

BOOKS



Kalila wa-Dimna, 1354. Arabic translation of an Indian book of fables. Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Pococke 400, fol 60r

Take, for example, the magnificent gold calligraphy of a 14th-century 'Kol' that begins to spell out the words 'Kol Nidre' in a Yom Kippur machzor (prayer book). Decorated by vines, pipes and bizarre dragons in vivid scarlet, green and blue, it is allotted an entire page. Just immerse yourself in it. But the longer I look, the more I notice, and the weirder the illumination becomes: there's the creature that has human hands instead of clawed feet; another sports a creeper of oak leaves and acorns instead of a tail; and a third, a kind of chimera, seems to have two – no, three – faces, some human, some not. This weighty slab of a book offers each grand illumination and tiny doodle the glossy acreage they deserve.

Once saturated by the bright colours and peculiar design, I tear myself away to delve into the manuscript's history. I'm looking at a facsimile from the Tripartite Machzor, an Ashkenazi festival prayer book, created in the early 1300s. Probably written and illuminated in a workshop near Lake Constance, this undated manuscript is just one of a set of three, with siblings in the British Library and in Budapest's Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The Tripartite Machzor, along with hundreds of other Hebrew manuscripts, makes the Michael Collection an invaluable source of material for the academic study of Judaism.

Not least among this collection's gems are a catalogue of titles, written in 1848 by the collector Heimann Joseph Michael, and an alphabetical list of authors compiled by Rabbi Eliezer Loeb, a prominent communal leader, and Abraham Berliner, the noted historian and editor of Rashi and Targum Onkelos translations. These prized documents shine a light on the great pains scholars have taken over the centuries in their study of Hebrew texts.

In fact, the collection's accompanying academic literature was held in as much reverence as the collection itself, with Leopold Zunz (arguably the founder of modern Judaic studies) calling them "important contributions" in his *Zur Geschichte und Literatur* (On History and Literature). Told alongside the story of Heimann Joseph Michael, whose mysterious source of wealth and sudden death pose many questions to lay readers and academics alike, this is a thrilling tale from beginning to end.

As such as anything, Jewish Treasures is a fitting tribute to the generations of librarians and collectors who have dedicated themselves to the study of Jewish texts, which expound the discipline's value within the academic canon and preserve Jewish history.

A few pages on and another intricate, brightly coloured image leaps out. The eerie illustrations of the Meshal ha-Kadmoni, a book of fables by Isaac ibn Sahula, written on parchment in Ashkenaz around 1500, are strikingly reminiscent of the bird-head people in the Birds' Head Haggadah, the oldest surviving Ashkenazi Haggadah, which was written and illuminated around 200 years earlier. Many of us will know of the Birds' Head Haggadah from the reproductions of its fine illustrations in the Steinsaltz Haggadah (1997). Could the exposure of these sinister drawings of eagles and hawks similarly inspire a new wave of modern publications? A machzor for the Yamim Nora'im (the High Holy Days) containing long-hidden medieval scholarship, or a Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) with 15th-century illustrations? Yes please.

One of the great gifts of these manuscripts is the snapshot they offer of biblical and ritual events and of how our forebears imagined them. The Arba'ah Turim, a legal code by Jacob ben Asher, written on parchment in Italy in 1437-8 by Avignon's Moshe Beit El, displays gaudy illuminations of a wedding ceremony and the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, among others. But who are these children under the chuppah? Why are there ships in a scene from the Garden of Eden? Why does the serpent have a human face?

What's more, the manuscript's use of Rashi script (a semi-cursive typeface of the Hebrew alphabet named after the rabbinic commentator Rashi) will vindicate Talmud students the world over for their hard-spent hours mastering this alphabet.

Even the less colourful pages are eye-catching. In the Pococke Collection, we have facsimiles of Maimonides' plans of the Second Temple, paired with 17th-century recreations of those outlines. Aside from the wonder of peering at the Rambam's own handwriting, these pages reveal layers of European study and interpretation so reminiscent of talmudic commentary itself. Other folios showing Rambam's 13 Principles of Judaism contain his own revisions and edits: on these parchments we truly see Judaism's palimpsest of learning and tradition.

There is just one thing to note. While the preservation of holy texts in museums and archives allows Jewish thought and writings to be passed on to the next generation, it is something that more halachically observant Jews find incongruous and do sometimes have a problem with. As living to this line of thought, books are regarded as things that are either used as part of the community or retired with dignity in a genizah.

Then again, what a privilege it is to be offered this stunning stained-glass window into our history. It's wonderful to see the stories of Jewish texts woven into the histories of Oxford University, England and Europe. How grateful we should be that we have access to these manuscripts, which tell us so much about ourselves, and that they are cared for in as safe and esteemed a location as the Bodleian. ■



Jewish Treasures from Oxford Libraries by Rebecca Abrams and César Merchán-Hamann, The Bodleian Library, 2020, £30.79. **Noa Lessof Gendler** is the winner of the JR Young Journalist Prize 2020. She is education administrator at the New North London synagogue and a freelance editor for the Economist.

Everything is illuminated

A new book sheds light on Oxford's extensive collection of Hebrew manuscripts and offers an enthralling window into Jewish history. But let's be honest, it's all about the pictures, says **Noa Lessof Gendler**

Let's be honest now – there's not a single one among us, highbrow as we may be, who doesn't feel a childish surge of joy when confronted with a picture book.

Which is why the Bodleian Library's new coffee table tome, *Jewish Treasures from Oxford Libraries* by Rebecca Abrams and César Merchán-Hamann, is an unending delight. A thoughtfully laid-out history of Oxford's extensive Hebrew manuscript collections, this volume takes pride in the centrality of Judaica at the university and within the European academic canon. It is an extension of the Bodleian's dedication to this discipline, bringing rare and precious manuscripts to the public with characteristic sensitivity and flair, and inviting closer those who feel

spiritual ownership of them.

And the pictures. We have to start with the pictures.

The lustrous pages of this book rival even Christopher de Hamel's stunning 2016 volume *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*. The luxuriant facsimiles have been meticulously selected to offer not only comprehensive historical examples, accompanied by narrative and contextual information, but to demonstrate the sheer beauty and artistic merit of these works. On the first flip-through, you simply have to sink into the glorious illuminations.

"There's a creature that has human hands instead of clawed feet"