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WHAT CAN JEWISH HISTORY LEARN FROM JEWISH ART?

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Presentation

Joseph Gutmann

The Jewish involvement with medieval feudal Christianity was vividly portrayed in the thirteenth- to fifteenth-century art of the European Hebrew manuscripts that were on display at the New York Public Library exhibit, "A Sign and a Witness: 2000 Years of Hebrew Books and Illuminated Manuscripts."

Jews had entered Franco-German lands during the ninth century as itinerant international traders providing the rulers of Western Christendom with much coveted luxury goods from the East. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, they began settling in such Rhenish cities as Worms, Mainz, and Speyer. As sedentary merchants there, they played a significant role aiding and stimulating the growth of burgeoning feudal cities. By the twelfth century some were involved as large-scale money-lenders, financing such costly Christian building projects as churches, monasteries, and castles. Emperors, nobles, and clergy alike vied with one another to offer Jews considerable privileges. Although suffering sporadic persecutions from the eleventh century on, Jewish lives and property were generally protected by special charters. Jews were moderately taxed and granted a large measure of autonomy; their communities flourished.

By the thirteenth century, however, with the rise of a Christian middle class that resented Jewish competition, with political rivalries and reorganization, and with church and nobility heavily in debt to Jews and seeking, not only avenues to

escape payment but additional revenues through outright confiscation of monies and properties, Jews began to be subject to a campaign of ideological vilification. Accused of, and tried for, such reputed crimes as host desecration and the ritual murder of Christian children, their once favorable status progressively deteriorated in the declining medieval Franco-German feudal structure. Reduced to a servile and even pariah legal status, they were now constantly plagued by confiscatory taxes and expulsion. They became pawns of their feudal rulers, who saw fit to buy, sell, or barter the humiliated, largely impoverished Jews at will.¹

How is this historic state of affairs reflected in contemporary Jewish and Christian art? The involvement of Jews and Judaism with medieval European Christianity can be traced in art clearly from the twelfth century on. We behold a revolving stage on which at last two major dramas were playing simultaneously. On one stage we witness how Christians came to view Jews; on the other, how Jews viewed themselves and how they reacted to and were affected by the Christian drama.

On the thirteenth-century Strasbourg cathedral we note two sculptures of beautiful women. On the right is Ecclesia, the Church, holding a cross victoriously in her right hand, and

¹ Cf. J. Gutmann, "Christian Influences on Jewish Customs," in L. Klenicki and G. Huck, eds., Spirituality and Prayer: Jewish and Christian Understandings (New York, 1983), pp. 128-30, and I. Ta-Shema, "Ashkenazi Jewry in the Eleventh Century: Life and Literature," in G. Hirschler, ed., Ashkenaz: The German Jewish Heritage (New York, 1987), pp. 23-56.

confronting Synagoga, the Synagogue, on her left. Ecclesia holds in her left hand the sacramental chalice, symbolic of the certainty of faith and salvation through Christ. Synagoga is a tragic figure, her staff broken and eyes blindfolded, signifying that God's true purpose is hidden from her view. From her left hand slips her last security, the Sinaitic tablets of the Law, for, according to Galatians 3:13, "the Church has redeemed us from the curse of the [Old Testament] Law."²

A fifteenth-century image known as the "Living Cross" from Freiburg, Germany, further emphasizes how Christianity came to view Jews. In the center is Christ on the cross wearing the crown of thorns, his face covered with blood. Above the cross a nimbed hand holds the key to paradise. Next to the right hand of Christ a hand blesses the scene below, in which a priest is holding a host in his left hand and bestowing the benedictio latina with the right hand. On the draped altar there is a paten -- a plate used to hold the eucharistic bread -- and a chalice. Close to Christ's left hand (that is, on the evil side), is a woman whose crown has fallen, whose eyes are partially covered and who sits on a wounded donkey. The donkey appears to be tottering and is desperately licking the foot of the cross. The beautiful but sad woman astride the donkey is Synagoga, who gazes longingly at a skull -- symbolic of death. Another crowned snake-like creature, with breasts exposed, hovers near the skull:

² W. Seiferth, Synagoge und Kirche im Mittelalter (Munich, 1964), figs. 35-37.

the snake of paradise, symbol of lust, vice, and treachery, that stands for Synagoga's (or Jewry's) downfall. Is it any wonder that a third hand emerges from the cross and ruthlessly plunges a revenging sword into Synagoga's neck, so that in death she, too, can finally attain Christian forgiveness and salvation?³

The paradisiacal tree-of-life-and-death motif is exploited for its Christian implications in a late fifteenth-century missal by Berthold Furtmeyr of Regensburg. Here we discover a tree whose foliage is covered with both hosts and apples, as well as a small crucifix behind the Virgin Mary and a grinning human skull to her left. The beautiful crowned and nimbed figure of the Virgin Mary plucks the hosts and graciously gives them to the kneeling figures. Adam, the first sinner, sits under the tree, his left hand pensively placed on his forehead to indicate that awareness of his sin is beginning to dawn. The shamelessly nude figure of Eve stands next to the Virgin. She is receiving malum (which means both apple and evil in Latin), the fruit of damnation, from the snake's mouth, and she tenders it to the kneeling, praying figures. Behind them stand the smiling skeletal figure of Death. The Virgin here represents the New Eve, giver of life and salvation, while the Old Eve stands for the Old Law or Death.⁴

³ R.L.Füglister, Das lebende Kreuz (Einsiedeln, 1964), pl. XIII, pp. 55-61. Cf. also L. Kretzenbacher, Wortbegründetes Typologie-Denken auf mittelalterlichen Bildwerken (Munich, 1983).

⁴ Füglister, pp. 145-46 and F. Mütterich and K. Dachs, eds., Regensburger Buchmalerei: Von frühkarolingischer Zeit bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters (Munich, 1987), pl. 75.

