

Jewish Book Illustration in the 18th Century¹

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Of all art forms which Jews drew upon to embellish objects for religious purposes, book illustration—through its very nature—forms the largest single category. From the beginning of the Common Era until well into the Middle Ages the most widespread craft carried out by Jews was probably that of the goldsmith. However, the emergence of guilds led to the exclusion of Jews from this form of decorative art as well, and following the revival in the significance of decoration in Jewish religious practice, ritual objects were made by non-Jewish artists. The same is true of course in the case of the guild of painters except that—at least in northern Europe—the outcome was quite the opposite. In medieval manuscripts, especially in Italy and Spain, it is very much evident that the writing and the illuminations were not always by the same hand. On the contrary, the striking fact that larger illustrations in a manuscript are hardly influenced by the text itself nor are they, at times, even in the correct place, can only be explained by the involvement of non-Jewish illustrators. Due to the above mentioned relationship between Europeans and Jews, which after centuries of expulsion and persecution had led to the virtually complete social exclusion of Jews and consequently to their cultural exclusion, the necessity emerged for *soferim*, as trained scribes, to be responsible for the illustrative ornamentation of manuscripts as well.

David Kaufmann, who—with his broad knowledge of Jewish history—was also keen to emphasize the connection between art and Jewish life, provided a fundamental description of this in his detailed appendix to the Müller/von Schlosser edition of the “Sarajevo Haggadah.”² In this work he placed Jewish book illustration in the 17th and 18th centuries in an appropriate framework, especially with regard to the Moravian school for scribes, which, originating in Třebíč, primarily produced its most important works in the newly founded Vienna congregation in the first third of the 18th century. A large number of testimonials to highly developed Hebrew calligraphy still to be found in Bavaria are of this origin. The most important document of this kind is without doubt the handwritten *th'fillah* in the possession of the Heidingsfeld congregation. This prayer book, covering the whole year, comprises 187 sheets (each 22.5 x 30 cm), the first side of each sheet being numbered. The title page (fig. 1) and the last page (187b) provide information about the work's creation. Arjeh Juda Loeb “Cahana” and “Saphra” from Třebíč began working on this book on the first Tebeth 5491—Sunday, December 10, 1730—in Vienna during the reign of Emperor Charles (IV; 1711–1740) and completed it on Tuesday in the Chukath pericope 5495—June 28, 1735—in Hanau (הענה). The scribe also adds that he was the son of the Rabbi Elchanan “Cahana,” buried in Jerusalem. These details enable us to attribute the creation of the *th'fillah* precisely. It was a gift of the rabbi at that time, Baruch Cahana-Rapaport, to mark the inauguration of Heidingsfelder Synagogue on Friday, 30, in the month of Nisan 5540—May 8, 1780—and came into the possession of the congregation where he had held office.

¹ Harburger, Theo[dor]: Jüdische Buchmalerei im 18. Jahrhundert, in: Bayerische Israelische Gemeindezeitung, vol. 4 (1 May 1928), pp. 113–117.

² D.H. Müller and I. von Schlosser, *Die Haggadah von Sarajewo*, appendix by D. Kaufmann, “Zur Geschichte der Jüdischer Handschriftenillustration,” Vienna 1898, pp. 253–311. (Taken from David Kaufmann, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. III, pp. 173–228, Frankfurt a. M. 1915).



fig. 1. *Heidingsfeld Th'fillah*: title page

“Arjeh Juda Loeb Cahana and Saphra” and “Arjeh Loeb Cohen and Sopher” mentioned by D. Kaufmann, from whom various works have survived and are known to be by him, are, without doubt, identical. Some of these works date from the second half of the 18th century and are executed with great artistic and praiseworthy skill and complemented with illustrations.



fig. 2. *Heidingsfeld Th'fillah*: Depiction of the Temple lamp in the kabbalistic tree of life

The Heidingsfeld prayer book is a testimony to the mature skill of the Třebíč Torah scribe whom we encounter as someone completing not only the title sheet (fig. 1) but also the otherwise richly decorated pages.

With lively precision which, to us, seems utterly surprising, he endeavors to create the impression of a book “with letters based on the Amsterdam style” while simultaneously adhering to the late 17th century fashion of drawing. It is clearly apparent that he based this on a particular model which has still to be identified. The title page shows greatest similarities to those produced by printers in Frankfurt a. d. O. dating from the end of the 17th century, whereby our hand drawing is executed with much more care and artistic coherence. It therefore stands to reason that the Frankfurt woodcuts did not serve Arjeh Loeb as a model although they probably come from one common source.



fig. 3. *Heidingsfeld Th'fillah*: The beginning of “Psalms.”

