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Moses Mendelssohn - The Humanist, 1920.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"MOSES MENDELSSOHN--THE HUMANIST,"
SUNDAY MORNING, JANUARY 30, 1921,
CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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I called Moses Mendelssohn a humanist and not a reformer, because in very truth he was not a reformer. He was not concerned, as was Geiger, David Einhorn and Oldheim, with the reform of the religious practices of his people, but with the adjusting of the dogmas of his faith with the new ideas of the day.

He was not a reformer, like Luther, who tried to reorganize the body politic of the Christian Church. Mendelssohn was a traditionalist in every sense of the word; Mendelssohn believed in the literal inspiration of the Bible; he believed that Judaism was the code of law divinely revealed, which code cannot and should not be abrogated but augured.

Mendelssohn never questioned any dogma of Judaism, principally because he did not believe that Judaism had any dogma. Judaism, he said, left thought entirely free, but insisted on conformity in action. Judaism does not ask of a man to subscribe to a creed-- "I believe in this, or I believe in that." All that it asks of a Jew is to do this or do that.

In other words, Judaism has a code of laws or

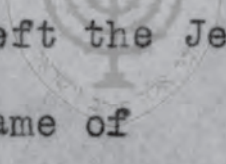
practices or observances or ceremonies divinely revealed and binding for all time. And so he could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be called a reformer, but he was a humanist in the finest sense of the word. Humanism means this: it is that system of thought which lays emphasis upon the human interests of man as distinct from his religious interests or his scientific interests. The humanist is concerned with art, with culture, with literature, with the broadening of the intellectual horizon of man, with the inculcation of wider sympathies among them. Humanism means the harmonious development of mind and soul to the greater glory of mankind. In other words, it is concerned with man as man, and not so much with scientific knowledge or with religious formalism.

Now Mendelssohn was a humanist; Mendelssohn tried to broaden the intellectual horizon of his people; he tried to introduce a little more of sweetness and life into the habitations of Israel; he tried to destroy the intellectual and mental ghetto as well as the physical ghetto in which the Jew lived in the Eighteenth Century; he endeavored to bring them into close contact with the vast currents of new thought and with the new movements of the day. He wanted his people to learn German, so that they may come in contact with German thought and culture and philosophy and art.

And so Mendelssohn is truly called the third Moses in Israel: Moses, the Revealer of Truth; Moses

Maimonides, the expounder of the philosophy of Judaism; and Moses Mendelssohn, who proved to a doubting world that a Jew may be cultured and refined and still be a Jew. He ushered in a new epoch in Jewish life; he is the father of the Jewish renaissance.

In the days of Moses Mendelssohn (he was born in 1729 and died fifty-six years later) the condition of Jews in Germany and in Poland was far from satisfactory. I am not speaking now of the physical condition; I am speaking now of the intellectual condition. The Jews of Italy and the Jews of Holland, who had enjoyed political emancipation to a degree prior to their co-religionists in Germany and Poland, had identified themselves to some extent with the new ideas and new movements about them.

The renaissance left the Jews in Italy not untouched. A Jew by the name of  began to question the validity of the Talmud in its historical and scientific subjects. That was a remarkable thing in those days. Another Jew by the name of Leon Bodoni began to insist upon the need for introducing changes in the religious practices of his people, and that was a marvelous thing in those days.

In Holland, of course, the Jews combined the study of the Torah with the study of secular knowledge, and Spinoza in the Seventeenth Century represents the highest expression of the intellectual achievements of Jewry in Holland. But no such thing happened in Germany

and in Poland. These Jews were still limited in their learning to the Bible and to the Talmud; they knew practically nothing of secular education; the minds of the young Jews were trained in the dialectics, the scholasticism of the ^YAsheboth, where Talmud was taught. To know German was heresy. During the days of Mendelssohn a Jewish lad was banished from Berlin because he was caught with a German book in his hands; and another young man was publicly chastised by the community because he dared to trim his beard. The Jew spoke a sort of a jargon--a broken, unseemly and ungainly German; they were completely ghettotized in mind and in spirit.

