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Christians, the Talmud, and American Politics

Ari Lamm

People participating in *Daf Yomi*—the daily study by Jews across the world of a new page from the Babylonian Talmud—recently encountered censorship of one of the Talmud's pejorative references to Jesus. This act of whitewashing was deeply influenced by the history of Christian thought about both Judaism and the wider world.

But the censors were not Christians. They were Jews.

The story begins with the seventeenth page of Tractate *Avodah Zarah*, which contains one of several talmudic passages that refer to Jesus. Throughout the ages, these references were often erased or altered by Christian censors (although we still possess manuscripts that escaped this fate). This phenomenon was the subject of a recent entry in *Talmud Yisraeli*'s recent discussion of the passage in *Avodah Zarah*. *Talmud Yisraeli* is an Israel-based, weekly educational pamphlet for children containing brief synopses of material from the previous week's *Daf Yomi*. It comes out in both a Hebrew version and an English version. As my *Lehrhaus* colleague, Elli Fischer, pointed out, whereas the Hebrew version (primarily addressed to the Israeli public) described the censorship of material in the Talmud "about Jesus," the English translation dispensed with this reference to Jesus. Instead, this version mentioned censorship of material "about Christianity." As Fischer noted, the irony is that the very same Jews excoriating Christians for censoring talmudic references to Jesus are themselves doing just that.

But the problem here is larger than just censorship. A worldview that demands the replacement of "Jesus" with "Christianity" itself reflects fundamental assumptions about both Judaism and broader society that are deeply shaped by the history of Christianity.

To begin, there's the claim that is implicit in this act of censorship, namely, that the Talmud has something to say explicitly about Christianity.

It does not.

The Talmud *never* speaks about Christianity as a whole, nor, with one possible exception, does it mention Christians as a group. The Talmud's interest is in *Jesus*, the individual. It conceives his followers as students (idolatrous ones, to be sure, at least for the Babylonian Talmud), not worshippers. It refuses to treat them as a full-fledged community. The only possible exception comes in the form of the two references to Sunday observance in tractates *Avodah Zarah* (6a, 7b) and *Ta'anit* (27b). But even in those cases most manuscripts—at least in the *Avodah Zarah* versions—refer to "the Nazarene" (in the singular, i.e., Jesus), not "the Nazarenes" (in the plural, i.e., Christians).

Why is this important? For two reasons, one relating to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and one with broader implications for American society.

First, contrary to popular wisdom, Judaism and Christianity—certainly in the first century CE, but even later, as well—were not immediately recognizable, either to insiders or outside observers, as distinct religious communities. In fact, it took a great deal of time for the idea of "Judaism" and "Christianity" as mutually exclusive groups or religions to crystallize. People in antiquity continued *not* to think in these terms for centuries. The traditions in the Babylonian Talmud referring to Sunday as an idolatrous holiday do appear to assume that its observers are idol worshippers but we still must be careful not to interchangeably use "Jesus" and "Christianity," as if one implies the other. After all, the assumption that the former inevitably and as a matter of course birthed the latter has been a core tenet of Christian supersessionism and antisemitism for almost two millennia.

But the significance of replacing "Jesus" with "Christianity" extend far beyond the Judaism, and its relationship with Christianity. It possesses implications, as well, for contemporary American political discourse.

For example, one distinguishing feature of rabbinic literature in late antiquity is that it never really developed a genre historians call "heresiology." Heresiology is the "science," as it were, of heresy, and it became a staple of the literature produced by early Christians beginning in the second century CE. Heresiologists emphasized the importance of creating (they would say "describing") boundaries for their community, and thought the best way to do so was by relentlessly calling out all those whom they felt deviated from right belief or practice.

To this end, the heresiologists compiled exhaustive catalogues of "heretical" groups, and meticulously—if not accurately—detailed all the ways in which they were dangerously wrong. A quick glance at the heresiological work *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus, the second century bishop of Lyon, reveals colorful entries on the deviant followers of Valentinus, Ptolemy, Marcos, Carpocrates, Marcion, the Ebionites, and many more. The *Panarion* by the fourth century writer, Epiphanius of Salamis, contains entries on no less than eighty different types of heresy.

Rabbinic literature has none of this.

