Exegesis and Politics Between East and West: Nachman Krochmal, Moses Mendelssohn, and Modern Jewish Thought*

Elias Sacks
University of Colorado Boulder; elias.sacks@colorado.edu

■ Abstract

Recent scholarship on modern Jewish thought has sought to overcome the field's Germanocentrism by recovering diverse visions of Jewish life across eastern and western Europe. While studies typically emphasize either striking differences or surprising affinities between these settings, I use the neglected eastern European philosopher Nachman Krochmal to highlight a strategy of creative appropriation and redirection—an eastern European strategy of breaking with German-Jewish philosophy precisely by deploying that tradition's own resources. One of modern Jewish philosophy's early episodes, I argue, is a politically charged engagement with biblical exegesis involving Krochmal and the German-Jewish thinker Moses Mendelssohn. Implicitly drawing on yet revising the treatment of biblical interpretation in Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings, Krochmal seeks to retrieve what he sees as a vital element of Jewish politics: possessing neither a shared land nor military strength, he insists, Jews have long sustained their diasporic collective through hermeneutical endeavors such as rabbinic midrash, and they should continue to do so by launching a transnational project of historically sensitive exegesis. The resulting image of a transnational Jewish collective whose fate is separate from

that of non-Jewish polities breaks with Mendelssohn's political vision, pointing to an east-west dynamic of creative repurposing—an instance of an eastern European thinker drawing on a German-Jewish predecessor to develop a sharply contrasting philosophical vision.

◼ Key Words

Moses Mendelssohn, Nachman Krochmal, Galicia, diaspora, politics, midrash

◼ Introduction

Scholars of modern Jewish thought should look to the east.

This is the judgement offered by a growing body of literature seeking to overcome what is sometimes seen as the field's Germanocentrism.[1] Looking beyond German philosophers such as Moses Mendelssohn, Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig, this work has recovered diverse trajectories of Jewish modernity across eastern and western Europe. Some studies emphasize differences between eastern European settings such as Russia and Galicia on the one hand and contexts to the west such as Germany on the other, focusing on characterizations of the Jewish tradition,[2] degrees of intellectual and political agency (and concern with apologetics),[3] attitudes toward economic life and other materialist factors,[4] and non-Jewish influences.[5] Other studies raise questions about a focus on differences, uncovering surprising affinities between western European philosophers and eastern European rabbis[6] and suggesting that key German figures should themselves be situated against an eastern backdrop—for instance, that eighteenth-century Berlin was eastern European in the sense that many of its Jewish intellectuals had

---

[1] Some German-Jewish philosophers, most famously Martin Buber, explore eastern Europe: see Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de Siècle Orientalism, the *Ostjuden*, and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation," in *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (The Culture of Jewish Modernity; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 77–132. Recent studies, however, worry that while some specific thinkers examine eastern Europe, scholarship on Jewish thought remains Germany-focused.

[2] Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (S. Mark Taper Foundation Imprint in Jewish Studies; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[3] Eliyahu Stern, *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Shaul Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism* (Encountering Traditions; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[4] Eliyahu Stern, *Jewish Materialism: The Intellectual Revolution of the 1870s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

[5] Eliyahu Stern, "Catholic Judaism: The Political Theology of the Nineteenth-Century Russian Jewish Enlightenment," *HTR* 109 (2016) 483–511.

[6] Paul E. Nahme, "*Wissen und Lomdus*: Idealism, Modernity, and History in some Nineteenth-Century Rabbinic and Philosophical Responses to the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*," *HTR* 110 (2017) 393–420.

immigrated from regions such as Poland, and that German figures thus operated in a setting shaped by eastern European life.[7]

Both types of narratives are surely needed. This article, however, suggests that there is another story that we should also be telling. I will argue that while there are cases where we should emphasize differences and cases where we should stress affinities, we should also be attentive to a strategy of creative appropriation and redirection—an eastern European strategy of breaking with the German-Jewish philosophical tradition precisely by deploying that tradition's own resources. I develop this claim by revisiting one of Jewish thought's best-known but least-studied figures: the eastern European Jewish philosopher Nachman Krochmal. Born in 1785 in eastern Galicia (now Ukraine), Krochmal is often described as central to Judaism's encounter with developments ranging from biblical criticism to German idealism. A businessperson and communal leader who taught himself German, French, Latin, Arabic, and Syriac, he is remembered for *The Guide of the Perplexed of the Time* (*Moreh Neḇuḵey Hazeman*), a magisterial yet opaque Hebrew treatise that—despite being unfinished when he died in 1840—remains one of the most significant attempts to construct a philosophy of Jewish history. He also exercised considerable influence, especially on early pioneers in the academic study of Judaism.

Nevertheless, Krochmal is now rarely studied, at least in North America. Despite scholarship in Israel and Europe (including a new Hebrew edition and German translation of the *Guide*),[8] the most recent English-language book on his work appeared in 1991,[9] and the *Guide* remains largely inaccessible to Anglophone audiences.[10]

This paper uses Krochmal's neglected voice to complement yet complicate narratives about Jewish modernity across western and eastern Europe, calling attention to the strategy of creative appropriation and redirection outlined above—a

---

[7] Olga Litvak, *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism* (Key Words in Jewish Studies 3; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

[8] Nachman Krochmal, *Moreh Neḇuḵey Hazeman* (ed. Yehoyada Amir; Jerusalem: Carmel, 2010); idem, *Führer der Verwirrten der Zeit* (trans. Andreas Lehnardt; 2 vols.; Philosophische Bibliothek 615a–b; Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2012).

[9] Jay M. Harris, *Nachman Krochmal: Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age* (Modern Jewish Masters 4; New York: New York University Press, 1991). See also, e.g., Yehoyada Amir, "The Perplexity of Our Time: Rabbi Nachman Krochmal and Modern Jewish Existence," *Modern Judaism* 23 (2003) 264–30l; Litvak, *Haskalah*, 124–30; Lawrence Kaplan, "Yehezkel Kaufmann, R. Nachman Krochmal, and the 'Anxiety of Influence,'" in *Yehezkel Kaufmann and the Reinvention of Jewish Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Job Y. Jindo, Benjamin D. Sommer, and Thomas Staubli; OBO 283; Fribourg: Academic; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017) 122–46.

[10] English selections appear in, e.g., *Ideas of Jewish History* (ed. Michael A. Meyer; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987); Gershon Greenberg, *Modern Jewish Thinkers: From Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig* (Emunot: Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah; Brighton, MA: Academic Studies, 2011); *Jewish Legal Theories: Writings on State, Religion, and Morality* (ed. Leora Batnitzky and Yonatan Y. Brafman; Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought; Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018).

strategy that I highlight in Krochmal, but that may find analogues in other figures, as well.[11] One of modern Jewish philosophy's early episodes, I argue, is a politically charged engagement with biblical exegesis involving Krochmal and Moses Mendelssohn, the eighteenth-century German-Jewish philosopher often cited as the founder of modern Jewish thought. Implicitly drawing on yet revising the treatment of biblical interpretation in Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings, Krochmal develops an alternate theory of hermeneutics to retrieve what he sees as a vital element of the Jewish political tradition. Discovering in those earlier exegetical writings the core of a political vision that he takes to have been left undeveloped, Krochmal draws on those texts to restore biblical interpretation to what he sees as its proper place at the heart of Jewish politics: possessing neither a shared land nor military strength, he insists, Jews have long sustained their diasporic collective through exegetical endeavors such as rabbinic midrash, and they should continue to do so in modernity by launching a transnational project of historically sensitive exegesis. This argument owes much to Mendelssohn, but it also breaks sharply with the German-Jewish thinker's politics. While Mendelssohn is committed to a vision of civic inclusion, Krochmal focuses on national separation. Despite agreeing that Jews constitute a diasporic, transnational collective whose members remain distinct from their non-Jewish neighbors, Mendelssohn and Krochmal disagree about this group's place in the modern world: whereas Mendelssohn argues that members of this distinctive collective can also be committed participants in non-Jewish societies, Krochmal turns to exegesis to construct a transnational entity whose fate is separate from that of non-Jewish polities. Krochmal thus points to a relationship between eastern European and German-Jewish thought that is neither primarily one of rupture nor primarily one of affinity, but rather one of creative repurposing—an instance of an eastern European thinker drawing on a German-Jewish predecessor to develop, in a different context, a sharply contrasting philosophical vision.

◼ Krochmal on Exegesis

The description of Krochmal as eastern European—widespread among scholars[12]—is not without complications. The boundaries between eastern and western European Jewry are notoriously fluid,[13] and Krochmal's life reflects this dynamic. While his home of eastern Galicia—including the Ukrainian cities of Brody, Zolkiev, Lwow, and Tarnopol where he lived—is typically seen as falling on the eastern side of

---

[11] See below (n. 97) on the Polish Jews in Nancy Sinkoff, *Out of the* Shtetl*: Making Jews Modern in the Polish Borderlands* (BJS 336; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004); this book was reissued with a new preface and bibliographic material in 2020.

[12] See, e.g., Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 3–14, 313–26; Sinkoff, *Out of the* Shtetl, 201; Litvak, *Haskalah*, 124–30.

