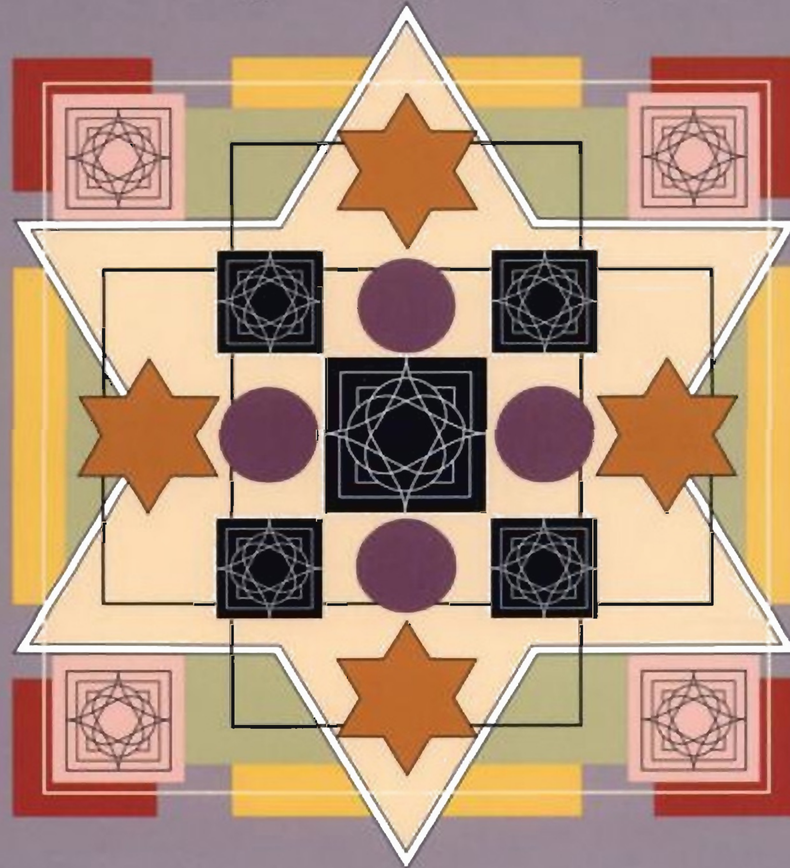
Edited by Lawrence Fine

JUDAISM
IN PRACTICE

From the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period



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JUDAISM IN PRACTICE

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Illustrating History and Illuminating Identity in the Art of the Passover Haggadah

Marc Michael Epstein

When one examines illuminated manuscripts of the Haggadah (pl. Haggadot, the liturgical text read at the Passover *Seder*) dating from the thirteenth through the eighteenth centuries, and the sixteenth- through eighteenth-century printed haggadot that both emulated and departed from the illuminated models, it is easy to regard the illustrations in these books as straightforward depictions of narrative or ritual—what Pooh Bah, in the *Mikado,* rather uneconomically termed "merely corroborative detail intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative." But to yield to this temptation is to miss a great deal of richness. It is true that these illuminations appear at first glance to be simple illustrations of the texts they accompany, mirrors of sacred history or of the progress of the ritual meal that takes place in the world outside the window of the page. But they also have a life of their own as separate, yet interdependent "texts" that, like the others in this volume, may be fraught with issues of Jewish identity and self-image, with polemics and politics. These visual sources are a crucial component of "Judaism in practice." They form a contextual progression and engage in a dialectic between themselves and with the user of the manuscript during the *Seder.* Can one, after all conceive of a moment of "Judaism in practice" more central to the Jewish experience as a whole than the *Seder* experience? Can one conceive of the *Seder* without the Haggadah? And—although they tend to be taken for granted—can one conceive of the Haggadah without the illustrations that accompany it?

The tradition of illustration of the Haggadah goes back almost as far as the oldest known manuscript Haggadot, and it must always be kept in mind that the audience of the Haggadah was never simply an audience of readers but also an audience of actors, one that viewed the book not only as a text but as a script for the ritual reenactment of the Exodus, a drama for which the illustrations set the scene, and to which they added color and detail, filling in various narrative and

