

Collectors' corner: 18th-century *Meah Berachot* is 'a miniature handbook of Jewish life'

The world of quality facsimile manuscripts opens up to a wider audience later this year with the publication of "Meah Berachot," an exquisite 18th-century miniature prayer-book handwritten and illuminated in Central Europe.

The volume, a mere 1.6 x 1.4 inches, is being reproduced on vellum by London-based Facsimile Editions, which until now has concentrated on some of the world's largest and most valuable Hebrew manuscripts.

The cost of these facsimiles — ranging from \$3,850 for the 14th-century Barcelona Hagadah to \$26,000 for the 15th-century Alba Bible — has put them out of the reach of most collectors, but the publishers, husband-and-wife team Michael and Linda Falter, have been anxious to extend the range to enable less ambitious Judaica devotees to acquire one of their editions.

Says Michael Falter: "Knowing that many people covet our books but simply cannot afford them, we were intrigued when, some time ago,

a New York collector of Hebrew manuscripts suggested that we reproduce the miniature prayer-book, thus enabling us to reduce the cost without compromising the quality."

The new volume is available at a pre-publication price of \$550 (about £366) until August 31. The first copies are expected in time for Chanukah, when the cost will be \$650. At the manuscript owner's request, all royalties are being donated to Jerusalem's Shaare Zedek medical centre.

Tradition has it that the very pious seek to recite at least 100 blessings — *meah berachot* — a day. The manuscript is a compendium of such blessings and prayers, each allocated to a specific time of day or to a special event.

They include morning prayers, grace after meals, prayers on retiring at night, petitions for the safety of travellers, and such blessings as those on seeing a beautiful tree, on hearing thunder and on wearing a new garment for the first time.

The volume also contains three blessings specifically related to wom-

enly duties — on bread-making, ritual bathing and kindling the Shabbat lights — and is believed to have been commissioned as a gift to a woman.

"Such a splendid prayer-book," say the Falters, "may well have been presented to a bride and would doubtless have been treasured by generations of her descendants. Indeed, it is a miniature handbook of Jewish life intended for Jews of all ages.

"The manuscript is a remarkable example of the revival of Hebrew illumination in the 18th century. At that time, long after the invention of printing, it was recognised that a handwritten and finely illustrated book offered a sense of luxury and a respect for religious ritual unmatched since the Middle Ages."

The Hebrew text, on 70 vellum pages, is accompanied by an illuminated title-page and 29 miniature panels illustrating some of the activities associated with the blessings. Each painting is headed by a cartouche containing the relevant *berachah* and is preceded by directions on how to recite it, written in a cursive Yiddish script.

Three additional miniatures depict a variety of everyday genre scenes: lighting the candles, family meal times, tending the garden, putting on new clothes, entering the mikveh, and even the then common medical practice of blood-letting.

Every aspect of the original has been meticulously recreated in producing the facsimile. Vellum skins of ultra-fine quality were selected — the hair side virtually indistinguishable from the skin side — and the printing has been done in up to nine colours.

The craftsman-made binding of morocco leather is tooled in 23-carat gold and adorned with solid silver clasps, corner-plates and studs made in one of the last silversmith's ateliers in Milan. The leather presentation case, which holds both the facsimile and a companion volume, is small enough to be carried in a pocket.

The companion, written by Iris Fishof, chief curator of Judaica and Jewish ethnography at the Israel Museum, and edited by Jeremy Schonfield, contains a detailed description of the manuscript and of



The exquisitely illuminated title-page of the 18th-century "Meah Berachot"

the Jewish world from which it came.

The facsimile is being printed in a limited edition of 550 copies. Once completed, its plates will be destroyed in compliance with halachic requirements.

MEIR PERSOFF

Full details of the "Meah Berachot" and other reproductions are available from Facsimile Editions at 40 Hamilton Terrace, London NW8 9UJ.



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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