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Tolerance for the Tolerant "Other"—Moses Mendelssohn's Claim for Tolerance in the "Vorrede/Preface" (1782)

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Abstract: In this paper I discuss Moses Mendelssohn's argumentation on religious tolerance in his "Vorrede" ("preface") that he added to his translation of Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel's letter "Vindiciae judaeorum" in 1782. Instead of solely deducing Mendelssohn's idea of religious tolerance, I examine Mendelssohn's argumentation strategies. For this purpose, I firstly determine the political and social conditions in which Mendelssohn wrote the "Vorrede". Secondly, I examine the normative reasons or resources that Mendelssohn argues for tolerance with. In my observation, he is legitimizing religious tolerance on the normative resources of philosophical reasons (natural law/universal reason) and pragmatic reasons (utility). Further, I will analyse Mendelssohn's concept of a tolerant Judaism in the "Vorrede".

Keywords: religious tolerance; Moses Mendelssohn; Vorrede; Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel

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1. Introduction

Current developments of increasing racism, antisemitism, and islamophobia show us that the concept of tolerance is not and probably never will be resolved. As a task that compels every generation anew, it asks us scientists to look for representatives who were already charged with the burden of fighting for their toleration. One representative was the Jewish German philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). In his lifetime and abroad, Moses Mendelssohn was one of the most famous proponents of religious tolerance and tolerance in general. As a representative of a religious minority and willing to be accepted as a modern German intellectual and as a Jew in the German society, he did not only call for tolerance for different religions, but also for freedom of speech and opinion. This makes him an important defender of tolerance in a broader frame—a development that evolved within the Enlightenment period. His famous "Vorrede" (Mendelssohn 1983b; Ben Israel 1983), that Mendelssohn authored as preface for his translation of Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel's letter "Vindiciae judaeorum" in 1782, provides a basis for examining Mendelssohn's philosophy of tolerance that he further developed in his "Jerusalem" (Mendelssohn 1983a) in 1783. In this text, he not only argued for tolerance towards the Jewish community in Germany but also for pagans, Muslims, and followers of natural religion. Eventually, Mendelssohn also addressed Jewish authorities and their tolerance towards members of their Jewish community. I chose to work on the "Vorrede" for two reasons. Firstly, the text is not as prominently researched as, for example, his famous "Jerusalem". Secondly, with the composition of the "Vorrede" of his translation of Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel's letter "Vindiciae judaeorum", Mendelssohn decided to actively participate in the debate on tolerance more prominently for the first time.

In this paper, I discuss Moses Mendelssohn's argumentation on religious tolerance in his "Vorrede". Instead of solely deducing Mendelssohn's idea of religious tolerance, I examine Mendelssohn's argumentation strategies. For this purpose, I firstly determine the political and social conditions in which Mendelssohn wrote the "Vorrede". Secondly, I examine the normative reasons or resources that Mendelssohn argues for tolerance with. In my observation, he is legitimizing religious tolerance on the normative resources of

philosophical reasons (natural law/universal reason) and pragmatic reasons (utility).[1] Furthermore, I analyze Mendelssohn's concept of a tolerant Judaism in the "Vorrede". Mendelssohn required Jews to act with tolerance because tolerance will be granted to those who already are tolerant. Finally, I take a short and clearly incomplete glance at the blind spots of Mendelssohn's tolerance philosophy. Following this method, I aim to answer the following questions: What was Mendelssohn's role in the debate on tolerance in 18th century Germany? What are, in his eyes, the resources/reasons for tolerance in the "Vorrede"? And whom did he address?

Besides the "Vorrede", this paper takes a look at the famous public discussion with Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801). In their correspondence, Mendelssohn firstly openly admitted to the revelation and laid fundaments for further discussions on religion and tolerance (Meyer [1967] 1992, p. 45). Of course, this paper cannot ignore Mendelssohn's famous publication "Jerusalem", which summarized his ideas on tolerance.

The case of Moses Mendelssohn—struggling between public integration on the one side and public justification of his own Jewish identity on the other side—constitutes one example of the need and claim for tolerance. As a member of a religious minority, Mendelssohn is claiming his right to become equal but remain different. Although he was asked to convert to Christianity in order to be fully assimilated into the German intellectual elite, he insisted on his right and will to remain a Jew by demanding tolerance towards the other and independence of opinion. Due to his wish of remaining differences and his claim for the independence of opinion, Mendelssohn stood upon current proponents of a so called unification of confessions (Mendelssohn 1983a, pp. 202ff) by claiming tolerance as a "Bedingung unserer Selbstbestimmung und des Mutes, Andere als Anderes und Fremdes bestehen zu lassen" (Wierlacher 1996, p. 77)[2]. Instead of full cultural assimilation, Mendelssohn wanted to be German and a Jew. He wished for a "community of communities" (Pisano 2018, p. 81), where Jews and Gentiles could live side by side, equally but different. The demand of tolerance in difference was based on pragmatic and philosophical reasons.[3] While for the Enlightenment period, tolerance was primarily a requirement of practical considerations after a period of murderous religious and civil wars, it gradually also became a subject of ethics and reason.

2. Power and Rejection as Conditions for Tolerance in Mendelssohn's "Vorrede"

In Germany in the times of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), tolerance was mainly understood as a political act towards religious minorities. Tolerance was in the first place a demand towards the regent not to persecute—hence politically and juridically sanction[4]—religious minorities. It was rather understood as a practical political act than an ethical virtue. As a contemporary lexical entry from 1745 stated: tolerance

> "is generally used by a government which allows a province or city to do so, that other religious relatives besides the religion which has been introduced there, and to which it is committed, may have the free practice of their worship in it."[5]

In the 16th century, the Holy Roman Empire lost its denominational unity, and the ruling power lost its claim to holiness. The different sovereigns in the Holy Roman Empire were given the right to determine the confession of their subjects ("der daselbst eingeführten Religion"[6]). Additionally, the law of its own mercy—hence the sovereignty—was introduced. The loss of the denominational unity and the introduction of state sovereignty in the 16th century were key conditions for political tolerance because on the condition of sovereignty—that is, the primacy of political power over religious ones—political tolerance is conceivable in modern times (Schmidt-Biggemann 1988, p. 173). Sovereignty means to measure religious questions against the standard of politics because sovereignty is identical to the superiority of the political principle over all others. Under the conditions of sovereignty, the policy of tolerating different religions became the policy of tolerating minorities in general. Tolerance politics lost its denominational character and was also ascribed to Jews or other non-religious minorities (Schmidt-Biggemann 1988, pp. 167f).

