

The Jewish Response to
German Culture

FROM THE ENLIGHTENMENT TO
THE SECOND WORLD WAR

EDITED BY
Jehuda Reinharz
Brandeis University
and
Walter Schatzberg
Clark University



PUBLISHED FOR CLARK UNIVERSITY
BY UNIVERSITY PRESS OF NEW ENGLAND
Hanover and London, 1985

ceivable that someone like Hitler, apparently without *Bildung* or the proper comportment, could occupy Otto von Bismarck's chair in the Reich's chancellery.

The embourgeoisement of the German Jews in all its hopes and frustration must be seen against the background of the embourgeoisement of German society as a whole. *Bildung* and respectability were two important aspects of the triumph of the middle classes, exemplified by the spread of decent and correct manners and morals—of a certain way of life—long before it was completed by the sharing of political power. The ideals of *Bildung* and respectability, once so promising, eventually proved dangerous to that process of emancipation which they had once encouraged. *Bildung* turned away from Humboldt's concept, falling into the hands of narrow-minded academics and bureaucrats. *Sittlichkeit* as respectability played a more complex role through stigmatizing and identifying those supposedly outside social norms, presenting a potential danger to Jews as new arrivals. Emancipation made all aspects of German life relevant to the Jewish situation in Germany, especially those social and cultural factors apt to be taken for granted as an integral part of a way of life that dated from the past and would never change.

The historical myths of nationalism both narrowed the base of this way of life and gave it a new dimension of immutability. Jews had to transcend this historical base even while attempting to maintain *Bildung* and respectability—ideals that in reality were not immutable but changing with the passage of time, just as they had triumphed only in the age of Jewish emancipation. Thus the process of emancipation reflected some basic demands of modern society that, for better or worse, both Jews and Germans were forced to fulfill. German Jews became *Bildungsbürger*, exemplifying until the end of their history the ideals current at the time of their emancipation.

Moses Mendelssohn as the Archetypal German Jew

The term "archetypal" as used in the title of this essay needs some clarification. It does not correspond to the way it was used by Carl Gustav Jung, who associated the archetypal with myth and the collective unconscious. The term as understood here implies nothing of the sort. It simply suggests that the image of Moses Mendelssohn served German Jewry as a model upon which to form itself, as a potent directive, and as an assuring symbol of what it stood for. In many ways Mendelssohn was the first modern German Jew, the prototype of what the world came to recognize as the specific character, for better or worse, of German Jewry. The uniqueness of that character can hardly be disputed.¹

There is ample evidence of the fact that the Jews of Germany were acutely conscious of the role Mendelssohn's image played in their lives. A steady stream of literary production was devoted to an evaluation of his personality and the works he had left behind. The literature is permeated with a sense of Mendelssohn's relevance for the basic aspirations that animated German Jewry. The private correspondence of prominent Jews like Leopold Zunz and Moritz Lazarus contains frequent references to Mendelssohn; he was obviously much alive in their consciousness. Outstanding anniversaries of Mendelssohn's birth and death were cherished occasions for public commemoration and fresh spurts of literary activity

1. The question as to whether German Jewry faced problems different from those encountered by other European Jewries was discussed at a colloquium held in Jerusalem in 1970. See *Zur Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Jerusalem, 1971), pp. 20-34.

about him.² To all intents and purposes, he was the patron saint of German Jewry. The numerous anecdotes that circulated and the many witticisms—some in rhyme—that were attributed to him were often spurious, but, precisely on this account, they testify to the popularity and almost legendary status he had attained as the very incarnation of wisdom and virtue. There was a tendency among the rank and file to lose sight of the more strictly defined contours of the philosopher and writer by indulging in a purely sentimental approach *à la Gartenlaube*.³ Yet the awareness of his truly historical accomplishments was never seriously in jeopardy.

These observations apply to the bulk of German Jewry, which was determined to uphold the Jewish heritage in one form or another. Those who chose the path of total assimilation were, naturally, at loggerheads with Mendelssohn. Karl Marx had only harsh, disparaging words to say about him. Heinrich Heine, on the other hand, was sufficiently imbued with Jewish values to feel a great respect for the man. Moses Hess, who, from Marxism, returned to the fold, gave the most concise expression to his view of Mendelssohn's significance by pointing out that Mendelssohn had shown how a modern intellectual may remain a Jew.⁴

The questions that this essay seeks to answer are, In what manner did the archetypal function of Mendelssohn's image operate? What are the specific areas in which it came to fruition? In reply, altogether four points may be elaborated.