[13] Steven Lowenstein, "The Shifting Boundary Between Eastern and Western Jewry," *Jewish Social Studies* 4 (1997) 60–78. More broadly, see Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

this divide,[14] he was familiar with intellectual and political developments that occupied German Jewry. He was engaged with the work of German philosophers such as Kant and Hegel,[15] and Galician Jews encountered reform efforts similar to those associated with Prussia. After the territory that came to be called Galicia was seized by Austria during the late eighteenth-century partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Galician Jews were subject to reforms enacted in the 1780s by the Austrian Habsburg monarch Joseph II, who—pursuing an imperial project of state-building—sought to curtail premodern Jewish communal autonomy, incorporate Jews more fully into the Austrian body politic, and promote the adoption of German culture.[16]

Nevertheless, Krochmal's biography reflects the distinctive intellectual and socioeconomic circumstances of his eastern European, Galician home. He was deeply engaged with Galician religious life, corresponding with the region's Karaites and navigating conflicts with local Hasidic groups.[17] His Galician setting was also one where Jews—significantly more than in areas to the west—maintained corporate frameworks of identity and participated in a largely premodern economic system that involved, among other activities, managing businesses leased from the Polish aristocracy. After Joseph II died in 1790, his successors showed little interest in continuing his reforms, seeking instead to preserve stability through alliances with traditionalist Jews wary of efforts to dissolve corporate autonomy and promote Germanicization. Additionally, hoping to maintain Galicia as an agricultural province, Joseph's successors did not encourage the region's industrial development, with the result that lease-holding—especially in the alcoholic beverage industry—remained important to Jewish economic life. The result, in one historian's words, was that "Galician Jewry's encounter with the Austrian government opened with a short-lived radical attempt to change Jewish society, but in the end, the government, the Polish aristocracy, and the major forces in Jewish society joined together to conserve the existing situation, at least until the 1840s," and "Jews largely still maintained corporative frameworks of identity."[18] Krochmal's life was marked by

---

[14] See Israel Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772–1881* (trans. Chaya Naor; Jewish Culture and Contexts; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); on Galician Jewry's "Polishness," see Sinkoff, *Out of the* Shtetl. On east-west boundaries, see Lowenstein, "Shifting Boundary," 60–78.

[15] Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 3–14.

[16] See Bartal, *Jews of Eastern Europe*, 70–81; Sinkoff, *Out of the* Shtetl, 203–70; on Joseph II, see also Stanislaw Grodziski, "The Jewish Question in Galicia: The Reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, 1772–1790," *Polin* 12 (1999) 61–72. More broadly, see Iryna Vushko, *The Politics of Cultural Retreat: Imperial Bureaucracy in Austrian Galicia, 1772–1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[17] Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 11–12. See also Litvak, *Haskalah*, 124–28; Rachel Manekin, "Galician Haskalah and the Discourse of *Schwärmerei*," in *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times* (ed. Ari Joskowicz and Ethan B. Katz; Jewish Culture and Contexts; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) 189–207, at 196–98.

[18] Bartal, *Jews of Eastern Europe*, 79–80 (more generally, 70–81). See also Sinkoff, *Out of the* Shtetl, 203–70. On Galicia's complexities, see Rachel Manekin, " 'Dayṭšen,' 'Polanim,' 'O ' 'Osṭrim'? Dilemat Hazehut šel Yehudey Galiṣyah (1848–1851)," *Zion* 68 (2003) 223–62.

precisely this persistence of premodern economic patterns and corporate communal structures: he operated a liquor franchise and served as community leader for Zolkiev's Jews (with duties including assisting tax collectors, interacting with government officials, and supplying Jews for military service).[19] Viewed against this backdrop, Krochmal's *Guide* provides an opportunity to explore how a figure embedded in eastern European, Galician surroundings deployed yet repurposed German-Jewish philosophy.

Published posthumously in 1851, the *Guide* explores topics ranging from metaphysics to history. My initial focus lies with Krochmal's claims about halakhah or Jewish law—more specifically, about how this system emerged from the rabbis of antiquity and their predecessors extending back to the First Temple's destruction and the Babylonian exile. This history, Krochmal suggests, exhibits a pattern followed by "any comprehensive legal system given to a full collective." Such a system will initially codify, in writing, only a few principles, and these general statements will exist alongside unwritten "methods of bringing forth particulars," of interpreting general principles to derive detailed rules:[20]

> As time passes, as branches of particulars multiply considerably, and as conditions change greatly, necessity will produce sages knowledgeable regarding language and text and wise regarding matters of law and statute. They will assist the leaders and teachers, and [these sages'] wisdom will aid [those leaders and teachers] in governance (*hanhagah*). Especially as more time passes and the language in which the legal system was given also changes, and as words' and utterances' proper meaning in the ancient language is forgotten . . . how much more will necessity produce entire settlements and groups investigating utterances' and words' meaning. They will work on methods of reasoning from the general to particulars and comparing one time with another, in accordance with all changes and divergence in deed and thought. These groups' leaders will make judgments . . . by means of the methods they received from their predecessors, in accordance with the jurisprudential science they acquired.[21]

If a society's foundational document articulates principles that must be interpreted to yield detailed rules ("particulars") amid shifting circumstances, individuals who can interpret such texts and derive laws suited to new conditions will serve a crucial societal function, "aiding . . . in governance" by generating norms that leaders can administer.

Krochmal continues:

---

[19] Simon Rawidowicz, "Maḇo' Lamahadurah Hari'šonah," in *Kitḇey Rabbi Nachman Krochmal* (2nd ed.; Waltham, MA: Ararat, 1961) 7–225, at 34–35, 46–47; Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 3–14. See also Raphael Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (trans. Eugene Orenstein, Aaron Klein, and Jenny Machlowitz Klein; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985) 34–35.

[20] Krochmal, *Moreh*, 189. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

[21] Ibid., 189–90.

> If all this occurs with a political legal system . . . what will be the case with a *divine legal system*, which in principle and character is given for all time and extends to the totality, every section, and all the details [of the lives] of the collective's individual members. . . . How much more so will it be necessary, from the legal system's initial promulgation, for there to be a tradition and transmission process for its leaders, and for there to be everything we have mentioned, so that the leaders will understand the system, enforce it among the people, and reach judgements on its basis.[22]

For Krochmal, "everything . . . mentioned" above applies even "more" to "a divine legal system." The need for experts who provide norms derived from a core text will be particularly pronounced when a system is linked to God, since such a system may be envisioned as enduring "for all time" and enacting divine principles in all areas of life, and may therefore require the ongoing interpretation of foundational texts and development of detailed rules.

This framework, Krochmal claims, illuminates ancient Judaism:

> Besides the Torah that we possess in writing, there likewise appeared alongside it orally received matters of equal value. . . . Their core content was spoken orally to Moses at Sinai, and passed by him in a similar manner to Joshua and subsequently to the elders, prophets, and wise men . . . until the time of the sages of the Mishnah and Talmud. . . . These received matters' core content and the consequences following from them, along with all that the leading sages of the many generations in that long period . . . fashioned and innovated on their basis and agreed upon—all that was produced is included by our sages under the general heading *Oral Torah*.[23]

Krochmal casts "the sages of the Mishnah and Talmud" and their predecessors as examples of his sociolegal model: just as that model envisions the initial written promulgation of principles alongside the development of additional rules over time, with Judaism "there likewise appeared alongside" a written Torah additional legal content elaborated by sages over "many generations." For the *Guide*, then, ancient Jewish intellectuals played a crucial social role. Interpreting a foundational document (the Bible) to derive detailed communal rules (halakhic norms), the rabbis and their predecessors enacted a process vital to "governance."[24]

Krochmal then discusses practitioners of this socially relevant exegesis: "scribes," whom he dates to the time of Ezra (following the First Temple's destruction and the Babylonian exile), and "teachers of *halakhot*," whom he takes to emerge around 200 BCE and include the early rabbis.[25] Introducing the word *midrash* when discussing this second group, he explains that this term denotes the manner in which exegetes would generate "particulars." Also known as *derash*, this approach took two forms: *midrash halakhah*, involving the production of

---

[22] Ibid., 190 [emphasis in original].
[23] Ibid. [emphasis in original]
[24] For Krochmal, while not all laws arose exegetically, "the vast majority" did (ibid., 206).
[25] Ibid., 191–237.

the detailed laws outlined above, and *midrash 'aggadah*, yielding "particulars of character traits, ethical teachings, and good beliefs and opinions, and every matter or story conducive to ethics and faith":[26]

> In *midrash halakhah*, they would always preserve a biblical section's essence, directing the verse only towards content proximate or close to it. They would very precisely examine the division of every statement into all its components—superfluous words, their ordinary and non-ordinary senses, and utterances' essential and figurative meanings, along with their continuity in terms of the whole, section, and details therein. The result is that . . . Scripture's *peshat* and the sages' *midrash* regarding *halakhot* can in most cases be held on scales together. . . . This is not so with *midrash 'aggadah*. Since it focuses only on character traits and ethical teachings that, in principle, are founded in the intellect and a pure heart, and since *derash*'s benefit is only to introduce the good teaching to the listener's ear and serve as a reminder for him, the sages did not refrain from bringing forth these teachings from whatever portion of Scripture was present in whatever section occurred [to them].[27]

Krochmal begins with communal laws, suggesting that legal *derash* derives such norms from textual details or "components," such as specific "words," "utterances," and layers of "sense" beyond "ordinary" and "essential" meanings. The contrast is with a *peshat* or straightforward reading, described elsewhere in this section of the *Guide* as focusing not on details such as specific words' subtle nuances, but on terms' basic meaning and literary context—as an approach that refuses to look away "from words' and utterances' primary and natural sense, *the ways of using them in a language*, an utterance's connection with what is before and after it, or what is recounted regarding that utterance and the sense of its neighbors in the Holy Writings."[28] While *peshat* and legal *derash* thus differ, their shared focus on textual detail entails that they are often compatible. Krochmal insists above that "*peshat* and the sages' *midrash* regarding *halakhot* can in most cases be held . . . together"; similarly, the *Guide* elsewhere invokes the relation between *peshat* and *derash* by noting that "we are permitted by all the sages collectively to consider the *peshat* in the case of a difference with the *derash*, which nevertheless remains valid and honored."[29]

