

interpretation

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interpretation

Volume 15 numbers 2 & 3

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On the Wisdom of Nathan

A Lecture given by

CHANINAH MASCHLER

at St. John's College, Annapolis

November 1985

The Nathan whose wisdom is our theme is not the prophet who reminded David of limits upon royal power.¹ My Nathan is a merchant. But he has more in common with his namesake than a name. My Nathan too lives in Jerusalem and, like his predecessor, is remembered chiefly for having told a story to a king, a special kind of story, a parable for self judgment.

The king taught by this second Nathan's parable is Saladin, the Moslem ruler who, at the time of the Crusades, conquered Jerusalem and established his court there (1197, during the Third Crusade), roughly two thousand years after the bible's King David made Jerusalem his stronghold (II Sam. 5).

The story Nathan tells King Saladin goes like this:

LONG LONG AGO THERE DWELT IN EASTERN LANDS
A MAN WHO OWNED A RING OF PRICELESS WORTH
WHICH HE'D RECEIVED FROM HANDS BELOVED.
THE RING'S STONE WAS AN OPAL, SHINING IN MYRIAD HUES.
IT HAD THIS OCCULT VIRTUE, THAT HE WHO WORE THE RING,
RELYING ON ITS POWER, BECAME DELIGHTFUL TO BOTH GOD AND MEN.
NO WONDER, THEN, THAT THIS MAN FROM THE EAST
WOULD NEVER TAKE THE RING OFF.
THAT HE WANTED IT KEPT IN HIS HOUSEHOLD FOR ALL TIME.
HE LEFT THE RING TO THAT ONE OF HIS SONS WHOM HE LOVED BEST,
PROVIDING THAT, IN TURN, THE CHOSEN ONE BEQUEATH THE RING TO HIS FAVORITE
SON.
THUS THE SON DEAREST TO THE FATHER, REGARDLESS OF THE ORDER OF BIRTH,
WAS TO BECOME RULER, PRINCE, OF THE ENTIRE HOUSEHOLD
STRICTLY BY VIRTUE OF THE RING.
AT LAST THIS RING, PASSED DOWN FROM SON TO SON,
DESCENDED TO A FATHER OF THREE SONS
ALL THREE OF WHOM WERE EQUALLY OBEДИENT TO THE FATHER.
ALL THREE, ACCORDINGLY, HE NEEDS MUST LOVE ALIKE.
BUT, BEING SOMETIMES ALONE WITH THIS SON, THAT ONE, OR THE THIRD
THEY'D ALTERNATIVELY SEEM TO BE THE SON WHO MOST DESERVED THE RING.
AND SO TO EACH THE FATHER, IN PIOUS FRAILITY,² PROMISED IT.
THE HOUSEHOLD LIVED TOGETHER FOR A WHILE.

1. II Samuel 12; cf. II Chronicles 9:29.

2. *fromme Schwachheit*, but later spoken of in a different tone, . . . *indem er zwei nicht drücken mögen, um einen zu begünstigen.*

BUT WHEN THE TIME FOR DYING CAME, THE FOND FATHER IS IN STRAITS:
 TO WOUND TWO OF HIS SONS, WHO HAVE RELIED UPON HIS WORD, IS GRIEF TO HIM.
 WHAT'S TO BE DONE?
 HE SENDS IN SECRET FOR A CRAFTSMAN OF WHOM HE ORDERS TWO MORE RINGS
 MADE ON THE PATTERN OF HIS OWN.
 HE BIDS THE JEWELER SPARE NEITHER COST NOR TOIL
 TO MAKE THEM IN ALL POINTS IDENTICAL.
 THE JEWELER SUCCEEDS, AND WHEN HE BRINGS THE RINGS TO HIM,
 THE FATHER HIMSELF CANNOT DETERMINE WHICH RING IS THE ORIGINAL.
 RELIEVED, HE JOYFULLY CALLS HIS SONS TO HIM,
 EACH IN PRIVATE,
 CONFERS ON HIM HIS SPECIAL BLESSING,
 HIS RING AS WELL, THEN DIES.
 NO SOONER IS THE FATHER DEAD THEN ALL THREE SONS APPEAR,
 EACH WITH HIS RING, AND EACH WOULD BE THE HOUSEHOLD'S RULER.
 THEY SEEK THE FACTS; THEY QUARREL; THEY ACCUSE. IN VAIN:
 WHICH WAS THE GENUINE RING COULD NOT BE ASCERTAINED³

I called Nathan “mine.” Of course, he’s *ours*, and he was given us by the German playwright and man of letters Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781). I pronounce the name feelingly not only from affection for its bearer, but also because I take pleasure in the historic fact that by chance so fitting a name belongs to our author. Or is it wrong to say “by chance” since his father, Johann Gottfried, germanizing the grandfather’s baptismal name Theophilus, bestowed the ring-like name upon his first-born?

I hope that the parable of the rings is new to some of you so that you will be able to tell me whether I rightly imagine that, detached from its setting (I mean, the rest of the play), the parable might be heard as teaching that tradition, precedent, even if riddled with arbitrariness, should not be tampered with—the father, you will recall, is chided for “pious frailty” in not making choice among the three. Or again, that the story might be heard to teach that it is perhaps more important that the question “who should rule?” have a *definite* answer than that the answer be *rational* and *just*. Such meanings may flash out momentarily when the story is taken by itself. In the play they are not caught because there Nathan adds one brush stroke to the picture of the quarreling brothers:

THEY SEEK THE FACTS; THEY QUARREL; THEY ACCUSE. IN VAIN:
 WHICH WAS THE GENUINE RING WAS NOT DEMONSTRABLE—ALMOST AS INDEMON-
 STRABLE
 AS IS FOR US, TODAY, THE GENUINE FAITH.

The three faiths *meant*, which together and in their division are made to represent the family of mankind, are Islam, Christianity, and Judaism: They stand side by side like biblical brothers contesting who amongst them has inherited the bless-

3. *der rechte Ring war nicht erweislich*. III.vii, B. Q. Morgan tr., somewhat altered.

ing of Abraham, who is the *bechor* (elect). Considering the story's application to the three chief branches of Christianity in the West, what is perhaps also being urged is that strife among Christian brothers—Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist—ought to be seen against the backdrop of biblical history.

You may be pleased with the story, though it seems to teach infinite resignation or infinite protest. The Sultan is not. He had asked the merchant for instructions in matters of religion, asked to be told which of the faiths in the Abrahamite tradition is the true one. To the Sultan, Nathan's fable is mere subterfuge.

In these United States of North America prejudice is uncouth. Still, I doubt that you are unaware that one of the standard opinions about Jews is that, like Jacob their forebear (cf. *Merchant of Venice* 1.iii.72f), they are devious, tricky, do not value that splendid Achillean round-outness which hates deception worse than death. Certainly this was one of the ruling suppositions about Jews in Lessing's Germany. And since the teaching of forbearance toward the stranger in their midst is one of Lessing's purposes (Kant, in the *Anthropology*, speaks of the "unter uns lebenden Palästinsener," The Palestinians Who Dwell Amongst Us), this prevalent opinion about the Jew as tricky coward is addressed by the play:

After hearing the Jew's fable, the Sultan irritably exclaims:

IS THAT SUPPOSED TO BE THE ANSWER TO MY QUESTION?

