

A Letter to Almeda: Shadal's Guide for the Perplexed

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Translator's Introduction

"One who has the erudition, the knowledge, and the time must lend me aid." With these words, a troubled Jewish man named Giuseppe Almeda appealed for guidance in his search for religious truth. The erudite scholar who answered this *cri de coeur* in 1839 was Samuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865), known by his Hebrew acronym Shadal.

Who was Giuseppe Almeda? An Internet search yields a bit of information. I have been able to ascertain that he was an active figure in the maritime insurance industry of Trieste (the cosmopolitan Italian seaport that was then part of the Austrian empire), and that he died in 1861. The family name "Almeda" would seem to indicate a Spanish Sephardic origin. A few more clues are given in his own introduction to the questions that he presented to Shadal. He describes himself in 1839 as "halfway down the path of life," and as a father of children who were evidently not yet grown. Perhaps, then, he was somewhere in his thirties at the time, in which case he would have been not only Shadal's fellow *triestino*, but also his contemporary.

As to who Shadal was, there is of course no mystery. He was the leading Jewish writer, educator, thinker, and Bible scholar of nineteenth-century Italy. It was only natural that Almeda should have turned to him for spiritual aid, as the two men were in fact

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part of a circle of friends.¹ The letter in which Almeda's questions are presented appears as number 185 in the *Epistolario italiano francese latino* (Padua, 1890), the posthumous collection of Shadal's correspondence in Italian, French, and Latin. (His Hebrew letters are collected in the better-known, two-volume *Iggerot Shadal*.)

Almeda starts by explaining his state of mind concerning religion. His Judaic education had been *quasi nulla*, "almost nil," and he had come to favor a pared-down belief in God, the immortality of the soul, and a "practical morality." But then he began to wonder whether this would be enough of a spiritual legacy to pass down to his children. Conversion to Christianity appeared to be a tempting choice, but ultimately he could not bring himself to take such a step: "No, my God! This I will never do... Because I was born into Judaism, I must persist in it." The alternative, as he saw it, was to "seek within" the Jewish religion, "to the greatest extent possible, conviction and truth." Hence his appeal to Shadal.

The next part of Almeda's document consists of five sets of questions, dealing with: (1) Jewish beliefs; (2) worship; (3) practices, ceremonies, and prohibitions; (4) morality; and (5) Jewish Reform. The content and tone of the questions make it obvious that Almeda had to be convinced that traditional Judaism could speak to his spiritual yearnings. Not only Christianity, but also the nascent Reform movement seemed to offer at least as good a model in many respects. And yet it seems that deep down, he wanted to be convinced by tradition.

Shadal's answer takes the form of a letter in Italian, numbered 186 in the *Epistolario* and dated March 6, 1839. He opens by expressing "the warmest esteem for the candor of a truly righteous and virtuous soul, and for the wise and judicious mind, of which [Almeda's] writing offers the most undoubted proof, and at the

¹ See Tullia Catalan, "La 'primavera degli ebrei.' Ebrei italiani del Litorale e del Lombardo Veneto nel 1848-1849," *Zakhor* 6 (2003): 41 n. 23, citing Angelo Cavalieri, *Giuseppe Almeda: memorie* (Trieste, 1868). Catalan's article makes mention (pp. 48-49) of the Almeda-Shadal correspondence of 1839. Almeda's name is included among the "Signori Associati" listed at the end of Shadal's early work on Hebrew grammar, *Prolegomeni ad una grammatica ragionata della lingua ebraica* (Padua, 1836).

same time declaring my awareness of the honor of the trust that he has shown me.” Shadal goes on to answer nine of Almeda’s questions—the eight contained in the section on Jewish beliefs, plus the one question concerning the Jewish system of morality. If Shadal ever specifically answered the rest of Almeda’s queries, the results do not appear elsewhere in the *Epistolario*. However, the nine answers provide not only a basic response to Almeda’s searchings, but also an overview of Shadal’s distinctive take on Jewish tradition.

