

REVIEW ESSAY
RE-PRESENTATIONS OF THE JEWISH IMAGE:
THREE NEW CONTRIBUTIONS

by

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Miri Rubin. *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. xiii, 266 pp.

Sara Lipton. *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xvi, 241 pp.

Ruth Mellinkoff. *Antisemitic Hate Signs in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*. Jerusalem: Center for Jewish Art, 1999. 158 pp.

Recently, I had the pleasure of visiting the representational realist painter Israel Hershberg in his Jerusalem studio, where he was busy working on a small painting, one of a series of “tree portraits.” It was an exquisite work, in which each dappling of light on every needle of a towering cypress was exactly represented on a miniature scale. But I was startled to see that, while he had blocked out the shape of the tree and the general parameters of light and shade “in the wild,” this champion of rendering from life was actually completing most of the painting in the studio. At first I thought the tree must be outside the window, or that he must be working from a photograph, but when I asked him where the detailing was coming from, he tapped his finger to his forehead.

For me, that simple gesture exemplified what representation is all about and why it is so crucial to the study of culture. Representation can be misunderstood by scholars, whose stock-in-trade is words as an attempt to render the world as it is. But it is never so straightforward, even when it employs photographically exacting methods of reproduction. Representation is always re-presentation, a mediated rendering and interpretation of the world not as it is, but as it is perceived. Psychologists often employ patients’ drawings as a window on the way their patients perceive the world, on both the conscious and unconscious levels. They understand that if one wishes to know one’s subjects, one must seek out not only what they say in the world, but how they describe that world. Likewise, even (and perhaps especially) when it is “wrong” from a historical perspective—politically incorrect, crude, or apparently badly organized—art is a crucial source for the understanding of societal mentalités. It is like having at one’s fingertips a rich

“personal diary” of a culture in which reality is revealed from the most intimate and internal perspective of those who created or commissioned the art, for the study of representation provides unprecedented access into the minds of its practitioners.

If we could survey medieval people with regard to what they “thought” about Jews, how they “perceived” them, we might well draw blank and uncomprehending stares. But if we asked such people to draw a Jew, or to represent a scene from the Bible in which Jews appear, or to chronicle in illustration last Easter’s events, even the simplest renderings they could give us would be rich, nuanced, and deeply interpretable. It would be like receiving an account in both stereo and living color.

In such a case, of course, we would have commissioned the representations, and so would have control and foreknowledge of what they represent and why. Reading representation that has come down to us, unsolicited, from the Middle Ages is somewhat trickier. Our reconstructions of meaning under these circumstances are, to borrow Neal Stephenson’s elegant phrase, “attempts to condense fact from the vapor of nuance.” Sensitive historians can effectively titrate out of such vapors the “pleasing savor” from that which is “quickly cut off and flies away.” Their readings make sense, they seem unforced, and whether they corroborate, overturn, or build upon received knowledge from other evidence, they always reveal history as richer and more complex than it would otherwise have been. Less sensitive historians’ readings are *lectio difficilis*; they ignore historical context, and they limit and narrow rather than broaden our understanding of the cultures in question.

Studies of the representation of Jews in medieval Christian art have as yet tended to mine images for evidence of “antisemitism.” Iconography is represented as bridging the historical gap between Johannine pronouncements of Jewish evil and Nazi caricatures of Jews. This is effected without much subtlety or discrimination between nineteenth-century racial antisemitism on the one hand, and the premodern anti-Jewishness of Christian society and anti-Judaism of Christian religion on the other. Most iconographic studies are devoid of any suggestion that anti-Judaism in Christian thought or anti-Jewishness in Christian society emerges from anything beyond a pure hatred of the Jews. Michael Camille, the ever-compelling and radical doyen of the new medieval art history, puts it, “Images are so much more easily misperceived than words, which is partly what makes them so powerful.”¹ What makes them easily misinterpreted is that it is manifestly difficult to see beyond the apparently bald, uncompromisingly negative nature of the caricatures and libels which seem to be explicit in what we imagine to be “literal” imagery. Thus, while several recent historical studies have considered anti-Jewish rhetoric, legislation, and theology as symptomatic or even symbolic of other internal sociopolitical or religious issues in Christian society, such a nuanced approach has not hitherto been employed with reference to anti-Jewish iconography, and the field has remained one that lacks the subtlety of its counterpart in history. Even as historical studies of anti-Judaism have become more sophisticated, iconographic studies have lagged behind.

Two new books, Sara Lipton’s *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of*

1. *Image on the Edge* (1992), p. 174.