One of the most disgusting Christian images that also emerges by the thirteenth century becomes an all-time favorite: the infamous Judensau motif. In an eighteenth-century depiction, an old Jew wearing spectacles sits backward on a pig and lifts its tail so that another Jew can eat the pig's excrement. The inscription reads: "Drink, drink, the [sow's] milk, Moses, and you rabbi eat the excrement. It's your best nourishment." A horned figure with a long, sharp nose stands by; next to him is the inscription: "This is the Jew's devil," to intimate that Jews are in league with the devil. A woman is seen carrying a goat's head, symbolic of stubbornness and Old Testament sacrifice. At the top of the miniature is an illustration of the Christian child Simon of Trent, supposedly the victim of Jewish ritual murder in 1475. (Jews had been accused since the twelfth century of murdering Christian children in order to use their blood to make matzah or wine for Passover.)⁵ Certainly the medieval Christian images make amply clear the statement of a German Dominican friar and anti-Jewish writer, Petrus Nigri (Peter Schwarz), who in 1477 emphasized that "there is no people more wicked, more cunning, more avaricious, more impudent, more troublesome, more venomous, more wrathful, more deceptive, and more ignominious than the Jews."⁶

⁵ I. Shachar, The Judensau: A Medieval Anti-Jewish Motif and its History (London, 1974), pl. 45, and R. P. Hsia, The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany (New Haven and London, 1988).

⁶ E. Zafran, "Saturn and the Jews," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 62 (1979), 17.

While the art of medieval Christianity is rife with anti-Semitism, the art of medieval Jews, with the exception of a few isolated images of martyrdom in the fifteenth century, directly expresses little of the hostility they encountered in late medieval Ashkenaz.⁷ What we find reflected in Jewish medieval art is an adaptation of, and a response to, Christian thought, practices, and art.

The Christian medieval emphasis on judgment and salvation in the world to come can be viewed on Romanesque and Gothic tympana which dramatically spell out the fate that awaits every Christian. Will he wind up in the loving embrace of Christ, the angels and the saints in heaven, or will he be eternally condemned to the clutches of the devil and his disciples in hell?⁸ The Jewish visual response to Christian pictorial concerns with the afterlife, as revealed in late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Hebrew manuscripts from Franco-Germany, focuses on a festive meal prepared from three primeval beasts that await the righteous in the world to come. The three beasts are: Behemoth or shor ha-bar, represented as a giant steer; a giant fish, known as Leviathan, rolled up in ocean waves, and the giant bird, known as Ziz or bar-yokhani, depicted as a griffin --a winged quadruped having the body of a lion and the wings and head of an eagle. In the lower panel five righteous Jews with animal

⁷ J. Gutmann, Hebrew Manuscript Painting (New York, 1978), pl. 31, p. 101.

⁸ Cf. H. Gardner, Art Through the Ages (New York, 1986, 8th ed.), figs. 9-30-31, p. 360.

heads and crowns sit at a long table spread with a white table cloth on which are golden vessels and the messianic delicacies. Off to the side, two musicians entertain the righteous who are dining at the messianic banquet. Although the messianic banquet of the righteous is a uniquely Jewish expression of the afterlife in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century medieval Ashkenaz, it is a response to similar ideas of heavenly reward found in the Christian environment. Its artistic models are obviously patterned after the popular Bestiaries of the period.⁹ A fourteenth-century miniature from Southern Germany shows us a ferocious-looking ox, horns lowered, making ready to attack the curled-up Leviathan, as God at the end of time will command Leviathan and Behemoth to engage in mortal combat. "Behemoth will, with its horns, pull Leviathan down and rend it, and Leviathan will, with its fins, pull Behemoth down and pierce it through."¹⁰

By the fifteenth century, messianic projections of the afterlife in Germany were entirely different. No longer were there speculations centering on the delicacies to be consumed at

⁹ J. Gutmann, "Leviathan, Behemoth and Ziz: Jewish Messianic Symbols in Art," in J. Gutmann, ed., No Graven Images: Studies in Art and the Hebrew Bible (New York, 1971), pp. 515-26, and J. Schirmann, "The Battle between Behemoth and Leviathan according to an Ancient Hebrew Piyyut," Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 4 (1970), 327-69.

¹⁰ Gutmann, Hebrew Manuscript Painting, pl. 26, p.90 and B. Narkiss, Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts (Jerusalem, 1969), pl. 25, p. 90.

the messianic banquet.¹¹ Instead, the Jews of Ashkenaz yearned for the actual coming of the messiah, who would bring immediate redemption from their daily miseries -- persecutions, blood libel accusations, well poisoning charges -- to which Jews were subjected regularly in the declining structures of medieval Central Europe. It became customary in fifteenth-century Southern Germany to open the door during the Seder ceremony to greet the long-awaited messianic guest. Since Passover came to be traditionally linked with the night of redemption, the Haggadah, also called the book of redemption (sefer ge'ulah), was used as the vehicle to express this yearning.

The oldest depiction of this theme comes from the early fifteenth-century Rhine region. We note a medieval city perched atop a hill next to the Hebrew word shefokh -- "Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that do not know You" (Psalm 79:6). From the openings of its towers and houses, figures are anxiously peering out at the scene below. A man, arms outstretched, seems to be welcoming a crowned figure, blowing a shofar and riding upon an ass. This is the prophet Elijah and the messiah, combined in one person. The streamers in the hands of the figures read: "Say to the daughters of Zion, behold your salvation comes" (Isaiah 62:11) and "Behold your king comes,

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Maimonides, a Sephardi Jew, in his Mishneh Torah, explicitly writes: "The sages and prophets did not long for the days of the messiah that Israel...might eat and drink and rejoice." (Code of Maimonides: The Book of Judges, trans. by A. M. Hershman [New Haven, 1949], p. 242 [Book XIV:4].)

lowly and riding upon an ass" (Zachariah 9:9).¹² A German Haggadah dated 1478 has the head of the house opening the door and holding the prescribed fourth cup of wine in order to recite the shfokh as he greets the messianic guest. The messiah is shown as a bearded old man. Seated behind him on the richly adorned ass is the household of Israel, symbolically riding with the messiah to the promised and hoped-for redemption in the land of Israel.¹³

These new images in Jewish manuscripts from fifteenth-century Germany can be attributed not only to changes in the socio-economic and political conditions, but to responses to Christian theology as well. The Christians in Southern Germany had instituted the practice on Palm Sunday of having sculpted images of Christ seated on his Palmesel, or messianic ass, wheeled on carts to the city gates of a mock Jerusalem. The Jewish depictions probably attempted to deny the Christian messianic claim that the messiah had appeared, and emphasized instead the traditional Jewish belief that the messiah was yet to come.¹⁴

Unique to medieval Ashkenaz are the many images of giddush

¹² Gutmann, Hebrew Manuscript Painting, pl. 30, p. 98.

