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PURIM AND PAUL: THE TORAH VEILED AND UNVEILED[1]

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Unlike the beauties of your world,
In the veil I am seen,
But without it I stay hidden
-Abd al -Rahmân Jâmî[2]

This upcoming Purim, Jews everywhere will celebrate the holiday of the unseen, and rejoice in radically redemptive concealment. "The perfection of art is to conceal art," the Roman rhetorician Quintillian was fond of saying, and on Purim we understand this truth. On Purim it is the concealed that is on display: God seems hidden, Esther's Jewish identity is hidden, and we conceal ourselves in costumes. The concealment we celebrate is first reflected upon in a Talmudic passage (*Hulin* 139 2:12) that wonders about the biblical roots of the heroine of the Purim story, Esther. "Whence Esther in the Torah?", the sages ask, in what is either a moment of Talmudic bible-fealty or a tongue-in-cheek self-mockery. The Talmud quotes a verse to answer the query: "I will hide My Face on that day" (Deuteronomy 31:18). The Talmud is riffing off a phonetic similarity between the Hebrew term in the verse used to connote hiding, *hasteir astir*, and Esther. It's worth noting that the word hiddenness is repeated for emphasis in the biblical verse, in what may constitute a form of double-concealment. This double-concealment is particularly relevant on Purim, a holiday in which the presence of God is doubly-concealed. This double-concealment reflects a double concealment of God that is also on display on Purim.

The first God-concealment: The Purim tale occured in a time in which God's face was hidden, the divine countenance concealed. Exiled in a foreign land, far from their home, the Jews were facing the unseen face of God. The miracle itself occured not through a revelation of the might of God, but through a subtler God. Instead of the God of earlier revelations, a God seen clearly within the revelation, this revelation reveals a more quiet God, a God willing to hide in the divine partnership with humanity. This miracle happens in the hands of humans. Through Esther's shrew political manipulations, God's subtle revelation courses through mundane tools, revealing the divinity at play even in the hands of humanity.

The second God-concealment: In the entirety of the Book of Esther, God's name isn't mentioned once. Not only was God's role in the miracle hidden, but His role is hidden even from our accounting of the miracle, in the Book of Esther. God's invisibility, or perhaps anonymity, accentuates the humanness of this book, the concealment of divinity occurring here. In a sense, it wasn't only God's role and name missing, but it was the sense of his concealment that was concealed: the concealment of concealment. One feels in the beginning of the Book of Esther that the Jews were comfortable in their exile, enjoying the fruits of divine concealment, drinking the wine of Ahashverosh. It wasn't just God that was apparently absent, but it was awareness of His Name, or of His absent-ness, that was absent. The Jews of Shushan seem unaware of God's absence, until this absence becomes painfully realized. Yet it was precisely during this time of doubly-enfolded concealment that the miracle occurred, as the fate of the Jews was turned around, and King Ahashverosh moved from the advice of Haman to that of Esther. This godlessness from our accounting is interesting; in a cannon so often obsessed with appreciating God's role in history, God's seeming absence from plot and book may subtly illustrate a deeper mode of revelation.The miracle as well was a hidden miracle, a subtle revelation, enacted at the hands of men through the spirit of God.

Interestingly, this 'godlessness' itself, the absent-ness of God, is one of the reasons why the Book of Esther received strong reprobation at the hands of Christian scholars. Elliot Horowitz sketches the reaction to Esther among Christian scholars, and points to the telling comments of W.M.L. De Wette (1780-1849) of the University of Berlin, who wrote that the Book of Esther "refers nothing to the operation and direction of God, and contains no religious element."[3]

[1] I would like to thank Mindy Schwartz Zolty for her critical editing of this piece, as well as Marc Eichenbaum, Y. Moshiach Schneider, and Shlomo Zuckier for their thoughtful comments and contributions. I am grateful as well to Professor Chaviva Levin for first drawing my attention to the implications of Synagoga, and to Joey Rosenfeld, whose Torah, for me, is one of deeply revelatory concealment.

[2] Abd al -Rahmân Jâmî (d. 1492), *Lawâ'ih: A Treatise on Sufism*.

[3] F. Bleek also says that "no other book of the Old Testament…[is] so far removed from the spirit of the Gospel." Horowitz notes that "for many nineteenth-century German Bible scholars (and some even in the twentieth) the words "Jewish," "narrow-minded," and "revenge" formed an unholy trinity that characterized the reified religion of narrow legalism and rough justice that Jesus came to rectify. And the text that was seen as most typifying this pre-redemptive state of Judaism was the book of Esther." Archibald Henry Sayce is an important contrast to this negative censure; Sayce argues in favor of Esther that it is "a useful illustration of a fact which is oft forgotten…[that] God's inspiration is not confined to a particular kind of literary work or a particular description of narrative." The Book of Esther "has been made an instrument through which God has revealed His will to us, and prepared the way for the work of Christ." See Elliott S Horowitz, *Reckless Rites : Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 23-45.

Horowitz notes as well the words of De Wette's student, F. Bleek, who considered the absence of God's name to be "characteristic of the untheocratic spirit" of Esther, which represents the "very narrow minded and Jewish spirit of revenge and persecution."

The literary critic James Wood is fond of asking one seemingly-straightforward question when reading, that he picked up from his *rebbe* in reading, Dr. Stephen Heath: 'What's at *stake* in this passage?'[4] In thinking about this dual concealment and the so-called 'godlessness' of this book, the tropes surrounding this work point us to the stakes of the issue of concealment in the Book of Esther. Hinging upon this local theme of concealment rests a weightier conversation about the nature and quality of concealment in the Jewish-Christian discourse. As such, appreciating the dual concealment, the so-called 'godlessness' of this book, takes a far greater import.

This tradition of donning costumes on Purim is threaded with this idea of concealment. The origins of this tradition are murky: R. Yehudah of Mintz (1405-1508) is the first to mention it, and later commentators play with the possibilities and permissibility of this costumed custom.[5] Whatever its historical origins, perhaps we can think about the meaning and motivation of this tradition in a larger context - cementing Purim as the ode to Jewish concealment. Costume-wearing isn't only another act of revelry on this day of joy and jest, but may in fact be a form of divine imitation, in which we too reveal ourselves through concealment, paralleling the revelatory concealment of God in the times of Mordecai, Esther, and Ahashverosh long ago. Perhaps we can think of this tradition as a sort of divine imitation, a grand act of intimate imitation of the revelatory concealment of God. We hide ourselves, dressing up like anything and everything but oneself, to mimic the hiddenness of God. This hiddenness that preempted a revelation within concealment, a miracle that occurred through the hands of humanity, beginning a mode of ongoing revelation throughout history.[6] The Baal Shem Tov connects this tradition to another Purim day tradition: the giving of alms to all that ask, without discretion. When all are hidden, all perception an illusion, and true identity a mystery, the truest acts of giving can occur: giving without hope of return, without the clarity of giving to a known asker-of-alms, a true act of anonymous beneficence. Alternatively, with Orwell in mind, we may go even further: Perhaps we "wear a mask," and our faces "grow to fit" them, and adapt to the concealment by shape-shifting transformation, as Orwell might say.[7]

This grand embrace of revelatory concealment may just be reflected within a different popular Purim tradition: the sharing of 'Purim Torah'. Purim Torah refers to playful, often satirical, absurdist Torah thoughts that are shared on Purim. Deliberate misreading of biblical texts is fair game, as are misspelled words, and overwrought expositions in the style of Talmudic discussion if the Talmudists were drunk. Purim Torah is parodical and often utilizes traditional methods of Talmudic logic to reach absurd conclusions or entertain far-fetched possibilities. As part of this day of revelry and jesting festivities, this tradition brings a smile to faces in the room, who smirk while refilling their cups.

