

- Lindell (Page 1)
- Ben-Porat (Page 4)

KI TETZE

This week's *Lehrhaus Over Shabbos* is sponsored by
Terry and Gail Novetsky
in honor of their 35th Wedding Anniversary

YES, WE NEEDED ANOTHER MODERN ORTHODOX PRAYER BOOK: A REVIEW OF THE RCA SIDDIR

YOSEF LINDELL is a lawyer, writer, and lecturer living in Silver Spring, MD.

Introduction and History of the RCA Siddur

If anyone had asked me a year ago whether the Modern Orthodox community in the United States needed a new *siddur*, I would have said no. The turquoise covers of Koren Publishers' [siddur with the translation and commentary of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](#) stand out on many a synagogue bookshelf these days. Next to the Koren Sacks, one might find the Koren [Mesorat ha-Rav Siddur](#) with a commentary based on the thought of the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who was the twentieth century's foremost Modern Orthodox leader. There's even a Koren [Rav Kook Siddur](#), with a digest of the thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook. If none of these speak to the individual, there's also [Nehalel beShabbat](#), a *siddur* chock full of pictures meant to inspire *kavannah*, which has been endorsed by several progressive Modern Orthodox figures. And finally, the [ArtScroll Siddur](#) is still going strong. After more than thirty years, it remains the mainstay of Orthodox English-speaking synagogues worldwide, Modern Orthodox included.

And yet, last October, the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA)—a rabbinical group with strong ties to Yeshiva University and Modern Orthodoxy—released [Siddur Avodat ha-Lev](#), a new daily, Shabbat, and festival prayer book. Edited by Rabbis Basil Herring, Leonard Matanky, and Heshie Billet, among others, and distributed by Koren, it is the culmination of years of collaborative effort among RCA member rabbis and others. It positions itself as a “*siddur* for the twenty-first century,” (xvi)¹ with a new translation and commentary, a carefully researched text, and prayers that reflect the Modern Orthodox experience in particular.

¹ Thank you to Rabbis Jonathan Hefter and Avi Narrow-Tilonsky and Dr. Ted Rosenbaum for their helpful feedback on this article. All in-text citations, unless otherwise noted, are to the *RCA siddur*.

Siddur Avodat ha-Lev is actually the third in a line of RCA *siddurim*. The first is the 1960 [Traditional Prayer Book for Sabbath and Festivals](#), edited and translated by Rabbi David de Sola Pool of Congregation Shearith Israel, the well-known Spanish-Portuguese synagogue in Manhattan. This *siddur* does not include weekday services and contains little commentary other than brief introductions about the structure of particular services. Although the *siddur* is now largely forgotten, it generated controversy in its day because some found Rabbi de Sola Pool's translation to have taken too much poetic license.²

A generation later, in 1984, the RCA simply adopted the then-new *ArtScroll siddur* with a few minor modifications for its next edition. The [ArtScroll RCA edition](#), still widely used by Modern Orthodox congregations around the country, is identical to the regular *ArtScroll siddur* except for an introduction by Rabbi Saul Berman that replaces the introduction of Rabbi Nosson Scherman, and an additional page with prayers for the government of the United States and for the State of Israel.

The newest edition of the *RCA siddur* has been a long time coming. In 2009, the RCA [announced](#) that it was preparing a new edition of its *siddur* for publication that would be ready in time for its 75th anniversary in 2010. The *siddur* was to again be published by ArtScroll, but the RCA [promised several innovations](#) in its layout and content. But by 2013, the new *siddur* still had not been released, and the announcement vanished from the RCA's website. The *siddur* resurfaced in 2018, but is published by Koren now, not ArtScroll.

² Dr. Philip Birnbaum, whose [1949 siddur](#) was the ArtScroll of its day and captured much of the American market, penned a blistering critique of Rabbi de Sola Pool's translation in the Hebrew weekly *ha-Doar*. Birnbaum felt that Rabbi de Sola Pool was insufficiently literal and made several egregious mistakes. Philip Birnbaum, “Siddur Hadash Ba le-Medinah,” *ha-Doar* 40:6 (Dec. 9, 1960), 85-86. Dr. Birnbaum's essay elicited an equally forceful response by Rabbi Charles Chavel (ibid. pp. 87-90), and the virtuosic debate between the two men spanned several issues of *ha-Doar*. My thanks to Dr. Jesse Abelman for making me aware of this controversy.

