



THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE  
**AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES**

**MS-763: Rabbi Herbert A. Friedman Collection, 1930-2004.**

Series E: Sermons, Speeches, and Writings, 1933-1959.

---

Box  
15

Folder  
17

"The Life and Times of Moses Mendelssohn." 1955.

For more information on this collection, please see the finding aid on the  
American Jewish Archives website.

---

## The Life and Times of Moses Mendelssohn.

*Cust*

The Dark Ages in Europe lasted for a thousand years. From approximately 500 to approximately 1500, namely from the time of the Fall of the Roman Empire until the time of the Renaissance, it might honestly be said that Europe lived in the dark. It is true that there were individuals who knew how to read and write, such as the monks in their monasteries and some few poets and scholars. But there were even kings who sat on mighty thrones, and there were certainly great and despotic feudal barons who knew neither to sign their names nor to do the arithmetic necessary to calculate the worth of their great holdings. The peasants were slaves attached to the land and there were no dreams which a common man could hold to alleviate the bitterness of his life. His entertainments consisted of war or women or a wandering minstrel.

Exactly during this same period the Jews lived in literacy, enlightened, and relatively free of the fears and the superstitions which beclouded the masses of the Christian world. Enjoying a religion which they practised out of love and not out of fear, they exercised their minds, expressed great poetic flights of fancy in an untrammelled imagination, and tasted of learning beyond the comprehension of those in the surrounding world. During these thousand years, the Jews completed the Talmud, added many commentaries to it, wrote poetry and philosophy, translated the heritage of the Greeks, through Arabic and Latin, making this available to the Christian world, practiced the highest skills of medicine, astronomy, and mathematics, wrote charts and tables and almanacs which were later to serve the



explorers of the New World to cross the seas, and in every way conceivable displayed their skill, ingenuity, and intelligence in fields of culture, religion and philosophy. While Europe was in the Dark Ages for a thousand years, the Jewish mind flourished and the Jewish soul created.

Then a paradox occurred. As Europe moved out of its Dark Ages into the Renaissance, only then did the Jews move into their Dark Ages. It is really interesting that as the clouds of freedom, liberation and emancipation began to move over the European horizon in general - as the light and color and brilliance of the Renaissance began to penetrate the previously benighted areas of politics and economics and social relationships - so that the common man of Europe began to feel himself freer and happier, exactly then did the darkness of a ghetto society close the Jews in, behind squalid walls.

*cut to page 4*

It might not be generally remembered that the term ghetto, referring originally to an area within a given city to which Jews were confined by law, did not exist in Jewish life prior to the 15th century. This compulsory system prevailed during the 15th to the 18th centuries in Italy and in Central Europe. In 1462 the Pope praised the idea of introducing the ghetto in Frankfort and the Church likewise insisted that the Jews be compelled to wear a distinctive patch of yellow or some other colored badge. Actual ghettos arose in various cities in southern France in 1378, 1453, 1461. Turin had a compulsory ghetto around 1400. In 1516 all the Jews of Venice were compelled to move to the ghetto.



Let us not misunderstand this ghetto situation. It did not mean that the Jews were plunged into a Dark Ages comparable to that which we have described as existing in Europe previously. There was no black-out on thought or creative study. The ghetto was primarily an instrument designed to affect the political and social and economic status of the Jews. It could not interfere with their intellectual achievements except in one way. The one really stifling aspect of the ghetto was the fact that it caused intellectual myopia. The secular knowledge of the outside was largely unknown and largely considered undesirable.

Aside from this, it must be understood that there was a positive side to the ghetto life. The effect of this enforced retreat from the outside world was the growth of a miniature self-contained Jewish society. The Jews developed their own social and political life and even an economic life, to a large extent. Frequently the ghetto was a state within a state. The famous Prague ghetto, for instance, boasted of renowned Talmudic schools, a town hall where the leaders of the community convened, and many synagogues. How highly developed their economic life was, may be judged by the existence of four Jewish Guilds of goldsmiths, tailors, butchers, and shoemakers.

There are some who look back and say that the disappearance of the ghetto was not an unmixed blessing. Within the ghetto walls, there was the guarantee of the continued survival and existence of the Jewish community. There was control, there was



incentive, there was reward for participation, and there was a sense of distinct solidarity.

