

Moses

Edited by
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Mendelssohn

WRITINGS
ON JUDAISM,
CHRISTIANITY,
& THE BIBLE

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Prefatory Note to Selections from the *Bi'ur*

In discussing the method of his *Bi'ur* commentary in *Light for the Path*, Mendelssohn sounds a traditional note, writing that he asked Dubno to “collect elucidations of scripture—according to its *peshat* and primary intention—from the books of the most prominent of the great exegetes.”⁶⁰ But the *Bi'ur* cannot be regarded as a simple compilation of traditional Jewish Bible commentaries. Although the *Bi'ur* sometimes transcribes the words of its predecessors verbatim, sometimes it subtly alters their statements, or openly takes them to task. Similarly, 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.

Some of the selections that follow are general introductions, and some are commentaries on specific verses. Where the *Bi'ur* comments on specific verses, I will provide the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation of the verses, followed by an English translation of Mendelssohn’s German translation. Eight selections from the *Bi'ur* follow.

The first two selections further elucidate Mendelssohn’s views of *peshat* and *derash*. In his introduction to Exodus 21 (first *Bi'ur* selection), Mendelssohn takes Rashbam to task for explaining verses according to their *peshat* even when this contradicts rabbinic *derash*, noting that *derash* is to be favored when it contradicts *peshat* in matters of law. We see an example of this in Mendelssohn’s discussion of *lex talionis* in his commentary on Exodus 21:24–25 (second *Bi'ur* selection).

In his commentary on Genesis 2:9 (third *Bi'ur* selection), Mendelssohn offers an original interpretation of Adam’s sin that sheds light on his view of human perfection. For Mendelssohn, Adam’s perfection involved having his powers of cognition and desire in harmonious balance, while his sin involved a disproportionate increase in his faculty of desire, which led him to seek imaginary goods such as luxury and excessive physical gratification.

Mendelssohn’s discussion of biblical poetry in his introduction to Exodus 15 (fourth *Bi'ur* selection) provides an important complement to his discussion of Adam’s sin. Drawing on discussions of biblical poetry by Judah Halevi, the

60. [See selection 17, from *Light for the Path*.]

Italian Renaissance Jewish scholar Azariah de Rossi (1513–78), and the Christian Bible scholar Robert Lowth (1710–87), Mendelssohn analyzes the qualities of biblical poetry that distinguish it from Latin and Greek poetry. Among the special—indeed, superior—qualities of biblical poetry are that it is concerned not with beautiful sounds but with inculcating ideas in poignant, resonant ways. In this fashion, biblical poetry helps serve as an important antidote to a person’s tendency to desire imaginary goods, by inspiring him or her to desire true goods, thereby fostering harmony between the individual’s powers of cognition and desire.

The fifth *Bi’ur* selection contains Mendelssohn’s discussion of how to translate the enigmatic name of God designated by the Hebrew letters *yod-heh-vav-heh*, known as the Tetragrammaton. By the third century BCE, pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton was avoided, and it was vocalized as *Adonai* (my Lord). The Mishnah notes that the Tetragrammaton was pronounced only by the high priest in the Holy of Holies in the temple in Jerusalem on the Day of Atonement (Mishnah Yoma 6:2) and by the priests when they recited the priestly blessing in the temple (Mishnah Sotah 7:6). The name *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* (Exodus 3:14) was understood to be closely related to the Tetragrammaton.

Given the mystery accompanying this name, how to translate it was a problem. Following the pronunciation of the name as *Adonai*, the Greek Septuagint rendered the Tetragrammaton as “Lord.” But in light of the Christian identification of God and Jesus, many Jews came to regard the epithet “Lord” as too Christian and so sought a different translation of the name. In *Scripture and Translation*, Franz Rosenzweig notes the enormous impact in German-Jewish circles of Mendelssohn’s rendering of the Tetragrammaton as “the Eternal,” observing that this translation was “reproduced in most subsequent Jewish Bible translations and made its way into standard liturgical translations, sermons, and all German spoken in and around religious services” (page 100).

Mendelssohn’s commentary on Exodus 20:2 (sixth *Bi’ur* selection) is an outstanding example of the interrelation between his German and Hebrew writings. In this passage, he elaborates on the claims he made in *Jerusalem* and *To Lessing’s Friends* regarding the universal knowledge of eternal religious truths, the impossibility of commanding belief, the nature of idolatry, and Jewish election.

Mendelssohn’s discussion of biblical verses that attribute jealousy to God (seventh *Bi’ur* selection) is a good example of how he treats biblical anthropomorphism and forms a fascinating contrast with Spinoza’s discussion of the

same verses, in chapter seven of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [Theological-political treatise].

The final text (eighth *Bi'ur* selection) elaborates Mendelssohn's discussion in *Jerusalem* of the transition from God's direct sovereignty over Israel to the appointment of a human king. In stressing God's instruction to Samuel to heed the people in their request for a king, Mendelssohn's comments shed light on his attitude toward political legitimacy and democracy.

Sources

Selection 18. Selections from the *Bi'ur*.

First selection. On *Peshat and Derash*, *JubA* 16:198–99 (in Hebrew).

Second selection. *Lex Talionis*, *JubA* 16:206–7 (in German and Hebrew).

Third selection. On Adam's Sin, *JubA* vol. 15, pt. 2: 23–24 (in German and Hebrew).

Fourth selection. On Biblical Poetry, *JubA* 16:125–27, 134 (in Hebrew).

Fifth selection. The Eternal, *JubA* 16:26–28 (in German and Hebrew).

Sixth selection. On Commanding Belief in God, Jewish Election, and Idolatry, *JubA* 16:185–88 (in German and Hebrew).

Seventh selection. On Divine Jealousy, *JubA* 16:189, 18:329 (in German and Hebrew).

Eighth selection. On Kingship, *JubA* 18:418 (in German and Hebrew).

ON PESHAT AND DERASH

Introduction to Exodus 21

Rashbam, may his memory be for a blessing, opened his elucidation of this pericope, which is exceedingly profound and rich in laws and rules, in this way:

Those who are endowed with reason know and understand that my purpose here is not to explain laws, even though they are what are essential, as I explained in my commentary on Genesis.⁶¹ Laws and extralegal matters have been deduced from the superfluous elements of scripture, and some are found in the commentary of my maternal grandfather, Rabbi Solomon [Rashi], may the memory of the righteous be for a blessing. Rather, my purpose here is to explain the *peshat* of the verses, and I will explain the rules and laws according to common linguistic usage. Nevertheless, the laws are what are essential, as our rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing, said: “Law uproots the Mishnah.”⁶²

Thus far, Rashbam’s language. Although we will take shelter under the wings of this great eagle and not stray from scripture’s *peshat* either to the right or to the left, we have not forgotten the principle that we adumbrated in this book’s introduction, regarding the distinction between the contradictory and the different.⁶³ Although it is possible for the *peshat* of scripture to differ from rabbinic tradition in its manner of elucidation, it is impossible for the *peshat* to contradict rabbinic tradition with respect to laws and rules. For although it is not impossible for propositions that differ to both be true, in a case of propositions that are contradictory, if one is true, the other must necessarily be false. Therefore,

61. [See Rashbam’s commentary on Genesis 1:1 and 37:2.]

