Detail of colophon (identifying mark) of Joseph ha-Zarfati, Spain, 1300.

The Medieval Mind Illuminated

JUDAISM IN GOLD LEAF

by D. Yael Bernhard

Ever wish you could step inside the mind of your Jewish ancestors? *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink* allows you to do just that. This elegant book of medieval manuscripts grants admission to the libraries of the most artistic and erudite Jews of the 12th through 19th centuries. Illuminated manuscripts of exquisite craft appear throughout its pages, and along with them comes a greatly enriched sense of what connects modern Jewish history to the very beginning of the Jewish diaspora.

Embedded in the images are layers of meaning not intended to be understood by all contemporaries who laid eyes upon them. These are skillfully unpacked for the reader by clear, informative essays by a variety of experts and artists.

Marc Michael Epstein's eloquent introduction is graced with a full-page image, reproduced from an illuminated *Mishneh Torah* (Maimonides' voluminous compilation of Jewish law) from 12th-century Italy. Beautifully scribed columns of Hebrew support a visual architecture crowned with an upper chamber in which a cloaked figure cradles a Torah scroll like a baby. Above and below, richly adorned letters are burnished with gold leaf. The Hebrew reads: "How I love Your Torah, it is my discourse all the day." "The love of books in the Jewish tradition is nowhere better shown . . . than in this poetic illustration," writes Epstein.

Jewish scripture, law, liturgy, poetry, and philosophy all found a home in these treasure-chest manuscripts — and few other ritual Jewish objects, or the synagogues and libraries that housed them, survived the Middle Ages. *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink* includes selections from manuscripts from medieval Germany, Italy, France, Spain, the Ottoman Empire, and Persia, with content that ranges from Torah passages to psalms to *ketubot* (marriage contracts) to *haggadot* (Passover ritual guidebooks) to the Book of Esther — a story that held much significance, with its message of

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triumph over oppression, for Jewish minorities.

Commissioned manuscripts were heirlooms, handmade objects decorated in hand-mixed colors and precious gold, many of them fine art of the highest caliber as well as a literary archive, to be handed down the generations. Even after the printing press was invented around 1440, illuminated manuscripts continued to be sought and created as one-of-a-kind objects representing the status and views of their patrons.

The quality of reproduction in the book is excellent, but the images beg for selected enlargement of details. I found myself using a magnifying glass in order to see the intricate imagery that was painted on a very small scale to begin with, and is further reduced here. We are nevertheless treated to the most exquisite calligraphy in Hebrew, Yiddish, and transliterated Persian. Dramatically large initial letters (called majuscules) burst forth with colorful designs, while narrative scenes intertwine with carefully placed text, creating an architecture of buildings and borders, flora, fauna, and fashions of the times, all skillfully composed into a pleasing symphony of pages. Each completed manuscript would be an impressive object, both practical and rare — yet easy to hide and transport.

Both Jews and non-Jews were commissioned by Jewish patrons, with styles ranging from Baroque grandeur to Renaissance lushness to charming folk art. In some cases, it was *halakha* (Jewish law) that ruled the content, in other cases *minhag* (tradition). Notwithstanding these widely diverse origins, however, the manuscripts were accessible only to the urban, educated, and well-to-do, and thus help us to penetrate, writes Epstein, the "secretly meaningful images, alternative histories, and all those fine and subversive elements historians garner from the documents of the elite" —that is, the homes of prominent Jewish families.

Because of frequent periods of upheaval, persecution, expulsion, and migration in Jewish history, few of the libraries that held these manuscripts survived as a whole. Historians can only surmise what the collections they belonged to would have been like. We find here not an accurate record of historical events, but a vivid interpretation. Popular icons of the era were common, such as stylized emanations of light and idealized depictions of Jerusalem. The voice or presence of God is represented as the Tabernacle. Fish were a Midrashic reference to fortune and procreativity, while a dominant metaphor for the Torah itself was the nut, "hard to crack, but rewardingly nutritious on the inside, the very food of life," writes Epstein. Thus Asher ben Yehiel of 14th-century France crowned the opening word of a commentary on Talmud with a nut-bearing squirrel. Other symbols include the four beasts that occupy the corners of a manuscript from 15th-century Italy, to serve as a model for Jews "to be strong as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a gazelle, and bold as a lion" *(Pirkei Avot)*.

