

Continuity and Change—  
Material Culture and Jewish History



Wesleyan University and Congregation Adath Israel

Middletown, Spring 2011



In Spring 2011, Wesleyan University and the Congregation Adath Israel in Middletown began to discuss possible collaborative work around the Judaica collection housed at the Congregation Adath Israel. The museum was created out of a passion for Judaica by Nathan and Shirley Shapiro, and has been cared for by their son, Stephen Shapiro. Located within steps of each other, Adath Israel and Wesleyan University rarely collaborated on projects. Wesleyan University “Service Learning Center” has opened up a new venue for such collaboration.

After a few months of preparation, my class HIST 267: “Out of the Ghetto: Jews of Eastern Europe” became the first to work with Adath Israel’s collection. Students in this course, alongside regular assignments for a history course, worked on select objects from the AI’s collection. They attended workshops and lectures focused on “reading” artifacts with Professor Shalom Sabar, an art historian from Hebrew University; they visited the Jewish Museum and the Tenement Museum in New York to get a sense of possibilities objects offer for studying history. Finally, students embarked on the project of crafting a catalogue description of objects said to originate from eastern Europe, and of writing papers, in which they investigated of the history behind the objects. They elaborated on, and sometimes corrected, the existing record.

This is the fruit of their work. Sometimes, objects considered were typical of east European Jewish cultural production – such as the fish spice box or the large Hanukkah lamp, typical of Hasidic east European Hanukkah menorahs. Sometimes, they discovered an unknown use of objects, as for example, the wooden noisemaker,

that had been thought to be a Purim grogger, but had in fact a very different use!

We photographed the objects, renumbered them, since some of the existing numbers were inconsistent, or even erroneous. The new numbering system consists of the year (2011). Semester (S, for Spring), class number (267), and the object number, as well as in parenthesis the original number in the AI Inventory—if such in fact existed. This new system will not only give each item a unique number, but it will also become a permanent historical record of the students’ work.

This is but the first step of what we hope will be years of fruitful collaboration.

We want to express our thanks to the Service Learning Center and the Jewish and Israel Studies Program at Wesleyan University for support, and of course, to the Congregation Adath Israel for their permission to let us work on their wonderful collection.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Magda Teter". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and a long, sweeping underline.

Magda Teter  
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Torah Pointer.

9 x 3 in. [at widest point] x ½ in. [at tallest point] (22.86 x 7.62 x 1.27 cm). Brass, cast, welded, and engraved.

2011.S.267.1 (no previous inventory number)

*A DECORATIVE TORAH POINTER:*

*A REFLECTION ON JEWISH ATTITUDES TOWARDS ART*

*Julia Fram '12*

The content and style of this brass Torah pointer is standard of pointers and ritual art made in Poland at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but unusual in terms of its form. A pointer is a tool used to indicate ones' place when reading from the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Pointers of Eastern European origins are usually made of metal, such as copper alloys or silver, although wooden pointers are not uncommon.<sup>1</sup> Handles of pointers are typically cylindrical, between 6 and 14 inches in length, and terminate in a figurine of a hand that has one outstretched finger.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, a Torah Pointer is referred to as a "yad," which means "hand" in Hebrew. This name not only calls to mind the structure of the yad, but also highlights how one uses the pointer to track the text when reading as if it were an extension of their hand. It is important for the pointer to be easy to hold so the reader can avoid directly touching the Torah. Pointers can be ascribed a very practical role in Jewish ceremony, both protecting the Torah scroll from damage and facilitating its reading.

On one end of the pointer from the Adath Israel Collection is a hand with an outstretched finger. The other features a crown and two lion figurines. Connecting the two ends is a

<sup>1</sup> Cecil Roth, *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) 324.

<sup>2</sup> Cecil Roth, *Jewish Art*. 324; see also Grace Grossman, *Jewish Art*. (New York: Beaux Art Publications) 109.

curved handle cast of brass that resembles a tree trunk that culminates in an arbor of four branches. A vine winds around the tree trunk shaft, which is engraved with small flowers.

The crown, a brass casting with a small loop at its tip, is welded to the two branches farthest away from the pointer's outstretched finger. The lions, welded to the main column mainly by their feet, have engraved features and face outwards, creating a symmetrical effect with the handle and crown serving as an axis. The pointer, made entirely of brass, is smooth and a golden color with a brown sheen. The object is heavy and due to its non-cylindrical shape, difficult to grasp in one hand.

The style and content of this specific pointer suggests that it was likely made in Poland in either the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The pair of ferocious lions are evocative of both traditional Jewish iconography along with the Polish folk aesthetic of symmetry. The lions might represent the Tribe of Judah, a symbol deriving its meaning from the moment in the book of Genesis when Judah's father Jacob compares Judah to a lion and implies that the Messiah will be a descendent of Judah.<sup>3</sup> A second potential interpretation of the lions relates to a segment from *Pirke Avot*, a rabbinic text, which states that a man must be, "strong as a lion [to do the will of thy father.]"<sup>4</sup> In addition to the symbolic significance of the lions to Jewish culture, the pair of identical lions,

facing away from each other, creates a striking symmetry across a vertical axis. This symmetrical effect is a common characteristic of Polish folk Art.<sup>5</sup>

The handle has been fashioned to resemble a tree with four branches, interspersed flowers and a vine that meanders its way to the top of the tree's arbor. It is possible that this resemblance is meant to symbolize the Tree of Life or the Tree of Good and Evil, both mentioned the first few chapters of the book of Genesis in the story of Adam and Eve. In addition, it is also possible that the form of the handle has been influenced by local Polish folk art. Natural themes were often expressed in the art of Polish peasants, reflecting their predominant roles as farmers, trapped by the feudal system.<sup>6</sup> Jews too lived in rural areas and likely were influenced by the major presence of plants and animals in the art of their Polish neighbors. Perhaps the traditions of Polish folk art along with the shared rural surroundings of Poles and Jews inspired the natural essence of this specific Torah pointer.

While the imagery and many aspects of the style of the pointer are generally consistent with that of the Jewish ritual art made in Poland during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the object is somewhat atypical because of its form. The pointer is quite heavy and difficult to grasp with one hand. Due to the significant function of yads, they are usually designed to be smaller and easier to handle and attempting to use this specific pointer to facilitate the reading of the Torah would likely be a challenge. The weight and

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<sup>3</sup> Harold W. Attridge, *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 79; Roth, *Jewish Art*, 314.

<sup>4</sup> "Ceremonial and Decorative Art." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. 20 Apr, 2011;

<[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ceremonial\\_and\\_Decorative\\_Art](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ceremonial_and_Decorative_Art)>; Maurice Berger, *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 40.

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<sup>5</sup> Ewa Fryś-Pietraskowa, *Folk Art in Poland* (Warszawa: Arkady Press, 1991), 41, 122.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Gutmann, *Beauty in Holiness*, 6.

awkward shape of the object suggests that the pointer was crafted to fulfill not a ritualistic role, but a decorative one.

Perhaps the object was a gift to a synagogue to commemorate its opening or maybe a present for a recent bar mitzvah. While there is not sufficient information to determine if the object was crafted for a specific occasion and what that occasion might be, if one assumes that the object has a decorative purpose, it is possible to make further insights about the cultural values and economic situation of the object's owner and community of origin. First of all, the creation of an object for an ornamental purpose, suggests that an individual, a group, or a community were sufficiently affluent to purchase or commission the decorative pointer. The economic condition of the owners must have been somewhat stable to afford the purchase of what might be considered a luxury good.

The ornamental nature of the pointer implies that at the time of its creation, there must have been a market for decorative ritual objects and, thus, that people considered decorative ceremonial objects to have value. This concept is quite striking considering the interesting relationship between the traditional Jewish religion and visual art. There has been a prevalent conception that Judaism might not value or even condone visual art.<sup>7</sup> Many scholars cite the second commandment in Exodus, Chapter 20 as evidence for this notion.<sup>8</sup> The text states, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on earth beneath or that is in the water

under them. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."<sup>9</sup> This statement in itself is somewhat unclear and doesn't explicitly prohibit the making of art or images but instead seems to forbid the making of images that one would worship. Furthermore, about 10 chapters later, the first documented Jewish artist, Bezalel, is introduced in the text. The initial reaction of many is to accept the intent of the text as a prohibition against creating art, resulting in an undetermined place for art in Judaism.<sup>10</sup>

In time, however, attitudes towards the place of art in Judaism has altered as authorities began to encourage the decoration and creation of objects used in religious ceremonies. The yad, one among other accessory objects for the Torah, that was first created in the Middle Ages and became widespread later in the modern period.<sup>11</sup> A number of objects that today many might assume date back to antiquity and times of the Mishnah and Talmud, like pointers and Torah Crowns, were in fact introduced into the Jewish tradition in more recent times. While many factors contributed to the creation and induction of these ritual objects into Jewish ceremonial custom, the influence of local cultures on Jewish communities in different geographic regions for example, the drive to satisfy the rabbinic concept of *hiddur mitzvot* likely contributed greatly to this trend.<sup>12</sup> *Hiddur mitzvot* refers to the expectation that when someone is performing a mitzvah, such as

<sup>7</sup> Shalom Sabar, lecture "Workshop at Adath Israel with Professor Shalom Sabar," 12 Apr, 2011. Middletown, CT.

<sup>8</sup> Guttman, *Beauty in Holiness*, xi.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Attridge, *HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York: HarperOnce (2006) 117.

<sup>10</sup> Shalom Sabar, lecture "Workshop at Adath Israel with Professor Shalom Sabar," 12 Apr, 2011. Middletown, CT.

<sup>11</sup> Vivian B. Mann, "Spirituality and Jewish Ceremonial Art," *Artibus et Historiae* 24, no. 48 (2003), 173.

<sup>12</sup> Roth, *Jewish Art*, 310.

when they read from the Torah, attempts should be made to glorify the act as much as possible, often resulting in the decoration and inclusion of elaborate ritual objects in Jewish ceremonies.<sup>13</sup>

Many Jewish artists have taken advantage of the comparative ease of creating intricate pointers, which at times can be more affordable and manageable objects to craft relative to other ritual objects due to their small size and their extremely significant role in the Torah service, resulting in a diverse array of elaborately decorated pointers.<sup>14</sup> Pointers are, however, usually crafted to be easy to hold so while artists often experiment in terms of decorative aspects of the objects, the form is somewhat consistent among pointers. The effort by artisans in making pointers reflects the perceived relationship between making a pointer beautiful and showing honor to God prescribed by the rabbinic understanding of Hiddur Mitzvot. For example, the pointer of interest has a brass crown welded to the end of the handle opposite the extended hand. The presence of the crown might serve to emphasize and praise the object's connection to the Torah. In addition to the regal associations connected to crowns and royalty, historically, the term "crown," has been used to represent the Torah.<sup>15</sup>

This decorative pointer represents an even further development in Jewish attitudes towards art. The community or owner of a pointer which could not be used in religious ceremony due to the shape were probably able to recognize and value the

visual aspects of the pointer apart from its ritual significance. This assertion is consistent with changing approaches to Jewish culture by Eastern European Jews in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, who, surrounded by the shifting political and cultural scenery of Eastern Europe, began to perceive Jewish identity and culture much differently. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a decline in observance among Eastern European Jews, many of whom began to assimilate into local communities.<sup>16</sup> Often associated with the secularization of many Jews was the application of the scientific analysis central to Enlightenment philosophy to the study of Jewish ritual art and other cultural tradition.<sup>17</sup> For the first time, many Jews, eager to understand and preserve their Jewish heritage but also, slightly distanced from the religion, were to perceive and study visual culture, in a way that was not completely biased by their connections to Jewish ritual and its meaning.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, not just visual aspects of Jewish culture were reexamined under this new lens. For example, at the turn of the century, Simon Dubnow, a preeminent Jewish scholar from Russia who had lost touch with the religious aspects of Judaism and experienced political change and violence towards Jews in Russia, produced historical writing that was highly influenced by the effect of the Enlightenment on his native Russia and the emerging political movements of a society consisting of multiple nationalities and economic sectors than ever before, all struggling to define themselves.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Vivian B. Mann, *The Jewish Museum, New York* (New York: Scala Books, 1993), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Roth, *Jewish Art*, 324

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Gutmann, *Beauty in Holiness: Studies in Jewish Customs and Ceremonial Art* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1970), 93.

<sup>16</sup> Berger, *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*, 90.

<sup>17</sup> Guttman, *Beauty in Holiness*, vii.

<sup>18</sup> Mann, *The Jewish Museum, New York*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> R. Seltzer "From Graetz to Dubnow: The Impact of the East European Milieu on the Writing of Jewish History: in *The Legacy of Jewish Migration: 1881 and its Impact* ed. D. Berger, 50, 54-55.

The changing attitudes of Jews towards visual culture are evidenced by new movements observed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to collect Judaica and establish Jewish museums. For example, in 1904, Judge Mayer Sulzbeger donated a large number of historical documents to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. This initial collection eventually became The Jewish Museum in New York. A large number of other major museums and collections were also established in Europe at this time, such as the Jewish Museum of Warsaw in 1910.<sup>20</sup> Like Dubnow who applied scientific thought to interpret Jewish history during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many other Jews acted to study, collect, and share Judaica due to their progressive ability to see ceremonial objects for their artistic and historic value, not only their ritualistic meaning.

The content, style, and form of the brass pointer exhibits characteristics consistent with ancient Jewish traditions but also that reflect the time of its creation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Poland. For example, the decorative figurines that have been cast and welded to the yad are likely meant to represent Jewish symbols that have existed since antiquity and are explicitly mentioned in the Torah such as the Tree of Life, the Lions of Judah, and the crown while the style in which these Jewish symbols were represented and symmetrically arranged exhibit the influence of Polish folk art. Furthermore, the weight and unusual shape of the pointer which would render it almost impossible to use for its ritualistic purpose in the Torah service suggests that that the pointer was crafted to serve a decorative purpose for either an individual or a community who had enough money to spare for an ornamental object. The

appreciation of ritual objects for simply their decorative value would mark a further change from antiquity. Furthermore, this progression reflects a new approach to the understanding of visual culture in the Jewish tradition and is likely related to trends among Eastern European Jews involving assimilation into local communities and use of Enlightened approaches to analyze, connect with, understand, and preserve Jewish culture.

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<sup>20</sup> Mann, *The Jewish Museum, New York*, 9.

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Tefillin Covers

Poland, late 18th or 19th century

2 in. x 1 ½ in. x 3 in. Silver or silver-plated brass, repoussé, engraved  
2011.S.267.2a and 2b (#72)

This pair of silver or silver plated hollow boxes contains several detailed engraved images of plants and animals on their tops and sides. These images of flora and fauna are consistent with others produced in 18th century eastern Europe Judaica. The front faces of the boxes are decorated with a strong, large male lion baring his teeth and standing on his hind legs. He is also wielding a staff with the Star of David on top of it in front of him. On the left side of the boxes is an engraving of an eagle or a falcon, perched on a branch with its wings spread, as if it is ready to take off or it just landed. An image of a single palm tree on top of some grass covers the right side of the box. Both of the boxes display an image of a gazelle, about to leap over a patch of grass. These four images around the sides are the same on both of the boxes, though not

identical. The only explicit difference between the two boxes is visible on the top covers. Both covers are engraved with an image of two lions standing on their hind legs, with their bodies facing the center and their heads turned facing outward with their mouths bared open. There is a crown set in between them, as well as some Hebrew letters. One box reads Shin-resch (*shel rosh*), telling the wearer that box is for the head, while the other box says Shin-yud (*shel yad*), or for the arm. The letters are the only major difference between the two boxes. One interesting thing to note about the engravings, with the exception of the image of the palm tree, is that all of the animals depicted seem to be in action or motion.

Ali Newman '12

*LIVING OUT THE WORD OF GOD: ANIMAL IMAGERY IN  
JUDAICA*

*Ali Newman '12*

Tefillin, two small boxes with straps attached to them that contain Hebrew texts that Jewish men are required to place one box on their head and tie the other one on their arm each weekday morning as a reminder to keep the law of God, are biblical in origin. They are commanded within the context of several laws outlining a Jew's relationship to God:

And these words, which I command you this day, shall be in your heart: And you shall teach them diligently to your

children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. And you shall bind them for a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the posts of your house, and on your gates.<sup>21</sup>

To fulfill the commandment to “bind” the texts to “your head” and “between your eyes,” boxes called *tefillin* were developed that contained the sets of biblical verses in which this was commanded. Many of these boxes were similar to this pair of engraved silver *tefillin* covers from eighteenth or nineteenth century Poland, and were crafted by Jews and non-Jews alike.

The *tefillin* also represent the tradition of the Oral Torah. The Torah was intended to be a part of the everyday life of the Jewish people, and as such, its tradition could not simply remain in a book. The Law of God was passed along by word of mouth until finally it was written down in the form of the Talmud, and the practice of wearing *tefillin* in everyday life is a continuation of the tradition of the Oral Torah. This shows that following the Law of God goes beyond reading the Torah and the Talmud, and involves an active participation in daily life—wearing *tefillin* is a great way of actively living out the Law of God.

