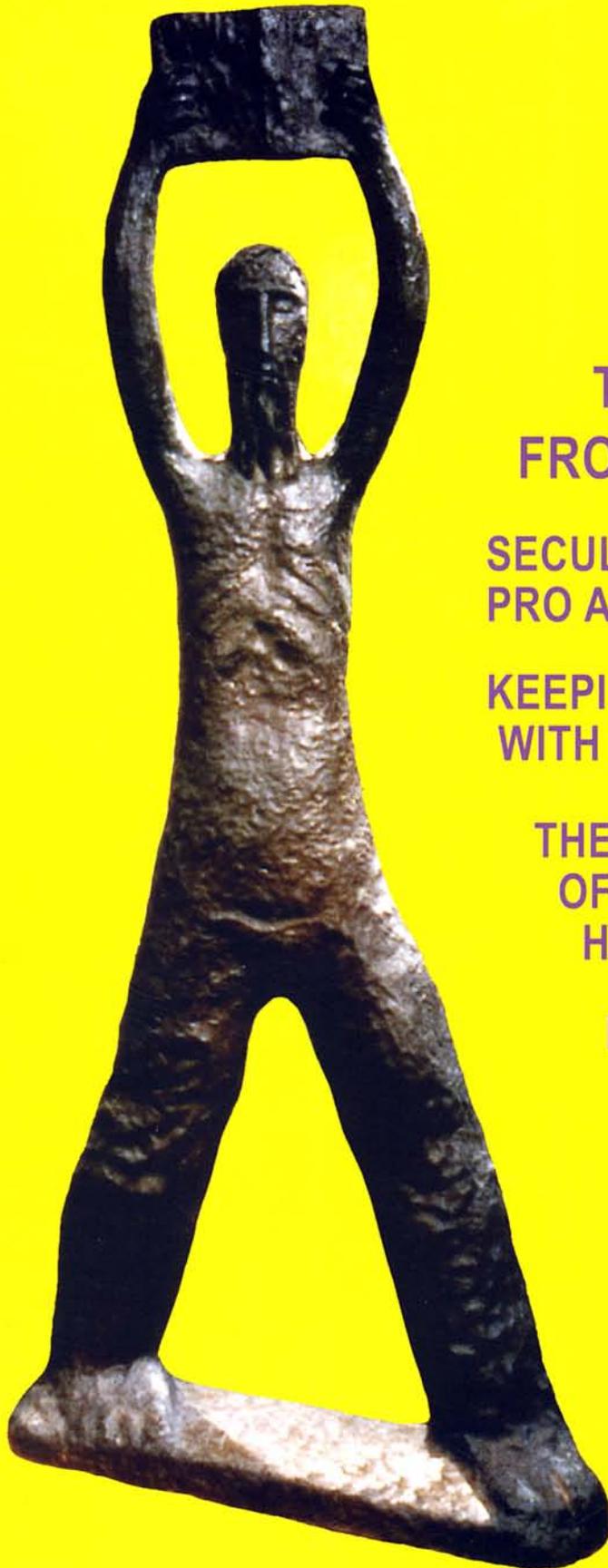


Jewish
RENAISSANCE

QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF JEWISH CULTURE



**THE JEWS
FROM EGYPT**

**SECULARISM -
PRO AND CON**

**KEEPING TIME
WITH LEBRECHT**

**THE ART
OF THE
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**ISRAELI
ART IN
LONDON**

**CHAGALL
IN PARIS**

ART OF THE HAGGADAH

ERICA GORDON

"And thou shalt tell thy son in that day saying: This is done because of that which the Lord did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt."

This verse from Exodus (13-8) is the origin of the Passover ceremony. By the first century CE as many as 1.5 million people crammed into the court of the Temple in Jerusalem to witness its most important component: the sacrifice of the Pascal Lamb. In the evening the lamb was eaten, and at the feast psalms of praise and thanks were sung.

The destruction of the Temple forced the transformation of the ritual into a domestic one. Men sat round the table, discussing former ceremonies and praying for the rebuilding of the Temple. *Matzah* and bitter herbs, symbolising the bitterness of slavery, now became much more important, and wine, which was always drunk with meals throughout the Mediterranean, was included at specific intervals in the proceedings.

Later, the *Mishna* suggested four questions which might be asked by any intelligent child. It seemed appropriate to end the meal with psalms of gratitude: the Hallel. Thus the *Haggadah* – literally 'the telling' – was laid out some 2,000 years ago virtually as it is now, and survives as possibly the oldest of human celebrations still practised today. Once its form had been settled, it began to be written down.

ILLUSTRATION

The commandment forbidding the creation of graven images ensured the absence of human forms in any books for synagogue use. Sometimes, in some places, this was taken to the extreme of a total ban on any such representation. It applied not only to ultra-Orthodox Jews, but to all Jews living in Moslem countries, where portrayal of the human form was prohibited by the Koran. Consequently decoration in *Haggadot* produced in Moorish Spain tended to be limited to very elaborate, highly-coloured and gilded imaginative calligraphy.