This point becomes sharper when in tension with its foil; in Second Corinthians 3 (13-16), Paul has a somewhat different view on this Jewish appreciation for concealment:

> *We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away / But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away / Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts / But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*

This critique sees the veiledness of Judaism, the embrace of concealment, as telling of a broader pathology. Instead of openness to the revelation of God, to the love present in His teachings, Jews are critiqued for needing a veil over their Torah, for requiring Moses to teach from behind a veil. This veil covers their hearts and numbs their minds. This passage has received more than its fair share of controversy over the centuries, with intense debate surrounding the nature and degree of this critique, as well as its implications for the broader understanding of Paul's supersessionist beliefs, should they exist at all.[8] Richard Hays, in his book *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, sees this critique as targeting Jewish literalism, the insistence on the literal over the allegorical, the body of the letter over the spirit of the letter.[9] In Hays' understanding, the veil refers to the preference for literal interpretation, instead of the allegorical hermeneutic of the Torah preferred by Paul. In the Jewish tradition, the face of God so sought by His followers is often seen only from behind, through a veil. Hays understands Paul's preferred mode of reading the scriptures to be symbolic, whereas the Jewish Midrash is typified by a devotion to the concrete details of the original language. In Daniel Boyarin's words, "Midrash…is a hermeneutics of opacity, while Paul's allegorical/typological reading is a hermeneutics of transparency."[10] This critique conceptualizes the veil as the perceived reference of rabbinic thinking (through the Oral Law) towards the legal/literal/body of the letter, which is theorized to be taking the Torah at face value, instead of the metaphorizing/spiritualizing activity of the non-rabbinic thinkers. In what may be a counter-intuitive turn, it is thus the literal-legal that is taken by Paul to be concealing, and the allegorical-spiritual as revealing.

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[4] See James Wood, *Serious Noticing: Selected Essays, 1997-2019* (United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

[5] It is worth noting that some rabbinic commentaries are concerned for the debauchery that costumes could lead to, while R. Yosef Messas (1892-1974) was concerned for the possible influence of the similarly timed, but non-Jewish, costumed holiday of Carnival.

[6] Perhaps we can move even broader: Rabbi Joey Rosenfeld, in thinking about this double-concealment, has noted that the concealment of a concealment may be a mode of revelation; the veiling of a veiling may constitute an unveiling of sorts.

[7] George Orwell, *Shooting an Elephant, and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950).

[8] For more on this passage and the wide-reaching debates surrounding it,see Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (University of California Press, 1997), 86-106.

[9] Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (Yale University Press, 1989).

[10] Boyarin, ibid. This is to say that instead of turning concrete aspects of the text into metaphors, the Midrash reads into the details, and hermeneutizes textual nuances for meaning, instead of atomizing the text into allegory.

In light of this history of secrecy or noeticism, in a sort of Purim Torah of comparative religion of my own, we can understand some of the traditions of Purim as an introjected refraction of the veil-dependence Paul so disliked. In the words of Oscar Wilde, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." Perhaps God, like man, when speaking through a self-imposed mask, communicates with a level of revelation not inhibited through His concealment, but made ever the more poignant.

It is not for naught that Synagoga, the portrayal of the Jewish congregation popular in medieval churches, is so often portrayed with a blindfold or veil. Elisheva Carlebach notes that this inability of vision moves in two directions, as the Jew has been understood to be both unseeing as well as unseen.[11] Carlebach shows that the perception of Jews as bearing some sort of noetic quality, a secret not transmitted, as being a long-running quality of medieval Christian antisemitism. Carlebach frames the antisemitic fears of Jewish secrecy as relating to blood libel narratives, in which a common trope was the fears of the distinctive 'private' language used by Jews, who were feared to be conconting 'secret' plans not understood by their European neighbors. This relates to the 'unseeing' quality of the Jews, who are blind to the truths of Christ, as well as the 'unseen' quality of the Jews, referring to the supposed secrets born in their private language(s) and books. Fueled by confessions of Jewish apostates intent on revealing the 'secrets of the Jews', the image of the Jew was intricately bound to the image of the unseen. She notes that the Latin term *caecus*, which refers to Jews, "could be interpreted as the inability to see – in the narrowest sense of physical or mental blindness, or as the inability to be seen – hidden, secret, invisible, preventing mind or eye from seeing."[12]

I am making two claims about Purim: The first is that the concealment of Purim and the Book of Esther can be conceptualized as a revelatory concealment, and that through putting this concealment in conversation with Christian texts we can better appreciate, and maybe even celebrate, concealment. Through the veil itself, in the shadows and murky hiddenness of life, we may find the light of revelation. This light does not negate the shadows, the revelation does not overwhelm or unfold the concealment, but rather makes the darkness of concealment shine. The second is that this concealment can be understood as being grounded in two very different traditions: costume wearing and Purim Torah sharing. On each plane we shroud the body in veils, concealing the apparent to reveal a deeper revelation. By hiding the literal *pshat* of our lives, we are able to express a deeper *sod*. In putting these traditions in contact with Paul and the troubling history of antisemitic theorizing about Jewish secrecy, perhaps we can better see our own misunderstood legacy of the concealed.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that we read of Moshe's veil in Exodus 34, the weekly reading for the *shabbat* following Purim. We embrace the noeticism, the veil of concealment-mystery behind which our God, and our people, have dwelled for so long. In a similar vein, Purim and the Book of Esther were particularly prominent for crypto-Jews,[13] those who kept Jewish practices in secret in Iberia and the New World due to religious persecution.[14] Esther, the original crypto-Jew of sorts, and her ever-so-hidden Book, represent the holiday of *kryptos*: the hidden, the secret, the concealed.[15]

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[11] Carlbeach points out that "Gavin Langmuir has located irrationality at the heart of medieval Christian anti-Judaism: 'By the late Middle Ages, in order to dispel doubts about their religion and themselves, many Christians were suppressing their capacity for rational empirical thought and irrationally attributing to the realities they denoted as Jews' unobservable characteristics.'" For more, see Elisheva Carlebach, "Attribution of Secrecy and Perceptions of Jewry," *Jewish Social Studies*, 2:3 (1996): 115–136.

[12] It is important to note that this accusation of blindness figures in larger dynamics than Purim, and the possibility for an introjected or originary differentiation in this 'jewish blindness' constitutes its own creative landscape. The imagery of the blindfolded bride has been portrayed in Jewish prayer books, possibly representative of either the Shekhinah or the Torah. The figure of the Shekhinah as a blind maiden originates in a puzzling parable of the Zohar (Pritzker ed. 5:2): "Who is a beautiful maiden without eyes, her body concealed and revealed, she emerges in the morning and is concealed by day, adorning herself with adornments that are not?" The blind Shekhinah also occupies space in Hasidic frameworks; Consider R. Nahman of Breslov, in his "The Small Person Leading the Blind Giant, and the Tree That is Beyond Space", where he mentions that "the moon is called 'blind,' for she does not shine in-and-of herself, and she has nothing of her own whatsoever." R. Nahman is invoking here the symbolic web of terms and imagery that enshroud the Shekhinah. This relates as well to R. Nahman's blind beggar, from his "Story of the Seven Beggars," the blind beggar that can see everything and therefore seems to see nothing. Contrast as well to the blind beggar of Mark 10:46-52, who sees something in Jesus unseen by others, but whose blindness is cured by Jesus. R. Nahman's blind beggar doesn't seek sight, as R. Nahman says about him: "You think that I am blind. I am not blind at all, except all the time of the whole world does not come across me as much as an eye blink (thus he appears blind, for he doesn't peek into the world whatsoever, for all the entire world's time doesn't come across him whatsoever, even as an eyeblink, therefore no sight or any glimpse of the world at all is relevant to him…)"

[13] The popular term 'Marrano' is sometimes thought of as offensive, and I therefore use the terms 'Anusim' or 'crypto-Jews', both of which similarly refer to those that were forced to convert but practiced Judaism in covert ways.

[14] It has been posited that Esther's popularity for crypto-Jews may have been related to Virgin Mary adoration in Catholic society. See Martin A. Cohen, *The Martyr: Luis de Carvajal, A Secret Jew in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Philadelphia, 1973). The position of Esther in crypto-Jewish religious practice can be seen in the creation of "Esther's Prayer", as well as in the popularity of Taanit Esther for crypto-Jews. As fast days were subtle ways to express religiosity in often hostile environments, fast days, and particularly the Fast of Esther, held particular prominence. Their practice of the fast was three days long, mimicking Esther's original decree. See Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1932).