I

First, Mendelssohn was the first Jew to identify himself with the cultural concerns of Germany and to make the German tongue the medium of his literary creativity. Although a master of biblical and rabbinic Hebrew and continuing, in some not inconsiderable measure, to use it for literary purposes, he confessed that his most personal thought could be adequately

2. Herrmann M. Z. Meyer, *Moses Mendelssohn Bibliographie* (Berlin, 1965), pp. 127-74 and passim.

3. Fritz Hamburger, "Die geistige Gestalt Moses Mendelssohns," *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 75, n.s. 37 (1929): 81; Henry Wassermann, "Jews and Judaism in the *Gartenlaube*," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* (hereafter *LBIB*) 23 (1978): 60.

4. Karl Marx-Friedrich Engels Briefwechsel, Abt. 3, Bd. 4 of *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin, 1931), p. 340; Karl Marx-Friedrich Engels Werke, vol. 32 (Berlin, 1965), p. 686. On Heine, see S. S. Frawer, *Heine's Jewish Comedy: A Study of His Portraits of Jews and Judaism* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 56-57 and passim. For Moses Hess, see his *Rom und Jerusalem: Die letzte Nationalitätsfrage*, 2d ed. (Leipzig, 1899), p. 41, where Mendelssohn is listed with Saadia, Maimonides, and Baruch Spinoza, who, "despite their progressive intellectual development, did not become apostates."

expressed only in the German language. This may have been due partly to the stultified growth of Hebrew, but it is explained, above all, by his nearly total immersion, in his late adolescence, in the modalities of German language and literature. Already his anonymously published first work, the *Philosophical Dialogues* (1755), was sufficiently distinguished in its diction to be mistaken, by one of the reviewers, as a work by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.⁵ It is well known that Mendelssohn's contemporaries, including Immanuel Kant and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, admired his style. Wilhelm Dilthey spoke of the new German prose created by Lessing, Mendelssohn, the young Goethe, and Justus Möser as a factor that made the writing of the great legislative enterprise of the age of Frederick II (1794) possible.⁶ In November 1785, when Mendelssohn, in the anguish over the Jacobi affair, needed to hear some words of encouragement, August Hennings reminded him of some of the accomplishments he had to his credit: in his early metaphysical writings, he had been the first to present the depth of speculative thought in graceful fashion; in his contributions to *Literaturbriefe*, he had molded the literary taste of the Germans.⁷ Mendelssohn was, no doubt, the archetypal figure of Jewish *literati* in Germany.

He was, at the same time, the spiritual ancestor of all those numberless Jews who cherished in the German language "the sweet sound of the mother tongue." The intimacy with German, for which Mendelssohn had to struggle hard, came naturally to generations of Jews after him. What a travesty of the truth it was when, on April 12, 1933, one of the "Twelve Statements of the German Student Body" said: "When a Jew writes German, he lies."⁸ Robert Schumann would hardly have set poems by Heine to music had he felt them to be anything but German and authentically human. The authenticity of Mendelssohn's German prose remained the hallmark of the best of German-Jewish writers down to Karl Wolfskehl and Franz Kafka.

This leads us to the much-debated question as to whether one may speak of a German-Jewish symbiosis. Selma Stern-Taubler concluded

5. Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University, Ala., 1973), pp. 39-40.

6. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3d ed. (Stuttgart and Göttingen, 1964), 22:143.

7. August Hennings to Moses Mendelssohn, November 1785, in *Moses Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Berlin, 1929), 13:326.