¹³ Narkiss, Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts, pl. 50, p. 140.

¹⁴ J. Gutmann, "The Messiah at the Seder: A Fifteenth-Century Motif in Jewish Art," in S. Yeivin, ed., Raphael Mahler Jubilee Volume: Studies in Jewish History (Tel Aviv, 1974), pp. 29-38; idem, "Return in Mercy to Zion: A Messianic Dream in Jewish Art," in L. Hoffman, ed., Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives (Notre Dame, 1986), pp. 240-41.

ha-Shem (sanctification of the Divine Name), seen in medieval Hebrew manuscripts in the guise of the agedat Yitzhaq (Abraham's binding of Isaac recorded in Genesis 22). The concept of martyrdom as giddush ha-Shem is foreign to medieval Spanish Jewry, but is completely at home in Germanic lands and grows out of memorializations of Jewish martyrs, which in turn are deeply rooted in and develop out of Christian martyrologies in behalf of saints martyred for the sanctification of Christ. An image from a 1309 Brussels manuscript reveals a naked Isaac, hands and feet bound, on the altar. Abraham, wearing a tallit and brandishing a sword, grasps his hair.¹⁵ This miniature probably alludes to contemporary Jewish life in Western Europe, where Ashkenazi Jews, by imitating and recalling Abraham's sublime example, willingly took their lives and the lives of their families rather than submit to the conversions forced upon them by Christian mobs during the brutal massacres of the Crusades. The ancient agedat Yitzhaq, as Pamela Sheingorn pointed out, became a living Jewish symbol in medieval Ashkenaz, an archetypal image that "sets a role model for human behavior in an age of persecution." Thus we read: "When were there ever a thousand and a hundred sacrifices in one day, each and every one of them like the agedah of Isaac, son of Abraham?" Or the story of Meshullam bar Isaac of Worms who, in 1096, "bound his son Isaac, and picked up the knife to

¹⁵ According to rabbinic traditions, Isaac was actually sacrificed by Abraham, but was resurrected by God, cf. J. Gutmann, "The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval Jewish Art," Artibus et Historiae, 16 (1987), fig. 23, pp. 78 and 80.

slay his son, and recited the blessing appropriate for the slaughter of cattle and fowl. And the lad replied 'Amen'. And the father [probably wearing the tallit] slew the lad."¹⁶ In wearing the tallit, the father was not only reenacting the biblical sacrifice of Abraham, but also imitating the ancient sacrificial Temple cult. He assumed the role of the biblical high priest in the Temple of Jerusalem by offering a pure and holy sacrifice. Hence we read that another Jew named Isaac took his two children, a son and daughter, and led them through the courtyard at midnight and brought them to the synagogue before the holy ark, and slaughtered them there for the sanctification of the Great Name. Like the kohen gadol, the high priest of the ancient Temple, he spilled their blood on the cover, the kapporet (i.e., the doors) of the holy ark, so that they would come as a memorial before the unique and everlasting King and before the throne of His glory. And like the high priest of old, Isaac intoned: "May this blood serve me as an atonement for all my sins."¹⁷

Memorializations of the dead, as clearly reflected in many images of the agedat Yitzhaq, became an important part of German Jewish life, and several ceremonies -- yizkor, mourner's gaddish,

¹⁶ Ibid., 79-80.

¹⁷ R. Chazan, European Jewry and the First Crusade (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 104-105. Cf. also J. Gutmann, "An Eighteenth-Century Prague Jewish Workshop of Kapporot," Visible Religion, 6 (1988), 180-90 and I. G. Marcus, "From Politics to Martyrdom: Shifting Paradigms in the Hebrew Narratives of the 1096 Crusade Riots," Prooftexts 2 (1982), 40-52.

and Jahrzeit -- evolved. These, too, although not directly illustrated in art, reveal their indebtedness to contemporary Christian practices. Two distinct commemorations developed in medieval Germany -- the Communal Martyr Liturgy and the Communal Family Liturgy. The Communal Martyr Liturgy consisted of reading the Memor lists, or martyrologies, to commemorate the godoshim (holy martyrs or saints) who had chosen martyrdom for the sanctification of God's Name. Alongside this rite, there developed in medieval Germany what is now called yizkor or hazkarat neshamot (prayer for the souls of the dead) -- the Communal Family Liturgy which memorialized the dead. Prayer and charity, it was held, can speed the redemption of the dead and enable dead souls to obtain rest in paradise. These two rites find early Christian parallels in the "Feast of All Saints" and "All Souls' Day." On the "Feast of All Saints" the commemoration consisted of reciting lists of saints (martyrologies), many of whom had been martyred for the sanctification of Christ. "All Souls' Day" was the solemn commemoration of all the departed faithful. Charity and prayer, it was believed, would help the deceased souls, perhaps lingering in purgatory, attain the final purification necessary for admission to the beatific vision. It should be observed that the very name Memorbuch (memorial volume) comes from the Latin memoria (memory) and that the prayer which follows the Christian recitation of the departed begins with memento (remember), just as the Hebrew prayer begins with yizkor (remember).

