INTRODUCTION

My focus in this essay is on what I regard as a very striking example of classical rabbinic Jewish humor—namely, “Masekhet Purim,” or “Tractate Purim,” a medieval parody of the Babylonian Talmud. There are a number of different approaches one could take for analyzing this remarkable work. One approach, of course, is to look at it as a very clever and well-informed piece of literature. Another way to think about this document is as an example of the larger genre of religious parody literature, a phenomenon that was remarkably widespread within the surrounding Christian community of the Middle Ages. Such parodies exist regarding both Church liturgy and sermons. A third approach would be to ask about the function of this work within the traditional rabbinic culture of the time. In this mode of analysis, we ask whether this composition is an actual act of subversion or if it in fact supports, even if in a sort of back-handed way, the norms of rabbinic society. Before turning to the document itself, I want to take up these various approaches in turn.

RELIGIOUS PARODIC LITERATURE

I turn first to Masekhet Purim as a piece of highly sophisticated literature. As will become clear in due course, the “masekhet,” for all its slapstick humor, is not the idle scribbling of an amateur. It is rather a clever and well-informed rewriting of the Talmud. In fact, it is such a knowledgeable reflection of the discourse, logic, and vocabulary of the Talmud that it could only have been written by an adept insider. This is true to the extent that, to fully appreciate it, the reader already has to have a good deal of familiarity with the Talmud’s style of discourse and argumentation.

Let me expand on this quality of the text for a moment. As anyone who has had a serious and sustained encounter with the Gemara can tell you, the Talmud is not an easy document. It focuses on often arcane legal principles and ideas; is written in a complex intermixture of Hebrew and Aramaic; has its own highly specialized technical vocabulary; develops ideas according to its own logic (itself the butt of many jokes); is written in an elliptical style in which often a word or phrase represents an entire complex of thoughts; and, finally, somehow assumes that you already know the rest of the Gemara since
the readers more often than not find themselves not at the beginning of an argument, but rather in the middle of an already highly developed one, often one in which materials from other parts of the Gemara are brought into play. All this means that, although making fun of the overly clever rabbi or fashioning a joke about the pitfalls of “Talmudic logic” is not all that hard, composing a true parody is a very difficult task indeed, one that requires specialized knowledge. This level of technical expertise is true not only for the composer of this tractate but also for the reader.

This of course raises questions not only about the author and the intended audience but also about the readers’ reactions, both intended and actual. Unfortunately, we have no access to those kinds of data. Although we have some idea of who authored the tractate, as discussed below, we have no way of knowing why, how it was used, how this work was received, or what others thought of it. All that we can safely adduce is that this tractate was meant to be “studied” on Purim, and so the (intended) audience would have been in that frame of mind. It also seems, given the sophistication of the work, that the intended audience would have been students in a yeshiva or kollel setting, at the least.

In light of these comments, it will be helpful to think about the whole phenomenon of medieval religious parody in general and about the making of parodies by members of a religious community of its own sacred materials in particular. As it turns out, this was a fairly common genre in Western Christendom, the supposed venue of our tractate. One of the classical studies of this genre is that of Paul Lehmann, who defined medieval parody as “a literary product, of any given known text or alternatively ideas, manners, customs, activities or people which are seemingly true but in fact are distorted, inverted with conscious, deliberate and noticeable comic effect, whether in whole or in part, whether formally copied or cited.”¹ Sander Gilman offers a more economic definition—namely, “a literary form which is created by incorporating elements of an already existing form in a manner creating a conscious contrast.”² Gilman goes on to argue that what makes for real parody is the maintenance of the same form, the parody lying in the introduction of new content. Conversely, under his definition, if the content remains the same but the form is changed, then we have something more like travesty.