Beyond their religious significance and historical origins, these *tefillin* boxes are a prime example of the importance of material culture and its connection to religion and history, as we can learn much about “the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given

time;” in this case, the Jewish community during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>22</sup> Because “gold and silver-smithery was one of the characteristic Jewish occupations in most countries...it is believed that from early times until the modern era, Jews in the Eastern countries were responsible for the manufacture” of objects such as these *tefillin* covers, menorahs, mezuzahs, spice boxes, and other Judaica.<sup>23</sup> Jews often used these artifacts to create a visual representation of the important teachings of the Torah and Talmud as a reminder to carry out their practices in everyday life.

These covers serve more than just a practical purpose—they are works of art, and because of this they “constitute a large and special category within artifacts because of their inevitable aesthetic and occasional ethical or spiritual (iconic) dimensions,” which makes them “direct and often overt of intentional expressions of cultural belief.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these *tefillin* covers is the imagery engraved on the top and sides of the boxes and the symbolism of these images. The two boxes contain imagery of flora and fauna that is consistent with other eighteenth and nineteenth century Judaica. By the eighteenth century, “the types of Judaica arriving...were transformed under the influence of East European art produced by both Christian and Jewish professional,” and it is at this point when we begin to see the emergence of “flora and fauna...overwhelm[ing] the traditional

<sup>21</sup> Deut, 6:6-9 (American King James Version)

<sup>22</sup> Jules Prown, “Mind Matter: an Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1

<sup>23</sup> Cecil Roth, “Jewish Ritual Art” in *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History* (New York: McMillan, 1961), 311

<sup>24</sup> Prown, “Mind Matter,” 2

tower form of objects such as the spice container” with “images of fruit, flowers, animals, and birds.”<sup>25</sup>

The front face of both of the boxes displays an image of a deer, about to leap over a patch of grass. The deer evokes an image of beauty, grace and swiftness in almost every culture, but it holds a particular importance for Jews: The Hebrew word for deer is *Tzvi*, and it was used to describe the Holy Land of Israel, which they referred to as the “Land of the Deer.” The abundance of animals and plants in the Holy Land was a source of pride for the Jews and thus, the deer on the cover might represent the bountiful and plentiful Israel. The image of the deer is consistent with the other images of abundant plant and animal life produced in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Judaica.

On the left side of the boxes is an engraving of an eagle, perched on a branch with its wings spread, as if it is ready to take off or it just landed. The eagle symbolizes “the wisdom based on the Holy Scriptures on its apocrypha, as well on Talmud, Midrash and the mystic literature, containing the knowledge from the oral tradition of Torah.”<sup>26</sup> Throughout the Bible, God’s power, protection and presence is represented through the eagle—as Pawel Szkolot notes, this passage from Deuteronomy perfectly depicts the ways in which the eagle represented God:

Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,  
that flutters over its young,  
spreading out its wings, catching them,  
bearing them on its pinions,  
the Lord above did lead them  
and there was no foreign god with him.<sup>27</sup>

The eagle on the *tefillin* box is almost a perfect visual representation of this passage—its wings are spread and is looking down, as if watching over its young, just as God watches over his creation. Additionally, the eagle is a symbol of mercy in many cultures, not just in Judaism, so the symbol of the eagle has many meanings for Jews: it is at once a reminder of God’s presence and power in daily life, as well as a representation of his mercy and love for his creation. It is at once a symbol to love, respect and fear.



Tefillin covers (side). 2011.S.267.2a and 2b (#72)

<sup>25</sup> “Ceremonial and Decorative Art” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. 2010. YIVO Jewish Research Center. 21 Apr, 2011; [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ceremonial\\_and\\_Decorative\\_Art](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ceremonial_and_Decorative_Art)

<sup>26</sup> Pawel Szkolot “The Eagle as the Symbol of Divine Presence and Protection in Ancient Jewish Art.” *Studia Judaica* 5, no. 1 (2002): 1-11.

<sup>27</sup> Deut 32: 11.

An image of a single palm tree covers the right side of each box. As Professor Shalom Sabar noted in his lecture, the palm tree is the symbol of Judea in the Roman culture, and is also often seen as a visual representation of the Torah, which is referred to as *Etz Haim*, or Tree of Life. This gives concrete expression to the phrase recited upon returning the *Sefer Torah* to the Ark: "The Torah is a Tree of Life to those who hold fast to it, and he who supports it is happy."<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the palm "represented the fecundity of Palestine," and its visual representation reminds us of the fertile and bountiful land of ancient Judea. Similar to the engravings of the deer and eagle, the palm tree is another visual representation of Jewish history and culture, and serves as a reminder of the importance of Torah and carrying out its laws in everyday life.

The backs of the boxes are engraved with a strong, large male lion baring his teeth and standing on his hind legs. He is also wielding a staff with the Star of David on top of it in front of him. The tops of the boxes are also engraved with two lions standing on their hind legs, with their bodies facing the center and their heads turned outward with their mouths bared open and a crown resting safely between them. The lion is perhaps one of the most common and important animals in Jewish culture, probably because of its direct biblical background. The lion represents the Lion of the Tribe of Judah because Jacob refers to his son Judah as a "Young Lion". Lions were often depicted in a harmonious pair, and historians speculate that these lions may be symbolic replacements of the cherubim that once adorned the Ark of the Tabernacle and the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>29</sup> Lions seem to serve as a link between the

spiritual and temporal worlds, as a protection of the sacred and holy word of God.

The lion, eagle and deer were all very common images in eighteenth and nineteenth century Judaica, but it is interesting that all three are depicted together on these boxes because together they illustrate "the Rabbinic dictum (Ethics of the Fathers, V, 23) that a man should be bold as a lion, light as an eagle and fleet as a deer to fulfill the will of his Father in Heaven."<sup>30</sup> Whether the maker of the covers was trying to visually recreate this dictum or if he was just using common imagery of the time is unknown, but either way the use of the animals and palm tree represents the importance of their symbolism in daily life centuries after the Torah had been commanded. This use of symbolism "together with an aesthetic...overlaid with the flora and fauna of the natural world defined a new branch of Jewish ceremonial art."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Proverbs, 3:18

<sup>29</sup> Roth, "Jewish Ritual Art," 312

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<sup>30</sup> Roth, "Jewish Ritual Art," 313

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Mezuzah

Eastern Europe, 19<sup>th</sup> century

4 inches x 1 ¾ inches. Silver, or silver-plated brass

Cast metal, embossed, engraved, punched; parchment

Middletown, CT, Adath Israel Museum, presented in honor of the

60<sup>th</sup> birthday of Max Edelberg by friends and family

2011.S.267.3 (#90)

*HISTORY OF MEZUZOT:*

*EXAMINATION OF A NINETEENTH-CENTURY*

*MEZUZAH*

*Joanna Schiffman '11*

This mezuzah appears to be created by casting metal and perhaps embossing and is composed of what resembles a small castle or temple and two men, presumably Moses and Aaron. Moses and Aaron were often depicted in Polish Jewish artifacts, as seen on a Polish Torah cover at the Jewish Museum in New York. An arch with a brass middle resides in the center of the piece, between Moses and Aaron. Above the arch is the tallest part of the castle with a window where the Hebrew scroll resides. *יְשׁוּעָה* is the only word on the scroll that can be seen. Above the window there is what looks to resemble fire or a light, perhaps represented the eternal light that burns in synagogues, or the burning bush used to communicate with Moses. At the bottom of the mezuzah, below where Moses, Aaron, and the arch stand, there is a single flower.

Analysis:

I remember sitting on the floor of the hallway, which had become a sea of empty cardboard boxes and packing peanuts. It was the day my parents had coined 'Grandma moving day.' The movers had left, the last box had been unpacked, and everyone was excited to sit down. Suddenly they realized they had forgotten just one thing. Everyone joined me in the hallway and I watched as my

parents and my grandmother fiddled with small shiny artifact. My mom held it perfectly slanted as my dad nailed it to the doorpost of my grandma's new apartment and then the adults quickly recited a short prayer. As soon as the prayer was finished, everyone breathed a sigh of relief and we all went inside to relax. That night, when I returned to my house, I noticed we also had a crooked piece of art on our doorpost. What I did not realize at five years old was that mezuzot exist on the doors of many Jewish homes all over the world, and have for many, many years.

A mezuzah is a religious object fastened to a doorpost. It consists of a piece of parchment rolled up and placed in a case with a small hole. Passages from Deuteronomy chapter six, lines four through nine and chapter 11, lines thirteen to twenty-one<sup>32</sup> are

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<sup>32</sup> Full text that is written on parchment in mezuzot: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house, and upon thy gates.

And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will give grass in thy fields for thy cattle, and thou shalt eat and be satisfied. Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; and the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain, and the ground shall not yield her fruit; and ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you. Therefore shall ye

inscribed on the parchment.<sup>33</sup> Within this inscription there is a particular passage that is written twice, both in chapter six, line nine, and chapter eleven, line twenty: "Write them on the doorposts of your house and upon the gates." This instruction from the Torah is the reason Jews post mezuzot.<sup>34</sup> The specific mezuzah here from the Adath Israel collection is a small silver, or silver-plated brass mezuzah from Eastern Europe, likely from the nineteenth century. An arch in the center depicts Moses and Aaron on either side. One of the figures looks as if he is wearing a breastplate, which is a clear way to depict Aaron. The top of the mezuzah has three peaks perhaps of a castle. The whole Mezuzah is tarnished, with the exception of the middle of the brass center of the arch. This, together with the imprecise and unrealistic faces of Moses and Aaron help reveal the object's age. As demonstrated in the opening story, mezuzot might often attract little attention. However, in modern times at least, it is customary for religious Jews to kiss it when entering or exiting the door. There are even strict rules about when a mezuzah must be affixed. Jews in the Diaspora are instructed to put their mezuzot in place within 30 days of moving

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lay up these My words in your heart and in your soul; and ye shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. And ye shall teach them your children, talking of them, when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates; that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, upon the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers to give them, as the days of the heavens above the earth." Deut: 6,4-9, Deut: 11, 13-21

<sup>33</sup> "Mezuzah," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Ben Zion Luria, "Development of the Mezuzah," *Dor le-dor*. 5, no. 1 (1976).

to a new home, while in Israel, mezuzot are supposed to be hung the day of the move.<sup>35</sup> In addition, Belle Rosenbaum argues that even in the Diaspora, if a Jew buys a house, he must hang the Mezuzah as soon as he moves in, even if he should not recite the blessing until 30 days later.<sup>36</sup> The Hebrew blessing that must be recited when hanging a mezuzah, translated in English is, “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to affix a mezuzah.”<sup>37</sup>

Mezuzot like this one, although fulfilling the same commandment, have evolved from what they once were. Originally the Torah passage, the “Shema,” was written on the outside stones of buildings. Evidence of this is found dating back to the Seleucid Empire.<sup>38</sup> However, the Greeks from the Seleucid Empire, which existed before the Common Era, sought to destroy the Torah, and they often destroyed or removed the Shema stones. Legend has it, in order to fulfill the commandment but prevent the text from being destroyed, Jews began writing the words on parchment and hiding them in hollow sticks.<sup>39</sup> The earliest evidence of mezuzot similar in form to this nineteenth-century mezuzah comes from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.<sup>40</sup>

Although Jewish mystics regarded the mezuzah as an amulet that protects the inhabitants of its house from demons, the rabbinic leaders emphasized a more religious purpose to it.<sup>41</sup> They hoped that having it on each doorpost would remind Jews that there is only one God.<sup>42</sup> During Geonic times, mezuzot were made with small apertures in the front of the casing. For the first time, something in addition to the Torah verses were written on the parchment. On the back of it, the word “Shaddai” would be inscribed and placed in the case so that the word could be seen through the hole.<sup>43</sup> Jewish mystics believed this to be a divine name.<sup>44</sup> This name for God was believed to be very influential in repelling demons.<sup>45</sup> This mezuzah, as well as all mezuzot since then, has been adorned with a small hole and with the name “Shaddai” showing through. On this mezuzah, the aperture appears to be a window of the castle that it is depicting.

Above the aperture is a flame-like image. It may represent the eternal light, or the *ner tamid*, a light that is above an ark in a synagogue and always burns. It is a reminder of the menorah that

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>41</sup> Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961), 146.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>44</sup> “Shaddai,” in *Encyclopedia of Occultism & Parapsychology*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit: Gale Group, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 148

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<sup>35</sup> “Mezuzah,” 157.

<sup>36</sup> Belle Rosenbaum, *Upon Thy Doorposts: The Law, the Lore, the Love of Mezuzot* (New York: Jacob and Belle Rosenbaum Foundation, 1995), 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Luria, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

was always burning in the temple as well a reminder of God's everlasting presence.<sup>46</sup> This may show that the castle-like structure is representative of the Temple or a synagogue. Since theoretically, according to rabbinic authority, the synagogue always had to be the tallest point in a town, the high tower in the middle may depict the massive height. Another possibility is that the flames represent the burning bush. According to stories from the Torah, Moses was spoken to through a burning bush and instructed by God to lead the Jews out of bondage.<sup>47</sup> Since Moses is also depicted on the Mezuzah, this is another strong interpretation of what the art is representing.

As the Jewish communities in Europe were growing and expanding in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the desire for and production of fancy and artistic religious objects increased. Silver became much more plentiful in Europe during the 15<sup>th</sup> century after the European discovery of the Americas.<sup>48</sup> Silversmiths in Eastern Europe were frequently Jewish so it made sense that beautiful Jewish art was made in silver. Jews themselves likely made most of it.<sup>49</sup> With the increase use of silver, too came an increase in

innovative artistic decorations on ceremonial art.<sup>50</sup> This mezuzah is made mostly of silver and therefore may have been worth something. Therefore, it most likely was put inside a building on a doorpost to a room, not outside. Perhaps it was on the doorpost of a synagogue.

The use of Moses and Aaron can be representative of many things. In Italy, Jews often borrowed ideas from Catholic art. For example, a common Catholic picture was of an arch with a saint on either side. Jewish ceremonial art would replicate this idea, replacing the saints with Moses and Aaron. Similarly, it was common for Christian art to specifically represented Moses and David. In Jewish ceremonial objects, David was replaced with Aaron.<sup>51</sup> It is possible that Jewish ceremonial objects in Eastern Europe were influenced by Italian Jewish work or other Christian work. However, it is also possible that Moses and Aaron are depicted on this mezuzah and in other pieces of Jewish ceremonial art because of their centrality in the Torah.

Moses is a prominent and significant figure from the Bible. Some of the most important stories of Moses include his communication with God through the burning bush, the exodus he leads out of Egypt, and his receiving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Moses was a leader of the Jewish people and gave them the Torah.<sup>52</sup> His older brother Aaron was also an important

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<sup>46</sup> "Ner Tamid," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillian Reference USA, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> "Moses," 527.

<sup>48</sup> Vivian B. Mann, "Spirituality and Jewish Ceremonial Art," *Artibus et Historiae* 24, no. 48 (2003).

<sup>49</sup> Cecil Roth, "Ritual Art," in *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History*, ed. Cecil Roth (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, INC., 1961).

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<sup>50</sup> Roth, "Ritual Art;" Mann, "Spirituality and Jewish Ceremonial Art." 176.

<sup>51</sup> Shalom Sabar, "The Use of Christian Motifs in Illustrations of Jewish Marriage Contracts in Italy and Its Meaning," *Journal of Jewish Art* 10(1984).

biblical figure. Not only was Aaron the chief priest of the Israelites, but he also was Moses' spokesperson. Moses is known as the prophet of the bible and Aaron as the priest.<sup>53</sup> Although Moses receives more praise than his brother, Aaron too is often glorified. In fact, according to some rabbinic literature, "The whole world exists only on account of the merit of Moses and Aaron."<sup>54</sup> The importance of these two biblical figures makes them a sensible choice to be represented on the case of a mezuzah, which holds perhaps the holiest words of the Torah. Moses gave the Jews the Torah and Aaron was his spokesperson.

The mezuzah that I watched my father nail to my grandmother's doorpost many years ago was new. She had had a mezuzah at her old house, but according to rule and tradition, it had to be left behind. When a house is sold to another Jew, the mezuzah is supposed to remain on the door.<sup>55</sup> Since the new owners of my grandmother's house were members of her synagogue, she made a special point to leave her old mezuzah in tact. It was them who actually gave her a new one for her new doorpost. The presence of a mezuzah signifies that the home belongs to a Jew. However, the materials used and the art on the mezuzah can also signify a lot. It can determine how much it cost, who it may have

belonged to, and what the values of its people were. Moses and Aaron, the *ner tamid*, and the Temple are all very important aspects of Judaism and have been for a long time, just as the words of the Shema have been inscribed on Jew's doorposts for centuries.

