



Collectors' corner: 18th-century manuscript of "A Chapter of Song" joins the list of Hebrew facsimiles

Judaica collectors who have been deterred by the high prices of Facsimile Editions' sumptuous offerings — the Kennicot Bible, Rothschild Miscellany, Barcelona Hagadah, Alba Bible and Meah Berachot, ranging from several hundred to several thousand pounds each — at last have something to tempt them.

"Perek Shirah" — "A Chapter of Song" — is a tiny (five inches by three) volume in the British Library, an illustrated Hebrew and Yiddish manuscript by the 18th-century Moravian artist and scribe, Aaron Schreiber Herlingen.

The Perek, written anonymously in the 10th century, has since been reproduced in a variety of manuscripts — more than 100 are known — and printed editions, reflecting at least three distinct medieval tra-

ditions: Oriental-Italian, Sephardi and Ashkenazi.

The first printed edition, with a commentary by Moses ben Joseph de Trani, appeared in Venice in 1576, and was followed by dozens of others. The work was also translated into Latin — in a Renaissance manuscript — and into German and Yiddish.

"Perek Shirah" is first mentioned in the work of a Jerusalem Karaite in the first half of the 10th century. References to it are found in European sources of the 12th century, and various interpretations are known, mainly kabbalistic.

From the outset, it was intended as a liturgical text, and in the early Ashkenazi manuscripts was included in machzorim and collections of special prayers. It later featured in the texts of printed Siddurim.

The song opens with the promise that all who recite it "are assured of



The opening folio of "Perek Shirah"

a place in the world to come." It ends with the hope that their study will be transformed into good deeds that will earn heavenly reward.

The praises are expressed in the form of scriptural quotations, reflecting the Jewish belief in the interdependence of study and prayer. They also reflect an awareness of the spiritual dimension of nature and the environment.

The Herlingen manuscript contains five delicately executed full-colour miniatures, illustrating the five sections of the text. They bring together in each illustration as many living creatures mentioned in the manuscript as possible.

Folio 1a of the 34-page volume contains an unusual image of a sea monster, and also depicts the heavens, earth, day night, sun, moon, stars, clouds, rivers and wilderness.

Subsequent miniatures include various aspects of vegetation (4b), trees (5b), birds (8b), and animals and creatures (12b).

The facsimile, in a limited edition of 550 copies, was printed in

Milan on specially milled paper and hand-bound in vellum.

It was designed as a barmitzva memento for Gideon Falter, first-born son — or "first facsimile," as he charmingly describes himself in a foreword to the companion volume — of Linda and Michael Falter, the creators of Facsimile Editions.

The 56-page companion, tastefully boxed with the main volume, contains an introduction to the text by Malachi Beit-Arié, emeritus director of the Jewish National Library, Jerusalem; a translation by Jeremy Schonfield, of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies; and a description of the manuscript by the Dutch scholar, Emile Schrijver.

"Perek Shirah," priced at £155, is available from the publishers, Facsimile Editions, 40 Hamilton Terrace, London NW8 9UJ.



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