Yet halakhic interpretation did not exhaust midrashic activity. Rather, the rabbis also pursued *midrash 'aggadah*, disseminating "character traits and ethical teachings . . . founded in the intellect" by using the Bible to "introduce the good teaching to the listener's ear and serve as a reminder." Instead of clarifying textual details, this approach involved formulating teachings about topics such as ethics (among other matters) through rational reflection and then framing this content as the message of "whatever portion of Scripture" occupied the interpreter. Finding themselves

[26] Ibid., 238–39.
[27] Ibid., 239.
[28] Ibid. [emphasis in original]
[29] Ibid., 191.

engaged with a text for some pedagogic or other reason, the rabbis would identify a feature that could be used to convey ethical content already generated through reason; indeed, the *Guide* suggests that many aggadic readings emerged from public sermons, and that scripturally-focused public instruction about matters such as ethics arose with the scribes.[30] For Krochmal, these readings generally break more significantly with the Bible's plain sense than do their textually-focused legal counterparts, since *'aggadah* treats Scripture less as a source of textual details to be clarified, and more as a collection of literary opportunities to present pre-formulated teachings about matters such as ethics: while "*peshat* and the sages' *midrash* regarding *halakhot* can in most cases be held on scales together," he notes, "this is not so with *midrash 'aggadah*." For example, discussing *midrash halakhah*, Krochmal invokes an attempt to derive laws regarding kidnapping from the details of a verse on that topic;[31] by contrast, he illustrates *midrash 'aggadah* with a rabbinic text linking an ethical teaching regarding jealousy to a listing of cities in a verse on geography.[32]

To be sure, Krochmal stresses, ancient Jews valued *peshat*:

> A great rule was laid down for all our predecessors, may their memories be for a blessing: *Scripture does not depart from its peshat (b. Shabbat 63), and the derashah can be expounded*. The meaning is that the sages have the capacity *to direct Scripture* towards some end and desired benefit, so that it alludes to or offers instruction either regarding the halakhah that was received, studied, determined, and arranged in the oral tradition, or regarding some ethical teaching, opinion, or conception of a virtue. . . . However, despite this capacity, no one may *direct Scripture completely from its peshat*.[33]

Even as they generated detailed legal and ethical content, earlier generations held that "no one may . . . completely" abandon the explication of Scripture's plain sense. Nevertheless, Jewish intellectuals were committed to going beyond that sense for "instruction either regarding the halakhah . . . or regarding some ethical teaching." Krochmal's picture of ancient Jewish intellectuals is thus, in part, an account of how they enacted socially vital biblical hermeneutics, engaging Scripture to supply legal norms and interpersonal ethics required by the Jewish nation. He even uses the same term—*hanhagah* (governance)—for both types of content, emphasizing their shared role in regulating ancient Jewish society: we have seen him describe the production of legal particulars as aiding "leaders . . . in governance (*hanhagah*)," and he elsewhere applies *hanhagah* to "*midrash* on verses for the sake of ethics."[34]

---

[30] Ibid., 242, 248–49; see also Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 284–85.

[31] Krochmal, *Moreh*, 229.

[32] Ibid., 239.

[33] Ibid. [emphasis in original]

[34] Ibid., 248.

◼ Krochmal, Mendelssohn, and Exegesis

Krochmal's hermeneutics have been read in apologetic terms. By emphasizing rabbinic concern with the Bible's details, he parries charges that rabbinic Judaism broke with Scripture; by linking *'aggadah* to rationally generated ethics, he addresses accusations that such readings are so absurd as to undermine rabbinic credibility.[35] His approach has also been linked to the non-Jewish jurist Friedrich Karl von Savigny and premodern Jewish thinkers such as Sherira Gaon and Azariah de Rossi.[36] Another potential source is the German-Jewish scholar Leopold Zunz, who edited the *Guide* after Krochmal's death. Krochmal was familiar with Zunz's work: although we possess no correspondence between the two and Zunz is not cited in the *Guide*, he was reportedly identified by Krochmal as the book's preferred editor.[37] Readers have also noted affinities with Zunz's 1832 *Liturgical Sermons of the Jews*. Like Krochmal, Zunz contrasts *midrash halakhah* and *'aggadah*, describing the latter as "free" interpretation that often breaks with the Bible's plain sense to discuss matters such as ethics; like Krochmal, Zunz traces *'aggadah* to sermons focused on engaging listeners.[38] Admittedly, there are also significant differences,[39] and one reader has speculated that it was Zunz who was indirectly influenced by Krochmal.[40] Nevertheless, Zunz has been identified as a potential source for the *Guide*.[41]

While correct, these readings offer only a partial picture of Krochmal's concerns. I argue that his account of biblical interpretation also involves a politically inflected encounter with the work of Moses Mendelssohn.[42] A clue emerges from an earlier

[35] Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 206–307. See also Krochmal, *Moreh*, 191, 202.

[36] See Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 226–34, 275–76; Margarete Schlüter, "'Jewish Spirituality in Poland'—Zur Rezeption früherer Konstruktionen der rabbinischen Tradition in Nachman Krochmals Darstellung der Entwicklung der Mündlichen Tora," *Frankfurter judaistische Beiträge* 28 (2001) 103–19; Andreas Lehnardt, "Einleitung," in Krochmal, *Führer*, 1:vii–lxxvi, at xlviii–l.

[37] Ismar Schorsch, "The Production of a Classic: Zunz as Krochmal's Editor," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 31 (1986) 281–315. Krochmal's correspondence, but not the *Guide*, mentions Zunz (Letter 18, in Krochmal, *Moreh*, 453).

[38] Leopold Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden, historisch entwickelt. Ein Beitrag zur Alterthumskunde und biblischen Kritik, zur Literatur- und Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin: Asher, 1832) 41–43, 57–61, 321–60 et al. See also Maren R. Niehoff, "Zunz's Concept of Haggadah as an Expression of Jewish Spirituality," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 43 (1998) 3–24.

[39] Whereas Krochmal distinguishes *peshat* and *derash* in terms of textual elements they highlight, Zunz links *peshat* to Scripture's past meaning and *derash* to its contemporary significance. Whereas Krochmal does not privilege *'aggadah* over *halakhah*, Zunz frequently praises the former over the latter (while ascribing importance to both). Additionally, whereas Krochmal suggests that *'aggadah* matters sociopolitically by yielding ethics, Zunz takes *'aggadah* to matter sociopolitically by preserving Jews' sense of freedom and hope. See the citations above.

[40] See Andreas Lehnardt, "Nachman Krochmal and Leopold Zunz: On the Influence of the *Moreh Nevukhe Ha-zeman* on the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 7 (2013): 171–85, at 182–83, which speculates about Krochmal's ideas, yet-to-be-formulated in the *Guide*, reaching Zunz through the Galician scholar Solomon Judah Rapoport.

[41] Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 178–79, 295, 303 n. 20.

[42] On Krochmal and other aspects of Mendelssohn's thought, see, e.g., Simon Rawidowicz,

section of the *Guide* which, exploring biblical texts such as Ecclesiastes, invokes "*peshat*-focused interpreters who preceded us, among them, in particular, the master Moses the son of Menaḥem, may his memory be for a blessing."[43] The reference to a "Moses the son of Menaḥem" concerned with *peshat* and Ecclesiastes is to Mendelssohn and his Hebrew commentary on that book, a 1770 text whose introduction explores the nature of *peshat* and *derash*.[44] Although Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings have until recently been overshadowed by his German oeuvre,[45] this material was well known to Krochmal, who also cites Hebrew texts from the 1780s including the *Bi'ur* or "Elucidation" (Mendelssohn's Hebrew commentary on the Pentateuch) and *'Or Lanetiḇah* or "Light for the Path" (the commentary's introduction).[46]

These works exhibit striking similarities with the *Guide*. Consider the Ecclesiastes commentary's account of methods employed by exegetes such as the rabbis:

> Every statement reflects an intention that fits with all the concerns of the speaker and listener, and that agrees with the flow and context of the words that are spoken, without excess or deficiency. This is called the primary intention, and the elucidation of this intention is called *peshat*. . . . The path of the *peshat*, or the primary intention, involves paying careful attention to the sense, but not the words.[47]

Characterizing *peshat* as focusing on words' context and general "sense," Mendelssohn continues:

'Iyunim Bemaḥšeḇet Yiśra'el (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1971) 2:217–18; Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 79–80, 100 n. 54; Litvak, *Haskalah*, 127. Krochmal's father, a merchant, reportedly met Mendelssohn.

[43] Krochmal, *Moreh*, 143.

[44] See Edward Breuer and David Sorkin, "Editors' Introduction to *Megillat Qohelet* [Commentary on Ecclesiastes]," in *Moses Mendelssohn's Hebrew Writings* (ed. Edward Breuer and David Sorkin; trans. Edward Breuer; YJS 33; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) 109–22.

[45] Recent works engaging Hebrew material include, e.g., Edward Breuer, *The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans, and the Eighteenth-Century Study of Scripture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Carola Hilfrich, *"Lebendige Schrift." Repräsentation und Idolatrie in Moses Mendelssohns Philosophie und Exegese des Judentums* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2000); Andrea Schatz, *Sprache in der Zerstreuung. Die Säkularisierung des Hebräischen im 18. Jahrhundert* (Jüdische Religion, Geschichte und Kultur 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009); Gideon Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012); Grit Schorch, *Moses Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik* (SJ 67; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012); Elias Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script: Philosophy, Practice, History, Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

[46] See Krochmal, *Moreh*, 166; idem, Letter 14 in *Moreh*, 447. See also Amir, "The Perplexity," 294 n. 26, 295 n. 35.

