

Why is this book different from all others?

Meet the people behind the most
opulent haggadah you've ever seen

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It's surely the most exquisitely fashioned haggadah created since medieval times, featuring five types of gold, hand-marbled silver and platinum leaf. **Simon Rocker** meets the team who created it

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HEN THE tech entrepreneur Martin Moshal sits down to the Seder in Sydney, he will be using a new haggadah that he commissioned himself. Designed by a Manchester-raised artist in Jerusalem, it is a work of beauty that can claim a place in the great tradition of illuminated manuscripts that have graced Seder tables since medieval times.

His family will be following the service with some of 180 facsimiles of the original that have been prepared by a London couple who specialise in reproducing Jewish literary treasures. Weighing five-and-a-half kilos, it is a giant of a book that if dropped on a plate of matzah would instantly give you matzah meal.

It took Roni Weiss five years to complete his exquisite creation, which required an array of skills from calligraphy to metalwork involving five types of gold. And Michael and Linda Falter, the husband-and-wife team behind St John's Wood-based Facsimile Editions, needed two years to make the reproductions, expected to cost in the region of £10,000 each.

"Roni's an immaculate technician who is incredibly creative," Michael said. "There's nothing he can't turn his hand to."

Born in Copenhagen, Weiss, who is 36, moved to the UK when he was eight. At 19 he headed off to yeshiva in Israel. He intended to spend two or three years before embarking on "a good Jewish profession"; he got married at 21 and had started studying accountancy when his artistic eyes were opened.

"In yeshiva, I happened to sit next to an American fellow who happened to be a dealer in high-end Judaica," he recalled. "I didn't even know what an illuminated manuscript was at the time. The first thing I saw was an haggadah. I was absolutely blown away by the quality of the work."

His career choice might have been all about numbers but since the age of three, he had always been "dabbling in some form of creativity", he said. "I could never go through a day without being involved in something. I was drawing, designing, I was a professional model-maker."

When he saw the illustrated texts, "I thought it was incredible, this is something I could actually do."

But as for learning the craft, "there is no one to teach it. It's such a niche product that I went and bought parchment. I studied Hebrew calligraphy, I experimented, I made a lot of mess. I pretty quickly got the knack of it, I would say. Obviously illuminated manuscripts are by their nature very labour-intensive and expensive."

By the standards of his new haggadah, his first manuscripts were



'It is a giant of a book that if dropped on a plate of matzah would instantly give you matzah meal'

fairly simple, he said, but "they enabled me to get my teeth into it". When he was introduced to Martin Moshal, who was at the time living in London, the chance to try something far more ambitious arrived.

"He said, 'I want you to create my dream family heirloom haggadah.' He was familiar with the [15th-century] Rothschild Haggadah and he said, 'I want it to be nicer than the Rothschild Haggadah. Do whatever it takes, just make me something wow.'"

It was a pivotal moment. "I felt I could spread my wings and fly... I put my heart and soul into it."

Design-wise, he explained, "it was a slight departure from the usual. If you look at a lot of illuminated manuscripts, they are typically heavily influenced by the Renaissance period, a lot of

baroque. I went for something a little different. I would describe the illumination as art deco with a twist of Egyptian revival. It happened to work very well together. The haggadah is about our Exodus from Egypt. The Egyptian revival element actually added a lot."

For the finely drawn black and white illustrations throughout the book, he decided to go for "copper-plate engravings... reminiscent of early printing plates". At one point, he has depicted the Moshal family at the Seder table.

For some of the Egyptian scenes, he was inspired by Napoleon's *Description de l'Egypte*, an illustrated record of what the French emperor found when he went there with his army that was compiled by a team of scholars and artists.

As well as the different golds

used in the text and decorative designs, "I used platinum leaf as well. There was also something called hand-marbled silver leaf, which is a unique technique."

Gilding with precious metals is a skill "that needs a lot of practice to perfect". He also innovated, creating techniques to engrave designs in gold leaf which had not been used before.

"The gilding adds a lot of sparkle to the pages," he said.

He had finished around three-

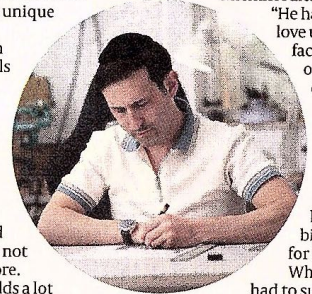
quarters of the book when the Falterers began work on the facsimiles are now available for collectors.

Over four decades, they have built up a reputation for high-grade reproductions of illuminated manuscript that retain the texture of the original. They have even designed a Dead Sea Scroll. They have not only done Jewish classics, their catalogue includes an antique handbook on falconry from Abu Dhabi. And they have also covered a number of modern megillot commissioned by an Israeli patron.

