From *Jerusalem* to Leipzig: Moses Mendelssohn, the Haskalah, and the Intellectual Inheritance of His Family

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Abstract

Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), known as the "German Socrates," emerged as one of the foremost philosophers of the Enlightenment and the initiator of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*). In works such as *Phädon* (1767) and *Jerusalem* (1783), he articulated a vision of Judaism as a rational religion grounded in practice rather than dogma, while advancing a powerful defense of religious toleration and liberty of conscience. This essay examines Mendelssohn's philosophical project in the context of Enlightenment thought and explores how his legacy extended beyond his lifetime through the cultural, musical, and scientific achievements of his children and grandchildren. From his defense of Judaism in *Jerusalem* to the revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Leipzig by Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn, the Mendelssohn family became a microcosm of modern European intellectual life. By tracing this intellectual inheritance, the essay highlights both the promises and tensions of Enlightenment modernity for Jewish identity and European culture.

1 Introduction

Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) occupies a pivotal place in the intellectual history of the Enlightenment. A German philosopher of Jewish origin, he became renowned as the "German Socrates" for his clarity of thought and his defense of rational religion. At the same time, Mendelssohn is widely regarded as the founder of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), a movement that sought to integrate Jews into European society through secular learning and cultural participation while preserving elements of religious tradition. His writings, most notably *Phädon* (1767) and *Jerusalem* (1783), articulated a vision of Judaism as compatible with reason, while advancing a universal case for freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state.[1]

This essay examines both Mendelssohn's philosophy and his intellectual legacy. The first part considers his philosophical project in the context of Enlightenment thought, focusing on his reconciliation of faith and reason, his defense of religious liberty, and his reinterpretation of Judaism as a non-dogmatic religion of practice. The second part traces the intellectual inheritance of his family, from his sons Joseph and Abraham, who extended his ideals into finance and cultural life, to his grandchildren Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn, whose revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Leipzig symbolized a broader renewal of European culture. By linking the rational defense of Judaism in *Jerusalem* with the musical achievements of the Mendelssohn descendants in Leipzig, this essay argues that Mendelssohn's legacy was not confined to philosophy or theology alone, but helped shape the cultural foundations of modern Europe.

Thesis Statement: Mendelssohn's philosophical defense of Judaism as a rational and tolerant faith provided a framework for Jewish emancipation and cultural integration, and his intellectual heirs—through their contributions to finance, music, and science—embodied the enduring influence of his Enlightenment ideals in the fabric of nineteenth-century European life.

[1] See David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (University of California Press, 1996).

2 Mendelssohn's Philosophy

Moses Mendelssohn's philosophy emerged at the intersection of Enlightenment rationalism and Jewish tradition. His writings aimed to demonstrate that Judaism was not only compatible with modern reason but could serve as a model for reconciling faith and freedom in a pluralist society. Three aspects of his thought are particularly central: the relationship between reason and revelation, the characterization of Judaism as a religion of practice rather than dogma, and the defense of religious toleration as a political principle.

2.1 Reason and Revelation

Mendelssohn's early philosophical reputation rested on his *Phädon, or On the Immortality of the Soul* (1767), a work modeled on Plato's dialogue that argued for the immortality of the soul in terms accessible to Enlightenment audiences.[2] For Mendelssohn, reason was sufficient to establish the fundamental truths of religion: the existence of God, divine providence, and human immortality. Revelation, by contrast, did not introduce new truths inaccessible to reason. Instead, it functioned pedagogically: divine legislation was a means of making rational truths available to the entire community through practice and tradition. This position allowed Mendelssohn to preserve the universality of reason while upholding the authority of revelation as a historical guide.