Nathan replies:

IT IS SUPPOSED TO BE AN EXCUSE FOR MY NOT DARING
PRECISELY TO DISCRIMINATE AMONG RINGS
WHICH THE FATHER EXPRESSLY ORDERED SO MADE
THAT THEY'D BE INDISTINGUISHABLE (III.vii.65f)

In a soliloquy immediately preceding the narration of the fable of the rings, the theatre audience had overheard Nathan as he reasoned to the conclusion that the sultan's sudden desire for instruction cannot be what it seems:

. I'M QUITE CONFUSED. WHAT IS HE AFTER? I CAME
EXPECTING TO BE ASKED FOR DINARS AND HE WANTS TRUTH,
THE NAKED TRUTH, AS THOUGH IT WERE READY CASH, LIKE COIN!
HAD IT BEEN THE OLD STYLE COIN, WHICH WAS DULY WEIGHED,
PERHAPS I COULD OBLIGE. BUT HE IS ASKING FOR MINTED COIN,
TRUTH ISN'T LIKE THAT, SO THAT YOU COULD PUT IT INTO SOMEONE'S HEAD
LIKE MONEY INTO HIS PURSE! WHO IS THE JEW HERE, HE OR I?
BUT WAIT, SUPPOSE IN TRUTH TRUTH ISN'T WHAT HE WANTS?
I DO ADMIT, TO SUSPECT SALADIN OF USING TRUTH AS A MERE TRAP IS LOW.
TOO LOW? WHAT IS TOO LOW FOR ONE SO HIGH?
THAT'S IT!

Nathan's wisdom, according to my exposition, seems to consist, first, in the ability unsentimentally to guess at people's motives, carefully taking account of

what is said but also looking behind the words at the speaker and his situation; second, skill at evasion. Most of us hope for more than this from the wise, especially when they bear a prophet's name. And even if there is something attractive about the merchant's intelligence, because it is so exact and adroit, mere prudence isn't the stuff of which our heroes are made. Ask yourself how Socrates would rate if you didn't know that he had drunk the hemlock.

Nevertheless, Nathan is being offered as a sort of hero. Lessing's play is designed to inspire affection and respect for a man whose action (*Handeln*) consists chiefly in trading (*Handeln*),⁴ and whose virtue is the power to reckon profits and losses rightly. By elevating such a man to the rank of paradigm for emulation, Lessing hopes to win us for that post-feudal, modern world in which willy-nilly we dwell.⁵

Of course, Nathan's lack of daring would merely be mean-spirited if he were gratuitously evasive. It is essential that we know that he had sized up his situation quite correctly: The sultan, though he may have sounded vaguely reminiscent of the king in Jehuda ha Levi's *Khusari*, is not a pagan ruler but "Defender of the Faithful," charged by his office to restrain, if need be by force, all who, in his judgment, threaten Islam. In Saladin's Jerusalem the Jew is, at best, a tolerated alien, such as Shylock was in Christian Venice. The Jew cannot speak freely. The sultan's opening words to Nathan, commanding him to shrink protective distance and abandon fear, make this plain:

COME CLOSER, JEW. STILL CLOSER. STAND RIGHT HERE. AND HAVE NO FEAR.

Here's how the interview develops:

Saladin YOU SAY YOU'RE NATHAN?

Nathan YES.

Saladin WISE NATHAN?

Nathan NO.

Saladin IF YOU DON'T SAY IT, STILL, THE PEOPLE DO.

Nathan MAY BE, THE PEOPLE

Saladin SURELY, YOU DON'T SUPPOSE THAT I DESPISE THE PEOPLE'S VOICE?

I LONG HAVE HAD THE WISH TO KNOW THE MAN WHOM THEY CALL WISE.

Nathan WHAT IF IT WERE IN SCORN THEY CALLED HIM SO? WHAT IF, TO THEM,

WISE MEANT NOTHING MORE THAN SHREWD AND THAT MAN'S SHREWD WHO KNOWS
THE WAY TO GAIN HIS OWN ADVANTAGE?

Saladin YOU MEAN, HIS *TRUE* ADVANTAGE?

Nathan WHY, THEN, INDEED, MOST SELFISH WERE MOST SHREWD,
AND SHREWD AND WISE WERE ONE.

Saladin I HEAR YOU DEMONSTRATE WHAT YOU'D DENY: THE TRUE INTERESTS OF A
HUMAN BEING, WHICH THE PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW, ARE KNOWN TO YOU. AT
LEAST, YOU HAVE TRIED TO KNOW THEM. HAVE PONDERED THEM. THIS OF ITSELF
PRODUCES THE WISE MAN. (*das auch allein macht schon den Weisen*)

Nathan WHICH EVERY MAN AT BOTTOM THINKS HE IS (*der sich jeder dünket*)⁶

4. II.iii.18f.

5. Cf. Spinoza's *Ethics*, Preface to Part IV, p. 189 Dover ed., *Short Treatise* IV, 23f, p. 75.

6. III.v; cf. opening paragraph of Descartes' *Discourse*.

Those who have caught the phrases reminiscent of Socrates, of Descartes, of Hobbes, of Spinoza in this brief exchange between the Moslem king and the Jewish merchant may ask: does Lessing want us to size up Nathan not just as a Jew and a merchant but as a philosopher?

Clearly, *Saladin* so regards him, who has heard barely more from Nathan than have you. Unlike you, Saladin has heard about Nathan, and does not entirely discount a man's reputation. When just now I cited the Sultan's words you probably noticed how he in effect chides Nathan for attributing disdain of the people's opinion to their ruler. If Saladin was sincere there, this might account for his trusting Nathan to know more than has been said so far.

The king gives voice to his disappointment:

BOTHER YOUR RINGS! DON'T TRIFLE WITH ME. I SHOULD THINK
THAT THE RELIGIONS WHICH I NAMED ARE EASILY DISTINGUISHED, DOWN
TO THEIR *CLOTHING*, DOWN TO *FOOD AND DRINK*!

