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TETZAVEH

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**A JOURNEY ACROSS THE AGES: ESTHER
IN AMERICA**

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Book Review of *Esther in America*, ed. Stuart W. Halpern (Jerusalem, Israel: Maggid Books, 2020).

The story of Esther could be considered an anomaly. Its content and worldview are different than almost everything else in the Tanakh. Its bawdy and sometimes humorous tone is out of step with the poetry and pain of the other *megillot*. It lacks the florid depictions of love found in The Song of Songs, even though it is a love story. Although, like Lamentations, it is a story of post-exilic Jewish life, in Esther the diaspora is just a fact, not a tragedy. Ruth and Esther may share the most similarities, focused as they are on heroines with a surety of purpose and sense of honor that drive them to make dramatic, sometimes dangerous choices, but the stakes of Ruth’s life are small and immediate compared to the geopolitical tightrope Esther walks. Esther is, in short, not like anything else.

It makes sense, then, that Esther would be a text that has had a peculiar and resonant life in the United States, a country that has often been unlike anything else. Like Esther, America proved that it was possible to stand up to a seemingly all-powerful ruler and survive. Like Esther, America has been the upstart newcomer, rejecting traditions that may have seemed immutable. In the new volume *Esther in America* editor Stuart W. Halpern writes that the themes of the Book of Esther, “freedom, power, fraught sexual dynamics, ethnicity, and peoplehood...define American identity,” which goes a long way toward explaining why there is enough of a history of this book in this land for more than two dozen scholarly essays, ranging from the earliest days of Puritan New England to 21st century popular media. Many of the essays

probe the complicated relationship between the biblical text and American Protestantism—a relationship made even more unexpected when you recall that Esther is the only book in the Bible never to mention God. How did the land of Manifest Destiny, the land of “In God We Trust” that sees itself as “One Nation, under God,” become so fascinated with, and even identified with, a book in which God is effectively absent and humans have to save themselves? There are myriad other questions to ask about Esther’s long history in North America, and Halpern has collected a panoply of analyses from a broad range of sources.

Esther in America is a book that both transcends historical categorization and is at the same time of the moment. It begins, as the reader would expect, with the earliest Americans and Cotton Mather’s “proto-feminist Esther.” It continues semi-chronologically into essays about Emancipation, but the remaining five sections are organized thematically, not chronologically, and the book resists easy classification into a particular genre or audience. At a time when America is wrestling with its identity and working to find a balance between religion and secularism, academic expertise and expertise gained in the field, a volume that brings together religious leaders, educators, writers, and academics understands the need to be able to speak to wide audiences, and to appeal beyond a narrow circles of interlocutors.

There are themes that are woven into the fabric of the project, both within and beyond the thematic delineations imposed by the editor. “Feminism” and gender studies looms large throughout the volume, as befits a set of essays dedicated to one of the Bible’s most prominent women. While Vashti is often seen as more of a crusader for women’s rights (addressed in Tzvi Sinensky’s chapter “Vashti Comes to America”, see also his *Lehrhaus* piece “Vashti: Feminist or Foe”), Esther is nonetheless depicted as a woman who risked much for a cause and for her people. The gender analysis is hit and miss, however. Only

about a third of the contributors to the volume are women, which perhaps leaves room for improvement, but at the same time more than half of the essays to address gender directly are by men, which is a fantastic indication that we are well past the days when it was assumed that an analysis of gender would be of interest only to women.

One of the strongest elements of the volume as a whole is that it leaves the reader wanting more and opens myriad avenues for conversation. There are sometimes connections that seem to be missing or points left unexplored, but in most cases those are things that were avoided because the scope of a particular essay did not allow for broader conversation, and rather than being lacunae these moments represent opportunities for discussion and for the reader to do her own thinking. Stuart Halpern's essay on Cotton Mather, for example, is a compelling look at the rhetoric of one of America's most divisive religious figures (an earlier version of his essay appeared in *Lehrhaus*, "Puritan Purim"). A reader who is primarily an Americanist (as this reader is) would want to discuss Mather's "vision for womanhood" in terms of his role in the Salem Witch Trials (3). Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World* was the staunchest support for the Salem trials, and his pronouncements about spectral evidence led to the convictions. The trials are mentioned only very briefly and note that Mather "played a role," but falls short of interrogating how this impacts an analysis of his vision for womanhood (6). But Salem is not Halpern's focus, and while Mather's involvement in Salem was based on Mather's interpretation of many scriptural sources, it was not based on Esther. Halpern's essay, as it comes first in the volume, therefore establishes the excellent precedent that this is not a volume that is going to hand the reader all the answers, but instead one that is going to present certain ideas and allow those to open new questions in the mind of the reader.