The questions that Shadal dealt with are as follows:

1. Is there a canonical book that clearly enumerates the cardinal points of the Jewish faith?
2. Must one believe to be equally true the precepts, the miracles, and the events recorded in the Bible?
3. Would a Jew who practices the rites and ceremonies, but does not believe in the revelation of Moses, be worthy of salvation in the mind of true believers?
4. Does the immortality of the soul, and the rewards and punishments of the life hereafter, constitute a basic Jewish belief?
5. Will the resurrection of the dead be political, religious, or both? Will it be universal?
6. Is the resurrection not an inconceivable mystery, on the order of the mysteries maintained by Christians?
7. Can the Jewish religion become universal? And if it cannot, how can Judaism be called divine?
8. How is it that to all of these questions, religious and learned persons have given inconsistent answers?
9. Do Jews receive a moral education purely as Jews, and not as subjects of the government of their respective countries?

In the course of answering these questions, Shadal expresses a number of ideas that he often returns to in his other writings. Among these are: (1) “Moses did not dictate articles of faith, because God does not command belief, that is, He does not command that which cannot be commanded”; (2) rather, God requires practices, ceremonies, and prohibitions that foster personal virtue and social well-being; (3) God chose the Jews as spiritual custodians because they had already accepted the idea of monotheism from their ancestor Abraham; and (4) Jewish morality is grounded upon a sense of

compassion on the one hand, and the fear of Divine retribution on the other.

Written in Shadal's characteristically vigorous and literary style, the letter to Almeda displays the writer's broad familiarity with secular as well as religious literature. His responses quote not only the Bible and the Talmud, but also a Stoic Greek philosopher, two Italian poets, and a contemporary Prussian statesman. Both Almeda's spiritual angst and Shadal's reply seem, in some ways, surprisingly modern. In particular, one remark by Shadal leaps out to the present-day reader: lamenting the fact that people tend to shed their morality as soon as they acquire "some glory by means of various personal gifts," Shadal sardonically observes that "no vice is sufficient to destroy the reputation of a distinguished artist or a celebrated writer."

Although relatively brief, Shadal's letter to Giuseppe Almeda is a remarkable addition to the genre of Jewish religious literature of which some more famous examples are Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* and Samson Raphael Hirsch's *Nineteen Letters*, the latter of which was published only three years before Shadal's work. I am indebted to my friend Shimon Steinmetz for alerting me to the availability of the *Epistolario* online, thus enabling me to discover the letter to Almeda and to make it familiar to an English-speaking audience.²

Here, then, are my translations of an excerpt from Almeda's request and the entire response by Shadal, both documents headed by the titles that they were given in the *Epistolario*.

Questions Presented by Giuseppe Almeda of Trieste to S. D. Luzzatto

Although I was born in the bosom of Judaism, my religious education was almost nil. The ceremonies, the prayers that I saw performed or that I did myself left no deep or intimate impression on me; I felt no serious conviction in my soul.

² The *Epistolario* can be found at <<http://books.google.com/books?id=jkw-AAAAYAAJ>>. I also thank Shimon for his valuable suggestions for improving this article.

Having reached the age of reason... I came to be—thanks to the serious meditations of the German philosophers and the modern eclectic-French school—intimately convinced of the existence of God, then of the immortality of the soul, and then of the true bases of morality: duty and virtue.

Now I am halfway down the path of life, and I am coming to consider whether these convictions, these beliefs, this internal cult of God and truth, are sufficient to discharge my obligations on this earth, and whether practical morality and the worship of the heart are all that the Almighty asks of one who seeks Him out sincerely... Besides which, I am a father... And some day perhaps I will be reproached for not having initiated [my children] in that which could have given them consolation and resolve throughout the hardships of life...

I see the Christian imbibe his religion with his mother's milk and absorb it into his blood, to the extent that reason most often comforts him in his faith. In contrast, I see the Jew more and more disbelieving the more he seeks to delve into science. What should I do? Abjure the faith of my fathers? But I am not convinced of that which I am close to embracing; I can merely glimpse it, sensing in it a material usefulness. Yet a general aversion, perhaps born of prejudice, awaits one who renounces his own religion.

