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## INTRODUCTION: FOR THE LOVE OF BOOKS

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*Habent sua fata libelli.* “Books,” remarks the third-century Latin poet Maurus in one of his epigrams, “have their own destinies.” Once upon a time in the 1980s, when I was a twenty-year-old graduate student full of arrogance and attitude, I worked in the Hebrew books and manuscripts division of the Judaica Department at Sotheby’s New York. My boss was the “Judaica expert,” the late, great Jay Weinstein, a man truly deserving of his title, which he bore with immense modesty and humor. My own title was also “expert,” but, by way of contrast, it only exacerbated my supercilious arrogance when I found myself called to the front desk to meet a client. At those moments, I always had a vision in my head of a potential *New Yorker* cartoon—a white-bearded man in a robe carrying two large tablets inscribed in archaic Hebrew waits patiently while the receptionist pages me: “Mr. Epstein, someone with a very old Hebrew book is here to see you.”

Indeed, just as in that imaginary cartoon, the client I was about to meet on the day I am describing had called a week before to tell me that he was in possession of “a very old Hebrew book.” I was not looking forward to the encounter, since auction experts know very well that the *hoi polloi* consider anything more than ten years old to be ancient and hence of untold value. Disabusing clients of this notion as it applies to their particular treasure is an often painful but necessary task. I steeled myself for what would be necessary to accomplish this: the sustained and enervating projection of a personal impressiveness composed of equal measures of authority and disdain. This was to be no mean feat, considering it was a Monday afternoon and the hour was late.

Mr. X, I was dismayed to find, embodied all my worst fears. Stooped, elderly, still in his coat, and eager—very eager. Authoritative and disdainful though I made myself, he was simply unimpressed by my “impressiveness.” With total focus and trembling hands, he reached into a plastic shopping bag and produced, wrapped in newspaper older than

**FIGURE 1**

“How I love Your Torah, it is my discourse all the day.” A man, covered in a prayer shawl, holds a Torah scroll in its embroidered cover in his arms. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*. Italy, perhaps Perugia, ca. 1400. Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, MS Heb. 4° 1193, fol. 32r.

I was, his “treasure”—a book of Psalms, printed in Warsaw in 1920. I couldn’t believe this monumental waste of my precious time—a brand new book of Psalms would be worth more than this one! I was exasperated by this schlepper, and I wanted to tell him so. I wanted to show him the real treasures—gold, silver, ancient, and precious illuminated manuscripts—that had been entrusted into my “expert” care. I wanted to show him the door as I told him with authoritative disdain, “That book is worth whatever you paid for it!”

But at that moment, like the angel in the legend who moves Moses’s hand toward the glowing coal rather than the glittering crown, thus saving his life, some kindly spirit moved my tongue. And instead of that anticipated send-off, I faltered, “Um, what did you pay for this?” The old man drew himself up to his full 5 feet, 2 inches. “For this, I paid seven days’ Auschwitz bread,” he replied with a dignity that totally deflated my pose. It seems that the Nazis had caught him with the little Psalm book, and, as a penalty for possessing it, imprisoned him without food—only water to drink—for an entire week. Like Moses touching the coal to his lips, I was struck dumb. “This,” I stammered, “is too valuable for us to sell.” And I stumbled out of the room, a changed young man, with a new appreciation of what is meant by the words *precious*, *valuable*, and *treasured*.

Moses, perhaps due to the childhood encounter with the coal that the story tells us literally scarred him, grew up to be “the meekest man on earth.” And I, while far from meek, bear to this day the scars where my callousness was abraded by this man’s sincerity, my callowness by his experience, and my cynicism by his faith. I learned then and there, in the most visceral way, that books indeed have their destinies, and each has a story to tell—sanguine or sanguinary. And their stories do not merely tell of themselves; they can, and do, transform readers, collectors, and historians. For involvement with books can be nothing short of a love affair.