2.2 Judaism as Divine Legislation

In his most influential work, *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism* (1783), Mendelssohn presented Judaism not as a religion defined by dogma but as a "divine legislation."[3] Whereas Christianity required assent to creeds, Judaism bound its adherents through commandments that regulated external actions and community practice. Belief itself, Mendelssohn argued, could not be coerced; conscience was free. By defining Ju-

[2]Moses Mendelssohn, *Phädon, or On the Immortality of the Soul*, trans. Patricia Noble (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

[3]Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1983).

daism as a religion of praxis, Mendelssohn not only defended Jewish distinctiveness but also framed it as uniquely compatible with Enlightenment liberty of conscience. This reinterpretation reshaped Jewish identity in modern Europe and laid the foundation for the *Haskalah*.

2.3 Religious Toleration and Civil Liberty

Mendelssohn's arguments in *Jerusalem* placed him squarely in Enlightenment debates about the relationship between religion and the state. Like John Locke, he insisted that the state's authority extended only to external actions, not to inner conviction.[4] Religious coercion, whether through civil penalties or ecclesiastical power, corrupted true faith, which must arise from free conviction. He opposed practices such as excommunication when used as coercive punishment, arguing that religious communities should guide by persuasion alone. For Mendelssohn, toleration was not a concession but a philosophical necessity: liberty of conscience was the precondition of authentic religion.

Taken together, these elements of Mendelssohn's philosophy articulated a distinctive Enlightenment Judaism. By reconciling rational philosophy with revealed tradition, he defended Judaism against its detractors while offering a universal model for the peaceful coexistence of faiths within modern civil society.

3 The Jewish Enlightenment and the Haskalah

Moses Mendelssohn's philosophy not only secured his place among the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment but also inaugurated a cultural and intellectual movement within Jewish life: the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment. The *Haskalah* sought to integrate Jewish communities into European society through the cultivation of secular learning, linguistic assimilation, and civic participation, while preserving Judaism as a living tradition. Mendelssohn's writings and personal example provided the intellectual foundation for this project.

[4]Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Moses Mendelssohn," last modified 2020, `https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mendelssohn/`.

3.1 Education and Cultural Integration

Central to Mendelssohn's program was the reform of Jewish education. He encouraged Jews to study philosophy, science, and modern languages alongside the traditional curriculum of Torah and Talmud. His German translation of the Pentateuch, accompanied by a Hebrew commentary known as the *Bi'ur*, exemplified this integrationist approach.[5] By making the Hebrew Bible accessible in the vernacular of German society, Mendelssohn both facilitated acculturation and reinforced the study of Jewish sources. The project symbolized the dual aim of the *Haskalah*: to open Jewish communities to modern culture without erasing their distinct identity.

3.2 Jewish Emancipation and Civil Rights

Mendelssohn's defense of liberty of conscience also had immediate political implications. At a time when European Jews were denied full civic equality, he argued that Judaism imposed no obstacles to citizenship. Since Judaism was a religion of practice, not belief, Jews could participate as loyal citizens in a modern state without compromising their faith. This claim undergirded calls for Jewish emancipation across Europe, lending philosophical justification to reform movements of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[6]

3.3 The Tensions of Modernity

The *Haskalah* also exposed tensions between tradition and modernity. Traditionalist critics accused Mendelssohn of diluting Judaism, while assimilationists pushed his project further than he intended. Indeed, many of his descendants eventually converted to Christianity, raising questions about whether the path of acculturation could preserve Jewish distinctiveness. Nevertheless, the cultural flowering of the *Haskalah*—in literature, philosophy, and music—owed much to Mendelssohn's articulation of Judaism as both rational

[5]David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[6]Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University of Alabama Press, 1973).

and historically grounded.

3.4 A Legacy Beyond Philosophy

By the early nineteenth century, the ideals of the *Haskalah* had spread across Central and Eastern Europe, shaping new forms of Jewish intellectual life. The movement produced a generation of Jewish writers, educators, and reformers who embraced secular culture while advocating Jewish renewal. At the same time, Mendelssohn's own family became a living embodiment of his vision: through their contributions to finance, music, and science, his children and grandchildren extended the Enlightenment ethos into diverse domains of European life. In this sense, the story of the Mendelssohn family illustrates both the achievements and the contradictions of the *Haskalah*.