Similarly, Shaina Trapedo's essay on beauty pageants and the "Esther aesthetic" offers a lively and engaging look into the hugely popular world of interwar beauty pageants and traces the connections from an annual "Queen Esther contest" to find the "Prettiest US Jewess" through the complicated relationship between American Jewry and Palestine in the 1930s and eventually to Bess Myerson's selection as the first (and as of 2021 still only) Jewish Miss America. This suggests myriad questions about how such pageants related to (or even attempted to dismantle) the more prominent images of Jewish American women. Trapedo tells us that 22,000 people (about the full seating capacity of Madison Square Garden) watched the 1933 Queen Esther contest, but in 1934 Fanny Brice filmed a comedic act poking fun at the idea that she (and her nose)

could ever compete for the title of Prettiest Follies Girl of 1934. What was the "Esther aesthetic" in a larger American context if these two visions of Jewish beauty could exist simultaneously? As with Halpern's essay, broader questions about Jewish American womanhood was not Trapedo's focus, so it is not a criticism of her work but only another of the moments within the volume that suggest to a reader other connections to the larger scholarly conversation around a certain topic.

The volume has many strengths—more than could possibly be enumerated in a single review. Two sections, however, stand out as being especially fruitful for future study. The section devoted to "Pop Culture Purim" contains essays about Queen Esther in children's books, Esther in American Art, and Esther in film. The latter chapter, by Yosef Lindell, may have had the most arduous task in the volume because his was the essay that had to include the inimitable *One Night With the King*. First a glossy romance/adventure novel by Tommy Tenney (2004) and turned into a film of the same name in 2006, it is perhaps the nadir of the relationship between Esther and American popular culture. There is little justice in a world in which this film is one of the last appearances of Omar Sharif and Peter O'Toole, reunited here in a strange simulacrum of *Lawrence of Arabia*. Lindell, however, is able to begin with the film, but then move it into a conversation about the broader issues around adaptations of Esther on screen, most of which have had a decidedly Christian agenda. Lindell exhaustively chronicles everything from big-budget Hollywood to *Veegie Tales* and from evangelical propaganda to Orthodox Jewish reclamations of the story.

Lindell's essay works extremely well with the essay that precedes it: "Esther in American Art" by Samantha Baskind. Baskind takes the reader through centuries of depictions of Esther in fine art (complete with beautiful visual aids, many of which are in color) and her ability to contextualize not only the elements of the American psyche that seem to be drawn toward Esther, but also the innovations in American art that contributed to an ever-evolving visual representation of the queen makes this chapter stand out. In particular it was wonderful to see J.T. Waldman's *tour de force* graphic novel *Megillat Esther* represented as part of a continuum of American artists using the motifs and themes of Esther in their work. Waldman's novel is one of the most visually complicated graphic novels ever produced and it is unfortunate that it went out of print rather quickly, but in Baskind's analysis we have at least some lasting record of how Waldman (and dozens of other artists) have seen Esther as "ripe material" for investigating questions of identity, belonging, and Otherness (219).

The volume (and this essay) saved the best for last. The section entitled “The *Megilla* and Modern Morality” is in some ways the catch-all section for the essays that did not fit elsewhere. In that way it is a perfect vehicle for discussing a book found in the catch-all section of the Bible for books that did not fit elsewhere. But while the essays in this section may not have a unifying theme (beyond the sort of vague “morality” designation) these also offer some of the most forward-looking analyses. Will everyone agree with Liel Leibovitz equating conservatives being “cancelled” in 21st century America to the Jews who were tyrannized by Haman in 5th c. BCE Shushan? Certainly not. But that is why the essay is so good; it is not because everyone will agree, but it is because it is such a good microcosm of American public intellectual life. All the essays in this section take on some element of 20th and 21st century discourse and they work, both as a set and individually, as excellent jumping-off points for discussion that is accessible to nearly every audience.

