olam he-zeh v'olam ha-ba

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There are many ways to describe the intellectual agenda of modern Jewish thought. We might tell a story about a growing emphasis on ethics, focusing on ways in which modern philosophers often grant morality a more central role in religious life than did premodern thinkers.1 We might also tell a story about a newfound interest in history, arguing that many modern Jews stress themes such as the unceasing development of ideas and societies, the links between Jewish and non-Jewish history, and the importance of deriving Judaism’s beliefs and relevance from the historical-critical study of Jewish sources.2 Yet another option would be to focus on the classification of Judaism itself, exploring debates about “whether Judaism and Jewishness are matters of religion, culture, or nationality.”3 And there are still other possibilities, as well.4

In this article, I wish to recover the importance of another issue for the emergence of Jewish intellectual modernity: immortality. While it is clear that the notion of a messianic future is a central concern for many modern thinkers,5 there is considerable disagreement about whether the idea of olam ha-ba or “world to come” in the sense of personal immortality—in the sense of the survival of the soul or some other aspect of the individual after the body’s death6—plays a significant role in modern Jewish thought. A group of publications in the early 1960s suggested that debates about Jewish and non-Jewish access to the afterlife allowed philosophers to explore the role of reason and tolerance in the Jewish tradition,7 and a number of studies have argued that nineteenth- and twentieth-century denominational literature, most notably works of liturgy, emphasizes personal immortality over themes such as bodily resurrection.8

By contrast, a starkly different view appears in the work of the historian and philosopher Hans Jonas, who famously began a 1961 lecture at Harvard Divinity School by invoking what he termed the “undeniable fact . . . that the modern temper is uncongenial to the idea of immortality,” especially to the “really substantive concept of immortality: survival of the person in a hereafter.”9 This position would reappear almost three decades later in the influential collection Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought, whose entry on
“immortality”—written by Allan Arkush—argued that since the eighteenth century there has been no “major Jewish thinker . . . for whom the doctrine of a life after death was a consolation and not a source of some embarrassment.”

A middle position of sorts appears in a recent essay by Leora Batnitzky. Like the first group of interpreters, Batnitzky argues that “a commitment to immortality is central to modern Jewish thought” and that modern Jewish philosophers have largely rejected (or at least downplayed) bodily resurrection. But Batnitzky indicates that she is concerned less with immortality in the sense of the survival of the individual self and more with what she terms a “loose conception of immortality” or “immortality in a very general sense,” namely, “the idea that the meaning of human life transcends human finitude or mortality.” She focuses on what she describes as attempts “to refute materialist conceptions of human existence without committing to any particularly theological or traditionally metaphysical notion of immortality,” and most of the thinkers she discusses are concerned with topics other than personal immortality—with the Jewish people’s eternal survival, for example, or with the eternity of humanity’s moral tasks.

My goal is to show that what Jonas terms the “really substantive concept of immortality” does, in fact, play a key role in modern Jewish thought—indeed, that the survival of the soul after death is crucial to works well beyond denominational documents and liturgical texts. I will do so by exploring the Hebrew writings of two thinkers who are widely invoked but too little understood: the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) and the Eastern European thinker Nachman Krochmal (1785–1840). Frequently portrayed as a leading figure in the late Enlightenment and as the founder of modern Jewish thought, Mendelssohn is known for his German writings on topics ranging from aesthetics to politics to metaphysics. Yet while these German works have long occupied scholars of philosophy and Judaism, Mendelssohn’s extensive body of Hebrew writings is only starting to become an object of sustained study, and 2011 marked the first time that a broad selection appeared in English translation. Krochmal has received even less attention, especially among English-speaking audiences. A teacher, businessman, and communal leader born in what is now Ukraine, he is remembered as one of modernity’s most significant Eastern European Jewish philosophers, and his unfinished Hebrew magnum opus—The Guide of the Perplexed of the Time [Moreh Nevukhei Hazeman]—is an early Jewish attempt to wrestle with developments such as biblical criticism and historicist thinking. However, despite some signs of renewed interest, his philosophy has
rarely been subject to scrutiny in North America, and his Guide is still largely unavailable in English. 13

This essay will draw on these neglected Hebrew works to reassess the role of personal immortality in the rise of Jewish modernity. More specifically, I will argue that the emergence of modern Jewish thought involves a high-stakes soteriological debate between East and West—that one of modern Jewish philosophy’s early episodes is a debate between Krochmal and Mendelssohn about immortality and the nature of Judaism. I will begin with Krochmal, showing that he casts Judaism’s affirmation of an afterlife as the product of long-standing debates among postbiblical Jews who disagreed about whether the soul is immortal. I will then suggest that Krochmal’s view is best read as a critique of a type of position that he associates with Mendelssohn, whose Hebrew writings are concerned less with showing that immortality was contested among postbiblical Jews and more with establishing that this doctrine is affirmed by the Bible itself. I will conclude by arguing that the Mendelssohn-Krochmal clash is, in part, a dispute about the nature of the Jewish tradition. Whereas Mendelssohn’s claims are part of a broader project of presenting Judaism as a vehicle of rationally accessible eternal truths affirmed by the Bible, Krochmal’s position helps ground a different vision of this tradition—a vision of Judaism as a phenomenon whose doctrinal content emerges through the efforts of postbiblical human beings. For these foundational philosophical voices in Jewish modernity, the world to come serves as a crucial terrain for formulating—and contesting—theories of Jewish existence.