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<sup>52</sup> "Moses," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007).

<sup>53</sup> Edward L. Greenstein, "Aaron," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> "Moses."

<sup>55</sup> "Mezuzah," 157.

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Mezuzah Case

Eastern European c. 19<sup>th</sup> century.

14 in. x 3 ½ in. x ½ in. Copper, silver-white metal (silver plated copper), turquoise and red semi-precious stones, embossed designs; parchment.

Middletown, Adath Israel Museum

2011.S.267.4 (#55)

14 inches long, 3 ½ inches wide, and about a half inch deep, the mezuzah case is made of two metals, copper and a white metal, likely a silver plated copper, soldered together. Its long rectangular body used to contain a prayer scroll is made of copper; the top and bottom of the object are made of a silver colored metal, and is decorated with embossed designs. The copper part is about 2 ½ inches wide and makes up most of the object's length. At the top of this piece is an ornamented silver cover, fastened with a latch, where the scroll is inserted or removed. A plate, about 3 ½ inches wide and 2 inches long, hangs off the bottom of the case, attached by two small metal rings on either end; a small bell is attached to the lowest point of this plate. The mezuzah contains two semi-precious stones: one red, shaped as a rectangle on the bottom, and one oval shaped turquoise on top. The two stones are placed symmetrically on the top and bottom of the case, surrounded by embossed leaves.

The hanging plate features embossed details; natural designs made up of leaves, and religious phrases in Hebrew: "Shema Yisrael" are embossed, "Hear O' Israel," the beginning of the two verse prayer contained in the mezuzah case (Deut. 6:4-9 and 11:13-21). In the center of the mezuzah, an opening reveals the Hebrew word "Shaddai," a divine name meaning "God Almighty." While the symmetrical and organic designs are present on all parts of the mezuzah, the leaves and "harvest imagery" cover the central part of the object almost completely, in a symmetrical "horror vacui" style typical of Eastern European Jewish objects. The leaves "frame" the items of significance on the object, such as the stones and the Hebrew words.

Daniel Krantz '11

*A 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY MEZUZAH AS AN INTERSECTION  
BETWEEN RELIGIOUS TRADITION AND A LOCAL  
MOMENT  
Daniel Krantz '11*

*History:*

There are a few basic things known about this specific ornamented mezuzah case. The ceremonial object was likely made during the 19th century. Based on the content and the style of decoration, it is also likely that it originated in Eastern Europe. The mezuzah case's large size, in addition to the valuable materials from which it is fashioned, indicate that it was probably used inside a synagogue. Past these important facts, little more can be known about the life of this particular object.

The mezuzah case, like most all Jewish ceremonial art, reflects the intersection of Jewish cultural and religious traditions on the one hand, and the surrounding local culture at the moment it was produced on the other hand. Because of the strong influence of dominant local culture on Jewish ceremonial art, Jewish ritual objects like this one vary greatly – in both form and use – across time and space. While the mezuzah case embodies social and cultural realities specific to the historical moment and site in which it was produced, the object's significance to those who used it can only be fully understood by locating its origins in Jewish tradition, for it links 19<sup>th</sup> century Jews in Eastern Europe to a complex tradition of Jewish ritual art dating back to commandments in the bible.

The historical origins of the mezuzah itself and the origins of the ornamented mezuzah case are different. It is through these origins that, in the words of Joseph Gutmann, “the customs and their art objects testify to an essential unity – the striving of Jews at all times to fulfill their obligation to God in the ‘beauty of holiness.’”<sup>56</sup>

While interpretations of the text have varied, the idea of the mezuzah itself comes from the bible. The first meaning of the word “mezuzah” was “doorpost.” It is twice commanded (Deut. 6:9 and 11:20) “and ye shall write them (the words of god) upon the doorposts (mezuzot) of thy house and in thy gates.” Overtime, the word came to apply to the *passages* fixed to the doorpost instead of the doorpost itself.<sup>57</sup> It is thought that in early years, the injunction was carried out as an inscription in the doorpost – the earliest evidence for the fulfillment of this instruction dates from the Second Temple period.<sup>58</sup> It was “to serve as a reminder of God and his commandments as well as a safeguard against evil spirits.”<sup>59</sup>

Although this 19<sup>th</sup>-century mezuzah case was made in response to a biblical commandment, the interpretation and execution of the religious responsibility was also a product of the early modern period in Europe. As the required text expanded during antiquity, the mezuzah became a parchment scroll attached to the doorframe, but it was not until the Middle Ages that the

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<sup>56</sup> Joseph Gutmann, *Beauty in Holiness* (USA: Ktav Publishing House, 1970), XXVI.

<sup>57</sup> Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, “Mezuzah” in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2007), 156.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>59</sup> Gutmann, *Beauty in Holiness*, XXIV.

custom of encasing the parchment within a metal or wooden container affixed to doorposts emerged;<sup>60</sup> moreover, it was not until after the 15th century at the earliest that mezuzah cases were ornamented.<sup>61</sup>

The move to an ornamented case for the mezuzah also fit into a long tradition of Jewish ceremonial beautification, or *Hiddur Mitzvah*, that has roots in ancient religious text. In understanding this tradition, it becomes clear why the mezuzah case would be so intricately ornamented, and what the importance of the object's beauty was to the Jews who used it. *Hiddur Mitzvah* "is [the] rabbinic concept which demands that all ceremonial objects used for the performance of religious duties in the home or synagogue be aesthetically pleasing."<sup>62</sup> Jewish religious authorities have long encouraged the creation of precious items, seen as part of the religious obligation to "beautify the commandments."<sup>63</sup>

Ceremonial art, such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century ornamented mezuzah case, was always understood in relation to this duty – to honor and glorify the holiness of God by performing mitzvahs with aesthetically beautiful objects. From antiquity, Jews adorned temples and sacred objects such as the Torah scroll.<sup>64</sup> The long lasting centrality of ritual objects to Jewish art was a reflection of interpretations of biblical text. The book of Exodus tells the story

of Bezalel, who has "the spirit if God, with wisdom, intelligence and knowledge in every craft: to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood – to work in every craft" (Exodus 31: 3-5). This passage not only established the value placed on artistic creation, but the connection of art and religious duty as well.

The *ways* Jews carried out this beautification of ceremonial objects stems primarily from two seemingly contradictory messages found in the bible. While interpretations of these texts varied greatly over time, the 19<sup>th</sup> century mezuzah case embodies both of the biblical messages and how Jews of the period responded to them. On the one hand, the previously discussed passage of Bezalel, which prompted Jews to invest great resources in the creation of objects such that they could be beautifully fashioned from valuable materials such those used in the mezuzah case.

On the other hand, in a biblical prohibition that has often led to the false dismissal of the possibility of Jewish art, the Second Commandment uncompromisingly states: "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in the heavens above or on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth" (Exodus 20:4-5).<sup>65</sup> Here, it is not the materials, but the decorative content of the mezuzah that reflects the way this commandment was interpreted. More specifically, the biblical injunction was often understood to prohibit any representation of living creatures, especially humans, but sometimes animals as well. This can be seen in the imagery on the mezuzah case, which is comprised exclusively of natural forms. Additionally, because of the prominence of human figures in Christian religious

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., XXIV.

<sup>61</sup> Franz Landsberger, "The Origin of the Decorated Mezuzah," in Joseph Gutmann ed. *Beauty in Holiness* (USA: Ktav Publishing House, 1970), 468-486.

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Gutmann, *Beauty in Holiness*, XIV.

<sup>63</sup> Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, *Jewish Art* (New York, NY: Harry Abrams Inc., 1995), 280.

<sup>64</sup> Cecil Roth. "Ritual Art" in Cecil Roth ed. *Jewish Art: an Illustrated History* (Israel: McGraw Hill, 1961), 310.

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<sup>65</sup> Roth. *Jewish Art*, 19.

art, the absence of human figures that we see on the mezuzah case became, in some places, a clear identifier of Jewish objects.<sup>66</sup>

*Reflections of the Local Moment:*

While the mezuzah case reflects many significant religious traditions that span centuries of Jewish life, it also embodies much about the local moment in which it was created. The specifically Jewish elements of the object can be found in its life as a ritual object, while the influence of dominant local culture can be seen clearly in the its decorative style. The mezuzah case's busy symmetrical composition made of floral imagery, "dominated by...the sense of horror vacui," was a product of techniques and aesthetics derived from the Eastern European culture surrounding the Jewish community.<sup>67</sup> This quintessentially Eastern European aesthetic came to define the style of Jewish ceremonial art during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As described by Vivian Mann, and also clearly demonstrated on the mezuzah case, the style "emphasized verticality and teeming compositions overlaid with the flora and fauna of the natural world."<sup>68</sup>

The significance of the mezuzah case is also linked with the socio-economic landscape of Eastern Europe during the period from which it originates. Although Gentile silversmiths made much of the silver Judaica produced in Western Europe during and after the middle ages, it is more than likely that this mezuzah case was

made by Jews. In Western Europe, Jews were barred from guilds, and thus, Jewish ceremonial objects were often fashioned by local gentile silversmiths.<sup>69</sup> In Eastern Europe, and in Poland especially, Jewish craftsmen were relatively privileged.<sup>70</sup> Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, they were allowed to practice silversmithing, a freedom that led to the rise of many Jewish guilds being formed during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>71</sup> Because of this, the mezuzah case, likely the work of Jews themselves, reflects differences around Europe in the restrictions faced by Jewish artists and craftspeople.

Through the intersection of Jewish religion and the local moment discussed above, the mezuzah case links the lives of Jews in a specific time and place with ancient tradition. From a historical standpoint, this connection provides valuable insight into both spheres of influence, and illustrates the depth of the connection between Jewish and non-Jewish culture in Eastern Europe. Clearly, the aesthetic influence of dominant local culture was powerful in Jewish artistic endeavors. For the Jews of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who actually used the ritual object, much of the object's significance was probably derived from the same linkage between their own historical moment and the biblical traditions embodied in the mezuzah case.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 17-35.

<sup>67</sup> Vivian B. Mann, "Ceremonial and Decorative Art." *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jewish Jews in Eastern Europe*.

[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ceremonial\\_and\\_Decorative\\_Art](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ceremonial_and_Decorative_Art)

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>69</sup> Roth, "Ritual Art," in *Jewish Art*, 311.

<sup>70</sup> Sed-Rajna, *Jewish Art*, 287.

<sup>71</sup> Moses Kremer, "Jewish Artisans and Guilds in Former Poland," in Joseph Gutmann ed. *Beauty and Holiness* (USA: Ktav Publishing House, 1970), 63.

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A Pair of Candle Holders  
Warsaw, Norblin & Co., late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century, before 1915  
7.5 in. tall; base 4 in. x 4 in.; top 2.6 in. in diameter. Silver-plated  
brass, engraved, hallmarks.  
Middletown, Adath Israel Museum.  
Given in honor of the 40th wedding anniversary of Nila and Bob  
Lapidus by family and friends.  
2011.S.267. 5a and 5b (#194)

A pair of candlestick holders, engraved with flowers on the base and in the center of the sticks. The bottom is adorned with 3 sets of roses that act as stilts to elevate the candlesticks about an inch off of the table. They are made of silver plated brass, according to a hallmark “N” in a diamond. <N> means “Silver plating on Alpacca.” These candlestick holders were made in the Norblin & Co. in Warsaw before 1915. A stamp as shown by the inscription

NORBLIN & CO

GALW:

WARSZAWA

Norblin and Co. was founded by a German goldsmith named Filip Vorbrodzt in 1809. Vorbrodzt’s son in law, Vincent Norblin, was the son of a bronze factory in Warsaw and helped to increase production of silver and bronze items along with silver plated items in Vorbrodzt’s shop. In 1865, Vorbrodzt sold the factory to his son, Norblin, one of his daughters, and his other son-in-law Teodor Werner who owned a silver shop in Warsaw. Norblin and Werner went on to unit their factories into what is now known as Norblin & Co. Norblin & Co. survived through WWI and eventually stopped production in 1939.

Jessica Titlebaum ‘14

*THE SABBATH LIGHTS**Jessica Titlebaum '14*

Candles and candlestick holders, or earlier lamps, are present at virtually every major Jewish life cycle event; they acquire a significant and different meaning at each occasion. Women have always had a special relationship with the candles and the candle-lighting ceremonies, especially the ceremony associated with the Sabbath.

The Sabbath lamp has evolved dramatically overtime. In the ancient period, according to the Bible and the Mishnah, oil-lamps were used in ceremonies that required lights. These lamps were sometimes hung like chandeliers over the Sabbath table and all meals were required to be eaten underneath or near the Sabbath lamp. These rules were most likely written for practical reasons since the festive Sabbath meals were eaten after sundown. There were many laws associated with this lamp: "Wick used for Sabbath lamp should be of such material as flax, linen, or cotton, but not of hair or wool or similar materials. The oil should be of a kind that will easily feed the wick; pitch, wax, or fat should not be used; neither should resin, which omits an ill odor, nor is it permissible to use balsam, which produces a sweet odor....all other kinds of oil may be used, although olive-oil is the kind most recommended."<sup>72</sup> Although candles had been invented by this time period, they were

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<sup>72</sup> Isidore Singer and Cyrus Adler, "Lamp, Sabbath," *The Jewish encyclopedia; a descriptive record of the history, religion, literature, and customs of the Jewish people from the earliest times to the present day*, 12 vols. (New York and London, Funk & Wagnalls, 1901), Volume 7: 601.

usually made of the fat of unkosher animals so they could not be used. Once paraffin was invented around the year 1850, candles began to replace the oil-lamps in Jewish households but, "oil was still regarded as the more appropriate fuel for ritual purposes, especially for the Sabbath and Hannukah lights."<sup>73</sup> As time went on, candles became increasingly popular in Jewish homes.

Due to the frequent use of candles throughout life cycle events and at religious celebrations, when in 1797 Austria imposed a new tax on the Jewish communities that the communities were unable to pay, the Jewish leaders created a self-imposed candle-tax. The suggestion was made by a Jewish farmer named Herz Homberg,<sup>74</sup> who interestingly assured the Kaiser that imposing a candle tax would not offend the Jewish faith.<sup>75</sup> The law stated that every Jewish woman who lit Sabbath candles owed, at the law's creation, 10 kreuzers, but as time moved on the sum was increased. To ensure that the tax was being observed, the town would employ men to enter Jewish homes on Friday nights to ensure that all money had been paid. If the woman had not paid the tax, these men would extinguish the Sabbath candles or confiscate items such as tablecloths or dresses from the home.<sup>76</sup> While the tax was effective in helping to eliminate the debt the Jews owed to Austria, it was

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<sup>73</sup> Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum, and Thomson Gale (Firm), "Encyclopaedia Judaica," In *Gale virtual reference library*. (Farmington Hills, Mich. Detroit: Thomson Gale ; Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), Volume 4: 429-430.

<sup>74</sup> Skolnik, Berenbaum, "Encyclopaedia Judaica," Volume 4: 429-430.

<sup>75</sup> Ch Wolnerman, Aviezer Burstin, and Meir Shim on Geshuri, *Sefer Oshpitsin : Osh\*viyents'im-Osh\*vits* (Yerushalayim: Irgun Yotse Oshpitsin be-Yi\*sra\*el, 1977).

<sup>76</sup> Yi sra el Bar\*tal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881*, Jewish culture and contexts (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

lifted in 1800 because it created a serious issue in the community over whether candles should be sacrificed in order to levy the tax. Still the candles were a necessary part of religious ceremonies.

Although kindling lights is not commanded by the Torah, it was turned into an obligation by rabbis. The exact reasoning as to why is still debated. Scholar Macy Nulman explains, "Lighting the Sabbath candles is one of the seven *mitzvot* legislated by the Sages. Kindling the lights is an obligation that was imposed by the Sages to maintain domestic peace so that no one in the house will trip over a piece of wood or stone and meet with an accident in the dark."<sup>77</sup> Midrashic sources assert that the obligation to light the candles on Shabbat is a punishment for females for disobeying God in the Garden of Eden. In 1577 Benjamin Slonik wrote, "Every woman is obligated to kindle lights on the eve of each Sabbath and festivals and this is a great mitzvah....they are obligated to keep it because they have extinguished the light of the world and have darkened the world with their gluttony."<sup>78</sup> The Mishnah goes on to state that a woman who does not observe this commandment will risk death during childbirth. Religious women have taken this responsibility very seriously. In the case of some very observant women, if they forget to light the Shabbat candles even one time, for the rest of their life they will always light an extra candle on Shabbat. In certain religious groups, women only begin to light the candles once they are married. Never the less, there always seem to be at least two

candles lit on Shabbat; however the reasoning for the number two is up for interpretation. A Yiddish prayer for lighting candles translates, "The earthly act of lighting candles corresponds to the kindling of lights in the realm of the divine." Slonik writes, "There must always be two lights to represent the limbs of a husband and a wife."<sup>79</sup> But some argued that at least two lamps should be lighted, one to express the "zakor" (remember) of Ex. xx. and the other the "shamor" (observe) of Deut. v."<sup>80</sup> Although male Jews are required to observe 613 mitzvot, women pay especially close attention to three positive commandments: burning a piece of challah dough once baked to symbolize giving of tithes to priests, to observe the laws of family purity, and lighting of candles to symbolize the onset of Shabbat.