These comments are several of the many reasons why this volume is going to be valuable to academics, clergy, and laypeople alike. Multiple authors in the volume refer to Esther as a “blank canvas;” one of the overall arguments of the collection is that Esther has had such a rich and dynamic life in the American context because it is a story onto which a wide variety of meanings can be attached and which is open to interpretation in all sorts of situations. Esther is a book in which many people can see themselves, and the characters are larger-than-life, allowing people to see themselves in the broad and brash actions of Esther, Mordecai, Vashti, Ahasuerus, and even Haman. *Esther in America* functions in a similar way. In

many ways it is also a blank canvas, allowing each reader to put in or take out whatever they need.

There is very little value in a work that does not spark conversation or inspire further research. Any book that someone reads and thinks “well, that’s nice” has done nothing to further our collective engagement with a subject. A book like this will have a long life, inspiring academics to think critically about why they agree or disagree with the various essays. It will inspire clergy to take a new look at the deeper meanings of the text and allow them to expand their understanding of how to apply diverse hermeneutics to the biblical text. Laypeople will find almost all of the essays accessible and interesting and can use them to foster their own interest in the text or give them a roadmap for what it looks like to think about a biblical text from every angle.

21st century America needs this book. Leibovitz called this America’s “Hamanite Moment,” and while not all readers will agree with who he casts as Haman, the idea that we are currently in the throes of a divisive political moment in which “us” and “them” are becoming ever more starkly divided categories in many situations rings very true. While we may all hope (and trust) that we are not headed for anything as brutal as the Revolutionary or Civil Wars there is nevertheless much to be gained from thinking about the way Esther helped Americans in those fractured societies navigate their world, and we can all take lessons away from the desire of Americans of earlier times to return to scripture to find meaning. *Esther in America* has appeared at the perfect moment, and is certain to inspire conversation, debate, argument, and rebuttal for years to come.

HUMOR: THE REFUGE OF THE WISE

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Some Talmudic passages are unforgettable. Images of Moses visiting Rabbi Akiva's study hall (*Menahot* 29b), of Rabbi Eliezer's suspension of the natural order to prove the correctness of his opinion about the oven of Akhnai (*Bava Metzia* 59b), and Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai's thirteen-years hiding in a cave (*Shabbat* 33b) are but a few examples of stories that linger long after we have turned the page. More typically, however, we encounter technical argumentation about matters of law. Perhaps more accomplished Talmudists remember the details of these passages, but for the rest of us, the back-and-forth discussions become indistinguishable after a while.

Then there are the rare occasions when we encounter a passage that seems almost but not quite typical. Something odd is happening beneath the surface, and on further investigation, a new dimension is revealed.

Such a passage appears in *Bava Batra* (149a). At the center of the discussion is a man with the odd name of Issur (which literally means "prohibition"). Issur converted to Judaism along with his wife while she was pregnant with their son, Mari. This Mari grew up to be one of the sages of the Talmud. The story begins with Issur on his deathbed. Since the family members are all converts, the question of bequests and inheritance among relatives becomes complicated, for conversion is deemed a rebirth: "A convert, upon conversion, is like a newborn baby." All prior family relations are considered null with regard to inheritance and other matters, so upon Issur's death, his son would not inherit him.

Issur, we learn, deposited 12,000 *zuzim* with Rava. Now, on his deathbed, he wants to give them to his son, Rabbi Mari, using a halakhically acceptable method for effecting a transfer of ownership. If Issur's attempt fails and he dies before making the gift, all that money will become Rava's. Since Issur, being a convert, has no legal heirs, his assets become ownerless upon his death. Because the money is already in Rava's possession, he would take ownership automatically.

Those surrounding Issur's bed as he breathes his last breaths understand the high stakes of the case at hand, and they raise various legal solutions to ensure the orderly transfer of the money from Issur to his son.

The Talmud attributes the presentation of the legal problem to Rava, who asks: "How can Rabbi Mari acquire these *zuzim*?" It seems as though Rava is making an honest effort to resolve the legal question raised here. In fact, Rava is not content to present the question. He subsequently suggests several potential solutions. His first suggestion, that Rabbi Mari simply inherit Issur, is rejected out of hand, for Mari, conceived while his parents were not yet Jewish, "is not eligible to inherit."

This suggestion and its rejection are too obvious. It seems that their whole purpose is to get us to the second suggestion: let Issur give his son the money as a deathbed gift, *matnat shekhiv mera* in rabbinic parlance. This would take effect while the patient is still alive, before the formal laws of inheritance apply. But Rava rejects this solution, too. The institution of *matnat shekhiv mera*, designed to streamline the gift-giving process and circumvent complex legal procedures when a person is dying and has no time for formalities, was limited to those who are subject to the laws of inheritance. A convert who has no lawful heirs cannot avail himself of these leniencies.