When the ghetto was destroyed, the Jewish community was scattered like popcorn and brought into contact with the Christian world. Freedom was a good thing, but the unexpected taste of it in many a mouth led to a weakening and often a destruction of Jewish values. There is no sense in such post-mortem. The Jewish emancipation was bound to come, delayed as it was beyond the general emancipation of the rest of Western Europe. It is commonly said that the French Revolution tore down the ghetto walls. Before this occurred, however, there was one man whose work set aflame in the hearts of many the desire for emancipation. That man was Moses Mendelssohn. He lived for 57 years, between 1729 and 1796. The historian Graetz has this paragraph summing up the effect of Mendelssohn:

"The Renaissance of the Jewish Race, which may be unhesitatingly ascribed to Mendelssohn, is noteworthy, in as much as the originator of this great work neither intended nor suspected it. Mendelssohn played an influential part without either knowing or desiring it: Involuntarily, he aroused the slumbering genius of the Jewish race, which only required an impulse to free itself from its constrained position. The story of his life is interesting, because it typifies the history of the Jews in recent times, when they raised themselves from lowliness and contempt to greatness and self-consciousness."



On the other hand, Professor Baron feels differently on the subject. He says:

"It has become customary to date the Jewish aufklaerung from Mendelssohn - but all the fundamental tendencies of the Haskalah, such as secular learning, a purified Hebrew tongue, historicism, and the revolt of an individual against communal power, had become more and more marked in Italy and Holland long before Mendelssohn."

Baron offers the theory that Spinoza and Uriel de Costa and the general ferment in Amsterdam laid the foundations for the secularization of Judaism and the incorporation of the Jews into the general cultural and political life of the Western nations.

Whether one believes that Mendelssohn actually set in motion the forces leading toward emancipation, or whether he was simply expressing those urges already in existence from earlier times in other countries, there is no doubt that his life had a direct tremendous and significant effect on the process. He was born in Dessau and came knocking on the gates of Berlin in 1743, when just a boy of 14. Already slightly hunchbacked and terribly poverty-stricken, he knew no one in the city except his teacher, Rabbi Frankel and immediately set to work studying under his tutelage. For seven lean and difficult years, he endured the most grinding poverty, while his eager mind absorbed all of the learning which he could possibly soak up. He developed a beautiful German style, which was to be the first thing to achieve him fame. He learned Latin and Greek. He learned French and English. He developed a finely critical sense of literature, so that he later



wrote essays on aesthetics and art. Twenty years after his arrival at the Rosenthal gate of Berlin, poor and friendless, he was to be awarded the first prize by the Royal Academy of Sciences for an essay on metaphysics and mathematics. This is an indication of the great distances he covered and of the great accomplishments of his mind.

The first easing of the financial strain occurred when, at the age of 21, he became the tutor in the household of Isaac Bernhard, a wealthy silk manufacturer. He taught the children in that household and later on became the bookkeeper of that firm. This gave him some degree of financial security and by the time he was 27 he had saved enough to obtain a house and garden of his own, to which the literati could come for conversation and chess.

Probably the happiest event of his life, and certainly one of the most significant, was his relationship with Lessing. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was one of the great minds of the 18th Century. He was probably the first free-thinking man in Germany. Bursting through all bounds and regulations of ordinary conventions, liberated from bigotry, as few of his contemporaries were, he was of a thoroughly democratic nature. He sought freedom and truth and tried to upset orthodox opinions of prejudice which existed in the community. Even before meeting Mendelssohn, he had written a play called, "The Jews", in which he desired to show that a Jew could be unselfish and noble. He aroused the complete displeasure of all Christian circles, in art, the theater, and litera-



ture of his time. This was the man who was brought together with Mendelssohn over a chessboard. The friendship which started then lasted up to the grave. These two men had the most extraordinary effect upon each other. Mendelssohn admired in his Christian friend ability and unconstraint, courage and perfect culture, overflowing spirit and vigor which enabled him to bear a new world upon his shoulders. Lessing admired in Mendelssohn his nobility of thought, his yearning for truth, and his firmness of character. They were both so imbued with loftly nobility of mind that they prized in each other a perfection which each sought to develop within himself. Lessing aroused in Mendelssohn an interest in aesthetic culture, poetry and art, while Mendelssohn stimulated Lessing to deep philosophical thought. They reciprocally gave and received, and enjoyed the true relationship of a worthy friendship.