The pages with the seven-branched lamp (fig. 2)—which as a kabbalistic tree of life, together with the name of god suggested through the position of letters, reminds us of amulets that were apparently important to people not only of Jewish faith in the 17th and 18th centuries—are also probably not to a design created by the book illustrator himself. The heavy lines preferred in the late Baroque period, which are also dominant here, speak in favor of this, whereas Arjeh Loeb had a lightness of hand wherever he was able to allow his own imagination to run free. This can be seen in the many illuminated letters with which he enlivens the text. In addition to purely ornamental motifs he placed the individual letters within a frame comprising small, picturesque landscapes, animals, fruits, and—without inhibition—human figures, similar to the two First Parents in the case of Iozer Ieschabbath Bereschith. The beginning of Psalms added to the prayer book illustrates this lightness of presentation in the introductory words אשרי (fig. 3). It can clearly be seen how the artist favored a lively design in contrast to the heavy style of the title sheet and the menorah. This same delicate

drawing can be found in another prayer book by the same artist that is now in the library of the Jewish Congregation in Vienna. It was created in 1721/22 (fig. 4).³

A collection of prayers for Yom Kippur Katan, written in 1720 for Mrs. Itl, the wife of Rabbi Meir Pösing, and now in private ownership in Fürth (fig. 5.), was created by the same hand or, if not, then certainly by someone in the same circle of Jewish scribes and book illustrators. As mentioned in the essay by D. Kaufmann above, a prayer book written and illustrated by Arjeh Loeb in the possession of Mr. Emanuel Baumgarten of Vienna, containing prayers for Shabbat and the songs of Isaac Luria, was made in 1717 for Meir Pösing, also of Vienna. Unfortunately, this masterpiece, picked out for praise by D. Kaufmann, was not transferred to the Vienna Jewish congregation with other items from the Baumgarten estate. A comparison, which would be of considerable art-historical interest, is therefore not possible. Nevertheless, due to the close ties to its first owner and its creation at approximately the same time, it can be assumed that the small Fürth prayer book is also a work by Arjeh Juda Loeb.

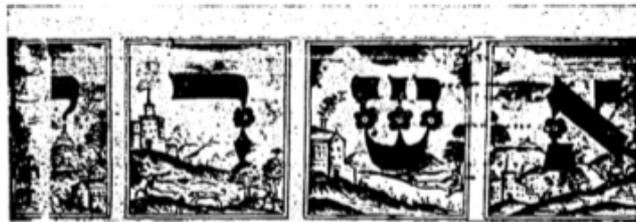


fig. 4. Prayer book previously owned by Baroness Wetzlar:
Miniature illustrating the first word in “Psalms.”



fig. 5. Yom Kippur Katan prayer book: title page
Private collection: Jgn. Schopflocher, Esq., Fürth i. B.

³ Dr. Bernhard Wachstein, “Das Testament der Baronin Eleonora Wetzlar von Plankenstern,” Archiv für Jewish Familienforschung, Vienna 1912, issue 2/3, pp. 4–9. The reproduction on which fig. 4 is based is shown in the aforementioned document on p. 2.

The more delicate execution of the drawing on the title sheet of the Fürth *th'fillah* compared to the pictures and even the illuminated letters in the Heidingsfeld *siddur* are largely due to its small format (15 x 8 cm), requiring it to be treated more like a miniature. That the later work demonstrates closer links to the outdated Late Baroque style than to the miniature of 1720 may be due to the fact that Juda Loeb Cahana—perhaps requested by the client—had to keep more or less closely to a certain model whereas, in the prayers for Yom Kippur Katan, he could give free rein to his own artistic concept and find expression in the less rigorous, lighter Rococo style which had predominated in the meanwhile.

