

Irene Kajon

Sapienza - University of Rome

*Aufklärung vs. Mysticism: Moses Mendelssohn reads Moses Hayyim Luzzatto*

In his *Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen 1932) Ernst Cassirer has opposed *Aufklärung* and Mysticism: he thinks that the first exalts human reason which makes a distinction between letter and spirit – sign and significance – in the symbols, so recognizing man's freedom from nature and history; the second, on the contrary, maintains the identity between sensible and intellectual, body and soul, introducing man in the being only and considering the being as a living organism, so denying his freedom. Other philosophers and researchers, like Adorno and Horkheimer, or Gershom Scholem, think that there is between *Aufklärung* and Mysticism a deep continuity: Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Amsterdam 1947) explain how a reason which does not recognize the rights of feelings and passions leads to negation of reason, obscurantism, totalitarianism; and Scholem in his *Sabbatai Zevi. The Mystical Messiah* (Engl. ed., London 1973) reminds that some participants in French culture at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in French Revolution came from Sabbatean families and experience.

The thesis that I would like to defend in this lecture, speaking about the *Aufklärer* Moses Mendelssohn and the Mystic Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, who was born in Padua, Italy in 1707 and died in Akko, Galilee, in 1747, is that both theses – that of a distance and that of a closeness between *Aufklärung* and Mysticism – are right and wrong at the same time. Mendelssohn – as we shall see – could consider Luzzatto as his brother when considering God's relationship with the world, and as his enemy when considering Messianic expectations. They were, so to speak, two enemy brothers: brothers, but fighting each other. In this lecture I shall try to prove this thesis of mine which intends to give you an idea of the complexity of Jewish intellectual history. Different trends often enter into a fruitful dialogue which nevertheless does not cancel their different approaches and perspectives. Hence also the interest and fascination of this history.

## I.

We have only one mention of Moses Mendelssohn – as far as we know about his life and work – about Moses Hayyim Luzzatto. But this mention is, as we shall see, very meaningful. It appears within a letter that Mendelssohn sent

to Johann Gottfried Herder from Berlin, September 24, 1781 [this letter is reproduced in Mendelssohn's *Briefwechsel III, Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe, XIII, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1977, pp. 25-27*]. From this letter it is possible to enlighten the intellectual relationship between Mendelssohn and Luzzatto at this time and in the following years (Mendelssohn died in January, 4, 1786).

But, before I deal with this subject, I would like to remind that Herder, who was a correspondent of Mendelssohn from 1769 onwards (their first exchange of letters refers to the problem of the immortality of soul, after Mendelssohn published in 1767 his *Phädon*), was very close to him for his personal relations, and for his interests and ideas: Herder as a young man was a pupil of Kant in Königsberg, and Kant was an interlocutor of Mendelssohn from the sixties; he was sympathetic, notwithstanding his friendship with Jacobi and Hamann, with the battles engaged by Lessing against the religious and political establishment in name of a critical reason, and Lessing was a dear friend of Mendelssohn from 1754, when they met in Berlin. Herder was able to read Hebrew and loved the Bible, which he inserted in the context of his universalistic vision of human culture. The intimate and warm tone of the Mendelssohn's letter expresses their long acquaintance and their friendship.

After Mendelssohn thanks Herder, in this letter of his, for Herder's sending of two writings to him, one of them in memory of Lessing (who had died in 1781), the other one on Winckelmann, Mendelssohn announces to Herder that he himself will send to him three Hebrew books. So Mendelssohn writes in the letter:

Sie erhalten in einem Pakete folgende Hebräische Sachen. 1) das dritte Buch Mose mit meiner Uebersetzung und einem Commentar von meinem gelehrten Freunde, Herrn Wessely, der zu meinem Schaden und zu manches Lesers Langeweile viel zu gelehrt gerathen ist. 2) *Examen mundi*, Hebräisch und Lateinisch, eins der schönsten unserer neuern Lehrgedichte das Ihnen vielleicht schon bekannt ist. 3) ein allegorisches Drama. Der Verfasser hat vor 50 Jahren zu Amsterdam gelebt, war ein großes Genie in mancher Betrachtung, ward aber von der Eifersucht einiger Rabbiner abgeschreckt, sich entwickeln, ward gemißhandelt, zog sich in die Einsamkeit zurück - und starb gar frühzeitig. Seine cabbalistische Manuscripte werden nunmehr in Polen fleißig studirt. Er soll auch neue Psalmen geschrieben haben, die mir aber nicht zu Gesichte gekommen sind [*Briefwechsel III, p. 26*].