Lest we forget, if Issur's attempt to transfer his assets to Rabbi Mari fails, Rava will assume ownership of Issur's large deposit. Does Rava really want to help Issur and Rabbi Mari overcome this technical halakhic obstacle, or is the Talmud suggesting that Rava – heaven forbid! – has a vested interest in the outcome of the case, and his various statements, those that we have encountered and those that will appear later in this passage, are only meant to demonstrate (and assert?) that Issur has no way of transferring ownership to Rabbi Mari, and therefore, with Issur's death, he – Rava – will become the lawful owner of a sum that just fell into his lap?

Our suspicions about Rava's agenda only seem to intensify as the discussion progresses. Every suggestion raised is rejected by Rava himself:

What about [transferring the money] by pulling it? They are not with him.

What about [transferring the money] by means of [symbolic] barter (*halipin*)? Money cannot be acquired by means of *halipin*.

What about [transferring the money] by way of acquiring land? [Issur] has no land.

During those fateful minutes, as Issur's life ebbs away, along with his ability to assure the transfer of his wealth to his beloved son, Rava is throwing up legal obstacle after

legal obstacle to prevent the transfer from taking place – and to ensure that Issur’s deposit remains in his hands.

Still, one might contend that this reading of Rava and his motives is uncharitable, perhaps even subversive given Rava’s stature in the pages of the Talmud. This lingering doubt is dispelled by the next attempt to resolve Issur’s predicament:

What about [transferring the money] by means of [verbal instruction] in the presence of all three parties [i.e., the giver (Issur), the recipient (Rabbi Mari), and the custodian (Rava)]? If he sends for me, I shall not go!!

If Rava really wants to help Issur and Rabbi Mari, he would rush to make sure that the transaction takes place before it is too late. But instead Rava says that he has no intention of attending a forum that could resolve the issue in favor of Issur and Rabbi Mari. Our fears have borne out! Our suspicions are confirmed! Rava, one of the most prominent, outstanding sages of the Talmud is depicted – by the Talmud itself! – as being completely rapacious.

Eventually, a solution was found. The Talmud describes how a sage named Rabbi Ika ben Rabbi Ami proposed yet another solution: Issur can formally confess, before witnesses, a debt to Rabbi Mari. The son could then lawfully collect his due from the father’s estate. Sure enough, such a confession is issued from Issur’s house; Rabbi Mari would receive all that his father wished to bequeath to him.

How did Rava respond to this resolution? The Talmud relates:

Rava became angry and said: “You are teaching people what to claim [in court] and **causing me to lose money.**”

The passage ends here, with Rava angrily complaining that a fellow sage deprived him of what was rightfully his.

What are we to make of this passage? Is it a formalistic discussion of the laws of inheritance and methods of acquisition? Is it a barely-concealed critique of one of the Talmud’s most important sages? Is its lesson that no one, not even Rava, is immune from having his judgment affected by personal interests? Or that no one is above warranted criticism?

But perhaps both the formalistic and critical readings of this passage miss the point. It seems to me that the right

way to read it, and others like it, is as comedy. We should be alert to its sarcastic, ironic, and even borderline grotesque elements. In such a reading, Rabbi Ika was not needed to save us from obvious injustice, and Rava is depicted not as a boundlessly greedy money-grubber, but as a comic actor in a performance that he stages by Issur’s deathbed.

The discussion we read is embedded within a larger treatment of the institution of *matnat shekhiv mera*. The general principle underlying the leniencies that Halakhah proffers to a dying person is that their final instructions should be upheld, even if their deteriorating condition makes it impossible to execute the formal transactions required by Talmudic law under normal conditions. Rava, the sole actor in the theater of the absurd that he stages by Issur’s deathbed, illustrates just how farcical it is to conduct a formalistic legal-monetary debate – at which Rava, the great sage, normally excels – at such a time. The goal of Rava’s theatrics is didactic; he aims to show how ridiculous such formal discussions are when a person, a righteous convert like Issur, is dying.

