



# Moses Mendelssohn as Bible Commentator

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Torah in Motion, 2020

# Moses Mendelssohn's Introduction to his Torah Commentary

ויאל מהרש"ד הנ"ל לעשות כאשר דברתי: אסף  
וקבץ דברי הכתוב לפי פשוטו . . . מעל ספרי  
ראשוני הפשטנים הגדולים . . .

המה המאור הגדול רש"י ז"ל אשר אין ערוך אליו  
בכל מקום שדרך בדרך הפשט

ונכדו הרשב"ם ז"ל המעמיק עד מאוד בפשוטו  
של מקרא ולפעמים יותר מהראוי, עד שלאהבת  
הפשט הוא נוטה לפעמים מנקודת האמת

והראב"ע ז"ל שהיה בקי בכל החכמות . . .

Rabbi Solomon Dubno did as I had instructed him. He gathered together the *peshat* explanations of Scripture . . . from the works of the earliest practitioners of *peshat* exegesis:

From the works of the great luminary Rashi, who has, when he offers a *peshat* explanation, no equal.

From the works of his grandson Rashbam who delved into the *peshat* meaning of the text deeply, in fact sometimes more than is appropriate. So much so that it happens that due to his great love of *peshat* he occasionally misses the truth.

From the works of ibn Ezra who was an expert in all the sciences . . .

# Mendelssohn's introduction to Mishpatim

הרשב"ם ז"ל פתח באורו על הפרשה  
הזאת העמוקה והרחבה עד מאוד  
בהלכות ודינין בלשון הזה: ידעו ויבינו  
ידעי שכל כי לא באתי לפרש הלכות, אף  
על פי שהם עיקר, כמו שפירשתי  
בבראשית כי מיתור המקראות נשמעין  
ההגדות וההלכות, ומקצתן ימצאו  
בפירושי רבינו שלמה אבי אמי זצ"ל.

Rashbam began his commentary on this profound and wide-ranging Torah portion by writing: "Let those who love wisdom know and understand that my purpose, as I explained in Genesis, is not to offer halakhic interpretations, wherein *haggadot* and *halakhot* are derived from superfluities in Scriptural language, even though such interpretations are the most essential ones. Some of those explanations can be found in the works of my mother's father, Rashi.

# Mendelssohn's introduction to Mishpatim

[cont.]

ואני לפרש פשוטן של מקראות באתי,  
ואפרש הדינין וההלכות לפי דרך ארץ.  
ואף על פי כן, ההלכות עיקר, כמו  
שאמרו רבותינו (בבלי סוטה ט"ז.)  
הלכה עוקרת משנה [צ"ל מקרא]  
עכ"ל.

[Continuing to quote Rashbam's intro]: "But my purpose is to explain the plain meaning of Scripture. I will explain the laws and rules [of the Torah] in a manner that conforms to the [natural] way of the world. Nevertheless, it is the halakhic level of interpretation that is the most essential one, as the rabbis said (Sotah 16a) "Halakhah uproots [the plain meaning of] the biblical text."

# Mendelssohn's introduction to Mishpatim [cont.]

והנה אף אנו בצל כנפי הנשר הגדול  
נחסה ולא נזוז מפשוטי המקראות  
ימין ושמאל אבל לא שכחנו את הכלל  
הכלול לנו בהקדמת הספ' על דעת  
ההבדל שיש בין הסותר למתחלף

We too will hover under the wings of the great eagle [Rashbam] and not depart from the plain meaning of Scripture to the right or to the left. But we have not forgotten the principle which we laid down in the introduction to this work about the difference between “contradictory explanations” and “differing explanations.”

# Mendelssohn's introduction to Mishpatim [cont.]

והוא שפשוטו של מקרא אפשר  
שיהיה מתחלף לקבלת רבותינו באופן  
הביאור אבל אי אפשר שיהי' סותר  
להם בהלכות ודינין. כי הדברים  
המתחלפים אינו מן הנמנע שיהיו  
שניהם אמת אבל הדברים הסותרים  
אם האחד אמת השני שקר בהכרח:

It is acceptable for the *peshat* to differ from the traditions of the rabbis, but it cannot contradict the rabbis in *halakhah* or law. It is still possible for “differing explanations” to both be true. But with “contradictory explanations,” if one is true the second is certainly false.

