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20/20 VISION FOR HILKHOT SHABBAT: A  
GLANCE AT RAV YOSEF ZVI RIMON'S  
NEWEST SEFER

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We live in a world where publication of *sefarim* is commonplace. The market is at or nearing the saturation point for new Torah volumes. In particular, there are dozens of new titles on practical areas of Halakhah, including *kashrut*, *aveilut*, *niddah*, and Shabbat. In this climate it is exceedingly rare for a new title to make a significant contribution. Of course, there will be *hiddushei dinim* here and there, and without question *sefarim* will address the most contemporary issues and will organize the material in a superior way to the way earlier *sefarim* were structured. Still, it is extremely unlikely that a newly-written *sefer* will make any significant impact on the already-full library of halakhic volumes.

Despite these formidable challenges, Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon's recently published two-volume work on [hilkhot Shabbat](#) covering the first eleven of the thirty-nine *melakhot* makes a genuine contribution to the study and teaching of this critical area of Halakhah. To see why this is, let us turn to a key distinction between two types of halakhic works.

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Many have distinguished between *sefarim* that provide practical halakhic guidance and those with the agenda of facilitating source-based learning and teaching the *halakhah*. A contrast is drawn between *sifrei limmud* and *sifrei pesak*, works which are intended to issue a bottom-line ruling versus those works whose intention is to present the major positions and not necessarily come to a conclusion.<sup>1</sup>

It is not always easy to classify a particular *sefer* as either a *sefer pesak* or *limmud*. Take the *Mishnah Berurah* for example. Many classify the *Mishnah Berurah* as a *sefer pesak*. Indeed, it is widely reported in the name of the Hazon Ish that the *Mishnah Berurah* is the *posek aharon*, the final and most definitive halakhic authority. However, as demonstrated by Benny Brown, *Mishnah Berurah* is not a *sefer pesak* in the truest sense. The Hafetz Hayyim steers clear of many of the most contentious issues of his time. He does not weigh

in on the question of electricity on Shabbat. He does not offer a clear position on the suitability of telephone poles serving as posts for an *eruv*. He only provides a list of sources in the responsa literature that address that question. In this respect, *Mishnah Berurah* is not a bona fide *sefer pesak* but should better be classified as a *sefer limmud*, a digest of classical *poskim* found on the page of *Shulchan Arukh* and authored until his day.<sup>2</sup>

In our day and age, however, it is easier to classify works as either a *sefer pesak* or a *sefer limmud*. Regarding *hilkhot Shabbat*, Rabbi Dovid Ribiat's [four-volume work](#) is most certainly a *sefer pesak*. The crux of the *sefer* marshals many modern-day cases which illustrate principles in *hilkhot Shabbat*. Of course, there are voluminous endnotes which probe the gemara and Rishonim to buttress a particular claim. However, that section of the work, located at that back and written in Hebrew - unlike the main text, which is written in English - is intended for scholars rather than the average, presumably-intended reader of the text. For the everyday reader, Rabbi Ribiat's text is a clear *sefer pesak*.

Similarly, the highly influential [Shemirat Shabbat ke-Hilkhatah](#) (SSK) of Rav Yehoshua Neuwirth is also a work of *piskei dinim*. *Shemirat Shabbat* is a work of tremendous importance. This is not only because of the many *piskei halakhah* of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach found in the book; it is even more correct because of how user friendly SSK is. Anyone with a question can easily locate where the question is addressed by merely looking at the index. The book is so user-friendly that the index actually contains a list of English-language terms which greatly assist the English speaker who may not be familiar with modern Hebrew parlance. SSK is not, however, a *sefer limud*. The book is arranged based on practical applications rather than conceptual underpinnings of the *Halakhah*. There is a great deal of analysis found in SSK, but it is relegated to the footnotes.

Similarly, the popular *Sefer Orhot Shabbat* is organized in a practical rather than conceptual way. Unlike SSK, however, each section begins with a brief introduction tracing the *Halakhah* back to its earliest source in gemara. However, there is little analysis of the original source, and little work is done to analyze the various approaches of *Rishonim* to any particular gemara. Effectively, the sources cited direct the reader to the *sugya* he should focus his attention on, but doesn't provide that reader with analysis of that section. Consequently although *Orhot Shabbat* does cite primary sources

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<sup>2</sup> See Benjamin Brown, "Soft Stringency in *Mishnah Berurah*," *Contemporary Jewry* 27: 1-41, especially pp. 8-11.

