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Thinking Beyond Borders: Moses Mendelssohn and the Beginning of German-Jewish Philosophy

Abstract: In this paper I would like to shed light on the beginning of German-Jewish philosophy by focusing on the figure of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). Why was Mendelssohn's role so crucial in Germany at the time? What does it mean to be a Jew and at the same time a German philosopher? In order to answer to these questions, I will shed light on the »bifurcated soul« of the German-Jewish thinker by dealing with two controversial bonds: the first concerns the relationship between philosophy and Judaism, and the second one regards the marriage between German culture and Jewish philosophy.

Key words: Moses Mendelssohn, German-Jewish Philosophy, *Aufklärung*, Judaism, Franz Rosenzweig

Povzetek: **Misliti onkraj meja: Moses Mendelssohn in začetek nemško-judovske filozofije**

V prispevku se bom osredotočila na osebo Mosesa Mendelssohna (1729–1786) in osvetlilazačetek nemško-judovske filozofije. Zakaj je bila Mendelssohnova vloga tako pomembna v nemškem prostoru tistega časa? Kaj pomeni istočasno biti Jud in nemški filozof? Da bi lahko odgovorila na ti vprašanji, bom »razcepljeno dušo« nemško-judovskega misleca približala prek dveh kontroverznih povezav: prva se ukvarja z odnosom med filozofijo in judovstvom, druga z zvezo med nemško kulturo in judovsko filozofijo.

Ključne besede: Moses Mendelssohn, nemško-judovska filozofija, razsvetljenstvo, judovstvo, Franz Rosenzweig

In this paper I would like to shed light on the beginning of German-Jewish philosophy by focusing on the figure of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). His impact in the history of philosophy marks a real watershed: with him, Jewish thought started to enter the *Geistesgeschichte*, since for the first time Jewish identity received proper attention in an intellectual milieu and within the broader context of intellectual history. Mendelssohn was the first Jew to play a cultural and political role in the history of German philosophy and, without any doubt, his thought represents a turning point.

Why was Mendelssohn's role so crucial in Germany at the time? What does it mean to be a Jew and at the same time a German philosopher? The encounter and the contrast between these two sides is the very heart of darkness of Western civilization. Mendelssohn yearned to be a friend of Lessing's, to be a German thinker and to develop a sort of cultural nationalism. However, since he was Jew, his dream of an enlightened synthesis was extremely controversial on both sides, the German and the Jewish one.¹ What are at work here are at least two controversial bonds: the first concerns the relationship between philosophy and Judaism, and the second one regards the marriage between German culture and Jewish philosophy.

1. Jewish Philosophy as a controversial field

Jewish philosophy is a controversial combination, which implies on the one hand a particular specification and on the other hand a vocation to universality, as Giuseppe Veltri stated in his last book *La sapienza alienata* (2017). This tension between particular and universal sides is just one of the difficulties that we must face when we attempt to define it. What seems to be – according to my view – worthy of detailed analysis is the fact that this field of research always implies a crossing of disciplinary boundaries: philosophy, history, religion, politics, literature and so on.

Husik's famous remark in the conclusion of his *History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (1916) states: »There are Jews now and there are philosophers, but there are no Jewish philosophers and there is no Jewish philosophy.« (Husik 1976, 432) Since this assumption was first formulated, many things have changed. Just thinking of what Auschwitz sadly represents in the reflections made by philosophers of the past century. The best philosophical insights of the 20th century were achieved by engaging with this wound, this catastrophe in our recent history.

However, the question is still controversial. Is there a thread able to unify 'Jewish thinkers' from Philo to Levinas? What does it mean to ask about the nature of Jewish philosophy? How can we define it? There is a terminological distinction between 'Jewish philosophy', 'the philosophy of Judaism' and 'Jewish thought', as Ze'ev Levy (1997, 515) has stated in the Routledge's *History of Jewish Philosophy*. Is it a philosophical thought made by Jews? Is it an articulation of Judaism in philosophical terms? If philosophy is universal, could its particular articulation in Jewish philosophy be considered still valid? Furthermore, could we apply the expression Jewish philosophy also to non-Jews thinkers?