# Mendelssohn's introduction to Mishpatim [cont.]

ולכן בכל מקום שהנראה מגלוייו של  
פשטות המקרא סותר לקבלת רז"ל  
בהלכות ודינין חובה על המבאר  
לעזוב דרך הפשט מכל וכל ולילך  
בדרך הקבלה האמיתית או לעשות  
פשרה ביניהם אם תצליח: ואנחנו את  
הברית הזאת כרתנו לבאורנו ואותו  
נשמור כיד ה' טובה עלינו

So whenever uncovering the *peshat* of Scripture contradicts the traditions of the rabbis in *halakhah* or law, the commentator must totally abandon the *peshat* and follow tradition, or, if possible, explain how the two explanations can be reconciled. We have made this the guiding principle of our commentary and we will keep to it, with God's help.

# וְרָצַע אֶדְנִי אֶת אָזְנוֹ בַּמְרָצֵעַ וְעָבְדוּ לְעוֹלָם (שמות כא ו)

**רשב"ם:** לפי הפשט: כל ימי חייו, כמו שנאמר בשמואל: וישב שם עד עולם (שמואל א א' כ"ב)

**מנדלסון:** ועבדו לעולם—ידענו כי מלת לעולם בלה"ק הוא זמן . . . לזמנו של יובל, שאין זמן מועדי ישראל ארוך ממנו. ויציאת חירות כאילו עולם מתחדש לו (ראב"ע)

**Rashbam:** According to the plain meaning of Scripture, לעולם means all the days of his life, as it says concerning Samuel (I Sam. 1:22), "he must remain there for good" (עד עולם).

**Mendelssohn:** We know that in [biblical] Hebrew עולם refers to time . . . [עולם here means] up to the time of the Jubilee year; there is no longer period of time in the Jewish calendar. Furthermore, when the slave goes free, it is as if his world has been renewed. (ibn Ezra)



# בַּעַל הַבּוֹר יִשְׁלַם כְּסָף יִשְׁיב לְבַעַלָּיו וְהֵמֶת יִהְיֶה לוֹ. (שמות כא לד)

**רשב"ם:** והמת יהיה לו – לפי הפשט:  
כיון שמשלם כל דמיו, בדין הוא שהמת  
יהיה למזיק. אבל חכמים פירשו  
(מכילתא שמות כ"א:ל"ד, בבלי ב"ק י':):  
לניזק.

**מנדלסון:** "והמת יהיה לו" לניזק. ששמן  
דמי הנבלה ומנכה לו מדמי נזקו.

**Rashbam:** According to the plain meaning of Scripture, since the person who is responsible for the damages pays the entire price [of the dead animal], the carcass now logically belongs to him. However, the rabbis interpreted the verse to mean "to the damaged party."

**Mendelssohn:** "The dead animal shall be his": shall belong to the damaged party. We estimate the value of the carcass and deduct that amount from the payment due.

# On the sale of Joseph (Gen 37)

והנה אף שהותר למפרשי הפשט לעזוב דברי חז"ל במדרשים ולבאר פשוטו של מקרא באופן אחר, מ"מ לא יהיה זה כי אם במקום שאפשר לישוב הכתוב באופן יותר נאות ומסכים עם טבע הלשון וקישור המאמרים. אך בפסוקים שלפנינו דעת רז"ל תסכים יותר בהתרת הספקות.

Although it is permitted for *peshat* commentators to stray from the midrashic explanations of the rabbis and to explain the plain meaning of Scripture in another way, this is only when they can offer an explanation of the verses that better conforms with the language and the context. In the verses here, the opinion of the classical rabbis does a better job of solving the difficulties.

# Exodus 20

א וַיְדַבֵּר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים  
הָאֵלֶּה לְאָמֹר. ב אָנֹכִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ  
אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית  
עַבְדִּים לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל  
פָּנָי. ג לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל . . .

God spoke all these words, saying:  
I the LORD am your God who  
brought you out of the land of  
Egypt, the house of bondage. You  
shall have no other gods besides  
Me. You shall not make for  
yourself a sculptured image,

imparts them by an utterance or statement must first believe that he is a *trustworthy soul* (Prov. 11:13) who does not deceive; and if the one who imparts them is God Himself in His glory, the listener must [first] believe that he is *truly God* (Jer. 10:10).<sup>18</sup>