In non-Muslim countries and northern Europe, however, because the *Haggadah* was for home, not synagogue use, this prohibition was not applied. Since it was



Facsimile of the Barcelona Haggadah at the British Library. Courtesy of Facsimile Editions

FAULTLESS FACSIMILES

The *Barcelona Haggadah* is among the old illuminated manuscripts immaculately copied by Facsimile Editions. This specialist publishing company grew out of the first meeting of its founders. Michael Falter, descended from an old printing family, naturally arranged to take the girl he fancied, Linda, to view a medieval manuscript on their second date! They fell in love with each other, and with the idea of copying old Hebrew manuscripts as accurately as the combination of modern technology in the hands of the most skilled printers together with age old crafts such as binding, paper-making and gilding would allow. Hebrew manuscripts were chosen partly because the script in which they were written is still almost totally comprehensible today, unlike ancient Greek or medieval German.

Each chosen manuscript has to be photographed with infinite care, reproducing as accurately as possible sometimes as many as 24 colours used by the original artist in a square inch of design. Colour separations are made, using computer-controlled laser scanners. Appropriate hand-made paper is selected. When, as in most cases, the original was on vellum, its character and feel has to be matched by the paper created for it. Where gold is used, often over embossed lettering, the metal leaf

has to be carefully matched to the original, and applied so that it remains fixed.

Almost all the processing is done in Italy, under Linda's supervision. Every detail of the original is included, down to holes in the original skins and needle pricks at the edges of the pages which were used by the scribe to draw guidelines, later rubbed out. Wine stains – often found in *haggadot* – are carefully rendered in their original colours. Equal care is taken over the choice and execution of the binding.

A volume of scholarly explanation is commissioned to accompany each original book, and is produced with as much care and attention to detail as the facsimile.

After several years of hard work, the Falters have just completed the sumptuous *North French Hebrew Miscellany*, the British Library's finest Hebraic treasure

Facsimile Editions can be justly proud of the magnificent books they produce with such respect and loving care.

Facsimile Editions sell for between £150 and £5,600. Illuminated pages are available for £20-£45. Phone Linda Falter on 020 7286 0071 email: st@facsimile-editions.com



The Four Sons from the Szyk Haggadah

ARTHUR SZYK

Amongst 20th century artists to have created a *Haggadah*, Arthur Szyk (1894-1951) is outstanding. Szyk was born in Lodz, Poland and he peopled his *Haggadah*, regarded as the greatest of his works, with characters he observed in the *stetl*. He began work on it in 1932, just as Nazism was emerging, finishing in 1939. It was published in London. For him it was a political as well as a religious mission. He equated slavery in Egypt with the Holocaust of his own time. The wicked one of the four sons is usually shown as a warrior, in contrast to the studious, peace-loving Jew he should be. In Szyk's version he becomes a Junker, with monocle, cigar, leather boots and jodhpurs – more German than the Germans! Szyk's sensuous, richly-coloured lettering blends medieval, Renaissance and oriental with art deco. The illustrations, full of vigorous exotic characters, often tailored to fit ornate cartouches, testify to his brilliant draughtsmanship.

Szyk had already completed several other prestigious, highly decorative projects by 1940. From London he went to the United States. As a totally committed supporter of the idea and then the fact of a Jewish state in Israel, he devoted his artistic energies to its promotion. He turned largely to cartooning and caricature until, at the age of 57, he died of a heart-attack.

a short book, and meant to explain the festival rituals to children as much as to adults, it became the best-loved Jewish text for illustrators throughout the ages. Northern European illustrators would begin with representations of the opening ceremonies e.g. looking for *chametz*, and would end with illustrations of the songs such as *Chad Gadya*, which were mediaeval additions to the festivities, intended to keep the children entertained.

Magnificent examples of old *Haggadot* can be found in great museum libraries such as the Bodleian and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. They were products of medieval developments in book production and the burgeoning passion for illuminated manuscripts. Skilled artists and scribes were commissioned by private Christian patrons to produce devotional

works such as the *Book of Hours*. This stimulated a parallel Jewish desire for highly decorative manuscripts. The *Haggadot*, which until the 13th century had been part of a much longer religious text, became a favourite subject for illumination.

Local styles were adopted by the commissioned artists, so that the *Haggadot* of Spain had full-page framed illustrations, whilst German and Italian versions had elaborate first-letter panels and ornate borders. Itinerant scribes such as Joel ben Simeon created hybrid styles.

The invention of printing in 15th century introduced the use of woodcuts, then woodblocks, and finally, in the 17th century, engraving on copper. *Haggadot* were produced using all these techniques. In Venice, and then Amsterdam, *Haggadot* exclusively in Spanish were

produced for Marrano refugees. In Germany, Yiddish and then German texts were inserted alongside the Hebrew.

The early 18th century saw a revival of beautiful hand-crafted Hebrew manuscripts commissioned by rich *hoffjuden*, who had risen to high positions in the princely courts of Europe. Then came the Enlightenment which brought assimilation, and a consequent decline in Hebrew literacy.

Upheavals and persecutions followed, in which the art of the *Haggadah* languished. Its revival came in the 1920s-30s when it was used by various artists to interpret their own situation. The most famous of these were Ben Shahn, whose *Haggadah* was published in 1931, and Arthur Szyk (see above). ■

Erica Gordon is a writer and artist



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