It has sometimes been said--I think it was an Austrian author who made this statement--that every country has the Jews which it deserves. Germany and Poland treated the Jews in a manner which drove them back upon themselves and forced them into a spiritual ghetto. While persecution in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries becomes a little less frequent in Germany and in Poland, still, in 1648 the terrible Cossack uprisings in Poland massacred one hundred thousand Jews.

In Prague and in Vienna the Jews in those days were still compelled to attend special religious services for their benefits in the churches; the Jews were still compelled to wear the yellow badge; they were restricted as to places of residence; they could not live in certain cities and certain principalities; they could not live in

certain parts of the city; they were restricted as to marriage--only a certain number of couples could be married a year, and even then they were subjected to a good deal of humiliation. Moses Mendelssohn, before he could procure his marriage licence, had to buy twenty life-size china monkeys from the royal china factory just then established by Frederick the Great outside of Berlin. These monkeys are today the precious legacy of the Mendelssohn family.

The Jews were restricted in trade--to the meanest sort of trade and small barter--dealing in old clothes and money lending. And so it is not surprising that the Jew, in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, subjected to these restrictions, being forced down to the lowest level of trade, being kept from free intercourse with his fellowmen, was narrowed, was limited in his outlook; he did not know the non-Jew and did not understand him.

I say that it has been said that every land deserves the Jews which it has, and it is most interesting to see how the Jew sensitively reacts to his environment. You recall that Poland at the end of the Eighteenth Century was divided between Austria, Prussia and Russia. Compare the condition of the Jew in the Nineteenth Century in Prussian Poland with the condition of the Jew in the Nineteenth Century in Russian Poland. The Jew of Posen--the Jew of Prussian Poland--made the most marvelous advances in culture, in learning, in refinement, in

commerce; he was completely modernized, Europeanized, in a generation. The Jew of Poland today is still the Jew of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries--the same kufthan, the same dress, the same speech, the same limited outlook on things. And why? Because Russia treated the Jew as a foreigner and an outcast and ghettotized him into a pale of settlement. Prussia, on the other hand, insisted on the Jew being liberalized by education; Prussia extended rights of citizenship and other opportunities to the Jew, and the Jew eagerly responded to these advances.

Now in the days of Moses Mendelssohn, say the middle of the Eighteenth Century, a new change began to come over the condition of the Jews in Germany. Frederick the Great was an enlightened despot; Frederick the Great was a dilettante himself in literature; he wrote poetry and a good number of other things. Frederick was under the influence of French thought, which at that time, through Voltaire and others was very liberal; and so that spirit of liberalism began to pervade the higher circles of Berlin and Prussia, and the Jews soon came to feel that change in their environment.

Moses Mendelssohn was the first of his German co-religionists who responded to this new change. He reacted to the new movements of the day. Moses Mendelssohn was the man who did most to bring the Jew into contact with the civilization and culture about him, and drive him out or drag him out of the ghetto life into which he had been

forced.

The early life of Mendelssohn was like unto the early life of any poor Jewish lad in Germany in those days. His father was a scribe; he eked out a scanty living by writing the scrolls of the Torah, and so forth. Moses Mendelssohn inherited from his father a beautiful handwriting. That, by the way, was all he did inherit from his father. He was terribly poor, was the father of Mendelssohn, but like all Jews, poor or rich, the father insisted upon the thorough education of his lad--Jewish education, of course.

Moses Mendelssohn had a wonderfully inquisitive mind--an alert mind, and he learned much; in fact, he learned too much, so that before very long he became dangerously ill with an illness that left him with a curvature of the spine for the rest of his life.

Mendelssohn went through life a hunchback--a deformed man.

His early teacher was Rabbi Frankel, who was soon called to Berlin, and Moses liked this Rabbi so much that he determined to follow him to Berlin, and at the age of fourteen Moses Mendelssohn leaves his home town, Dessau, and goes to Berlin alone. He passes through the gate, the only gate through which a Jew could pass into Berlin in those days, and finally, by inquiring, reaches the home of Frankel.

