CHAPTER THREE

LESSING IN JERUSALEM
MODERN RELIGION, MEDIEVAL ORIENTALISM, AND THE
IDEA OF PERFECTION

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It is not the eighteenth century but the nineteenth century that stands between Lessing and us. The nineteenth century’s obsession with history and commitment to ideology still looms so large in the political thinking of our times that we are inclined to regard entirely free thinking, which employs neither history nor coercive logic as crutches, as having no authority over us.

—Hannah Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing”

Advancing an idea that was to become common against the Enlightenment, the great nineteenth-century German Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz complained gently about Moses Mendelssohn. Simply put, the man whom Graetz held singlehandedly responsible for nothing less than the resurrection from the dead of the Jews and Judaism had no conception of history. In fact, however, the orientation of modern culture toward history and historical forms was not invented, as per Graetz, in the nineteenth century. The past was already alive in neoclassical and enlightenment culture. This is evident already among Mendelssohn’s contemporaries and in Mendelssohn’s own work as well. Images of the classical past—Greek, Roman, and Hebrew—were constructed as models upon which to secure freedom of thought and

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of culture and to foment opposition to Christian ecclesiastical authority in the present. Against medieval Christendom, German Jewish scholars in the nineteenth century such as Graetz, Abraham Geiger, and Michael Sachs will have found their classical ideal in the legend of a Jewish “golden age” in medieval Spain under Muslim rule. A highly stylized image of the Arab Orient will have lent itself to Jewish historians and their bourgeois readers as a fantasy platform upon which to model a free and open form of modern culture and modern Judaism. In the twentieth century, Franz Rosenzweig, Gershom Scholem, and Leo Strauss burrowed into the medieval past to create their own artful constructs (mytho-poetic, philosophical, political, religious, scholarly).

In this, modern Jewish thought was beaten to the medieval orient and to Islam by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the eighteenth-century dramatist and savant, friend of Mendelssohn, and antagonist to orthodox Lutheranism. Lessing set his most famous play, Nathan the Wise, at the political intersection of the three monotheistic religions in medieval Jerusalem under the enlightened rule of Saladin. In the pages to follow I argue that Lessing counts as one of the major architects of modern Jewish thought and Judaism; his play belongs to its canon as an important, even foundational outlier. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the warm regard for Lessing among German Jews was all but universal. It is well known that Nathan the Wise promotes the idea of tolerance, with Mendelssohn appearing as the work’s persona dramatis. While the story of the friendship between Lessing and Mendelssohn is profound and heartfelt, Lessing’s complex place at the foundation scene of modern religion and modern Jewish thought is conceptual and topographical, not sentimental. While their interests were ultimately to diverge, Lessing’s journey to the Orient and to Jerusalem constitutes nothing less than a condition of possibility for the renewal of Judaism promoted by Jerusalem, Mendelssohn own treatise on religion and power. The free and beautiful performance of ceremonial law Mendelssohn envisioned on the separation of politics from binding ecclesiastical authority could only have taken place at the historical fantasy place that Lessing built and which he was ultimately to leave behind.

Being fluid things, historical places make for funny platforms, especially when marshaled in the present for the sake of the future. In some cases, the platform might be made of flimsy factual stuff. In other cases, the historical researches depend on thick readings of pri-
mary archival or literary sources. Whether thin or thick, both sorts of construct are shot through as works of imagination. To readers influenced by postmodern and critical theory, this is already obvious. Less obvious and more curious is the use made of the medieval Islamic past by Lessing and by cultural critics or philosophers at work in his wake. Leaving to the side the suspicious reading proffered by Edward Said, what is the constructive or sympathetic use to which an image of this medieval past has been put in modern times? In defense of Lessing and the Enlightenment, I start with the premise that something good is sought for and found in the past. I argue that the good in Lessing’s case was nothing less than the capacious notion that the very idea of “perfection” consists in making place for everything and everyone. I then proceed to consider the epistemic status of an ahistorical image qua historical construct. My governing assumption in these pages is that artificial images are never purely arbitrary, even when these are fabricated theatrical inventions.

With my eye on Mendelssohn, I look primarily to Lessing and to Nathan the Wise in order to consider “the Orient,” “the medieval,” Judaism, and Islam as pivotal topoi from which to imagine modernity and modern religion in relation to the play of difference and to the idea of perfection in German enlightenment letters prior to Kant. Of all places, it is Jerusalem that provides Lessing “a counter image” of what perfection might look like, a state of mind and political place in which everything is harmonized—theory and practice, reason and religion, public and private. As observed by Matt Erlin in an essay on Mendelssohn, Jerusalem is that place where intellectual “enlightenment” and the arts of “culture” remains in balance, the dream of a society as a “harmonious totality.” To be sure, ancient Athens or republican Rome would have provided sites more in keeping with the spirit of Lessing’s own age, stamped by the prism of neoclassical manners against all things medieval, baroque, and rococo. One must consider, however, that Lessing’s choice to stage his play in Jerusalem under Muslim rule speaks to his own comedic impulse and to a logic of surface flows and truth. In this reading, imagination stands out as a fundamental working tool with which to articulate the compact

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between pluralism and religion in German enlightenment culture. No

doubt reflecting my own contemporary interest in Lessing, the image

of the medieval orient staged by Lessing is marked by a relaxed, ironic

concourse. It is a construct one might hope to recoup today, when

the future of such concourse seems so much in doubt among critics

arguing against liberalism and liberal religion from both the right and

the left.

In the second part of this essay, I turn to assess sympathetically the

unreality that marks the constructed, ahistorical, imagistic character of

Lessing’s enlightenment historical-oriental fancy. Obviously Lessing’s

Jerusalem does not represent a precise historical truth about a real

place in time. Indeed, “enlightenment artifice” is the defining creative

prescription animating enlightenment notions of human perfection.

In particular, my attention to aesthetic artifice stands as an alternative
to the naturalism and natural law privileged in Leo Strauss’s inter-

pretation of medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy.4 As I note in a

discussion of Strauss, his acknowledging that the idea of natural law
ultimately depends upon “vision” means that his own project is no less
a work of imagination than Lessing’s play. Strauss’s vision of the past
proves to be more knowing than was Lessing’s as to the literary history
upon which Strauss then proceeded to build more closed and rigid
philosophical concepts. It is this very rigidity that gives cause to recon-
sider more capacious conceptions of religion, philosophy, politics, and
history. Unreal and artificial as it is, the image of Lessing in Jerusalem
will in the end commend itself against more hard-headed and sober
models of religion and politics offered by thinkers such as Strauss.