[15] As the salvation eventually occurred through Esther's revelation of her Jewish identity, the revelatory concealment of Purim may constitute a revelation of secrecy, either in the telling of the secret, or perhaps in the telling of secrecy, in the revelation of the reality and possibility of concealment. (This may be related to an idea utilized by Heideger/Derrida of the *sous rature*, ~~under erasure~~, in which the concealment is signified and revealed in its concealment. This is the revelation that the absence of presence signifies the presence of Absence.) On Purim, the concealed is on full display, our hiddenness

On this holiday of revelatory concealment, perhaps it isn't only the illusory nature of our own identities that we are playing with, but also that of God and His Wisdom. Maybe Purim Torah and costume-wearing can both be understood as an outgrowth of the same impulse, both attempts at veiling the bodily literalism, only to reveal the deeper relegation therein, the unveiling present in the veiling itself. By playing with the literalism of the text, Jews are asserting that it is in the veiledness, in the hiddenness of the Torah, revelation can occur. By toying in absurd ways with the boundaries of text and intellect, this play expresses a deep love affair with the veil, the concealing revelation through which Jews hear the voice of God. In response to Paul's criticisms on the Jewish insistence on the literality of the Torah and her Law, on the concealment of God's Love in favor of the Letter of the Torah, Jews choose on Purim to mask their bodies, and their Torah, and thus to believe in a revelation within concealment.

This paradigm of revelatory concealment is particularly important for in our era; in a world of hiddenness and concealment, of the suffering darkness of the lived reality of the human condition, embrace of revelatory concealment reflects an affirmation of the human experience of the Veil, and an insistence on the revelation of the Face within the Veil. May we be blessed with seeing ourselves, others, and God, within hiddenness and revelation.

Unorthodox? How Megillat Esther Justifies the Holiday of Purim

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Purim is widely viewed as the ultimate rule-breaker. Many universal halakhic categories, including cross-dressing, rabbinic violations of wearing wool and linen, and the laws of damages, are very-nearly abrogated. Purim's observance on two distinct dates - 14 Adar for unwalled cities and 15 Adar for walled ones - and the ancient practice of some communities to read the *Megillah* as early as 11 Adar (see *Megillah* 2a), suggest that Purim departs radically from the holiday norm. More generally, its levity and drunkenness lend the day a carnivalesque character. These anomalies alone raise questions about Purim's credibility as a Jewish holiday. But even more fundamentally, as discussed extensively in the halakhic literature, the unprecedented innovation of a post-Mosaic holiday is highly questionable in its own right,[16] and there are hints in the *Megillah* itself that the people were slow to accept Purim as a permanent holiday.[17] Taken as a whole, these irregularities seem to suggest, Purim's very legitimacy seems precarious.

Quite possibly seeking to address these idiosyncrasies, *Esther* chapter nine goes out of its way to explain the process of Purim's ratification. The *Megillah* is painstaking in its depiction of Esther and Mordekhai's letters urging the holiday's establishment, as well as the community's gradual acceptance. It also accounts for the distinction between walled and unwalled cities by depicting the Jews of Shushan as having rested from their battle a day later than those in other locations.
Yet even after we finish reading the *Megillah*, questions remain. Does communal acceptance suffice to establish a new holiday? Don't Purim's unusual *mitzvot* mark it as peculiar? After all, the commandments referenced in the *Megillah* seem unusual, especially *mishloah manot*, which seems to have no precedent in any biblical holiday. Further, is Purim a completely novel holiday, or does it draw on biblical precedents, making it more palatable to the *Megillah*'s readers? Possibly seeking to address these outstanding difficulties, the *Megillah* invokes analogues to other books in Tanakh. Consequently, a close comparison between *Esther* and other biblical works suggests that the *Megillah* forwards a cluster of interrelated arguments: that there is solid precedent to see communal acceptance as binding in establishing an annual observance, and that while they may appear unusual, the day's *mitzvot* (and storyline) are actually quite familiar. Ultimately, the *Megillah* suggests that its climax is even a partial actualization of the prophets' messianic vision.

Esther explicitly appeals to biblical precedent on just one occasion. Curiously, the verse records that "these days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time, as Mordekhai the Jew and Queen Esther has obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the obligation of the fasts with their lamentations [*divrei ha-tzomot ve-za'akatam*]" (9:31). To what fasts and lamentations does this refer?

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dancing through the streets and on the rooftops of vans, as we sing songs to the concealment in our lives. Like the strike-through, we must be hidden, but our hiddennes must be revealed, as all the unexpressed hopes and words of our past year, born in concealment, are revealed in concealment. "As wine enters, *Sod* departs."

[16] The Talmud (*Megillah* 14a) teaches: "The Sages taught in a *beraita*: Forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people, and they neither subtracted from nor added onto what is written in the Torah, except for the reading of the *Megillah*. What is the exposition? R. Hiyya bar Avin in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Korha: If, from [Egyptian] slavery to freedom we recite songs, from death to life is it not all the more so?" The assumption seems to be that Purim is only legitimate if rooted in biblical precedent. Even more explicitly, the Yerushalmi (*Megillah* 1:5) states that were it not rooted in the preexisting obligation to destroy the nation of Amalek, the establishment of Purim would have constituted a violation of the prohibition against a prophet establishing a new holiday. Along these lines, most authorities, such as Nahmanides (Commentary to Deuteronomy 4:2) and Vilna Gaon (*Aderet Eliyahu* to Deut. 4:2), maintain that one who adds a holiday stands in violation of *bal tosif*. The position of Minhat Hinukh (to *Mitzvah* 454), who asserts that *bal tosif* only applies to one who adds to an existing *mitzvah*, does not reflect the predominant view.

[17] The second half of chapter nine lists at least three instances of the Jews having accepted Purim as a holiday: on the original occasion of the military victory, following Mordekhai's letter, and following the letter jointly composed by Esther and Mordekhai. Possibly, there is a fourth additional reference that appears in between the *Megillah*'s reference to these two letters. This reiteration suggests that Purim's establishment required continual reinforcement. Indeed, Ibn Ezra (9:29 s.v. va-Tikhtov) notes the repetition and goes so far as to suggest that the holiday was initially accepted yet subsequently dropped for a period of time. For a brief presentation of this view, see Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 83.

Many have seen in this verse an allusion to a historical fast day that served as the basis for *Ta'anit Esther*. For instance, Rabbeinu Tam (cited by Rosh *Megillah* 1:1) holds that the Talmud's (*Megillah* 2a) term "a time of gathering for all" refers to the Jews having gathered to fast on 13 Adar before going out to battle. According to other sources, such as *Masekhet Sofrim* (21:1) and (probably) Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Ta'aniyot* 5:5), the Jews fasted in Nissan upon first hearing of Haman's decree, and it is to this fast that the verse refers.[18]

In fact, however, the face reading of the verse appears to have nothing to do with *Ta'anit Esther*, which is not mentioned in the *Megillah*. Instead, as Ibn Ezra, Ralbag, and Malbim (9:31) contend, the verse more likely refers to the Jews' earlier acceptance of the four fast days associated with the Temple's destruction: those of Tammuz, Av, Tishrei, and Tevet. This itself can be understood in one of two ways: either the Four Fasts were initially instituted through communal consensus following the First Temple's destruction (Ibn Ezra to *Esther* 9:31 and *Zekhariah* 8:19) or, while they were initially enacted by force of rabbinic decree, they remained binding after the construction of the Second Temple due to popular acceptance (see *Rosh Hashanah* 18b). Either way, *Esther* claims the Four Fasts as precedent for the community's ability to impose new days of mourning or celebration.

Indeed, this reading of "the fasts and their lamentations" dovetails perfectly with an otherwise elusive section of *Zekhariah*, who prophesied in roughly the same period as the events of Purim.[19] Following the building of the Second Temple, which the community saw as a mere shadow of the First, the *navi* is asked whether or not the community should continue to observe the fasts associated with the Temple's destruction. Instead of answering directly, Zekhariah responds rhetorically, insisting that the Jews had never fasted for God's sake but for their own. In the continuation of chapters seven and eight, echoing a common prophetic motif, he goes on to underscore the priority of ethical behavior over fasting, and concludes with a messianic vision that foresees a time when the Four Fasts will be days of celebration.