And how can I resolve solemnly to profess a faith that condemns to eternal perdition those who gave me life?

No, my God! This I will never do; an urgent voice from my conscience tells me that this is Your will. Because I was born into Judaism, I must persist in it; nor can there be any fault in doing so.

After this, what remains for me? To seek within it, to the greatest extent possible, conviction and truth.

For this purpose I lack the erudition, the knowledge, the time. And yet the matter is sacred, important, essential. One who has the erudition, the knowledge, and the time must lend me aid, and it is for this reason that I have resolved to put into writing some questions in this regard, requesting, of one who is willing, to answer them one by one. Not without reason have I first introduced a few ill-chosen words as to my profession of faith and the state of my soul, for it matters greatly to the one who will respond to know how the questioner thinks about certain underlying matters, not so

much for the sake of the substance of the answers as much as for the form they should take...

To Giuseppe Almeda, Trieste

The page that introduces the proposed questions does not explicitly request any response, any explication; rather, it is presented for the sole object of serving as guidance, not for the substance of the answers to be given, but for the form that they are to take. Thus it is that I—expressing for the proponent the warmest esteem for the candor of a truly righteous and virtuous soul, and for the wise and judicious mind, of which his writing offers the most undoubted proof, and at the same time declaring my awareness of the honor of the trust that he has shown me—pass on immediately to respond to the questions. I do so even though I know that, in order to make the answers understood by the one who will read them as they are by the one who writes them, they ought to have been prefaced with lengthy discourses tending to substitute new groups of ideas for the existing ones, [taking into account] the great and unique source of divergence in human judgments, and the principal cause of the great diversity of ways of seeing and hearing that are displayed among the various individuals of the human race.

1. Is there a canonical book that is recognized without controversy as being obligatory, in which the cardinal points of our faith are clearly enumerated?

All of the books of the Holy Scriptures are commonly regarded as having infallible authority. The Pentateuch alone is unquestionably obligatory. However, neither it nor the other books of Scripture enumerate, or even mention, points of faith. The first one who enumerated them was Maimonides, and the motive that induced him to do so will be seen in the discussion of question 3, below. Moses did not dictate articles of faith, because God does not command belief, that is, He does not command that which cannot be commanded. He assigns grave punishments for many religious transgressions, but He never makes mention of the sin of disbelief, nor does He condemn antireligious speech, except for seduction to idolatry (since it leads to material acts condemned by the law) and

blasphemy, or cursing aimed against the nation's God, which was thus an act of *lèse-majesté* [an offense against the Sovereign].

The succeeding prophets, and the ancient Rabbis, animated by the same spirit as Moses, never make mention of articles of faith. Scripture detests the atheist, but the atheist of depraved conduct. "The vile one says in his heart: 'There is no God'; they have committed wicked and abominable actions" (Psalm 14:1).

On the other hand, Moses did not institute a religion; rather, on the bases of one that already existed, he raised the edifice of a state and of a body of legislation. For if by "religion" we mean various beliefs concerning one God or more, and some sentiments of filial devotion and some acts of homage toward such God or gods, the Israelites prior to Moses professed a religion. Moses presented himself to them in the name of the God of their forebears, not in the name of a God unknown to them. He did not repeat to them a catechism that they already knew; and it was only for the sake of posterity that he expounded it implicitly in the history that he left to us from the times previous to his.

There we see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants believing in One God, Master of heaven and earth, Distributor of just rewards and punishments, Whose Providence watches over the well-being of his devotees. We see them believing in miracles, angels, revelations in wakefulness and sleep, and giving thought to the place where their bodies should be buried (probably believing in resurrection). We see them praying to God in their distress, and also on behalf of others. We see them rendering to God thanks for favors received, by means of sacrifices. The way of God, which Abraham taught to his descendants, consisted in the exercise of humanity and justice (Genesis 18:19). The sole required ceremony was circumcision. An ancient but spontaneous practice among them was that of not eating the ligament that attaches the femur to the acetabulum.³