Jerusalem

The liberalism of Lessing and Mendelssohn was based on the concept
of “perfection” conceived under the impact of Leibniz and Wolff as
an inclusive universal. The philosophical apparatus for this was pre-
sented by Mendelssohn, in the eleventh letter of “On the Sentiments,”
where he identified three sources of pleasure. Appearing in this order,

4 The focus in German Enlightenment culture on artificial signs runs against the

grain of Charles Taylor’s analysis of “enlightenment naturalism” in his Sources of the

they are (1) “sameness in multiplicity,” namely beauty, followed by (2) "harmony in multiplicity," which is intellectual perfection, followed by (3) the “improved condition of the state of our body,” which is sensuous gratification. Perfection is an intellectual virtue intimately bound up with these other two sources of pleasure, the pleasures of beauty and of the body.⁵ Unlike beauty, which demands the homogenization of a complex manifold into simple forms (like the simple metaphysical truths discussed in Jerusalem), intellectual perfection requires the preservation of that very multiplicity. Perfection for Mendelssohn, as it was for Wolff, is harmonization of concepts, rational cohesion, agreement, that perspicacity by which one comes to understand why things are next to each other this way and not that way.⁶ Mendelssohn explained, “In [these] determinations nothing must be superfluous, nothing dissonant, nothing missing.”⁷ Perfection, then, is the harmonization of everything, of concepts grounded in each other and bound up with a final purpose that binds all the parts together. The perfection of an object (a body, the world) will contain even the ugliest shapes, which “do not cease to be perfect...do not cease to contribute to the general final purpose as they can.”⁸

In the conception of perfection articulated by Mendelssohn and Lessing, we see the development of a feature characteristic of the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition—the careful sifting between the parts of a composition or system into more and more elemental base-units (eternal truths and historical truths, the spatial arts and the temporal arts, pure reason from practical reason)—and then their re-combination into a new aesthetic totality. In the harmonizing schema learned from Leibniz, the greatest possible compossibility constitutes perfection, which, for Mendelssohn and Lessing remained the ultimate goal of everything—philosophy, politics, religion, ethics, art.⁹ Without windows, the Leibnizian monad constitutes a simple, autonomous substance that contains within its structure an infinity of monads. But

⁶ For Wolff’s definition of perfection, see Thomas Saine, The Problem of Being Modern or the German Pursuit of Enlightenment from Leibniz to the French Revolution (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 137.
⁷ Mendelssohn, Philosophical Writings, 23; cf. 28.
⁸ Ibid., 24.
⁹ Ibid., 154.
the monadic substance enters into compounds with other monads.\textsuperscript{10} Absolutely infinite perfection thus refers to a condition in which there are no limits or bounds or negation or contradictions.\textsuperscript{11} As noted by Cassirer, the system of a pre-established harmony was not intended to reduce the many to the one. Instead, Leibnizian metaphysics is dynamic and open to infinite variation, able to “comprehend and reconcile the most antagonistic principles” under a single system.\textsuperscript{12}

Integrating the human body and the body politic (including tradition, law, and civic and religious rites) into a metaphysical perspective, this conception of perfection is what sustained Enlightenment optimism. In a world invested by innate ideas and procreative powers, the state of nature is not without certain rights. With Shaftesbury, Mendelssohn also objected to the positions staked out by both Locke and Hobbes. He opposed the strict separation of church and state proposed by the former since, in his view, temporal and eternal welfare are bound up together.\textsuperscript{13} And unlike Hobbes, Mendelssohn distinguished between might and right, arguing that contracts based on fear and powerlessness do not yield security. More important, for Mendelssohn, the state of nature is not without imperfect rights and duties. In a state of nature, one in fact has the right to expect succor from one’s neighbor and must meet obligations regarding injury, marriage, and the education of children.\textsuperscript{14} One is bound there to others, albeit amorphously and without the power of civil society to enforce those obligations and rights, and to make them binding and perfect. On this natural basis society is built with all its artifice, including the laws, constitutions, and civil and religious rites that both Shaftesbury and Mendelssohn invoked as essential building blocks upon which to build up from there a perfectible polis.

This brings us to the plot of \textit{Nathan the Wise} and the image of the Orient. In the plot, a Templar knight had impulsively endangered his own life in order to save the life of Recha, the daughter of Nathan, the hero of the play. About the Templar we eventually learn that he

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., #41, #40, #45.
\item\textsuperscript{13} Moses Mendelssohn, \textit{Jerusalem, or, On religious power and Judaism}, translated by Allan Arkush (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983), 39.
\item\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 36–37.
\end{itemize}
is the sole survivor of a massacre of Crusader soldiers at the hand of Saladin, and that he was saved by the Sultan because of an uncanny family resemblance, just as we learn about Nathan that he survived the murder of his family at the hands of Christians, and that Recha is in fact his adopted daughter. The play begins with a grateful Nathan, the personification of Enlightenment wisdom, seeking out the Templar. Overcoming the young knight’s hatred for Jews and Judaism, Nathan must force him to be his friend. He will, in turn, also overcome the scheme of the cash-strapped Saladin. By overcoming Saladin and his sister Sittah’s plot against him, the purpose of which was to seize badly needed capital, the wisdom of Nathan will compel them to be his friends, completing the circle of amity. Minor supporting characters include Daya, an ignorant Christian woman in the employ of Nathan who conspires to bring Recha back to Europe, the wicked Christian Patriarch of Jerusalem who wants to murder Nathan, as well as a goodhearted Christian friar and a sagacious dervish named al-Hafi, both of whom seek their own particularistic forms of private religious enlightenment.

While much has been made about and against the ideal of “tolerance” in Lessing’s play, the diverse cast of characters and relevant philosophical contexts speak, in my estimation, more importantly to the idea of perfection. In *Nathan the Wise*, the idea of perfection drives, inter alia, the operative force of a common humanity correcting narrow and violent notions of sectarian identity, the simple human impulse to save a stranger’s life, the virtues of friendship, and the stirrings of the heart. Lessing was no naif. As with Shaftesbury and Mendelssohn, a more perfect state proceeds to encompass larger units into a single compass. But the element of coercion suggests that vision is based not so much on nature, but on an artifice whose purpose is to make (force) an imperfect nature to become more perfect.

Set in medieval times, Jerusalem is portrayed by Lessing as an artificial environment, a contrivance at the heart of Enlightenment aesthetics. Concerning the plot I say more below. For now, I want to note a fundamental tension that drives one of the most famous moments in the play, as well as most liberal accounts of religious truth. On the one hand, the action in the play stays at the level of surface appearance. Challenged by Saladin to identify the true religion, Nathan tells the famous parable of the three rings. A father owns a ring that his three sons covet. So he makes two copies, each so perfect as to be indistinguishable from each other and from the original. Unable to overcome
their enmity, the brothers go to a judge, who advises them that the
genuine ring will make its wearer beloved. Each brother should there-
fore seek to emulate the father’s unprejudiced affection. As for the
final verdict, the brothers are told to wait for the messiah. And yet, not
everything in Nathan the Wise remains at the level of simple surface in
that the drama within it is motivated by concern with the truth, with
an ontology of identities. There are secrets. Things “are” not what they
seem, especially about the young folk, Recha and the Templar.

