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Composed by Tom Krol

Cover photo: Baptism of Christ. Mosaic. Arian baptistery, Ravenna. (Photo: Bente Kiilerich)

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Dalia-Ruth Halperin. *Illuminating in Micrography: The Catalan Micrography Maḥzor MS Heb 8° 6527 in the National Library of Israel*, The Medieval and Early Modern Iberian World, 51. Leyden and Boston: Brill, 2013. Pp. xliii, 561; 15 color illus.; 100 black-and-white illus.; 36 diagrams.

This volume comprises an in-depth consideration of the Catalan Micrography Mahzor (Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, MS Heb 8° 6527; Catalonia, Spain; body text ca. 1280, micrographic decoration ca. 1340–50). The manuscript is so named because it contains a cycle (mahzor) of liturgical poems for the Jewish high holidays and festivals, bordered by and supplemented with a selection of images that seem to originate in various courtly, romantic, heraldic, and fabular contexts. The outlines of these images are formed by miniscule scribal renderings of various biblical verses, a technique referred to as micrography.

The study is comprehensive and conscientiously executed in all those areas of analysis that involve description, and exemplifies the *wissenschaftliche* methodology in analyzing manuscripts illuminated for Jews in the Middle Ages. It includes a full codicological and paleographic assessment, a consideration of the texts found in the manuscript and of their variants, followed by an analysis of the style of the manuscript, and a description of the configuration of the illustrations (which in this case are formed by the text). However, the sixth section—an analysis of the meaning of the images—is overdetermined, forcing the iconography to bear more meaning than it can reasonably sustain.

Owing to limitations of space, I will confine myself to discussing the author's method via a review of her analysis of the very first bifolium of micrographic images, an analysis representative of, and consistent with, her esoteric-kabbalistic approach to the interpretation of all the images in the manuscript. These folia are particularly interesting because they contain human images for which theomorphic and messianic associations are claimed.[1]

On folios 9v and 10r we are confronted with two facing full-page micrographic images. The right-hand folio (9v) contains a reverse-S-curve vine within a "twisted" lozenge micrographic frame. The concern here is primarily with the underdrawing, which is now erased and visible only with infrared photography. It is a very faint image of a couple that is described as facing each other and holding hands, the woman bearing a flower.[2] On the left-hand page we find the micrographic image of a falconer on a horse within a double rectangular micrographic border.

In both cases the iconography appears to have been adopted from courtly

and romantic imagery popular in a myriad of contexts in this place and time and certainly known to Jews. Halperin describes the male and female figures as representing "a wedding scene" in spite of the absence of wedding paraphernalia or participants.[3] She interprets this "wedding scene" as allegorical on the basis of images of clearly allegorical couples in Ashkenazic mahzorim—for example, one in the Hamburg Mahzor depicts a man with a *Judenhut* seated on a bench opposite a crowned and blindfolded figure that is clearly intended to represent Synagoga (Hamburg, Staats und Universitatsbibliothek, Cod. Levy 37, fol. 169v; Ashkenaz, 1300–30). In the Worms Mahzor another depicts a man with both a *Judenhut* and a badge—here, the Synagoga figure is not blindfolded (Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, MS Voller 1102/I, fol. 64v; Ashkenaz, Worms, ca. 1310).

Researchers correlate these images with the Maria-Ecclesia type in iconography made for Christians and adapted—it is claimed—to represent the Shekinah (the most imminent presence of God, troped as female) and the *tsaddik* (the righteous Jewish male).[4] Halperin attributes the same allegorical meaning and origin in Christian iconography to the image of the couple here despite the fact that they evince no attributes indicating that they are intended to be read allegorically. They are standing in profile, not seated, with no traces of Maria-Ecclesia iconography, Jewish badge, crown, or blindfold. Finding no precedents for such an adoption and adaptation in art known from Sephardi milieux, the author maintains that the iconography was imported from Ashkenaz.[5] Given that this image lacks all allegorical elements and appears among other courtly, romantic, and heraldic imagery, it seems farfetched to posit a link to an Ashkenazic repurposing of Maria-Ecclesia iconography, which itself was, according to some, based upon secular images. This tertiary leap across cultures and geography seems unnecessary, given that a closer and completely viable solution is at hand. It makes most sense to view this image as having been adopted directly from Iberian secular iconography, which it most resembles. Because the Ashkenazic images of the Shekinah and the *tsaddik* have been interpreted as having polemic valence, Halperin assumes that this polemic meaning must have been imported into this Iberian example as well. But although she takes the theory of the polemic nature of the Ashkenazic images as a proven fact, it is actually nothing more than a reasonable hypothesis. Halperin thus bases a speculative polemic interpretation on a "fact" that is really merely a conjecture, balanced on top of an already unstable structure of a tertiary cultural and geographical leap.