While Zekhariah never directly answers the question posed to him - whether or not the Jews continued to fast during the Second Temple period becomes a subject of debate among medieval commentaries[20] - the larger implication is clear: Zekhariah's scathing rebuke is rooted in the assumption that it was legitimate for the community to accept the fasts upon itself in the first place (and that, upon the Temple's rebuilding, the community can therefore determine whether or not to abrogate the fasts). The phrase "the obligation of the fasts with their lamentations," then, seeks to rebut a potential objection to the legitimacy of Purim: if the prophet Zekhariah held that the Four Fasts had achieved binding status through communal acceptance, much the same may be said for Purim.

Still other readers of the the *Megillah* may have been perturbed by the seeming unfamiliarity of Purim's *mitzvot*. To take the case of *mishloah manot*, it is widely assumed that this practice is rooted in the unique events of the Purim narrative. Perhaps best-known in this vein is the view of R. Shlomo Alkabetz who, in his *Manot ha-Levi*, explains that the purpose of *mishloah manot* is to increase unity. This represents the opposite of Haman's intention, which was to declare the Jews a "scattered and dispersed" people (*Esther* 3:8).

Yet a close examination of the parallels between *Esther* chapter nine and *Nehemiah* chapter eight suggests that, in fact, *mishloah manot* was viewed at the time as a quintessential holiday activity. To review, *Sefer Nehemiah* depicts a stirring moment of mass repentance. On the first day of the seventh month, the recent returnees from Babylon to the Land of Israel hear the Torah read publicly. The community comprehends the radical extent of their ignorance, and they wish to mourn. Yet Ezra and the Levites insist that Rosh Hashanah is no day for sadness. In doing so, they echo not only the *Megillah*'s requirement of *mishteh* [feasting], but also *mishloah manot*:

> [Ezra] further said to them, "Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks *and send portions* [*ve-shilhu manot*] to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Lord is the source of your strength." The Levites were quieting the people, saying, "Hush, for the day is holy; do not be sad." Then all the people went to eat and drink *and send portions and make great merriment*, for they understood the things they were told. (*Nehemiah* 8:10-12)

At first glance, the inclusion of *mishloah manot* in this passage seems curious. What association is there between this *mitzvah*, generally associated with Purim, and Rosh Hashanah? The generic language of the text - "for today is holy to the Lord" - suggests that there need not be a specific connection between the first of Tishrei and sending portions. Instead, as Malbim and Ralbag assert, sending portions is an integral part of typical Jewish holiday observance. Returning to the *Megillah*, the implication of this intertextual parallel seems clear: at least during that time period, *mishloah manot* was deemed an important part of any Jewish holiday. In context, then, it is highly plausible that the Jews reading *Esther* might well have seen *mishloah manot* as carrying a rather traditional flavor.

We can similarly account for the presence of gifts for the poor as part of the institution of Purim. While not explicit in the passage in *Nehemiah* - we would hardly expect an obligation of charity on a day that is subject to the biblical prohibition against labor - *matanot la-evyonim* are a basic component of any biblical holiday. For while the terminology may be novel to *Esther,* the concept is anything but: the Torah itself links the holidays with the imperative to "leave the [crops] for the poor and the stranger" (Leviticus 23:22). In a similar spirit, the Torah urges one to celebrate the holidays with "your male and female slave, the Levite in your communities, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your midst" (Deuteronomy 16:11).

Further, the *Megillah*'s seemingly unusual emphasis on the celebration of the Jews "and all those that joined them" ["*ve'al kol ha-nilvim aleihem*"] (9:27) may be understood in this light: the *Megillah* merely mimics the theme set forward by the Torah, which charges that you "shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities" (Deuteronomy 16:14; see similarly 16:11). Accordingly, in formulating this

[18] For further discussion, see Rav Soloveitchik's analysis, summarized here.

[19] This depends on the controversy concerning whether the events of Purim transpired between the First and Second Temple, or after the Second Temple had been rebuilt. For a summary, see here.

[20] For a summary of the literature, see Dr. David Hanschke's discussion. See also a summary of Rav Soloveitchik's analysis here.

requirement, Maimonides invokes the language of *Esther*: "One is required to rejoice and be cheerful on those days, along with his wife, children, grandchildren, and all his dependents" ["*ve-khol ha-nilvim alav*"] (*Hilkhot Yom Tov* 6:17).

By reading *Esther* in relation to *Nehemiah* and *Humash*, we gain new perspective on the holiday's seemingly unique observances, which would have been quite familiar to the reader. Even as they may carry unique significance in relation to the Purim story, *mishloah manot* and *matanot la-evyonim* simultaneously cloak Purim in the traditional garb of Jewish holiday observance.

Not only does the *Megillah* advocate the traditionalism of the holiday's ritual observances, but it even casts its storyline in a mode that immediately recalls familiar stories of Jewish heroism. The parallels between *Esther* and the Yosef narratives are widely recognized and need not be repeated. *Esther* also echoes many of the central elements of the book of *Daniel*: Mordekhai and Esther's influential roles in the Persian court are reminiscent of Daniel's position in Babylon; wine plays a pivotal role in both books; and Hananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah's refusal to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's idol parallels Mordekhai's refusal to prostrate before Haman. It is less clear why the *Megillah* underscores these parallels. While numerous interpretations may be offered, in light of our larger thesis, it appears that *Esther* means to suggests that the Purim story is not novel. Quite the opposite: it follows the familiar narrative arc of other diasporic heroes that were widely-known to its readership.

Yet the *Megillah*, beyond leaning on wide-ranging intertextual clues to stake its claim to legitimacy, takes one final step. Returning to the parallels between *Esther* and *Zekhariah*, we may appreciate a final textual oddity. Toward the book's conclusion, *Esther* stresses that that Esther and Mordekhai promulgated "words of peace and truth" (9:30). What could this possibly mean? Similarly, the *Megillah* concludes by emphasizing that Mordekhai "sought good for his nation, and spoke peace to all his progeny" (10:3). Why all the talk of peace and truth?

While the commentaries suggest many interpretations for both phrases, it is striking that in the same chapters we previously cited, Zekhariah repeatedly calls for a return to precisely these values:

> Thus said the Lord of Hosts: Execute true justice; deal loyally and compassionately with one another. (7:9)

Later, he urges much the same:

> These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates. (8:16)

Finally, this leads to the fulfillment of the messianic vision:

> Thus said the Lord of Hosts: The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month shall become occasions for joy and gladness, happy festivals for the House of Judah; but you must love honesty and peace. (8:19)

It is no coincidence that in the space of just a few verses, particularly at its conclusion, the *Megillah* twice invokes this vision of peace and truth. The implication is that Esther and Mordekhai's leadership helps the Jews come closer to fulfilling the messianic vision of Zekhariah. The protagonists bring peace to the Jewish people by fending off anti-Semites and advocating on behalf of their brethren. What is more, by ensuring that their people are protected, and, through *mishloah manot* and *matanot la-evyonim*, that all Jews and communities feel included, Esther and Mordekhai advocate for justice and inclusion.

Taken altogether, the *Megillah*'s rhetoric suggests that precisely because Purim initially appears unorthodox, the text labors to root the holiday in well-trodden biblical precedent. Taking a step further, *Esther*'s conclusion implicitly transcends its defensive posture and goes on the offensive: Esther and Mordekhai not only draw on the precedent of *Zekhariah*'s fast days, but embody the ethical character that will usher in the messianic era. Properly appreciated, the *Megillah* suggests, not only is Purim legitimate, but it is a harbinger of the very qualities that will transform the Four Fasts into "occasions for joy and gladness."

A Purim Teaching for our Time: Malbim's Proto-Feminist Commentary on Esther

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In 1845, Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Mikhel Wisser, better known by his acronym and *nom de plume* 'Malbim,' published his first biblical commentary, on *Megillat Esther*. Malbim is often characterized as a conservative commentator who defended traditional rabbinic exegesis and the sanctity of biblical texts. Yet his underappreciated commentary on *Esther* also contains the seeds of a radical political hermeneutic that might even be described as "proto-feminist" because it explores the political roots and consequences of women's oppression. We are used to thinking of Esther as a heroine who saved her people, but Malbim's analysis goes beyond the role of any individual person to describe how it was, in his view, that the systematic disempowerment of women *in general* helped to create the political conditions for genocide in *Megillat Esther*. This is a shockingly modern sort of analysis for a commentator better known for his fierce opposition to religious reform in the lands he served as rabbi.

