DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Judaica Art of Shully Ratson

Illuminated Hebrew manuscripts in the work of a contemporary artist

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A Illustrating Hebrew Manuscripts – A Historical and Artistic Introduction

Ms. Shully Ratson's initiative to create artistic manuscripts in the field of Judaica is important and most welcome. The manuscripts she has created in recent years already present a substantial body of new work, united by a search for new paths in Jewish art that draws on the traditions of the past and on a range of artistic styles, which enrich her work and give pleasure to those who use her manuscripts. In this, Ms. Ratson continues a Jewish tradition that is hundreds of years old. Indeed, the decoration of sacred books is a distinctive field of visual creativity in Jewish culture throughout the generations. Already among the documents of the famous Cairo Genizah, fragments were found of splendid biblical manuscripts produced in the Land of Israel and in Egypt in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. These luxurious manuscripts were written on parchment by highly skilled scribes and tastefully illuminated by the finest artists of their day. The illustrations reveal a connection to Islamic art, which prevailed at the time in the lands of the East, where the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people then lived.

In medieval Europe, Jewish patrons from large and prosperous communities attached great importance to commissioning lavish copies of the entire Bible, Passover Haggadot, festival prayer books (mahzorim) and personal prayer books, and even halakhic works (such as Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* or the *Arba'ah Turim* of Rabbi Jacob ben Asher). These were copied especially for them and handed to Jewish (but also Christian) artists for illustration and visual enrichment. Rabbis and communal leaders encouraged such undertakings, and some of them (depending on the community) even recommended decorating these manuscripts with splendid miniatures. Thus wrote the Spanish sage Isaac ben Moses ha-Levi, known as Profiat Duran, of Catalonia (1350–1415), in his book *Ma'aseh Efod*:

> "שיהיה העיון תמיד בספרים היפים והנאים, מנוי ויופי הכתיבה והקלפים, ומהודרים בזיוניהם ובכסוייהם, ושיהיו מקומות העיון, רצוני בתי המדרש, יפי הבנין ונאים, לפי שזה עם שיוסיף באהבת העיון והחפץ בו הנה הוא ממה שיטיב הזכרון גם כן. לפי שההבטה והעיון בצורות הנאות והפתוחים והציורים היפים ממה שיזרז הנפש, ויזרז אותה, ויחזק כוחותיה".

> *"Study should always be in beautiful and pleasing books, fine in the elegance of their script and parchment and splendid in their ornaments and bindings; and the places of study, that is, the houses of study, should be beautiful and pleasing in their building. For besides increasing the love of study and the desire for it, this also improves the memory, since gazing at and*

> *contemplating beautiful forms, fine engravings and lovely pictures quickens the soul, rouses it and strengthens its powers."*

The Hebrew manuscripts decorated with miniatures in Europe were created mainly between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, and their centers were the communities of Germany, France, Spain, Portugal and Italy. It should be noted that these manuscripts hold a prestigious and special place in the history of the book in general, and they are kept as treasures of the first rank in the most important libraries of Europe – such as the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, the British Library in London and the Vatican Library in Rome.

After Gutenberg's invention of printing, something occurred among European Jewry that ran counter to what became the norm in society at large: in Jewish society, the production of manuscripts, both ordinary and artistic, did not cease in the centuries after the fifteenth. The invention of printing could not affect the production of Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot, which are made to this day in almost the same way as in earlier centuries. Moreover, beyond the writing of these ritual texts (known as STaM), scribes continued to write texts of various kinds on parchment – whether single sheets, scrolls or bound volumes. This category includes Esther scrolls (by which I do not mean the scroll read aloud by the cantor in public, but personal scrolls, for which there is no general halakhic requirement to be handwritten on parchment), marriage contracts (in Italy, for instance, every ketubbah until modern times was written on parchment, without exception), Passover Haggadot, personal prayer books, small blessing books for women (a genre that flourished mainly in eighteenth-century Germany), Grace after Meals, Sabbath liturgies (*Tikkunei Shabbat*), *Perek Shirah*, circumcision books, amulets, mizrah plaques, booklets and tablets for counting the Omer, *Yihus Avot* (guides to the holy sites), and sometimes also the Five Scrolls, Haftarah books and various certificates (for example, of ordination as a rabbi, circumciser, ritual slaughterer or physician), together with many other manuscripts for a variety of purposes.

