

Queens Jewish Center Public Lecture Series

Haskalah: The Antecedent to the Tension Between Torah and Modernity

Part I: Moses Mendelssohn - Traditional or Modern?



Rabbi Judah Kerbel

December 25, 2019 ~ כ"ז כסלו תש"פ

1. Letter from Johann Caspar Lavater to Moses Mendelssohn

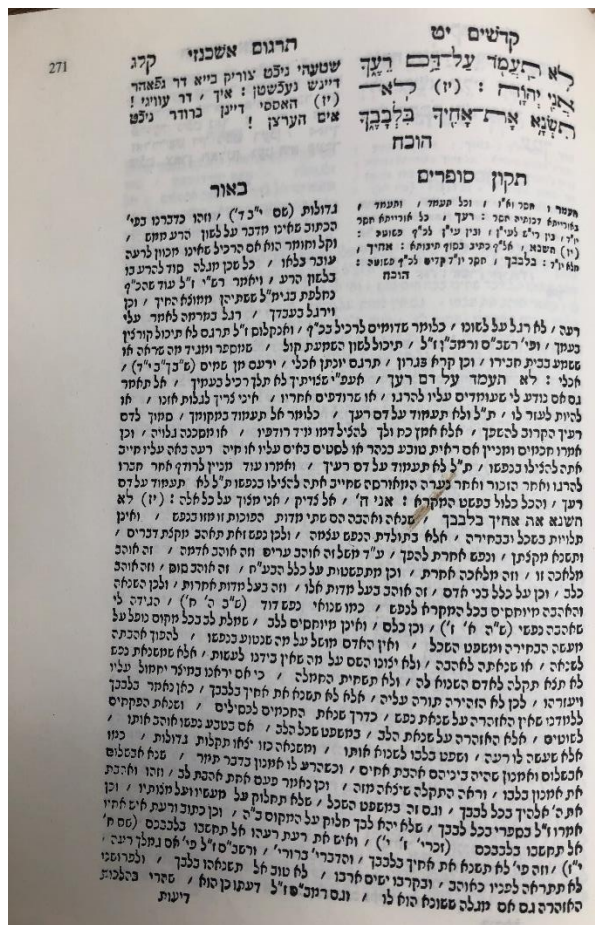
Most honorable sir!

I know not how I can better express the great respect that your excellent writings and your even more excellent character – that of an Israelite in whom there is no guile – have instilled in me, nor how I can better repay the pleasure that I enjoyed several years ago in your kind company, than to dedicate to you the best philosophical investigation of the proofs for Christianity that is known to me.

I am familiar with your deep insights, your steadfast love of truth, your incorruptible impartiality, your tender respect for philosophy in general and Bonnet's writings in particular. I cannot forget that gentle modesty with which you evaluate Christianity, given your remoteness from it. And I cannot forget the philosophical respect that, in one of the happiest hours of my life, you paid to the moral character of its founder. So unforgettable and, at the same time, so important was this to me that I dare ask you, **to ask and implore before the God of truth, who is your creator and father as well as mine**, not to read this work with philosophical impartiality (for you will certainly do this without my having to ask you to do so) **but rather to refute it publicly, provided that you do not find the essential arguments in support of the facts of Christianity to be correct. If, however, you find them to be correct, I ask and implore you to do what prudence, love of truth, and honesty would command you to do** – what Socrates would have done if he had read this work and found it irrefutable. May God allow still more truth and virtue to be spread by you. May God allow you to experience all the good that my whole heart wishes for you.