<sup>1</sup> See Rav Zevin's *Soferim Us-Sfarim*, and in particular his section relating to *Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav*.

these sources are not fully analyzed and developed. The footnotes in *Orhot Shabbat* analyze the cases brought in the main text and often provide various positions of modern-day *poskim*. Nonetheless, it remains primarily a *sefer pesak*.

There are *sifrei limud* published in our day as well. A fine example is Rav Uriel Eisenthal's excellent *Megillat Sefer*. This work employs powerful detailed halachic analysis of the *sugya* and often arrives at his own novel halachic conclusions. He even dedicates a full chapter to his disagreements with SSK. However *Megillat Sefer* is most certainly a *sefer limud*. One who has not already digested the halachic analysis in *Megillat Sefer* will be unable to locate his conclusions. The volume is useful almost entirely to those who are already deeply immersed in the *sugya*.

In contrast to all these, Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon's recently published two-volume *sefer* on *hilkhot Shabbat* is most unusual. Without question, it is simultaneously a *sefer pesak* offering bottom-line *halakhah le-ma'aseh* and a *sefer limud* which summarizes the *sugya*, analyzes the *Rishonim* and *poskim*, and even presents its own sometimes novel *pesakim*. Rav Rimon does this by structuring his *sefer* in an unusual way. He begins with a summary of *dinim* on all the *melakhot*. This summary presents basic *halakhot* in a succinct way. It clearly falls into the category of *pesak*.

However, the bulk of the *sefer* represents a *sefer limud*, taking the reader through the *sugya* and bringing him or her into the sources of the *halakhot*. It is so neatly organized it easily can be used to prepare *shiurim*. Rav Rimon does not simply cite the primary source for any given *din*. He probes that source, delineates the various possibilities found in *Rishonim* as to how one can understand that source, and provides practical cases to illustrate the difference between the various approaches. Building upon this analysis, Rav Rimon presents the positions of major *poskim* and how they rule on the question at hand. But he goes even further, outlining the cases in which one may follow the more lenient position even when the majority of halakhic authorities are strict.

Unlike the *sefarim* mentioned earlier, Rav Rimon does not relegate his analysis to footnotes or endnotes. He incorporates the various positions of *Rishonim* into the main text. He effectively takes the reader down the halakhic highway. The reader feels like he or she is engaging with a fully developed, high-level *shiur*. He or she does not feel like he is being spoon-fed halakhic conclusions; he is part of the total process from beginning to end, and clearly understands how a conclusion is determined.

Another unusual aspect of Rav Rimon's *sefer* is the equal treatment he grants to Ashkenazi and Sefardi authorities. Even *sefarim* which emanate from Israel, where there is a greater integration of Ashkenazim and Sefardim, tend to focus on one group or the other. Occasionally, a terse note will indicate that Ashkenazim or Sefardim follow a different practice than the one highlighted in the text. Rav Rimon, however, presents the positions of both Ashkenazi and Sefardi *poskim* even-handedly. His *sefer* is therefore usable by all segments of Klal Yisrael.

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There are other features of Rav Rimon's *sefer* which greatly add to its usefulness. Each halakhic section comprises not only text, but charts as well. These charts summarize the ideas contained in the text and help the visual learner process the material. There is considerable educational research indicating that many students assimilate

information more fully when it is presented visually rather than simply with text. In fact, *Shirat ha-Yam*, a popular *sefer* that prepares students for the Israeli Chief Rabbinate *semikha behinot* in various areas of Halakhah, makes extensive use of charts to organize the material and succinctly convey the *shitot*. The colored charts in Rav Rimon's *sefer* do far more than that. Each chart effectively summarizes the Halakhah, and the various *shitot* set forth without extensive text. The charts are color-coded to convey the *shitot* and their reasons, enabling the reader to quickly review a large section of the text.

Another element that contributes to the usefulness of the *sefer* are the many high-quality pictures included throughout. Many of the most popular *sefarim* mentioned above are comprised entirely of text. Incorporating photographs into the text further helps the visual reader to process the material. Additionally, the names of authorities cited in the text are bolded. This helps the reader locate the name of the *posek* who addresses the issue at hand. Moreover, the margins of the text identify briefly which particular topic is being addressed. The further makes it easier for the reader who is searching for a particular halakhic discussion.