Although like its two prior editions, the newest *RCA siddur* sports an all-black cover with gold lettering, it is little like its predecessors. For one thing, the text and layout are different. Also, although it hearkens back to the *de Sola Pool siddur* because, as noted on the copyright page, the translation is based on his, the translation has been thoroughly updated and modernized. Its extensive commentary has a Modern Orthodox bent, addressing issues such as women's prayer and the State of Israel. As I discuss each of these points below, it may become clearer why ArtScroll, a publisher known for its ties to the *haredi* and *yeshiva* world, might not have wanted to publish this *siddur*.

This review will focus on what makes the *RCA siddur* different from the Koren Sacks or the ArtScroll and how it is more consciously Modern Orthodox than prior *siddurim*. And although I believe that the new *RCA siddur* is a worthwhile addition despite the many *siddurim* already available, I will conclude with some logistical challenges to the *siddur's* widespread adoption.

Text and Layout

The new *RCA siddur* is distributed by Koren, but unlike the Koren Sacks and the other Koren *siddurim* I mentioned above, it uses its own distinctive text, font, and layout instead of adopting that of the [Hebrew Koren siddur](#). Although some aspects of its design reflect past Koren editions, not all of them do.

Unlike the Koren Sacks, which departed from [a more than one-hundred-year-old tradition](#) by placing the Hebrew text on the left hand page and the English on the right, the RCA retains the Hebrew on the right and the English on the left. Honestly, I've always found the Koren's decision to switch the Hebrew and the English hard to get used to. Further, the *RCA siddur's* fonts are plainer and less stylized than Koren's, making them easier to read. Also aiding readability is the fact that the RCA, unlike the Koren, arranges the prayers as paragraphs instead of formatting many of them as poetic verse.

Like the Koren and unlike the ArtScroll, the RCA notes the sources of biblical passages on the side of the page instead of in footnotes, which is helpful. But one design choice lifted from the Koren is less salutary: the use of razor-thin bible paper instead of thicker pages like the ArtScroll's which are easier to turn.

Unlike either the Koren or the ArtScroll, the RCA includes the full text of all five *megillot* (in Hebrew only), which allows one to use the *siddur* without needing another book on days when the *megillot* are read.

Another welcome change from the Koren and the ArtScroll is that the RCA places relevant laws of prayer on the page instead of in the back of the *siddur*. Some of the *halakhot* speak to useful matters that I have not seen addressed in a *siddur* before, such as how to pray on an airplane (avoid disturbing other passengers and daven in your seat if necessary) (236). [As others have already noted](#), the influence of the Rav looms large in the halakhic sections as it does elsewhere in the *siddur*.

Perhaps surprisingly, the *RCA siddur* makes minor changes to some familiar texts based on manuscript evidence or academic scholarship. For example, based on early medieval manuscripts, it considers, like the *Birnbaum siddur*, the words "*le-dor va-dor*" in *Modim* the beginning of a sentence: "**From generation to generation** we will thank You..." instead of the end of the prior sentence as in the ArtScroll and Koren *siddurim*: "You are the . . . Shield of our deliverance **from generation to generation**" (400). And in the poem

Kah Keli preceding *Musaf* for festivals, the RCA changes the words "*ve-todah ve-la-olah*" to "**ve-torah la-olah**" on the grounds that the received text is probably corrupt (826). (The commentary, quoting Dr. Bernard Septimus, a noted Jewish historian, explains that in the traditional text, the list of sacrifices in the poem—*todah, olah*, etc.—are a non-sequitur. The word "*torah*" on the other hand connotes that we hope that our recitation of "the torah of the sacrifices"—or in other words the sacrificial order—will be as pleasing to God as if we had offered the sacrifices in Jerusalem).

