

**What makes an object Jewish?**

**Exploring the Adath Israel Collection**



**Wesleyan University and Congregation Adath Israel  
Middletown, Spring 2014**



## *Foreword*

In Spring 2014, students in my History class “Out of the Shtetl: Jews in Eastern Europe” learned not only about Jewish history in eastern Europe but continued to explore the Judaica collection housed at the Congregation Adath Israel in Middletown. This was the third course that used the collection since a collaborative relationship between Wesleyan University and the Congregation Adath Israel began in 2011. This course was taught as a service-learning course, and objects will be displayed with new labels at the CAI Museum.

Students in this class researched the history of seventeen objects from the CAI Museum. In preparation for this project they participated in two workshops with Gabriel Goldstein, the former Associate Director for Exhibitions and Programs at the Yeshiva University Museum—one at Adath Israel and one at the Center for Jewish History in New York. This is the fruit of their work. In seventeen essays about seventeen objects, with some 100 images, they

explore the objects’ rich histories and contexts, and sometimes reveal that some of them were not exactly what they were thought to be.

The objects here are renumbered, or in one case numbered for the first time. It follows a convention established in 2011, consists of the year (2014), 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 gives each item a unique number, and becomes a permanent historical record of the students’ work.



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**Bezalel Box with Hebrew inscriptions and Zionist engravings**

Palestine, Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Brass cast, engraved, and wooden-latten panel

7 7/18 x 4 3/16 x 2 3/8 in.

Presented in honor of the special birthday of Muriel Schulman by Helen Holt and Saul Schwartz.

Adath Israel Museum, Middletown, CT

2014.S.267.1 (original inv. no. 160)

***Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem as a Producer of Early Zionist Trinkets***

Henry Karmin

The Bezalel brass box in the Adath Israel collection is made of a convex brass piece that screws to the structure. This piece opens and closes effortlessly. It can be assumed that the box is made out of brass because the color is similar to gold, yet it has tarnished overtime, typical of brass's long term reaction to sulfuric acid in the air. The inside of the box, however, is wooden.

The brass cover is adorned with 14 engravings of either Middle Eastern or Mediterranean images that encircle and frame a single embossed image of two men carrying a plate of grapes (Fig. 1). The carrying of the grapes iconographically represents a scene from the book of Numbers in the Hebrew Bible (Num. 13) where spies brought grapes from Canaan back to the camp of the Israelites.<sup>1</sup> This image became a staple of Zionist iconography (Fig. 2).

The encompassing images each represent an element of life in Palestine. Of the 14 images, 5 of them are engravings of animals; a goat, a deer, a

camel, a bird, and a lion. All the animals represented are found in the Palestine; these native species also became images associated with Zionist art (Fig. 3 and 4). The lion image seems out of place, but it does signify the emblem of the Tribe of Judah. Four more images are of men interacting with animals; for example two engravings of a farmer interacting with his goat, another of a traveler with his horse, and lastly one of a man playing with a smaller animal, perhaps a dog. Two of the images are of men fulfilling some of their daily activities. One man is shown smoking a pipe and another is seen reading scripture. The last three engravings are of objects, two of which display a home sheltered by trees, and the last is a boat sailing on the sea. In each corner of the top of the box reside 4 additional engravings, one of a man and his son, another of a man laboring, and 2 images of wild animals. Between all the engravings is an embossed pattern that displays the intricacies of the craftsmanship. The same pattern covers all the sides of the box. On both of the short sides of the box there are 6 images, which are engravings of leaves and trees (Fig. 5). On the back long side of the box, there are 11 similar tree-like and leaf-like engravings (Fig. 6). The

front long side bears the same 11 engravings as the back, however two Hebrew words surround the object בצלאל ירושלים, Bezalel Jerusalem, (Fig. 7). These words are the signature of the Bezalel Academy of Arts in Jerusalem. The bottom of the box is not engraved and the interior of the box has a wood-latten panel covering the brass. (Fig. 8 and 9). The images, engravings, and Hebrew inscriptions are reflective of the artistic style of the Bezalel Academy, an early twentieth-century art institution that represented Zionist ideals through its art.

The sale tag on the box survives to this day, and shows the last purchase of the box was made at Desa, a reputable Polish antique dealer, for about 1,800,000 zloty (or about \$60) (Fig. 8). The box was purchased in the early 1990's because the zloty was redenominated in 1995 (by 10,000). \$60 was a hefty price to pay for a box in the 1990's, its antique nature must have driven the price of the good higher. Lastly, the choice of the artist to use brass instead of a more valuable metal, shows that he/she did not intend to create a mere luxury good, but an item used everyday.



The origin of brass box in the collection of Adath Israel at the prestigious Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem allows for an exploration and greater contextualization of the object. The Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts was founded in 1906 by Boris Schatz, a Russian born, but Western-trained artist, who remained at its helm until 1929.<sup>2</sup> Boris Schatz had a utopian vision for Zionism; and his academy's productions and artwork would give character to the Zionist's attempts to create a Jewish nation in Jerusalem. Thus the iconography on the box represents Schatz's desire to create a Jewish nation, where, "people [would] have its own art to prove its right to statehood and its own art history to prove itself a nation."<sup>3</sup> Schatz shunned modernist art, and the box's iconography reflects Schatz desire to develop an encompassing Zionist identity, through the experience of a Jew returning to their home in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

The iconography on the "Box" reflects Schatz mission to create a historical biblical and linguistic identity for the Jewish people in Jerusalem through art. "Teaching the Bible was part of the curriculum at the school, and, together

with ancient Jewish history, it was taught under the course heading of Hebrew."<sup>5</sup> The center image on the cover of the box of the men carrying the grapes and the Hebrew inscription of "Jerusalem Bezalel" reveals the religious influence of Schatz on the artist. Schatz wanted his artistic Zionist movement to have a historically significant genesis. The School's "crowning achievement, the Aron Hakodesh" displays the same image of the grapevine being carried by two presumably Jews (Fig. 10).<sup>6</sup> This image, rooted in the Biblical text, reveals the essence of Jerusalem as a homeland for the Jews. The spies carry the grapes from exile in Canaan to Jerusalem or "the land of milk and honey."<sup>7</sup> The Bezalel Academy adopted the iconographic image as it is seen throughout their works (Fig 1, 2 and 10).

Through the Bezalel's iconographic elements in its art, Schatz attempted to promote Palestine as an ideal homeland to Zionists abroad. The "Bezalel... looked to the natural endowments of its chosen homeland"<sup>8</sup> to attract the Diaspora people's in Europe to Palestine. Thus the continual leaf-like engravings and Palestinian zoomorphic

iconography may represent the natural components of Jerusalem, and Palestine. Though the inclusion of the lion may seem somewhat out of place, as the species is not native to Palestine, the lion is also a repeated figure throughout Jewish art, not just in the Zionist movement because it is a metaphor from the Bible. Moreover, at the school, “there [was] an emphasis on figures that represent leadership, heroism, and salvation,”<sup>9</sup> so perhaps the Lion represents a heroic image. In the book of Judges, Samson is shown to kill a lion with his bare hands (Judges 14:5-6), and that scene has sometimes been depicted by Bezalel artists.<sup>10</sup>

The image of the lion is also rooted in the story of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132 C.E against the Romans Bar Kokhba was the leader of the tribe of Judea in the second revolt and after “initially [encountering] success in liberating parts of the country from the Roman garrisons... the Romans [then] managed to suppress the Jewish revolt and ended this short-lived liberation.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Bar Kokhba is seen through both a positive and negative light; he did heroically attempt to free the Jewish peoples from Roman rule, but in traditional

rabbinic sources “Kokhba is portrayed as a vain man who relied too much on his power, challenging God not to interfere in the process of war.”<sup>12</sup> Zionists, who wanted to find a rooted history in the Jewish people’s national past, enhanced the positive images of Kokhba to fulfill their desire to create a deep-rooted identity, disregarding Kokhba’s religious flaws. For the Zionists, Kokhba was a heroic figure that embodied the greatness of the Jewish people.

The Bezalel Academy seems to have strengthened the association of Kokhba with a lion in its art. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Bar Kokhba emerged as a recurring subject in Eastern European Zionist Jewish literature, and the contemporary image of Kokhba became associated not so much with the revolt, but with a legend of his encounter with a lion. The literature varies in style however they share a basic plot:

When the lion and the hero meet, the beast initially threatens the man (or presents a potential threat to him), yet the hero manages to subordinate the fierce animal to his will and thus subverts the threat to his life. The lion ultimately helps the hero (either

directly or indirectly) in his pursuit of freedom, hence becoming an instrument of support to the national cause.<sup>13</sup>

Zionists adopted the metaphor of the lion as an association with Bar Kokhba (and Samson); as the animal both represented the historical tribe of Judea and the heroic leaders the Jewish people needed in its attempt to find a home in Palestine. So although the lion does not serve as a representation of a species found in the region, it does metaphorically represent an image of Jewish pride and identity. The lion appears on many Bezalel works including the Aron Hakodesh, as two lions are sculpted, seemingly protecting the holy arch (Fig. 10). (Fig. 11) is a Bezalel drawing of a lion; this time the heroic beast is accompanied by a deer, another traditional animal form. The Bezalel Academy adopted, from Hebrew literature, the metaphor of the lion to embody the heroic nature of Bar Kokhba, and the biblical tale of Samson and the lion that would give the Zionist movement a historically rooted identity.

A similar representation of the lion can be seen at the Tel Hai memorial monument in Northern Israel, commemorating the Battle of Tel Hai in March 1920.

In 1918, Tel Hai was established as a border outpost after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire by British Colonial rule. During the start of the *First Aliyah*, some Zionist migrants had settled in the area amongst native Arabs. The British government was on the verge of gifting the lands to the French, which greatly concerned the Shiite Arabs, who believed a French imposition would betray promises made by the English to the Arabs during the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>14</sup> The Shiites were nervous that their Zionist Jewish neighbors would favor a French take-over of the region, so the two groups broke out in armed conflict. In an attempt to defend Tel Hai, eight Jews were killed.<sup>15</sup> About ten years later a monument was built to commemorate the valiant Jewish defenders (Fig. 12), where “the sculptor depicted a lion as the heroic aesthetic symbol commemorating eight watchmen killed in the Galilee [protecting Israeli Galilee lands].”<sup>16</sup> The monument in Tel Hai was created after the Bezalel closed down, but a link may be drawn between the neighboring Academy and the Tel Hai incident. The similar heroic, biblically rooted, nature of the lion on the box and on the monument may reveal both artists desire to show Palestine as a

place of pride for Jews. Both at the Bezalel and Tel Hai the lion is used as a symbol of Zionist heroism and identity.

The images of the men on the box could also represent the “natural endowments” and occupations of the inhabitants in Palestine, but it may alternatively reveal the artists own artistic freedom. The first Bezalel students were rural dwellers; Palestine did not have an urban community like those in Eastern Europe. “Bezalel would give farmers employment during the off-season, training them and their wives to combine crafts with agriculture and providing them with designs”.<sup>17</sup> Thus the images of men, who are biblically unidentifiable, may simply represent images the artist has encountered in his life. The farmer and herder, commonplace rural occupations, are icons on the box. The people may also represent the Zionist ideals of returning to a simpler life.

The cultural and historical context can be seen through an investigation of the artwork on the “box’s” genesis in Bezalel, but the box’s purpose deserves further investigation. The description of the box at the Museum, based on the description from DESA, called the object a “Cigar Box”, however, upon further

investigation it may not have been used for tobacco. There was no lingering smell of tobacco in the box. Additionally (Fig. 13), which is another box created at Bezalel, has similar physical qualities the “Cigar Box”. The box is made of brass and has a wooden shield cover on its interior. So, perhaps the “Cigar Box” was constructed in the same style as the circular box presented; originally sold as an ordinary box, sometimes used for tobacco. Cedar wood is used to cover traditional cigar boxes, so perhaps the curator made a contemporary, excusable error.

A deeper investigation of the box’s timeline reveals the nature of its consumer and the intrinsic nature of the box itself. Boris Schatz’s vision for the Bezalel Academy, ended in 1929, when “its rigid old-fashioned academic ways... and its pursuit of the tourist and overseas markets for nostalgic Jewish trinkets,”<sup>18</sup> produced little profit and thus the school was shutdown. The School reopened in 1935, but its new mission of modernity was not in line with that of Schatz, and does not reflect the box’s iconography.

It is thus safe to assume the box in the Adath Israel collection dates back to the lifespan of the early Academy, 1906-1929. The description of the object at

the Museum is erroneous, as the box was produced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as opposed to the stated mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The economic failure to sell “nostalgic Jewish trinkets... overseas” reveals that the box was used as a sales tool to attract the Jewish Diaspora to Jerusalem. Thus, the top of the box may be re-analyzed as a narrative from the artist to their Jewish relatives in Eastern Europe. The men carrying the grapes could represent the righteous path to Jerusalem, where the icons surrounding the biblical reference could entice the consumer to a more peaceful land (in fact on some Bezalel objects they explicitly refer to the biblical adage of “the land of milk and honey.” Fig. 2) The box may have found its way to the consumer some time in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, under the assumption it was made in a similar time frame to (Fig

12), which was constructed in 1911. So the production was at the Bezalel Academy in Palestine, but the box may have been conspicuously consumed in Eastern Europe.

The box at the Adath Israel Museum was not constructed in Poland in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, but in Jerusalem in the early 1900’s. The style of the box reveals the ethos of the Bezalel School. The icons on the box create a narrative about the land in Jerusalem, where Diaspora Jews were welcome and could live safely and autonomously. The “Cigar Box” is more of a trinket box, as it could barely fit a small 20<sup>th</sup> century cigar. But it reveals a rich history of both the supplier and consumer, and of the early Zionist movements and Zionist art.

## Figures



Figure 1: Top of the Bezael "Cigar Box"



Figure 2: 1925, The iconic image of the Hebrew spies carrying grapes from the Bezael Academy (source, Nurit Shiloh-Cohen, *Bezael shel Shats (1906-1929)*, 237, fig. 5)



**Figure 3: A camel engraving on a Bezael piece (source, Nurit Shiloh-Cohen, *Bezael shel Shats (1906-1929)*, 236, fig. 2)**



**Figure 4: A Deer engraved on the same piece as Figure 3 (source, Nurit Shiloh-Cohen, *Bezael shel Shats (1906-1929)*, 236, fig. 7)**



**Figure 5:** *Identical Short Sides of the "Cigar Box"*



**Figure 6:** *Back Side of the "Cigar Box"*





**Figure 7: Front Side of the "Cigar Box"**



**Figure 8: Bottom of the "Cigar Box"**



Figure 9: Inside the *"Cigar Box"*



**Figure 10: “Aron Hakodesh” (Holy Ark) constructed by students at the Bezalel Institute from 1913-23.**



**Figure 11: Mordechai Rosenshain, student at the Bezalel, drawn in the 1920's at the Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem.**



**Figure 12: Avraham Melinkov, "Tel Hai Monument" constructed in 1926. Upper Galilee, Israel.**



**Figure 13: Jewelry Box produced by Bezalel, 1911.**

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- <sup>1</sup> The Hebrew phrase, וישארו במוט בשנים, on either side of the box refer to the Number 13:23 in the Bible, but the story of the men carrying grapes is Numbers 13:1–15:41.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard I. Cohen. *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), 213-4.
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- <sup>3</sup> Margaret Rose Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2001), 36.
- <sup>4</sup> Ellie Armon Azoulay, "Abandoned Daughter of Israeli Art Pioneer Airs Dirty Linen on Canvas," *Haaretz*, Jan. 3, 2013: <http://www.haaretz.com/culture/arts-leisure/abandoned-daughter-of-israeli-art-pioneer-air-dirty-linen-on-canvas.premium-1.491566> (Accessed, May 6, 2014)
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.
- <sup>6</sup> One hundred students worked on the "The Holly Ark" and it took nearly ten years to produce. *Ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>7</sup> Zionists at the Bezalel wanted to present Jerusalem as the ideal homeland for the Jews through their art. For the Bezalel Zionists, the spies also symbolize a new generation Diaspora Jews ready to settle in the land of Israel. Dalia Manor, "Biblical Zionism in Bezalel Art." *Israel Studies* 6 (201), 56.
- <sup>8</sup> Margaret Rose Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2001), 43.
- <sup>9</sup> Dalia Manor, "Biblical Zionism in Bezalel Art." *Israel Studies* 6 (201), 56.
- <sup>10</sup> Norit Shiloh-Cohen, *Bezalel shel Shatz (1906-1929)*, (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1983), 219, fig. 35, 229 fig. 51.
- <sup>11</sup> Yael Zerubavel, *Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 48.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.
- <sup>14</sup> Ben G. Frank. "Tel Hai History Lesson" *Jewish Advocate* (2007), 1.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.
- <sup>16</sup> David Ohana, *Zionism and Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 20.
- <sup>17</sup> Margaret Rose Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2001), 40.
- <sup>18</sup> Margaret Rose Olin, "Art in Zion: The Genesis of Modern National Art in Jewish Palestine". *Brill Journals* 2 (2008), 227.



