

LESSING'S NATHAN THE WISE OF 1779 THE WISE FOR ALL THE TIMES

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NATHAN

We did not choose a nation for ourselves.

Are we our nations? What's a nation then?

Were Jews and Christians such, e'er they were men?

And have I found in thee one more, to whom

It is enough to be a man?

(from Nathan the Wise)

Nathan the Wise, a verse play, written in 1778 by Lessing, and published in 1779, was first performed in Berlin on 14 April 1783. Nathan is a rich merchant in Jerusalem. A monk brings an infant girl named Recha to him. Nathan, the monk, and Nathan's Christian servant, Daja only know the secret identity of Recha. Without referring to the teachings of a particular religion, Nathan gives her teachings of respecting God. In the words of Gerhard Sedding:

>Nathan the Wise< is not to be understood as a historical play; the historical period of Crusades is an alienating background – that serves as a basis for Lessing to respond dramatically to the challenges of his time.

The play takes place in Jerusalem at the time of the Crusades. A young Templar rescues Recha, adopted daughter of Nathan, who is a Jew. Saladin catches and sets the templar free. Recha falls in love with the templar. The templar, after meeting Recha does fall in love with her, though he denies Recha on hearing that she happens to be adopted in seduce from Christianity to Judaism.

The Christian servant Daja instigates the templar by saying that Nathan has seduced his adoptive daughter from Christianity to Judaism. He is moved by his sense of sacred duty and approaches the Christian Patriarch of Jerusalem for advice.

The knight feels disgusted. He visits the Sultan, Saladin. In a state of utter torment the templar denounces Nathan for having turned Recha from Christianity to Judaism and for having hidden the entire story. When the Sultan summons Nathan, the Jew

due to his monetary problems, provokes Nathan to prove his qualities as Wise by answering the question as to which of the three great religions is the true one. Nathan, the Jew, who enjoys the title *Nathan the Wise* in the society, does prove his talents by referring to a parable of three identical rings, adapted from Boccaccio, Decameron.

Through his wisdom and tolerance he wins the Sultan as a friend. Qualities of an ideal humanity are clearly pronounced in the judge's words of the Ring parable – free from corruption and biased feelings, softness and tolerance are the virtues proclaimed by the judge. Nathan warns the Sultan to take a note of the ideals named by the judge in the ring parable.

A father had a costly ring in his possession that he wanted to leave his three sons bequeath. These three sons symbolized in Nathan's parable three religions namely Christianity, Jew and Islam. In order not to bring his sons on war path on the grounds of inheritance of the ring, the father got two imitation rings very much similar to the original one – thus he distributed three rings among his sons – the one being original and the rest of the two being imitation.

The intention of the father failed, as the three sons fought among each other, as to which of the rings was true one. When they approached the judge, it was found out that none of the rings was true. The three rings are here symbols for the three religions. Like the three sons were fighting to prove the genuineness of their own ring, representatives of different religions keep fighting to prove and claim the genuineness of their own religion.

As Nathan makes it clear, the pure ring had the magic power to make its owner lovable with gods and human beings equally – all the three sons failed, when the judge asked them to prove the quality of the ring. A tentative peace prevails in Jerusalem, governed by Saladin, where Jews, Christians and Muslims are dwelling in. A sense of distrust misguides their lives due to

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the prevalent communal feelings. In the atmosphere of ingrained hatred taught by centuries of suspicion and ignorance, Nathan, a wealthy Jewish merchant, forms a bond of friendship with the ruler and, through example, brings all but the most fanatical character to acceptance of compassion and accord.

Eventually, when the Sultan pledges to bring the lovers together, Lessing gives a twist to the story with the revelations that Recha and the knight happen to be the children of Sultan's deceased brother and his Christian wife. Religious tolerance is the message of the play, as one can closely read the play.

A continuous transformation of Recha from Jew to Christian and Moslem is the appeal of Lessing for religious tolerance. The play brings the message of fraternity and stresses the need for their coexistence without attacking each other. Nathan proposes that the question of her/his belongingness to a particular caste and creed should not be a measurement to judge a human being.

Lessing creates in his play Palestinian front, where Europe and the oriental anterior, Christianity, Judaism and Islam meet each other in manifold ways. Jerusalem came in 1099 during the first Crusade as a Christian empire in existence. It was weakened by the continuous change of power and the absence of help from Bezan. Saladin, the Sultan of Egypt and Syria, invaded Jerusalem in 1187 followed by an attack of a Christian knight on a caravan, in which his sister was passing by. The Third Crusade broke out carried to the land by Empire Fredrick Barbarossa, who drowned in water on the way. 1192 a peace treaty was signed and Jerusalem remains in the hands of Saladin.