It would appear that this is truly how it was: that [the children of] Israel—descendants of a long line of believers<sup>19</sup>—knew and believed in the existence of God and His unity, some of them by means of intellectual discernment, and some as a received tradition from trustworthy ancestors or from the leaders and sages of the generation. This statement [in v. 2] only intended to single them out as a *special possession among all the nations* so that they become a *holy people to God* (Ex. 19:5–6) from among all the nations of the earth, as I will explain. This is because with regard to all the speculative intelligible propositions that we mentioned, the children of Israel are neither different from nor have an advantage over the other peoples; all acknowledge His divinity, may He be blessed, and even those who worship other gods acknowledge the great power and the unqualified might of the God most High, and likewise our Sages said, “They call Him the God of Gods.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Scripture states *From where the sun rises to where it sets, my Name is honored among the peoples, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to my Name* (Mal. 1:11). And it would appear that this is what the Psalmist was also referring to when he said *The heavens declare the glory of God*, etc. (Ps. 19:2), *No teaching, no words, without a voice being heard* (Ps. 19:4). The intended meaning is that that notion [of God’s existence] would become known in the world without utterance and speech, for every utterance and speech is known only to one who understands that [particular] language, while the declarations of heaven and the works of God’s hands can be understood by all the world’s inhabitants. With these, there is neither speaker nor words that won’t be heard and understood by everyone, for *their chord is sounded over the entire earth, their instruction reaches as far as the habited world* (Ps. 19:5).<sup>21</sup>

18. The phrase from Jeremiah can also be translated adjectivally, as *God is true*, in the sense that God is faithful and trustworthy. Mendelssohn articulated this argument in the same terms in *Jerusalem*. After stating that Judaism contained no exclusive revelation of eternal truths, and that no “universal religion of mankind” was revealed at Sinai, he wrote: “In reality, it could not have been revealed there, for who was to be convinced of these eternal doctrines of salvation by the voice of thunder and the sounds of trumpets? Surely not the unthinking, brute-like man, whose own reflections had not yet led him to the existence of an invisible being that governs the visible. The miraculous voice would not have instilled any concepts in him and, therefore, would not have convinced him” (*JubA*, 8:164).

19. Lit.: believers [who are] the sons of believers, a popular saying that originated in rabbinic literature.

20. Men. 110a. The latter part of this sentence, from “[they] acknowledge the great power” and the rabbinic citation, was drawn from Ramban’s commentary on v. 3. The phrase “God most High” (*el’elyon*) was apt here, since it alluded to Gen. 14:18–20 and a pre-Israelite acknowledgment of divine power and authority.

21. The argument and prooftexts offered here were repeated in *Jerusalem*; see *JubA*, 8:191–92.



[Only] afterward did [the Psalmist] point out the superiority of the Torah,<sup>22</sup> which is a heritage of the congregation of Jacob (Deut. 33:4) [and] exclusive to a special people; through [the Torah] they are distinguished from the other nations of the earth, to set them high above all the nations (Deut. 26:19).

Although the peoples of the world acknowledge the existence of God and His power over everything, they nevertheless also worship a being other than Him. Some worship ministering angels, thinking that God gave each of them a nation or state or province to rule and that [ministering angels] have the power to bring harm or benefit [to them] at will. They are referred to in the Torah and in all of Scripture as *other gods*, as Ramban explained in [his commentary on] this section, and likewise they were referred to as the *gods of the peoples* (e.g., Deut. 6:14), for angels were referred to as gods [*elohim*]. Others worship the celestial stars or demons or humans; they construct images and idols and bow down to them, as is known.<sup>23</sup>

Now, rational judgment would not compel one to prohibit worship of this kind to a descendant of Noah,<sup>24</sup> as long as he does not think to remove himself from the domain of the God most high,<sup>25</sup> for what would obligate him to direct all worship and prayer to the Eternal alone (Ex. 22:19)? If a person should hope for good and fear evil from a being other than Him, and acknowledges that such a being is also subservient to the hand of the God most high, it would not defy reason were he to sacrifice, offer incense and libations, and pray<sup>26</sup> to that being, be it an angel or spirit or a person, a *mighty warrior; officer*, and ruler (2 Chron. 32:21).<sup>27</sup> Who would tell us that all these forms of worship are properly directed to the Eternal alone were it not that the Holy One, Blessed be He, warned us against it in His Torah? And indeed, the Sages stated that the descendants of

22. Mendelssohn was referring ahead to Ps. 19:8, *God's teaching [torah] is complete*, etc.

23. Much of this paragraph was drawn from Ramban's commentary on v. 3; Ramban delineated three categories or forms of idolatry, and it was only in the context of the first category—the worship of celestial guardian angels—that he explicitly linked such idolatry with the acknowledgment of a supreme God. Mendelssohn, however, suggested that all peoples, regardless of their modes of worship, still acknowledge God as a supreme being; he notably avoided the use of the word idolatry in this context, since he will take the position (in what follows) that for gentiles, the worship of other gods in tandem with the God of the Bible does not constitute idolatry and is therefore not prohibited.