A preliminary remark is in order. Readers familiar with Mendelssohn’s thought will not be surprised to find him invoked in an essay on immortality. His fame in his own era was due, in part, to a celebrated 1767 treatise—a rewriting of Plato’s Phaedo—that defends the demonstrability of immortality and was quickly translated into five languages. 14 Nevertheless, for many commentators, Mendelssohn’s work signals the end of a concern with personal immortality among modern Jewish philosophers. When Arkush suggests that after the eighteenth century “the doctrine of a life after death was . . . a source of some embarrassment,” he takes Mendelssohn to be the “last major Jewish thinker” for whom this was not the case. 15

Similarly, Neil Gillman, one of the readers who focuses on the role of immortality in modern denominational literature, moves from his treatment of Mendelssohn not to a survey of other philosophical perspectives but rather to topics such as “modern liturgical reforms,” returning to philosophical voices primarily when discussing renewed interest in bodily resurrection among late
twentieth-century Jews. By contrast, I seek to complicate this picture and recover a trajectory of philosophical thinking about immortality as a significant element in the emergence of Jewish intellectual modernity. Rather than signaling the end of a philosophical embrace of the survival of the soul, Mendelssohn’s writings constitute the first stage in a debate, extending from Germany to Eastern Europe, that treats this belief as an opportunity to construct visions of the Jewish tradition.

KROCHMAL

Krochmal’s Guide is a wide-ranging text, dealing with topics including metaphysics, Jewish law, and biblical criticism as part of an effort to address “perplexities” plaguing nineteenth-century Jews. Unfinished at the time of its author’s death in 1840, the manuscript was edited by a leading German scholar, Leopold Zunz, and eventually published in 1851. The key section for us is the Guide’s discussion of Ecclesiastes, a biblical book that presents itself as the words of “Koheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem,” traditionally identified as King Solomon. This insistence on Solomonic authorship was challenged by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biblical critics such as Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, and Krochmal devotes a section of the Guide to defending this critical perspective. Ecclesiastes, he argues, was written long after Solomon’s reign by a Jewish nobleman who oversaw a group of scholars, and the book’s post-Solomonic provenance was already well known to the rabbis of late antiquity.

Krochmal’s initial comments explore Ecclesiastes’ concluding verses:

A further word: Because Koheleth was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He listened to and tested the soundness of many maxims. Koheleth sought to discover useful sayings and recorded genuinely truthful sayings. The sayings of the wise are like goads, like nails fixed in prodding sticks. They were given by one Shepherd.

A further word: Against them, my son, be warned! The making of many books is without limit and much study is a wearying of the flesh. The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe His commandments! For this applies to all mankind: that God will call every creature to account for everything unknown, be it good or bad. (Eccl 12:9–14)

Commentators have long noted that these words read more as an epilogue appended to Ecclesiastes than as an integral part of the book. Krochmal
suggests that the opening of this passage was written by the book’s post-Solomonic author, but he argues that the final lines were written not by that individual, but rather by a later group of scholars involved in the process of compiling the biblical canon. It is worth quoting Krochmal’s words at length:

Behold, it seems to us that those verses at the end of the book of Ecclesiastes—“the sayings of the wise are like goads,” etc., until the end of the book—are verses of sealing and completion not for this book (for what would be the reason for and sense in Solomon, or whoever wrote this book, warning against producing further books beyond this book of his?), but rather for the collection of the books of the Writings [the third section of the Hebrew Bible] as a whole. It seems that the men of the Holy Assembly of that time—which was closer to the time of the initial arrival of the Greeks and the priest Jaddua or Simon I—sealed and closed the compilation of the third part of the Holy Scriptures with these verses. . . . They further completed their words of sealing with ethical teaching: “The sum of the matter, when all is said and done,” etc. They did this in order to remind [readers] that the purpose of all the study and reading of books is reverence for the Lord and observing His commandments, in accordance with the verse: “The beginning of wisdom is reverence for the Lord” [Ps 111:10]. And with the statement “God will call every creature to account,” etc., they were affirming the final judgment in the world to come, since many denied this at that time, as is known from the Sadducees.

According to Krochmal, the final verses quoted above were written by the compilers of the canon not as a conclusion to the book of Ecclesiastes, but rather as an epilogue to the entire third section of the Hebrew Bible—as “verses of sealing and completion not for this book . . . but rather for the collection of the books of the Writings as a whole.” The idea here is that Ecclesiastes was originally the concluding book of the final division of the Bible and that these lines were intended to serve as the closing words of that section—and, by extension, the canon as a whole.

I am interested less in the historical accuracy of this claim and more in the argument Krochmal builds on its basis. Consider his declaration that “with the statement ‘God will call every creature to account,’” the compilers of the canon “were affirming the final judgment in the world to come, since many denied this at that time, as is known from the Sadducees.” He is suggesting that this epilogue to the Bible was composed, in part, as an
intervention in debates in antiquity. On this interpretation, many ancient groups denied “the final judgment in the world to come,” and the compilers of the canon responded by placing a reference to this judgment in olam ha-ba at the end of the Bible as a whole, reminding readers that God “will call every creature to account.”

If we read this comment against the backdrop of earlier sections of the Guide, it becomes clear that the reference to “the world to come” is crucial—that Krochmal sees these lines as an intervention not simply in debates about a “final judgment,” but rather in debates about the very existence of a “world to come” in which such a judgment can occur. More precisely, he takes these lines to be an intervention in debates about whether the soul endures after the death of the body. He suggests that the tensions he has in mind are similar to those involving the ancient sect known as the Sadducees, and he stresses earlier in the Guide that this group clashed with another sect, the Pharisees, over whether the soul survives death.