conceptual lacunae. The Haggadah text explicitly advertises itself as a certain kind of "mirror," in which "in each and every generation, one must envision oneself as if one had come forth from Egypt." Through the Haggadah, in other words, one is to attempt to experience the *Seder* as if one had been involved personally and actually in the miracle of the redemption of Exodus. Such a connection is facilitated by the illustrations, which depict the scriptural and rabbinic narratives cited by the text. Yet those illustrations do more than merely re-present narrative. The Haggadah is a book whose actual text is less important than what is said about it—how it is interpreted. Its very title, "the telling," reminds us that although it serves as a guide, an instruction manual, a script, and an outline, in performance at the *Seder* it is not a mere text but a hybrid of the words on the page with the polyphony of voices weaving in and out of those words. The received text is conservative and familiar—it was so already in the Middle Ages. But this actual and prescribed text provides the "background drone" that is enlivened and vivified by the commentary and discussion by the participants in the *Seder,* which provide creative and innovative interpretation. In a parallel fashion, the illustrations of the Haggadah serve both as countertext and commentary. If the letter of the law concerning the eve of the *Seder* is that "you shall tell your child [of the Exodus]," and the spirit of the commandment is "everyone who expands upon the telling of the Exodus from Egypt, is indeed praiseworthy," it is, in fact, the illustrations as commentary that facilitate the fulfillment of both letter and spirit of the commandment of what is called *sippur yeziat mizrayim*—the telling of the Exodus from Egypt. Small wonder that the colophon of an illuminated Haggadah created by Avraham of Ihringen of Germany in 1732 paraphrases the Haggadah's mandate, asserting that "everyone who expands upon the scribal illumination and the illustration of the Exodus from Egypt is indeed both praiseworthy and superb!"

Sources and Types of Illustrations

There are four basic types of illustration present in illuminated and printed illustrated Passover Haggadot. One finds illustrations of narratives or ideas found in the Haggadah text itself (we will call this genre "haggadic illustration"); illustrations of biblical or midrashic texts not actually referred to in the text of the Haggadah ("extrahaggadic illustration"); illustrations of *Seder* rituals; and (generally toward the end of the book or manuscript) eschatological illustration. Of these categories, two—illustrations of ritual and haggadic illustration—depict the contents of the actual Haggadah text. The other two categories, those of extrahaggadic and eschatological illustration, take up and expand upon themes of the larger story of the Exodus, or upon ideas that, although perhaps hinted at by the actual Haggadah text are not explicit in it. But it would be a mistake to assume that haggadic or ritual illustration is literal or straightforward and that only extrahaggadic or eschatological illustration can serve to polemicize, to define, or to

affirm a specific vision of Jewish identity. All of these types of images can, in fact, tell us a great deal about the attitudes and self-understanding of the patrons or audience of the works in which they appear.

It is important to distinguish between haggadic and extrahaggadic illustration and to describe how they work together. Extrahaggadic illustration is nowhere more evident than in medieval illuminated Haggadot of the Sefardic realms, in which the text, with its haggadic illustrations (*mazzah,* unleavened bread, and *maror,* bitter herbs, depicted on the pages that contain the blessings over those ritual foods, for instance) is often prefaced by a series of extrahaggadic depictions of selected events and incidents from the creation of the world until the Exodus. The Exodus (in accordance with midrashic tradition) arose in God's mind even earlier than its mention to Abraham at the Covenant of the Pieces (Gen. 15:7–21); it was a part of the sacred destiny of the people who would become the Children of Israel even from the moment of the creation of the world. This iconographic strategy of centralizing the Exodus in the Jewish sacred story and emphasizing its foreordainment and ineluctability, mirrors the poetic strategy of the Avodah, a type of liturgical poetry for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which, like the Haggadah text, comprises a "reenactment," in this case, a meticulous description of the Yom Kippur ritual in the Holy Temple while it yet stood. The poem's climax is the recounting of the high priest's pronouncement of the Name of God from before the Holy of Holies. But this awesome and paramount moment is prefaced by a long recitation and description of events in the history of the world since the creation that lead up to that juncture in increasing crescendos of inevitability, just as the illustrated "historical preface" to Spanish Haggadot leads up to the central event of the Exodus.

Narrative illustration in Ashkenazic Haggadot is less panoramic, more selective. In the Middle Ages, illustrations remain fairly limited and they tend to be haggadic, with such depictions as the rabbis in Bnai Brak, the four sons, the labors of the Israelites, the plagues, and the drowning of the Egyptians—all referred to explicitly in the text of the Haggadah. Yet by the eighteenth century, Ashkenazic illuminated Haggadot, under the influence of a number of famous printed Haggadot, most notably those of Venice (1609) and of Amsterdam (1695), are replete with extrahaggadic illustrations. Ashkenazic artists developed a series of narrative illustrations that strategically condensed the story of the Exodus and linked it with the ultimate redemption in a way (and occasionally with polemic intents) absent from or only hinted at in the text itself. This series is interspersed with illustrations of the Haggadah text itself, and so one typically encounters a series that includes, in the following order, the rabbis of Bnai Brak, the four sons, Abraham destroying the idols, Abraham and the three angels, Moses striking the Egyptian, Pharaoh's daughter finding Moses, the transformation of Moses' rod before Pharaoh, the plague of frogs, the drowning of Egyptians in the Red Sea, the Israelite travels in the desert from Raamses to Sukkot, the giving of the Torah, the Passover in Egypt, King David praying/composing the Hallel, and the rebuilt Temple.