Up to this development, tolerance in the Holy Roman Empire was only granted towards Christian religions, as Mendelssohn wrote in his "Vorrede":

> "But what has hitherto been written and disputed with regard to toleration referred merely to the three favored religious denominations in the Holy Roman Empire and, at most, to some of their side branches. Either no thought was given to pagans, Jews, Muslims, and the adherents of natural religion, or if any was, it was only for the purpose of making the grounds for tolerance more problematic." (Gottlieb 2011, p. 40)[7]

The uniformity of religion was still an important anchor for the homogeneity and thus stability of the different states in the Holy Roman Empire that determined the confession of their subjects independently. If different religions were to be tolerated in the state of modern times, it had to be proven that the diversity of religions did not affect state sovereignty. This is one reason why for example Samuel von Pufendorf and John Locke were demanding tolerance out of the reason of political harmlessness (Schmidt-Biggemann 1988, p. 17).[8] Tolerance was hence dependent on the ruler's acceptance that the tolerated minority will not harm the stability of his state. Mendelssohn's plea for tolerance required him arguing that granting Jews tolerance would pose no threat to the state.

This Early Modern definition of political tolerance is still topical.[9] John Horton defines it as the will of "putting up with the beliefs, actions or practices of others, by a person or group that disapproves of them, and who would otherwise be inclined to prohibit or suppress them, if they had the power to do so" (Horton 2011, p. 290). This concept constitutes of willed reluctance to interfere coercively with what is regarded as the objectionable behavior of others. The "reluctance to interfere" is what Mendelssohn called for, when he asked for tolerance in his "Vorrede", that the inferior Jewish minority is "geduldet und geschützt" (Mendelssohn 1974)—tolerated and protected. To be tolerated did not mean to be socially or politically equated. Jews and other minorities lived legally underprivileged lives, always dependent on the will and mercy of the sovereign and always afraid to lose the status of being politically tolerated.[10]

The conditions in 17th century Germany combined two components: power and rejection. In a very broad sense, one can say that Mendelssohn's examination of the principle of tolerance only happened due to the pressure of at least these two conditions: the rejection of Judaism as a disapproved "other" and the possibility of prohibition or repression it by the powerful sovereign. In other words: due to the political reality of majority and minority, major player and inferior identity, and the political routine of rejecting the inferior or "abnormal' identity", the discussion of tolerance ever appeared. That is why Mendelssohn demanded "vom starken Theile die ersten Schritte" (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 3)[11]. The powerful must give up his superiority and offer if the weaker part should gain confidence and respond. Earlier in his life, in a letter to Diaconus Lavater (1770), he explained his situation like this:

> "I am a member of an oppressed people who must beg for protection by appealing to the benevolence of the dominant nation, protection that we do not receive everywhere and that we do not receive anywhere without certain restrictions." (Gottlieb 2011, p. 12)[12]

This environmental conditions of power and rejection correlate with currently discussed conditions for the engagement in tolerance (Forst 2017; Brown and Forst 2014).

In 1782, Mendelssohn wrote his "Vorrede" in the atmosphere of political tolerance. From 1781 to 1790, Joseph II decreed several "Edicts of Tolerance" for Lutherans, Calvinists, and Greek Orthodoxists—and also for Jews—that granted the Jews civic improvements (Hecht 2011–2017). The aim of Joseph's politics was to acculturate and harness the Jews.[13] The edicts included a number of rights and duties. Legislation varied widely in different parts of the empire due to the different legal status in each state, while the rights were most extensive in Galicia. Although the Josephinian legislation did not bring civil equality to the Jews, nor did it make a significant contribution to the standardization of Jewish policy

in the Habsburg monarchy, in the 1780s, they still represented the most advanced Jewish legislation in Central Europe (Hecht 2011–2017). In this atmosphere, after a great motivation by Mendelssohn, the administrative officer Christian Wilhelm Dohm published a book that strongly argued for the emancipation of the Jews and gave practical legal advice: "Ueber die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden" (Dohm 2015). Within this context and after facing strong accusations against his Jewishness, Mendelssohn decided to actively participate in the debate more prominently.[14] He translated and published Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel's letter "Vindiciae judaeorum" and added a notable "Vorrede" (Preface). In his first sentences, he praised the current developments, Dohms literary contribution and the legal improvements granted by the monarch that he called "Menschenfreund" [philanthropist]:

> "Thank all-bountiful providence that it has allowed me, at the end of my days, to live to see this happy point in time in which the rights of man are beginning to be taken to heart in their true extent." (Gottlieb 2011, p. 40)[15]

What written legal texts do not tell us is that the practiced tolerance and the law did not always go hand in hand. Other sources like philosophical debates and lexical entries show us that the understanding of tolerating "the other" out of ethical or pragmatic reasons was already broad (Wollgast 2004, p 16).