According to Krochmal, the Pharisees “believe that there exists within souls the power of eternal life, and that beneath the earth there is reward and judgement for everyone who proceeds through life to righteousness or wickedness: the lot of the latter is eternal imprisonment, whereas the former are given the power to live and return to life.”24 Drawn from the historian Josephus, the picture here is of a sect that affirms the survival of souls after the death of bodies: for Krochmal’s Pharisees, the souls of the wicked survive and are subjected to “eternal imprisonment,” while the souls of the righteous also endure but are returned to resurrected bodies. Krochmal repeats this point less than a page later, writing that the Pharisees hold that “the soul does not fall under the sway of death: the souls of the righteous return to their bodies, and the souls of the wicked are afflicted with torment without end.”25

By contrast, he continues, the Sadducees “deny the eternity of the soul,” “teach that souls disappear with bodies,” and clash with the Pharisees “on the principle that is the main one of them all: the belief in the eternity of the soul and the resurrection of the dead being found in the Torah.”26 Krochmal again emphasizes the survival of souls after death: whereas the Pharisees affirm this principle, the Sadducees deny this idea, along with the idea that the Bible takes at least some of those immortal souls to return to resurrected bodies. For the Guide, this issue stands at the very heart of the Pharisee-Sadducee controversy, serving not as a peripheral concern but rather as “the principle that is the main one of them all.” When Krochmal links the final lines of Ecclesiastes to the disputes involving the Sadducees about a “world to come,” then, he is presenting
these verses as an intervention in debates about personal immortality, suggesting that the compilers of the biblical canon were so troubled by widespread denials of this doctrine that they inserted an affirmation of the soul’s survival into the closing words of Scripture.

Krochmal casts these final lines not simply as an intervention in ancient debates, but as part of a string of ultimately successful interventions in those debates—as part of a constellation of efforts that eventually established belief in the afterlife as an accepted element of the Jewish tradition. Consider, again, his claim that the compilers of the canon “were affirming the final judgment in the world to come, since many denied this at that time [bazeman habu], as is known from the Sadducees.” Elsewhere in his writings, Krochmal stresses that the Sadducees did not prevail in their debates with the Pharisees. He introduces these clashes by stating that in most cases “the approach of the early Pharisees to belief and deeds . . . is in its substance and appearance the approach of our sages, may their memories be for a blessing, in all the works of the Oral Torah that we possess,” suggesting that it was this sect, rather than its Sadducean rival, that shaped the subsequent development of Jewish life.27 Krochmal repeats this point later in his discussion, insisting that many of “the words of the Pharisees are words of our tradition” and that key “beliefs and practices . . . were supported in the hands of individuals among their men”28—that the Pharisees played an important role in securing the place of various principles in the Jewish tradition. Moreover, he identifies the notion of an afterlife as one of the Pharisaic ideas accepted by later Jewish thinkers, referring in his correspondence to the rabbis’ insistence in the Mishnah that “all Israel has a share in the world to come”29 and to treatments of immortality by medieval Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides.30 Krochmal’s view is thus that immortality eventually became an accepted part of the Jewish tradition despite opposition from groups such as the Sadducees. When he discusses the composition of Ecclesiastes’ final verses by suggesting that “many denied” immortality “at that time,” then, the phrase “at that time” seems significant. Krochmal seems to be alluding to the idea that denials of immortality were eventually overcome—to be suggesting that although “many denied” this belief at that time, this was not the case in later times, since the efforts undertaken by groups such as the compilers of the biblical canon and the Pharisees were ultimately successful.

Finally, while Krochmal alludes to the idea that denials of immortality were eventually overcome, his comments regarding Ecclesiastes indicate that, on his interpretation, this result was not achieved until well after the
emergence of the Bible. The key, once again, is his use of the Sadducees as an example of how “many denied” immortality in the ancient world. Discussing this sect earlier in the Guide, he states that it did not emerge until “after the final sealing of the Holy Writings.” By invoking this group immediately after describing the efforts of the compilers of the biblical canon to affirm immortality, then, he is indicating to his readers that those efforts did not prevent future disputes about life after death—that groups such as the Sadducees would still emerge and “deny the eternity of the soul.” He is indicating, that is, that the status of immortality as an accepted element of the Jewish tradition is a decidedly postbiblical achievement—that the production of the biblical canon failed to firmly embed the notion of olam ha-ba into the fabric of Jewish life and that it was therefore the efforts of postbiblical groups, such as the Pharisees, that ultimately secured the place of this doctrine in Judaism.

Indeed, Krochmal seems to carefully avoid clarifying the degree to which the Bible should be read as endorsing the eternity of the soul. Although he states that verses quoted above—the epilogue appended to Ecclesiastes and the biblical canon—affirm “the final judgment in the world to come,” he rejects the idea that the body of Ecclesiastes itself advances this doctrine, and his account of the Sadducee-Pharisee clash suggests that the rest of the Bible does not address this topic with sufficient clarity to forestall theological uncertainty. After all, he claims, this exegetical point figured prominently in the controversies between these sects, who disagreed on “the eternity of the soul and the resurrection of the dead being found in the Torah.”

The issues at stake in Krochmal’s treatment of Ecclesiastes now begin to emerge. Invoking the existence of debates in ancient Judaism about the immortality of the soul, he suggests that it was the efforts of groups involved in these debates that secured the place of this belief in Jewish life, and he emphasizes that this result was not achieved until long after the Bible emerged. The Guide’s discussion of Ecclesiastes thus provides readers with a history of immortality in the Jewish tradition. Krochmal casts Judaism’s affirmation of an afterlife as the product of long-standing debates among postbiblical Jews who disagreed about whether the soul is immortal. He argues that the notion of a world to come continued to be contested even after the biblical canon took shape and that it was only the efforts of later, postbiblical groups that established this doctrine as an accepted element of the Jewish tradition.
KROCHMAL AND MENDELSOHN

Krochmal soon turns to other Jewish interpretations of Ecclesiastes, invoking “our early sages who labored to interpret” this book as well as later figures who struggled with its plain sense:

May blessings rest upon the heads of the interpreters focused on the plain sense of Scripture who preceded us—among them, in particular, the master Moses the son of Menahem, may his memory be for a blessing—who made every effort to elucidate and interpret [Ecclesiastes] internally so that it does not contradict true belief. . . . But was this, in fact, the opinion and desire of the book? This is a question that earlier generations never asked. In the present time, however, the path of inquiry drives us to this question. 33

The reference to “Moses the son of Menahem” attempting to “elucidate” Ecclesiastes is a reference to Mendelssohn and his Hebrew commentary on that book. Published in 1770, this work includes a verse-by-verse commentary on the text of Ecclesiastes, along with an introduction that discusses the nature of this biblical book and of scriptural exegesis more generally.34 Krochmal offers a critical evaluation of Mendelssohn’s exegetical work, citing him as an example of a thinker who “made every effort to elucidate and interpret” Ecclesiastes “so that it does not contradict true belief,” but who failed to ask a question to which “the path of inquiry drives us” in “the present time”: namely, “was this, in fact, the opinion and desire of the book?” What is Krochmal claiming?