There are other illustrations that appear in some Haggadot, such as the Israelites laboring, or Abraham crossing the river, or Pharaoh killing the firstborn males. The order of the illustrations is linked to the various Haggadah texts that evoke them. Thus, for instance, the depiction of a grown-up Moses striking the Egyptian tends to precede that of the discovery of baby Moses by Pharaoh's daughter, despite the fact that, historically, it should have followed it. The rearrangement occurs because the scene of Moses striking the Egyptian contains as its backdrop the building of Pharaoh's store cities, and the text which that illustrates ("and they built store cities for Pharaoh") precedes in the Haggadah the text illustrated by the finding of Moses ("every child which is born . . . cast into the Nile"). Some later Haggadot (for instance, one printed in Trieste in 1864) have different, and often more logical arrangements that follow "historical" sequence more closely, largely ignoring the actual text of the Haggadah.

What is clear despite the variations is that these illustrations are intended to be a shorthand narration of the events of the Exodus that fills major lacunae in the text. Strangely enough, in spite of the fact that the Haggadah develops from the commandment to narrate the Exodus, the received text ultimately does no such thing—certainly not in the way in which one might expect, with excerpts from the actual story in Exodus. It is well known, for instance, that the name of Moses is mentioned only once in the Haggadah, in a peripheral context, in conformity with the theological necessity of affirming that God accomplished the redemption, "not by the hand of a messenger." The omission of Moses is but one of a number of glaring gaps in the received text. Instead of a simple, cohesive, and flowing narrative, the core of the Haggadah consists of an exegesis of the "wandering Aramean" passage from Deuteronomy (26:5–9), which promotes collective memory but leaves out much of the story. The apparent lack of narrative in the text of a ritual whose purported purpose is to narrate the Exodus tends to irk, and it has been redressed in various strata of Haggadah reform that have reinserted Moses and incorporated passages from Exodus in order to tell the story in a more straightforward way. Even before these reforming insertions of narrative, however, there were insertions of iconography of the sort we will shortly consider These textual and extratextual illustrations work together to make it clear that there is a cohesive narrative, that "saying the Haggadah" constitutes the "telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt." In the following pages, we will examine some examples of characteristic illustrations from each of the categories noted above. This is by no means intended to be an exhaustive survey, but merely a selection of a pertinent example of each of these categories, beginning with illustrations of the Haggadah text itself.

Further Reading

At one time, facsimiles of medieval Haggadot were very expensive and hard to come by, but happily in the past few years more and more popular-priced editions have become readily available.

Two notable examples are the *Joel Ben Simeon Haggadah,* edited by David Goldstein (New York: Abrams, 1985) a Haggadah of the Ashkenazic tradition with Italianate influences in its illumination, and a selection of illuminations from the *Golden Haggadah,* a classic example of Sefardic illumination, in a new popular paperback edition edited by Bezalel Narkiss (London: British Library, 1997).

The classic catalogue of Haggadot is Avraham Ya'ari, *Bibliography shel Haggadot Ha Pessah* (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1969), which has recently been surpassed by Yizhak Yudlov's *Ozar Ha Haggadot* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997). These volumes leave practically no bibliographic stone unturned when it comes to describing every known printed edition of the Haggadah.

Standard surveys on Jewish illumination include Bezalel Narkiss's *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1969), and Josef Guttman's *Hebrew Manuscript Illumination* (New York: Braziller, 1978)—each work exhibiting only one characteristic folio or bifolium from each manuscript in question. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Haggadah and History* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974) presents printed Haggadot in a similar survey format: one or two interesting pages from each volume are reproduced opposite a discussion the volume and the particular pages. Mendel Metzger has published *La Haggada enluminée: Étude inconographique et stylistique des manuscrits enluminés et décorés de la Haggadadu XIIIe au XVIe siècle* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), which groups, describes, and interprets illuminations of the medieval Haggadot by topic. Also helpful for contextualizing medieval Jewish art in the setting of its sociology and material culture is Therese and Mendel Metzger's Jewish *Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Alpine, 1982). An important work is *Illustrated Haggadot of the Eighteenth Century* by Haviva Peled-Carmeli (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1983), the catalogue of a 1983 exhibition at the Israel Museum that surveyed an important but neglected stratum in the history of the Haggadah—illuminated Haggadot produced as luxury items after the advent of printing.