"How I love Your Torah, it is my discourse all the day." From a page of *Mishneh Torah*, Italy, ca. 1400.

What exactly is an illuminated manuscript? *Skies of Parchment* acquaints us with the process of creation, from sheepskin (or, infrequently, cow or goat) to finished page. Beginning with a patron who acted much like a film producer, a collaboration of professionals no less ambitious than a crew for an epic movie would be engaged. The parchment would first be stretched, scraped, and polished. An illustrator would then design the page, draw outlines, and decorate letters. Guidelines were scored with a stylus for the calligrapher or scribe, who penned the text, using the cut quill of a swan or goose. The manuscript would then pass to the colorist, who ground and mixed compounds of minerals, dried plant material, and natural substances such as pomegranate skins, burnt acorn, and wasp galls, to make colored ink. Finally, the illuminator would apply gold as powder or leaf, bonded to a ground that kept the gold fairly stable. There was even a punctuator to add vowel signs, and another to add cantillation marks *(te'amim)*. The manuscript took shape in the hands of skilled artisans in every detail of creation. The result was a splendid work of art, embellished with rare, hand-mixed colors.

Medieval manuscripts served not only as documents and ritual objects, but also as visual reference, often in the form of maps. These were informed by scriptural texts and rabbinic traditions more than geographic observations. Jews also used manuscript illumination to mourn the destruction of the Temple and the exile of their people. Whether Sephardim, Ashkenazim, or Mizrakhim, medieval Jews lived in a Muslim or Christian-dominated world, but gazed always toward Jerusalem as the navel of the Earth and the symbol

Baby Moses as depicted by 20th-century artist Arthur Szyk (1894-1951) in a lavishly embellished Hebrew letter *"mem"* in the Four Questions.

of messianic redemption.

Both the exile and redemption of the Jewish people, with freedom as its goal, were expressed in illuminated *haggadot*, meant to act as spiritual mirrors reflecting each and every generation of Jews who envision themselves as emerging from Egypt. At the same time, Jews in Christian lands often integrated Christian iconography into their manuscripts, and Jews in Muslim lands drew upon elements of Muslim architecture and design. Nationalist themes from host civilizations were woven into Jewish manuscripts, yet simultaneously mocked with a subtlety and esotericism designed to evade detection. The nuance of the work would evade the understanding of many educated Jews today.

In 1492, the edict that expelled over 350,000 Jews from Spain also coincided with the rise of print technology. The hand-illuminated book temporarily declined in Western Europe. Chapter 5 explains how Jews throughout the diaspora were restricted in their artistic expression, and the vital role that aniconism — the religiously commanded avoidance of visual depiction — plays in the history of art. The Biblical Second Commandment ordains: "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image *[pessel]* or any likeness *[temunah]* of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth." A vast legal literature exists on the Jewish prohibition of graven images. In some communities, depictions of animals and trees were allowed as long as they were two-dimensional and without substance; others banned even the most innocent depictions. An acceptable technique for "annuling" any hint of an idol was to fit human bodies with bird or animal faces, of which the famous Griffins' Head *Haggadah* of 13th-century Germany (formerly known as the Birds' Head *Haggadah*), said to be "as mysterious as the Pyramids of Giza," is one example (an image of the Binding of Isaac from the Griffin's Head *Haggadah* is shown on the first page of this article). Such animal figures, part lion, part eagle, part human, sometimes had exaggerated features so as to avoid any semblance of human countenance. They were also made to resemble the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant and the curtain of the Holy of Holies. As a children's book illustrator, I was greatly amused to discover that medieval manuscripts contain the kind of animal-headed figures that abound in modern children's literature, beginning with the cute characters of contemporary illustrators such as Maurice Sendak and Richard Scarry, and persisting right up to the graphic novels of today.

Another technique for avoiding idol depiction was the obliteration of faces, the turning of figures to face away from the viewer and the draping of heads in cloaks. The rubbed-out faces commonly seen in medieval manuscripts are not damaged, but deliberately deleted.

