

# JEWISH ART

## The art of bookmaking

*Modern technology has made it possible to own an exact copy of a medieval Hebrew masterpiece by a mysterious scribe*

BY LEORA EREN FRUCHT

Picture King David in a crimson robe, seated on his throne, playing the lyre. Visualize Aharon pouring oil into the menorah. These famous scenes from the Bible are among dozens of richly colored, gold-embossed illustrations completed under the guidance of a scribe named Benjamin, who worked near Troyes – the French town where Rashi taught – in the Middle Ages.

The scribe, about whom little is known, collaborated with local artists to illustrate – and possibly commission – what is considered one of the most exquisite and comprehensive Hebrew manuscripts of Medieval Europe, known as the North French Hebrew Miscellany.

More a library than a single document, the 1,494-page manuscript was composed around the year 1280 and includes the Pentateuch and Haftot (passages from the Prophets), Song of Songs, and several other biblical texts; the daily, Sabbath and festival prayers; *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers); the Passover Haggada; prayers associated with mar-

riage and birth; assorted legal codes for agreements concerning marriage, divorce, and business partnerships; a mathematical riddle; laws governing ritual slaughter; and a wide range of medieval poetry – in all, 84 subjects. To date, the treasure has been kept in the British Library, where only a handful of scholars have been granted permission to examine it because of its fragility.

This month, the public will get a peek at the trove, when the first copy

of the manuscript, produced by Facsimile Editions of London, is displayed at the Jerusalem Book Fair, June 23–27.

"This is one of the finest, most beautiful Hebrew manuscripts I have ever seen," says Prof. Malachi Beit-Arié, one of the few scholars to have viewed the original at the British Museum.

Beit-Arié, a former director of the National Library in Jerusalem, has studied some 5,000 Hebrew manuscripts written between 900 and 1540 CE. He also wrote part of the commentary accompanying the soon-to-be-published facsimile edition of the North

French Hebrew Miscellany which, like the original, contains full-page gold-embossed illustrations of famous biblical scenes, as well as marginal decorations of arabesques, flowers, animals, and birds adorning every folio.

"In terms of design, production and complexity, this one is a real beauty," says the professor of Codicology and Palaeography at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

It is also a rare document. Most Hebrew manuscripts from this period have perished – in part because of the public burnings of Jewish books in which France's King Louis IX personally participated. There is another less dramat-

ic explanation for the dearth of Hebrew manuscripts.

"While most Latin manuscripts of that time were produced to be kept in

royal collections or cathedrals, the Hebrew manuscripts of the Middle Ages were produced for consumption," notes Beit-Arié. "These books perished over time out of sheer wear and tear." The North French Hebrew Miscellany is a remnant of that period – one which is surrounded by mystery.

"This work is one of the most impressive achievements of any Jewish scribe of the Middle Ages," says Beit-Arié, "and yet we don't know who he was or who his patron was." "Benjamin the Scribe" has signed his name in several places, but Beit-Arié notes that this name does not appear in any other Hebrew manuscript – and he has studied thousands of them. There is also no mention of a patron.

"This," he says, "is a great paradox. It is inconceivable that such a luxurious manuscript would be signed by a scribe without mentioning the patron, who must have been more than well off – unless Benjamin produced it for himself."

Beit-Arié notes that Benjamin must have been an extraordinary man.

"We know he was a scholar. He would have had to have been a learned man in order to compile this unique combination of texts."