Rabbi Frankel welcomed his pupil, but could hold out for him no prospects. He gave him a little work to do

copying, and Moses spent the next seven years in the utmost privations. He lived in a garret, many a day hungry and cold; and they tell the story that when he did buy a loaf of bread he marked it with seven lines--a slice for each day, so as to be sure that he would not in his hunger consume the portion of the next day.

His life was the true life of the Jewish scholar as laid down by the Rabbis--"Thou must eat thy bread with salt; thou must drink thy water in measure; thou must sleep upon the floor; thou must live the life of affliction, because thou dost study the Torah." His life was exactly like the life of Benjamin Franklin,--who, by the way, was a contemporary of Moses Mendelssohn--plus the fact that Franklin was not a Jew and Moses Mendelssohn was a Jew, with all the increased disabilities of the Jew.

But Mendelssohn had thirst for learning, and before very long he was not satisfied with the Talmudic studies alone; he began to study Latin and French and English and mathematics and philosophy, and more especially German. He just was determined to master the German language, and he did. After seven years of privation he was taken into the home of Isaac Bernhard, who was a silk merchant of Berlin, as a tutor for the children. From that day on the economic life of Moses improves. He remained in the home of Bernhard practically all his life--first as a tutor, then as a clerk in his business, then as the overseer of his establishment, and finally as a partner in the establishment.

The greatest good fortune that happened to Moses Mendelssohn in his early days--when he was twenty-five--was his meeting with the great German poet Lessing. These two--Moses Mendelssohn, this misshapen and deformed Jew, and Lessing, this physically handsome and spiritually beautiful soul--the great German poet, the great artist, and still greater humanitarian,--the friendship of the two endured throughout their lives and has remained an inspiration for all men after them.

Lessing was not only the hero of new German literature, but he was the hero of real liberalism in Germany. Even before he met Mendelssohn, in 1749, he had already written a drama called "Die Juden," in which perhaps for the first time in the literature of Europe the Jew is represented as an honest and respectable man. Heretofore the literature of Europe was full of Jews like and Shylock and characters of that kind. Lessing represented for the first time in a dignified and impressive way the Jew.

Mendelssohn profited a great deal from this friendship as did Lessing. Mendelssohn learned culture and refinement from Lessing; Mendelssohn was mellowed by contact with this Jew-loving non-Jew. Lessing learned from Mendelssohn a number of ideas, and Mendelssohn was the inspiration to Lessing for his immortal work--Nathan, the Wise; and together these two fought the cause of human emancipation as well as the cause of German culture.

It is interesting to note that it remained for this Jew of the ghetto--Moses Mendelssohn, who until the age of fourteen did not know a word of German, to become the champion of German literature. In his day German literature was not what it is today. The writings of Schiller and Ketteler had not yet come. German was still despised by the real aristocracy of Germany; they spoke French. Frederick the Great said of German that it was a boorish language, devoid of all grace, and that German literature was not worthy of the name.

Frederick the Great wrote his poetry in French, and it remained for Moses Mendelssohn to censure the king --for the ghetto Jew to criticize Frederick the Great for despising German and for writing in a foreign language. And it remained also for Mendelssohn to criticize the poetry of Frederick the Great, so that the king took offense to it; but Mendelssohn appeased his wrath by telling him that one who writes poetry is like one who plays at bowling--he must stick to the rules of the game, and the one who sets up is the one to say how many he had knocked down. He must play the game and submit to criticism.

Mendelssohn wrote the purest, the most perfect German of his day. It is a rare phenomenon, but it does occur--Conrad today is writing the purest English, and Conrad is a Pole by birth. Before very long Mendelssohn became known to the philosophic world of his day by winning a prize essay on the subject of "Evidence in Philosophy."