In this frame, is it correct to define Mendelssohn a Jewish philosopher? As Leora Batnitzky (2012) stated, Mendelssohn lived and wrote before the invention

¹ Mendelssohn's attempt at conciliation was harshly criticized even by Jews, in particular from a Zionist point of view. Perez Smolenskin (1842– 1885) was against Mendelssohn's idea of Judaism as a mere fulfilment of religious obligations because – according to the Zionist writer – it aims to achieve complete assimilation with the German nation. (Barzilay 1986)

of the category of Jewish philosophy. But his intellectual research, together with his historical context, produced an autonomous reflection on Judaism. With the demolition of the ghetto wall at the end of the eighteenth century, Jewish intellectuals began to take part in spiritual and cultural life, but they had to cope with the problem of their identity or, better, their Jewishness. The Mendelssohn's biggest achievement was the unexpected union between Judaism and the Enlightenment, the rationalism of Wolff and the Mosaic tradition, the particularity of Judaism and universal reason.

2. Moses Mendelssohn's thought between Aufklärung and Judaism

Mendelssohn's work consists in a huge variety of essays, monographs, dialogues, letters, biblical commentaries and translations, and so on. Among them it's worth mentioning the *Philosophical Dialogues* (1755), *Treatise on Evidence*, the prize essay for the Royal Academy (1763), the *Phaedon* (1767), *Jerusalem* (1783), and the *Morgenstunden* (1785). There is a break in his production because he had a neurological illness, a paralytic episode, and he had to stay away from philosophy for several years. In this period he decided to make a new German translation of the *Pentateuch* with a commentary which could be useful for the younger generation.

He was really active in the defence of Jewish dignity by supporting the cause of tolerance and of Jewish citizenship. By emphasizing the need of a *Vernunftreligion* Mendelssohn's attempt was not only philosophical, but also political since he strove for a more enlightened Judaism and for a community of communities, in which German and Jew could live together. The political emancipation of the Jew wasn't an exclusively Jewish process, but – according to Mendelssohn – had to involve Christians too.

Mendelssohn's big challenge to integrate the universality of reason and the particularity of Judaism entirely belonged to the Enlightenment, even if one can say that he inherited this project from the seventeenth century (Morgan 1997, 591). There was a marriage between the universality of morality and the particularity of Jewish life, but what were at work were also metaphysical, political, religious and moral issues.

Can we say, to some extent, that Mendelssohn was an *Aufklärer*? As Allan Arkush (1994, XIII) has argued, he followed Lessing and Wolff in emphasizing the importance of rational proofs of the existence of God, the account of divine providence and the demonstration of the immortality of the soul. With the publication of his *Phaedon* in 1767 Mendelssohn became one of the most representative figures of the German Enlightenment. Furthermore, he gave an important definition of *Aufklärung* as the synthesis of two different historical phases of the German Enlightenment: a *Frühaufklärung* focused on the practical aspect of life and a sec-

ond, more theoretical based on Leibniz and Wolff's philosophies (Mendelssohn 1784). This conjunction of theory and praxis is the basis of Mendelssohn's *trostvolle Aufklärung* (Altmann 1982), or consolatory Enlightenment, devoted also to practical aims. But he rejected the idea of an universal and monolithic reason which has to overcome traditions: in fact, in his thought there is a tension between innovation and past.