That is not to say that the Talmud's rabbis were not interested in drawing the boundaries of their own community, or maintaining normative standards on everything from belief to practice. They certainly were. What they *were not* interested in was relating to wrongdoers systematically as a *community*—let alone as multiple communities—the details of which could then be described and catalogued in intimate detail.

The rabbis simply developed general, catch-all terms for all sorts of people, practices, or beliefs that they considered unacceptable, like *minut* (probably best translated as "dangerous distinctiveness"), or *meshummad* ("one who has become destroyed"). While these terms would eventually be used as code words for Christianity, or Jewish apostates to Christianity, that development took several centuries. But as far as rabbinic literature in late antiquity is concerned, one couldn't use the terms "*minim*" or "*meshummadim*" to signify specific, historical communities that existed, in the same way that one very much could refer to the "Montanists," "Valentinians," or "Elchasaites" of Christian heresiological literature. Even terms in rabbinic literature that *do* refer to specific social groups—like "Sadducee" or

"Boethusian"—are used interchangeably with each other In any case, they appear to have been inherited by rabbinic literature from earlier historical periods.

The bottom line is that while the rabbis' insistence on clear boundaries produced outsiders, they did not dwell on different communities of outsiders. This includes Christianity, which is why the Talmud does not engage with it as a distinct social category. Rather than spending time defining other groups, and analyzing what was wrong with them, rabbinic tradition overwhelmingly emphasized its own values, and its own vision for society. Naturally, this vision itself entailed that people would be excluded, perhaps just as many as those whom the heresiologists wished to expel. But the insistence on presenting a case *for* something, rather than a case *against* something else, is instructive.

So much of American political discourse has devolved into heresiology. We have grown obsessed with cataloguing the evils of our opponents and detailing the deviations of supposed allies. I don't mean to minimize the sins at stake, but in light of the continuing corrosion of American civic discourse, it is high time for a course correction. What we need now is a positive vision for the future. We require a set of values to cherish rather than deficiencies to abhor.

In other words, we don't need, at least at this moment in history, the heresiological fixation upon others. We need the Talmud's focus upon ourselves, upon a positive case for a moral and just society.

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Revisiting Mendelssohn's Living Script

Tzvi Sinensky

I read with interest Dr. Lawrence Kaplan's insightful essay concerning the key role oral instruction plays in the thought of Moses Mendelssohn. I appreciate his complimentary words regarding my earlier piece concerning Mendelssohn's notion of the Oral Law as living script, and find myself in agreement with key elements of his argument. Still, since I perceive significant daylight between my reading of Mendelssohn and that of Kaplan, I'd like to continue the conversation.

Drawing on Dr. Haym Soloveitchik's notion of a mimetic tradition and Professor Moshe Koppel's fruitful comparison of Judaism to a first language, Kaplan suggests that in addition to helping the student "avoid loneliness," such instruction also helps to fashion a mimetic community in whose language members are fluent from youth. This, Kaplan contends, is also the key to understanding Mendelssohn's enigmatic position regarding the purpose of *mitzvot*:

> When people speak in their first language, that language in which they are at home, that language which they speak so fluently and intuitively, then, precisely because they are so at home and so comfortable in it, it is easy and natural for them to use that language for higher purposes, to exploit its possibilities, capabilities, and resources to explore the most abstract, the most imaginative, most demanding, the richest intellectual, cultural, political, literary, scientific, philosophical, and religious issues.
>
> On the other hand, when people speak in their second language, that language which they "speak haltingly and stiltedly, [since] a part of the mind is occupied with retrieving the relevant rule," then, precisely because they are so ill at ease and so uncomfortable in it, so afraid of making mistakes, they will tend to use that language more functionally and practically, will play it safe and seek to avoid any discussion which might make untoward demands on their still limited and fragile linguistic capabilities.

If this is so, continues Kaplan, we may be able to account for Mendelssohn's position regarding matters of dogma. Eli Sacks has argued that for Mendelssohn, while the *mitzvot* remain stable, there is great flexibility concerning the core conceptual principles that underlie those halakhic commitments. Kaplan submits that "this flexibility derives, at least in part, from the mimetic nature of the halakhic society established by that constitution." Knowing *halakhah* as a first language, "its practitioners shift conceptual and philosophical registers in the course of their discussion, while continuing to adhere to the same fundamental religious truths and principles."