Fully to savor the bitter humor of the tête à tête between ruler and philosopher, it is necessary to know that Saladin, in trying to entrap the Jew into actionable attack on Islam, is himself trapped. Saladin is a man of honor. Also, as the lines I quoted have already shown, he is steeped in the writings of the philosophers. But the ancient philosophers have not prepared him to deal with money and matters economic. So he is late to learn that his treasury is empty and when at last he must face the fact, he knows not where or how to turn to refill it. Mistought, perhaps, by the ancient philosophers, who treat goods of the body with disdain and who mistrust trade and money, Saladin becomes putty in the hands of his sister, Sittah. He falls in with her schemes because he supposes that, barring outright violence, the Jew could be made to serve as money lender only by trickery (III.iv). Neither the philosophers nor his own religious tradition allow Saladin to look upon finance rationally, so that charging interest would be understood as fair exchange for risk taking and interest rates charged of the one impersonating the state would be kept moderate because the financier recognizes the benefit to himself of having his life and goods protected.⁷

7. See I.iii, II.ii, v.i. Al Hafi's bitter outburst—"Es wär nicht Geckerei bei Hunderttausenden die Menschen drücken, ausmergern, plündern, märtern, würgen: und ein Menschenfreund an Einzelnen sein wollen? Es wär nicht Geckerei des Höchsten Milde, die sonder Auswahl über Bö's und Gute und Flur und Wüstenei, in Sonnenschein und Regen sich verbreitet, nachzuaffen, und nicht des Höchsten immer volle Hand zu haben" at III.i.107ff is not a mere venting of feeling. It contains a diagnosis of the source of the economic evil to which the dervish refuses any longer to be a party. The words italicized allude unmistakably to Jesus' teaching: " . . . LOVE YOUR ENEMIES AND PRAY FOR THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU, SO THAT YOU MAY BE SONS OF YOUR FATHER WHO IS IN HEAVEN. FOR HE MAKES HIS SUN RISE ON THE EVIL AND ON THE GOOD AND SENDS RAIN ON THE JUST AND THE INJUST." Lessing's dervish continues the reflection to which Shakespeare's use of the Gospel passage (in *Merchant of Venice* IV.i) gives rise: A moral and religious teaching that would "compel" men to forswear the principle of mutuality, of exchange, especially when it is adopted by a ruler, breeds the most terrible injustice, because it so much strengthens men's longing for God-like generosity that they will disown those deeds that might bring home to them that they lack *des Höchsten immer volle Hand*, that they are not *natura naturans*. How dear the picture of himself as "giver" who need not be "given to" is to Saladin Lessing shows in the opening scene of Act V.

Nathan does not know the ruler's character. He only knows that, to protect himself against Saladin's wrath, he must be more forthcoming. So Nathan admits the shallowness of his ring image: the three religions, unlike the rings, manifestly differ! But not, he claims, as to their grounds:

ARE THEY NOT ALL GROUNDED IN HISTORY, WRITTEN OR ORALLY TRANSMITTED?
AND HOW, EXCEPT THROUGH FAITH AND TRUST, CAN WE BE HEIRS TO HISTORY?⁸
NOW TELL ME, WHOSE FIDELITY AND FAITH ARE LEAST SUBJECT TO DOUBT?
SURELY, THOSE OF OUR OWN PEOPLE, WHOSE BLOOD WE SHARE. . .
HOW CAN I TRUST MY FATHERS LESS THAN YOU TRUST YOURS? OR, TURNING
THINGS AROUND, HOW CAN I ASK OF YOU THAT YOU YOUR FOREBEARS GIVE THE LIE
SO THAT MY ANCESTORS NOT BE GAINSAID?
THE SAME HOLDS FOR THE CHRISTIANS, DOESN'T IT? (III.vii.75–90).

The merchant's evenhandedness is pleasing, but do not overlook that differences of creed are allowed to slip by unattended to. And note the sultan's reference to diversity of food and drink and clothes: In writing these off as inessential (mere externals), one could be judging by Pauline standards which neither devout Jew nor Moslem (both of whom have a dietary and even in some measure a dress code), would accept.⁹

Most important, don't blanch at the thought that the equal dignity of the three rival faiths is hardly distinguishable from their equal indignity: None can, according to Nathan, make good on its claim to deserve fealty except on grounds of reverence for tradition and recognition of the human need for such reverence, a claim which is both very strong and very weak!¹⁰

8. Cf. Lessing's "Ueber den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft," VIII, 9–14; Lessing's *Werke*, (München: Carl Hanser, 1979), and Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, Arkush tr. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 90ff. Lessing and Mendelssohn both rely on Leibniz's distinction between eternal truths, which are general, though they may be of either a mathematico-logical or of a physical sort, and temporal truths, which are singular. Since the Mendelssohn passage is less easily available, I shall cite from it. Of temporal truths Mendelssohn writes: "Those passages which, as it were, occur but once in the book of nature, must be explained by themselves or remain incomprehensible; that is, they can only be perceived, by means of the senses, by those who were present at the time and place of their occurrence in nature. Everyone else must accept them on authority and testimony. Moreover, those who live at another time must rely altogether on the credibility of the testimony, for the thing attested no longer exists. . . . In historical matters, the authority and credibility of the narrator constitute the only evidence[;] without testimony we cannot be convinced of any historical truth. Without authority, the truth of history vanishes along with the event itself."

9. Cf. Maimonides, *Mishne Torah* i.1: "We should not follow the customs of the gentiles nor imitate them in dress or in their way of trimming the hair. The Israelite shall be distinguished from them and be recognizable by the way he dresses and his other activities just as he is distinguished from them by his knowledge and his principles." (Isadore Twersky, *Maimonides Reader*, New York: Behrman House, 1972). That Maimonides' judgment as a sociologist deserves respect is shown in a fascinating way in Lord Kinross' account of Ataturk's campaign to modernize Turkey. His *Ataturk, Rebirth of a Nation* (London: Weidenfeld, 1964) holds a chapter about Ataturk's expressly forbidding the wearing of the fez!

10. Cf. Maimonides' "Letter on Astrology," Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy*, p. 228: "Know, my masters, that it is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things. The first is a thing for which there is clear proof

Nathan is beginning to sound a little like some of our better anthropologists—which brings me up sharply against the question why he doesn't "go native," that is, why he has not become a Moslem. In phrasing the question this way, I may already have answered it in part!

When first Saladin commanded Nathan to say what faith and law carry conviction for him, Nathan had simply answered: "Sultan, I am a Jew" (III.v.40). The Sultan, however, had pressed Nathan, insisted that a sage is bound to transform chance into choice:

A MAN LIKE YOU DOES NOT STAY PUT
WHERE ACCIDENT OF BIRTH HAS CAST HIM.
OR IF HE STAYS, IT IS FROM INSIGHT, HE HAS REASONS, CHOSE THE BEST.
IMPART THIS INSIGHT. LET ME HEAR THOSE REASONS! (III.v.42f).

We, who have heard Nathan's soliloquy, know from it that Nathan discriminates "coined" or "positive" from "natural" religion. We must, therefore, ask why Nathan perseveres in the religion of his forebears. Remaining "peculiar" is not only inconvenient and expensive but even dangerous.

The "insight" (if that is what it is) which prompts Nathan to remain a Jew is chiefly expressed through his way of winding up the fable of the three brothers. But it may be prefigured in his name. This name, *Nathan*, was chosen by Lessing. In Boccaccio's *Decameron*, where the ring-story first occurs, the Jew who tells the story is not called Nathan but Melchizedek.