Furthermore, in this context it is questionable to what extent Mendelssohn was an *Aufklärer* since he didn't reject religious enthusiasm at all. But in doing that he was completely in line with the Germany of his day, where there was a spiritual atmosphere in which – in contrast with the French Enlightenment – religions played a peculiar role. As Cassirer (2007) noted, the medium of modern religious thought was Leibnizian philosophy as a search for the comprehension and reconciliation of opposite principles. The main tendency of the Enlightenment in the field of religion was to submit the positive tradition to the scrutiny of reason. During the eighteenth century an important debate emerged in Germany concerning the *theologia naturalis* first developed by Reimarus and followed by the tradition of Leibniz and Wolff, who had a big influence on the young Mendelssohn.² According to German theologians such as Spalding, Reimarus and so on, the *theologia naturalis* was an attempt to find the *Grundwahrheiten* that are common to all human religions: God, providence and the immortality of the soul.

But Mendelssohn wasn't only an »*Ikone des jüdischen Bürgertums*« in Germany (Schulte 2002, 205), but also a Jewish philosopher. There is in Mendelssohn the tendency, as later in Hermann Cohen, to consider Judaism within a philosophical framework by stressing its conjunction to reason.³ With regard to this conjunction we can say that Mendelssohn was a Jewish philosopher at least in two ways. He was not only one of the pioneers of German philosophy but also of modern Jewish thought. Mendelssohn embarked on outlined a prudent project of reforming the mentality, habits and approaches to Judaism that towards the end of the eighteenth century inspired the first Jewish enlightened movement, the Haskalah.

3. The Jews and the (Limits of) Enlightenment

If I may digress for a moment, I would like to say a few words about the Enlightenment and its impact on Jewish thought. One can define the Enlightenment as a theoretical and practical phenomenon, which is the result of a deeper and longer revolution begun in the seventeenth century or even before and devoted to

² »Die Tradition der *theologia naturalis* ging zurück auf den großen Leibniz und seinen Popularisator Christian Wolff. Sie hatte eine unwiderstehliche Anziehungskraft auf den jungen Mendelssohn, der bald ein Wolff-Anhänger werden und es für immer bleiben sollte. Seine bereitwillige Anerkennung der natürlichen Religion findet ihre Erklärung durch das, was er in die natürlichen Religion einbrachte, wie durch das, was sie ihm bot«. (Meyer 1992, 22)

³ But whereas Mendelssohn showed that there is no contradiction between Judaism and reason, Cohen (1919) went further and considered reason and Judaism to be synonymous. So Cohen made an attempt to establish a correlation between the universal truth of Judaism and the universal truth of philosophy.

the triumph of reason over superstition and to the overthrowing of old idols in order to construct a better world. As is well known, Kant (1913) in the *Answer to the Question, What is Enlightening?*, stated that it is a process or a passage from an age of minority to an age of reason. At the turn of the eighteenth century there was the idea of an universal representation of human beings together with natural justice and universal religion. Since universal human rationality is one of the pillars of the Enlightenment, Jews were supposed to be treated on equal terms with all other men and their segregation was regarded as unjustifiable. Tolerance of the religious Other is one of the main theoretical assumptions of the Enlightenment; however, there are always some limits in the definition of the Other as a group. Despite this atmosphere of theoretical tolerance, the stereotypes concerning the Jews were always the same: greed, avarice, superstition and exclusiveness. For instance, Voltaire – the champion of tolerance – described the Jews as inferior, irrational and immoral in many passages of his works (Voltaire 1995, 10:284).⁴

In Germany the first work which offered a different perspective on the situation of the Jews was Lessing's *Die Juden*, a play written in 1749 and published in 1754, in which he sheds light on the controversial issue of tolerance and humanity, and describes the Jews, in a sympathetic way, as independent and unconventional. When Lessing wrote this play, he hadn't met Moses Mendelssohn yet.⁵ Still, it's worth saying something about the fruitful intellectual bond between Lessing and Mendelssohn. In the Jewish thinker Lessing saw the living example of the Enlightenment against all prejudices towards the Jews. He was a brilliant intellectual, a virtuous and moral man and a great philosopher who was at the same time a German and a Jew. One of the best metaphors of tolerance and the Enlightenment is Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, modelled on his friend Moses Mendelssohn, since the hero of this »parable of tolerance« is a Jew (Mendes-Flohr 1991, 36).⁶ As Mendes-Flohr stated, historically and symbolically, »the marriage between *Judentum* and *Deutschtum*« was initially represented by their friendship.⁷