Rabbi Ika, who rushed to Issur’s house and suggested a formal confession as a solution, thought he was resolving this ethical-legal quagmire, but in Rava’s eyes, Rabbi Ika is a manifestation of the problem, not its solution. The only words that Rabbi Ika can utter as he approaches the bedside of the dying Issur are legalistic formulae. Rava’s outburst, which concludes the passage, is not about Rabbi Ika’s advice to Issur, but about the very notion that this is what is important at the most significant moments of someone’s life (or death). According to the naïve reading, Rava is rapacious and Rabbi Ika’s ethical vision triumphs over injustice. Now it turns out that Rabbi Ika is trapped within a world of legalistic, Talmudic terminology, unable to grasp the piercing irony and bitter sarcasm underlying Rava’s critique of engaging in halakhic discussion at such a time.

Rabbi Ika is not the only one caught in the formalistic trap of halakhic law. Over time, this passage became the cornerstone of the laws of inheritance for converts, with all its harsh halakhic ramifications. Based on this passage, Rabbenu Tam,² one of the leading Tosafists, concluded that not only are converts not subject to the laws of inheritance and bequests, and not only are they unable to will their assets through the vehicle of *matnat shekhiv mera*, but even the Talmudic principle that “it is a *mitzvah* to uphold the instructions of the deceased” does not apply to instructions issued by a convert. The whole gist of this principle, “it is a *mitzvah* to uphold the instructions of the deceased,” is to tell the dying, “Focus on substance, not

the details, for we, the living, promise to execute your wishes regardless of this or that legal formality.” And yet, in Rabbenu Tam’s hands, it becomes just another detail within a tightly-woven web of legalistic minutiae.

Rabbenu Tam, and many other interpreters of the Talmud in his wake, read this passage with customary gravitas for reading, studying, interpreting, and inferring practical conclusions from Talmudic passages. This aligns completely with the trend, which began in the Geonic era, to isolate the legal elements of the Talmud and read them using only legal interpretive techniques. However, the gates of interpretation are never closed, and every generation develops new methods for reading and interpreting the Talmud.

QUEEN ASTER AND QUEEN ESTHER

ARIEL CLARK SILVER is the author of *The Book of Esther and the Typology of Female Transfiguration in American Literature* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018) and a contributor to *Esther in America* (Maggid, 2020).

Purim arrives at the end of winter and the advent of spring. Perhaps, then, it will come as no surprise that the literary language of flowers was invoked in nineteenth century America to celebrate the significance of Queen Esther and her annual commemoration of deliverance through the female. Just a few years before the Botanical Society of America was formally established in 1893, Louisa May Alcott published her short tale, “Queen Aster,” about a well-positioned flower that grows both within and without the walls beside the road. Aster, a Greek name meaning star, alludes to the goddess Ishtar, a Babylonian variant of the female Canaanite deity, Asherah, from which the name Esther may be derived. And just like Esther, whose Jewish name, Hadassah, is forsaken in exile in favor of the Persian variant, Esther, the floral Aster also has a history of multiple identities. Though Aster is the traditional genus name for a flower in the Astereae tribe, the Aster often hides behind other names: Symphyotrichum, Ionactis, Eurybia, and Doellingeria. In America, she also lives in exile; only one species of Aster, otherwise native to Eurasia, originates west of the Atlantic.

We have suggested that this passage and others like it demand a reading that is open to the possibility of irony, sarcasm, didactic humor, and other heretofore unexplored modes. Read in this way, the passage is not quite so grim, and its implications not only reflect on the developing world of Halakhah, but also enrich our understanding of its modes of discourse, and consequently of the eternal truths contained within the Torah.

¹ Translated from Hebrew by [Elli Fischer](#).

² Sefer Ha-Yashar, Responsa, §52 (pp. 110-1 in Shraga Rosenthal’s edition [Berlin, 1891]). It is worth noting that Rabbenu Tam’s nephew, Rabbi Isaac of Dampierre (Ri Ha-Zaken) disagreed with his illustrious uncle and teacher. This is one of a series of disputes between Rabbenu Tam and Ri Ha-Zaken regarding proper treatment of gerim.



Aster

In Alcott’s story, the lovely and determined Aster functions as an Esther figure, leading a revolt against the prideful Golden-rods who have perennially ruled the kingdom of the meadow from their privileged place within its walls. The roadside asters, privy to the “great world” beyond the meadow, convey their information and insight to their relatives inside the court. Already we see a dynamic developing much like that in the Book of Esther between Mordecai, who lives by the side of the road, and Esther, who is ensconced in the palace of the Persian king, Ahasuerus. In “Queen Aster,” one of these roadside asters finally speaks up: “Matters are not going well in the meadow; for the Golden-rods rule, and they care only for money and power, as their name shows. Now, we are descended from the stars, and are both wise and good ... it is but fair that we should take our turn at governing ... I propose our stately cousin, Violet Aster, for queen this year.” This plea draws not only the Asters, but the Clovers, Buttercups, and the Pitcher-plant to their case, but other

flowers – the Cardinals, Fringed Gentians, and Clematis – joined the Golden-rods in opposing the idea of displacing a king.