Another great revival of the art of the Hebrew book – in both manuscript and print – took place in the twentieth century. Jewish artists in various European countries, the United States and the Land of Israel created new books in the spirit of modern art movements, alongside more conservative decoration. Examples of early modernist Haggadot are that of the German-Jewish artist Otto Geismar, printed in Berlin in 1928, and that of the woodcut artist Jakob Steinhardt (Berlin, 1923), whose images reflect the somber style of German Expressionism. Other important figures are Joseph Budko, known for the personal graphic style he developed (Germany and the Land of Israel); Arthur Szyk (Poland and the United States), who created illustrations in the style of medieval miniatures; and Saul Raskin and Siegmund Forst in the United States, who also gave expression to the Holocaust in

traditional manuscripts. Even the important American-Jewish artist Ben Shahn was drawn to create a Haggadah in his personal, contemplative style in 1958.

In the Land of Israel, too, local artists were drawn to producing traditional Hebrew books, enriched with art that expressed their own time. Some emphasized messages connected with the national revival in the Land of Israel – for example, the Haggadot of Nahum Gutman (Tel Aviv, 1930) and of Arieh Allweil (Tel Aviv, 1950), who also created the first illustrated Haggadah for soldiers of the IDF. Alongside them stand quintessential "Bezalel" artists such as Ze'ev Raban, who illustrated the Song of Songs and the Book of Ruth, and Shmuel Ben David, who illustrated an Esther scroll and painted ketubbot emphasizing the landscapes of the Land and the pioneering spirit of the time. In the last generation there has been a further revival among artists who have drawn public attention to the achievements of Hebrew manuscripts of earlier centuries – for example, the handwritten Haggadah (also published in print) of the American-Israeli artist David Moss (1983), the Haggadah of Yaacov Agam, one of the founders of kinetic art (1993), that of the Moroccan-born folk artist Raphael Abecassis (2002), whose work is characterized by vivid color and Eastern decorative motifs, and the Haggadah of the Jerusalem artist Avner Moriah (2003), who often draws on motifs from the art of the ancient Near East. Other traditional texts have also received artistic attention in recent years – though less than the Passover Haggadah – among them Pirkei Avot, Esther scrolls (or the Five Scrolls), Psalms, books of blessings, Kiddush books and more.

B The Illuminated Manuscripts of Shully Ratson

Alongside the activity of the artists mentioned in the previous section, a revival of traditional Hebrew manuscript illustration has also begun over roughly the last two decades among artists from the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) community. An interesting aspect of this new creativity is that most of its practitioners are, in fact, Haredi women. A few Jewish women are known to have illustrated Hebrew manuscripts in the past – but these are exceptional and rare cases. Moreover, each of them is known for a single example that she created and that has survived to our day. One such is Stellina bat Menahem, who illustrated an Esther scroll in Venice in 1564 (one of the earliest Esther scrolls known to us – the decoration of the scroll was born among Italian Jewry during the Renaissance, under the

influence of the rising place of Esther and her story in Italian Renaissance culture). Another rare example is a magnificent Passover Haggadah with figurative images in a classical Italian style, created in Frankfurt in 1842. Its illustrator (the text was written by a scribe of the same period) was Charlotte von Rothschild, of the famous Rothschild family, whose own art collection served as a source of inspiration for the Haggadah's paintings (it is now in a private collection in Zurich).

To this tradition the Haredi artist Shully Ratson now adds her name. **Ms. Ratson is undoubtedly one of the women who hold an increasingly central place** in this group of Haredi women artists who create illuminated Hebrew manuscripts with great splendor and deep attention to every detail, usually in close collaboration with a scribe who first writes the required text, which they then illustrate with the best of their talents. These are women with families, often with many children, who despite their many occupations and demanding family obligations feel a strong urge and an inner pull to create splendid manuscripts that captivate contemporary viewers and enrich their Jewish world. In the opinion of the present writer, the day is not far off when it will be possible to speak of this activity as a new artistic school, with its own independent standing in the history of Jewish art in general and of Hebrew manuscript illumination in particular.

Ms. Ratson studied and specialized in graphic design, and even worked as a professional graphic designer. Over time, however, she felt that the field did not offer enough scope for personal and independent artistic expression, or for other creative directions that interested her. Gradually she was exposed to other fields of visual art and studied academic painting and drawing with expert teachers. Refining her skills in these areas led her to seek a means of personal expression, chiefly in the field of Judaica. The answer was eventually found in the illustration of Hebrew manuscripts, where the artist could draw on her earlier expertise and channel it into a suitable outlet for her abilities, while entering the inner world of Judaism and the spiritual enrichment and enjoyment that accompany this activity. At the same time, the new field naturally demanded further expertise and mastery of the techniques of manuscript illumination, such as painting on parchment, gilding and ornamentation on surfaces of varying and unusual sizes (as in the case of Esther scrolls), as well as deeper study of Jewish texts, their meanings and their messages, and the effort to reach the narrative layers of each story and to imagine how best to render it visually for the contemporary viewer.