On the other hand, from a Jewish perspective, there was a serious attempt to reconfigure Judaism according to rationalism, as was the case with the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment, which was based on a deep interaction between Jews and the intellectual culture of the time. The Haskalah lasted from 1770s to 1880s and started in Germany among intellectuals close to Mendelssohn, even though it later spread to Eastern Europe. The members of Haskalah were *maskilim* (in the plural – the singular is *maskil*) and they pursued a Jewish cultural renewal in order

⁴ Concerning the Anti-Semitism in Voltaire, see Herzberg 1968.

⁵ Concerning all the polemics that this play raised, see Meyer 1992, 20–21.

⁶ However, this novel was interpreted in many different ways; in fact, as Dilthey later noted, the value of Nathan has nothing to do with his being a Jew. Even Rosenzweig considered the play as too messianic in its voicing a benighted vision of fraternity between Germans and Jews and a superficial concept of tolerance as a meeting between pure souls.

⁷ They met in 1754 and they became lifelong friend. Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche* – written in 1755 – are the result of their conversations about Shaftesbury and the role of feelings.

to be integrated into Europe. That's why it is generally considered the 'ideology of emancipation', but they launched a real *Kulturkampf*. (Dubin 1997)⁸ They sought to combine the Enlightenment and Judaism, even if Haskalah wasn't itself a kind of Enlightenment since it rejected any kind of atheism, deism or materialism. However, this tension was extremely fruitful for the emergence of a secular Jewish culture.

Incidentally, we might say that the Enlightenment was the period in which Jews potentially entered into modern Europe. But this is true only in theory, and not in practice. Alexander Altmann (1985, 21) defined Mendelssohn as »the archetypal German Jew«, »the great *Vorbild* [model] of the Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum* in Germany and beyond«. But for the German culture of the time it was extremely difficult to accept him as a Jew and an *Aufklärer*. This hostility is clear in Mendelssohn's lifelong polemics with many intellectuals of the time, in particular with Lavater.

4. Lavater – Mendelssohn: Can an Intellectual be a Jew?

Johann Caspar Lavater was a Swiss writer and a Calvinist pastor – the founder of physiognomic, an antirational, religious and literary movement. In 1769 he published a translation of parts of Bonnet's *La Palingénésie philosophique ou Idées sur l'état passé et sur l'état futur des êtres vivans*, a defence of Christianity, with a dedication to Mendelssohn. This public gesture challenged Mendelssohn either to refute Bonnet's arguments or to accept them, as Socrates would have done. This direct challenge was presumably aimed at Mendelssohn's conversion to Christianity.⁹

What emerged from this discussions? Briefly, one can say that most Christians at the time wished for a conversion of the Jews, in particular erudite Jews. At the heart of the polemic with Lavater there was a deeply-seated prejudice according to which an intellectual cannot be or cannot remain a Jew.¹⁰ Faced with this public challenge, Mendelssohn responded with an open letter through which he earned much more respect among Enlightenment intellectuals. He pointed to all the disadvantages of the Jews in a Christian society and called for concrete tolerance since there is no big difference between Judaism and Christianity. Mendelssohn

⁸ Their controversial manifesto, written by Hartwig Wessely in 1782 and entitled *Divrei Shalom ve-Emet* (Words of Peace and Truth), is based on a new cultural ideal according to which the Jews must know something beyond the Talmud: young Jews had to learn first of all the 'torah of the man' accessible with human reason and later the 'torah of God', which pertains to Jews alone. There was also an apologetic reason for this: as much as they tried to transform Jewish culture, they had to defend Judaism against attacks. To sum up, one can say that it acted on two fronts: internal criticism and external apology. As Altmann (1985) stated in his essay, to the eyes of the early generation of the Maskilim Mendelssohn was a kind of second Moses. Mendelssohn was one of the more moderate among the *maskilim*: his attempt was to rationalize Judaism through an harmonization between natural religion and revealed law.