Translation

In its translation, the *RCA siddur* tries to balance fidelity to the Hebrew with common English usage (xxiv-xxv). While its translation is based on Rabbi de Sola Pool's, which is one of the less literal translations available, the RCA thoroughly revises it to favor plain meaning over poetry.

For example, in *Adon Olam*, Rabbi de Sola Pool translates the words "*ve-hu nisi u-manos li menat kosi be-yom ekra*," as "My banner, refuge, portion true, / My guide to whom my prayer is prayed" (de Sola Pool, 104) but the new RCA instead says "My banner and my refuge, / to Whom I will raise a cup on the day I proclaim my salvation," which is more literal but less poetic (19). (Of note, Rabbi Sacks has perhaps the most poignant rendering: "My banner and my safe retreat, / my cup, my portion when I cry" (Koren Sacks, 22)). Despite the fact that the RCA's approach to translation differs from Rabbi de Sola Pool's, it presumably used the de Sola Pool translation in order to maintain continuity with its original *siddur* and because it already had the rights to it.³

Yet, despite its tendency toward literal translation, the RCA is also more functional and less formal than ArtScroll in many instances. ArtScroll often slavishly preserves the Hebrew syntax, or word order, in its translations.⁴ One simple example: ArtScroll translates "*retzon yereav yaaseh ve-et shavatam yishmah ve-yoshe'em*" in *Ashrei* as "The will of those who fear Him He will do; and their cry He will hear, and save them" (ArtScroll, 69). This tracks the Hebrew precisely, but

³ There are places, however, where the RCA very nearly retains the translations in its original 1960 *siddur*. Many of the translations of the *hoshanot* for *Sukkot*, for example, follow a "free-form poetic rhyming scheme" (881, 883) by Rabbi de Sola Pool. In some of these translations, a backwards English acrostic matches a backwards Hebrew acrostic, but the order of the verses in English are rearranged entirely (e.g., 896). Among these translations are also ones closely based on those by, among others, the cultural Zionist writer [Israel Zangwill](#) (1864-1926) and the noted Hebrew translator and poet [Nina Salaman](#) (1877-1925). It is interesting that the RCA chose to retain these translations—the very ones that were criticized by Dr. Birnbaum in his 1960 review as being "not translations, but free imitations infused with expressions from another world" (Birnbaum, "Siddur Hadash," p. 85). But, as Rabbi Chavel pointed out in his response, they were only "used for *piyyut*, the saying of which is not halakhically significant" (Ibid., p. 88).

⁴ In the [introduction](#) to the [Gutnick Edition Chumash](#), a Chabad translation and commentary on the Torah, the editor Chaim Miller distinguishes his approach to translation from that of ArtScroll by noting, "We have also rejected the opposite extreme exemplified by Scherman, where the precise sequence of words within each verse is preserved, and loyalty to original Hebrew grammar has led to abnormal English usage" (xv).

leaves something to be desired in English. RCA has, “He does the will of those who fear Him, and He hears their cry and saves them,” (71) which in my opinion is superior. (Although, again, the Koren Sacks translation is perhaps a tad more elegant and appropriately regal, rendering the first half of the verse as, “He fulfills the will of those who revere Him” (Koren Sacks, 72).)

In translating biblical passages, the *RCA siddur* uses a lightly edited version of the [1917 Jewish Publication Society \(JPS\) translation](#). The use of this classic translation may simply reflect the fact that the 1917 JPS is in the public domain. The 1917 JPS is also known to be quite literal; it only slightly modifies the early seventeenth century [King James Bible translation](#),⁵ which itself is one of the more literal translations available. In any event, the *RCA siddur*'s use of the 1917 JPS is an interesting example of how the King James [continues to wield an outside influence](#). However, when translating Psalms that occur in the *tefillot*, and for its translation of the entire Book of Psalms in the back (also a first for a daily and Shabbat *siddur* and a very good idea), the RCA uses Mosad HaRav Kook's [Daat Mikra Koschitzky Hebrew-English edition](#).