In the following pages we will briefly discuss the main manuscripts Ms. Ratson has created to date. The texts were written by a scribe using the finest materials, and were then illustrated by the artist.

1

Esther Scroll with Narrative Scenes

2017



Esther Scroll with Narrative Scenes

Parchment, scribal script, gilding and miniatures · 2017

This scroll is characterized by long text columns of 28 lines each, written in the traditional scribal script (that is, the letters are adorned with crownlets, or tagin – three, one or none – according to the scribal tradition for writing Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot). It belongs to the type known as a "Ha-Melekh" scroll – that is, every possible column (from the second onward) opens with the word *ha-melekh*, "the king," which in the Book of Esther refers to the Persian king Ahasuerus but in Jewish tradition is considered an allusion to God, whose name is not mentioned explicitly in the scroll yet who is present in it and stands at the head of every column to direct and watch over events. Meeting this requirement demands great skill and careful planning from the scribe, and sometimes the stretching of letters, to achieve the desired result.

Ms. Ratson's illustrations in this scroll fall into three types. First and foremost are the small pictures at the foot of the text columns, as in Italian scrolls of the Baroque period (mainly the eighteenth century). Each picture is set within a fixed octagonal frame and contains a colorful scene from the Book of Esther as it appears in the text above. The scenes are figurative and depict the events in a realistic style, in the order in which they occur. The influence is mainly that of Baroque biblical art, but the

figures have an appearance drawn from the world of the East (although Baroque artists such as Rembrandt also incorporated Oriental elements in their paintings). At the head of the scroll is a picture that occupies the entire column – Mordecai in royal garb riding a horse, with the gate of the city of Shushan and its towers in the background, depicted in a Persian Islamic style.

The second and third types of decoration are mainly ornamental. At the top of each column is a lunette containing the figure of a bird, a different bird in each column. The birds lend themselves to various interpretations – for example, as an expression of the freedom and liberty for which the Jews of Shushan and of King Ahasuerus' provinces longed, and which they finally attained thanks to Mordecai and Esther. The third type is an ensemble of gold ornaments framing each column. These ornaments are exceptionally delicate – like fine latticework or delicate filigree.

2

Esther Scroll with the Heroes of the Story

2019



Esther Scroll with the Heroes of the Story

Six parchment membranes, acrylic · 2019

This scroll is made of six parchment membranes, 47 cm high. The ten chapters of the Book of Esther were written by an expert scribe who carefully added all the crownlets to the required letters according to the rules. Like its predecessor, this scroll is also of the "Ha-Melekh" type (see above). Each text column has 21 lines – except, of course, the column with the list of Haman's sons, which has 11 lines, as halakhah requires.

Shully Ratson's illustration of the scroll was painted by hand in acrylics, in a design that combines several styles, prominent among them Art Nouveau, together with decorative elements from Islamic and Eastern art. **The compositions and the choice of subjects reveal an artistic conception completely different from that of the previous scroll – and, in truth, from the scrolls of other artists past and present.** There are none of the small narrative scenes at the top or bottom of each column that are customary in Italian or Dutch scrolls. Nor is there the purely ornamental approach that dominates the illustration of scrolls from Islamic lands such as Morocco, Iraq or India, with their geometric, floral or architectural ornament – but no human figures. Instead of these traditional modes of decoration, we find here the heroes of the story "larger than life." The text columns occupy only about a third of the height of the membrane, while the heroes rise to its full height – above, beside and below the text column. The columns are thus "dominated" on both sides by large figures painted in strong colors, in which shades of green and red prevail and immediately catch the eye.

The figures rising on both sides of the text column "conduct" a dialogue with one another. In the last column, for example, Esther stands on the right, wearing a meticulously decorated royal garment and an elaborate headdress reminiscent of the *gargush*, the distinctive headdress of the Jewish bride in Yemen. She holds a large quill and gestures with it toward the towering figure of Mordecai standing opposite her on the left, he too in royal garments in shades of red and green; with the help of a young boy they hold a large red scroll decorated with symbolic gold flowers. The scroll is spread out to its full length so that the words of Esther's mission may be written on it, as the verse says: "Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority, to confirm this second letter of Purim" (Esther 9:29).