8. Quoted by Ingrid Belke, *In den Katakomben*, special issue of *Marbacher Magazin* 25 (1983), Chronik 1933, p. 67.

the final chapter of the third volume of her great work, *The Prussian State and the Jews*, by quoting Martin Buber describing the dialogue between Lessing and Mendelssohn as "the earliest stage of the symbiosis between the German and the Jewish spirit." She added, "The dialogue ended in 1933, when the symbiosis had not been accomplished though it had been a 'real possibility.'"⁹ In other words, the friendship between Lessing and Mendelssohn was the first and last instance of a true dialogue or symbiosis between German and Jew. This bleak appraisal has to be qualified on two counts. First, Mendelssohn's relationship to Lessing was not the only exemplification of that "real possibility," though it undoubtedly was the one he most cherished. He had other close and intimate friends—Friedrich Nicolai, Thomas Abbt, Hennings, and, to a lesser extent, Dr. Johann Georg Zimmermann and Elise and Johann A. H. Reimarus. Second, during the nearly 150 years between Mendelssohn's death and 1933, many instances of friendship and true dialogue did occur, as Gershom Scholem, the most outspoken opponent of the symbiosis theory, readily admitted.¹⁰ Ingrid Belke's admirable edition of the correspondence between Heymann Steinthal and Gustav Glogau is an apt reminder of this fact.¹¹ Though severely limited in scope, the precedent set by Mendelssohn and his German friends did not remain without fruitful consequences.

The symbolic significance that German Jews increasingly attached to the friendship between Mendelssohn and Lessing was indicative of the disillusion they suffered in their efforts for social acceptance. Mendelssohn's image as linked to Lessing's represented an ideal that had eluded them. Recalling and celebrating that friendship between the "Dioscuri" was more of an incantation than anything else. The archetypal figure of Mendelssohn assumed here the aura of mythical rather than prototypical reality. This is equally true of the dream role he played as the model of the hero in Lessing's drama *Nathan the Wise*. When it first appeared in print (1779), it was at once taken for granted that the figure of Nathan portrayed none other than Mendelssohn.¹² German Jews eagerly adopted this interpretation. How firmly they clung to it may be gauged from the fact that *Nathan the Wise* was selected for the première of the Jewish

9. A condensed English version of the chapter appeared in Selma Stern-Tseubler, "The First Generation of Emancipated Jews," *LBIYB* 15 (1970): 40.

10. Gershom Scholem, *Judaica*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt a.M., 1970), p. 16.

11. Ingrid Belke, ed., *Moses Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal: Die Begründer der Völkerpsychologie in ihren Briefen*, II, 1 (Tübingen, 1983), pp. 1-367.

12. Altmann, *Mendelssohn*, pp. 569-70.

Kulturbund theater in Berlin, on October 1, 1933—an occasion intended by the Nazis to mark the ghettoization of German Jewry.¹³ The choice of this particular play was inspired, no doubt, by two considerations: first, by the Jews' desire to remind the German people of Lessing's idea of tolerance, and second, by their determination not to become ghettoized in spirit, no matter how narrowly they were otherwise confined. The performance of *Nathan* recalled the image of Mendelssohn who had led his people out of the ghetto. The legacy bequeathed by him, a wide-openness to culture, was to remain their treasured possession.

Mendelssohn had, indeed, become the great *Vorbild* of the Jewish educated citizenry (*Bildungsbürgertum*) in Germany and beyond. He epitomized all the virtues enshrined in the typically German term *Bildung*, for which there is no equivalent in any other language. To the early generations of "the Enlightened" (*maskilim*), Mendelssohn was an object of boundless admiration, a kind of new Moses.¹⁴ He was enthusiastically hailed as the harbinger of a new dawn. Varying Alexander Pope's lines on Sir Isaac Newton, an anonymous contributor to *Ha-Messef* wrote: "Truth and religion lay hid in night. / God said, Let Moses [Mendelssohn] be! And there was light."¹⁵ During the last phase of German Jewry, the Weimar period, Franz Rosenzweig lamented the excess of *Bildung* and the paucity of Jewish substance,¹⁶ but essentially he, too, continued to follow the Mendelssohnian pattern of ghettoization that had become the norm in Western Europe and was the envy of many an Eastern European Jew.¹⁷

II

There is a further dimension to Mendelssohn's archetypal role, and it relates to his image as a loyal Jew. I have already mentioned Moses Hess's somewhat simplistic, yet true and compelling, observation that Mendelssohn showed how one could remain a Jew even though one's intellectual pursuits had opened up vistas far away from Judaism. Mendelssohn had to face repeated challenges to his Jewish faith, but he never wavered in his allegiance. The forthrightness and elegance of his reply to Johann

13. Belke, *In den Katastrophen*, p. 6.

14. See James H. Lehmann, "Maimonides, Mendelssohn and the *Me'asim*," *LBIYB* 20 (1975): 87-108.

15. *Ha-Messef* 3 (1786): 161, quoted in Altmann, *Mendelssohn*, p. 758.