A prayer book in a private collection in Munich which comprises the Shabbat hymns by Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Man of God, written in 1724 in Vienna (measuring 10 x 7 cm), was produced by the flourishing Viennese school of Jewish *Kleinmeister* (Little Masters) that excelled in the field of book illustration. Compared to the latter book discussed above, it boasts a stronger artistic concept as a whole, as shown both on the title page (fig. 6) and in one other sheet which depicts the Ten Men, gathered in the open air, observing the blessing of the new moon (fig. 7).



fig. 6. Shabbat prayers by Rabbi Isaac Luria: Title page
Private collection: Jakob Spaeth, Esq., art dealer, Munich



fig. 7. Shabbat prayers by Rabbi Isaac Luria: Blessing of the new moon
 Private collection: Jakob Spaeth, Esq., art dealer, Munich



fig. 8. Small *th'chinnah* book: Title page
 Private collection: J. Wassermann, Esq., banker, Bamberg

In this scene taken from life, as well as in other pictures of religious life in the home, the pleasure of creating a genre-like composition—something that is otherwise not so frequently the case in Jewish artwork—can be found. This is also of considerable importance culturally and historically on account of its depiction of traditional Jewish dress. A small, privately owned *th'chinnah* book in Bamberg, the first owner of which was the charitable Mr. David Moseö, son of the priest Mr. Nathan Moseö, for whom the little book (measuring 6.5 x 9.5 cm) was made in 1726, is likewise of importance thanks to its pictures. The style of its artistic execution as a whole points to the same provenance as the other works mentioned above, even without text-related correlations.

A similarly very small book of common prayers with conventional blessings and short prayers for special occasions, completed on the first of Kislev 5516, i.e. November 5, 1755 by Moses, son of the late Mr. Jakob Moses of Schnaittach, demonstrates a different artistic concept that was, however, not uninfluenced by the Bohemian school of artistic writing. It was commissioned by a young man, the bridegroom David Lewi, son of Mr. Naftali of Schnaittach, as a gift for his bride, the chaste Chanah of Baiersdorf.



fig. 9. Small prayer book for private devotional use: Front endpaper and title page
Private collection: Dr. B. Meyer, *Geh. Justizrat*, Munich

The little book (fig. 9), measuring 10.5 x 7 cm, is now in private ownership in Munich. Through the more intensive working of the background, the effect is less clear and the result more cumbersome and primitive. Nevertheless, the picture of the carriage (fig. 10), selected to illustrate a prayer when traveling, is not only delightful through the choice of its subject—its execution is equally appealing. This small book, still with its pretty original leather binding, is of particular value due to the craftsman who made it. He is connected to a *soferim* family from which Moses Schnaittach is descended. The latter, born at the turn of the 19th century in Fürth, created the *Kriegshaber Memorbuch* (Memory Book),⁴ adding a linear decoration to the first page. While the ornamentation of most *Memorbücher* is

⁴ Illustrated in a description of Rabbi Dr. M. Weinberg, *Das Memorbuch* (*Bayer. Israel. Gemeindezeitung*, 1926, no. 5)

only very simple, this book—now in Fischach—is the work of an artist. In 1738, during the reign of Charles (VI), Z'bi Hirsch, son of the late R. Bezalel of Lemberg, decorated it with delicate illuminated letters and pen-and-ink drawings which are noticeably different to European illuminated characters. On a narrow strip we can see depictions of mythical animals fighting each other—depictions without any contextual relationship—whereas, for the blessing of the new moon, a new moon and a full moon appear as an explanatory addition.⁵ This interesting work clearly highlights the important cultural-historical fact that educated and adept artists from Polish lands, beset by internal conflicts, migrated to the west and spread elements from their own culture among German Jews. That, in addition to trained artists, proficient scribes without any specific artistic education also added decorations to the manuscripts they had completed, is illustrated by the *Kriegshaber th'fillah*. Created in 1748 by the devout local cantor Nathan (Note) Sternburg, son of the rabbi Nastali Hirsch, it is very primitive but nevertheless not without charm.

The artistic decoration of manuscripts by hand was, of course, increasingly pushed into the background when printing became cheaper and more widespread. It therefore comes as no surprise that there were fewer and fewer opportunities for such scribes to demonstrate their religious fervor and introspective reflection, and that the use of ornate lettering became less and less. Consequently, an artistic genre perished which, thanks to its unique qualities and advocates, can rightfully be called “Jewish.”

(Translation: Christopher Wynne)



fig. 10. Small prayer book for private devotional use: Prayer for when traveling
Private collection: Dr . B. Meyer, *Geh. Justizrat*, Munich

⁵ Illustrations in *Jüdisches Lexikon*, vol. I, column 769/770