Finally, because she has predetermined that the manuscript has kabbalistic meaning, Halperin resists the reading of the male figure as the earthly *tsaddik*, instead viewing him as an avatar of a particular sefirotic configuration (a valence of the emanations of the divine). Accordingly, the woman here is not merely the Shekinah, but the Shekinah in a specific manifestation and conjunction relative to the male figure, who is no longer simply the human *tsaddik* but a personification

of a particular divine emanation in a precise occlusion. This interpretation transmogrifies an erased and highly schematic image that looks nothing like the analogues proposed for it into a deeply sophisticated, metageographic, cross-cultural, polemic-kabbalistic allegory.

Halperin assays further proof for her reading by associating the flower in the woman's hand with Aaron's flowering rod (see Numbers 17:8). This rod, which was placed in or near the Ark of the Covenant in the Wilderness Tabernacle and then in the Temple, appears in the *Mikdash-Yah* (Temple implement) illustrations in some Sephardic bibles, as well the micrographic example of that genre that appears in this manuscript (fol. 12v). Wishing to associate the flower with redemption, Halperin cites a theory holding that in medieval *Mikdash-Yah* illuminations Aaron's rod becomes a symbol of redemption, replacing the *lulav* (palm branch) signifying redemption in the antique mosaic depictions of the Temple implements.[6] The flower thus equals the rod, which in turn betokens redemption, making the flower itself a sign of redemption.

Yet this association is weakened by the fact that the single-budded flower held by the woman on folio 9v looks nothing like the depiction of Aaron's flowering rod with its triple terminal buds and many flowers on fol. 12v of this very manuscript. To counterbalance the weakness of the association, the author observes that in some (by her own admission) rare images, Ecclesia holds a triple-budded flower, which Halperin contends refers to the Trinitarian Godhead (166). The flower could, of course, refer to virginity or purity generally. But a Trinitarian valence serves to position the mahzor's depiction of Aaron's rod (with its triple terminal buds) as a polemic response to the Maria-Ecclesia images. Since Halperin has linked the flower held by the woman in the mahzor with Aaron's rod, she can now also view the woman as a polemic response to Maria-Ecclesia, which in turn compels a parallel with the (allegedly) polemic images of Synagoga/Shekinah in the Ashkenazic mahzorim. This is "proved" by the fact that in the mahzor the sprig held by the female figure culminates in a single flower, representing a polemic against Ecclesia's Trinitarianism. But although the single flower is useful for Halperin's assertion of a monotheistic polemic, it cannot be associated with Aaron's rod, which—by definition in scripture as well as in iconography, including the iconography present in this same manuscript a few folios later—sprouts multiple blossoms. Again, the author has built a comprehensive argument on a faulty initial premise.

The association of the woman with the Shekinah is then used to explain why the image was erased: it was too explicitly anthropomorphically referential to the Godhead for the patron, who, it is argued, would have somehow known of the Ashkenazic convention that the image represented the Shekinah and the *tsaddik*. According to the author's reading of the iconography, the patron was a proponent of the Barcelonan Ramban/Rashba School of Kabbalah and thus hostile to anthropomorphic depiction

of the Godhead. She concludes, “The image of the couple clearly reflects its kabbalistic content.” But any such reflection is debatable at best.[7]

A simpler and less esoteric logic would dictate that this image is an adoption of the common secular romantic iconography of a man with a woman holding a flower. Clearly, it was adapted and Judaized. But the adaptation need not be esoteric at all: the image could easily be understood to betoken the general principle of divine love for Israel, with absolutely no recourse to any esoteric principle. The erasure too might be explained in any number of exoteric ways. Perhaps the patron’s rabbinic advisor disapproved of the image of the loving couple as being too sensual. Or maybe the mahzor was intended as a wedding gift, but the wedding was called off at the last minute thus rendering the wedding imagery moot. Neither of these suggestions is any less plausible than the assumption that there was a particular mystical-esoteric reason for the abandonment of the program.

Halperin moves on to parse the left-hand page, with its image of a mounted falconer. She begins by interpreting various psalm verses (mostly from Psalm 59) in the text of the micrography on this page as relating to messianism and esoteric understandings of the redemption of the Divine Presence in the vicissitudes of internal (sefirotic) exile. Since these verses are explicitly labeled in the psalm as the plaint of David when pursued by Saul, Jewish commentators most commonly understand them as referring to personal or national deliverance and rescue. Yet Halperin resists reading the falconer as a reference to Israel’s enemies. Her overall contention that the manuscript must bear esoteric and theosophical meaning mitigates against more prosaic political readings. But there are, in fact, a myriad of possible political and personal readings of this psalm, including ones that extend in the direction of a critique of royalty—or, alternatively, of certain types of profligate Jewish courtiers—represented by King Saul and by the pious patrons of the manuscript, who position themselves as the true inheritors of the mantle of David. I would not propose reading the iconography this way because it depicts a falconer, not a king—although, as we shall see, the author will proceed to interpret the falconer as the King Messiah. But if one intends to mine the micrography for meaning, it seems reasonable to ask why that meaning must be exclusively and inevitably esoteric.