[47] Moses Mendelssohn, *Haqdamah Lemegillat Qohelet*, in *Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe* (ed. Fritz Bamberger et al.; 24 vols.; Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: F. Frommann, 1971–) 14:148 (hereafter *JubA*); following *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible* (ed. Michah Gottlieb; trans. Curtis Bowman, Elias Sacks, and Allan Arkush; Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought; Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011) 176 (hereafter *WJCB*).

> However, there is a time when even the natural human speaker will be precise. . . . He will deliberately use one of the words or statements that are alike in meaning, rather than another. He will do so . . . in order to thereby allude and refer to a specific matter. . . . The elucidation of this secondary intention is called *derush*. . . . The sages, may their memories be for a blessing, never rejected the *peshat* and primary intention. . . . But they also left a place for the secondary intention, which scrutinizes every word, every letter. . . . A mark of the secondary intention is that the matter intended does not agree in every way with all the concerns of the speaker and listener, with the entire context of the statement, with its connection with what comes earlier and afterwards. . . . In every place where the sages, may their memories be for a blessing, expounded a verse according to their methods . . . they saw that the path of *peshat* is insufficient for understanding the statement's details and precise features.[48]

Mendelssohn presents *derush* (used interchangeably with *derash*) as exploring "details and precise features"—as looking beyond words' "flow and context" and general "sense" to consider nuances and layers of signification associated with "every word, every letter." This approach is animated by an awareness that while speakers may intend to communicate a "primary" meaning that is not dependent on the nuances of specific words, individuals sometimes also intend to express a "secondary" meaning by choosing one word or phrase over another. If such linguistic sophistication is possible with "even the natural human speaker," then it is possible with the Bible's divine author, and it will be necessary to scrutinize even seemingly minor scriptural features for potential meaning: for example, when the Bible demands both "remembering" and "observing" the Sabbath, we should read the different verbs as emphasizing distinct Sabbath-related rules.[49] Mendelssohn thus develops an account of biblical hermeneutics focused on language use. He states above that his predecessors' exegesis reflects a familiarity with the "natural human speaker," and he elsewhere invokes the habits of "one who has mastered a language."[50]

The resonance with Krochmal is clear. Just as the *Guide* links legal *derash* to textual details or "components," Mendelssohn links *derush* to Scripture's "details and precise features." Just as Krochmal's examples of such "components" include layers of "sense" beyond the "essential" meanings of words and phrases, Mendelssohn's examples of "details" include the "specific matter" to which "one of the words or statements that are alike in meaning" can "refer"—layers of signification associated with words or phrases beyond their basic meaning. Just as Krochmal links *peshat* to the context of biblical lines rather than such nuances (invoking "an utterance's connection with what is before and after it" and "what is

---

[48] Mendelssohn, *Haqdamah Lemegillat Qohelet*, in *JubA*, 14:149–51, slightly altering *WJCB*, 177–81.

[49] Mendelssohn, *Haqdamah Lemegillat Qohelet*, in *JubA*, 14:149–50, following *WJCB*, 178–79; idem, *Bi'ur* on Exod 20:8, Deut 5:12, in *JubA*, 16:191, 18:339.

[50] Mendelssohn, *Haqdamah Lemegillat Qohelet*, in *JubA*, 14:148, following *WJCB*, 176.

recounted regarding that utterance and the sense of its neighbors"), Mendelssohn associates this approach with the "context of the statement."[51] Most fundamentally, both thinkers emphasize linguistic sensitivity. Krochmal casts ancient readers as "sages knowledgeable regarding language and text" and sensitive to how "language . . . changes," just as Mendelssohn presents them as linguistically sensitive exegetes attentive to the "natural human speaker."

These similarities extend beyond content to phrasing. A minor example emerges above: just as Krochmal's claim about *peshat* and context cites a verse's "connection with what is before and after it (*qešuro 'im mah šelefanav ule'aḥarav*)," Mendelssohn invokes a line's "connection with what comes earlier and afterwards (*qešuro 'im haqodem vehamit'aḥer*)." More suggestive is Krochmal's statement, cited earlier, that "we are permitted . . . to consider the *peshat* in the case of a difference with the *derash*, which nevertheless remains valid and honored"—that while *derash* should be accepted, a *peshat* reading also merits consideration "in the case of a difference (*beḥiluf*) with the *derash*." While there are premodern precedents for using the Hebrew root *ḥ-l-f* when discussing *peshat* and *derash*, Mendelssohn deploys this language in precisely the same context as the *Guide*: a case where both approaches should be taken seriously. *'Or Lanetiḇah* states that "a rule was laid down for us" regarding *peshat* and *derash* specifying, in part, that when "the path of *peshat* merely deviates and differs (*umitḥalef*) from the path of *derash*, but is not opposed to it, Scripture does not depart from its *peshat*, and the *derashah* can be expounded."[52] Similarly, the *Bi'ur* on Exodus 21 endorses accepting both readings when *peshat* turns out merely to "differ (*mitḥalef*)" from *derash*, but not when "what appears to be Scripture's *peshat* contradicts rabbinic tradition" regarding laws.[53]

Mendelssohn's declaration that "a rule was laid down for us" specifying that "Scripture does not depart from its *peshat*, and the *derashah* can be expounded" is particularly telling. While each of the two clauses used—"Scripture does not depart from its *peshat*" and "and the *derashah* can be expounded"—appears widely in premodern sources, I have not found this formulation—this combination of the clauses with no words added—in earlier texts, and none of the few works using these phrases in close proximity describes this idea as "a rule [that] was laid down."[54] As we saw, however, Krochmal employs precisely this Mendelssohnian

---

[51] Although Krochmal invokes statements' "continuity" (context) when discussing *midrash* (*Moreh*, 239), his emphasis on context's centrality to *peshat* suggests that "continuity" figures in *midrash* as something other than a defining focus—perhaps that *derash* notes when textual features do not fit their context (and thus require investigation). Mendelssohn, too, links *derash* to cases where some "matter . . . does not agree" with its "context."

[52] Moses Mendelssohn, *'Or Lanetiḇah*, in *JubA*, 14:244, slightly altering *WJCB*, 199. According to this rule, when *peshat* and *derash* diverge, they are sometimes contradictory but sometimes merely different (yet logically compatible); only in the latter case can both be accepted.

[53] Mendelssohn, *Bi'ur* on Exod 21, in *JubA*, 16:198, following *WJCB*, 205–6.

[54] *Yešu'ot Mešiḥo* by Isaac Abrabanel (1437–1508) inserts one word between these phrases: *Yešu'ot Mešiḥo* (Königsberg: Gruber, 1860) 17a. *Tosafot Yom Ṭov* by Yom-Ṭov Lipmann Heller

formulation, adding only a talmudic source: "*Scripture does not depart from its peshat (b. Shabbat 63), and the derashah can be expounded*." Even more strikingly, he echoes Mendelssohn's introduction of this formulation, casting these clauses as part of "a great rule [that] was laid down (*kelal gadol munaḥ*)," just as Mendelssohn includes them as elements of "a rule [that] was laid down (*kelal munaḥ*)."[55] And although two post-Mendelssohnian sources published prior to Krochmal's death join "Scripture does not depart from its *peshaṭ*" to "and the *derashah* can be expounded" without intervening words, neither is cited by Krochmal, nor do they use the term "laid down (*munaḥ*)" invoked by both him and Mendelssohn when describing the rule built from these phrases. The relevant passages from these sources, in fact, themselves reflect Mendelssohn's influence, further pointing to this formulation's association with the German-Jewish thinker.[56]

Yet despite these (and other) similarities,[57] there are differences. Krochmal locates ancient exegesis against a social backdrop absent from Mendelssohn's argument. While Mendelssohn suggests that all *derash* involved textual attentiveness rooted in a concern with language use, Krochmal limits this to legal

---

(1579–1654) inserts several clauses between these phrases: *Tosafot Yom Ṭov* on Menaḥot 9:4, Bar Ilan Responsa Project (version 20). Neither mentions "a rule" being "laid down."

[55] My point is not that only Mendelssohn influenced Krochmal. Indeed, Krochmal mentions Abrabanel's *Yešu'ot Mešiḥo*, albeit merely as illuminating aggadic material used against Judaism by converts to Christianity—and not as illuminating *peshat* and *derash* (*Moreh*, 246). Nevertheless, the striking Krochmal-Mendelssohn similarities—the lack of intervening words linking the relevant phrases and the reference to a "rule" being "laid down"—suggest a particularly close link between the two figures. On Abrabanel and another element of Krochmal's thought (his metaphysics), see Rawidowicz, *'Iyunim*, 2:281–89.