Taken as a whole, all these works, if short on analysis, provide a basis for collecting data on what exists in the realm of Haggadot. The reader interested in serious study of the Haggadot themselves would do well to consult the individual Haggadot to which these works lead, because only when one sees all the illustrations spread out can one get a feeling for the totality of their sequential and contextual dimensions.

Narrative Illustrations

"We were slaves . . . / And the Egyptians oppressed us": Haggadic Illustration

The famous beginning of the Haggadah "narrative" (or non-narrative, as we have discussed), "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt," is accompanied in the Barcelona Haggadah of the fourteenth century by an illustration of the Jews laboring in Egypt (Figure 22.1). The labors of the Israelites are depicted under the watchful

Figure 22.1. "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt." Haggadah, Barcelona, mid-fourteenth century. British Library, London, MS Add. 14761, fol. 30v. Photo: British Library. Reproduced with permission.

eyes of their Egyptian taskmasters. We see Israelites making bricks and raising them into position on buildings. Both Egyptians and the Israelites, it must be noted, are depicted in contemporary dress. This is not merely the result of the lack of knowledge of ancient Egyptian fashions on the part of the medieval artists. Artists of this period and place, if not familiar with specifically Egyptian modes of dress, knew how to archaize costume, and did so when it suited them. This depiction of Egyptians and Israelites as urban Aragonese Christians and Jews of the late fourteenth century is a deliberate attempt to bring the historical suffering of Egyptian bondage into the realm of contemporary experience, enabling the patron and audience of this manuscript to empathize with his or her ancestors. Thus, the illustration accomplishes at least two things in terms of the halakhic mandates of the *Seder*: it elaborates on the narrative such that details are supplied—what, for instance, does it mean to labor "in mortar and with bricks"? And it promotes an empathy with the narrative by literally dressing it in contemporary clothing, casting the narrative not only in an historical but also in a reflexive light—"In each and every generation, one must envision oneself as if one had come forth from Egypt."

But the illustration does something further: it comments on the eschatological dimension of suffering and a theodicy—an explanation of evil—which, if it cannot justify the pain of slavery, certainly exercises the muscle of hope. In the top margin, we have the depiction of a hare being served a drink by a dog. This illustration at first seems out of place—perhaps the unimaginative artist had exhausted his supply of iconography depicting forced labor and filled the space with what art historians tend to identify as a "drollery," or a humorous image. This image certainly seems to be a typical example of the iconography of the *mondus inversus*—a "world turned upside down"—in which, instead of pursuing the hare as dogs are wont to do, this one serves a hare. But there may be a deeper meaning. Scholars of Jewish art have noted that the hare can stand as a symbol for the Jewish people. A second illumination (Figure 22.2), this one from the Sarajevo Haggadah, another Aragonese manuscript of the fourteenth century, serves to illustrate the phrase, "And [the Egyptians] oppressed us: . . . [we] built Pithom and Raamses, store cities for Pharaoh." Here, over two buildings that schematically represent the cities built by Jewish slave labor, a dog pursues a hare as an allegory for the Egyptian oppression of the Jews. Read in the context of the Sarajevo illumination, the implication of the dog serving the hare in the Barcelona Haggadah becomes clear. Although the historical reality is represented by the central illumination of the page, the eschatological hope is for a world turned upside down, a reversal of fortunes: "We were slaves, but one day the Egyptian dogs will serve us!" Thus, a single illustration, linked closely with the text itself, serves on several levels: halakhic, narratological, self-referential, polemical, and eschatological.

Moses Striking the Egyptian: Extra-Haggadic Illustration

What did Ashkenazic illuminators do with the same text? An interesting example of the addition of an extra-haggadic illustration is that of Moses beating the Egyp-

Figure 22.2. "And [the Egyptians] oppressed us: . . . [we] built Pithom and Raamses, store cities for Pharaoh." Haggadah, Aragon, mid-fourteenth century. Sarajevo, National Library, Heb. MS 1, fol. 47r. Reproduced with permission.

tian (Figure 22.3). In the Amsterdam Haggadah of 1695 and in the illuminated Haggadot that imitate it, it comes to subsume the place of the illustration of the labors of the Israelites. The depiction of the building of Pithom and Raamses is relegated to the background of the scene, and a depiction of events from Exodus 2:10–12, which is not discussed in the actual Haggadah text, takes the foreground. It is a particularly turbulent scene, both in terms of its content and its implications about identity: Moses, hitherto having been raised as an Egyptian prince in the house of Pharaoh, went out one day "among his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors." It is unclear whether Moses knows that these slaves are his kinsfolk in the way that the omniscient narrator and his audience do. But the ambiguity surrounding Moses' understanding of his own identity is addressed as the biblical text (Exod. 2:11–15) continues:

> He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He turned this way and that, and seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, "Why do you strike your fellow?" He retorted, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened and thought: Then the matter is known! When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.