Some interpretations of lighting the candles include the idea of bringing to life one's "Shabbas Soul." Susan Starr Sered of Bar-Ilan University had an interesting take on this concept. She writes, "Candles do seem to resemble souls in a number of ways. Both 'flicker' and can go out, both (potentially) bring 'light' to those nearby, both disappear at 'death', and both need to be 'nurtured' or 'fed' in order to 'grow'."<sup>81</sup> Using this interpretation it becomes perfectly clear why women are traditionally the ones to light the candles; just as women must take care of their children,

<sup>77</sup> Macy Nulman, "Candle Lighting in Jewish Ritual," *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 25(2002-2003).

<sup>78</sup> Benjamin Aaron ben Abraham Slonik, *Seder mitsvat ha-nashim* (Kraków: s.n., 1577). Translated by Edward Fram, <http://www.earlymodern.org/citation.php?citKey=13&docKey=e>

<sup>79</sup> Slonik, *Seder mitsvat ha-nashim*.

<http://www.earlymodern.org/citation.php?citKey=13&docKey=e>

<sup>80</sup> Singer and Adler, *The Jewish encyclopedia; a descriptive record of the history, religion, literature, and customs of the Jewish people from the earliest times to the present day*.

<sup>81</sup> Susan Starr Sered, "Gender, Immanence, and Transcendence-The Candle-Lighting Repertoire of Middle-Eastern Jews," *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 6, no. 4 (1991).

they must treat a candle as if it were a child and assist it to flourish. Some women add a candle each time they give birth to a child, further linking women' lighting of the Shabbat candles. Women are the ultimate caretakers.

The specific candlestick holders upon which this research is based were made in the Norblin & Co. in Warsaw before 1915 as shown by the stamp found on the bottom of each candlestick:



A Pair of Candlesticks (hallmark), 2011.S.267. 5a and 5b (#194)

Another stamp—an “N” in a diamond—reveals the material. “N” means “silver plating on Alpaca.”

Norblin and Co. was founded by a German goldsmith named Filip Vorbrodz in 1809. Vorbrodz's son in law, Vincent Norblin, was the son of a bronze factory in Warsaw and helped to increase production of silver and bronze items along with silver plated items in Vorbrodz's shop. In 1865, Vorbrodz sold the factory to his son, Norblin, one of his daughters, and his other son-in-law Teodor Werner who owned a silver shop in Warsaw. Norblin and Werner went on to unit their factories into what is now known as Norblin & Co. Norblin & Co. survived through WWI and

eventually stopped production in 1939. There is no way to know if these candlestick holders were used for the Shabbat ceremony, or even if they were owned by a Jewish family. In the book *Image before my eyes: a photographic history of Jewish life in Poland, 1864-1939* by Lucjan Dobroszycki and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, an old postcard displays two Jewish women lighting the candles for Shabbat.<sup>82</sup> The women are covering their eyes as they bless the Sabbath lights and the candlestick holders in the picture resemble the candlesticks being used for this project. Shabbat candlestick holders have a special place in women's hearts because they often use one pair for their whole lives which, if these candles sticks were indeed used for Shabbat, would explain the many dents, scratches, and worn out areas on the candlestick holders.

Candles have a rich history in Jewish tradition and can be found in death ceremonies, weekly services, remembrances, and most holidays. They have always held deep meaning and often a mystical attraction. Although discrepancies exist as to why, if it is commanded or not (and if it is commanded by whom), women have retained the responsibility to light the Sabbath candles every Friday night. In a fast paced world it can be difficult to maintain a strong religious presence in one's life, but candles have a mystical attraction that always keep people coming back.

<sup>82</sup> Lucjan Dobroszycki et al., *Image before my eyes : a photographic history of Jewish life in Poland, 1864-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).

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*THE END OF THE SABBATH: A FISH SPICE BOX*

*Jonathan Sheehan '11*



A Fish Spice Box

Poland, nineteenth century

10 in. x 2.5 in. Silver-plated brass, cast, cut, hammered, engraved, with red glass.

Middletown, Adath Israel Museum, Gift in memory of Tessie Schwarz by friends

2011.S.267.6 (#194)

This silver-plated brass fish shaped spice box is flexible, and opens at the head. The entire body is ten inches long, two and a half inches high, and three quarters of an inch wide. The head is two and a half inches by one and a half inch. The head unsnaps right above the scales, from the bottom. The fish spice box is composed of several different parts: a one and half inch high solid tail, a flexible seven inch body made up of twenty-six links measuring two inches at its highest point, an upper portion with engraved scales, and a patterned head, with two striking red glass eyes, which contrast with the worn out silver-plated brass colored body.

The box's color is a faded silver-brown, though it has greenish rust on the outside, which would indicate oxidization of copper; therefore there must be some copper in the composition, suggesting brass. Green oxidation rust is also prevalent on the inside, where the spices would have been. Deviating from the uniform color are two striking red eyes, roughly the size of a pea. There are countless engraved scales on the body, which help to create a rough feel to the spice box. The engravings are different for each portion of the fish, as the tail has horizontal lines, the links are vertical curved lines, the scales are small fingernail sized semi-circles, and the head designed with three larger semi-circles. This careful craftsmanship by the metalworker extended to almost every

type of spice box, whether it was in the shape of a fish, a steeple, or a local tower.

Such spice boxes were used for storing spices used in the Havdalah service, which signifies the ending of the Sabbath. Spices are used in the Jewish tradition to evoke a remembrance of the sweetness of Shabbat, by smelling the sweet aromas in the spice box. The pleasant odors remind us of the good times we had during the holiday, and counteract the sadness one feels when the holiday has ended. Cloves were a traditional smell for the spice box, yet some families would also add their own spices to the mix.<sup>83</sup> The size of this fish spice box would have been perfect for passing around the table, for all to smell, as the Sabbath came to an end.

Fish spice boxes were not the norm in regards to Havdalah spice boxes. The tradition of spice boxes developed during the Middle Ages, in Germany, where spice boxes began to resemble local towers and buildings, many of them with clocks indicating the time when the Sabbath ends.<sup>84</sup> In Eastern Europe, many were made of filigree, in order to replicate the intricate designs of the towers.<sup>85</sup>

Unlike in Germany, Gabrielle Sed-Rajna writes that, “in Poland, Jewish craftsmen were relatively privileged, since they were authorized to practice silversmithing from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>86</sup> The

creation of Jewish ritual objects, by Jewish silversmiths, could be why such beautiful objects as spice boxes entered Jewish religious traditions. This fits in with the notion of “hiddur mitzvah,” which is the making of beautiful objects used for rituals. Of all the ritual objects of Polish Jewish religious life, many considered the Havdalah spice box to be the most beautiful object. While popular from the Middle Ages on, these boxes became especially prevalent in 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland, and then spread to neighboring areas as well, which led to a surge in traditional silverware. One reason for this was that the eighteenth and especially nineteenth century marked an era where traders and dealers realized how truly profitable art could be.<sup>87</sup> During this time, there was a large increase in the number of fake objects put on the market.

Few books or articles discuss why Havdalah spice boxes would have been in the shape of a fish, however fish do play a significant role in the east European Jewish tradition. Fish are eaten on Rosh Hashanah because fish multiply quickly, and Jews request to be fruitful and multiply. Jews also eat fish heads, in praying that Israel will be at the head of the nations, not the tail.<sup>88</sup> The head of herring and carp were given to the head of the table, as a sign of respect.<sup>89</sup> This particular Havdalah spice box opens at the

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<sup>83</sup> Elliott Horowitz. "Sabbath." In *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010.

<sup>84</sup> Cecil Roth. *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1961.

<sup>85</sup> Vivian Mann. "Ceremonial and Decorative Art." *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010).

<sup>86</sup> Gabrielle Sed-Rajna. *Jewish Art*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1997.

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<sup>87</sup> Aviva Briefel. *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the 19th Century*: Cornell University Press, 2006.

<sup>88</sup> Jennifer Suss. "Fish and Judaism." Stern College for Women, 2008.

<sup>89</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. "Food and Drink." In *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010.

fish head. In Germany, barbell, trout, tench, and pike were the staple fish, while in France, herring, tunny, carp, and salmon were preferred.<sup>90</sup> Kalonimos Kalman Epstein, a Hasidic scholar, wrote in 1842 that, “the holiest fish of all is lox, since salmon has very large scales.”<sup>91</sup> Gefilte fish, today associated mainly with Passover, was a very popular dish for Eastern Europe’s Jewry. The word “gefilte” means “stuffed,” or “filled,” and Jews hope that all of their hopes and needs will be fulfilled. Steven Rosenberg of the *Jerusalem Post* writes that: “This rather special fish dish is not only reserved for the Seder meal. It also features as the traditional delicacy for the *seuda shlishit*, the Shabbat afternoon meal. The dish consists of a large ball of chopped fish seasoned with egg and onion, and often eaten with *chrane* or horseradish spice. This was the essential dish for the Orthodox of the Polish shtetl, who sat around the rebbe’s Shabbat table, often with a glass of weak beer, singing and listening to his words of wisdom till the fall of night.”<sup>92</sup>

Eric Feudenstein, a foremost Jewish nutritional scholar, has argued that the prevalence of fish in Jewish diets, both for traditional and daily meals, may have had more to do with the fact that it was more economical than meat for Polish Jews. Gefilte

fish, which is composed of different types of fish, could have been a delicacy that was engendered by the lack of means of Eastern European Jews.<sup>93</sup>

This fish spice box, along with all of the well-crafted Havdalah spice boxes, is largely considered one of the most beautiful ritual objects. With the fish, instead of a tower or steeple, we see the versatility of ritual objects that the Jews of Poland used. While some of the towers and steeples that existed in eastern Europe during the eighteenth century were carefully handcrafted with filigree, this flexible fish spice box seems more durable and casual, and was probably less expensive. The objects’ beauty has led, in recent years, to the market being flooded with fake spice boxes, which are either new (indicating they are obviously not originals), or wildly overpriced, as the value in today’s U.S. dollars is roughly \$50.<sup>94</sup> This fish spice box is a wonderful ritual object that gives us many interesting insights into the Havdalah tradition of Polish Jews, prior to the twentieth century.

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<sup>90</sup> John Cooper, *Eat and be Satisfied* (Lanham: Jason Aronson Publishers, 1993) 97-100.

<sup>91</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Food and Drink.” In *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010.

<sup>92</sup> Steven Rosenberg, “In Praise of Gefilte Fish,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 16, 2010, accessed April 29, 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/Features/InTheSpotlight/Article.aspx?id=171114>

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<sup>93</sup> Eric Feudenstein, “Sabbath Fish.” *Judaism* 29 (1980): pp. 418-431.

<sup>94</sup> EBAY, “Fake Judaica Silver Besomim Boxes – Beware.”

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A Noisemaker

19<sup>th</sup> Century (US?)

Wood. L shape 8 in. x 10 in.

Presented in honor of 30th wedding anniversary of Rose and Phil Shapiro by family and friends

2011.S.267.7 (# 82)

This wooden L-shaped noisemaker is 8 inches tall and 10 inches wide. The parts have been carved from a smooth, dark brown wood. The handle has a bulbous center and is made to fit easily in the hand. The bottom of the handle comes to a blunt triangular point, and from the top, a rod protrudes. Attached to the rod are the spinning piece and the ratchet. The spinning piece of the device is about 10 inches long and 1.5 inches tall. One side of the spinning piece is curved like the heavy base of a gourd, and it transitions into

a skinnier structure, much like the neck of a gourd. It is carved so that it has rounded edges but can also lie perfectly flat on either of its long sides. A hole has been bored straight through the skinnier end of the gourd shape so that the handle's rod can be fit through, attaching the two pieces. From the side of the spinning piece that is attached to the handle and down its length, there is a hollow that is about one inch deep. This part of the spinning piece has been hollowed out so that the ratchet, in the shape of a six-pointed star, has room to function. Attached by two screws to a flat side of the spinning piece is a thin, rectangular slat. It rests in the hollow of the spinning piece and produces noise when it makes contact with the ratchet. On one side of the spinning piece, the hollow is visible, while on the other side it is not because the slat covers the hollow from view. To create noise, the handle has to be gripped and pulsed by the hand. Each pulsing movement will make the spinning piece of the device rotate on a circular path, with the center point being the handle. The star-shaped ratchet is loosely attached to the rod and can only move slightly on its own as the spinning piece rotates around it. The ratchet keeps the spinning piece moving in one direction, allowing the slat to make contact with the points of the star several times during one rotation to produce noise. The noisemaker has been well-preserved, with slight wear on its rounded edges and more serious wear on the ratchet and slat, caused by frequent rubbing. On the top of the spinning piece of the device, on the opposite end of where the hole for the handle is, there is a small hole about half an inch deep drilled into the wood that may once have held a knob. If such a knob existed, it would have been used to propel the spinning piece of the device on a

circular path with one hand while the other hand gripped the handle and held it in place.

Sewon Kang '14



A Purim Grogger  
 Eastern Europe, late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century  
 9.5 in. x 7 in. Brass, cast  
 Presented in honor of the 90th birthday of Henry L. Shapiro by  
 family and friends  
 2011.S.267.8 (#104)

The brass Purim grogger is 9.5 inches tall and 7 inches wide. It is dense, suggesting that the noisemaker is solid metal. It is a bronze-brown color with a bit of luster on its surfaces. Its individual parts appear to have been cast separately and then pieced together for the final product. The handle is about four inches long with the bottom of it coming to a rounded point. It has several rings carved into it near the bottom to give it a decorative element. Atop the handle is a circular pedestal with a figurine of a man on it. The top of the figurine's head to the bottom of the handle measures about nine and a half inches. The man is depicted wearing mid-calf length boots, pants, a shirt, and a tall hat. The man is shown trapped in a pillory, a board that rests upon a prisoner's shoulders with holes for the head and hands. The figure is in a crouched position with its toes pointed out, as if the man is struggling under the weight of the board on his shoulders. There is also a ring around the man's waist that is connected a rigid structure made to look like a chain. This chain extends out to the right of the man and is connected to what is supposed to be a wooden post. The textured bark of the wooden post is represented in metal through the use of incisions. It rests on a beam that extends out about three inches and is attached to the handle by a movable ring underneath the circular pedestal. Connected to the wooden post is a thin piece of metal in the shape of a horn. The wide mouth of the horn-shaped piece of metal is attached to the wooden post and it curves into a skinner shape, as it gets closer to the figurine of the man. This thin piece is there to produce noise, and is part of the device has to spin as the handle is gripped and pulsed by a hand. The part of the device that spins includes: the movable ring around the figure's waist and the chain it

is connected to, the wooden post and the attached horn-shaped piece, and finally, the beam supporting the wooden post that is connected to the handle. To produce noise, the spinning piece of the device has to make contact with something as it spins. The figurine of the man itself does not move, and serves as the center point of the circular path that the spinning piece takes. The ring around the figure's waist that keeps him chained to the post causes the bottom of his shirt to ruffle up. When the spinning piece of the device goes on its circular path, the horn-shaped piece makes contact with the ruffles of the man's shirt, and each time it hits a ruffle, a noise is produced. When looking down upon the figure's head, one can see that the words "Haman Arur/Ha-Reshim Arurim" (which means "Haman is cursed/The wicked oppressors are cursed") have been inscribed on the board in relief.



A Purim grogger (detail, top view), 2011.S.267. 8 (#104)

The noisemaker is well preserved, with only a bit of green and white rust in the tight creases of where two pieces of metal meet.

Sewon Kang '14

*THE BUZZ ABOUT PURIM—A STUDY OF TWO  
NOISEMAKERS*

*Sewon Kang '14*

The brass and wooden noisemakers from the Adath Israel collection were both believed to be of east European origin. While the brass noisemaker can indeed be said with to be a Purim grogger, the wooden one is likely of non-Jewish origin, used as a police rattle. Still, even that particular noisemaker may have been used on Purim as well. It would not have been uncommon for Jews to use such groggers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the holiday Purim. As ritual objects, groggers can be studied as reflections of the people and societies in which they were consumed. The ways in which these groggers were used, however, may or may not have been restricted to ritual use, as there were other needs and uses for such noisemakers as those seen in the Adath Israel collection.