[56] Yeḥezkel Feivel's 1801 *Toldot 'Adam* reproduces—with alterations (but no attribution)—the Mendelssohn passage Krochmal echoes: *Sefer Toldot 'Adam* (Dyhernfurth: R'ayḳil, 1801) 25b. See Edward Breuer, "The Haskalah in Vilna: R. Yeḥezkel Feivel's *Toldot Adam*," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 7 (1997) 15–40, at 28–30. The relevant interpretive "rule" is described as "great" by Krochmal and Feivel but not Mendelssohn, suggesting that Krochmal may know *Toldot 'Adam*. However, Krochmal also uses language present in Mendelssohn but not Feivel: Feivel alters Mendelssohn to cast this "rule" as "a sign between our eyes," whereas Krochmal follows Mendelssohn by describing it as "laid down [*munaḥ*]." This suggests, at the very least, a use of Mendelssohn; if Krochmal knows Feivel but nevertheless follows Mendelssohn, using *munaḥ* might even suggest a preference for Mendelssohn. Jacob Zvi Meklenburg's 1839 *Haketaḇ Vehaqabbalah* quotes (without attribution) the Feivel passage quoting Mendelssohn: *Haketaḇ Vehaqabbalah* (2 vols.; Frankfurt: Kaufmann, 1880) on Deut 24:16 (at 2:67a). See Edward Breuer, "Between Haskalah and Orthodoxy: The Writings of R. Jacob Zvi Meklenburg," *HUCA* 66 (1995) 259–87, at 278–79. *Haketaḇ Vehaqabbalah*, on Lev 16:23 (at 2:29a) uses—but reverses—the phrases in Mendelssohn and Krochmal. Again, though, the Mendelssohnian language Krochmal invokes—the reference to a rule being "laid down"—is absent; moreover, *Haketaḇ Vehaqabbalah* was published the year before Krochmal's death, raising questions about whether he knows it. David Eybeschuetz's 1825 *'Arḇey Naḥal* uses the phrases in Mendelssohn and Krochmal but with clauses intervening: *Sefer 'Arḇey Naḥal* (2 vols; Warsaw: n.p., 1871) 1:138a.

[57] One of Mendelssohn's innovations was to apply the phrase *kavanah šeniyah* ("secondary intention")—employed medievally in non-exegetical contexts—to derashic meaning (Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 190–93). Krochmal uses this same phrase when discussing *midrash* and *derash* (*Moreh*, 240).

exegesis, arguing that *'aggadah* was animated not by a linguistically-driven concern with clarifying textual features, but by a desire to disseminate rationally derived intersubjective ethics. Whereas Mendelssohn insists that "in every place where the sages . . . expounded a verse according to their methods . . . they saw that the path of *peshat* is insufficient for understanding the [Bible's] details," Krochmal states that *'aggadah* linked "ethical teachings . . . founded in the intellect" to "whatever portion of Scripture was present."

Even when associating legal exegesis with textual detail, Krochmal grounds this in social considerations that Mendelssohn does not invoke in his Hebrew account of exegesis. Whereas Mendelssohn links *derush* to a recognition that "*peshat* is insufficient for understanding [the Bible's] details," Krochmal links legal *derash* to the need for norms enabling communal "governance." Whenever Krochmal emphasizes linguistic sensitivity, in fact, he also emphasizes societal concerns. He casts the rabbis and their predecessors as "knowledgeable regarding language and text," but in the next clause portrays them as "wise regarding matters of law and statute"; he writes that these groups attended to how "language . . . changes" and to "utterances' and words' meaning," but he then emphasizes their concern with "jurisprudential science" and "comparing one time with another . . . in deed and thought." By contrast, despite linking halakhah to social concerns on a number of occasions, Mendelssohn rarely identifies legal exegesis as the site of halakhah's social significance. The conclusion of the *Bi'ur* on Exodus suggests that halakhically mandated behaviors cultivate attentiveness to sociopolitical circumstances, but this passage says nothing about legal interpretation figuring in this process.[58] Similarly, writing to his collaborator Herz Homberg, Mendelssohn describes shared halakhic practices as creating a "unifying bond" and "some kind of connection" among Jews confronting "polytheism, anthropomorphism, and religious usurpation," but says nothing about halakhic *midrash*.[59] Indeed, I know of only two brief comments by Mendelssohn linking halakhic exegesis and societal concerns. Both appear in his 1783 German treatise *Jerusalem, oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*, which suggests that because the Bible leaves many legal details unarticulated, adherents must further clarify the biblical text to understand their obligations, and that such interpretive activity in turn promotes "sociability"—substantive interactions among individuals seeking to determine how to act. Because the Bible contained "few written laws," Mendelssohn writes, halakhah would "impel" Jews "to social

---

[58] Mendelssohn, *Bi'ur* on conclusion of Exodus, in *JubA*, 16:405–7; his best-known German treatise, *Jerusalem, oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*, may also invoke this idea. See Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script*, 93–121. Krochmal seems to know this *Bi'ur* passage, which divides societal activities into "works of necessity" such as agriculture, "works of utility" such as road building, and "works of splendor" such as painting; this model reappears in Krochmal (*Moreh*, 34, 42). Kaplan ("Yehezkel Kaufmann," 130 n. 26) also suggests a possible link between a cyclical account of history Mendelssohn outlines here and Krochmal's historiosophic views.

[59] Moses Mendelssohn to Herz Homberg, 22 September 1783, in *JubA*, 13:134, following *WJCB*, 124.

intercourse," since there would be a need for "the unwritten laws, the oral tradition, the living instruction from man to man . . . to explain, enlarge, limit, and define more precisely what . . . remained undetermined in the written law";[60] he uses similar language in a second passage shortly thereafter.[61] Even here, the difference with Krochmal is striking. Whereas Krochmal explores the social significance of norms emerging from exegesis, Mendelssohn's brief comments emphasize the dynamics of interpretive activity itself: whereas Krochmal's exegetes generate rules needed for "governance," Mendelssohn's interpretive endeavors themselves produce "social intercourse."[62]

Krochmal thus resonates with, but also diverges from, Mendelssohn's Hebrew treatment of hermeneutics. Krochmal echoes some of Mendelssohn's key phrases, along with his picture of ancient Jews as linguistically and textually sensitive exegetes; Krochmal and Mendelssohn even offer strikingly similar accounts of *peshat* and (some) *derash*. Nevertheless, Krochmal breaks with his predecessor regarding ancient interpreters' broader agenda. For Krochmal, although groups such as the rabbis possessed a sophisticated understanding of language and explored the meaning of textual details, these linguistically inflected projects of textual clarification were animated, and sometimes even displaced, by a concern with societal life.

On one level, then, if the *Guide* not only singles out Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings on exegesis but also echoes those texts' claims and language, the most compelling conclusion is that the *Guide* is drawing on that material. Yet the differences suggest that Krochmal also finds Mendelssohn's approach to be inadequate. If Krochmal employs the linguistically-oriented account of ancient exegetes in Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings but locates these individuals against a social backdrop absent from that account, then Krochmal holds that his predecessor's position is partial at best. Krochmal takes Mendelssohn to offer useful resources for theorizing classical exegesis, but holds that Mendelssohn's perspective requires supplementation in the form of a turn to extra-linguistic factors—factors that surface elsewhere in Mendelssohn's writings, but are framed

---

[60] Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*, in *JubA*, 8:184–85, following *WJCB*, 106–7.

[61] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, in *JubA*, 8:192–93; *WJCB*, 113–14. See also Edward Breuer, "Politics, Tradition, History: Rabbinic Judaism and the Eighteenth-Century Struggle for Civil Equality," *HTR* 85 (1992) 357–83, at 379–83.

[62] The arguments are not entirely dissimilar: Krochmal envisions the Bible becoming opaque as "language . . . changes," and Mendelssohn notes that biblical laws might become "incomprehensible" because no "words . . . preserve their meaning unchanged" (*Jerusalem*, in *JubA*, 8:193, following *WJCB*, 113). Nevertheless, as noted above, their positions differ considerably. Indeed, an earlier *Jerusalem* passage invoking written laws, social intercourse, and historical development focuses less on legal exegesis, and more on how halakhah promotes religious reflection, with concepts being revised over time and adapted for different individuals (*JubA*, 8:168–69; *WJCB*, 91–92). Krochmal never cites *Jerusalem*'s statements about interpretation, but does invoke a different passage: see *Führer*, 1:34–35.

in different terms and rarely connected to exegesis. Krochmal's account thus involves a covert appropriation and development of Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings on interpretation. Krochmal implicitly draws on, but remains dissatisfied with, those texts: employing Mendelssohn to explain how ancient Jews read the Bible, Krochmal holds that his predecessor's position must be revised to capture the social concerns animating such activity.

◼ Krochmal, Mendelssohn, and Politics

More is at stake. Consider an idea foregrounded in Krochmal's hermeneutics: that the type of exegetically grounded legal system that Judaism possesses should endure "for all time" amid "all changes." The endurance of Judaism and the Jewish people is one of his central themes, receiving its best-known expression several chapters before the discussion of ancient exegesis:

> According to the way of the natural order, there are three periods that pass for every ancient nation, from the time that it becomes a people until the time that it vanishes and is lost. . . . *flowering and growth. . . . strength and activity. . . . decay and destruction*. This is the case for all nations whose spiritual is particular and therefore possesses an end and is destined for destruction. However, in the case of our nation, even though we too succumb to the aforementioned orders of nature in relation to the material and to sensuous, external matters, nevertheless . . . the universal spiritual that is in our midst defends us and rescues us from the judgment that falls upon all mortals. . . . If we fell, we rose and recovered.[63]

Krochmal invokes his core concept of the "spiritual" (*ruḥani*), understood as a dimension of existence distinct from (albeit discernable in) the physical world and particularly manifest in human cognition and culture. For example, a nation's "spiritual inheritances" include elements such as "laws, ethical teachings, linguistic concepts, books of science."[64]

Krochmal states that while Jews are associated with "the universal spiritual," every other nation's "spiritual is particular." He alludes here to another recurring claim: that Jews are distinguished by their view of God as the "absolute spiritual" or "universal spiritual," as "the source of every spiritual being and the totality of them all."[65] What Jews treat as divine is the totality of phenomena relating to human cognition and culture: while every other nation accords supremacy to an entity such as a god of war or beauty and thus emphasizes only one "particular" subset

---

[63] Krochmal, *Moreh*, 40 [emphasis in original].