16. Franz Rosenzweig, "Bildung und kein Ende," in his *Kleine Schriften* (Berlin, 1937), pp. 79-93.

17. See Baruch B. Kutzweil, "The Image of the Western Jew in Modern Hebrew Literature," *LBIYB* 6 (1961): 171-72 and passim.

Caspar Lavater earned him increased respect and gave delight to many. What enabled him to remain steadfast was, in the first place, his deep-rootedness in the Jewish tradition. Yet there was more to it. In his answer to the Swiss evangelist he declared:

I may say that not only yesterday did I start to investigate my religion. I recognized at a very early time the duty to examine my opinions and actions, and if, from my early youth on, I devoted my hours of leisure and recreation to philosophy and *belles lettres*, I did so solely for the purpose of getting ready for that urgent examination. . . . Had the result of my research of many years not been a decision in favor of my religion, it would necessarily have been imperative for me to announce it through public action. I fail to see what could have tied me to a religion so overtly strict in appearance and held in such contempt by the general public, had I not been persuaded, in my heart, of its truth.¹⁸

This statement indicates an attitude of inner freedom, a sense of interior distance *vis-à-vis* the tradition and its impact. Mendelssohn remained a Jew not because he was an heir to the tradition and/or motivated by respect for authority, but from a free inner choice. True, he was immersed in the rich world of Hebrew literature and participated in what, with Ludwig Wittgenstein, we may call the "language-game" of his native religion, in a form of life inherited and well understood. Yet, according to his testimony repeated more than once, he managed to look at his inheritance with its powerful stock of images objectively and critically— from a distance. His continued loyalty was the fruit of a decision on his part. He was a Jew by conviction, not merely by birth. He proved that distance need not annul loyalty; on the contrary, it helped to confirm it. It is this sovereign attitude that prefigures, in an archetypal sense, the way in which many modern German Jews down to Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig came to embrace Judaism.

There is a certain affinity between Mendelssohn's approach to Judaism and the attitude characteristic of medieval Jewish philosophers in Spain, Provence, and Italy, who rejected mere reliance on authority (*taqlid* in Arabic) and applied rational standards to the interpretation of biblical and rabbinic theology. In the case of Mendelssohn, the stance of objectivity is already manifest in his application of esthetic categories to the Scriptures, a type of evaluation that he took from Robert Lowth's famous *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* (1753). In so doing, Mendelssohn intro-

18. Mendelssohn to Johann Caspar Lavater, December 12, 1769, *Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe* 7:8-9.

duced a viewpoint that was totally absent from the medieval mind. His critical stance expresses itself, above all, in the freedom with which he discriminated between authentic and nonauthentic elements in Judaism, identifying the latter with the kabbalistic tradition, especially its demonological and magical aspects. As an exponent of *Aufklärung*, Mendelssohn sought to discredit the mystical elements of the tradition, and he thereby became the prototype of an outlook that dominated German Jewry until Gershom Scholem began to rehabilitate the Kabbala in the late 1920s. Mendelssohn's antikabbalistic attitude was not entirely new. It had been anticipated by Italian-Jewish rationalists like Elijah del Medigo and Leone Modena. Yet it derived added force from the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment. Mendelssohn also felt free to criticize the method of excessive dialectics (*pilpul*) frequently employed in the study of the Talmud. Here he stood on more solid ground, for some outstanding rabbinic authorities had done likewise.

In the aggregate, all this tends to show that Mendelssohn's attachment to Judaism was tantamount to a free and discriminating loyalty. It was the stance of a Jew who claims the right and the duty to look upon tradition not as something monolithic, undifferentiated, but as an entity composed of various layers, not all of which were of the same validity. Well versed in the tradition, Mendelssohn discovered possibilities of molding its future course. He discarded the long-ingrained perspective that saw all phases of the past as unified by a mystical synchronicity, as it were.¹⁹ Although, as a child of the Enlightenment, he had not yet developed a truly historical sense, he was enough of a scholar to realize that Judaism had to be comprehended in historical terms, and he drew the consequences. In his *Jerusalem* (1783) he presented a picture of what he considered to be the "true," "authentic" Judaism, shorn of accretions he disapproved of. In this respect he became the forerunner of many German-Jewish interpreters of the faith down to Leo Baeck, who viewed tradition sympathetically but with critical eyes. Mendelssohn was no reformer, nor was he the "Luther of the Jews," as he was erroneously dubbed by a contemporary Christian writer.²⁰ There was no "Luther of the Jews." German Jewry went through a series of attempts at reform, not through a Reformation. Mendelssohn could be called, with more

19. On the traditional stance, see Max Wiener, *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation* (Berlin, 1933), pp. 38-39.