### **Etrog Box**

Warsaw, Russian Poland, 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Fraget (Fraget n plaque, silver-plated on Alpacca)

4.75 in. wide x 3.5 in long x 2.75 in tall.

Middletown, Adath Israel Museum. Given in memory of Edith and Arthur Curkin by their nieces and nephews.

CAI Inventory 2014.S.267.2 (original inventory number #152)

### ***The Box: Maintaining the Devotion to the Etrog***

Zacko Brint

In Jewish tradition, etrog boxes were produced as a means to protect and glorify the sacred fruit, the etrog, used during the festival of Sukkot. The silver plated box in the collection of Congregation Adath Israel the specific box upon which this research is based is an “Etrog box”. However, we cannot confirm that this box was made strictly as a box for this holiday. The four sides of the box that are not the top or bottom of the box contain the same repeated patterns. However, the front and back of the box are longer than the other sides. Two continuing patterns wrap all around the exterior of the box. The bottom one is linear. The design comprises constant figure eight circles that continue with dots in the middle of them. The top design is semicircles with dots in the middle of them. A bar of metal separates the semicircles. The work is rather intricate, and its lacks uniformity. In the center of the top design on each box there is a symmetrical leaf structure that is stippled.

There are tens of tiny dots on the leaves. Finally, the front of the box contains a metal knob that sticks out. This knob is attached with a modern looking screw. The box is not shiny, and may in fact have some tarnish, indicating the need for polishing. None of these markings indicate any connection to Judaism, and only a slight reference to the holiday with the flowers. This box could very well have been used for the holiday, but there is no indication that the box is in fact an etrog box.

No commandment exists that tells the Jews to put the etrog in a box. Instead, the boxes are symbols of wealth. The box may have been used for other purposes during the year as it does not have a specific marking linking it to Sukkot, but its dimensions would easily fit an etrog. The dimensions would easily and securely fit an etrog.

Furthermore, the maker of the box, determined by the engravement on the bottom of the box, is a company called Fraget n Plague, which produced works that were not solely Judaic. “Fraget was a Polish metal smith whose firm became a subsidiary of the famous German metal company WMF

(Wurttembergische Metallwaren Fabrik). Two gentile French brothers in Warsaw founded the factory in 1824.<sup>1</sup> In that time Poland was part of Russia. In many parts of Russia it was forbidden for Jews to work with silver, so instead they plated their brass ware with silver.”<sup>2</sup> It is probable that this design was made for universal purposes, yet bought by Jews as an etrog box. In studying etrog boxes, it is found that “their most common shape is that imitating the fruit itself”.<sup>3</sup> This begs the question, was this object made to be Judaica, or did it become Judaica because the object served the Jews in a religious manner.



Fig 1. Silver etrog box, Germany, 19<sup>th</sup> century

The container in fig. 1 is an example of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century etrog box. It was produced in Germany as an Etrog box.



According to the original description of the etrog box from Adath Israel, the box was made in middle to late 19<sup>th</sup>-century. However, the markings allow for a more precise dating and suggest that the box was made between 1896-1915.<sup>4</sup> There are four markings on the bottom of the box. First there is a two-headed eagle on top of the Fraget n Plaque oval symbol. This represents the Russian Empire's stamp of assayers approval in Warsaw. Then, on either side of the Fraget oval is the same symbol of a man riding a horse. Finally, there is the number three on the bottom of the oval.



Fig. 2 Hallmarks on the etrog box from the Adath Israel Collection.  
Photo: Zacko Brint

The fragility and scarcity of the etrog contributed to the extreme care with which eastern

European Jews took when dealing with this fruit, and could account for why Jews required boxes to care for them. There are also religious reasons why Jews hold the Etrog dear. The etrog is “shaped like the heart, which the ancients believed was the seat of a person’s intelligence, it symbolized the hope for divine forgiveness for the murmuring and impure desires of the heart”.<sup>5</sup> This sacred fruit, also thought to be the forbidden fruit that Eve ate in the Garden of Eden, required great protection and care.<sup>6</sup> In order for an etrog to be used in the holiday, it needs to be larger than an egg and no large than a fist. They tend to be about 4 inches long and 2.5-3 inches wide, which is plenty of space for the etrog to fit in this box. The boxes were the perfect size and were necessary for eastern European Jews to carry out the holiday.<sup>7</sup>

The primary religious setting in which the etrog is used is for the holiday of Sukkot, The Feast of Tabernacles, which is the last of three pilgrimage Jewish festivals where ancient Jews were supposed to make pilgrimage to the temple to celebrate the harvest.<sup>8</sup> The sukkah, reproduced on the holiday to represent the tents of the Jews during their pilgrimage,

contains four kinds of symbolic plants that celebrate the harvest and God's earth. The four species are the Lulav (palm), Hadassim (myrtle), Avaroth (willow) and etrog (citron).<sup>9</sup> The etrog is a fruit that looks something like a lemon, but with a bumpier exterior, less dense with fruit inside, and a stem that is essential in the holiday because if it is broken, the fruit is considered to not be kosher. A box is required to be sure that this stem does not break.



Fig.3 The Lulav (left) and the Etrog (right) (calabasasnul.org)

Objects used in Jewish religious ceremonies can often clearly be traced back to the Mediterranean ecosystems because the Jewish religion emerged there. For example, the four species required to perform the holiday of Sukkot. But the Ashkenazi Jews living in eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had difficulty acquiring these essential products in order to

celebrate the holiday customarily proved quite difficult. One of the species, the perishable citron known in Hebrew as etrog, got the Yiddish name bokser, which means inedible food because they were rotten when they got to central and eastern Europe.<sup>10</sup> The etrogim were expensive and hard to attain because they had to be shipped from the Mediterranean. They also proved difficult to attain when the importation of the etrog was prohibited.<sup>11</sup>

In order to continue the traditions of Sukkot, eastern European Jews found ways to celebrate Sukkot, cherishing their etrogim, even if they had to break some religious laws. This scarce fruit could not be imported to every Jewish family in eastern Europe, even though the Torah says “each person should have his or her own four species for the first day of Sukkor”, based on the literal translation of the biblical verse, ““You shall take to yourselves (Lev 23:40).” Halakhah regulations explicitly state that Lulavs and Etrogim can only be given as presents on the holiday and therefore cannot be simply lent out for a few hours on the holiday.<sup>12</sup> This ensured that each family obtained its own objects. Even though this strict law

was clearly written in Jewish texts, the rabbis allowed the people of eastern Europe to interpret the Halakhah so that an entire community could share the Etrog due to scarcity.<sup>13</sup> But, if someone could afford his or her own etrog, surely that was a sign of affluence. This symbolic “fruit of the gods” was cherished in Jewish homes, and those who could afford it, sought great boxes to store them in.

Sukkot is a biblical holiday that calls for many traditions that connect Jews to their past, Israelites, and to the land, etrog and other species. The etrog box is not a mandate from the Torah. Rather, Jews adapted boxes from other cultures and used them to show their commitment to the holiday. Their commitment to the holiday could have been questioned when the Jews failed to follow the commandment that every Jew must have his/her own species on the first day of Sukkot. Eastern European Jews adapted to their geography and found a means to show their respect for the traditional items in the holiday. Though the box may not be Jewish in markings, it clearly tells us a lot about Jews in eastern Europe and their desire to remain connected with their religion.

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald L. Eisenberg and Society Jewish Publication, *The Jps Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004). 231.

<sup>6</sup> "Go and see which tree ...can be eaten just as its fruit. You will only find the Etrog" (Breishit Rabba 15, 8)

<sup>7</sup> Yalkut Yosef Moadim, *Chazon Ovadia Sukkot*.

<sup>8</sup> "And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations that came against Jerusalem Shall ho up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feasts of tabernacles." (Zech 14:16-19)

<sup>9</sup> "Ritual Objects," The Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art, [http://jewishmuseum.net/?page\\_id=127](http://jewishmuseum.net/?page_id=127).

<sup>10</sup> Morris Faiersten & Berel Wein, "Religious Year," [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Religious\\_Year](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Religious_Year).

<sup>11</sup> Empress Maria Theresa (mid-18th century) demanded a huge annual tax of 40,000 florins from the Jews of Bohemia for the right to import their Etrogim.

The local Jewish community was often in charge of Etrogim sales, and a small tax was levied in order to help with communal expenses. Ari Greenspan, "The Extraordinary History of the Etrog," [Www.JPost.com](http://www.JPost.com).

<sup>12</sup> Eisenberg and Jewish Publication, *The Jps Guide to Jewish Traditions*. 233.

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**Fig. 1 Saltcellar**

Silver (875/1000)

Warsaw (Russian Poland), Ludwik Walenty Nast, 1854-1890

Ca. 3.5 inches (8.89 cm, height), 4.5 inches (11.43 cm, length),  
2 inches (5.08 cm, width)

Presented in memory of Norman Kabatnick by the Shapiro family.

2014.S.267.3 (original. inv. no. 186)

***The Knowable and Unknowable – A Silver Saltcellar  
in the Adath Israel Collection***

Joseph Weinberger

The silver object, described as “a saltcellar” in the Adath Israel collection is accompanied by the Museum’s description: “All silver cellar from Russia in late 19th century. Used Friday nights to salt Challah before saying the blessing. Presented in memory of Norman Kabatnick by the Shapiro family.”

The underside of the base is imprinted with a total of four marks (figs. 1 and 2): the number 84, some bird/tree-like marking, a marking that resembles a cloud, and “L Nast.” The assessment of its silver materiality comes from the marking of ’84’ on the bottom of the object:



Fig. 1. Base of the silver saltcellar (2014.S.267.3; original. inv. no. 186)



Fig. 2. "L. Nast" stamp on the base of the saltcellar (2014.S.267.3; original. inv. no. 186)

The silversmith of this object was Ludwik Walenty Nast, who was a silversmith in Warsaw from 1854 through 1890. This is apparent from another

marking on the base that bears the silversmiths signature.

'84' was one of the four standard silver purities used in the Russian monetary and hallmarking system. The four grades of silver purity were 96, 90, 84 and 64, all measured in zolotnik, a now obsolete Russian weight measure. In terms of its silver purity, 84 zolotnik is equal to  $875/1000$ .<sup>1</sup>

The bird-like marking to the left of "84" is the stamp of the Imperial Russian Assay Office in Warsaw, given that Ludwik Walenty Nast was active in Warsaw and that the marking resembles that emblem (figs 1, 3 and 4):



Fig. 3. Stamp of the Russian Assay Office in Warsaw at the base of the saltcellar 2014.S.267.3 (original. inv. no. 186)



Fig. 4 An example of the Warsaw Assayer's 1860s-1870s.  
Source: [http://www.925-1000.com/Frussia\\_city\\_04.html](http://www.925-1000.com/Frussia_city_04.html)

The markings on the object locate it in Russian Poland, specifically Warsaw, in the second half of the 19th century.

The elongated-bowl-like object is mounted upon a base and sits on top of a bird. The cellar has two ornate handles protruding from the two long-ends:



Fig. 5. Saltcellar in the Adath Israel Collection, (2014.S.267.3, original. inv. no. 186)

The object is described as being a saltcellar for the Friday-night-Sabbath-meal where the bread-cutting ceremony involves the use of salt.<sup>2</sup> It is again hard to verify that this cellar was produced or used as a salt-cellar; in fact it is hard to verify that it had any Jewish ritual or ceremonial significance at all. In my research (looking through museum catalogues and such) I have found only one mention of a salt-cellar and that in an inventory listing from a synagogue in Amsterdam.<sup>3</sup> As such it doesn't seem that salt-cellars were a common ritual object in Jewish households.

The bird (possibly eagle) is another interesting marker that we see on many different ceremonial and ritual Jewish objects from this time. One example is the eagle sitting on top of a Torah crown from a synagogue in Poland:



Fig. 6 Silver Torah crown, Krakow, Poland. Source: Ewa Martyna. *W Synagodze i w Domu*. (Krakow: Drukarnia PASAZ, 2010), fig. 16, p. 21.

Eagles or birds were frequent motifs on Hanukkah menorahs and other Torah ornaments. Thus the presence of the eagle may be a signifier of

religious or ritual significance, and thus Jewish use, but this is inconclusive.

The fact that the cellar was made of silver might lend credence to the idea that it was used for an important (maybe ritualistic) purpose. As collector of Judaica William Gross notes, “...even leading into the 20th century, silver objects were the privilege of the economic aristocracy of the Jewish people.... The well-to-do were the users of the brass and pewter.”<sup>4</sup> It is thus possible that the object was produced and/or used as a salt-cellar by wealthy Jews, “the economic aristocracy of the Jewish people.”

What is clear about this object is its materiality, place and date of origin and its maker. It was produced in Warsaw in the second half of the 19th century; it is made of silver (875/1000), and its maker was the silversmith Ludwik Walenty Nast, son of silversmith Ludwik Bernard Nast. An essential aspect of the object that remains unclear is its use and function. While the description at the museum assigns its function as a saltcellar used in the Friday night ritual bread-cutting ceremony, the cellar may not have been produced or used as a ritual-salt-cellar. One possibility is that the cellar was not produced as a saltcellar but was used as a ritual-saltcellar. However,



given the dearth of records of ritual-salt-cellars from this period (only one mention found of a saltcellar, and that in Amsterdam), it is possible that it was not even used as a Jewish ritual-salt-cellar, or even used by Jews at all. It is possible that the object was used as a bowl or decorative object and the auctioneers described it as a Jewish ritual-salt-cellar for auction purposes. While there are very few resources available to verify its function and use, the unanswered questions provide an additional element of intrigue to this historical object.

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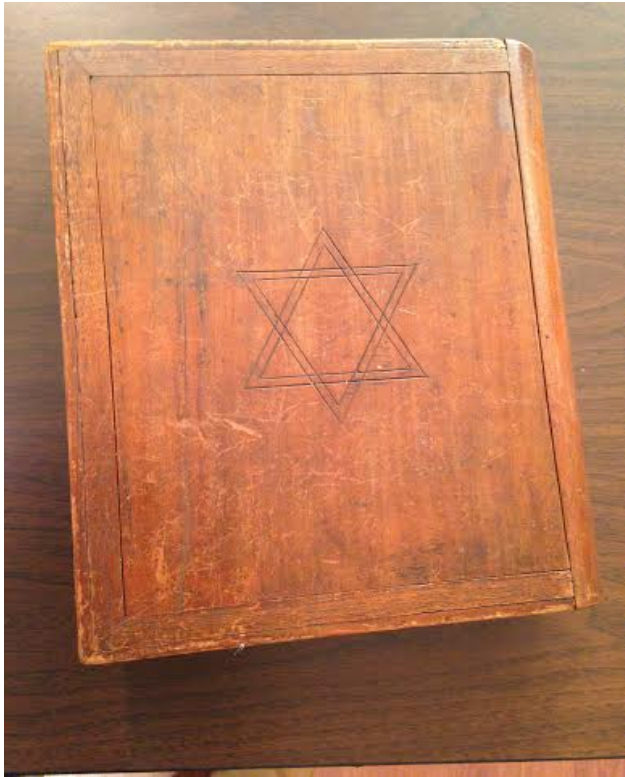
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**Security Box**, closed  
Wood  
England, 19<sup>th</sup> century (?)  
10 x 8 x 2 1/16 in. (25.4 x 20.3 x 5.2 cm)  
Presented to museum in memory of Gertrude Silverzahn by  
friends.  
Adath Israel Museum, Middletown, CT  
2014.S.267.4 (original inv. no. 143)

### *The Style and Use of the Book-Shaped Box*

Isabel Fattal

The collection at Adath Israel includes a wood book-shaped box; its label describes this object as a security box from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Poland, but it is more likely that this box is from 19<sup>th</sup>-century England. The original label further described it as “a crafted box that Jews used to hide their gold or jewelry. The box was placed among their books.” While the minimal signs of wear on this box suggest that it may be more recent than its description claims, the possibility that this box is in fact from the 19<sup>th</sup> century is supported by the existence of similarly styled wood book-shaped boxes from that period that show the same minimal level of wear. In contrast to other book-shaped boxes from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western Europe, the box in the Adath Israel collection is the simplest in style and does not attempt to imitate a book realistically as was typical in most other styles of this period. This lack of detailed imitation calls into question

the label's claim that this box was hidden amongst other books. However, the small compartments on the inside of this box and its trick opening support that the box was indeed used to hold and to protect small and delicate objects.

