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LEHRHAUS ON CAMPUS, CURATED BY THE LEHRHAUS CAMPUS FELLOWS, COMPILES ARTICLES THAT ADDRESS THE INTERESTS AND NEEDS OF TODAY'S UNIVERSITY STUDENTS. PLEASE READ AND, MOST IMPORTANT, JOIN THE CONVERSATION ON YOUR CAMPUS!

THREE IN ONE: CREATION, EXODUS, AND EQUALITY

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Introduction: Why Observe the Shabbat?

Of all the questions one might ask about Judaism, the rationale for Shabbat observance would seem to be about the easiest. One's instinct is to simply cite the text of the fourth commandment (Exodus 20:10), which contemporary observant Jews repeat every week in the *Kiddush* before the second Shabbat meal:

> "Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it … because for six days, God made the heavens and the earth … and he rested on the seventh day. That's why God blessed the Shabbat and He sanctified it."

This idea—that Israel rests because God rested after creating the world—is bolstered by two additional texts repeatedly recited in the contemporary liturgy: the first creation narrative (Genesis 1-2:3), where the Shabbat is the climax of the creation process; and the covenantal passage whereby continuous Shabbat observance is described as a sign between God and Israel that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh (Exodus 31:16-17).

Matters are not so simple, however. This week, Jews throughout the world will hear a very different rationale for the Shabbat, as expounded by Moses in his recalling of Sinai one generation later:

> Keep the Shabbat day to sanctify it … so that your slave and your maidservant rest just like you; and you will come to remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God took you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. That's why God commanded you to make the Shabbat day (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

Let us put aside for the moment two important differences between the two renderings of the fourth commandment—the opening word ("Keep" versus "Remember") and the specific target of the rationale (why *God* blessed and sanctified the Shabbat versus why *Israel* is enjoined to "make" the Shabbat) and focus instead on the two-part rationale Moses provides here for Shabbat observance: (a) the suspension of the status difference between master and servant; and (b) commemoration of the Exodus process.[1] Two obvious questions come to mind:

1. What does the Shabbat have to do with the Exodus?
2. How can Moses provide a different rationale here in Deuteronomy from the one God Himself provided in Exodus?

In considering the first question, it is important to recognize that later books of the Hebrew bible cite *only* the connection between Shabbat and the Exodus (Ezekiel 20:10-12; Nehemiah 9: 13-15), and it is a connection that is reinforced in contemporary liturgy (see the Friday night *kiddush* and the *Dayenu* poem sung during the Passover *seder*). But if recognition of the link between Shabbat and the Exodus is well-attested, that just begs the question of what this connection is.

As for the inconsistency in the rationales provided, this issue is somewhat allayed by the fact that Moses never claims to be quoting from God at Sinai, and that much of Deuteronomy is an exercise in "complementary reapplication," whereby Moses provides a different

[1] In his *Guide for the Perplexed* (2:31), Maimonides argued that the reference to the Exodus is meant merely to accompany the first part of the rationale, which is primary. Nahmanides (*ad loc.*) disagrees, and there is strong textual support for the latter position. In particular, while six commandments in total are discussed in Deuteronomy as commemorating redemption from Egyptian slavery, and each of these commandments pertain to limiting the pernicious effects of social hierarchy, only two—Passover (16:3) and Shabbat—are discussed as commemorating the Exodus process itself. The other four are: (a) freeing the slaves at the sabbatical year (Deuteronomy 15:13-16); (b) including slaves, Levites, strangers, orphans, and widows in the Shavuot service (Deuteronomy 16:10-12); (c) providing justice to the stranger and orphan (Deuteronomy 24: 17-18); and (d) allowing the stranger, orphan, and widow to gather harvest leftovers (Deuteronomy 24: 20-22).

perspective on earlier issues and events—one that is geared to an audience who are soon to be entering the land to settle and conquer it without the benefit of his leadership and God's constant presence and providence.[2] But again, that just begs the question of how the two-part rationale provided in Deuteronomy is a complementary reapplication of the rationale provided in Exodus.