The love of books in the Jewish tradition is nowhere better shown forth than in this poetic illustration from a fourteenth-century manuscript of Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah. Here, under the rubric “How I love Your Torah—she is my meditation all the day!” (Psalms 119:97), a man holds a Torah scroll with tender affection—a fitting opening illumination for a folio that enumerates the laws of the reading of the Shm’a, the scriptural verses emphasizing both the Unity of God and the centrality of Torah (figure 1).

The various fates of the books of the People of the Book are particularly rich and variegated, and upon them hang many tales. This book is a labor of love, a compendium of words and images by some of the best and brightest scholars in the field of Jewish manuscript illumination and beyond. It is the first attempt at a comprehensive survey of this field in more than thirty years, and I hope you will find it particularly distinguished by its mission, its composition, and its quality.

When I was approached to take on this project, it occurred to me that it would be both somewhat presumptuous and rather boring to attempt to write the book by myself.

The field of Jewish manuscript studies has grown exponentially in the past thirty years, and there are excellent scholars, many of them young, whose contributions bring unprecedented quality, scope, and depth to this work. Moreover, the idea that art is a legitimate form of historical documentation—not just of events but of the attitudes, mentalities, and aesthetics of those who commissioned, and in some cases, created it—has taken off in a dramatic way in that period of years. Just as art is increasingly being applied as a tool for the study of history and culture, I felt that the voices of scholars of history and culture should be included in such a way as to illuminate (if I may be forgiven the use of

the word) the places and times in which the works of art we examine herein were created. So this is a work of dialectic, of a community of scholars (figure 2). Our opinions belong to each of us, but as general editor, I accept the burden of any inaccuracies or errors.

A word about the title (and contents) of this work: This book will explore what I have styled *Jewish illuminated manuscripts*, in place of what has tended in the past to be called *Hebrew illuminated manuscripts*. There are compelling reasons for this. The term *Hebrew illuminated manuscripts* has the advantage of sounding precise and scientific, a simple categorization on the basis of linguistic content. But of course, it is much more ambiguous than it seems: Does it refer to the illumination of manuscripts whose language is Hebrew? Or does it signify the process of the illumination of manuscripts as undertaken by *Hebrews*, whoever they might be? And what, in the end, do we gain by avoiding the use of the term *Jewish*?

Unlike Arabic manuscripts, many of which are written in the Arabic language without necessarily being Muslim in content, the vast majority of illuminated manuscripts written

in Hebrew are Jewish in content. And unlike Greek manuscripts, which were commissioned both by Christians and by Greek-reading non-Christians, Hebrew manuscripts were overwhelmingly commissioned by Jewish patrons for Jewish audiences. With the exception of the occasional inclusion of translations of medical or philosophical works, most surveys of “Hebrew illuminated manuscripts” include manuscripts with identifiably Jewish content: scripture, liturgy, law, poetry, and philosophy. They also routinely include Jewish manuscripts whose language is not Hebrew at all, but Judeo-Arabic, Yiddish, or Ladino. So when scholars speak of “Hebrew illuminated manuscripts,” they are invariably referring to Jewish illuminated manuscripts.

If that’s the case, why not say so? The act of “christening” what are essentially Jewish works of art as *Hebrew* is the result of something beyond a simple desire for scholarly



**FIGURE 2**  
A community of scholars: the Five Rabbis at B'nai Brak. Haggadah, German rite with the commentary of Eleazar of Worms and illustrations by Joel ben Simeon Feibush (The Ashkenazi Haggadah). South Germany, perhaps Ulm, ca. 1460. London, British Library, MS Add. 14762, fol. 7v.

clarity. It represents an attempt to erase the inherent Jewishness of these monuments. As a euphemism for Jewish illuminated manuscripts, the expression “Hebrew illuminated manuscripts” rings hollow and archaic in an era in which only a benighted few are still afraid to use the *J* word in polite company. And so, we dare say it: the manuscripts displayed and discussed on the following pages are Jewish—made for, and in many cases, by Jews, in Jewish communities, in the context of the Jewish year, and as part of the tradition of Jewish learning.