Through his friend, who exerted great attraction upon talented men, Mendelssohn was introduced into his circle, learned of the forms of society, and threw off his awkwardness which was the stamp of the ghetto. Through Lessing's zeal to advance him in every way, Mendelssohn became known in the learned circle of Berlin. There was established a "coffee house of the learned", for an association of about 100 men of science and literature. The founders did not pass over the young Jewish philosopher, but invited him to join them. His critical works were applauded by this highly elect group. Once, each member was asked to describe his own defects in verse. Mendelssohn, who stuttered and was slightly hunchbacked, wrote about himself as follows:



"Great you call Demosthenes  
Stuttering orator of Greece;  
Hunchbacked Aesop you deem wise -  
In your circle I surmise,  
I am doubly wise and great.  
What in each was separate  
You in me united find -  
Hump and heavy tongue combined."

He was appreciated for his modesty and loved for his intellect. His taste became more refined every day, his style grew nobler, and his thoughts more lucid.

At about this time, Mendelssohn applied for the status of Schutzjude, which would grant him rights of residence and marriage. This status was granted, because of the fame he already enjoyed. He became engaged to Fromet Guggenheim of Hamburg whom he called "a blue-eyed maiden." The story goes that the girl shrank at Mendelssohn's proposal of marriage. She is alleged to have asked him: "Do you believe that matches are made in Heaven?" "Most assuredly", answered Mendelssohn. "Indeed, a singular thing happened in my own case. You know that, according to a Talmud legend, that at birth of a child, the announcement is made in Heaven: So and so shall marry so and so. When I was born my future wife's name was called out and I was told that she would unfortunately be terribly hunchbacked. "Dear Lord", said I, "A deformed girl easily get embittered and hardened. A girl ought to be beautiful. Dear Lord, give me the hump and let the girl be pretty, graceful, and pleasing to the eye."



He married her, and their married life was very happy. He was sincerely in love with her all his life and she became his very faithful and devoted companion. Six children were the offspring of that marriage, three girls and three boys. The fate of these children is a very interesting and in many ways depressing story. We shall come to it later.

In 1767 Mendelssohn wrote a work which made him famous throughout all of Europe. It was translated into every single European tongue and brought a whole stream of admirers and visitors to his garden. It was called "Phaedon" and dealt with the question of the immortality of the soul. Twenty years after it was written, it was already obsolete, but it appeared exactly at the right moment to make him one of the celebrities of the age.

The French school of rationalists, materialists, and encyclopedists had been attacking religion all during the 18th century. They denied the existence of God, the divinity of Jesus, the doctrines of religion which had been the main pillars of support to Christian Europe for hundreds of years. Among other things, they denied the immortality of the soul and suggested that the moral acts of the present were really of no consequence. This philosophy, somewhat similar to the existentialism of our 20th century, left man with the feeling that there was no sense in moral conduct because man had no moral freedom. There was no retribution in this world or the next. Such a philosophy, deny-

cut to 11  
(keep in B m 10)



ing God, denying morality, and withdrawing the stimulus to a virtuous life, can and did lead society into a state of degradation and cynicism.

Mendelssohn attempted to combat this, and to ward off these materialistic attacks, by composing a dialogue called "Phaedon" or "The Immortality of the Soul". It was a popular book, in an attractive style, designed to speak as Plato and Socrates spoke in the ancient dialogues, of the basic truths of mankind.

Mendelssohn's starting point, improving the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, was the fact of the existence of God, of which he had the highest possible certainty. The soul was the work of God, just as the body was. The body did not actually perish after death but was transformed into other elements. Much less then, could the soul, a simple essence, be decomposed and perish. Further, God had acquainted the soul with the idea of immortality and had implanted it in the soul. "If our soul were mortal, then reason would be a dream, which Jupiter has sent us that we may forget our miseries; and we would be created like the beasts, only to seek food and die."

Theologians, philosophers, artists and poets, such as Herder and Goethe came to thank the Jewish sage who had restored to them that comfort which Christian atheists had deprived them of. This volume, dealing as it did with religious questions, took Mendelssohn away from the purely literary field of criticism and aesthetics in which he had been living up to this moment. This



volume paved the way for his future interest in other religious questions, as well as matters pertaining to Judaism.