Halperin maintains that the image of the falconer represents the Messiah. She cites Zechariah 9:9, which describes the Messiah as “a poor man riding on a donkey.” This verse is an inadequate proof text for the image because it fits neither the person of the falconer, who is elite rather than abject (a fact that Halperin does not address), nor the character of his mount, which is a horse, not a donkey. Seeking an instance where the Messiah appears on a horse, she begins with the association made between Moses’s donkey and the Messiah’s donkey by some commentators on Exodus 4:20. She then cites an isolated opinion that in a particular instance in a single manuscript Moses’s donkey is depicted as a horse (177).[8] Halperin adduces

this unique example of the allegedly horse-like appearance of Moses's supposedly messianic donkey as proof that the Messiah can—contra Zechariah 9:9—ride on a horse. From this she concludes that the image of the mounted falconer in the mahzor is intended to represent the Messiah and that his horse is intended to stand in for the Messiah's donkey. This, in turn, is bolstered by the assertion that the verses making up the image relate to messianic redemption. This reading is based on a predetermined esoteric/messianic interpretation of the psalm, which, as we have noted, contravenes the majority opinion of the commentators that it refers to personal or national deliverance and rescue.

More speculation is then offered regarding the messianic nature of the falconer, the meaning of which, it is maintained, is present in iconography created for Christians. Halperin asserts that the model for the mahzor is the Anglo-Catalan Psalter (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 8846; Christ Church, Canterbury, England, ca. 1180–1200; Catalonia, ca. 1340–50). This has the effect of situating the mahzor in the atelier of Ferrer and Arnau Bassa, making the scribe (who is also assumed, with no convincing evidence, to have also been the artist) that long-sought-after and much-fabled commodity—a Jew working in a Christian atelier. Although most of the stylistic observations brought to support this thesis seem to me to be tendentious, each reader should judge them on his or her own.

I can, however, see significant differences between the images in the mahzor and those claimed for their models in the psalter, such as the falconer shown on folio 161r. The falconer in the psalter is not wearing a hat, although a *chapeau à bec* like the one worn by the falconer in the mahzor is represented elsewhere in the psalter (fol. 156v), so there was the potential at least for the psalter image to have been a better and more precise model. The position of the "model's" arm in the psalter is completely different from that of the figure in mahzor. The position of the horse's legs differs, its saddle is configured differently, and the hawk's head is facing away from the falconer, rather than towards him. In light of these differences, the falconer in the Anglo-Catalan Psalter can be described as the "model" for the one in the mahzor only as much as any image of any mounted falconer in any work of art may be described as its model.[9]

Conceptually the readings offered here are also a stretch: "The miniature [in the Anglo-Catalan Psalter] portrays the Seven Ages of Man . . . however, preachers linked this concept with that of the Six Ages of the World, where the falconer represents the Third Age, the period from Abraham to King David. The scribe's use of this specific image alongside the image of the Celestial Couple [*sic*] might have been another deliberate replacement of the Christological content of these images with content that was consistent with a Jewish worldview" (179). Halperin has two irons in the fire here: first, she is assured of the messianic content of the image of the falconer in the mahzor because of her eisegetic reading of the micrographic

text; secondly, she is convinced that the Anglo-Catalan Psalter was the model for the mahzor, on the basis of very slim, subjective stylistic evidence, born of her desire to place the mahzor in the Bassa workshop.

On the basis of this tenuous evidentiary structure, the author retrojects nonexistent messianic content into the image of the falconer in the Anglo-Catalan Psalter. She asserts that preachers (unnamed) linked (in a manner undescribed) the concept of the Seven Ages of Man with the Six Ages of the World. She contends (without citation or evidence) that the Third Age of the World (Abraham to Noah) is "messianic." She then reads the image of the falconer in the Third Age of Man in conjunction with the alleged messianic valence of the Third Age of the World (which is allegedly linked to the Third Age of Man by the unnamed preachers) to certify that in the psalter, the image of the falconer is Christological. She finally asserts that this entire process was detected, understood, and adapted to a Jewish context by the ingenious scribe/artist of the mahzor, who turned the Christian Messiah into the Jewish one.

Halperin goes on to propose that in the putative positional analogues in Christian art, the page facing the "Maria-Ecclesia" image ought to contain not the Messiah but the figure of God the Father. The falconer thus also comes to replace the figure of God that "should be" in this position with that of a human Messiah because this was more palatable to these particular kabbalist patrons: "I suggest that the falconer was adapted to symbolize not the Almighty but the anointed Jewish messianic king" (174). But if this is the case, it is difficult to say why the figure here is depicted as a falconer, rather than as a king.