62. [See Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 16a; Yalkut Shimoni 217. All versions of Rashbam’s commentary apparently have this corrupt reading, which should be amended to read *Mikra* (scripture) instead of *Mishnah*. Rashbam apparently understands this statement to mean that the rabbinically accepted interpretation of the law should be followed, even when it contradicts the *peshat* of the verse.]

63. [See selection 17, from *Light for the Path*.]

in every place where what appears to be scripture's *peshat* contradicts rabbinic tradition with respect to laws and rules, the one who elucidates must either completely abandon the approach of *peshat* to follow the path of the true tradition, or broker a compromise between them, if possible. We have made this covenant for our elucidation, and we will preserve it in accordance with the Eternal's good hand that is upon us.

LEX TALIONIS

Exodus 21:24–25

JPS TRANSLATION

eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, (21:24) burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise (21:25)

MENDELSSOHN TRANSLATION

(According to law it should be) eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot [21:24], burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. (Therefore, the offender must give money instead [21:25]).

Commentary: Exodus 21:24, “eye for eye”

Through rabbinic tradition (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kamma 83b), it is known that this refers to monetary compensation. Payment is often referred to with this language, as in the verse: “One who slays an animal must pay life for a life” (Leviticus 24:18).⁶⁴

There are many proofs for the words [of the sages] grounded in the judgment of the understanding and the verdict of sound reason (*mishpat hasekhel hayashar*).⁶⁵ As Rabbi Saadya Gaon said, “If one person strikes another in the eye and the latter loses a third of his eyesight, how would it be possible to inflict this precise wound without inflicting more or less [damage than had been caused]? Perhaps [the offender] will lose his entire eyesight. Even more difficult are the cases of the burn, the wound, and the bruise, since if these were inflicted in a dangerous spot [on the body], the individual [being punished] might die. The understanding cannot tolerate this.”⁶⁶ Similarly, if a person who is blind blinds another, or a

64. [It is clear from the context of the verses that one who kills an animal need not be killed, but rather must make financial restitution.]

65. [Mendelssohn may be referring to the judgments of common sense. See part 1, note 189.]

66. [Saadya's comments are cited in Ibn Ezra's commentary on Exodus 21:24.]

person who is missing a limb destroys the limb of another, what will we do to [the offender]?

To be sure, the sages, may their memories be for a blessing, rejected all of these proofs and others similar to them, saying that it was possible to answer them (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kamma 83b–84a). However, it appears that the sages intended only to say that these proofs are not completely decisive and convincing, absent [the support of rabbinic] tradition, for it is possible to answer each of them, [albeit] with difficulty. But in truth, one who surveys the entire matter comprehensively cannot stubbornly continue refusing to heed the tradition of our sages, may their memories be for a blessing.

Nahmanides, may his memory be for a blessing, brought another “proof for their words from what is said above: ‘[If men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or a fist, and the latter does not die but must lie in bed, then if he rises again and can walk about the streets on his crutch, the one who struck him should be freed and must pay] only for loss of time and healing’ [Exodus 21:18–19]. But if we must do to the person who struck his fellow what he himself did, why must he then pay compensation? Does he not also incur loss of time and require healing? Moreover, one should not argue that this verse refers to a case in which the offender heals quickly [and thus owes his victim the difference between their respective expenses],⁶⁷ since this is not the *peshat* of the verse, which refers to cases in general. Indeed, even were [the offender] to heal quickly [and thus seem to owe compensation], we have already taken vengeance on him, for we have done to him just as he did.” Thus far, Nahmanides’s language.

The intended meaning of the verse is as Ibn Ezra wrote. According to the law of retribution, “an individual is liable to [have done to him what he himself originally did] if he does not pay a ransom. The verse states that we ‘should not take a ransom for the life of a murderer who deserves to die’ [Numbers 35:31], implying that we should take a ransom in the case of an individual who deserves [merely] to have one of his limbs severed. Therefore, we have never severed the limbs [of one who assaults another], although [the offender must] pay a ransom. And if he does not have [the money], he will be liable until he acquires it.”⁶⁸ This is how [the verse] is translated in German.

The verse began with loss of limbs and speaks of the most common cases.

67. Thus, the rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing, rejected this proof in Baba Kamma ad loc. [Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kamma, 83b–84a].

68. [Ibn Ezra’s position is cited by Nahmanides in his commentary on Exodus 21:24.]

For a person who strikes his fellow will generally damage an eye, tooth, hand, or foot. From there you can logically extrapolate to the other limbs.

ON ADAM'S SIN

Genesis 2:9

JPS TRANSLATION

And from the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.

MENDELSSOHN TRANSLATION

The Eternal Being, God, let grow out of the earth all types of trees, lovely to behold and good to eat. The tree of life was in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Commentary: Genesis 2:9, "the tree of knowledge of good and evil"

[. . .]

This is the German translator's [Mendelssohn's] language:

Before responding, I will first provide you with an introduction. The entire account of creation, as well as all that scripture recounts regarding what happened to Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel, is all true and reliable without doubt: what actually happened to these individuals is just as [scripture] recounts it. In addition, however, these stories contain an allusion to and model for what will happen to the entire human species in general. What happened to Adam and his children in particular is what happens to the entire species in general. For this reason, scripture describes at length the details of their [lives], on the basis of which a wise individual will understand all that happens to human beings, from the time they were created to the end of all the generations.⁶⁹

Man possesses a faculty of cognition and a faculty of desire. By means of the faculty of cognition, he comprehends the truth, and distinguishes between truth and falsehood and between good and evil. For that which leads to flourishing is called "good," and that which impedes flourishing is called "evil." By means of the faculty of desire, a person longs for the good and cleaves to it, while fleeing from the evil. From the point of view of cognition, the good and the evil are "the beneficial" and "the harmful," while from the point of view of the senses,

69. [In Hebrew, the name Adam is also the word for "man" or "human being."]