His chief competitor was Immanuel Kant, and Mendelssohn won over Kant. Now Kant was really a great philosopher and Mendelssohn was not. But the judges actually couldn't understand Kant; they confessed it; and they liked Mendelssohn's German so well that they gave him the prize. That happens very frequently. The story is told of the great Russian poet Gorky, and the great Russian singer applying one day in a village to a church for a position in the choir; was turned down and Gorky was accepted. A few years later both met in another town and tried for a position as journalist on a German newspaper, and Gorky was turned down and was accepted.

The work that made Mendelssohn famous throughout Germany, and for that matter in Europe, was his "Phadon," a book on immortality modeled after Plato. Phadon is written in such a magnificent style, so clear, so elastic, so convincing, that it was a revelation to the Germans who had been accustomed to a heavy, cumbersome, pedantic German and nothing else. You know the Germans still have not passed out of that stage; they still think that a great thought must be so expressed that it is almost unintelligible; otherwise it is not great.

The story is told of an Englishman presenting a book to a German professor, and telling him that the book is so well written that his own daughter might read it and enjoy it. "Well," the German professor said, "I don't want to read that book if my daughter can understand it;

there is no reason for me to read it." That massiveness and cumbersomeness of style was dominant in those days and Mendelssohn showed how a man can write big things in a simple way and a pleasant way.

He soon became known as the German Plato, as the Jewish Socrates; his book went through fifteen editions in his own day; it became the most widely read book in Germany. And all the while that Mendelssohn was writing his German classics he was at the mercy of the Berlin police, who could expel him at any moment because he did not have the privileges of a protected Jew in Berlin; he was an outcast and a foreigner. It was only through the intercession of his friends and through a petition which he himself sent that the rights of a protected Jew was given to Moses Mendelssohn.

But we are not interested in Moses Mendelssohn as a writer, or as the forerunner of the esthetic revival in Germany, because his writings on art and esthetic criticism are up to this day the text book in Germany. We are interested in Moses Mendelssohn principally as the Jew and his contribution to Jewish life. He first came into prominence in Jewish life in that famous dispute with Johann Kaspar Lavater, a clergyman of Zurich. This Lavater was a great admirer of Mendelssohn; he admired him for his thought, for his style and for his lovely character. And so he was determined to save Mendelssohn from his own people and to convert him to Christianity. He could not

see how a man of the capacities and the brilliancy of Mendelssohn could remain content as a Jew; and so when he translated Bonnet's book on Christian Evidences, he dedicated that book to Mendelssohn, with an open letter challenging Mendelssohn either to refute the evidences for Christianity in the book, or publicly to accept Christianity.

That put Moses Mendelssohn in a frightful predicament. He was never a fighter; he was never aggressive; he never cared much for theologic disputation; he was a man who loved peace and art and literature and was content to be left alone. But this challenge found him firm, strong, and the champion of his own people. For months he hesitated and deliberated over the matter, and finally asked permission from the consistory to give his answer. They granted him permission, saying that they relied upon his wisdom and his modesty, meaning that Mendelssohn was not to say too much; and Mendelssohn, in his reply, in a forceful and dignified way said he is a Jew by conviction, that he is a Jew by preference, that he hopes to continue to live as a Jew, that the evidences in the book presented to him are not at all startling or convincing, that he had read all these things even in a more convincing way in other books..

And he makes an appeal for religious toleration. He said, "I never ask of my friends whom I love whether they are Jews or non-Jews, and I never want to persuade them to change their religion. As long as a religion is not

inimical to public welfare and public morality it is no concern of anyone and should not be the cause for hostility or discrimination." Mendelssohn came out triumphant. Jews and Christians alike recognized with what tact and courage and firmness Mendelssohn had replied to Lavater, and Lavater himself realized his mistake, his over-zealousness, and apologized for it.