Figure 22.3. Moses slaying the Egyptian taskmaster. Copperplate by Avraham bar Ya'akov. *Seder Haggadah Shel Pessah* (Amsterdam: Weisel, 1695), fol. 7v. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Photo: Suzanne Kaufman.

At first glance this account appears completely peripheral to the narrative direction of the Haggadah, nothing more than a colorful depiction of an incident in Moses' coming of age. But it is, in fact, a turning point in the story. Moses learns who he is here. If he doesn't know that these Israelites are his kin in verse 11, that fact is certainly obvious to the Hebrew in verse 13, who resents the fact that Moses describes the man he has been beating as "your fellow," not seeming to understand that he is Moses' fellow as well. Moses fails to "pass" in this incident. He is identified as a fellow Hebrew—regardless of the fact that he appears (as we shall see) and views himself as an Egyptian. As such, he has no particular right to lord it over his fellows. Moses certainly gets the message: "The matter is known!" But to which matter does he refer? His murder of the taskmaster would not have merited the death penalty from Pharaoh—after all, if he had been a bona fide Egyptian prince and he had killed an underling, he would have, at most, been subject to a fine but certainly not sentenced to death. No, the "matter" which is known is the fact that Moses is a Hebrew. Pharaoh had, perhaps, known it all along, but he was banking on the fact that Moses would not learn of it. Now that Moses has found out, he has, in effect, become a Hebrew, and is subject to Pharaoh's original decree against male children, "if it is a boy, kill him."

But how Hebrew has Moses become? True, he goes to Midian to sit beside a well, like his ancestors Isaac and Jacob. The biblical employment of the well as a metaphor for seeking one's past is pervasive; it parallels the way we speak of "seeking our roots" today. But if he is imitating the odysseys of his ancestors, he does it with little consciousness, certainly not with the God-consciousness we might expect of the future leader par excellence of the Jewish people. Moses does not encounter the "God of the Hebrews . . . the God of your father" for the first time until the third chapter of Exodus. In this second chapter, Moses remains very much an Egyptian. When he comes to Midian, he is well-nigh indistinguishable from the Egyptians among whom he was raised. His speech, his appearance, his manner, his carriage, manage to deceive Jethro's daughters: Having been aided by this mysterious strange in their struggle against on-the-job harassment by some pesky shepherds, they report to their father, who is incredulous at their early arrival home in the evening, that "an Egyptian man saved us." Yet we, the readers of the biblical text, know the whole story—we know that this is "our" Moses. He senses it, as well—his consciousness has been raised by the moment of revelation that enabled him to see the Jew who was being beaten by the Egyptian as "one of his kinsmen"—but he is not sure to what it has been raised until his fateful encounter with "the God of your father," for which the incident of the recognition of his kinship with that father, those ancestors, that people, has been a preparation.

The medieval Spanish illuminations illustrating the verse "the Egyptians oppressed us" respond to that ancient oppression, as well as the contemporary oppression it evoked, even for Jews well-off enough to commission these manuscripts. They do so by allegorizing the pathos of oppression (the hare pursued by the dog) or symbolizing the hope for an eschatological redress of the oppression (the hare being served a drink by the dog). In the Amsterdam Haggadah of 1690, and in eighteenth-century Ashkenazic illumination, the complex identity politics that grow out of the image of Moses beating the Egyptian are very much the point of its depiction. This is why it becomes necessary to push the illustration of the verse from the Haggadah text itself literally into the background, and to "bring to the fore" the extratextual biblical narrative of Moses striking the Egyptian. Although this feeds the fantasy of Jewish power, it also presents the patrons of the manuscript with an opportunity to make a statement about their own identity and affiliation. These patrons are the elites, the communal leadership of the day. In Spain, they are the courtier class, in Amsterdam, the more monied merchant class, in Ashkenaz of the eighteenth century, they are the court Jews and their circles. In the material culture they left behind, the documents in which they figure, the letters they wrote, the literature in whose creation they participated or whose diffusion they sponsored, they appear as modern Moses figures. Like Moses, they are princes of the wider culture, but like Moses, they show concern for their fellow Jews and perceive themselves as the leaders of the generation, viewing themselves and being viewed by common Jews as the saviors from oppression when it rears its ugly head by virtue of their proximity to circles of power and influence. These men and women appear, in all the externals of their breeding, taste, and material culture, to be "Egyptian," that is, to be part of the broader culture in which they participate. But the illumination of this particular scene emphasizes that the patrons see themselves as coming down squarely on "the Jewish side" of their identity despite their participation in the material culture of their surroundings. The depiction of Moses (symbolic of the contemporary Moses—the patron of the manuscript) striking down the Egyptian (symbolic of the contemporary Egyptians—Christian oppressors) is quite a risky and a politically edgy image to use, but by its very riskiness it serves as an internal statement of solidarity on the part of the wealthier, materially more assimilated class with the community of their "kinsmen." By the choice of this scene, they proclaim themselves willing to defend their fellow Jews and prepared to fight external oppression. This seemingly inconsequential extra-haggadic illustration is, in fact, of central importance in serving to define and bolster the identity of the patrons who commissioned it.