These are only very few of the more problematic observations, analyses, and interpretations in which Halperin engages with regard to the iconography of the opening bifolium of micrographic illustrations. The underlying problem of this book is that the author "knows" (that is, she preconceives) too much and thus sees too little. Having discussed the eisegetical fallacies present in the author's iconographic interpretations, I would now like to address her stylistic, textual, and citational eisegesis, offering some constructive proposals for alternate strategies.

Stylistic observations regarding the similarities between the Anglo-Catalan Psalter and the mahzor are couched in scientific language. But each in fact depends on subjective observations—i.e., "the head fits four times into the torso in a 1:5 proportion . . . these are the proportions common to the Bassa atelier" (116). This may be true, but the 1:5 proportional ratio was certainly not exclusive to the Bassa atelier.

Very often the author will assert that a particular figure would appear exactly like the one she claims for its analogue if only its position were changed, its movement modified, its aspect adjusted—in short, if its whole formulation were entirely reconfigured: "taking this into account and adjusting the proportions accordingly allows us to subtract 22–24 mm from the height of the falconer's frame. The ratio of

figure to frame in the Mahzor is then identical to that of the mounted falconer in the Anglo Catalan Psalter" (117). This strategy of adjusting visual observations to fit a predetermined agenda is generally emblematic of Halperin's eisegetic method.[10]

In the case of the micrographic texts, the method is employed in the following way: the texts are primarily drawn from the Psalms, which the author subjects to kabbalistic interpretation. But the Psalms contain repeating and often-overlapping themes and motifs, and each psalm is subject to multiple readings and interpretations at any given historical moment. Halperin problematically constructs an eisegesis that seamlessly links the specific psalm texts chosen by the micrographer with the iconography, in light of an esoteric/kabbalistic interpretation she claims must have been in the mind of the artist/scribe in building the image from that particular psalm text. In doing so, she seems unaware of the fact that if another of the very many similar psalm texts were substituted, the implications for the iconography would not substantially differ. Likewise, if a different reading of the same psalm text was assayed, the understanding of the iconography might radically alter.

Finally, I will provide a single example from among many in the area of citational eisegesis. At one point the author asserts that "It is very tempting to hypothesize that the text at the basis of this specific theurgical moment relates to Rabbi Baḥya ben Asher's commentary on Psalm 145:20–21, which forms part of the folio's frame. His interpretation regards these verses as . . . " (173). This is misleading to the reader, who searches in vain for Baḥya's commentary on the psalm in the framing micrography. The frame yields only the Psalm 145 verses themselves, with no commentary at all, kabbalistic or otherwise. Such misdirection makes it appear as if there is kabbalistic content in the texts and illustrations, when they are in fact purely conventional and exoteric, the esotericism being evident in Halperin's interpretations alone.[11]

How has this multicontextual eisegesis come about? In principle, what Halperin proposes theoretically seems mostly reasonable. She insists that images must (1) relate to each other conceptually across any given bifolium and across the manuscript as a whole, (2) be Jewishly meaningful, (3) conform in some explicit way to the text actually written in the micrography, and (4) serve to situate the book in a particular milieu. I agree that (1) the images need to relate to each other, but only insofar as any two images relate to each other across a given bifolium or program—perhaps visually, perhaps thematically, and sometimes, but not necessarily *always*, conceptually. (2) It seems obvious that the images—even if adopted from imagery common to art made for Christian audiences—must be adapted in some way (iconographically or conceptually) to be Jewishly meaningful. It was Jews, after all, who commissioned the manuscript. (3) I remain unconvinced about the precise nature of the relationship of the images to the micrography; I think the key lies in their use as a technology, as I will discuss below. Finally, (4) I think that

a book's situation in a particular milieu can be known to some extent via its text and iconography, but cannot be definitively corroborated in the absence of positive documentary evidence.

The selection of liturgical poetry found in the Catalan Micrography Mahzor can convincingly situate the manuscript in Catalonia; the style of the illustrations can further emplace it plausibly in Barcelona; the inclusion or exclusion of particular texts can help solidify the dating. But determining whether the illustrations reflect the thinking of a particular philosophical trend or Kabbalistic school (in this case the Barcelonan school of the Ramban/Rashba) seems beyond the sort of data that can be gleaned from iconographic analysis, at least of this sort of imagery, which consists of typically courtly, romantic, and heraldic topoi—hounds and hawks and hares and monkeys and abstract designs—formed of micrography derived from conventional biblical (and not at all kabbalistic) texts.