Nathan, in Hebrew, means HE (presumably, but not necessarily, God) HAS GIVEN. By equipping his merchant-philosopher with the name Nathan, Lessing focuses attention on the singular qualities of Nathan's patience, of his not chafing at the fact that human life is shot through with arbitrariness, the sheerly given. The Sultan (as well as two other male characters, not yet mentioned, a Sufi Dervish and a Christian Monk) differs from Nathan in this respect: The Sultan yearns to become *sala ad dunyah ve-ad din*, IMPROVER OF THE WORLD AND OF THE LAW. From Nathan he wants to learn what he must do to become deserving of that name. What Nathan tries to teach the ruler is to think small, to choose (as does Nathan himself) not only means according to his ends but even ends according to his means.

Such an attitude of resigned realism easily turns into callous passivity. Not so in Nathan's case. Having gained the Sultan's good will, he steers it toward free,

deriving from man's reasoning—such as arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. The second is a thing that a man perceives through one of the five senses. The third is a thing that a man receives from the prophets or from the righteous. For every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy and say 'This I accept as trustworthy because of tradition, and this because of sense perception, and this on grounds of reason.' Anyone who accepts as trustworthy anything that is not of these three species, of him it is said 'The simple believeth anything' (Proverbs 14:15)." See also "Ernst und Falk," Second Conversation, VIII, 462, *Werke*, on the inherently divisive nature of the sources of solidarity among human beings.

because rationally grounded, renunciation of the right to use state power to issue a judicial verdict about religious truth."¹¹

He continues his fable of the brothers by having them bring suit against each other. The judge who hears their case dismisses it. He does not accuse the brothers of perjury when each claims to have received his ring directly from the father and to have been promised privilege by dint of grace. But he denies the court's competence, so long as he presides over it. Carefully distinguishing verdict (with coercive authority) from advice, he advises the three:

TAKE THINGS AS THEY FELL OUT (*nehmt die Sache wie sie liegt*):
 IF EACH OF YOU RECEIVED HIS RING FROM HIS FATHER
 LET EACH BE FIRM IN HOLDING THAT IT IS THE TRUE ONE.
 PERHAPS THE FATHER WISHED TO TOLERATE NO LONGER
 IN HIS HOUSEHOLD *THE TYRANNY OF JUST ONE RING*.

The judge does allow that some time in the distant future a man wiser than he may hold his office and be equipped to issue judgment. Turning directly to the Sultan, Nathan says:

IF YOU FEEL THAT YOU ARE HE, THAT WISER JUDGE WHO IS PROMISED US, THEN. . .

In answer Saladin takes Nathan by the hand and exclaims:

I? MERE PARTICLE OF DUST? . . . NATHAN, DEAR NATHAN
 THE THOUSAND TIMES THOUSAND YEARS THAT YOUR JUDGE SPOKE OF
 ARE NOT YET UP.

Saladin, in declining the messianic competence that Nathan pretended to be offering him and choosing instead to identify himself with the judge in the fable who acknowledges his judicial impotence, is freed for the modesty to which, by temperament, he is inclined. Whether Saladin will be able to act according to his insight is a different matter.

As I construe the fable, the modest judge spoke also for Nathan. Nathan himself believes that "just one ring" would be or become tyranny, would make us forget that the thousand times thousand years are not yet up. To stave off the forgetting of our being *in via* while *in patria* he stays a Jew.

The interview that had begun so harshly ("Come closer, Jew . . . ") concludes with the Sultan's cry, "Nathan, dear Nathan, be my friend" (III.vii.155). Or rather, it would have concluded there, had it been up to Saladin. Nathan, remembering the king's wars and need for cash, gracefully offers to supply what is needed. In thus saving both the king's and his own dignity, he seems to be confirming Saladin's faith in the people's ability to judge who is truly wise.

11. Cf. Spinoza, *Theol.-Pol. Tr.* xx, especially pp. 258,9 of the Dover edition. In calling attention to the double motivation of Nathan's name I mean to ask, among other things, whether the Prophet, who may well have been the historian through whom we learn of the fate of kings, knew (at least by hindsight) that David's misconduct was first in the causal chain that led, via the rape of Tamar and the going unpunished of the crown prince Amnon, to the rebellion of Absalom.

The oasis of friendship makes a pretty picture. It does nothing to stop the Moslem-Christian wars. In the concluding act of the play, Lessing goes out of his way to remind us that the tumult in Egypt and in Lebanon continues (v.ii). If, like me, you cannot help wondering whether pockets of peace in the midst of war deserve to be so much celebrated, you were probably also worried by the word "blood" in Nathan's speech in defense of religious pluralism:

THOSE WHOSE BLOOD WE SHARE, THEY ARE THE ONES WE'RE PRONE TO TRUST.

I believe Lessing wants us to squirm, that his design was to make us uneasy, but not too easily uneasy. To show why I think this I must briefly recount the play's plot. Bear in mind that the fable and the entire encounter between ruler and merchant that I have described belong to the center, Act III, of a five-act play.

At the play's opening, Nathan has just returned from a long commercial journey, taking him as far as Babylon. His daughter Rachel's nurse, Daja, welcomes him, alone, without her charge. She is full to bursting with the story of a recent fire that threatened Nathan's house and nearly cost Rachel her life. Had it not been for the heroic intervention of a Knight Templar who, hearing Rachel's cries, rushed into the flames, the girl would surely have perished.

That a Knight Templar, openly wearing his white mantle with red cross, should freely march about in the streets of Saladin's Jerusalem is mighty strange, since the Order had just treacherously broken the Christian truce with Saladin (I.v.108) and every member of the Order could expect death at Moslem hands. The knight's life has been spared, Daja reports, because of his uncanny resemblance to the Sultan's deceased elder brother.

Nathan, whose snubbing of the nurse's love of melodrama may at first have set some of the theatre audience against him, soon redeems himself by his love for his daughter. He wants, of course, to express his gratitude to her savior, the Knight Templar. But this is made difficult, not only by the oath of poverty sworn by all such knights, and by their violent contempt for Jews,¹² but also, even primarily, by the self-loathing that has overcome the dishonored knight. His life is no longer his own, having been granted him by an enemy who might, and ought, to have slain him.¹³ By rights¹⁴ the Templar's status is that of a slave to Saladin. The knight avoids the Jew until Act II, scene 5. Then, softened by the father's remarkable ability to enter into both his daughter's feelings and her savior's sense of what honor requires (II.v.72), the knight becomes enraged when Nathan proceeds to preach about universal human kindness.¹⁵ The knight now blurts out his real rancor:

12. E.g. I.iv.58, II.v.20, II.v.39, II.v.47, IV.iv.119f.

13. II.v.27 and knight's soliloquy at III.viii.

14. IV.iv.

15. Cf. *Merchant of Venice* on kind and kindness.

WELL SAID INDEED! BUT DO YOU KNOW THE PEOPLE
 THAT WAS THE FIRST TO CARP AT OTHER TRIBES?
 WAS FIRST TO CALL ITSELF THE CHOSEN PEOPLE?
 SUPPOSE THAT I DO NOT EXACTLY HATE
 BUT FOR ITS PRIDE AM FORCED TO SCORN
 THIS PEOPLE?
 THIS PRIDE IT HAS PASSED ON TO CHRISTIANS, MOSLEMS—
 EACH GROUP CLAIMING THAT *ITS* GOD ALONE IS THE RIGHT GOD.¹⁶

I'm curious how you feel about Nathan's response. He says:

COME, WE MUST, WE MUST BE FRIENDS!
 DESPISE MY PEOPLE AS MUCH AS YOU LIKE . . . (II.V.108).