And if our questions were not hard enough, consider three puzzles concerning the seemingly obvious idea that we are enjoined to observe Shabbat "because" God did:

a. The creation of the world is a historical event of equal significance to all creatures. As such, it is unclear why it should be the basis for a covenantal commandment given only to Israel, as emphasized in Exodus (31:11-17). By contrast, if the Shabbat is anchored in the special experience of the Exodus, a particularistic command would make more sense.[3]

b. How does Israel know that "for six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth … and He rested on the seventh day" (Exodus 20:10)? Nowhere is it attested that the Israelites knew the stories of Genesis. And if indeed they did, they might be struck by the fact that the agent behind the seven days of creation is *Elohim* ("the higher powers" acting in the singular) in Genesis (1-2:3) whereas according to Exodus (in both 20:10 and 31:17), it is "the Lord" (denoted by the four-letter Tetragrammaton) who is said to have worked for six days and rested on the seventh.

c. Finally, it is also unclear how the fact that God rested on the seventh day of creation explains why Israel must rest. God didn't rest *every* seven days, after all. And even if He had, why must human beings—and Israel in particular—follow His example?

In sum, not only it is puzzling why each of the renderings of the Decalogue provides a different historical grounding for the Shabbat, each of the historical rationales is puzzling on its own. How can we unlock these puzzles?

I argue that the key is to recognize that each of the rationales refers to *the very same historical event*: the first Shabbat observed by Israel. I will suggest that this first Shabbat—which sets the template for all future Shabbatot—should be regarded as three complementary experiences in one. It is at once the climax of the Exodus, a special encounter with God as creator of the world and active parent of mankind, and a paradigmatic experience of social equality before God. Once we appreciate how these three themes are powerfully intertwined in the first Shabbat, the complementarity between the two Decalogues' treatment of the Shabbat is abundantly clear; and it also becomes evident why each rationale is appropriate for its time.[4]

Key to Unlocking the Puzzles: When was Shabbat Introduced?

In his beautiful essay *Sabbath: Day of Eternity*, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan provides the following, quite straightforward answer to our first question:

> How do we know which day was the Sabbath? Who counted it from the time of Creation? The answer is that G-d Himself revealed the exact day of the Sabbath in giving the Manna.

Following the lead of several commentators and consistent with contemporary academic scholarship, Kaplan bases his observation on the fact that the seven-day week was a radical innovation in the ancient world, observed only by Israelite/Jewish society. As such, a key objective of the Torah is to describe the introduction of the seven-day week to the world. But this momentous event *did not* occur in Genesis. After all, there is no attestation that the characters in Genesis were aware of the seven-day week, nor is there any indication that Adam and Eve were made aware of God's "sabbathing" on the seventh day of creation (Genesis 2:1-3).

So, when were human beings introduced to the seven-day week? As Kaplan notes, this occurred a month after the Israelites left Egypt, just after the miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds and a few weeks prior to their arrival at Sinai. In short, after complaining about a lack of food, God rains manna from heaven for five straight days. On the sixth day, the Israelites are startled to find a double portion even though they had previously learned that the manna could not be stored. The princes report this news to Moses, who explains: "This is what God has said: Tomorrow is a day of rest, God's holy Shabbat. Bake what you want to bake, and cook what you want to cook [today]. Whatever you have left over, put aside carefully until morning" (Exodus 16:23).[5] A few verses later, the story climaxes with a powerfully terse four-word verse: "And the people rested [sabbathed] on the seventh day" (16:20).

Shabbat as Climax of the Exodus Process

One might wonder whether this event—occurring more than a month after the departure from Egypt—should be considered part of the Exodus process. The textual proof is just two verses later. Here the manna is described as the "bread that I fed you in the desert when I brought you out of Egypt."

But one can go further: Not only is the Shabbat of the manna part of the Exodus, there are two reasons to think of it as the *climax* of the Exodus process.

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[2] "Complementary reapplication" is drawn from Joshua Berman's (whom I thank for reading a previous draft of this article) landmark new book *Inconsistency in the Torah*, where he provides convincing evidence that the Torah deployed literary conventions quite different from our own (some of which are well attested in the ancient near east). The central idea (which is echoed in Nahmanides' approach to Deuteronomy and in contemporary literary-theological approaches such as that advanced by Menachem Leibtag), holds that later treatments of the same issues and events complement earlier ones in offering a new perspective that is appropriate to new historical conditions.

