin's intellectual circles first, but he also, "helped Mendelssohn to pursue the same course of self-education," as he had taken.⁹ Mendelssohn was following in the footsteps of another man, though to be sure, Mendelssohn made more significant contributions to philosophy than his predecessor. Nonetheless, it is difficult to understand how Mendelssohn can be considered the first modern Jew when men clearly came before him as inspirations and mentors.

Katz does qualify Mendelssohn's impact, contending that, "Mendelssohn in his turn set a precedent to be followed by others."¹⁰ If this meant that Mendelssohn was the inspiration for what would be a mass movement of Jews into modernity, then perhaps he could be considered the first modern Jew. Katz is not implying that Mendelssohn's precedent was one that was adopted by the Jews as a whole, though. In fact, Mendelssohn was far from inspiring a mass change in Jewish thought that would carry the Jews into modernity. His inspiration went no further than a few enlightened *Makilim*, meaning 'enlightened ones,' that followed him into European intellectual circles.¹¹ Outside of this small group of intellectuals, Mendelssohn didn't even inspire his own children and grandchildren into becoming modern Jews! His grandson, Felix Mendelssohn did go on to be an influential

figure in Gentile society, but not as a Jew. A famous composer, Felix Mendelssohn was the son of one of Moses' children who chose to convert to Christianity.¹² In fact four out of Mendelssohn's six children converted, and they weren't the only ones by any stretch of the imagination. The nineteenth century saw an unprecedented number of Jews converting to Christianity. Heinrich Heine, a German poet who made the switch described conversion as his, "ticket of admission to European culture."¹³ Clearly Mendelssohn's example was not sufficient for these Jews to successfully enter into modernity, as they chose to convert en masse. Stemming the flow of converts draining Judaism of its followers would take more than the example of one enlightened man.

Conversion was only successfully slowed when the Reform Movement materialized in the 1830s and 1840s, offering a form of Judaism better adapted to the modern world. Perhaps the most important of the reforms made by the new movement was the alteration of the Messianic belief. Commonly cited as an excuse for the exclusion of Jews from society, the belief that a Messiah would arise and return the Jews to Palestine was the biggest obstacle to Jewish integration with Gentile society. It called into question the dedication of the Jews to their land of residence, implying that they only viewed it as a temporary home. This concern is expressed as late as 1806 when Napoleon questioned the Assembly of Jewish Notable, asking, "In the eyes of the Jews, are Frenchmen considered as their brethren? Or are they considered as strangers?"¹⁴ As this took place after

Mendelssohn's death it is obvious that he was unable to resolve this key issue. The question persisted for almost forty more years after Napoleon asked it, until the Reform Movement finally adopted a policy that would put the issue to rest. At the Reform Rabbinical Conference at Frankfurt in 1845 the majority of the rabbis agreed upon the resolution that, "The messianic idea should receive prominent mention in the prayers, but all petitions for our return to the land of our fathers and for the restoration of a Jewish state should be eliminated from the liturgy."¹⁵ This resolution would finally permit those Jews that took part in the Reform Movement to put to rest any question regarding their loyalty to the state. This was, at last, the movement of a large portion of the Jewish population across the social divide between Gentile and Jew. There had been individuals that had made it before, and laws had even changed in some areas to allow it, but there had yet to be a significant population breaking out of Jewish isolation.

This is not to say that the alteration of the messianic tradition immediately led to the Jews' acceptance in society, and certainly not that every Jew followed the reforms. If anything the modern Jewish period is marked by a split in Judaism over these issues of reform, another testament to the fact that Moses Mendelssohn could not be the inspiration for modern Jewry. In the nineteenth century, Judaism split along lines that eventually coalesced into the Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Movements. The difference between these various groups,

on a basic level, is the extent to which they adhere to traditional Jewish laws. Mendelssohn had never questioned Jewish law; he only revised the traditional lifestyle by which a Jew followed the law. It would therefore be untrue to claim that Mendelssohn promoted a modern Jewry that split over what extent to follow the traditional law.

While all of this clearly goes a long way in refuting Mendelssohn's title as the first modern Jew, it does not get at the larger issue involved. That is, it does not address the fact that, except for a few select cases, it is impossible to pinpoint any individual as the inspiration for any era or event. Even in a seemingly obvious case such as WWII, where Hitler's rise to power might be seen as the instigation, there are always other circumstances that must be considered. In the case of WWII there was the unfair Treaty of Versailles imposed upon the Germans which created an atmosphere allowing Hitler to arise. Mendelssohn might have been an early example of a Jew that was able to cross into and succeed in Gentile society, but it is more likely that he was part of a large trend than the instigator of one. It might, therefore, be appropriate to use Mendelssohn's lifespan as a marker of approximately when Judaism began to shift into modernity, but this is only because Mendelssohn lived a remarkable life at the proper time. The connection between him and Jewish modernity goes no further.

⁹ Katz, 49.

¹⁰ Katz, 50.

¹¹ Schwartz, "Mendelssohn and Enlightenment."

¹² Dan Schwartz, "Religious Reform and Wissenschaft des Judentums," 15 February 2007, Class Lecture.

¹³ Schwartz, "Reform and Wissenschaft."

¹⁴ Assembly of Jewish Notables, "Answers to Napoleon (1806)," in *The Jew In the Modern*

World, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (New York: Oxford U., 1995), 129.

¹⁵ The Reform Rabbinical Conference at Frankfurt, "The Question of Messianism (1845)," in *The Jew In the Modern World*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (New York: Oxford U., 1995), 185.

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Toward a virtue of irresolution:

An exploration of Descartes' practical philosophy

Nicholas Koziolk '07

This paper explores an apparent tension in Descartes' practical philosophy between an agent's commitment to the search for practical knowledge and the necessity for the agent to act, at least sometimes, on the basis of a judgment he recognizes (or suspects) to be uncertain, and so possibly false. The main argument of the paper is that the psychological mechanisms through which the agent brings himself to act with certainty on the basis of uncertain judgments threaten the very happiness that is the goal of Descartes' practical philosophy. More specifically, the worry is that one cannot maintain a real commitment to the search for practical knowledge, while at the same time recognizing that one's knowledge is inadequate, and still avoid the kind of anxiety and irresolution that Descartes seems to think are the greatest threats to human happiness.

In Part Three of the *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes sets out a "provisional moral code" (CSM I: 122, AT VI: 22), which he plans to follow while he carries out his theoretical project of calling into question everything he has accepted as true in the past. To any modern ethicist, however, the second maxim of this moral code will sound at least a bit odd. Descartes states the maxim as follows: "My second maxim was to be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain" (CSM I: 123, AT VI: 24). He adds, a few lines later:

Even when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some; and having done so we must then regard them not as doubtful, from a practical point of view,

but as most true and certain, on the grounds that the reason which made us adopt them is itself true and certain. (Ibid.)

One worry is that such a view of morality will be apt to engender either disingenuousness or self-deception. I suspect that such worries are rooted in part in the thought that the only way we can follow this maxim is either to *pretend* to be certain when we know we are not, or else (somehow) to *convince* ourselves that we are certain, and so to forget any uncertainty we may have had. Neither of these options sounds particularly appealing as a guide to practical thinking. We can imagine the kind of person who follows this maxim: bullheaded, unwilling to listen to reason, unwilling to consider other ways of acting. As a result, we are disinclined to take Descartes' maxim seriously.

We ought to wonder, then, why exactly Descartes would put forth such a maxim. And our perplexity is only increased when we turn to his later work, *The Passions*