

Leaves of old

Simon Rocker meets London couple Linda and Michael Falter, who have mastered the art of reproducing rare Hebrew manuscripts

One afternoon, in 1979, Michael Falter set off to Bloomsbury in search of romance. "I was single and feeling a little sorry for myself because I didn't have a girlfriend," he recalled. "I wanted to meet a girl who was intelligent, so I thought I'd browse round the British Museum."

What he found certainly ignited his passion — though not quite as he had intended. The object of beauty that caught his eye was not a woman, but a book. "I saw a showcase full of amazing Hebrew manuscripts. I could see only a couple of open pages behind the glass and on the way home, I reflected how I'd love to see much more."

That glimpse of rare illuminated manuscripts was to prove the start of an enduring fascination that first became a hobby, then a career. Such priceless Judaica hardly ever comes on the market but for 25 years he and his wife Linda — whom he met the year after his museum visit — have enabled collectors to enjoy it by producing high-quality facsimiles. Their creations are not the kind of reprints of medieval hagadot you commonly see round a Seder table, but lavishly crafted replicas which, from their leather bindings to the antique look of the pages, could almost pass as originals.

On Tuesday evening the British Library will be hosting a reception to launch the Falters' ninth reproduction, a facsimile of the late 13th-century masterpiece, the North French Hebrew Miscellany, which retails for a princely £4,695. This glorious compendium of Chumash, prayers, poems, other biblical texts — and sundry items including a riddle — which was compiled in 1280, is the British Library's most prized Hebrew manuscript.

Its 84 texts range from the apocryphal Book of Tobit to laws on shechitah. But its true richness lies in its pictorial charm, the colourful Gothic illustrations that light up its 1,494 pages — cherubs, dragons, Leviathan and other fantastical creatures along with scenes from biblical life. A somewhat contempla-

tive-looking Samson is about to finish off a lion, one knee pressing down on its back while his

hands rip its jaws apart. A giant Abraham, as if on stilts, averts his gaze as he prepares to bring the blade down upon an elfin Isaac.

But these medieval splendours have a value beyond their artwork, for they are also testaments to survival. The persecutors of European Jews wreaked devastation on their libraries. Some 40 years before the Miscellany, for example, Louis IX of France consigned cartloads of Jewish books to the flames.

The more Michael Falter considered what he had seen in the museum case, the more he was intrigued by the idea of trying to reproduce it. A natural thought, perhaps, since both his grandfather, originally in Prague, Czechoslovakia and his father, in Vienna and London, were involved in the printing industry. "I went to the London College of Printing," he said. "It was the only thing I ever wanted to do. My father had a business reconditioning old printing presses and he gave me a small press as a present when I was 12."

On their second date, Michael took Linda on a visit to Oxford University's Bodleian library. "She misheard me and thought I'd said the Bodley Inn," he recalled. "But I don't drink," she protested.

Linda had grown up in Nottingham in a family more gastronomically Jewish than pious. "We ate our way through Judaism," she said. "When I was very young, I was the only religious member of my family. I went every week to shul till I was 16... Then I met a Mexican and I lived away from England for 10 years." Her travels took her to Switzerland, where she worked for the UN; Iran, where she ran a school; the USA, where she had a restaurant; and also to Israel, which she loved. When she met Michael, she was back in Britain helping her brother set up a skin-care business.

Captivated by the art of the manuscripts, she was also struck by a sense of immediate connection with the words. "When you open the Kennicott Bible and come across the Shema, it's amazing that you can read something written down more than 500 years ago just as if it were in a printed book," she said. "It links you with your roots."

The upshot of their trip to Oxford was their first project, to make a facsimile of the



Copy kings: Linda and Michael Falter with their latest facsimile, the North French Hebrew Miscellany (PHOTO: PETER FISHER). Two illustrations from the new publication: right, Leviathan and below, the binding of Isaac

Kennicott Bible, an illuminated 15th-century Tanach, so zealously guarded that the Bodleian has allowed only 30 scholars and historians to study it in two centuries. The Falters spared no effort in trying to match the original features. They had paper specially milled to replicate the appearance and feel of authentic vellum, they refined techniques to imitate the medieval gilders' use of gold and silver leaf. They scoured Europe and even wrote to people in Japan before finding a suitably skilled printer, based in Milan.

Linda would maintain her long vigil by the presses while each of the 922 pages went into production. "Sometimes, it would take 24 hours to make ready one set of plates," she said. "We wanted people to feel that what they had was something precious, as though it were an original manuscript."

After five-and-a-half years' work, their Kennicott Bible was ready in 1985. By that time, Michael had given up his job selling software and they had set up Facsimile Editions from their home in St John's Wood.

Through their extraordinary attention to detail, they have since gained the trust of other institutions and collectors to win further commissions. The North French Hebrew Miscellany comes in a limited edition of 360 copies, accompanied by a companion volume explaining the background to the texts and the illustrations (edited by Jeremy Schonfield of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies and written by scholars such as University College London's emeritus professor of Hebrew, Raphael Loewe).

"We're the only people in the world who do what we do to this standard," Michael said. Not surprisingly, the circle of potential buy-



ers is small and highly specialised, mostly but not exclusively Jewish. On one occasion, Michael succeeded in selling a copy of the Kennicott Bible between the third and sixteenth floors in a hotel lift in Manhattan: on another, he sold one during a plane journey to a non-Jewish raincoat manufacturer from Hong Kong.

He remembers once being approached at the Jerusalem Book Fair by a man "with a crumpled shirt, rolled-up sleeves and sandals held together by string. He turned out to be one of the Manhattan Project scientists and ordered five copies of the Kennicott Bible."

But the identity of one foreign customer was particularly surprising. "We got a postcard from a guy in Austria," Michael said. "It turned out his father had been a high-ranking Nazi. His father had gone one way, but he went the other and now he spends his time studying Hebrew texts."

For more on the work of Facsimile Editions, visit: www.facsimile-editions.com





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