For Malbim, the *mise en scene* of *Esther* is Ahasuerus' meteoric rise to power and the political intrigue that would have accompanied such an upheaval. He notes, for example, that the biblical story begins just three years into Ahasuerus' reign, when he still would have been consolidating power, and cites a midrash that portrays Ahasuerus as a commoner who seized power.[21] This is not historical research. Instead, it is a form of biblical interpretation grounded in rabbinic exegesis and it needs to be appreciated in that vein.

Crucially for his account of gender politics in this book, Malbim adopts a midrash that portrays Vashti as a daughter of the supplanted royal house, suggesting that her marriage to Ahasuerus would have been a political matter contributing to the legitimacy of

[21] See *Esther* 1:3; *Esther Rabbah* 1:4.

his new regime.[22] This in fact is the heart of the story that Malbim wishes to tell, because it helps to make sense of the first two chapters of the book whose proliferation of details about drinking and life in the capital might otherwise have seemed superfluous. For Malbim, Ahasuerus' political dependence on his wife sets up a dynamic of murderous intrigue that reverberates through the book.

Political Prologue: "It's Good to be the King!"

In his somewhat lengthy prologue to the commentary, Malbim elaborates on two broad theories of government that would have been very familiar to his nineteenth century readers. In a limited or constitutional monarchy, he writes, royal power is constrained by law and by a conception of the common good. Sometimes the king even needs to demonstrate that he has received the consent of the governed. Not so the absolute or unlimited monarch, who rules by fiat as both lawgiver and king simultaneously. In Malbim's account—which he tries to illustrate through close reading of biblical and rabbinic texts—Ahasuerus seized power from a constitutional monarch but was set on absolutizing his rule through a series of very intentional stratagems that required him to sideline or eliminate his wife. Faced by the ancient rabbinic conundrum whether to portray Ahasuerus as a wise or a foolish king, Malbim decides from the outset to treat him as someone who knows what he wants and works deliberately to achieve his goals.[23]

This kind of excursus in political philosophy is unusual among rabbinic commentators, but it is crucial to Malbim's methodology, lending vital context to the plethora of small details on which he builds his interpretation. Why, for example, would Scripture devote so much attention to the lavish parties Ahasuerus held for his servants and subordinates throughout the whole third year of his reign? Malbim's answer is that no mere constitutional monarch could have opened the state coffers so brazenly for his own aggrandizement. Ahasuerus understood that people would be less likely to object to the precedent he was trying to set if they were included among its early beneficiaries.[24]

Why specify, furthermore, that Ahasuerus had invited three distinct groups to these parties: the nobles and princes of Persia, the nobles of the (conquered) provinces and ultimately "all the people who were present in Shushan the palace, both great and small?"[25] As a commoner who had seized power in a large and centralized empire, Ahasuerus wanted to signal that the traditional Persian elites (who would have been most likely to challenge the legitimacy of his rule) had no more access to him than anyone else. Extending invitations to lowly servants conveyed to Ahasuerus' more privileged guests that "both great and small are equal before him for all are [merely] his servants."[26]

This flattening of the political structure may not have immediately weakened the Persian nobility but it would have stoked the fires of a fiercely populistic loyalty to the new king among the leaders of the disenfranchised, non-Persian provinces and the lower Persian classes who had been systematically excluded from most of the benefits of the constitutional—but colonial and deeply class conscious—state Ahasuerus had come to dominate.

Malbim certainly gives signs in his commentary of a preference for constitutional monarchy, yet he implicitly lays the groundwork for a critique of both constitutional and authoritarian regimes. Ahasuerus' attention to the provinces and to the servant class of Shushan could not have been successful unless there were already deep reservoirs of disaffection throughout the empire. Malbim never says this in so many words, but the pretense of a state governed by law for the common good may not have appealed so much to the provincial nobles chafing under imperial rule or the underclass of Shushan whom Ahasuerus had been so careful to flatter. Malbim's deep personal intuition for the workings of power in social contexts makes him a profound commentator on a book devoted to the intrigues of a royal court, but these same intuitions sometimes seem to outstrip his commitment to critical analysis of the world beyond the text.

Every Man Should be Master in his Own House: On Misogyny and Power

Vashti, we have seen, poses a special problem for Ahasuerus. She is at once the key to his legitimacy in the eyes of the traditional Persian elites and the most distressing evidence that his independent power is limited. So, at the end of his long populist campaign, when his heart was "merry with wine," Ahasuerus cleverly sends his chamberlains to summon the queen.[27] Sending his own servants rather than those who normally attend upon her was meant, in Malbim's reading, to signal his disrespect. If she answered his call it would be a symbolic victory for him and if she refused it might present him with an opportunity to move against her. Directly attacking her dignity as the daughter of a royal house, he he also summons her "to show the people and the princes her beauty," as if her attractiveness outstripped the importance of her royal person and pedigree.[28] By demanding that she appear wearing her royal crown, according to one well-known midrash, the king went so far as to intimate that she should appear before the gaze of his servants, dressed in *nothing else*.[29]

Malbim pointedly ignores several popular midrashim that attribute Vashti's refusal of the king's summons to mere vanity because she had developed a skin disease or even (miraculously) grown a tail.[30] I consider it a scandal of Jewish education that these fanciful midrashim belittling Vashti are often the only ones taught to children, while more substantive readings like Malbim's are ignored. Ever the close reader, Malbim notes that Ahasuerus called for "Vashti the Queen," putting her private name first to emphasize that her status was derived from marriage to him while she responds as "Queen Vashti," emphasizing that her own rank came first.[31] Read this way, her refusal of the king's summons constitutes a self-conscious act of *political* resistance because she understood what her husband was trying to accomplish at her expense.

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[22] See, for example, *Esther Rabbah* 3:14.

[23] See *Megillah* 12a.

[24] Malbim on *Esther* 1:4.

[25] *Esther* 1: 5.

[26] See *Esther* 1:3-5.

[27] *Esther* 1: 10-11.

[28] *Esther* 1: 11; *Esther Rabbah* 3: 14.

[29] *Esther Rabbah* 3: 13-14.

[30] See *Megillah* 12b.

[31] See *Malbim on Esther* 1: 9.

Baiting Vashti in this way would have been a dangerous strategy for Ahasuerus because the Persian nobility was likely to side with her in any serious dispute. Malbim thinks that Ahasuerus still loved her and did not wish her condemned to death but that his advisor Memukhan ultimately prevailed with the argument that Vashti's public challenge had to be treated as an offense of the state if Ahasuerus' plans for unlimited government were ever to be achieved.[32] Her offense should not, moreover, be framed in the context of Ahasuerus' political struggle with the last remaining representative of the old royal house but as a *woman's* rebellion against her husband, thus implicating every man in the desire to see her put in her place. Ahasuerus' cabinet would have to work quickly, because Malbim assumes that both Vashti and the Persian noblewomen with whom she had feasted had already seen through this subterfuge and might work to subvert it.[33] So they released a royal edict banning her from the king's presence almost immediately before following up with seemingly unrelated letters "to every province according to its writing and to every people according to their language that every man should be master in his own house and speak according to the language of his people."[34]

On the level of political rhetoric, Ahasuerus' executive order must have seemed a master stroke because of all that it simultaneously accomplished. Malbim thinks that by emphasizing that the letters were to be sent in the diverse languages of the polyglot empire, Ahasuerus was once again stoking popular resentment against the Persian elites who used to demand that all state business be conducted in Persian.[35] Apparently, "cultural diversity" can be coopted by authoritarian state power as easily as any other ideology under the right circumstances. More importantly, Ahasuerus' letter would have distracted people from his naked power grab by disguising it as the utterly ordinary resentment of a husband whose wife has defied him, guaranteeing the support of other men who feared the rebellion of their own wives in turn. Could he have found a more potent strategy for harnessing their resentment? In the 1970's it began to be said in some quarters that "the personal is political," but Ahasuerus' letters represent the utter suppression of that frame by insisting that the political is merely personal. Whether or not she was finally executed—as Malbim assumes—Vashti's resistance had been nullified.