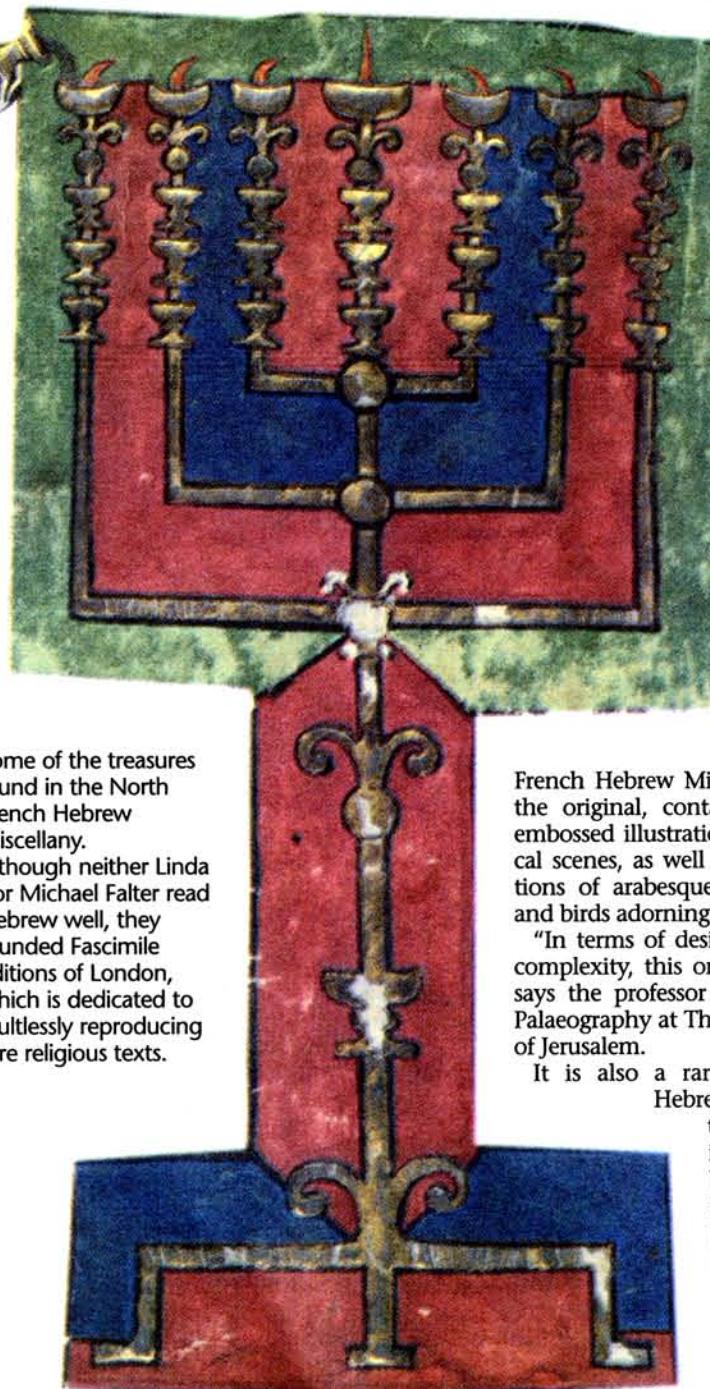
He probably employed top artisans, many of them Christians, to execute the work, particularly the gold illuminations.

The enigmatic Benjamin also composed a poem about a Jewish French martyr, Samson, who was murdered in 1275. That poem is one of many in the manuscript, notes Beit-Arié.