Commentary

The crown jewel of the *RCA siddur* is its commentary. Although the quality of the prose never approaches that of Rabbi Sacks in the Koren, the RCA's commentary is more comprehensive than his, as well as both broader and more academically inclined than ArtScroll's.

Rabbi Sacks' brilliant introduction to the *Koren siddur* focuses on the function of prayer and its literary structure. The commentary throughout the *siddur* often introduces prayers by using ideas from the introduction to explain their placement in the *siddur*. But aside from the introduction, the commentary in the Koren Sacks is very short.

The *RCA siddur* has no overarching literary thesis about prayer. Its commentary, like the one in the ArtScroll, is an anthology drawing on disparate ideas and sources. But it's a remarkable anthology, with far more discussion than Koren and far more diversity than ArtScroll. The breadth of who it quotes is unparalleled; [Nehama Leibowitz](#) might be cited in one paragraph and [Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev](#) in the next. [Rav Moshe Feinstein](#)'s and [Rav Elyahu Dessler](#)'s ideas share space with the thoughts of literary *Tanakh* teachers like [Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom](#) and academics like [Dr. Shai Secunda](#). There is a good balance between the traditional and the academic, the old and the new. The range of ideas is likewise vast and eclectic; the *siddur* tells inspirational Holocaust stories and quibbles over whether the word for rain in the second blessing of the *Amidah* should be pronounced *geshem* or *gashem*—and it does both well. Perhaps such diversity is particularly appropriate for the *siddur*, which is itself an anthology echoing the voices of authors living in different places and at different times.

It's in the commentary more than anywhere else that the *siddur*'s Modern Orthodox character is apparent. First, the commentary highlights *peshat* and literary approaches to *Tanakh*, which have become widespread in Modern Orthodox educational settings in recent years. In particular, in explaining the many Psalms that are part of *tefillah*, it makes extensive use of the work of Rav Amos

⁵ Leonard J. Greenspoon, “A Book ‘Without Blemish’: The Jewish Publication Society's Bible Translation of 1917,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 79:1 (1988), 17-18.

Hakham (1921-2012), the editor of the [Daat Mikra Psalms](#). The *siddur*'s concise explanation of the relationship between the five seemingly unconnected verses of *mizmor le-todah* is a good example. According to Rav Hakham, the Psalm begins with a feeling of joy, moves to the recognition of God, and closes with concrete actions acknowledging God's salvation (64).

Second, the RCA does not shy away from academic work, particularly when discussing the origins of particular prayers. For example, the commentary notes that *Yekum Purkan* in *Shabbat Musaf* first appears in medieval times, long after the office of the Babylonian Exilarch it references had ceased to exist, but suggests that medieval Jews were showing respect to traditional centers of leadership by using old terms to refer to their new communal organizations (550-51).

Third, the *siddur* has a rationalist bent. To give one example: when discussing Psalm 29, the commentary quotes Ibn Ezra, who suggests that the reference to mountain ranges skipping like wild animals is a metaphor for an earthquake (367). Beyond the commentary, the RCA moves kabbalistic *le-shem yihud* invocations often recited before performing *mitzvot* to the back of the *siddur* because they are Hasidic innovations not favored by all halakhic authorities (765).

The *siddur* is concerned with broader issues of communal life beyond prayer alone, and weighs-in on matters of religious and ethical significance. It recommends performing *kapparot* before Yom Kippur with money instead of live fowl out of concern for the prohibition of inflicting pain on animals and to ensure that local laws relating to the handling of livestock are followed (938). It urges that no marriages take place without first signing an RCA prenuptial agreement (1048). It contains extensive guidelines for visiting a sick person so that it is done respectfully and compassionately (1087-1091). It even makes suggestions for how to conduct one's self when death is approaching, and has an extensive and moving deathbed confession ceremony (1092-1094).