Consider the description of Mendelssohn as attempting to show that Ecclesiastes “does not contradict true belief.” His commentary expresses concern that Ecclesiastes’ early chapters contain “difficult words that seem, heaven forfend, as if they are opposed to belief in providence and immortality, which are fundamental principles of the true religion,” and he declares that he is even more troubled by later sections that “seem, at first glance, to be even more difficult and further from the fundamental principles of the true religion.”35 His worries revolve around lines such as these:

And, indeed, I have observed under the sun: Alongside justice there is wickedness, alongside righteousness there is wickedness. I mused: “God will doom both righteous and wicked, for there is a time for every experience and for every happening.” So I decided, as regards men, to dissociate them [from] the divine beings and to face the fact that they are beasts. For in respect of the fate of man and the fate
of beast, they have one and the same fate: as the one dies so dies the other, and both have the same lifebreath; man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing. Both go to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust. Who knows if a man’s lifebreath does rise upward and if a beast’s breath does sink down into the earth? I saw that there is nothing better for man than to enjoy his possessions, since that is his portion. For who can enable him to see what will happen afterward? I further observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors—with none to comfort them. (Eccl 3:16–4:1)

However we might understand these verses today, it is not difficult to see how a reader such as Mendelssohn could interpret them as denials of doctrines such as immortality. These lines declare that “there is nothing better for man than to enjoy his possessions” because we “return to dust” and material life is our only “portion,” a statement that could be read as a rejection of the idea that there is some incorporeal substance that endures after the body’s death.

Another passage that is troubling for Mendelssohn reads as follows:

For he who is reckoned among the living has something to look forward to—even a live dog is better than a dead lion—since the living know they will die. But the dead know nothing; they have no more recompense, for even the memory of them has died. Their loves, their hates, their jealousies have long since perished; and they have no more share till the end of time in all that goes on under the sun. Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy. . . . Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun—all your fleeting days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the means you acquire under the sun. Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might. For there is no action, no reasoning, no learning, no wisdom in Sheol, where you are going. I have further observed under the sun that the race is not won by the swift, nor the battle by the valiant; nor is bread won by the wise, nor wealth by the intelligent, nor favor by the learned. For the time of mischance comes to all. (Eccl 9:4–11)

These lines suggest that even the lowliest living animal (“a live dog”) enjoys an advantage over the noblest deceased creature (“a dead lion”), for while “the living know they will die . . . the dead know nothing.” These lines might be interpreted as a claim that while living creatures possess some degree of
awareness (albeit awareness of their impending doom), death marks the end of all awareness and a passage into nonexistence.36

One of the central claims in Mendelssohn’s commentary is that he has discovered a way to show, contrary to appearances, that Ecclesiastes affirms doctrines such as immortality:

Not all that is said in [Ecclesiastes] is, in truth, the opinion of King Solomon, may peace be upon him. Rather, he sometimes speaks as one engaged in give-and-take regarding a matter, asking and responding in the manner of syllogistic thinkers who search for the truth by means of the intellect. These thinkers arrive at what they seek only if they attend to contradictory arguments, raise all sorts of doubts, straighten out the matter with proper scales and balances, and carefully consider and approach the lines of reasoning, one after another, until they separate the true from the false, and the correct from the doubtful. . . . We see that the author of this book wrote in the manner of searching and give-and-take.37

Mendelssohn casts Ecclesiastes as a philosophical dialogue, as a book written “in the manner of syllogistic thinkers who search for the truth” by engaging “contradictory arguments.” On this view, Ecclesiastes presents arguments in favor of various doctrines as well as arguments against those doctrines, leading readers to ascribe “truth” to whichever set of arguments seems stronger. Applied to immortality, this means that “not all that is said . . . is, in truth, the opinion of King Solomon”—that verses such as the ones quoted above, which seem to deny this doctrine, do not reflect the opinions of Ecclesiastes’ author, but rather function as hypothetical arguments against this belief that set the stage for its ultimate affirmation. Indeed, lest readers miss Mendelssohn’s focus, he emphasizes his concern with personal immortality, stating that he addresses “the immortality of the soul” and the idea “that souls remain after death.”38 along with perspectives that posit the “destruction” and “annihilation of the soul.”39

Some examples will prove helpful. On various occasions, Mendelssohn suggests that the author of Ecclesiastes issues statements that seem to reject immortality not in order to undermine this doctrine, but rather in order to reveal the problematic consequences that follow from its denial and to thereby provide readers with a reason to avoid such a posture and instead affirm the eternity of the soul. Consider Mendelssohn’s discussion of Ecclesiastes 3–4:

After I reflected on this entire section from beginning to end, it seemed to me that the significance of the verses is that the most
correct and powerful proof for the immortality of the soul and reward in the world to come is the one on the basis of injustice in this world. [Consider the verses from] “Alongside justice there is wickedness,” etc., [to] “the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them,” etc. [Eccl 3:16–4:1]. For one who believes in the existence of God and His providence cannot escape one of these two options: either he will believe that souls remain after death, and that afterwards there is a time of judgement for every deed, either good or evil; or he will ascribe, heaven forefend, iniquity and injustice to the holy God.40

According to Mendelssohn, Ecclesiastes 3–4 may seem to deny immortality, but it does so in order to highlight a “proof for the immortality of the soul and reward in the world to come . . . on the basis of injustice in this world.” By stating that we “return to dust” while repeatedly invoking the “wickedness” and “oppression” we see around us,41 this text reminds us that someone who denies immortality will have to come to grips with the pervasiveness of evil in this world and that such an individual will ultimately be forced to “ascribe, heaven forefend, iniquity and injustice to the holy God.” While those who “believe that souls remain after death” can affirm that perpetrators of evil are punished (and the victims of evil compensated) in an afterlife, someone who denies immortality will be forced to conclude that God has created nothing other than a world riddled with evil and suffering, choosing to produce a cosmos in which wickedness goes unpunished and righteousness unrewarded. Unless we are prepared to ascribe this sort of behavior to the deity, then, our only option is to reject denials of immortality and embrace this doctrine. Unless we are willing, that is, to cast God as a cruel entity unconcerned with the well-being of creatures and values such as justice, we must take the deity to have created not only a universe replete with evil and suffering, but also a compensatory afterlife for immortal souls.