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Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée, and Miri Rubin's *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews*, have emerged to impart the sort of subtlety to the discourse of representation of Jews in literature and art that has long been a desideratum. Both are highly polished, erudite studies that significantly advance the cause of research, and have in common a readability that allows the reader to follow their sophisticated arguments with ease, recommending them to a diverse audience of medievalists, historians, and scholars of art and literature.

By way of contrast, another recent book, Ruth Mellinkoff's *Antisemitic Hate Signs in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*, presents much more dubious arguments. Though Mellinkoff is a respected scholar, her work in this book exemplifies many of the negative qualities of the methodologies of the dominant school of contemporary research in Jewish art. It takes some of the most problematic presumptions of that school to their logical, albeit extreme conclusions, and in doing so, essentially denies the possibility of Jewish meaning in medieval Jewish art.

Miri Rubin's *Gentile Tales* serves as a welcome complement to her previous study, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*.² Reading that book, an exemplary study of the rhetoric and theology surrounding late medieval eucharistic piety and its implications for culture and society, one is tempted to ask, Where are the Jews? While Rubin makes some tempting connections between assertions of Jewish disbelief and the late medieval fashioning of the parameters of Christian belief, the "Jewish angle" feels insufficiently developed. *Gentile Tales* serves to confirm that Rubin was not unaware of the fascinating relationship of Jews to the fallout of eucharistic piety, but that the subject was sufficiently large to deserve separate treatment. The present work is an account of the development of anti-Jewish tales of eucharistic desecration and the ensuing violence that emerged in the late thirteenth century following the development of the theology of Christ's Real Presence in the consecrated eucharistic wafer. The book, which finally brings the Jews into the picture in the constellation of issues surrounding the new eucharistic piety, is well worth the wait, a sophisticated excursion into the ways in which "history" is recounted in narrative and in iconography, both ecclesiastical and popular. Along the way, Rubin affords us a real sense of the nuanced and complicated interdependencies in the very nature of the narrative topos—among them the tensions between perception and narration, between narrative and history, between narrator and subject, and between calls to responsibility and the assuaging of guilt. Her work asserts that there is as much to be learned in the manner of the telling as there is in what is told—and sometimes, in fact, a great deal more.

Rubin emphasizes the current nature of the host desecration tales in spite of their obvious connection with very ancient canards against Jews. Though "all myths ground meaning in the past . . . the myth of Jewish deicide took its form from strong notions about the *present* disposition of Jews" (p. 2). The newness of the particular configuration of these tales in this period bespeaks for Rubin a new set of social and theological preoccupations and realities. Again, it is the way in

2. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

which the tales are told—of whom, by whom, for whom, and in what context—that is paramount for an understanding of those preoccupations and realities. Since these narratives constitute, by any standard, a rather implausible form of evidence for actual historical occurrences, the tales are examined not as testimonials of the events described, but as touchstones for the emotional and theological backdrop against which Jews and Christians interacted in the time and place of their creation.

Rubin successfully demonstrates how the narrative “encompassed a world” with a didactic aim, a “moral center” (ibid.), and a cast of characters including insiders and outsiders, who, stereotyped as they might have been, nonetheless served specific functions in advancing the narrative. Within the narrative, she describes the dialectic between hierarchies of meaning, and the place of opposition and doubt in the “world” the narrative creates. By establishing how the tales respond narratologically to the discrete historical context, Rubin reveals them in a nuanced fashion, rather than simply resorting to the reductionist view that they were vaguely the result of “historical circumstances.” Because she is unafraid to reflect, *inter alia*, on the possibility of meaning in narrative detail—on the choice of one way of recounting a tale over another, and of details within the tales—she is able to present a rich and variegated picture of a total reality, illuminating all of its facets from the sociopolitical to the psychological. I think, for instance, of her insistence on cataloguing the resonances of an oven for late medieval Christians: Rubin goes beyond explaining the pragmatic necessity for the presence of ovens in the tales or illuminations, and asks what it is about the image of the oven that is so frightening but so necessary as to be consistently insisted upon both in narrative and in iconography, and why should this be. In appreciating the role of detail and in not being afraid to speculate upon its meaning, she opens up entirely new vistas—I feel myself a little closer to understanding both the prominence of ovens in Passover Haggadot and the imagery of Abraham flung into the fiery furnace in Ashkenazic *mahzorim* as a response to Christian eucharistic anxiety.