20. See Altmann, *Mendelssohn*, p. 9.

justification, the founding father of the objective-critical approach that came to fruition in *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, when Leopold Zunz and his friends embraced the philological-historical method initiated by the German school of classical studies (*Altertumswissenschaft*).

The linkage of Jewish loyalty and inner freedom that Mendelssohn bequeathed to German Jewry is a corollary and, in a sense, an expression of his notion that religion, if it is truly to be religion, must be noncoercive. Whereas the state has the right of coercion and exists by virtue of the social contract that empowers it to enforce obedience to the laws, religion consists in man's relationship with God and lives by the power of inner persuasion. It simply cannot be enforced without losing its character. This thesis is the burden of the first part of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*. With this emphasis on freedom in religion, he coupled a political demand for liberty of religion, but from an inner Jewish perspective his great concern was for abandoning all semblance of coercion in religious matters. In his preface to Menasseh ben Israel's *Vindiciae Judaeorum* (1782), he appealed to the rabbis and elders of his nation to forgo the use of excommunication (*herem*) as a means of enforcing religious conformity.

Mendelssohn must have been aware of the fact that, from late antiquity down to the threshold of the modern age, the functioning of Jewish life in exile (*galut*) depended, to a large extent, on the exercise of communal controls; that the Jewish community had no choice but to form a kind of "state within the state." Yet envisioning as he did a new order of things as a result of emancipation, he wished to see Judaism assume the character of a pure religion, free of all attributes of power. The model he advocated was to become the blueprint of Jewish life in the period of emancipation.

III

My third point concerns Mendelssohn's archetypal role as the first philosopher of Judaism in modern times. I shall not deal with Mendelssohn the philosopher of the Enlightenment who earned the epithet the "German Socrates," was one of the pioneers in German esthetics, and made a valiant effort to uphold the metaphysics of pure reason even in the face of Kant's critique of it. His place in eighteenth-century German philosophy was one of distinction, and his fame suffered eclipse only when Kant overtook him and gave philosophy a new direction. Today, when much attention is being paid to the eighteenth century as the cradle of moder-

nity, Mendelssohn is a figure of renewed interest.²¹ Yet all this is not my concern here. My object is confined to an elucidation of Mendelssohn's significance as a pioneer in modern Jewish thought.²²

In Mendelssohn's interpretation of Judaism, reason as understood by the Enlightenment is written large. In his view, the eternal truths, which are necessary truths of reason and form the content of natural religion open to all men, are also the truths of the Jewish religion. They relate to God's existence, His providence, and the future life in which reward and punishment are meted out. Mendelssohn lived at a time in which one could still believe that these propositions were capable of demonstrative proof and certainty. The tradition of René Descartes's, John Locke's, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's rational faith in their "necessity" was still potent among the moderate deists, and Mendelssohn could feel on safe ground in affirming them. In a sense he was far more radical in his reliance on reason alone than those Christian philosophers who were ready to admit the validity of revelation as an additional source of religious truth of a superrational kind. As Mendelssohn pointed out, there was no need for a divine revelation to assure man of the truths the knowledge of which made for his felicity in this world and the next. Nor, he suggested, would it have befitted God's universal love for all mankind to single out a particular nation as the beneficiary of a special revelation concerning those truths. Judaism did not claim to possess knowledge about God in excess of what man was able to obtain by his own unaided reason. Where Judaism differed was not in matters of doctrine but of law, commandments, and ways of serving God. It was solely its legislation that was revealed at Sinai, and that legislation—the realm of *Halakha*—was not, as Baruch Spinoza had declared, a device for the furtherance of purely political, mundane goals but itself closely linked to the eternal verities of Judaism, which were identical with the truths of natural, universal religion. For the commandments were meant to be constant reminders of God's existence, providence, and justice, while some of them were to recall the historical experiences surrounding the act of revelation.