[3] See Allen Friedman, "Unnatural Time: Its History and Theological Significance," *Torah-u-Madda Journal* 15 (2008-2009): 101

[4] Space constraints prevent full consideration of prior attempts to understand the Exodus and Deuteronomy rationales as complementary: that of Nahmanides (*ad loc.*); of Friedman, *op cit.*; and of Yoel Bin-Nun (*Zakhor ve-Shamor: Teva ve-Historiya Nifgashim be-Shabbat u-ve-Luah He-Hagim* (Alon Shvut: Tevunot, 2015) The approach developed here is broadly consistent with these prior efforts but is distinctive in arguing that the complementarity between the two rationales can be seen most clearly in how they come together in the first Shabbat.

[5] Translation drawn from Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's *The Living Torah* (Brooklyn: Moznaim, 1981).

First, recall how Pharaoh responds to Moses and Aaron's initial appeal on behalf of their brethren by unleashing a brutal system of oppression via what I have called his "anti-Shabbat" tantrum (Exodus 5:1-21). In response to Moses's bewildered entreaty to save the people, God asserts His intention to manifest Himself as "the Lord" by performing four types of intervention on Israel's behalf, all leading up to the ultimate goal: "so that you will know that I, the Lord am responsible for bringing you out from under Egyptian oppression" (Exodus 6:7).

But when did Israel come to acquire this knowledge? Well, there is only one other time in the Torah when the question of who is responsible for the Exodus is mentioned: at the opening to the story of manna and Shabbat! Somehow Moses intuits that when Israel complains about the lack of food, they are really doubting that God [as the Lord] is responsible for the Exodus (16:6), an interpretation that God then echoes (16:12).[6] And while it is not clear when precisely Israel finally assimilated the knowledge that God is their redeemer, the issue of Israel's knowledge of God (as responsible for the Exodus or more generally) is never again a problem in the rest of the Torah (though it requires the daily sacrifice (Exodus 29:46) and Shabbat observance (31:13) for reinforcement), thus implying that the knowledge was acquired via this episode.

Moreover, it appears that the lesson had not been fully acquired until after the two sins with the manna—storing it when Moses said it could not be stored, and searching for it on the Shabbat when Moses said it would not fall—had occurred. At that point (16:29), Moses emphasizes God as the source for the Shabbat—"observe that it is *God* Who has given you the Shabbat" and that the double portion of manna was given so Israel could rest in place on the seventh day. At that point, Israel is described as fulfilling this commandment perfectly: "And the people sabbathed on the seventh day" (16:30).

Drawing on my earlier article in this forum, we can also now see how the first part of Deuteronomy's rationale for the Shabbat—how the Shabbat suspends status barriers—is deeply intertwined in the second part of the rationale—the Exodus process. In short, the manna/Shabbat erects a regime that is the perfect antidote to the system of oppression that Pharaoh created. This contrast, which is signaled by a series of intertextual linkages, involves two primary elements: (a) whether or not Israel would have to work every single day or be afforded a day they could devote to God; and (b) whether they would be forced to compete with one another for life-sustaining resources.

Under Pharaoh's regime, each Israelite who succeeded in meeting his quota of straw hindered his brothers' ability to do so, thus risking punishment—punishment that was meted out by other brothers who were required to act as overseers at the lowest rung of the Egyptian hierarchy of oppression.

But under God's regime of the manna, there was no competition. Each individual miraculously received exactly what he required for his sustenance. And since the manna would not keep, there was no ability to amass wealth. On that first Shabbat, when the people's instincts for competing for their daily bread had abated, it was Israel's first taste of perfect equality. And if there is a narrative arc that begins with Pharaoh's anti-Shabbat regime and ends with the first Shabbat, the intermediate point in that arc is the commandment of the paschal lamb/Passover (Exodus 12:1-19). This is the first moment when Israel is first commanded to take action to recognize God, it is asked to take a "sabbath" from leavened bread (12:15), a seven-day holiday is introduced, and Israel is instructed to consume the paschal lamb in a manner that ensures that every individual gets a fair share (12:3-4). This is Israel's first taste of equality.