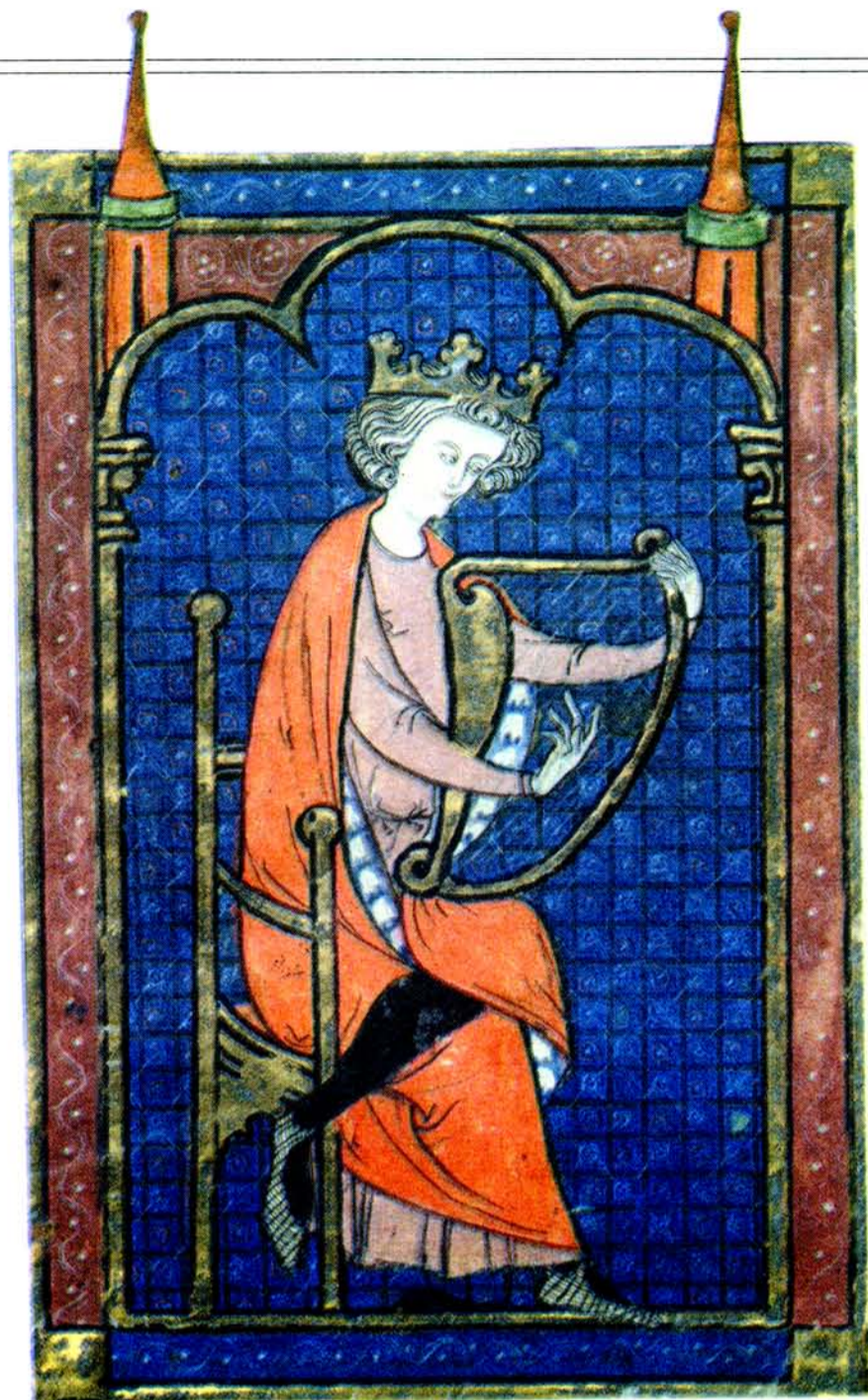
"So he was a scribe, a scholar, a poet, and possibly a wealthy man. Yet he remains an obscure figure in Jewish history."

While little is known about the master behind the manuscript, much more is known about the fate of the document. The original manuscript found its way into the British Library after a circuitous route. According to the publishers: "A deed of sale written in a German rabbinic hand shows that it was sold in 1431 by Samuel b. Hayyim to Abraham b. Moses of Coburg. The manuscript probably left France when its owners were banished during the wave of persecution in 1306. By 1479 it had reached Mestre in Italy, and a little later it was in Venice..."

"By the end of the fifteenth century it had made its way to north-eastern Italy and was



Some of the treasures found in the North French Hebrew Miscellany. Although neither Linda nor Michael Falter read Hebrew well, they founded Facsimile Editions of London, which is dedicated to faultlessly reproducing rare religious texts.



re-bound in Modena, near Bologna, in the sixteenth century. The magnificent calf binding that still survives bears the arms of the Rovigo family, one of whose most eminent members, Rabbi Abraham b. Michael, a kabbalist writer, may have owned the manuscript. In the seventeenth century it was examined by a censor and later came into the possession of the Barberini family, whose famous golden-bee insignia can still be made out on the binding under a later decorative motif.

"It is unclear where the manuscript spent the intervening years, although Cardinal Richelieu, Louis XIV, Henry IV and Catherine de Medici all collected Hebrew manuscripts... The manuscript finally came into the possession of the Reina Library of Milan, and remained there until it was sold in 1839 by Maison Silvestre in Paris to Payne & Foss, and then on to the British Museum, where it became Additional Manuscript 11639."

