

Moses Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism (1783)

Abstract

Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) published *Jerusalem* in 1783. The text consists of two main parts: a discussion of freedom of conscience and Mendelssohn’s musings about his relationship to Judaism. This passage is anchored in Mendelssohn’s analysis of the work of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, and he reflects in this passage on the interplay between church, state, society, nature, and the individual. His plea for a form of governance rooted in morality, one that exercises power through persuasion rather than force, provides a provocative critique of state religion in the years before the French Revolution. Mendelssohn’s commitment to Enlightenment is clear in this passage, and his status as a religious minority amplified the power of his arguments. Consider reading Christian von Dohm’s parallel essay, “Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews,” published two years before in 1781.

Source

SECTION I

State and religion—civil and ecclesiastical constitution— secular and churchly authority—how to oppose these pillars of social life to one another so that they are in balance and do not, instead, become burdens on social life, or weigh down its foundations more than they help to uphold it— this is one of the most difficult tasks of politics. For centuries, men have strived to solve it, and here and there enjoyed perhaps greater success in settling it practically than in resolving it in theory. Some thought it proper to separate these different relations of societal man into moral entities, and to assign to each a separate province, specific rights, duties, powers, and properties. But the extent of these different provinces and the boundaries dividing them have not yet been accurately fixed. Sometimes one sees the church move the boundary stone deep into the territory of the state; sometimes the state permits itself encroachments which, according to accepted standards, seem equally violent. Immeasurable evils have hitherto arisen, and still threaten to arise, from the dissension between these moral entities. When they take the field against each other, mankind is the victim of their discord; when they are in agreement, the noblest treasure of human felicity is lost; for they seldom agree but for the purpose of banishing from their realms a third moral entity, liberty of conscience, which knows how to derive some advantage from their disunity.

Despotism has the advantage of being consistent. However burdensome its demands may be to common sense, they are, nevertheless, coherent and systematic. It has a definite answer to every question. You need not trouble yourself any more about limits; for he who has everything no longer asks, “how much?” The same holds true for ecclesiastical government, according to Roman Catholic principles. It deals fully with every circumstance, and is, as it were, all of a piece. Grant it all its demands: you will at least know where you stand. Your structure is completely built, and perfect calm reigns in all its parts. To be sure, only that dreadful calm which, as Montesquieu says, prevails during the evening in a fortress which is to be taken by storm during the night. Yet he who considers tranquility in doctrine and life to be felicity will find it nowhere better secured to him than under a Roman Catholic despot; or rather, since even in this case power is still too much divided, under the despotic rule of the church itself.

But as soon as liberty dares to move anything in this systematic structure, ruin immediately threatens on all sides; and in the end, one no longer knows what will remain standing. Hence the extraordinary

confusion, the civil as well as ecclesiastical disturbances, during the early years of the Reformation, and the striking embarrassment on the part of the teachers and reformers themselves whenever they had occasion to settle the question of “how far?” in matters of right. Not only was it difficult, in practice, to keep the great multitude within proper bounds, once it was released from its fetters, but even in theory, one finds the writings of those times full of vague and wavering ideas whenever the definition of ecclesiastical power is discussed. The despotism of the Roman church was abolished—but what other form was to be introduced in its place? Even now, in our more enlightened times, the textbooks of ecclesiastical law could not be rid of this vagueness. The clergy will not or cannot give up all claims to a constitution, yet no one really knows in what it should consist. One wishes to settle doctrinal differences, without recognizing a Supreme Judge. One still continues to refer to an independent church, without knowing where it is to be found. One advances a claim to power and rights, yet one cannot state who should exercise them.

Thomas Hobbes lived at a time when fanaticism, combined with a disorderly sense of liberty, no longer knew any bounds and was ready to bring royal authority under its foot and subvert the entire constitution of the realm (as it eventually did). Weary of civil strife and by nature inclined toward a quiet, speculative life, he regarded tranquility and safety, no matter how they were obtained, as the greatest felicity; and these, he thought, were to be found only in the unity and indivisibility of the highest power in the state. He believed, therefore, that the public welfare would be best served if everything, even our judgment of right and wrong, were made subject to the supreme power of the civil authority. In order to do so more legitimately, he assumed that man is entitled by nature to everything it has endowed him with the ability to obtain. The state of nature is a state of tumult, a war of all against all, in which everyone may do what he can do; everything one has the power to do is right. This unfortunate condition lasted until men agreed to put an end to their misery, to renounce right and might, as far as public safety was concerned, and to place both in the hands of an established authority. Henceforth, whatever that authority ordered was right.