4 The Intellectual Inheritance of the Mendelssohn Family

The legacy of Moses Mendelssohn did not end with his writings. Through his children, grandchildren, and extended intellectual networks, his ideals found expression in finance, music, and science. The story of the Mendelssohn family illustrates both the cultural flowering of the Enlightenment and the challenges of Jewish assimilation in modern Europe.

4.1 Joseph and Abraham Mendelssohn

Mendelssohn's son Joseph continued the family's banking enterprise, which played a significant role in financing scientific and cultural endeavors, including Alexander von Humboldt's expeditions.[7] Another son, Abraham, married Lea Salomon and raised a family that would become a cornerstone of European cultural life. Abraham himself embraced cultural assimilation, often remarking that his children were "born to be baptized," yet he

[7]Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig: The Shaping of Jewish Intellectual Identity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983).

ensured that they received rigorous training in music and literature. In this sense, Abraham embodied the paradox of Mendelssohn's legacy: seeking integration into German society while preserving the intellectual and artistic excellence of his heritage.

4.2 Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn

The grandchildren of Moses Mendelssohn—particularly Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809–1847) and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805–1847)—became among the most important musicians of the nineteenth century. In 1829, Felix organized a historic performance of J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Leipzig, the first since Bach's own time.[8] This event not only revived Bach's music but symbolized a broader cultural renewal, paralleling Moses Mendelssohn's revival of Judaism as a rational, living tradition. Fanny, though constrained by gender norms of her era, composed over 400 works and led a prominent Berlin salon that served as a center of intellectual and artistic life. Together, Felix and Fanny embodied the Enlightenment balance of reason, tradition, and creativity that their grandfather had defended in philosophy.

4.3 Rebecca Mendelssohn and Lejeune Dirichlet

Rebecca Mendelssohn, another grandchild of Moses, married the mathematician Peter Gustav Lejeune Dirichlet (1805–1859), a student of Gauss and one of the founders of modern number theory. Dirichlet's early career brought him into the Mendelssohn household, where scientific experiments under Humboldt's patronage coincided with the musical rehearsals of Felix and Fanny.[9] This convergence of science and art in the Mendelssohn garden at Leipziger Strasse became a living symbol of the Enlightenment vision of unified knowledge, demonstrating how the family's intellectual inheritance extended beyond theology into the very fabric of European culture.

[8]Schiller Institute, "Lejeune Dirichlet and the Mendelssohn Youth Movement," *Fidelio* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2004).

[9]Ibid.

4.4 Cultural Networks and Intellectual Circles

The Mendelssohn family was also connected to wider networks of poets, philosophers, and reformers. Heinrich Heine, though not a descendant, moved within the same circles and wrestled with the dilemmas of Jewish assimilation that Mendelssohn had confronted a generation earlier. Figures such as Wilhelm Hensel, who married Fanny, and Eduard Gans, a Hegelian philosopher briefly linked to the family, further illustrate the Mendelssohns' central place in the cultural ferment of Berlin. Through these networks, the family served as a bridge between Enlightenment ideals and nineteenth-century European intellectual life.

4.5 Ambivalence of Legacy

The Mendelssohn heirs highlight both the promise and the tension of Moses Mendelssohn's project. On the one hand, they embodied his Enlightenment ideals: Felix's revival of Bach, Fanny's musical achievements, and Dirichlet's scientific contributions all reflected the synthesis of tradition and modernity. On the other hand, many of Mendelssohn's descendants eventually converted to Christianity, raising questions about whether his reinterpretation of Judaism could preserve religious identity in the modern world. This ambivalence underscores the complexity of his legacy: both a triumph of cultural integration and a source of anxiety about continuity.

5 Conclusion

From the publication of *Jerusalem* in 1783 to the revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Leipzig in 1829, the Mendelssohn family exemplified the intellectual and cultural trajectory of Enlightenment Europe. Moses Mendelssohn's philosophy articulated a Judaism that was rational, tolerant, and grounded in practice rather than dogma, while defending liberty of conscience and the separation of church and state. His role as the father of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) established a framework through which Jews could pursue secular learning, cultural participation, and eventual emancipation without

abandoning their religious heritage.