This box measures 10 x 8 x 2 1/16 in. (25.4 x 20.3 x 5.2 cm). It is made of dark brown wood; the straight grain and the shade of the wood indicate that the wood is most likely walnut.<sup>1</sup> Three out of four of the box's sides are straight, but on one of the 10-inch sides a 1-inch wide rounded edge has been added; this edge seems to be modeled after a rounded bookbinding and gives the box the shape of a book. A Magen David, or "Shield of David", is carved into the wood in the center of one of the 10x8 inch rectangular surfaces, presumably the top of the box. The star is bi-layered and measures 2 in. tall x 2 5/8 in. wide. The curved edge of this box slides down by 1/4 of an inch to allow the 10x8 inch surface with the Magen David to slide back in the direction of this rounded edge and to be slid off of the box completely. When this surface is slid off, a 3/4-inch border remains on the three sides of the box that are not rounded. On the side of the box closer to the rounded edge, a hollow area is

revealed which spans slightly less than 2/3 of the inside of the box. This hollow space is 8 1/2 x 3 3/4 x 2 inches.

Next to this hollow space, on the side of the box farther from the rounded edge, is a layer of striped wood with a small square wooden compartment on each end. The striped wooden layer is 5 in. long x 2 in. wide. The layer is striped with walnut and a light-colored wood; there are 24 horizontal stripes on this layer, alternating in color with each stripe. This striped layer folds down into a 1 1/2 in. long x 2 in. wide square wooden box, revealing a hollow space beneath this layer. Another 1 1/2 in. long x 2 in. wide square wooden box is located at the other end of the striped layer; when the striped layer is folded down, the top surface of this square slides down into the long hollow space to reveal a small hollow square space. The space beneath the striped layer and the space beneath the small square surface are separated by a wooden partition. All areas of the box besides for the striped layer are made of the same dark wood, presumed to be walnut.

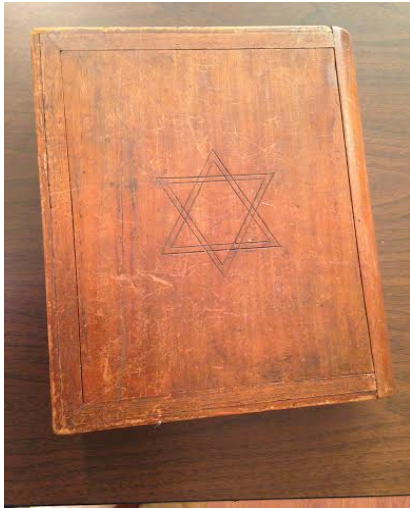


Fig. 1 Box from Adath Israel, closed  
England, 19th century (?)  
10 x 8 x 2 1/16 in. (25.4 x 20.3 x 5.2 cm)

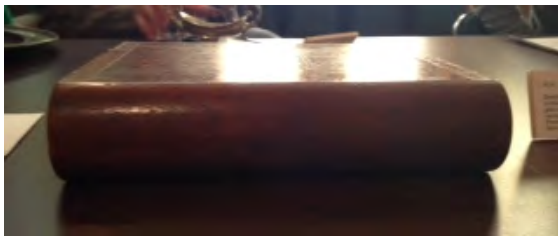


Fig. 1a: Wooden box from Adath Israel (side view, spine)

While the Magen David carved into the surface of this box appears to provide information in support of its identity as a Jewish object, this detail may not automatically imply that the box was created or sold by a Jew. Instead, a non-

Jewish seller may have included the Magen David to attract the interest of Jewish consumers by portraying this box as a Jewish object. The Magen David is a six-pointed star formed by two equilateral triangles placed in opposite directions; in the Magen David on this box, each triangle is bi-layered.

The Magen David became widely popularized as a Jewish symbol during the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the Jewish desire to imitate Christianity's use of the cross and to have an easily recognizable symbol for the Jewish religion.<sup>2</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this symbol was widely used on Jewish ritual objects as well as in other aspects of Jewish social and religious life in central, eastern and Western Europe; Jewish charities and organizations, for example, often bore this symbol on their seals.<sup>3</sup> Assuming that this box is in fact from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Magen David would have been widely recognized as a Jewish symbol and therefore may have been used to attract a Jewish consumer.

While the original label described this box as being from Poland, there is minimal available information that directly links this object to eastern Europe. The creation of decorative wood boxes has

a long history of popularity in the Tatra region of the Carpathian Mountains in Poland, and wood boxes became popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as souvenirs for visitors from urban areas.<sup>4</sup> Despite Poland's historical connection to box-making, all of the book-shaped boxes available in antique collections are not from Poland but rather from Western Europe. Several similar book-shaped boxes dated from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century have been documented in antique collections, but these objects are described as originating mostly from England, with several from Switzerland, the U.S., and France. The styles that are most similar to the box at Adath Israel seem to be from England, dating to the third and fourth quarters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

The box from Adath Israel has minimal signs of wear; there are several small scratches on the outer surface on which the Magen David is carved, but the remainder of its surfaces and the entirety of its interior do not show any signs of use. A box dated from 1870 in England (Figure 2) bears an extremely close resemblance to our box in size and in its minimal embellishment.<sup>6</sup> This box is equal to our box in its minimal level of wear; it has only two small scratches on its surface and one small,

darkened area that appears to be a stain. Another box dated from 1870 in England (Figure 3) also bears similarities to our box in its simplicity and style; at the center of its top surface—in the same spot where the bi-layered Magen David is located on our box—a bi-layered cross is carved.<sup>7</sup> This box does not appear to have any signs of wear other than one small scratch on its top surface. Images of the full interiors of these boxes are not provided by the antique collector, making it difficult to ascertain whether the boxes show similarly minimal signs of wear on their interiors; however, the evidence available from the exteriors of these similar boxes supports the possibility that the Adath Israel box is in fact from late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Assuming that the labeling on these English boxes is accurate, the fact that similarly styled boxes from the 19<sup>th</sup> century show equally minimal signs of wear portrays that it is possible for this type of wood object to be preserved from the 19<sup>th</sup> century without substantial damage. This possibility is strengthened by the fact that wood is naturally a very durable material and can last centuries without significant damage if preserved in the proper temperature and environment.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 2 Box from Leatherwood  
Antiques Collection  
English c. 1870  
2 ½ in. H x 10" L x 6 ½ in. W



Fig. 3  
Box from Leatherwood Antiques Collection  
English c. 1870  
3 ½ in. H x 2 ½ in. W

While the original description of the box states that it was placed among other books as a hiding place for gold and jewelry, the simplicity of the fake spine of this box suggests that it was not created with the intention of being camouflaged among other books. The spine of our box is made entirely of wood; it does not contain any writing, patterning, or imitation of the material of the real spine of a book. Close study of other book-shaped boxes from the 19<sup>th</sup> century illustrates that our box is the simplest model in comparison to these more detailed imitations of books. Antique collections show several book-shaped boxes that are used to hide objects, particularly liquor, and are therefore designed as elaborate facsimiles of leather or cloth-bound books. One box dated from 1860 in England (Fig. 4) was used to hide a flask and is most likely made of cardboard and covered in cloth;<sup>9</sup> this style attempts to mimic the cloth binding that was popular of books in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> A book title, volume number and the name of a publisher are written on the spine, and it is decorated with an imitation of the raised bands that were common in well-made leather-bound books of the 18<sup>th</sup>

century.<sup>11</sup> Another box from 19<sup>th</sup> century France is shaped like a stack of four books (Figure 5). This box was used as a decanter box; the inside of the box has spaces specifically designed for two decanters and six glasses. This box was most likely made of cardboard and covered with leather; the spine of the box is a detailed imitation of four leather book spines, complete with book titles, intricate gold design and multiple imitations of raised leather bands.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 4 Decanter Box from Leatherwood Antiques Collection  
 French, Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century  
 7 in. L x 11 in. H



Fig. 5 Box from Leatherwood Antiques Collection  
 English, c. 1860  
 6 ½ in. H x 4 ½ in. L



Fig. 5a  
 Box from Leatherwood Antiques Collection (open)  
 English, c. 1860  
 6 ½ in. H x 4 ½ in. L

While these detailed imitations of book spines stand in stark contrast to the simple wood spine of



the box at Adath Israel, several other boxes dated from 19<sup>th</sup>-century England are more similar to our box in their simplicity. The box with the carved cross (Fig. 3) is made entirely of wood; its spine contains several shaded lines which imitate raised leather bands, but there is no attempt to imitate the texture or three-dimensionality of these bands.<sup>13</sup> Another box dated from 1880 in England (Fig. 6) is also made entirely of wood; five raised wooden bands are visible on its spine, but there is no embellishment or decorative patterning.<sup>14</sup> Similarly simple in material and style is also the box from England c. 1870 (Fig. 2); two thin parallel lines have been carved on each end of its wood spine to mimic the form of two raised bands.<sup>15</sup> While this array of book-shaped boxes displays a wide range of levels of imitation, all of the boxes include at least a slight detail to render its side similar to a real book spine; the box from Adath Israel is the only box out of all of the available examples that possesses a solid wood spine with no embellishment whatsoever. The lack of detailed imitation of a real book spine suggests that the box was likely not hidden among other books on a shelf. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of books were

bound in cloth.<sup>16</sup> This solid wood spine would be too easily detectable amongst these cloth-bound books to be used successfully as a camouflaged box.



Fig. 6 Box from Leatherwood Antiques Collection  
English c. 1880, 6 ½ in. H

The level of imitation in each of the English boxes discussed above seems to correspond to its intended contents; while the more intricately detailed book facsimiles were used to hide objects, the more easily identifiable wood boxes were likely not used for this purpose. The two most elaborate imitations of books, Figures 4 and 5, were both used to hide bottles of liquor.<sup>17</sup> Unlike these elaborate imitations, two of the boxes that bear relatively simple wood spines, Figures 2 and 3, are not described as being designed to hide any

particular contents.<sup>18</sup> These boxes are both opened by sliding one of their sides outward to reveal hollow rectangular interiors; from what can be seen from the provided images, these interiors do not have any detail that may suggest their intended contents. The lack of realistic imitation in these boxes and the apparent ease with which they can slide open may suggest that these boxes were not intended to be used as hiding places for specific items.

The box from Adath Israel is extremely similar in style to the simpler wood boxes seen in Figures 7 (2) and 8 (3), and it even exceeds these boxes in simplicity; however, our box differs from these in that it contains details that suggest that it may in fact have been used to hide and protect certain items. Unlike the relatively simple openings of Figures 7 and 8, the box from Adath Israel has a more difficult process of opening; the spine must be lowered by about a quarter of an inch and the top surface must then be pushed back (fig. 9). While the openings of the two similarly styled wood boxes are also somewhat hidden from plain sight, the box at Adath Israel has an especially complicated method of opening; only after attempting to open

this box in various ways can one come upon the actual process of opening it. The box at Adath Israel also differs from the two similarly styled boxes in that it has small compartments on its interior that provide some information as to its intended contents. The left side of the interior of this box contains one long and narrow rectangular compartment and one small square compartment; the size of these compartments implies that they were used to hold small items. The small size of these compartments suggests that this box may have indeed been used to hold gold and jewelry. While the simplicity of the spine of this box suggests that it was not hidden among other books, the difficult process of opening the box and the small compartments within it hint that it was intended to keep small objects safe and untouched.



Fig. 7 Box from Leatherwood Antiques Collection (open, see fig.2)  
English c. 1870  
2 ½ in. H x 10" L x 6 ½ in.W



Fig. 8 Box from Leatherwood Antiques Collection (open, see fig. 3)  
English c. 1870  
3 ½ in. H x 2 ½ in. W



Fig. 9 Wooden Box from Adath Israel (open)



Fig. 10. Wooden box from Adath Israel (open detail)

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> “How to Judge a Book by Its Cover: The History of Binding: Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Publisher’s Cloth Bindings,” Michigan State University Libraries, accessed April 20, 2014, [www.lib.msu.edu/exhibits/bindings](http://www.lib.msu.edu/exhibits/bindings).

<sup>17</sup> “Snuff/Tobacco Boxes and Other Boxes,” Leatherwood Antiques, accessed April 20, 2014, [www.leatherwoodantiques.com](http://www.leatherwoodantiques.com).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



**Brass Shot Tray**

Eastern Europe, 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century

Polished brass, stamped/punched

7.6 x 17.6cm (3 x 7 in.)

Presented in memory of Virginia Goldstein by friends.

Adath Israel Museum, Middletown, CT

2014.S.267.5 (original inv. no. 172)

*Material Culture and Social Change in Eastern Europe*

Alex Sarkowsky

This brass tray, which may have been used as a shot tray for a variety of daily and festival uses, does not necessarily have religious uses. The size of the tray suggests that no more than six to eight small shot glasses could fit at any one time, indicating that this tray was not used for larger, fancier gatherings. Perhaps during a small dinner party, or Kabbalat Shabbat, the item would aid in distributing liquor to various individuals, but it would be an inconvenience to utilize for a larger scale event. Important to note as well, is that the item does not have a matching set of glassware to accompany it. The item has a sticker with a logo “DESA Unicum”<sup>1</sup> on the back of it, a reputable Polish auction house and Gallery. This sticker indicates that the item was purchased in Poland, and perhaps sheds more light on the tray’s origins.<sup>2</sup> While there is no guarantee that this object was once part of a set, there were no cups or other brassware that went along with it. This suggests

that the item was simply for decorative and transportation purposes for drinks in the home.

Therefore, this item, while classified as “Judaica” from a visual standpoint, because of the Star of David stamped in the center of the item, does not have to have any direct and distinct religious purpose. If anything, it would be suggested that due to the material, make and size of the item that this tray would be reserved for more common or non-festival occasions, particularly for domestic use.

In the nineteenth century, the same century this tray is said to be from, brass was used for making domestic items. Brass’ gold hint of color and polished finish allows guests and homeowners to enjoy an expensive looking aesthetic in a much more economically advantageous way. The tray has an overall modest design, there is no fancy ornamentation and all the detail is imprinted in the actual brass piece. The markings in the center panel, suggests that the Star of David and other floral prints were stamped into the metal. Thus, items made of brass would still appear to be nice but owners may not be afraid to use them for everyday or common use. Upon observation of this

particular item, the edges and center panel show signs of wear and use. This is not necessarily what these indicators conclude, perhaps the item was lost or hidden in a cupboard, dropped or used for other purposes, but nonetheless, the item does not appear to be kept in pristine condition. This may indicate that alcohol consumption was so traditional and standard to the daily routine that trays such as this one were commonplace in homes across Poland. Much like today, the consumption of alcohol in the 19<sup>th</sup> century marked an end to the workday, a festival, occasion, or simply as a beverage served to guests in ones home. Various Jewish memoirs dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century shed light on the “individual cases of Jewish alcoholism”<sup>3</sup> alongside a “Jewish sobriety stereotype.”<sup>4</sup>

Jews in 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland were known for being inn and tavern-keepers, and alcoholic beverages were commonplace inside as well as outside the home for social and occupational purposes. Thus it seems reasonable that a tray with these dimensions, with this pattern, would be used as such. As Dynner mentions in his article on Jewish drinking habits, “the sense we get from

prescriptions like these is that East European Jews drank moderately enough in comparison to their non-Jewish neighbors, but drink they did—and a great deal more than is customary in America or Israel today.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, an item used for the consumption of alcohol portraying Jewish insignia seems to fit into the historical and social framework of Polish Jews’ lives in this time period. Alcohol was a daily item used in business and in pleasure, so it seems plausible to have items designed specifically for personal consumption.

Landowners required peasants “to buy beer and vodka only in landowners’ taverns and were also banned from importing such items from other lords’ estates. Thus the taverns could always be counted on to provide a steady source of income.”<sup>8</sup> Jewish owned taverns were social locations for local people to engage with friends and spaces to consume alcohol. Over the course of the nineteenth century, “Improvements in distilling,[...] elevated the potency of drink fourfold while lowering the price of a drink dramatically. Levels of Jewish drinking, while remaining low relative to the societal norm, rose along with it.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, despite lower drinking rates, the availability of stronger

alcohol led to greater consumption, but in smaller quantities. Thus more products needed to be created to aid in alcohol’s consumption both outside and inside the home, shot glasses and trays to carry them became popular.

It, therefore, seems plausible that this tray was designed for use with alcoholic beverages. Despite the lack of shot glasses or cups to accompany the tray, the cultural impact of alcohol in the home and generally at this time leads individuals to believe that such an item was utilized for this purpose. The star of David indicates who the item was appealing to (a Jewish consumer), and its brass material implies that even individuals without the economic ability to invest in high quality metal items could still possess such a tray. This by no means makes shot glass trays such as this one exclusive to Jews in this time period, but this example shows the connection between the occupation and cultural lifestyles of nineteenth-century Jews in Poland. Jews who hosted social events for friends and family, for religious gatherings, or for any other get-together, such a tray would provide guests with a drink and exemplify a common bond between individuals in attendance. This item is a motif for



the unwavering connection between the political, economic and religious environment that Jews in this time period found themselves in.