the good is called “the beautiful” and the evil is called “the ugly.” Cleaving to the good produces pleasure, while cleaving to the evil produces affliction. Moreover, there is true good and imaginary good, and similarly true evil and imaginary evil: the true good produces true pleasure, the imaginary good produces imaginary pleasure, and it is similar with evil and affliction. As our ancestors have already put it, “there is nothing in ‘the good’ above pleasure (*oneg*), and nothing in ‘the evil’ below affliction (*nega*).”⁷⁰

The connection between the faculties of comprehension and desire produces the soul’s character traits, which are dispositions to do evil or good, toward oneself or others. They all emerge in accordance with an individual’s comprehension and capacity for distinguishing between good and evil, as well as in accordance with the faculty of desire that leads him to do good and refrain from evil. Part of the perfection of the rational being is the presence within him of a harmonious relation and proportion between the faculty of desire and the faculty of comprehension, producing the virtues. For the more powerfully the faculty of comprehension recognizes the good and the evil, the more desire grows, and love for the good and hatred for the evil gain strength as the rational being is stirred to cleave to the good. Our rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing, alluded to this when they said that “whoever is greater than his fellow has a greater inclination than he” [Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 52a]. But if the harmonious proportion between those faculties is lacking, then vices result. For if the faculty of desire is stronger than the faculty of cognition, this fact will incline the person toward craving luxuries and sensuous pleasure, and he will pursue the imaginary beautiful and good while abandoning the true good. Sometimes, even when he sees with his eyes and understands with his heart the true good that would lead him to flourish, the strength of his desire that overcomes the intellect’s judgment will tempt him to follow bodily enjoyment, and he will become absorbed in the pursuit of sensuous pleasure. This is the cause of all sin and rebelliousness in man.

On the other hand, if the faculty of comprehension is stronger than the faculty of desire, a person will neglect to perform those deeds that are good and pleasing. He will not attain the excellence of a man of valor and great deeds,

70. [See *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of creation) 2:4. The statement derives from the fact that the Hebrew consonants of the words *oneg* (ונג) and *nega* (נגו) are the same, just in a different arrangement. *Sefer Yetzirah* is one of the earliest extant Jewish esoteric texts. Traditionally, it is ascribed to the patriarch Abraham. Scholars are unsure when it was written, generally dating it between the first and eighth centuries.]

who girds himself like a lion to do the good and the upright, and who fights the wars of the Eternal despite all the impediments that frighten and oppose him. Because of the small amount of suffering and grief that will come to him from performing a good deed, this man will flag in performing it: the sound of a driven leaf will cause him to sit in idleness and inaction. In the end, even his comprehension will become confused, and he will fail to attain a state of flourishing with respect to his faculty of cognition and spirit of understanding. The rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing, alluded to this when stating of “an individual whose wisdom is greater than his deeds” that “his wisdom will not be preserved” [Mishnah Avot 3:9].

Hence, God formed Adam upright on the earth and established a harmonious relation and proper proportion between his cognition and his desire. Had Adam remained in this upright disposition, he would not have deviated at all from the path of the good through the strengthening of the faculty of craving, except through limited comprehension—that is, when thinking that the good is evil and that the evil is good, which would occur only rarely. Moreover, a limited comprehension is not a sin, and a deficiency in knowledge is not rebelliousness, provided that it is not in one’s power to increase one’s knowledge and comprehension. The sages, may their memories be for a blessing, alluded to this when saying that “erring in study is accounted a wanton transgression.”⁷¹ Therefore, although the [first] man possessed choice and will even before he sinned, he nevertheless was not likely to fall into the trap of craving and seeking sensuous pleasure. For in accordance with the intention of the Creator, may He be exalted, Adam’s desire was harmoniously related and properly proportioned to his comprehension in a way that would lead to flourishing and the true good. Thus, Adam and his wife would crave sexual intercourse and take pleasure in this desire in the degree that was proper and suitable to the end of perpetuating the species. If the craving for sexual intercourse is in accordance with this disposition, then it is no disgrace or shame for man, as a few philosophers have thought.⁷² Rather, the opposite is true—it is a source of splendor for him. Adam and Eve thus walked about naked and were not ashamed, since a person’s shame and disgrace at uncovering

71. [Mishnah Avot 4:13. Mendelssohn apparently takes this statement to mean that only the person who intentionally avoids studying where he has the capacity to do so is considered to be committing a transgression.]

72. [This calls to mind Maimonides’s repeated attribution to Aristotle of the view that the sense of touch is a disgrace to man. See Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:36 and 40; 3:8 and 49.]

his genitals comes only from the strengthening of craving. For the imagination wanders to and fro on seeing the genitals uncovered, arousing craving and desire in a degree, place, and manner not suitable to promoting the end [of perpetuating the species], as is known.

Behold, it belonged to the nature of the tree of knowledge to strengthen and add vigor to the faculty of desire, with the result that when the first man ate from that tree, he became similar to the supernal angels with respect to his faculty of desire. With regard to those supernal beings, the strength of this desire and vigor of this faculty are a great excellence and advantage, since [their desire] is arranged in proper proportion with the excellence of their comprehension. Their desire to do the will of their Creator, to love the good with a powerful love, and to hate the evil with a great hate, increases according to the excellence of their comprehension and cognition, and this is their splendor. With regard to man, however, this was a great evil, since compared to his limited comprehension, his faculty of desire gained strength beyond the proper proportion and relation. From this issue all the vices that we mentioned above—namely, the seeking out of luxuries and the love of bodily pleasure. A person will sink and drown in the mire of the imaginary good, turning to what is beautiful and pleasant to the senses or the imagination, while abandoning the true good that leads to flourishing and true felicity.

Thus far, the German translator's language. It seems that we can resolve, on this basis, all of the doubts that the commentators mentioned regarding this pericope, as you will see in the following verses, with the help of the Eternal.

ON BIBLICAL POETRY

Introduction to Exodus 15

The commentator [Mendelssohn] said: Before beginning to elucidate the Song at the Sea [Exodus 15:1–19], I will first provide you with an introduction concerning the nature and quality of the poetry in the sacred books. I have already informed you that poems of prophecy and the holy spirit are not measured and counted according to a specific number of syllables and a fixed value for their length and shortness (as is the case with Greek and Latin poetry),⁷³ or according to the measuring of syllables⁷⁴ and the resemblance of sounds at the ends of verses (which

73. [Mendelssohn discusses this in his comments on Genesis 4:23, in a passage not translated here.]

