

The Haggadah

BY DR. DAVID GEFFEN

Next to the Bible, more copies of the Haggadah are produced than of any other Jewish book. Printed or handwritten in practically every language spoken by Jews, it has become a unique volume in world literature.

The basic text of the Haggadah, as we know it today, was formulated by Rabban Gamliel in the second century CE. The first complete text is found in the 10th century siddur (prayer-book) of Sa'adia Gaon. As its recitation became an integral part of the Seder in the home, it was felt that it should be separated from the siddur, and became a book on its own.

Translations and Illustrations:

To be used properly, it was essential that the Haggadah be not only read but understood. Translations of the Hebrew text into the various languages of the Diaspora began to appear very early, so that Jews in every country could follow whoever was conducting a Seder ritual. But it was several hundred years before illustrations were added, not only as an art form, but also to engage the interest of the old and the young around the table.

The transformation of the Haggadah into an illustrated and illuminated manuscript was possible because it was not bound by any religious restrictions. The beginning of Haggadah illustrations can be dated back to the beginning of the 14th century and resulted in the creation of a new form of Jewish pictorial art.

There are two types of medieval illustrated Haggadah manuscripts - the Sephardi or Spanish version and its Ashkenazi or Franco-German counterpart. Those coming from Italy display some of the characteristics of both schools.

Earliest Examples:

The earliest surviving illuminated Ashkenazi Haggadah is the Birds' Head Haggadah in the Israel Museum. Produced around 1300, it substitutes birds' heads for the human face, thus circumventing the prohibition of the second commandment. All the figures wear the famous medieval "Jews hat," so even those who could not read could not mistake their identity.

The second great revolution in the production of the Haggadah came with the invention of printing in the middle of the 15th century. What

is believed to be the first printed Haggadah was produced in the Spanish city of Guadalajara in 1482. This is a rather modest Haggadah containing no illustrations of decorative initial letters.

More than 3000 different versions of the Haggadah have been produced in various parts of the world over the centuries. One of the most interesting is the 17th - 18th century Chinese manuscript of the Jewish community of Kai - Fend - Fu. The text includes instructions in Parsee written in Hebrew characters, which indicates that the Jews of China derived their religious teachings from Persia. Written with a reed pen on rice paper, the letters have a somewhat Chinese look.

A Haggadah was produced for the Indian Bene Israel community in Bombay in 1846. It is in the local language Mahriti, with the Hebrew text alongside. A second edition printed in Poona 28 years later has illustrations showing women in typical Indian dress baking matza in specified shapes for the three matzot used in the Seder.

Treasures:

During World War II even the Nazis showed respect for one of the greatest medieval gems of Jewish art, the Darmstadt Haggadah produced in the 15th century in southern Germany. They kept it hidden in the Offenbach Leather Museum so that it did not share the fate of thousands of other Hebrew books and manuscripts, which were burned or destroyed.

Another precious treasure, the Sara jevo Haggadah, one of the best known Sephardi Haggadah manuscripts of the 14th century, was saved for posterity by the initiative of a local school principal. A German officer was sent to Sara jevo to pick up the Haggadah from the school, in which it was housed. The principal had a quick copy made and hid the original in a nearby cave, where it lay until the end of the war, when it was placed in the Bosnian National Museum.

Developing the Haggadah Concept:

Because the Haggadah stresses the idea of freedom and the liberation from bondage, many different groups have utilized its format and that of the Seder service itself as a means for transmitting their own ideas. Best known in this category are the Haggadot produced by the Kibbutzim. There, an effort was made to formulate a Haggadah which would express the striving and yearnings of the Halutzim. Hundreds of these Haggadot have appeared, and through them one can better understand the history and outlook of the various kibbutz movements.


In the United States in recent years, the struggle for equal rights by all oppressed groups like blacks reflected itself in a Freedom Haggadah produced by Arthur Waskow. Originally it appeared in the magazine 'Ramparts' and was later produced as a separate text, founded on concepts of peace, freedom and equality. A very meaningful Haggadah reflecting the struggle of Soviet Jewry was produced in the 1970's by Mark Podwal, with the Russian commissars in place of the officials of Pharaoh's Egypt. Moreover, Jewish feminists have produced a Haggadah of their own in the USA.

The Haggadah then, is a book which permits each individual Jew to add his own interpretation to it. It is never really complete because its theme - oppression and tyranny - still exists. When persecution forever ceases, when every trace of bondage disappears, when right rules over might, then perhaps the ideas of the Haggadah will reach fruition. That really is what the Haggadah, perhaps our greatest Jewish book, is all about.

TEL AVIV (WNS) -- The 1983 Wolf Foundation Prize in the arts (music) -- the first time a music prize has been awarded -- will be shared among musicians from Israel, the United States and France, the Foundation announced. The three who will split the \$100,000 award are Yosef Tal, 82, of Israel, who is composer-pianist and pedagogue, Vladimir Horowitz, 79, of New York, a world renowned pianist, and 75 year - old composer and music professor Olivier Messiaen.

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