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Rav Rimon's approach to Halakhah, which involves tracing the Halakhah from its earliest sources and carefully analyzing the sources to uncover its conceptual underpinnings, is based on the approach of his late Rebbe, Ha-Rav Aharon Lichtenstein *zt"l*. Rav Aharon extended the Brisker *derekh ha-limmud* of his father-in-law Rav Soloveitchik *zt"l*. However, unlike Rav Soloveitchik who analyzed a relatively small corpus of *Rishonim*, Rav Aharon added a plethora of *Rishonei Ashkenaz*, Sefard, and Provence into the mix. Including this wide array of *Rishonim* provides authorities upon whom to pin conceptual possibilities. Rav Rimon clearly employs this methodology but adds to it, including variant texts of those *Rishonim*.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, like his Rebbe Rav Aharon, Rav Rimon begins his halakhic discussions by focusing on the Bible and the themes that emerge from the *pesukim*. Of particular interest here is the masterful introduction Rav Rimon presents to the book. His analysis of the reasons to observe Shabbat begins with a careful examination of the *pesukim*. However, instead of merely reviewing the basic verses, he uses a careful reading of the biblical text to inform a conceptual analysis of the nature of refraining from *melakhah* on Shabbat.

A fine example of this is found in the Introduction. Rav Rimon inquires: Are we commanded to avoid *melakhah* based on the ideal of *menuhah*, physical rest, or is the ideal *shevitah*, the cessation of creative labor? On the one hand, Hashem rested after six days of creation. This exemplifies *menuhah*. However, for *Adam ha-Rishon*, Shabbat was his first full day on Earth. Resting in the physical sense makes no sense. Rather, *Adam ha-Rishon's* Shabbat represents *shevitah*, the idea of imitating God by refraining from being creative. The idea is that one is not an infirm being who needs to rest, but a powerful figure who is challenged to bring the sacred value of *shevitah* into daily life and allow this value to inform the six days which follow Shabbat. The beauty of this idea emerges from the analysis of *pesukim* and citation of *gemarot* that bring it into clear focus. Rav Rimon further cites kabbalistic and hasidic sources that support his idea.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See p. 281.

<sup>4</sup> See pages 58- 72.

The *sefer* also contains *piskei halakhah* of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l. Many think of Rav Aharon only as a Rosh Yeshiva who analyzed and conceptualized positions of the *Rishonim*. Few recognize that Rav Aharon also issued *piskei halakhah*; Rav Rimon's *sefer* corrects that limited perspective.<sup>5</sup> We also read *piskei halakhah* of Rav Soloveitchik that are found in Rav Schachter's [sefarim](#), but sadly are often not cited in contemporary *sifrei halakhah*.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the *sefer*, Rav Rimon intermittently includes hasidic and other *mahashavah* ideas that emphasize the meaning and beauty of Shabbat. In this respect, the reader of the *sefer* will not only be fluent in the practical applications of the *halakhot*, but will also understand the meaning and value of Shabbat. Incorporating hasidic sources into halakhic works is a particularly Israeli phenomenon. It is well known that Israeli *yeshivot*, unlike their American counterparts, include far more *mahashavah* and *hasidut* in their curricula. Rav Rimon's *sefer* therefore represents an extension of Rav Soloveitchik's application of Brisker analysis to include not only a greater scope of *Rishonim* and themes of *Mikra*, but the values and ideals that stem from *hasidut* and *mahashavah* as well.

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Rav Rimon makes a point of incorporating biographical material of *Rishonim* and *gedolei ha-poskim* into his work. Interestingly, this idea also comes from Rav Aharon zt"l, who instructed Rav Rimon to incorporate this material so as to educate the current generation towards appropriate appreciation of *gedolei Yisrael*.<sup>7</sup> Although these biographies comprise a fairly small part of Rav Rimon's *sefer*, it is worth emphasizing them due to their importance and relative uniqueness.