⁹ Concerning Lavater-Mendelssohn-Streit, see Mendelssohn 1972, and the introduction of Simon Rawidowicz 1972, XI–LVII; Altmann 1973, 194–263; Tomasoni 2003, 21–49; Luginbühl-Weber 1994.

¹⁰ »Wie können Sie ein Gelehrter, ein Philosoph, Jude bleiben?« (Meyer 1992, 33)

(1770, 16–7) referred here to Locke's idea according to which only a religion which is a threat for the peace of society has to be banned.

One can say that Jerusalem was born from the fire of polemics. The first sources of this work were the *Gegenbetrachtungen – Counterreflections on Bonnet's Palingenesis* – forty page of comments on Bonnet's arguments where Mendelssohn already defined Judaism as a rational faith bound to a revealed ceremonial law. Furthermore, in 1782 a pamphlet entitled *The Search for Light and Right in a Letter to Herr Moses Mendelssohn occasioned by his remarkable Preface to Manasseh Ben Israel* – anonymously published and written by August Friedrich Cranz – gave Mendelssohn the opportunity to respond to the accusations according to which his arguments for liberty of conscience were not compatible with the religion of the Old Testament and were a step away from Judaism. In order to respond to these accusations, Mendelssohn wrote in the same year *Jerusalem*, his principal apologetic work.

5. *Jerusalem* – Mendelssohn's account of Judaism

This duality of Mendelssohn as a philosopher of the *Aufklärung* and as a Jewish thinker is evident in this book, where he stressed the difference between the domain of reason and that of revelation. In the first section of *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn distinguished between state and religion: while the former deals with power and authority, the latter doesn't. Hence, there was nothing to stop the Jewish integration into a modern state. In the second section Mendelssohn defined Judaism as a religion of behaviour rather than a religion of beliefs. Since Judaism doesn't impose any beliefs and is nothing but an historical and temporal truth, it does not conflict with the Enlightenment, reason in general and eternal truths in particular. According to Mendelssohn, Judaism is a rational understanding of God as well as a revelation of law and not doctrine. This is his fundamental synthesis between the Enlightenment and his conception of Judaism, which is peculiar – in his view – because it is a revealed legislation based on specific rules and prescription, but at the same time is also universal since it is a rational faith based on the principle of natural religion.

Judaism can also be seen as a tool for *Bildung* and the achievement of human well-being. No supernatural revelations of the truth, but a revelation of the law. Eternal truths are rational, which means that they are grasped by reason and written in the soul, through which we can also prove the existence of God.

»In truth, everything depends here also on the distinction between *believing* and *knowing*, between religious doctrines and religious commandments. To be sure, all human knowledge can be reduced to a few, fundamental concepts, which are laid down as the bases. The fewer these are, the more firmly the structure will stand. But laws cannot be abridged. In them everything is fundamental; and in this regard we may rightly say: to

us, all words of Scripture, all of God's commandments and prohibitions are fundamental.« (Mendelssohn 1983, 101–2)

The fundamental truths of rational religions are readily accessible to all men. But in addition to this rational truth, Judaism added historical truths. The peculiarity of Judaism is due to its laws and rules of conduct revealed by God. According to Mendelssohn the laws and the doctrines of Judaism are like its body and soul (Meyer 1992, 57). Even if Judaism offers human culture what reason provides on its own, there is a sort of revelation not of universal truth, but rather of certain historical truths – given by God to Israel at Sinai – and of the ceremonial laws.¹¹