Noisemakers were used on Purim, a holiday commemorating the events documented in the megillat Esther, or the biblical Scroll of Esther. The Scroll tells the story of the court official Haman, and his failed plan to cleanse the Persian Empire of all Israelites.<sup>95</sup> At the

<sup>95</sup> Shifra Epstein, "Purim," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010), <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Purim>.

risk of their lives, Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai dissuaded the King from carrying out Haman's plan, thus, saving their people from the brink of destruction.<sup>96</sup> The Israelites were also able to defeat a number of their enemies on this occasion, prompting Queen Esther and Mordecai to declare that the Jews should celebrate this triumph with merrymaking from that moment on. The name Purim comes from the Akkadian word meaning "lot," which Haman is said to have used in choosing the day on which he would conduct the mass-murder of the Jews.<sup>97</sup>

On the day of the Purim festival, people took off from work so that friends and family could gather to share meals, exchange gifts, and give to charity. On this holiday, the Scroll of Esther was read twice in the synagogue (once in the morning and again in the evening) to commemorate the survival of their ancestors. In eastern Europe, the reader would spread the paper out to make it seem as if a letter was being read to the congregation, a visual reminder of the letters written by Queen Esther and Mordecai urging the people to remember their survival in Persia.<sup>98</sup> Another aspect of the celebration was the so-called Purim-shpil. The Purim-shpil was a skit or pantomime based on the Scroll of Esther that was performed in public and in the homes of Jews during the holiday meal. The nature of the performances varied, and could be performed as a theatrical farce, a solemn telling of the Jews' deliverance from the Persians, or a combination of elements both comic and serious.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Albert I. Baumgarten, S. David Sperling, and Shalom Sabar, "Scroll of Esther," 18.

<sup>98</sup> Epstein, "Purim."

<sup>99</sup> Jean Baumgarten, "Purim-Shpil," *ibid.*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Purim-shpil>.

During these readings and performances, it was custom for members of the congregation to create a lot of noise every time Haman's name was spoken out loud. This tradition was derived from the order found in Deuteronomy to drown out the name of Amalek. A long-time enemy of the Israelites, Amalek was considered to be Haman's ancestor by rabbis. As such, Jews sounded noisemakers or groggers every time the name of Haman was said during these ritual readings. Haman's legacy of shame deserved to be struck from people's memories, which was done metaphorically on Purim with such fervor that some rabbis sought to ban the use of groggers because of all of the chaos they created.<sup>100</sup>

East European Jews are known for producing especially good noisemakers for this occasion.<sup>101</sup> Children and skilled professionals alike made groggers of all different varieties and used them in synagogues for Purim festivities. Some people showed their creativity, designing makeshift groggers out of old keys, nails, and even explosive powders that made sounds when tossed on the floor.<sup>102</sup> Other groggers had more standard toy-like designs and were sometimes made out of woods or metals. Ritual objects, such as Purim noisemakers, have been significant in Jewish culture as they aid believers in fulfilling commandments and observing holidays. Objects are consequently valuable in the study of history today because they reveal much about the every day experience of Jews from times that are long gone. Material objects also reflect the intentions and desires of the craftsmen who produced them and the

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<sup>100</sup> Shifra Epstein, "Purim," *ibid.*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Purim>.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

patron who paid for them. As such, objects can be read for information that goes deeper than what is revealed on the surface.<sup>103</sup>

Professional artisans most likely produced the brass and wooden noisemakers from the Adath Israel Collection. They represent two types of craftwork, metalworking and woodworking, both common industries for Jews residing in Eastern Europe. It is even believed that at one point, seventy five to one hundred percent of the brass-working labor force was made up of Jewish workers.<sup>104</sup> Such businesses were conducted out of small family workshops run by a few artisans.<sup>105</sup> It is possible that Jews crafted such pieces as the two noisemakers in their own workshops, but it should be kept in mind that non-Jews were also artisans in these fields. The noisemakers, as well as other ritual objects, may have been commissioned by Jews but actually crafted by non-Jews. It is also possible that such objects were originally intended for non-religious purposes and simply used by Jews for their religious holidays.<sup>106</sup> The origins and purposes of these objects cannot be known for sure.

Objects can be read into to reveal how “Jewish consciousness and religious tradition” was combined with more contemporary issues. This was done in accordance with the longstanding Jewish tradition of drawing parallels between past and present Jewish

experiences.<sup>107</sup> For example, a noisemaker that is currently part of the permanent exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York dates from 1933 and fulfills the ritual need of a grogger while also reflecting upon the happenings of the time. It creates noise when it is shaken, allowing its hammer to strike the heads of miniature representations of both Haman and Hitler.<sup>108</sup> The design of this Hitler-Haman grogger shows how Jews sought to draw parallels between contemporary hardships and the difficult situations faced by Jews in the past. This noisemaker, along with the brass grogger from the Adath Israel Collection demonstrate how Jewish artisans were interested in finding new ways to express themselves by reworking old symbols and ideas to reflect the more current atmosphere of their times.<sup>109</sup>

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw huge changes in the economic situation for many of those in Eastern Europe. Groups of disgruntled Christian peasants staged numerous pogroms against Jews in villages and town neighborhoods. In these times of economic hardship, it was easy for non-Jews to blame Jews because of the visible competition posed by Jewish businesses.<sup>110</sup> The people staging the pogroms faced only a few, slight punishments for their actions, encouraging the masses to continue the violence.<sup>111</sup> Thousands of Jews were wounded or killed as non-

<sup>103</sup> Richard I. Cohen, *Jewish Icons Art and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 69-70.

<sup>104</sup> Lucjan and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett Dobroszycki, Barbara, *Images before My Eyes a Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 89.

<sup>105</sup> Adam Teller, "Economic Life," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010), [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Economic\\_Life](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Economic_Life).

<sup>106</sup> Cohen, *Jewish Icons Art and Society in Modern Europe*, 70.

<sup>107</sup> Maurice. Rosenbaum Berger, Joan, *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004), 13; Cohen, *Jewish Icons Art and Society in Modern Europe*, 221.

<sup>108</sup> Berger, *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*, 13.

<sup>109</sup> Cohen, *Jewish Icons Art and Society in Modern Europe*.

<sup>110</sup> Howard Morley Sachar, *A History of the Jews in the Modern World*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 2005), 194.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-200.

Jews across Eastern Europe organized armed groups for the sole purpose of harming Jews.<sup>112</sup> As a result of the many instances of Jewish persecution in eastern Europe during this period, the Purim holiday was transformed from a festival celebrating a specific biblical event to a day symbolizing Jewish survival in the face of hardships and persecution. In some European towns, there were so-called Second Purims, or special celebrations to commemorate certain instances during which Jews triumphed or avoided death, like the Jews of Persia were able to do.<sup>113</sup>

The brass noisemaker depicts a man being held captive in a pillory. The figure is representative of a Cossack, or a man of east European peasant origin, which can be discerned from the clothing it is shown to be wearing. The clothing on the figurine is similar to the clothing seen on figures in east European genre paintings.<sup>114</sup> In the late nineteenth century, artists from Ukraine and southern Russia were interested in producing realistic portrayals of the everyday lives of peasants, thus producing reliable representations of how people from this time period and region would have lived.<sup>115</sup> This serves as a way to determine when this noisemaker was produced, as works of art from this time period provide comparable evidence in terms of physical representations of this particular social group.

The figurine of the Cossack, in conjunction with the object's inscription reading "Haman is cursed/The wicked oppressors are

cursed" shows how objects served as an outlet for the Jews' social commentary, in addition to fulfilling a traditional, ritual purpose. The piece was made not only to aid in the observance and remembrance of this historic event, but was also used to speak to the problems facing the contemporary Jew. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Cossacks were committing horrible acts of violence against Jews, victimizing them in their homes and villages. Here the Cossack is depicted as a prisoner, which reflects a reversal of roles held by each group during the pogroms. Role reversal is a theme on Purim because it reflects the inverted power structure between the Israelites and the Persians; for the first time, the Jews had a tremendous amount of control while the Persians had none. On Purim, people cross-dressed in addition to relaxing and taking the day off, which reflects a reversal in the normal roles and habits expected of Jews.<sup>116</sup> The brass grogger illustrates the possible duality of an object's purpose with its ritual, ceremonial use and contemporary content. And the manner in which it is executed ties all of the elements together as a balanced amalgamation of things old and new, traditional and modern.

The material used to construct the noisemaker is also valuable, as it reveals the intentions of the patron and craftsman of the object. The patron and the craftsman of the brass piece designed it to be an overtly Jewish object, with its Hebrew inscription and Cossack caricature. Wealthy Jews sometimes commissioned unique works in metal or other precious materials to show off their wealth.<sup>117</sup> It is also possible that this grogger cast in brass was

<sup>112</sup> Berger, *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*, 176.

<sup>113</sup> Epstein, "Purim."

<sup>114</sup> Professor Magda Teter brought this to my attention.

<sup>115</sup> Jana and L.I. Popova Howlett, "Ukraine," *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*,

<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T086947>.

<sup>116</sup> Epstein, "Purim."

<sup>117</sup> Cohen, *Jewish Icons Art and Society in Modern Europe*, 69-70.

manufactured in large quantities and sold to many. People of humbler means, however, may not have the funds to spend on such lavish objects, and would have had to make do with whatever was accessible to them. Noisemakers could be made out of any found material. Indeed, some people did not even bother to use groggers and just stomped their feet to make noise during the Scroll readings, implying that it was not so important how or with what you fulfilled the tradition, as long as it was fulfilled.<sup>118</sup>

While the brass grogger is a very obviously Jewish object, the wooden noisemaker could not be definitively labeled as a strictly Jewish artifact. It is known that many groggers were constructed similarly out of wood, but there are no clear-cut signs to indicate that this particular noisemaker was used for strictly Jewish ritual purposes. The wooden noisemaker does not have any special markings or symbols on it to identify it as a Jewish object as the brass one does. On the other hand, the choice to construct this noisemaker out of wood was not unusual in eastern Europe. Poland is known producing wooden folk objects of many different types, for many different purposes.<sup>119</sup> Jews used regional materials and techniques in the observance of religious traditions in the construction of wooden synagogues, showing how age-old customs could be executed differently to incorporate new circumstances.<sup>120</sup> The wooden grogger could have similarly been created with the purpose of using local materials and techniques of crafts making in

the fulfillment of a specifically Jewish ritual, representative of the mixing of the two cultures and Jewish integration into Polish society. Consequently, the wooden noisemaker could plausibly be said to come from eastern Europe.

And yet, this supposition is complicated by the fact that there is some evidence indicating that late eighteenth and nineteenth-century police in London and New York used wooden rattles such as the noisemaker in question during their night watches. Night watchmen patrolled the streets of cities and were instructed to cry out for help if they witnessed anything suspicious or illegal. For this they were at the receiving end of criticisms for sleeping on the job and for haphazardly using their noisy rattles to scare off potential criminals instead of actually keeping the streets safe.<sup>121</sup> There is evidence of night patrols being conducted in London and as early American policing systems were based off of the British model, later in cities across the United States.<sup>122</sup> In New York City in particular, it was recorded that night shifts were more heavily staffed because that was when there was the most need for officers. Night watchmen would either patrol the streets or man the booths set up around the city to respond to distress calls sounded by wooden rattles.<sup>123</sup> Part of an exhibition in the New York Police Department Museum in New York City is dedicated to showcasing these wooden rattles that were used to alert people of danger, which are strikingly similar to the wooden grogger from the Adath Israel

<sup>118</sup> Epstein, "Purim."

<sup>119</sup> Ewa Fry\*s-Pietraszkowa, Anna Kunczy\*nska-Iracka, and Marian Pokropek, *Folk Art in Poland* (Warszawa: Arkady, 1991), 76.

<sup>120</sup> Dobroszycki, *Images before My Eyes a Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939*, 67.

<sup>121</sup> Eric H. Monkkonen, "History of Urban Police," *Crime and Justice* 15(1992): 549.

<sup>122</sup> Roger Lane, "Urban Police and Crime in Nineteenth-Century America," *ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Christopher Thale, "Assigned to Patrol: Neighborhoods, Police, and Changing Deployment Practices in New York City before 1930," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 4 (2004).

Collection.<sup>124</sup> Taking this evidence into consideration, it is possible that this noisemaker, which was until now believed to be a wooden Purim grogger, actually served as a policeman's night watch rattle. Considering the very similar designs and constructions of the noisemakers reportedly used for both purposes, it is a likelihood that this object was used for either purpose, or perhaps even for both.

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<sup>124</sup> Professor Magda Teter brought this to my attention.



Hannukah Lamp.

Eastern Europe, late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century

7.13 in. x 12.83 in. x 16 in. Brass and pewter, cast, cut-out, repoussé, chased, punched, bolted.

2011.S.267.9 (#52)

This Hanukkah lamp, or *Hanukiah*, is made of brass, with some pewter (“white metal”) arrangements at the top level. There are multiple levels to this object—a lower level, which acts as a platform for the eight Hanukkah lights, a middle section with an interior structure, and a top area that serves as a platform for arrangements of decorations.

There are four brass legs that keep the bottom stage from being the base of the object itself. They are shaped like funnels with the wide base facing downwards, and are 1.5 inches tall. They are not placed directly on the corners, but rather  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches towards the center from the corners. The interiors of the legs are hollow.

The bottom stage that the legs support is also hollow, and is also made out of brass. The stage is 3 inches tall, 12.83 wide and 7.13 inches deep. The base of the bottom stage is smooth and slants upward. The walls of the stage have rounded corners, and the walls themselves are comprised of a brass design resembling loosely woven cloth. The front side of the bottom stage acts as a platform for lion figurines. The rest of the bottom stage supports the middle stage.

There are eight lion figurines in all, each of them 1.83 inches long, 2.75 inches tall, and 1 inch wide. They are identically molded, standing on their hind legs, their paws on a rail that surrounds the open platform created by the bottom stage; their tails curved upward in the back. Both their tails and hind legs are welded into the edifice itself—the lions are not detachable. Each of the lions has an open tongue, about  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch wide and  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch long. The tongues are all fashioned with a depression—so that they have the appearance of a vessel.

The middle stage directly behind the lion figures on the platform is 9.75 inches tall, 4.6 inches deep, and 12.83 inches wide. There are three walls to the middle stage, and one open colonnade at the front. The two sides have the same loose weaving design found in the bottom stage, with rounded corners.

The front—as well as the two sides—has an arch design of vegetation that mimics a tree design. In the center of this design—at the top of the arch—there is a flower. There are three arches in the front, and one on each of the sides. The arches are all 2.25 inches tall, and are located at the top of the stage. The open space below the arches is left open in the front, but on the side it is filled in with the cloth design, which acts as support for the arches. In the front, the arches are supported by Doric columns: 5.75 in. tall and 0.75 in. thick.

On the front corners of the middle stages, 4 inches from the bottom, there are two lamp holders. Facing the object, the lamp on the left is still intact, whereas the lamp on the right has the top portion broken off. The original lamp that was broken was found in the museum case, and is identical to the lamp still on the object. The lamps resemble a vine, and curve upward to hold a container-like object that resembles a Greek amphora. The amphora is 1.75 inches tall. The amphorae face upward. The vine component, roughly producing a rounded right angle, is 3.3 inches wide and 3 inches tall. On the bottom portion of the vine, there are two “branches” that protrude.

The back wall of the middle stage is solid brass. In addition to the columns, behind the columns are emblems that depict images with names of the ten tribes. In between the four columns of the front stage, there are three figurines, each occupying a lacuna

underneath one of the arches. The left brass figurine is an elderly male figure dressed in a robe and a belt around the chest. He has a beard, and is facing towards his right while he still focuses somewhat on the front. His right hand is away from his body, and the palm of that hand is open, thumb facing the viewer, while the elbow is at a 75-degree angle. The left arm is on his other side, and goes straight down. Held by the fingers of this hand is a lantern-like object with a cone-shaped top. This figure also wears a breastplate with twelve squares of identical colors—four columns and three rows. A hat is also on this figure’s head—one with rounded sides and a crescent-shaped depression in the center, so that the hat almost looks like two horns. The breast plate suggests this is Aaron. The figure is cast from brass, and is 2 inches wide and 5.25 inches tall. The central figure wears a robe as his only garment and also has a beard. His eyes are facing his harp, and the figure has two arms—the left one curved so that the hand is touching a harp, and the right one supporting the harp from the other side. The figure is wearing a simple crown with four points, and holds a symmetrical harp with six strings in the center. The harp suggests David. This brass cast figure is 1.5 inches wide, and 4.68 inches tall. The right figure faces his left. He has a clean beard and a more neutral expression. His robe is his only garment, but it is larger than the garments of the other two figures. His left hand, paralleling the movement of left figurine, is open and faces the nearest corner. His right hand is on his torso, and the elbow of the right arm is curved inward. Supported by the wrist of the right arm is a staff that appears bent. The figure also has two horn-like appendages at the top of his head, indicating Moses. This figure is 5.25 inches tall and 2.5 inches wide.