³ Shadal is referring, of course, to the *gid ha-nasheh*, the part of Jacob's body that was injured in his fight with the angel (Gen. 32:25-33). In his commentary on these verses, Shadal takes the position that Jacob's thighbone (femur) was dislocated in the struggle when the ligament that attached it to the socket of the hip bone (acetabulum) gave way. Such an explanation

On the basis of this religion, Moses raised his Republic, his legislation. At the time that the Israelite people were brought into possession of the promised land, God so chose to organize the people by means of civil and criminal legislation, to which religion was given as a base. Moses, the chosen organ of the Divine will, does not teach a new religion, but inculcates in the Israelites that of their ancestors. He does not announce any new dogma, but imposes new practices, new ceremonies, new prohibitions, with which it pleased God to render both fixed and public that cult which had originally

is contrary to the halakhic view, according to which the *gid ha-nasheh* is the sciatic nerve. In a footnote to my translation of the commentary (Daniel A. Klein, *The Book of Genesis: A Commentary by Shadal (S. D. Luzzatto)* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998) 316 n. 6), I sought to reconcile this surprising discrepancy by distinguishing between the halakhic practice and Shadal's literary interpretation of the narrative. However, now that I have seen Shadal's letter to Almeda, I must modify my approach and say that although Shadal indeed maintained that the "spontaneous" (i.e., uncommanded) pre-Mosaic custom was not to eat the ligament of the head of the femur, he would have recognized that the prohibition *as subsequently codified* was transferred, for whatever reason, to the sciatic nerve. See *Hullin* 100b for the proposition that the practice of not eating the *gid ha-nasheh* was not a mitzvah until it was promulgated at Sinai (although Rashi's comment ad loc. seems to take the view that the practice itself started at Sinai).

It should be noted that not only Shadal, but also classical exegetes such as Rashbam and even, on occasion, Rashi, "permitted themselves to interpret texts according to the simple sense even when it stands in opposition to the conclusion which is demanded by the derashah of the passage, and that they saw no contradiction in this" (Yeshayahu Maori, "The Approach of Classic Jewish Exegetes to Peshat and Derash and Its Implications for the Teaching of Bible Today," trans. Moshe Bernstein, *Tradition* 21 (1984): 3). Further, it should be emphasized that like those exegetes, "Shadal did not intend to deny the authoritativeness of the Rabbinic halakhah or to determine that on the basis of his interpretations, one ought to conduct one's practice and to turn aside from the established halakhah. Like them, he regarded himself as subject to the halakhah accepted by the Rabbis" (Shmuel Vargon, "S. D. Luzzatto's Critique of Rabbinic Biblical Exegesis Which Strays from the Plain Sense of the Bible," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 2 (2003): 101, <<http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/JSIJ/2-2003/Vargon.pdf>>) (my translation from the Hebrew).

been individual and spontaneous. He does not teach a new morality, but dictates a code that does no more than develop and sanctify the principles of humanity and justice that Abraham taught.

The Mishnah, the supremely authoritative text of Rabbinic Judaism, enumerates [in *Sanhedrin* 10:1] three classes of persons who are condemned to deprivation of future blessedness, and they are: one who says that the Resurrection of the Dead is not (taught) in the Torah, one who says that the Torah is not from Heaven, and the Epicurean (*apikores*). Rabbi Akiva adds, one who reads esoteric books (according to some, the Apocryphal books) and one who recites over a plague (as a remedy) the text of Exodus 15:26. Abba Shaul adds, one who pronounces the Tetragrammaton. About this Mishnah text I would observe that if those ancient scholars had meant that a person can be condemned for his beliefs, they would have said "one who denies the Resurrection of the Dead," not "one who says that the Resurrection of the Dead is not in the Torah"; and instead of specifying the "Epicurean," they would have said "one who denies God." Besides, it would be hard to understand how Akiva and Abba Shaul placed alongside these three cardinal misbeliefs three physical acts. All of this impels me to conclude that these scholars never thought to enumerate points of faith, nor did they believe to be condemned those who do not believe; rather, they intended to declare as deprived of future blessedness (that is, not condemned to eternal suffering, but deprived of resurrection): (1) those violators of the law who, instead of pleading in their own defense human or individual frailty, claim that the Pentateuch does not teach of the Resurrection, thus after death there is nothing to hope for or fear, thus anything that pleases is lawful; (2) those who, in other words, allege the non-divinity of the Torah; and finally (3) the Epicurean, that is, not the merely theoretical atheist, but the practicing one.