Finally, the Shabbat of the manna was the climax of the Exodus in another important way: it is the culmination of Israel's liberation from the rhythms of Egypt and from the ancient world's cosmology more generally. Nahum Sarna points out that when considered in the context of Egyptian culture—and its calendar that was based on the sun and the Nile—the commandment that Israel receives at the opening of the paschal/lamb commandment is a revolutionary statement of emancipation in two respects.[7] First, rather than privileging the sun over the moon, Israel is enjoined to create a calendar that raises the moon to the status of the sun (as in Genesis 1:14-19), intertwining them to create a lunisolar calendar.

Second, Israel's calendar was revolutionary ("without analogy in the ancient world (*Sarna, op cit.,* p.85) in that it was rooted in a historical event, thus marking a break from the cyclical conception of history that governed the ancient world and thereby providing the basis for a collective memory. And with the lunisolar calendar in place, the inauguration of the seven-day week marks an even more radical change in that it creates a rhythm for life that completely breaks free of guidance by celestial bodies.

And just as one can trace a narrative arc that begins with the nadir of Pharaoh's anti-Shabbat tantrum and culminates in Israel's knowledge of God and social equality at the Shabbat of the manna, one can also trace an arc that begins with an earlier nadir: the genocide decreed earlier by Pharaoh (Exodus 1:15-22). At Israel's darkest hour, Moses is born—a moment that is described in a way that evokes the creation of light by God ("and she saw that he was good") and with Israel's future leader successfully hidden for "three moons" (Exodus 2:2). The text thus hints of the beginnings of a revolution in each of the two senses noted by Sarna: a new beginning to history and a subversion of Egyptian cosmology. The climax of that revolution—the Shabbat—involves the introduction of a paradoxical institution into the world: one that marks time cyclically but where those cycles are unmoored from natural cycles and they point back to a revolutionary moment in human history.

Intertwining of Experience of Creation with Exodus

Now let us see how our approach to clarifying Deuteronomy's rationale for the Shabbat can be used for clarifying Exodus's rationale and how the latter is a complementary reapplication of the former. In short, in the experience of manna/Shabbat Israel also had a unique experience of creation, one that merged the relationship between God and human beings represented by the two stories of creation.

Observe first how in the seven days of the first manna/Shabbat, God essentially reenacted the first creation story [in which He acted as *Elohim*, the higher powers] by creating something entirely new every

[6] Arguably, God is lightly correcting Moses and Aaron here. Whereas Moses and Aaron seem to be implying that knowledge of God will be acquired in the "fall" of the quail that evening (16:6), God declares that it will occur only after Israel is satisfied from eating manna.

[7] Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 81-85.

day for six days, followed by a day in which He rested from creation. But whereas no human beings experienced the first week in its entirety, Israel had a unique (and repeated) experience of this one. Moreover, the climactic verse, "And Israel sabbathed on the seventh day" is an obvious intertextual reference to the central verb phrase of the description of the seventh day of creation: "And He [God] sabbathed on the seventh day" (Genesis 2:2). Note well: Israel is thus playing *God*. In this sense, we see here a fulfillment of God's objective for the creation of man in the first creation story—i.e., that man (uniquely among all the creatures) is created in the image of God. In the words of Rabbi David Fohrman, human beings are cast in the role of "little creators," and there is no more perfect example of such emulation than the first Shabbat.

Now let's observe how the experience of manna/Shabbat evoked the experience of Adam and Eve in the *second creation* story, in which human beings relate directly to God as children to parents. The main parallel is clear: God [as the *Lord* Elohim] made a special garden in which man did not need to "work by the sweat of his brow for his bread" (Genesis 3:19) but needed only to pick it from trees just as Israel needed only to collect the manna from the ground .[8] Moreover, just as God tested Adam and Eve by marking off one tree from which they were forbidden to pick fruit, God tested Israel by setting aside one day in which they could not collect manna (Exodus 16:4, 28; Deuteronomy 8:5). Note also how Israel reprises a key role of Adam's in the second creation story (Genesis 2:19-20)—naming God's creations. In this case, it is the manna that they name—the first time that the Torah depicts such a naming (all other naming is of a human being or of a place used by human beings for their purposes).