In the interior middle section, behind the three figurines, there are three rows of emblems with the Hebrew names of the tribes of Israel. The Hebrew names are inscribed below the items on labels that resemble the shape of leaves. The only labels that do not resemble leaves are the labels in the bottom row, which resemble simple canoes instead. All of the emblems are made up of a single piece of brass, and they are all screwed into the back wall. The emblem for the tribe of Issachar has been loosened. All of the emblems are about one inch tall and one inch wide, and the labels—a part of the emblems—are one inch wide and  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch tall. The first row's emblems are, from left to right: Levi, Naphtali, and Zebulun. Levi's symbol is a tower with a door, one window, crenellations on top, and two fortress-like additions to the right and left. Naphtali's symbol is a thin deer with antlers, head cocked upward and facing right. Zebulun's symbol is a ship with no sails and a pointed front. The middle row's emblems are, from left to right: Joseph, Dan, Benjamin, Issachar, Judah, and Asher. Joseph's symbol is a plant, perhaps with fruit, with three rose-like flowers on top and four wide leaves closer to the base. Dan's symbol is a plant-like entity with six leaves facing outward. These leaves resemble palm fronds. Benjamin's symbol is a howling wolf that faces the left. The tail and belly of the wolf have juts in them, making them look serrated, and the tail is curved upwards and towards the body of the wolf. Issachar's symbol is an evenly balanced scale with a weight on each side. Each of these weights looks like a thick bottle. Judah's symbol is an upright lion that faces the left. It has a smooth character and a curved tail that hovers over its body. Asher's symbol is a tree, and the leaves in this tree are "created" by having simple cuts created in the top half of the tree above the trunk—creating

the appearance of vegetation. This tree has no fruit. The bottom row's emblems are, from left to right: Simeon, Reuben, and Gad. Simeon's emblem is a breastplate, similar to that worn by the left figurine in the colonnade. Reuben's symbol is a sun that looks like a wheel with spokes, and five-pointed stars in between these spokes. There are eight spokes and eight stars, and they are all connected. Gad's symbol is a closed, smooth, triangular tent.

The top component has a roof-like structure. There is a fence—similarly made out of the cloth-like design—2.5 inches tall. A smooth canopy, 1.25 inches in length, acts as a perimeter around this fence. This fence has square corners. The area enclosed by this fence is 4.67 inches by 12 inches, and this area is smooth on the bottom and decorated by other pieces, mostly made from pewter. In the center of this top arrangement, there is a pewter bird, with its wings outstretched, with a crown on its head. The bird is  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick, 5.5 inches tall, and 6 inches wide. The feathers on the bird are visible throughout, and it is facing to the right of the arrangement. There is a bulbous crown on its head, and its beak is short and pointed.

The other objects in the arrangements tend to come in pairs: palm trees and lions, attached to form one upright item of pewter. The two sets are mirror images of each other. The palm tree is 6.75 inches tall, the lion is 5 inches tall, and the overall combination is 4 inches wide. The lions stand on their hind legs, their paws on the tree. Both trees have three round fruits.

Another pewter item in the arrangement on top is a vase with flowers in it. There are ten leaves in each vase. Each vase has a curved cylindrical shape, and an upright neck. The two arrangements of plants in the vases were identical, but on account

of damage, the leaves now exist in two separate patterns. The vase on the left is tilted and the leaves in that vase are significantly more bent towards the back in comparison to the right vase. The leaves in both plants are broad, and resemble maple leaves without any curves inward, and have an exterior design that shows with good detail the interior structure of a leaf. The trunks of the plants (if they could be called that) are very thin, and can be bent easily.

Jared Gimbel '11

*HANUKIAH (or HANNUKAH MENORAH)*

*Jared Gimbel '11*

This large menorah—18 inches tall and 13 inches wide—serves both as an artistic display and ritual object. There are three levels to the menorah—a lower level, which acts as a platform for the eight Hanukkah lights, a middle section with an interior structure, and a top area that serves as a platform for arrangements of decorations. Eight lion figurines on the lower level serve as miniature oil lamps, with their jaws extended to enable wicks and oil to be placed in them.

Because there are four legs at the bottom of the edifice, it is clear that this item was not supposed to be an assembly part for any greater piece, but rather a standalone item. Instead of, for example, being a part of a table, it would be placed on the table. There are

also no pieces that have any connective properties anywhere on or in the Menorah.

The entire piece, except for the “white metal” arrangements on top, is made of brass. One possible explanation for the utilization of one metal throughout the entire object—with the exception of the decorations on top—is the injunction about the construction of the Menorah in the book of Exodus. “And thou shalt make a Menorah of pure gold: of beaten work shall the Menorah be made: its shaft, and its branches, its bowls, its bulbs, and its flowers, shall be of the same” (Ex. 25, 31). Likewise, it is common for menorahs—even in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—to be made of one material. There are other decorations on this piece as well, and this also references the Bible because the menorah in the Temple also had ornamental parts, as the verse says “of a talent of pure gold shall he make it, with all the vessels” (Ch. 25, 39)<sup>125</sup>.

A reason that pewter might have been used at the top is because of the plant arrangements with very thin branches. It is unlikely that most other metals—or any other allows—would allow for plants with such thin stems. To ensure unity among the top arrangement, the other pieces are also made of pewter.

There are two groups of objects in the middle stage—the emblems on the back wall of the Menorah, representing the twelve tribes with two-dimensional symbols labeled accordingly in Hebrew, and the figurines of Aaron (the High Priest), King David (the singer with the Harp) and Moses (the staff-bearer with the horns of light). On the top stage, there is a bird with outstretched wings and a crown—an animal that prominently acts as a royalty

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<sup>125</sup> Dani Michelson, *The Shape of the Menorah*, BDD 23 (2010) 29-54.

symbol throughout Europe<sup>126</sup>. There are also two vases of plants and two lions, each symmetrically placed on both sides of the platform. There is a crown atop the bird, which not only could represent royalty the way the adjacent lions do, but also the *keter torah*, or the “Torah crown” with which the scrolls are routinely adorned.

One thing that many of the objects in this piece have in common is their association with symbols of light, prominent in the three righteous men in the arrangement (especially Moses’ visible horns of light). The entirety of the menorah resembles the *Aron Kodesh*, or the back area of the synagogue where the Torah scrolls are kept, because of its rectangular prismic shape and interior design. The coupling of light and plants (especially treelike plants) is also used in the arrangement on top, and was a common juxtaposition in eastern European Jewish art and material culture, as it represented life alongside the light to properly guide oneself on life’s path. The idea was so prominent in Jewish art that the State of Israel, upon its formation in 1948, used the Menorah with the olive branches to similarly couple light and plants according to artistic custom<sup>127</sup>.

The lions—present in both the lamps as well as on top—could also reflect the nature of “Judah”, whose symbol is a lion, according to the book of Genesis. Furthermore, because it was common that the Second Temple Façade was shown alongside a

menorah in Late Antique artwork, it is not surprising that a temple-like edifice give shape to the menorah in its whole function<sup>128</sup>. While the Menorah and the *Hanukiah* (Hanukkah Menorah) were (and are) two different things, the influence of the Menorah and its subsequent historical background influenced the Hanukiah in all of its designs. Hence, the coupling of the Menorah function with a building structure—as is shown here—echoes drawings and motifs from earlier times. Because the Menorah is more symbolic and the Hanukiah is more functional, it is more common that “liberty” is taken with the shapes of the Hanukiah than with the Menorah, which has a strict shape based on the descriptions in the Book of Exodus. That said, the Hanukiah must be beautiful, but not too detached from the overall purpose and symbolism of the Menorah, and this item does that, echoing the Biblical Menorah because it is constructed out of a single metal (see above). It was only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the traditional menorah began to influence the shape of the European lamps for Hanukkah.

In this case, the Hanukkah menorah is not to be confused with a temple menorah. The usage for Hanukkah can be unmistakably proven, by the presence of eight lamp pieces as well as two candleholders on the side (one of which is broken). Because its original function was not seasonally connected to the winter festival of Hanukkah, the Menorah—especially one as decorated as this one—would probably have a year-long decorative function, as opposed to being used only during Hanukkah. Keep in mind that the Hanukiah had eight lamps, excluding the *Shamesh*, or the

<sup>126</sup> Shalom Sabar noted in his lectures that both Albania and Austria have similar emblems of royalty on their flags.

<sup>127</sup> Gol’tzman, Aleksandr, *Изобразительные мотивы на еврейских надгробиях Восточной Европы : менора и символика света* “Евреи в меняющемся мире” (2005) 171-188.

<sup>128</sup> See illustration folios in Leon Yarden, *The Tree of Light: a Study of the Menorah*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1971.

lamp from which the other lights are lit. The Menorah in Exodus, on the other hand, had only six.

The family that used this object was likely an upper-class household—as indicated by the ornate nature of the work as well as the novel presence of screws in some of the pieces, present primarily in the tribe emblems.

In almost all times of Jewish history, the seven-arm Temple Menorah acted as a symbol of Jews. The first purpose of the Menorah in recorded history, according to Leon Yarden in his study on the Menorah, is to provide an aura of holiness<sup>129</sup>. As a result, a menorah—especially an ornate one—was probably a regular decoration, as opposed to something stored in a crate or an attic for most of the year. However, it is likely that while this one was present on a year-long basis, it was not lit on a regular basis except for on Hanukkah. After all, the primary components of this item are not associated with the lights.

According to Shalom Sabar, an expert on Jewish art, the entire premise of Jewish art, in the light of the prohibitions on making or keeping graven images, depended on the Rabbinic notion of “beautifying a mitzvah” (Heb. “Hidur Mitzvah”). This object ensures the fulfillment of “Hidur Mitzvah” at its finest—making a beautiful object with many pieces in order to ensure that the commemoration of the miracle is made as aesthetically pleasing as possible—for the sake of humans as well as for the sake of making the divine beautiful. There are many elements of this piece that are ornamental—and none of them have to do with Hanukkah—and so the purpose, instead of for some other practical means, becomes the fulfillment of this Rabbinic precedent.

However, to view this piece entirely as a ritual device would be a grave error. This object edges on the concept of “art for art’s sake”, because the piece highlights Jewish symbols in a household object, but not for any religious purpose—except for the eight days of Hanukkah. Then as well as now, the keeping of art in the home that was primarily “art for art’s sake” is and was generally associated with the upper classes. While “Hidur Mitzvah” was required of everyone, under all circumstances, pieces such as these were not common or even present at all in poor households, and the other smaller pieces in this collection are testament to this notion.

This is a piece that merges two significant elements of Jewish material culture, as well as different aspects of an important Jewish symbol that dates back to antiquity. Material culture comes in the “art” category as well as the “utility” category, and in countless cultures do utility and art converge in creating “beautiful but useful” object. The “beautiful” aspect is significantly more pronounced in this work than in many other ritual objects. It has elements that affirm its status as a national symbol (such as the “tzadikim” in the front as well as the tribe emblems in the back), and becomes not only a useable lamp but also an art piece. In addition to this, it is made out of one piece of metal (with the exception of the top arrangements for reasons described above) in order to pay tribute to the first Menorah in recorded literary history. Despite the conventions that it has in common with the Biblical Menorah, it is to be viewed as something quite apart from it, because the *Hanukiah* allowed the artists to take more liberty with the concept of the Menorah, while occasionally using elements of the Biblical Menorah for inspiration, symbolism, and beautification.

<sup>129</sup> Yarden, *A Study of the Menorah*, 4-5.

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Hanukkah Lamp for Travel (closed)  
Silver-plated brass, soldered, chased, nielloed, engraved.  
3-1/2 x 2-9/16 x 5/8 in.  
2011.S.267.10 (#75)

This rectilinear menorah, when closed, is 3-1/2, 2-9/16, and 5/8 inches in length, width, and height, respectively. Once opened, it becomes 3-1/2 inches long, 5-3/8 inches wide, and 7/16 inches tall. The oil holders are each 7/16 by 7/8 by 1-1/6 inches with a small circle with a diameter of 5/32 inches for holding the wick. The entire object is likely made out of silver plated brass, accounting for its heavy weight and its slightly yellowed silver color. The menorah also hinges out and each plane is joined to the next by soldering.



Hanukkah Lamp for Travel (open, unfolded)  
2011.267.10 (#75)

The menorah has a few consistent motifs. The front cover is chased with a seven-armed menorah with a woven stem that has flames but no visible candles. The goats on either side face toward the middle and each puts his mouth on a menorah arm. They stand on big flowers in the midst of a vegetal or floral pattern that contrasts with the geometric design of the border.

The back cover of the menorah is chased with similar ornament as the front. The menorah here, however, is five-armed, has a tree-like stem, and has lit candles instead of simple flames. In place of the goats are two birds facing outward. The rest of the

pattern on the back matches that of the front, including the geometric border.

There are two inscriptions on the menorah. The first, on the spine of the menorah is an engraving of the word Chanukah to specify the holiday during which it is used. The inside cover reads *Ki ner mitsvah / ve-torah* or meaning “because the light is a mitzvah and the Torah is the light [of God].” Between the two lines is a zigzag floral motif that mimics the geometric pattern in the border.

Altogether, the menorah resembles a Hebrew book in the way in which it opens (from right to left). Instead of pages, however, there are eight oil holders for lighting during the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. The holders fold out (two on each side) to form a straight line. A small wick holder is held in the center of each rectangular oil container with an “X” form. This form acts as a three-dimensional form of the geometric pattern that exists in the borders of all the other sides and in the spine. Additionally, the oil container on the far right has an extra, larger wick holder, presumably for the shammes candle.

The texture of the silver-plated brass of the menorah varies throughout the piece. The front and back covers are chased and inlaid with niello to create a slightly three-dimensional surface. The dark gray of the niello contrasts with the silver, making the motifs more legible. Contrastingly, the surfaces of the oil containers are very smooth and two-dimensional. Falling somewhere between the two textures are the inside cover and spine. These two surfaces are two-dimensional but are engraved in order to easily articulate the text.

Elana Scudder ‘11

## CONTEXTUALIZING A TRAVELING MENORAH

*Elana Scudder ‘11*

A Hanukkah menorah was a common possession in most east European Jewish homes. Its most recent form came from story of Hanukkah, the festival of lights. As it goes, during the rededication of the temple, the Maccabees had only enough oil to light the menorah for one day but it instead lasted for eight. The result of this miracle was the nine-branched menorah form with nine candles or oil lamps that is still used today. Eight of these candles or lamps are lit, one each day, for the eight-day duration of the holiday. The ninth candle or the “shammes” candle, however, has a special purpose; it is used to light the other candles and is often larger or higher up than the rest.<sup>130</sup>

Consistent with tradition, this particular menorah has eight oil holders, each with its own wick holder, and one with an extra, slightly larger wick holder for the shammes candle. Instead of being a candelabrum, however, it has a rectilinear shape and folds up into a book-like object. Its compact dimensions (3-1/2 x 2-9/16 x 5/8 in.) when closed imply that it was necessary for it to be stored, instead of displayed on a shelf, during times of disuse. This could mean that the owners lived in small quarters and had to conserve space or it could mean that the family often traveled, whether by choice or by necessity. In eastern Europe in the nineteenth century,

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<sup>130</sup> Riley, Moira. “Hanukkah Symbols and Their Meanings.” *Associated Content*. (November, 2008): <[http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/1212566/hanukkah\\_symbols\\_and\\_their\\_meanings.html?cat=30](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/1212566/hanukkah_symbols_and_their_meanings.html?cat=30)>.

at a time when Jews did not have their own state and were often on the move to find more prosperous towns, the latter is more likely. Furthermore, the occurrence of the partitions of Poland that eventually evaporated the state in the late 1700s indicates that this piece may have belonged to a Polish Jewish family who traveled from their slowly dissolving hometown to the flourishing cities of Russia, Prussia, or Galicia.<sup>131</sup> Or perhaps, it belonged to a Jewish merchant, frequently on the move. During this period of dispersal, it was essential for Jews to hold on to precious objects that would help them maintain their Jewish identity and forever connect them with the Jewish community. Consequently, these religious objects had to be crafted in a way that would ensure ease of travel and assembly. This small foldable menorah, although simple and relatively unornamented, was as thoughtfully designed and held as much importance in the lives of the Jewish owners as would a larger, more decorated one.

The small traveling menorah is made of silver plated brass instead of pure silver, indicating that the family was probably not wealthy enough to own a silver menorah. Not only would a construction of pure silver have given the menorah a more consistent hue that might have better displayed the precious nature of the object, but it also would have made it much lighter weight and therefore more easily packed and moved. The owners, however, clearly could not afford a menorah made entirely of such an expensive material as silver. The brass skeleton of the piece made it more affordable while the silver plating gave it the appearance of a more valuable object.

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<sup>131</sup> Bartal, Israel. *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 38-46.