[64] Ibid., 35 (more generally, 29–39). See also Yossi Turner, "Ma'amad Haruaḥ Betefisat Hahisṭoriyah šel Rabbi Nachman Krochmal," in *The Path of the Spirit: The Eliezer Schweid Jubilee Volume* (ed. Yehoyada Amir; 2 vols.; Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought 18–19; Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Van Leer Institute, 2005) 1:289–323; Amir, "Še'arim Le'emunah Ṣerufah," in *Moreh*, 7–40, at 31–39.

[65] Krochmal, *Moreh*, 37; see also 29–30, 38–39.

of spiritual manifestations, Judaism takes God to be "absolute" or "universal" by in some sense encompassing all such phenomena, from art to ethics.[66]

For Krochmal, this view of the divine has consequences. History involves cyclical processes of growth and decline that typically result in nations disappearing. However, although Jews also "succumb to the . . . orders" common to all nations, "the universal spiritual that is in our midst . . . rescues us." Despite experiencing growth and decline, the Jewish nation does not disappear after decay but instead "recovers" because of the "universal spiritual . . . in our midst"—because of its distinctive understanding of God.[67] Jews' view of God, that is, allows them to survive catastrophes and rebuild flourishing communities. For instance, after the First Temple's destruction, Jews were able to "gather the exiled" and "establish . . . full communities," eventually "binding [them] together . . . until they would again become a full nation."[68] Krochmal's point seems to be, in part, that seeing God as encompassing the totality of spiritual manifestations confers considerable value on those phenomena and thus disposes Jews to preserve and cultivate these cultural inheritances, rebuilding communities that allow this treasured legacy to survive. Writing about renewal after the First Temple's destruction, he links Jews' commitment to "establishing their community" to "recognizing the value of the dear treasure that they possessed from their fathers" and even "giving up their souls for [these inheritances'] existence in times of need."[69]

Beyond disposing Jews to preserve their inheritances, this view of God cultivates an awareness that renewal is even possible. Krochmal writes regarding non-Jewish nations:

> They remained with *the particular forms of the spiritual and their powers.* . . . They did not achieve comprehension of the spiritual at the level of

[66] Generally, "one of these aforementioned spiritual portions becomes dominant," and a nation's "god or guardian angel is described . . . by that spiritual attribute"; by contrast, for Jews, "all the spiritual inheritances and portions come to be manifest and arranged harmoniously . . . so that they all are connected to Him, may He be blessed, and referred to Him in their truth" (ibid., 37–38). See also Turner, "Ma'amad," 308–18; Eliezer Schweid, *The Period of the Enlightenment* (trans. Leonard Levin; vol. 1 of *A History of Modern Jewish Religious Philosophy*; Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 14; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 317–19. Nations also err by too strongly attaching the spiritual to materiality.

[67] Although appearing to cast the "universal spiritual" as an active deity who "rescues," Krochmal emphasizes that references to God's presence "in our midst"—including to that presence rescuing Jews—denote Jews' understanding of the divine. He states that "the rational representation of the statements 'that I may dwell in their midst' [Exod 25:8], 'for I am with you [to save you and to rescue you]' [Jer 42:11 NJPS], and 'My spirit is still in your midst' [Hag 2:5 NJPS]" is that Jews would attain a form of awareness—that "with every lofty and good spirit manifest and coming to light among us, we would know in our hearts and acknowledge with our mouths that a living God was among us and that they came to us from Him, that is, that they are rooted in Him and emanate from His spirit, the totality of all spiritual manifestations" (*Moreh*, 38). See Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 126–27; Kaplan, "Yehezkel Kaufmann," 134–45.

[68] Krochmal, *Moreh*, 50.

[69] Ibid., 51.

purified consciousness. Therefore, they did not arrive at the point of comprehending that its truth and persistence does not lie in what is, according to its essence, particular, attached to a time and place . . . but in what is universal—that is, what has the truth of its existence in the absolute spiritual. . . . The spiritual in them was completely lost, and they, too, were annihilated and lost.[70]

Fixating on "particular forms of the spiritual," and worshiping them as "powers," is linked here to emphasizing "what is . . . particular" and "attached to a time and place" when seeking the "truth and persistence" of spiritual life. Habituated to elevating one "particular" subset of spiritual manifestations, nations will become mired in a mode of thinking that emphasizes other "particular," or only partially important, aspects of collective life, such as a specific location in which that life flourished; accustomed to mistakenly ascribing ultimate importance to what constitutes just one dimension of its culture, a nation will become prone to making similar errors in other contexts, erroneously treating factors of limited significance, such as a specific land, as indispensable to national flourishing. When confronting a catastrophe such as territorial loss, therefore, such groups will despair of rebuilding in a new setting and be "lost."

By contrast, a nation that understands the divine as the absolute spiritual will locate the "truth and persistence" of its spiritual life not in factors such as a specific territory, but "in what is universal—that is, what has the truth of its existence in the absolute spiritual." Accustomed to taking God to encompass all spiritual phenomena, a nation will adopt a more "universal" mode of thinking, refusing to treat any "particular" factor (such as a location) as crucial to its cultural life, and focusing instead on the importance of absoluteness or universality itself. Aware that it differs from its neighbors by linking the totality of spiritual phenomena to the divine, this nation will view this conception of the divine as what grounds its collective life, and this group will therefore experience catastrophes such as territorial loss as setbacks from which recovery is possible: recognizing that its cultural life is grounded in its understanding of God as encompassing all spiritual phenomena, this nation will maintain hope when confronted with the loss of transient possessions, realizing that such losses leave intact the factor—the conception of God—vital to national existence.

What is crucial is the process by which Jewish national renewal occurs. Krochmal's most extensive account of rebirth—also appearing several chapters before his discussion of hermeneutics—explores the period after the First Temple's destruction and the Babylonian exile:

Israel was terribly dispersed. . . . It was difficult to believe that . . . a new spirit would grow for the nation and become strong in the degree necessary to gather the exiled, unite them into groups, and establish . . . full communities across all lands and borders—and that this spiritual activity would become

---

[70] Ibid., 38 [emphasis in original].

still stronger, also binding together those different communities by means of some sort of association (despite their distance from one another and the many variations among them), until they would again become a full nation.[71]

Facing dispersion, Jews renewed themselves through "spiritual activity":

There arose anew in the nation, that is, in all the exiled communities that constituted its substance, a new and great mode of spirituality. . . . "A spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and valor, a spirit of devotion and reverence for the Lord" [Isa 11:2 NJPS]. The meaning is*: A spirit of wisdom and insight*—to recognize the value of the dear treasure that they possessed from their fathers (in contrast to the vanities of the peoples into whose lands they had come). *A spirit of counsel and valor*—to establish their community and fortify and crown it with Toraitic commandments and good customs of their ancestors, all of which were so dear to them that they would give up their souls for [these inheritances'] existence in times of need. *A spirit of devotion and reverence for the Lord*—to gather, write down, and copy all that remained to them of the holy books, reflecting on them, understanding them clearly, and giving [them] sense, until the Torah was strengthened in every place of exile.[72]

Krochmal depicts renewal as a project in which Jews generated legal rules and other practical content necessary for communal life (in which Jews would "establish their community and fortify and crown it with Toraitic commandments and good customs"), and he elaborates on this activity by adding that it involved explicating biblical texts—taking up "the holy books" and "reflecting on them, understanding them clearly, and giving [them] sense." At least in part, then, the Jewish nation renewed itself through norm-generating activity involving scriptural exegesis. Linking God to the totality of spiritual phenomena, Jews treasured these inheritances and sought to rebuild communities in which this legacy could survive, and they did so by using the Bible to generate laws and other practical content needed for collective life.

Far from a minor component of national renewal, this exegetical activity was vitally important:

All this occurred in every place of exile, not via signs and wonders by revealed miracles, and not even by force of arms or strength of the sword (since we find no trace of those two among the first foundational exilic congregations for the duration of this period, from Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the Temple to the beginning of Greek rule), but rather exclusively by means of quiet well-being and spiritual arousal.[73]

Having framed the exegetical production of practical content as "spiritual activity," Krochmal states that it was primarily such "spiritual arousal," rather

---

[71] Ibid., 50.

[72] Ibid., 51 [emphasis in original].

[73] Ibid, 52.

than "arms or . . . the sword," that secured national survival. The references to "the sword," "arms," and foreign "rule" are telling. By juxtaposing military activities with "spiritual arousal" involving the exegetical production of norms, and by stressing that this occurred when Jews were ruled by others, Krochmal both posits a shift from military strength to exegesis, and links this development to political circumstances. He casts a practically oriented engagement with Scripture as a mode of fostering national survival tailored to a context where communal well-being could no longer be secured through tools such as force of arms.