On Purim and Genocide

One of the extraordinary features of Malbim's commentary is how little it initially focuses on the fate of the Jews. For Malbim, that fate rested not just on divine providence but on an exceedingly subtle reading of contemporary events by social actors holding a wide a variety of different political aspirations. Ahasuerus had no particular brief against the Jews, according to Malbim, but was ultimately manipulated by his advisor Haman the Amalekite, who bore Mordekhai a personal and hereditary grudge. Without mentioning who the targets of his wrath would be, Haman tells the king that "there is a certain [unnamed] people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom . . . who follow their own laws and do not obey the king."[36] Haman convinces Ahasuerus that extermination of the Jews will be welcomed by all the nations of the empire whose support he has been seeking. Driven by hatred rather than financial gain, Haman even offers to fill the king's coffers with the Jews' money rather than keeping it for himself.

Astoundingly, Ahasuerus turns down Haman's offer of booty because his own intentions at this point are merely to "improve his nation by destroying the harmful religion and its vices."[37] One may easily perceive here an echo of Malbim's critique of reformers and state agents in his own day who claimed to be interested in public morality or "progress" but whose efforts were often construed by traditionalists as efforts to assimilate or destroy the Jewish people.[38] Be that as it may, Ahasuerus ultimately accedes to Haman's request and once more sends letters throughout the land allowing the Jews to be exterminated.[39] Later, when Esther intervenes with the king on her people's behalf yet a third group of letters must be sent, giving the Jews the right to bear arms in self-defense.[40]

So where does this leave us? A curious Talmudic text suggests that "had it not been for the first set of letters" in *Megillat Esther* "no remnant or remainder of the Jews would have survived."[41] As Rashi glosses, the "first set of letters" refers to the one that mandated male control of the household in the first chapter of *Esther*. The rule that every man should "speak the language of his own people" is taken to mean that women who marry a man from a different ethnic or linguistic group than their own must limit themselves to speaking in their husbands' language.[42] But such a decree was so clearly daft and unenforceable that it cast all of the king's subsequent decrees into disrepute.[43] When the letter about exterminating the Jews later arrived, most people dismissed it as another laughable farce, and this allowed the Jews to mount a successful defense against the relatively few who did attack them.

Malbim and a few other interpreters have a different reading, whose direct source in rabbinic literature (if there is one) I have not yet been able to identify. Malbim's version, which he attributes without specific citation to "our sages" reads "if it were not for the first set of

[32] *Malbim on Esther* 1: 16.

[33] See *Esther* 1:9 and *Malbim on Esther* 1: 17.

[34] *Esther* 1: 19-22.

[35] *Malbim on Esther* 1: 22.

[36] *Esther* 3: 8.

[37] See *Esther* 3: 11, in which the king gives Haman the treasure to do with as he sees fit, as well as Malbim's comment on that verse.

[38] Malbim would not have been alone in that regard. See for example Barukh Halevy Epstein's account of rabbinic interactions with the Jewish reformer, Rabbi Max Lilienthal, in his memoir *Mekor Barukh: Zikhronot Me-Hayyei Ha-Dor Ha-Kodem* Vol. IV, chs. 43-44 (Vilna: Rom Publishers, 1928), 1850-1927. For an analysis of this and other relevant sources, see Don Seeman and Rebecca Kobrin, "'Like One of the Whole Men': Learning, Gender and Autobiography in R. Barukh Epstein's Mekor Barukh," *Nashim* 2 (1999): 59-64.

[39] *Esther* 3: 12-14.

[40] *Esther* 8: 10-14.

[41] *Megillah* 12b; also see *Pesikta Zutrata* (*Lekah Tov*) *Esther* 1:22.

[42] Rashi on *Esther* 1: 22. See similarly *Hakhmei Zarfat* cited on the same verse in *Torat Hayyim: Megillat Esther 'im Perushei Ha-Rishonim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 2006), 48. See *Esther Rabbah* 4: 12 and additional sources cited by *Torah Shelemah Megilat Esther* (Jerusalem: Noam Aharon Publishers, 1994), 50n.187.

[43] See Rashi to *Megillah* 12b s.v. *Iggerot Rishonot*.

letters, the second set could never have been fulfilled."[44] On this reading, the second set of letters were the ones permitting the extermination of the Jews, and the meaning is that Haman could never have conspired to kill the Jews in a constitutional monarchy.[45] The first set of letters disempowering women paved the way for Ahasuerus to become an absolute monarch and it was only under *those* conditions that a genocide of the kind Haman plotted could ever have a chance to succeed. To put it simply, the murder of Vashti and the suppression of women throughout the empire paved the way for Haman's projected Holocaust.

Though this is bound to be provocative, I have referred to Malbim's commentary on *Esther* as proto-feminist for a few reasons. First, because this commentary demonstrates how the systematic domination of women served broader imperial interests and was also enhanced by blurring the relation between patriarchal domination of households and despotic domination of the empire. Under Ahasuerus, women (starting with Vashti) had to be controlled or neutralized so that the household could serve as a model for the state, even while the state claimed to be modeled on the structure of households. This sort of mutually reinforcing dynamic or political cosmology is by now a commonplace of social analysis, but it wasn't in 1845.[46]

Malbim shows, moreover, that the political project of misogyny formed a necessary prelude to authoritarian rule and genocide. Jews reflecting on Purim ought to reflect as well on the ways in which the fate of the Jews cannot help but be embedded in larger structures of power that also determine the fates of other groups, including women and all those other peoples (some of them also quite vulnerable) who also inhabit our necessarily imperfect political regimes. Though the *Megillah* and its commentators certainly assume a transcendent significance to the travails of Israel, a reader shaped by Malbim's commentary would also have to conclude that those travails can *only* be understood by reference to a much broader canvas of interlocking stories, political calculations, and tribulations suffered by others. "Without the first set of letters," Malbim reminds us, "the second set of letters could never have been fulfilled."

Concluding Thoughts

Malbim's interests in the commentary on *Esther* bear witness more to his thoughtfulness as a reader than to any explicit political project, and that is why I only referred to his commentary, in all fairness, as *proto*-feminist. I do not mean to imply that he would himself have subscribed to any of the the much later developments in feminist thought or practice, including those that seem to be at issue in contemporary Orthodox Jewish life. Given his attitude toward Reform in his own day, it would be odd to portray him as a hero of religious reforms in ours. But this is actually one of the reasons that his commentary on *Esther* is so profoundly unsettling. He isn't trying to sell anything but a better reading, grounded in rabbinic sources, and a more nuanced appreciation for the dynamics of power. The fact that this leads him to an unprecedented analysis of gender politics in Scripture tells me that this is a discussion we ought to be having no matter what our stance on hot-button contemporary issues might be. At the very least, it will make us better students of Torah.

This is not a small thing. Does the fact that Malbim presaged later developments in gender theory and linked his observations about gender and politics to Scriptural interpretation mean that we can begin to have non-defensive conversations about these matters in religious settings? That our sons and daughters might be able to confront the complex realities of power in their own lives as well as Tanakh rather than focusing almost exclusively on fanciful midrashim about Vashti's physical deformities? Or that we might recapture the importance of political philosophy to almost any kind of intelligible conversation about sacred Scripture? That may be a lot to rest on the back of one short commentary on a biblical book, but I am hardly deterred. Purim, after all, is a holiday of miracles.