74. [The reference is to the categorizing of sounds as short or long, a type of meter that

today has become customary among us in the holy language). For there is neither advantage nor excellence in any of this, except with respect to the pleasantness of the sound for the ear. Indeed, even this is present only in plain recitation, and not in the text's musical rendering; on the contrary, the expert who recites poetry to music will reject such precision and in most cases will need to either swallow some syllables for the sake of musical pleasantness, or lengthen short [vowels] and shorten long [vowels], so that he demolishes the syllabic structure and confuses the overly precise order. For the individual who recites poetry to music has no desire for the harmonious proportion and relation sensed in the sound of the words, as is known to one who is learned in this science.

Aside from this, there is the pressure and trouble that insisting on this type of precision causes the poet. To preserve the poetic order that he has selected, he will sometimes have to violate the intended meaning of a statement by distorting its order, adding to it, subtracting from it, or substituting for one word another word that does not entirely fit with the intended meaning, as is known. However, the benefit gained by rendering the recitation more pleasing does not justify the damage inflicted on the intended meaning and content, which is the purpose of the utterance. Moreover, translating a poem constructed according to meter from one language into another is like pouring good oil from one vessel into another such that its fragrance is completely lost; in the same way, the poem's pleasantness is lost, and no trace of it will remain. For syllabic meter is intimately connected to [a particular] language, and a translator will succeed only in producing prose devoid of any arrangement, order, or fixed meter. From all this precision in syllabic arrangement, counting, and fixed meter, all that will be evident in the translation is its deficiency—that is, the sense of pressure that forced the poet to fail to give his intended meaning its due, as we have mentioned.

It seems that for all these reasons, our ancestors left aside this meager excellence in favor of a more noble excellence. This is the excellence that arises from arranging content and statements in a beautiful way intended for the end desired in [poetry]—namely, that the words enter not only the listener's ear, but also his heart. They should remain engraved on the tablets [of his heart], moving him to joy or sadness, timidity or confidence, fear or hope, love or hate (according to the intended meaning), and firmly establishing within him the virtues and excellent dispositions like goads and nails that have been planted, like a stake that

the medieval Hebrew poet Dunash ben Labrat (mid-tenth century) imported into Hebrew poetry from Arabic poetry.]

will not be dislodged. And since the pleasantness of poetry and pleasing music contribute greatly to meeting this need and promoting this end, as is known to experts in psychology, our ancestors chose to order their noble phrases according to a beautiful order that agrees with the art of music. Just as the systems of melodies, the motions used in playing different instruments, and the number of strings, chords, and openings of those instruments varied, so too did the names of those poems vary, as did the order and division of their content—as is proper. [The names of the instruments included] *kinor, nevel, tof, halil, minim, mitziltayim, neginot, gitit, sheminit, asor, ayelet hashahar, mahol, ugav*, and the like. [The names of the songs included] *menatze'ah, maskil, mizmor shir, mikhtam*, and the like.⁷⁵

However, we have forgotten these melodies during the length of our exile. On account of our great suffering and dislocation, all of this wondrous science in which the great men of our people would take pride has been lost from us, including the art and form of these instruments, the system of voices, the modes of playing, and the pleasantness of the music. Nothing remains for us except the names of the instruments and songs, which in most cases are mentioned in the book of Psalms by the sweet singer of Israel.⁷⁶ Yet we know that this science was widely disseminated within the nation, and that the great men, sages, and prophets of the nation were experts in poetry, excellent performers of music, and exceedingly learned in this science. It was on its basis that they arranged most of the parables, riddles, chastisements, prophecies, and psalms praising the Eternal, which it was His will to proclaim to the people of the Eternal when the spirit of God descended on them from above. However, do not liken the musical art that we possess today to the glorious science that these perfect individuals used, since it appears that there is absolutely no resemblance between the two. What happened to this science is similar to what happened to the science of poetry: excellence in content and idea, which fosters the welfare of the rational soul, has departed in favor of excellence in hearing, which yields nothing but sensuous pleasure and that which is sweet to the ear, as is known to those who are experts in this art. For although [contemporary poetry] is concerned primarily with what is pleasant to the senses, in ancient times [the poet's] art and purpose was to subdue the faculties of the soul, rule over its character traits, and transform its dispositions according to his will.

75. [Since the meaning of many of these terms is not entirely clear, they are left untranslated.]

76. [David. See 2 Samuel 23:1.]

So that the poem's words might serve this end, our ancestors would cut every utterance into parts and divide each part into short clauses nearly equal in their quantity. Therefore, you will not find in any one of these clauses more than four or fewer than two words,⁷⁷ and most pairs include three words in each clause. In contrast, with prose there is no fixed number of words in each clause; you will find a clause with ten or more words followed by a clause with two words without any order at all. Our ancestors did this for two reasons. The first was that with short clauses, the number of caesuras and points of rest increase, which helps considerably to awaken attention to the intended meaning and impress this intended meaning on the heart, as linguists have observed. Similarly, this practice aids memory, since when a short clause contains content and meaning that enter the heart, this content easily becomes orally preserved, memorized, and enduringly familiar. The second reason involves the benefit associated with music. If you sing a long clause out loud and accompany it with instrumental music, you destroy the intended meaning, which will then be intelligible to the listener only with great difficulty. This is not the case with a short clause, and [our ancestors'] entire aim was to preserve the intended meaning and awaken [listeners] to it; indeed, their practice was to divide the words of the poem among two or three groups of singers, as we will mention later on.⁷⁸ For these reasons, then, it was appropriate to divide the poem into small parts: sometimes they would sing responsively, and sometimes they would sing in choruses and all join in together, with varying voices and in different ways. Some would raise their voices and ascend, while others would make their voices descend. Some would strain their voices, while others would sing tenderly. Some would sing with overpowering strength, while others would sing sweetly with pleasant voices. For it is known that the variation and arrangements of voices yield much pleasure and delight for the soul, promoting the desired end that we have mentioned.

You see that in our days, although we have lost this ancient musical science, and no remnant of the musical art used by our ancestors remains (we do not even know the methods of pronunciation and the true sounds of the vowels), there nevertheless remains in our sacred poetry much sweetness that is sensed by every wise reader, even if he does not grasp its cause. This sweetness is not merely auditory sweetness, which is intimately connected to the language in which a poem is composed, as we noted above when discussing poetic meter.

77. A small word or one connected to another by a hyphen does not count.

78. [In a passage not translated here.]