The reproduction of the manuscript is the result of years of work by the London-based husband-and-wife team, Michael and Linda Falter. The company has produced precise copies – in limited editions – of 10 outstanding Hebrew manuscripts, among them: the Alba Bible, a 1430 translation of the Hebrew Bible into Castilian; the Kennicott Bible, a 1476 edition from northwestern Spain, considered the treasure of the Bodleian Library; the Rothschild Miscellany, a 948-page body of religious and secular works commissioned at the height of the Renaissance in Italy; *Me'ah Berachot* (One Hundred Blessings), a miniature prayer book handwritten and illuminated in Central Europe during the eighteenth century; and the Parma Psalter, a profusely illuminated book of Psalms written and decorated

around 1280 in Northern Italy.

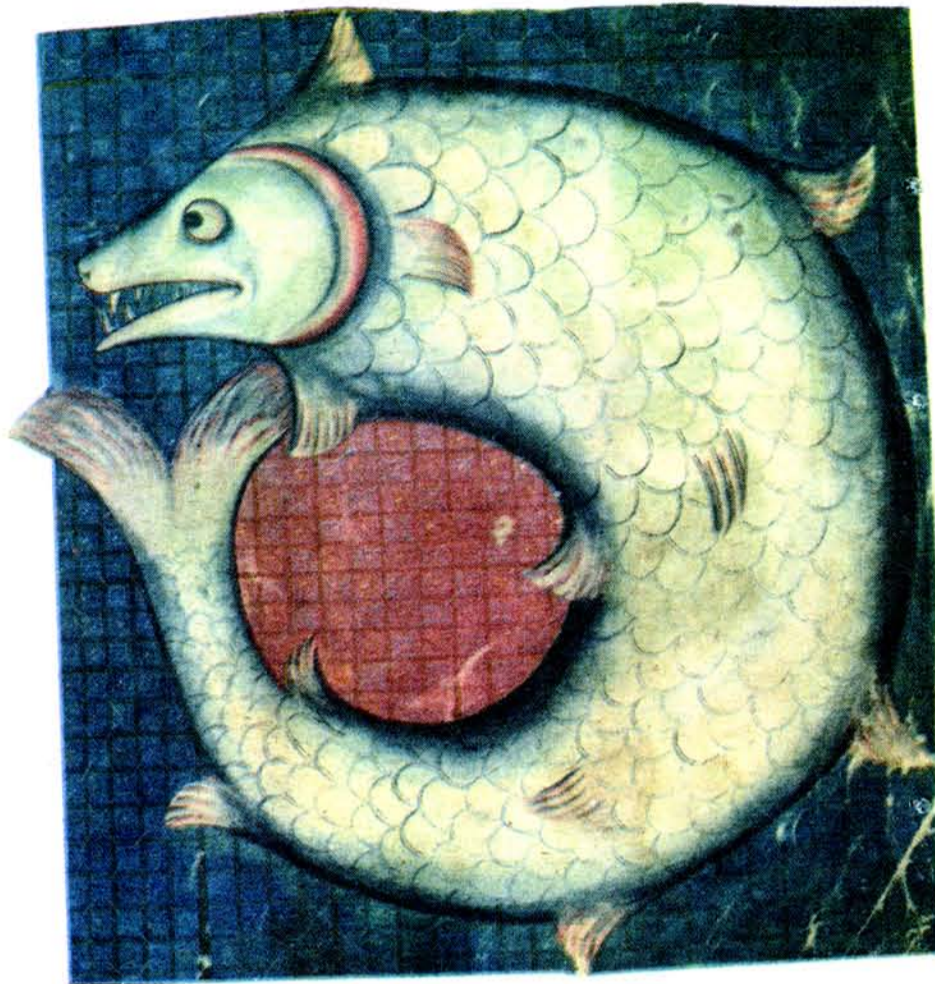
"This team is unquestionably the best in the world when it comes to producing facsimiles of Hebrew manuscripts," says Dr. Binyamin Elizur of the Hebrew Language Academy. Elizur recounts that a senior researcher at the National Library, upon seeing the Rothschild Miscellany on a desk in the library, asked his supervisor how he could obtain the original.