The letter ends with Mendelssohn's promise to Herder to write a text on Lessing as soon as Lessing's brother had sent him his correspondence with Lessing (this project will be realized, as we shall see, only in 1785).

With regard to the first two “Hebräische Sachen” as a gift of

Mendelssohn to Herder, I do not enter in details. I only remind, with regard to the first – “das dritte Buch Mose” – that Mendelssohn had begun from the seventies a German translation of the Pentateuch with a Hebrew commentary together with his pupils and friends, and that Wessely, the author of the commentary to this Biblical book, was a Jew from Copenhagen, arrived to Berlin in 1774, after he had lived in Amsterdam in 1767 and 1768. And, with regard to the second one – *Examen mundi-Bechinat olam* – I only remind that this text had been published in Leiden in 1650 (it is a reproduction of the Hebrew poem of Yedayah ben Avraham Bedersy, born in Béziers, Provence, in 1270, died in 1340, written after the expulsion of the Jews from France in 1306, and of the Latin translation of Allard Uchtman). About the third “Hebräische Sache” I have to give you more information and commentaries because it is a book whose exactly Luzzatto is the author. The title of this book is *La-yesharim tehillah* [Praise of the righteous].

## II.

*La-yesharim tehillah*, the “allegorische Drama” Mendelssohn intends to send to Herder, was printed in Amsterdam in 1743, when Luzzatto lived in this town: he arrived there in 1736, after he was obliged by the *cherem* declared against him by the rabbis in Venice and Padua in 1735, to leave Padua. The book had been reprinted in Berlin in 1780 by Salomon Dubno, who was a member of the circle of Jewish intellectuals around Mendelssohn, formed in the seventies. Alexander Altmann, author of a wonderful biography of Mendelssohn [*Moses Mendelssohn. A Biographical Study*, London 1973], gives us some information about this figure [*ibid.*, pp. 354-355].

Salomon ben Yoel (1738-1813), born in Dubno, Poland, therefore called Salomon Dubno, arrived to Berlin in 1772. For his education he was a rationalist: after he had been a pupil of the Gaon Rav Naftaly Hirz in Dubno, he had as his teacher Solomon ben Moses Helmah, author of a commentary, entitled *Murkevot Mishneh* [Guide to Mishneh], to Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* [Repetition of Torah]. In the introduction to this commentary he criticizes all the people who do not use rational methods in studying Torah and Talmud, like Qabbalists or Chassidim; and Dubno had accepted and deepened the criticism of this master of his. When Dubno had lived in Amsterdam, from 1767 until 1772, this rationalistic attitude, which refuses darkness or confusion, had led him to join a group of Hebraists, who wanted to renew Hebrew poetry according to the ideals of cleanness and harmony. The leader of this group, David Franco Mendes, had been a pupil of Luzzatto, when he lived there, from 1736 until 1743. So Mendelssohn had a man in his circle, Salomon Dubno, who in a sense was a pupil of a pupil of Luzzatto: Dubno was very close to him,

especially from 1775, when Dubno became also a teacher for his son Josef.

In the light of this historical connections, it is possible to suppose that *La-yesharim tehillah* – a drama where the actors allegorically are personifications of virtues – was for Mendelssohn a beautiful example of a modern Hebrew expression which takes again the pure Biblical language. The name of Luzzatto was reminded by Mendelssohn to Herder in a period, 1781, in which Mendelssohn was involved in his translation and commentary of the Hebrew Bible, pondering the problem of the passage from a language to another, from Judaism to German culture.