Rubin’s work stands in subtle contradistinction to R. Po-chia Hsia’s important study of the ritual murder accusation, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany*.³ Hsia, while acknowledging the lack of credibility of ritual murder narratives as historical sources, nonetheless attempts to extract history from them, even if by means of counter-readings. Rubin’s book attempts less to uncover “historical” narrative in the case of host desecration tales than to explore a topos. Historical investigation is but one tool employed, and historiography is analyzed as evidence of attitudes and *mentalités* rather than of the sequence of historical events. As in Hsia’s work, the sociology of religious consciousness is paramount here, particularly in Rubin’s masterful division of the narrative strata into social groups and hierarchies and her characterization of various “actors” in the narratives—men, women, children, clergy, thieves, converts. But Rubin does not simply trace the construction of the “standard” narrative. She is exceptionally good at portraying the disjunctions between what come to be stereotypes in tales, and the subtle or blatant deviations from those stereotypes which she correctly assumes to reveal meaning.

3. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

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Rubin's arguments are supported by a skillful blend of evidence elicited from a smoothly presented, yet wide range of genres—psychological, literary, historical, and iconographic. Her facility with iconographic sources is impressive. One becomes aware, as pictorial evidence is seamlessly interwoven with other evidence in Rubin's analysis, that iconography was an essential and necessary conduit of transmission of information about these alleged desecrations: The mass was the "showing forth" of a God who transformed Himself, through the medium of the Eucharist, from transcendent and unattainable to immanent and accessible. This "showing forth" was so central to the meaning of the Eucharist that it made sense that the desecration of this image should be publicized and transmitted by visual means.

Gentile Tales is masterful in its evocation of *climate*: it exposes tensions within Christian society that created the atmosphere in which the host desecration accusation was transmitted. To her credit, Rubin includes a section—what she calls an interjection—on what Jews thought of the Eucharist. This is an extremely important development in the scholarship on this topic. It finally removes Jews from a realm wherein they are the almost mythological subject of Christian fantasy and gives them a voice, allowing us to see into their minds and lives. To this end, Rubin garners in impressive fashion the relevant sources, both polemic (*Sefer Yosef HaMekaneh*, *Sefer Nisāḥon*, *Profiat Duran*), and, for the first time, poetic, in the form of various *qinot* in the wake of the Rintfleisch massacres and other occasions of violence precipitated by the accusation of host desecration. Though medieval Judaism, with the exception of certain Spanish thinkers, was not strong on systematic theology, Rubin demonstrates how firm pseudo-theological positions were developed through exegetical and philosophical polemic, and how the pain of the persecutions gave rise to the poetic expression not only of emotional reaction, but of intellectual disdain for the concepts of transubstantiation and Real Presence and the philosophical and theological problems they engendered. Rubin's *Corpus Christi* clarified systematically what Christians thought of the Eucharist. *Gentile Tales* teaches us how they acted upon those ideas at the level of mythic narrative, and how that could percolate down into mob violence. It also gives us a preliminary glimpse of what Jews thought of the Eucharist.

Apart from the lack of a separate bibliography—a function possibly more of the publisher's conventions than of the author's desires—my only substantial criticism of this well-organized, developing argument is that, having laid the groundwork for it, one would have hoped for some speculation as to what Christians thought Jews thought of the Eucharist. Obviously, they thought Jews believed in its efficacy on some level. Otherwise why steal it and attempt to mutilate it? My question for Rubin is whether, in fact, the whole constellation of accusations—the ritual murder accusation, the blood libel, and the host desecration accusation—might be somehow linked as part of a larger polemic between matzah and Eucharist.

If, as the clergy maintained in using tales of host desecration as an exemplum, the Jews as a people were not living in blindness, but were fully aware of the miracle of the Incarnation and the power of its reenactment on every altar in Christendom, then their desecration of the host could be read as evidence of their secret acknowledgment of the efficacy of Christian rituals. Jews are represented by this

libel as jealous of the Christian reenactment of the Passover, which after the Fourth Lateran becomes, beyond a mere reenactment, a successful act of theurgy, of the drawing down of God's Real Presence into the consecrated wafer. The Jews, as people of the Letter rather than of the Spirit, are frustrated and dissatisfied with the "inefficacy" of their own rituals. They feel they cannot effect this theurgical reenactment without an actual, literal crucified victim, they must kill a Christian child, in a reenactment of the crucifixion, and use his blood to replicate, by their black arts, an *ad littera*, demonic simacrulum of the host.