24. *ben noah*, or Noahide, referred to the peoples of the world, a designation informed by the rabbinic notion of *mišvot bene noah*, the seven injunctions that applied to all humans. The first of these injunctions was the prohibition against idolatry, and Mendelssohn's discussion sought to articulate the precise bounds of that prohibition.

25. On Mendelssohn's choice of this appellation, see above, n. 20.

26. This use of the phrase "to sacrifice, offer incense and libations" is highly suggestive here, since it was drawn from midrashic sources with reference to two non-Israelites, Pharaoh and Yitro, and their idolatrous practices; see Mekh. *Be-Shallah*, section 2, and Yal. Sh. § 232; and Mekh. *Yitro*, section 1. See also M. San. 7:6.

27. Cf. Ramban's comment on Deut. 32:12.

Maimonides, *Laws of Avodah Zarah*

In the days of Enosh, the sons of man erred exceedingly, the advice of the wise men of that generation was nullified, and even Enosh himself was among the victims of that folly. Their mistake was this: Seeing, said they, that God created these stars and planets to rule the world, that He placed them high above to share honours with them, for they are ministers who render service in his presence, it is proper that they be praised and glorified and honoured. This is the will of God, to exalt and honour him whom He exalted and honoured, even as a king desires to honour those who stand in his presence, for such is the honour of the king. As soon as this matter was rooted in their heart, they commenced to erect temples in honour of the stars, to offer sacrifices to them, to praise and glorify them in words, and bow down to them—their purpose, according to their perverse notions, was to obtain the Creator's favour. This was the root of idolatry and this was what the idolaters, who knew its fundamentals, said. They did not, however, maintain, that there was no God other than a particular star [that they were worshiping]. This is as Jeremiah says: "Who would not fear You, O King of the nations? For it befits You; forasmuch as among all the wise men of the nations, and in all their royalty, there is none like unto You. But they are altogether brutish and foolish; the vanities by which they are instructed are but a stock" (Jer. 10.7–8). As if saying: Everyone knows that You alone are God; but their mistake and foolishness is in supposing that this vanity is Your will.

In the long process of time, there arose among the sons of men false prophets, who asserted that God commanded them saying: "Worship that particular star, or all of the stars, and offer sacrifices to it, and pour out for it such and such libations, and erect a temple for it. Make an image of it so that all of the people, women and children and the rest of the populace shall bow down to it". The false prophet pointed out to them the form which he invented and told them that this was the image of the particular star which was pointed out to him in his prophecy. In this manner they started to draw images in temples, beneath trees, upon mountain-tops and elevated places, where they congregated to bow down to them. They spoke to the people, saying: "This image has it in its power to do good and evil, and it is proper to worship it, and be in awe of it." Their priests, moreover, would say to the people: "By this worship you will increase and succeed; do thus and such, but not that and this". Then still other imposters rose up to assert that the star itself, or the planet, or the angel spoke to them and instructed saying: "Worship me thus and such"—thus making known to the people the ways of worship—and taught the people, "Do so but do not do so." So gradually the custom spread throughout the world, and the worship of images with varied ceremonies, to sacrifice to them and to bow down to them was inaugurated. After the lapse of a long time the honoured and revered Name of God was forgotten by mankind . . .



Noah were not warned against *shittuf*,<sup>28</sup> since with regard to [Noahides] these deeds are not considered to be a rebellion against divine honor—as long as it is not their intention to remove themselves from the domain of the *God of gods and the Lord of lords* (Deut. 10:17).