The Dessau of Mendelssohn's youth, Kaplan suggests, while intellectually relatively unenlightened, likely carried more of a mimetic flavor than the Berlin in which he raised his children. Kaplan concludes by wondering whether (or not) it might be conceivable in our

world to craft a culture in which *halakhah* is intuitive to even the youngest of its practitioners.

Kaplan is correct that for Mendelssohn, the purpose of *mitzvot* is not just to avoid loneliness, but also to ensure an immersive education especially for fledgling members of the halakhic community. I would contend, however, that a consideration of the primary aim of that immersion is critical to a full appreciation of the "living script."

For Mendelssohn, the ceremonial laws are primarily aimed at inspiring reflection regarding broader metaphysical and ethical truths. In his words, "All laws refer to, or are based upon, eternal truths of reason, or remind us of them, and rouse us to ponder them" (*Jerusalem*, 90). On this view, ritual observance is not primarily intended to instill within the student fealty to a particularist tradition, but to inspire him to reflect on universal truths.

This also helps to account for another point. Kaplan writes that for Mendelssohn, "we may have here, though Mendelssohn does not say so, a chronological mimetic progression. In one's childhood, one absorbs, by osmosis, as it were, the practices prescribed by the ceremonial law from family, friends, and more broadly society at large and its institutions. It is at a later stage of mimesis that the youth 'follow[s] an older and wiser man at his every step.'" In this telling, Mendelssohn stresses not just exposure to sages but also a pervasive halakhic milieu that that merely culminates in the exposure to the scholar.

Yet, a close reading of the passage in *Jerusalem* suggests that Mendelssohn lays far greater stress on the importance of "the occasion to follow an older and wiser man at his every step, to observe his minutest actions and doings with childlike attentiveness and to imitate them with childlike docility." If anything, Mendelssohn de-emphasizes the role of the family and thick cultural environment in permeating the child's spirit, accentuating instead the scholar's model and the child's "inquir[y] after the spirit and purpose of these doings."

Mendelssohn is less interested in embeddedness in a halakhic culture per say than in the reflection and growth that such immersion inspires. True, the young man must first be embedded in a thick halakhic milieu to become habituated to observance of the ritual. Still, since the ultimate aim is to inspire deeper understanding of the metaphysical and moral truths embodied in the Torah, it is the exposure to the scholar that is, far and away, most crucial.

Further, for Mendelssohn the conclusions one is intended to draw from that introspection, at least regarding matters of dogma, are not truly open-ended. Mendelssohn is firmly committed to the Leibnizian triad of belief in God, divine providence, and the immortality of the soul: "one calls eternal truths those propositions which are not subject to time and remain the same in all eternity" (*Jerusalem*, 90). What is more, precisely because his interest is less in acculturation to halakhic observance per say and more in the reflection the mimetic culture inspires, it is difficult to argue that the living script accounts for the peculiarities of Mendelssohn's relative leniency in matters of dogma.

A final piece of evidence buttresses our reading of Mendelssohn's living script. The source for his predilection toward teaching over writing, as Peter Fenyes has noted, is almost

certainly the Platonic Dialogue *Phaedrus*.[1] As a general matter, Mendelssohn is intellectually indebted to Plato on multiple counts. Mendelssohn's *Phaedon* is modeled on Plato's *Phaedo* in offering a philosophical defense for the immortality of the soul. In *Jerusalem*, he cites the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis, that all learning is relearning: "The instructions which we may give others is, in Socrates' apt phrase, but a kind of midwifery. We cannot put anything into their minds which is not actually contained there already" (91-92).

It is similarly evident that Mendelssohn again draws on Plato in the doctrine of the living script. For in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates recounts a myth in which the Egyptian god Theuth presents the Egyptian ruler Thamus with a new invention: written script. After Theuth recounts the potential benefits writing can afford the people of Thebes, the king retorts:

> O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

Oral discourse, Plato suggests through the mouthpiece of Socrates, ensures both comprehension and retention; writing fails on both counts. Of course, we ought not assume that Mendelssohn, known as the Jewish Socrates, slavishly parrots the ideas of his distinguished predecessor as put forward by Plato. Still, the obvious resemblance between the two presentations reinforces our reading: the primary purpose of the doctrine of oral study is more for the sake of spurring the student to fuller comprehension and reflection, than to inculcate lived practices per say.