Rather, it is the sweetness of the content, which is connected to the meaning and intention of the statement, rather than to the pronunciation or the sound of the voice. Therefore, when our sacred poetry is translated into another language, even if its flavor is weakened and its fragrance made bitter by the translation, there nevertheless remains the sweetness of the content that we have mentioned. This derives from the arrangement of utterances and the division of clauses into groups in a manner that is beautiful and sweet to the palate, and that is accepted by the soul of the listener. Thus, the poetic magnificence is not entirely destroyed, as occurs in the translation of foreign poetry.

[. . .]

I have already departed from my intention and transgressed the law and boundary that I established for my elucidation—namely, to avoid going on at length regarding [various] disciplines. However, I did this out of love for the subject. For among all the commentators on the Torah, I have not found one who treats this matter adequately, awakening the soul of the reader to the splendor and magnificence of the poems in our sacred books. I have seen the youths of our nation satisfying themselves with the creations of foreign peoples and taking pride in the poetic arts of foreign nations, as if the splendor and gracefulness of poetry had been granted to them. The fire of jealousy burned in my heart, to show that just as the heavens are elevated high above the earth, so too are the ways of sacred poetry elevated high above secular poetry. This is the case not only with respect to the poem's efficient cause (the excellence of the poet), the poem's matter (the splendid and noble phrases), and the poem's purpose (guidance toward eternal felicity and true flourishing by means of the elevated and lofty content, prophecies, promises, blessings, and psalms praising the Eternal that lead man to eternal life). Rather, this is the case even with respect to the poem's form—that is, with respect to the arrangement, combination, and ordering of its statements. In terms of magnificence and beauty, sacred poetry possesses much advantage and great excellence when compared to all of the poems that are so greatly praised for these matters. I now return to elucidating the words of the Song at the Sea, which lie before us.

THE ETERNAL

Exodus 3:13–15

JPS TRANSLATION

Moses said to God, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” (3:13) And God said to Moses “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’” (3:14) And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This shall be My name forever, this My appellation for all eternity.” (3:15)

MENDELSSOHN TRANSLATION

Mosheh⁷⁹ said to God: “When I now come to the children of Yisrael and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers sends me,’ what should I say to them when they say to me ‘What is His name?’” (3:13); God said to Mosheh: “I am the being that is eternal.” That is, He said: “So shall you speak to the children of Yisrael: The Eternal Being, which calls itself ‘I am eternal,’ has sent me to you.” (3:14); God said further to Mosheh: “So shall you speak to the children of Yisrael: The Eternal Being, the God of your ancestors, the God of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya’akov, sends me to you. This is always my name, and this should be the word that brings me to mind in future times.” (3:15)

Commentary: Exodus 3:13, “they say to me ‘What is His name?’”

[This question seeks to discover] the unique name that teaches comprehensively about [God’s] existence and providence. For during the long period of Israel’s exile and subjugation [in Egypt], the holy names known in the nation from the times of the forefathers⁸⁰ were almost forgotten. [The children of Israel] relapsed and became like the nations that revere the celestial bodies and [affirm] their foolish notions on the basis of the opinion that there is no deity other than

79. [In his *Bi’ur* translation, Mendelssohn preserves the Hebrew names rather than transcribing them into their German forms; for example, he writes “Mosheh” rather than “Moses.” In his commentary on Exodus 2:11 (not translated here), he explains that the reason for this is that Hebrew names generally have meanings, based on their Hebrew roots, that are not preserved when put into vernacular form.]

80. [Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.]

these entities. The only exception was the tribe of Levi, which remained steadfast in its faith, never engaged in idolatrous worship, and for this reason merited the crown of priesthood.⁸¹ Hence Moses said: “Your great name is hidden and concealed from all nations and tongues, and all worship beings other than you. What should I say to Israel if they ask me ‘Who sent you? What is His name that indicates His essence, His preceding all, His eternity, and His ruling and exercising providence over all matters?’”⁸²

Commentary: Exodus 3:14, “I am the being that is eternal [Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh]”

In the midrash it is written that “the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: ‘Say to them that I am the one who has been, I am now the same, and I will be the same in the future.’”⁸³ {Our⁸⁴ rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing, also said: “I [who] will be with them in this plight am the one who will be with them when they are subjugated to other kingdoms.”⁸⁵ The sages intended to say that} since there is neither change nor fixed time with Him, and since not one of His days has passed, both past and future are in the present for the Creator. Therefore, with Him all times are called by one name, which includes “has been,” “is,” and “will be.” Consequently, [Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh] indicates necessary existence, as well as perpetual providence, as if He says with this name: “I am with human beings, bestowing grace and having mercy on those on whom I will have mercy. Hence, tell Israel that I have been, I am, and I will be, ruling and exercising providence over all matters. I, I am He. I will be with them in every plight, I will be with them in this plight, and I will be with them whenever they call me.” However, in

81. [Aaron, the high priest from whom the priestly caste in Israel descended, was a member of the tribe of Levi.]

82. See part one (“the chapter on existence”) of the book *Ginnat Egoz* by our Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, who elaborated on this matter, repeating himself over and over as is his wont. His objection to Maimonides’s explanation of the words *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* will be resolved for you at verse 15 with sound reasons. [Joseph Gikatilla (1248–c. 1325) was a Spanish kabbalist. His 1274 *Ginnat Egoz* (Nut orchard) is an introduction to the mystic symbolism of the Hebrew alphabet, vowel points, and divine names. Gikatilla criticizes Maimonides for identifying the meanings of the name *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* and the Tetragrammaton. Maimonides’s discussion of these terms is found in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 1: 61 and 63.]

83. [Exodus Rabbah 3:6, quoted by Nahmanides in his commentary on Exodus 3:13.]

84. [The curly brackets indicate insertions by Dubno.]

85. [See Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 9b, as cited by Rashi in his commentary on Exodus 3:14.]

German there is no word that, like this holy name, combines the teachings of eternality, necessary existence, and providence.⁸⁶ We have thus translated this name as “the Eternal (*der Ewige*)” or “the Eternal Being (*das ewige Wesen*).”