If this were the case, Christians would have been confronted by a climate of "knowing heresy," wherein Jews secretly admit the inefficacy of their own rites without magical intervention, while confirming the efficacy of Christian theurgy. This climate might have served to effect a shift in the theological climate whereby it was easier to harm the Jews in spite of the church's ostensible protection of them. The idea of Jewish "blindness" would have been transformed by the combination of the ritual murder and blood accusation libels and by the connection of this new hybrid libel with the accusation of host desecration. Could it be that as a result of this confluence, the church was now ready to "read" Jews as heretics rather than as infidels? In these two new libels, there was, at last, a contemporary and public crime for which there was alleged physical evidence of the harmfulness of Jewish stubbornness and hypocrisy with regard to Christians and Christianity. As the Eucharist is definitively identified not as a memorial, but as the real and continuing presence of Christ, so too do the Jews gain Real Presence, through the transubstantive effects of these libels, as the confirmed and verifiable perpetual enemies of Christ and of Christendom.

If the Jews can be proved by these actions to be perpetual enemies of Christ and of Christendom, this provides justification for the ambivalence of the church with regard to the protection of the Jews, and permits some of the baser desires of Christians, which had long required a legal sanction of some kind in order to be transformed into action, to be played out with the blessing of the church. The two libels override the possibility that Jews are blind naifs, or misguidedly stubborn and hypocritical, and prove their willful and malicious stubbornness and hypocrisy, hence, theoretically, making them guilty of breach of their "contract" with God and allowing the church, if not officially, then tacitly, to relax its vigilance somewhat in its protection of Jews. This shift in perception enabled the church to have its wafer and eat it too—popes could continue to condemn these libels and the mob violence they precipitated, while at the same time promulgating the theology that could feed it as it trickled down to the provincial, diocesan, and parochial levels.

It has hitherto been perfectly acceptable to struggle through the thicket of Christian eucharistic theology without asking what the Jews thought of the Eucharist. Yet Rubin has shown that proceeding without asking this question is inexcusable if one is attempting to grasp the larger sociopolitical and theological picture. Kudos accrue to her for having placed this question squarely (and literally) at the center of the enterprise. The question "What did the Christians think the Jews thought of the eucharist?" might strike one as a less essential query, particularly since to answer it requires more conjecture about the psychology behind theology, and about the influence of theology on politics, than it does substantiation on

the basis of texts. But it is precisely the type of question that one *must* ask if one wishes to pass through the forest of iconography on the topic, since in this case the iconography is a representation of what the represented is thought by the representer to think.

I am merely an interested reader in these areas, but I would be fascinated to hear Rubin's thoughts on the connections between these libels—her thoughts, in other words, about what Christians thought Jews thought of the Eucharist, and how they related that to their understanding of matzah, ritual murder, and Jewish literateness. Such thoughts would round out the historical discourse, lending it both spice and substance. And, in attempting to penetrate the veil of alterity, they are inexorably intertwined with the undertaking of looking at iconography, which is simultaneously so eloquent and so mute.

Sara Lipton's *Images of Intolerance* is a study of the images of Jews in the earliest manuscripts of the French moralized Bible, a thirteenth-century work which presents roundels depicting events from the biblical narrative in tandem with interpretations both contextual and contemporary. Lipton demonstrates the association of Jews with persons, issues, and circumstances beyond themselves, particularly heresy, secular learning, alien philosophy, idolatry, and usury. Just as *Gentile Tales* seamlessly employs representation in the service of history, *Images of Intolerance* equally masterfully educes history in the service of representation. Rubin supplies the ethos of the era on the basis of narrative and iconography and demonstrates the ways in which narratives both mirror and shape historical consciousness. Lipton reveals the historical impetus behind images of intolerance and shows how historical consciousness effects and affects representation.

Sara Lipton was a student of the late-lamented John Boswell, and it shows. Her scholarship has solid roots in philological/iconographic methodologies, yet it is, at the same time, compellingly theory-savvy, engaging, and entertaining. Through meticulous research and clear and incisive reasoning, Lipton is able to situate convincingly her manuscript historically, clearing up many of the mysteries about its composition and patronage. This is no small feat, but, like Boswell, who called attention to people who lay neglected in historical sources, Lipton's primary achievement is simply to have read brilliantly the long ignored or misunderstood images of Jews in the *Bible moralisée*.

Her observations are fresh and compelling. Through them, we begin to see Jews not just as Old Testament patriarchs or New Testament deicides, but as subtly shifting signs, semiotic markers that reveal new levels of meaning in any iconographic narrative into which they are interjected. With Rubin, Lipton reads these images as a means of grasping the theological underpinnings and social mentalités of contemporary Christians—and particularly of what constituted “otherness” for them even and especially within their own society.

Lipton's readings of what constitutes the “other” in iconography reveal a mastery of previous scholarship, but are augmented by acute new observations, even concerning topics about which one had supposed the last word to have already been said. For instance, in any future discussion of the *pileum cornutum*, the “Jewish hat,” the standard will be Lipton's discussion of the matter (pp. 15–19).