The existence of some decoration on this menorah undoubtedly added some cost for the family. Historically, however, religious objects were often more extravagant than normal everyday objects. It was a “mitzvah” – a commandment – to spend more money on sacred objects because it glorified God.<sup>132</sup> Thus, even if the owners did not otherwise live a lavish lifestyle, the maintenance of their connection to Judaism was important enough to splurge on a more ornate, and hence a more expensive, menorah.

The particular motifs on this menorah are extremely symbolic of the Jewish religion. The seven-armed menorah on the front cover can be interpreted in a couple of different ways. First, it is similar to the menorah depicted on the Arch of Titus. Built c. 80 CE, the Arch of Titus displays an image of the Romans leading their Jewish captives to their homeland after Titus’s victory over Judea.<sup>133</sup> With them they carried their most precious object of booty, the menorah from the holy Temple of Jerusalem. The menorah acted as a symbol of Judaism and its capture signified the end of Jewish independence in the holy land. Later, this menorah appeared on the emblem of the state of Israel and remains the most important symbol of Jewish religion and culture to this day.<sup>134</sup> Its appearance on the cover of this traveling menorah therefore immediately indicates that the object was made for religious use by Jews.

Additionally, the placement of the symbol in the center of the image is especially important. The traditional way to represent the

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<sup>132</sup> Roth, Cecil. *Jewish Art: an illustrated history* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1971).

<sup>133</sup> McFayden, Donald. “The Date of the Arch of Titus.” *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 3. (December, 1915): <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3287778>>.

<sup>134</sup> Hachlili, Rachel. *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-Armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form, and Significance* (BRILL, 2001).

holy Temple and ancient synagogues in images was to depict only the niche in which the ark was held.<sup>135</sup> The ark, the closet that housed the Torah, is the holiest of holy objects because it protects the word of God (the Torah) and is always shown in the center of the niche. Placing the seven-armed menorah symbol in this important central location therefore acts to further emphasize the importance of this symbol for the Jews in the preservation of their Jewish identity.

The ornament on the back cover of this traveling menorah at first glance appears to be the same as that on the front. Looking closer, however, one can see that the menorah depicted here is different; it has only five arms and has a tree-like stem. Menorahs such as this were found in Golan, Israel and were often as common in that region as seven-armed menorahs were in other regions.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, the tree-like stem on this menorah could be a reference to God's description of the construction of the menorah as recorded in the Torah. "Of hammered work the lamp stand is to be made. Its base, its branches, its cups, its knobs and its blossoms are to proceed out from it. And six branches are running out from its sides, three branches of the lamp stand from its one side and three branches of the lamp stand from its other side"<sup>137</sup>. The indication of "branches" coming from the base of the menorah indicates in a literal sense that a menorah is a tree.

The differences between the menorahs on the front and the back covers of this object can be accounted for by the prohibition by the Rabbis of the Talmud to make "any menorah which was identical or even similar to the one that had stood in the Temple"<sup>138</sup> until the new temple was built. In fact, in most images with more than one menorah, the forms were purposely made to be different so as not to take away any importance from the Temple's menorah as a symbol of Judaism and the miracles created by God. An example of such can be found in the mosaic of the Beit Alfa synagogue, which shows two menorahs that are very similar except for their varying tripod bases.<sup>139</sup>

Similar to the front, the menorah symbol on the back takes on a central position. Here, however, there are two birds that flank the outer branches of the menorah. These winged creatures are symbolic of the cherubs that hover over the ark as described in the Bible. In Jewish tradition, they are the "throne bearers of God"<sup>140</sup> and their presence in this object signifies that the menorah as a symbol of Judaism was supposed to hold as much importance in the lives of Eastern European Jews as did God.

The inscriptions on this foldable menorah also highlight its significance in nineteenth century Jewish life. The first inscription, on the spine of the menorah, reads *Hanukkah* and specifies the

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<sup>135</sup> Hachlili, Rachel. "The Niche and the Ark in Ancient Synagogues." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* (October, 1976):

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1356719>>, 43.

<sup>136</sup> Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-Armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form, and Significance*, 69.

<sup>137</sup> Exodus 25: 31-40

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<sup>138</sup> Huberman, Ida. "The Seven-Branched Menorah: An Evolving Jewish Symbol." *Jewish Heritage Online Magazine*.

<<http://jhom.com/topics/seven/menorah.html>>.

<sup>139</sup> Sukenik, Eleazar Lipa. *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha: an account of the excavations conducted on the behalf of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem: from the Hebrew* (Gorgias Press LLC, 2003), 16.

<sup>140</sup> "Cherub." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (2011): <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/109581/cherub>>.

holiday for which the object is to be used. The second inscription, which arguably has a more figurative implication, says *Ki ner mitzvah / ve-torah or*. This can be translated to “because the light is a mitzvah and the Torah is the light [of God].” In addition to the mitzvah of the lighting of the candles to commemorate the miracle of Hanukkah, this menorah serves as a reminder to honor the word of God by keeping true to Jewish faith.

The inscriptions, the symbols, and the size of this menorah all indicate that this piece was meant to be both a ritual object used during the holiday of Hanukkah and to link Jews to each other even at times when the community was dispersed in many different countries. Since there was not yet a Jewish state, it was important that Jews preserved their religious identity in order to avoid the disappearance of Judaism in Eastern Europe. As a result, even relatively simple and inexpensive religious objects were quite ornate and contained many layers of symbolism that served to honor the word of God.

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Yahrzeit Lamp  
 Poland, 19<sup>th</sup> century  
 Backplate: 9.75 x 6.5 in. Lamp Cup: 2.75in depth, 2.5in average diameter. Pewter; repoussé, chased, soldered, and engraved  
 2011.S.267. 11(#99)

The overall design is symmetrical in relation to the vertical axis, so that the left and right sides are mirror images in both shape and design. All of the major designs are embossed, with the exception of the inscription at the bottom, which has been engraved. This yahrzeit lamp is composed of two pieces of pewter, making up a lamp cup and a decorative backplate. It is a darker grey-silver with a bluish tint, suggesting a relatively high proportion of lead in the pewter. The functional part of the lamp, which would have held lamp oil and a floating wick, consists of half of a cup which has been solder to the backplate. At the top-center of the backplate is a small half-ring, allowing the lamp to be hung on a wall. A raised border outlines the edges of the piece. Just below the half-ring is a pair of Polish peacocks in mirror image, facing in opposite directions. Groups of lines etched into the bodies of the birds show the outlines of feathers. Vines representing the Tree of Life, as well as human vanity, decorate the remainder of the backplate and lamp cup, with the exception of the area bearing the engraved inscription. Again with the exception of the smooth area bearing the inscription, the entire piece is etched with small lines resembling scales, giving the lamp a rough texture.

In the center of the face of the lamp cup are the embossed letters נ"ג, most likely an acronym of "נר נשמה" ("soul candle"), from "נר אלהים נשמת אדם" ("the soul of a man is a candle of God" Psalm 20:27). This inscription was initially overlooked as part of the surrounding vegetal design. It was only later recognized as an acronym because the adjacent letters do not conform to the otherwise complete vertical symmetry of the lamp.



Yahrzeit Lamp (detail), 2011.S.267. 11 (#99)

Just below the lamp cup and extending over the remaining bottom of the backplate is a smooth, bordered area containing the inscription:

“וישב העפר על הארץ כשהיה, והרוח תשוב אל האלהים אשר נתנה” (“the dust will settle on the ground as it had been before, and the spirit will return to the God who gave it” Eccl 12:7).<sup>141</sup>

Zachary Steinman ‘13

<sup>141</sup> Transliterations: נר נשמה (*ner neshema*); נר אלהים נשמת אדם (*ner elohim neshemat adam*); וישב העפר על הארץ כשהיה, והרוח תשוב אל האלהים אשר נתנה (*ve-yashav ha-afar al ha-aretz k’she-bayah, va-ha-ruach tashuv el ha-elohim asher natnah*)

*SYMBOL AND SYMBOLISM: JEWISH ART AND A 19<sup>TH</sup>*

*CENTURY POLISH*

*Yahrzeit Cup in Historic Context*

*Zachary Steinman ‘13*

The fundamental concept in Judaism is more than merely monotheism. It is the idea that the One God is a being so powerfully awesome that he exists outside of the realm of traditional forms.<sup>142</sup> While this fundamental idea led to the modern Western concept of divinity, it left the Jews of antiquity at a distinct artistic disadvantage because much of the major art at the time was related to pagan ritual and worship.<sup>143</sup> For instance, the classical sculptures of Greece and Rome are most frequently representations of Gods and Goddesses. These depictions have consistent and identifiable features, contributing to what is known as the “classical style.” In contrast, Judaism has no comparable prescriptive artistic models. With its prohibition against “graven images” and the fear that art would lead to idolatry, ancient Judaism did not leave room in its theology for the visual arts. In spite of this a distinction eventually developed between visual art and visual art for the sake of idolatrous worship. However, by this time there was a fundamental lack of a fixed Jewish style, necessitating an adoption of the styles of the surrounding culture.

<sup>142</sup> Gabrielle Sed-Rajna and Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Jewish art* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1997), 10.

<sup>143</sup> Cecil Roth, “Ritual Art,” in *Jewish art: an illustrated history*, ed. Cecil Roth (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 338.

This pattern continued into the Diaspora, eventually allowing for the absorption of Polish folk arts into Eastern European Jewish ritual art.

Jewish culture maintains the unique ability to absorb and modify, and ultimately to Judaize, the artistic traditions of the dominant surrounding cultures.<sup>144</sup> The absence of a continuous homogenous style, however, calls into question the “specificity of Jewish art as a repertoire distinct from other visual arts.”<sup>145</sup> Nevertheless, Jewish art does exist as a genre distinct from all others. The problem is not that Judaism does not have a distinct artistic heritage, but rather that the accepted stylistic criteria used to classify art is not appropriate for a cultural history that extends over four continents and three thousand years.<sup>146</sup> In the case of Jewish art, it is not so much a matter of style and technique as much as a shared vision and purpose. During the Second Temple Period, this meant that while the encounter with Hellenistic culture led the Jews to adopt Greek styles and forms, all Greek religious imagery and motifs were removed and replaced with “symbols peculiar to Jewish art.”<sup>147</sup>

The destruction of the Second Temple accelerated the development of a “repertoire of symbols” which became

characteristic of Jewish art.<sup>148</sup> Because the Temple and its associated sacrificial rituals had been the cornerstone of Jewish worship, the image of the Temple remained a central element. Cult objects associated with Temple worship, such as the Menorah and the Ark, developed into symbolic iconography representative of Judaism as a whole.<sup>149</sup> An additional consequence of the destruction of the Temple, which had previously housed most of the “ritual adornments,” was the development in the Diaspora of objects for personal religious ritual.<sup>150</sup> Because a central place of worship no longer existed, ritual practices could no longer be left to the priestly class alone. This necessitated the production of ritual art. In addition, rabbinic interpretation generated the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, “beautifying the commandments,” concluding that one can “glorify the commandments” by beautifying ritual objects.<sup>151</sup> In this way, Judaism began to encourage an aesthetic ideal in the visual arts, if only in relation to ritual observance. Still, Judaism did not prescribe any specific stylistic ideal. As a result, ritual objects tended almost universally to “reflect the tastes and fashion of the countries in which they were manufactured.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>145</sup> Sed-Rajna and Amishai-Maisels, *Jewish art*: 9.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. In fact, mosaics that have been found in Galilean synagogues are based on Roman astrological compositions, though the Roman nature-oriented designs were replaced with images of the Temple or the Ark, surrounded by ritual objects.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid. Other examples of such “Jewish symbols” include festival objects such as the Etrog and Luluv from the festival of Sukkot, certain animals such as the lion, and Jewish inscriptions, especially biblical quotations.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Roth, “Ritual Art,” 308.

<sup>151</sup> Sed-Rajna and Amishai-Maisels, *Jewish art*: 280., Roth, “Ritual Art,” 308.

The concept of *hiddur mitzvah* stems largely from an interpretation of Exodus 15:2 “this is my god and I will glorify him.” How can a human possibly glorify God? The rabbis argued that one can glorify God by glorifying, i.e. beautifying, his commandments.

<sup>152</sup> Roth, “Ritual Art,” 309., Sed-Rajna and Amishai-Maisels, *Jewish art*: 287.

Nevertheless, old Temple imagery and symbolism persisted. One of the most ancient, and most ubiquitous symbols is that of candlelight.<sup>153</sup> Aside from the obvious importance of a light source, candle lighting has been an important symbolic ritual custom throughout Jewish history, extending back even to the Menorah of the Temple period. In modern Judaism, candle lighting is a relevant part of many important Jewish rituals.<sup>154</sup> Jews light candles for the Sabbath, for nearly every major holiday, and for major events in the life cycle, including the ritual circumcision, the wedding, and at various points during the death and mourning rituals.<sup>155</sup>

During the rituals associated with death and mourning, a candle is lit at three major times, marking three important points in the mourning process. First, when an individual has just passed away, a candle is placed near the head of the deceased.<sup>156</sup> After the burial, when the family returns home to begin the seven days of intensive mourning known as *Shivah* (“seven”), a second candle is lit that will burn for the whole seven days. Finally, a third candle is lit on the anniversary of the death, and is subsequently lit each year

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<sup>153</sup> Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish way in death and mourning* (New York: J. David, 1969), 202. It should be noted that the English *candle* was chosen as the best translation for the Hebrew *ner*, which refers to a light or to a light source. Therefore, *candle* does not refer exclusively to a modern wax candle, but to any burning light, including wax candles, oil lamps, or fat burning lamps. As a consequence, some Jewish religious scholars have even argued that an electric light may be a valid *yahrzeit* light. See: Steven Oppenheimer, “The Yahrzeit Light,” *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* 37 (1999).

<sup>154</sup> Lamm, *The Jewish way in death and mourning*: 101.

<sup>155</sup> Samuel C. Heilman, *When a Jew dies: the ethnography of a bereaved son* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 231.

<sup>156</sup> Lamm, *The Jewish way in death and mourning*: 4. In some traditions, candles are placed all around the body.

on that day, according to the Hebrew calendar. The type of lamp associated with this third candle is known as the *yahrzeit* lamp, from the Yiddish for “a year’s time.”

The piece of ritual art on display here is an example of a *yahrzeit* oil lamp from nineteenth century Poland. It is composed of two pieces of embossed pewter that have been soldered together, making up the lamp cup and the decorative backplate. The lamp bares two uniquely Jewish inscriptions, but is otherwise closely related to the Polish folk art of the time. In particular, the general design of the backplate bares striking resemblance to the backs of the Polish backed-stools known as *zydles*.<sup>157</sup> Common features of these stool backs, which are also apparent on the *yahrzeit* lamp, are a general curved and bordered shape, and a decoration “arranged symmetrically in relation to the vertical axis.”<sup>158</sup> And since these “backed stools were known throughout Poland,” it is understandable that the design has found its way into Jewish ritual art.

Other characteristics of the backplate also demonstrate Polish cultural influence on the Jewish art of the region. The most apparent iconography on the backplate, the “symmetrical double arrangement” of birds, is an especially common zoomorphic symbol

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<sup>157</sup> Ewa Fryś-Pietraszkowa, Anna Kunczyńska-Iracka, and Marian Pokropek, *Folk art in Poland* (Warszawa: Arkady, 1991), 61. No. 69 “zydle” (area of Limanowa, Nowy Sącz District, Early 20<sup>th</sup> century) This stool back also features a bird, very similar to the Polish Peacocks on the backplate. And No. 71 “zydle” (Katowice District, Silesia region late 19<sup>th</sup> century)

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 69., see also Sed-Rajna and Amishai-Maisels, *Jewish art*: 307. No. 167, Torah Shield from 19<sup>th</sup> century Ukraine, baring the same shape and vertical symmetry

in Polish folk art.<sup>159</sup> In addition, the surrounding geometric vegetal motif is a clear reflection of paper-cuts, which were a popular craft “mainly within the boundaries of the former Kingdom of Poland,” and a “unique artifact of Polish folk art.”<sup>160</sup> Because paper-cutting was popular in Eastern Europe, where the greatest number of Jews lived, Jews could not have avoided exposure to it. In fact, paper-cutting is well documented among Polish Jews of the time.<sup>161</sup> It is not surprising, then, that these motifs are found in the design of the *yahrzeit* lamp. In general, the *yahrzeit* lamp is decidedly Polish in style, even closely resembling some Polish Catholic holy-water cups.<sup>162</sup>

This does not mean, however, that the *yahrzeit* lamp is not Jewish art. Possessing Polish character does not supersede or nullify Jewish character, but rather serves as a medium for it. This lamp demonstrates perfectly the notion that the creations of Jewish art are “more significant in the realm of ideas and iconology than in the means of expression.”<sup>163</sup> For instance, while the specific form of the birds is clearly borrowed from Polish folk art, depictions of birds or other winged creatures have historically been associated in Jewish art with the Temple, representing the *cherubim* of the Ark. As is often the case in Jewish art, the symbol is foreign, but the symbolism is Jewish.<sup>164</sup> Moreover, the lamp is purely Jewish in

function, and includes two crucial Jewish inscriptions that identify the object as Jewish and specify its function as a *yahrzeit* lamp. Under the lamp cup is the inscription:

“וישב העפר על הארץ כשהיה, והרוח תשוב אל האלהים אשר נתנה” (“the dust will settle on the ground as it had been before, and the spirit will return to the God who gave it.” Eccl 12:7) This passage is traditionally cited as the answer to the question of the soul after death, and is therefore a rather obvious choice for a *yahrzeit* inscription. The passage also parallels the mystical interpretation of the mourning candle. The Zohar, the central text of Jewish mystical literature, considers the burning wick to represent the soul, while the oil that is consumed represents the body.<sup>165</sup> The allegory is that, like the soul to the body, the flame is only temporally connected to the candle, “striving ever upward toward the supernal light of paradise.”<sup>166</sup> This mystical interpretation also relates to the embossed two-letter inscription נ”נ on the face of the oil cup. This second inscription is apparently an acronym of “נר נשמה” (“soul candle”), from “נר אלהים נשמת אדם” (“the soul of a man is a candle of God.” Psalm 20:27)

Because Judaism rejects idolatry, the religious culture cannot formally embrace any particular visual style. However, the tradition of Temple worship and a symbolism-rich religious literature provided Jewish society with a unique repertoire of symbols. Judaism was subsequently able to develop a deeply rooted set of religious iconography independent of an artistic style. Since the particular style was not important, Jewish communities throughout the Diaspora freely adopted the artistic techniques of

<sup>159</sup> Fryś-Pietraszka, Kunczyńska-Iracka, and Pokropek, *Folk art in Poland*: 108., see No. 184 “latch-lock fitting” (Matski, Łowicz region)

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>161</sup> Sed-Rajna and Amishai-Maisels, *Jewish art*: 287-88.