Zurich, 25 August 1769

Johann Caspar Lavater



I. Revelation and Belief

2. שמות פרק כ פסוק ב

אֲנִי יְקֹנֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל פְּנֵי :

2. Shemot 20:2

I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage:

3. נתיבות השלום, שמות פרק כ פסוק ב

והנה יש בכלל שתי הדברות הללו לדעת הרמב"ם ז"ל מצות עשה אחת וד' מצות ל"ת כי ימנה הרב ז"ל מאמר אנכי ה' אלקיך מצו בפני עצמה והיא להאמין שיש שם עלה וסבה הוא פועל לכל הנמצאים... ובעל הלכות גדולות לא מנה האמונה באלהות מצות עשה כלל כי לדעתו תרי"ג מצות הן כלם גזירותיו של הקב"ה שגזר עלינו לעשותם או מנענו שלא נעשה אבל האמונה במציאותו יתעלה שהוא העקר והשורש שממנו יולדו המצות אינו נכנס בחשבון הזה וכן דעת הרב רי"א בפירושו על התורה שדבור אניכי ה' אלקיך אינו מצוה לא אמוניית ולא מעשית אבל הקדמה למצות ולאזהרות שיאמר בשאר הדבומרים ועינו להודיעם מי הוא המדבר אתם ושאנו מלאך מליץ מדבר אליהם במצות הבורא ית כענין בשאר הנביאים כלם אבל הוא הסבה הראשונה בלי אמצעי עכ"ל: והנה מפשטות הכתוב נראה כדבריהם שלא דבר השם ב"ה אניכי ה' אלקיך אלא כנגד המאמינים במציאותו ולא ירד הקב"ה על הר סיני ללמד לעמו היותו נמצא מחויב המציאות בלי גבול ותכלית מן המושכלות האמתיות וקיימות... ומי שלא הגיע אל המעלה הזאת צריך שיקבל המושכלות ההם מפי אדם משיג נאמן להגיד לו האמת כאשר עם לבבו אבל לא יתאמתו המושכלות הללו ולא יקבעו בלב מסכילם ונלאה להשיגם לא ע"י דבור ה' אניכי נמצא ולא ע"י קולות וברקים וענן כבד וקול השופר ואין בכל אלה עדות וראייה על המושכלים העיוניים ההם כי אם להמאמין במציאת השם כי אף המקבלם ע"פ דבור ואמירת מגיד צריך שיאמין מקודם שמגיד ההוא נאמן רוח ולא ישקר ואם המגיד הוא ה' ב"ה בכבודו ובעצמו צריך שיאמין השומע שהוא אלקים אמת. ויתכן שכן היה הדבר באמת שישראל מאמינים בני מאמינים ידעו והאמינו במציאות השם ויחודו קצתם ע"פ בחינת הלב וקצתם בקבלה מפי אבות נאמנים או מפי גדולי הדור וחכמיו ולא בא האמר הזה כי אם ליחדם לסגולה מכל העמים שיהיו קרוי קדוש לה' מכל עמי הארץ כאשר אבאר...

3. Netivot Ha-Shalom, Shemot 20:2 (Trans. Elias Sacks in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity and the Bible*, ed. Michah Gottlieb, p. 220)

According to Maimonides, may his memory be for a blessing, these two *dibrot* contain one positive and four negative commandments. For the master, may his memory be for a blessing, counted the statement "I am the Eternal your God" as a commandment in its own right, namely "to believe there is a cause and reason that produces all existents..." However, the author of *Halakhot Gedolot* did not count belief in the Deity as a positive commandment at all. For according to his opinion, "while the 613 commandments are all decrees of the holy One, blessed be He, which He decreed that we should perform or prohibited us from performing, the belief in the commandments derive – is not included in this enumeration." This is similarly the opinion of the master, Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel, in his commentary on the Torah: "The Dibur 'I am the Eternal your God' is neither a commandment of belief nor a commandment of practice, but rather a premise of the commandments and prohibitions that are stated in the other diburim. Its function is to inform the children of Israel of who is speaking with them – that it is not an intercessory angel who speaks to them at the command of the Creator, may He be blessed, as is the case with all other prophets, but rather the First Cause without any intermediary." Thus far, Abarbanel's language.