Mendelssohn adopts a similar strategy when discussing material such as Ecclesiastes 9, declaring that “with the help of God, may He be Blessed, I have also arrived at and found a way . . . to resolve every difficulty in those sections and interpret the words of the wise king in a manner that does not contradict, heaven forfend, but rather strengthens the fundamental principle[s] of the true religion.”42 For example, juxtaposing the statement in Ecclesiastes 9:4 that “a live dog is better than a dead lion” with the claim in Ecclesiastes 4:2 that we should count “those who died long since more fortunate than those who are still living,”43 Mendelssohn suggests that these
verses are supposed to illuminate another problematic consequence that follows from denying immortality:

The distinctive mark of this worthless opinion is that it distorts the ways of the intellect and inquiry and brings those who affirm it, in great perplexity, to a point where they do not know whether to prefer life or death. For if the one who denies immortality sees the evil deed performed under the sun, it is possible that he will abhor life. . . . For many evils and sorrows trouble him, but nothing offers comfort. . . . But if he responds to himself that there is no evil greater than the complete absence and destruction [of the soul], then the ways of the intellect will compel him to prefer a life of suffering and grief over death and the destruction of the soul.44

On this reading, Ecclesiastes includes lines that valorize life (such as 9:4) alongside verses that praise death (such as 4:2) in order to indicate that individuals who deny immortality cannot coherently decide which option to prefer. While such individuals might conclude that life should be preserved at all costs because the only other option is “death and the destruction of the soul,” they might also conclude that injustice and suffering are so pervasive, and the absence of divine justice so glaring, that nonexistence is preferable to remaining in a world of “evils and sorrows.”

Moreover, Mendelssohn continues, this is not the only perplexity that will plague someone who denies immortality:

Sometimes he will say to himself “do whatever it is in your power to do, for there is neither justice nor accounting” [based on Eccl 9:10]; at other times, he will despair of doing anything great or small, and he will say “the race is not won by the swift,” etc. [Eccl 9:11], as is explained in the ninth section of this book. Therefore, his thoughts will frighten him and, as an instrument of torture, cast his soul from panic to fear: there will always be strife in his heart. . . . An individual will be rescued from this perplexity only by the belief in immortality and in reward in the world to come.45

On this reading, verses such as Ecclesiastes 9:10 and 9:11 are supposed to show that individuals who deny immortality cannot coherently make decisions about how to behave. After all, such individuals will be unable to decide whether they should “do whatever it is in [their] power to do” and disregard moral norms on the grounds that there is no final judgment, or whether they should “despair of doing anything great or small” and avoid participation in worldly affairs on the grounds that human life is transitory and human
accomplishments fleeting. Unless we are prepared to live with these forms of incoherence, then, the only solution is to reject attacks on immortality and affirm this doctrine.

Krochmal’s argument now takes shape. When the Guide invokes Mendelssohn’s attempt to interpret Ecclesiastes “so that it does not contradict true belief,” the reference is to the types of arguments outlined above—to Mendelssohn’s attempt to show that this biblical book affirms rather than rejects doctrines such as immortality. Krochmal goes further, however, and claims that while Mendelssohn is a type of thinker who failed to ask whether “this [was], in fact, the opinion and desire of the book . . . the path of inquiry drives us to this question” in “the present time.” The reason that Mendelssohn strives to show how Ecclesiastes “does not contradict true belief,” the Guide charges, is that he never seriously contemplates the genuine possibility of such a contradiction, assuming instead that biblical books must affirm doctrines such as immortality. By contrast, Krochmal claims to avoid that assumption and ask what the available evidence actually shows. He indicates, in other words, that his treatment of Ecclesiastes and immortality should be understood as a critique of Mendelssohn. He casts his position as an attempt to avoid the type of approach adopted by his German-Jewish predecessor: while Mendelssohn seeks to show that immortality is affirmed by a biblical book such as Ecclesiastes, Krochmal contends that an honest assessment of the evidence points in a different direction, revealing that the Bible does not address this topic with sufficient clarity to forestall theological uncertainty, that this doctrine continued to be contested long after the canon took shape, and that it was the efforts of groups such as the Pharisees that firmly embedded the soul’s eternity into the landscape of Jewish belief.

This confrontation with Mendelssohn seems to so occupy Krochmal’s attention, in fact, that he implicitly takes aim at his predecessor on multiple occasions, repeatedly targeting the type of position associated with Mendelssohn (albeit without mentioning him again by name). As the Guide’s treatment of Ecclesiastes proceeds, Krochmal not only declares that this biblical book “does not engage in philosophy,”46 but also denies that “the book’s style of inquiry points to its composition at a time when the philosophy of the Greeks had already been disseminated among us in the land of Israel.”47 Indeed, he suggests in an earlier paragraph, “even if we concede that the book’s opinion does not accord with all the sayings mentioned therein, and that its words follow the approach of human investigation exclusively, proceeding by offering all parts of a contradiction for the sake of ultimately leading to the
opinion of faith—behold, we do not know how and by what means that good opinion is established and affirmed by [the author], and he mentions nothing regarding this in his book.”