The author's contention that the mahzor comes from a kabbalistic milieu is based on the inclusion in the manuscript of liturgical poems written by scholars whom she portrays as kabbalists. The problem here is that although these scholars might have been kabbalists, they were also, variously, exegetes, romantic and expository poets, physicians and natural scientists, political critics, philosophers, and theologians. Halperin chooses to emphasize their identity as kabbalists because her esteem for the manuscript necessitates her connecting it with the depth and complexity of kabbalah.

But what exactly is a "kabbalistic" liturgical poem? Absent specific commentary designating it as kabbalistic, a liturgical poem expressing the pining of, say, a slave girl to be freed or a lover to be reunited with his beloved might easily be read by audiences then and now as expressive of generalized tropes of longing for redemption and security rather than as the plaint of the exiled Shekinah or the articulation of the desire for a particular part of the Godhead—held in the thrall of a specific valence of the forces of darkness—to move up to a precise locus in the divine framework. Being primarily psalmic, the texts of the micrography can speak of God's sovereignty, Israel's election, and the hope for redemption. The texts can, accordingly, be replaced by almost any other texts in the Jewish canon.[12] Moreover, the themes of liturgical poetry are unceasingly broad and encompassing. One finds, often in a single poem, articulations of religious longing, loving, desire, exile and redemption, divine sovereignty, remembrance, human suffering, persecution, shame, and sinfulness, as well as feelings of hopelessness, hopefulness, joy, and exultation. It is no wonder at all that the texts appearing in the micrography and accompanying it in the body of the mahzor can be read to correlate with such a breadth of themes. The connections are thus more in the mind and eye of the interpreter and reader than actually present.

So, too, the visual motifs preceding and accompanying the liturgical poems

of the mahzor seem perfectly straightforward and interpretable in a whole range of not particularly esoteric ways—as "mere" decoration, as polemic, as generalized visualizations of God's love for, and protection and redemption of Israel. But because the manuscript has been predetermined to have emerged from a kabbalistic milieu, the author is bound to interpret those images, too, in a very specific and deeply kabbalistic manner.

Halperin argues that the very fact that the images do not seem to be kabbalistic is, in fact, what makes them kabbalistic, because it is the nature of kabbalistic discourse to be apophatic. She goes on to assert that the psalm verses constituting the images need to be read "kabbalistically" in order to support the hidden meaning obscured by the apophasis. But this is a slippery slope that can lead to everything being read in any manner and to anything being deemed cognate with anything else that one desires. In other words, once one maintains that although an apple appears in a given illustration it actually must represent something else because it is the nature of kabbalistic discourse to be apophatic, one hovers on the brink of the precipice of overdetermination.

If one stops there, one has made a statement about Kabbalah and kabbalistic readings that may be true in a general sense but that can be disputed in the case of any specific occurrence. How, for instance, do we determine when an otherwise conventional image constitutes an apophasis and when it does not? This is problematic enough. If, however, one goes on to specifically identify the underlying element one claims has been apophatically erased, with only tendentious support for that identification, one gives oneself license to completely deconstruct both the individual meanings and the "meaning" more generally of any iconographic element, depending on one's predetermined need for a particular interpretation.

Ironically, in presenting such airtight, specific readings as facts, the author supports a totally deconstructive view of iconography. In other words, if one proceeds to insist that the apple—even though it looks like an apple—really comes to replace an orange because an orange is the specific undiscussable or undepictable element that an apple *should* come to replace, proving this by means of a string of free-associative, stream-of-consciousness analogies, one has blithely stepped off the precipice into the chasm of eisegesis, because one could perform similar citational slight-of-hand to contend that the apple should come to replace a pear, a pineapple, or a pig. One could prove that the falconer on horseback in the mahzor really represents the Messiah on his donkey. But by the same evidentiary and citational standards, one could just as easily prove that the falconer is Emperor Marcus Aurelius or St. James Matamoros.

In interpreting the images, Halperin positions herself as an advocate of the turn towards the meaningful in the analysis of iconography (17), something that I have argued for in my own work, where I agree with her that we must shun the Scylla of

ignoring texts.[13] But we must likewise avoid the inevitable plunge into the Charybdis of eisegesis, a plunge against which no hedge of footnotes or citational misdirection can protect. In order to do this, I submit that we must offer the most reasonable interpretations, based on the sort of general knowledge available to moderately learned, elite Jewish audiences, without recourse to the esoteric unless it is called for by the explicitly kabbalistic nature of the text, or by other specific clues. The author might, in fact, agree with me here. The problem is that the clues she adduces as proving the kabbalistic nature of this manuscript are tendentious. She reads the apparent *lack* of kabbalistic content in the images as apophatic kabbalistic visual language. She sees yet a further apophasis in the very fact that only plain scriptural verses, and not kabbalistic texts, are used to make up the micrography, and chooses—from among the myriad of possible commentaries on the psalm verses that make up the images—only the most esoteric to interpret them (assuming ab initio that they require interpretation). She interprets the description of the book (in the flyleaf note of a later owner) as containing "marvels" not as praise of the micrographic technology but as hinting at the deep kabbalistic secrets to which, according to her, each successive owner of the manuscript was privy. Halperin might have steered more effectively between the extremes of claiming iconographic meaninglessness—which she is correct to avoid—and the assertion of a meaningfulness so pervasive that one fears she will attempt to read the traces of the whorls left on the hair side of the parchment as a deliberate, kabbalistically motivated choice made by the parchment preparator as he moved his knife over the skin.