In line with these definitions, Lehmann and Gilman go on to investigate this little-known genre in Western culture. Lehman traces the literary roots of such parodic literature back to Roman times and finds examples in the Middle Ages as early as the seventh century Latin grammar of the supposed Virgilius Maro.³ More to our point, around the same time there appears the “Discus-
mations of Solomon and Marcolf,” which, with its mischievous [frescb] handling of the Bible, shows that even at that early date sacred texts could be the subject of such fun-making. Gilman’s interest is more in the parodic sermon. His argument is that the seed of parody lies in the idealized sermon—or, more specifically, the idealized sermon form (found in, say, the Sermon on the Mount of the Gospel of Matthew) on the one hand, and the actual given sermon on the other.\(^4\) This latter definition works well with the tractate before us because the Talmud in some ways represents the ideal form of the Oral Torah, and what we have in our tractate is the preservation of that form but with a distinctly different content.

The real flowering of religious parody in the West, however, occurs only in the eleventh or twelfth centuries. At this time, a major stylistic transformation occurs as parodies move from being more gentle, amusing, and noncritical to being sharper and more satirical.\(^5\) These changes are associated by Lehmann with the various struggles emerging at that time between spiritual and secular power, between cloistered and noncloistered clergy, and among the various religious orders themselves. To be added to this, it seems to me, should be the rise of Aristotelianism and of the early university as a source of knowledge and learning outside the conventional, church-controlled monasteries and seminaries. Such parodies focused not only on the Bible but also on prayers, hymns, the liturgy, and even the mass itself.\(^6\) Lehman’s analysis deals with very early texts. Gilman, who is examining parodic sermons, especially the French “Sermon Joyeux,” deals with material that is somewhat later—namely, from the fourteenth century.\(^7\) This later date seems to provide a more likely context for the composition of our tractate.

Among the writers of early medieval parodic literature were the “Goliards,” comprised largely of clerical students at the new universities of France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and England. These students, portraying themselves as the pious followers of one putative Saint Golias, made fun of the Crusades, the Roman curia, church politics, financial abuses, and the like. Many of their works went even further, celebrating such vices as gluttony, gambling, and drunkenness.\(^8\) Sometimes whole masses were written that revolved around figures like Bacchus, the Greek god of wine and therefore alcoholic consumption. While such nonconformist students, who were insiders in terms of their knowledge of the literature but outsiders in terms of their subversive attitudes, may be the models of the authors of Talmudic parodies like the Purim tractate, it is hard to find a direct connection. Martha Bayless points out, in fact, that most of these Goliard parodies are not terribly sophisticated but are written more to humiliate religious, political, or social rivals than to be serious pieces
of literature. Masekhet Purim is, however, hardly amateurish or mean-spirited in this way. While it might be inspired by the existence of Goliard parodic literature in the Latin West more generally, it does not share the political, theological, or in fact social edge of such works.

A more apt model might again be the more sophisticated parodic sermons studied by Gilman. In discussing the mid-fourteenth century Spanish archpriest Juan Ruiz, Gilman notes that the “logical illogic is perhaps the highest level of parody to be found generated by the scholastic sermon. Further, the use of biblical quotations coupled with literary references to classical authors such as Cato add some measure of parodic authority to the sermon, but the true source of parody in the sermon is the convolute structure of medieval logic.”

In all events, as Bayless notes near the end of her study, much of this literature, as is the case of Masekhet Purim, was too sophisticated for a common lay audience. In her words, “The evidence of authorship, the fact that there is such a large body of the genre in Latin, and the familiarity with Scripture, theology and the Church required to appreciate the jokes suggest that these texts were written by and for members of the clergy and were not intended primarily, if at all, for lay consumption.”

This brings us to the issue of the potential subversiveness of parody literature. Lehmann ends his discussion by asserting that the medieval parodic literature of the Latin West helped pave the way to the Renaissance and thus the beginning of modernity. In this regard, then, the literature may have been, and even intended to have been, for more than just comic relief. It may actually have participated in the undermining of the old order. One theoretical foundation for understanding the social subversiveness of humor is Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the medieval carnival. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin posits that common folk participated in carnivals and perverse “ritual spectacles” precisely as ways of expressing their resistance to the religious, social, and political structures to which they were subservient. While Bakhtin’s understanding of “folk” humor may be correct to some extent, it seems clear from both the Goliard parodies and the Masekhet Purim that such humor challenging the powers that be is not restricted to the lower class but circulates as well, maybe sometimes almost exclusively, among the estate that is supposedly being subverted.