**THE RISE OF MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT**

It might be tempting to dismiss Krochmal’s critique of Mendelssohn as a relatively insignificant episode in the history of Jewish philosophy. After all, the argument might run, what we have here is little more than a dispute about the interpretation of one biblical text and the history of one theological doctrine.

Consider, however, the element of Mendelssohn’s argument singled out in Krochmal’s *Guide*: the insistence that Ecclesiastes affirms rather than rejects immortality. One of the claims that recurs throughout Mendelssohn’s writings is the idea that immortality is an “eternal truth”—an eternally valid principle accessible through rational reflection. As noted above, his 1767 rewriting of the *Phaedo* defends the demonstrability of this doctrine, seeking to “adapt the metaphysical proofs” for immortality offered by Plato “to the taste of our time.” Similarly, Mendelssohn’s best known treatment of Judaism—his 1783 treatise *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*—suggests that we encounter eternal truths in the statement that God is “the necessary, independent being, omnipotent and omniscient, that recompenses men in a future life” or that God “rules the entire universe . . . and discerns men’s most secret thoughts in order to reward their deeds . . . if not here, then in the hereafter.” When Mendelssohn insists that Ecclesiastes affirms immortality, then, he is arguing that a key eternal truth is present in the Bible.

This is not a trivial claim for the German-Jewish thinker. *Jerusalem* places rationally accessible eternal truths such as immortality, as well as God’s existence and providence, at the heart of Jewish life, famously claiming to “recognize no eternal truths other than those that are not merely comprehensible to human reason but can also be demonstrated and verified by human powers,” and to “consider this an essential point of the Jewish religion.” He elaborates:

> Although the divine book that we received through Moses is, strictly speaking, meant to be a book of laws containing ordinances, rules of life and prescriptions, it also includes, as is well known, an inexhaustible treasure of rational truths and religious doctrines which are so intimately connected with the laws that they form but one entity. All laws refer to, or are based upon, eternal truths of reason, or remind us of them, and rouse us to ponder them.
Judaism is presented here as a tradition whose “divine book . . . includes . . . an inexhaustible treasure of rational truths” and whose laws “refer to . . . eternal truths of reason, or remind us of them, and rouse us to ponder them.” That is, Mendelssohnian Judaism is a vehicle of rationally accessible eternal truths affirmed by the Bible, a tradition whose laws lead adherents to reflect on principles that can be discovered through reason but are also articulated in the biblical text—a tradition that requires practices, such as prayer or the celebration of holidays, that remind adherents of rationally accessible and biblically expressed ideas such as God’s existence and providence. The idea here seems to be, at least in part, that much of Jewish law can be traced to biblical provisions (or, at least, to rabbinic interpretations of biblical provisions), that the Bible also affirms rationally derivable principles such as God’s existence, and that this connection between norms and a textual “treasure” of eternal principles results in the former calling attention to the latter. Put more simply, if adherents trace laws to a biblical text that invokes eternal truths, these individuals are likely to associate these norms with those principles, and the performance of actions required by one is likely to bring to mind the other.57

It is important to be clear about Mendelssohn’s position here. He is neither uninterested in changes in Jewish life over time nor unconcerned with the activities of postbiblical Jews. On the contrary, I have argued elsewhere that history is one of the central concerns animating his thought. While he takes Jewish law to generate reflection on rationally accessible eternal truths affirmed by the Bible, he also holds that these principles have been understood in different ways at different points in time. For instance, while he claims that Judaism’s adherents find themselves reflecting on principles such as divine providence, he also insists that shifts in philosophical and scientific models have led these individuals to understand the nature of this divine governance in different ways in different eras, with medieval Jews influenced by Aristotelianism taking God to be concerned only with the fates of species and modern Jews influenced by other philosophical frameworks taking God’s care to extend to the fates of individual creatures.58 Similarly, Mendelssohn is deeply interested in postbiblical groups such as the rabbis of antiquity, taking rabbinic exegesis to play a crucial role in securing the authoritative grounding of much of Jewish law—to establish that many norms governing Jewish life are rooted in the text of the Bible.

Nevertheless, despite this interest in historical change and in postbiblical groups such as the rabbis, it remains the case that, from Mendelssohn’s perspective, the core doctrinal content of Judaism is already affirmed by the
Bible. Postbiblical Jews may play an important role in Judaism and understand principles such as providence in different ways at different points in history, but according to Jerusalem it is the presence of these principles in Scripture—the existence of “an inexhaustible treasure of rational truths and religious doctrines” in “the divine book that we received through Moses,” and the resulting link between these truths and the norms governing Jewish practice—that leads individuals to reflect on such content, taking up biblical ideas such as the notion that God governs the cosmos and attempting to understand what that governance involves. 59

The crucial point for our purposes is that the position outlined in Jerusalem relies on precisely the type of claim Mendelssohn advances in his Ecclesiastes commentary. If he wishes to present Judaism as a vehicle of eternal truths affirmed by the Bible, it will be crucial for him to show that such truths are, in fact, present in that work. That is, it will be crucial for him to show that biblical books such as Ecclesiastes endorse principles such as immortality, strengthening rather than contradicting “the fundamental principles of the true religion.” It will be particularly important to advance this claim with respect to the eternity of the soul, for one of the recurring attacks on Judaism advanced by Mendelssohn’s Enlightenment contemporaries was the claim that this notion is absent from the Hebrew Bible. According to this accusation, while texts such as the New Testament accept the concept of an afterlife, the Hebrew Bible lacks any such notion, and Judaism—a tradition built on the Hebrew Bible, rather than the New Testament—is therefore either (at best) an inferior religion or (at worst) no religion at all. 60 Mendelssohn’s treatment of immortality in his Ecclesiastes commentary thus plays an important role in his thought, providing evidence for a presupposition on which his portrayal of Judaism depends: he takes Judaism to be a vehicle of eternal truths affirmed by the Bible, and his commentary helps establish that such truths are actually endorsed by the biblical text.