The dichotomy thus established between Judaism as a "religion of reason" and Judaism as a "revealed legislation" was hardly commensurate

21. Michael Albrecht, "Moses Mendelssohn: Ein Forschungsbericht, 1965-1980," *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 57 (1983): 64-166.

22. For a more elaborate treatment, see Alexander Altmann, "Reflections on Mendelssohn's Concept of Judaism," *Jewish Thought in the Eighteenth Century: Harvard Judaica Texts and Studies*, forthcoming.

with the organic character of the Torah as an indivisible unity of doctrine and law, belief and action. On the other hand, Mendelssohn's emphasis on the rationality of the Jewish religion and his rejection of superrational mysteries such as were characteristic of Christianity, reflected a stance that had been much in vogue in medieval Jewish philosophy as far as it had to engage in polemics.²³ Mendelssohn was the first modern Jew to adumbrate the notion of a definite superiority, in rational terms, of Judaism over Christianity, and the stand he took became paradigmatic for the Jewish Hegelians and neo-Kantians. His trust in reason led him to the assertion that Judaism made no demands on faith, except in the sphere of historical truths. Here, again, a polemical attitude is evident. It is directed, in particular, against Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's philosophy of faith, which regards rationalism as the road to atheism and feels itself in deep accord with the Christian idea of faith as the *refugium* of the truly religious soul. It may be recalled that Friedrich W. J. Schelling, too, took issue with Jacobi and, though affirming faith as the necessary last stage in man's endeavor to comprehend God, insisted on the use of dialectic as the initial method of approach. Mendelssohn's denial of the requirement of faith—he recommended rational conviction instead—did not correspond to authentic Jewish religiosity, but, as a philosopher of religion, he was entitled to seek the road to God through reason, and in this respect his precedent set the stage for other German-Jewish thinkers to follow. The way in which reason was understood by the idealist philosophers and, later, by the neo-Kantians, changed conspicuously,²⁴ yet all Jewish philosophers down to Hermann Cohen followed Mendelssohn in presenting Judaism as the "religion of reason."

It would be a misreading of Mendelssohn to assume that in equating Judaism, as a body of beliefs, with natural religion, he lost sight of the historical dimension. Whereas the deists and Kant were bent upon the elimination of the historical element from religion, Mendelssohn was keen to preserve it. Indeed his profoundest consideration stemmed from the prophetic view of history. He saw the messianic goal of history in the triumph of pure, unadulterated monotheism over degenerate beliefs (idolatry, paganism) and unbelief (atheism), and he assigned to the "ceremonial" law the function of ensuring the continuing existence of the Jewish people as the torchbearer of the true religion. This historical per-

23. Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977).

24. The static reason of the Enlightenment philosophy became dialectical.

spective concerning the function of the ritual is something distinctly modern. Medieval Jewish theologians had sought to define the "reasons of the commandments" (*ta'amey ha-mitsvot*) in either rational or mystical terms. Mendelssohn did not presume to "enter into the Sanctuary," as he called this particular enterprise, but, instead, he viewed the law as a whole as having a messianic purpose in mind. It is this historical (or metahistorical) viewpoint that enabled him to affirm the continued validity of the revealed law until such time as God would abrogate it as solemnly and publicly as He had proclaimed it. Kant remarked *apropos* this utterance that it betrayed a certain callousness, a disregard for the hopes for an alleviation of the "burdens pressing upon the people."²⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt showed greater understanding when he interpreted Mendelssohn's loyalty to the ritual law as flowing from a desire to prevent the "national spirit" (*Nationalgeist*) of the Jewish people from perishing, a desire "worthy of a sagacious mind."²⁶

What Humboldt failed to see was the messianic perspective that informed Mendelssohn and gave spiritual depth to his concern for the preservation of the Jewish people through adherence to the Torah. In Mendelssohn's view, the survival of Israel as a separate nation was a matter of religious concern. It was bound up with an ideal to be achieved. It had an ultimate purpose beyond the natural instinct for self-preservation, national identity, or sentimental considerations. It was an idea that compelled Jews to remain Jews. At the very end of his *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn declared that if abandonment of our separateness as a nation were the price to be paid for the granting of emancipation, we would have to reject the offer. This proud statement was not lost on subsequent generations of German Jews. It is echoed in Hermann Cohen's discussion of "The Law" in his *Religion of Reason from the Sources of Judaism* (1919). After praising Mendelssohn's "great messianic tendency," Cohen pleads for the recognition of the need for maintaining a measure of separateness, even "isolation," in cultural respects, seeing that, ultimately, the future of pure monotheism was at stake.²⁷

25. Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, trans. Allan Arkush, introd. and commentary Alexander Altmann (Hanover, N.H., 1983), pp. 123, 236.