Far from seeing an image of a perfect polis, critics of the play, as do
progressive critics of liberalism and Enlightenment, tend to focus upon
the idea of tolerance, which they see as a mask for hegemony. For these
critics, liberalism is too powerful and too violent (unlike conservative
critics like Schmitt and Strauss who used to argue that liberalism is not
powerful enough!). To be sure, Mendelssohn also understood the trap
that proponents of alleged toleration set for minorities whose differ-
ence they seek to quash by subsuming it into a false universal, which
turns out to be just another, albeit larger and dominant, particularity.
Contemporary critics of Enlightenment take Mendelssohn’s argument
one step further. Their critique is a Foucauldian argument, according
to which there is no way to escape the rigors of power. For them, there
is no way to integrate enlightenment and whatever form of subaltern
human difference matters to the critic, be it Jewish difference in the
eighteenth century or sexual difference in the twentieth century. They
argue that there is no such thing as neutral space or neutral common
ground, because emancipation requires assimilation, constituted as the
elimination of public difference.15

This putative failure to account for hegemony is supposed to be a
mark against Enlightenment thought. But the critics fail to see a sec-
ond fundamental tension driving Lessing’s play, the model of a type of
pluralistic Enlightenment culture that promotes mutable forms of dif-

15 Against Lessing in particular, see Richie Robertson, “‘Dies hohe Lied der Dul-
dung? The Ambiguities of Toleration in Lessing’s ‘Die Juden’ and ‘Nathan der Weise,’”
Modern Language Review 93, no. 1 (January 1998): 105–120; Meno Spann, Der
“Nathan” im heutigen Literaturunterricht,” German Quarterly 12, no. 3 (May 1939):
153–159; Aamir R. Mufti Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the
For more general criticism of the idea of tolerance, see Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann
Pellegrini, Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance (New
York: New York University Press, 2003); Wendy Brown, Regulating Aversion: Toler-
ance in the Age of Identity and Empire (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,
2006).
While perfection requires difference, there is no such “thing” as an immutable difference in an artificial environment. On the one hand, cultural difference has to matter. Without cultural difference, there is no play to Lessing’s play, no play in the culture. Religions are grounded in history, faith in history, and Nathan understands that we tend to doubt least our people’s own history, the people who love us and deceive us only when necessary. In order for Nathan’s parable to work, each of the brothers must believe in his own ring. On the other hand, cultural difference does not matter. The main thing is not to believe that there is only one ring. Did Lessing intend the first truth (embracing particularity) to succumb to the second truth (rejecting particularity)? That may have been Lessing’s own ultimate intention, as we see below in our discussion of his essay “The Education of the Human Race.” However, one could also conclude that in the perfection presupposed by Enlightenment sociability, toleration and friendship cannot presuppose complete or absolute identity, just significant points of overlap by which to finesse the differences that continue to otherwise separate people.

In Lessing’s play, Jerusalem is a political space. As such, it is probably not the place from which to solve the problem of hegemony. It may even be that no such solution is possible, given the possible constitutive relation between political power and cultural majority. Clearly, the Enlightenment was not an innocent thing. That Lessing’s Jerusalem is a place of autocratic governance is the main point made by Christiane Bohnert. With her attention focused on Saladin, it is plain to see how Nathan indeed colludes with authority. According to Bohnert, the world of despotism is the world of particularism in which Jews and Christians are intense rivals, in which status depends upon social rank, and in which legitimacy derives from the legal status of its ruler. Reason is tool of pragmatic governance. At the end of the play, according to Bohnert, only Saladin and Sittah are happy. Handing out embraces, Saladin is left “in possession of the stage.”

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17 Ibid., 234.
19 Ibid., 359–360. In my estimation, Bohnert’s analysis falters only insofar as her case is overargued. It is clearly an overstatement to declare that in “the world of
Hegemony, however, is never as stable as it seems. It may be that Bohnert thinks little of the very notion of a magnanimous, political sovereign, and so fails to see this in Saladin. Without the interdiction of the State, no matter how imperfectly motivated (states must always take an interest in money), without Saladin (who is “neutral”—i.e., neutral as regards Judaism and Christianity), Nathan would have died a violent death at the hands of the Christian Patriarch of Jerusalem, the principal villain of the play (modeled on Lessing’s real-life antagonist Hauptpastor Johann Melchior Goetze). The common space, as the critics of liberalism correctly note, is never neutral or un-invested in power and normativity. It remains, however, just as true that power and normativity are never stable. They are more open-ended than commonly argued by the critics who tend to focus either on (1) examples of liberal illiberality (coercion exercised at the expense of this or that group at any one particular moment of time) or on (2) the political power of social conservatives, whose inclusion and influence both instantiate while historically undermining the “liberal” tolerance at the basis of modern constitutional government. Neglected by the progressive critique of liberalism is what Lessing recognized as the power of law to force more powerful parties to adapt to new social realities and the power of friendship to transform the social contract.

What, then, is one to say about those political differences that cannot be sublimated into liberal order? What about the friend/enemy distinction posited by Carl Schmitt as the essence of the political? These were critical questions especially facing readers of Lessing’s play responding to totalitarianism in the polarizing contexts of the 1930s and 1940s. Writing in 1939 in the German Quarterly, Meno Spann argued that Nathan der Weise is unable to make recognize genuine political difference. Writing two years later in response to Spann, Harold Lenz pointed out that Lessing knew well enough that the difference between Nathan and the Patriarch is in fact irreconcilable. One could

Enlightenment” neither God nor state has a future (349) (cf. Cassirer, who devotes an entire chapter to religion in The Philosophy of Enlightenment). Moreover, the “world of despotism” so aptly described in her essay with its mix of pragmatism and hegemony describes exactly “the world of the Enlightenment,” as most critics of the Enlightenment see it today. In contrast to Bohnert, David Hill is more right to note the educability of all the main characters. People can change. Hill argues that Saladin goes through the education process and through him the play’s audience. See Hill’s introduction to G. E. Lessing Nathan der Weise, edited by David Hill, (Hull, England: New German Studies, German Dept., Hull University, 1988), 31–32.
add as well the differences between Daya and Recha, and between Schmitt and Lessing themselves. As Lenz writes, the differences that cannot be brought together in the play include those between human versus antihuman values, inclusiveness versus exclusiveness, dynamic versus static schemas. The overriding difference between eighteenth-century Enlightenment and conservative critics of liberalism writing in the twentieth century is that the critics conceive political difference on a single rigid principle, such as natural law or the structural antagonism between friend/enemy, Athens/Jerusalem, and so on. For Lessing and liberalism, most forms of difference are not irreducible. Eventually these can be made to give way to each other in more pluralistic positionings of complimentary and competing goods—inclusion, justice, equality, freedom.