Strikingly, Krochmal’s claims about Ecclesiastes and immortality play a similar role in his philosophy. The Guide, we will recall, casts Judaism’s affirmation of an afterlife as the product of debates among postbiblical Jews who disagreed about whether the soul is eternal. The implication is that Judaism is a phenomenon whose doctrinal content emerges through the efforts of postbiblical human beings—that Judaism’s beliefs develop over time because of the activities of the tradition’s adherents. While Krochmal acknowledges that groups such as the compilers of the canon affirmed immortality, he emphasizes that such voices have not always been dominant: according to
the Guide, immortality was a contested doctrine, and it was only the efforts of postbiblical groups that established this belief as an integral element of the Jewish tradition. Indeed, we saw him claim that various “beliefs and practices . . . were supported” not simply by the biblical text, but rather “in the hands of individuals among” the Pharisees.

Far from constituting a peripheral element of Krochmal’s thought, this vision of Judaism as a tradition that develops over time by means of human efforts appears elsewhere in the Guide. One of this book’s primary concepts is the “spiritual” or ruhani, understood as a dimension of existence distinct from (albeit discernable in) the physical world and manifest with particular clarity in human beings and cultures. For example, a nation’s “spiritual inheritances” include elements such as its “laws, ethical teachings, linguistic concepts, [and] books of science.” Drawing on this conception of the ruhani, Krochmal argues that Judaism’s central metaphysical claim is that God should be understood as “the absolute spiritual,” as the source and totality of spiritual manifestations such as human cognition and culture. What Judaism treats as divine is the totality of spiritual phenomena: while other nations accord supremacy to entities such as a god of war or a god of beauty and thus each emphasize one subset of spiritual manifestations, Judaism takes God to in some sense encompass all such phenomena, from art to ethics.

Nevertheless, Krochmal denies that this view of God was always a widely accepted element of the Jewish tradition. After introducing this understanding of the divine, he offers the following account of its history within Jewish life: “Even the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai and heard [this conception of God] did not attain it, in the purity of its truth, in their multitude and totality until around the time that the exiles returned from Babylonia, that is to say, until the passage of one thousand years from the giving of the Torah.” Krochmal’s claim is that even if the events at Mount Sinai involved some exposure to a key understanding of God, this view of the divine neither enjoyed widespread acceptance, nor was fully grasped, until the return from the Babylonian exile and “the passage of one thousand years from the giving of the Torah.”

In fact, he stresses, it was the actions of later generations of Jews that established this conception of God as an integral part of Jewish life:

The time would come when the spiritual orientation of the nation would be strengthened until it arrived at a point that had not been achieved by the prophets of old. All of this occurred in every place of exile, not in the way of signs and wonders by means of revealed
miracles, and not even by means of the force of arms or the strength
of the sword . . . but rather exclusively by means of quiet well-being
and spiritual arousal among the elders and the people. 64

On Krochmal’s interpretation, it was not “signs and wonders by means of
revealed miracles,” but rather the efforts of “the elders and the people,” that
ensured that “the spiritual orientation of the nation would be strengthened”
by the time following the Babylonian exile—that enabled the understanding
of God as the absolute spiritual to become more firmly rooted and widely dis-
seminated over time. For example, members of the Jewish community would
“reflect” on and seek to “comprehend” religious matters, arriving at a deeper
understanding of the divine and thereby leading their nation to “arriv[e] at a
point that had not been achieved” in earlier times. 65

This account of Jewish views on God resonates strongly with the Guide’s
account of Jewish views on immortality. In both cases, an idea that initially
enjoys only limited affirmation eventually becomes an accepted part of the
Jewish tradition due to human efforts. Krochmal’s claims about immortality
thus constitute an element of a broader argument about the nature of Judaism,
providing further evidence for, or another example of, the idea that this tradi-
tion’s doctrinal content has developed over time through human efforts. Just
as Mendelssohn’s treatment of immortality helps secure his vision of Judaism,
so too do Krochmal’s arguments about immortality help ground his portrayal
of this tradition.

The significance of the Krochmal-Mendelssohn dispute should now
be clear. Earlier, we saw that Krochmal’s reading of Ecclesiastes offers an
account of the place of immortality in the Jewish tradition and that he casts
this account as a critique of a type of position associated with Mendelssohn.
While the German-Jewish thinker attempts to show that the eternity of the
soul is already affirmed by the Hebrew Bible, his Eastern European successor
insists that the Bible does not address this topic with sufficient clarity to pre-
vent future conflict and that this doctrine achieved acceptance only as a result
of debates among postbiblical Jews. We have now seen that these accounts of
immortality are crucial to broader philosophical projects that animate these
thinkers. Whereas Mendelssohn’s reading of Ecclesiastes as a philosophical
defense of this doctrine helps ground his picture of Judaism as a vehicle of
rationally accessible eternal truths affirmed by the Bible, Krochmal’s narrative
of biblical uncertainty and communal debate strengthens his own image of
this tradition as a phenomenon whose content emerges through the efforts of
postbiblical human beings.
When Krochmal engages Mendelssohn, then, what we have is not simply a debate about the afterlife, but a debate about the very nature of Judaism. Krochmal is presenting an account of immortality that helps establish the conception of Judaism that he wishes to advance, and he is criticizing a Mendelssohnian account of immortality that is crucial to a competing vision of this tradition. When he criticizes Mendelssohn for taking immortality to be affirmed by Ecclesiastes and highlights the existence of ongoing debates about this doctrine, Krochmal is rejecting a key building block in the Mendelssohnian construction of Judaism and highlighting a piece of evidence for his own understanding of this tradition. For these foundational philosophical voices, then, *olam ha-ba* becomes a crucial terrain for formulating—and contesting—theories of Jewish existence. Immortality provides an arena in which the German-Jewish founder of modern Jewish thought and one of Eastern Europe’s most significant Jewish philosophers generate competing understandings of the Jewish tradition.