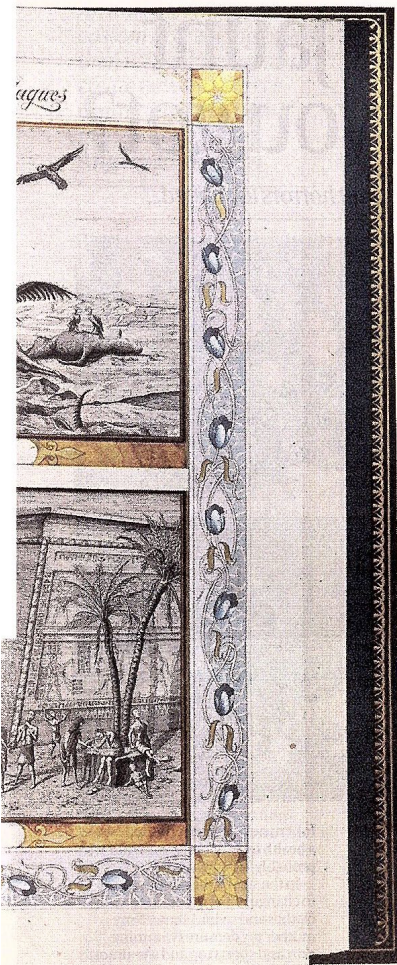
"We have been in contact over the years with Roni, because we have been great fans of his work," Michael Falter said.

"He had said he'd love us to make a facsimile of some of his work one day and the day came. Martin already knew of our work because he had bought one of our books as a 40th birthday present for his brother."

While they have had to surmount many a technical challenge over the years, the haggadah, Linda said, was "probably the most com-



PHOTOS: FACSIMILE EDITIONS, RONI WEISS



Art deco with a twist of Egyptian revival: pages from the new Moshal Haggadah created by Roni Weiss (inset) showing illustrations of four of the plagues (top left), the Seder plate (top right), and Chad Yadya (bottom left).



licated thing we have ever made because it's got extremely intricate designs, in many different types of metal and many delicate colours.

"Almost on every page you have got so many different elements which are difficult to reproduce, particularly in register. His work is very, very fine."

While the original is written on parchment, the facsimiles are printed on paper. "We used a paper that was as near to the original as we could - it's made to last for centuries," Linda said.

One feature that distinguishes

the Moshal haggadah from its classic predecessors is that it is dual language, coming with an English translation. "Most manuscripts of haggadot are just Hebrew," Linda said.

"It's very important for today's families because most people don't know Hebrew that well."

Working on the facsimiles involved "a lot of sleepless nights", Weiss said. The Falters are "perfectionists. But we got there."

Some collectors may be tempted to keep their edition safely under lock and key. But Moshal will be bringing his out for Pesach.

"He intends to spill wine on it, he intends to have matzah crumbs all over it," Weiss joked.

And this beautiful book is just the

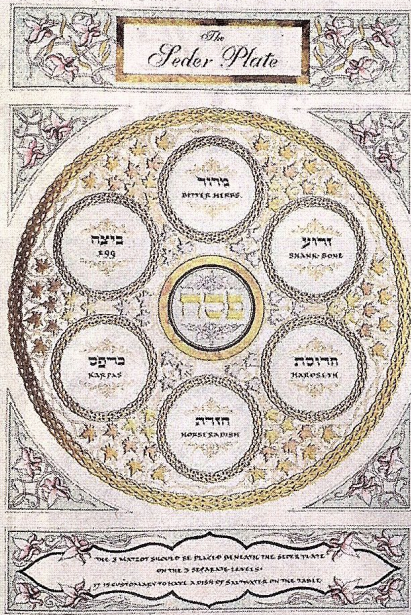
start of the partnership. Weiss has just begun an even more monumental project commissioned by the entrepreneur: to produce an illustrated edition of the entire Hebrew Bible with an English translation.

The last time anything like this was attempted was 600 years ago - with a Castilian Spanish translation.

Weiss calculated that it would take 45 to 50 years to produce. So Moshal told him, "Let's put together a team".

That team now includes a calligrapher from Manchester. On the day that we spoke Weiss was off to collect the parchment. "We hope to complete it in ten years," he said.

For more about the Falter's collections: see facsimile-editions.com/haggadah



Only one kid, only one kid which my father bought for two zuzim; only one kid, only one kid.

And a cat came and devoured the kid which my father bought for two zuzim; only one kid, only one kid.



And a dog came and bit the cat, which had devoured the kid which my father bought for two zuzim; only one kid, only one kid.



And a stick came and beat the dog, which bit the cat, which had devoured the kid which my father bought for two zuzim; only one kid, only one kid.