Krochmal's political focus also emerges when he compares this era with earlier periods:

> In the past, the life of the nation was dependent upon dwelling in one territory. . . . The nation's spirit and unity became still stronger by means of wars with the surrounding neighboring peoples: much of their labor was to cast off any foreign yoke. . . . Furthermore, there was prophecy . . . along with many books and the sublime song and exalted speech. . . . However, *in this new period*, all these good spiritual portions were present only in a small degree, or not at all. . . . The Torah and remaining holy books . . . were like a sealed book, requiring translation and interpretation. . . . The exiled communities were separated from one another by great distances to the ends of Asia, from Egypt to Kush, and in the west to the lands of Greece. They all were subjugated under foreign rulers and their governance in political matters.[74]

While Krochmal laments that post-exilic Jews lost access to their literary heritage, he is also concerned, to a significant extent, with their new political context. On his telling, whereas Jews had once sustained their collective life through a shared territory and shared wars, this nation now turned to activities such as exegesis because its communities were "separated . . . by great distances" and "subjugated under foreign rulers and their governance in political matters." The project of "fortifying and crowning [their community] with Toraitic commandments and good customs" is thus cast as a political adaptation. By describing endeavors such as the exegetical production of laws and other practical content as part of "spiritual activity" that would "bind together . . . different communities" to "again become a full nation," Krochmal explains how Jews secured their survival in a particular type of political context: exegetical pursuits helped sustain a diasporic Jewish collective without territorial or military resources by generating shared norms necessary for communal survival.

The important point is the resonance between this interpretive activity crucial to national renewal and the exegesis described in Krochmal's later chapters on hermeneutics. Both endeavors secure Jewish national survival: Krochmal treats the post-exilic production of norms as part of how the Jewish nation avoids "destruction," just as he casts ancient exegetes as enabling their legal system to endure "for all time." Both involve explicating the Bible: Krochmal takes Jewish

---

[74] Ibid., 51 [emphasis in original].

national renewal to involve "reflecting on" biblical texts, just as he takes ancient exegetes to investigate biblical "utterances and words." Both involve generating communally required legal norms: Krochmal narrates national renewal as a story of Jews striving to "establish their community and fortify and crown it with Toraitic commandments," just as he takes ancient exegetes to "aid . . . in governance" by utilizing "jurisprudential science" to produce legal rules. Both are linked to times of textual inaccessibility and historical change: Krochmal locates reliance on exegesis in an era when "holy books . . . were like a sealed book" and geopolitical circumstances had radically transformed, just as he links ancient exegetes to periods when "meaning . . . is forgotten" amid "changes." Both endeavors even appear to involve biblically-framed moral pedagogy. We saw Krochmal stress this when discussing *'aggadah*, but indications of this project also appear in his account of post-exilic renewal, which is presented as involving not only "reflecting on" biblical texts, but also "understanding them clearly and giving [them] sense." The *Guide* identifies the latter phrases—drawn from Neh 8:8—as referring to the practice of deploying the Bible to offer public instruction about matters such as ethics.[75]

Again and again, then, Krochmal's analysis of ancient exegesis recalls his discussion of national renewal, suggesting that one functions as an elaboration of the other—that his treatment of hermeneutics provides a more detailed account of the interpretive activity crucial to Jewish communal survival. This connection between exegesis and national restoration becomes even more pronounced when Krochmal describes the next period of renewal.

This period began around 135 CE, after Roman persecutions and the Bar Kokhba revolt:

> Our rabbis have many beautiful teachings about this beginning: how they . . . instituted good enactments according to the needs of the time. . . . The *nasi* [a rabbinic official] and sages of his company always stood ready to defend [the people], both among the rulers in Caesarea (the proconsul) and in special trips to Rome.[76]

Emphasizing that this renewal also occurred under foreign rule, Krochmal highlights the rabbis' role in this process. Discussing this period further elsewhere in the *Guide*, he casts this role in exegetical terms, invoking a "forgetting of *halakhot*" during the preceding period of decline:

> This great forgetting did not concern the core content of *halakhot,* but rather, especially, the *midrash* regarding the reason[s] and reasoning behind the ha-lakhah. . . . Even beyond the terrible slaughter that befell the students of the teachers of *halakhot* during the conflict . . . behold, the survivors, too, were especially buffeted by the great storm of the Roman persecution, which, with respect to Torah study, was fiercer than that of the Greeks.[77]

---

[75] Ibid., 248–49; see also 52.
[76] Ibid., 112.
[77] Ibid., 228.

Traumatized by war and prevented by persecution from engaging in scriptural study, the Jewish nation retained laws' "core content" but suffered a "forgetting" of "the *midrash* regarding the reason[s] and reasoning behind the halakhah": Jews retained knowledge of many norms governing communal life but could no longer feel confident that this content possessed an adequate biblical basis. The rabbinic attempt to restore national flourishing under the "Roman Empire, to which all Israel's exiled communities were subjugated," therefore involved clarifying and publicizing the midrashic process grounding these laws:

> [The rabbis] became exceedingly strong in teaching and reasoning regarding *halakhot*. . . . Thus did the formulation of *halakhot* and the study of their reasons grow stronger and attain new heights. . . . [Some] held fast to the approach of teaching halakhah with *midrash* according to the order of portions, and therefore always according to the origin provided by their verses. . . . [While] Rabbi Me'ir held firm to the approach, received from Rabbi 'Akiva his master, of teaching the *halakhot* alone. . . . Rabbi Yehudah held firm to teaching the *midrash* according to the portions of Leviticus, both with halakhah and with *'aggadah*, and Rabbi Shimon proceeded in a similar manner.[78]

While some rabbis formulated norms without explicitly outlining their scriptural basis,[79] others were committed to "teaching halakhah with *midrash*." Seeking to rebuild Jewish life in a dispersed nation recovering from a failed military uprising, some rabbis sought not only to formulate laws needed for communal survival, but also to instill confidence in those laws by clarifying their basis in the nation's foundational text. Krochmal even stresses that this occurred "both with halakhah and with *'aggadah*"—that rabbis sought to ensure that Jews would link the Bible to not only the legal norms, but also the moral teachings, governing social life.

Krochmal's treatment of hermeneutics now comes into sharper relief. When discussing ancient exegetes, he uses language that hearkens back to his description, elsewhere in the *Guide*, of interpretive work crucial to national renewal amid the territorial loss and military powerlessness following the First Temple's destruction. He also emphasizes that the socially vital interpretive methods of *midrash halakhah* and *'aggadah* figured prominently in a subsequent period of renewal spearheaded by rabbinic sages supporting dispersed communities scarred by military failure. Repeatedly, then, Krochmal indicates that his account of biblical hermeneutics is intertwined with his arguments about Jewish survival. His hermeneutics functions as a building-block in a political vision that takes biblical exegetes to play a crucial role in sustaining a diasporic Jewish collective that has often lacked territorial and military resources: by describing how ancient Jews produced legal norms and disseminated ethical teachings through methods such as midrash, Krochmal fills out the details of a picture gestured towards elsewhere in the *Guide*, providing

---

[78] Ibid., 229–30.

[79] For Krochmal, this basis existed: most laws arose exegetically (n. 24 above), but this derivation was not always outlined (*Moreh*, 204–6).

a more comprehensive account of the techniques by which exegetes promoted national flourishing.

Future studies might explore possible links to non-Jewish Polish thought. While studies discussing Krochmal's Galician Jewish surroundings often distance him from his non-Jewish Polish intellectual environment,[80] his concerns exhibit intriguing affinities with debates emerging after the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between Russia, Austria, and Prussia. Contemporaneously with Krochmal, Polish intellectuals wrestled with how to preserve and restore Polish nationhood without a state; such conversations intensified after the 1831 defeat of a Polish uprising in Russian-controlled territory bordering Galicia, with many authors (in ways perhaps resonating with Krochmal) linking national renewal to engagement with Polish texts, rather than military strength.[81]

What's crucial now, though, is that Krochmal's engagement with Mendelssohn appears in a new light. We saw that even as the *Guide* employs Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings on exegesis to explain how ancient Jews read the Bible, Krochmal implicitly holds that those texts fail to fully capture the extra-linguistic factors animating such exegesis. This indicates, first, that Krochmal takes Mendelssohn to have recovered a crucial element of Jewish politics. If the *Guide*'s account of hermeneutics clarifies techniques by which ancient exegetes helped secure Jewish national renewal amid dispersion and powerlessness, and if the *Guide* derives its account of those techniques from Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings, then Krochmal takes his German-Jewish predecessor to have identified interpretive practices crucial to Jewish survival in certain political conditions. Yet Mendelssohn's account is, from Krochmal's perspective, inadequate. For the *Guide*'s author, even if Mendelssohn identified techniques vital to Jewish national survival, he failed to develop this point. Texts such as the Ecclesiastes commentary grasped ancient exegetes' linguistic sensitivity, but for Krochmal this sensitivity must also be seen as part of the repertoire available to a collective seeking to "become a full nation" amid dispersion and subjugation; societal concerns appear elsewhere in Mendelssohn's work, but rarely in connection with exegesis. Krochmal is thus engaged in a project of restoration and correction. Encountering an earlier account of Jewish exegesis, he seeks to restore the hermeneutical methods described to the political context in which they belong; taking "Moses the son of Menaḥem" to have come across a vital element of Jewish politics, Krochmal aims to retrieve this resource and reveal the centrality of exegesis to a nation confronting dispersion and military powerlessness.

This perspective extends to modernity. Corresponding with the Italian-Jewish intellectual Samuel David Luzzatto, Krochmal describes the *Guide*'s intended audience in emphatically diasporic terms, expressing hope that his words might "enter the heart and be accepted by the intellect of the Italian Jew and the eastern

---

[80] See, e.g., Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 313; Schlüter, "'Jewish Spirituality,'" 103–5.

[81] See Andrzej Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982). I thank Nancy Sinkoff for raising this in correspondence.

