
Abstracts

- 1 • On His Blindness:
The Book of Job as a Model for
Spiritual Enlightenment in
Milton's Sonnet XIX

Miri Avissar

The Hebrew University
of Jerusalem

This essay offers a reading of Milton's Sonnet XIX vis-à-vis the Book of Job. Based on the poet's own mid-life blindness, the sonnet features a speaker who laments the loss of his eyesight and voices his fear of divine retribution for not being able use his poetic gift to properly worship God. Sonnet XIX is thus a lyrical-theological piece that dwells on the relationship between man and God and ponders the right way to serve the Lord. The poet's thematic engagement with this theological issue is stylistically complemented by his insertion of intertextual echoes and allusions to biblical moments, which also present religious worship as a problem and whose embedding in the sonnet sheds light on the speaker's spiritual crisis.

The essay explicates the ways in which the Book of Job served Milton as a major model in composing Sonnet XIX. As the poem's analysis demonstrates, contrary to *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, which conservatively treat Job as a perfect example of religious patience, here Milton stresses the profound spiritual crisis experienced by the biblical protagonist and his subsequent transformation – from an initial stance of doubt concerning God's conduct to a stance of acceptance and reconciliation – thanks to the spiritual enlightenment bestowed on him by divine grace. In addition, the essay points to the importance of the Book of Job to Milton's formulation of his meta-poetic worldview regarding the standing of poetic creativity with relation to one's yearning to worship God. In adopting the Book of Job as a prototypical context for the sonnet, Milton expresses devotional humility and self-negation, while insisting on maintaining his superiority as the creator of a poetic world. Hence, the Christian poet manages to have it both ways: to imagine himself as a modern-day Job and as God at one and the same time.

2 • Based on a True Story:
History and Fiction in Daniel
Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague
Year*

Rudy Kisler

Tel-Aviv University

This article addresses the far-reaching changes in the field of historical writing during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this time, the classical assumption that history, unlike fiction, is based on objective truths was called into question. Daniel Defoe (1660–1731) was a writer, journalist and historian best known for the pioneering novel *Robinson Crusoe*. In this article, I analyze Defoe's historical novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* through the lens of the seventeenth century's changing perceptions of history and its production. The work reflects an ambivalence, rooted in the time and place of its writing, regarding the nature of historical knowledge and the boundary between historical and narrative writing. This tension is evident in the fact that while Defoe's title indicates that it is a historical text, the characters and some of the content in the book are clearly fictional. This inconsistency raises the question: why does Defoe use fictional tools and style to tell, in his words, "a historical story"? Through an examination of the sources upon which Defoe based his narrative, I identify the historical sources of the text and explore how Defoe utilized these components in the construction of his moral story. By reframing *A Journal of the Plague Year* through the lens of seventeenth and eighteenth historiography, we can better understand the period's ambitious attempts to write history, explain the past and capture truth.

3 • Thomas More in Berlin:
The Reception of *Utopia* in
Modern Germany

Daniel Rosenberg

The Hebrew University
of Jerusalem

This article addresses the reception of Thomas More's 16th century work *Utopia* in Germany, from the beginning of the Weimar Republic to the aftermath of the Second World War. More's famous *opus* depicts an ideal society, free of violence, oppression and poverty. Its respective German reception, though, exhibits suspicious tendencies: instead of a pacifist and idealist reverie, it was perceived as a practical, and even "Machiavellian" strategy. To those German modern minds, More's *Utopia* was not a mere fantasy but rather a concrete political program.

This type of interpretation, which generally represents the historicist tendency in modern German scholarship, has gone through several transformations during that period. The

discussion in the article revolves around three prominent authors who engaged with More's work – each in his own way: the historian Herman Oncken, who prompted the modern interest in *Utopia* and worked on a translation of the text throughout the 1920's; his student Gerhard Ritter, who published an exegetic treatise devoted to the work in 1940; and the political thinker and jurist Carl Schmitt, who dealt with *Utopia* in his diaries while in custody under Allied Occupation.

