

The Politics of Exclusion in Judaism

Nodeh Beyehuda and R. Yaakov Emden

I. Brief Biographies via Wikipedia

1. Yechezkel ben Yehuda Landau (8 October 1713 – 29 April 1793, Hebrew: יחזקאל לנדא) was an influential authority in halakha (Jewish law). He is best known for the work *Noda BiYehudah* (נודע ביהודה), by which title he is also known. Landau was born in Opatów, Poland, to a family that traced its lineage back to Rashi, and attended yeshiva at Ludmir and Brody. In Brody, he was appointed dayan (rabbinical judge) in 1734, and in 1745 he became rabbi of Yampol.

2. Jacob Emden (Hebrew: יעקב עמדין) (the Yavets) (born at Altona June 4, 1697, and died there April 19, 1776) was a rabbi and notable talmudist, and prominent opponent of the Sabbateans. He was the son of the Chacham Tzvi

3. Moses Mendelssohn (6 September 1729 – 4 January 1786) was a German Jewish philosopher to whose ideas the renaissance of European Jews, Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment) is indebted. He has been referred to as the father of Reform Judaism. Born to a poor Jewish family in Dessau and originally destined for a rabbinical career, Mendelssohn educated himself in German thought and literature and from his writings on philosophy and religion came to be regarded as a leading cultural figure of his time by both Germans and Jews.

Mendelssohn also tried to better the Jews' situation in general by furthering their rights and acceptance. He induced Christian Wilhelm von Dohm to publish in 1781 his work, *On the Civil Amelioration of the Condition of the Jews*, which played a significant part in the rise of tolerance. Mendelssohn himself published a German translation of the *Vindiciae Judaeorum* by Menasseh Ben Israel.

The interest caused by these actions led Mendelssohn to publish his most important contribution to the problems connected with the position of Judaism in a Gentile world. This was *Jerusalem* (1783; Eng. trans. 1838 and 1852). It is a forcible plea for freedom of conscience, described by Kant as "an irrefutable book". Mendelssohn wrote:

Brothers, if you care for true piety, let us not feign agreement, where diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of Providence. None of us thinks and feels exactly like his fellow man: why do we wish to deceive each other with delusive words?

Its basic thrust is that the state has no right to interfere with the religion of its citizens, Jews included. While it proclaims the mandatory character of Jewish law for all Jews (including, based on Mendelssohn's understanding of the New Testament, those converted to Christianity), it does not grant the rabbinate the right to punish Jews for deviating from it. He maintained that Judaism was less a "divine need, than a revealed life". *Jerusalem* concludes with the cry "Love truth, love peace!"—in a quote from *Zacharias* 8:19.

Kant called this "the proclamation of a great reform, which, however, will be slow in manifestation and in progress, and which will affect not only your people but others as well." Mendelssohn asserted the pragmatic principle of the possible plurality of truths: that just as various nations need different constitutions – to one a

monarchy, to another a republic, may be the most congenial to the national genius—so individuals may need different religions. The test of religion is its effect on conduct. This is the moral of Lessing's Nathan the Wise (Nathan der Weise), the hero of which is undoubtedly Mendelssohn, and in which the parable of the three rings is the epitome of the pragmatic position.

To Mendelssohn his theory represented a strengthening bond to Judaism. But in the first part of the 19th century, the criticism of Jewish dogmas and traditions was associated with a firm adherence to the older Jewish mode of living. Reason was applied to beliefs, the historic consciousness to life. Modern reform in Judaism has parted to some extent from this conception.

II. Texts and Contexts

3. Landau then made it clear that secular learning, especially attaining a full command of the German language, was in and of itself a positive thing, but not if it led to exposure to books that contain rationalistic interpretations of the Torah. Thus, the atmosphere in Prague at that time was filled with danger and demanded that loyal Jews remain apart from those who promote such approaches:

Do not mix with those who are strange [or "unstable" – *shonim*]...with those who follow arbitrary whims, who cogitate and ponder with their confused intellects, darkening the religion of the Torah, whether they be Jews or from any other people, those who deny individual providence over the affairs of men, who deny the revelation of the Torah and supernatural miracles, who say that religion was not given by the Creator. With them do not mix. Now because of our many sins, strange sects have multiplied among our people, each different from the other – except in their common proclivity to undermine the perfect faith. It was about such sects that Solomon warned: "Do not mix with the strange [unstable], for disaster comes from them suddenly, the doom of them both who can foreknow?" he was alluding to those sects that are equal in their in their capacity for evil. But we God's people are obligated to sacrifice our lives for our sacred Torah, both the written Torah and the oral one...and if those sects mock us – we do not take heed, for we shall walk in the name of God. (Fertzieger 48-49)