In this context I must mention the more than one hundred pages of essays on prayer in the back of the *siddur* written by various leaders in the Modern Orthodox community and beyond covering issues of history, Halakhah, and *kavannah*. The section as a whole is reminiscent of the essays at the end of each book of the Torah in the [Hertz Pentateuch](#), which explore ideas at greater length than a line-by-line commentary allows for. Not every essay in the *RCA siddur* is remarkable, but one standout is Rabbi Daniel Feldman's guide to the interpersonal laws of prayer (E33-E47); if we know when to interrupt Shema's blessings to answer “amen” but can't speak civilly to the *gabbai*, perhaps we've missed the point of prayer. So too, Rabbi Shalom Carmy's short meditation on how the foreignness and visceral nature of animal sacrifice can unlock a deeper understanding of prayer is thought-provoking (E95-E96).⁶

The State of Israel

⁶ Achieving *kavannah*, or the proper mindset and concentration, is perhaps one of prayer's most elusive aspects, so I'm glad that the *RCA siddur* devotes many essays to the topic. Still, I can't say that I found any of them as moving and relatable as either Hillel Halkin's magisterial [essay](#) in the *Jewish Review of Books* from 2013 or Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt's very recent [piece](#) for *Vox*. Perhaps the problem is that the *siddur*'s essays, while inspirational, are written by rabbis and established communal leaders, and don't fully acknowledge how difficult prayer can be for the average person.

Reflecting the contemporary practice of many Modern Orthodox congregations, this *RCA siddur* goes well beyond its prior ArtScroll adaptation in its recognition of the State of Israel. In addition to the prayer for the State of Israel, the Israeli Defense Forces, and Israeli soldiers held captive, the *siddur* contains the full services for Yom Ha'atzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim endorsed by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, and even includes *harahaman* verses in *birkat ha-mazon* for Israel and its army (228). The *siddur* also discusses whether parts of *Nahem* recited in the *Minha Amidah* on Tisha Ba-Av should not be said nowadays because describing Jerusalem as desolate and uninhabited does not jive with the current reality (271).

Women's Prayer

The *RCA siddur* "seeks to reflect a sensitivity to women's prayer experiences" (xxiv), and this is a positive turn, as earlier *siddurim* do not appear to have made a conscious effort to think about how Orthodox women [might experience prayer differently from men](#).

Still, as befitting a mainstream Orthodox *siddur* in current times, it addresses relatively minor matters: the gendering of prayer texts and inclusivity in a limited number of rituals. So you will find "*modah ani*" in addition to "*modeh ani*" (2), and a different congregational response when the *ha-gomel* blessing said after travel, illness, or childbirth is recited by a woman (162). Daughters may recite *kaddish* for deceased parents, but maybe not out loud or alone (52). The RCA contains the text of the *zimmin* for three or more women who share a meal together (220). There is also a *mi sheberakh* blessing for a girl turning bat mitzvah (540), and the commentary suggests that a father can recite the traditional bar mitzvah blessing for a bat mitzvah if God's name is omitted (544). The RCA acknowledges the possibility that a woman may one day be elected President of the United States (554). And like the Koren Sacks, the *RCA siddur* contains the Sephardic *zeved ha-bat* service as a possible format for a celebratory meal upon the birth of a girl (1076-1079). Although basically all of the same changes were introduced in the *Nehalel siddur* in 2013, it is significant that they have now been adopted by the RCA, a mainstream rabbinic organization.

Women contributed to the *siddur's* commentary, but the vast majority of contributors are male. And often (but not exclusively), women's contributions concern women: a female professor, Dr. Devra Kay, wrote a section about *tehinot*, which are supplicatory prayers written by and for women (351-53), and Mrs. Shira Schechter wrote commentary on *Eshet Hayyil* (422-24). The only one of the eighteen essays in the back written by a woman is Rabbanit Rookie Billet's discussion about achieving *kavvanah*. Although the essay is valuable to women and men, it alone among the essays addresses women in particular, encouraging them to pray (E99) and suggesting that parents divide childcare responsibilities so that mothers can attend *shul* on Shabbat (E101).