{Onkelos translated *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* as “I will be with whom I will be,”⁸⁷ in the sense of “I will bestow grace on whom I bestow grace, and I will have mercy on whom I have mercy” (Exodus 33:19). He intended to translate this name solely in terms of the intended meaning of providence, in accordance with the second midrash cited above. Rabbi Saadya Gaon wrote that the elucidation of this name is that He has not passed away and shall not pass away, since He is the first and the last. Saadya’s words are close to the words of the first midrash, which indicates eternity.⁸⁸ Maimonides, in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, elucidated this name as “the existent that is [the] existent,” intending the teaching of necessary existence.⁸⁹ In truth, this name includes all three teachings, but Onkelos did not find in Aramaic, just as Rabbi Saadya and Maimonides did not find in Arabic (in which the latter composed his book the *Guide*), a word that, like this holy name, includes all these teachings. Therefore, each individual explained the name as referring to one of these teachings in accordance with his own approach. The German translator [Mendelssohn] has seen fit to explain it by means of the concept of eternity, since the other teachings derive from this concept. Similarly, I found that Yonatan ben Uzziel translated [*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*] in terms of this teaching, [rendering the end of Exodus 3:14 as]: “I-am-who-I-have-been-and-who-I-will-be sent me to you.”⁹⁰}

Commentary: Exodus 3:15, “God said further”

[The Tetragrammaton] is a different name, which possesses the same sense as [*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*], except that the latter is in the first person, while the former is in the third person. Nevertheless, there is a great, important difference between these names. The holy name [the Tetragrammaton] has no vocalization

86. *Das ewige, notwendige, vorsehende Wesen* [the eternal, necessary, providential being].

87. According to the version [of Onkelos] cited by Nahmanides, may his memory be for a blessing. [The note here is by Dubno, not Mendelssohn. See Nahmanides’s commentary on Exodus 3:13.]

88. [Saadya Gaon’s position is cited by Nahmanides in his commentary on Exodus 3:13.]

89. [See Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:61 and 63, cited by Nahmanides in his commentary on Exodus 3:13.]

90. [See Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel on Exodus 3:14.]

at all and is sometimes given the vocalization of *Adonai* and sometimes given the vocalization of *Elohim*.⁹¹ This indicates that He is hidden and concealed from every wise being—different from Himself—who mentions Him with this name. Therefore, our sages, may their memories be for a blessing, expounded the word “always (*le’olam*),” which is written [in this verse] in deficient form without the letter *vav*,⁹² as stating that one should hide Him, [as if God were saying] “I am not written as I am read, etc.” [Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 71a]. For one should not pronounce the essence of the Eternal, may He be blessed: one has no hold on it, except in the subtlety of purified thought. However, the name *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* has its proper vocalization and is read as it is written, since the Exalted Being who speaks in this [first-person] language comprehends His essence in the most perfect way. For He is the one who speaks and says “*Ehyeh*,” and He is what is comprehended as well as the one who comprehends Himself. Reflect on this, for this is the exalted difference between these holy names, and I have not found another author who has noticed this.

ON COMMANDING BELIEF IN GOD,
JEWISH ELECTION, AND IDOLATRY

Exodus 20:1–6

JPS TRANSLATION

God spoke all these words, saying: (20:1) I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: (20:2) You shall have no other gods besides Me. (20:3) You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. (20:4) You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, (20:5) but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments. (20:6)

MENDELSSOHN TRANSLATION

Then the Eternal spoke all of these words as follows: (20:1); I am the Eternal your God, who led you from the land of Mitzrayim, from the house of slaves.

91. [*Adonai* and *Elohim* are two other names for God that are sometimes used in the Bible. *Adonai* means “my Lord,” while *Elohim* means “God,” although its form is plural.]

92. [See note 56.]

(20:2); You shall have no other gods before my countenance. (20:3); You shall make for yourself no graven image, and no similar form of what is in heaven above, on earth below, or in the water under the earth. (20:4); You shall neither bow down before them nor honor them with divine service. For I, the Eternal your God, am a jealous God (who can suffer no others beside Himself), who inflicts punishment for the crime of the fathers on the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, namely on those who hate me, (20:5); but shows mercy to the thousandth generation—to those who love me and keep my commandments. (20:6)

Commentary: Exodus 20:2, “I am the Eternal your God”

Through “and keep my commandments” [Exodus 20:6], all of this is one verse from the point of view of the system of upper accents,⁹³ even though these lines contain two *Dibrot*.⁹⁴ You know that the upper accents were established [to distinguish the verses] according to the *Dibrot*, and that it therefore would have been proper to place an accent indicating the conclusion of a verse at the word “slaves” [Exodus 20:2] [since this is the end of the first *Dibrah*]. However, these two *Dibrot* were joined together on account of their great excellence, since the Eternal uttered them in the first person. And our rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing, said that “we heard ‘I am the Eternal’ and ‘You shall have no other gods’ from the mouth of the Almighty.”⁹⁵

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 that there is a cause and reason that produces all existents.”⁹⁶ The author of *Sefer Hahinukh* added to

93. [The Bible contains a system of accents that serve as a form of punctuation and guide on how to chant the Torah portion. The Decalogue contains two sets of accents, an upper and a lower set.]

94. [On the term *Dibrot* (singular *Dibrah*) being left untranslated, see note 5.]

95. [Babylonian Talmud, Makkot 23b–24a; Exodus Rabbah 33:7. The first six verses refer to God in the first person, but the last eight *Dibrot*, beginning with the seventh verse, refer to God in the third person. The rabbis infer from this that God spoke the first two *Dibrot* directly to the people, but spoke the last eight *Dibrot* to Moses, who conveyed them to the people.]

96. [Maimonides, *The Book of Commandments*, positive commandment 1. The negative commandments are: (1) the prohibition against believing in a deity other than God; (2) the prohibition against making an idol for oneself to worship; (3) the prohibition against

this [an obligation to believe] “that He has been and will be forever, and that He took us out of Egypt and gave us the Torah.”⁹⁷ This resembles the language of the *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the author of the *Sefer Mitzvot Katan* and Nahmanides, may his memory be for a blessing, added other principles which, in their opinion, are included in this verse.⁹⁹

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 His existence, may He be exalted—which is the principle and root from which the commandments derive—is not included in this enumeration [of the Torah’s commandments].”¹⁰⁰ 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

worshiping other beings through bowing, pouring libations, slaughtering animals, or burning incense, whether or not this is the usual means of worshiping these deities; and (4) the prohibition against worshiping a deity in ways other than these four if it is the usual means of worshiping the deity.]

97. [Aaron Halevi, *Sefer Hahinukh* (Book of education), commandment 25, pericope Jethro. Rabbi Aaron Halevi of Barcelona was a thirteenth-century Spanish scholar. His *Sefer Hahinukh* was composed at the end of the thirteenth century and first published in Venice in 1523.]

98. [See Moses of Coucy, *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* (Great book of commandments), positive commandment 1, cited in Abarbanel, commentary to Exodus 20:2. Moses of Coucy was a thirteenth-century French scholar and itinerant preacher. His *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* was first published in Rome before 1480.]