2. *Must one believe to be equally true the precepts, the miracles, and the events recorded in the Holy Scriptures? What I mean is, must one hold to an equal standard of belief the dogma of the Unity of God proclaimed by Moses, the miracle of the Red Sea, and the law of not eating forbidden foods?*

Speaking precisely, true things are all equally true; one such thing cannot be truer than another. On the other hand, the precepts demand observance, not belief; to “believe in” a precept is not a very clear expression, and even less so the question whether one must hold to an equal standard of belief the dogmas, the miracles, and the precepts. One believes or does not believe a dogma; one believes or does not believe a miracle; but a precept is either observed or not observed. However, one believes or does not believe in the Divine provenance of a precept. If, then, the sense of the question is whether one must have equal faith in the divinity of the precepts, in the miracles, and in the dogmas, I respond in the first place that in Mosaism, faith is not commanded, and in the second place that whoever is persuaded of Mosaism is equally persuaded of the precepts, miracles, and dogmas contained in the Pentateuch. If, however, by “believing in the precepts” one means giving them importance, I respond that the observance of the precepts being a commanded thing, and the dogmas and miracles not being commanded things, these are things of different natures, and one cannot make comparisons or contrasts among them. But if it is asked whether violation of the precepts constitutes a desertion from Mosaism equal to the denial of the dogmas and the miracles, I respond: violation out of weakness, passion, or the like, no; violation due to denial of the divinity of the precepts, yes.

3. *With respect to a Jew who, having arrived at the truth of natural religion, practices the rites and ceremonies out of a love for order, but does not have faith—on account of either ignorance or error—in the revelation of Moses, would such a person be worthy of salvation in the mind of true believers? (See question 5 under “Reform.”)*⁴

⁴ The question to which Almeda refers (and to which Shadal does not respond in this letter) asks whether there is a danger that if certain laws and practices were to be abolished by reformers, the entire idea of revelation would be lost and the Jewish religion would be reduced to a form of pure Deism. Shadal’s opinion of the Reform movement was clearly expressed elsewhere. For example: “Some Israelites, eager to exonerate themselves from the religious practices connected with Judaism, and wishing to do so with a sort of legality, so as not to have to be regarded as impious transgressors of the Law of God, mask their project of totally abolishing the

I say yes. Maimonides, the originator of the opinion to the contrary, did not draw it from the sources of Judaism, but rather from those of Aristotelianism, which taught that because the soul is not a substance but a faculty, man acquires immortality through knowledge of the metaphysical truths, and that whoever does not know them does not have a soul and is a beast. This past year I set this fact out clearly, and I drew upon myself a crusade on the part of believers and nonbelievers alike—a result that every sincere friend of the truth and of the *juste milieu* [the middle way, “golden mean”] must expect.⁵

4. *Does the immortality of the soul, and the rewards and punishments of the life hereafter, constitute a solemn, universal, and indestructible belief of Mosaism? Is it deduced from the Holy Scriptures, and if so, from where? Why is there no august ceremony that makes mention of it at the point of one's death? Why do people pray so confusedly for the dead if, as I have heard, such prayer is not an essential point? If prayers for ourselves have value, why can they not be equally effective for a substance that continues to exist?*

The immortality of the soul is solemnly expressed in Ecclesiastes 12:7 [“And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it”]. Rewards after the resurrection are clearly announced in Daniel 12:2 [“And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to reproaches and everlasting abhorrence”]. That belief in the resurrection existed among the ancient Israelites can also be deduced

Mosaic law under the specious name of Reform” (letter to A. J. Fürst, Sept. 1, 1843, in *Epistolario*, 424-425).