This brings us back to the political in Lessing’s Jerusalem. In radical rightwing and leftwing political thought, the political locks down every aspect of culture. In contrast, liberal models tend to respect boundaries between and facilitate passages across different types of space. For Mendelssohn, the political concepts in part I of Jerusalem let out into the religiously performative aesthetic space of part II, with its discussion of ceremonial “law.” In much the same way, Lessing’s Jerusalem is open to other types of placing. For him, Jerusalem is a political space, not a religious one. Nathan’s friend the dervish Al-Hafi leaves for the Ganges, while the simple and goodhearted friar opts for monastic life at Mt. Tabor. Sympathetic characters, they go their separate way in pursuit of more particular forms of religious enlightenment uncorrupted by the court intrigue that, for his part, Nathan seeks to master and to transform.

Instead of basing politics on tragedy and trauma, Lessing’s political vision takes shape as comedy. It is humor that constitutes the sine qua non for the type of perfection promoted by Lessing and other eighteenth-century writers. Indeed, for Lessing, the jokes at work in his play can only work in medieval Jerusalem.

Regarding the related connection between humor and religion, Shaftesbury pointed out how the social use of humor is its ability to rub off sharp corners. In his view, humor is the best security against

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21 Lord Shaftesbury, Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 31.
unrestrained enthusiasm and “the best foundation for piety and true religion,” as it is only due to ill humor that people come to think that the world is at the mercy of devilish powers; and only due to ill humor do people come to atheism.22 For Shaftesbury, Jesus stands out as a paragon of good humor in his “repartees, reflections, fabulous narrations or parables, similes, comparisons and other methods of milder censure and reproof.”23 As for the institution of Christianity, he finds it to be, in the main, a good-humored religion, albeit vulnerable to sad representations and melancholy. And while he declines the temptation to cite instances of Christian good humor, lest he be forced to cite the more melancholic side of the balance, about Judaism, Shaftesbury hesitated less.24 The fact that the Jews have “the least good humor of any people in the world” he saw as “very apparent.” Despite his own kindly disposition, the lawgiver Moses was compelled to threaten them with blood and massacre. For all that, Shaftesbury goes on to note that Scripture indicates that the first kings and princes of Israel enjoyed music, and even play and dance as holy appointment and divine right. Observing that Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Job, and “other entire volumes” are full of “humorous images and jocular wit,” Shaftesbury goes into great detail narrating how God lovingly exhorts the melancholic prophet Jonah into good humor.

As for the joke in Nathan the Wise, Recha is clearly the linchpin. Her ultimate subject position is left open and vulnerable. We learn that after the murder of his first family, Nathan had adopted her as an infant foundling from a friend who is at first presumed to be Christian. Everything comes together in this perfect, contrived world once the truth is revealed. Nathan claims to have raised Recha in no particular faith. Leave aside that the claim rings completely false (after all, Nathan gave to her a Jewish name). The question still stands. Who will claim Recha, Judaism or Christianity? The servant Daya wants her for “Europe.” She wants Recha to marry the Templar knight who will save her for Christianity. Only time will tell. Noting how Christendom is built on Judaism, the good friar admits to Nathan, “Our Lord Jesus was a Jew himself.” Moved by the story of Recha’s adoption, he declaims, “O Nathan, Nathan! You’re a Christian soul! By God a better

22 Ibid., 13.
23 Ibid., 390.
24 Ibid., 393–394.
Christian never lived.”25 Jesus the Jew, Nathan the Christian. These are the inversions that spin Lessing’s comedy, a comedy hedged in by the bleak realities of massacre and the omnipresent threat of murder.26

A fraught subject position, to be a Jew and not a Jew is nevertheless not as “untenable” or “impossible” as claimed by Aamir Mufti in Enlightenment in the Colony.27 Certainly, it is much harder to be a woman than a Jew in Lessing’s play.

Lessing’s world is a world without mothers. Who, after all, is looking out for Recha? This question is not Lessing’s. They belong to us late modern or postmodern readers, for whom the world in Lessing’s play will appear as a helter-skelter place. A young woman, the daughter, stands out as the weak point, the question mark (as opposed to Nathan, who provides the play its desperate pivot). Clearly Recha does not control her own fate. While this is also true of the Templar knight, his fate is not the object of concern. As asked by Susan Gustafson, what then do fathers want in Lessing’s plays? They want an exclusive relation with one’s daughter. Fathers want to form with their daughters into dyads from which the mother is excluded. Girls are intended to project their father’s values, the true object of pity for Lessing being the father threatened by the loss of his daughter.28 But as Gustafson notes, the absent mother is anything but absent in Lessing’s work. She is everywhere, in the form of mother figures, maternal bodies, and fragments of the mother’s body. Indeed, one could add to Gustafson’s critique and note that Jerusalem as a place represents one such protecting matrix figure that Lessing himself was unable to recognize as such.

So what then about Recha? The final inversion might stand in as the punch line of the entire play. The joke involves both her and the Templar. Now complicating the plot, the friar reveals to Nathan that the young Templar, who by now has fallen in love with Recha, is the

25 Lessing, Nathan the Wise, 256–257.
26 Mufti notes the dark undercurrents under the surface in Nathan, threatened and threatening forms of difference (Enlightenment in the Colony, 43). More charitably to Lessing, Steven D. Martinson observes how in serious comedy the comical and potentially tragic are always interrelated and interpenetrate each other. Martinson’s argument is based on Lessing’s play Minna von Barnhelm, but the insight applies just as well to Nathan. Cf. Steven D. Martinson, “Chaos and Comedy: Lessing’s Theory and Practice,” in Lessing Yearbook XXXIV (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003), 21–34.
27 Mufti, Enlightenment in the Colony, 52.
son of one Wolf von Filnek, and that the young man's true name is "Leu von Filnek." And Recha is now revealed to be the Templar's sister. Her true name is Blanda von Filnek. As for senior von Filnek, long since deceased, we now learn his preferred language was Persian, and he turns out to have been... the Sultan's brother, Assad! This explains the family resemblance that had moved Saladin to spare the Templar's life after a battle back-shadowing the events played out in the drama. It thus transpires that the Templar and Recha are neither Christian nor Jewish. They are Muslim! And that is the joke, I think, as Lessing understood it. It makes no real difference to any of the wise and good-hearted characters. With the circle of amity complete, the Templar is compelled to love Saladin, the very Saladin who slaughtered his compatriots, since the Templar now knows that he and Recha are Saladin's nephew and niece.

In a perfect world, in which all parts cohere politically and metaphysically, difference makes the difference that makes no difference. That is the essence of both perfection and comedy. The convivial atmosphere of Nathan the Wise belies the bleak political background of violence and mayhem upon which it is founded. That background provides the political edge undergirding the comedy, including the fact that Nathan must force his friendship upon others. As I argue below, this fraught social harmony could only have been staged in a medieval environment in the Orient, because only there is it possible to create the triad of Christian-Jew-Muslim. More parts contribute to a greater perfection. That is to say, both a perfect polis and comedy demand genuine difference. In a comedy, difference may in fact be a matter of secondary importance, but to overcome difference is, perforce, to reassert it. Otherwise, there is no joke, no matter how bleak the foundation. And the play will not work, and not just the play, but the entire concept of perfection and political life upon which it builds.