Goldenrod

Read principally as a whimsical tale, or “Flower Fable,” which was its original 1887 title, this story by Alcott deserves greater consideration as a continuation of the critique which Hawthorne begins in “Legends of the Province House” (1837). Like “Legends,” which introduces Hawthorne’s first Esther figure, Esther Dudley, Alcott’s “Queen Aster” combines a re-consideration of both monarchy and male rule. Written a century after the signing of the United States Constitution, this tale suggests that while Americans may have overcome the sovereignty of England, they had yet to surmount the patriarchy seemingly implicit in any political rule. Many of the flowers in the meadow “blush with shame” and are “shocked” by the “bold” idea of a queen in place of a king. The very suggestion of female rule drives them to scorn, and her victory at the verdant ballot box causes them to react with anger, disdain, and dismissal: “We will never go to Court or notice her in any way.” Worse, they slander her as a “dreadful, unfeminine creature.” In their rage, they reject her authority and turn their backs on her, dividing the meadow. Her supporters, on the other hand, sustain her with their solidarity, much as the handmaidens in the story Esther fast with her as she prepares to challenge the conventions of monarchical male rule.

The cause of Queen Aster is immediately associated with liberty, justice, and deliverance. Echoing the primordial experience of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis even as she channels the existential threat faced by Esther, her first act upon ascending the throne is to banish the evil snakes who have lured innocent birds to death. Queen

Aster makes quick work of Haman-like serpents who build nests (or gallows) of grief for others. She then proceeds to eradicate other forces of stupidity, laziness, greed, and dishonesty so that her flower people can thrive in peace and comfort, free from harm and threat of extinction. Her efforts are also benevolent, building hospitals for the sick and homeless, and altruistic, extending help to ladybugs who had lost their children and ants crippled in conflict. Her goodness and success in governance then lead to messages of “praise and good-will” from other rulers. Her reign is a Purim holiday writ large: choosing a new queen, executing a criminal, charitably giving gifts, and celebrating the triumph over forces of darkness and destruction.

The spirit of Purim pervades the story of “Queen Aster” and extends even to its final reversal, upending a palatial world once controlled by ignorance, fear, and prejudice. When the accomplishments of Aster become well-known, the reluctant Cardinals, Gentians, and Clematis, who resisted her administration, turn at last to embrace her rule. But it is the shift in Prince Golden-rod that is the most significant. In the Book of Esther, the Queen requests an audience with her husband, King Ahasuerus, risking death if he does not extend his golden scepter to her. Esther is able to advance her redemptive plans in great measure because she is admitted into his presence, where she can then convince him of her righteous cause. In Alcott’s tale, however, it is reversed: the displaced Prince Golden-rod is the supplicant to a woman on the throne. In the end, he admits that “she has done more than ever we did to make the kingdom beautiful and safe and happy, and I’ll be the first to own it, to thank her and offer my allegiance.” This remarkable subversion at the end of “Queen Aster,” where the male Prince effectively places himself, the golden rod (read: scepter), in the hands of the female Queen, acknowledging that she “is fitter to rule,” magnifies the trope of enthronement and dethronement at the heart of Purim. In “Queen Aster,” Alcott brings into bloom a new ideal made possible by the world imagined in the Book of Esther: the bending of both monarchy and male rule to the bright light of female wisdom and discernment. The last plea of Prince Golden-rod, to “let me help you if I can” as a friend and faithful subject, is answered by Queen Aster with a more egalitarian vision. She proposes that “there is room upon the throne for two: share it with me as King, and let us rule together.” Building on the advances made by Queen Esther, who was granted possession of up to half a kingdom by King Ahasuerus, Queen Aster suggests shared rule of a province no longer governed by patriarchy. In Alcott’s utopian vision of social unity through sustained matriarchal influence, enduring liberty requires not just the eradication of evil, but the establishment of justice and true equality.