Malbim learned about the dynamics of power on his own flesh in the decades following the publication of his commentary on *Esther*.[47] In 1859 he became chief rabbi of Bucharest in Romania but was denounced as an enemy of the state because of his fierce opposition to various reforms and assimilationist policies. Moses Montefiore intervened to save him from being sent to prison but he was exiled and forced to seek redress from the Turkish government in Constantinople. He spent the remaining twenty years of his life embroiled in controversies with reformers and state authorities in a variety of cities across Europe and finally died in 1879 while traveling to assume a new rabbinical post. A committed traditionalist of deep learning and broad intellectual horizons, Malbim can be read with profit today not just for the specific positions he took (these are inextricably tied to his time and circumstances) but for the habits of mind and spirit that writings like his commentary on *Esther* exemplify. Within a traditional frame, he sought more complex and contextually coherent understandings of Jewish literature and Jewish life. At a moment when many are struggling with renewed passion to comprehend the intersection of different potential forms of oppression (racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny) and also questioning the forms of political discourse in which more constitutional or more authoritarian trends might come to the fore of our national life, Malbim should be on the curriculum

[44] *Malbim to Esther* 1:22

[45] Ibid.

[46] For a few ethnographic treatments of the relationship between cosmologies of gender and state regimes, see, for example, Carol Delaney, *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Sally Cole, *Women of the Praia: Work and Lives in a Portuguese Coastal Community* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Rebecca J. Lester, *Jesus in our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[47] See Yehoshua Horowitz's entry on Malbim in *Encyclopedia Judaica* Vol. XI (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1971), 822-23.

Puritan Purim

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Cotton Mather had much to say on how women should behave. In fact, he had much to say on many topics, writing 469 books over his 65 years. As historian Mark Noll has quipped, Mather "never had a thought he felt was unworthy of publication." Mather's fittingly titled *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion, or, The Character and Happiness of a Vertuous Woman: in a Discourse Which Directs the Female-Sex how to Express, The Fear of God, in Every Age and State of their Life; and Obtain both Temporal and Eternal Blessedness*, was published in Boston in 1692. In it, the popular Puritan minister, accomplished scientist, prolific author, owner of the largest private library in the colonies, grandson of Massachusetts Bay Colony spiritual leaders Richard Mather and John Cotton, and son of Harvard President Increase Mather, laid out his vision for womanhood.[48] In his usage of biblical archetypes to describe the proper behavior of the ideal female (the very phrase "Daughters of Zion" is used in the Bible to connote Jerusalem and its inhabitants)[49] including maids,[50] wives,[51] mothers,[52] and widows,[53] Mather demonstrated a particular affinity for a rather surprising biblical character. While in his later *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) Mather used the precedent of Nehemiah, the Persian Jew who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in the time of the Second Temple, to describe Massachusetts Bay Colony governor John Winthrop's building the walls of New England ("our American Jerusalem"), here Mather found his prototype in the form of another Persian Jew, the beautiful and wise Queen Esther.[54] Despite his characteristic verbal gymnastics, however, Mather's attempt to fully appreciate Esther's heroism falls short.

In *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion*, a conduct and virtue manual, Mather, New England's most "intellectually and spiritually dynamic pastor" and the greatest North American scholar of his era,[55] brings up Esther multiple times. The first is in praise of the women of his era, whose "beautiful countenance" does not preclude their "good understanding." Such individuals follow in the ancient footsteps of biblical women including Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Esther, who possessed the same "benefits" of good looks and good insight and who simultaneously "feared God." Mather then invokes Esther (juxtaposed to a reference to the *Sotah* ritual) as paradigmatic for women, who should demonstrate resolve and integrity in the face of suspicious husbands, refusing to upset the patriarchal order:[56]

> She will even Abstain from all appearance of Evil; and as 'tis abominable unto her to Entertain the least groundless and causeless *Jealousie* of her Husband… She affects to be an *Esther*, that is, *A hidden One*. But if a foolish and forward Husband will wrong her, with unjust suspicions of her *Honesty*, she will thence make a Devout Reflexion upon her *Disloyalty* to God; but at the same time very patiently vindicate her *Innocency* to man; and the more *patiently* because the *Water of Jealousie* procures greater Blessings to those that have it Unrighteously and Abusively imposed upon them.

In a similar vein, in the same section, Mather again invokes Esther by taking the prototype one step further. Not only, as described above, does an "Esther" patiently and respectfully (as she is, after all, "a hidden one") disavow suspecting husbands of any suspicions they might have regarding her behavior, Esther also models for women their ability to inspire proper behavior in, and even provide salvation for, their husbands.

> Opportunities are those that a Woman *has* to bring over her Husband unto Real and Serious Godliness, and a Good

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[48] Never one to spare words (in his *Diary* he admits "I am exceedingly sensible that the Grace of Meekness is very defective in me"), Mather later published subsequent works on women, including *Elizabeth in Her Holy Retirement* (1710) and *Bethiah: The Glory which Adorns the Daughters of God* (1722), a sequel to *Ornaments.* Mather's visage, like his pen, was prolific. He was the first American whose portrait others bought and hung in their homes. See Rick Kennedy, *The First American Evangelical: A Short Life of Cotton Mather* (Grand Rapids, 2015), vi. Noll's remark about Mather appears in his *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, 1992), 86.

[49] E.g., Zekhariah 9:9 "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem."

[50] "She prudently avoids the reading of *Romances*, which do no less naturally than generally inspire the minds of young people."

[51] "She will therefore not be too much from home, upon concerns that perhaps to him are *unaccountable*; but if the angels do inquire, where she is, her Husband may reply, as once *Abraham* did, *my wife is in the tent.*"

[52] "'Tis possible, her *Children* may *Sin*; but this causes her presently to reflect upon the Errors of her own *Heart* and *Life.*"

[53] "The *Kindred* of her Expired Husband are also still Welcome and Grateful to her, upon *his account.*"

[54] While composing *Magnalia Christi*, a history of the founding of Massachusetts Bay Colony written in biblical style that described New England as a redemptive society, Mather took to wearing a skullcap and calling himself "rabbi." At the same time, he was composing a textbook geared towards converting Jews to Christianity. See Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History* (New York, 1989), 39-41. Louis H. Feldman argues that Josephus' *Jewish War* was a particularly influential influence on both Mather and his father in their historical writings and that Cotton took "an extraordinary interest" in Josephus, considering him "a kindred personality, full of soul-searching and very defensive about his actions, very similar to Paul, whose friend, Mather claims, interestingly without evidence, Josephus was." See Feldman, "The Influence of Josephus on Cotton Mather's *Biblia Americana*: A Study in Ambiguity," Shalom Goldman, ed. *Hebrew and the Bible in America: The First Two Centuries* (Hanover, 1993). Feldman describes Cotton Mather's desire to convert Jews to Christianity as "very nearly an obsession for him."

[55] Kennedy, 86; Hertzberg, 27.

[56] In the colonial era, obedience to one's husband was both a religious and legal requirement and the husband represented the household to the outside world, though on occasions wives acted as "deputy husbands" giving instructions to workers, negotiating with Native Americans, and settling accounts. See Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750* (New York, 1991).

> Woman, will *use* those Opportunities. An *Esther*, a Witty *Esther*, what can't she do with the most haughty Husband in the World?… If her Husband be a Carnal, Prayerless, Graceless man, she will not leave off her Ingenious Perswasions, till it may be said of him, *Behold, he Prayes!*… If her Husband be under the Power of any Temptation, she will do what she can to prevent his *Destruction*."