»I return to my previous remark. Judaism boasts of no *exclusive* revelation of eternal truths that are indispensable to salvation, of no revealed religion in the sense in which that term is usually understood. Revealed *religion* is one thing, revealed *legislation*, another. The voice which let itself be heard on Sinai on that great day did not proclaim, »I am the Eternal, your God, the necessary, independent being, omnipotent and omniscient, that recompenses men in a future life according to their deeds.« This is the universal *religion of mankind*, not Judaism; and the universal *religion of mankind*, without which men are neither virtuous nor capable of felicity, was not to be revealed there.« (Mendelssohn 1983, 97)

Especially the role of ceremonial law is crucial in his account of Judaism. This performative role of rituals is one of the most interesting and innovative aspects of Mendelssohn's thought, because his idea of Judaism is connected to a philosophy of signs; hence, it is based on aesthetic theory. Ceremonial practice – according to Mendelssohn – evokes and promotes the achievement of virtue and happiness, because the legislation governing it has been revealed.¹² The Jewish ceremonial law was interpreted as a specific semiotic and a peculiar Grammatik of Judaism (Krochmalnik 1998, 247). As Michael Morgan stated, »the role of the ceremonial law is like a unifying bond, keeping the Jewish people together and alive«;¹³ in fact, it is deeply connected to the destiny of the Jewish theocracy, since it allowed that the Jews are still a nation. Jews are bound to a particular form of life and, since Judaism is authorized by reason and contributes to the state's goal of well-being, they can legitimately have a place in a liberal state.

¹¹ God's revelation to the Jewish people at Sinai really occurred as an act of divine providence. Revelation can only teach historical truths about Jewish biblical history, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the redemption from Egypt and the laws. In fact, even if he considered revelation unnecessary, Mendelssohn cannot be defined as a deist because he justified the revelation on Mount Sinai as the giving of laws before the whole Jewish people, who is still a witness to this revelation, whereas in Christianity only few people were witnesses to Jesus' miracles.

¹² See Krochmalnik 1999, 102: »Unter den Begriff Religionsästhetik lässt sich bei Mendelssohn eine ganze Reihe von Gegenständen subsumieren, die teils von der Religions- in die Kunstphilosophie hineinreichen ... Der Begriff der Religionsästhetik wirkt im jüdischen Kontext allerdings etwas befremdlichen ... Sein medien- und zeichenästhetischer Ansatz ist in der jüdischen Religionsphilosophie allerdings ein Novum und ist nur aus dem Kontext seiner aufklärerischen Kunstphilosophie verständlich.«

¹³ As Morgan (1981, 475) stated, there is a parallel between Spinoza's account of ceremonial law and Mendelssohn's idea. While the latter argues that the content of the law – as Spinoza had also argued – may change during the history, the law in itself does not have any historical dimension. But whereas Spinoza admitted that the law plays a political role, for Mendelssohn it is bound to a moral principles.

6. The *Bifurcated Soul of the German Jew*

Paul Mendes-Flohr (1991, 1–2) speaks of the »bifurcated soul of the German Jew« and states that Moses Mendelssohn »took the first step beyond the ghetto walls to join enlightened Germans in the pursuit of shared human concerns«. The process of assimilation – or, better, of acculturation – through *Kultur* and *Bildung* was a long process which implied a prolonged and fruitful exchange between Germans and Jews. On the other hand, there was a fracture in their identity which obliged them to deal with this kind of challenge. According to Aleida Assmann (1993, 91), the Jews were »the last guardians of the original German idea of *Bildung*«, because they adopted it as a means to shape their new identity, in order to gain a kind of bourgeois respectability. However, they were still Jews: they claimed the right to maintain their identity.

In what sense was Mendelssohn the first German Jewish intellectual? As Altmann (1985, 18) argued in his essay: »Mendelssohn was the first Jew to identify with the cultural concerns of Germany and to make the German tongue the medium of his literary creativity.« Also, his translation of the *Pentateuch* into High German could be interpreted as a metaphor of the encounter between two traditions. The seeds for the further ways of thinking about Judaism in a modern and philosophical way are to be found in Mendelssohn's Jerusalem.