Jew, by the ears of the sages of Germany and the pious of the northern empire."[82] The first task the *Guide*'s introduction assigns to this transnational network of readers is exegetical:

> To investigate, inquire, and place each and every matter in its correct time of composition. For example, in the sages' midrashic works . . . it benefited Israel that they ascribed, for instance, the entire book of Psalms to David and his era—even the psalm "by the rivers of Babylon." . . . In this time of ours, this would not achieve . . . what hope, trust, and faith it achieved in the hearts of that [earlier generation].[83]

Urging his diasporic audience to properly date biblical writings,[84] Krochmal cites Psalm 137, which begins "by the rivers of Babylon . . . we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion" (NJPS):

> We . . . will better achieve this desired end [of hope, trust, and faith] if we elucidate this song in this manner: it was sung by one of the Levites, the Temple singers whom the Babylonians forcibly exiled. . . . One of them would sing, with his heart afire and spirit full of sorrow over what had been lost. He would vow not to forget it in the far-off land. . . . All the song's words served as a blazing fire and flame of the Lord . . . and reliable testimony to the greatness and depth of their infinite and limitless love for [their] land, people, and God. And as all this would perform holy work, it would also constitute a good in this modern generation's ears and hearts . . . in accordance with the needs of the present time.[85]

Insisting that Psalm 137 was composed after the First Temple's destruction, Krochmal stresses that this perspective reveals the psalm's role in national renewal: lamenting a catastrophic loss, this psalm strengthened ancient Jews' commitment to their nation and its inheritances, reminding these individuals of their "limitless love for [their] land, people, and God." But Krochmal also envisions the psalm having a similar impact in his own era. He states that the psalm's effect in its original context can also emerge from a historically sensitive reading in "this modern generation": by highlighting an earlier case of national renewal, this reading might arouse "trust" and "hope" regarding the possibility of revival and thus inspire modern Jews to pursue similar endeavors. Indeed, Krochmal hints that his era may be one of potential renewal,[86] and his description of this psalm's modern impact echoes language he uses to describe national growth.[87]

---

[82] Krochmal, Letter 8, in *Moreh*, 425.

[83] Krochmal, *Moreh*, 5.

[84] See Harris, *Nachman Krochmal*, 156–205.

[85] Krochmal, *Moreh*, 5.

[86] Ibid., 112.

[87] Just as he notes here that historicizing this psalm "gives birth to every type of . . . goodness, wisdom, and commitment to justice" (ibid., 5), he later declares that national growth involves "wisdom," "good ethical teachings," and "justice" being "born" (34–35).

Far from relegating the political relevance of biblical exegesis to the past, then, Krochmal reimagines this relevance for the present. He suggests that a historical hermeneutic can be politically significant, revealing earlier cases of national renewal and inspiring similar projects in modernity: the diasporic Jewish collective that has sustained itself by endeavors such as midrash should now be renewed by a transnational project of historically sensitive exegesis.

▇ Modern Jewish Thought

Already, then, recovering Krochmal has opened up a richer story about Jewish thought, revealing that one of modern Jewish philosophy's early episodes is a politically charged engagement with biblical exegesis. Discovering in Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings on hermeneutics the core of an undeveloped political vision, Krochmal draws on those texts to restore biblical interpretation to what he sees as its proper place at the heart of Jewish politics.

Future scholarship might explore Krochmal's long-debated relationship to Zionism[88] and relevance for diasporic politics.[89] For now, though, I return to my opening topic: trajectories of Jewish thought across eastern and western Europe.

As I noted, recent studies typically emphasize either striking differences or surprising affinities across these settings. However, while both narratives are important, Krochmal suggests another possibility. His engagement with Mendelssohn cannot be described primarily in terms of eastern European-German affinities. Even as Krochmal draws on Mendelssohn, he breaks with his predecessor's hermeneutics, locating exegesis against a sociopolitical backdrop absent from texts such as *'Or Lanetibah* and the Ecclesiastes commentary (and connected to hermeneutics only rarely, and in a different form, elsewhere in Mendelssohn's writings).

Moreover, the political vision that Krochmal constructs by using Mendelssohn differs considerably from the German-Jewish thinker's own politics. Living in a Galician context where attempts to integrate Jews more fully into the body politic had largely stalled after Joseph II's death (and perhaps resonating with broader Polish conversations about nationhood), Krochmal theorizes the mechanisms by which Jews constitute themselves as a collective that transcends the boundaries between non-Jewish states while remaining separate from those entities. His is a transnational collective that incorporates both "the Italian Jew and the eastern Jew," both "the sages of Germany and the pious of the northern empire," but that pursues exegetical endeavors which render its survival independent of the fate that befalls surrounding polities.

---

[88] Compare, e.g., Abraham I. Katsh, "Nachman Krochmal and the German Idealists," *Jewish Social Studies* 8 (1946) 87–102, at 98–99; Rawidowicz, *'Iyunim,* 2:217–18.

[89] On contemporary debates, see, e.g., Julie E. Cooper, "A Diasporic Critique of Diasporism: The Question of Jewish Political Agency," *Political Theory* 43 (2015) 80–110.

This is not Mendelssohn's political program. He, too, describes Jews as a diasporic, transnational collective whose members remain distinct from their non-Jewish neighbors: he stresses that Jews are widely scattered[90] and possess distinctive laws (yielding benefits such as the preservation of monotheism).[91] Yet Mendelssohn and Krochmal disagree about the place of this diasporic Jewish group in the modern world. Whereas Krochmal turns to exegesis to construct a transnational entity whose fate is separate from that of non-Jewish polities, Mendelssohn argues that members of this distinctive collective can also be committed participants in non-Jewish societies. Living in a Prussian setting with vigorous debates about Jewish civic inclusion,[92] Mendelssohn urges the state to begin treating Jews as "citizens and enlisting into its service the many hands and heads born for its service,"[93] and he expresses hope that non-Jews might "unite with us as citizens" even "as we are outwardly distinguished from you by the ceremonial law."[94] He offers a similar vision to Jewish readers:

> Adapt yourselves to the morals and the constitution of the land to which you have been removed, but hold fast to the religion of your fathers too. . . . The burden of civil life is made heavier for you on account of the religion to which you remain faithful, and on the other hand, the climate and the times make the observance of your religious laws in some respects more irksome. . . . Nevertheless, persevere.[95]

The Mendelssohnian resource Krochmal utilizes to develop his argument about national separation may itself be part of the German-Jewish thinker's case for civic inclusion. On one reading, Mendelssohn's account of Jewish exegesis and its strengths serves to show that Judaism merits acceptance by states committed to tolerance.[96]

Yet Krochmal's engagement with Mendelssohn is more than another instance of rupture. Krochmal breaks with Mendelssohn, but he does so on the basis of resources provided by Mendelssohn himself. Mendelssohn's account of exegesis allows Krochmal to generate his non-Mendelssohnian position; Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings allow Krochmal to articulate an exegetico-political vision absent from those texts. What we have, therefore, is neither primarily a story of rupture nor primarily a story of affinity, but rather an instance of repurposing and redirection:

---

[90] See, e.g., Moses Mendelssohn, "Letter to 'a Man of Rank' (Rochus Friedrich Graf von Lynar)," 26 January 1770, in *JubA*, 12.1:212; *WJCB*, 37; idem, *Jerusalem*, in *JubA*, 8:198; *WJCB*, 118; idem, *'Or Lanetiḇah*, in *JubA*, 14:232–42; *WJCB*, 193–96 et al.

[91] See his Homberg letter (n. 59 above) and *Jerusalem*.

[92] See, e.g., Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*. While Mendelssohn did not pursue civic inclusion at all costs (Litvak, *Haskalah*, 112), it remained a key goal.

[93] Moses Mendelssohn, *Vorrede zu Manasseh ben Israels "Rettung der Juden,"* in *JubA*, 8:5, following *WJCB*, 42.

[94] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, in *JubA*, 8:200, following *WJCB*, 119.

[95] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, in *JubA*, 8:198, following *WJCB*, 118.

[96] Stern, *Genius*, 63–82; see also Breuer, "Politics," 357–83.

an eastern European thinker drawing on a German-Jewish predecessor to develop a sharply contrasting philosophical vision. My recovery of Krochmal's voice thus contributes to broader conversations about Jewish modernity, complementing—but also complicating—an emerging constellation of narratives about eastern and western European visions of Jewish life. While there are cases where we should emphasize differences and cases where we should stress affinities, we should also be attentive to a strategy of creative appropriation and redirection.[97] An eastern European thinker such as Krochmal could break with the German-Jewish philosophical tradition precisely by deploying that tradition's own resources.

[97] This strategy may extend beyond Krochmal. Sinkoff argues that eastern European figures such as Mendel Lefin "appropriated certain values of the Berlin Haskalah and reshaped them to suit . . . Polish Jewry" (*Out of the* Shtetl, 7). Admittedly, this strategy may involve less tension with German-Jewish philosophy than I discover in Krochmal: Sinkoff generally describes figures less as breaking with philosophers such as Mendelssohn by utilizing those philosophers' own writings, and more as sometimes diverging from such thinkers and wary of "radical acculturation" and "atheism" in post-Mendelssohnian Berlin (9, 46–47, 271 et al.). Moreover, although Sinkoff (like me) uses the language of "redirection" when discussing eastern Europe, I do so for Krochmal's attempt to redirect German-Jewish philosophy, whereas Sinkoff stresses how Lefin and others appropriated such resources to "redirect" Polish-Jewish life (91, 199, 265). Nevertheless, in at least one case, Sinkoff's Lefin uses Mendelssohn for non-Mendelssohnian purposes, invoking the German-Jewish philosopher to support a project—Yiddish biblical translation—that would have clashed with his commitment to German and Hebrew (176–98). See also Sinkoff, "Benjamin Franklin in Jewish Eastern Europe: Cultural Appropriation in the Age of Enlightenment," *JHI* 61 (2000): 133–52.