Unlike so many who describe *gedolei Yisrael* in a relatively uniform way, such that it is hard to differentiate one *gadol* from another, Rav Rimon makes a point of stressing the uniqueness of each *gadol* he quotes. His biographies draw out the unique personality of various *hakhmei ha-mesorah*. The reader will not only become aware of halakhic positions of Rav Eliezer of Metz (the Yereim), but will also become aware of where the Yereim fits into the timeline of *Rishonim* and that he suffered the loss of his wife and all his daughters.<sup>8</sup>

Of particular interest is the way Rav Rimon discusses his personal interactions with *gedolei ha-poskim* of the past generation. We learn about the Tzitz Eliezer's interest in poetry<sup>9</sup> and his awareness of the religious poetry penned by Rav Rimon's grandfather.<sup>10</sup> We also learn that Hakham Ovadia Yosef zt"l had a profound influence on Rav Rimon in the way he responded to Rav Rimon's questions when Rav Rimon was still young, and how reading Hakham Ovadia's *teshuvot* first drew Rav Rimon into the serious study of Halakhah.<sup>11</sup>

Rav Rimon makes a point of stressing the human sensitivity of *gedolei ha-poskim* by noting episodes with Rav Mordechai Eliyahu<sup>12</sup> and Rav

Yosef Shalom Eliashiv, as well as noting *pesakim* of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach that exhibit his human sensitivity.<sup>13</sup> An interesting anecdote that conveys the tremendous sensitivity of *gedolei Yisrael* relates to the somewhat obscure Rav Binyamin Zilber. Rav Zilber had a practice of engaging in a *ta'anit dibbur* from *Rosh Hodesh Elul* through Yom Kippur. He maintained this personal practice for over sixty years, only breaking it on one occasion: speaking to an orphaned *kallah* the day of her wedding.<sup>14</sup>

The stories Rav Rimon tells about *gedolei yisrael* from all generations convey valuable lessons. We read of how Rav Avraham Danzig, the author of *Hayyei Adam*, was a businessman early in his life but nonetheless was able to compose *sifrei halakhah* since he was always focused on learning and worked only to support his family.<sup>15</sup> This lesson is of particular importance to lay people, who clearly are an intended audience of Rav Rimon's *sefer*. Lay people also have the responsibility and capability to not only study Torah but to make genuine and lasting contributions to the corpus of Torah.

Rav Rimon also makes a point of noting relatively surprising facts related to *gedolei Yisrael*. Few are aware that in the first week Hazon Ish was in Eretz Yisrael, he sent a *sha'ailah* to Rav Kook related to the proper way of separating *terumat* and *ma'asrot*.<sup>16</sup> We read of how Rav Avraham of Sochatchow, famed author of *teshuvot Avnei Nezer*, only composed his monumental *Eglei Tal* on *hilkhot Shabbat* when he was ill and unable to deliver regular *shiurim*.<sup>17</sup>

Rav Rimon makes a special point of stressing which *gedolei Yisrael* felt a strong connection to Eretz Yisrael. We read of the Ohr Sameach's famous statement that the three oaths described in the *gemara Ketubot* which prevent Klal Yisrael from taking Eretz Yisrael by force no longer apply after the San Remo conference of 1920 which endorsed the Balfour declaration.<sup>18</sup> We read of the Ben Ish Hai's strong connection to Eretz Yisrael, how he lectured about it often, and even brought Eretz Yisrael's dirt back with him to Baghdad and placed it on the eastern wall of his *shul*.<sup>19</sup> The connection to Eretz Yisrael can most clearly be seen from the lengthiest biography in the *sefer*, the biography of Rav Kook. In that biography Rav Rimon references the strong bond his grandfather had to Rav Kook, how Rav Kook repaired the rift between different segments of the community and how Rav Kook viewed Eretz Yisrael as a place that raises the spirituality of every person and everything.<sup>20</sup>

Rav Rimon emphasizes these *gedolim* in particular because of his own deep love for Eretz Yisrael. This love is evidenced in his *sefarim* on *Shemithah* and *halakhot* for soldiers in the Israeli army. Moreover, Rav Rimon has established many *hesed* organizations to assist various segments of Israeli society, including evacuees from Gush Katif and immigrants from Ethiopia. Without question, Rav Rimon's deep and abiding love for Eretz Yisrael is the reason he decided to include biographical information of those *gedolei Yisrael* who similarly exhibited deep love for Eretz Yisrael.

5 See page 690 regarding crushing avocado onto bread.

6 See page 528 regarding making ice cubes on Shabbat. See page 264 regarding making tea on Shabbat. *Mahshavah* ideas of Rav Soloveitchik are also included, for instance on p. 44.