That having been said, they are extraordinarily diverse. As we shall see, they comprise illustrated texts of the Bible, the prayer book, the home liturgy, historical works, books of customs, marriage documents, and household decorations. They are the production of many people—Jews and non-Jews commissioned by Jews—over many centuries, and they represent politics and perspectives east and west, male and female. They represent Jewries from all the world over—communities that were pietistic and communities that were liberal.

It is important, I feel, to note that what they do not represent for the most part is a variety of socioeconomic strata. This book is a mirror of sorts: it displays for you—a by-and-large urbane, educated, and well-to-do audience—the productions of medieval Jewish societies that were socioeconomically the equivalent of your own. And this makes the “world” depicted in these works—that of “Jewish life as depicted in art,” as it has sometime been known—a world seen from a rather narrow and isolated perspective. The people who would have viewed the books we will encounter would have expected those volumes to be somewhat of a mirror of their own world, much like the mirrored faces in this page from a fourteenth-century Ashkenazic haggadah written and illuminated by Joel ben Simeon Feibush, which (in spite of accompanying the text describing *mazah* as “this bread of poverty”) primarily reflect the countenances of members of the well-to-do sphere of the manuscript’s patrons and their dependents (figure 3). Consequently, the recovery, based on the “manuscript evidence” of Jewish life on the basis of Jewish illuminated books, is tendentious at best, rather as if one had attempted to reconstruct Jewish life in the twentieth century on the basis of an archeological survey, some 500 years hence, of the estate area in the Fieldston section of Riverdale, New York, or of Beverly Hills, California, or of the renewed Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. But still, we take what was left us, and if we are clever, we can mine what we have for secretly meaningful images, alternative histories, and all those fine and subversive elements historians garner from the documents of the elite when they lack material from the other societal strata with which to work.



**FIGURE 3**  
“This bread of affliction.” *Mazah* as mirror of faces. Haggadah, Italian rite with illustrations by Joel ben Simeon Feibush. Italy, 1454. New York, Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 8279, fols. 49v–50r.

A few words about words: this work is intended for nonspecialists, but it is necessary from time to time to make use of certain terms that are common in the field. When we refer to *manuscripts*, we mean handwritten books on parchment, or more rarely, on paper. An *illuminated manuscript* is a manuscript that is illustrated in applied color and contains gold or silver as part of the decoration. We can refer to individual pictures or decorations within an illuminated manuscript either as *miniatures*, as *illuminations*, or simply as *illustrations*. However, an *illustrated manuscript* (a term often erroneously used interchangeably with illuminated manuscript) is a manuscript with illustrations in pen and ink alone, containing no applied color, gold, or silver.

A scribal *colophon* is the signature of the *scribe*, the person who wrote the text of the manuscript, occasionally (though not often enough!) with the date and place of the book's completion. If our interest is in the illustrations, knowing the name, date, and location of a manuscript's scribe will help us situate it broadly, but will not definitively answer all of our questions about the artwork. This is because each and every manuscript is the result of the work of a particular *authorship*, a collaboration between Jewish *patrons*, who sponsored and conceptualized the manuscript (in some cases, it seems, with the aid of rabbinic advisers), and *illustrators* (the artists who drew the pictures) and *illuminators* (the artisans who colored and gilded the illustrations), Jewish or non-Jewish. These illustrators and illuminators were usually distinct persons from the manuscript's scribes and only very rarely let us know their names in colophons. Even when we have the name of a scribe and of an artist, the two tasks of illustrator and illuminator are never differentiated entirely clearly.

The authorship of each manuscript engaged in its own, very particular, sometimes unique way of telling the tale of the relationship of Jews with God, their neighbors, and each other through their visual translation, commentary, and sometimes even subversion of Jewish texts and traditions. The authorship worked together on the successive stages of the project: First, in the planning of each manuscript, the patrons and their advisors decided upon those aspects of the text that was being illustrated and the ideas that underlay it that highlighted the agenda it wished to convey, working with the designers and artists to clothe those ideas in visual language. Then, these concepts were transmitted through the interpretation of their commission by the designers and executors of each work. Ultimately, the images and their motivating ideas were received and reinterpreted by the various audiences of each manuscript over time.