MIRACLES DO NOT HAPPEN AT EVERY HOUR": PURIM DRINKING AS ANTI-CHRISTIAN POLEMIC

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Of all the texts, customs, and practices that color the observance of Purim, there is one that elicits highly polarized reactions. Some sing it with gusto, enthusiastically celebrating it as an expression of the day's festive nature. Others are disgusted by it, consider it an enabler of dangerous and illegal behavior, and do all they can to offset its normative impact. I am referring to Rava's (in)famous statement recorded in Megillah 7b:

Rava said: A person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim, such that they cannot tell the difference between 'cursed is Haman' and 'blessed is Mordechai.'

Whether celebrated as a dispensation for drunkenness or decried as promoting illicit underage libations, Rava's statement is rarely subjected to careful scrutiny and close reading. In what follows I will propose that we must read both Rava and the subsequent story of Rabbah and R. Zeira seriously: doing so will unveil a sharply polemical statement with deep contextual and historical roots.

Our text is brief enough that we may begin by citing it in full:

Rava said: A person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim, such that they cannot tell the difference between 'cursed is Haman' and

'blessed is Mordechai.' Rabbah and R. Zeira made a Purim feast together. They became drunk. Rabbah got up and slaughtered R. Zeira. The next day, he prayed for him and resurrected him. The next year, he [Rabbah] said to him [R. Zeira]: "Come and let us make a Purim feast together." He [R. Zeira] replied: "Miracles do not happen at every hour" (Megillah 7b).

Rava's statement seems straightforward enough: a person must imbibe so much on Purim that they can no longer remember the reason they are celebrating in the first

place. Upon closer consideration, however, making sense of Rava's proclamation is challenging. Rava says that this drinking is a *hiyyuv*, an obligation, yet he cites nary a biblical nor a tannaic source in support of this claim. In the absence of any earlier source backing the claim, we might surmise that Rava is explaining the established requirement to hold a *mishteh*, a celebratory feast, on Purim (See, e.g., Esther 9:22).

On this reading, Rava would argue that one fulfills the *hiyyuv mishteh* only if the finer distinctions between biblical characters are lost to the bottle. This interpretation, however, would be difficult since there are well-established requirements that govern celebratory feasts throughout halakhah, and Rava's statement marks a severe deviation from those norms. We are thus left with a perplexing question: whence this notion that a person must become so inebriated on Purim that they cannot tell the difference between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai?"

Rava's statement seems to allude to the following discussion in the Yerushalmi:

Rav said: One must say, "Cursed is Haman, cursed are his sons" (y. Megillah 3:7).

According to Rav, "cursed is Haman" constitutes liturgy that must be recited on Purim. Masekhet Soferim expands the liturgical requirement several words further:

And after [reading Megillat Esther], one praises the righteous: "blessed is Mordechai, blessed is Esther, blessed are all Israel." And Rav said: he must say "cursed is Haman and cursed are his sons" (Soferim 14:3).

This text may be familiar from the *piyyut asher henit* (better known as *Shoshannat Ya'akov*) which includes ארור המן אשר בקש לאבדי / ברוך מרדכי היהודי. Tur and Shulhan Arukh mandate the recitation of Rav's formulation as well (Orah Hayyim 670).

With this context, Rava's statement in Megillah 7b thus comes into somewhat clearer focus. Rava states that one must become so inebriated on Purim that he can no longer properly formulate the liturgical blessings and curses that accompany the reading of the megillah. (This interpretation is followed by Tosafot (s.v. de-lo yada'), Meiri (s.v. hayyav adam le-harbot), and Tosafot Rosh (s.v. bein arur haman), all ad. loc.)

Thus, according to Rava, those whom the liturgy canonizes as cursed are instead blessed, and those usually celebrated with blessing are subjected to curses in the day's prayers. Advocacy for such confusion between blessing and cursing is highly evocative of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you (Matthew 5:45).

The Sermon on the Mount comprises perhaps the most central collection of Jesus' teachings in the gospels. In this address, Jesus celebrates the meek, the oppressed, and those who withstand suffering without retaliating. It is in this context that Jesus exhorts his followers not to hate their enemies, but to love them, bless them, and pray for them.

Strikingly, Jesus' words are fulfilled to the letter by Rava's statement. Reversing "cursed is Haman, blessed is Mordechai" in the liturgy does precisely as Jesus specifies: "bless them that curse you ... and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you."