99. [See Isaac of Corbeil, *Sefer Mitzvot Katan* (Small book of commandments), commandment 1, cited in Abarbanel’s commentary on Exodus 20:2; Nahmanides’s commentary on Exodus 20:2, and his glosses on Maimonides’s *Sefer Hamitzvot*, positive commandment 1. Rabbi Isaac of Corbeil (d. 1280) was a French codifier. His *Sefer Mitzvot Katan* was first published in 1510 in Constantinople.]

100. [Mendelssohn quotes Nahmanides’s summary of *Halakhot Gedolot* (Great laws) in the latter’s glosses on Maimonides’s *Sefer Hamitzvot*, positive commandment 1, as it is reproduced by Abarbanel in his commentary on Exodus 20:2. *Halakhot Gedolot*, which was composed around the tenth century, was first published in Venice in 1548. Its author is unknown.]

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 the other prophets, but rather the First Cause without any intermediary.¹⁰¹

Thus far, Abarbanel's language.

Now, the verse's *peshat* seems to confirm the words of [*Halakhot Gedolot* and Abarbanel], 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 similar eternally true intelligibles. For [grasping] these intelligibles is the product of discerning and reflecting on the actions of the Eternal and the works of His hands. Whomever the Eternal graces to recognize the greatness of His deeds in minerals, plants, animals, and the body of man's own self, and to raise his eyes to the heavens and see who created these things and brings forth their host by number—he is the individual on whom grace is bestowed. 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.¹⁰² 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 [the

101. [Abarbanel, commentary on Exodus 20:2. See part 1, note 117.]

102. [The shofar is an animal horn blown on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year. According to Exodus 19:16, the sound of this horn was heard when God descended on Mount Sinai.]

first *Dibrah*] 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 among all the peoples of the earth, as I will elucidate. But with respect to all of the theoretical intelligibles that we have mentioned, the children of Israel are neither distinguished from, nor possess any advantage over, the rest of the nations. All acknowledge His divinity, may He be exalted; even the worshipers of other gods acknowledge that God Most High possesses the greatest power and absolute ability. Thus our rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing, have said that “they call Him ‘the God of gods’” [Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 110a]. Similarly, scripture says that “from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is great among the heathens, and in every place frankincense is presented unto my name, even pure oblations” (Malachi 1:11). Moreover, it is possible that the poet intended this when he noted that “the heavens declare the majesty of God, etc.” (Psalms 19:2) and that there is “no teaching, no words, without their voice being heard” (Psalms 19:4). The intended meaning is that this theoretical content becomes widely known in the world without statement or utterance. For while every statement or utterance is known only to someone who understands that particular language, the declarations of the heavens and the works of His hands are intelligible to all people; in these phenomena there is neither speech nor words that are not heard and understood by every human, for “their chord resounds over all the earth, their message goes forth to the ends of the earth” (Psalms 19:5). Afterwards [this psalm] mentions the excellence of the Torah, which is the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob, unique to the treasured people, the means by which they are distinguished from the other peoples of the earth. [This is what] places them most high over all the nations.¹⁰³

Now, although the nations of the world acknowledge God’s existence and power over all matters, they nevertheless also worship other beings. Some worship heavenly ministers, thinking that the Eternal allocated to each one a nation, province, or district to rule, and that it is in their power to do evil or good, according to their will. These are the beings called “other gods” in the Torah and all other biblical writings, as Nahmanides, may his memory be for a blessing, explained when discussing this pericope.¹⁰⁴ These beings are also called “gods of the nations” [Deuteronomy 6:14], since the angels are called “gods.” Some of the nations worship the stars of the heavens, demons, or human beings,

103. [See Psalms 19:8–15.]

104. [See Nahmanides, commentary on Exodus 20:3.]

and make for themselves forms and graven images to which they bow, as is known.

However, the intellect's judgment does not forbid such worship to a descendant of Noah, provided that he does not intend to remove himself from the authority of God Most High. For in virtue of what is he obligated to direct all worship and prayer to the Eternal alone? If he hopes for good and fears evil from a being other than Him, while acknowledging that even this being is subordinate to God Most High, then the intellect does not exclude his sacrificing, burning incense, offering libations, and praying to this being, whether it be an angel, demon, or human hero, minister, or ruler. Were it not for the fact that the Holy One, blessed be He, prohibited such actions to us in His Torah, who would tell us that all these forms of worship are proper only when directed to the Eternal? In fact, our rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing, stated that the "descendants of Noah have not been prohibited from engaging in *shittuf*,"¹⁰⁵ since for gentiles such acts are not accounted as rebelliousness against the glory of God, provided that it is not the intention of such individuals to remove themselves from the authority of the God of gods and the Lord of lords. {The¹⁰⁶ intention in *shittuf* is not to claim that there are two authorities, since the individual would then remove absolute power from God Most High, blessed be He. Rather, the principle that the descendants of Noah are not prohibited from worshiping in *shittuf* applies when they worship with the intention [of acknowledging] that God Most High allocated honor and granted a measure of dominion to other beings—when these descendants of Noah therefore consider the worship of such beings to be the will of God.}

However, we are a nation close to Him, since He took us out of Egypt, from the house of slaves, and performed all these wonders for us, in order that we might be His inherited and treasured people out of all the peoples, and that He might rule over us Himself, in His glory, without the intermediary of an angel, minister, or star. We are His servants who are obligated to accept on ourselves the yoke of His kingship and dominion and fulfill His decrees. He decreed for us

105. [Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 63b. *Shittuf* literally means "association." The twelfth-century Tosafist Rabbi Isaac interpreted this Talmudic statement to mean that gentiles were permitted to associate (*leshattef*) worship of beings other than God with their worship of God. Mendelssohn's ancestor Rabbi Moses Isserles (1520–72) codified this view in his glosses on Rabbi Joseph Karo's authoritative legal code, the *Shulhan Arukh* (Set table), Orah Hayim (Path of life), #156.]

106. [As noted above, the curly brackets indicate insertions by Dubno.]

as a general principle that we should not worship any being other than Him, and He specified for us the types of worship that are properly directed only to Him, not to any being other than Him. It is not proper, then, to associate another god with Him in any one of these forms of worship. Thus, scripture said “lest you raise your eyes toward the heavens, and see the sun, the moon, the stars, and the whole host of the heavens and be misled to bow down and worship those beings whom the Eternal your God has, in fact, permitted for all other peoples under the entire heaven. But the Eternal took you out of the iron furnace—that is, out of Mitzrayim—so that you might become His inherited people, as you now actually are” (Deuteronomy 4:19-20).