Hobbes either had no taste for civil liberty or wished to see it destroyed rather than have it thus abused. But in order to retain for himself the liberty of thought, of which he made more use than anyone else, he resorted to a subtle twist. According to his system, all right is grounded in power, and all obligation in fear. Since God is infinitely superior in power to any civil authority, the right of God is also infinitely superior to the right of the latter. Consequently, the fear of God obliges us to perform duties which must not yield to any fear of the civil authority. This, however, applies only to inward religion, which was the philosopher’s sole concern. The outward [mode of] worship he subjected entirely to the dictates of the civil authority: every innovation in church matters without its sanction is not only high treason, but blasphemy as well. The collisions which are bound to ensue between inward and outward worship he sought to remove by means of the subtlest distinctions; and although many gaps still remain, making the weakness of the accord quite evident, one cannot help admiring the ingenuity with which he sought to render his system coherent.

There is, at bottom, a great deal of truth in all Hobbes’s assertions. The absurd consequences to which they lead follow solely from the exaggeration with which he propounded them, whether out of a love of paradox or in compliance with the needs of his time. Moreover, in his day the concepts of natural law were, in part, still not sufficiently enlightened. In matters of moral philosophy Hobbes has the same merit as Spinoza has in metaphysics. His ingenious errors have occasioned inquiry. The ideas of *right* and *duty*, of *power* and *obligation*, have been better developed; one has learned to distinguish more correctly between physical and moral ability, between might and right. These distinctions have become so intimately fused with our language that, nowadays, the refutation of Hobbes’s system seems to be a matter of common sense, and to be accomplished, as it were, by language itself. This is a distinctive feature of all moral truths. As soon as they are brought to light, they become so much a part of the spoken language and so connected with man’s everyday notions that they become evident even to

ordinary minds; and now we wonder how man could ever have stumbled on so level a road. But we fail to consider the pains it cost to clear this path through the wilderness.

Hobbes himself must have been aware, in more ways than one, of the inadmissible results which necessarily followed from his exaggerated propositions. If men are not bound by nature to any duty, they do not even have a duty to keep their contracts. If there is, in the state of nature, no binding obligation other than that based upon fear and powerlessness, contracts will remain valid only as long as they are supported by fear and powerlessness. Thus, men, by their contracts, will not have come any step closer to their security, and will still find themselves in the primitive state of universal warfare. But if contracts are to remain valid, man must by nature, without contracts and agreements, lack the moral ability to act against a compact into which he has voluntarily entered; that is, he must not be permitted to do so, even if he can; he must not have the *moral* faculty, even though he may have the *physical*. *Might* and *right* are therefore different things; and in the state of nature, too, they were heterogeneous ideas. Moreover, Hobbes prescribes to the highest authority in the state strict laws not to command anything which would be contrary to its subjects' welfare. For although that authority is not accountable to any man, it does owe an account to the Supreme Judge; and even though, according to his principles, it is not bound by the fear of any *human power*, it is still bound by the fear of the *Omnipotent*, who has made his will in this respect sufficiently known. Hobbes is very explicit on this point, and is, in fact, less indulgent to the gods of the earth than his system would lead one to expect. Yet this very fear of the Omnipotent, which should bind kings and princes to certain duties toward their subjects, can also become a source of obligation for every individual in the state of nature. And so we would once again have a *solemn* law of nature, even though Hobbes does not want to admit it. In this fashion, in our day, every student of natural law can gain a triumph over Thomas Hobbes, to whom, at bottom, he nevertheless owes this triumph.

Locke, who lived during the same period of deep confusion, sought to protect the liberty of conscience in another manner. In his letters *concerning toleration* he proceeds from the basic definition: *A state is a society of men who unite for the purpose of collectively promoting their temporal welfare*. From this it follows, quite naturally, that the state is not to concern itself at all with the citizens' convictions regarding their eternal felicity, but is to tolerate everyone who conducts himself well as a citizen, that is, who does not interfere with the temporal felicity of his fellow citizens. The state as such is not to take notice of differences of religion, for religion as such has no necessary influence on temporal matters, and is linked to them solely through the arbitrary measures of men.