But the real contribution of Moses Mendelssohn to the thought of Jewry--the thing that makes him the father of Jewish renaissance, was his translation of the five books of Moses into German. Now one would wonder why a translation of the Bible would be so epoch-making; but the translation of Luther marked the beginning of German literature. Moses Mendelssohn, who was known as an orthodox Jew, translated the five books of Moses into German, and printed them in German and Hebrew characters, so that the young Jew was able to read for the first time pure German; for the first time they were able to learn a new language which was taken into the literature and the culture of Germany of the Eighteenth Century.

That was the avenue paved for the new advancement and the new enlightenment. Furthermore, an appendage of this translation was a Hebrew commentary on the five books of Moses--concise, scientific, logic, but utterly unlike the commentaries of the Bible preceding, which were involved and full of dialectics, and full of midrash,--where the sense of the text, the literal meaning of the text

was completely obscured. Moses Mendelssohn said that both Jews and Christians found in the Bible things that were not there because they were reading everything they wished into the text of the Bible.

Now, Moses Mendelssohn taught the Jews of his day to study the Bible grammatically, syntactically, simply. He taught them Hebrew as a science. The translation of the five books of Moses by Moses Mendelssohn meant the beginning of a new system of education in Jewish life. Henceforth the Jewish child would be trained not into homilectics, not into hair-splitting discussions, but was to be trained logically into the language and into the literal sense of the Scriptures.

The translation was welcomed by a great number of Jews as a new revelation. It was opposed by others. The real orthodox Rabbis of the day realized the dangers to traditional Judaism involved in this translation. They knew full well that the young Jews that would study Mendelssohn would not study it for the sake of Jewry but for the sake of Mendelssohn, which they did; they knew full well that as soon as the young Jew came in contact with new ideas, that their hold of traditional Judaism upon them would be weakened, which it was.

So the Pentateuch of Mendelssohn was put under a ban before very long, and the orthodox Jew was prohibited from reading it; but the ban did not stop people from reading the Pentateuch. So that perhaps his greatest work

as far as the Jew is concerned, was one called "Jerusalem," published in 1783. In this work Mendelssohn, like his mighty predecessor, Spinoza, challenges the cause of the separation of church and state. The church must not interfere with the laws of the state. In this book "Jerusalem" Moses Mendelssohn defines his religion, his faith. Judaism, he says, has no monopoly on truth. Judaism is simply a revealed system of conduct of laws binding only upon the Jew. There may be other religions equally as good and equally as true; Judaism has no dogmas; no Jew is asked to subscribe to any creed; thought and speculation are absolutely unchained and unfettered in Judaism; only conduct is determined and binding.

Now, the weakness of this position is evident. In the first place, it is unhistorical. Once you believe that Judaism is not a divinely revealed code of laws, once you begin to study Biblical criticism and learn that the laws of the Bible represent the human efforts of various ages and various places--that they are as human and as subject to temporal influences as anything else, the entire system built up by Mendelssohn collapses; and it did collapse. Once you say that Judaism has no dogma and is like unto any other religion, you open the way for complete assimilation; because before very long people were saying: "Judaism is no better than any other religion; I will accept another religion; or perhaps I will accept no religion at all."

And so Moses Mendelssohn, in spite of the fact that he himself was a pious, observant Jew, was followed by waves of assimilation and apostasy in Germany, and his own children were converted to another faith. And of the Berlin Jews who lived in the days of Moses Mendelssohn, there is not a family that has a Jewish descendent today in Germany.

The philosophy of religion as presented by Mendelssohn is not sound. While Judaism does not have a complete system of dogmas, it has certain fundamental principles that must be accepted by everyone who calls himself a Jew. "The Lord, He is one." "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord He is one." That is the eternal challenge down the ages, and that is that something which distinguishes Judaism from any other religion. It is basic and fundamental.

And Judaism believes in reward and punishment; and Judaism believes in Providence; and Judaism believes in free will; and Judaism believes in the selected function of the Jew as the mouthpiece, the spokesman of God in the world. These you may not call dogmas, but they are certainly basic principles in Jewish life.