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<sup>1</sup> , <http://www.desa.pl/en/about/About-us.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Dynner Glenn, ““A Jewish Drunk Is Hard to Find”:  
Jewish Drinking Practices and the Sobriety Stereotype in  
Eastern Europe,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 1  
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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Yivo Encyclopedia,”

[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Tavernkeepi](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Tavernkeeping)  
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<sup>9</sup> Glenn, Dynner. ““A Jewish Drunk Is Hard to Find”:  
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*Scribe Pen case and Inkwell: A Study of Pens in Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*

Max Lee



**Scribe Pen-Case and Inkwell (lid open)**

Brass, welded, engraved

Ottoman Empire, 19<sup>th</sup> century

(or Ottoman-style, 20<sup>th</sup> century)

Pen case: 10 3/16" (25.9 cm, length) x 1 3/16" (3.0 cm, height)  
x 5/16" (0.8 cm, width)

Inkwell: 1 3/4" (4.4 cm, length) x 1" (2.5 cm, height) x 7/8"  
(2.2 cm, width)

Presented in memory of Rabbi Nathan Levinson by friends.

2014.S.267.6 (original inv. no. 122)

The object in the Adath Israel Museum described as “a scribe set,” is made of brass adorned with a golden finish throughout its surface. It consists of two compartments: One is a long, thin and mostly rectangular pen case; while the other is a much smaller, rounder inkwell. These two objects are welded together at one end of the pen case. On both ends of the pen case, there is a cap-like piece. On the end away from the inkwell, the cap is soldered onto the pen case. On the end closest to the inkwell, a brass hinge is welded onto both the cap and the case itself, and the cap contains a small handle, allowing that end of the case to be opened. The inkwell similarly has hinges on its top, as two somewhat long and thin brass hinges are attached to beaded brass objects, which are welded onto the inkwell. These hinges are screwed into a portion of the inkwell that has been cut into an elliptical shape, allowing the inkwell, too, to be opened. Inside both of these openings, the metal is not glossed with paint, leaving a grey metal exposed.

Somewhat similarly, the bottom of the inkwell has only remnants of brass paint on it, as the original color of the metal is apparent in areas.

The outside of both the pen case and the inkwell are engraved. These engravings were formed by punching small holes into the metal. One of the three exposed faces of the inkwell contains three small stripes, formed with six thinly engraved lines. The other two sides of the inkwell have similar designs to each other. The side of the inkwell pointing towards the pen case has engraved on it a design of three candles attached to some structure, probably indicative of the Hebrew symbol Shin. The opposite side (the side at the end of the pen case) is engraved with the same symbol but with four branches (and four flames). The pen case, meanwhile, is engraved on both sides with Hebrew letters. The letters on the side that has the inkwell form “יצועבגצבבא.” It is hard to translate these letters, and they may possibly mean nothing, although “בגצ” could be an acronym for “High Court of Justice” and “בבא” could be an acronym of “speedily in our own day, Amen,” with “יצוע” meaning “bed.” The side without the inkwell says “יוסף סופר מהיר,” or “Joseph the fast Scribe.”

The object called the “Scribe’s Set” from the Museum collection of the Congregation Adath Israel in Middletown, CT has the following description: “18<sup>th</sup> century scribe’s pen carrier from Poland. Made of brass but covered in silver for decoration.” Despite this description, the object does not appear to derive from Poland, or even Europe. Instead, the object bears the most resemblance to a pen case and inkwell called a *divit*, used by Ottoman calligraphers around the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The design of pens throughout the history of Europe does not fit with the design of the set described here. Throughout ancient European history, people wrote using reed pens.<sup>1</sup> However, beginning around the sixth or seventh century, pens made from bird quills began to replace the reed pens.<sup>2</sup> These quill fountain pens would remain the dominant form of pen until the 1820s, when they slowly began to be replaced by the mass-produced steel pen.<sup>3</sup>

This means that the pen most likely to be used in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Poland, the date and location attributed to the piece in the Congregation Adath Israel Museum, was the quill pen. However, the “Scribe’s Set” would do a poor job of carrying quill pens. Physically, the carrier may not have been able to hold

a pen, although the preparation of a quill pen involves removing half of the barbs from the quill, which may make quill pens small enough to fit in the 1 3/16" pen case.<sup>4</sup> The more problematic issue lies in the protection of the pen within the case. Inside the pen case, there is only pure, unpainted metal: There is nothing to hold a pen in place, nor are there any pads at the ends of the case to limit damage that might occur should the pen hit the ends. This is particularly problematic for quill pens, because quill pens were extraordinarily frail and cannot be fixed when they break.<sup>5</sup>

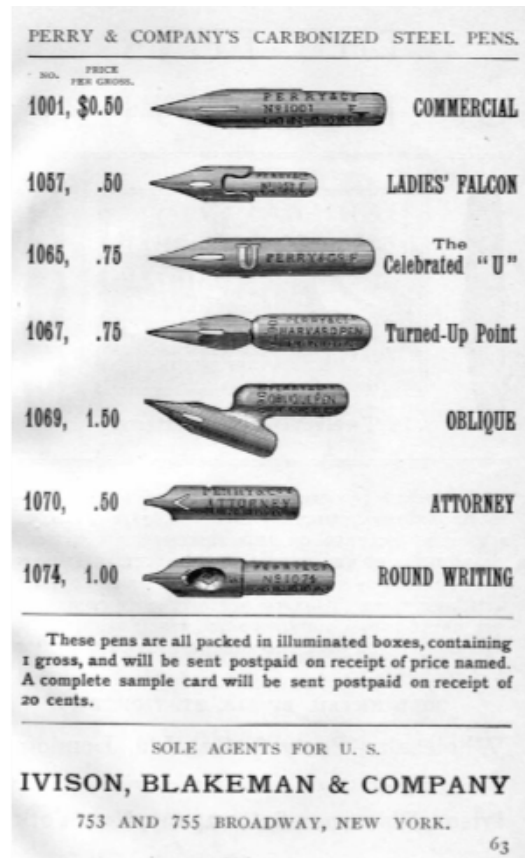
It is possible, of course, that the case does not come from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, if the pen case was not produced when quill pens were being used, it would have had to have been made before the eighth century or during either the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century. The eighth century option is obviously highly unlikely, particularly with welded and soldered parts, leaving only the reasonable possibility that the object comes from the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that, as a result, the pen carrier served to hold steel pens instead of quill pens.

In theory, it could be possible that the pen carrier held steel pens; steel pens are less fragile and

less tall than quill pens, suggesting that the risk of carrying steel pens in the pen case was reasonably low. However, this ignores the primary reason why steel pens are less fragile than quill pens. In the first nearly three decades of steel pen production, the part of the pen the writer held and the tip were inseparable, much as they were in quill pens.<sup>6</sup> As a result, similarly to quill pens, once the tip on the pen wore off or broke, the pen could not be used.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, early steel pens would not be ideal for the pen case in the Congregation Adath Israel Museum.

In 1809, however, Joseph Bramah patented a machine that could produce a tip for the pen, called a pen "nib," that could be placed on a quill pen, increasing the longevity of the pen.<sup>8</sup> Over time, this technique became used for steel pens, so a pen holder could be reused even as the tips from the pen wore out.<sup>9</sup> The problem the use of nibs poses on the pen case and inkwell is that the nibs would have to have been carried around with the writer. As an example, Perry & Co. Limited sold nibs in boxes holding 1 gross, or 144, nibs.<sup>10</sup> Because their pen nibs were sold in such large quantities, it is likely that the nibs broke frequently. As a result, a writer would have almost certainly needed to have spare nibs on hand while

writing. Furthermore, as is shown in Figure 1, Perry & Co. made several different designs for their nibs, which differed in the placement of the slits, and therefore differed in where the ink could flow in the pen.



**Figure 1** Six of the twelve Perry & Company Pen Nibs, from “The Story of the Invention of Steel Pens” by Henry Bore, 1890

It is possible, thus, that a writer may have desired to own multiple styles of nibs. Both the fragility of the nibs and the multiple styles of nibs found at least in Perry & Co. pens suggests the need for a place to put nibs within the pen case. But the set in the Adath Israel Museum is not the type designed to protect steel nibs, or the earlier quill pens.

Both the British Museum and the Metropolitan Art Museum’s collections contain an object similar in design to the “Scribe’s Set” discussed here. But they come from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman Empire. In Islamic calligraphy, pens were occasionally held in cases called *divit* that consisted of a single case for pens attached to a small inkwell.<sup>11</sup> The inkwell of these objects is cylindrical and occasionally domed, while the pen case is upright and far less round than the inkwell, although it is also cylindrical.<sup>12</sup> Prominent statesmen or scholars would often, though not always, inscribe their names and titles onto the pen cases or inkwells.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 2 shows the obvious similarities between the object at the Congregation Adath Israel and this form of Islamic pen case and inkwell. Both objects contain the two separate containers (one for the pens and one for the ink), as well as two ends, one of which

has a handle; and, though it cannot be seen in this image, both have an opening at the top of the inkwell, into which ink can be poured.



**Figure 2** Pen Case and Inkwell, from Turkey, in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession Number 1982.478.6

In contrast to the object at the Congregation Adath Israel museum, this *divit*, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Catalog, has markings referring to both the maker, Sayad Hussein, and to the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II, who ruled from 1808 to 1839. As a result, the Metropolitan Museum of Art can be fairly certain that this pen case (assuming the markings are not fraudulent) comes from the Ottoman Empire in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the pen case from the Metropolitan Art Museum has a length of 9 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (24.8 cm) and a height of 1 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (4.5 cm), which only slightly differs from the 10 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (25.9 cm) length and 1 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" height of the pen case in the Congregation Adath Israel

Museum and is not especially different from the 30 cm length that Islamic art scholar Sheila Brail attributes to larger boxes.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it seems reasonable to claim that both objects are at least derivations of the pen cases and inkwells that were used by Islamic calligraphers.

The point about length can be helpful in considering the uses of these pen cases in more detail. Quill pens have never been used in Islamic calligraphy. Instead, Islamic calligraphy was created with the use of *kalem*, or reed pens.<sup>15</sup> The ideal pen was made of cane — particularly from the marshes of Iraq and the swamps of Egypt and Fars, where such reeds were renowned — that, after being taken from the land, was submerged in water or buried in cow or horse manure for years until it hardened and darkened in color.<sup>16</sup> In later Ottoman times, other materials, such as bamboo and wood, was used, but the general straight, long and cylindrical shape of the *kalem* persisted as the shape of calligraphic pens.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that the pens used in Islamic calligraphy were reed pens helps explain the shape and design of the pen cases. Although the tips of reed pens wear out quite easily, the pen itself is durable, with good reed pens lasting for over a decade.<sup>18</sup> As a

result, the lack of anything to hold the pens in place would, at worst, require the calligrapher to cut and sand the tip of the pen in order to refurbish the pen for use, something the calligrapher would already have to do quite often.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, as can be seen from Figure 3, while reed pens are durable, their tips are inseparable and therefore, there would be no reason for an additional compartment for nibs. (This reed pen is from only the sixth century or so, but 19<sup>th</sup>-century reed pens similarly did not have separable tips.)



**Figure 3** Reed Pen from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession Number 14.1.259

The pen case at the Congregation Adath Israel Museum collection would, therefore, have been far better suited for the writing instruments in the Ottoman Empire than it would have been for the writing instruments in Europe.

Whether the pen case in the Congregation Adath Israel Museum comes from a Jewish scribe in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman Empire is another question altogether. According to Judaica collector William Gross, the 1990's and early 2000's brought in many new collectors of Judaica.<sup>20</sup> These collectors, Gross claims, were not always deeply knowledgeable about what they purchased, and relied on their suppliers to also advise their purchases, which led to a significant market of fake Judaica, since forgeries, if undetected, net more profit than real Judaica.<sup>21</sup>

The pen case and inkwell from the Congregation Adath Israel Museum may be an example of this “fake Judaica.” The one Hebrew inscription makes little sense, and the other says simply “יוסף סופר מהיר,” or “Joseph the fast scribe.” In the Ottoman Empire, scribes were paid for the beauty of their writing, not for how quickly they produced material, and, as such, it makes little sense why this inscription would be on the pen case. Furthermore, the



other side of the pen case says “צועבגצבבא,” is incomprehensible.



**Figure 4** Brass Pen Case and Inkwell from Egypt or Syria, in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure 4, above, hints towards the possibility that the object here may be an imitation of Judaica. Fig. 4 shows a brass inkwell set from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It has flatter hinges on the inkwell opening and has more paint at the bottom of the inkwell than the object at the Congregation Adath Israel Museum, but, besides these two minor details, the two objects are extraordinarily similar. The biggest difference is that Figure 4 has no Jewish markings on it. It is therefore entirely possible that the “Scribe’s Set” from the Congregation Adath Israel Museum and Figure 4 used to be even more similar than they are today. The blank space on the surface may have inspired an engraver to engrave Hebrew letters and sell the object as Judaica. Figure 2 and

Figure 4 both lack inscriptions in the places where the Hebrew writing is in the object at the Congregation Adath Israel Museum. As a result, it would be trivial for the Hebrew writing on the Congregation Adath Israel Museum’s pen case to be inscribed from a similar *divit*.

Why someone would inscribe a *divit* with Hebrew goes back to the “fake Judaica” that Gross refers to. Gross states that much of the market for Judaica lies in a remembrance of the Holocaust and, therefore, lies specifically in a collection of Jewish ritual objects rather than objects that may (or may not) have been used by Jews.<sup>22</sup> An addition of Hebrew — even incomprehensible — could potentially increase the sale price without substantially increasing production cost. Thus, the object at the Congregation Adath Israel Museum was either made in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman empire, or, later on in that style.

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## Figures

Figure 1: "Perry & Company's Carbonized Steel Pens, Second Image" from "The Story of the Invention of Steel Pens" by Henry Bore. Originally Published in New York, 1890. Accessed on Project Gutenberg, can be found at the [html version: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9954](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9954).

Figure 2: "Reed Pen" from the Metropolitan Art Museum Collection. Reed. 10 3/8 x 1/4 in. (26.4 x 0.6 cm). Accession Number 14.1.259. Can be found at: <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/474921?rpp=20&pg=1&ao=on&ft=reed+pen&pos=5>.

Figure 3: "Pen Case and Inkwell" from the Metropolitan Art Museum Collection. Gold and silver. 9 3/4" (24.8 cm) L x 1 1/8" (2.9 cm) W

pen case, 1 5/8” (4.2 cm) W x 1 3/4” (4.5 cm) H. Accession Number 1982.478.6. Can be found at: <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/453201?rpp=20&pg=1&ao=on&ft=pen+case+inkwell&pos=1>.

Figure 4: “Pen Case and Inkwell” from the Metropolitan Art Museum Collection. Brass. 11 3/8” (28.9cm) L x 2 1/2” (6.4 cm) W x 2” (5.1 cm) H. Accession Number 90.3.4. Can be found at: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/443578?img=1>.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Bane and Tim Sorrels, “Quill Pens,” *Barony of Wiesenfeuer*, 2012, <http://wiesenfeuer.ansteorra.org/links/artsandsciences/useofquillpensbyisaacbane.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Maygene Daniels, “The Ingenious Pen: American Writing Implements from the Eighteenth Century to the Twentieth,” *The American Archivist* 43, no. 3 (1980): 312.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 313.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “The Science of Pen-Making,” *The Independent* 29, no. 1508 (1877): 18, accessed May 2, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/90233655>

<sup>11</sup> M. Ugur Derman, *Letters in Gold: Islamic Calligraphy from the Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 64

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Zakariya, Mohamed, “Islamic Calligraphy: A Technical Overview,” in *Brocade of the Pen: The Art of Islamic Writing*, ed. Carol Garrett Fisher (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 2, and Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 58-59.

<sup>17</sup> Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> Zakariya, “Islamic Calligraphy: A Technical Overview,” 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> William Gross, “Collecting Judaica After 1945: The Pleasures, Perils, and Pitfalls,” *Jewish Collectors and their Contributions to Modern Culture* (2011), 344.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Gross, “Collecting Judaica After 1945,” 344.