Ritual Illustrations

THE ORDER OF THE SEDER AND ITS RITUALS: A WORLD AS IT WAS OR AS IT WAS WISHED TO BE?

Ritual illustration serves to bolster identity, as well, but in an even more internal way that assuages the insecurities of the privileged class about their privilege and

their fears of losing it at any moment. Narrative illustrations call upon the reader to insert herself or himself into the biblical or rabbinic story order to enhance the experiential component of the *Seder* as mandated by the idea of "in every generation"—to see himself or herself in "historical costume." Ritual illustrations, by contrast, directly address the reader in his or her own context; reflecting exclusively the contemporary audience, the householder-owner of the book is represented in contemporary garb. Here is one such illustration from a Haggadah written and illustrated by Meshullam Zimel Sofer of Polna in Vienna, 1719 (Figure 22.4). The audience, the well-heeled and well-connected Oppenheim family, is clearly meant to identify with the figures in the illustrations. Yet can we assume that these figures are "straightforward depictions" of the ways in which the Oppenheims "typically" dressed and lived? There is lavishness, ostentation, and "fancy-dress" drama to these illustrations—the interiors, costumes, and furniture change in each panel—and though one could argue compellingly that they depict the world of the wealthy patrons "as it was," it is more likely that they depict that world in which the patrons wished to represent themselves as residing.

There is a parallel here with another aspect of "Judaism in practice," the custom of displaying one's most lavish and precious housewares in the home during the seder—"vessels of silver and gold"—not because this was the way in which one always entertained, but specifically because this was unusual. Passover was a time to show another face—the face of free people—in stark contradistinction to the

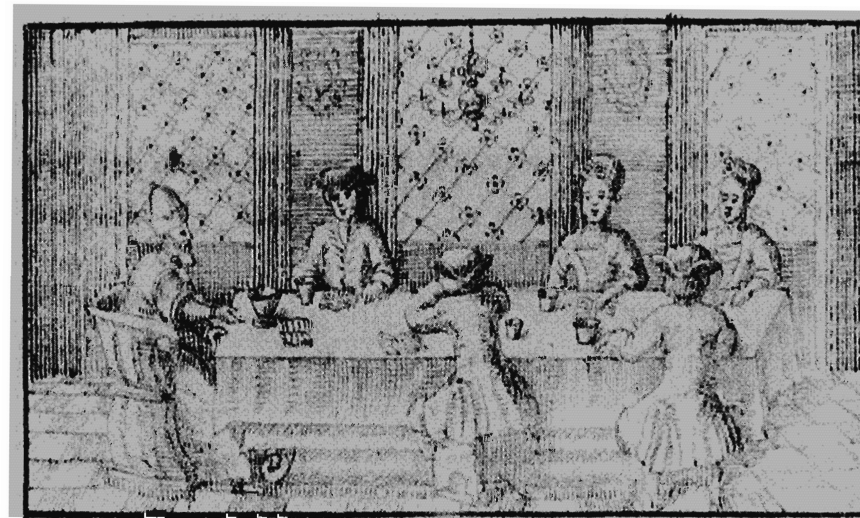

Figure 22.4. Family at the Seder. Haggadah written and illustrated by Meshullam Zimel Sofer of Polna, Moravia. Vienna, 1719. Jewish National and University Library, Heb. MS 8 5573, fol. 4r. Photo courtesy of the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem. Reproduced with permission.