Now the verse's *peshat* seems to confirm the words of their words, for the Eternal, blessed be He, uttered "I am the Eternal your God" only for the sake of those who [already] believed in His existence. The Holy One blessed be He, did not descend on Mount Sinai to teach His people that He exists, is the necessary existent, is without boundary and limit, or similarly eternally true intelligibles... Whoever does not attain this excellence must accept these intelligibles from the mouth of a comprehending person who is trustworthy to tell him the truth as it is in his heart. However, these intelligibles will neither be confirmed, nor be firmly established in the heart of one who is ignorant of them and despairs of comprehending them, by

means of the Eternal uttering “I exist,” or by means of thunder, lightning, a dense cloud, and the sound of a shofar. All such phenomena yield no testimony and proof on behalf of these theoretical intelligibles except for an individual who already believes in the existence of the Eternal, since even one who accepts them through a speaker’s utterance must believe, beforehand, that this speaker is trustworthy of spirit and will not lie. If the speaker is the Eternal himself, blessed be He, in His glory, then the listener must already believe that He is the true God.

It is possible that the situation was actually as follows: Israel, believers and the descendants of believers, knew of and believed in the existence and unity of the Eternal, some through their heart’s discernment, and some through tradition received from the mouths of trustworthy ancestors or from the mouths of the great men and sages of the generation. The only purpose of this statement was to single out the children of Israel as a treasure from all the peoples, so that they would be a nation holy to the Eternal from all the peoples of the earth...

4. דברים פרק ד, פסוק לט

וַיִּדְעֶתָ הַיּוֹם, וְהִשְׁבֵּתָ אֶל-לִבְּךָ, כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים, בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל-הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת: אֵין, עוֹד.

4. Devarim 4:39

Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the LORD alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other.

5. נתיבות השלום, דברים פרק ד פסוק לט

הידיעה הזאת תשים אל לבך פעם אחר פעם עד שתשרש בנפשך כי ה' הוא האלקים ועי"ז ושמרת את חקיו כלומר כשתהיה הידיעה הזאת חקוקה בלבבך אין ספק שתשמור את חקיו אשר הם לטוב לך.

5. Netivot Ha-Shalom, Devarim 4:39

This knowledge you must place on your heart repeatedly until the fact that God exists is rooted in your soul, and through this you will [be able to] observe His commandments, meaning to say that when this knowledge is engraved in your heart, undoubtedly you will observe his commandments.

6. Moses Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 97-98

In reality, it could not have been revealed there, for who was to be convinced of these eternal doctrines of salvation by the voice of thunder and the sound of trumpets? Surely not the unthinking, brutelike man, whose reflections had not yet led him to the existence of an invisible being that governs the visible. The miraculous voice would not have instilled any concepts in him and, therefore, would not have convinced him... He demands rational proofs, not miracles.

Anyone who did not know this, who was not imbued with these truths indispensable to human felicity, and was not prepared to approach the holy mountain, could have been stunned and overwhelmed by the great and wonderful manifestations, **but he could not have been made aware of what he had not known before. No! All this was presupposed; it was, perhaps, taught, explained, and placed beyond all doubt by human reasoning during the days of preparation.** And now the Divine voice proclaimed: “I am the Eternal, your God, who brought you out of the land of Mitzrayim, who delivered you from the bondage, etc.” **A historical truth, on which this people’s legislation was to be founded, as well as laws, was to be revealed here – commandments and ordinances, not eternal religious truths.**

II. Commandments of Feeling

7. ויקרא פרק יט, יז-יח

(יז) לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך הֹכֵחַ תוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֲטָא : (יח) לֹא תִקֵּם וְלֹא תִטֹּר אֶת בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹד אֲנִי יְקֹנֶה :

7. Vayikra 19:17-18

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD.

8. נתיבות השלום ויקרא פרק יט פסוק יז

שנאה ואהבה הם שתי מדות הפוכות זו מזו בנפש, ואינן תלויות בשכל ובבחירה, אלא בתולדת הנפש עצמה, ולכן נפש זאת תאהב מקצת דברים ותשנא מקצתן, ונפש אחרת להפך... ואינן מיוחסים ללב שמלת "לב" בכל מקום נופל על מעשה הבחירה ומשפט השכל, ואין האדם מושל על מה שנטוע בנפשו להפוך אהבתה לשנאה או שנאתה לאהבה, ולא יצונו השם על מה שאין בידנו לעשות, אלא שמשנאת נפש לא תצא תקלה לאדם השנוא לה ולא תשחית החמלה כי אם יראנו במיצר יחמול עליו ויעזרהו, לכן לא הזהירה תורה עליה אלא לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך.