The gaddish, now popularly thought of as a prayer for the dead, in reality is a doxology whose content reveals no link with death or praying for the dead. The idea that the recitation of gaddish by the living has the power to atone for the sins of the deceased and to redeem the dead from Gehinnom (Gehenna) is first indicated in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Rhenish sources. The custom of reciting gaddish as a prayer for the dead has its roots in the Requiem Mass or Mass for the Dead celebrated so that through prayer and sacrifice the living can aid the souls in purgatory and help them attain eternal glory. Jahrzeit (i.e., the anniversary of a death) has its counterpart in the Christian church, where it was customary to observe the Jahrzeit by honoring the dead at annual anniversary masses.¹⁸

We can more clearly trace in art the development of Jewish marriage customs. The portable canopy, the huppah, so much part of today's Jewish wedding, was probably adopted from Catholicism, which had used the portable canopy for Church ritual since the Middle Ages. It is first recorded by Moses Isserles and appears in contemporary sixteenth-century art. During the Middle Ages, from around the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, the wedding was held inside the European synagogue. There the huppah was simply a cloth, called sudar, or tallit, which was spread over the bridal couple, as can be seen in several medieval German miniatures. A similar and related practice already existed in the early medieval church, when, during the nuptial mass a cloth

¹⁸ Gutmann, "Christian Influences," pp. 133-35.

(pallium or velum) was sometimes spread over the bridal couple. This practice was given religious sanction and explained by reference to such biblical statements as "Spread your robe over your handmaiden" (Ruth 3:9) or "I spread My robe over you" (Ezekiel 16:8). How different these huppah customs are from the practice of the Talmudic period, where the couple knew neither the sudar-tallit nor the portable canopy, but was ceremoniously led into the huppah -- a special room or nuptial tent set up at the groom's or his father's house.

Smashing a glass at weddings was customary in medieval Christian Germany, as popular folklore believed that broken glass would smash the power of demons dwelling in the northern region. This practice among Jews arose in medieval Germany and is at home in the Rhineland by the twelfth century. It was the custom to have the bridegroom shatter the glass against the interior northern synagogue wall. By the eighteenth century, when the wedding was shifted to the exterior, it appears that a stone was affixed to the outside northern wall of the synagogue building and the groom shattered the glass against it. Although we have no medieval depictions of this practice, we do have later illustrations. This originally superstitious custom was justified by interpreting the shattered glass as a symbolic reminder of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.¹⁹

¹⁹ J. Gutmann, "Jewish Medieval Marriage Customs in Art: Creativity and Adaptation," in D. Kraemer, ed., The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory (New York, 1988), pp. 47-62, and idem, The Jewish Life Cycle (Leiden, 1987), pls. XXX-XXXI.

Thus far we have seen how the historic encounter of Jews with medieval German Christendom spawned novel Jewish theological concerns, customs, and liturgical practices. Was the art itself influenced by Christianity and does it echo what Judah ben Samuel he-Hasid observed about Jewish customs (minhagim) -- that they were, in many places of Germany, like those of Christians?

The art of the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz clearly shatters the romantic notion, sometimes found in popular Jewish history books, that Jews lived in German lands in splendid isolation untouched by Christianity and that Jewish art is rooted in a now lost, antecedent Jewish art that began in Hellenistic Egypt.

Obviously the Gothic knights in the Sussex Pentateuch, representing the four tribes of Ephraim (bull), Reuben (eagle), Judah (lion), and Dan (snake), surrounded by wonderfully fantastic creatures, are familiar features of medieval Christian art.²⁰ The large German mahzorim, both in size and format, are patterned after contemporary Breviaries -- one mahzor is even called a Breviarium Judaicum. The illustrated Haggadah emerges as a separate private book in thirteenth-century Europe at the very time when private Christian books, such as the Psalter and the Book of Hours, began to appear. They, too, in format and decoration closely follow the Christian books.²¹ Even the Hebrew lettering at times takes on the characteristics of the Gothic

²⁰ Narkiss, Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts, pl. 32, p. 104.

²¹ Gutmann, Hebrew Manuscript Painting, pls. 11-15, pp. 60-71.

script.²² Within the holiest of medieval Ashkenazi texts we find not only prevailing Christian styles, but the intrusion of Christian iconography as well. Thus, in depictions of the agedat yitzhag we find Isaac on a draped Christian altar;²³ and we see the ram suspended from the tree -- as an allusion to Christ crucified, a sign that the lamb of God would also be hung from the cross. In addition, we see underneath the liturgy for the second day of Rosh Hashanah another obvious Christian symbol, the Paschal candle, which stands at the gospel side of the altar and is lit at Easter Vigil time to commemorate Christ as the light of the world.²⁴

In a manuscript of the Mishneh Torah, the law code of Maimonides, painted in the Lorraine region in the early fourteenth century, we encounter such obscenities as a man shooting an arrow at the exposed posterior of another man. At the bottom of the page, we note an irate peasant woman with a distaff and spindle chasing a fox with a cock in his jaws -- an episode taken directly from medieval Christian exempla.²⁵

To counter the prevailing notion that medieval Jewish art is a continuation of an antecedent Jewish art, as many scholars still insist, we need only look at two depictions of the agedat

²² Cf. I. Fishof, "The Origin of the Siddur of the Rabbi of Ruzhin," Jewish Art, 12/13 (1986-87), figs. 5-6, p. 76.

²³ Gutmann, "Sacrifice of Isaac," fig. 8, pp. 70 and 80.

²⁴ Ibid., fig. 9, pp. 71 and 81.

²⁵ Gutmann, Hebrew Manuscript Painting, pl. 23, p. 84.

yitzhag to realize that there is no direct link from antiquity to the Middle Ages. The agedat Yitzhag of the Beth-Alpha synagogue mosaic from the third quarter of sixth-century Palestine follows contemporary Byzantine models,²⁶ while the earliest Ashkenazi depiction of the agedat Yitzhak from thirteenth-century Würzburg is entirely different and follows late Christian Romanesque models.²⁷

Our time is too short to explore the many fascinating but largely unexplored aspects of how Jewish art sheds light on medieval Jewish history. We have seen the distinct theological responses to the German Christian environment by the messianic meal in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Germany, and the messiah at the seder in fifteenth-century Germany. We have noted how the martyrdom of Jews in medieval Ashkenaz is expressed in art and how practices arising from it are rooted in Christian thought and practices. We have observed how distinct Jewish marriage customs, such as the huppah and the throwing of the glass, are delineated in medieval art and how they stem from the Jewish encounter with Christianity. Finally, we have indicated that the very books used, as well as the style and iconography

²⁶ J. Gutmann, "The Sacrifice of Isaac: Variations on a Theme in Early Jewish and Christian Art," in D. Ahrens, ed., Thiasos ton Mouson, Studien zu Antike und Christentum. Festschrift für Josef Fink zum 70. Geburtstag (Cologne, 1984), pl. 7, pp. 120-22. Cf. also idem, "The Dura-Europos Synagogue Paintings and their Influence on Later Christian and Jewish Art," Artibus et Historiae, 17 (1988), 25-29.