However, we [are] *the people close to him* (Ps. 148:14), since He *brought us out of Egypt, the house of bondage* (Ex. 13:14), and did all these wonders for us in order *to be His very own treasured people from among all the peoples* (Deut. 4:20, 7:6); [and on account of] His ruling over us in His glory directly, without the means of an angel or [celestial] minister or star, we, his servants, are obligated to accept upon ourselves the yoke of His kingship and rule, and to fulfill His decrees. He decreed upon us not to worship anything other than Him; and He specified the forms of worship that are appropriate to Him alone, [but] not to any being other than Him, and it is thus not appropriate to conjoin another god to Him with any of these modes of worship. Thus Scripture said:<sup>29</sup> *Or when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon, the stars, the whole host of the heavens, and you are misled to venerate them and worship them; since, indeed, the Eternal your God has surely permitted them for all the other peoples under the sky. But the Eternal took you from the iron furnace, that is, he led you out of Miṣrayim, that you might become His treasured people, as you now truly are* (Deut. 4:19–20).<sup>30</sup>

As such, our verse may be restated as follows: **I** °(the speaker and commander) **am the Eternal** °(who was, is, and will be, the source of all existent things, who is provident and present at the time of their troubles to those who love me) **your God** °(mighty and powerful, from whom all good is hoped and all bad is feared,

28. The word *shittuf* (lit.: partnership or association) appeared in medieval sources with reference to the notion that Noahides were not prohibited from believing in deities other than God as long as those deities were associated with—and secondary to—the true God of Israel. Mendelssohn was thus arguing that as long as gentiles recognized the ultimate supremacy of God, the worship of an associated star or celestial being or even a human did not constitute idolatry and was therefore permissible. The source of this position, however, was not in the writings of the Sages, as Mendelssohn suggested, but Tosafot to San. 63b, later codified in the gloss of R. Moses Isserles to *Shulḥan 'Aruḥ, Oraḥ Hayyim* § 156(1).

29. The verses preceding this citation reiterated the warnings against worshipping idols or sculpted images of any sort. Verses 19–20 served as a deuteronomistic addendum that articulated Israel's unique obligation to uphold a "pure" monotheism, thus proscribing the worship of heavenly bodies even though they were divinely created.

30. In the *Be'ur* to Deut. 4:19, Mendelssohn cited Rashbam and inserted two parenthetical comments that reinforced his point here: "*Since, indeed, the Eternal your God has surely permitted them for all the other peoples: . . . According to the true peshat, the words mean that indeed, God allowed them [= heavenly bodies] to all the nations to worship because He is not concerned about them [engaging in such worship] °(as long as they recognize and acknowledge that God is the cause of all causes, the supreme Provident; for shittuf was not prohibited to the descendants of Noah). But the Eternal took you . . . and led you out . . . that you might become His treasured people and to worship Him, and that He will be for you a God* (Deut. 29:12) °(without any intermediary or *shittuf*)."



and to whom it is fitting to direct all prayer and worship), **who led you out of the land of Mišrayim, out of the house of slaves** °(*that you might become His treasured people* [Deut. 4:20], as we have said, and it is proper for you to dedicate all worship to the Unique Name). You will understand from this why He did not say “I am the Eternal your God who created the heaven and the earth and who created you.” This was the question that the scholar Judah ha-Levi, may his resting place be an honor, asked Ibn Ezra and [which] is also raised in his *Kuzari*, but his answer is inadequate.<sup>31</sup> Whether a belief in creation and production [of the world] in time could be sustained by decisive rational demonstration, as some scholars think, or whether reason cannot determine between this view and the belief in the eternity of the world, as per Maimonides in the *Guide*<sup>32</sup>—this belief, in any event, is not unique to God’s treasured people alone, and is not a reason for the acceptance of the exclusive yoke of His sovereignty and a rejection of *shittuf*. But being taken from the house of slaves, from slavery to freedom, is the correct reason for this.<sup>33</sup> It likewise applies to the observance of the other commandments in the Torah such as that of the Sabbath; and although [this precept] serves as a sign for the creation of the world, *for in six days the Eternal made heaven*, etc. (Ex. 20:11), the descendants of Noah are not commanded to desist from all work on this day, and this is what is indicated in the second Decalogue, *for you were a slave*, etc., . . . *therefore the Eternal your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day* °(Deut. 5:15), as we will mention there in [the commentary], with the help of heaven. God, may He be exalted, gave the Torah and the commandments, the statutes and laws, to us alone; *He is our king, our lawgiver* (Isa. 33:22), and it is incumbent upon us to observe His statutes and precepts, whether as children or slaves;<sup>34</sup> and likewise, in the Mekhilta, the Sages said with regard to the verse **who led you out [of the land of Mišrayim]**—“the exodus would be reason enough for you to be subjugated to me.”<sup>35</sup>

**out of the house of slaves** [*mi-bet ‘avadim*]: [do you interpret these words to mean that they were removed] from the house of Pharaoh to whom you were enslaved, or do you take the words **out of the house of slaves** to mean that they were the slaves of slaves? When Scripture says [*He*] *rescued you from the house of slaves, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Mišrayim* °(Deut. 7:8), we may answer

31. See Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Ex. 20:2, in which he recounted the question and offered his response; and *Kuzari* I:12–25. Mendelssohn’s gibe that “his answer is inadequate” referred to Ibn Ezra.