The philosophical and theological foundations upon which all this depends were evidenced in the best-known instance of Lessing's metaphysical meanderings, his late essay “The Education of the Human Race.” This peregrination also ends with a joke, a little tongue in cheek. Lessing here set the old medieval tension between Scripture and reason on a temporal frame, positing the need for revelation as a tool with which to instruct crude humanity as to the truths of reason. Such truths cannot be taught all at once. From the ancient Hebrews to Jesus, one revelation supersedes the less perfect one that came before it. The argument is both for and against Christianity in relation to
Judaism. Christianity is more spiritual than Judaism, which is associated not with arid intellectualism but rather with sensualism. In turn, a new gospel will one day surpass the revelation of Jesus. Revelation teaches morality, first to the Jews whose morality is guaranteed by the promise and threat of material rewards and punishments; and then to two teachings, taught by Jesus. These are, one, morality for its own sake and, two, the reality of "another true life." True morality and the immortality of the soul were notions too refined for crude "sensual Jews," who had no conception of either.

Mendelssohn expressed deep hurt in Jerusalem about his friend's essay, while arguing that humanity itself is not subject to progress. He maintained that perfection subsists only for individual persons endowed with immortal souls, whereas history itself gives way to more cyclical patterns of ebb and flux. What Mendelssohn did not see was that Lessing's interest was not Judaism, Jesus, or even morality. His friend's intent was more esoteric. The acquisition of moral purity of heart, namely the love of virtue for its own sake, was itself meant to serve instrumentally the "the ultimate stages of enlightenment and purity." How is perfect enlightenment possible for the individual person? How can a person be a "sensual Jew" and a "spiritual Christian," or "have overtaken both in this same life?" Positing the transmigration of souls, Lessing supposed that each individual soul, born and then reborn, comes back to acquire new knowledge and accomplishments, submitting to the same education enjoyed by the entire human race. Not uncharacteristically, Lessing ends with a quip. Why not? "Or am I not to return because too much time would be lost in doing?—Lost? And what exactly do I have to lose. Is not the whole of eternity mine?"

Some Jewish readers might be tempted to fear against Lessing that Recha is now lost to Nathan and to Judaism forever. Mufti and other critics of the Enlightenment claim that at the end of the play Nathan is left unrelated and alone. I would argue, however, that the conclusion of the play proves more ambiguous. At play’s end, Nathan now claims

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30 Ibid., 239–240.
31 Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony*, 54. On Nathan’s alleged loneliness at the end of the play, see Bohnert, "Enlightenment and Despotism," 359. Likewise, Gustafson claims that Nathan recedes from view (*Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers*, 259). In his contrast, Graetz does not seem to care and refers freely to Recha as "an abandoned..."
the Templar as his son since he is now revealed to be his daughter’s brother. Furthermore, the play’s penultimate embrace is between Saladin and the Templar, indicating the degree to which Nathan the Wise is not even a story about Christians and Jews but about Christians and Christianity. The ultimate embrace is the one that ends as the curtain falls “amid silent embraces on all sides,” and there is no reason to suspect that Nathan has been excluded from this circle.32 Certainly there is no indication that Recha is no longer Nathan’s daughter just because she is now Saladin’s niece. As David Hill comments, the future for humanity lies outside the play.33 The only thing we know about Recha is that she cannot marry the Templar, which resolves both the problem of incest and the problem of endogamy in one fell swoop.

Rather than insist on either a happy or unhappy ending for Nathan and Judaism, it is more true to say that Lessing’s play highlights the different possibilities open to minority cultures in the modern world. Enlightenment and Emancipation entail what for some will be the anxious possibility that one’s biological or adopted children may one day come to differ profoundly from oneself. Parents do not enjoy exclusive control over or claim to progeny. About this, one might note two points. The issue for Lessing is not whether Recha will be Jewish or not Jewish, as it is for the Jewish critic or for Mufti, the critic of colonialism. Lessing could not have cared less. At issue is whether she will be Jewish or Christian, and to this Lessing’s answer is simply “neither,” nor does she have to choose. This remains a prescient prediction for an eighteenth-century writer. A second point is this. It is worth considering the relaxed optimism and confidence struck by Lessing. Jewish cultural critics worried about Recha’s fate might consider that the play remains open-ended. One can imagine any number of possibilities open to the characters after the play. In the eternity entertained by Lessing, there might be alternative worlds. One can imagine worlds in which there are mothers, or worlds in which Judaism or Christianity or Islam disappears or worlds in which they take on robust shape, worlds in which all kinds of happy or unhappy endings are possible. Instead of worrying about the fate of Recha as an object, the idea of perfection demands less anxious, more open orientations toward

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32 Lessing, Nathan the Wise, 275.
33 Hill, Nathan der Weise, 34.
different possible types of futures created by subjects, even if those subjects happen to be women. What does one have to lose?

*Medieval*

If Lessing was so modern in orientation, why did he select medieval Jerusalem as the setting of his play? And if the setting is in fact as contrived as it seems to be, what are we to make about the relation between history and fantasy, in *Nathan the Wise* and elsewhere? The first question is slightly easier to answer than the second. David Hill contends that Orient is used to create distance. The image of the Orient sets up an alternative reality in opposition to European society and Christian intolerance, providing a literary setting for a safe discussion of European ideas. But again, why not stage the play in Athens or Rome? In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century letters, after Winckelmann’s penetrating explorations of ancient art, that is where one might have expected to seek out a platform for the performance of ideal perfection. Here we see just how canny Lessing was in setting his play in a place dear to Jews and Christians under Muslim rule. Only in Jerusalem could he meet the problem of Christendom head-on because only there is it possible to introduce a third mediating principle, namely Islam. Jerusalem is a place where Jews, Christians, and Muslims mix under the wise leadership of Saladin. Only in the Land of Promise can a Templar knight fall in love with the Jewess Recha, Nathan’s daughter. While not the land of “wonder,” Jerusalem is a place of “wondrous things.” “Can it be otherwise?” the Templar asks himself; “the whole world comes together here.” Only there could Lessing imagine not just the coordination of dyads (German-Greek; Greek-Jew; Jew-German), but triads (Jew-Christian-Muslim).