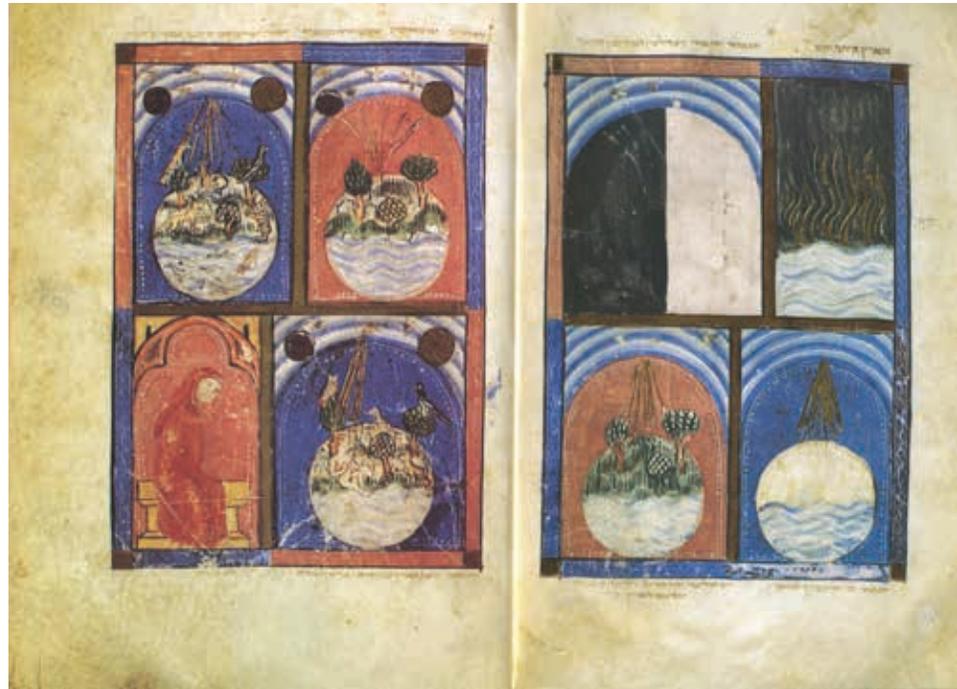
What were the various parts of a manuscript when it was received by its patrons and audiences? A *folio* is an entire page of a manuscript, front and back. When we talk about *folio 2a*, we mean the "front" side of the second folio that faces up, since the book, if you imagine it in front of you, opens on the left side (Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Arabic, and Judeo-Italkit all being written in Hebrew script, from right



ABOVE LEFT **FIGURE 4**  
The dove returns to Noah. Miscellany of biblical and other texts. France, Amiens, 1277-86. London, British Library, MS Add. 11639, fol. 521.

ABOVE RIGHT **FIGURE 5**  
Binding of Isaac. Miscellany of biblical and other texts. France, Amiens, 1277-86. London, British Library, MS Add. 11639, fol. 521v.

LEFT **FIGURE 6**  
David and Goliath. Miscellany of biblical and other texts. France, Amiens, 1277-86. London, British Library, MS Add. 11639, fol. 523v.



to left). Consequently, *folio 2b* is the opposite side of the page (the “back” of the folio), revealed as you turn the page to the right. The *a* side of a page is also referred to as the *recto* (or “correct”—in the sense of upward-facing) side of the page, and the *b* side as the *verso* (or “reverse”) side of the page, and so folio 2a is alternatively known as folio 2r, and folio 2b, as folio 2v.

Now, if illustration is simply the process of laying down the images, and illumination is the coloring—particularly the application of gold—to those illustrations to make them illuminations, what of a third term beginning with the letter *i*, a term about which there will be a great deal of talk in the ensuing pages—*iconography*?