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[1] Peter Fenves, "Language on a Holy Day: Moses Mendelssohn's Jerusalem and the Temporality of Language" in *Perspectives on Early Modern and Modern Intellectual History: Essays in Honor of Nancy S. Streuver*, eds. Joseph Marino and Melinda W. Schlitt (Rochester: University of Rochester Press), 430.

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

Don Seeman

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

For Malbim, the mise en scene of Esther is Ahasuerus' meteoric rise to power and the political intrigue that would have accompanied such an upheaval. He notes, for example, that the biblical story begins just three years into Ahasuerus' reign, when he still would have been consolidating power, and cites a *midrash* that portrays Ahasuerus as a commoner who seized power.[1] This is not historical research. Instead, it is a form of biblical interpretation grounded in rabbinic exegesis and it needs to be appreciated in that vein.

Crucially for his account of gender politics in this book, Malbim adopts a *midrash* that portrays Vashti as a daughter of the supplanted royal house, suggesting that her marriage to Ahasuerus would have been a political matter contributing to the legitimacy of his new regime.[2] This in fact is the heart of the story that Malbim wishes to tell, because it helps to make sense of the first two chapters of the book whose proliferation of details about drinking and life in the capital might otherwise have seemed superfluous. For Malbim, Ahasuerus' political dependence on his wife sets up a dynamic of murderous intrigue that reverberates through the book.

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

In his somewhat lengthy prologue to the commentary, Malbim elaborates on two broad theories of government that would have been very familiar to his nineteenth century readers. In a limited or constitutional monarchy, he writes, royal power is constrained by law and by a conception of the common good. Sometimes the king even needs to demonstrate that he has received the consent of the governed. Not so the absolute or unlimited monarch, who rules by fiat as both lawgiver and king simultaneously. In Malbim's account—which he tries to illustrate through close reading of biblical and rabbinic texts—Ahasuerus seized power

from a constitutional monarch but was set on absolutizing his rule through a series of very intentional stratagems that required him to sideline or eliminate his wife. Faced by the ancient rabbinic conundrum whether to portray Ahasuerus as a wise or a foolish king, Malbim decides from the outset to treat him as someone who knows what he wants and works deliberately to achieve his goals.[3]

This kind of excursus in political philosophy is unusual among rabbinic commentators, but it is crucial to Malbim's methodology, lending vital context to the plethora of small details on which he builds his interpretation. Why, for example, would Scripture devote so much attention to the lavish parties Ahasuerus held for his servants and subordinates throughout the whole third year of his reign? Malbim's answer is that no mere constitutional monarch could have opened the state coffers so brazenly for his own aggrandizement. Ahasuerus understood that people would be less likely to object to the precedent he was trying to set if they were included among its early beneficiaries.[4]

Why specify, furthermore, that Ahasuerus had invited three distinct groups to these parties: the nobles and princes of Persia, the nobles of the (conquered) provinces and ultimately "all the people who were present in Shushan the palace, both great and small?"[5] As a commoner who had seized power in a large and centralized empire, Ahasuerus wanted to signal that the traditional Persian elites (who would have been most likely to challenge the legitimacy of his rule) had no more access to him than anyone else. Extending invitations to lowly servants conveyed to Ahasuerus' more privileged guests that "both great and small are equal before him for all are [merely] his servants."[6]

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

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

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

Vashti, we have seen, poses a special problem for Ahasuerus. She is at once the key to his legitimacy in the eyes of the traditional Persian elites and the most distressing evidence that his independent power is limited. So, at the end of his long populist campaign, when his heart was "merry with wine," Ahasuerus cleverly sends his chamberlains to summon the queen.[7] Sending his own servants rather than those who normally attend upon her was meant, in Malbim's reading, to signal his disrespect. If she answered his call it would be a symbolic victory for him and if she refused it might present him with an opportunity to move against her. Directly attacking her dignity as the daughter of a royal house, he he also summons her "to show the people and the princes her beauty," as if her attractiveness outstripped the importance of her royal person and pedigree.[8] By demanding that she appear wearing her royal crown, according to one well-known midrash, the king went so far as to intimate that she should appear before the gaze of his servants, dressed in nothing else.[9]

Malbim pointedly ignores several popular midrashim that attribute Vashti's refusal of the king's summons to mere vanity because she had developed a skin disease or even (miraculously) grown a tail.[10] I consider it a scandal of Jewish education that these fanciful midrashim belittling Vashti are often the only ones taught to children, while more substantive readings like Malbim's are ignored. Ever the close reader, Malbim notes that Ahasuerus called for "Vashti the Queen," putting her private name first to emphasize that her status was derived from marriage to him while she responds as "Queen Vashti," emphasizing that her own rank came first.[11] Read this way, her refusal of the king's summons constitutes a self-conscious act of political resistance because she understood what her husband was trying to accomplish at her expense.