The answer to our second query is more complicated. The first place to look for its solution is enlightenment sign-theory. In enlightenment aesthetic theory, the artificial, unreal, or unnatural character of Lessing’s medieval construct would actually have been a mark in its favor. For instance, while Mendelssohn appreciated the value of natural

34 Ibid., 39.
35 Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, 237.
36 Ibid., 242. Hill also notes how Jerusalem is a place where different people can meet on stage (40).
signs, he understood that their value could only be penultimate. Pride of place went instead to the arbitrary sign. Regarding the natural sign, Mendelssohn defined it as one in which “the combination of the sign with the subject matter signified is grounded in the very properties of what is designated.” An example includes the way in which the passions are connected with certain motions of the body and with certain sounds and gestures.37 These thoughts from Mendelssohn’s essay on the “Main Principles of Fine Arts and Sciences” are a central part of a theory of imitation that goes back to Winckelmann. An aesthetic representation must be faithful to nature. To acquire a desired natural effect it must “imitate.” At the same time, as per Winckelmann, the aesthetic representation must go beyond nature, reflecting the artist’s subjective perfection of soul which is displayed in the work, and which is more excellent than imitation or the nature it imitates. Art beautifies nature. It elevates above common nature. In that ideal, beauty is abstracted from nature, and color becomes in art more vivid and more narrow in range.38

In contrast to the natural sign, artificial signs are the ones that “by their very nature have nothing in common with the designated subject matter, but have nonetheless been assumed as signs for it.” These include the “articulated sounds of all languages, the letters, the hieroglyphic signs of the ancients, and…allegorical images.”39 By means of the artificial sign in poetry, rhetoric, and even painting, Mendelssohn claimed, “Our knowledge becomes visible.” “Objects are represented to our senses as though they were right in front of us, and the subordinate powers of our mind are deceived since they frequently forget the signs and believe themselves to be catching sight of the subject matter itself.”40 Indeed, the superiority of artificial signs is the capacity they give to the poet to express everything with them: “All the beauties of nature, its colors, figures, and sounds, the cohesiveness of the immense system of the world, the commandments of God and his infinite properties, all the inclinations and passions of our soul…. All this can serve as material for poetic inspiration.”41

37 Mendelssohn, Philosophical Writings, 177.
38 Ibid., 174–176.
39 Ibid., 177.
40 Ibid., 178.
41 Ibid.
Identical assertions can be made about the Orient in Lessing’s play. “Jerusalem” represents an artificial sign. The stage itself was meant to charm, with its palm trees, camels, rings, gold treasure, Saladin, Sittah, their palace, and other oriental notes. The play itself conveys an exotic sensation, and not just in the stage design. Its drama unfolds not here. Its action is someplace else, geographically. Temporally, it belongs less to the present than to the past and future. Considered in this light, Nathan the Wise serves as a political object lesson, a practical compliment to the unreality evidenced in Lessing’s theoretical speculations regarding metempsychosis or alternative worlds in “The Education of the Human Race.” These speculations, nestled deep in the imagination, were carried along with the idea of perfection in Enlightenment thought. Insofar as they press beyond the limits of reason, they soften any putative difference between “modernity” and “the medieval.” As noted by Lieselotte Kurth-Voigt in her study on this theme, all kinds of occult speculation were made plausible by the phenomena of sympathy between persons and instantaneous affection, the knowing in recollection of things one couldn’t possibly know and metaphysical notions peculiar to the time prior to Kant that nature is continuous, admitting no radical transitions or ruptures. This was strange Enlightenment, like contemporary New Age religion. Lessing playfully ascribed fantastic powers to human consciousness, the positing of abilities to acquire new physical senses, to transverse time. Apparently there was more to rationalism in the eighteenth century than mere reason. For both Lessing and Mendelssohn, Jerusalem constitutes a politically elastic micro-cosmos in an expanding, mentalist universe.

In what way, however, is this modern occidental imaginary so unlike the medieval one? I would like to venture this tenuous historical link to the Orient in Lessing’s play. As observed by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, citing the work of Dov Schwartz, the intermingling of reason and occult speculation was already at play in the thought of such medieval rationalists as Ibn Sina, the Brethren of Purity, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Moses Ibn Ezra, and other medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers. What is of interest here is the combination of rationalism with belief in astrology and astral magic. As observed by Tirosh-Samuelson, during the

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end of the thirteenth century and throughout the fourteenth century, "astrology and astral magic thrived precisely among the rationalists who sought to understand how the sublunar world works." In terms of metaphysical speculation, what will distinguish Lessing from those curious (heterodox?) paragons of medieval rationalism is the former's tongue in cheek? But what occurs behind the joke? Coupled with reason, fantastic elements are pronounced no more clearly than here in Lessing's articulation of an enlightenment conception of perfection.

Unhistorical to be sure, there is enough basis in the historical record to suggest that as historical fiction Lessing's play is worth a second look. The persistence of fantastic occult elements in the work of reason is just one instance of an overlap between modern and medieval. In Nathan the Wise, that overlap is political, not speculative. To be sure, recent historians have sought to complicate the myth of a golden age of science, tolerance, and reason in classical Arab cultures. Comparing Jewish life under Muslim and Christian rule, historian Mark Cohen shows how Muslim authority in the medieval world maintained its own superiority over Christians and Jews. To violate what was a strongly articulated social-political-religious hierarchy was to incur risking the violent wrath of the majority. But because this was a hierarchy, a relatively secure place was found for the Jews in the system. In daily life it was often not impossible to cross hierarchical boundaries and even participate as "virtual equals" with Muslims of similar social class.

Cohen's impeccably judicious study suggests that there is just enough in the historical record to assert that a Muslim milieu was the only one in the medieval world from which to imagine the co-fraternity of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. As is well known, Lessing took the parable of the three rings of religious faith from Giovanni Boccaccio's The Decameron, a fourteenth-century text. One of its tales tells the legend of the Muslim Saladin and the Jew Melchezidek. So choosing the Orient as a locus from which to critique Christian ecclesiastical authority was not unique to Lessing. In the Renaissance tale, however, the moral of the story has nothing to do with how the discovery of interreligious

brotherhood forces enemies to turn into friends. Its story relates more narrowly to how a clever Jew avoided financial ruin while retaining the identity of a true ring unresolved. In contrast, Lessing transforms the clever Jew into a genuine symbol of humanity.

What gives a charge to the broadminded atmosphere conjured onstage by *Nathan the Wise* is the frothy, bubbling and bubbly, floating character of Lessing’s conception and style. It is the very weightlessness upon which Lessing builds his stage that allows one to assess his project overall, both pro and contra. In “Education,” Lessing lets go of Judaism first and then Christianity for a quasi-mystical form of paranormal critical religion. Lessing offers something more recognizable today at the end of the twentieth and the start of the twenty-first centuries. Derrida called it “religion without religion.” It is an old idea going back to Simmel, Buber, Barth, Rosenzweig, and others writing at the start of the twentieth century, against religion and in favor of “religiosity” and revelation. In its floating character, religion persists without foundations. No longer bound to a single time-frame, it rises above the surface of any single fixed system of points in historical, terrestrial time and space.46 This free approach to history is markedly unlike the one taken by Johann Georg Hamann, an eighteenth-century *Sturm und Drang* critic of enlightenment reason, who staked the authority of Christianity on its value as historical truth. For Lessing, it was the historical place of medieval Jerusalem that offered him the chance to work himself through and free himself from history. Free play and freedom constitutes the shimmering ahistorical quality in Lessing’s play.