"He couldn't tell it was a copy. Anyone who has a copy of a manuscript produced by this firm has no need to see the original; they are virtually indistinguishable," notes Elizur, who dated the Rothschild manuscript.

Producing such high-quality reproductions of ancient texts is a tedious ordeal. Before work could commence on the North French manuscript, the binding had to be "relaxed" so that the pages could be safely photographed flat without damaging the delicate stitching that holds the leaves together. The British Library's senior conservator spent days removing the glues applied to the spine when the manuscript had been bound centuries ago. To ensure minimum stress to the binding, a special cradle was constructed to support the volume during photography. All this was done under a controlled temperature and humidity setting to protect the manuscript's leaves.

A special paper was milled to emulate as closely as possible the opacity, texture, and thickness of the original vellum. Natural wormholes, stains, and pricking in the original skin are faithfully reproduced in the facsimile, and pages were aged where necessary.

A special process was developed to enable craftsmen in small workshops to apply gold and silver leaf to each page by hand so as to simulate the metallic leaf found in the original.



The long production process – and limited edition of each volume – is reflected in the cost: Each of the 550 copies of the North French Hebrew Miscellany will sell for almost \$9,000. Previous reproductions have ranged from \$650 for the Rothschild Haggada to \$26,000 for the Alba Bible. Who spends that kind of money on a copy of an old Hebrew book?

Libraries, of course. The facsimile editions are found in dozens of institutions, from Sydney to Santiago, Scotland to South Africa, where they can be studied by scholars. Oxford's Bodleian, the British Library, Israel's National Library, and the Israel Museum are regular clientele. The facsimile editions have also become a popular gift among statesmen. An Israeli minister gave US president Bill Clinton a Parma Psalter inscribed with a dedication from Psalms "How pleasant it is for

brothers to dwell in unity." Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was presented with a Kennicott Bible, as was former crown prince Hassan of Jordan.

King Juan Carlos I and Queen Sophia of Spain received a copy of the Alba Bible in 1992 to mark the king's formal retraction of the order expelling the Jews from Spain 500 years earlier. Not all recipients are rich or famous.

Falter says the publications have become popular family gifts. One person wrote in his dedication: "A Gift from beyond the Grave," and left it to his son in his will. Other ordinary people buy them to commemorate special events, or for donation to their synagogue. Most of the clientele are in the US, Israel, and the UK. Says Falter: "People often buy them to keep within the family." ■

## Making it real

Michael and Linda Falter, a Jewish couple from London, are the force behind Facsimile Editions Ltd.

Michael Falter is the third generation of a family which has worked in the printing industry since the late 1800s. During a stroll through the British Museum in the late Seventies, Falter saw two pages of a manuscript on display behind glass, and thought what a pity he couldn't view the whole work. He wondered whether he might be able to use the antique presses given to him by his father to reproduce a Hebrew manuscript. He called a friend, Prof. David Patterson, director of the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, who told him about the Kennicott Bible, and though it was a restricted manuscript, arranged for Michael to see it.

He and Linda Falter launched their partnership – in life and work – during a visit to Oxford's Bodleian Library a few days later.

"On our first date he said to me: 'I'm going to the Bodleian on Thursday. Would you like to come with me?'" recalls Linda.

"I said: 'I'm sorry, I don't drink' – thinking he had said Bodley Inn!"

The two went to the library, fell in love with the Kennicott Bible and "before we knew it, we were on a path of no return," continues Linda. "We soon set across Europe looking for printers, binders, and various experts who would be able to carry out such a complex book. It took us two years to convince the Bodleian that we could complete such a huge undertaking."

"Apparently, Oxford University Press had looked at the project and decided it was too complex."

It took them more than five years to produce their first facsimile, the Kennicott Bible. But upon completion of the work, the Bodleian Library – and other prestigious libraries – lauded their effort.

The couple, who are both Jewish, read Hebrew only haltingly.

"We may do a summer ulpan so that we are more fluent by the next Book Fair," notes Linda.

— L.E.F.



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