This interpretative tendency did not pertain exclusively to academic concerns, but also to the broader historical context: while Oncken reads *Utopia* as an expression of the typical English political and strategic doctrine, which is related to the insular nature of England as opposed to continental Europe, Ritter – who has been associated with the resistance movement – regards More as an opposition figure whose criticism was wrapped with a careful ironic literary style. In contrast, Schmitt returns to *Utopia* in order to vindicate his compliance with the Third Reich; he does so by presenting More as the representative of modern technological totalitarian tendency, shared by Germany and the Anglo-Saxon west alike. This development, then, represents not only a curious intellectual episode, but also exhibits the deep currents of the crisis of “realist” political philosophy.

4 • A Secular Zionist Revision of
Tsene U'r'ene:
Reading David Cohen's Homilies

Netta Schramm

The Hebrew University
of Jerusalem

The current study describes the secular Zionist movement's addition to the *derash* literature through the writings of David Cohen (1894–1976). I wish to argue that his writings conflate his socialist secular milieu with his religious upbringing. This fusion informed his homilies on the weekly Torah portion, which were published locally on his kibbutz.

The paper opens with a brief description of the *derash* literature and how it was affected by modernity, followed by a presentation of relevant theoretical hermeneutical paradigms, including the translation of canonical texts for a modern audience.

The main section deals with the writings of David Cohen, who was known as “the father of HaNoar HaOved”. It shows how Cohen devoted his life to working with underprivileged youth, while writing homilies in a mixed style that combined Histadrut ideology, Hassidic lore, and the *Tsene U'r'ene* format.

Gad Opaz's premise that the Shedemot group had to break through a screen of silence and repression reflects a misconception of Cohen's generation's engagement with a secular Jewish outlook. The current study sheds new light on this matter and suggests that Opaz's premise may have been too general.

- 5 • "Studio of Her Own":
Body and Sexuality in the Works
of Young Jewish Religious Women
Artists in Israel

David Sperber

Bar-Ilan University

A trend has emerged in recent years among young Jewish-religious female artists in Israel, of engaging with the body, "femininity", and even eroticism. The common denominator of the works discussed in the present paper – and of the phenomenon itself – is the rather explicit images of nudity, as well as representations or references of the female body. Such representations of nudity and even indirect references of it are considered taboo in mainstream Jewish religious society. This paper examines works by several young female artists, graduates of the "Bezalel Academy of Art and Design", Israel's most prestigious art college. All of them are participants in "Studio of Her Own", a Jerusalem-based project supporting young religious women artists. The paper analyzes several works by members of the group, adopting a theoretical and critical outlook at the resurgent Modern Orthodox discourse of sexuality and the body. The paper demonstrates how these works cross the boundaries of modesty as set out by Jewish tradition, thus becoming an act of opposition to hegemonic rabbinical attitudes toward women.

- 6 • Beyond Abjection:
The *Niddah* in Contemporary
Art, a Gender-oriented Halakhic
Discussion

Roni Tzoreff

Ben-Gurion University
of the Negev

The discussions about the *Niddah* and its representations in contemporary art are saturated with the concept of *abjection* – a term that deals with repressed cultural phenomenon such as the menstruation blood and other physical discharges. Although the association of *Niddah* with abjection seems appropriate, the latter was developed within a secular discourse, which perceives the *Halakha* (a set of Jewish laws) as a permanent and unchangeable canon which is the product of a patriarchal and anachronistic religion. The discussion I propose in this paper is based on a dynamic perception of the *Halakha* as a constantly changing body of knowledge, influenced by a wide range of social matters. Therefore, I offer a discussion in the representation of *Niddah* utilizing the concept of *appropriation*, which will allow us to discern the mutual influences of Halakhic, aesthetic, and gender issues.

As a case study, I will analyze the discourse regarding *My Patchwork Quilt* (2004), an artwork by Hagit Molgan. I contest the common reading of this work as a representation of "rebellion" against the ritual of Niddah. Instead, I offer an alternative reading, claiming that Molgan isn't "rebellious" against the ritual, but rather resisting the masculine control of it – by appropriating the Niddah in order to resist the patriarchal cultural structures. Accordingly, I argue that when artworks appropriate gendered-Halakhic themes, the artistic action influences the Halakhic discourse as well as the gender discourse. Conceived this way, such artworks can (and should) be read not only from a worldview informed by the binary permanent positions articulated throughout the secular discourse – but as part of a dynamic perception, one that acknowledges the political agency of art.