**Imitation circumcision set (box, knife, shield)**

Wood, metal, ivory

20<sup>th</sup> century, origin unknown

Box: 8.0cm (diameter) x 4.0cm (height)

Knife: 13.5cm (total length; 4.0cm blade) ,

Shield: 7.0cm

2014.S.267.7 (original inv. no. 27)

***Exploring Questions of Authenticity in Judaica – A Case Study of a Circumcision Set***

Jordan Ellman

The Adath Israel museum has a set comprised of three individual items: the box, the knife, and a shield. They are made of wood, ivory, and metal. The box is made out of wood. Its round shape has a radius of 8.0cm. The height of the wooden box is 4.0cm. In the center of the box cover there is an image carved in an ivory inset. The image's shape is a hexagon. Its greatest length (concurrent with the imaginary line that divides the box into two hemispheres) is 4.5 cm. Similarly, its greatest width is 5.0cm. The box contains a knife and a shield for the knife. The total length of the knife is 13.5cm, which includes the blade that is 4.0cm long. The blade appears to be made out of rusted metal. Its two rounded, dull sides meet at a single point, forming the blade's tip. It is not a smooth blade; designs have been etched onto either side of the tarnished metal. The shield has a total length of 7.0cm. Both the handle for the knife and the shield were carved out of ivory, in a shape of a circumcision set.

The three elements of the circumcision set exhibit intricate decoration, a testament to the set's craftsmanship and artistry. The image on the cover of the box, which was hand crafted out of ivory and painted in black plays off of an image of Hasidic Jews. Engraved are five men wearing tall, black hats, and peyyot (fig. 1). Four of the men's bodies are angled towards the fifth man (two men on each side) who sits in a chair that is elevated. The seated man holds a baby boy in his arms.



Fig. 1 Cover of the circumcision set, Adath Israel Museum 2014.S.267.1X (original inv. no. 27)

The scene suggests a circumcision ceremony. The image is both the center of the entire surface of the top of the box, and the center of a Jewish star of David that has been carved out of the wood and painted in a lighter shade of brown. Below the Star of David and around the circumference of the box, “וְכָרַתְתָּ אִמּוֹת הַבְּרִית עִמּוֹ” (Ve-kharot ‘imo ha-brit ) is carved into the wooden surface; the translation of the Hebrew phrase is, “and you made with him a covenant.” It is part of a blessing known as the Nehemiah 9:8 said by some Jews on the morning of a circumcision in order to spiritually connect between the covenant of circumcision and the giving of the land.

The ivory handle of the knife and the ivory shield has both been engraved too (figs. 2 and 3). The design patterns on both objects match stylistically. The lowest part of the handle and the edge of the shield contain decorative outlines of swirls and flower-like designs. At the center of the shield the word *priy’ah*, is carved into the ivory, which means uncovering. Traditionally, this word suggests the “uncovering” of the foreskin. On both sides of the rusted, metallic blade of the knife, there is a design that has been engraved. The design appears to be a pattern for decoration purposes. Finally, there is clasp

made out of rusted metal used to open and close the box to access the tools inside.

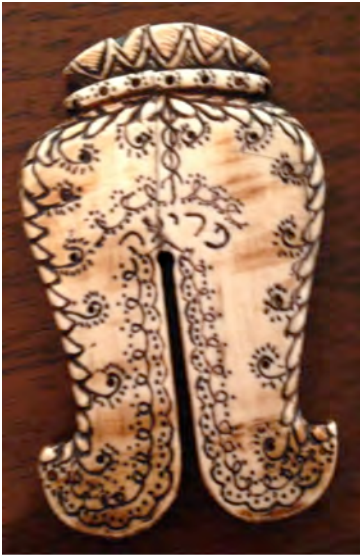


Fig. 2 The ivory shield from the set in Adath Israel, 2014.S.267.1X (original inv. no. 27)



Fig. 3 The knife on top of the shield from the set in Adath Israel, 2014.S.267.1X (original inv. no. 27)

The set—the box and the knife and shield inside the box—resembles a circumcision set. In the Jewish tradition, ritual circumcision or brit milah in Hebrew symbolized the confirmation of the covenant between the Jewish male infant and God.<sup>1</sup> An individual known as the mohel, who was trained in both the laws

governing the execution of the brit milah and the medical procedure for the specialized surgery, used the set of instruments to carry out the proceedings of the ceremony.<sup>2</sup> However, the set may not be an authentic circumcision set as several elements and characteristics of the set that raise questions:<sup>3</sup>

All circumcision sets contain a knife, as both of these sets do. However, a mohel is customarily equipped with additional accessories for the ceremony such as a shield, scissors, vials for unguents, and shallow bowls as Figure 4 shows.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 4 Circumcision Set of the Torres Family, Netherlands, 1827 and 1866

The Jewish Museum, New York, The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 232a-b

The knife in the set from Adath Israel discussed here, in both its physical and aesthetic characteristics is most indicative of the set's inauthenticity. The knife was essential to have in that it was used exclusively for the removal of the male infant's foreskin; it was a surgical tool. Below are photographs of knives from three different circumcision sets.



Fig. 5. Circumcision knife with glass handle, Holocaust Memorial Museum



Fig. 6. Silver Circumcision knife. The Max Stern Collection of Judaica. Yeshiva University Museum

It does not seem likely that the knife in Fig. 3 was used to perform a circumcision. Unlike the blades seen in Figures 4, 5 and 6, the blade in Figure 1 is too dull and too small to cut through human flesh of an appendage. It is also too thick, and does not appear to have been sharpened. Not only would it make the cut more difficult and less precise, but it also could not be sterilized to use for the ceremony. The blades of the knives in Figures 5 and 6 are characteristically more similar to a surgical instrument used to make an incision. The edges of the blades appear to be sharpened more finely and precisely than the knife in

the set from Adath Israel. The blade in Figure 5 is a double-edged, polished, steel knife with a rounded point and ridged center.<sup>5</sup> The handle in Figure 6 was made out of silver, and is 6.35cm.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the knife blades in Figures 5 and 6, the blade from Figure 3 was etched with decorative designs. This feature also attests to its inauthenticity, because its surface is not smooth as a surgical instrument should be.

The handle of the knife shown in Figure 3 was carved out of ivory, as well as the shield from the same set and the image carved into the top of the box. The use of ivory to make the shield in particular provides another reason to believe it was a forged ceremonial object. Until recently when controls and bans of ivory were put in place, ivory had been a popular medium for the manufacturing of commercial items. Sellers of fake Judaica often used it because it was inexpensive (due to illegal trading), accessible, and reusable.<sup>7</sup> Ivory was an ideal material for someone who wanted to make an object to be passed on for commercial enterprise as an authentic Judaica from the original time period and use.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the shield within the set from the Adath Israel museum was carved thickly. The shield, like the knife was to be a mohel's tool to facilitate the circumcision.



The purpose of the shield was to act as a barrier between the glans and foreskin to be cut; the opening in the middle of the shield was placed above the glans, which allowed the foreskin to come through this opening.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the shield in Figure 2 above had too small of a gap to serve this purpose. The ivory was also not a material that could be sterilized like a surgical tool. Finally, the ivory shield is too thick for the purpose of the circumcision.

The maker of the imitation circumcision set also utilized ivory's characteristically white color by using it as a canvas to paint on as seen above. The craftsman detailed the individual pieces from the set with Hebrew words that had to do with circumcision, and depicted an obviously Jewish image on the box. These purposeful additions by the seller scream Judaism and were probably added in order to make it a convincingly authentic circumcision set. The image in particular was unique to the set: the tall black hats, long robes, and long beards and peyyot of the men were representative of Orthodox men. The simplicity of the etching makes it look antiquated and faintly resemble Old Jerusalem. Thus, it was meant to give buyers the impression that it was traditional Judaica from eastern Europe. The irony is that the seller added

the image for believability purposes, but earnest Orthodox Jews would likely know it was counterfeit and never use it.

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<sup>7</sup> Gabe Goldstein, April 4, 2014

<sup>8</sup> Gabe Goldstein, April 4, 2014

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**Fig. 1 Amulet (?) in the shape of the Star of David with chain**

Brass, 19<sup>th</sup> century (?)

Origin unknown

3in, with an 11in chain

Adath Israel Museum, Middletown, CT

2014.S.267.8 (original inv. no. 41)

### *Exploring Amulets in Jewish Culture— A Brass Amulet of Unknown Origins at Adath Israel*

Peter George

Adath Israel Museum has an object identified as a “Marriage Amulet.” It is said to date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Made of brass, its pendant is the Star of David, measuring 3 inches from one point to its opposite. At the center of the star lies a brighter colored, semi-spherical shaped node (fig. 1). On the back, there is a keyhole shaped indent (fig. 2). It is unclear if this is actually a keyhole, or if there was something connected to it at one time. Interestingly enough, the root of the Hebrew word, *kame’a*, is “to bind.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, perhaps this amulet may have been linked to another object. Attached to the Star of David—by two clamps, one at each end—is an 11-inch long chain that resembles a necklace. The chain is configured of hundreds of small brass circles linked together, resembling a thick coil shape, and with a thickness of one-half-inches. With a length of only 11-inches, the amulet is too small to be worn as a

necklace, yet too loose to be placed around one's wrist. It is thus unclear how the object was used.



Fig. 2 Brass amulet in the shape of the Star of David (back)

Since the times of the Talmudic sages, amulets have had a significant role in this Jewish culture.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word for amulet is *kame'a*.<sup>3</sup> Jews found

pleasure in the amulets, as they acted as protection against bad thoughts, pain, and failure. Worn by both humans and animals, amulets represented hope. From the constant contact with other societies, to the pressure of their own religion, “there was sufficient room for unofficial, often unwritten, beliefs and practices.”<sup>4</sup> This gave rise to the development of Jewish folk beliefs. Though these folk beliefs were not always accepted in the “official” halakhic sources, they were still very strong within the Jewish communities.<sup>5</sup> Jews were not the only ones who used amulets, nor were Jewish amulets used only by Jews.

Jewish folk tradition consisted of two main components: “the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Jewish people, and the influence of the host culture.”<sup>6</sup> Folk beliefs came about as a means of dealing with certain life experiences. Childbirth was one of the most daunting times for Jews, as survival rates for both babies and mothers were unsurprisingly low.<sup>7</sup> Amulets were thus relied upon for good fortune and healthy delivery. Their purpose was to “provide response to suffering and distress and the ravages of time.”<sup>8</sup> In the case of childbirth, many mothers feared

the demon Lilith, Adam's legendary first wife, who was said to be responsible for the death of newborn babies in folk tradition.<sup>9</sup> Written around the room, the names of biblical couples—including Adam and Eve, and Abraham and Sarah—signified the welcoming of good health and protection from the evil Lilith in the birthing room.<sup>10</sup>

In Eastern Europe, yeshiva boys crafted childbirth amulets, called *Kimpetbrivl* in Yiddish, or “letter for the childbed.”<sup>11</sup> While their significance may have been based on folk religion, it is obvious that their existence eased the fears that were so prevalent during a time of discomfort.

Arguably more critical than the existence of these amulets was their production. Amulets came in two forms: as written and as material objects. In eastern Europe, paper amulets were the most common.<sup>12</sup> The most frequently used material for written amulets was a parchment made of deerskin.<sup>13</sup> Abiding by Jewish law, specific rules applied to these pieces of parchment, they had to be kosher, or ritually accepted.<sup>14</sup>

Amulets raised many questions for religious Jewish authorities. Debates ensued as to whether or not these amulets should be carried on the Sabbath, as it was “forbidden to have on one's person anything that could be technically included in the category of burdens...”<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, a set of rules was created to differentiate between “effective”, or approved, and unapproved amulets. One rule stated three different people must have success with an amulet before it was approved. Additionally, a writer, who had written three successful amulets for three different people, was therefore permitted to produce effective amulets for all.<sup>16</sup> These approved amulets could be worn any day including Sabbath. Nonetheless, with little regulation from officials, Jews continued to show off their amulets regardless of the day or its approval, as “the lust for miracles was more compelling than religious scruple...”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to written amulets, objects amulets were made of foxes' tails, herbs, stones, and metals.<sup>18</sup> Having a reputation of metalworkers and engravers, Jews were the perfect designers of these protective metallic items.<sup>19</sup> All amulets were designed in a way

that was specific to their use. Eastern European Jews had a tendency to inscribe Jewish symbols into the object, as opposed to historical human figures. These symbols consisted of animals such as the leopard, deer, eagle, and lion. As noted in the Mishnah, one must “be bold as the leopard, light as the vulture [eagle], fleet as the deer, and strong as the lion, to do the will of Your Father in Heaven.”<sup>20</sup> The inclusion of certain designs was for a very explicit purpose.

Additionally, the Star of David was a major element of all amulets. Despite common theory, the hexagram does not have any true connection to Jewish history. Dating back to the early post-Talmud prayers, the hexagram has, however, become the symbol of Judaism.<sup>21</sup> The Magen David, or “Shield of David”, was “a symbol of protection in the name of the powerful biblical King David.”<sup>22</sup> When amulet craftsmen incorporated the Star of David, they would often engrave the six points of the star with the names “of other abbreviated magical combinations...including six Hebrew letters of the ‘Magen David’ itself”.<sup>23</sup> The usage of this principal Jewish figure also reinforces the pride one took in

being Jewish. Whether written on deerskin, engraved into metal, or used as a pendant on a necklace, it is very clear why this symbol was one of the most common amongst amulets. Not only was the Star of David a symbol of protection, but it gradually also became the cornerstone of identifying as a Jew.

Scholar Jacob Goldberg discusses marriage in Poland, as the ceremonies became very significant during the second half of the eighteenth-century.<sup>24</sup> However, he mentions nothing about marriage amulets. Thus, it is very challenging to accurately verify the identification of this “marriage amulet.” In Islamic countries, “amulets made with valuable materials were more common...”<sup>25</sup> Also, the Star of David was often used as a decorative pattern in this region. The amulets from Islamic lands are more similar to the one found at the Adath Israel Museum, as Islamic amulets were often hung around the neck, arm, or even used as a belt buckle.<sup>26</sup> This could explain either the chain attached to the Star of David, or the keyhole-shaped indent in the back. With this, as well as the fact that written amulets were more prevalent in Eastern Europe, this specific amulet may not have actually

been from Poland. While the “marriage amulet” was said to be from eastern Europe, it is clear that its true identity and origin may lie elsewhere, it may be in fact from Islamic lands.

Whether eloquently written on deerskin or masterfully sculpted into metal, the significance of these amulets was essential to the subsistence of Jewish culture. With all of the ravaged times experienced by the Jews, they relied on folk religion to maintain stability and protection. Every amulet had a specific role for its individual owner. The “marriage amulet” must have had particular meaning to its previous owner at one time. While its purpose may not have been for a wedding procession, this new chapter does bring about additional perilous stints. Thus, amulets offered to newlyweds would have been of great value. Jewish culture is composed of a multitude of entities, but it is clear that these amulets were major constituents in dealing with the unofficial, yet equally popular folk religion.

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**Clock with Music Box**

Brass, steel, velvet, glass

Central Europe, Early 19<sup>th</sup> century in perfect working order.

8 in X 6 in X 3 in

Presented in memory of Max Schulman by family and friends

Adath Israel Museum, Middletown, CT

2014.S.267.9 (original inv. no. 85)

*A Nineteenth-Century Clock in A Historical Context*

Michael DeLalio

Adath Israel Museum in Middletown, CT displays numerous Jewish historical artifacts that have been donated by members of the synagogue. The collection includes a mantel clock described as, “Austrian Clock; early 19<sup>th</sup> century in perfect working order. Music box plays Rock of Ages. Presented in memory of Max Schulman by family and friends.” Though it is impossible to establish the clock’s role and place of origin, evidence suggests the clock belonged to a prosperous Jewish family in Central Europe.

The entire clock structure is eight inches tall, six inches wide, and three inches deep. The base is a fat oval shape, decorated with a brass band featuring stamped images. The stamped images look like rolled-up curtains and wreaths. The extravagant curtains and wreaths have striking similarities to Ancient Roman architecture. The curtains resemble arches, which are frequently used in Roman architecture. The actual clock itself is featured on top of two pillars, which

stand atop a base featuring a structure of Moses and two lions. The positioning of the clock above the figure of Moses gives the clock a ‘heavenly feel,’ suggesting that time itself adheres to a higher power. The entire weight and size of the structure indicates it was for display purposes; the clock itself is but a mere fraction of the entire structure, suggesting that the piece was used and purchased for symbolic décor in addition to serve the purpose of telling the time.

The craftsmanship and materials used in the production of the clock suggest that the clock was rather expensive. Though mantel clocks were very popular at the time, mostly due to their relative inexpensiveness,<sup>1</sup> clocks in general and this mantel clock and music box in particular were luxury items.