Hence, the meaning of the verse before us is as follows: *I* (the one who speaks and commands); *am the Eternal* (who has been, is, and will be; the source of all beings, exercising providence and present to those who love me in their time of distress); *your God* (powerful and capable, from whom you should hope for all good and fear all evil, and to whom it is proper to direct all prayers and worship); *who led you from the land of Mitzrayim, from the house of slaves* (to be His inherited people as we stated, and to whose unique name it is proper that you devote all worship).

On this basis you will understand why He did not say “I am the Eternal your God, who created the heavens and the earth, and who created you.” This is the question that the master, Rabbi Judah Halevi, may his rest be in dignity, posed to Ibn Ezra, and that is also mentioned in Halevi’s book *The Kuzari*.¹⁰⁷ [Ibn Ezra’s] answer, however, is not satisfactory.¹⁰⁸ Belief in creation in time—regardless of whether there is a clear-cut rational proof for it, as some scholars thought, or whether the intellect cannot decide between it and the belief in the eternity of the world, as was Maimonides’s opinion in the *Guide*¹⁰⁹—is neither unique to the treasured people of the Eternal alone, nor a reason for accepting the yoke of His exclusive kingship and shunning *shittuf*. Rather, the act of taking us out of the house of slaves, from slavery to freedom, is the correct reason for this.

This is also the case with respect to the observance of the Torah’s other com-

107. [See Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Exodus 20:2; Halevi, *Kuzari* 1:19–27.]

108. [Ibn Ezra claims that the reason for mentioning God’s taking the Israelites out of Egypt is that Israel alone acknowledges creation in time, while the “wise men” of the nations believe that the world is eternally created. By recognizing the miracle of God’s taking the Jews out of Egypt, the Israelites acknowledge God’s ability to intervene in the world and hence creation in time.]

109. [See Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:16.]

mandments, such as the commandment to keep the Sabbath. Although the Sabbath is a sign of the creation of the world “because the Eternal made [heaven and earth] in six days, etc.” [Exodus 20:11, 31:17], the descendants of Noah were nevertheless not commanded to rest from all labor on that day. This is what is said in the second version of the *Dibrot*, [which commands you to] “remember that you were a slave [in Egypt]” [and states that] “the Eternal your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day for this reason” (Deuteronomy 5:15), as we will mention in its place with the help of the Eternal.¹¹⁰ For to us alone did the Eternal, may He be exalted, give the Torah, commandments, decrees, and laws, since He is our king and lawgiver, and it is incumbent on us to observe His laws and precepts, whether as children or as servants. Thus our sages stated in the *Mekhilta* regarding the words “who led you, etc.” that “this act of taking [you out of Egypt] was sufficient to render you subjugated to me.”¹¹¹

ON DIVINE JEALOUSY

Exodus 20:5

JPS TRANSLATION

You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me.

MENDELSSOHN TRANSLATION

You shall neither bow down before them nor honor them with divine service. For I, the Eternal your God, am a jealous God (who can suffer no others beside Himself), who inflicts punishment for the crime of the fathers on the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, namely on those who hate me.

Commentary: Exodus 20:5, “jealous”

Apportioning honor and love to that which does not deserve them, and withholding honor and love from that which does deserve them, arouses the spirit of jealousy in our hearts. Someone who has in his soul the disposition to be moved when he sees this is called “jealous”—either for his own honor, as in the verse “a spirit of jealousy seizes him and he becomes jealous regarding his wife”

110. [In a passage not translated here.]

111. [See *Mekhilta*, quoted by Rashi in his commentary on Exodus 20:2.]

(Numbers 5:14), or for the honor of others, as in the verse “are you jealous on my behalf?” (Numbers 11:29).

The language of jealousy is applied to the Eternal, may He be blessed, only in the case of idolatry. Thus, in the *Mekhilta*, our rabbis said, “I [God] jealously punish in cases of idolatry, but I am gracious and merciful regarding other matters” [Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, BaHodesh 6]. Similarly, as we have noted, you will not find jealousy mentioned—even regarding idolatry—except in reference to Israel. For it is only when Israel engages in idolatry that honor and worship are withheld from that which deserves them and accorded to that which does not deserve them. This is the language of Rashi:

He becomes jealous to punish and does not forgo His rightful retaliation by pardoning idolatry. All language of *kin’ah* [jealousy] should be rendered as *enprement* in [Old French]. {This should read *enpreusement*. In German, however, we use the term *Eifer*.} [The verse in question, then, means that] “He directs His attention to punish.”¹¹²

Deuteronomy 4:24

JPS TRANSLATION

For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, an impassioned God.

MENDELSSOHN TRANSLATION

For the Eternal your God is a consuming fire (He punishes with severity), a jealous God (who tolerates no alien deities alongside Himself).

Commentary: Deuteronomy 4:24, “is a consuming fire”

“Despite appearing without the prepositional letter *kaf* that indicates resemblance, this phrase means that He is like a consuming fire.”¹¹³ Perhaps, however, the prepositional letter *kaf* that indicates resemblance is missing in order to strengthen the statement. Its sense is that “He punishes justly and does not overlook anything.”¹¹⁴

112. [Rashi, commentary on Exodus 20:2].

113. Ibn Ezra. [Mendelssohn and Homberg split the commentary of Deuteronomy. This pericope was commented on by Mendelssohn. The following pericope that appears in this volume (Deuteronomy 17:15) was drafted by Homberg, but extensively revised by Mendelssohn.]

114. This is the opinion of the German translator [Mendelssohn].

Commentary: Deuteronomy 4:24, “a jealous God”

When He sees that Israel is worshiping and honoring an alien deity, He becomes jealous of the honor being rendered to that alien deity, since Israel’s acts of honor and worship are properly directed only to Him, not to another. See the elucidation of the word “jealous” in Exodus 20:5.

ON KINGSHIP

Deuteronomy 17:15

JPS TRANSLATION

You shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the LORD your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not set a foreigner over you, one who is not your kinsman.

MENDELSSOHN TRANSLATION

You can set over yourself a king, whom the Eternal your God will then choose. But you must choose one of your brothers to be king and may not set over yourself a foreigner who is not your brother.

Commentary: Deuteronomy 17:15, “you can set”

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” [Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 20b]. Similarly, our rabbis said in the *Sifre* that “‘you can set a king over yourself’ is a positive commandment” [Sifre Deuteronomy 157].

It seems that this commandment was imposed on the prophets, the 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 (who might rule tyrannically, as they see among all the nations around them), 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 Eter-

nal. But the Eternal said to him that “it is not you, but rather me, whom they have rejected from ruling over them” (1 Samuel 8:7). Nevertheless, the Eternal said to Samuel, “listen to their voice and set a king over them” [1 Samuel 8:22]. 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.