A certain admirer of his, John Caspar Lavater, an Evangelical minister of Zurich, arrived at the fantastic conclusion after reading the "Pheadon", that Mendelssohn had become entirely estranged from Judaism. The idea dawned upon Lavater that he might be able to persuade Mendelssohn to convert to Christianity. This would be a tremendous victory. Lavater, therefore, translated into German a certain book which contained arguments about the proof of Christianity, and sent this book to Mendelssohn asking him to refute these proofs, or else to accept them and renounce the Jewish religion.

Due to his reticence, it was a difficult thing for Mendelssohn to respond to this somewhat impertinent challenge. He was shy and did not want to make public his own innermost thinking, yet on the other hand was forced to do so because it was impossible to ignore the challenge. He wrote a public letter, addressed to Lavater and through him to all of Christendom, stating what he believed about Judaism and Christianity. He made what amounted to a public confession of his belief in Judaism, saying that his philosophical views never moved him to doubt his religious beliefs. He said that he was opposed to Christianity for the reason that its founder had declared himself to be God, and that was unacceptable to Mendelssohn. He said, "I do not deny that I have noticed in my religion certain human additions and abuses, such as every religion accepts in the course of time, which unfortunately dim its splendor. But



of the essentials of my faith I am so firmly and indisputably assured, that I call God to witness that I will adhere to my fundamental creed as long as my soul does not assume another nature."

Following this defense of Judaism, Mendelssohn's activities on behalf of Jews and his interest in Jewish things began to increase. The next great episode in his life was the translation of the Torah and the Psalms into German. This was done originally for the edification of his own children, but ultimately was published to the world at large. The purpose of the translation was to enable all who read it to develop a knowledge of the German language, in good style, and thus to have opened to them the whole world of modern thought which was available in that modern European language. The net result of the translation was not so much to teach Torah as it was to teach the German tongue.

*cut to next page*

Opposition to the translation developed immediately. Opposition came from such earnest and respected men as Ezeikiel Landau, Rabbi of Prague, Raphael Cohen, the grandfather of Gabriel Rieser; Hersh Janow a son-in-law of Raphael Cohen, Phineous Hurwitz, Rabbi of Frankfurt, and many others. The orthodox rabbis of the day finally passed a ban against the "German Pentateuch of Moses of Dessau". This ban was published in Furth in 1779, and all who were to be considered true Jews were forbidden, under penalty of excommunication, to use this translation. From their point of view, these men were right in opposing Mendelssohn's innovation. They perceived that the Jewish youth would learn the German



language more than an understanding of the Torah; that the attention to Holy Writ would degenerate into an unimportant secondary matter; and that eventually the study of the Talmud would be completely ignored as well.

Forbidden fruit always tastes sweeter. Hundreds of Talmud students in the great Yeshivas seized the German translation and read it behind the backs of the rabbis. Graetz feels that "the Mendelssohn translations speedily resulted in a veritable renaissance of the Jews. Thousands of Talmud students became little Mendelssohns. Many of them became elegant profound thinkers. With them Judaism renewed its youth. The inner freedom of the Jews dates from this translation."

From this time on in his life Mendelssohn also became concerned with the question of the outward liberation of Jews, as well as their inward liberation. The Jews of Alsace came to Mendelssohn seeking help. They wanted to draw up a memorandum to the State Council asking for relief from some particularly oppressive laws under which they were suffering. They felt that this memorandum should be written so as to influence public opinion at large, which was almost as powerful at that time as the opinion of King Louis XVI himself. For this was the time when free expression was beginning to become apparant. They felt that if Mendelssohn would write their memorandum for them, it would have the necessary polish and give an impressive weight to their petition.



Mendelssohn persuaded a friend of his, Christian Wilhelm Dohm, to write the memorandum. Dohm had been coming to Mendelssohn's house every Saturday, sitting in a circle of charmed friends who were inspired by the great philosopher. Through this contact, Dohm had acquired an interest in the fate of the Jews. When Mendelssohn asked him to engage in the task of drawing up the memorandum for the Alsatian Jews, Dohm decided to strike out and make a plea for all German Jews who suffered under similar oppression. His work<sup>was</sup> called "Uber die Burgerliche Verbesserung der Juden". It was a masterful document. It was probably one of the first steps taken toward removing the heavy yoke from the neck of the Jews. Dohm addressed himself to sober enlightened statesmen and laid stress upon the arguments from history which should lead to the emancipation and freedom of the Jewish people.