On the other hand, such subversiveness need not lead to an outright challenge. Gilman’s study of the parodic sermons, for example, associates them closely with the “festum stultorum,” which had many parallels to some of the traditions of Purim (like the election of a boy bishop, reminiscent of the “Purim rabbi”). Although disliked and at times directly challenged by the Church, such occasions not only were popular but also remained within
the confines of the Roman Catholic Church. The development of the “festum hypodiaconorum,” or feast of the subdeacons (marginally educated lay brothers), offers a good example of the “institutionalization” to some extent of the “festum stultorum.” To be sure, such parodies of sermons and the like took on a specifically partisan role among Protestants during and after the Lutheran Reformation, but that is another story.

The parodic and at least potentially subversive nature of this literature raises an important question as to the intended, if not actual, function of Masekhet Purim. If there is a type of carnivalesque folk subversiveness in rabbinic Judaism, it is the holiday of Purim itself, which, in the end, became an “officially” sanctioned holiday. It is no secret that Purim portrays itself quite explicitly as the inversion of all rabbinic norms. Not only do Jews triumph over gentiles, but the rabbi is mocked, drunkenness becomes a mitzvah, and so forth. Medieval Megillot are often illustrated with truly carnivalesque imagery, including people wielding slapsticks and dancers wearing their clothing inside out. I do not intend here to go into the various anthropological and sociological theories of how such reversals and liminalities operate to preserve the status quo. Rather, my point is that it is the very occasion of Purim itself that embodies such subversiveness.

Masekhet Purim, insofar as it is associated with the celebration, thus adds no particular incitement to social rebellion or overturning of the rabbinic norm. It is, it seems to me, nothing more than a sophisticated participant in the already colorful array of Purim amusements and inversions. I should add at this point that Tractate Purim was not even the only form of Purim parody. There is also an Evening Service for the First Night of Purim, a service for the Second Night of Purim, and other “liturgical” sorts of things.

THE TRACTATE MASEKHET PURIM

With these thoughts in mind, I want to say a little about what we know of the history of this tractate. The main source here is Israel Davidson, who published in 1907 what still seems to be the definitive book on Jewish parodies, a book titled, appropriately enough, Parody in Jewish Literature. Davidson writes, “It is only in the twelfth century, that we first meet with parody in Jewish literature.” In particular, he notes that the first Jewish parody of which he finds evidence is actually “Hymn for the Night of Purim,” composed by Menahem ben Aaron and found in the Mahzor Vitry (eleventh to twelfth centuries). It was modeled on the very serious piyyut “Hymn for the First Night of Passover” by Meir ben Isaac. As noted above, we do find in Europe at roughly this same time—that is, the eleventh to twelfth centuries—Christian parodies
of the Gospels and the mass (so-called parodia sacra). This strongly suggests that this rise of mockery and parody in Western Christendom may have sparked or inspired a parallel literature among the Jews, likely mostly in Italy and Provence. As for Masekhet Purim itself, Davidson, after reviewing allusions to the text in various sources, comes to the conclusion that the Masekhet Purim tradition goes back at least to Kalonymos ben Kalonymos circa 1320.