To further enrich the scene and to express the continuity of the story and its meaning in modern times, another child stands at the hem of Mordecai's robe, turned outward toward the end of the scroll, alluding to the continuity of tradition in generations to come. He holds a gragger, or noise-maker – a relatively recent Purim symbol (typical of Ashkenazi communities in earlier generations) – used to blot out the memory of Haman. The same is done in other columns, where here and there the spaces left between the main figures are filled by smaller figures, who also converse with the heroes of the story. **This is undoubtedly an innovative scroll that presents a fresh and original conception of illustrating the heroes of the Book of Esther.**

3 # Illuminated Pirkei Avot 2018



Illuminated Pirkei Avot — 39 parchment leaves, oil, tempera, 23-karat gilding, papercut · 2018

"Pirkei Avot" (Ethics of the Fathers), the ninth tractate of the order Nezikin in the Mishnah, is among the most beloved and widely read books of the Jewish people. This is no doubt partly because, unlike the other tractates of the Mishnah, it deals with matters that concern the life of every individual – ethics, good character and proper conduct. It has therefore been copied many times over the generations, both in manuscript and in print. Many commentaries have also been written on it by the greatest Jewish exegetes from the Middle Ages onward (of particular importance is the commentary of Maimonides, which appeared as a separate work under the title "Eight Chapters"). The Mishnah was even translated into the Jewish languages spoken in various places, such as Judeo-Arabic, Yiddish and Ladino. (Following the custom of reading Pirkei Avot in the synagogue every Sabbath after the afternoon prayer, Ladino-speaking Sephardic Jews developed the custom that well-known and beloved cantors would chant that Sabbath's chapter in a particular maqam, followed by its Ladino translation.) Its great popularity in Israel today is attested by Prof. Avigdor Shinan's edition, *Pirkei Avot: A New Israeli Commentary* (Avi Chai Foundation and Yedioth Books), which since its first publication in 2009 has appeared in several editions and set sales records.

Continuing this splendid tradition, **it is refreshing to see a new artistic edition of "Pirkei Avot," prepared with fine taste by a contemporary artist who invested her best energy and skill in this work.** It is a book of 39 parchment leaves, as in medieval manuscripts, bound in an artistic leather binding

with decorative tooling. The leaves are in fact doubled – that is, they were written on only one side of the sheet, which is always backed by another sheet (making 68 parchment leaves in all). Each page of text and decoration thus receives its proper due, with no show-through from the page before. (This was also done in splendid medieval manuscripts such as the famous Sarajevo Haggadah, and in the twentieth century, in a similar way, in the important Haggadah of the Jewish artist Arthur Szyk.) The text of the Mishnah appears in passages set apart from one another, which can be read immediately and clearly as independent units, and the vocalization of the words, which not every edition provides, no doubt helps in this.

Every page of Shully Ratson's "Pirkei Avot" is designed individually and differs from the one before and the one after it. There is great emphasis on ornament, alongside narrative scenes in a realistic style influenced by nineteenth-century Neoclassical painting. The illustrations are painted in oils, together with a mixture of tempera and gilding in 23-karat gold. The various sayings of the Sages quoted in the book are separated by decorative gold bands. Each passage opens with an elaborate gilded initial set on an ornamental ground. Frame decorations in the form of horizontal bands with plant patterns and other ornaments border the pages. To these are added figurative miniatures on varied subjects – sages in Oriental dress seated around a table discussing some question, schoolchildren with curled sidelocks studying Torah, and so on. Other pages bear illustrations of animals and birds. Among them, for example, is a deer that perhaps alludes to the saying: "Judah ben Tema said: Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer and strong as a lion, to do the will of your Father in heaven" (5:20).

Each chapter opens with a richly decorated page bearing the chapter number in a gilded letter at its center. The ornament is surrounded by a frame of delicate papercut with a plant motif. One page, made entirely of harmonious and symmetrical papercut work, is based on a system of concentric circles within a square frame. On the closing page opposite, against a background of burnished gold leaf, a bird soars out of the abstract, heavenly background around it toward the unknown. All in all, this is a book that is a pleasure to leaf through, in which a beloved and familiar text is accompanied by paintings and decorations that make reading it a delight.

4

Song of Songs Scroll – Rainbow Colors

2018



Song of Songs Scroll – Rainbow Colors

Three parchment membranes, acrylic, tempera, 23-karat gilding · 2018

In the Jewish culture of the past it was not customary to illustrate the Song of Songs as a separate book or scroll. At most, illustrations of the Song of Songs are found in medieval Bible manuscripts (for example, from Germany and Spain), and above all in manuscripts of festival prayer books (mahzorim) from Ashkenaz and Italy. In these mahzorim, medieval artists created allegorical images that are of great interest and unusual in the history of Jewish art – whether as direct illustrations of the words of the biblical text or for liturgical poems (piyyutim) inspired by the imagery of the Song of Songs (for example, the piyyut "Itti mi-Levanon Kallah"). In the Baroque period, verses from the Song of Songs were sometimes incorporated into ketubbot, and among Italian Jews it was customary to write the entire Song of Songs in micrography on the parchment of the ketubbah. Only in modern times (the twentieth century) were artists drawn to illustrate the Song of Songs as a separate book, with illustrations expressing the spirit of their age. Prominent among them is the "Bezalel" artist Ze'ev Raban, who in 1923 published an illustrated edition of the book, combining the Oriental style in which he specialized with landscapes of the Land of Israel.