7 See page 4.

8 Page 285.

9 Page 210.

10 See also page 444 regarding Rav Rimon's interaction with the Steipler.

11 Page 352.

12 Page 373.

13 Page 201.

14 Page 133.

15 Page 86.

16 Page 290.

17 Page 400. He also cites Rav Soloveitchik that Avnei Nezer employs Brisker methodology despite his hasidic heritage.

18 Page 566.

19 Page 508.

20 Page 518-519.

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There are of course some things I would prefer to see in Rav Rimon's *sefer*. The index is not as thorough as it could be. Consequently, the book is not as usable for the individual who has a particular *sha'ailah* to investigate.

I would love to see forthcoming volumes of Rav Rimon's *sefer* addressing the remaining *melakhot* of Shabbat. We are told that shortly a volume on the *mitzvot aseh* of Shabbat will come out. That will certainly be a major contribution. It would be wonderful to see a completion of this work to include all thirty-nine *melakhot* as well. Moreover, I would recommend expanding this work in two directions that would enhance the usefulness of this text. An edition of Rav Rimon's *sefer* that would appeal to children would be a major benefit for fathers and mothers who would like to teach *hilkhot Shabbat* to their children using this methodology. Moreover, a translation of this work into English (Rav Rimon's *sefer* of [Shemitah](#) is already translated into English) would greatly assist English speakers and help to enhance Shabbat observance in North America as well.

Rav Rimon has already proven himself as a significant posek in our Modern Orthodox */Dati Leumi* community. This most recent book only further emphasizes just how significant his contributions to Halachah can be.

## PURIM AND PAUL: THE TORAH VEILED AND UNVEILED<sup>21</sup>

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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<sup>22</sup>

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 occurred 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 occurred 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 shrewd 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

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<sup>21</sup> I would like to thank Mindy Schwartz Zolty for her critical editing of this piece, as well as Marc Eichenbaum, Y. Moshiah 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.

<sup>22</sup> Abd al -Rahmân Jâmî (d. 1492), [Lawâ'ih: A Treatise on Sufism](#).

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 canon 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."<sup>23</sup> 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?'<sup>24</sup> 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

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<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> See James Wood, [Serious Noticing: Selected Essays, 1997-2019](#) (United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

costumed custom.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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

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<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> George Orwell, [Shooting an Elephant, and Other Essays](#) (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950).

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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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."<sup>30</sup> 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.

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.<sup>31</sup> Carlebach shows that the

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<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> Richard B. Hays, [Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul](#) (Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> Carlebach 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.

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 concocting '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."<sup>32</sup>

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

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<sup>32</sup> 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...)"

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](#),<sup>33</sup> those who kept Jewish practices in secret in Iberia and the New World due to religious persecution.<sup>34</sup> Esther, the original crypto-Jew of sorts, and her ever-so-hidden Book, represent the holiday of *kryptos*: the hidden, the secret, the concealed.<sup>35</sup>

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 literalism 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.

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<sup>33</sup> 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.

<sup>34</sup> 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).

<sup>35</sup> 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 Heidegger/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 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 hiddenness 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."

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.

## ESTHER THE QUEEN, HESTER PRYNNE, AND THE SCARLET LETTER AS BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

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**M***egillat Esther* tells us precious little about Esther's inner world. We know about her early life: the death of her parents, her maturation in Mordecai's house, and how she is taken first to the harem and then to the palace. We know of her accomplishments: how she found favor in the eyes of those who saw her, approached Ahashveirosh, and became savior of the Jews. And the text does drop a few hints as to her emotions and development: she shifted from passivity to proactivity, as Mordecai's challenge compelled her to make a fateful decision to throw in her lot with the Jewish people. Yet we wonder: how did her orphaned childhood impact her? What was it like growing up in Mordecai's household? How did she process - if at all - the traumatic experience of being coercively taken into Ahashveirosh's harem, raped, and forced to marry the King? Did she experience her rise to the throne with pride, shame, or ambivalence? The *Megillah* responds to our inquiries into Esther's emotional life with deafening silence.