While the work of previous authors identified this sartorial detail consistently and unequivocally as a “sign of infamy,” Lipton demonstrates an unparalleled sensitivity to the broad spectrum of variation in the ways it is employed. She demonstrates how, while in the most extreme cases it can accompany truly negative images of Jews with distorted human features, more usually it serves as a symbol of identification because the Jews depicted are physically indistinguishable from the non-Jewish characters. Toward the negative extreme of the spectrum, it serves as a symbol of unfavorable identification when shown worn by New Testament era or contemporary Jews engaging in contemptible actions, from murdering the Son of God to lending at interest or leading astray the faithful sons of the church. In other cases it is tinged with a milder sense of negativity, as when it identifies the Old Testament patriarchs. These could be viewed either as corrupt ancestors of the New Testament era and contemporary Jews or as saintly proto-Christians eventually to be redeemed in the Harrowing of Hell. Developed, conscientious observations of this kind are what serve to make nuance and subtlety the two bywords of this study; the book as a whole highlights issues of difference, and even where difference is limned broadly, it is in the subtlety of the details and the nuance of the contrast that one can come to view old differences with new eyes.

I appreciate the way in which Lipton reveals her methodology clearly at the outset, recognizing, as she does so, the inherent instability of “meaning”: “The framework for my analysis is always the immediate and larger contexts. As I examine each text or image, I consider not only what the figures in question might ‘mean’ (bearing in mind that meaning can be multiform and unstable) but also how they function within the phrase or roundel in which they appear, how the phrase or roundel functions within the page . . . the page [within] the overall exegetical sequence” (p. 4). She links the images she studies to “the changing medieval economy; Capetian theories and practice of power; and the attitudes of various streams of clerical thought toward money, morality, learning and authority” (ibid.). Her explicit, semi-confessional clarity and her humility with regard to the limitations of her sources for absolute historical knowledge—coupled with her confidence in their power to reveal mentalités—recall the best of Michael Camille’s work. She reminds us that no matter how much it may look as if images of Jews are simply about Jews, they nowhere appear in a vacuum.

Jews can be read as exempla for various strata of Christian culture, it is true, but the signs can be read back into the Jewish context as well. As in the case of Rubin, my primary criticism of the book is that I wanted more. In this case, for instance, Lipton’s discussions of heresy and of Jews as symbols of heresy can be read as extremely significant iconographic evidence for the shift in the understanding of Jews from *infideles* to *heretici*. But one cannot include all things in each book. It would be wonderful to get Rubin and Lipton in the same room to discuss and expand upon this matter and many others.

The last resort of scoundrels and the first rule of bad book reviewing is to criticize the illustrations in lieu of substantive discussion of an illustrated book. There is no chance of that in the case of the three volumes under review here. All contain reproductions of adequate quality and size that avail rather than hinder the reader. One need not strain in order to see details to which the authors refer. But

special praise is due the University of California Press for having produced, in *Images of Intolerance*, a volume whose apparatus, layout and illustrations are wonderfully easy on the eye; elegant, well ordered, and well conceived for consultation. The book provides a fitting setting to the jewels offered within.

There are many points of positive comparison in *Gentile Tales* and *Images of Intolerance*, but I am particularly impressed by how sensitive both authors are to the moral questions raised by the representations they examine. Some might accuse them of palliating the issues of anti-Jewishness and anti-Judaism by explaining the mitigating circumstances of anti-Jewish imagery and the fact that it is symptomatic of other issues in Christian society. But the use of the Jews as metaphors for persons, issues, and circumstances beyond themselves, well testified by both authors, certainly does not exonerate Christians, Christian society, or the Christian theology of hatred of Jews and Judaism. It simply highlights the subtlety and richness of the issues of anti-Jewishness and anti-Judaism. “The power of a metaphor,” as Lipton asserts, “lies in its flexibility and transferability” (p. 141). If Christians used the image of the Jew to castigate Christian usurers in their own society, for instance, it does not mean that they hated Jews any less. It simply helps us to understand their use of the topos of “Jew” in a more nuanced fashion. It helps to explain why the rabid and widespread anti-Jewish rhetoric, although precipitating serious violence, did not make for concrete action against Jews on the scale one might imagine. It also helps us to realize the centrality of context in understanding these narratives and images.