Very well! If the dispute allowed itself to be settled by a verbal definition, I would know of none that is more convenient; and if by this means one could have talked the agitated minds of his time out of their intolerance, it would not have been necessary for the good Locke himself to go into exile as often as he did. But what prevents us, they ask, from seeking to promote collectively our eternal welfare as well? And indeed, what reason do we have to restrict the purpose of society solely to the *temporal*? If men *can* promote their eternal felicity by public measures, it should be their natural duty to *do* so, their rational obligation to join forces for this purpose and to enter into social relations. If, however, this be the case, and the state as such be preoccupied solely with the temporal, a question arises: To whom are we to entrust the care for the eternal? To the church? Now we are, once again, back at our starting point. State and church—concern for the temporal and concern for the eternal—civil and ecclesiastical authority. The former relates to the latter as the importance of the temporal does to that of the eternal. The state is, therefore, subordinate to religion, and must give way whenever a collision arises. Now resist, whoever can, Cardinal Bellarmine and the frightful concatenation of his arguments [to the effect] that the head of the church, on behalf of the eternal, ought to be in command over everything temporal, and therefore possesses, at least indirectly,^[1] sovereign authority over all goods and minds in the world; that all secular realms are indirectly subject to the dominion of the spiritual monarch, and must take their orders from him if they have to alter their form of government, depose their kings and appoint others in their place, because very often the eternal

welfare of the state cannot be maintained in any other way—and so forth according to the maxims of his order, which Bellarmine propounds with so much ingenuity in his work *De Romano pontifice*. All the objections raised in voluminous works against the cardinal's sophisms seem ineffective as soon as the state completely abandons the care for eternity.

On the other hand, it is, in the strictest sense, neither in keeping with the truth nor advantageous to man's welfare to sever the temporal so neatly from the eternal. At bottom, man will never partake of eternity; his eternality is merely an *incessant temporality*. His temporality never ends; it is, therefore, an essential part of his permanency and inseparable from it. One confuses ideas if one opposes his temporal welfare to his eternal felicity. And this confusion of ideas is not without practical consequences. It shifts the borders of the sphere in which man can act in accordance with his capacities, and strains his powers beyond the goal which Providence has so wisely set for him. "On the dark path," if I may be allowed to quote my own words,^[2] "on the dark path man has to walk here, he is granted just as much light as he needs for the next steps he has to take. More would only blind him, and any lateral light would only confuse him." It is necessary for man to be reminded constantly that with this life all does not end for him; that there stands before him an endless future, for which his life here below is a preparation, just as in all of creation every present is a preparation for the future. This life, say the rabbis, is a vestibule in which one must comport oneself in the manner in which one wishes to appear in the inner chamber. But you must also beware of establishing any further opposition between this life and the future, and of leading men to think that their true welfare in this life is not one and the same as their eternal felicity in the future; that it is one thing to care for their temporal, and another to care for their eternal well-being, and it is possible to preserve one while neglecting the other. Delusions of this kind shift the viewpoint and the horizon of the weak-sighted man who has to walk along a narrow path; he is in danger of becoming dizzy and of stumbling on a level road. Thus many a man does not dare to enjoy the benefits bestowed by Providence in the here and now for fear of losing an equal portion in the hereafter, and many a man has become a bad citizen on earth in the hope of thereby becoming a better citizen of heaven.

I have sought, through the following considerations, to clarify for my own benefit the ideas of state and religion, of their limits and their influence on each other as well as upon [the state of] felicity in civil life. As soon as man recognizes that outside of society he can fulfill his duties toward himself and toward the author of his existence as poorly as he can fulfill his duties toward his neighbor, and, hence, can no longer remain in his solitary condition without a sense of wretchedness, he is obliged to leave that condition and to enter into society with those in a like situation in order to satisfy their needs through mutual aid and to promote their common good by common measures. Their common good, however, includes the present as well as the future, the spiritual as well as the earthly. One is inseparable from the other. Unless we fulfill our obligations, we can expect felicity neither here nor there, neither on earth nor in heaven. Now, two things belong to the true fulfillment of our duties: *action* and *conviction*. Action accomplishes what duty demands, and conviction causes that action to proceed from the proper source, that is, from pure motives.