נתיבות השלום ויקרא פרק יט פסוק יז

אם הכונה כדעת מפרשי המקרא זצ"ל שיאהב כל אדם כאשר אוהב את עצמו, יפלא מאד שיצונו על דבר שאינו בכל שום נפש, ואי אפשר שיאהב האדם את זולתו וביותר איש נכרי לו כאשר אוהב את עצמו, גם אין לצוות על אהבה או על שנאה שאין האדם מושל עליהן... ועוד א"כ צריך שיתאבל על צרת כל זולתו כעל צרת נפשו וחיינו אינן חיים שאין לך שעה שלא יראה או ישמע בצרת אחד מישראל, וכן לענין הטובה צריך שייטיב לזולתו כל מה שייטיב לעצמו וגם זה רעיון רוח... ואומר אני שאין מלת כמוך בלה"ק כולל כונה זו אלא כמוך פרושו הדומה לך כמו "כי כמוך כפרעה"... וכן כאן פרושו ואהבת לרעך שהוא כמוך שוה לך שנברא גם הוא בצלם אלקים והרי הוא אדם כמוך וזה כולל לכל בני אדם שכל נבראים בצלם ועל זה אמר ר' עקיבא זה כלל גדול בתורה...

9. Letter to Rabbi Jacob Emden (*Mendelssohn Writings*), 32

Concerning the question which I have asked him several times, my lord, teacher, and the rabbi has now commented on it, and this has roused me to mention it to him once again. The matter concerns what Maimonides wrote in the eighth chapter of "the Laws of Kings," namely that to be accounted "virtuous men of other nations," gentiles must accept and perform the seven Noahide commandments out of the belief that the Holy One, blessed be He, issued these commandments in the Torah and informed us through Moses our master, peace be on him, that descendants of Noah had previously been commanded to observe them. **I, however, consider these words harder than flint. Shall all the inhabitants of earth from east to west, except for us, be cast into a pit of annihilation and be abhorrent to all flesh if they do not believe in the Torah, which was given as an inheritance to the congregation of Jacob?**

10. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 138-139

Brothers, if you care for true piety, let us not feign agreement where diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of Providence. None of us thinks and feels exactly like his fellow man.... For the sake of your felicity and ours, a union of faiths is not tolerance; it is diametrically opposed to true tolerance! For the sake of your felicity and ours, do not use your powerful authority to transform some eternal truth, without which civil felicity can exist, into a low, some religious opinion, which is a matter of indifference to the state, into an ordinance of the land! Pay heed to the conduct of men... Reward and punish no doctrine, tempt, and bribe no one to adopt any religious opinion! Let everyone be permitted to speak as he thinks, to invoke God after his own manner or that of his fathers, and to seek eternal salvation where he thinks he may find it, as long as he does not disturb public felicity and acts honestly toward you and his fellow citizens. Let no one in your states be a searcher of hearts and a judge of thoughts; let no one assume a right that the Omniscient has reserved himself alone!

11. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 88-90

I have never publicly contested the Christian religion, nor shall I ever engage in dispute with its true adherents... Let him who has eyes see, let him who has reason examine, and live according to his conviction... I believe that Judaism knows of no revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a divine legislation – laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal and eternal felicity. Propositions and prescriptions of this kind were revealed to them by Moses in a miraculous and supernatural manner, but no doctrinal opinions, no saving truths, no universal propositions, of reason. These the Eternal reveals to us and to all other men, at all times, through nature and thing, but never through word and script.

12. א"ה, כל דבריו דברי חן ושכל טוב ושכל טוב לעושיהם ואשרי כל השומע לתוכחתו, אבל אין פשטות הכתובים נירה עליהם, ולדעתי שעור הכתוב כך הוא, לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך, הזהיר שלא לבד ישמר מעשות לרעהו כמעשה השונא להכותו, לקללו או לעשות לו רעה, כי אם אף בלבו ובקרבו לא ישנאנו, ומצאנו שיצוה השם ב"ה אף על מדות הנפש, כי גם הן מסורות לבחירה, וביד הנבון למשול עליהם בכח מבינתו, כמו שצוה לא תחמוד, וכן צוה על אהבה בכמה מקומות, כגון אהבת הגר והעבד ונאמר להלן ואהבת לו כמוד.