It was in the afterlife of these representations—when they had been committed to parchment and remained after the original context and meaning of their critique were forgotten—that they could be renewed or recycled as specifically, and exclusively, anti-Jewish. This is the central problem with these representations, and it strikes me that a study of the reception of these representations at a later time, when their original context had become less clear, would be in order. Each author ends her book with a hint at this afterlife—Lipton with a glimpse at an illumination that prefigures the role of the preachers in the forefront of the new persecutions of Jews in the later Middle Ages, and Rubin with an appendix containing the full translated text of R. Avigdor Kara’s *Et Kol HaTela’a*, a lament on the destructive violence that was the repercussion of the host desecration libel tales she studies. In each case, we can see clearly how the representations, regrettably, have leaped off the page, leaving the realm of the mythic to enter the world of the all-too-real.

One of the things *Images of Intolerance* is best at doing is contextualizing the images it discusses: “If it is not impossible to recall Nazi anti-Jewish visual propaganda [when examining these images],” writes Lipton, “let us also remember that it was created in conditions very different from those of the Middle Ages and that its makers and viewers drew conclusions and formulated policies quite alien to thirteenth-century France. Similarity of form by no means entails identity in meaning” (p. 141). This advice goes unheeded in Ruth Mellinkoff’s new book, *Antisemitic Hate Signs in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*. In her very choice of title, Mellinkoff insists on the anachronistic term “antisemitic,” a nineteenth-cen-

ture racist category that fails to distinguish between the textures of medieval sentiment toward Jews—sociological anti-Jewishness on the one hand, and theological anti-Judaism on the other. This is irksome because it leaves the ensuing analysis devoid of the subtlety and nuance that characterize the works of Rubin and Lipton. Terminology aside, what is most disturbing about Mellinkoff's work is its thesis. Mellinkoff proposes that Ashkenazic Hebrew manuscripts of the high Middle Ages, manuscripts created for (and, until now, it could be presumed at least possibly *by*) Jews, which evince various kinds of facial distortions, ostensibly in conformity with *halakhic* restrictions on the depiction of the human face, were actually the product of "antisemitic" Christian artists. These artists somehow foisted these representations upon their simple, gullible Jewish patrons. And the patrons, in spite of the blatancy of the images and the high prices they presumably paid for the manuscripts, accepted them without complaint, having been habituated by the constancy of anti-Jewish imagery around them to "looking without seeing" (p. 58).

There is nothing new in Mellinkoff's contention that Hebrew illuminated manuscripts were not necessarily illuminated by Jews. One of the great lessons of the historiography of Hebrew manuscript illumination in the latter part of this century has been that, in light of the pervasive division of labor in manuscript production, we cannot blithely assume that because the language of a manuscript is Hebrew, it was illuminated by a Jew. This caveat is an extremely important lesson in avoiding ungrounded assumptions, and it raises the question of how we determine whether the artists were Jews or Christians. In this context, assumptions are cast about with abandon.

For several decades, Bezalel Narkiss has argued that in the instance of Sephardic illuminated manuscripts, while the scribes were clearly Jews, the illuminators might well have been Christian. Yet, when one investigates Narkiss' reasons for this assertion, it turns out that his construction of the illuminator's Christianity is based not on any particular documentary evidence (there is none), but on the fact that in the case of the so-called Golden Haggadah of ca. 1320, for instance, "the high quality of the illuminations . . . and their stylistic resemblance to royal books of the period . . . imply that the Haggadah was illuminated by a secular Christian craftsman."⁴

Following Narkiss, historians of Jewish art have tended, on an aesthetic basis, to label Hebrew manuscripts with unknown illuminators as the work of non-Jews, with no documentary evidence for such claims. Such assumptions challenge the very nature of Jewish art. If Hebrew manuscripts were illuminated by Christian artists, why should the iconography necessarily have any peculiarly *Jewish* significance? After all, the Christian artist might simply have illuminated the manuscript in conformity with general stylistic and iconographic convention.

There is an entire Jewish art historical "industry" devoted to mining iconography often ascribed to Christian artists for the many details they contain that suggest familiarity with midrash or with a Jewish model. But let us be honest with ourselves: If we can posit Christian artists who simply executed Jewish iconogra-

4. *The Golden Haggadah* (London: British Library, 1997), p. 67.

phy to order, what stops us from postulating Jewish artists who were accomplished in the style of the period? Or, to move to a more complex conceptualization of cultural interplay, what prevents us from imagining Jewish artists who felt comfortable with and expressed themselves with facility in the idiom of the period, as did the patrons of the manuscript?

Scholarship willing to make a leap of imagination in the direction of Christian authorship but refusing to do so in the direction of Jewish authorship keeps the field of Jewish art conceptually and methodologically in the nineteenth century. It persists in viewing Christians as “owning” medieval culture, so that Jews must simply emulate it. Its practitioners refuse to acknowledge the possibility of independent and often subversive aesthetic and creative impetus on the part of the sophisticated Jews who commissioned and possibly created the manuscripts they study. To determine that a manuscript “looks too good” to have been created by Jews is to denigrate the possibility of Jewish aesthetic capability. Furthermore, it is a small step from seeing Jews as a priori incapable of creating manuscripts of high quality that exhibit style—and, in some cases, iconography characteristic of their time and place—to positing that the non-Jewish artists who actually did the work encoded it with anti-Jewish imagery to which the aesthetically challenged patrons were oblivious.