3. Utility as a Resource of Tolerance in Mendelssohn's Vorrede

As mentioned, to be tolerated in the state of modern times, it had to be proven that the diversity of religions did not affect the state's stability. However, political harmlessness was not reason enough to tolerate Jews in the states of the Holy Roman Empire. Defenders of tolerance had to find valid resources to legitimate the tolerance of Jews and other minorities and to obtain the mercy of the sovereign. After Jews were expelled from Mark Brandenburg in 1571, it was not before 1671 that after the "Edikt zur Förderung von Handel und Wandel", Jews were officially accepted in Brandenburg-Preußen for the first time in 100 years. To promote trade and change, elector Friedrich Wilhelm accepted 50 Jewish families:

> "That for strange reasons and with the most submissive insistence (. . .) we were moved to promote trade and change, some Jewish families, 50 of them, who moved away from other places, to our land of the Electorate and March of Brandenburg and to our strange protection kindly receive and accept."[16]

In 1672 he granted a privilege to Rabbi Chain to act as the Rabbi of all Jews in Brandenburg (Diekmann 2006, pp. 56f). However, the Jewish families did not enjoy equal status. Jewish communities were not allowed to hold public service or to build a synagogue, and Jews were not allowed to hold offices in the court or in the military (Jersch-Wenzel 1978, pp. 36ff). The desired settlement of rich Jewish families was the result of a so called "Peuplierungspolitik" (Engl. settlement policy) of Brandenburg after the Thirty Years' War that brought Brandenburg enormous population losses. The sovereign needed population to pay taxes to fill the empty treasury of the state (Diekmann 2006, pp. 56f). For political pragmatic reasons, the sovereign tolerated Jews to settle. However, one hundred years after the "Edikt zur Förderung von Handel und Wandel", Christian Wilhelm Dohm interpreted that the sovereigns of the greatest states of Europe still valuated population growth as the essential condition to gain the greatest possible good:

> "It is therefore believed that the ultimate purpose of every civil society will definitely be achieved if the population is constantly increasing."[17]

Dohm stressed this desire of population growth as one argument to explain the utility of tolerance towards Jews. Additionally, Mendelssohn stressed the "Peuplierungspolitik" of a wise sovereign. No state, Mendelssohn explains, can do without the least or seemingly useless of its inhabitants without carrying a disadvantage. No matter if beggar or cripple—no man is unusable for a wise government:

> "People can be more or less useful; occupied in one way or another, they can promote the happiness of those around them and their own to a greater or lesser

> extent. But no state can do without the smallest, most useless of its inhabitants without serious disadvantage, and for a wise government no beggar is too many, no cripple is completely useless."[18]

The legislature should take no account of the argument that the crowd in a country cannot exceed without overcrowding and becoming harmful. Because the limitation of the amount of people would in any way be to the disadvantage of the residents (Mendelssohn 1983b, pp. 12f). Holland[19] served Mendelssohn as an example of reasonable settlement policy. The popular success—Mendelssohn argued—came from the rightful politics of freedom and tolerance:

> "Nothing but freedom, clemency from the government. Equity of laws, and the open arms with which they welcome people of all kinds, and dress, opinions, customs, tradition and religion, and protect them, and allow them to do so; It is nothing but these advantages that have produced in Holland the almost abundant blessing, the amount of good, which is why it is so much envied."[20]

As a large part of the "Vorrede", Mendelssohn tried to disprove prejudices against Jews[21], as he did with the accusation, that Jews were not useful for the economy as they only consume and do not produce. In this context, Mendelssohn defended the area of the service that also includes the dealer's call. He compared the call of the merchant with that of teachers and soldiers. Although these call groups would not produce food or tools, they produce other valuable physical and mental goods, such as security, knowledge, or pleasure. The call of the middleman, which the Jews carried out due to the political situation, was in his words "höchst nützlich und fast unentbehrlich" (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 14)—extremely useful and almost indispensable:

> "That through their mediation the products become more usable, more beneficial and also cheaper and the producer still profits more and is therefore able to live more comfortably and better without excessive exertion of his strength."[22]

Mendelssohn did not, like Dohm, suggest that Jews be introduced to other professions in order to become more useful. Instead, he showed that the professional field, in which the Jews already were increasingly active, was useful and indispensable:

> "In this view, the humblest Jewish merchant is not a mere consumer, but a useful inhabitant (I dare not say citizen) of the state, a real producer."[23]

While Moses Mendelssohn put effort into disproving prejudices against Jews, he used the resource of utility to claim tolerance for the Jews and other minorities. Besides religious or humanistic reasons, political pragmatism served in the Early and Late Modern Period as a plausible reason for tolerance. Popular proponents for tolerance like John Locke and John Toland used pragmatic reasons to legitimize tolerance towards Jews.[24] Apart from religious reasons, *Zedlers Universal-Lexicon* quoted in 1745 that a government does good if it tolerates people who disagree and placed Holland as an example (Zedler and Ludovici 1745, pp. 1115f, art. „Tolerantz"). In 1796, the *Strelin Realwörterbuch* determined that governmental intolerance is being warned for economic and educational reasons (Strelin 1796, p. 41, art. „Toleranz"). Pragmatism served also as one reason for the "Toleranzpatente" of Joseph II to make the members of the Jewish community[25] more useful to the state: "so zahlreiche[n] Glieder der jüdischen Nation dem Staate nützlicher zu machen"[26]. Only later was this argument supplemented by humanistic arguments.