A printed version of Masekhet Purim is first mentioned by Giovanni De Rossi, a Catholic archaeologist and philologist who was active in the later half of the nineteenth century. Among his many publications was a series of catalogs on Hebrew manuscripts in the Vatican library. In this series, he mentions what may have been the editio princeps of the masekhet from the sixteenth century. This edition may have contained other works, including “Sefer Habakkuk ha-Navi” [Book of the Prophet Bottle], an obvious play on “The Book of the Prophet Habakkuk,” with the name of Habakkuk being replaced with “HaBakbuk”—that is, “the bottle.” This Masekhet Purim was presumably published sometime in the early sixteenth century. What is more firmly known is that a second edition was published in Pesaro in 1552. By the seventeenth century there were at least five versions, all stemming, it seems, from the same source. Davidson helpfully gives us a comparison of the various versions. The text I use below comes from an edition put together by Shelomo Ephraim Blogg (or Salomon Blokh), a Jewish educator from Hanover who also owned a publishing business. This text appeared in 1975 as a limited reprint of the original 1874 edition of Blogg’s.

THE TEXT
I now turn to the tractate itself and give a brief “feel” for the text with three short, but I think representative, excerpts. To fully appreciate the cleverness of the parody, one needs to be familiar with Talmudic vocabulary and diction, but I will do my best to convey some of its personality.

My first example comes from the opening of the Masekhet. The opening is almost certainly modeled after the opening of Bavli Tractate Pesachim. The real Tractate Pesachim, which is about Passover, begins by noting, “On the night preceding the fourteenth [of Nisan], they seek out leaven.” The reason one gets rid of leaven, of course, is the biblical command that no leaven shall be seen in the house and whoever eats of it shall be cut off from the people. This piece of rabbinic law is based on Exodus 12:19. It should also be pointed out that there is reference here to water. In the Talmud and the midrashic (extra-Talmudic exegetical and hermeneutic) literature, water is very often a sign of purity, Torah learning, and even life. As we shall see in a moment, it
has the exact opposite treatment in Masekhet Purim. The reason is, of course, given the logic of the parody, if you are drinking water, then you are not drinking wine.

Here is my translation of the opening of the tractate:

**PART MISHNAH:** on the morning of the 13th of the month of Adar, they remove [m'va‘rin] all the water from the houses and from the courtyard. And it is forbidden to give drink from them until the fifteenth of the month and they are subject to flogging on account of “least you see” and “lest there be found” from the middle of the thirteenth day and forward. **GEMARA:** From where are these deductions? Said R. Hatsavah [Keg] said R. Kada [Jug], Scripture says, “remove the evil from your midst” (Deut 21:21). And evil is none other than water for it is written “but the water is bad and the land causes bereavement” (2 Kgs 2:19). This supports the view of R. Yayna Saba [Old Wine] for R. Yayna Saba said the generation of the flood was only punished because they drank water on Purim as it says of them, “every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time” (Gen 6:5). It was also thus taught in a baraita [early source “outside” the Mishnah], whoever drinks water on Purim has no portion in the World to Come, as it says, “the people quarreled with Moses. ‘Give us water to drink,’ they said” (Exod 17:2). The meaning is that had they asked for wine, they would have a portion in the World to Come, as it says, “and Noah began to plant a vineyard” (Gen 9:20).

The last allusion might bear a bit of explanation. The claim is that the world was brought to near chaos by water. Noah clearly got the message because the first thing he did when emerging from the ark was to plant a vineyard, presumably to make wine. Later, under Moses there was also an issue of water, suggesting that the demand to Moses to supply water occurred on Purim. Behind this one can make the further inference that this is why the striking of the rock is cited as the reason Moses was not allowed into the Promised Land—he made possible the drinking of water on Purim. This would of course violate the “command” on the holiday to drink (only) wine.

Before moving on to my second passage, I want to point out that the passage just cited perfectly follows Talmudic form. There is a citation from “Mishnah” and then the “Gemara” poses a very characteristic question in the standard form—from where do we know this [mana haney miley]? There then follows the various biblical references and cross-references. Also cited is a putative “baraita,” a statement from a tannaitic authority—that is, someone from the time of the Mishnah, but a statement not in the Mishnah itself.