The attractive fantasy aspect of Lessing’s play carried over into works by nineteenth-century Jewish historians. For them the Orient remained the paragon of cultural perfection. Not Jerusalem, but Moorish Spain provided them the privileged platform upon which to model emancipation and enlightenment. Consider Graetz. Putting aside the historiographical bona fides of his account, what I would note for now is the whimsical character that accompanies the reading of this history in the third volume of his *History of the Jews*. A first sign of this is when Graetz asserts that whereas the history of Jews in Byzantium, Italy,

and France is of interest only to specialists, the history of the Jews in Spain “rises to the height of universal importance.”47 His account begins in Arabia, mingling reverie with the historical detail available to him at the time. The story takes place against a lachrymose European background. “Wearied with contemplating the miserable plight of the Jews in their ancient home and in the countries of Europe,” Graetz is “fatigued by the constant sight of fanatical oppression.” In contrast, the eyes of the observer “rest with gladness upon their situation in the Arabian peninsula.”48 The Jews, it is surmised, most likely zealots escaping Roman Palestine, “were not compelled to hide their love of freedom or to abandon their warlike bearing.”49 “The Jews of Arabia enjoying complete liberty and subject to no restraint, were able to defend their religious opinions without fear and to communicate them with impunity to their heathen neighbors.”50 There they became “thoroughly Arabic,” a tribe of warriors and poets, equal to the pre-Islamic tribes in bravery and, most tellingly for Graetz, competitive in the “palm of poetry.”51

As for Jewish life after the advent of Islam, the story as told in the nineteenth century was only a little complicated. Neither Graetz nor Abraham Geiger, who wrote his own history of Judaism as well as a book on the debt of Islam to Judaism and also one on the poet-philosopher Ibn Gabirol, overlooked the tense ambivalence about the Jews in Islamic scriptures or the legal indemnities forced upon Jews and Christians as dhimmi people under the Pact of Umar. At the same time, Graetz also remarked upon the freedom enjoyed by the Jews after the initial spread of Islam, most notably into Spain.52 Above all, he highlights culture, namely the renaissance of the Bible, the creation of poetry, and its impact on Jewish religion.53 Graetz notes how liturgical poetry expands what was a simple service while displacing law

48 Ibid., 53.
49 Ibid., 54.
50 Ibid., 59.
51 Ibid., 56–58.
52 Ibid., 76–89.
and aggadic exposition.\textsuperscript{54} The reader in the synagogue supplants the preacher, and singing is introduced into the synagogue.\textsuperscript{55}

Of Spanish Jewish intellectualism, Graetz observes that it was not narrow and specialized. Those who studied Talmud were not indifferent to biblical lore or to poetry. Philosophers were versed in Talmud and rabbis taught philosophy.\textsuperscript{56} For liberal German Jews, Jewish life in Moorish Spain was the perfection of culture. And they owed it to Islam. Geiger paints the scene with a broad, humanist brush. He contends that Islam purged Spain of Gothic ugliness and gave to Spain “splendor and glory and noble civilization, merry song, elevation of the mind, and flourishing science.”\textsuperscript{57}

So far, we are still with Lessing in Jerusalem. No less than was the case with Lessing, the interest in medieval Spain remained ahistorical, even for historians of Graetz and Geiger’s caliber. Jewish life in the Muslim Orient provided Graetz and Geiger the platform from which they and other nineteenth-century German Jewish liberals sought to free themselves and their religion from the shackles of medieval Christendom. The destructive effects of that legacy were, for them, closer at hand than the memory of a golden age in a more geographically distant historical past. The paradoxical coexistence noticed by David Myers in twentieth-century Jewish thought between historicism and anti-historicism is already present in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Except in this case it is not so much ambivalence about history coinciding unavoidably with historicist ways of thinking as much as it is the blend of ideas, fact, and fancy permeating historical writing.\textsuperscript{58}

In the writings about medieval Spain by Graetz and Geiger, lightness comports with the spirit of idealization at play in their own historical and antiquarian researches.

In the twentieth century, something changes. The Orient is now employed to do more heavy philosophical lifting than was the case for the nineteenth-century historians. In works by Strauss, the medieval represents luminous truth and authority against the relativism of history and historicism dominating nineteenth-century academic

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 113, 117.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 117–118.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 235.
culture and liberal religious thought. The same is true of Rosenzweig in his translation of the poetry of Yehuda Halevi and of Scholem in his researches of Kabbalah.

If Strauss is remarkable, it is because it was he who made perhaps the most radical claims about the superiority of the medieval in comparison to the modern; and also because his “vision” of the medieval stands in such stark contrast to the one offered by Lessing. Strauss looked at medieval Islam and Judaism as prophetic religions, in which the content of revelation was law, not theology. No doubt, he was burdened by the memory of World War I and the failure of Weimar liberalism to sustain itself against fascist and communist tides. Writing at the nadir of western history, Strauss announced the “unconditional superiority of medieval over modern philosophy.” Curiously, this superiority consisted in the formation of the idea of “total order,” a “perfect society,” the “perfection of man” that only obedience to prophets can promise based on the “direct knowledge of the upper world.” The thought articulated in *Philosophy and Law*, a text from 1934, reflects in an unnerving manner the spirit of his own time, whose unfreedom is projected back onto the medieval world.

About this, I have critically commented elsewhere. It bears repeating here. In the reconstruction offered by Strauss in this peculiar text, the prophet stands out as the one who “knows more, and more directly than the philosopher… blinded by the all too bright unaccustomed light.” The prophet occupies the highest rung of human consciousness, “the stage of the blissful; the men of this stage see the thing in itself; they see, as it were, the light itself. In their seeing there is absolutely nothing seeming; they themselves become the thing they see.” Only this lends the basis upon which to create an ideal state, to mandate the freedom of philosophy, and to ensure the survival of humanity. The order for which the early Strauss longed was immutable, absolute, unconditional, and authoritarian. “The health of

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60 Ibid., 53, 100, 104, 105.
63 Ibid., 105.
64 Ibid., 99.
the world of the senses” and the survival of the political world was forced to rest upon direct perception of the supernal world. An overpowering light applied directly to the optical nerve, an appeal to a concentration of order and authority two years after the rise of Hitler, it leaves one breathless.

It is not for me to decide if the “enclosed world of the past” represented by Strauss does or does not jibe with the historical record. At the very least, a deep incoherence undermines Strauss’s model. The medieval was everything that modern political thought and modern religious thought were not and could never be. Taking up the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns against synthesis and compromise, Strauss claimed that in Judaism and in Islam, as in classical Greece, the link between philosophy and religion were severed. On one hand, the practice of philosophy was vulnerable to political authority, requiring legal warrants and safeguards. On the other hand, philosophy was rendered private, thus enjoying “inner freedom” from political supervision. It is the latter claim that requires probing since it is unclear how philosophy can enjoy an “inner freedom from supervision” if it has to justify itself externally vis-à-vis political and ecclesiastical authorities who seek to control it. With Strauss, the medieval becomes not the light place of open, public concourse as it was for Lessing or Graetz. A walled off and self-enclosed enclave as heavy as cast lead, it presses in on the philosophical freedom which, according to Strauss, can only happen in this kind of place.