²⁷ J. Gutmann, "Medieval Jewish Image: Controversies, Contributions, Conceptions," in P. Szarmach, ed., Aspects of Jewish Culture in the Middle Ages (Albany, 1979), figs. 11-12.

found in them, are inseparably bound up with the medieval Christian environment. We have not touched upon such topics as how art reveals medieval Jewish legends,²⁸ illuminates Jewish liturgical prayers, or how in dress, furnishings, occupations, and synagogue architecture the imprimatur of a Christian society can be discerned.²⁹

Our sketch has, in broad strokes, tried to indicate that Jewish art reveals to us aspects of medieval Jewish history. Ashkenazi ideas, customs, and liturgical practices were not only firmly rooted in the lands of medieval Christian Europe, but were deeply affected by that environment as well.

²⁸ Cf. J. Gutmann, "The Testing of Moses: A Comparative Study in Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Art," Bulletin of the Asia Institute, 2 (1988), 107-17.

²⁹ Cf. T. and M. Metzger, Jewish Life in the Middle Ages: Illuminated Hebrew Manuscripts from the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Centuries (New York, 1982), and the review by E. Horowitz in Jewish History, 1 (1986), 75-90.

Response

Pamela Sheingorn

I would like to thank Professor Seltzer for inviting me to participate in tonight's program, especially since in order to prepare I spent happy hours with the beautiful and interesting manuscripts in the exhibition. I would also like to thank Professor Gutmann because I have learned a great deal from his paper.

Professor Seltzer suggested that since my own work is interdisciplinary, focusing on the relationship between art and its cultural context in the Middle Ages, that in these remarks I might want to address issues of methodology, that is, methods of interdisciplinary research in this period. Under this general heading I will concentrate on two basic points.

First, I see art as playing an active role in the process of shaping a culture. This is especially true of the larger cultural context of medieval Hebrew manuscripts, that is, medieval Christian culture. Medieval Christian culture was a visual culture. As Herbert Kessler notes,

Medieval theologians praised sight as the most spiritual of the senses and the source of divine knowledge; and so art, because it is visual, acquired a special dignity. Believers, needing to see and witness, were attracted by the animating character of art, in particular that of three-dimensional objects which, . . . invigorated their faith (pp.184-85).

In such a visual culture, art shapes and changes with the society that produces it, and we can therefore use art as evidence in studying that society. That art takes an active role in cultural

discourse and in the shaping of the ideology of a culture does not mean that it is always a force for the good. I agree when Professor Gutmann says that "the art of medieval Christianity is rife with anti-Semitism." And medieval Christian culture employed the visual arts not only to give expression to its ideology of anti-Semitism but further to motivate translation of that ideology into action. For example, a recent study of the Gulbenkian Apocalypse, a thirteenth-century English manuscript, describes a number of images in that book that express a radical anti-Jewish ideology. Suzanne Lewis, who analyzed these images in their historical context, concludes that the book itself "not only served as a forceful ideological statement but also provided stimulus and justification for action in the decades preceding the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290" (p.543).

Similarly art took an active part in the shaping of medieval Jewish culture. One has to wonder whether the images of Abraham's Binding of Isaac in Hebrew manuscripts made in Germanic lands were not more than just memorializations of the dead. It seems to me they could have been active expressions of ideology as well. First, they reclaim a story that had been appropriated by Christian ideology, as Professor Gutmann has shown us. In reclaiming the image, these Jewish versions assert that this image has nothing to do with Christian ideology, but rather sets a model for human behavior in an age of persecution. Thus art is not separate from history, not just a record of what was thought and done, but a powerful historical agent in its own right.

To introduce my second point I want to begin with Professor Gutmann's important conclusion that we cannot think of medieval Christian and medieval Jewish cultures as isolated one from the other; Professor Gutmann proved his case by documenting specific instances of symbols from Christian culture, like the wedding canopy, that were adopted by Jewish culture. We can understand this conclusion in another way if we look at the interaction of these two cultures through the framework of cultural theory or cultural criticism, recently developed by anthropologists. According to this approach, we can view medieval civilization as composed of many sub-cultures, each with its own ideology. Cultural activities, such as festivals, other ritual events, or works of art, can be ways of articulating ideologies, of bringing them into conflict in a controlled situation, and of finding resolutions that allow the culture to continue to function. Sometimes resolution is not achieved, and articulated conflict leads to violence.

Professor Gutmann's examples of the influence of Christian art on Jewish art reflect a pattern of interaction in which the dominant culture had a significant impact. But these interactions are not simple appropriations of chunks of the dominant culture. Cultural theory insists that sub-cultures often reinterpret the symbols they borrow and may even subvert their original meaning. That is surely what happened with the borrowing of the Palmesel, the Palm Sunday donkey whose procession through the streets of medieval German cities ritually

reenacted for Christians an event that they believed had happened at a specific time in the past, namely the arrival of the messiah in Jerusalem. It is directly subversive of the dominant culture when illustrations in Hebrew manuscripts use the same image to assert that the messiah has not yet come.