My second citation is from later in the first chapter (p. 7, bottom paragraph). It reads, in my translation:
Our rabbis taught, R. Shikran [Drunkard] and R. Hamran [Wine-maker] were the descendants of Noah and once they were on the road and the time arrived for the obligation of the day to drink but they had no wine. They kneeled down and fell on their faces and burst out in cries and said, “Ribbono shel Olam [Master of the Universe], revealed and known to You it is that our father’s father, Noah, was the first tzaddik [righteous person] in the world and it was he who brought wine into the world in order to fulfill the mitzvah of the day and we, the children of his children, do not have wine this day to drink in order to fulfill the mitzvah of the day and our end will be to die of thirst on this road.” Thereupon their eyes opened and they saw before them a well of wine and they drank and became drunk. This well is called by their names, the well of drunkenness [Be’er Shikurim], to this day.

This passage seems to echo in some way the story of Hagar and Ishmael from Genesis 16, in which a well is miraculously provided and is called “Be’er Le-Hai Ro’i.” The language is also similar to that describing the naming of the “well of the oath” [Be’er Sheba]. The language of “obligation of the day” is a standard expression for the Shabbat or one of the three major rabbinic holidays. At first read, it thus seems that this passage refers to the Sabbath and the need for wine for Kiddush. This would be a perfectly pious usage and an example of an actual mitzvah concerning the drinking of wine. The placement of this story, however, and of course the reference to the “tzaddik” [righteous] Noah suggest that the “obligation of the day” should be read as referring to Purim, which now has suddenly taken on the sanctity of Shabbat. It is also, of course, a bit of a clever twist to call Noah the first “tzaddik” [one of the Righteous of the World], a fairly weighty status when all the Bible says is that he was a tzaddik in the context of his generation. In short, this passage cleverly brings into juxtaposition well-known expressions and descriptions about the “real” holidays and the Sabbath in a way that elevates Purim to the height of importance and holiness. In this it is being very “Talmudic.”

My final illustration echoes the beginning of the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Berachot [Blessings]: “From when may they recite the Shema.” The opening argument in this section of the Babylonian Talmud has to do ostensibly with when one recites the Shema in the evening, but it is really a discussion about when the evening is taken to begin and to end. Here is the parallel in Masekhet Purim:

PART 3:
MISHNAH: From when (me’aimatai) do they begin to drink. R. Shakran [Drunkard] said, from the time the sun sets, R. Gargaran [Glutton] said, from the time the stars come out. GEMARA: What
is the reasoning of R. Shakran? In order to add from profane to the holy. And what is the reasoning of R. Gargaran? He compares wine to bread. As it says, “and Melchizedek, king of Salem brought out bread and wine” (Gen 14:18). Now just as we find that that matzah (unleavened “bread of affliction” used on Passover) is from the coming out of the stars, so also the drinking of wine is at the coming out of the stars. And if you were to ask me, just as the wine for sanctifying the day on the first night of Passover is from the time of the coming out of the stars, so is the obligation of drinking wine on Purim from the coming out of the stars.

The argument here recapitulates standard Talmudic discourse about how to fix the parameters of a ritual (in this case beginning the drinking of Purim wine). Usually, the argument places a general theory on the one side and a homologation to a specific practice on the other. In this passage, the argument is about how one goes about “adding to holiness”: one always starts a holy time early, in this case as soon as the sun sets without waiting for full darkness. This is the view of Rabbi Shakran. On the one hand stands the specific practice of the holiday of Passover. In this case, Rabbi Gargaran argues, the starting time for eating the unleavened bread is when it is dark enough to see stars, and so we follow the same practice regarding Purim wine. The implication is that, just as the matzah of Passover is a holy act, so is the analogous drinking of wine on Purim. The parodic character of this “debate” is heightened by the appearance of an almost identical argument ascribed to Shammai and Hillel about Hanukkah in the Babylonian Tractate Shabbat 22. The exact same structure appears, although the holiday being modeled in the second case is Sukkot, not Passover. The patterned discourse, however, is precisely the same, and as in the case before us, the second argument (Hillel, Rabbi Gargaran) prevails. The implication is that drinking wine on Purim is the religious equivalent of obeying the biblical command to eat unleavened bread on Passover.