The first sign is the materials used. Nearly the entire piece seems to be made of bronze rather than a cheaper metal such as brass or copper. Though some of the clock is pressed such as the wreath-like band around the base, much of the clock has been carefully hand-carved, or cast. The objects that are displayed on the object; including Moses, the lions, and the doves, have been carefully handcrafted, or cast. The clock itself, which hangs above Moses, must have also been engraved by hand.



Fig. 2. Moses with lions, detail. 2014.S.267.9 (original inv. no. 85)

Another sign of the object’s worth is the use of velvet above the base. According to an article by the Metropolitan Museum regarding Renaissance velvet textiles, velvet wasn’t created until the 13th century and was expensive to produce<sup>2</sup>. Though the Metropolitan Museum’s article focused on an earlier period, since velvet creation began in Italy and gradually spread eastward, the use of velvet in the base of the clock suggests the object was expensive.

What is most prominent and most telling about the clock structure and the clock’s likely owners is the symbolism on the clock. Above the base of the clock there sits a figure of Moses, flanked by two lions,

which in turn are flanked by two pillars with a dove sitting atop each pillar (fig.2). The clock itself features Hebrew numbers, and a pendulum hanging beneath the clock that has a Star of David hanging at the bottom. But, interestingly, the Ten Commandments Moses is holding are notated by Roman numerals.

The symbolism on the clock displays a mix of Christian and Jewish symbols. Many symbols on the object suggest Jewish traditional beliefs. First, the two lions sitting on the edge of the base of the clock tie back to the tribe of Judah. The tribe of Judah meaningful both for King David in the Jewish tradition, and for Jesus in Christianity. The lion represents the tribe, and is a symbol for strength and courage.<sup>3</sup> Next, there are also two doves sitting atop the pillars on each side of the clock above the lions. These doves are also associated with both Jewish and Christian traditions. The dove is the animal that brings Noah the olive branch in Genesis. The doves are meant to symbolize peace, devotion, and marital fidelity.<sup>4</sup> In Christianity the dove symbolized the Holy Spirit.

Last, a small Moses statuette in the middle of the object supports the object's Jewish association as well. There are rays of sunlight that look like horns on

the top of Moses's head, which symbolize the connection between Moses and the heavens. The rays of light refer to Exodus 34:29-35, and stands for Moses being enlightened by God.<sup>5</sup> Moses is holding the Ten Commandments, and although the commandments are symbolized by Roman Numerals, the numerals are read right to left, which is consistent with Hebrew reading. Hebrew numbers are also used on the clock to denote the hours.

Lastly, a large Star of David hangs from the pendulum off the center of the clock. The Star of David is one of the most powerful symbols within Jewish traditionalism and is regularly displayed on Jewish artifacts. Originally used in amulets, in modern times, the Shield of David has been generally used as a symbol of Jewish identity.

Additionally, Christian symbolism also exists on the object. The Christian symbolism suggests that the family who owned the clock was aware of and possibly integrated within a Christian community. Although the family was in all likelihood Jewish, there must be a Christian influence in or around their lives or the Christian symbols wouldn't exist in the object.

The description of the object itself at Adath Israel states that the music box, which makes up the base for the clock, plays the song Rock of Ages, a hymn use by Jews and Christians. Rock of Ages, the Christian Hymn, was first published in 1775 and was named “one of the Great Four Anglican Hymns” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> The hymn reached its peak in popularity at around the time that my object was created. The hymn does include a phrase “Not the labor of my hands/Can fulfill Thy law's demands.”

Still there is a Jewish song called *Ma'oz Tzur*, sometimes called Rock of Ages, which was a popular Hanukkah song across Europe, and arranged to contemporary music.<sup>7</sup> Without access to the music it is difficult to judge, which song the clock/music box played.

Other signs of Christian influence on this object include the Ten Commandments being displayed using Roman Numerals rather than Hebrew writing, and the clock itself is read clockwise. Traditional Hebrew clocks would be read counter-clockwise as Hebrew is read right to left.

By examining Austria’s social climate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the period and place where Adath Israel Museum believes the object came from, we can better

understand the object’s purpose and the way its owners used it. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century many Jews enjoyed great economic success in Austria. “By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the archduchy of Lower Austria contained the largest, wealthiest, and most self-confident Jewish community.”<sup>9</sup> During this period, Jews faced varying levels of anti-Semitism across Europe, and were the heavy minority to Christian followers. The population of all of Europe was 188,000,000 in 1800, with a population of 2,000,000 Jews. By 1850, there were 266,000,000 people in Europe and 4,100,000 Jews. During this period while Jews were increasing in population percentage, anti-Semitism increased, as Christians felt their powerful roles in society were threatened.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in Austria, “Jews embraced Christianity in the two decades from 1822 to 1841.”<sup>11</sup> In Austria, Jews were at record levels of wealth and there was a large Jewish population.

Additionally, time, or “public schedules,” as argued by Robert Rotenberg, became increasingly central across areas in Austria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> Rotenberg notes that by the middle of the nineteenth century “industry began to grow” outside of the city of Vienna, while commercial enterprise was already

firmly established.<sup>13</sup> The spread of industry and commercial enterprises into the countryside likely lent itself to increasing the need to keep time. This increased need would make clocks more central to individuals and a household than they previously were.

Another way to evaluate the object's role in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is to look at its owners. Though little is known about the clock's original owners, the clock was "[p]resented in memory of Max Schulman by family and friends." Max Schulman is buried at the Adath Israel Cemetery on Pine Street in Middletown, CT. His tombstone states that he was born on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1912, and died on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1975.

According to one of the overlookers of the Adath Israel Museum, Max graduated from Harvard University and was a prominent businessman. His wife, Muriel Schulman, who died at the age of 94 in 2013, was a 1939 graduate of Radcliffe College.<sup>14</sup> Radcliffe College was one of the most prestigious institutions at the time and merged with Harvard University in 1999. These accomplishments reveal the Schulman's success in America.

Finally, by analyzing the object itself, we can make a number of educated guesses as to how the

object was used. Just looking at the mechanics of the object, it was undoubtedly a mantel clock. It may have sat on a bed-side table and also had the capability of playing music. The object most likely played music on command rather than on every hour or on any increment of time because a mechanism on the bottom looks like it would trigger the music box to play. Given the plentiful Jewish symbolism on the object as well as its place at Adath Israel Museum, we can conclude that the owners were Jewish. The use of some Christian practices on the clock suggests that the owners of the object were comfortable with Christianity and most likely lived in a community where Jews and Christians lived side by side. The Jewish clock owners may have even enjoyed listening to the Christian Hymn, or Jewish but arranged to modern music, Rock of Ages. Lastly, the owners were most likely fairly wealthy. Literature from the period suggests that Jews were successful in their communities as lenders, and taking into account the hand-craftsmanship of the clock, the velvet and bronze used in the clock.

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<sup>6</sup> Breed, David Riddle, and Charles N. Boyd. *The History and Use of Hymns and Hymn-Tunes, by the Rev. David R. Breed*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1903, 103.

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<sup>7</sup> On the hymn in Jewish tradition, see:  
[http://www.jhom.com/calendar/kislev/maoz\\_tsur.htm](http://www.jhom.com/calendar/kislev/maoz_tsur.htm) and  
<http://www.chazzanut.com/chanukah.html>

<sup>9</sup> Godsey, William. "Nation, Government, and 'Anti-Semitism' in Early Nineteenth-Century Austria." *The Historical Journal*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Baron, Salo. "The Jewish Question in the Nineteenth Century." *The Journal of Modern History*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Rotenberg, Robert. "Fighting with Time: Intraregional Conflicts in Public Schedules in Austria." *Urban Anthropology*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>14</sup> "Muriel Shapiro Schulman Obituary." Middletown, CT: Middletown Press, 2013.





**Five-Armed Sabbath Lamp (James)**

Brass, cast, engraved and riveted

Eastern Europe, c. 20<sup>th</sup> century.

17 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in (height); 14 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in (length, top) 5 ½ in. (base); 2 ½ in (candle)

Adath Israel Museum, Middletown, CT

2014.S.267.10 (original inv. no. 10)

***Beloved of the Soul: Deer and Shabbat Service***

James Kwon

The five-armed brass lamp in the collection of the Congregation Adath Israel contains candle holders at different levels of elevations roughly, each differing by two inches—the outer candle holders occupy the lowest height, the second and fourth candle holders occupy a second, higher height, and the middle candle holder occupies the third, highest height. The candle holders are supported by the body with cast-out spaces on both the top and bottom of the body. The body is seamlessly integrated to the top sides of a ridged, cylindrical stand with a riveted base. Engraved on the body is Hebrew text approximately corresponding in English “to light the candle on Shabbat” (להדליק נר / של שבת; le-hadlik ner shel shabbat).<sup>1</sup> Greening and flaking is observable in both the interiors of the candleholders and the underside of the base and discoloration occurs predominately around the rivet on the top of the stand and the base’s underside. Shallow, pencil size dents appear across

the body and light scratches appear on the body's top and both interior and exterior of the candleholders.

The object is light enough to be carried with one hand; however, the use of two hands leaves the user with a more comfortable grasp with the stand's ridges forming comfortable finger-holders. The decorative body itself resembles two deer-like figures standing on branch-like supports. The base is decorated by a series of ridged, concentric circles as is the center. Overall, the piece evokes a sense of elegant humility and gravity through its minimalist decoration, despite its zoomorphic depiction; although this very form appears on focused examination awkward, marked by unnatural extensions across the object's body that support the candle holders and lines across the deer's necks and bodies which cannot easily be distinguished from scratches.

### ***Prostrating Deer: Thirst for God***

For eastern European Jews, the existence of zoomorphic imagery in both word and visual depiction was commonplace and closely related to religious life. Pairs of lions and deer often adorned nineteenth century eastern European Hanukkah menorahs, and eagles similarly could be found

perched on the tops of spice containers and Torah crowns.<sup>2</sup> In the widely popular Mishnah tractate, Pirkei Avot (Chapters of the Fathers), four animals are invoked as possessing characteristics beneficial in understanding and reaching God—the tiger's strength, the eagle's lightness, the deer's swiftness, and the lion's bravery.<sup>3</sup> Use of zoomorphic symbolism also occurs in the sixteenth-century liturgical poem "Yedid Nefesh" (Beloved of [My] Soul), one of several *zemirot* (table hymns) commonly used in Ashkenazi religious practice.<sup>4</sup> Like other poems composed by kabbalist Eleazar Azkiri and general kabalistic literature, Yedid Nefesh expresses the powerful love the believers feel for God and their desire for holy union. The servant's desire to "run like a gazelle / to prostrate before Your glory" (ירויץ עבדך כמו איל) (אל מול הדרך ישתחוה) demonstrates this powerful urge through the narrator's identification with the deer, which possesses the graceful swiftness required in seeking God.<sup>5</sup>

Deer, however, possess more associations than just speed. In the first verse of Psalms 42, the deer, experiencing intense thirst, "pants for streams of water" as the psalmist's soul (*nefesh*) similarly pants for God.<sup>6</sup> As water is not only a desirable substance

but necessary for the survival of any creature, God's life-sustaining essence similarly affects the psalmist. The receivers of this psalm, especially those residing in a relatively unindustrialized eastern European environment, could not fail to identify the deer's vulnerability and reliance with themselves. Desperation and lament characterize this psalm at the apparent absence of God's presence in the psalmist's life—the immediate following verses further intensify this longing as the psalmist enunciates his soul's thirsting for “God, the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” and tears become his sustenance.<sup>7</sup> As the psalm proceeds, however, confidence in God's ultimate deliverance shows.<sup>8</sup>

This correlation between deer and thirst for God appears also in the Song of Songs, though modified in tone by the text's sensually evocative nature. Arranged mostly in a call-response, lyrical format between a pair of lovers, the Song of Songs mostly comprises of the dialogue between the two, who often utilize sensual imagery in their communication.<sup>9</sup> Deer are invoked for this purpose—the female lover several times charges the daughters of Jerusalem by “the gazelles and by the does of the field” not to “arouse or awaken love until it so desires,”

and describes her beloved as a “gazelle or a young stag” who leaps across mountain and hills to gaze at his beloved.<sup>10</sup> Compounded with the male lover's description of his beloved's breasts as “two fawns, / like twin fawns of a gazelle / that browse among the lilies,” the deer's association with desire still exists, albeit on a more temporal plane and supported by a supplementary association between the deer and beauty and grace.<sup>11</sup> On a more gendered level, this beauty aspect seems to apply solely to female contexts with the fawn (צִבְיָה, tzeviyah), while associations with speed are more strongly identified in masculine contexts with the gazelle (אֵיל, ayal).

Abiding by earlier, kabalistic perspectives of the earlier centuries, however, the Song of Songs may also serve as an allegory for God's relationship with man (the book's alternative title, the Song of Solomon, and traditional ascription to Solomon also favors the existence of an alternative, Wisdom based reading).<sup>12</sup> By this interpretation, the deer functions similarly to its Psalms counterpart, representing the fervent, invigorating desire that not only man, but God, holds to unite with each other. The Song of Songs' historical limitation to liturgy and generally controversial reception, however, limits its potential

to affect the average late-nineteenth century, eastern European Jewish urbanite.<sup>13</sup>

### *Candles and Spirituality*

Candles had existed at least since the Middle Ages for use in Shabbat rituals, although the popularity and economic accessibility to candles among eastern European Jews increased upon the development of paraffin in the 1850s since the substance circumvented earlier problems related to ritual uncleanness.<sup>14</sup> The actual requirement for lighting candles on the eve of Shabbat was historically present in European Jewish legal interpretation at least since the eleventh century in the works of the French Talmudist Rashi.<sup>15</sup>

In Poland, mid-sixteenth century commentary on the custom of Shabbat lighting interpreted the lights, customarily two, as symbols of the husband and wife's unity of their soul; however, kabbalah and later Hasidic interpretations of the Bereishit Rabbah, a midrash with parts traditionally dating from the third century, stipulate the human soul is comprised of five parts, the nefesh, ruach, neshamah, chayah, and yechidah.<sup>16</sup> This number corresponds to the number of candleholders, though some Ashkenazi traditions of candle lighting also allow for the lighting of

additional candles depending on the family's number of children. The extreme paucity of five-branch candelabra, however, complicates any analysis of this object's numerology as such lamps appeared, if at all, mostly in eighteenth to early-nineteenth century France, Italy, and Germany in non-Jewish contexts and with significantly different compositional structures.<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 2 Candelabra

Friedrich Adler (German, 1878-1942)

Manufacturer: Walter Scherf & Co., Nuremberg, Germany, c. 1900; Each: 16 1/8 x 9 1/8 x 8 1/4 in. (41 x 23.2 x 21 cm).

Pewter: cast

The Jewish Museum, New York

### *Urban Man's Sabbath*

Several elements of this Sabbath lamp lend itself to upper class household consumption. Its portable size lends itself to comfortable handling for household use and movement—larger sized religious objects tend to appear in relation with synagogues.<sup>18</sup> Its brass composition not only compliments the object's ease of handling in comparison to heavier silver objects but also indicates its origin in upper-class consumption due to cost—brass, while cheaper than silver, still ranks as more expensive than other, less durable and less desirable materials like sheet metal.<sup>19</sup> The rivet holding down the base suggests the lamp's probable production in an assembly line; however, the rough inscription and slightly inconsistent treatment of the deer's facial features, as well as the chasing technique necessary to produce this object indicates manual, rather than machine, production, probably increasing the object's contemporary, material value.



Fig. 3 Sabbath lamp  
Poland or Ukraine, ca. 1900  
Brass, cast, turned, chased  
Inscribed in Hebrew: “To light the Sabbath candles”  
Gross Family Collection

Comparison to another, extremely similar lamp found in the Gross Family Collection also seems to confirm

the inconsistent quality of this lamp's inscription—the word for Sabbath (שבת) is correctly spelled and the words and other lines marking the deer are more sharply engraved.<sup>20</sup> Despite this difference, the lamp found in the Adath Israel Collection seems more complete than the Gross Family Collection lamp, with more ridges on its vertical stand and taller candle holders, giving the object not only a more varied, elegant appearance, but also greater practicality as the ridges enable more comfortable handling and the candle holders can more easily hold the tall candles necessary to last the length of Shabbat. Complemented overall by its minimalist, unassuming design, this lamp, with its utilitarian function and humble, but graceful form, could easily sit in the home of an urban, upper-class Eastern European Jewish family.

### ***Conclusion***

Integrating the discussions on the Sabbath lamp's deer depiction, its candle holders, and its general composition, this lamp becomes an object well suited for the needs of Eastern European Jews, residing in a world rich in religious symbolism. The presence of deer in the believer's Shabbat rituals

would constantly remind their of the yearning and desire appropriate for approaching God and the inherent beauty in this process, the five branches of candlesticks recall the inseparable tie between the service and the soul, and the practically simple, yet graceful composition of the piece transports the user to a hallowed ground of religious sanctity.