---

He dwelt almost completely upon political and economic aspects of freedom, leaving out all references to religious differences between Judaism and Christianity. He pleaded for freedom of religion in all its details, but made much more of the point that the Jews could contribute to the developing economy of the world if they were given free and equal rights.

*cut  
to  
next  
page*

The pamphlet became extraordinarily popular and was read and discussed everywhere. Dohm's arguments were re-echoed by liberal statesmen in France, when the discussions were being conducted there a few years later concerning the granting of full citizenship to Jews. Dohm was quoted by Mirabau; humanitarian clergymen like Abbe Gregoire; convinced democrats such as Clermont-Tonnere;



and radicals such as Robespierre. Exactly ten years after Dohm's pamphlet first appeared the Jews were given full citizenship in France, in 1791. Thus the door was open now toward the eventual emancipation of the entire Jewish community of the continent.

And, so the second step in the process was achieved. Mendelssohn began with enlightenment, trying to teach the Jews the culture of the world about them, or at least trying to make that culture available to them. Enlightenment thus led to emancipation. And emancipation was going to lead to a fabulously accelerated assimilation, as the third and final step, whose ultimate consequences were not always beneficial, and with which Mendelssohn would not have been in accord. But, again, as we have held the story of the ultimate fate of his children in the balance, let us also hold in the balance for another few moments, the story of the tendency to assimilation which resulted from these activities.

*reduce*

Let us first deal with Mendelssohn's last great work, called "Jerusalem", in which he gave his beliefs about Judaism. He felt that Judaism recognizes the freedom of religious convictions. Judaism does not know of any compulsory belief. What it commands and asks for are no dogmatic opinions, no truths of salvation, no catechism. Judaism prescribes not faith, but knowledge, and urges that its doctrines be taken to heart. Judaism never experienced the conflict between religion and thinking. It can never be opposed to a religion of reason, because it is not a religion in the strict sense of the word at all. Judaism is revealed law- it is not revealed religion. It contains prescriptions for a certain way of thinking. Its precepts do not deal with how



people should believe but with how people should live. The commandments of Judaism are ceremonial law, a sort of constitution for the Jewish community. This ceremonial law is designed to bind the Jews together and is valid only for Jews. Beside the law, Jewish teachings are of a general philosophical nature and are therefore in complete harmony with a general religion of reason.

One historian says that since on the one hand, Mendelssohn recognized the basic principle of Judaism to be freedom of thought and belief, and, on the other hand, placed the whole essence in the ceremonial law - that therefore both the orthodox party and the reformers claimed him as their own.

This brings us to the whole question as to whether Mendelssohn might be said to be the father of the Reform Movement or not. Many scholars and historians have attempted to penetrate the meaning of his life with an eye to obtaining an answer to this question. There is much debate pro and con. Mendelssohn's own words in this connection might be interesting. He said: "Comply with the customs and the civil constitutions of the countries in which you are transplanted, but, at the same time, be constant to the faith of your forefathers." It is told of him that in his youth he refrained once from seeing his fiancée rather than comb his hair on the Sabbath, for he felt that ceremonial laws were inviolable no matter what one's personal wishes might be.

My own feeling in the matter is that he was not a religious reformer or thinker, and that he had no intention of giving rise to a new form of Jewish expression. I tend to agree with the



1929  
very penetrating study made many years ago by Rabbi Felix Levy of Chicago, who wrote a brilliant paper on the relation of Mendels- to Reform Judaism, and who pointed out that Mendelssohn was no leader of men. He did not attempt to launch a movement within Judaism. He was primarily occupied with bettering the conditions of Jews by advocating political and social emancipation. He broke the bars of the ghetto, thereby liberating the Jew. But he had no capacity or intention to change Judaism.

cut to next page  
He was not a theologian and had no definite system or consistent set of beliefs. As a rationalist, he denied supernatural revelation of religion and maintained that religion rested on reason. He believed that certain truths upon which religion rested as for example, the existence of God, the necessity of practicing virtue, the doctrine of reward and punishment in some form, the immortality of the soul, were all self-evident, which all men could instinctively accept as beyond appeal - hence he used the term "natural" in contra-distinction to "revealed" religion.