Finally, just as there was no reason for the first human beings to compete with others or any reason to accumulate property (consistent with a state of nakedness and a lack of self-consciousness), we have seen how this was true for Israel under the manna/Shabbat.[9] If the Torah's goal is to inculcate the revolutionary idea that "all men are created equal," it is not clear who has ever experienced such equality other than (a) Adam and Eve in Eden and (b) Israel during the Exodus (paschal lamb and manna/Shabbat).

Observe now how our three difficulties concerning the link between the Shabbat and creation have been resolved. First, while it is indeed odd to root a particularistic covenant in the universal moment of creation, we see how Israel did in fact have a unique experience of creation via the manna/Shabbat. The Shabbat is a sign of the creation of the world in seven days, and it is appropriately given to Israel as the people who had a special reenactment of that experience.

Second, while it remains unclear when Israel learned the story of creation and how they might have understood the fact that the *Elohim* of the seven days of creation is discussed as the Lord by Exodus, the question seems largely neutralized when we see how the experience of creation via the Shabbat/manna linked Israel with both creation stories. The experience of manna/Shabbat teaches Israel that the Lord/*Elohim* and the first and second creation stories are two sides of the same coin. And if the stories of creation were unknown prior to Sinai, the experience of Shabbat/manna would have made Israel quite a receptive audience.

Finally, the rationale that Israel should observe the Shabbat because God did seems more cogent now that we see that Israel already had the experience of imitating God in the first Shabbat. It may remain mysterious to us in just what way we are made in God's image, but having experienced what this means, Israel is surely better prepared to act on it. And the Shabbat is apparently a script for doing so.

Conclusion: Complementary Reapplication in the Rationales for the Shabbat

We have seen then how the rationale provided by Exodus—that Shabbat commemorates creation—beautifully complements the rationale provided by Deuteronomy—that Shabbat is intended to suspend status barriers and commemorate the Exodus. These rationales all point to the very same experience: the climax of the very first week in history, which was also the climax of the revolutionary emancipatory process of the Exodus and a unique vehicle for acquiring knowledge of God via a fusion of the roles cast for mankind in the two creation stories. Indeed, once we see how all three rationales point to the same climactic moment, one can see how Moses's re-articulation of the rationales for the Shabbat *enhances* our understanding of the meaning of the Shabbat.

But if the complementarity among the rationales for the Shabbat is now clear, what about "reapplication?" That is, why does Exodus link the Shabbat with creation whereas Deuteronomy focus on status barriers and the Exodus? The answer would seem to be that the first rationale was particularly important to stress during the Exodus whereas the second rationale bore emphasis when Israel was at the cusp of entering the land. The idea of God creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh would have been new to a new congregation of liberated slaves; it made sense to drive home this idea, a lesson that would be repeatedly reinforced by forty years of observing the seven-day week. By contrast, the first months after the Exodus was hardly a time when Israel needed to remember that it had just had an Exodus from Egyptian bondage and that the master-servant relationship was problematic. But these matters required special emphasis in the fortieth year, when Moses was addressing people who had never known slavery and would soon be taking up roles in an agricultural economy.

Note finally how this approach can also illuminate the other two variations between the two versions of the commandment of Shabbat.[10] The first rendition commands Israel to "remember" the

[8] Note that in describing His intention to provide manna, God says he is will "rain bread for you" (Exodus 16:5). Not only does God's provision of bread evoke the cessation of such provision after Eden, but the root used for rain—מטר—is first used in the Torah to describe the key divine act necessary for life in the garden to begin with, and it is directly linked with man's role in the garden (Genesis 2:5). Note also that throughout the Hebrew Bible, this verb is exclusively used to describe divine interventions into history to exact judgment—in the flood (Genesis 7:4), in the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24), in the plague of hail (Exodus 9:18), in Ezekiel's prophecy concerning Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38:21), and in Amos's prophecy concerning divine deployment of rain in reward and punishment (Amos 4:7).

