

More than a Book

Private Lives of Manuscripts @ Columbia

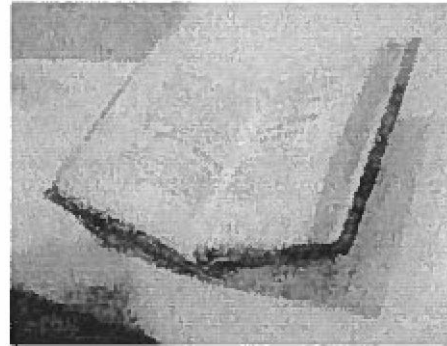
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Melted wax. A dripping Havdalah candle caught the eye on the page more than the ornate woodprints. If NYMA members walked away with anything from "The People in the Book: Hebraica and Judaica Manuscripts from Columbia University Libraries," it was the sense that while the printing press may have opened a world, the manuscripts may have revealed something more hidden.

On Wed., Dec. 12th, **Michelle Chesner**, Norman E. Alexander Librarian of Jewish Studies, treated NYMA to a private tour of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library within Columbia's Butler Library, whose collection of Judaica and Hebraica is the third largest in the country and the largest of any non-religious institution. Their recent exhibit, which ran from September to January and contained a vast display of manuscripts, from medieval to modern and from India to the Caribbean, displayed not only their respective eras but the personal lives and cultural nuances within their societies.



"Blotchy." One person pointed to the wine stain on an apparently well-used Haggadah. Fingerprint smudges screamed from the text of another *sefer*, along with the commentaries. Not all artifacts claimed that level of holiness: secular — even heretical — works faithfully followed their owners from one banished land to the next.



While rabbis may relish a page for Torah insights, the layperson may simply wonder at the biography that once lurked. To quote Isaac Mendelsohn, author of the first catalog of the Hebrew manuscripts at Columbia: "An old Hebrew book is . . . more than a mere collection of bound sheets on which a given text is [written]. The notes on the flyleaves, the remarks on the margins, the names of its various owners, and the countries in which it saw service actually make it into two books — one containing the text, the passive part, and the other the history of the persons who owned and used it."

Personalized items lined the exhibit walls while patrons perused the contents, trying to conjure mentally the Kabbalist in the attic or the penitent pouring out his or her soul for Divine succor. Other patrons simply admired the craftsmanship behind the bookmaking, as the question of its viability in the present age rings louder: Will an ancient Kindle or iPad ever reveal as much?

Certainly if these items could tell their tales, their contents might reveal not only the intellectual climate of the era but the tastes, mindsets, and dramas that inspired or necessitated their creation in the first place. It was the hope of Columbia University that visitors walked away not only with possible hints as to the origin of the manuscripts but as a spark to ignite the imagination.

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