He felt that the revelation at Sinai was not one of religion but one of law. He therefore felt that only God can abrogate the laws since only God gave them. This would be a completely orthodox point of view.

On the other hand, he espoused ideas which were later taken up by the Reform Movement. Out of his doctrine that Judaism is legislation, for instance, he evoked with Lessing's help, the ideal of the mission of Judaism, although without active proselytizing. He insisted that Judaism was not narrow, but that it was universal,



because it was free from all dogma. He said, "There is no dogma in Judaism except this one, that there is no dogma".

His attitude toward the Bible was strictly traditional. In his introduction to his translation he wrote: "We, the whole congregation of Israel, believe that Moses wrote the Torah as it is in our hands today. There has not been a single thing in it changed from that date to this, nor did it undergo the vicissitudes of a secular book."

To sum up this point, it seems to me that Mendelssohn was a modernist or a reformer only in externals. Like many a reformer after him, he thought all that was necessary to make the Jew at home in the New World and keep him to his Jewishness at the same time was an easy synthesis of Jewish tradition and modern culture. He wanted to try to reach the objectives of making the Jew at home in the non-Jewish world, and yet keeping him at all costs within Judaism. Herein lies the very tragedy of his life and perhaps the most severe indictment of his times. Enlightenment led to emancipation which in turn led to assimilation. This assimilation, without any brakes on it, ran headlong down the path toward intermarriage and conversion. Mendelssohn could not have had this process in mind or he would not have started it. The fact that it got out of hand would have been a matter of deep personal regret to him.

Let us return now to the concluding point, which is the aftermath of Mendelssohn, as this was to be seen in the society he left behind and in the fate and fortunes of the members of his own immediate family. It has been estimated that between



1800 and 1899, namely during the entire course of the 19th century, there were in Germany 204,542 actual baptisms and that during that same period there were 19,460 baptized children of mixed marriages. In other words this is the extreme result, or the final fruit of the forces and movements which were unleashed. The historian Learsi said: "In the generation after Mendelssohn no less than half the members of the community in Berlin had, it has been estimated, left the Jewish fold. In Koenigsberg, Breslau and other cities baptism among the cultured and wealthy was a common occurrence. The flight from Judaism was advance payment for the boon of emancipation. The labors of Mendelssohn, coinciding as they did with the dawn of emancipation and the general progress of enlightenment, acted like an enzyme on the Jewish youth of Germany and otherlands, producing a variety of phenomena all of which moved in the direction of assimilation."

What happened with his own children? His oldest daughter, Dorothea, married Simon Veit, a banker and a worthy man. She later, after her father's death, abandoned her husband and children to become the mistress and later the wife of Friedrich von Schlegel, the most famous romantic poet of his day. At the end of many follies and wanderings during which she and her husband dabbled in Brahma, yogi, and other occult practices, she became a bigoted Catholic and toward the end of her life she was seen in Vienna, a lighted taper in her hand, walking in a Catholic procession entering St. Stephens Cathedral.

The second daughter, Henrietta, became a governess first in Vienna later in Paris and entered the sparkling brilliant salon



society of the French capital. Here many musical evenings were held, many brilliant people met and conversed and finally Henrietta also converted to Catholicism. Only his youngest daughter Recha, who made an unhappy marriage with a poor man and moved eastward remained within the Jewish fold.

Of the three sons again it was only the youngest Joseph who did not convert. The other two became baptized into the Protestant Church. One was Nathan and the other was Abraham, the oldest. Abraham was the father of the composer Felix and had his son baptized as well as himself. Abraham's brother-in-law Bartholdy wrote, when Abraham was hesitating about the matter of baptism: "You say that you owe it to your father's memory not to abandon Judaism. Do you think that you are committing a wrong in giving your children a religion which you and they consider the better? In fact you would be paying a tribute to your father's effort on behalf of true enlightenment."

So with this bitter ending, ironic as it is, Bartholdy tried to persuade Abraham in the very name of Moses Mendelssohn's enlightenment to bring himself and the child to the baptismal fountain. And he succeeded. Thus the famous Moses Mendelssohn, producing six children, lost two sons and two daughters to the church. The other two who remained within the Jewish fold did nothing to add to the luster of his name and his influence disappeared within his own immediate successor generation.