This omission, of course, is to be expected from biblical narrative. As Erich Auerbach develops in his magisterial essay "[Odysseus' Scar](#)," the protagonists' internal experience is conspicuously absent in the "biblical epic." He offers the example of the binding of Isaac:

God gives his command in direct discourse, but he leaves his motives and his purpose unexpressed; Abraham, receiving the command, says nothing and does what he has been told to do. The conversation between Abraham and Isaac on the way to the place of sacrifice is only an interruption of the heavy silence and makes it all the more burdensome. The two of them, Isaac carrying the wood and Abraham with fire and a knife, "went together." Hesitantly, Isaac ventures to ask about the ram, and Abraham gives the well-known answer. Then the text repeats: "So they went both of them together." Everything remains unexpressed.

As is equally typical of biblical personalities, *midrashim* fill in some of these lacunae. In one place, the Rabbis offer a graphic depiction of Esther's anxiety upon hearing of Haman's decree against the Jews:

"Then the queen was exceedingly distressed" [*va-tithalhal*] ([Esther 4:4](#)). What is the meaning of *va-tithalhal*? Rav said: She began to menstruate. And Rabbi Yirmeyah said: Her bowels were loosened. ([Megillah 15a](#))

Then, following the midrashic viewpoint that Esther and Mordecai were married, the Talmud offers an alternative interpretation of the phrase "If I perish, I perish":

"Go, gather together all the Jews not according to the custom" ([Esther 4:16](#)). Rabbi Abba said: It will not be according to custom, for every day until now it was under compulsion, but now it will be of my own free will. "And if I perish, I perish" ([Esther 4:16](#)): Just as I was lost to my father's house ever since I was brought here, so too, shall I be lost to you [for after voluntarily having relations with

Ahashveirosh, I shall be halakhically forbidden to you]. ([Megillah 15a](#))

On this reading, Esther is profoundly anxious about not only her survival but also about the eventual prohibition against her return to intimacy with Mordecai.

Finally, the Talmud teaches that upon deciding to enter the King's throne room, Esther was nearly seized by an internal paralysis precipitated by the departure of the divine presence:

"And she stood in the inner court of the king's house" ([Esther 5:1](#)). Rabbi Levi said: Once she reached the chamber of the idols, which was in the inner court, the divine presence left her. She immediately said: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" ([Psalms 22:2](#)). Perhaps it is because You judge an unintentional sin as one performed intentionally, and an action done due to circumstances beyond one's control as one done willingly. Or perhaps You have left me because in my prayers I called Haman a dog, as it is stated: "Deliver my soul from the sword; my only one from the hand of the dog" ([Psalms 22:21](#)). She at once retracted and called him in her prayers a lion, as it is stated in the following verse: "Save me from the lion's mouth" ([Psalms 22:22](#)). ([Megillah 15b](#))

Yet, even taking these aggadic statements together, we are left with a decidedly piecemeal portrait of our protagonist's state of mind.

And so, in seeking to account for Esther's inner experience, we turn to an unexpected source: Hester Prynne, the central character in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 19th-century classic [The Scarlet Letter](#). Let us begin by briefly reviewing the novel's plot.

Set in mid-17th century Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony (today Boston), *The Scarlet Letter* tells the tale of Hester Prynne, whose much-older husband Roger Prynne has sent her ahead to the New World. He disappears and is assumed to have died at sea. Having lost hope of his survival, Hester falls into a secret relationship with the minister Arthur Dimmesdale, and ultimately gives birth to a girl, whom she names Pearl. As punishment for her illicit relationship she is compelled by the magistrates to wear a scarlet letter "A," standing for adulterer, across her chest. All but excommunicated, she lives with Pearl on the margins of society, supporting herself through her work as a seamstress. Despite her marginalization, Hester's inherent goodness and acts of kindness ultimately win over the hearts of the community members.

Meanwhile, her husband, who had in fact survived a shipwreck, takes on a new identity as Roger Chillingworth, and comes to suspect that Dimmesdale may be the child's father. Seeking revenge, he becomes the pastor's personal physician, eventually becoming his live-in caretaker. Dimmesdale deteriorates, repeatedly harming himself in seeking to atone for his sins. He and Hester finally decide to flee on a ship to Europe, but are forced to abandon the plan upon learning that Chillingworth has intentionally booked passage on the same vessel. Dimmesdale confesses publicly and dies on the town scaffold from self-flagellation. Pearl and Hester travel to Europe. Pearl marries an aristocrat and remains in Paris. After some time, Hester returns to Boston, living out the remainder of her life performing good deeds in the Colony.