What I'm getting at here is that although the *siddur* makes a notable effort to be gender-inclusive, and the changes in it are novel, it is not fomenting a revolution. Women who want to recite certain prayers in a gender appropriate form will now have a text to guide them, and that is no small thing. Yet the changes adopted have already been sanctioned by rabbinic leaders and practiced in some Modern Orthodox communities for years. Thus, at the end of the day, the *siddur* may not satisfy women whose prayer is hampered by more than its gendered language or anyone who is hoping for more profound progress on women's issues in Orthodoxy.

Impact and Conclusion

The RCA has created a truly fine *siddur*. It's user-friendly and has a comprehensive and innovative commentary. It's Modern Orthodox in its acceptance of academic approaches, and in the way it addresses women's issues and the State of Israel. One can imagine why ArtScroll was uncomfortable with publishing it. But I'm glad it made it into print, for its perspective is welcome, and it will unquestionably add value to the synagogue bookshelf.⁷

But will anyone use it?

A few [large congregations](#) under RCA leadership have made a point of purchasing it, but a year on, I still haven't seen it around much. Many people I've spoken with didn't even know it existed.

One problem is over-saturation. Our Hebrew-English *siddurim* nowadays are already user friendly, and there are already a number of choices. Moreover, in America, we tend to pray with ArtScroll. In Modern Orthodox synagogues, where Hebrew-English *siddurim* have always been highly valued, ArtScroll was rapidly adopted and became a familiar favorite.

Additionally, I suspect that it takes more than ten years to turn over *siddur* stock. The Koren Sacks was released in 2009, and my synagogue only recently acquired a significant number of them to supplement its existing collection of *ArtScroll RCA siddurim*, which for the most part are still holding up just fine.

Thus, it may take some time for the *RCA siddur* to reach the shelf. Yet perhaps there is another way for its influence to be felt.

Since one of the greatest features of the new *siddur* is its commentary, here's something for the RCA as an organization to consider: why not put the commentary online?

I'm not the first to make a suggestion along these lines; the RCA itself has contemplated it. In an advertisement for the *siddur* in 2010, the RCA [announced](#) "a regularly updated multi-media website" with commentary, "recordings of beloved and popular *baalei tefilah*," and more to accompany the new edition. Perhaps it's time to seriously consider this feature again.

The *siddur* itself suggests that it's better to study its commentary outside of *shul* (E106). Imagine an interactive repository about prayer that could be accessed when one is not davening at a breakneck pace. Contemplate how it might deepen appreciation for prayer and have dividends for devotion. A website could teach not just about the words of prayer, but its music as well. Perhaps, greater access to the *RCA siddur's* teachings will inspire new conversations about prayer—where it comes from, what it means, and how it can be a way for all of us to connect with God.

⁷ In fact, I consider the *RCA siddur* something of a model for the Modern Orthodox *Humash* that [I've advocated for before in these pages](#). The RCA's commentary cites traditional sources, but also espouses literary and even academic approaches as long as they are within the bounds of Halakhah.

HEBREW BIBLE OR OLD TESTAMENT? EVALUATING THE AMERICAN BIBLICAL TRADITION

ISRAEL BEN-PORAT is a PhD student in early American history at CUNY Graduate Center.

P[*roclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States: A Sourcebook*](#). Ed. Meir Y. Soloveichik, Matthew Holbreich, Jonathan Silver, and Stuart W. Halpern. New Milford, CT: Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought and The Toby Press, 2019. (All unidentified page numbers refer to this volume.)

In 2007, journalist A. J. Jacobs published [*The Year of Living Biblically*](#), a satirical account of the author's year-long "quest" to follow the Bible as literally as possible.⁸ This endeavor, which included "stoning" an adulterer with pebbles, humorously highlights the dissonance between contemporary American society and the biblical past. In an era of increasing secularism and biblical illiteracy, the Bible strikes the modern reader as an ancient, irrelevant text. However, this phenomenon belies the long and venerable American biblical tradition. The Bible was a deeply important text in American history, so significant that intellectual historian Perry Miller posited, "The Old Testament is truly so omnipresent...that historians have as much difficulty taking cognizance of it as of the air the people breathed."⁹ Yet the newly-edited anthology [*Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*](#) indeed takes cognizance of this omnipresence. *Proclaim Liberty*, produced under the auspices of Yeshiva University's Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought, offers a collection of primary sources to center the Hebrew Bible in the story of the United States.