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Magda Teter for the translation.

<sup>2</sup> Vivian B. Mann, “Ceremonial and Decorative Art,” *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*,  
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<sup>3</sup> Pirkei Avot, 5:20 (Chabad),  
[http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/682520/jewish/English-Text.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/682520/jewish/English-Text.htm); Amran Tropper, “Avot,” *Encyclopedia*

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<sup>6</sup> Psalms 42:1 (New International Version 1984); Robert L. Foster and David M. Howard, *My Words Are Lovely: Studies in the Rhetoric of the Psalms*, (London: T & T Clark International, 2008), 58.

<sup>7</sup> Psalms 42:2.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, *My Words Are Lovely*, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Keith N. Schoville, David S. Sperling, and Bathja Bayer, “Song of Songs” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Song of Songs 2:7-9 (NIV 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Song of Songs 4:5.

<sup>12</sup> Schoville, “Song of Songs,” 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Casual recitation of these verses was condemned by various rabbinical authorities.

<sup>14</sup> Meir Ydit and Rela Mintz Geffen, “Candles” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 429.

<sup>15</sup> J. Rappel, “Shabbat,” in *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 2013), 485.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin Slonik, “The Order of Women’s Commandments: Seder Mitzvot Nashim” trans. Edward Fram (Isaac Prostitz: Cracow, 1577), in *Early Modern Workshop, Volume 1: Early Modern Jewries* (Middletown, CT: Early Modern Workshop,



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2004), 216; Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit 14:9; Yanki Tauber, “What is a Soul?” (Chabad.org).

<sup>17</sup> Observations based on perusal of material record found in the online catalogs of the Metropolitan Museum, the Jewish Museum, the Max Stern Collection, and the Jewish Museum Berlin.

<sup>18</sup> Mann, “Ceremonial and Decorative Art.”

<sup>19</sup> William L. Gross, “Collecting Judaica After 1945: The Pleasures, Perils, and Pitfalls,” *Jüdische Sammler und ihr Beitrag zur Kultur der Moderne* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011), 347.

<sup>20</sup> Elliot Horowitz, “Sabbath,” *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*,  
<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sabbath>



**Spice Box**

Europe, 20<sup>th</sup> century

Brass (top), composite material (base)

5.6 cm X 4 cm base for top half

~9 cm total height (~7cm top; ~2cm bottom)

Adath Israel Museum, Middletown, CT

2014.S.267.11 (original inv. no. 37)

*A House-Shaped Spice Box—An Adaptation or a New Form?*

Lucy Rubin

The house-shaped object, described as a spice box, in the Adath Israel Museum is made of two parts separate parts. The top part is made of either bronze or brass, with red painted interior.<sup>1</sup> On the top half there are three openings. The openings on what appears to be the sides and back have windows with a glass-like material overlaid that provide a view inside the box. Surrounding the window-structures is a decorative outlining of the same material the box itself is made of. On what appears to be the front is an opening and closing door-like openings, again made of the same material as the rest of the box. Since the top half is not connected to the bottom any of the sides could function as the front, although it seems as if the side with the door on the top half should be aligned with the stairs on the bottom half. Atop the square bottom of this top half, the roof is prism shaped, and is made out of the same bronze/brass-like material.

The bottom half, made of some sort of composite material, is lighter in weight than the

material of the top half. The bottom half is square with an upper smaller square protrusion that fits the size base of the top half (fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Bottom base of the spicebox, made of composite. 2014.S.267.11 (original inv. no. 37)

On one side of the square base there is a stair structure from the base of the base to the top edge. The stair structure is not made of the same material as the rest of the base, as it is a slightly different color and texture, and is not made from the same original piece of material as the rest of the base. Covering the bottom of the base (excluding the stair structure) there exists a green felt-like material (fig.2).

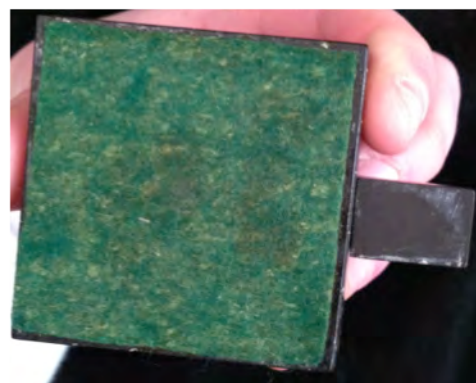


Fig. 2 The bottom of the base.

On the top half, on each of the four sides of the prism roof is an inscription in Hebrew. The outline is made up stippled dots with the interior altered in some way to make it slightly darker than the surrounding material. The inscription reads: **המבדיל בין קדש לחל** or “He who distinguishes between the Holy and the Profane,” a text from the havdalah prayer, indicating its potential use as a spice box (fig. 4). However, the prayer lost vav in **kodesh** and in **hol** and reads

**המבדיל בין שקד לחל** where it should read  
**המבדיל בין קודש לחול.**



Fig. 4 The spicebox, top, all four sides. 2014.S.267.11 (original inv. no. 37)

Surrounding each of the three window-structures is the same decorative bordering made out of the same material as the rest of the top half. The opening to the door is approximately the same size as the window opening. The door does not have the same decorative outline as the windows though, but is merely a plain rectangular shape with a smaller rectangle punched inside. The door and its hinges are made of the same material as the rest of the top half. In the interior red paint is seen only on the square walls of the inner part of the top half. The bottom half has bricks carved into it, which reveals a white color underneath the un-carved exterior.

The bricks on the bottom half are most likely carved by hand, as the lines in some places are not even or straight. The stairs are revealed to be of a different material as where the stairs would be

displaying the same seemingly natural white color from the carving, white color is painted on, mimicking the appearance of the two being of the same material. The entirety of the bottom half does not have the same weathered appearance as does the top half. Significant weathering of the material on the top half is apparent as many scratches and seemingly unintentional markings appear on the exterior. The red interior paint also seems weathered, but in a different way. It is likely that the paint was added in haste, as it is not an even or well-done paint job and appears to be chipping in many areas.

The house-like appearance of the top and bottom half, as well as the inscription on the roof of the house structure lends itself to the conclusion that this object was supposed to be some sort of *besamim*, or spice box. A spice box is traditionally used as part of the ritual of the Havdalah service to mark the conclusion of the Sabbath.<sup>2</sup>

There exist many theories as to the historical and spiritual origin of the use of the spices during Havdalah. The smelling of spices came from the tradition dating back to ancient Palestine in which incense was burned at the end of every meal.<sup>3</sup> As

Object top half interior

Jewish law stated that one must bless anything enjoyed by the senses, the incense had to be blessed.<sup>4</sup> A problem arose in the use of incense whereby it was not allowed to kindle fire on the holy day, thus making the burning of incense not possible.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the spices as a smelling aroma were used as a substitute.<sup>6</sup> At this point, the use of incense or spices did not have a specific religious meaning and was not obligatory, but if used required appropriate blessing.<sup>7</sup>

Within Jewish liturgy, the spice's importance to the Havdalah ceremony is only briefly mentioned "in the Mishnah as an old established fact."<sup>8</sup> Even though the origin of the ceremonial usage of the spices is unknown, it was in practice in the first century C.E. as it was mentioned in the Mishnah<sup>9</sup>:

The school of Shammai says, "Flame, and [then] Grace after Meals, and [then] spices, and [then] *Havdalah*." The school of Hillel says, "Flame, and [then] spices, and [then] Grace after Meals, and [then] *Havdalah*." The school of Shammai says, "Who created the light of fire." The

school of Hillel says, "Creator of the lights of fire." (Mishnah Berakhot 8:5)<sup>10</sup>

The time at which the Havdalah ritual first appeared as a formalized home ceremony is unknown.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the custom of smelling spices is not given any explanation in early Rabbinic sources.<sup>12</sup> Only in sources from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onward is a "psychological insight...introduced as the reason for the inclusion of spices within the Havdalah."<sup>13</sup>

Maayan Jaffe explains "historically, Jews used spices in the Temple both as an offering and to cover up the smells of the burning sacrifices."<sup>14</sup> Jaffe cites the spiritual reason for the spices in how "as the holy Shabbat leaves us for another mundane week of work, we resuscitate ourselves with fragrant herbs. Others purport we use the spices so some of the sweetness of Shabbat can linger into the days that follow."<sup>15</sup> Ronald Eisenberg gives an alternative view for the significance of the spice box, saying that the act "compensates for the Jew for the loss of the 'extra soul' that departs with the close of the Sabbath day."<sup>16</sup> He also cites that "according to an ancient legend, the fires of the netherworld that are rekindled at the end

of the Sabbath produce such a appalling odor that the Havdalah spices are needed to guard against it.”<sup>17</sup>

Within the writings exist two variants as to the spiritual purpose of the spices.<sup>18</sup> The first is from the *Tosafot* school, speaking of the previously mentioned loss of the additional soul.<sup>19</sup> The second being from Ashkenazic sages “sustaining the spirit not the body,” in line with the previously mentioned sustaining of the lingering sweetness of Shabbat.<sup>20</sup>

The spice box itself has gone through many stages of design through the ages relating both to aesthetics and functionality. In the Middle Ages, the practice of putting Havdalah spice into a special container was developed in Germany. The spices were used to mark the coming and going of the Sabbath were “initially myrtle and later previous spices that were often stored in special glass containers.”<sup>21</sup> This initial glass container design for the spices is furthered by first literary account of a spice container in Rabbi Ephraim Regensburg’s writing that “I have a small glass vessel containing various kinds of spices and over it I make the benediction.”<sup>22</sup>

Later on, the spice box is most often “a beautifully crafted silver or wood container, full of aromatic spices.”<sup>23</sup> The most popular shape for spice

boxes among Jews in Europe was the tower shape (figs. 5 and 6).<sup>24</sup> Most commonly in the 18<sup>th</sup> through 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the miniature tower shaped building, reflective of the ornate architecture of Europe.<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 5 Traditional 18<sup>th</sup> Century Spice Box, Germany. Note tower structure and clock face. Yeshiva University Museum.

[http://www.yumuseum.org/maxsterncatalog/picture.php?pid=113&alt=0&p\\_datetime\\_id=6&p\\_album\\_id=8](http://www.yumuseum.org/maxsterncatalog/picture.php?pid=113&alt=0&p_datetime_id=6&p_album_id=8)



Fig.6 Spicebox Budapest c. 1800. Source: *Towers of Spice* Pg. 26

In Europe, the spices were traditionally very expensive because they came from the Far East, and as such were regarded as “treasures, often in spice towers.”<sup>26</sup> Marilyn Gold Koolik writes that “the sense of height in the spicebox is achieved primarily in the ratio of height to width but is accentuated by two additional elements: the elongated foot and pointed spire which give the entire vessel an upward sweep.”<sup>27</sup> According to Ronald Eisenberg “Ashkenazic spice boxes were sometimes made in the shape of a tower topped with a pennant and having a clock face to indicate the time when the Sabbath ended that week.”<sup>28</sup> This practice can be dated back to the eighteenth century, as in his memoir, M.L. Ettinghausen wrote that “I was presented with an eighteenth-century Besamim box with four clock faces to show the times of the exit of the Sabbath on four successive weeks.”<sup>29</sup>

Moving towards more modern designs, “contemporary boxes were light years away in imagination, form, and materials – to be expected given the distinguished roster of architects, fine artists, ceramists, glassmakers, and metal smiths who contributed designs.”<sup>30</sup> Because there are no halakhic rulings regarding the form of the spice boxes, artisans

were free to express their own creative instincts and break from the tower shape.<sup>31</sup> Thus, like other Jewish ceremonial objects, spiceboxes can “reflect the style, technique and iconography of their geographical origins.”<sup>32</sup> Modern spice boxes maintain a balance between playing with artistic form and expressing the spiritual meaning of the Havdalah service.<sup>33</sup>

The description of the object in the collection of Adath Israel states that the spice box is from late 18<sup>th</sup>-century Hungary. However, this is most likely incorrect due to the differences design and functionality of the object to a traditional spice box. Although the object examined here bears many resemblances and differences to traditional design of a Havdalah spice box, there are also significant differences. The spice box object maintains a traditional square shape, and a little bit of the tower-like appearance with its pointed roof. Additionally, the height to width ratio of the object is not like that found in a traditional tower spice box design.

Moreover, traditional spice boxes of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are typically entirely in filigree, especially in Eastern Europe.<sup>34</sup> These kinds of “filigree spice boxes were made with... emphasis... placed on the silverwork ornamentation itself.”<sup>35</sup>





Fig. 7. These two spiceboxes display different ornamentation on the top and bottom half. Source: *Towers of Spice* Pg. 22

By contrast, the object in the collection of Adath Israel has no filigree at all, and rather seems to be reflecting a simple modest house. The object does not maintain the clocks or flags found on traditionally designed spice boxes. Breaking with traditional spice box design of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, this object also has windows, somewhat resembling another spice box

from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century made in Holland. The inscription on the spice box has the traditional Havdalah prayer inscription, indicating its potential use as a spice box.



Fig. 8 The late 19<sup>th</sup> century spicebox, Holland. Note the similarity of the square structure, door, and windows. Source: *Towers of Spice* Pg. 46

One glaring flaw in the objects ability to function as a proper spice box is that the bottom half separates very easily from the top half. In the history of spicebox design, “the join of the architectural element to the foot is artificial and... there was no attempt to make this connection integral to the design. This is also emphasized by the patterns of ornamentation which are often different on each part.”<sup>36</sup> Even though the base design may have differed from the spicebox itself, it did not impede the functionality/ability of the spicebox to hold the spices. If the spices are held in such high regard, it does not make proper functional sense for the spices to be able to be released so easily, as is part of the object’s design, especially when an essential part of the Havdalah service is having the spice box be “passed hand to hand.”<sup>37</sup> This design flaw of the object as a spice box suggests the object may not have originally been meant to be a spice box. “Spiceboxes were not always... objects not originally made as spiceboxes [and] were often adapted for the purpose.”<sup>38</sup> This difference in material and appearance along with the dysfunctional nature of the object suggests that the top half could have been used as a spice box with a

different bottom half, and the current bottom half was added as some sort of replacement at a later time.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Zvi A. Yehuda, "The Ritual and the Concept of 'Havdalah'," *Judaism* 43, no. 1 (1994): 81.

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<sup>18</sup> Yehuda, "The Ritual and the Concept of 'Havdalah'," 81.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 82.

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<sup>26</sup> Eisenberg and Jewish Publication, *The JPS guide to Jewish traditions*: 151.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, *Towers of Spice: The Tower-Shape Tradition in Havdalah Spiceboxes* 5.

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<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, *Towers of Spice: The Tower-Shape Tradition in Havdalah Spiceboxes* 11-12.

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<sup>34</sup> Benjamin, *Towers of Spice: The Tower-Shape Tradition in Havdalah Spiceboxes* 21.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>37</sup> Gans, "'Scents of Purpose: Artists Interpret the Spice Box': The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco," 54.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, *Towers of Spice: The Tower-Shape Tradition in Havdalah Spiceboxes* 12.



**Spice Box with Hebrew Inscription**

Copper Alloy and Ivory (?)

20<sup>th</sup> c. – Origin Unknown

Entire Piece: approx. 10½ in (height); approx. 4 in (diameter)

Spice Capsule: approx. 3.5in (height); approx. 4 in (diameter);  
2 in (width)

Presented in Memory Mrs. J Kabatznik

Middletown, Adath Israel Synagogue

2014.S.267.12 (original inv. no. 57)

***A Modern Spice Box or a Fake in Dialogue with Tradition?***

Jesse Brooks

Embossed from a copper alloy, the finishing mold created a hollow encasing for which to place the desired *havdalah* spices. The central decoration on the front face of spice capsule – a copper alloy plate embossed with a symmetric floral design has a small opening in its center. The center opening, covered by an additional piece of metal that swivels open on a hinge, allows for its owner to place spices inside the capsule. This ceremonial piece would have been utilized during Shabbat and Jewish holidays to mark a symbolic end to the holy day and subsequently welcome in the new, or an ordinary weekday.<sup>1</sup> The spices, *besamim* in Hebrew, were sweet-smelling herbs. Embossed, in a semi-circle, along the top half of the front face is “בורא מיני בשמים” - the literal translation: ‘*Creator of all kinds of fragrances/spices.*’ This inscription paid homage to God for creating the enclosed spices used during *Havdalah* services. The floral patterns, also on the back plate of the capsule, are for both aesthetic

purposes and to further emphasize the herbs that are to be placed inside. The spice box displays green patina covering sections of the greyed front and back plates. The rounded shell that connects these two plates is made of white ivory, or another bone. Not indigenous to Eastern Europe, ivory was a beautiful and somewhat rare aesthetic for Jewish ceremonial objects. The stem and the base, which allows the piece to stand alone, connect to the bottom of the spice capsule. Both the stem and the base are stippled and engraved with a similar floral pattern. On top of the capsule, connected to the tops of the front and back plates, sits a silver dome with two symmetrical bells attached and hanging on either side. While now somewhat damaged, the bells presumably rung upon smelling the spices – a supplemental sound to signify the end of the holiday. A dual-tipped flag, attached to the silver dome, sits atop the entire piece. The flag was a common topper for tower-like spice boxes in Europe.

