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Collectors' corner: facsimile of Barcelona Hagadah recalls Spanish Jewry's golden age

Coinciding with the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, one of the most exquisite manuscript Hagadot in existence appears this week in facsimile — itself a tribute to the highest standards of lithography and binding.

The Barcelona Hagadah, purchased by the British Museum in 1844 for £52 10s., is today recognised as one of the finest illuminated Hebrew manuscripts in the British Library. Dating from the mid-14th century, it is named after an heraldic shield it bears resembling the coat of arms of Barcelona.

At the time of its creation, the Jews of Aragon and Catalonia formed one of the largest communities in Europe, and Barcelona was home to a flourishing centre of manuscript illumination, linked to the court and influenced by French and Italian styles.

Rich in decorative and representational illuminations, the Hagadah is illustrated on no fewer than 128 of its 322 pages, studded with fanciful figures and pictorial scenes that provide fascinating insights into Jewish life in medieval Spain. A lively interest in music is displayed throughout the manuscript, with 28 different instru-

ments appearing in the illustrations.

More intimate details, such as the paintings of the Seder, take one straight into a Jewish home of the period, with a synagogue scene reflecting contemporary conditions and traditions.

The illustrations of the Exodus — shown taking place on horseback in medieval costume — the four sons, the rabbis at Bnei Brak and Abraham breaking the idols are of great historical value, while the unrestrained humour of the artist is evident from the images of dogs and rabbits that romp through the pages of the manuscript.

The large, clear script, possibly designed to be read more easily by children, was written on eight lines per page. The text occupies 180 pages, with the remaining leaves containing liturgical poems and prayers for the other days of the festival.

The Barcelona Hagadah is the third facsimile to be produced by Facsimile Editions of London, following the outstanding success of the famed Kennicott Bible and Rothschild Miscellany. It re-creates the overall aura of the original manuscript by including every detail — such as the pricking and scoring of

pages to indicate the marks and lines used by the scribe.

As gold leaf cannot be adequately simulated by printing, the original raised burnished gold has been reproduced by laying leaf by hand in order to achieve the richness of the 14th-century gilding. Each page of the facsimile has been cut to exactly the size and shape of the original, and aged at the edges.

A companion volume contains essays on the palaeography, liturgy, provenance and historical context of the Hagadah, with a new English translation and commentary by Rabbi Dr Harry Rabinowicz, of London, and notes by the late Rabbi Dr David Goldstein, former curator of Hebrew manuscripts and printed books at the British Library (whose "Hebrew Manuscript Painting," published by the library, contains several illustrations from the Barcelona Hagadah).

Priced at £2,250, the facsimile is in a numbered edition of 500, contained in hand-made slip-cases with certificates bearing the seal of the British Library. Destined primarily for major Hebraica collections throughout the world, it is a fitting tribute to Spanish Jewry's golden age, so tragically cut short 500 years ago this week.

For less commodious purses, a wide range of inexpensive yet attractive Hagadot and handbooks continues to be published.

At the cheapest end of the range — in cost though assuredly not in quality — comes the Koren Hagadah (£4.99), translated by Professor Harold Fisch and profusely illustrated with reproductions from the Erna Michael Hagadah in the Israel Museum, written in the Rhineland around 1400.

For clarity of printing, typography and translation, the Koren edition — a mere five inches by seven — is a festival gem and a perfect companion to the Seder service.

For those seeking unusual insights and contemporary teachings relating to Pesach, the Breslov Hagadah (£8.95) is strongly recommended. Compiled and adapted by Rabbi Yehoshua Starret from the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, it features midrashic stories of the Exodus, Pesach anecdotes from Chasidic lore, and a joyous journey through Breslov tradition from Pesach to Shavuot.

This handsome volume will shed hours of light, and delight, both as preparation for the Seder and during the ceremony itself.

"Every Person's Guide to



A page from the 14th-century Barcelona Hagadah now published in facsimile

Judaism," by Stephen J. Einstein and Lydia Kukoff (Jason Aronson, £14.99), contains a useful chapter on Pesach as part of a panorama of contemporary Jewish life and faith.

MEIR PERSOFF
Editor, Judaism Today

The Barcelona Hagadah facsimile is obtainable from Facsimile Editions, 40 Hamilton Terrace, London NW8, and the other volumes from Kuperard (London) Ltd., No 9 Hampstead West, 224 Iverson Road, London NW6.



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Facsimile Editions Limited
40 Hamilton Terrace
London NW8 9UJ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7286 0071
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7266 3927

www.facsimile-editions.com