Can these words be squared with what Nathan says to Saladin in the next act (already discussed), where he reminds the ruler, and ourselves, of the sweetness of loyalty to one's own people? Are they honorable, considering the reverence Nathan enjoys among his own people (according to the Christian nurse's [Daja] probably trustworthy testimony, I.vi.22ff)? They do work: this meeting too, between the merchant and the knight, ends in a friendship pact.

I hardly need tell you that the inevitable happens: Nathan prevails over the knight and persuades him to call on Rachel. The man and maid converse. The man, as you'd expect, is caught in a second fire, and rushes from the girl's presence to save himself (III.ii.8).

Unable to escape his passion, unwilling perhaps too,¹⁷ the knight confesses his love for Rachel to her father (III.ix), who is slow to encourage the Templar's suit.

Nathan's standoffishness, which Lessing exhibits by having the knight bestow the title of father on Nathan without Nathan's completing the gesture through the counter-gift of calling the knight son, exacerbates the young man's self-despair. The knight had abandoned himself to his passion for Rachel to fill the void left in him when bereft of the organizing purpose of his life previously given him as member of his chivalric order.¹⁸

Himself suspecting that he is a bastard, he interprets Nathan's inquiries about his lineage as a half-knowing proving of his illegitimacy.¹⁹ Deprived of Rachel, on whose love he has, as he believes, a legitimate claim, even according to her father, he is now overwhelmed by the recognition that he is illegitimate through and through: his former purpose, as knight, is ashes²⁰ and his new purpose, as

16. II.v.89; cf. Deuteronomy 10:15, 7:7, 4:8, cited in this order by Maimonides in "Epistle to Yemen," Isadore Twersky, *Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), p. 439. See also Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, III.

17. Cf. III.viii.2–30.

18. Cf. Rachel's lines at III.i.17f.

19. Cf. *Oedipus Rex* 1062 and 1070 with *Nathan* III.ix.42–50.

20. Cf. *Nathan* II.5 with *Iliad* IX. 316–65.

husband, to which his fancy had given the glow of emulation of his father,²¹ is blocked. While the knight is in this utterly vulnerable condition, Rachel's Christian nurse, Daja, gives him the information that Nathan has no right to stand in passion's way, since his daughter is daughter only by thieving adoption: Rachel was born of Christian parents, baptized as a Christian too! (III.x).

In his confusion, outrage (III.x.118: *Wie? Der weise, gute Nathan hätte sich erlaubt, die Stimme der Natur so zu verfälschen?* What, that wise, good Nathan allowed himself so much to falsify the voice of nature?) the knight seeks spiritual guidance. He might, as Saladin later points out to him, have gone to the Sultan for advice, as would have befitted the supposed new identity he had been trying out in his soliloquy. But, at the opening of the next act, we see the knight approaching the cloister. Neither he nor we, the audience, are certain whom he has chosen as mentor, whether the lay brother Bonafides or the Patriarch of Jerusalem (the only character in the play who has no proper name). The lay brother is standing in the porch of the monastery and the knight's first words to Bonafides are to the effect that he's been looking for the monk. But just a little later (IV.i.36) we hear that the knight wants to consult with the Patriarch.

If, instead of listening to this lecture, you were attending a performance of the play, you would have met the Patriarch (i.e., the local Bishop) in Act I, not directly but by proxy: Taking advantage of Bonafides' monastic oath of obedience, the Patriarch, in Act I, had used the monk as his messenger to the knight. The message was that the knight should serve Christendom by capitalizing on the Sultan's infatuation with him so as the more easily to assassinate the Sultan (I.v). Lessing made us witness the interview between the Patriarch's go-between, Bonafides, and the Knight not only to exhibit the Patriarch's wickedness but also so that we might see the Knight's moral steadfastness: The Patriarch's promise of a crown in the hereafter for rendering assassin's service to the church failed to confuse the knight. Nor did his Order's breaking of the truce confuse him: The Knight felt bound by that natural code of honor which deems murder in exchange for the gift of being saved alive base ingratitude. The knight (greatly to the messenger's relief) stayed *ritterlich* (knightly). But now, in Act IV, our knight would use this same treacherous Patriarch as his spiritual advisor! True, the knight seems relieved to come upon Brother Bonafides rather than the Patriarch as he approaches the cloister. Unfortunately, the good monk, apprehensive of sharing intimacies that would burden his conscience, begs off from hearing the knight out. Consequently, it is to the Patriarch of Jerusalem himself (now substitute for his substitute!) that the knight puts his case of conscience, despite the knight's moral and even physical revulsion at the Patriarch:

SUPPOSING, REVEREND FATHER, THAT A JEW
POSSESSED AN ONLY CHILD, CALL IT A GIRL
WHOM WITH THE GREATEST CARE . .
HE HAD BROUGHT UP .

21. III.viii.30ff.

AND NOW WE ARE INFORMED THE CHILD WAS NOT
 THE JEW'S OWN DAUGHTER . . .
 THE GIRL WAS KNOWN TO BE A CHRISTIAN CHILD,
 BAPTIZED. THE JEW HAD MERELY REARED HER AS A JEWESS
 TELL ME, FATHER, IN SUCH A CASE, WHAT SHOULD ONE DO?

The patriarch answers that the Christian child must be removed and that the foster-father must burn: in seducing a Christian to apostasy, the Jew has broken both imperial and Papal law. For the child it were better that it had died than that for its damnation everlasting its earthly life were to be saved apart from Christian doctrine. Repelled by such unreason, the Knight tries to extricate himself. Too late! According to the articles of the recent humiliating truce, Sultan Saladin, as local secular ruler from the Christian standpoint, is obligated to enforce the Christian Church's "rights, doctrines, and law."²²

THANK GOD, the Patriarch exclaims, THANK GOD
 WE HAVE SALADIN'S SEAL TO THIS AGREEMENT.
 AND EASILY I'LL MAKE HIM SEE WHAT DANGER
 LIES FOR THE STATE ISELF IN LACK OF FAITH:
 ALL CIVIC BONDS DISSOLVE . . . WHEN MEN NEED NOT BELIEVE.²³

We can be sure the Patriarch will ferret out Nathan's identity and that, should Saladin refuse to abide by the written terms of the truce, the Christian-Moslem war will be renewed in Jerusalem.