The subsequent achievements of his descendants demonstrate the enduring resonance of these ideals. Joseph and Abraham Mendelssohn extended Enlightenment values into finance and cultural patronage; Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn gave musical expression to the renewal of tradition within modernity; Rebecca Mendelssohn and her marriage to Lejeune Dirichlet symbolized the union of science and art at the heart of Enlightenment culture. These contributions reflected the continuing interplay of faith, reason, and creativity that their grandfather had defended in philosophy.

Yet the Mendelssohn legacy also reveals the tensions inherent in modernity. The path of acculturation opened by Moses Mendelssohn often led to assimilation and conversion, raising questions about the preservation of Jewish identity in an age of emancipation. At the same time, the family's achievements in philosophy, music, and science demonstrated how minority traditions could enrich the cultural foundations of Europe.

In sum, the story of Moses Mendelssohn and his heirs embodies both the promise and the paradox of the Enlightenment. By defending Judaism as a rational and tolerant faith, Mendelssohn laid the groundwork for pluralism and civil liberty. Through the intellectual inheritance of his family, his ideals reverberated across generations, shaping the soundscape, scientific imagination, and cultural identity of modern Europe. The movement from *Jerusalem* to Leipzig thus captures not only a geographical journey but also the enduring legacy of Enlightenment ideals transformed across time and discipline.

A Mendelssohn and Kant: A Philosophical Encounter

Moses Mendelssohn's philosophy developed alongside that of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and while the two thinkers never engaged in systematic controversy, their intellectual proximity reveals both convergences and divergences that shaped the trajectory of modern philosophy.

A.1 Common Ground in Enlightenment Rationalism

Both Mendelssohn and Kant sought to defend the autonomy of reason and the moral dignity of the human being. Mendelssohn's *Phädon* (1767) argued for the immortality of the soul on rational grounds, while Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) would later establish immortality, freedom, and the existence of God as "postulates of practical reason." In this sense, both thinkers resisted Enlightenment skepticism by insisting that faith could be grounded in reason, although they approached the problem through different methods.[10]

A.2 The Pantheism Controversy and Spinoza

The most direct intellectual contact between Mendelssohn and Kant arose in the context of the Pantheism Controversy of the 1780s, sparked by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's claim that Enlightenment rationalism led inexorably to Spinozism. Jacobi argued that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Mendelssohn's close friend, had confessed to being a Spinozist. Mendelssohn's response in *Jerusalem* (1783) and his *Morning Hours* (1785) sought to defend rational theism against charges of Spinozistic fatalism. Kant, though not directly involved in the controversy, shared Mendelssohn's concern for preserving freedom against determinism, yet criticized traditional proofs of God's existence that Mendelssohn still upheld.

A.3 Religion, Freedom, and Conscience

Both thinkers also addressed the relationship between religion and morality. In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn argued that Judaism imposed divine legislation on external actions while leaving inner conviction free. Kant, in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* (1793), similarly emphasized the primacy of moral law over ecclesiastical authority. Yet Kant's philosophy was more radical: he interpreted religious doctrines symbolically, as vehicles for moral truth, whereas Mendelssohn insisted on the historical particularity of Jewish practice as divinely commanded.

[10]Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Moses Mendelssohn," 2020.

A.4 Legacy of the Dialogue

The relationship between Mendelssohn and Kant demonstrates how Jewish Enlightenment thought both aligned with and diverged from German idealism. Mendelssohn shared Kant's defense of freedom, reason, and conscience, but retained a more traditional confidence in metaphysical proofs and a commitment to Judaism as a revealed, practiced tradition. In the eyes of later generations, Mendelssohn represented the last major figure of the rationalist Enlightenment, while Kant inaugurated a new era of critical philosophy. Nevertheless, their shared concerns about tolerance, autonomy, and the moral basis of religion reveal a deep affinity between their projects, even amidst their differences.

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