Similar to the efforts of such scholars as D. W. Robertson and Friedrich Ohly in tone, method, and the tendency to overallegorize both texts and art represented at one time, work like Halperin's demonstrates the consequences that result when researchers are taught to pile up heaps and heaps of showy but often extraneous erudition in both primary texts and secondary scholarly citations on every iconographic jot and tittle (cf. BT *Menahot* 29b).[14] In this sort of work specific texts are deemed to present "concrete," "solid," text-based "solutions" to iconographic "problems," and, more generally, texts are fetishized as if they are a proactive hedge against a fear of idolatry to the image.

Such an approach cannot help but give rise to eisegesis. In the study of medieval visual culture created for Christians, iconography is no longer always expected to literally illustrate either text or commentary, or even to respond to them in a direct manner, but to be exegesis in and of itself, even serving, on occasion, as commentary that "reads against the grain"—responding to text in a deliberately countertextual manner. There is every reason to read contemporary Jewish iconography in the same way—as a primary text— and to read the texts that may (or may not) have influenced it as aids to understanding the images, not as keys to solving them. If we do not do so, we run a great risk: rather than being a window

on the intellectual universe of its creators, the manuscripts we study become solipsistic mirrors of our own often vivid, extremely creative, and febrile imaginations. Our interpretations become more like synagogue homilies or the fever dreams of obsessive-compulsive kabbalists than like scholarly evaluations. Our analysis becomes, more than anything else, an extended meditation on our own textual fantasies. The more unalterably linked with a text or particular school of esoteric thought an interpretation becomes, the more points at which it can fail.

Manuscripts are not jigsaw puzzles that form a single picture; they are much more akin to sophisticated lateral or multisolution puzzles that form a myriad of possible pictures wherein each constellation of interpretative possibilities is sometimes radically different from the next, but equally plausible. The problem with Halperin's interpretations is that they are not the most plausible, rather, they are intentionally the most abstruse and complicated—the *lectio difficilior*. It is possible that she knows this, and that she realizes that her "solution" is only one of several possible solutions, most much less abstruse than the one she proposes. But there is absolutely no indication of such an awareness in her confident formulation; there is no space to let the material breathe, so airtight is her thesis. One needs, I believe, to acknowledge, *expressis verbis*, the inherent fragility and mutability of one's conclusions.

Halperin has proposed an epigram for the micrography, the text of Mishnah Avot 5:19, which states (of the Torah itself), "turn it and turn it for all is within it." This is indeed a fine axiom for thinking about micrography, but it simultaneously, and ironically, highlights one of the greatest deficiencies of her study: the lack of consideration or conjecture regarding who was doing the turning and to what end—the use and meaning, in other words, of the technology. The research in *Illuminating in Micrography* is aided by such postmodern technology as ultra-high-quality photography zooms, optical analysis that enables one to see below layers of paint, and databases that can instantly search and find every instance of any word in the extensive corpus of Jewish literature relevant to the period and place of the manuscript's composition. Given her engagement with technology, it is strange and somewhat ironic that the author gives such short shrift to the employment of the very technology that is literally written all over this codex—the micrography and how it was effected.[15]

The question of how the mahzor was used cannot be solved by any amount of casuistic kabbalistic homiletics. There are no texts to pin it to. But this does not mean that this crucial question can be ignored. There must be a point at which the monographic study meets and connects with the implications of the interpretive iconographic study, something that fails to occur in this book. I don't mean for Halperin to answer these questions, but she could at least have asked them.

Michel De Certeau discusses what he calls "secondary production[s]" that are "hidden in the process of utilization."[16] Alongside the reading of micrography, perhaps we need to think more about the practice of it as performative gesture,

activating the body and somatically engaging the scribe, first and foremost, as a meditative exercise as he or she worked—the very act of *creating* the book therefore being a prayerful one. Extending De Certeau's category of "utilization," we can imagine the subsequent use of the book in a manner akin to the way in which a Buddhist prayer wheel foments meditation without specific focus on the words. Maybe it could have served as a meditative focus for viewers who already knew which psalms and/or liturgical poems were "keyed" to the illustrations. It somewhat strains credulity to imagine that the owners would have perused the book with a magnifying lens, twisting it and turning it in order to read the psalm verses, the directionality of which is so complex that Halperin needed to employ a graphic designer to elucidate it in complex diagrams. Still, we should not dismiss this—or any of these possibilities, in any combination—out of hand. They interestingly problematize the question of what we mean when we conceive of the mahzor as a "utilitarian" object, for it is difficult even to entertain the idea that a manuscript in which the images are literally composed of text could have been merely decorative.