The knights break the treaty in 1119. Sultan wanted to revolve the same, where by his brother Melek would marry Richard's sister – so that both the areas would be bound in a Christian- Moslem mixed state. Whether it be understood as a coincidence that Recha is brought up as a Jew, is born in a Muslim family and is now in love of a Christian templar, a religious triangular is built - this very idea of the plot development is modern in its construction and behind this is hidden an intellectual thought that calls for a modern idea of tolerance. This is the very base of Enlightenment period. Nathan the Wise is inevitably a representative masterpiece of Enlightenment.

While looking at this play as a piece of Enlightenment, one can see that Lessing embodied his argu-

ments for toleration in the story here. He suggests that the absolute truth of any religious faith cannot be proven on historical grounds and that a search for truth takes precedence over the possession of truth. Nathan argues for a nondogmatic view of religion, based on a shared humanity above the accidents of race and creed.

The Enlightenment occupies a central role in the justification for the movement known as modernism. The neo-classicizing trend in modernism came to see itself as a period of rationality which overturned established traditions, analogously to the Encyclopaedists and other Enlightenment philosophers.

A variety of 20th century movements, including liberalism and neo-classicism, traced their intellectual heritage back to the Enlightenment, and away from the purported emotionalism of the 19th century. Geometric order, rigor and reductionism were seen as Enlightenment virtues. The modern movement points to reductionism and rationality as crucial aspects of Enlightenment thinking, of which it is the heir, as opposed to irrationality and emotionalism. In this view, the Enlightenment represents the basis for modern ideas of liberalism against superstition and intolerance.

Lessing makes his enlightening views wide open in opposition to the blindness and fanaticism caused by narrow mindedness in Nathan the Wise. Nathan is an emancipated man of the eighteenth century, whom Lessing pulls back and sets in the time of crusades, who tries to carry on the process of Enlightenment. The Ring parable begins with the reference to "ancient times" and at the end of it there is a reference to the era of thousand years to come in the wide spread future – this is the hint to the up bridging of history with the future – where overcoming the intolerance is suggested to take place.

Nathan is even seen as a presumption of the well-ordered world. This play suggests that the human beings are supposed to serve for the up bridging the discrepancy between the historical reality and philosophy of history. Lessing wants perhaps to suggest through the arrangement of the three oppositions at the beginning in Nathan and Recha on one side, the templar on the other side and thirdly Saladin on one hand – but these three opposing forces form a

family at the end of the story.

Through Sultan Saladin and by pulling the plot back in the times of Crusades, Lessing aims at showing in this play the political and religious disharmony and prevailing stress; while he depicts the need for the search for new realities through the character of Nathan. As Sedding correctly says, Lessing presents through this play a picture of Enlightenment and criticism of religion, intolerance and suppression of minorities [especially that of Jews], vagaries of the political and religious power.³ Enlightenment was an intellectual movement of 17th & 18th Century, that was initiated in England & France and became around the middle of 18th century a matter of discussions in Germany – The beginning of modernism was deeply rooted in this movement of Enlightenment. Search for the truth with the help of rationalism was the main characteristic of the second phase of the modernism initiated by Enlightenment. Empirical observation, rationalism, liberalization were the basics of Enlightenment. Advancement in the light of knowledge and under-

standing from the darkness of superstitions, innocence was the aim of enlightenment.

Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* is understood to be a didactic play – that aims at giving teachings to its readers and viewers to be >good human beings< – Nathan himself teaches to be a good human being by adopting Recha – he gives teachings to Recha to be a good human being – he gives teachings to Sultan to be rational – he imparts teachings of being rational and good human to the templar. Nathan's love to Recha, his anxiety to lose her as a father, indicate the sensitivities in him – He evokes in her phantasy and feelings for others apart from rational thinking.

Coming close to the last truth – should be the aim of life. When one fails to distinguish between the truth and the delusion, one should hear the heartbeats giving the melody of unconditional love – that contains the element of deity – the ultimate truth – the ultimate purity – none of the religions happen to be pure – the only pure religion is HUMANITY.

Footnote

1. This English version is from one of the sources available in the Internet.
2. We have translated the original quotation from the book "Gotthold Ephraim Lessing – Nathan der Weise" by Gerhard Sedding. Klett-Lektürehilfe. Ernst Klettverlag, Stuttgart, Dresden, 1993. Pp: 45.
3. Ibid.

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