4. Natural Law and Universal Reason as Resources of Tolerance in Mendelssohn's Vorrede

In 1745, the entry in *Zedlers Universal-Lexicon* quoted religious and practical reasons for tolerance. Seventy years after that, common dictionaries already held different definitions of where tolerance duty comes from:

> "Tolerance is the active recognition of the freedom that everyone has to follow their own convictions with regard to faith or their judgment about what is true,

> good and beautiful. This tolerance is mandatory because freedom of thought is an original right of humanity that cannot be lost through any social agreement between people. But if it is to be of the right kind, it must arise from respect for the dignity of man, as a rational and free being, and not from indifference to everything that is true, good and beautiful."[27]

> "Toleration (religious tolerance) is based on the principle that every person has the right to live their faith and is expressed in the mutual acceptance of that fact. The right to have one's own beliefs and to follow them is one of the inalienable human rights."[28]

The Enlightenment period was influenced by the redefinition of the human as a creature that is in possession of several rights out of its being human. Besides the idea of universal natural law and universal human nature, at the turn of the eighteenth century, the idea of universal human rationality was at the center of philosophical debate (Meyer 1967, pp. 14f). According to the universal human rationality, Jews were supposed to be treated on equal terms and their segregation was regarded as unjustifiable. However, these theoretical assumptions were still shadowed by stereotypic prejudices and the striving for Christian conversion of the "unfaithful Jews" by the Christians (Pisano 2018, pp. 83ff; Meyer 1967, p. 38). This explains Mendelssohn's ambition to disprove common prejudices through the translation of the letter from Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel and his analysis in the "Vorrede". Mendelssohn argued that reason and humanity have not yet cast out all the wrong prejudices against the Jews. All rationality, however, speaks for the equal rights of the Jews.[29]

Freedom of opinion or freedom of conviction as a fundamental human right entered the argumentation on tolerance. This tolerance is compulsory because freedom of thought was seen as a fundamental human right that cannot be lost through social relationships. The idea that human dignity is based on its natural intrinsic value and in its image of God has something revolutionary in the Enlightenment period, but it solidified over the course of the 18th century (Wollgast 2004, p. 15). Already, Dohm stressed the condition of the Jew not as a Jew but a human. To refuse the Jews equal civil rights was not only against the welfare of the state but an interference with the natural right of humanity. To lift the disadvantage of the Jewish community and to grant them full civil rights was just in accordance with the humanity and justice and the enlightened politics of this time.[30]

Mendelssohn justified tolerance towards other convictions and beliefs through a theory on legislation, oriented on the current development of natural law theory. According to Mendelssohn, there are three goods that people have the right to: their own capacities, the products of their industry, and their property. There are perfect rights and imperfect rights. While in the case of a perfect right, one's right to their good depends solely on their will; in the case of an imperfect right, their right depends on the discretion (or will) of the person petitioned. People are justifying the state's use of coercive power to safeguard their perfect rights. The people also grant the state the authority to administer imperfect rights (like, for example, redistribution through taxation) and to transform them into perfect rights through contracts. As in nature, the positive duties between people are grounded on imperfect rights, the state has the duty to transfer them into perfect rights. According to Mendelssohn, one has the ability to alienate their perfect rights to many of their goods, but there are rights to certain goods that are inalienable. That is, for example, one's right to eat and to breathe and the right to convictions (Gottlieb 2016, pp. 9ff.). As Mendelssohn states: "Our judgment itself is an inseparable, immovable and therefore inalienable property"[31]. Beliefs are dependent on rational conviction and not on one's will. Hence, the state cannot have the right to one's belief. Vice versa, it cannot punish someone according to their convictions. Why is that? Mendelssohn referred to the theory of natural law. The right of conviction is not the state of nature. If there is no root in natural law, people are not able to make a right out of it. The ability of the people is only to make perfect rights out of imperfect natural law:

> "where nature has laid down no muscle; just as little can all the contracts and agreements among human beings create a right the ground of which cannot be found in the state of nature." (Gottlieb 2011, p. 47)[32]

According to opinions or convictions that is:

> "Since our opinions do not depend immediately on our will, no other right belongs to us except the right to investigate them, to subject them to the strenuous test of reason". (Gottlieb 2011, p. 47)[33]

As convictions are not a result of our free will, like imperfect rights, we have no right but to test them against reason. Contracts according to convictions are not only wrong but also unsuccessful because right must imply ability. In a contractual community, there is the possibility to voluntarily not act dependent on our own judgment but to subject them to the opinion of another. In this case, we waive our own judgment, but our judgment itself remains unchanged and an inalienable property (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 20). Eventually, the state has no right to grant or to forbid any good according to a certain conviction. As Mendelssohn stated:

> "Therefore, the maternal nation does not have the authority to combine the enjoyment of an earthly good or privilege with a doctrinal opinion that is agreeable to it, or to reward or punish the acceptance or rejection of it." (Gottlieb 2011, p. 48)[34]

The same rule counts for the religious authorities and institutions. Gottlieb explains it as following:

> "Since my perfect right to my convictions is inalienable, the church can never have the right to coerce my beliefs even if I agree to transfer this right to the church." (Gottlieb 2016, p. 11)

The right of non-disturbance does not hold on the political or legal level. Mendelssohn was convinced that it is an intrinsic value of the nature of true religion in general. As Mendelssohn put it:

> "True divine religion arrogates to itself no prerogative over opinions and judgments, [. . .]. It knows of no power besides the power of prevailing and persuading by means of reason". (Gottlieb 2011, p. 46)[35]

For this reason, Mendelssohn absolutely rejected the ban law that was defended by Dohm:

> "Reason's house of devotion requires no locked doors; there is nothing inside it that is to be guarded, and no one outside it who is to be denied entry." (Gottlieb 2011, p. 48)[36]

The true, divine religion does not assume violence over opinions and judgments. It should know no other power than the power to convince and to gain power by reasons. Jews should not copy the mistakes of the ruling powers (like the ban law). Instead, they should imitate the virtue of tolerance (Mendelssohn 1983b, pp. 18, 25).

As in the Enlightenment period rationalism replaced superstition and was in the center of any decision, Jews attempted to reconfigure Judaism according to rationalism (Pisano 2018, p. 83). According to Mendelssohn, Judaism is a religion of practiced behavior rather than a religion of belief. Judaism does not impose any beliefs, it does not conflict with the Enlightenment or reason in general. For Mendelssohn, Judaism combines a rational understanding of God and a revelation of law (Pisano 2018, p. 85). In the presence of the Enlightenment, for him, it fit very well in the idea of universal human rationality as he claimed it a rational faith based on the principles of natural religion. Authorized by natural law and reason and contributing to the state's welfare, Judaism can legitimately be fully tolerated to the state.