The best iconographic interpretations—even if far-fetched and speculative—feel as if they emerge organically from the images they parse. Such readings make the erudition of the scholar doing the interpretation secondary to the wonder they foment when the interpretation "clicks" in a transparent, easy, harmonious, and unforced manner—"How," asks the reader, "could I have missed that?" *Illuminating in Micrography* will never elicit such a reaction. An apposite epigram for the book's methodology would be the interesting variant text for Avot 5:19, found in the Kaufmann manuscript, which reads: "Turn it and turn it, for it is all in you, and you are within it."[17] The interpreter is too much within this interpretation. The fifth chapter of Avot—the source of both the axiom Halperin applies to micrography and the variant that provides me with my own epigram for her method— concludes with the adage of Ben He He, who said, "According to the labor is the reward." Although the labor has been indisputably great in this case, I am very sorry to say that I am less than sanguine about the reward.

Marc Michael Epstein
Vassar College

NOTES

1. The reader should note that in the interest of concision, this is a vastly simplified version of Halperin's arguments, which—in the case of this single bifolium—run for nineteen single-spaced pages with extensive footnotes.

2. The image is so faint as to be almost completely invisible in the reproduction (fig. 55).

3. Perhaps the author intends to say that the figures represent "a married couple" rather than "a wedding scene," but if this is the case, a bit more precision would be of help to the reader. She does note the discrepancy in height between the female and male figures, ascribing it to the particular con-

figuration of divine emanation she alleges is represented by the female figure. But in the art of courtly love the woman is often elevated, so it is unclear why a stretch towards the esoteric is warranted here.

4. Katrin Kogman-Appel, *A Mahzor from Worms: Art and Religion in a Medieval Jewish Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 145–75; Sarit Shalev-Eyni, "Iconography of Love: Illustrations of Bride and Bridegroom in Ashkenazi Prayer Books of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," *Studies in Iconography* 26 (2005): 27–57.

5. She does, in a densely referenced passage (166–67), provide many citations (many themselves conjectural) speculating that cross-cultural currents *may have existed*, but none that definitively prove that they occurred, and certainly none that refer to this particular iconography. This footnote is one example of many that appear to be evidentiary when they are in fact broadly contextualizing or informational.

6. Elisheva Revel Neher, *Le Témoignage de l'absence: Les objets du sanctuaire à Byzance et dans l'art Juif du XIe au XV siècle* (Paris: De Boccard, 1998), 115–18. The research cited clarifies why the palm branch falls out of the roster of the implements of the Temple in medieval Spain, and why a new symbol of redemption—the flowering rod—was introduced. In Christianity the palm branch came to symbolize martyrdom, an association Jews rejected, and Aaron's rod was a symbol of the Virgin, an image against which they polemicized. In employing the symbol of Aaron's rod, medieval Jews could both shed a symbol the redemptive meaning of which had fallen into desuetude (the palm) and add a symbol that could be used for polemic purposes (the rod).

7. Halperin also explores the connection between this motif and others she cites as similar in the Somme-le-Roy (166–71), particularly London, British Library, MS Add. 28162, but I must confess that I had exceptional trouble following her arguments because what she describes in the illustrations and the "similarities" she proposes are so much at odds with what actually seems to appear on the page, and the leaps she makes to connect the vices and virtues in the Somme-le-Roy with kabbalistic ideas and iconography are so vast.

8. Bezalel Narkiss, *The Golden Haggadah* (London: The British Library, 1997), 38. In introducing this interpretation as her proof, Halperin ignores significant visual, textual, and scholarly evidence. The animal in the Golden Haggadah has the long ears of a donkey. The caption in the Golden Haggadah labels it as a donkey. And the majority of scholarship before and after the solitary opinion she adduces has understood the creature to be an apotheosized donkey. In fact, the arched neck of the animal (its horselike aspect) has to be taken into account along with its long (donkey-like) ears as indicating that it is intended to represent the "hamor hame'uhad"—of the midrash and of Rashi's commentary, the "singular" or "special" donkey that Abraham took to the binding of Isaac and on which the Messiah will appear. Marc Michael Epstein, "Another Flight into Egypt: The Cross-Cultural Dialectic of Messianism and Iconographic Appropriation in Medieval Jewish Culture," in *Imaging the Self, Imaging the Other: Representations of Jews in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. Eva Frojmovic (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002); with citations of previous scholars, all of whom (with the exception of Narkiss) viewed the creature as a donkey.