Something more: Luzzatto could be the writer who inspired Mendelssohn in his utilization of the allegory in order to describe virtues or faculties of the soul. The problem of the relationship between an idea and its sensible expression – be it sign, word, hieroglyphic, action – is discussed by Mendelssohn already in his essay on evidence in metaphysics (1763), and afterward again in his *Jerusalem* (1783). Certainly, Longinus, Shaftesbury, Rousseau are his sources. But the way in which Mendelssohn in *Morgenstunden* (1785) represents the *Gemeinsinn* or *sensus communis* and the *Beschauung* or *contemplatio* – figures in a dream, a man and a woman, sometimes in agreement, sometimes walking different paths – reminds exactly *La-yesharim tehillah*. The words “allegorisches Traum” and “allegorische Bedeutung” to indicate the first the dream which appears in *Morgenstunden*, and the second its meaning, are – it seems to me – a reminiscence of the words “allegorisches Drama”, used by Mendelssohn in his letter of September 24, 1781, in order to characterize Luzzatto's important work.

### III.

The first point I tried to underline is the influence Luzzatto had on Mendelssohn about his aesthetical views. The second point refers to the feelings of respect and sympathy for Luzzatto that Mendelssohn shows in the quoted letter to Herder: “...[Er] hat vor 50 Jahren zu Amsterdam gelebt...”. The year of the beginning of Luzzatto's staying in Amsterdam that Mendelssohn refers to Herder is not precise: he arrived in this town, as I reminded, in 1736 – so in 1781, when Mendelssohn writes, only 45 years had spent: probably Mendelssohn has not direct news about him, but only rumours (it seems that Luzzatto's legend, which lasts until now, is already present at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century). But what is more important is the fact that Mendelssohn, telling Herder some lines of Luzzatto's life and work, apparently intends to wake up his interest and appreciation for him. For the *Aufklärung* a man persecuted for his ideas is a hero of a free and critical thinking against despotism and

clericalism: Herder, who shared the views of the *Aufklärung*, could not be indifferent to Mendelssohn's short description of Luzzatto's biography.

Mendelssohn himself, at the time of his letter to Herder, was the object of criticism and hostility because of his defense of Judaism and the Jews. In the seventies Mendelssohn had had a sad polemic with the Swiss theologian Johann Kasper Lavater (1741-1801). I remind that Lavater, who with Johann Georg Sulzer in 1763 had visited Mendelssohn in Berlin and discussed with him religious and philosophical matters, published in 1769 in Zürich a German translation of some parts of Charles Bonnet's work *Palingénésie philosophique, ou Idées sur l'Etat passé et sur l'Etat futur des êtres vivants* (Genève 1769) with the title *Herrn Carl Bonnets Philosophische Untersuchung der Beweise für das Christentum. Samt desselben Ideen von der künftigen Glückseligkeit der Menschen*; and that in a Preface to this translation of his Lavater maintained the soundness of Bonnet's prove of the truth of Christianity, and invited Mendelssohn either to refute it or to convert himself to Christian religion as a philosopher and a honest man. Mendelssohn was obliged to reply to Lavater with a letter to him, dated December 12, 1769, published in Berlin in 1770. In the following years – 1770-1772 – there were other texts published by Lavater and Mendelssohn about the problem of the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and philosophy: the polemic between them gave rise to more than thirty pamphlets, and many writers – among them Herder – discuss the *affaire* in their letters of these years.

According to Alexander Altmann's biography of Mendelssohn (which I above quoted), Mendelssohn was afraid that Lavater was only the most evident opponent in the context of a larger hostility, coming from Christian clergy and Christian circles and institutions in Berlin. So it is not surprising that Mendelssohn felt a deep affinity with Luzzatto in the eighties, and that he wanted in his letter to share this feeling with Herder.

However, it is also true that Mendelssohn, who was always careful in maintaining the unity of the Jews, had good relations with the guardians of Jewish orthodoxy. Among his correspondents there is Jacob Emden (1697-1776), chief rabbi in Altona, who signed the *cherem* against Luzzatto in 1735 – when Luzzatto was in Germany, coming from Padua and going to Holland – and later, in 1752, published in Amsterdam a collection of documents against Luzzatto and his followers, whom he accused of Sabbateanism. Salomon Dubno himself, who was – as I above mentioned – the editor of Luzzatto's work *La-yesharim tehillah* in 1780, in 1776 composed an elegy in the occasion of Emden's death. The hard fight between the philo-Luzzattians and the anti-Luzzattians, which took place especially from 1727 until 1752, seems to melt in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Mendelssohn, speaking about Luzzatto, shared this more moderate atmosphere.