⁵ Shadal is evidently referring to his article in the Prague periodical *Kerem Hemed* 3 (1838): 61-76, in which he criticizes Maimonides on several grounds, one of which is his adoption of the Aristotelian concept of the soul (see in particular p. 67; this volume of *Kerem Hemed* is accessible online at <<http://books.google.com/books?id=Zl0pAAAAYAAJ>>). The article in question did indeed stir up much controversy; for example, about five weeks after writing the letter to Almeda, Shadal broke off his friendship with Rabbi Solomon Judah Rapoport as a result of this and related scholarly disputes (see, for example, Morris B. Margolies, *Samuel David Luzzatto: Traditionalist Scholar* (New York: Ktav, 1979), 151).

from the poetical allusion that Isaiah makes to it in 26:19 [“But your dead shall live, my dead bodies shall arise—awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust—for Your dew is as the dew of light, and the earth shall bring to life the shades”].

That the Israelites at the time of Moses believed in the immortality of the soul can be perceived beyond doubt from the law that forbids consultation with the dead. Moses implicitly teaches of a blessedness beyond this life when he narrates that Abel’s sacrifice was pleasing to God, and that Abel was murdered soon after, as well as when he says that Enoch was faithful to God and was taken by God before he reached even half the usual lifespan of his times.

However, for purposes of sanction in his laws, Moses announced rewards that were earthly, natural, verifiable in this life, and such a sanction was much more effective than one that would have been drawn from heavenly rewards, supported by faith alone.

Words of comfort relating to immortality are offered by the rabbi at the bedside of every dying person, and upon the coffin of every deceased. A religion without mysteries could not suggest any other ceremony, much less an august ceremony. The dead are not prayed for, because it is believed that God rewards or punishes everyone according to his actions, not according to those of any other person. I can pray for my sick child, because his death or illness affects me as well; it is not so for my deceased father, because he must be treated according to his own merits, and his punishments that are unknown to me do not affect me. Nevertheless, some ancient Rabbis taught that leaving behind a well-raised and pious child is ascribed by God to the parent’s merit, and thus the prayers and good works of the child are of benefit to the parent’s soul. And this doctrine is most praiseworthy for its salutary effects.

5. Will the anticipated regeneration be political, religious, or both? Will it be universal? Is normative Rabbinism, the keeper of this belief, un-animously in agreement as to its nature?

The anticipated regeneration will be political for the Jews and religious for the universality of the human race, the entirety of which will embrace not Judaism but monotheism. So the prophets and the ancient Rabbis unanimously teach.

6. *Is the resurrection of the dead not an inconceivable mystery? And if it is, why criticize the irrational mysteries that Christians maintain? For it costs no more to believe that one dead man will return to life after a thousand years or two than to believe that a million dead people will return to life at some future time.*

The resurrection is not inconceivable. The body is not destroyed, but is dissolved. Could the Creator not gather together its particles, or incorporate them into a new body like the first? The resurrection of Jesus does not constitute part of the mysteries of Christianity; that is, it is not one of the inconceivable dogmas that some might criticize.⁶

7. *Can the religion of Moses become universal? And if it cannot, and if the Jews, as I believe, do not maintain this pretension, how can Mosaism be called divine, revealed by the Creator Himself? For it is repugnant to reason to believe it to be among the truths proclaimed by God Himself, without also believing that all humankind will at some time taste of this heavenly manna.*

Mosaism will never become universal, but its fundamental principle—that is, monotheism—can indeed become universal. It is precisely for this purpose that God chose the Jewish people, that is, so that it might become the custodian of these truths and the organ by which they might be propagated among all the nations. The Jewish people was chosen because it was the only one that had already known and professed these truths through the teaching of its ancestors. Revelation to any other, polytheistic, people would have been fruitless, for without the advance conviction of the unity of God,

⁶ The Roman Catholic Church does in fact refer to “the mystery of the Resurrection”; see, for example, the online reference Catholicsource Scriptural Rosary, <www.catholicsource.net/rosary/resurrection.html> (accessed April 7, 2010). However, the term “mystery,” in this context, may mean nothing more than an incident in the life of Jesus that is deemed to have special significance to Christians (see Random House Dictionary (1966) s.v. “mystery”). What Shadal appears to be maintaining is that the resurrection is not a doctrine that can be understood only by an initiated elite. Note that in his response to question 4, he makes a similar claim for Judaism in general, calling it “a religion without mysteries.”

any revelation, no matter how indisputable, would leave it its wake a doubt that some other day, some other god might reveal himself and impart different and contrary doctrines.