Iconography refers to the manner in which the narrative is expressed by means of its illustration not only in a particular manuscript but in all manuscripts from a given time, place, or tradition—or, indeed, over the entire history of art. There are any number of ways in which a given story might unfold in art—try to visualize the tale of Noah’s ark (figure 4), or the story of the binding of Isaac (figure 5), or the episode of David’s encounter with Goliath (figure 6), for instance. This is because there are many different points in time in the narrative that can be depicted, and different details that can be inserted into the scene. The *standard iconography* of a scene is the way it is generally presented in a tradition of iconography particular to a time, place, and social, political, and/or religious context. For instance, in the West, in the Middle Ages, Jews do not generally depict the creation of the world, and when they do, they avoid any depiction of the Creator (figure 7). Christians, on the other hand, show the Creator as God the Father, often an old man with a white beard, or as God the Son, a younger, bearded personage, who is present within various spheres

**FIGURE 7**  
Creation with the Divine  
represented as golden rays of emanation. Haggadah (The Sarajevo Haggadah). Spain, Catalonia, ca. 1350. Bosnia and Hercegovina, Sarajevo, Zemaljski Museum, MS 1, fol. 1v.



indicating the individual days of creation, taking an active part in the process (figure 8). The standard medieval Christian iconography of saints and prophets, for example, shows God as appearing to them or hovering above them in a cloud. Jews, it goes without saying, would not have tolerated such a depiction in their books. Of course, as soon as we begin to speak of “standard” iconography, we encounter startling exceptions that raise pointed questions about the identity and motives of artist and patron (figure 9).

We make a determination of the “contents” of the standard iconography of a scene on the basis of the majority of examples in a given time and place. Iconography becomes interesting when it changes in a considerable or even a subtle way, and giving an account of and an explanation for these changes is the task of the art historian. Art historians take their cues for closer examination or reappraisal of iconography when obvious changes are in evidence. We may have a scene illustrated “anew”—that is, a scene that does not customarily appear in the historical and geographical context in which it is now manifest. Or a given illustration may add or omit details—characters, objects, landscape, or interior elements—generally found to be present in the time and place of its creation. Or, the style, relative size, or placement of a detail in a given scene may be altered—radically or subtly.

When we talk about “the iconography of Joseph’s dream,” for instance, we mean the persons, places, and things that appear in depictions of this biblical narrative in all media, throughout the history of art. This iconography generally includes the sleeping Joseph, with his dreams depicted in a realm somewhat “above and beyond” his bed. The actual depiction may be more detailed, including more elements, or more schematic, including fewer elements. So, in the case of Joseph’s dream, one could imagine a “standard” iconography in which Joseph lies on the ground with the dreams “projected” above him in schematic form, as indeed they are in most medieval examples, like the famous mosaics in

**FIGURE 8**

Creation with God appearing as the Son in the anthropomorphic form typical in manuscripts made for Christians. Note, however, the otherwise striking parallels with the Sarajevo Haggadah, particularly in the way the sphere of the created world is depicted. Bible with scenes from the Hebrew Bible and Latin, Persian, and Judeo-Persian inscriptions (The Morgan Picture Bible). France, Paris, 1240s. New York, Morgan Library, MS M.638, fol. 1v.

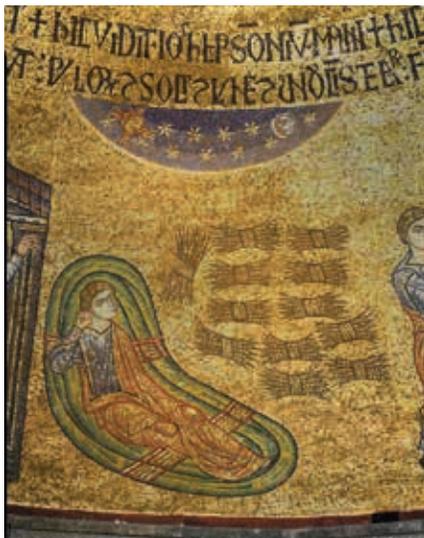


**FIGURE 9**  
A significant departure from the “standard iconography”: an unusual instance of God appearing in human form in a Jewish manuscript. Opening page from the Book of Psalms. Italy, 15th century. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung, MS Hamilton 547, fol. 1r.