#### IV.

In the letter he wrote to Herder about Luzzatto Mendelssohn mentions his “cabbalistischen Manuscripte”, carefully read in Poland (it is possible that Mendelssohn had this news from Dubno or his Polish correspondents: in his age the relations between German Jews and Polish Jews were very close). As in the following passage of the letter Mendelssohn speaks about Luzzatto's writings (I shall deal with them in a moment) that did not come to himself “zu Gesichte”, I presume that these “cabbalistischen Manuscripte” instead did. Should one interpret this expression in a realistic meaning (Mendelssohn could read Luzzatto's qabbalistic writings, arrived to him perhaps through Salomon Dubno or some other Polish or Lithuanian friends – I remind that Luzzatto's thinking was brought from Padua to Poland and Lithuania by his pupil Yekuti'el Gordon in 1734), or rather only in a metaphorical meaning (Mendelssohn did not read Luzzatto's qabbalistic writings, but he was informed about their content)? We cannot reply to this question – as far as we know until now about Mendelssohn's life and work. But we know that about the relationship between God and the world Mendelssohn had ideas which were identical with the views maintained by Luzzatto as a Qabbalist.

In his book *Morgenstunden oder Vorlesungen über das Daseyn Gottes* (1785), the work which is the realization of his project in 1781 to write something on Lessing, Mendelssohn, after his criticism of Spinozism or pantheism – which maintains that between God and the world there is no difference – defends what he calls a “geläuterte Pantheismus”, coherent with “Religion” and “Sittlichkeit”. According to this pantheism, it is true that the world is in God, but it is not true that God is in the world: the world becomes cosmos only in the light of divine glory, but divine glory does not lose its distance from the world. Mendelssohn thinks that this pantheism is maintained by Jewish sources and that Lessing himself was a supporter of this view. So he writes, expressing his ideas under the form of a dialogue between himself and a friend, called only with the initial letter “D”:

[D.] fuhr fort: [...] Gott [...] mehr in Naturbegebenheiten, als in Wunderdingen verehren, dieses dünkt mich, ist die höchste Veredlung menschlicher Begriffe, die erhabenste Weise, über Gott und seine Regierung und Vorsehung zu denken. - Ich gab ihm meinen Beyfall zu erkennen, und führte die Worte des Rabbinen an, der diesen Gegensatz der Erhabenheit und Herablassung bereits bemerkt hat: *Allenthalben, wo du Gottes Größe und Erhabenheit findest, da findest du auch seine Herablassung.* [...] D. fuhr fort: Nun dünkt mich, Freund, daß eben diese Lehre von

keinem Schriftsteller, auf der einen Seite mit mehrer Ueberzeugung und Darstellung in einzelnen Fällen, auf der andern Seite mit mehr Inbrunst und frommer Begeisterung vorgetragen worden sey, als von unserm unsterblichen Lessing [*Morgenstunden, Ges. Schriften*, III.2, pp. 128-129].

Now, this “geläuterte Pantheismus” – which does not appear in Mendelssohn's previous writings, although already in *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755) he intends to find a Spinozism coherent with the idea of Providence – is offered by Luzzatto in his interpretation of Isaac Luria's concept of creation. In *Da'at tevunot. Ma'amar ha-wikkuah ben ha-sekel we ha-neshamah* [Wisdom of reason. A dialogue between intellect and soul], published only in 1889 in Warsaw (reprinted in Bne Braq 1983), Luzzatto writes about the relations between God and the world:

Intellect [to soul]: Our teachers said: 'Flesh and blood are under His government, but the Eternal is above His government'. [...] It seems that God maintains existence in all its details, but He is above them, in the highest [pp. 21-22].

So it is possible, I think, to suppose that Mendelssohn could take exactly from Luzzatto's qabbalist manuscripts suggestions in order to defend Spinoza – and his friend Lessing, considered by Jacobi a Spinozist in his *Spinozabriefe* (Breslau 1785) – from the charge of atheism and immorality. It seems to me that this hypothesis of mine acquires consistency especially if we remind that Jacobi considered Spinoza only as a ring in the qabbalistic chain, and that Qabbalah for Jacobi was the Jewish doctrine about being: in his *Morgenstunden* Mendelssohn intended to defend the entire mystical Jewish tradition from the charge of atheism and immorality (together with fatalism and totalitarianism), moved against it by Jacobi.