The reasons for the denial of the possibility of indigenous Jewish creativity in the diaspora are complex and political. They are based in tensions between scholarship in Israel and America, Zionist and post-Zionist agendas, and religious and secular outlooks. The logical, though extreme, conclusion of such essentially political exercises is Ruth Mellinkoff’s argument in the present work. Mellinkoff assumes Christian authorship not on the basis of aesthetic or stylistic criteria, but because these manuscripts “don’t look Jewish”—because, in other words, there are elements in them, particularly the distorted faces and the bird- and animal-headed figures, which seem to her to be bizarre, unexpected, or negative.

Of course, though the facially distorted and zoocephalic figures may seem bizarre to contemporary viewers, they might, during their long historical odyssey, have elicited any one of an entire spectrum of reactions, ranging from horrified abhorrence to tolerant bemusement. And evidence suggests that over the centuries the manuscript has been more treasured than abhorred. We need to consider not how the manuscript looks to us today, but what it may have meant to those who obviously treasured it for so long. Unfortunately, Mellinkoff is not the person to determine this. She is unfamiliar with Jewish sources and emphasizes that she does not read Hebrew. She is capable of contextualizing these figures neither within the textual field of associations of the specific manuscripts in which they appear nor in the wider Jewish intellectual environment. Accordingly, she washes her hands of that responsibility, preferring to walk the trail that Narkiss blazed in ascribing Hebrew manuscripts to Christian artists, even though he himself is convinced that these particular manuscripts (whose style he tellingly describes as primitive) were illuminated by Jews.

Because she reads the images negatively, Mellinkoff formulates a theory that makes medieval Jews out to be as blind as the Christians alleged them to be, a theory of “antisemitic” Christian artists, patrons jaded into acquiescence by ever-

present “antisemitic” iconographic conventions, and, most risibly, generations of dupes who continued in blissful oblivion to the artist’s nefarious devices, preserving as a treasure of Jewish cultural production what is in actuality the precursor of the caricatures in *Der Stürmer*. Her misinterpretation causes her to stray far afield and necessitates a cast of thousands of maximally ignorant, minimally oblivious collaborators. If we accept this thesis, it would seem that these manuscripts are better suited to display at Yad Vashem than in any of the collections that currently house them.

I am surprised that Mellinkoff could think that these illuminations somehow enjoy a life independent from the text. Michael Camille, for instance, has shown us how intertwined medieval texts are with their illuminations. Few scholars today would presume to work on Latin illuminated manuscripts without knowing Latin. Mellinkoff, by contrast, feels that *not* knowing Hebrew puts her at an advantage; she is somehow freed from having to deal with the texts and can examine the imagery “on its own”—that is, in a disembodied, decontextualized state in which it never really existed. I feel very strongly the opposite: that text and image in Hebrew, as in Latin, manuscripts are inexorably intertwined, even if the text is “standard,” as in the case of a Haggadah. Accordingly, where Mellinkoff is puzzled by the apparently bizarre or negative images, I assume them to be meaningful to the people who commissioned them. Where she sees oblivion on the part of the patrons, I apprehend forethought, intentionality, and collusion. Of course, a reading that presumes indigenously meaningful iconography rather than imposed “hate-signs” forces us to work somewhat harder to decipher the choices of the artists and the patrons, to struggle against the alterity of the images, and to engage in the sort of bold speculation that is anathema to positivists. I cannot accept the solutions currently so rife in the field of the history of Jewish art—to blame illuminators and patrons alike for what is not (yet) understood. I see no alternative to constructive interpretive boldness if we are to make any progress in resolving these issues, and I address these problems in such a manner in my current work-in-progress.

A final disturbing element in this work, one which pervades its overall conception and calls into question the basic validity of its enterprise, is the apparently compelling necessity to depict the various Ashkenazic manuscripts in which facially distorted and zoocephalic figures appear as a “genre.” One of the grave problems of most studies of the phenomenon in Jewish art is that scholars feel compelled to propose a single solution to the problem of the entire genre—whether *halakhic*, sociological, or, in Mellinkoff’s case, antisemitic. The idea that the instances of facial distortion and zoocephalism must constitute a genre again arises from the assumption that Jewish art must follow the patterns of Christian art, in which it has, until recently, been fashionable to speak of conventions and genres. But there has been a shift in the understanding of Christian art, and art historians now understand genre in a more nuanced manner.