We *could* be sure if this course of events were *Nathan the Wise* a tragedy. But it is not. Lessing's play, somewhat like Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* or Molière's *Tartuffe*, tends toward a disaster that does not come to pass. The fall of the *spoudaios* (who is not a ruler, not even a "real" father, but merely a private person, a merchant, friend, and teacher) is prevented by the conspiracy of stubborn decency and luck.²⁴

Before we examine how Lessing arranges for the untying of the play's "knot" and expressly consider what justice there was in my claim that the plot is contrived so as to make us have regard for *and* to look askance at the mystique of blood (III.vii.7 "*Gut and Blut*"; III.vii.85 "*deren Blut wir sind*"), let us briefly return to Sir Knight; also, give further instances of Nathan's wisdom.

May it not fairly be said that the knight, subjected to the test of the rushing waters of returning chaos, that is, of the loosening from all bonds of habitual solidarity, fails? The ins and outs of this failure are studied with greater psychological nicety than anything or anyone else in the play. Even after, as we thought, he

22. IV.ii.100, 139f; cf. Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* where, with the enigmatic ruler's connivance, the ruler's placetaker, Angelo, representing secular authority, enforces a stricter than civic ecclesiastical sexual code.

23. IV.ii.107. Cf. *Werke.*, VIII, pp. 102, 115f.

24. Cf. Dogberry and company in Act V, scene i of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* with Brother Bonafides.

has been brought to his senses by the Patriarch's naked villainy, we're made to hear the knight's terrible words:

HE'S BEEN FOUND OUT! THAT BABBLER OF TOLERANCE IS UNMASKED
I SHALL CONTRIVE TO SET UPON THIS JEWISH WOLF
IN PHILOSOPHIC SHEEPSKIN HOUNDS WHOSE TEETH
SHALL TEAR HIS FLEECE TO BITS. (IV.iv. 119f).

And we are made to know *why* the knight falls.²⁵ In pitying him, we fear for ourselves.

Was it in anticipation of such failure, because he saw the young man's despair and hoped to arm him with a new solidarity, that Nathan earlier embraced him so unreservedly with the words which, earlier in this lecture, gave me pause? Nathan said:

COME, WE MUST, WE MUST BE FRIENDS.
DESPISE MY PEOPLE AS MUCH AS YOU LIKE.
NEITHER OF US HAS CHOSEN HIS OWN PEOPLE.
ARE WE OUR PEOPLE? (II.v. 108f).

If Nathan spoke from solicitude for the knight's weakness, was that not wisdom? Surely it was kindness?

Nathan's kindness, like Spinoza's, has its own unkindness.²⁶ Lessing contrived that when first we meet Nathan, in Act I, we find him quite tough, toward his daughter. Rachel, unable to bear the thought that she is despised by one whom she must needs admire—her savior from the fire, the Knight Templar—has transformed him, with Daja's enthusiastic assistance, into a being so high that he cannot but "look down," an angel sent to save her. Lessing seems to be sketching a miracle-tale in the making: the Templar's white mantle has become angel's wings.²⁷ We're shown how Nathan does everything in his power to cure his daughter of the self-gratifying delusion that supernatural powers take a special interest in her. He wants to free her for active gratitude to a fellow human being. For the vanity of "the iron pot's wanting to be drawn out of the fire with silver tongs, to think *itself* a pot of silver" he substitutes delight in the patterns made by sheer coincidence:

A CURVE, AN ANGLE, WRINKLE. MOLE
. ON A RANDOM COUNTENANCE
FROM EUROPE, AND YOU ARE SAVED FROM FIRE,
IN ASIA.
IS THAT NO WONDER, WONDER-AVID FOLK?
WHY MUST YOU CALL AN ANGEL DOWN FROM HEAVEN? (I.ii. 103).

25. IV.iv, V.iii, V.v, V.viii.

26. Cf. Spinoza's *Ethics* IV.9, p. 238 Dover edition.

27. See also I.i.109, 123f.

Nathan is commenting on the fact that the features of the Knight Templar *happen* to stir Saladin, so much so that he spares the Templar's life; that this Templar *happens* to be by as the fire threatens Rachel.

The same opening act in which we see how Nathan takes his daughter in hand also shows how coolly he bribes the nurse when she too insistently mentions her Christian conscience and its demand that she disclose Rachel's origins (I.i.41). If you don't like my calling it bribery, say that the merchant, to distract the nurse, overwhelms her with gifts too glamorous to resist.²⁸ Nathan has no compunction about buying the nurse's silence. Someone raised on Kantian notions of respect may well be troubled: Wasn't it from her father that Rachel learned to accept Daja—miracle-*tales-and-all*—that she learned also that Daja must torment from love, that Daja cannot (since she believes that her Christian way alone leads to salvation) patiently stand by when the child that is so dear to her continues to walk to what, from her Christian perspective, is perdition? (v.vi). Now offering bribes instead of words shows disrespect. Yet Rachel's more than patience, love for Daja as a Christian, is a kind of respect, albeit not of the Kantian sort, since it seems, paradoxically, to relish "heteronomy" and sheer givenness. (*Wie weiss man denn für welchen Erdklotz man gebohren wenn nicht f. den auf welchen man gebohren?*) It is a respect that is indistinguishable from resignation but, instead of being felt as a passive emotion, is active affection. According to the Knight, it was through Nathan's raising that Rachel developed such suppleness. There must, then, be some kind of affection in Nathan's ability to size up who each is—daughter, nurse, Knight Templar, Sultan—and in his freedom to give to each what is "fitting."²⁹

This virtue, which some Christians might be tempted to identify as *ἀγάπη* (agape), is, most paradoxically, linked to *commerce* by our play. The play seems to argue that the merchant-philosopher, because it is his business to deal with detachable circulating goods and money (things which *cannot* be mistaken for a human being's *οὐσία*, being *made* for alienability), because he is landless, can be clear-eyed about who stands before him. Thus the very condition that made Jews since first they were dispersed an object of suspicion—their "unrootedness"—is in Lessing's play made a source of freedom.

From the Sultan's trap Nathan was rescued by his own wit and the Sultan's good heart and aspirations to nobility. From the Patriarch's law he is saved by three—Brother Bonafides, the fact that men the world over give a certain primacy to bands of kinship (*die ersten Bande der Natur*. IV.vii.160) and a piece of written evidence such as a modern court and a modern "critical historian" would admit.

Brother Bonafides, always obedient, though inwardly protesting, go-between

28. IV.vi: It's probably not unimportant that Nathan's distractive manoeuvres work not because the nurse is greedy but because she sees Nathan's goodness in his generosity.