San Marco in Venice (figure 10). But what if the stars are missing from the composition, as they are in this example from the fourteenth-century Golden Haggadah (figure 11)? Is it just a case of a lack of space in the panel? What if Joseph does not appear at all, only the dream elements by themselves? What if Joseph were shown in a particularly elaborate bedroom? What if the brothers appear holding their sheaves or their stars? What if God or an angel appears, “directing” the dream? And what if Joseph’s face betrays particular states of mind or emotional clues? Any or all of these “differences” would be cause for increased interest on the part of investigators.

More and more, art historians are learning that “models” can mean many things—from actual works of art known to those who “translated” them into their Jewish form, to model-books and motif-books present in the workshops of artists on the basis of which artists could offer the patron a sample of treatments of particular scenes, motifs, and details. And we realize that the transmission of motifs was often on the basis of memory—either of the whole composition or of small details of it. Though scholars sometimes speak of a “standard” iconography, there is in fact no uniformity. The designers of manuscripts borrowed from a wide range of sources and traditions. Pinpointing these sources might give us a better idea of the general identity of a given manuscript’s authorship. The task of the interpreter of motifs is be alert to the ways in which they translate their sources in a manner relevant to particular times, places, communities, families, and individual patrons. That is what makes the task of interpretation fascinating, rewarding, and fun.

How does this book on Jewish manuscript illumination differ from all other such books? In the pages to come, we venture beyond the traditional mode of cataloguing manuscripts chronologically and geographically by means of a sample page from each manuscript and a description of each manuscript’s origin, form, and contents. This is something that has been done to good effect in the past by excellent scholars, whose works



**FIGURE 10**  
Joseph’s dreams. Inscribed HIC VIDIT IOSHEP SO(M)NIU(M) MANIPULOR(UM) ET SOLI(S) (ET) LUNE ET UND(E)CI(M) STELARU(M) (“Here Joseph dreams the dream of the sheaves, the sun, the moon and the eleven stars.”). San Marco, Venice, Atrium, bay 6, dome. Mosaic. Italian, 13th century.

**FIGURE 11**  
Joseph’s dreams. Haggadah (The Golden Haggadah). Spain, Barcelona, ca. 1320. London, British Library, MS Add. 27210, fol. 5rb.



**FIGURE 12**  
Moses receiving, then transmitting the tablets of the Covenant to the Israelites at Sinai. Pentateuch (The Regensburg Pentateuch). Germany, 1300. Jerusalem, the Israel Museum, MS 180/52, fol. 154v.



**FIGURE 13**  
Moses receiving the tablets of the Covenant. Mahzor (The Rothschild Mahzor). Italy, Florence, 1490. New York, Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 8892, fol. 139a.

are noted in Jenna Siman Jacobs's fine and useful bibliography (chapter 13). Here, we will engage less in a survey of individual manuscripts than in a survey of iconography, East and West. We'll look at the way the flow of the narrative is conveyed over sequences of illuminations in various manuscripts, and at the ways in which themes are transmitted, comparing and contrasting East and West and the Jewish and non-Jewish use of motifs throughout various time periods.

The Jewish tradition is often concerned with transmission and interpretation. From the moment of the revelation at Sinai, as the book of Exodus describes it, to the present age, the traditions of the Jews have been inexorably bound up with books. And the variety of ways of interpreting those books, as with the traditions themselves, is myriad. Witness how even the imagining of the giving of the Torah at Sinai can shift as it is depicted in thirteenth-century Regensburg (figure 12) or in Renaissance Italy (figure 13)! How do the aesthetic and the setting differ in each case? What action is occurring in each view of what at first appears to be the same scene? What moment is depicted here? What is Moses's role? What is the people's place? What does it mean to be camped "below the mountain" in each case?