life of slavery. Although such illustrations of ritual in contemporary garb, if they have been considered at all, have by and large been mined in the past as concrete evidence of social mores or material culture, we ought to resist the temptation to do so, understanding that they may depict an ideal rather than a real world. The nineteenth-century east European rebbe Menahem Mendel of Kotzk was once rumored to have asked his students which was the most difficult Jewish holiday to observe. They answered that it was Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles, because it required the erstwhile householder to leave the warm comforts of home to dwell in a fragile and permeable hut for eight days in the first blush (and it was never a shy one) of the long Polish winter. The Kotzker, for whom the greatest pain was caused not by physical discomfort but by the psychological pain of self-deception, replied that it was not Sukkot but Passover which was the most difficult holiday to observe. His students were amazed. "But Rebbe," they argued, "on Passover, one sits in the comfort of home, in one's best clothes, surrounded by the most magnificent of vessels, amid one's family, and eats a beautiful and lavish meal, all the while recounting the glories of the Exodus from Egypt." "True," replied Menahem Mendel, "but it is all a falsehood, don't you see? One recites from the Haggadah, 'we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.' We *were* slaves? That is self-deception, for we are *still* slaves, perhaps not to the same Pharaoh, but slaves nonetheless. To deny this is a lie that all the lavish accouterments of the *Seder* cannot cover up." The householders and families depicted so lavishly in the haggadot are an outcry against the inescapable realities of servitude and subjugation that existed on one level or another even for the very wealthy patrons of such books in the often dark times in which these manuscripts were produced.

One notes a distinct contrast between the approaches of the medieval Ashkenazic and the Sefardic worlds. In Ashkenazic-influenced manuscripts during the Middle Ages, one tends to see the depictions of the head of the household alone performing the ritual actions. This has the effect of isolating and focusing on the head of the household, who is likely to be the person using the book. The Haggadah thus becomes a personal mirror. Sefardic illuminations reflect more of the communal aspects of the *Seder*: women and children are seated at table, servants are depicted (Figure 22.5). The Sefardic trend is continued in the famous Venice Haggadah of 1609, which depicts the entire household (Figure 22.6). This configuration influenced subsequent printed haggadot, even Ashkenazic ones. But the original and fundamental difference in depiction reflects halakhic differences between Sefardic and Ashkenazic practice—instructions in Ashkenazic Haggadot often indicate that the head of the household or the men at the table perform a given ritual, washing before the eating of the *karpas* greens (vegetable such as parsley), for example, or reclining. Sefardic halakhah for the seder tends to be more egalitarian, and to assign specific roles and responsibilities to women and children. Women recline (if they are "women of consequence"), and children enact the Exodus with the basket of *mazzot* (unleavened bread) on their heads. These differing halakhic tendencies and sociological shadings are reflected in the illuminations.

Figure 22.5. "This is the bread of poverty." Haggadah, Barcelona, mid-fourteenth century. British Library, London, MS Add. 14761, fol. 28v. Photo: British Library. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 22.6. The Order of the Seder. Woodcut from *Seder Haggadah Shel Pessah* (Venice: Di Gara, 1609), fol. 2r. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Photo: Suzanne Kaufman.

MAROR ZEH, "THIS BITTER HERB": POLEMIC

Of particular interest is the limited use of misogynistic iconography in the illumination of the phrase Maror *zeh,* "this bitter herb"—an instance in which polemic iconography intrudes upon or blends with ritual iconography. The polemic manifests itself primarily in Italian and italianate manuscript Haggadot of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is directed from the husband to the wife—he points at her, rather than at the actual bitter herb, as he identifies the source of bitterness (Figure 22.7). This is an unlovely and unloving statement under any circumstances, but it is particularly disturbing since historically the wife would undoubtedly have done much of the preparation for the holiday, making the entire *Seder* possible. The very fact that husbands could recite the narrative of the Exodus "at the hour when *mazzah* and *maror* (bitter herb) are placed before you" was, in most cases, due to the ministrations of their wives; this misogynistic joke thus seems particularly disrespectful and ill-placed.

There have not, as yet, been any satisfactory explanations of this image beyond tacit admissions of its misogynism. Is what is at issue here a domesticized, chauvinistic rereading of the idea of servitude—has the husband been called upon to do more around the household in the pre-Passover season than he is accustomed to doing? Might he feel hemmed in by his added responsibilities, enslaved in a "narrow place" (*Mizrayim,* "a narrow place" = Egypt), and therefore accuse his wife, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, of embittering his life with "slavery"? Is this part of the attempt by male Jews to understand and define their own personal *mizrayim,* in this case providing a male safety valve for the psychological tensions of marriage in a culture of few conveniences? Do the positive depictions of women as salvific in the haggadah (Pharaoh's daughter, Jewish wives and mothers who went against Pharaoh's death decree in order to convince their husbands to have children with them) balance out this negative image? And is this ultimately a negative image of woman, or of the man who thus denounces and characterizes her? Is it a parody of the husband and does the usage carry with it an element of carnival? Is it something no Jewish husband would ever actually do, and therefore, something to be found humorous? Such a mysterious and disturbing image only serves to remind us that there is much explication that still remains to be assayed in parsing Jewish art as text. Both this specific example and the more general questions we have raised about "realism" in ritual illustrations show that such illustrations can by no means be characterized as merely descriptive of material culture or customs.