It is widely acknowledged that the so-called zoocephalic phenomenon in world art arises from a panoply of considerations, and that the animal-headed figures depicted by Egyptian, Hindu, Chinese, and Christian artists serve various functions, depending on their particular context, even within the same culture.

Having grappled at length in my work-in-progress with the highly sophisticated conceptual framework of the Birds' Head Haggadah—an example of this so-called genre—I am skeptical as to whether a single key will suffice for all the occurrences of zoocephalic figures, let alone for all the instances of facial distortion.

While Mellinkoff identifies various strategies for avoiding the depiction of the human face, she does not acknowledge their complex hierarchy of internal relationships. The blank or deformed human head is the simplest method. It is the default, so to speak. In this approach, the figure is human, the artists distort or obscure the head in various ways noted by Mellinkoff. Zoocephalic figures, by contrast, appear in fascinating variety and individuation. They do not merely satisfy *halakhah*, for they far exceed the default of the simple featureless human face. As in the case of the featureless default, the figure is human; again the artists wished to refrain from depicting the countenance. But they did not merely leave it blank. They engaged considerable imagination to replace it with the heads of particular types of birds or animals, and furthermore, represented these creatures in a highly individuated manner, according to age, sex, and status. Viewed in this way, there is no escaping the fact that the choice in a single manuscript to depict certain figures simply with featureless human faces but others with animated and individuated animal and bird heads is evidence both of authorial deliberation and iconographic significance, originating either with the illuminators or with their patrons. By establishing how the approaches to the problem of depicting human features are varied, even on a single page, and by demonstrating that each choice the artists made has inherent meaning in the particular context of the manuscript, it can be established that the *halakhic* issues concerning the distortion or replacement of human heads are extremely nuanced. And, if the approaches employed within in a single manuscript are so variegated, how much more will approaches vary in each and every other manuscript comprising the “genre.”

Perhaps, then, we should not speak of a genre at all. We can certainly observe that a number of manuscripts from medieval Germany exhibit a variety of ways of avoiding the depiction of the human countenance. But while they may be consistent in their intention to satisfy *halakhah* by obscuring the face, and they evince some commonality of iconographic method, I do not detect any obvious consistency of meaning for the chosen iconography. The contextual objective of each manuscript—beyond halakhic considerations—differs from every other. The illuminator of the Tripartite Mahzor, for instance, seems to have a particular horror of depicting women's features. In the illuminations, men are depicted with human features, but women's features are replaced by those of various identifiable animals. Perhaps the artist, whether a Jew or a non-Jew, was attempting to make sense of his patrons' demands to avoid the depiction of the face, or perhaps he was interpreting (or misinterpreting) previous models. The inconsistent treatment of human features makes it clear that it only scratches the surface to note that these animal heads are intended to satisfy the halakhic mandate to avoid the depiction of the human face. The more specific dimensions of the artist's particular rationale have yet to be explored through a complete analysis of the overall conceptual themes of the manuscript.

Any attempt at a single comprehensive solution to the problem of the genre—

even one less tendentious than Mellinkoff's—will simply not suffice to explain the individual impulses behind facial distortions in discrete manuscripts. Each manuscript needs to be judged on its own terms, since each has story of its own to tell. Such a project of complete contextual analysis is a desideratum for all the Ashkenazic manuscripts in which facial distortions and zoocephalic figures appear. With individual analysis, the focus will shift from the obvious question of what makes these manuscripts similar to the more subtle question of what their differences mean—what the varying ways in which the illuminators chose to satisfy *halakhah* can teach us about their individual or communal agendas. And, doubtless, one thing will emerge very clearly: though we may not yet completely comprehend them, and though we may be barred by our alterity from a complete understanding of them, each of these manuscripts had meaning and resonance in its indigenous and its Jewish context, both for its patrons and for subsequent audiences.

If one could apply scholarship of the quality and depth, subtlety and nuance of Miri Rubin's *Gentile Tales* and Sara Lipton's *Images of Intolerance*—which discuss the representation of Jews by others—to indigenous representations of Jews by Jews, one could effect truly monumental changes in the often retrograde field of Jewish art. But such work has yet to be done. Ruth Mellinkoff's *Antisemitic Hate Signs*, in denying medieval Jews the possibility of self-representation, accordingly stands as a challenge to those who would conscientiously and with recourse to corroborating textual sources bring the methodological, conceptual, and iconographic issues in the field of the self-representation of the Jews in their own art into the twenty-first Christian century.

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