Mather, of course, was much concerned with preventing societal destruction. He played an active role in the hysteria that emerged in and around Salem, Massachusetts after local women were accused by young girls of witchcraft. The fallout from these accusations, an episode that became known as the Salem Witch Trials, resulted in the executions of 14 women and 5 men in the same year *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* was published.[57] Mather was a pillar of Puritan patriarchy. In *Ornaments* he even cites Ahasuerus' decree in Esther 1:20 that "all the Wives give to their Husbands Honour both to Great and Small" as properly demonstrating the "reverence" a wife should have for her husband. As Harvard historian and scholar of early America Laurel Thatcher Ulrich notes, women were thought to play an invisible role in history, "because their bodies impel them to nurture. Their job is to bind the wounds, stir the soup, and bear the children of those whose mission it is to fight wars, rule nations, and define the cosmos." As a contemporary of Mather put it in 1650 describing the unobtrusive, home-centered role women were expected to play, "Woman's the center & lines are men."[58]

And yet, Mather saw in the biblical Esther a woman of independent action to be admired. As scholar of religion Ariel Clark Silver notes, Mather's Esther is obedient while at the same time proactive. She is a "good conqueror" who obeys rules but is spiritually independent of her husband, providing him with salvation. Looking past figures in the Christian tradition including Mary, Mather offered his fellow Puritans a heroine from the Hebrew Bible who modelled a willingness to stay faithful unto death, overcome challenges and adversity, and provide salvation for others. For his era, this emphasis on Esther - a figure from a story largely marginal to Christians - coupled with his very interest and concern for the inner spiritual lives of women, made Mather rather unique - one might say he was progressive in positioning Esther as a proto-feminist.[59]

Ornaments was not the last time Mather would meditate on Esther. His magnum opus, *Biblia Americana*, the first biblical commentary written in America, which ran a very Mather-ian 4,500 pages and which he worked on from 1693 until his death in 1728, recapped the story and provided the scholarly interpretations current in Mather's time. In it, Mather cites, among his many sources, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, Mekhilta, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Zohar, Onkelos, Seder Olam Rabbah, Saadiah Gaon, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Nahmanides, Moses of Coucy, Gersonides, Bahya ben Asher, Abravanel, and Seforno, remarking that "the writings of the rabbins [sic] are often very helpful to us."[60] In comments ranging from why Mordekhai did not bow down to Haman,[61] to how the myrrh was utilized by the virgins in Ahasuerus' harem,[62] to how Esther could ask the Jews to fast for three days straight,[63] to the "miraculous" timing of Haman's arriving before Ahasuerus when the king was unable to sleep,[64] to the custom of reacting to the mention of Haman's name during the reading of the Megillah on Purim,[65] Mather, as always, had much to say. Strikingly, however, very little centered on Esther herself. While Mordekhai and Ahasuerus' actions and intentions are elaborated upon in Mather's retelling (Mordekhai "exhorted [the Jews] unto Fasting, and Humiliation, and Repentance, & to follow the Example of the Ninivites," and Ahasuerus, upon seeing Haman fall upon Esther's bed, "turned every thing to the worst Sense, and made the Posture of his Petition but the Aggravation of his Crime"), Esther

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[57] The degree of involvement has been subject to much scholarly debate stemming from the work of Robert Calef, a contemporary of Mather's whose decade-long negative portrayal of the latter, eventually published in a book, colors the modern popular perception (inspiring, for example, Mather appearing in Marvel Comics as a scowling villain wearing a green cape). Mather's recent biographer Kennedy notes how Cotton did not support the push to swiftly execute the accused witches, and was a kindly figure who often visited prisons, hosted countless visitors, including a young Benjamin Franklin, in his vast study, and even housed some of the young women who claimed to be possessed by demons in his own home in an effort to cure them. Per Kennedy, Cotton never attended the trials, though he did preach at one of the executions, and wished to err on the side of leniency with the "witches." "If Cotton's advice had been followed [during the trials], it is safe to assume that matters in Salem would have turned out better" (63). In the words of Feldman, "Cotton Mather has had a bad press."

[58] Ulrich, *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History* (New York, 2007), xxi. The title of Ulrich's book stems from a phrase she coined in an article in a 1976 edition of *American Quarterly* that surveyed the literature about women in Mather's era. The phrase was then tweaked (with "seldom" replaced by "rarely") and popularized by journalist Kay Mills, who used it as an epigraph in her history of women in America *From Pocahontas to Power Suits*.

[59] See Ariel Clark Silver, *The Book of Esther and the Typology of Female Transfiguration in American Literature* (Lanham, 2018), 32-36.

[60] Feldman, 143-144.

[61] "It is not easy to find reason for *Mordecai*'s refusing to pay unto *Haman* the Respect which he required & exposing his whole Nation to an Extirpation…. Probably it was because *Haman* was the race of the *Amalekites*, and under the Curse denounced by God upon that Nation; and therefore, he thought it not proper to give that Honour unto him."

[62] "*Myrrhe*, from whence not only a Noble Oyl [oil] was drawn, but being beat unto a Powder, such a Fumigation was made with it."

[63] "*Josephus* understands it as only an Abstinence from Delicacies, and a Contentment with Hard & Coarse Fare." For an analysis of Mather's extensive usage of Josephus, see Feldman, 122-155.

[64] "Haman should come in at the very Nick of Time, & so determine the Honour, and be made the Instrument of it [ch. 6]; This was from the *Keeper of Israel*, who *never slumbers nor sleeps*! [Psalm 121:4]."

[65] "The Book of *Esther* is read in all their Synagogues: & when the Name of *Haman* occurs, they clap their Hands, and cry out, *Let his memory perish*."

as an actor in her eponymous tale is *a hidden one*, meriting only the mention that "Her Beauty was extraordinary."[66]

This interpretation of Esther and the legacy of her actions, however, misses the true significance of her story. When Esther is called upon by Mordekhai, it is not, as Mather offers in his *Ornaments of the Daughters of Zion*, to prevent the destruction of her husband, but to risk everything to provide salvation for her nation. And she does so despite the danger approaching her husband, to whom she is subject, presents.[67] As Mordekhai states in his only recorded words in the entire *Megillah*:

> Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis. (4:13-14)

Esther the Persian, who until this point hid her Jewish identity, is called upon to save her people as they stand on the precipice of destruction. She is to be Haddasah once more. As *The New York Times* ethicist Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, "identities work only because, once they get their grip on us, they command us, speaking to us as an inner voice; and because others, seeing who they think we are, call on us, too."[68] It is Mordekhai's beseeching Esther to plead on behalf of her people (4:8), and the courage demonstrated by Esther in entering the king's throne room unannounced and revealing her identity to Ahasuerus at her party, that lead to the salvation of the entire nation.[69] Contra Cotton Mather's reading, it is the destruction of Mordekhai and the Jewish people that Esther prevents, not that of her husband.

In 1912, two hundred and twenty years after Cotton Mather published *Ornaments for the Daughters of* Zion, thirty-eight Jewish women, led by fifty-two-year-old Henrietta Szold, gathered in Harlem, New York on Purim day.[70] These women, sensing they were living in an historical era of Jewish national significance, gathered to found a new organization dedicated to promoting Zionism in America and improving the health and welfare of their brethren in Palestine. As political scientist Samuel Goldman has documented, staking a position rather unique among Christians of the time, Cotton Mather's father, Increase Mather, "never wavered in his conviction that God's promise to restore the Jews to their ancient homeland would one day be fulfilled."[71] With the flowering of the eventual State of Israel in sight, these women evoked the biblical figure whose dedication to her people inspired their own efforts in ensuring Jewish national survival. They, after some time, decided to name their organization Hadassah. In what can best be described as historical coincidence with a sprinkling of divine humor not unlike the events of *Megillat Esther* itself, the women had changed the organization's name from what they had agreed upon that Purim day. The original name for Hadassah, the charitable women's organization now 330,000 U.S. members strong? Daughters of Zion.

[66] Citations from Harry C. Maddux and Reiner Smolinski (ed.), *Biblia Americana: America's First Bible Commentary. A Synoptic Commentary on the Old and New Testaments. Volume 4: Ezra-Psalms* (Heidelberg, 2013), 139-166. For an extensive discussion of the sources Mather drew upon, particularly in his discussion of Mordekhai's refusal to bow, see Introduction, 3-7.

[67] For an elaboration of Esther's identity evolution, see Joshua A. Berman, "*Hadassah Bat Abihail*: The Evolution of Object to Subject in the Character of Esther," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120:4 (2001): 647-669.

[68] *The Lies that Bind – Rethinking Identity* (New York, 2018), 218.

[69] See Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (Sheffield, 1995) for a discussion of how the Greek translations of Esther emphasize God's historical relationship with the Jewish people in their telling of the story.

[70] For more on Szold's story see Pamela S. Nadell, *America's Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today* (New York, 2019), Mishael Zion, *Esther: A New Israeli Commentary* (Jerusalem, 2019), 67.

[71] *God's Country: Christian Zionism in America* (Philadelphia, 2018), 14. Goldman notes that Cotton "initially echoed his father's arguments about the salvation of all Israel, but eventually concluded that the Jews had no further part to play in God's design." (41)