32. See, e.g., II:16 and 25.

33. I.e., for the acknowledgment of God’s exclusive sovereignty over Israel.

34. This phrase was taken from the New Year liturgy.

35. The version of the Mekhilta from which this was cited had not yet been printed; Mendelssohn’s immediate source was Rashi.



the fat of my festival offering should not be left overnight, etc. [*ve-lo yalin helev haggi*]: off of the altar, since if it is placed on the wood pile it is not rendered invalid at night, as it is written, [*that remains*] upon its fire-place on the altar all night °(Lev. 6:2).<sup>41</sup>

19 You shall bring the first of the early fruits of your land to the house of the Eternal your God; do not boil any young animal in its mother's milk.

#### Commentary

19. the first of the early fruits of your land [*re'shit bikkure admatekha*]: [this applies to the first-fruits of] the seven species mentioned in Deuteronomy, [as it is written] then you shall bring from the first fruit of all the species °(Deut. 26:2).<sup>42</sup>

young animal [*gedi*]: this [prohibition] applies to all meat with milk, as the Sages have explained in the tractate Hullin.<sup>43</sup> It is written three times in the Torah, and the Sages have expounded it [to include three separate actions]: one for the prohibition of eating [meat cooked with milk], one for the prohibition of deriving benefit [from such an admixture], and one for the prohibition of cooking [them together].<sup>44</sup>

Now, one should not ponder why the Holy One prohibited meat with milk, for God decreed many commandments for us without revealing their rationale. However, it should suffice for us to know that they are commanded from Him, may He be blessed, and inasmuch as we have accepted upon ourselves the yoke of His kingship, we are obligated to do His will. The benefit [of such commandments] lies in their performance, not in knowing their reason. I say this not, heaven forbid, as one who denigrates the honor of the great Torah scholars who endeavored in such speculations and sought to understand the reasons of the commandments whose meanings were not revealed, for we know that their intention was only for the sake of heaven.<sup>45</sup> However, it is patently clear that for all the breadth of their understanding they offered only weak reasoning with no

41. Based upon Rashi.

42. Rashbam. The source for the limitation of the commandment of the first fruits to the seven species enumerated in Deut. 8:8 was Sifre § 297.

43. Rashbam.

44. Rashi.

45. Mendelssohn referred here to the legacy of some medieval scholars, including Maimonides, who sought to articulate the reasons behind the commandments (*ta'ame ha-miṣvot*). Although the wisdom and efficacy of their endeavor had long been questioned, Mendelssohn was careful to express respect for their stature despite his negative assessment of their quest.

basis; they were unconvincing, and in the end it was possible for the evil inclination to refute their words and for the gentiles to use them to taunt Israel, as the Sages said with regard to the commandments whose reasons were not revealed. To us, believers in God and his Torah, the Sages put it well: "can one perhaps say that they were empty commandments? Scripture therefore states *I am the Eternal* (Lev. 18:4)—I decreed them, and you have no right to question them."<sup>46</sup>

46. The passage appeared with some variation in a number of rabbinic texts, although Mendelssohn seems to have preferred a later variant included in Tan. *Mishpatim* [§ 7]. Mendelssohn's eschewal of the rationalization of the commandments is consistent with other pronouncements regarding the nature of the commandments. His comment, in fact, touched on two long-standing and related concerns: the emphatically particularistic practices enjoined by the Torah, and the limits of human comprehension. Mendelssohn did not regard the commandments as a means of conveying abstract truths, at least not directly. The Decalogue, as he explained at length, did not teach abstract truths about God's existence but rather that Israel was "His treasured people" who had accepted, and were irreversibly subject to, the yoke of the commandments. Particular commandments thus referred to the particular historical experiences of the Israelites, or to the need to subject oneself to God's kingship. In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn asserted that while Jews were welcome to reflect on the commandments and surmise their reasons, such speculation was secondary to the obligation to observe them: "reverence for God draws a line between speculation and practice that no conscientious man may cross." See *JubA*, 8:198–99; Arkush, *Jerusalem*, 133–34.