How does it all add up? There is no doubt that in Jewish history a new epoch began with Moses Mendelssohn. This resulted from the fact that he was the first Jew in modern times who in his own personality combined Judaism and modern culture and was recognized as such by the non-Jewish world. The advocates of Jewish emancipation could point to him as striking evidence for their assertion that the Jew can become an equal member of modern civilization. Lessing modeled his noble Jew of "Nathan, the Wise" after Mendelssohn and pointed to a doubting Christian world that such a Jew actually lived in the person of the gentle saintly Moses. He was a literary stylist without peer and brought honor to the Jewish name. He walked with ease and grace through the corridors of kings and nobility, known always as a Jew in an age in which the free and emancipated Jew was a rare phenomena. He enabled a whole people to raise their heads in pride in his accomplishments. He was the idol of struggling youth, eager to be free. He was the star whom they sought to emulate. He was the proof that one could write in good Hebrew and good German at the same time. He seemed to represent the best possible blending of both worlds.

And yet on the other hand, with sadness we note what happened in the century following his appearance on the scene. If, he, whether meaning to or not, <sup>ed</sup>succeeding in opening the door to the church, as well as breaking down the door of the ghetto, then it must be said that there was evil as well as good to his



work. If the responsibility for the sad and disheartening mass flight from Judaism can be laid on his door step in any measure whatsoever, then he must bear the blame, in the judgment of history, for much of the disintegrative process at work in modern Jewish life. I am not sure it is fair to assess him with this responsibility. Perhaps the current trends of the 19th century were inevitable, and were in no part the result of his personal rôle. It may be that in emancipating the Jews, he cannot be held responsible for what happened to Judaism.

I would conclude simply by saying that we must understand the lesson of his times, without attempting to assess blame or place guilt. Whether he was responsible or not, whether before the bar of history he must be judged guilty or not, it is nevertheless true that these disruptive forces took their terrible toll and we today must understand that it is our responsibility once and for all to find a new way to help achieve the adjustment of modern Jew to modern culture. All of our force and all of our energy should be devoted to search for a suitable answer to this question. The Reform Movement, whether started by Mendelssohn or not, is an instrument whose power must be turned toward the solution of this problem. The Reform Movement within Judaism cannot simply be a vehicle by which people can leave Judaism. The mass baptisms have stopped. In this regard the 20th century is different from the 19th. But the mass ignorance and the mass lack of piety and enthusiasm are still present. It seems to me it is the particular obligation of the reform movement, which



seeks to adjust the Jew to the modern world, also to adjust him to Judaism.

The Reform Movement must create an ideology, a methodology, a series of values and a series of instrumentalities by which it will deepen and strengthen the loyalty of its adherents to basic Judaism. The leaders of the Reform Movement of the past generation have come to realize this and are struggling in their effort to find such a formula as I am attempting to adumbrate. Just as modern orthodoxy is attempting to re-infuse itself with a spirit of Chasidic enthusiasm, so modern reform must seek to strengthen itself with injections of more traditional Jewish practices and teachings.

One cannot turn the clock backward, nor would one wish to. The emancipation of the Jew, a quarter of a millenium after the emancipation of the rest of western mankind, was long overdue and necessary. Now that we enjoy the fruits of civil and political emancipation, we must be very careful to see that we are also able to enjoy the fruits of Judaism. It would not do to lose that religion which has been our only and most precious armor for the sake of participation in the Western World. For mere participation as individuals, without the special distinctiveness of our participation as Jews, would be very hollow and we would bring nothing to the world. Let us take the emancipation which Moses Mendelssohn helped win for us and make it all the more meaningful by strengthening, in freedom, our timeless and ageless religious heritage.



# COMPOSER'S GROWTH

## Relation of Judaism and Christianity Traced in Felix Mendelssohn's Life

By OLIN DOWNES

IN this column, on Jan. 30, The New York Times referred to the subject of Felix Mendelssohn's heritage, the conflict within him due to social cross-currents and his father's decision, for the sake of his children, to adopt the Christian faith. The probable inhibiting effect of all this upon Mendelssohn's actions, psychology and art were suggested by one of the chapters of Dr. Eric Werner's biography of the composer, to be published by the Oxford University Press.