A handful of scholars have noted the biblical precedents for Hawthorne's characters.<sup>36</sup> Pearl's name is borrowed from multiple passages in the book of Matthew (13:45-6). Chillingworth, whose all-consuming hatred for Dimmesdale ultimately devours himself, has much in common with Haman, who was hanged on a gallows of his making. Dimmesdale might be a stand-in for Mordecai, another religious leader with whom Esther may have had an intimate relation.

Most obvious is Hester, whose name is nearly identical to that of Esther, and whose life experience shares numerous parallels with that of her biblical namesake. Both are beautiful, strong women who are compelled to live in lonely environments, distanced from their communities. They are unhappily married to older men, clinging to secrets whose revelation is essential to the unfolding of their narratives. Both overcome profound adversity, retain an abiding commitment to their core values in the face of hostile societal opposition, and come to be deeply respected by the people of their communities.

Critic Ariel Silver Clark has further noted the parallels between Esther standing before Ahashveirosh to plead for her nation, and Hester's (successful) petition to Governor Bellingham to allow Pearl to continue living with her, as well as Hester's royal bearing as strongly resembling the character of Queen Esther.<sup>37</sup> As Clark puts it, "The more time I spent with Hawthorne, the more I saw the type of Esther in his work. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the type of Esther is a thinly veiled type of redemption through the female" (viii).

Why does Hawthorne cast Hester as Esther? One critic concludes that Hawthorne simply sought to destabilize the meaning of the biblical text. Just as the scarlet letter "A" carries multiple and shifting meanings, so too does the biblical text, which is subject to regular reinterpretation, leading Hawthorne to "reread" Esther as Hester. Another possibility is that Hawthorne suggests that while the Puritans saw Hester as an embodiment of sin, in fact she was as pure as the biblical heroine Esther.

But these interpretations fall well short of the mark. In reading Hester as Esther, Hawthorne sheds light not only on the character of Hester, as well as the Puritans' hypocrisy, but also on the book of Esther. For we may identify four outstanding aspects of Hester's inner world. First, due to events not entirely in her control, Hester suffers immensely. Second, relatedly, she experiences an extended period of communal censure. Third, her kindness is an essential part of her personality, and ultimately wins over the members of her community. Fourth and above all, she draws her resilience from remaining true to her own internal ethical compass, refusing the temptation to assimilate the values of the society around her.

In drawing such a strong parallel to Esther, Hawthorne suggests that we should see Esther in the same light. Esther too experiences tremendous suffering, from the death of her parents, to her traumatic experiences in the harem and palace, to living at the margins of her community. Second, the comparison to Esther suggests that Esther too was met with significant criticism by members of her community - or, at the very least, was wracked by

internal doubts as to what others thought of her. Third, in winning others over with her good will and deeds, Esther distinguished herself with kindness. Fourth and most important, Esther too was driven by immense internal conviction. While it was Mordecai who urged her to approach the King, Esther made the decision on her own. It was at her initiative that the Jewish community fasted, and she independently hatched the ingenious plot of Haman and Ahashveirosh's feasts. And she, along with Mordecai, established Purim as a holiday.

Historical context clinches this reading of Hawthorne's Esther. Hawthorne read Cotton Mather's *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion*, a conduct manual in which Esther is one of the biblical heroines adduced as a model of proper behavior.<sup>38</sup> Mather's guide was highly influential, and was widely read throughout the 19th century. Yet [for Mather](#), Esther was the ideal woman inasmuch as she supported her husband Ahashveirosh (!) even as she urged him to improve his character. Hawthorne, alongside other 19th-century authors, broke from *Ornaments*, transforming Esther-as-Hester into an independent-minded, strong-willed, creative, elegant woman who was willing to break convention in order to do what was right. In so doing, Hawthorne offers us a three-dimensional view of Esther's rich inner world.

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<sup>36</sup> For a list, see Matthew Gartner, "'The Scarlet Letter' and the Book of Esther: Scriptural Letter and Narrative Life," *Studies in American Fiction*, 23:2 (Autumn 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Ariel Clark Silver, [The Book of Esther and the Typology of Female Transfiguration in American Literature](#) (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).

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<sup>38</sup> Jacob Mason Spencer, "Hawthorne's Magnalia: Retelling Cotton Mather in the Provincial Tales," unpublished Harvard Dissertation, 2015.