

**Can Jews Be Citizens?**  
**Jewish Politics from the Enlightenment to Today**  
Elias Sacks (University of Colorado Boulder)  
Valley Beit Midrash – January 2019

Halakha (Jewish Law)

The Eternal, Blessed be He...gave us the Torah and commandments...to awaken us always, by means of particular practices and actions, to the cornerstones and foundations of the true faith. He commanded us to perform signs and symbolic reminders regarding [those foundations] by means of our flesh, our homes, and everything visible and perceptible to us, so that these exalted matters might never depart from our eyes: these are the commandment of circumcision and the commandment [to affix] a *mezuzah* to the openings of our homes and courtyards. Moreover, He commanded [us] to place the sign of *tefillin* on our head and left arm, along with the commandment [to place] *tzitzit* on our garments, so that we would remember Him every time we look upon them. (Mendelssohn, *Bi'ur* on Numbers 15:39, in *Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe*, 18:133)

Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) on Jewish Politics

Initially, it is proper for a nation to foster an increase only in works of necessity [במלאכות הצורך]; however, when it grows and flourishes in its deeds, it should also pursue works of utility [במלאכות התועלת] and even turn to works of splendor [מלאכות ההדר] and pleasure, in accordance with [its] condition. While the excess is dangerous and harmful in all of these stages, the excess and breaking through beyond the limit in works of splendor [במלאכות ההדר] and pleasure rapidly destroy and ruin the political felicity, and many are the fallen whom it has caused to perish. For this gives rise to love of pleasures [אהבת התענוגים], weakening the body with a forceful desire to acquire, as well as the coveting of wealth and luxurious, pleasurable objects. Moreover, this gives birth to a man's jealousy of his fellow and division among the hearts of those who are close, stirring up war among those who inhabit the land, as well as strife and contention between a man and his neighbor who is close to him. Order will thereby be disrupted and the people will be transformed, disorderly and corrupt.

The rule is that in matters such as these, which properly change in accordance with time and events...the more correct approach to being on guard against the trap is as the sages, may their memories be for a blessing, have said: "may all your deeds be for the sake of heaven." For by means of this, the person will always set it upon his heart to distinguish between the good and the evil...Blessed is He and Blessed is His great name, who has distinguished us from the peoples and given to us a true Torah, good decrees, and upright laws, in order that love and reverence for Him might be upon our countenance at all times. (*Bi'ur* on conclusion of Exodus, in *Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe*, 16:406-407)

Nachman Krochmal (1785-1840) on Jewish Politics

The Lord—may He be exalted—strengthened and fortified the connection within the nation by giving to it, in an exceedingly wondrous and sublime manner, righteous and comprehensive

precepts, decrees, and laws, perfecting the individual and the community in the most complete manner possible. And He promised them that by observing the laws in their truth, the nation would endure and neither perish nor be lost...This belief lived and was strong in the nation at all times, and the absolute spiritual [הרוחני המוחלט] that was in its midst was always known to it...And thus among us, the children of Israel, this was our principle—that we always cleave to the Lord, the totality and truth of all spiritual manifestations. (*The Guide of the Perplexed of the Time [Moreh Nevukei Hazeman]*, ed. Amir, 43-44)

Behold, according to the way of the natural order, there are three periods that pass for every ancient nation, from the time that it becomes a people until the time that it vanishes and is lost...*the season of flowering and growth ...the season of strength and activity...[and] the season of decay and corruption.* This is the case for all nations whose spiritual is particular...However, in the case of our nation, even though we too succumb to the aforementioned orders of nature in relation to the material and to sensuous, external matters, nevertheless...the universal spiritual that is in our midst defends us and rescues us from the judgment that falls upon all mortals...If we fell, we rose and recovered. (*Guide*, 40)

They would gather the exiled, unite them into groups, and establish (to the extent possible) full communities...until they would again become a full nation and a great people...All of them were subjugated under foreign rulers and their political governance... [Nevertheless,] they would recognize the value of the dear treasure that was in their hands from their fathers...They would establish their community and fortify and crown it with the commandments of the Torah and the good customs of their ancestors, all of which were so dear to them that they would give up their souls for [these inheritances'] existence in times of need...All of this occurred in every place of exile...not 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. (*Guide*, 50-52)

### Krochmal's Language

The works would grow from those of necessity alone to the useful and splendidous [יעלו המלאכות מן הצורך לבד אל המועיל ונהדר]. (*Guide*, 34)

Egypt was rich in buildings and in works and crafts of utility and splendor [במלאכות ואומנות התועלת וההדר]. (*Guide*, 42)

[A nation] eventually perishes and is lost. This is because with the multiplication of splendor [ההדר] and luxuries in the nation, love of pleasures [אהבת התענוגים] also increases. (*Guide*, 36)

— Mendelssohn and Krochmal translations by Sacks