26. Hans Liebeschütz, "Judentum und deutsche Umwelt im Zeitalter der Restauration," in *Das Judentum in der deutschen Umwelt, 1800-1850*, ed. Hans Liebeschütz and Arnold Paucker (Tübingen, 1977), pp. 5-6.

27. Hermann Cohen, *Religion des Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (Leipzig, 1919), pp. 421-23, 430-32.

IV

Finally, Mendelssohn represents the archetypal fighter for Jewish civil rights. Throughout his life he had been the spokesman for the downtrodden and persecuted of his people. In numerous instances he had exerted his personal influence on their behalf. He had been the force behind Christian Wilhelm von Dohm's epoch-making treatise *On the Civil Improvement of the Jews* (1781). When Joseph II proclaimed the Edict of Toleration (1781-82), Mendelssohn considered the time propitious for open action on his part, and in his preface to Menasseh ben Israel's historic apologia and, above all, in his *Jerusalem*, he broke a lance for civil equality. What he sought to achieve was a political rather than a social solution to what was later called the Jewish Problem. He advocated a secular state on the, broadly speaking, Lockean pattern (which he somewhat revised) such as was being instituted in the United States. Indeed, at the very time he wrote *Jerusalem*, Thomas Jefferson was writing his *Notes on Virginia* (1782), which took a similar direction. It was Count Mirabeau who, in a book published in 1787, put Mendelssohn on the same pedestal with the framers of the American Constitution and with A. R. J. Turgot, the French liberal theorist. The analogy had not occurred to any one of the many German reviewers of *Jerusalem*.

What Mendelssohn envisaged was a secular state in which there was no longer any civil discrimination on grounds of religion. Such a state would secure Jewish rights of redress in cases of injustice, allow for active participation by Jews in the political process, and, as a result, confer dignity on the Jew. This agenda was adopted by German-Jewish leadership when the struggle for emancipation entered into a more acute phase in the nineteenth century. Gabriel Riesser made this platform his own. It was thwarted by the rising tide of German nationalism, which would not tolerate an alien element in its midst. Germany was not America. Her tragedy was that she never produced an Abraham Lincoln who said, "I don't want to be a slave, neither do I want to be a master." The master-race complex was too deeply ingrained in the German psyche to permit noble sentiments of this sort. The response of many German Jews was flight into assimilation and conversion rather than political struggle and preservation of their Jewish identity. What caused anxiety was, in the first place, social ostracism. The denial of political equality was considered to be of secondary importance. The proud and upright stance that Mendelssohn had assumed was the very opposite to the self-denying atti-

tude of those who sought to conceal or negate their Jewish identity. Instead of accepting prejudice as a seemingly ineradicable disease, they tried to overcome it by the pretense of being no less German than the Germans, an attitude that merely aggravated the problem.²⁸ Fortunately, this is not the whole picture. There were others—and they formed the nucleus of Jewish survival—who followed in Mendelssohn's footsteps.

Mendelssohn considered antisemitism to be a phenomenon resulting from prejudice. He saw in it nothing more than a survival of medieval Jew-hate produced and nurtured by the Christian church, which stigmatized the Jewish nation as the Christ-killers. With the progress of enlightenment, he hoped, this inherited prejudice would fade away. Although he realized that in the modern period antisemitism had changed its color, he did not hesitate to identify it with the old, "superannuated" prejudice, the roots of which were difficult to extirpate. In our time Jacob Katz has put forward a similar theory.²⁹ Mendelssohn's view may be described as typical of the Enlightenment mentality, which was fond of diagnosing manifestations of crass irrationality as "prejudices." The Kantian philosopher Johann G. C. C. Kiesewetter defined the Enlightenment itself as "a critique of prejudices."³⁰ Mendelssohn simply applied that current mode of explanation to antisemitism. He might have pondered the fact that Jew-hate goes back to Greco-Roman antiquity and is also found in the Islamic world, where it is unrelated to Christian theology. Whatever the ultimate reasons of this disturbing phenomenon may be, he clung to the prejudice theory because it offered the comforting prospect of an eventual remedy. Prejudice is bound to give way, in the long run, to a more enlightened opinion. In this optimism subsequent generations of German Jews found solace and hope. Again, Mendelssohn provided an archetypal pattern that guided the type of defense (*Abwehr*) aimed at spreading enlightenment.³¹ Strangely enough, this utterly in-