Still, in spite of the multiple possibilities for interpretation of texts and for going beyond texts—which spill over into a gorgeous diversity of depiction—there was no point in Jewish history (even when Jews had to share a single book among seven or eight pupils,

and thus learn to read Hebrew from all sorts of interesting angles) in which books were completely absent. A child learning Parashat Shelakh Lekha for Bar or Bat Mizvah in modern-day Indianapolis uses very much the same tools as a boy might have in Old Cairo in the Middle Ages (figure 14), although teachers today may tend to spare the rod more than they apparently did in bygone days (figure 15). Even the form of a single work—let's say the *Megillah*, the scroll of Esther—may vary (again a testimony to the degree to which the text was loved), from exquisite Gothic codices (figure 16), to beautifully written and encased scrolls (figure 17), to miniature volumes bound in silver (figure 18). The aesthetic may range from Baroque grandeur (figure 19) to charming folksiness (figure 20). But the goal is always the same—to encourage engagement and to incite interpretation.



ABOVE **FIGURE 14**  
Shelakh Lekha. “Send forth for yourself.” Numbers 3:1–15:41. Parasha (Torah Portion) manuscript. Probably Persia, 1106. Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, MS Heb. 8° 2238, fols. 3v–4r.



LEFT **FIGURE 15**  
Teacher chastising a pupil. Pentateuch with the Five Scrolls, prophetic readings, and grammatical treatises. Central Germany, possibly Coburg, 1390–96. London, British Library, MS Add. 19776, fol. 72v.

OPPOSITE **FIGURE 16**  
Queen Esther and Ahashverosh/ The hanging of Haman and his sons/The triumph of Mordechai. Pentateuch (The Regensburg Pentateuch). Germany, 1300. Jerusalem, the Israel Museum, MS 180/52, fol. 157v.





**FIGURE 17**  
Megillah cases. From left: Ioannina, Greece, ca. 1900; Aleppo, Syria, ca. 1875; Izmir, Turkey, 1873; Ukraine, ca. 1850; Turkey, ca. 1875. Tel Aviv, Gross Family Collection, 080.001.043, 080.001.007, 080.021.001, 080.001.034, 080.001.020.



**FIGURE 18**  
Accordion-folded scroll of Esther in silver book binding. Italy, 18th–19th century. Jerusalem, the Israel Museum, Stieglitz Collection.



TOP FIGURE 19  
Scroll of Esther in Baroque style.  
Probably Germany, ca. 1700. Tel  
Aviv, Gross Family Collection,  
081.012.037.

BOTTOM FIGURE 20  
Miniature scroll of Esther in a folksy  
Baroque style. Probably Germany,  
ca. 1700. Tel Aviv, Gross Family  
Collection, 081.012.038.

Witness the lovely opening folio from a fourteenth-century German manuscript of Rabbenu Asher's Talmudic commentary (figure 21). Below the charmingly decorated initial word panel (the left-most arm of the shin contains an enigmatic hooded fool's face—the great-grandfather, perhaps, of Maurice Sendak's Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*, replete with wolf-suit), a scholarly figure sits on a plump, tasseled pillow in a grand chair—a *cathedra*—backed by a velvet cloth sprinkled with stars. A book is open before him, as he studies Torah. At the top of the panel, there is another illumination equal in size and prominence, depicting a squirrel, seated on an identical tasseled pillow, and cracking a nut! The juxtaposition seems a bit—well, “nutty”—until you realize that one of the dominant medieval metaphors for Torah itself was the nut: hard to crack, but rewardingly nutritious on the inside, the very food of life. The squirrel invites us to do what the scholar has done—to open the book and enter the text and mine it for the riches it contains. Dear reader, after nearly 700 years, that invitation still stands. Join us . . .

OPPOSITE **FIGURE 21**

A man studies Torah below an image of a squirrel cracking a nut, which serves as a metaphor for getting beyond the shell of learning and extracting the sweet meat of the interior of the text. Asher ben Yehiel, Commentary on the Talmud. Germany, 14th century. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS hébr. 418, fol. 198.

