
Not the least important aspect of this study is its thoroughgoing engagement with both aspects of Moses Mendelssohn’s life-long project—German Enlightenment philosophy and Jewish thought. Michah Gottlieb has succeeded admirably in granting his readers a sustained look into how Mendelssohn struggled to bring both sides together into a dialogue (not to say a synthesis). In so doing, Gottlieb has pushed Mendelssohn scholarship to a new level—one where Maimonides actually interacts with Leibniz and Jacobi through (of course) the theological-political thought of Spinoza. More than any other recent text on Mendelssohn, Gottlieb’s does justice to both the Jewish and philosophical aspects of Mendelssohn’s thought.

Gottlieb’s argument can be stated as follows: As an exemplar of the ‘moderate enlightenment’, Mendelssohn holds that belief in a providential deity is compatible with reason (2); this co-ordination of reason and revelation is of ethical and political (rather than metaphysical and epistemological) concern (2). Being a question of practice rather than theory, Mendelssohn is attempting to show the relation between (a) philosophy and Jewish law and (b) the co-ordination of Judaism and philosophy within the larger context of German society. Briefly, Mendelssohn’s abiding project (as shown specifically within the context of the Pantheism controversy) amounts to “a debate over competing visions of how best to promote human flourishing in the modern world” (2). Mendelssohn’s controversy concerns his decisive departure from the medieval mind-set which held that joining European society necessitated becoming Christian (5). In sharp contrast, Mendelssohn believed that “one could be both a European and a Jew without compromise” (5).

But if German Jews need not compromise in their striving to become European, perhaps Judaism as such—as well as enlightened thought (philosophically or politically construed)—undergoes a modification. Pace Allan Arkush, Gottlieb does not believe Mendelssohn to be a Deist who constructs an exoteric version of Judaism which allowed Jews to be citizens with a clean conscience (8). Pace David Sorkin, Gottlieb does not view Mendelssohn as a traditionalist who employs German Enlightenment thought to support a pre-modern version of Judaism (8). Instead, Gottlieb opts for something of a mean in holding that “Mendelssohn is so firmly convinced of the truth of both Judaism and of the German Enlightenment that he simply cannot imagine a contradiction between them. To bridge any apparent gaps between the two, Mendelssohn does what all theologians do; namely he adopts a selective attitude toward the Jewish tradition, drawing on sources that reflect his deep-seated commitments and ignoring or marginalizing...
contrary perspectives" (9). Through discussions of Mendelssohn’s relation to Maimonides, Spinoza, Lessing and Jacobi, Gottlieb makes a strong case for adopting this middle position.

Chapter 1 deals with Mendelssohn’s early “defense of Spinoza as a model of Jewish cultural attainment and moral rectitude” (10). This interpretation involves maintaining the Leibnizian-Wolffian belief in a providential deity in order to philosophically justify the Bible’s insight concerning the goodness of God (10). That both Maimonides and Spinoza rejected attributing ‘goodness’ to God (insofar as such attribution amounted to a transgression of the ban against divine representation of God’s oneness) did not deter Mendelssohn from holding that “Judaism’s fundamental insight is that God’s goodness involves God’s concern for the happiness and perfection of every individual” (20). Insofar as Maimonides’ conception of God still preserved divine transcendence, Mendelssohn’s claim did not absolutely contradict the ideas of the prior Moses. Spinoza presented greater difficulties insofar as his conception of ‘God or (sive) Nature’ denied creation and suggested that the divine was both radically immanent and non-miraculous (24). Mendelssohn counters that Spinoza’s ‘theoretical’ errors should not be maligned insofar as they were helpful in leading the way to the true Leibnizian philosophy (which postulated an omnibenevolent personal divinity). In this way, Mendelssohn argued for the “Jews’ capacity for participating in the collaborative effort of developing scientific and cultural knowledge” (28).

Chapter 2 deals specifically with Mendelssohn’s philosophy of Judaism. Gottlieb argues that Mendelssohn’s views on prophecy, halakha (law), election, and ethical-political matters “can be profitably read as an adaptation and critique of Spinoza[’s] and Maimonides[’] intellectual elitism and their endorsement of state religion. In contrast, Mendelssohn defends a more egalitarian view of humanity and justifies religious diversity, which he sees as a traditional Jewish position” (10-11). For Mendelssohn, halakhic observance “benefits society as a whole” (54) insofar as the Jews are chosen by God to be “a model community preserving pure monotheism and… proper… belief is crucial for attaining perfection.” (54) If, as Mendelssohn holds, “truth cannot conflict with truth” (58), one is compelled to understand his project as a “sincere theological enterprise” (58) aimed at co-coordinating Judaism with enlightened society.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with perhaps the most famous philosophical aspect of Mendelssohn’s thought—the Pantheism controversy. Given its visibility in the intellectual history of Europe, I will compress my discussion in order to treat the most original aspects of Gottlieb’s account. Rather than treat this controversy as a metaphysical issue centering on Spinoza’s monism (and thus ceding to Jacobi the ontological reading of Spinoza which was to dominate German philosophy for the next 150 years), Gottlieb treats it as a manifestation of social and political
concerns over individual freedom within the context of Enlightenment society:
“[f]or Jacobi, the very structure of reason [as evinced in Spinoza and Lessing’s ‘Spinozism’] is inimical to freedom and undermines individuality since reason operates by means of logically necessary, universal judgments” (11). In sharp contrast, Mendelssohn argues “that we are most free when obeying the demands of reason since reason is the deepest stratum of ourselves and gives us a standard for critiquing those who would impose their beliefs on us” (11-12). That Mendelssohn’s conception of freedom in accordance with reason (as opposed to Jacobi’s ‘freedom as autonomy’) leads him to support Frederick the Great reveals a striking parallel with contemporary discussions between libertarians and ‘strong-state’ advocates. Regardless of one’s views on the matter, it is clear that Mendelssohn attempts to bring together tolerance of religious pluralism with rational social and political structures—a noble aim which (in my view) ought always to be pursued.

I have no criticisms of Gottlieb’s book, given that I am in manifest agreement with his approach and interpretations. In fact, I would be excited to see him extend his reading of Mendelssohn’s co-ordination of reason and revelation. As Gottlieb mentions in Chapter 1, Mendelssohn’s subtle attempt at bringing Maimonides and Aristotle together (in his Elucidation of Logical Terms) issues in a rapprochement between Greek philosophy and Judaism under the auspices of Judaism: “Mendelssohn claims that reading Aristotle through the lens of Maimonides guarantees that Aristotle’s teachings are kosher” (16). Gottlieb also surely knows Mendelssohn’s early re-working of Plato’s Phaedo in the form of Phädon, which presents a Socrates fully aware of 18th century arguments concerning God, ethics, and epistemology. Not for nothing was Mendelssohn known as the “German Socrates”, and his re-working of the Phaedo shows that he was as willing to bring philosophy in line with the German Enlightenment as he was with Judaism. While Gottlieb gestures to both avenues of research in his book, they remain of subsidiary import; this is understandable given the strictures of Gottlieb’s present work. One can only hope that this solid study produces further expansion and reflection (be it affirmative or critical) on this seminal thinker’s attempt to co-ordinate Athens and Jerusalem.

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