In "Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysical Defense of Religious Pluralism", Mendelssohn expert Michah Gottlieb successfully demonstrated, that in his "Jerusalem" from 1783,

Mendelssohn bases his claim for religious tolerance also on metaphysical resources. As "Jerusalem" is not the subject of this paper, I did not illustrate Gottlieb's explanations on metaphysical resources. Nonetheless, the proved existence of a metaphysical defense might hold very important insights on Mendelssohn's appraisal of tolerance. He not only perceived tolerance as a tool or a strategy to protect his minority status (see utility as a resource) or a natural human treat (see natural law as a resource of tolerance) but also as a religious value. Gottlieb observes that for Mendelssohn, "religious diversity is the plan and purpose of providence" (Gottlieb 2013, p. 112). He further formulates that Mendelssohn considers providence as a function to maximize perfection. As the most perfect world is one with the most perfect individuals on it, "rational perfection involves having the clearest and most distinct representations of reality" (Gottlieb 2013, p. 114). Hence, it follows that "religious diversity reflects divine providence insofar as it helps assure proper representation of divine truth" (Gottlieb 2013, pp. 114f). Gottlieb is convinced that Mendelssohn's perception of religious diversity is its prevention of idolatry. If one perceives one's own metaphysical symbols as the only adequate signs of the divine, idolatry arises. Without a plurality of signs, a certain set of symbols can falsely be perceived as representing God adequately. However, no sign has the ability to be divine, and God forbade the Israelites to worship anything other than him as divine. Instead, "religious diversity helps impress on people that any signs used to represent God are arbitrary and inadequate" (Gottlieb 2013, p. 117). If a plurality of signs exists, the assumption of the divinity of individual signs is weakened, Gottlieb concludes his interpretation. For Mendelssohn, it follows that religious plurality helps the individuals to prevent idolatry.

5. Tolerance for a Tolerant Judaism

In 1770 Mendelssohn wrote in a letter to Jacob Hermann Obereit (1725–1798):

> "You ask me: In which religion in the world would I find the greatest, most perfect virtue against God and people, [. . .]? I believe in the one that is most tolerating, in which we can embrace the entire humanity with equal love. Nothing squeezes our hearts more than an exclusionary religion."[37]

For Mendelssohn, the religion that was the most tolerating was the most virtuous. Religion could therefore mean anything but exclusion. In the "Vorrede", Mendelssohn summed up his concerns about the right of excommunication. He sharply criticized Dohm's defense to grant the Jewish authorities the right of excommunication. According to Mendelssohn, that intolerant right of exclusion is an abuse and not the religious authorities' to have:

> "It seems to me that every society possesses the right of expulsion except for an ecclesiastical society, for it is diametrically opposed to the ecclesiastical society's ultimate goal, which is collective edification and participation in the outpouring of the heart through which we show our thanks for God's beneficence and our childlike trust in His infinite goodness. [. . .] But quiet and peaceful entry to the assembly must not be forbidden to the offender, if we do not intentionally wish to bar him from every path of return." (Gottlieb 2011, p. 48)[38]

In Mendelssohn's view, in Judaism, there are no special duties to God. Because man's relation to God only enhances duties and rights to other men/women or to the self, it follows that there cannot be any special duties to any earthly body that is supposed to represent God on Earth, and therefore, a church or another religious community cannot have rights or duties. Without rights, there is no right of coercion like—for example—excommunication. Only the state has rights relating to the conduct of its members. Concerning man's opinions and beliefs, no other person or body can have a right in another holding certain beliefs because holding opinions and beliefs does not harm any other's happiness in any way. Thomas Mautner summarizes this conviction with this sentence:

> "Where the conduct of a member of a religious community is concerned, any coercive measures are to be imposed by the state; with respect to beliefs of the

> member, no coercive measure is justified. No church has the right to impose coercive measures." (Mautner 1994, p. 208; Gottlieb 2016, p. 11)

Mendelssohn argued that religion shall follow the path of love. Within his own religion, Mendelssohn called for the virtue of tolerance. To be tolerated means to tolerate; to be loved means to love. Mendelssohn required tolerance for a tolerant Judaism:

> "Imitate the virtues of the nations whose vices you have until now believed you must imitate. If you wish to be cherished, tolerated, and spared by others, then cherish, tolerate, and spare one another! Love and you will be loved!" (Gottlieb 2011, p. 52)[39]

Mendelssohn backed up his opinion by referring to tradition. The religious ancestors never executed excommunication, he argued. King Solomon and the ancient rabbis even tolerated idolaters in temples when they had the power not to do so (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 22). Additionally, Mendelssohn sharply distinguished between "true Judaism" and its historical manifestations in many places. He did not interchange the ideal with the reality; he was fully aware of the intolerant traits of his religion. In 1781, he wrote in a private letter to Avigdor Levi that he knew about the intolerance of his nation towards the slightest innovations that could lead to important improvements. He admitted that one risks facing opposition and persecution by suggesting reforms to the tradition. Concerning the authoritative ban of his publication and translation of the Tora he comments: "Unfortunately, I know! how much contradiction, hatred, persecution, etc., the slightest innovation—when it results in important improvement, finds among the people"[40]. As soon as he offered to publish his translation, he says, he had turned his back to protect himself against the opposition that he clearly expected.

With his "Vorrede", Mendelssohn needed to reach a Christian majority audience in a more welcoming atmosphere at the edge of Joseph II's tolerance edicts. However, he also strove to address the authorities of his own religion. He was certain that tolerance was a duty for every member of a religious community.