29. Cf. *Republic* I, Socrates's conversation with Polemarchus; cf. also Spinoza p. 238, Dover edition, appendix to part IV of the *Ethics*.

before, in the play's penultimate act (iv.vii) takes the initiative of warning Nathan that the Patriarch is on his track. The monk knows the facts of Rachel's adoption because, eighteen years ago, he had been the horseman who brought Rachel, then a babe-in-arms, from war-torn terrain to Nathan. In so doing he was carrying out the wishes of the baby's father, recently bereaved of his Christian wife. The monk has piously preserved, through all those years, a prayerbook that belonged to Rachel's father, in which are written, in Arabic script, the names of both the father's and his wife's kinfolk. Thus it is learned that Rachel is the daughter of Sultan Saladin's deceased brother. Rachel is safe: Even the Patriarch will not defy Saladin when the Sultan defends as his own a brother's daughter! (v.iv.28f).

We have almost reached the end of the play. The stage directions for the finale are that the curtain come down as all who are left on stage—Moslem ruler, Jewish merchant-sage, Christian knight, plus the two female figures (the ruler's sister, Sittah, and the merchant's daughter, Rachel) "repeatedly embrace." On a (fortunately) very much reduced scale the picture is reminiscent of Schiller's "Ode to Joy," and almost equally saccharine . . . until one asks oneself what might be the implications of three final facts:

First, that the man who long ago saved the Christian infant's life and now, as part of the action of the play—Nathan the Jew as well, namely the lay brother Bonafides—is as little included in the final embrace as is the sufi dervish Al Hafi. Al Hafi is probably still wandering eastward, toward the river Ganges. As for Bonafides, I'm not at all confident that he will be allowed to spend his last days in the hut on Mt. Tabor that he's always dreaming of: the Patriarch of Jerusalem, his superior, unlike the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, continues to reign.³⁰

Second, we're being deprived of the ending that the play seemed to promise us: The knight does not marry Rachel.

Third, though Nathan may end up as every decent person's friend, he has no kinsman and no equal. In the midst of those embracements he is as solitary as the misanthrope sufi.

Let me elaborate a little on the last two observations. Every comedy I know of (barring Aristophanes), even and especially dark ones like *Measure for Measure*, culminates in a wedding. Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* concludes with a non-wed-

30. Mozart's opera and Lessing's play are much akin. Both are Masonic drama. The Queen of the Night corresponds to the Patriarch of Jerusalem. She is Ecclesia, Hobbes' Kingdom of Darkness. The three ladies from the Queen's court are Lessing's Daja. The three messenger boys are the lay-brother Bonafides. Papageno (though it takes a trick of the imagination to see this) is the Sufi Dervish. This leaves Sarastro, Monstatos, Pamina, and Tamino. Nathan is, of course, Sarastro (Zoroaster). It is precisely because one runs into difficulty in matching up Mozart's Prince and Princess and Moor with Lessing's Knight, Daughter, and Sultan that I urge the comparison: Each effort to see by seeing-as illuminates while darkening. Lessing's play, performance of which was prohibited in Saxony and Austria, was first performed in Berlin, in 1783, two years after Lessing's death. It had been published in 1779. Mozart's opera was first performed at the Imperial Royal Theatre of Vienna, in 1791.

ding: The knight's love for Rachel cannot issue in wedlock because the same little prayerbook that proves Rachel to be Saladin's niece establishes that the knight is Rachel's brother. Why this shock to our sensibilities? Why mete out such suffering to the knight? To the knight, not to Rachel. Lessing makes sure that we learn that, despite the nurse's unrelenting efforts to couple her ward with the Christian knight, for *Rachel* the gaining of a brother is total gain: The stage directions at v.viii.98 call for Rachel's approaching and the knight's withdrawing at the news of their blood relationship. That the asymmetry is carefully designed is shown by the fact that in Act II Nathan checks on Rachel's feelings towards the knight and finds that amorous thoughts have found no entry. (II. iv. 1–20). When in Act V, now in full knowledge of the knight's family history, Nathan worriedly checks again, the fact of Rachel's never having left the father-daughter cocoon becomes so obvious that even the knight registers it (v. viii. 12–22).

I cannot answer my own question what Lessing means to show by involving the knight in innocent almost incest. The effect on the theatre audience is, I take it, to be reminded of barriers. Is Lessing apprehensive lest the too great success of doctrines that would make us tear down boundaries destroy humane life by reducing the number and kinds of attachment and intimacy among human beings? Or is he punishing the knight, not for his passion, but for remaining a lover like Palamon and Arcite in Chaucer's "Knight's Tale," incapable of conceiving of reciprocity between a man and a woman? The knight had never, it turns out, confessed his love to *Rachel*, never imagined that ought except Nathan and Nathan's pride could stand between him and union with the girl he rescued (cf. v.vii. 30ff and III.ii. 3ff). Or, finally, is Lessing using the sibling relation between the knight and Rachel to drive home that the exasperating deliberateness of Nathan, the stuffy carefulness of the bourgeois, no matter how unloveable it looks next to the spontaneity and daring of the knight, deserves our grateful respect?

This last suggestion brings us back to the hypothesis that Lessing contrived his play to cure his countrymen of nostalgia for the supposedly finer pre-commercial feudal world. In Germany, Lessing seems to have been the first man of letters to appreciate and teach the power for good of a mercantile mentality. Elsewhere, in France and England and the Netherlands, the merchant had had his defenders in more or less popular literature.³¹

31. Voltaire writes, in the Sixth Letter on the English Nation: "Go to the London Stock Exchange, a place much more deserving of respect (*respectable*) than any number of courts. There you will see representatives of all the nations assemble to serve the good (*utilité*) of mankind. There the Jew, the Moslem, and the Christian deal with each other as though they were of one religion and count none infidel except the bankrupt. There the Presbyterian trusts the Anabaptist and the Anglican accepts the Quaker's promise" p. 21, *Lettres sur les Anglais* (Cambridge, 1961). Addison remarks (*Spectator*, May 19, 1717): "There are no more useful members in a commonwealth than merchants. They knit mankind together in mutual intercourse of good office, distribute the gifts of nature, find work for the poor, add wealth to the rich, and magnificence to the great." And Hume observes in his essay "Of Civil Liberty" (*Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy*, Hafner edition p. 316): "Trade was never esteemed an affair of state till the last century, and there scarcely is any ancient writer on politics who has made mention of it (Xenophon mentions it, in *Hiero*: Plato in the *Laws*, excludes it)

But how can drama, which has been, traditionally, the medium for giving liturgical expression to the gratitude we owe to those who accept the risks of greatness (tragedy) or, again, for infecting us with confidence in the restorative powers of smallness (comedy), how can drama be made to celebrate *middling* people, merchant go-betweens like Nathan? How can the human imagination be persuaded to shift its allegiance from the extremes to the middle?

By revealing the *source* of this moderation.