III. Political Power

13. דברים פרק יז, יד-טו

(יד) כי תבא אל הארץ אשר יקחך אלהיך נתן לך וירשיתה וישבתה בה ואמרתי אשימה עלי מלך ככל הגוים אשר סביבתי: (טו) שום תשים עליך מלך אשר יבחר יקחך אלהיך בו מקרב אחיך תשים עליך מלך לא תוכל לתת עליך איש נכרי אשר לא אחיך הוא:

14. נתיבות השלום דברים פרק יז, פסוק יד-טו

אין עבודת המלך וממשלתו טובה לאומה אלא תקנא בכל הגוים אשר סביבותיך... רז"ל אמרו שלש מצות נצטוו ישראל בכניסתן לארץ ואחת מהן להעמיד מלך... והנראה שהמצוה ההיא על הנביאים והזקנים והשופטים אשר ישפטו את ישראל שאחרי ירושה וישביה בארץ כאשר יראו שהמון ישאל וירצו במלך וידמה להם כהצלחה וטובה גדולה לחזות מלך ביפיו ויקרו... המודה בעם באות נפשו כאשר הם רואים בכל הגוים אשר סביבותיהם שלא יעבדו עוד על ידם ולא ילחצו את העם תחת יד שלטון בלתי רצוי להם, כי אם יביאו להם תאוותה וישימו עליהם מלך, כי כן משפט ההמון, כאשר ישים על לב לבד דבר בעניני המדינים לא ינוח ולא תשקוט אף לא יצליח טרם נהיה תאנתו... וכן היה בימי שמואל הנביא כאשר שאלו להם מלך הרע להנביא ההוא והתפלל אל ה', וה' אמר לו לא אותך מאסו כי אותי מאסו ממלך עליהם, ואעפ"כ אמר לו שמע בקולם והמלכת עליהם מלך, זהו הנראה לפי פשוטו בביאור דעת רז"ל בזה שהעמדת מלך מצות עשה אף ששאלתו למרי יחשב.

14. *Netivot Ha-Shalom*, Devarim 17:14-15

Our rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing, said that "Israel was issued three commandments when it entered the land [of Canaan], and one of them was to appoint a king over themselves..." It seems that this commandment was imposed on the prophets, elders, and the judges who would judge Israel. After taking possession of and settling in the land, when they see that the multitude of Israel desires a king, imagining that it would be a sign of flourishing and a great good to behold a king in his beauty and splendor, **the leaders should not stay their hand and force the people to remain under a regime that is not acceptable to them. Rather, the leaders should bring the multitude what it craves and set a king over it. For this is the way of the multitude: when it sets its heart on innovation in political affairs, it will neither rest, nor be calm, nor flourish until it has satisfied its craving.** This was the case in the days of Samuel the prophet. When the people asked for a king for themselves, this distressed the prophet, and he prayed to the Eternal. But the Eternal said to him that "it is not you, but rather me, whom they have rejected from ruling over them. Nevertheless, the Eternal said to Samuel, "listen to their voice and set a king over them". This appears to be the meaning according to the text's *peshat* as elucidated through the opinion of our rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing – **namely, that the appointment of a king is a positive commandment, even though the request is considered rebellious.**

15. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, p. 132

I have said that the Mosaic constitution did not persist long in its erstwhile purity. Already in the days of the prophet Samuel, the edifice developed a fissure which widened more and more until the parts broke asunder completely. The nation asked for a visible king as its ruler, a king of flesh and blood, perhaps because the priesthood had already begun to abuse the authority which it had among the people as Scripture reports about the sons of the High Priest, or perhaps because the splendor of a neighboring royal household dazzled the eyes. In any event, they demand a king such as all other peoples have. The prophet, aggrieved by this, pointed out to them the nature of a human king, who had his own requirements and could enlarge them at will, and how difficult it was to satisfy an infirm mortal to whom was transferred the rights of the Deity. In vain; the people persisted in their resolution, obtained their wish and experience what the prophet had threatened them with. Now the constitution was undermined, the unit of interests abolished.