6. Blind Spots of Tolerance in Mendelssohn's Thought

John Christian Laursen analyzed the phenomenon of blind spots in the theories of tolerance proponents. For him, no tolerance requirement was perfect, but each proponent lacks a tolerance for something reasonable (Laursen 2011). In Mendelssohn's case, I locate his blind spot clearly in his refusal to tolerate atheism. In his opinion "belief in God helps the state achieve its purpose by helping motivate individuals to actualize their this-worldly capacity" (Gottlieb 2016, p. 11), atheism in the contrary endangers human happiness and public welfare. In his "Jerusalem", Mendelssohn stated:

> "The state must ensure from a distance that no doctrines are spread that cannot ensure public prosperity; which, like atheism and epicurism, undermine the foundation on which the happiness of social life rests."[41]

Atheism was widely seen as harming the welfare of the state and therefore one should confront it with intolerance. Some commentators on Mendelssohn argue that this passage in his "Jerusalem" proves that Mendelssohn granted the state the right of excommunication and violent action against the beliefs of its members. For them, it proves that the view of Mendelssohn as a role model of unrestricted tolerance of opinion is an enlightened fairy tale because "he supported the use of excommunication by the state and argued for the political persecution of those who denied the three dogmas of the religion of the bourgeoisie" (Melamed 2015, p. 58). Mendelssohn did, in their opinion, grant the state the right to punish beliefs and opinions that may violate the happiness of the society (Melamed 2015, p. 54). Other commentators instead disapprove of this conclusion and emphasize the compromising character of Mendelssohn's claim. Instead of proclaiming the state's right to coerce excommunication, in his "Jerusalem", Mendelssohn only argued that the state can "monitor" threatening opinions like atheism from afar (Michah Gottlieb 2015, pp. 71ff):

> "But the state must only take this into account from a distance, and only favor with wise moderation the doctrines on which its true happiness rests, without getting directly involved in any dispute."[42]

7. Conclusions

In times where minorities are threatened by increasing racism, fanatism or world conspiracies, we have the need to reach back to representatives that experienced similar enemies before and learn from their experiences. Traditional conceptions of "tolerance" can help us to rebuild bridges that seem lost in a dissolving society. Investigations show us that Mendelssohn's philosophy of tolerance coming from universal reason and natural universal law was nothing new but was backed up by a philosophical tradition whose roots lie in the Middle Ages (Meyer [1967] 1992, p. 16). The legislation by Joseph II and textual sources prove that the understanding of economic advantages and the ethical need for toleration already influenced political acting and intellectual thinking. However, practical disadvantage and discrimination, stereotypes, as well as intolerance were still an everyday companion of minorities in 18th-century Europe. In numerous minds, there was still the idea of rejecting or overcoming different convictions, particularly in the field of religion. To confront these matters was challenging and, as Mendelssohn argued himself, far out of his comfort zone. Mendelssohn's self-confidence, to fight for his right to remain different but equal, inspires people until today. As differences still exist and the myth of ethical progression in eternity disproved itself in current history, concepts like the proven core concept of tolerance may help to promote peaceful and sympathetic coexistence.

The acculturation process of Moses Mendelssohn, who adopted the modern principles of natural law and universal reason, did not necessarily support the tolerance towards Jews in general. It further confirmed for the intellectuals of the Enlightenment the superiority of their worldview.[43] The appreciation of Mendelssohn resulted rather from Mendelssohn's will to acculturate in the non-Jewish majority society. First, when Mendelssohn refused to convert to Christianism, he separated himself from the process of assimilation and really became the idol of truly tolerance towards "the other". There he set the beginning of a self-confident Jewish nation that claimed their right to remain different and be treated equally.

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Notes

1 Michah Gottlieb successfully demonstrated, that in his "Jerusalem" from 1783, Mendelssohn bases his claim for religious tolerance also on metaphysical resources. That will be discussed later in this paper. See Gottlieb (2013).

2 Engl. "Condition of our self-determination and the courage to let others exist as other and foreign." (Translation of the author).

3 He supplemented theological reasons later in his Jerusalem, see Gottlieb (2013).

4 In this context it is important to literally define the practical limitation of tolerance, means *intolerance*. In a lexical entry of 1783, 'intolerance' was defined as using violence against people who cross the limitation of tolerance. Further sanctions are described as monetary penalty, prison, exile or even death penalty. See Höpfner (1783).

5 Translation of the author. German Original: "wird insgemein von einer Obrigkeit gebraucht, welche in einer Provinz oder Stadt geschehen läßt, daß auch andere Religions-Verwandten außer der daselbst eingeführten Religion, und welcher sie selbst zugetan ist, die freie Übung ihres Gottesdienstes darinnen haben mögen." (Zedler and Ludovici 1745). From now on abbreviated to *Zedlers Universal-Lexicon*.

6 Ibid. Engl. "the religion introduced there." (Translation of the author).

[7] German original: "Was aber auch über Toleranz bisher geschrieben und gestritten ward, gieng blos auf die drey im R[ömischen] R[eich] begünstigte Religionsparteyen, und höchstens auf einige Nebenzweige derselben. An Heiden, Juden, Mahometaner und Anhänger der natürlichen Religion ward entweder gar nicht oder höchstens nur in der Absicht gedacht, um die Gründe für die Toleranz problematischer zu machen." (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 3).

[8] He is referring to von Pufendorf ([1698] 1972, §3/4), and to Locke ([1690] 1968, pp. 59–77).

[9] For definition see Wollgast (2004, p. 24).

[10] It must be noted, that at the end of *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn is calling for something much stronger, namely *valuing* religious diversity. I thank Michah Gottlieb for this important indication.

[11] Engl. "from the strong part the first steps" (Translation of author).

[12] German original: "Ich bin ein Mitglied eines unterdrückten Volks, das von dem Wohlwollen der herr-schenden Nation Schutz und Schirm erflehen muss, und solchen nicht allenthalben, und nirgend ohne gewisse Einschränkungen erhält." (Mendelssohn 1974).

