

JUDAISM
EDITED BY MEIR PERSOFF

Renaissance of a Hebraica masterpiece

NEXT MONTH sees the publication of the Rothschild Miscellany facsimile, one of the highlights of last week's Jerusalem Book Fair.

The Rothschild Miscellany was commissioned by Moses ben Yekutiel Hacohen, probably around 1470, at the height of the Renaissance in Italy. It was a time when artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo executed their greatest achievements.

It was also a time when the Jews in Italy came into contact with all sectors of society and adopted the way of life of the gentile aristocracy. They enjoyed the favourable attitude of some of the great Italian princes, such as the Medici of Florence and the Este of Ferrara.

The prohibition by the Church for Christians to lend money for interest was highly beneficial to the Jewish community, many of whom prospered. The wealthy Jew became a man of the Renaissance, with a taste for letters and art, and a delight in affluent living.

Nonetheless, the Jews never became estranged from their intellectual and religious heritage. This was a period of unprecedented cultural activity among Italian Jewry, producing scholars, artists, poets and physicians.

The Rothschild Miscellany, as it is now known, is the most elegantly and lavishly executed Hebrew manuscript of that era. From its inception, it was planned as a sumptuous work to encompass, in minute detail, almost every custom of religious and secular Jewish life.

The figure drawings and border decorations of the miniatures mirror the rich Italian Renaissance influence and were probably made in a workshop in northern Italy.

Fanciful landscapes, spatial perspective settings and the precision of human and animal representations echo the style of the best artists who worked for the court of the Este in the third quarter of the fifteenth century.

The history of the Miscellany is something of a mystery. From 1832 to 1855, the manuscript was in the Solomon de Parente collection

in Trieste; it was later sold to the Rothschild family in Paris and remained there until it was stolen during the Nazi occupation and reappeared, after the war, in New York.

Someone tried to sell it to Alexander Marx, librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who realised that it had been stolen from the Rothschilds and returned it to them in London.

James de Rothschild was persuaded by Mordechai Narkiss, director of the Bezalel Museum in Israel, that a manuscript of such importance was a national treasure and therefore belonged in Israel. In 1957, de Rothschild sent it as a gift to the Bezalel (now part of the Israel Museum).

The Rothschild Miscellany consists of more than 70 religious and secular works. All have textual illustrations for each festival, and prayers for special occasions.

The secular books include philosophical, moralistic and scientific treatises. The text throughout is accompanied by marginal notes and rabbinical commentaries.

This large collection of miscellaneous yet connected texts became the framework for an unprecedented programme of illumination. It contains a wealth of material illustrating almost every custom of daily life in a Jewish Renaissance household. Of 948 pages, 816 are decorated in minute detail in vibrant colours, gold and silver.

In 1980, when we embarked on the Kennicott Bible facsimile, few believed that the colossal project could ever come to fruition. Five years later the Bodleian Library was moved to write that it was "perhaps the most faithful and exact copy ever to be produced."

The Rothschild Miscellany proved to be an even greater challenge, for the publisher's philosophy dictates that a facsimile must be as close to the original as humanly possible. Tremendous efforts were made to acquire the finest materials and craftsmen to impart to each volume not only the presence, but also the feel, of an original manuscript.



The Ma Nishtana in the Rothschild Miscellany, whose Hagada illustrations and decorations are among the finest produced

We moved to Italy to supervise every stage of the facsimile's production and, by combining craftsmanship and dogged determination with modern technology, remarkable results have been achieved.

The Rothschild Miscellany was hand-copied and illuminated on foetal vellum, which is soft and translucent. The folios were studied for their thickness, weight and opacity and a new type of "paper," virtually indistinguishable from the manuscript's vellum, was specially milled in Italy.

The result is a fine vegetable parchment, with the same natural characteristics of skin, that makes printing on it very difficult.

The printing of the minutely-detailed illuminations, in up to 12 colours, demanded considerable skill and perseverance of the Italian master-printer. Colour separations were made for each of the 948 pages; every one was individually checked against the manuscript in Jerusalem and then re-proofed in Italy (up to four times for each page) until the colour was exactly right.

However, no printing process can adequately simulate the gold leaf in the manuscript and it was decided that the only way to

reproduce raised burnished gold was to lay the leaf by hand, thereby achieving the richness and "feel" of the original gold. Thus, on 812 pages, gold was "built up" so as faithfully to reproduce burnished gold.

In addition, the manuscript contains thousands of illustrations with powdered gold and flat gold leaf and this, too, has been applied by hand in the facsimile.

The pages of the manuscript contain the minute pricking holes made by the scribe between which he ruled parallel lines to guide him in the writing of the text. Even these pinsize holes have been reproduced.

The edges of the pages of the Miscellany are brown with age and irregular. In the facsimile, each one has been laboriously cut to exactly the same size and shape as the original, then "aged" and finally gilt with 23-carat gold leaf at the very edges.

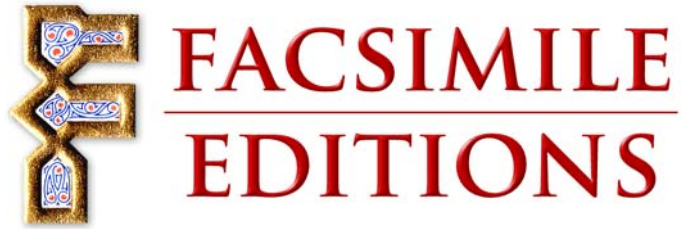
As the original binding of the manuscript no longer exists, Dr Mirjam Foot, binding specialist at the British Library, suggested an exquisite Italian binding of the period, worthy of the manuscript, which our craftsmen have copied in minute detail.

The facsimile is bound in fine-grain, morocco goatskin, blind-tooled with bevelled edges, hand-sewn head and tail bands and silver clasps on leather thongs. The Israel Museum plans to rebind the manuscript in the same binding as the facsimile.

The companion volume, edited by the Israel Museum, was written by five eminent scholars, who have discussed the art, iconography, palaeography, liturgy and history of the manuscript in great detail. This volume is in itself the most comprehensive work ever written about the Rothschild Miscellany and is bound to the same exacting standards as the facsimile.

MICHAEL FALTER

Further details of the Rothschild Miscellany are obtainable from Facsimile Editions, 40 Hamilton Terrace, London, NW8.



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