Hence actions and convictions belong to the perfection of man, and society should, as far as possible, take care of both by collective efforts, that is, it should direct the actions of its members toward the common good, and cause convictions which lead to these actions. The one is the *government*, the other the *education* of societal man. To both, man is led by *reasons*; to actions by *reasons that motivate the will*, and to convictions by *reasons that persuade by their truth*. Society should therefore establish both through public institutions in such a way that they will be in accord with the common good.

The reasons which lead men to rational actions and convictions rest partly on the relations of men to each other, partly on the relations of men to their Creator and Keeper. The former are the province of the *state*, the latter that of *religion*. Insofar as men's actions and convictions can be made to serve the

common weal through reasons arising from their relations to each other, they are a matter for the civil constitution; but insofar as the relations between man and God can be seen as their source, they belong to the *church*, the *synagogue*, or the *mosque*. In a good many textbooks of the so-called ecclesiastical law one reads serious inquiries as to whether Jews, heretics, and heterodox believers can also have a church. In view of the immeasurable privileges which the church so-called is in the habit of arrogating to itself, the question is not as absurd as it must appear to an unbiased reader. To me, however, as it can be easily imagined, the difference of nomenclature is of no consequence. Public institutions for the formation [*Bildung*] of man that concern his relations with God I call *church*; those that concern his relations with man I call *state*. By the formation of man I understand the effort to arrange both actions and convictions in such a way that they will be in accord with his felicity; that they will *educate* and *govern* men.

Blessed be the state which succeeds in governing the nation by education itself; that is, by infusing it with such morals and convictions as will of themselves lend to produce actions conducive to the common weal, and need not be constantly urged on by the spur of the law. In social life, man must renounce certain of his rights for the common good or as one may say, he must very often sacrifice his own advantage to benevolence. He will be happy if this sacrifice is made on his own prompting and when he realizes, in each instance, that he acted solely for the sake of benevolence. *Benevolence*, in reality, makes us happier than *selfishness*; but we must, while exercising it, be aware that it springs from ourselves and is the display of our powers. Not, as some sophists interpret it, because everything in man proceeds from self-love; but because benevolence is no longer benevolence, and has neither value nor merit if it does not flow from the free impulse of the benevolent individual.

This will perhaps enable us to give a satisfactory answer to the well-known question: *Which form of government is the best?* This question has hitherto received contradictory answers, all of them having the same appearance of truth. It is, in reality, too vague a question, almost as vague as a similar one in medicine: *Which food is the most wholesome?* Every complexion, every climate, every age, sex, and mode of life, etc., requires a different answer. The same is true with regard to our politico-philosophical problem. For every people, at every level of culture at which it finds itself, a different form of government will be the best. Certain despotically ruled nations would be extremely miserable if they were left to govern themselves, as miserable as certain free-spirited republicans if they were subjected to the rule of a monarch. Indeed, many a nation will alter its form of government as often as changes take place in its culture, way of life, and convictions, and, in the course of centuries, will pass through the whole cycle of forms of government, in all their shades and combinations, from anarchy to despotism; yet it will always be found to have chosen the form of government which was best for it under existing circumstances.

Under all circumstances and conditions, however, I consider the infallible measure of the excellence of a form of government to lie in the degree to which it achieves its purposes by morals and convictions; in the degree, therefore, to which government is by education itself. In other words, in the degree to which the citizen is given the opportunity to understand vividly (*anschauend*) that he has to renounce some of his rights only for the common good; that he has to sacrifice some of his own advantage only for the sake of benevolence; and that he therefore gains as much, on the one hand, through a display of benevolence as he loses, on the other, by sacrifice. Indeed, that by means of sacrifice itself he greatly adds to his inner felicity, since it enhances the merit and the worth of the benevolent act and therefore also the true perfection of the benevolent individual. It is, for example, not advisable for the state to assume all the duties of love for our fellow man down to the *distribution of alms*, and to transform them into public institutions. Man is conscious of his own worth when he performs charitable acts, when he vividly (*anschauend*) perceives how he alleviates the distress of his fellow man by his gift; when he gives because he wants to give. But if he gives because he must, he feels only his fetters.