8. *How is it that to all of these questions, I receive answers that are inconsistent one from another, from persons who are religious and learned?*

Precisely because Judaism has no articles of faith and leaves full freedom to the thinker, making only material actions binding. True Religion is not the science of divine matters (a science that is too far above the reach of man); it is an intimate belief, a filial devotion, that extends itself in the acts of a spontaneous and indeterminate cult, as in the case of the Judaism that preceded Moses, or—as in the case of Mosaism—in practices and observances that are determined by law. The goal of such law is not that God may become known and worshipped by us, as if He were in need of our homage, but rather: (1) to keep alive in our minds the idea of God and of Providence, the only idea that is capable of keeping us constantly attached to virtue; and (2) to accustom us to keep a rein on our desires and to undergo privations patiently, an indispensable attitude for rendering us superior to the passions and the temptations of vice. As [the Stoic philosopher] Epictetus said, if one would keep to heart two words, he would be blameless: *sustine et abstine* [“sustain and abstain”; “bear and forbear”].

Jeremiah reposes the glory of humankind in the sound knowledge of God, that is, he says, in the knowledge that God is that Being Whose acts are universal compassion, benevolence, and justice; for these, concludes the prophet—introducing God Himself as the speaker—“these are the things that I desire (that people should do)” (Jer. 9:23). This text manifestly proves, in the first place, that the knowledge which God wants us to have of Him has, as its object, not His honor but our betterment. He does not say that God is great, powerful, terrible, but that He is beneficent and just; nor does He content Himself in explaining the concept that we should have of God, but He adds, “These are the things that I desire”; that is, the knowledge of God is not desired for its own sake; compassion, humanity, and justice are what He desires; it is important to know Him so as to practice the virtues that He loves; “these are the things

that I desire,” says God, not a sterile knowledge of Me. In the second place, this text proves that our betterment and perfection, desired by God, consist of the social virtues: compassion, humanity, justice; that these are the things desired by God, and the only things for which He wishes to be known and worshipped by us.

9. *Do Jews receive—purely as Jews, and not as subjects of this or that government that has thought of it—a moral education? With what standards? With what book? What is the moral education of a Jew in the Levant that still preserves the entire teaching of Mosaism?*

Those Jews who have the benefit of being trained from infancy by religious parents or teachers receive, in whatever region in which they live, the best of moral educations, that of the Bible, of the Talmudic books, and of example. The sincerely religious Jew is the same in all countries and all eras; European or Asiatic, in the Middle Ages or in the nineteenth century, he is a model of virtue. His morality is the fruit of the two principles that dominate within him, one disinterested and the other interested, and these are the sense of compassion and the fear of God.

The disinterested sense of compassion, of sympathy, inborn in humankind, but too often suffocated by egoism and by calculating reason, is warmly nourished and reinvigorated by the Jewish religious upbringing, that is, by the books of the Bible and Talmud, and by the example set by religious trainers. In every age, humanity and compassion have comprised the glory of the Jewish people. The Syrians, after having lost a battle, said to their king (I Kings 20:31), “We know, by reputation, the kings of Israel to be compassionate.” The Rabbis of the Talmud said, “One who has no compassion is not of the descent of Abraham” [*Beitsah* 32a]. Indeed, the shame of all the ancient legal systems, torture, is an unknown thing to Jewish legislation, whether Mosaic or Rabbinic; it was practiced only by Herod, a king of foreign origin, despiser of all things Jewish and imitator of the Romans in everything. A commonplace maxim of the Talmud is, “Love your neighbor as yourself; even for a convicted criminal, select the least harsh form of death” [e.g., *Sanhedrin* 45a]. Even causing pain to animals is, according to the Talmudic sages, forbidden by the Divine law. Nowadays, here in Italy, it is

not uncommon to see tenant farmers call themselves fortunate when the holdings that they cultivate pass into the hands of a Jew.