The key to the interrelationship of medieval Christian and Jewish cultures is what Krister Stendahl has called the "ambiguous bond." Stendahl is referring to the Hebrew Bible, called by Christians the Old Testament, which, he says, "has been, is, and perhaps must be both a bone of contention and a bond of common heritage" (p.1). Certainly it is an excellent example of different perceptions of the same text by different sub-cultures, for Jews place primary emphasis on the first five books, the Torah, while Christians focus much more attention on Isaiah than on Numbers or Deuteronomy.

The nature of this ambiguous bond has been both positive and negative. From antiquity, Christians turned to Jews for help in understanding this text; some, like Jerome, studied Hebrew. As Marc E. Saperstein observes, by the twelfth century, Christian Biblical commentaries repeatedly cite Jewish authorities; Herbert of Bosham, for example, "quotes the interpretations of Rashi on virtually every page of his commentary on the Psalms," (p.5) and the influence of Maimonides, whose Guide for the Perplexed was translated into Latin in the thirteenth century, can be discerned in the content and substance of the work of Thomas Aquinas. As Professor Gutmann has shown elsewhere, many works of medieval

Christian art can only be explained by reference to Jewish commentaries on the Scriptures. If we could leave it at this, we could say that this interaction, with its give and take, enriched both cultures by providing rich sources of new material to be absorbed and reinterpreted; it served to keep either culture from stagnating.

But, of course, we cannot leave it at this. Professor Gutmann points out that the thirteenth century marks an important turning point, and offers an economic explanation: "the rise of a Christian middle class who resented Jewish competition." In addition, there is an explanation that has to do with the "ambiguous bond," and specifically with its expression in art through a method of juxtaposition called typology. Typology began as early as the Christian New Testament, and is an excellent example of the borrowing and re-interpretation of cultural symbols which result in the subversion of their meaning. In typological thinking, Christians assert that there is a historical correspondence between certain "Old Testament" persons, events, or things and similar New Testament persons, events, or things. These Old Testament types prefigure their New Testament fulfillments or antitypes. The New Testament thus looks on the history of Israel recorded in the Old Testament as God's prefigurement of the one historical event that gives everything its meaning and which had recently occurred, namely the advent of the messiah. Although typological thinking appears in the New Testament, it was not until the twelfth

century that it began to be codified. From that time forward, typological juxtaposition, like the pairing of Isaac with Jesus, or of Eve with Mary, begins to characterize Christian art. From the Christian perspective, typology pushes the Jews irrevocably into the past, for the New Testament anti-type, the fulfillment, is always greater than, always supersedes the Old Testament foreshadowing, the type. In the terms of cultural theory, typology forcefully argues that the dominant culture has no reason to allow the Jewish sub-culture to continue to exist, for the contribution of that sub-culture to the course of history is in the past. Typology in art thus played a significant role in the development of medieval anti-Semitism and helped to justify the move toward the activism of the thirteenth century: the expulsions, forcible conversions, and destruction of post-biblical Jews.

My purpose has been to place Professor Gutmann's paper in the context of cultural theory. In so doing, I have changed the question under discussion, for, as Professor Gutmann has so clearly demonstrated, we cannot look at Jewish art or Jewish history in isolation. I hoped to have shown that, placed in a theoretical framework, both Jewish art and Christian art can tell us much about the complex interactions between their cultures.

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Response

Herbert R. Broderick

It is an honor to be called to this lectern tonight to give a response to Professor Gutmann's moving and insightful presentation. I know that many in the audience join me in expressing our gratitude to Joe, the dean of American historians of Jewish art, for his unfailingly friendly guidance to the perplexed over the years; it has been our pleasure to have known him.

I was particularly struck, in the material brought before us this evening, by the sight of the round-topped tablet of the Law held by the beautiful and tragic Strasbourg Synagoga. It seemed to me a perfect example of Professor Gutmann's thesis that, as ironic and contradictory as it might appear initially, so much in medieval European Jewish history and art is firmly rooted in the soil of medieval Christianity.

The round-topped tablets of the Law is a motif so ubiquitous and apparently so fundamental to Jewish iconography in both medieval and modern times that it is hard at first for us to believe that we do not know exactly when or where it originated, nor what it fully meant. Our distinguished colleague, Dr. Ruth Mellinkoff, has traced its earliest known appearance to date to a Christian context of the eleventh century ("The Round-Topped Tablets of the Law: Sacred Symbol and Emblem of Evil," Journal of Jewish Art, I (1974), pp. 36-37), where it occurs in an important illustrated Anglo-Saxon manuscript known as the Hexateuch of

elfric (London, British Library, Cotton MS Claudius B.IV). (I have worked on the iconography of this manuscript for about fifteen years and have formulated an hypothesis about the origin and meaning of the round-topped tablets of the Law in its illustrations, an hypothesis too detailed to describe at this moment.)

The lesson to be drawn from this motif in the present context is a timely and appropriate one. Albeit that the origin of the round-topped tablets of the Law is most likely a Christian one and that, as Ruth Mellinkoff has shown, their later history in medieval Christian art is as a negative attribute of Judaism, this motif appears prominently on a folio of the famous Birds' Head Haggadah in the current exhibit at the New York Public Library. The presence of this motif in a Jewish manuscript of the early fourteenth century, a manuscript probably illuminated by a Jewish artist, leads us to seek a deeper understanding of the Sitz im Leben of Jewish art and the relationship of Jewish art to its broader cultural context.

Mysteries abound: Why the birds' heads on the figures of Moses and other Jews in this manuscript's illustrations? Why the round tops on the tablets of the Law? Why are Jews represented in this Jewish work wearing the distinctive Judenhut or Jew's hat as stipulated by local Christian law? This last question leads us to another unresolved question in the history of medieval Jewish customs: the tradition of kippah, the obligatory covering of the head by Jewish males at tasks both sacred and secular, a

tradition whose origins remain quite unclear.

Professor Gutmann's demonstration of the degree of cultural and artistic assimilation of medieval Ashkenazi Jews to their geographical milieu has opened a new door to our understanding of a remarkable Jewish attitude: literally turning sorrow into joy by adapting a pre-existing, sometimes pejorative, pictorial language of Christian origin and transforming it into a new language in which to express the ancient Jewish story. Thus, what had been symbols of ignominy in certain Christian hands -- the Judenhut, the tablets of the Law -- are, in a work of art such as the Birds' Head Haggadah, transformed into proud symbols of joy.