Jonas may be correct that for some thinkers, “the modern temper is uncongenial to the idea of . . . the survival of the person in a hereafter.” Yet this judgment offers only a partial picture of the concerns that shape modern Jewish philosophy. An exploration of Hebrew texts such as Mendelssohn’s ECClesiastes commentary and Krochmal’s Guide suggests that immortality should figure prominently in the stories we tell about the emergence of Jewish intellectual modernity, for one of the early episodes in modern Jewish thought turns out to be a high-stakes soteriological debate between East and West. When it comes to Jewish philosophy, we might say, “the modern temper” emerges among thinkers who, operating in very different settings across Europe, embrace the eternity of the soul and treat it as a starting point for delving into the nature of Judaism itself. Wrestling with the status of immortality in the past, Mendelssohn and Krochmal seek to forge visions of the Jewish tradition for the present.

NOTES


4. For example, we might understand modernity as a “condition”—as a constellation of factors, such as “the differentiation between public and private spheres, the weakening of religious governing structures, and the democratization of knowledge in Jewish society”—that generated ideologies ranging from Chasidism to the Haskalah [the Jewish Enlightenment] to Zionism. See Eliyahu Stern, The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 8.


6. Understood in this sense, immortality is distinct from, but in principle compatible with, the idea of bodily resurrection. That is, if immortality denotes the idea that the soul or some other part of the self endures after death, it is possible that this soul (or other part of the self) could either remain in an incorporeal state or be returned to a resurrected body. Indeed, it could be the case that some souls return to bodies while other souls do not: this position, for instance, will be ascribed by one of the thinkers we explore, Nachman Krochmal, to the Pharisees. On the relationship between immortality and resurrection in Jewish thought, see the sources in notes 8–11 below.


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16. See Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 190–241. Gillman does discuss the philosopher Mordecai Kaplan during this treatment of denominational literature, but he does not describe Kaplan’s conception of immortality as a belief in the survival of a soul. Quoting a statement by Kaplan that “insofar as the good we do while we live bears fruit after we are gone, we have a share in the world to come,” Gillman writes that “that is about as much immortality as Kaplan is prepared to concede” (210). Batnitzky does call attention to one post-Mendelssohnian philosopher who endorses personal immortality (and not simply, say, the eternity of the Jewish people or moral tasks): Samson Raphael Hirsch. See Batnitzky, “From Resurrection to Immortality,” 289–90.

17. See the sources in note 13 above.

18. This description appears in Ecclesiastes 1:1. Unless otherwise noted, I follow the New Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible throughout this essay.


21. I alter the New Jewish Publication Society translation of this verse.


23. Ibid., 140.

24. Ibid., 73.

25. Ibid., 74.

26. Ibid., 75–76.

27. Ibid., 72.

28. Ibid., 74.


32. Krochmal suggests that beyond the epilogue appended by the compliers of the canon (and perhaps one or two other verses), “we did not find a verse that clearly agrees with
truth and with faith.” Similarly, he takes a line that might seem to endorse immortality—Ecclesiastes 12:7, which states that “the dust returns to the ground as it was, and the lifebreath returns to God who bestowed it”—to refer to God’s absolute power over human beings. See ibid., 145.

33. Ibid., 143.

34. On this commentary see Sorkin, Moses Mendelssohn, 35–45. For other references to or uses of Mendelssohn in the Guide, see, e.g., Amir, “The Perplexity of the Time,” 294n26, 295n35.


36. See also ibid., 14:193.

37. Ibid., 14:154.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 14:193. As indicated above, he is also concerned about perspectives that deny providence.

40. Ibid., 14:154.

41. The quotes are from Ecclesiastes 3:20, 3:16, and 4:1, respectively.

42. Mendelssohn, Sefer Megilat Kohelet, in JubA, 14:155.

43. Ibid., 14:151–52.

44. Ibid., 14:152.

45. Ibid.

46. Krochmal, Moreh Nevukhei Hazeman, 145.

47. Ibid., 146.

48. Ibid., 142.


50. Moses Mendelssohn, Phädon, or on the Immortality of the Soul (trans. P. Noble; New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 42; the German is JubA, 3.1:8.

51. Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 97; the German is JubA, 8:164.

52. Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 98; the German is JubA, 8:164–65.

53. On God’s existence and divine providence as additional eternal truths, see the lines quoted in the previous paragraph. See also Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 63; the German is JubA, 8:131.
54. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 89; the German is *JubA*, 8:156–57.


56. Mendelssohn's insistence that the Bible outlines rationally accessible principles has often been obscured by his denial that revelation communicates indispensable eternal truths that are not rationally derivable. Nevertheless, Mendelssohn repeatedly affirms that the Bible presents—we might say repeats—truths that are also accessible through reason. See Michah Gottlieb, “Aesthetics and the Infinite: Moses Mendelssohn on the Poetics of Biblical Prophecy,” in New Directions in Jewish Philosophy (ed. A. Hughes and E. Wolfson; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 326–53; Michah Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 56–58.

57. See Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script*, 29, 44–59. Mendelssohn may also have in mind additional mechanisms through which Jewish law yields reflection, such as requirements to invoke God during rituals: see Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry*, 135–59.

58. Mendelssohn's position, in other words, is that although there is only one correct understanding of a principle such as providence, this view has not always been affirmed, with alternate perspectives gaining acceptance—and being rejected—over time. What is “eternal” about an eternal truth is thus the validity of its proper understanding, rather than its interpretation throughout history.

59. On these issues, see Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script*.


63. Ibid., 39.

64. Ibid., 52.

65. Ibid., 51–52. More specifically, Krochmal suggests that members of the Jewish community would “gather, write down, and copy all that remained to them of the holy books. They would reflect on them and comprehend them, clearly and with reason.” That is, using the Bible as a starting point for theological reflection, Judaism’s adherents would eventually go further and arrive at a deeper understanding of the divine through rational reflection.