The editors—among them Meir Soloveichik, Director of the Straus Center and Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York—largely succeed in demonstrating their overall argument: "One cannot understand the American political tradition and its articulations through time without understanding America's relationship with the Hebrew Bible" (p. xvii). Drawing on recent scholarship such as Eran Shalev's book *American Zion*,¹⁰ *Proclaim Liberty* justifiably brings attention to important documents and makes lesser-known ones accessible to a popular audience. However, by situating its sources within the framework of Jewish thought, *Proclaim Liberty* raises fundamental questions about the meaning, nature, and significance of the American biblical legacy.

In the introduction, the editors stress that their book "is not a volume about the Jewish experience in America," given the paucity of Jews in American history. Additionally, they distinguish between the Hebrew

⁸ A. J. Jacobs, [*The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*](#) (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

⁹ Perry Miller, "The Garden of Eden and the Deacon's Meadow," *American Heritage* 7.1 (December 1955). Available at: <https://www.americanheritage.com/garden-eden-and-deacons-meadow>.

¹⁰ Eran Shalev, [*American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War*](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

Bible and post-biblical Jewish thought, which encompasses a much wider corpus of texts. "The traditional American passion for the Hebrew Bible is distinct from the Jewish religion and the history of Jewish law and letters." Puzzlingly, however, while they acknowledge the Christian origins of this passion, the editors insist that the "metaphors, images, and narrative arcs that Americans have taken from the Hebrew Bible to describe their own experience are distinct from, and cannot be fully encompassed by, Christian theology (p. xviii)." The latter assertion perhaps reflects the interest of the editors, of their institutional affiliations, and of the press in disseminating material that highlights the confluence of Jewish and secular thought.

Indeed, the most notable editorial feature of the volume is the inclusion after each source of relevant citations from the Hebrew Bible, with the original Hebrew text followed by the King James translation. The editors also occasionally included and translated sources from rabbinic Jewish literature, even though very few authors cited in *Proclaim Liberty* could read Hebrew or rabbinic texts.¹¹ In doing so, the editors seem to appropriate a Christian tradition for an American Jewish legacy. While this editorial feature creates a rewarding theological exercise for Jews interested in American history, it obscures the fundamentally Christian nature of much of the material, even when the translations or interpretations appear to overlap with Jewish thought.

The anthology's section on Puritan New England illustrates both the extent of the Hebrew Bible's significance in this chapter of American history and the limitations of its relevance to Jewish thought. The Puritans attempted to create a biblical society modeled after ancient Israel, and several of the legal systems in the New England colonies drew substantially upon Mosaic Law—a phenomenon partially documented in *Proclaim Liberty*. The editors could have gone further in documenting the centrality of the Hebrew Bible in Puritan New England: the Massachusetts Body of Liberties (1641) and the subsequent Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts (1648), for instance, contained almost exact reproductions of biblical laws (the document "[*Moses His Judicials*](#)" cited in the book [pp. 21-22] was not a legal code). Additionally, Cotton Mather's "[*Biblia Americana*](#)," the first bible commentary in America, bespeaks a more profound influence of the Hebrew Bible than does his [*Magnalia Christi Americana*](#) (pp. 16-19).