A new door has indeed been opened and an invitation gone forth for scholarly cooperation in exploring further the mutual medieval heritage of Jewish and Christian art.

Response

David Berger

Professor Gutmann's learned and provocative presentation addresses several key issues that cannot help but stimulate some methodological reflections on the use of artistic evidence in the reconstruction of medieval Jewish history.

The central question that emerges from the paper is that of the interaction between Ashkenazic Jewry and the Christian environment with respect to three distinct but related phenomena: the response to persecution, the reaction to Christian beliefs and customs, and the borrowing of Christian artistic motifs.

Professor Gutmann notes that "the art of medieval Jews . . . directly expresses little of the hostility they encountered in late medieval Ashkenaz." This is itself highly intriguing in light of the fact that certain genres of Ashkenazic literature express hostility openly and vigorously. Two explanations readily come to mind. The first, which has other implications as well, is that many of the illuminations were produced by non-Jews, who could scarcely have been commissioned to depict the vicious cruelty and eschatological agony of the persecutors of Israel. The second is that pictorial art was too readily comprehensible to Christians. Despite the availability of converts to interpret Jewish texts for interested Christians, a Jew writing in Hebrew felt a certain sense of security -- however misguided it may sometimes have been -- that his words would be restricted to a Jewish audience. Illuminations, on the other

hand, are universally accessible, and even aggressive Ashkenazic Jews evinced a sense of healthy caution.

One example of an artistic reaction to persecution noted by Professor Gutmann is the emergence in fifteenth-century Germany of the messianic motif of Elijah's appearance in conjunction with the recitation of Psalm 79:6 at the Passover seder. It is, of course, beyond question that the late medieval custom of opening the door for Elijah was rooted in an urgent hope for redemption which stemmed in large part from the sufferings of exile, while the artistic depiction was an inevitable result of the development of this custom. At the same time, we must examine the literary sources as well before reading this development as evidence of a shift in the messianic posture of late Ashkenazic Jews toward a yearning "for the actual coming of the messiah" rather than mere "speculations on the delicacies to be consumed at the messianic banquet."

First of all, the artistic evidence is very thin. We are speaking of two motifs, the first of which may well have receded because of the penetration of even a minimal amount of Maimonidean-style skepticism about the literal understanding of such depictions. With the virtual eradication of anthropomorphism in Ashkenaz, the messianic meal, too, undoubtedly became a source of some theological discomfort.¹ If

¹ Although there is no necessary link between the denial of anthropomorphism and the allegorization of the messianic meal, the habits of mind that produce the one tend to produce the other. There can be no better indication of this than the letter of Abraham Maimonides in which he denounces the alleged

this suggestion is correct, the disappearance of the motif is indeed historically significant, but the lesson is different from the one proposed by Professor Gutmann.

Moreover, the meal itself had functioned as consolation in an age of persecution; consequently, it is by no means clear that increased persecution would have served to diminish its role. One of the most famous liturgical poems produced by early Ashkenaz was Akdamut, the piyyut recited at the beginning of the Torah reading on Shavuot. The high point of the poem is a moving exchange between the nations of the world and the people of Israel. "Who," ask the Gentiles, "is your beloved, O beautiful one, for whose sake you are willing to endure the sufferings of a lion's den?" The question is reinforced by an offer to provide Israel with all it desires in return for abandoning its religious identity. The response points to the eschatological punishment of the persecuting Gentiles and the great rewards to be enjoyed by a Jewish people steadfast in its faith. In this context, we are presented with a lengthy description of the battle between Behemoth and Leviathan as a prelude to a depiction of the messianic meal. To the modern, rationalistic ear, the grandeur of a magnificent poem ends in anticlimax; to the early Ashkenazic Jew, the meal was consolatio par excellence.

Finally, although fifteenth-century German Jews no doubt

anthropomorphism of the Provençal anti-Maimonists and then pokes fun at their literal understanding of this meal. See his Milhamot HaShem, ed. by Reuven Margaliyot (Jerusalem, 1953), pp. 60-61.

awaited the coming of the messiah with eager anticipation, literary sources of the period do not reveal any special upsurge in messianic activism or speculation. This too should make us cautious before reading broad messianic significance into the interesting depiction of Elijah that Professor Gutmann has called to our attention.

The proper integration of literary and artistic sources is a central challenge to students of medieval Jewish art, and inadequate attention to literary materials has often led to serious errors among scholars less careful than Professor Gutmann. Elliot Horowitz has made some especially important observations about this issue in a review essay on the Metzgers' Jewish Life in the Middle Ages, as well as in several other studies. He has noted, for example, that the imputation of halakhic errors to medieval artists on the part of modern scholars has occasionally resulted from a failure to consult the legal texts themselves and to rely instead on contemporary practice regarding such matters as the placement of the mezuzah and the configuration of the priest's fingers during the recitation of the priestly blessing.²

The Metzgers' book provides two examples not noted by Horowitz which reflect an even more egregious failure to pay attention to texts. The authors describe illuminations in blithe

² See "The Way We Were: Jewish Life in the Middle Ages," Jewish History 1 (1986): 75-90; "'Al Ketav Yad Mezuyyar shel Sefer Mishneh Torah," Qiryat Sefer 61 (1986-87): 583-86; and his forthcoming paper on the beard and early modern qabbalah.

disregard of the captions above the pictures themselves. The Metzgers' full description of one reproduction reads as follows: "Germany, c. 1470 -- Jews pursued with blows and assaults from even beyond the gates of the city where they had been obliged to leave their places of worship, tombs, dwelling places, and all kinds of goods." The illumination, which shows the banished Jews carrying bundles on their shoulders, no doubt reflects the appearance of medieval city walls and typical medieval costume. Nonetheless, one can hardly justify omitting the not insignificant information that the caption reads, "For they were driven out of Egypt . . . their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders" (Exodus 12:39,34).³