This brings me to saying what I deem to be the real reason for Lessing's choosing to make a Jew of his hero of the middle. Unlike Voltaire, who is free from prejudice toward Islam but full of it toward the Jew, especially when his less than scrupulous business dealings make intimidation in good conscience convenient, and unlike Kant, who delivers himself in private letters as well as in his *Anthropology* of remarks of such mean-spirited bigotry as to make his admirers blush, Lessing is a genuine practitioner of the *φιλανθρωπία* (*unbestochenen, von Vorurteilen freie Liebe*, III.vii.135f) which he preaches.³² He is neither an anti- nor a philo-semite. He makes Nathan a Jew, not because he puts any stock in a mystique of chosenness, but because, with Aeschylus, he believes that Zeus, whoever He might be, has established as a fixed ordinance that wisdom, *if* it comes, comes from suffering: In Act IV, scene vii, we learn the circumstance of Rachel's adoption. Thereby we learn how human freedom springs from human bondage rightly understood.

Speaking strictly in private to the lay brother Bonafides, Nathan tells him that, shortly before their meeting eighteen years ago, the Christian populace of the town of Gath had been roused to a pogrom against the local colony of Jews (as happened frequently during the Crusades). Among those killed were Nathan's wife and seven sons. His brother's house, where Nathan had brought his family for safety, was set on fire and all within were consumed.³³

. . ." Hume goes on to point out that the supposition that the flourishing of the arts and sciences goes with political freedom is erroneous, as the French example shows. What is much more true is that "commerce can never flourish but in free government." He cites the examples of Athens, Syracuse, Carthage, Venice, Florence, Genoa, Antwerp, Holland, England. "The three greatest trading towns now in Europe are London, Amsterdam, and Hamburg—all *free* cities . . ." He adds the important observation: "Commerce . . . is apt to decay in absolute governments not because it is there less secure but because it is less honorable. A subordination of rank is absolutely necessary to the support of monarchy. Birth, titles, and place must be honored above riches and industry, and, while these notions prevail, all the considerable traders will be tempted to throw up their commerce in order to purchase some of those employments to which privileges and honors are annexed."

32. Cf. Lessing's early play *Die Juden* with Kant, *Werke*, Cassirer ed. IX.396; X.235f; Rosenkrantz and Schubert ed. VII/2, 112.

33. I hardly need belabor the fact that the fire which threatens Nathan's house and daughter in Act I, the fire with which the Patriarch thrice threatens Nathan in recompense for his adoption of a baptized girl child (IV.ii.79), and the fire of eighteen years earlier by which Nathan lost all his intimates are one and all Masonic trials by fire. They correspond to the Sabaeans, Chaldeans, and lightning and gale "sent to" Job to detach him from all that was his except "his very self" and Nature as revealed in the Voice from the Whirlwind.

WHEN YOU MET ME, I HAD BEEN LYING IN DUST AND ASHES FOR THREE DAYS
AND NIGHTS, WEEPING, CALLING GOD TO ACCOUNT, RAGING AGAINST HIM.
IN A FRENZY OF REBELLION I CURSED MYSELF AND THE COSMOS,
AND SWORE UNDYING HATRED TOWARD CHRISTENDOM . . .
BUT REASON, RETURNING BY DEGREES,
ADDRESSED ME GENTLY, SAYING: "NEVERTHELESS GOD IS. THAT TOO
WAS HIS DECREE. COME. PRACTICE WHAT LONG YOU'VE UNDERSTOOD.
THE DOING OF WHICH IS NO HARDER THAN IS ITS COMPREHENSION.
RISE."³⁴
I STOOD AND CRIED TO GOD: "I WILL ACCORDING TO YOUR WILL."
THEN YOU DISMOUNTED AND HANDED ME THE CHILD

The second Nathan, having *suffered* greatly, *acts* on a scale so circumscribed and modest that to us Americans, beneficiaries of a war for independence and a constitution that have made separation of church from state seem almost as self-evident as human equality, he and the play named after him may seem petty.

Nathan's efficacy is purely private: He makes friends of a Moslem and a Christian and he gives a fine raising to a baptized girl-child. True, the Moslem he befriends is a king, so that "taking him aside privately" may bear public consequence. True, the child who largely owes the goodness of her second nature to Nathan is one Christian girl for seven sons of his own begetting that were murdered by her mother's co-religionists. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Lessing goes out of his way, presumably to make us believe in the possibility of the works of reason, to picture them as fairly small, unheroic, and self-interested: Nathan's advice to Saladin not to use state power to foster religious uniformity is to his own advantage, as are those friendship pacts and the adoption of Rachel.

Nathan's returning reason taught him that nothing except a well-focused love

34. Because of the sentence I italicized, which makes no sense except on Spinozist grounds of identifying will with understanding (*Ethics* II corollary to proposition 99), I see no providence in Lessing's play except such as Spinoza and Maimonides both would acknowledge. Thus *Nathan the Wise*, where the Sufi and the Jew agree that a man *must* do the good which he clearly perceives to be such, seems to me to teach the same determinism as do the *Dialogues for Freemasons*: In the *Dialogues for Freemasons* Lessing's clear-eyed and far-sighted Falk (falcon) maintains that "the sage is unable to say things that he had better leave unsaid" (*Der Weise kann nicht sagen, was er besser verschweigt*, *Werke* VIII, 459). Rightly or wrongly, Lessing seems to me to hold with Spinoza that *reasons* necessitate as much as *causes* (cf. *Werke* VIII, 427, the "Zusatz" to his young friend Jerusalem's essay on freedom). In the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (2nd piece, *Werke* IV, 242), Lessing denies the possibility of Christian tragedy. The expressly stated reason for this impossibility is that the true Christian's imperturbable meekness is inherently untheatrical. But putting two and two together I believe the deeper reason is that to the Christian death lacks finality and that, where for the Christian moral miracles are possible, tragedy as tragedy rules them out: It admits neither the creative rupture of divine grace nor the annihilating rupture of a man who wills evil for evil's sake. Tragedy requires (in truth, and in Lessing's judgment) that we confess that "this character, placed in this situation, and overcome by this passion, could not have judged except as the playwright shows him to have judged." The determinism of tragedy Lessing identifies (*Werke* IV, 243) as the "absolute" and "philosophic" truth. The upshot of all this is that the famous (or infamous) conversation with Jacobi (*Werke* VIII, 563ff) is very far from being the sole or even the prime evidence for Lessing's "spinozism." Hence my citation of passages from Spinoza.

is strong enough to overcome hatred (cf. Spinoza, *Ethics* III.54, IV.14, 15) and that the man whose sense of life derives from hate is in bondage to the past, least of all *causa sui* (cf. Spinoza, *Ethics* III, definitions 1 and 2 and proposition 1, pp. 129f Dover ed.). He is not without courage—a Jew's adopting of a baptized infant is risky business. But he takes risks only *wenn's nötig ist, und nützt* (III. vii.8), and most of the time his virtue as a free man is shown by the intelligence with which he declines or circumvents rather than overcomes dangers (cf. Spinoza, *Ethics* IV.69).

If Nathan is a hero, he is a hero of sobriety and as such being offered as *Musterbild der menschlichen Natur* (cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Preface to part IV).

Thus the chief question that the play leaves me with is whether Nathan's goodness—*so gut als klug, so klug als weise* (I.iii.88)—is sufficient to inspire one to self-exertion.