## V.

The last point I would like to deal with refers to Mendelssohn's words in his letter to Herder which inform about Luzzatto's writing of some Psalms: “...Er soll auch neue Psalmen geschrieben haben...”. Recent research about Luzzatto (particularly Joelle Hansel's and Natascia Danieli's studies about him and his circle [ cf. J. Hansel, *Moïse Hayym Luzzatto. Kabbale et Philosophie*, Paris 2004; N. Danieli, *L'epistolario di Mošeh Hayym Luzzatto*, Firenze 2006] discuss this subject) has explained how these Psalms, probably composed before 1727 – the year of the beginning of Luzzatto's mystical visions – were considered by the Rabbis who later declared against him the *cherem* as a prove

of his will to substitute the existing Torah with a new Torah, following Sabbateanism. In the *cherem* (1735) also his Psalms were considered dangerous, writings to be burnt in the fire. Certainly, through Salomon Dubno, Mendelssohn could be well informed about the heretical character – according to the Rabbis' evaluation – of these Psalms.

Mendelssohn, who loved the existing Torah, especially Psalms, which he translated into German and commented in the seventies, was not able to agree with Luzzatto about his attempt to give new Psalms to Jewish people: about *mitzvot*, i. e. the rules and norms which govern Jewish life, he was conservative rather than reformist. Moreover, he shared with Jewish tradition the idea that in the most of cases the oldest has more value than the new (for example in religion and art), and in some cases the new only is an explication of the oldest (for example, in metaphysics) – as he wrote in his essay on evidence in metaphysical sciences (1763).

Mendelssohn's criticism of Lessing's philosophy of history in his *Jerusalem* (1783) could be interpreted in the light of Mendelssohn's refusal of Sabbateanism: in his *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (first part, Berlin 1777; first and second part, Berlin 1780) Lessing shares the utopian views of Gioacchino da Fiore about an age where only Spirit will lead mankind – no more God as a Father or Jesus Christ as God's Son – and mankind will be free in the world; Luzzatto, as a follower of Sabbateanism, maintains a Messianism grounded on Jewish actions, and his aim is to give humanity redemption. Mendelssohn was suspicious about both trends – the millenarism of the *Aufklärer* and the millenarism of the activist Messianic Jew. He was afraid that millenarism could cancel the difference between man and God, forget human limits, emphasize universality against the individual.

So it seems that Luzzatto, who inspired Mendelssohn through his excellent Hebrew language, his life, and his mystical treatises, was not loved by Mendelssohn as a writer of texts which could be considered not so much as commentaries of the Jewish Bible, rather as new religious compositions.

\*

In Alexander Altmann's book about Mendelssohn's biography one finds a very interesting comparison between Mendelssohn and Luzzatto. He writes:

There was a world of difference between the spiritual climate in Dessau, where Mendelssohn grew up, and the atmosphere in Padua, where only a few years before Moses Hayym Luzzatto and his circle were engrossed in qabbalistic speculations and messianic dreams. Both Mendelssohn and Luzzatto were adepts of pure biblical Hebrew. Both were steeped in



traditional learning and piety. Yet they moved in different worlds. Mendelssohn tended toward a humanistic type of Judaism, and his inwardness was that of a lonely youth who sought to enlarge his horizon. Luzzatto was expecting salvation on a cosmic scale from the concentrated power of a mystical fraternity of prayer and meditation. Each member of his group could secretly regard himself as destined for messiahship [*op. cit.*, pp. 11-12].

However between Mendelssohn and Luzzatto – so different for their personalities and aims – there are also similarities. The difference especially refers to their concept of history and salvation. The similarities to their will to renew Hebrew expression, their idea of the connection between God and the world, their consciousness about human right to speak and act frankly and honestly against religious authorities who forbidden to think, to use one's own reason.

So *Aufklärung* and Mysticism – in the case of Mendelssohn reading Luzzatto – on one side oppose each other, on the other harmoniously meet. *Concordia discors*.