4. ...Mendelssohn had confirmed the suspicion already raised against him that he opposed coercion as a viable means for ensuring that Jews continue to follow Jewish law. Landau considered this to be a rejection of the obligatory nature of the halakha for every Jew. Regarding Mendelssohn, Landau recommended:

Now I see that our entire negative judgment of that man [oto ha-ish – Mendelssohn] is all true. For he himself has proclaimed that he has no part in the God of Israel nor his Torah and he has abandoned the path – rather [he says], all should act as their heart tells him...For he is a sectarian [*min*]...if two proper witnesses were to testify that he truly published these types of statements, certainly he too and those among the congregation of Israel who cling to him [shall be] separated from the congregation of Israel...Anyone whose honor is dear to them must separate from them, and not go near them, for God will burn the thorns of his vineyard, and defeat the ruthless ones..." (Fertziger 50)

5. In an early responsum (1737), Emden had differentiated between the study of philosophy (*bigayon*) and natural sciences (*hockmat ha-teva*). At the end of an intricate halakhic discussion of why he could not permit a Jewish medical student to observe surgery on the Sabbath, he added some personal reflections regarding the

entrance of this young man into the world of non-Jewish knowledge and culture. Despite his fear for the religious stability of his correspondent, he recognized the importance of medical study. However, regarding the study of philosophy he said:

These wisdoms should be seen by Edomite [Christian] and Ishmaelite [Muslim] scholars and those of the rest of the nations, for they have no other wisdom. For even if one should not be completely naked of such knowledge, in these degenerate times...when each day the stumbling blocks mount and the true light is darkened by that of rational thought [*seikebel habarur*], [one should learn] only that needed in order to defend against dangerous tongues, so that there should be no room for the attacks of the heretics [*apikorsim*]. (Fertziger 54)

6. Yet most disturbing to Emden was that which he had always feared about philosophy: its potential to provide justification for abandoning traditional Jewish practice was now coming to fruition before his eyes.

Initially, Satan opened for them a small aperture to ridicule the words of the Sages and they mocked the masters of the traditions, angels of God. They cast off the yoke of the Oral Law from upon their shoulders...After they had uprooted a whole section from the Torah where it is written *you must not deviate from the verdict that they shall declare unto you either to the right or to the left*, the gap now widened for them...They also cast the Written Law behind their backs...They take no part in the commandments and deeds. I will mention only [a few of] the customs of licentious ones [*porakim*]. At the time when the Jews enter their synagogues for prayer...these people go to circuses and theaters, offering their bodies in worship of the impulses, to satisfy their lusts...At the time when the Sabbath and Festivals begin – when the holy nation is occupied with sanctifying the day – honoring the date with many candles...in their homes there is darkness...For they are among the harlots...and later in the fishing boats. They waste the most of their time pre-occupied with frivolous books, with words of sexual desire, sensual lust [and] heresy, new licentiousness that comes forth every day from the printing press. (Fertziger 56)

7. The philosophers of the 1770's were not just heterodox in their rationalistic outlook; their combination of deviant ideology with deeds had placed them beyond the margin:

They are surely not of the seed of Israel, only descendants of the mixed multitude [*erev rav*]. We are not responsible nor guarantors for them, although Jews are responsible for one another. Nevertheless one must be careful to separate oneself from them and their murmuring so that the holy and pure seed of Israel not stumble through them. We should not have any business dealings with them and they should not come [for burial] in Jewish graves...I hope that their neighbors are not smitten by their ways...Just one obligation exists for us: to save our brothers, the pure, the legitimate and upstanding Children of Israel = that they may separate from them [the philosophers]. They shall not live among them, lest they be scorched by their flaming coals. (Ibid).

Bibliography

Fertziger, Adam S. *Exclusion and Hierarchy: Orthodoxy, Nonobservance, and the Emergency of Modern Jewish Identity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2005.