Yet it would be misleading to focus solely on the Puritans' interest in the "Hebrew Bible," a conventional scholarly substitution for the Christian term "Old Testament." The Puritans believed that the "New" Testament superseded the Old. While they still derived influence, inspiration, and laws from the latter, the Puritans did so through the lens of the former. They viewed Old Testament characters and rituals as typologies (symbols) of Jesus or Christian theology. Hence, while Massachusetts founder John Winthrop indeed "looked to Micah... as a model of a political community" (p. 21), he did so in a sermon tellingly titled "A Model of Christian Charity," in which his famous phrase "city upon a hill" (p. 11) alluded to Matthew 5:14. Similarly, Mather's *Nehemias Americanus*, which compares Winthrop to the biblical character Nehemiah, appeared in his [*Magnalia Christi Americana*](#), literally "The Great Works of Christ in

¹¹ Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, and Ezra Stiles did have varying degrees of proficiency in Hebrew. On early American interest in Hebrew, see Shalom Goldman, [*God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination*](#) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

America” (16-17). Moreover, Puritan biblicism did not translate into acceptance of Jews in their midst; the few Jews who made their way into Puritan colonies faced an intolerant environment inhospitable for establishing a Jewish community, where they had to constantly ward off ministers’ efforts to convert them.¹²

A similar dynamic appears in [Proclaim Liberty](#)’s second section, on the revolutionary era. The American Revolution was exceedingly ripe with biblical material. The colonists cast the imperial conflict in biblical terms, drawing upon narratives, tropes, and characters from a variety of biblical stories, such as the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan, the kingless period of the various Israelite judges, and the corruption of Haman in the Persian royal court (p. 60). This phenomenon manifested in a wide variety of sources, including newspapers, literary texts, correspondence, and sermons. As in the previous section, some additional sources would have bolstered the book’s argument for the centrality of the Hebrew Bible in revolutionary America; Yale president Ezra Stiles’ correspondence with a visiting rabbi in Newport in the 1770s would be of greater interest and relevance to the reader than his [The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor](#) (pp. 128-136).

However, a wider selection of sermons might suggest that the New Testament played a similarly significant role in revolutionary biblicism. James Byrd’s book [Sacred Scripture, Sacred War](#) (2013) conducted a statistical analysis of thousands of scriptural citations in revolutionary-era sermons to determine the most influential biblical passages.¹³ As Zachary Hutchins points out in a review essay, of the top eight results in Byrd’s research, half of them came from the New Testament.¹⁴ While methodologically tenuous (a higher number of citations does not necessarily indicate a higher degree of influence), Byrd’s findings reveal a wider biblical imagination than [Proclaim Liberty](#) might acknowledge.

Additionally, [Proclaim Liberty](#)’s section on slavery and the Civil War, while it skillfully documents how both pro- and anti-slavery advocates drew upon the Hebrew Bible for arguments, elides Eran Shalev’s claim that the New Testament played a more significant role in this discourse, especially as the nineteenth century progressed.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the subsection on African-American treatments of the Hebrew Bible (pp. 297-320) missed a wonderful opportunity to include the poetry of Phyllis Wheatley, whose work drew upon both the Old and New Testaments.¹⁶

Few would deny the importance of the Hebrew Bible in American history, especially after reading [Proclaim Liberty](#). It is not immediately clear, however, how to evaluate that significance not only with regard to the New Testament but other competing influences. The editors themselves acknowledge that “the Hebrew Bible has played an integral role in the American past, alongside Roman republicanism, the English Common Law tradition, and the political doctrines of John Locke, Cato, and Montesquieu” (p. xxv). Moreover, not all citations were created equal; it is difficult to distinguish between genuine belief and rhetorical flourish, between influence and usage. Thus, while [Proclaim Liberty](#) lays crucial groundwork for further research on the American biblical tradition, it remains an open question how to evaluate that tradition and what that tradition means to different religious groups.

**LEHRHAUS EDITORS:
YEHUDA FOGEL
DAVID FRIED
DAVIDA KOLLMAR
TZVI SINENSKY
MINDY SCHWARTZ ZOLTY**

¹² William A. Braverman, “The Ascent of Boston’s Jews, 1630-1918” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1990), 2-20; Michael Hoberman, [New Israel/New England: Jews and Puritans in Early America](#) (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 86-120.

¹³ James Byrd, [Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Zachary Hutchins, “Who Reads an Early American Sermon?” *Early American Literature* 49.2 (2014): 517-532.

¹⁵ Shalev, *American Zion*, 151-184.

¹⁶ Phillis Wheatley, [Complete Writings](#), ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 2001).