[9] Relatedly, just as human hierarchy is not mentioned until after Adam and Eve are punished and then banished from Eden (3:16), the manna regime knows no hierarchy.

[10] The value of this approach is not unique to the commandment of the Shabbat. Consider another puzzling variation: whereas the tenth commandment in Exodus uses the word תחמד for "covet," the tenth commandment in Deuteronomy uses the term תתאוה, which is difficult to translate since it is reflexive, but might mean "yearn." As

Shabbat and provides a rationale for why God "blessed and sanctified" the Shabbat. By contrast, the second rendition commands Israel to "keep" the Shabbat and provides a rationale for why Israel must "make" the Shabbat.

Remembering the Shabbat, which is particularly important just a few weeks after the seven-day week was introduced by God into the world, dovetails with a focus on why Shabbat is blessed by God. But Shabbat is not just a gift from God, it is an institution that must be continually "made" by all of humankind.[11] This is reflected in the covenantal passage on the Shabbat (Exodus 31:11-17), which begins by emphasizing God's sanctification of Shabbat and ends with Israel's actions to "make" the Shabbat. And after an entire generation has grown up with its life governed by the manna/Shabbat as dictated by God and Israel prepares to enter a world in which it must earn its bread by the sweat of its brow, it is appropriate to stress that Israel must now "keep" the Shabbat and "make" it themselves. The training period (Deuteronomy 8:2-18) is over.

in the case of the rationales of Shabbat, it is unclear why different language is used and the commandments are puzzling on their own: how can one refrain from coveting or yearning? There is a good reason to think they are complementary though: the two verbs חמד and תאוה are quite rare words but they both appear in the very same verse, as pertains to the tree of knowledge: "And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and it was תאוה for the eyes and נחמד for gaining intelligence (Genesis 3:6)." While one might not recognize it if only one of the two terms was deployed for the tenth commandment, the deployment of both terms strongly suggests that if we want to understand this commandment, we need to ponder what Adam and Eve did wrong. One might also suggest that תאוה is more appropriate in Deuteronomy because perhaps the key moment precipitating the downfall of the first generation of the Exodus (leading to the decree that they must die out before their children can enter the land) began through תאוה (Numbers 11:4, Deuteronomy 9:22). It is also possible to suggest that the key moment precipitating the downfall of Jacob's family began when Rebecca took Esau's חמדת (favorite) clothes and put them on Jacob, thus making it appropriate for Exodus to use that term.

[11] This can also illuminate why Moses inserts "as the Lord God commanded you" in Deuteronomy 5:11. Since the Shabbat would now be made by Israel rather than governed by God through the manna, Moses emphasized that Shabbat must be observed according to God's guidelines rather than what might seem right to human beings. Relatedly, Moses may have added the same phrase for the fifth commandment ("Honor your father and mother) as it reinforces the non-intuitive idea that God is above one's parents. By contrast, given that slavery destroys the natural respect that children have for parents, the wording in Exodus puts no limits on the commandment in a bid to restore the parent's natural authority.

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.[12] 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 his new regime.[13] 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

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

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

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.[14]

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.[15]

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?"[16] 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."[17]

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.[18] 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.[19] 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*.[20]

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.[21] 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.[22] 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.

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.[23] 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.[24] 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

[14] See *Megillah* 12a.

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

[16] *Esther* 1: 5.

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

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

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

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

[21] See *Megillah* 12b.

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

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

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

man should be master in his own house and speak according to the language of his people."[25]

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.[26]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."[27] 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."[28] 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.[29]

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.[30] 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.[31]

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."[32] 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.[33] But such a decree was so clearly daft and unenforceable that it cast all of the king's subsequent decrees into disrepute.[34] 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 letters, the second set could never have been fulfilled."[35] 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.[36] 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

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

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

[27] *Esther* 3: 8.

[28] 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.

[29] 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.

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

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

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

[33] 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.

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

[35] *Malbim to Esther* 1:22

[36] Ibid.

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.[37]

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*.[38] 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.

[37] 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).

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