CONCLUSION

I think the above examples are enough to give you a flavor of the Masekhet and its intricate relationship with the real Talmud it is parodying. Although the work is almost totally unknown today, it should be remembered that it did survive for centuries. It thus had some sort of devoted following. To be sure, the humor and sheer artistry of this work would be totally lost today on the vast majority of Jews, as may well have been the case even in the heyday of rabbinic Judaism. As noted earlier, this is a text that presupposes a high level of Talmudic literacy. Yet the very creation and persistence of this remarkable work show us that, even in the Middle Ages, the traditional rabbis and schol-
ars could also mock themselves. This Masekhet seems to me to be a wonderful example of how deep-seated a sense of humor, self-reflection, and criticism were embedded in the culture of medieval religion in general and of Judaism in particular.

There is, of course, the other side of parody—that is, its potential subversiveness. I noted earlier in this essay that the parodic sermons of the “festum stultorum” were maintained within the confines of the Church but also were seen as dangerous. The carnivalesque ritual celebrations of Purim are very self-consciously mocking the establishment, but the parameters of the holiday itself keep the mockery within certain epistemological boundaries. No one is tempted to think of Purim as somehow reflecting a real alternative to Judaism. A parody of the Talmud, however, is not so easily confined. The tractate can, of course, be read at any time and in any occasion. It does show the flexibility of the Talmudic form and so can bring into question the objectivity, reliability, or even truth of the content. To be sure, there is no direct evidence that this or other like parodies played a role in the emergence of nonrabbinic Judaisms in the early modern period, such as Chasidism on the one hand or German Reform on the other. Neither movement, for example, mocked rabbinic Judaism in the way the Lutheran Reformation went on to mock the Roman Catholic Church. The German Jewish Reform movement took itself quite seriously as an intellectual movement and never fully rejected the Talmud. Quite to the contrary, the Jewish Reformers regarded the rabbinic literature as important and even seminal documents for getting at the spiritual heritage of Judaism, although they did question the authority of such documents for the modern Jew. This may well lie in that fact that the Reformation saw the Church as a perversion of true Christianity, while both Chasidism and Reform (in different ways, to be sure) saw themselves as building on and adjusting Rabbinism in ways that would better serve their religious constituency. Works like Masekhet Purim, then, did not give rise to a widespread parodic literature during the Jewish “reformations” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In all events, the text has had a long life, although with the coming of modernity it has slipped into obscurity. Most Jews today could not read and appreciate its humor, and the growing body of Yeshiva students is simply not exposed to this kind of parody of religious literature. This, it seems to me, is a real loss and maybe reflects, and even lends to, the unsmiling rigidity of modern ultra-Orthodoxy. The Masekhet Purim and texts like it show us that things could be otherwise. What we often regard as the grim and lachrymose “dark age” of persecution and expulsion that comprised the Jewish experience of the Middle Ages was in fact much more complex. As may have been the
case in Christianity, this literature may have had deep subversive or mocking intents, but much of it seems part of the human capacity to step outside of its current state of affairs and take frivolous potshots at the human condition. There is certainly no shortage of this in any religion, and Judaism turns out to be no exception. Masekhet Purim and its imitators like Masekhet America represent a part of the rich rabbinic tradition that, if lost, would only diminish our inheritance.

NOTES
3 Lehmann, *Die Parodie*, 21f.
6 Ibid., 39.
9 Ibid., 12.
13 Bayless, *Parody*, has a considered critique of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory on pages 182-84.
15 Ibid., 17.
17 Ibid., 115ff.
18 See, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (trans. Hélène Iswolsky; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); see also Paul Lehman et al., eds., *Die Parodie in Mittelalter* (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1922), 42.
19 Davidson, *Parody*, 133.
20 Ibid., 172.
21 Benjamin Maria Baader, *Gender, Judaism, and Bourgeois Culture in Germany, 1800-1870* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006), 107.