[13] Joseph II probably also wanted to convert them as Mendelssohn notes in his 1784 letter to Homberg in Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 13: 179. Also Low (1979, p. 21). I thank Michah Gottlieb who supplemented this indication.

[14] 12 years earlier Mendelssohn already participated through the published correspondence with Johann Caspar Lavater. This publication resulted from Lavater publicly challenged Mendelssohn to explain himself. In 1770 he therefore did not actively but rather passively became part of the discussion on religious tolerance.

[15] German original: "Dank sey es der allgütigen Vorsehung, daß sie mich am Ende meiner Tage noch diesen glücklichen Zeitpunkt hat erleben lassen, in welchem die Rechte der Menschheit in ihrem wahren Umfange beherziget zu werden anfangen" (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 3).

[16] Translation of the author. German original: "daß Wir aus sonderbaren Ursachen und auf untertänigstes Anhalten (. . .) zu Beforderung Handels und Wandels bewogen worden, einige von andern Orten sich wegbegebende jüdische Familien, und zwar 50 derselben, in unser Lande der Kur- und Mark Brandenburg und in Unseren sonderbaren Schutz gnädigst auf- und anzunehmen", from the "Edikt zur Förderung von Handel und Wandel", cited after Stern (1962–1971, p. 13/Nr. 12).

[17] Translation of the author. German original: "Man glaubt daher den letzten Zweck jeder bürgerlichen Gesellschaft ganz sicher zu erreichen, wenn man eine immer zunehmende Bevölkerung bewirkt." (Dohm 2015, p. 9).

[18] Translation of the author. German original: "Die Menschen können mehr oder weniger nützlich seyn; können so oder anders beschäftiget, die Glückseligkeit ihrer Nebenmenschen und ihre eigene mehr oder weniger befördern. Aber kein Staat kan die geringsten, nutzlosscheinendsten seiner Bewohner, ohne empfindlichen Nachtheil, entbehren, und einer weisen Regierung ist kein Bettler zu viel, kein Krüppel völlig unbrauchbar." (Mendelssohn 1983b, pp. 11f).

[19] Holland also served as an example in *Zedlers Universal-Lexicon* to show that different religions and opinions can coexist peacefully and productively in one state: Zedler and Ludovici (1745, pp. 1115f).

[20] Translation of the author. German original: "Nichts als Freiheit, Milde der Regierung. Billigkeit der Gesetze, und die offenen Arme, mit welchen sie die Menschen aller Art, und Kleidung, Meinung, Sitte, Gebrauch und Religion aufnehmen, und schützen, und machen lassen; nichts als diese Vorzüge sind es, die in Holland den fast überreichen Segen, die Fülle des Guten hervorgebracht, darum es so sehr beneidet wird." (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 11).

[21] Why that? The common understanding in the years of the "Vorrede" was, that from a private and a public perspective the person or the state should not act against opinions that were held in private. As long as the private opinions didn't harm another person or the society as a whole, opinions can and must be tolerated. See (Höpfner 1783, pp. 716–17): "Alle Handlungen entspringen zuletzt aus gewissen Vorstellungen und Grundsätzen. Um dieser letzten Willen wird niemand bestraft, sondern wegen der Handlungen, die er in Gemäßheit derselben ausübt [. . .] So wird auch der Irrende nicht deswegen bestraft, daß er einen Irrthum hegt, sondern daß er ihn ausbreitet, und dadurch dem Staate Schaden zufügt". Jews were persecuted due to different prejudices: usury, infanticide, poisoning etc. If it was proven that these prejudices were wrong, it was shown that Jews did not harm any other person or the society as a whole. This is the reason why Mendelssohn particularly wrote against prejudices and published Manasseh's letter from the 17th century, that did exactly the same: fighting prejudices.

[22] Translation of the author. German original: "Daß durch ihre Vermittelung die Produkte brauchbarer, gemeinnütziger und auch wohlfeiler werden und der Producent dennoch mehr gewinne, und also in den Stand gesetzt werde, ohne übermäßige Anstrengung seiner Kräfte, bequemer und besser zu leben." (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 14).

[23] Translation of the author. German original: ""Der geringste Handelsjude ist in dieser Betrachtung kein bloßer Verzehrer, sondern ein nützlicher Einwohner (ich darf nicht sagen, Bürger) des Staats, ein wirklicher Hervorbringer." (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 16).

[24] See Meyer ([1967] 1992, p. 18); Meyer is referring to Locke (1689) and Toland (1714).

[25] In this period the Jewish minority was called the Jewish 'nation'.

[26] (Pribram 1918, p. 440); see: Hecht (2011–2017). Engl. "to make so many members of the Jewish nation more useful to the state." (Translation of the author).

[27] Translation of the author. German original: "Duldung (Toleranz), ist die thätige Anerkennung der Freiheit, die Jedermann hat, in Ansehung des Glaubens oder seines Urtheils über das Wahre, Gute und Schöne seiner eigenen Überzeugung zu folgen.

Diese Duldung ist Pflicht, weil die Denkfreiheit ein ursprüngliches, durch kein geselliges Verhältnis der Menschen verlierbares Recht der Menschheit ist. Sie muss aber, wenn sie rechter Art seyn soll, aus Achtung gegen die Würde des Menschen, als eines vernünftigen und freien Wesens entspringen, nicht aber aus Gleichgültigkeit gegen alles Wahre, Gute und Schöne." Brockhaus (1815), pp. 261f., art. "Duldung (Toleranz)".

[28] Translation of the author. German original: "Duldung (religiöse Toleranz), beruht auf dem Grundsatze, dass ein jeder Mensch das Recht habe, seines Glaubens leben zu dürfen, und äußert sich in der gegenseitigen Zugestegung desselben. Das Recht, eine eigene Überzeugung ha-ben und derselben folgen zu dürfen, gehört zu den unveräußerlichen Men-schenrechten." (Pierer and von Binzer 1826, p. 554, art. "Duldung").