How might one decide to weigh such different presentations of the medieval? Dominated by the play of surfaces, Lessing’s Jerusalem is obviously an image with no direct bearing to any historical reality. Its patently obvious antiquarianism declares almost immediately to the modern or contemporary reader the time and place of its production

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65 Ibid., 104.
66 Ibid., 70.
68 Cf. Leora Batnitzky, Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 121–122. Batnitzky pays more attention to the freedom to philosophize in Strauss’s account, less on the need to justify it.
69 On Strauss’s anti-cosmopolitan preference for small-scale communities, founded on the claim that only there, not in a more open society, is it possible to cultivate human excellence, see Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 130–132.
in eighteenth-century Europe. The image of Jerusalem in Nathan the
Wise is as medieval as Mozart’s so-called “Turkish Concerto” (Violin
Concerto No. 5) is Turkish. That the image of the medieval in Strauss’s
work is of more recent vintage and more closely read might there-
fore blind readers to its own constructed and contrived characteristics.
Despite his deep immersion into the primary sources, Strauss him-
self understood that the quest for human perfection that he himself
espoused is based on visions. An imagistic thinker, he understood fully
that “prior to any perception of particular things, the human soul must
have had a vision of the ideas, a vision of the articulated whole.” Since
each single vision remains inadequate, competing visions testify to that
whole about which they disagree. In doing so, inadequate visions in
their contradiction stimulate thought to more adequate conceptions.70

Perhaps more adequate than the conception pushed by Strauss and
more in concert with that of Lessing is the image of the medieval in
works of recent contemporary Jewish philosophy. Strauss failed to
see how the “vision” that he himself saw as central to philosophical
inquiry manifests a share common to reason and revelation. Housed
in the imagination, this common share undermines the strict opposi-
tion between philosophy and religion while sustaining the difference
between them. No longer conflicted by that unyielding opposition
dominating Strauss, the medieval begins to lose its heavy weight.
Recent work by Kalman Bland, Aaron Hughes, Menachem Lorber-
baum, Tirosh-Samuelson, and Elliot Wolfson allows us to see a more
fluid dynamic between reason and imagination in medieval philoso-
phy and mysticism; the value accorded to happiness, art, and aesthetic
pleasure; and the separation of divine law from political law. Some-
thing of Lessing’s light quality is subsequently restored to contempo-
rary approaches to medieval material. Our own look at Lessing I hope
has shown how any attempt to get at something real is always steeped
in imagination and fantasy. From Wolfson, we might learn that any
truths that modern and contemporary readers learn from the medieval
are conditioned upon fabrication and constitutes fabrication.71 This
does not make claims to historical truth “arbitrary,” only “artificial”
in the technical sense intended by Mendelssohn in his aesthetic the-

70 Ibid., 125.
71 Elliot R. Wolfson, Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revi-
sion of Menahem Mendel Schneerson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009),
13–14.
ory. In philosophy and on stage, an image of the medieval should first
take off from and then transform the historical material to which it
remains true.

Perfection is a multiplicity in unity, that place in which as many
phenomena as possible subsist together. Instead of an unhappy picture
of persecution and conflict, the image of the medieval in Lessing is
happy and synthetic. Read alongside Tirosh-Samuelson’s substantial
study of happiness in medieval philosophy, Lessing’s world-image may
not appear so foreign after all to the medieval Islamic milieu. I make
this assertion in opposition to the type of thought predicated upon
stark oppositions reflected in twentieth-century political theology. In
works by Strauss, Schmitt, or Jacob Taubes, the relation between phi-
losophy and religion is beset by essential structural predicaments; the
soul takes on the character of an alien implant in the world; religion
is reduced to the dictates of obedience and omnipotence. In contrast,
the ancient and medieval Jewish and Jewish philosophical traditions
explored by Tirosh-Samuelson are ones in which conflicts between
religion and philosophy are not immutable, in which “happiness” is
an objective condition rooted in the very structure of the cosmos.72
The viewpoints reflected in her study are not “radical.” They represent
a “bourgeois view…which entails a moderate and prudent enjoyment
of life in this world,” a view of the world combining robust worldliness
and recognition of the transience of temporal existence.73

About Lessing one can be of two minds. Lessing’s religion, the place
of Jerusalem in Nathan the Wise, and his “unchristian Christianity”
are bubbly, floating, and free, unmoored from historical sources,
historical weight, and necessity. They reflect fantasy, which lends to
religion a playful, ironic, and light touch—an enhanced freedom over
against traditional authority and historical sources. With Lessing, reli-
gion avoids the heavy weight brought to it by conservative theologians
and philosophers. In Jerusalem, religion can breathe in the clear air
made possible by the Enlightenment. For those wanting more ballast
for religion, Lessing’s model will not work. An anti-historicist thinker
avant la lettre, Lessing was preoccupied by the problem of scripture
and history. He disputed Hebrew and Christian Scriptures because of
their unreliability as historical truth. For his part, Mendelssohn saw

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72 Tirosh-Samuelson, Happiness in Premodern Judaism, 56.
73 Ibid., 76, 160–165.
himself at home in law, and did not see himself as burdened by doctrinal dogmas about God, miracles, or the inerrancy of the Bible as a Christian would have been.

In the end, the difference between Mendelssohn and Lessing is infinitesimal and complimentary. Although Mendelssohn saw in Hebrew Scripture a source of reliable historical truth, his primary interest in Judaism as a historical form was the tradition of ritual performance and poetry. Ritual and poetry constitute the contribution of the imagination to the recognition and formation of common truths that both Mendelssohn and Lessing sought to separate out from any one single historical matrix. Unlike Lessing the unchristian Christian, Mendelssohn the Jewish Greek Jew allowed himself more freedom to think in what he thought was a tradition that keeps “pace” with new articulations of truth, and that allowed a modern subject to see poetry in scriptures, and to see scripture as poetry. By his own account in “Education,” Lessing will have one day left Jerusalem, whereas Mendelssohn never wanted or needed to do so. One should not neglect his debt to Lessing. Mendelssohn can only stay in Jerusalem because of Lessing. Truth moves in the Orient (Judaism à Christianity), to the occident (Enlightenment), back to the orient (Islam), to points unknown in the universe (metempsychosis). It is Lessing’s primary deterritorialization of religion out of prior, binding historical matrices that opens for Mendelssohn the possibility of reterritorializing Jewish thought and culture on a free basis, the resurrection of the Jews and Judaism in the modern period.