However, this tension in Mendelssohn's soul was harshly criticized even by other Jewish thinkers. Among them, it's worth mentioning Rosenzweig (1984a, 566), who stated that this split in Mendelssohn's soul was »incomprehensible – *unbegreiflich*« to his contemporaries and revealed that 'thinking about' and 'thinking within' Judaism was a slippery slope. Even though Rosenzweig acknowledged the role and the contribution of the 'German Socrates'¹⁴, who had made explicit for the first time the issue of the relationship between Jews and Germans, he stated that Mendelssohn's attempt to combine Judaism and German culture was, in practice, a separation: an attempt to keep his Jewish and German identities apart. Mendelssohn's '*and*' was too weak, but this split was embodied by Mendelssohn himself who – by his own admission – was not »a unified human being«, as Rosenzweig remarks.¹⁵ As Rosenzweig and later on Mendes-Flohr stated, since Mendelssohn most of the Jews had to choose between the enlightened *Deutschtum* or anachronistic Judaism. Therefore, this bifurcation had significant consequences for the German-Jewish union. (Mendes-Flohr 1991, 82)

Rosenzweig's attempt was a continuation and an overcoming of Mendelssohn's project: to turn this '*or*' into '*and*', this alternative into a connection. In his *Apologetisches Denken* Rosenzweig rejects the notion of timeless and universal truth in order to define the strengths as well as the limits of Judaism:

¹⁴ Karl Philipp Moritz (1756–1793) named Mendelssohn the »zweite Sokrates« (Schulte 2002, 199).

¹⁵ »Mendelssohn ist gar kein einheitlicher Mensch, gar nicht, in keiner Weise ein Zukunftstyp. Ebenso wenig der Vergangenheitstyp. Auch nicht der Zeittyp. Denn er ist weder noch. Sondern es ist beides nebeneinander in ihm. Unbegreiflich für die Zeitgenossen. Wie sollten sie begreifen, daß hier nicht ein Mensch vor ihnen stand, sondern zwei. Beide dabei ohne Bewußtsein«. (Rosenzweig 1984a, 566)

»No one became a Jewish thinker within the private domain of Judaism. Thinking was not thinking about Judaism /.../; it was thinking within Judaism, learning – ultimately ornamental, rather than fundamental, thinking.«¹⁶

According to Rosenzweig, the crisis of modern Judaism is nothing but the passage from a genuine 'thinking within' to a distant 'thinking about', a passage which is due to an over-rationalized approach to Judaism – introduced by Mendelssohn – which turned it into an issue without real vitality.

However, I would rather say that the duality which Mendelssohn experienced as a Jew and an enlightened human being is the peculiar dialectical tension of Jewish philosophy itself. German Jewry or Jewish Germanness are both exercises in thinking within and beyond certain borders. That's why Mendelssohn's case is not just a story of bifurcation and separation, but the story of an encounter and connection. The bridge between two different culture is Mendelssohn's most important legacy, a legacy to which our modernity owes much more than is commonly assumed.

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¹⁶ Rosenzweig 1984b, 679: »Zum jüdischen Denker wurde man nicht im ungestörten Kreise des Judentums. Hier wurde das Denken nicht zum Denken über das Judentum, das eben das Allerselbstverständlichste, mehr ein Sein als ein 'tun', war, sondern zum Denken im Judentum, zum Lernen; also letzthin nicht zum fundamentalen, sondern zum ornamentalen Denken. Wer über das Judentum nachdenken sollte, der mußte irgendwie, wenn nicht seelisch, dann doch mindestens geistig, an die Grenze des Judentums gerissen sein.« The English translation that I quote is taken from Batnitzky 2012, 38.

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