Despite this modern revival, few artists illustrate the Song of Songs, and fewer still in the form of a scroll. **Shully Ratson is therefore to be congratulated on creating a new artistic scroll in this field.** The scroll, which has come to be called the "Song of Songs Scroll – Rainbow Colors," consists of three parchment membranes 40 cm high. The eight chapters of the biblical text were written by an expert scribe, and the calligraphic letters are adorned with one crownlet (on the letters *bet, dalet, kof, het, yod, heh*) or three (on *shin, ayin, tet, nun, zayin, gimel, tsadi*), as the scribal craft requires. The illustration was executed by the artist in acrylics combined with tempera and burnished 23-karat gold leaf. Each column of the scroll is set within an ornamental frame based on plant motifs – winding tendrils delicately interlaced in all the colors of the rainbow. **These rich frames are painted with precision and great talent, attesting to high skill and command of line, color, ornament and interlace.** In addition to the ornament, the artist added two illustrations, or miniatures – one at the beginning of the scroll and the other at its end. These are naturalistic landscapes, without human figures, connected with Jerusalem: at the beginning, a garden of trees beside an ancient wall and a tower recalling the Tower of David; at the end, the hills of Jerusalem painted romantically in earth tones, with olive trees growing on them. The landscapes of Jerusalem provide a romantic atmosphere fitting for the song of King Solomon and for the oath of love sworn by the daughter of his city: "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I am sick of love" (Song of Songs 5:8).

5

Song of Songs Scroll – The Lace Scroll

2015



Song of Songs Scroll – The Lace Scroll

Three parchment membranes, tempera, cut parchment · 2015

[For background on the Song of Songs in Jewish art, see the previous section.]

Before us is a new Song of Songs scroll by Ms. Shully Ratson. Like the Song of Songs scroll discussed above, it consists of three fine parchment membranes, with a total height of 38 cm. It was written by an expert scribe who took care to adorn the appropriate letters with crownlets, as in Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot. The text columns are 21 lines each and are surrounded by exceptionally wide margins. These margins, planned in advance, served the artist as the decorative ground that frames the text columns and gives them life and splendor.

The decorative ground is worked by hand in tempera and delicate lacework. The area around the text columns was first painted with soft Impressionist landscapes in light, delicate hues, flowing gently along the full length of the three membranes. Over this first layer, the artist used the parchment itself as an ornamental element in its own right: the parchment was cut like delicate lace into captivating plant and ornamental patterns that run the entire length of the text columns. **The work in these parts, which demanded great care in planning and execution, is astonishing in its precision, its perfect symmetry and the rhythmic repetition of its motifs, carried out with a meticulousness that inspires wonder.** The patterns formed in the light parchment against the colorful painted landscapes create a powerful impression, and the viewer feels as though gazing at the landscapes of Creation through delicate lace or latticework – something near, yet at the same time beyond place and time, and out of reach. **Studying and reading this special scroll will undoubtedly give its owner a genuine experience.**

In conclusion, the body of Ms. Shully Ratson's work in the illustration of Hebrew manuscripts presents the viewer with a mature artist, deeply aware of the values that accompany her work.

After many years of study and professional training in various techniques, and of mastering several artistic styles that helped her shape the distinctive artistic expression she chose for herself, Ms. Ratson turned to the illustration of Hebrew manuscripts. This field undoubtedly suits her abilities, and at the same time opens a path for the expression of important values, in the world of Jewish art in general and in her own creative world in particular. Close engagement with the texts and their messages inspires decorative ornament alongside narrative scenes that illustrate the story and "translate" the words into eye-catching sights and landscapes. The use of different styles points to an eclecticism that draws on motifs and patterns both from Western European art of various periods and from Islamic art, with the complex ornamentation characteristic of visual expression in that culture. At the same time, this eclecticism serves the message and aesthetic values of the manuscript chosen for illustration, and the result ultimately stands on its own as an independent work of art.

The result is that each manuscript is, in itself, a delightful Judaica object, pleasing to the eye and offering its owner an aesthetic and spiritual experience.

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