<sup>162</sup> Fryś-Pietraszka, Kunczyńska-Iracka, and Pokropek, *Folk art in Poland*: 164. No. 164, “small holy water basin (1935)”

<sup>163</sup> Sed-Rajna and Amishai-Maisels, *Jewish art*: 13.

<sup>164</sup> Roth, “Ritual Art,” 309.

<sup>165</sup> Oppenheimer, “The *Yahrzeit* Light,” 103.

<sup>166</sup> Heilman, *When a Jew dies : the ethnography of a bereaved son*: 137.

the surrounding cultures, while maintaining their peculiar iconology. Thus as large Jewish communities emerged in Eastern Europe, they absorbed the styles and techniques of Polish folk art. They added Jewish imagery to Polish styles, and imbued Polish symbols with Jewish symbolism. The yahrzeit lamp displayed here in this exhibit is a wonderful example of the coexistence of these two disparate cultures in a single piece of material culture. Although the style and some of the imagery is borrowed from the neighboring Polish culture, its uniquely Jewish function, symbolism, and inscriptions make it that special form of cross-cultural craftwork that is characteristic of Jewish art.



A chicken *halaf*, knife for shehitah  
 Molten steel, wood. Wooden case with velvet.  
 8 in. x 1 in.  
 2011.S.267.12a (no previous inventory number)

A sheep *halaf*, knife for shehitah  
 Molten steel, bone.  
 13 in. x 1.65 in  
 2011.S.267.12b (#206). Purchased in memory of Dr. Henry  
 Sherwood by friends.

### THE TOOLS OF THE SHEHITAH

*Aaron Eidman'12*

Nowhere in the Torah are the laws of Jewish slaughter, or shehita, clearly delineated. These complex laws have become part of the great bulk of Jewish tradition passed down orally. Shehita requires that a highly trained butcher, the sho<sup>h</sup>et, perform the slaughtering. Aside from being intensively trained in the laws of shehita, the sho<sup>h</sup>et must utilize specific tools for the slaughtering process. Perhaps the most important of these tools is the knife used to make the incision on the animal's throat. This knife is known among Ashkenazi Jews as the *halaf*, which "...is derived from the Hebrew verb 'to change', since it effects a change in the state of the animal from being forbidden as food while alive to being permitted for consumption after shehita."<sup>167</sup> The specifications of the *halaf* are of critical importance to the shehita process.

During the physical act of shehita, there are many considerations to take into account. Firstly, the prohibition of *shehiya* entails that the sho<sup>h</sup>et's incision be a smooth, uninterrupted act. Any pausing or hesitation in the act renders the animal not kosher. Another prohibition is called *derasa*; it requires that the point of the blade never be pressed stabbed into the neck. This law effectively renders the use of a guillotine not kosher. The law of *halada* necessitates that no part of the blade should be hidden by the hide or feathers of the animal being slaughtered. The

<sup>167</sup> Rosen, S. D. "Physiological insights into Shehita," *Veterinary Record* 154 (2004): 759.

law of *hagrama* requires that the incision be made at the correct location on the neck that which permits the severance of the neck structures as quickly and as neatly as possible. Lastly, *ikkur* states that there must be no tearing of tissues during the incision.<sup>168</sup>

Each of these five halachic considerations has played a role in shaping the form of the modern day *halaf*. A sharp blade aides in the fulfillment of the law of Shehiya, as it is less likely to get caught on any part of the animal's neck and therefore facilitates an uninterrupted incision. This is why the blades currently used for shehitah are required to be razor sharp. In an article titled "Physiological Insights into Shehita," S.D. Rosen states that, "This [the *chalaf*] is honed to an exquisite sharpness, comparable to that of a surgical knife..."<sup>169</sup>

In addition, the traditional lengths of the knife have been determined in accordance with the law of *halada*. A general rule is that the knife's blade be at least twice the diameter of the neck of the animal being slaughtered.<sup>170</sup> These lengths ensure that the blades are long enough to extend beyond the animal's hide or feathers and remain visible throughout the entire shehitah process. This reason is also explains why the blade of the *halaf* is broad and straight, without a thin sharp end at the front or back to cause stabbing. *Ikkur*, as Rosen shows, requires that the trachea and esophagus must be cut through and not torn out. The knife, therefore, must be smooth and extremely sharp, without any nicks

that may cause tearing. In the eighteenth a controversy over the type of knife used in the shehitah emerged between the newly emerging Hasidic Jews and the more traditional rabbis, their opponents.

In his article "The Jewish Dietary Laws," Samuel H. Dresner states that, "He [the shohet] must be both a learned and pious person. He must pass an examination attesting to his thorough knowledge of the laws of Sh'chitah. He must be a man of piety and is obliged to recite a blessing before he executes his duties, ever reminding him of the nature of his labor, that this whole process is but a "divine concession." Thus he is prevented from becoming brutalized by the manner of his work. "...Thou shalt kill of thy herd and thy flock which the Lord hath given thee, as I have commanded thee..." (Deut. 12:21); that is, we may slaughter an animal for food, but only "as I have commanded thee." Thus Sh'chitah teaches reverence for life."<sup>171</sup> This reverence for life is born out of sections of biblical text which preach this philosophy. Maimonides explains this text as honoring animal mothers' relationship with their young:

It is also prohibited to kill an animal with its young on the same day (Leviticus 22:28), in order that people should be restrained and prevented from killing the two together in such a manner that the young is slain in the sight of the mother; for the pain of the animals under such circumstances is very great. There is no difference in this case between the pain of man and the pain of other living beings, since the love and tenderness of the mother for her

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<sup>168</sup> Rosen, 759.

<sup>169</sup> Rosen, 760.

<sup>170</sup> J.M. Regenstein, M.M. Chaudry, and C.E. Regenstein. "The Kosher and Halal Food Laws," *Comprehensive Reviews in Food Science and Food Safety* 2 (2003): 114.

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<sup>171</sup> Samuel H. Dresner, *Jewish Dietary Laws* (New York: Burning Bush Press, 1959), 27-8.

young ones is not produced by reasoning, but by imagination, and this faculty exists not only in man but inmost living beings.<sup>172</sup>

The two knives for shehitah in the collection of Adath Israel are prime examples of halafim, one about 8 inches long is a chicken knife and the other, about 13 inches long is a knife for larger animals, perhaps sheep or goats. The basic function of these knives is the same – both are used to slaughter animals – but each is used in a different context. Aside from this size difference, the knives are highly similar. Both exhibit the telltale characteristics that are required in a chalaf. The blades of both knives are broad and straight; they do not come to a point. The blades are also of equal width from top to bottom. It is interesting to note that the simplicity of the knives. Both have smooth handles and metal blades, and are largely devoid of any of the ornament or embellishment that can be seen in so many Jewish artifacts used in other rituals. The reason for this can be explained by the difference between shehitah and other Jewish rituals. While other rituals emphasize complex orders and procedures, shehitah is different from other rituals in that it is above all a functional act and ritual. Still, the larger knife's handle is made of bone, or perhaps ivory, which is a valuable material and indicates that the knife was probably created and/or used by a person of respectable means.

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<sup>172</sup> Pablo Lerner and Alfredo Mordechai Rabello, "The Prohibition of Ritual Slaughtering (Kosher Shehita and Halal) and Freedom of Religion of Minorities" *Journal of Law and Religion* 22 (2006/2007): 4.

*MEAT CLEAVER- AN INTERPRETATION*

*Emily Schubert '12*



A Meat Cleaver

19<sup>th</sup> century or early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Blade: 13 1/8 in. x 4 1/15<sup>th</sup> in., tapering to 2 5/8 in. near the handle. Wrought steel, wood.

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The meat cleaver in the Adath Israel collection depicts the head of a cow on the top part of the blade. The eye of the cow is disproportionately large in relation to the rest of the cow's head. The blade is 13 and 1/8 inches long and 4 and 1/15<sup>th</sup> inches wide at the end, and tapers to 2 and 5/8 inch near the handle. It is grey in color, and made of wrought iron, it is rather crude and unpolished, with rough edges. The blade continues through the handle. The handle is made of some type of dark brown wood, and is fastened together with two bolts, which go through the blade. A cap has been placed where the handle meets the blade. The blade is at a slight angle from the handle.

The cleaver is a simple practical device. Although the exact time and place where the cleaver was made is not known, it was definitely hand crafted. Its size and weight make it easy to handle, and it appears that it was often used because it is quite well worn. The large eye would make it easy to hang on a nail in the wall. Neither the handle of the blade is engraved or contains any kind of ornamentation, which would indicate that it was meant to be used during every day kitchen activities, or that its owners were not particularly fancy.

The meat cleaver could have been made in eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then the home of the world's largest Jewish community at that time.<sup>173</sup> The symbol of the cow on the blade

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<sup>173</sup> Israel Bartal, *Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881*, p. 168.

might indicate that the knife may have been used for cutting only meat, perhaps in a traditional kosher household. Kashrut is the body of Jewish law that deals with what foods Jews can and cannot eat and how those foods must be prepared. The word itself is derived from the Hebrew word meaning “fit, proper or correct.” Most Jews in eastern Europe observed these detailed and specific dietary laws. Arguments have been made that the laws were originally made for health reasons, but that is not the whole story. While it may appear that people who do not obey the law are freer than those who do, religious Jews would say that this is not true. Such men are “slaves of their own instincts, impulses and desires.”<sup>174</sup> Voluntarily obeying the Law, frees man from his animal instincts. Religious Jews, then, obey the kosher laws because the Torah commands them to, and because obeying the law is the “beginning of human freedom.”<sup>175</sup> In Eastern Europe, it was easier for Jews to follow these laws because they lived in isolated communities and prepared their food at home; they rarely went to a restaurant. Therefore, not only were there fewer opportunities to not keep kosher, but also there were enormous social consequences in not following the law.<sup>176</sup> Since, over 80% of the Jews who immigrated to America from Eastern Europe were Orthodox,<sup>177</sup> someone who followed the kosher laws probably used this cleaver.

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174 Regenstein, J., Chaudry, M., Regenstein, C. “An Introduction to Kosher and Halal Food Laws.” from Curtis, P. *Guide to Food Laws and Regulations*. p 165.

175 Regenstein, J., Chaudry, M., Regenstein, C. “An Introduction to Kosher and Halal Food Laws.”. p 165.

176 Danziger. *The Meanings of Keeping Kosher :Views of the Newly Orthodox*. p 462.

177 Danziger. *The Meanings of Keeping Kosher :Views of the Newly Orthodox*. p 461.

According to the rules of kashrut, some animals may not be eaten at all, and the ones that can be eaten must be slaughtered in strict accordance to Jewish law. Meat, the flesh of birds and mammals, cannot be eaten with dairy. Even in Biblical times, the Rabbis knew that there were times when it would be impossible to be sure that food was kept completely kosher, for example, “if a drop of milk accidentally dropped into a pot of meat.”<sup>178</sup> Thus, there was some degree of flexibility, as noted in the Bible, “Improperly slaughtered beef will be... nullified by a measure of sixty to one.” The sixty to one ratio refers to ratio between the uncontaminated meat and the contamination.<sup>179</sup> The rules also extend to utensils like pots, pans, dishwashers, and plates, which take on the status of the food that they touch in the presence of heat. Thus, it would make sense that the cow symbol on the cleaver would make it easy for the cook to know whether this particular cleaver was meant to be used for dairy products, *milkhig*, or for meat products, *fleschig*. If a utensil is used improperly, the kosher rules have been violated. There was probably some sort of social stigma attached to members of the community who were not able to follow the kosher laws properly, so it would make sense that utensils should have obvious associations with one type of food or the other.

Kosher laws are also rather strict when it comes to butchering meat. The presence of the cow’s head, however, would also weaken the blade, and make it unsuitable for handling thicker

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178 Kraemer, David Charles. “Problematic mixings : Foods and other prohibited substances in rabbinic legislation.” p 37.

179 Kraemer, David Charles. “Problematic mixings : Foods and other prohibited substances in rabbinic legislation.” p 41.

cuts of meat. Therefore, this particular cleaver was probably used for household meat cutting rather than butchering. One can see this with the unfinished top of the blade, most likely home made.

The presence of the cow's head on the cleaver may also have been at least partially decorative. Jews lived mainly in small towns called shtetls, and often kept animals. Cows are very large animals, and probably very expensive. They were probably prized possessions in that they are very useful animals. Their meat and their milk are nutritious, and they can be used as beasts of burden. The depiction of the cow would have made the cleaver more special to its owner.

After the breakup of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the fortunes of the Jews became more and more precarious. Anti-Semitism was on the rise, and pogroms became more frequent. Between 1882 and 1914, two million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States.<sup>180</sup> Once in America, Jewish culture had to adapt to the American middle class Protestant culture, but the culture they had established in Europe helped them in America.

In Eastern Europe, Jewish communities were largely self-governing. They lived within the confines of various countries, and were active participants in the economic life of their respective countries, but were not really part of them in any political sense. Jews did not consider themselves Russian, or Polish, or German. They were Jews who just lived in these lands. The Jewish community was governed by its own leaders who had both police and judicial power over the populace. When the Jews moved to America, they quickly formed organizations to help newly arrived

immigrants. This sense of community that they had established in Europe helped them make a place for themselves in America. However, the Jews in America considered themselves American. Judaism in America has become a religious faith, rather than a way of life. Jews abided by the same laws as the rest of society which meant that they were liberated from the restraints of the more religious way of life they had been used to in Europe.<sup>181</sup> In America, they have had to forge a new identity and a new meaning to being Jewish.

Throughout our study of Eastern European Jewry, we have seen Jews being pulled both toward "modernism" as evidenced by the Jewish enlightenment or the Haskalah, and the Hasidic movement, which emphasized tradition. In America, this conflict still exists. The secularized Jew is assimilated into American society while the Orthodox live in separate communities, wear the same sort of clothes, and obey the laws in the Torah just as their ancestors did. Whereas before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of American Jews were born in Eastern Europe, today they have little connection to Europe.<sup>182</sup> This little meat cleaver reveals this dichotomy within the Jewish community. As Leavitt says, "American Jews are both too religious and not religious enough, too American, and not nearly American enough."<sup>183</sup> The cleaver seems old, and indeed, it might have been made in Eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was probably owned by an observant Jew who left Eastern Europe in search of a better life. He or she might

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<sup>181</sup> Levitt, "Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism."

<sup>182</sup> Diner, H. *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000*. p 6.

<sup>183</sup> Diner, H. *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000*. p 6.

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<sup>180</sup> Davis. *Immigration and Americanization*. p 138

have been carried in a carpetbag in the steerage section of some mighty steamer. It might have been handled by some immigration officer in Ellis Island, and then used in some tenement in the lower East side before finding its way to the museum in Connecticut. Its original owner must have been kosher, as were most of the Jews of that time, so the cleaver was probably used for only meat, hence the symbol of the cow on its blade. But the original owner is long gone. Perhaps his descendants have kept to their kosher, old world ways, or perhaps they have assimilated into American culture. We will not know the answer to these questions, but we do know that the little cleaver is a remnant of the past.

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