Mendelssohn died in 1786. Physically, Mendelssohn was a misshapen, unattractive, ungainly man, but spiritually he was really beautiful. He made friends and held them. He was calm, mild-mannered, profound in thought, kindly of speech--a true representative of the highest

virtues of his race. He faced the hostility of the world about him in no spirit of resentment; he knew that he could find a great deal of happiness in life, in spite of the discriminations and ostracisms and disabilities; and he did. He found it among his books, in his family circle, and among his friends. He showed to the Jew of his day how loyal a Jew may be, and yet how educated and modernized and refined, and his example served as an inspiration for all of the succeeding ages.

He was a man of kindly humor and wit--a man who spiced his conversation with a good deal of Jewish humor. You perhaps recall that story told by Berthold Auerbach concerning the wooing of Moses Mendelssohn. Moses Mendelssohn somehow fell in love with a girl by the name of Fromet Guggenheim, but when the girl saw Moses Mendelssohn in his deformity she was discouraged, and it remained for the father of the girl to tell Moses about it. Moses was wise enough to save the father a lengthy explanation, and said, "May I not say farewell to your daughter?" He went up to see her and went into a conversation, and before very long Moses Mendelssohn had turned the conversation to the subject of matrimony, and the girl, in her innocence, asked, "Is it true, Moses Mendelssohn, what the Rabbis say: that forty days before a man is born the voice of the angel proclaims the daughter of this man is destined to marry the son of this man?" "Yes," said Moses Mendelssohn, "and a strange thing happened when I was born.

When I was born they announced that the daughter of
Gugenheim--Fromet--was to marry me, but that unfortunately
she would be deformed by a humpback. And I said, 'Good
Lord, it is a terrible thing for a woman to go through
life with such a deformity; it would depress her and make
her unhappy. Let me take the humpback.'" He married
Fromet, and they lived very happily.

Another story is told of Mendelssohn. You know
in those days the Jewish money lenders were fond of lending
money to young men of noble families, in the hope that their
parents would die before long and they would receive the
money plus the interest. A teller who did not like
Moses very much wrote him a verse one day, which read
something like this: "You already believe in God, the
Father; why don't you also believe in His son; you are
accustomed to give credit to the Son during the life of
the Father." This was all in poetry, and Moses writes back:
"How can I give credit to the Son when the Father lives
forever?"

They tell the story of a typical French officer
meeting Mendelssohn one day, and, in a contemptuous way,
said to him: "Look here, Jew, what commodity do you deal
in?" And Moses Mendelssohn answers: "Why, that in which
you are greatly in need--good sense."

Moses Mendelssohn became a tradition in Jewish
life. Heine had much of the native wit and humor of
Moses Mendelssohn.

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II. There was a Time when Y. L. did not interest Am. L.
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the will & the normal are in much
of great concern in this first of adjustment
in much need of as great &
delightful

III. Such efforts as this upon which y. L. are
engaged make me happy -

(1) There is no need to sadden us -

(2) Tragedy ahead - It is out

(3) Chaos

(4) Couch has her - Rev. of Tribulation
when I see Y. L.

(5) Am. is hearing y. L. as

(6) giving only True as me to Am. L.

(7) More sympathy Y. L.

World needs us most

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would to-day need youth

II. Unfortunate life vulgarize youth

1. No general indictment - not
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worse - not good enough -

2. Not aware to amusement -
jest vs. Puritanism -

Suppression vs. Conquest
in answer to money. 2021
Rich man. needs.

3. But seek change - voice and
music - excite. and happiness.

4. Lost idealism Even college men

5. Must be trained to seek happiness
where it is to be found - Integrated
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6. Peril young men must be
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To sum up what I have said concerning this great man, for indeed he was a great man. His real contribution to Jewish life consisted in this: that he broke down the walls of the ghetto and opened the way for the admission of his people into the intellectual life of Europe. That process is still going on in Russia, in Galicia and in Poland today. Moses Mendelssohn began the process.

Moses Mendelssohn showed that the Jew can be a Jew and still be in the vanguard of culture and refinement.

So that he was in very truth the third great Moses of his people.