IV. Traditional or Modern?

16. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 101

Hence, ancient Judaism has no symbolic books, no articles of faith. No one has to swear to symbols or subscribe, by oath, to certain articles of faith. Maimonides was the first to conceive of the idea of reducing the religion of his fathers to a certain number of principles, in order that, as he explains, religion, like all other sciences, would have fundamental conceptions, from which all others are deduced. This merely accidental idea gave rise to the thirteen articles of the Jewish catechism, to which we owe the morning hymn Yigdal, as well as some good writings by Chasdai [Crescas], [Joseph] Albo, and Abarbanel. These are the results they have had up to now. Thank God, they have not yet been forged into **shackles of faith**. Chasdai disputes them and proposes changes; Albo limits their number... **and although the thirteen articles of Maimonides has been accepted by the greater part of the nation, no one, as far as I know, has ever branded Albo a heretic because he wanted to reduce their number and lead them back to far more universal propositions of reason.**

17. Or La-Netiva (in *Mendelssohn Writings*, 189)

Moses, our master, peace be on him, wrote the entire Torah from “in the beginning” to “before the eyes of Israel,” including the final eight verses from “Moses died” to the end of the Torah... We, the entire assembly of the congregation of Israel, believe the Torah that is in our possession today is exactly the same as was written by Moses our teacher, peace be on him.

18. Michah Gottlieb, *Mendelssohn Writings*, 202

Mendelssohn adds important excurses that complement his German philosophical writings, by amplifying the ideas presented in his German writings or taking them in new directions. The *Bi'ur* is thus an important source for understanding Mendelssohn's philosophy.

19. Alexander Altmann, Introduction: *Jerusalem*, 13

Jerusalem is the work of a man who had achieved a unique and highly personal blend of the rabbinic culture in which he had grown up and continued to feel at home and the European Enlightenment in which he had immersed himself with dazzling success. **It is hard to say which of these two elements predominated in his inner life. To study *Jerusalem* is to try to read Mendelssohn's mind.**

20. Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, 552

It cannot be doubted that Mendelssohn's profile emerges in distinct outline, without any haziness or confusion. It is the profile of a man who lives up to the image that one would expect to find at the closing stage of a life steeped both in the Enlightenment and in Jewish tradition. Section One represents the philosopher, Section Two the loyal Jew, **and the two levels of existence, though by no means blending into an organic unity, at least do not fall apart.** They are held together by a strong tendency to interpret the one in light of the other, to infuse philosophy into Judaism and to allow Judaism to color philosophy... It took a man of the upbringing, training, experience, and energy of a Moses Mendelssohn to write this strange, powerful, and unique book, the *Jerusalem*.

21. Menachem Butler and Zev Eleff, "Moses Mendelssohn and the Orthodox Mind"

Mendelssohn was therefore nowhere. The earnest Reform Jew found him far too halakhic. The Orthodox had more in common, but steered clear of his loaded legacy. Moses Mendelssohn was off-limits, despite his religious observance and noble efforts to engage Judaism with the modern world. Mendelssohn's memory was already far too tarnished, entangled with unseemly and untouchable notions like assimilation, heterodoxy, and secularism. Some might have considered his mission valiant, a reminder of their own struggle to maintain a religious balance in the shifty middle ground. Owing to all this, though, the Jews who occupied this precarious space sought out more pristine heroes, ones with far less historical baggage than the load weighing painfully upon Mendelssohn's shoulders.

22. Rabbi Avi Shafran, *The Enigma of Moses Mendelssohn*

So, rather than condemn Moses Mendelssohn, a man who was dedicated, all said and done, to the ideals of Torah, we would do better, much better, to relate ourselves to him, to understand him, and ultimately to learn from him. For the lesson of his life is of vital concern for our own lives today: It is not enough, not nearly enough, to be frum.