Baiting Vashti in this way would have been a dangerous strategy for Ahasuerus because the Persian nobility was likely to side with her in any serious dispute. Malbim thinks that Ahasuerus still loved her and did not wish her condemned to death but that his advisor Memukhan ultimately prevailed with the argument that Vashti's public challenge had to be treated as an offense of the state if Ahasuerus' plans for unlimited government were ever to be achieved.[12] Her offense should not, moreover, be framed in the context of Ahasuerus' political struggle with the last remaining representative of the old royal house but as a woman's rebellion against her husband, thus implicating every man in the desire to see her put in her place. Ahasuerus' cabinet would have to work quickly, because Malbim assumes that both Vashti and the Persian noblewomen with whom she had feasted had already seen through this subterfuge and might work to subvert it.[13] So they released a royal edict banning her from the king's presence almost immediately before following up with seemingly unrelated letters "to every province according to its writing and to every people according to their language that every man should be master in his own house and speak according to the language of his people."[14]

On the level of political rhetoric, Ahasuerus' executive order must have seemed a master stroke because of all that it simultaneously accomplished. Malbim thinks that by emphasizing that the letters were to be sent in the diverse languages of the polyglot empire, Ahasuerus was once again stoking popular resentment against the Persian elites who used to demand that all state business be conducted in Persian.[15]Apparently, "cultural diversity" can be coopted by authoritarian state power as easily as any other ideology under the right

circumstances. More importantly, Ahasuerus' letter would have distracted people from his naked power grab by disguising it as the utterly ordinary resentment of a husband whose wife has defied him, guaranteeing the support of other men who feared the rebellion of their own wives in turn. Could he have found a more potent strategy for harnessing their resentment? In the 1970's it began to be said in some quarters that "the personal is political," but Ahasuerus' letters represent the utter suppression of that frame by insisting that the political is merely personal. Whether or not she was finally executed—as Malbim assumes—Vashti's resistance had been nullified.

On Purim and Genocide

One of the extraordinary features of Malbim's commentary is how little it initially focuses on the fate of the Jews. For Malbim, that fate rested not just on divine providence but on an exceedingly subtle reading of contemporary events by social actors holding a wide a variety of different political aspirations. Ahasuerus had no particular brief against the Jews, according to Malbim, but was ultimately manipulated by his advisor Haman the Amalekite, who bore Mordekhai a personal and hereditary grudge. Without mentioning who the targets of his wrath would be, Haman tells the king that "there is a certain [unnamed] people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom . . . who follow their own laws and do not obey the king."[16] Haman convinces Ahasuerus that extermination of the Jews will be welcomed by all the nations of the empire whose support he has been seeking. Driven by hatred rather than financial gain, Haman even offers to fill the king's coffers with the Jews' money rather than keeping it for himself.

Astoundingly, Ahasuerus turns down Haman's offer of booty because his own intentions at this point are merely to "improve his nation by destroying the harmful religion and its vices."[17] One may easily perceive here an echo of Malbim's critique of reformers and state agents in his own day who claimed to be interested in public morality or "progress" but whose efforts were often construed by traditionalists as efforts to assimilate or destroy the Jewish people.[18] Be that as it may, Ahasuerus ultimately accedes to Haman's request and once more sends letters throughout the land allowing the Jews to be exterminated.[19] Later, when Esther intervenes with the king on her people's behalf yet a third group of letters must be sent, giving the Jews the right to bear arms in self-defense.[20]

So where does this leave us? A curious Talmudic text suggests that "had it not been for the first set of letters" in Megillat Esther "no remnant or remainder of the Jews would have survived."[21] As Rashi glosses, the "first set of letters" refers to the one that mandated male control of the household in the first chapter of Esther. The rule that every man should "speak the language of his own people" is taken to mean that women who marry a man from a different ethnic or linguistic group than their own must limit themselves to speaking in their husbands' language.[22] But such a decree was so clearly daft and unenforceable that it cast all of the king's subsequent decrees into disrepute.[23] When the letter about exterminating the Jews later arrived, most people dismissed it as another laughable farce, and this allowed the Jews to mount a successful defense against the relatively few who did attack them.