Many illuminated manuscripts gave emphasis to stories from the Bible. The altruism of Abraham, the narcissism of Noah, the humbleness of Moses were all worthy themes meant to bolster the moral education of leaders and demonstrate the glory of Biblical ancestors. This was accomplished in a style that was both conformist and distinctive, most beautifully exemplified in Judeo-Persian manuscripts of the 18th century. In these, Queen Esther becomes symbolic of Divine protection, "the saving link," Epstein writes, "between the Jewish and Persian universes."

Other manuscripts depict women, marriage, and medieval Jewish family life. Elaborate *ketubot* served to enumerate a married woman's rights. The author cautions, however, that determining whether Jews actually lived as depicted in these artworks is a tricky matter. Manuscripts of court Jews, in particular, did more to illuminate the wishes, dreams, and aspirations of patrons than to reveal life as it was. As if mimicking the status of Jews within repressive societies, some of the most telling images are placed in the margins of manuscript pages.

Illuminated manuscripts also served as a visual aid for spiritual contemplation. The realms of Divine Mystery are elucidated in intricate decorative *shiviti*, protective talismans hung on a wall as a point of focus in meditation and prayer.

Others served as calendars, which also reflected the ebb and flow between Israel and the Divine Realm in the weekly Sabbath, festivals, and other events. Hung in a *sukkah*, these *shiviti* invited the *Shekhinah*, or feminine spirit of God, into the family's holiday shelter.

Chapter 12 brings us to contemporary Jewish illumination. Though few artists today work on parchment with traditional materials, the confluence of Hebrew text and illustration continues to thrive. The examples given are of inconsistent quality, however. Some seem overdone and contrived, while the works of Arthur Szyk, the Polish-Jewish graphic artist who lived from 1894-1951, are exceptional. Overall, in a world full of artistic talent, it is hard to imagine most of these modern illuminations enduring the passage of time. Also included in the book are irrelevant depictions of modern graphic novels, mass-produced works that have little to do with illuminated manuscripts. A grandiose statement that "the sweep and grace" of one contemporary artist's lines make him "an heir to the linear beauty of painters like Amadeo Modigliani" simply does not ring true. The same commentator, Susan Vick, even asserts that the definition of illumination itself may be broadened to mean "relatively small, mostly two-dimensional works of art that capture and project an inner light to the eye of the viewer," regardless of approach or medium. I heartily disagree — and from what I have learned from the astute interpretations of the medieval Jewish mind in previous chapters, so would my ancestors.

Overall, though, *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink* is an impressive and edifying collection of superb quality and presentation. I will treasure this book for many years to come. JC

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"Dearest Jung . . ."

ERICH NEUMANN'S LIFELONG CORRESPONDENCE WITH C.G. JUNG

by Aryeh Maidenbaum

In April 2015, the Israel Jung Group hosted an important international conference discussing the contributions of Dr. Erich Neumann (1905-1960, shown in the photo on the facing page) to the field of analytical psychology (another name for the psychology and ideas of Carl Jung, 1875-1961). The impetus for this program, held at Kibbutz Shefayim, not far from Tel Aviv, was Princeton University's recent publication of the correspondence between the Jung and Neumann, which began in the early 1930s shortly after Neumann arrived in Israel, and lasted until his death at 55.

The significance of this correspondence was clearly attested to by the attendance of over 250 people, both Israelis and participants from abroad. The letters not only highlight Neumann's contributions to analytical psychology but reflect his taking Jung to task for some of Jung's naïve comments on Jewish culture in general and "Jewish psychology" in particular.*

Born in Berlin, Neumann was one of Jung's most important disciples, both admired and envied by some of Jung's leading students in Zurich. After earning a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Eriangen-Nuremberg at the age of 22, he earned a medical degree at the University of Berlin, then fled from Germany to Palestine shortly after the Nazis came to power. For those who are familiar with his writings, Neumann is widely admired for the groundbreaking contributions he made in furthering Jung's ideas, most

* See my article, "Carl Jung and the Question of Anti-Semitism," in *Jewish Currents*, Autumn 2012 and at *bit.ly/1P-Fiflw.*