A correspondent objects to this argument. Can anyone, he asks, point to a single Jewish-sounding measure, either in that early phenomenal work of genius, the overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream," or any other work that came from Mendelssohn's pen, from the time of his birth, on Feb. 3, 1809, 146 years ago, to his death, in his thirty-eighth year, in 1847?

To this, we answer that certainly there is not a trace of the Jewish element in Mendelssohn's beautiful music that we know. But this does not answer the very important question of what Mendelssohn might have become as a composer had his racial heritage been strengthened rather than suppressed throughout his life and if his natural compulsion had been that of the ancestral expression rather than conformation to the Christian, or rather Christianized, culture. Suppose that the dominating force in Mendelssohn's growth as artist and man had been that personified by his aunt, Sara Levy, instead of his paternal uncle, Jacob Lewin Salomon, who so strongly influenced Felix' father, Abraham, in his adoption of Christianity?

### Great Character

The aunt was a character, and a great one. "Seen against the weird background of a Jewry that half prayed for emancipation and half despaired of it, fleeing into Christianity, this Sara Levy appears as a person of strong character and unusual accomplishments."

At her home Napoleon's Ambassador was an eager guest. Mendelssohn's revival of Bach in 1829 is one of the great monuments to his fame. But Bach was known and intensively cultivated by this lady long before Mendelssohn's invocation of his genius. "Her musical soirees were famous, although at that time no longer as popular as fifty years before, when she and her family championed the music of Sebastian and Philip Emanuel Bach."

Tante Sara, notwithstanding her adoration of Bach's universal spirit, "was deeply grieved by the apostasy of some of her near relatives. 'I am like a tree without leaves' [Heir steh ich, ein entlauber Stamm, a quotation from Schiller], 'so many of my relatives are estranged to me by their conversion,' she wrote to her friend, the famous Protestant theologian Schleiermacher, who had done his level best to proselytize as many intelligent and attractive Jewesses as possible.

### Aunt's Saying

"She used to say, referring to the then general fashion of conversion, 'As the Jewish belief is, even according to Christian doctrine, the foundation upon which the whole structure of Christianity is erected, how can I be expected to break down the basement of my house in order to live on its first floor?'"

"This extraordinary woman had already in her youth cultivated the music of the great Bachs, especially that of Philip Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. She was the latter's favorite pupil as well as his warm-hearted patroness. After Philip Emanuel's death, she supported his widow and had a bust of the master made, which, many years later, was placed in the concert hall of the Royal Schauspielhaus in Berlin. Her strong interest in the music of the Bach family brought her into contact with Karl Friedrich Zelt-

er, conductor of the Berlin Sing-Akademie and later teacher of Felix Mendelssohn. It seems that it was she who recommended Zelter for the post of Felix' teacher to his mother, her niece Lea. \* \* \*

"While the early correspondence of the Mendelssohn family contained frequent references to her and her house, her name increasingly faded after 1822; possibly the proud old lady withdrew from her relatives after their conversions."

Suppose that these forces, these characters had become the dominating influences in Mendelssohn's development as artist and man? We ask these questions, especially in view of Mendelssohn's early quality as a musician and composer, and in the perspective of his creative development, which never fulfilled the promise of his youthful years. A great and immortal master he was, but one has good reason to wonder as to the heights that he might have attained through a stronger affirmation of his heredity.

### Early Works

Dr. Werner owns early scores and student efforts of Mendelssohn, as well as the libretto of the oratorio, "Moses." A few measures of these we have seen. Among the musical examples is a clear anticipation, deliberate, purposeful and audacious, of the "Tristan" chord with the ascending semitone. The passage in which this occurs is more modern than anything we have known in the published works, and it is early Mendelssohn. He was bolder in those days, less polished, less polite and conformative in his ideas. At that time he was neither conventionalized nor frustrated.

To this day, the manuscripts have remained unknown, except to members of the Mendelssohn family and Dr. Werner.

"Not only," says Dr. Werner, "did he feel most keenly the conflict with his native Judaism and the German culture with which he was so deeply imbued, but he found himself in a dilemma involving his very core—his music."

As with the man, so, we believe, with the artist. We think Mendelssohn's family and personal history, and the conflicts within him due primarily to social and ancestral disharmony, did in a measure vitiate his expression as the years passed by, and gave us a master of the second instead of the first rank.

Dr. Werner's book should be of great and lasting value for a truer assessment, and the better understanding, of Mendelssohn and his music.