The fear of God, an interested sense, the other foundation of Jewish morality, exercises its salutary influence where the disinterested sense of compassion would not suffice, suffocated by interest and need. Belief in an eye that sees, an ear that hears, a book in which everything is recorded, an avenging hand to which all resistance is vain—this belief is inculcated by all the Prophets, by all the Rabbis, by all good instructors of Judaism.

What other principles could morality possess? I mean to say a sincere morality which, issuing forth from the heart of the teacher, is capable of reaching the bottom of the student's heart, not a useless morality of pure ostentation. Honor, the great basis of the morality of civilization, governs a person on the world's scene, and abandons him as soon as he thinks himself invisible, or as soon as he acquires some glory by means of various personal gifts, for no vice is sufficient to destroy the reputation of a distinguished artist or a celebrated writer.

The idea of social utility is too easily defeated by the idea of personal utility. The sense of justice is nothing more than an emanation from the sense of compassion; like the latter, it needs to be nourished and invigorated, and being, like the latter, disinterested in nature, it often gives way in the face of individual utility and need, where it is not sustained by the interested idea of reward and punishment. The dignity of the rational being, the categorical imperative of the conscience, the sense of duty are not felt by everyone. As for those Jews who receive a moral education from their respective governments, what other morality do they learn from them if not the Jewish one, that of the Holy Scriptures? Is the evangelical morality anything other than the Biblical? If it contains any new principle, it is that of the damnation of unbelievers, the basis of all intolerance, and the doctrine of the "Keys" [the power of the Church to forgive sins], the basis of [the often abused authority to grant] indulgences. Christianity is certainly a worthy foundation for public civility and morality, but this is only thanks to the Biblical morality that it teaches. The equalization of humankind, in that we are all the children of One Father, is a doctrine of the Pentateuch.

Being born in the bosom of a civilized or barbarous nation does not modify the morality of the Jew, but the varying degree of morality of the peoples who surround him in the various regions of his dispersion can render him more or less devoted to them. If in Asia and Africa he is less so than in Europe, that would stem not from a difference in his moral education, but from the eternal laws of the human heart, according to which:

*Amar chi t'odia, ell'è impossibil cosa;
Nè con altro che amore amor si merca.*⁷

The moral education of civilization can render the Jew more attached to honor, that is, to the appearance of virtue, but never more attached to virtue itself. And if civilization seizes away from him his ancestral education, it can only weaken or destroy his religious principles, for which it hardly possesses an equivalent to substitute. If religion was once useful for refining barbarous peoples, it is now necessary in the development of an advanced civilization, in which:

With the development of the intellectual powers, with the increase and perfection of all the objects that delight the inclinations of the senses, there is an increase of brutal desires, sensual passions, a yielding to unjust tendencies, the skill of achieving an interested goal at the expense of the rights of one's fellow man, and such crimes multiply and proceed at an equal pace with the development of such powers. (Ancillon, *Du juste milieu*, vol. II, p. 29.)⁸

Padua, March 6, 1839



⁷ These are lines from two different Italian poets. The first, by Vittorio Alfieri (1749–1808), means, “To love one who hates you, that is an impossible thing.” The second, by Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782), means, “With nothing else but love is love dealt.”

⁸ Johann Peter Friedrich Ancillon, *Du juste milieu, ou du rapprochement des extrêmes dans les opinions* [“The Middle Way, or Of the Reconciliation of Extremes in Opinions”] (Brussels: Société Belge de Librairie, 1837), a French translation from the original German. Ancillon (1766–1837) was a Prussian historian and statesman. The excerpt in question was quoted by Shadal in French.