Similarly, the authors' description of a second illumination provides the following information: "A pregnant woman, Germany c. 1470, consults two sages about her condition; the sages appear to be resorting to bibliomancy, that is to say, the interpretation of a word or verse that first attracts their eyes as an omen when opening at random the volume of the Bible lying on the table." The depiction itself provides no decisive indication of bibliomancy, and the caption explicitly indicates that the picture refers to Rebecca's consultation at the yeshivah of Shem and Ever, a consultation which reflects the rabbinic understanding of her going "to inquire of the Lord" during her

³ T. and M. Metzger, Jewish Life in the Middle Ages (New York: 1982), p. 195, #274.

difficult pregnancy with Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25:22-23).⁴

Professor Gutmann also addresses the fundamental question of the impact of Christian beliefs and practices on medieval Jews. Recent scholarship has largely undermined the picture of an Ashkenazic Jewry that lived in isolation from the larger environment. Our understanding of Jewish exegesis, polemic, pietism, conceivably even Talmudic methodology, can be enriched by an examination of contemporary developments in the Christian world.⁵ In light of this interaction, it is not shocking -- though it is certainly interesting -- to find the penetration into Jewish life of such practices as the use of a portable huppah, which may well have been borrowed from the surrounding environment.

Although we should certainly be receptive to the possibility of Christian influence on the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz, assertions of such influence must be subjected to critical examination. The afterlife, for example, is a fundamental part of medieval Jewish faith, and I am far from certain that we should see the messianic banquet in Ashkenaz as "a response to similar ideas of heavenly reward found in the Christian environment." Even more problematic is Professor

⁴ Ibid., p. 203, #291. The presence of an open book on the table may simply have been a way of indicating that this was a yeshivah.

⁵ Ephraim Urbach, Avraham Grossman, Aryeh Grabois, and Elazar Touitou are among the scholars who have contributed to this reevaluation. See also my "Mission to the Jews and Jewish-Christian Contacts in the Polemical Literature of the High Middle Ages," American Historical Review 91 (1986): 576-91.

Gutmann's assertion that "the concept of martyrdom as giddush ha-Shem is foreign to medieval Spanish Jewry, but is completely at home in Germanic lands and grows out of memorializations of Jewish martyrs, which in turn are deeply rooted in and develop out of Christian martyrologies in behalf of saints martyred for the sanctification of Christ." Martyrdom was certainly more important in Ashkenaz than in Spain, and Robert Chazan has speculated about some relationship with "the themes of crusading martyrdom."⁶ Whatever the validity of such speculations, Professor Gutmann's formulation is far too strong. The concept of martyrdom as giddush ha-Shem preceded the memorializations; without it, there would have been no martyrs to memorialize. As for Spain, which was not entirely bereft of martyrs, it is sufficient to note the ruling in Maimonides' Code: "The entire house of Israel is commanded regarding the sanctification of this great name (giddush ha-Shem ha-gadol ha-zeh) . . . [so that] if anyone tells a Jew to violate one of [the three cardinal prohibitions against idolatry, adultery/incest, and murder], he should die rather than transgress."⁷

Finally, we come to the direct question of the Jewish borrowing of artistic motifs found in the dominant culture. Professor Gutmann is surely correct that such borrowing is massive, indeed pervasive. Since there is in fact no reason to

⁶ See his European Jewry and the First Crusade, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987), p. 193.

⁷ Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Yesodei Ha-Torah 5: 1-2.

believe that there was an unbroken Jewish artistic tradition, one wonders how the situation could have been different. Of course Jewish animals would look like Christian animals. Of course patterns of decoration would follow Christian models. It is unlikely that Jews perceived the entire genre of the visual arts as a part of indigenous Jewish culture, and precisely for this reason it was a pursuit in which their resistance to outside influence would have been dramatically diminished.

The interesting questions arise in connection with what Professor Gutmann calls "the intrusion of Christian iconography" with its draped altars and hanging rams. The scholarly furor unleashed by Erwin Goodenough's analysis of pagan themes in the Jewish art of late antiquity is only partly relevant here. The assertion that some Jews would knowingly incorporate artistic affirmations of the truth of another religion can be seriously entertained with respect to antiquity, but such a possibility is vanishingly remote in medieval Europe. This is not to say that the tastes of rabbis and the laity were identical; it is surely unlikely in the extreme that any medieval rabbi would have commissioned or accepted the "exposed posterior" in that manuscript of the Mishneh Torah. Still, the flexibility of the laity surely stopped short of the knowing incorporation of a symbol representing the agedah as a prefiguration of the crucifixion.

Hence, rather than demonstrating the openness of Ashkenazic society to Christian influence, the appearance of genuine

Christological themes in Jewish art underscores the superficiality of that influence. If a hanging ram appears in a Jewish illumination, this constitutes decisive evidence that the Jew involved had no understanding of what a hanging ram signifies. In a fuller discussion of the agedah, Professor Gutmann himself cited this and other examples in support of the observation that "many of the miniatures were probably made by Christian artists or by Jews copying medieval Christian models."⁸ The motifs are real, and they surely demonstrate Jewish-Christian contacts; these are not, however, contacts that penetrate beneath the surface. Thus, although the symbiosis of Jews and Christians in medieval Ashkenaz was wider and deeper than scholars used to suppose, the usefulness of artistic evidence in establishing significant influence is more limited than we might imagine.

In other areas, creative and careful examination of artistic materials has enabled historians to address a broad array of historical questions to which literary sources provide partial answers at best. What was the actual appearance of a Jewish home? Were Jews bearded or not? What did a death scene look like? Did women play a role in the ceremony redeeming a first-born son? Such lines of inquiry, which illuminate both religious and social history, have been opened to us by the work of Professor Gutmann and a small number of other scholars. This is the appropriate occasion to convey our gratitude and to

⁸ "The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval Jewish Art," Artibus et Historiae 16 (1987), 80-81.

express the hope that Jewish historiography will be increasingly enriched by much-needed attention to the visual as well as the literary evidence of the Jewish past.