Hence, one of the state's principal efforts must be to govern men through morals and convictions. Now, there is no other way of improving the convictions, and thereby the morals, of men than through

persuasion. Laws do not alter convictions; arbitrary punishments and rewards produce no principles, refine no morals. Fear and hope are no criteria of truth. Knowledge, reasoning, and persuasion alone can bring forth principles which, with the help of *authority* and *example*, can pass into *morals*. And it is here that religion should come to the aid of the state, and the church should become a pillar of civil felicity. It is the business of the church to convince people, in the most emphatic manner, of the truth of noble principles and convictions: to show them that duties toward men are also duties toward God, the violation of which is in itself the greatest misery; that serving the state is true service of God; that charity is his most sacred will; and that true knowledge of the Creator cannot leave behind in the soul any hatred for men. To teach this is the business, duty, and vocation of religion; to preach it, the business and duty of its ministers. How then, could it ever have occurred to men to permit religion to teach and its ministers to preach exactly the opposite?

But if the character of a nation, the level of culture to which it has ascended, the increase in population which has accompanied the nation's prosperity, the greater complexity of relations and connections, excessive luxury, and other causes make it impossible to govern the nation by convictions alone, the state will have to resort to public measures, coercive laws, punishments of crime, and rewards of merit. If a citizen is unwilling to defend the fatherland from an inner sense of duty, let him be tempted by rewards or compelled by force. If men no longer have any sense of the intrinsic value of justice, if they no longer realize that honesty in trade and traffic is true felicity, let injustice be chastised and fraud be punished. Admittedly, in this manner the state attains the ultimate aim of society only by half. External motivations do not make a man happy, even though they have an effect on him. The man who avoids deception because he loves honesty is happier than one who is merely afraid of the arbitrary punishments the state linked with fraud. But to his fellow man it does not matter what motives cause the wrong to remain undone, or by what means his rights and property are safeguarded. The fatherland is defended, regardless of whether the citizens fight for it out of love or out of fear of positive punishment, even though the defenders themselves will be happy in the former and unhappy in the latter case. If the *inner felicity of society* cannot be entirely preserved, let at least *outward peace and security* be obtained, if need be, through *coercion*.

The state will therefore be content, if need be, with mechanical deeds, with works without spirit, with conformity of action without conformity in thought. Even the man who does not believe in laws must obey them, once they have received official sanction. The state may grant the individual citizen the right to pass judgment on the laws, but not the right to act in accordance with his judgment. This right he had to renounce as a member of society, for without this renunciation civil society is a chimera. Not so with religion! It knows no act without conviction, no work without spirit, no conformity in deed without conformity in the mind. Religious actions without religious thoughts are mere puppetry, not service of God. They themselves must therefore proceed from the spirit, and can neither be purchased by reward nor compelled by punishment. But religion withdraws its support also from civil actions, insofar as they are not produced by conviction, but by force. Nor can the state expect any further help from religion, once it can act only by means of rewards and punishments; for insofar as this is the case, man's duties toward God no longer enter into consideration, and the relations between man and his Creator are without effect. The only aid religion can render to the state consists in *teaching and consoling*; that is, in imparting to the citizens, through its divine doctrines, such convictions as are conducive to the public weal, and in uplifting with its otherworldly consolations the poor wretch who has been condemned to death as a sacrifice for the common good.

Here we already see an essential difference between state and religion. The state gives orders and coerces, religion teaches and persuades. The state prescribes *laws*, religion *commandments*. The state has *physical power* and uses it when necessary; the power of religion is *love and beneficence*. The one abandons the disobedient and expels him; the other receives him in its bosom and seeks to instruct, or at least to console him, even during the last moments of his earthly life, and not entirely in vain. In one

word: civil society, viewed as a moral person, can have the *right of coercion*, and, in fact, has actually obtained this right through the social contract. Religious society lays no claim to the *right of coercion*, and cannot obtain it by any possible contract. The *state* possesses *perfect*, the *church* only *imperfect* rights. In order to place this in a proper light, I may be allowed to ascend to first principles and to examine more closely

*the origin of the rights of coercion and
the validity of contracts among men.*

I court the danger of becoming too speculative for some readers. Yet everyone is free to skip what does not suit his taste. To the friends of natural law it may not be disagreeable to see how I sought to define for myself its first principles. [...]

NOTES

[1] Bellarmine himself was nearly declared a heretic by Pope Sixtus V for ascribing to him only indirect power over temporal matters of kings and princes. His work was placed on the Index of the Inquisition.

[2] See Notes to Abbt's *Friendly Correspondence*, p. 28.

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