9. On some occasions Halperin offers sensible readings of certain iconographic elements, while on many others her desire to advance her interpretation compromises her readings of the visual evidence. For instance, she notes with poetic acuity that the line of the text formed by the spikiness of Hebrew micrography is "staccato" rather than the flowing "legato" one experiences in Arabic calligraphy (13). On the other hand, she requires the image of a beast being vanquished by a knight on fol. 7v to be a boar (220–21) in order to (1) suit the kabbalistic allegory she constructs around it and (2) view it as an exact parallel to its proposed model—the boar on fol. 142v of the Anglo-Catalan Psalter. She thus fails to notice that the spikes on the back of the boar in the psalter are absent in the beast in the mahzor, or that the distinctively split trotters of the boar in the psalter are different from the tripartite, leonine pads in the case of the beast in the mahzor, or that the short, curly tail of the boar in the psalter looks nothing like the extravagantly long, leonine tail of the creature in the mahzor.

10. Her note here typically obscures even as it pretends to corroborate: "These proportions

of the mounted falconer are characteristic of the Bassa atelier model. I wish to thank Rosa Alcoy I Pedrós . . . who confirmed this in our meeting in Barcelona in September 2006" (139). But what exactly did Halperin's interlocutor confirm? Her language is imprecise, and neither of the two possible conclusions that can be reached are particularly informational. If Halperin meant that Alcoy I Pedrós confirmed that a 1:5 proportion is common to the Bassa atelier, this merely affirms an easily ascertainable fact while appearing to corroborate her conclusion. If she means that Alcoy I Pedrós confirmed that the proportions of the mounted falconer in the mahzor—*when calculated in the particular way Halperin calculates them*—are characteristic of the Bassa atelier model, this only corroborates that when manipulated in the particular way Halperin has manipulated them, the "facts" do appear to accord. See also her excurses on 170–72 and 222, where it is contended that if only the body positions of figures in a putative model were altered, they would accord exactly with a figure in the mahzor. This is equivalent to saying that if only a circle had four corners, it would be a square.

11. What Halperin seems to mean is, "The text of Psalm 145:20–21 forms part of the folio's frame. It is very tempting to hypothesize that the text . . . relates to Rabbi Baḥya ben Asher's commentary on this Psalm, which he interprets as. . . ." The micrographic frame contains verses from various other psalms, including a verse that does admonish the believer to "be not like a senseless horse or mule, whose movement must be curbed by bit and bridle." Certainly this verse—which explicitly mentions a horse and rider—could have been connected with the image. Halperin, alas, has been curbed by the bit and bridle of her predetermined interpretive scheme (into which this verse does not fit) and thus adds blinders to her tack.

12. Although Halperin makes much of the inclusion and exclusion of the Tetragrammaton (176, for instance), and the elision, substitution, or duplication of various parts of verses, ascribing to each a deep and intentional meaning.

13. I have always maintained that one should assume, until proven otherwise, that the sequence and disposition of the iconography in medieval manuscripts illuminated for Jews is both coherent and intentional. I insist that we, as scholars, cultivate humility in the face of iconography that seems to be erroneous or misplaced, asking what the authorship might have understood about it that we do not. I think it is essential to recognize the importance of midrashic *mentalités*—with their inherent acceptance of interpretive polyvalency—for the understanding of the iconography we explore. Marc Michael Epstein, *The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative and Religious Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 8–10.

14. For example, in a study in which historical information is generally adduced in a relevant and convincing manner, *A Mahzor from Worms: Art and Religion in a Medieval Jewish Community* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), Katrin Kogman-Appel nonetheless at times somewhat thickly applies historicizing veneer. For instance, she presents an image in the thirteenth century Worms Mahzor that depicts, inter alia, a synagogue precentor wearing a prayer shawl over his head. This image occasions an extensive and impressively annotated excursus on the history of the prayer shawl from earliest antiquity to the thirteenth century (68–82). But the conclusion reached as a result of these exertions—that in the southern Rhineland valley at the time of the manuscript's illumination, the synagogue precentor may (or may not have) worn his prayer shawl over his head—ultimately fails to advance our knowledge of the image in question in any significant way.

15. The author asserts that she disagrees with Suzy Sitbon, who believes that the text was not meant to be read, as well as with David Stern, who contends that it served as an aide memoire, but she does not say why (18).

16. *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), xiii.

17. Budapest, Hungarian Academy of the Sciences, Kaufmann Collection, MS A50 Mishnah, fol. 173v; Italy, late 11th–mid-12th century (Avot V.14–23). My thanks to Professor Hartley Lachter for making me aware of this textual variant. I would like also to acknowledge the assistance of Ágnes Vető in helping me to formulate this critique.