In my view, Rava is poking fun at a fundamental Christian text. Jesus' doctrine of universal love, Rava slyly insinuates, is intelligible only when one is in a drunken stupor. No sober, rational-thinking person could possibly take this central teaching of Christ with any seriousness.

With this in mind, let us reconsider the story of Rabbah and R. Zeira, which immediately follows Rava's statement. Rabbah and R. Zeira share a feast; Rabbah slaughters R. Zeira; Rabbah prays, and the next day R. Zeira is resurrected; R. Zeira declines Rabbah's invitation next year because "miracles do not happen at every hour."

R. Zeira's miraculous resurrection is intended to remind us of a most important Christian doctrine: Christ's resurrection. However, R. Zeira's death and resurrection are not the somber culmination of a divine mission, nor does his miraculous revival bring salvation in any measure. Rather, R. Zeira's resurrection is but the zany outcome of Purim buffoonery. It is a drunken exploit, not a theological linchpin. In allowing R. Zeira to return from death, the story degrades resurrection from a foundational theological concept to a convenience that is dispensed towards drunk people.

We are thus meant to read the story of Rabbah and R. Zeira as continuous with Rava's statement, as both

lampoon fundamental elements of Christian belief. (This diverges from some (including Meiri, s.v. hayyav adam, citing Geonim) who read the story as in tension with Rava's statement.) Rava implies that one must be inebriated beyond measure to give any credence to illogical Christian teachings; the Rabbah and R. Zeira vignette suggests that resurrection is a casual aid to inebriated rabbis, and is hardly a mark of deific significance.

Rabbah and R. Zeira's episode closes with the latter politely declining the former's invitation to next year's Purim feast: "miracles do not happen at every hour." Though this conclusion could certainly be read differently, my reading is as follows. The Gospels can be read as a litany of Jesus' miracle work: Jesus heals the sick, distributes bread and fish to the masses, revives the dead, walks on water, and so on. The impression one gets is that miracles tended to occur "all the time" around the Nazarene. R. Zeira's rather blithe demurral of Rabbah's invitation serves as a searing dismissal of Jesus' miracle-work; the Gospel's reports are fanciful fantasy, since we know that "miracles do not happen at every hour." Even more searing, the story suggests that when miraculous resurrections do occur, intoxicated rabbis are the lucky beneficiaries, rather than salvific messiahs and their adherents.

Despite the scathing polemic against fundamental Christian tenets, the story of Rabbah and R. Zeira also invites readers to step inside the realm of Christian belief. The story beckons us to consider resurrection as a narrative device, as something that can happen to esteemed figures, even as it rejects resurrection by granting it to drunken revelers rather than deities. The story enters Christian doctrine in order to pillory it. Rava's statement, too, mocks Christian doctrine by demanding that Jews briefly adopt it. Rava encourages us to "bless those who curse," even if in so doing this doctrine's absurdity is exemplified.

This model of engagement and simultaneous mockery is in fact endemic to Purim texts and liturgies. Historically, Purim is an extraordinarily ripe locus for Jewish polemics and parodies of Christianity. In Late Antiquity, Jews produced commentaries to Esther packed with anti-Christian polemics; burned effigies of a crucified Haman apparently representing Christ; and wrote popular poetry for Purim featuring, astonishingly, Jesus debating Haman about who met a more wretched fate.

The inclusion of Christian figures in Jewish cultural production for Purim is indicative of Purim's status as a

“carnavalesque” release involving “boundary-crossing.” But, as Ophir Munz-Manor writes regarding the Jesus-Purim poetry: “On the one hand they transgress the accepted boundaries, but on the other they reinforce them.” Rava’s foray into the teachings of the Gospels, and Rabbah and R. Zeira’s experiments with resurrection are distinctly within the genre of Purim texts: they involve transgressing a boundary that is normally impenetrable. Yet, these brief excursions into Christianity conclude with the boundary reinforced; the rabbis laugh at Christianity.

Endnote: For further reading on rabbinic readings and parodies of the gospels and Christian doctrine, see: Peter Schafer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). Schafer raises the possibility that gospel traditions were known to the rabbis of the Bavli through Tatian’s Diatesseron, which spread through Babylonia. For the argument that Babylonian rabbis responded equally to Christian influence from the Roman east as to Sassanian Babylonian influence, see: Richard Kalmin, *Migrating Tales: The Talmud’s Narratives and their Historical Context* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014). For an argument that broad swaths of literary material from the Roman east found their way to

Babylonia via Syriac Christian channels, see: Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 136-138.

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