Eschatological Illustration: Elijah the Prophet

Finally, let us turn our attention to an example of eschatological illustration. Many Haggadah illustrations—like the Barcelona "We were slaves"—have some element of eschatology in them. But eschatology becomes explicit in depictions such as that of Elijah the Prophet. It is common custom that at the *Seder,* following

Figure 22.7. "This bitter herb." Rotschild Miscellany, Ferarra, 1470–80. Israel Museum, Jerusalem, MS 180/51, fol. 131r. Photo courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

the meal, Jews open the door "for Elijah the prophet." Yet this custom is not made explicit in the instructions of the Haggadah, nor is it part of the text. According to the rabbinic tradition, which bases itself on a statement by the prophet Malachi (3:23–24), Elijah is the herald of Messiah. Although his "appearance" has become an occasion that is primarily a delight for children, the moment when he is evoked is actually an occasion of high tension and great drama at the *Seder*, the moment at which a passage cursing the oppressors of Israel is read at the open door In the Ashkenazic tradition, the passage is succinct, though in places where Jews had experienced extraordinary persecution, one finds versions of these curses that go on for an entire page in manuscript. The text in the printed Haggadah is "Pour out Your wrath upon the nations which do not know You, and upon the kingdoms which do not invoke Your Name [some texts: For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste to his dwelling]. Pour out Your indignation upon them and cause Your fierce anger to overtake them. Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of the Lord." Thus Elijah is evoked not as a harbinger of a more peaceful world, as it has become the custom to think of the messianic denouement in more recent times, but as the initiator of just revenge against Israel's oppressors. The Messiah heralded by Elijah is the successor of the Davidic line—the true world emperor as opposed to the pope or the sultan—and with his restoration will come revenge against those who have tormented Israel. Thus, appearances of Elijah in the Haggadah may speak explicitly or implicitly to themes of revenge, aligning this eschatological image with other vengeful images such as that of Moses striking the Egyptian, the plagues on Egypt, and the drowning of Pharaoh and his host. This is made explicit in the Prague Haggadah, in which Elijah appears between images of Samson and Judith, two heroes who avenged the Jews in times of persecution, and Adam and Eve, whose misdeed was judged by God—emphasizing that no matter how much Jews may want to take revenge into their own hands, it is God's wrath and not human wrath that is to be poured upon the nations (Figure 22.8).

The theme of judgment and vengeance is a continuation from the other page in the Prague Haggadah that contains a text to be recited at an open door, "This is the bread of poverty." That page is illustrated with images of David and Goliath and the Judgment of Solomon. The Prague Haggadah, the first printed Haggadah with extensive illustration, was the model for later printed Haggadot, and it is clear from its context in this first illustrated printed Haggadah that the illustration of the prophet Elijah, tame and folksy as it often seems, is a shorthand for Jewish dreams of vengeance against oppression.

On several other holidays during the Jewish year that celebrate miraculous salvation, Jews thank God for "performing miracles for their ancestors in those days at this season." This sentiment is not expressed in those words at any time during Passover, since it is a holiday whose redemption is not merely remembered but also reenacted; it is explicitly, rather than implicitly, linked with hopes for a speedy and present redemption. Thus, "Pour out Your wrath" is the Haggadah's answer to "in those days at this season." It may be viewed, in fact, as the climax

Figure 22.8. "Pour out your wrath." Woodcut from *Seder Haggadah Shel Pessah* (Prague: Sons of Shlomo HaKohen, 1526), fol. 25r. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Photo: Suzanne Kaufman.

of the Haggadah, the moment that most explicitly invokes God's miraculous intervention in the present situation, in the same way that God intervened in history to redeem the Israelites from Egypt. Elijah's appearance signals the moment of the interpenetration of the miraculous into the quotidian; a historical figure reappears to usher in the age to be born, just as the redemption of the Exodus foreshadows the redemption to come. In this sense, Elijah as manifestation of history "repeating itself" is both a symbol of the Exodus and a bridge to the ultimate redemption. Such a transition is certainly worthy of being signaled by an eschatological illustration to highlight the fact that the passage being read is not merely a curse. It serves to cue the viewer that the text is doing something much more profound than its literal words might suggest. It is invoking God to enter history.

The centrality of these illustrations, their relationship with the Haggadah text and the drama of the *Seder*, can only be hinted at by these examples. The illustrations of the Haggadah could call upon God to enter history. They could also invite their patrons and their original audience to gaze into the mirror of history and see themselves, allowing them to critique the society in which they dwelled and to express their dreams regarding the transformation of that society. Finally, these illustrations, "read" carefully, provide the latter-day viewer with the precious opportunity to glimpse the self-revealing self-perceptions of those original patrons and audiences, over their shoulders in history's mirror, by the grace of art.