Malbim and a few other interpreters have a different reading, whose direct source in rabbinic literature (if there is one) I have not yet been able to identify. Malbim's version, which he attributes without specific citation to "our sages" reads "if it were not for the first set of letters, the second set could never have been fulfilled."[24] On this reading, the second set of letters were the ones permitting the extermination of the Jews, and the meaning is that Haman could never have conspired to kill the Jews in a constitutional monarchy.[25] The first set of letters disempowering women paved the way for Ahasuerus to become an absolute monarch and it was only under those conditions that a genocide of the kind Haman plotted could ever have a chance to succeed. To put it simply, the murder of Vashti and the suppression of women throughout the empire paved the way for Haman's projected Holocaust.

Though this is bound to be provocative, I have referred to Malbim's commentary on Esther as proto-feminist for a few reasons. First, because this commentary demonstrates how the systematic domination of women served broader imperial interests and was also enhanced by blurring the relation between patriarchal domination of households and despotic domination of the empire. Under Ahasuerus, women (starting with Vashti) had to be controlled or neutralized so that the household could serve as a model for the state, even while the state claimed to be modeled on the structure of households. This sort of mutually reinforcing dynamic or political cosmology is by now a commonplace of social analysis, but it wasn't in 1845.[26]

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

Concluding Thoughts

Malbim's interests in the commentary on Esther bear witness more to his thoughtfulness as a reader than to any explicit political project, and that is why I only referred to his commentary, in all fairness, as proto-feminist. I do not mean to imply that he would himself have subscribed to any of the much later developments in feminist thought or practice, including those that seem to be at issue in contemporary Orthodox Jewish life. Given his attitude toward Reform in his own day, it would be odd to portray him as a hero of religious reforms in ours. But this is actually one of the reasons that his commentary on Esther is so profoundly unsettling. He isn't trying to sell anything but a better reading, grounded in rabbinic sources, and a more nuanced appreciation for the dynamics of power. The fact that this leads him to an unprecedented analysis of gender politics in Scripture tells me that this is

a discussion we ought to be having no matter what our stance on hot-button contemporary issues might be. At the very least, it will make us better students of Torah.

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

Malbim learned about the dynamics of power on his own flesh in the decades following the publication of his commentary on Esther.[27] In 1859 he became chief rabbi of Bucharest in Romania but was denounced as an enemy of the state because of his fierce opposition to various reforms and assimilationist policies. Moses Montefiore intervened to save him from being sent to prison but he was exiled and forced to seek redress from the Turkish government in Constantinople. He spent the remaining twenty years of his life embroiled in controversies with reformers and state authorities in a variety of cities across Europe and finally died in 1879 while traveling to assume a new rabbinical post. A committed traditionalist of deep learning and broad intellectual horizons, Malbim can be read with profit today not just for the specific positions he took (these are inextricably tied to his time and circumstances) but for the habits of mind and spirit that writings like his commentary on Esther exemplify. Within a traditional frame, he sought more complex and contextually coherent understandings of Jewish literature and Jewish life. At a moment when many are struggling with renewed passion to comprehend the intersection of different potential forms of oppression (racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny) and also questioning the forms of political discourse in which more constitutional or more authoritarian trends might come to the fore of our national life, Malbim should be on the curriculum.

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

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

[3] See Megillah 12a.

[4] Malbim on Esther 1:4.

[5] Esther 1: 5.

[6] See Esther 1:3-5.

[7] Esther 1: 10-11.

[8] Esther 1: 11; Esther Rabbah 3: 14.

[9] Esther Rabbah 3: 13-14.

[10] See Megillah 12b.

[11] See Malbim on Esther 1: 9.

[12] Malbim on Esther 1: 16.

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

[14] Esther 1: 19-22.

[15] Malbim on Esther 1: 22.

[16] Esther 3: 8.

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

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

[19] Esther 3: 12-14.

[20] Esther 8: 10-14.

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

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

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

[24] Malbim to Esther 1:22

[25] Ibid.

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

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