[29] See Mendelssohn (1983b, p. 10): "Vernunft und Menschlichkeit erheben ihre Stimme umsonst; denn graugewordenes Vorurtheil hat kein Gehör." Engl. "Reason and humanity raise their voices in vain; for prejudice that has become gray has no hearing." (Translation of the author).

[30] See Dohm (2015, pp. 19, 48, 70): "daß es der Menschlichkeit und Gerechtigkeit, so wie der aufgeklärten Politick gemaß sey, diese Drückung zu verbannen, un den Zustand der Juden zu ihrem eignen und des Staats Wohl zu verbessern". Engl. "That it is humanity and justice, as well as enlightened politics, to banish this oppression and to improve the condition of the Jews for their own good and that of the state." (Translation of the author).

[31] Translation of the author. German original: "Unser Urtheil selbst ist ein untrennbares, unbewegliches, und also unveräusserliches Eigenthum." Mendelssohn (1983b, p. 20).

[32] German original: "wo die Natur keine Muskel hingelegt; eben so wenig können alle Verträge und Verabredungen unter den Menschen ein Recht erschaffen, davon der Grund nicht im Stande der Natur anzutreffen seyn sollte." (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 19); Also see: Feiner (2015).

[33] German original: "Da [Meinungen] nicht unmittelbar von unserm Willen abhängen; so kömmt uns selbst kein anderes Recht zu, als das Recht sie zu untersuchen, der strengen Prüfung der Vernunft zu unterwerfen". (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 20).

[34] German original: "Also hat die mütterliche Nation selbst keine Befugniß mit einer ihr gefälligen Lehrmeinung den Genuß irgend eines irdischen Guts oder Vorzugs zu verbinden, das Annehmen oder Verwerfen derselben zu belohnen, oder zu bestrafen" (Mendelssohn 1983b, pp. 20f).

[35] German original: "Die wahre, göttliche Religion maßt sich keine Gewalt über Meinungen und Urtheile an; [. . .] [sie] kennet keine andere Macht, als die Macht durch Gründe zu gewinnen, zu überzeugen" (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 18).

[36] German original: "Das Andachtshaus der Vernunft bedarf keiner verschlossenen Thüren. Sie hat von innen nichts zu verwahren, und von aussen Niemanden den Eingang zu verhindern." (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 21).

[37] Translation of the author. German original: "Sie fragen mich: In welcher Religion auf der Welt ich die größte, vollkommenste Tugend gegen Gott und Menschen, [. . .] fände? Ich glaube in derjenigen, die am meisten duldend ist, in welcher wir das ganze Geschlecht der Menschen mit gleicher Liebe umfassen dürfen. Nichts preßt unser Herz so sehr zusammen, als eine ausschließende Religion." (Mendelssohn 1976, cited after (Wollgast 2004, p. 28)).

[38] German original: "Jede Gesellschaft, dünkt mich, hat das Recht der Ausschließung, nur keine kirchliche; denn es ist ihrem Endzwecke schnurstracks zuwider. Die Absicht derselben ist gemeinschaftliche Erbauung, Theilnehmung an der Ergießung des Herzens, mit welcher wir unsere Danksagung gegen die Wohltaten Gottes, und unser kindliches Vertrauen auf die Allgütigkeit Desselben zu erkennen geben. [. . .] ein stiller und ruhiger Zutritt zur Versammlung muß dem Verbrecher selbst nicht verwehrt werden; wenn wir ihm nicht geflissentlich alle Wege zur Rückkehr versperren wollen." (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 21).

[39] German original: "Ahmet die Tugend der Nationen nach, deren Untugend ihr bisher nachahmen zu müssen geglaubt. Wollet ihr gehegt, geduldet und von anderen verschonet seyn: so hegt und duldet und verschonet euch unter einander! Liebet; so werdet ihr geliebt werden!" (Mendelssohn 1983b, p. 25).

[40] Translation of the author. German original: "Ich weiss es leider! wie vil Widerspruch, Hass, Verfolgung, u.s.w., die geringste Neuerung, wan sie wichtige Verbesserung zur Folge hat, bei dem Volk findet." (Mendelssohn 1994, pp. 415f, 416).

[41] Translation of the author. German original: "Der Staat hat zwar von Ferne darauf zu sehen, daß keine Lehren ausgebreitet werden, mit denen der öffentliche Wohlstand nicht bestehen kann; die wie Atheisterey und Epikurismus den Grund untergraben, auf welchem die Glück-seligkeit des gesellschaftlichen Lebens beruhet." (Mendelssohn 1983a, pp. 130f).

[42] Translation of the author. German original: "Aber nur von ferne her muss der Staat hierauf Rücksicht nehmen, und selbst die Lehren nur mit weiser Mäßigung begünstigen, auf welchen seine wahre Glückseligkeit beruhet, ohne sich unmittelbar in irgend eine Streitigkeit zu mischen" (Mendelssohn 1983a, p. 131).

[43] "They (the intellectual elite of Germany), in turn, were prepared to accept Mendelssohn as the exceptional Jew par excellence, without generally changing their attitude towards the Jewish people as a whole". Translation of the author. German original: "Sie (die geistige Elite Deutschlands) wiederum waren bereit, Mendelssohn als den Ausnahmejuden par excellence zu akzeptieren, ohne daß sie im Allgemeinen ihre Einstellung zum jüdischen Volk in seiner Gesamtheit änderten". See: Meyer ([1967] 1992, p. 30). Meyer summarized that it was Mendelssohn's plan himself to become an ideal of Jewish acculturation to show the Christian environment how virtuous a Jew can become (See: ibid., p. 21).

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