28. Hannah Arendt's critique of Mendelssohn in her consideration of German-Jewish leadership in the nineteenth century is misapplied. See Leon Botstein, "Liberating the Pariah: Politics, the Jews, and Hannah Arendt," *Salmagundi: Politics and the Social Contract*, Spring-Summer 1983, no. 60, pp. 78-81.

29. Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980).

30. Werner Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilskritik: Studien zur Geschichte der Vorurteilstheorie* (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt, 1983), pp. 312-13.

31. Barbara Suchy, "The Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus," pt. 1, *LBIYB* 28 (1983): 205-39. See also Eleonore Sterling, "Jewish Reaction to Jew-Hatred in the First Half of the 19th Century," *ibid.*, 3 (1958), 103-21; and Marjorie Lamberti, "Liberals, Socialists and the Defence against Antisemitism in the Wilhelminian Period," *ibid.*, 25 (1980): 147-62.

effective method was still tried in the 1920s, when the storm signals of virulent racism should have been unmistakable.

I conclude my analysis with a brief reference to the limitations that Mendelssohn's archetypal function suffered in the very last phase of German Jewry. The rise of Zionism on the one hand and the emergence of religious existentialism on the other tended to render the Mendelssohnian pattern in its political and religious complexion obsolete. Politically, the old blueprint for accommodation in the *galut* came under severe attack by Zionist ideology, and the rationalistic trend in Jewish philosophy gave way to new ways of thinking as represented by Buber and Rosenzweig. There is symbolic significance in the fact that in the Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the Bible the rendition of the Name of God as "The Eternal" (*der Ewige*) was changed into "HE" [IS PRESENT] (*ER [IST DA]*). "The Eternal" reflects a philosophical approach, a concern with the eternal truths of reason. "HE" has a religious connotation. It points to the presentness of God and, at the same time, to the unapproachable mystery of His being. Mendelssohn's translation of the Bible had sought to lead the German Jews into a symbiosis with German language and culture. Buber and Rosenzweig endeavored to recapture, through their mode of translation, the very character of the Hebrew original. The direction they took was the reverse of Mendelssohn's.³²

The transformation that was taking shape in both political and theological thinking was well described by Leo Baeck, the most representative figure in the last phase of German Jewry. In a series of lectures he gave in 1956, he spoke of Moses Hess, the pioneer of Zionism, as a legitimate rival of Mendelssohn's leadership, and he acknowledged Franz Rosenzweig as the new star on the horizon of German-Jewish theology.³³ Yet such awareness had in no way diminished German Jewry's sense of indebtedness to Mendelssohn's legacy. On the eve of the catastrophe, in 1929, the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth was made the occasion

32. Wera Lewin, "Die Bedeutung des Stefan George-Kreises für die deutsch-jüdische Geistesgeschichte," *ibid.*, 8 (1963): 187. See also Rosenzweig to Martin Buber, December 29, 1925, quoting Julius Blau, who made precisely this point: "This [the new Bible translation] answered the need of contemporary German Jews; it represented Mendelssohn's endeavor a century ago, only in reverse direction: at that time they had to learn German, now Hebrew [*jüdisch*]." Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher*, vol. 2 (The Hague, 1979), p. 1072.

33. See Leo Baeck, *Von Moses Mendelssohn zu Franz Rosenzweig: Typen jüdischen Selbstverständnisses in den letzten beiden Jahrhunderten* (Stuttgart, 1958). An excerpt relating to Moses Hess had appeared in *LBIYB* 2 (1957): 38-44.

for starting a new edition of his collected works in a form commensurate with the highest standards of modern scholarship. This Jubilee Edition, which is now nearing completion, stands as a document of the role Mendelssohn played in the consciousness of what was once German Jewry.