The Adath Israel Synagogue's info card dates this spice box back to early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Poland, and indicates it was made from Russian silver and white ivory. Although, several indications suggest this spice

box to have been crafted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and inconclusive evidence makes it impossible to determine this piece's origin.



Fig. 2 Spice box (back view), 2014.S.267.12 (original inv. no. 57)

Most spice boxes crafted between the 17<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe bore a specific tower-like shape and commonly utilized filigree<sup>2</sup> - see Figures 3 and 4. These figures embody the tower-design symbolism, derived from a Talmudic verse, which was primarily seen in Eastern Europe. At the end of the Sabbath, the spice boxes were shaken in order to ‘activate’ the spices, so that patrons could smell them. Flags and bells were, thus, common ornaments for spice boxes – upon shaking the box, the flags would wave and the bells would jingle.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 3. 19th c. Russian silver spice box; note the tower design and the ornamental flags. North Carolina Museum of Art.



Fig. 4. 19th c. Poland. Spice box made from Russian Silver. Note the use of filigree and the ornamental flags. Jewish Online Museum. Jewish Online Museum  
<http://jewishonlinemuseum.org/sites/default/files/styles/modal/public/original/20120815-9311.jpg?itok=rGqVkgML>  
<http://jewishonlinemuseum.org/claire-bruell>

The metal, additionally, was stamped or embossed – to create the floral design and inscriptions – in a modern fashion<sup>4</sup> - note the stamped floral pattern in the base of figure 5.



Fig. 5. Modern example of a spicebox.  
<http://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/1273304>

Since the design of the spice box from Adath Israel collection is unknown it may have been crafted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the craftsmen clearly played off these 19<sup>th</sup> century tower designs, flags, and bells and utilized them when creating this spice box.

Additionally, the use of ivory was very rare for the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While rarity can point to a sign of luxury, it can also point to a sign of more modern work – especially as globalization of trade increased, or reworking and reuse of ivory. Still, because of the rarity, craftsmen often used other bone as a substitute for ivory – which appears to be the material on this spice box.<sup>5</sup>

Craftsmen of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian silver utilized filigree in designing their spice boxes – especially those with a tower-like design.<sup>6</sup> Though other patterns are known as well. Not only does this piece not employ filigree, but also the patina film on the front and back plates indicates that its metal is a copper alloy rather than silver. With no hallmarks to suggest a chronology, location or maker, it is difficult to place the origin of this *besamim* box.

In 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> c. eastern Europe, craftsmen experienced obstacles in acquiring silver because of



its high demand for religious objects. Manufacturers produced according to community needs. The most popular of the ceremonial metal works in contemporary Jewry were Hanukkah lamps, but close behind were *Havdalah* spice boxes and *Kiddush* cups.<sup>7</sup> Jews place high value on their ceremonial objects, and the craftsmen of our piece played on this cultural value by mimicking much of the details used in early 19<sup>th</sup> century designs.

A large market for Judaica still exists in modern times. And spice boxes are in high demand. Still except for one example, no similar spicebox can be found in museums and in auction catalogues in the last decade or so. Figure 6, priced at \$633 in 2011, is an almost exact match to our spice box.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 6 Kovel's Judaica Collection, 'Judaica Spice Box – Silver with Ivory Bone'  
[https://www.kovels.com/index.php?option=com\\_datalists&Itemid=0&catid=425&lang=en&pattern=All&sobi2Search=c3BpY2UgYm94IGl2b3J5&table\\_name=datalist\\_price\\_guide&type=pg&view=search\\_result](https://www.kovels.com/index.php?option=com_datalists&Itemid=0&catid=425&lang=en&pattern=All&sobi2Search=c3BpY2UgYm94IGl2b3J5&table_name=datalist_price_guide&type=pg&view=search_result)

Given the unusual shape of the spicebox in the collection of Adath Israel, it may be that the object was a 20<sup>th</sup> century creation, crafted to fit a new market niche. In pre-20<sup>th</sup> century spiceboxes the blessing is rarely engraved on them. The craftsmen, additionally, embossed a common inscription – *besamim* - on this spice box to explicitly indicate its purpose. Other inscriptions include Torah portions that related to either the tower design or Talmudic writings on the value of spice.<sup>9</sup> Since it was not a particularly common tower design, the inscription on this spice box was presumably left to help the buyer understand the purpose of the box.

Common among contemporary objects, non-Jewish objects were often converted into Jewish spice boxes. In *Collecting Judaica after 1945*, William Gross notes, for example, the altering of miniature silver fish and locomotive train toys into *besamim* objects.<sup>10</sup> Additionally many fake *besamim* boxes have molds of ‘sad Jews,’ but no pre-WWII Judaica view the Jew as unhappy or depressed.<sup>11</sup> This piece, however, was originally crafted to serve as a *besamim* box. Henceforth, the question arises as whether it was sold as an antique (i.e. made as a forgery) or sold as a

20<sup>th</sup> century object? If we presume the latter, the information as to its origin and time period could have been lost between buyers and sellers. There’s no conclusive evidence to say whether this piece was crafted as a fake or rather created to imitate or evoke the 19<sup>th</sup> century *besamim* boxes (e.g. Fig. 4 and 5).

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<sup>8</sup>Kovel's Judaica Collection, 'Judaica Spice Box – Silver with Ivory Bone'

[https://www.kovels.com/index.php?option=com\\_datalists&Itemid=0&catid=425&lang=en&pattern=All&sobi2Search=c3BpY2UgYm94IGl2b3J5&table\\_name=datalist\\_price\\_guide&type=pg&view=search\\_result](https://www.kovels.com/index.php?option=com_datalists&Itemid=0&catid=425&lang=en&pattern=All&sobi2Search=c3BpY2UgYm94IGl2b3J5&table_name=datalist_price_guide&type=pg&view=search_result)

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**Mezuzah**

Poland, 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century

Silver

2.75in x 8.5in x 0.5in

Presented in honor of the 75th birthday of Maurice Schwarz by his friends.

2014.S.267.13 (original inv. no. 177).

*Placing a Mezuzah in Time*

Rachel Leicher

The mezuzah above belongs to the collection at Congregation Adath Israel in Middletown, Connecticut. As a traditional door marker for Jews, it contains a scroll of the Hebrew prayer, the “Shem’a.” It is an unusually large mezuzah, with dimensions of 2.75in in width, 8.5in in length, and 0.5in in depth curved in an ark. Metal work on the mezuzah is detailed, covered with floral patterns, leaves, and shell shapes. The shell-like fans resemble a menorah. Made of silver, the piece could have been pressed and hammered, or cast. The letters “shin, dalet, yod,” inscribed on the parchment peak out behind a glass and metal covering, representing the words Shomer Daltot Yisrael, a name of God as the guardian of the doors of Israel with the duty of the mezuzah to protect the house. The letters also read “Shaddai,” one of the names of God. On the back of the piece, a sliding metal sheet reveals the parchment scroll. The mezuzah is thought to have come from nineteenth-

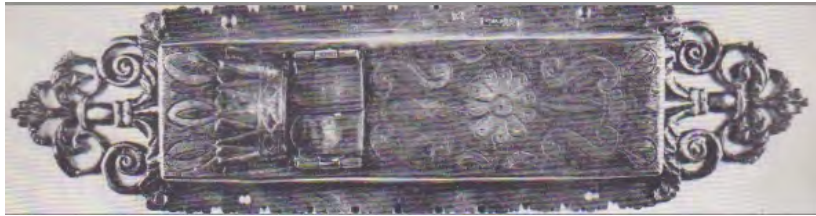
century Poland. However, it is also possible it was made in the twentieth century, cast in a factory, as a replica of a nineteenth-century mezuzah. Made of silver the mezuzah would have been placed inside a home.

### **Placing a Mezuzah in Time**

Two parts, a parchment scroll and an outer casing, comprise the mezuzah, a ritual object hung on Jewish doors. The inner parchment scroll contains a commandment from the Torah to hang mezuzot on doorposts of Jewish dwellings. Parchment scrolls, resembling the Torah, are prepared by a sofer, and represent a ritual tradition for Jews. Mezuzot were also a symbol of protection, where the spiritual significance of mezuzot protected Jewish homes against the demon. Eastern European Jews were known to hold superstitions, especially against ‘the demon,’ referred to as *ruah*, or spirit in Hebrew, among other names.<sup>1</sup>

While the parchment displays religious aspects of Judaism, the outer casing indicates more about daily life for Jews. The smooth finishing on the design,

moving parts, and absence of great detail indicates that it may have been cast in a factory in the twentieth century for a lower cost. This brings into question whether the mezuzah was pressed and embossed by hand, or cast in a line of production on the verge of the industrial revolution. A nineteenth-century mezuzah, such as the one depicted in Figure 2, would display more rudimentary characteristics of metalwork done by hand compared to the more finished look of the mezuzah in Figure 1. Furthermore, only the wealthiest individuals held ownership of handcrafted silver in earlier periods, where factory made silver mezuzot from the twentieth century were more common for bourgeoisie individuals. The differences between hand crafted and factory made mezuzot reflect a shift that industry brought to Europe between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These changes affected Jews economically in terms of legal employment and business opportunities.



**Figure 2:** This silver mezuzah with shutters is dated to the nineteenth century, serving as a doorpost marker in Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The mezuzah from the collection of Adath Israel, discussed here, illustrates changes in industry as Eastern Europe transitioned from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. Jews were originally disadvantaged economically in terms of industry due to lack of capital and discrimination. While banned from many crafts and industries in Europe, they often played the role of subcontractors, middlemen, or suppliers of materials. By the late nineteenth century, many Jews were employed in crafts. Specifically in Russia, most Jews in the metal industry worked in craft employment (39,578) rather than factories (2,553) in the preindustrial period.<sup>3</sup>

Still, Jewish craftsmen and artisans may have faced discrimination in Eastern Europe. At the time,

Russians placed regulations on Jewish economic activity, limiting entry into new markets, affecting many Polish Jews in the Pale of Settlement. Through industry, a new middle class was formed, competing with Jews for economic prosperity and employment, especially in the crafts sector. Competition increased discriminatory attitudes and perpetuated religious and racial anti-Semitic sentiments behind the pogroms.<sup>4</sup>

Since the sixteenth century, Jews internally sought to protect their economic situation by forming guilds. With strength numbers, Jews stood up to Christian guilds and claimed more market share. Before the Enlightenment they created ties with the nobles directly and formed a self-supportive economic group.<sup>5</sup> Jewish guilds provided niches that met the constraints of *haskalah* allowing for Jewish laws, practices, and customs.<sup>6</sup> If this mezuzah was crafted before the onset of factory industrialization in the nineteenth century, it may have originated in a shop of an artisan belonging to one of these Jewish silversmith guilds. In 1816, the royal commissioner of the congress Poland repealed the law requiring guild membership.<sup>7</sup> This allowed more Jews to enter skilled

labor trades that were dominated by Christians. Therefore, a mezuzah created in the nineteenth century may have originated from an individual Jewish silversmith as well.

If the mezuzah was made at a guild in the early nineteenth century, Poland is a likely place. The guilds of Western Europe often did not allow Jews into the market for silver, so most metal crafts artisans worked in Eastern Europe, often producing Jewish ritual items. Many details on the mezuzah suggest an Eastern European origin. The floral detailing on the mezuzah was characteristic of metal work and silver ritual objects made in the area with this iconography symbolizing the tree of life and its fruit.<sup>8</sup> In general, metal mezuzot decoration originated in Eastern Europe, utilizing silver in particular to embellish the doorpost markers. However, from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, no new decorative innovations were made on mezuzot, instead they tended to replicate traditional motifs.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, stylistic aspects of the nineteenth century were carried forward, leading to twentieth century mezuzot that resembled those from the past.

As factories and more complex assembly lines entered Poland, the Pale of Settlement, and surrounding areas, Jewish occupations shifted and transformed from a guild structure to workers unions.<sup>10</sup> Modernization changed how the metal industry operated internally and externally. The hand crafted art of silver smiths diminished with techniques such as pressing, embossing and hammering by hand transforming into cast pieces. Therefore, a mezuzah made in the twentieth century would have likely been cast in a factory to replicate nineteenth century work.

Precious metals, such as gold and silver, were utilized in ritual objects for wealthier individuals. Brass, pewter, and copper, often cheaper, comprised menorahs, spice boxes, and mezuzot from Eastern Europe. While many historians place silver objects in the hands of Jews with some economic groundings, William Gross, an avid Judaica collector disagrees. According to Gross, silver objects were increasingly more rare than represented today and only owned by Jewish economic aristocracy before the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> These valuable pieces contained hallmarks of worth, which the Adath Israel mezuzah lacks. Not



until the later half of the nineteenth century during the American silver rush was the metal more readily available at a lower cost for production. According to this evidence, the silver mezuzah of study in the Adath Israel Collection was most likely made in the twentieth century and is therefore dated incorrectly.

The glass on the front, moving parts, lack of a silversmith seal, and the overall factory finish of the piece suggest its origination in a factory in the twentieth century. The mezuzah most likely originated in a small factory at the decline of most precious metalwork guilds.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, "Demons," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Franz Landsberger, *The Origin of the Decorated Mezuzah, Beauty in Holiness* (United States: Ktav Publishing House Inc. , 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Arcadius Kahan, *Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986). 6-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-40.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Wischnitzer, *Beauty in Holiness, Notes to a History of the Jewish Guilds* (United States: Ktav Publishing House, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Ela Bauer, "Guilds," *The Yivo Encyclopedia for Jews in Eastern Europe* (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Marcos Silber, "Crafts," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Guido Schoenberger, *The Ritual Silver made by Myer Myers, Beauty in Holiness* (United States: Ktav Publishing House Inc. , 1970).

<sup>9</sup> Landsberger, *The Origin of the Decorated Mezuzah*.

<sup>10</sup> Bauer, "Guilds."

<sup>11</sup> William L. Gross, "Collecting Judaica After 1945," *Jewish collectors and their contribution to modern culture* (2011).



### **Seder Plate**

Pewter, cast, engraved

18<sup>th</sup> century, Germany

3 ½ inches (height) x 12 ½ inches (diameter)

Presented in memory of Irma & Joseph Gilfix by family and friends.

2014.S.267.14 (original inv. no 97)

### ***The Pewter Seder Plate: A Window Into the Lives of the Eighteenth Century German Jewry***

Leah Bakely

On the back of the pewter plate from the collection at Congregation Adath Israel, the letters “S.E.” —presumably the initials of the maker or engraver—are engraved, with “1776”—presumably the year it was cast—directly below. On the rim on the front of the plate, near its top, the letters זבר (zabar or Z.B.R.) are inscribed in what appears to be a heraldic shield. Based on what is known about similar extant pewter seder plates, it is likely that these letters are the original owner’s initials (see figure 1 in the glossary of images at the end the paper).<sup>1</sup> There are two lions on their hind legs, each flanking one side of the shield. There is a crown on top of the shield. There are two branches, each engraved at approximately a 30-degree angle with the feet of each lion.

Starting to the left of the seal, the steps of the seder are engraved, in order, in Hebrew letters, without spaces between the words: קדש (Kiddush recitation) חרוץ (hand washing) כרפס (dipping of green

vegetable in salt water) יחזק (breaking of the middle matzah) מגיד (telling of the story of Passover) רהצה (hand washing again) מצה מוציא (blessing the matzah) מרור (eating of the bitter herbs) כורך (eating a matzah sandwich of bitter herbs) שלהן ערך (sic; setting the table/eating the meal) צפון (eating of the afikomen, the “dessert” matzah) ברך (saying of the grace after the meal) הלל (recitation of the second half the Hallel) נרצה (seder conclusion).<sup>2</sup> In the center of the plate, there is an engraving of three bearded, presumably Jewish men, sitting at a table. They have peyes (or *peyyot*, sidecurls), and are wearing “traditional” Orthodox Jewish garb—kipot (skullcaps) and robes. There is a plate in the center of the table, a goblet on its left side, and a cup on its right. There is also a basin with a jug in it at the men’s feet, perhaps meant to symbolize receptacle used for ritual hand washing. The seder plate itself is quite worn—there is even a hole in it, and it is dented and scratched. The rim is elevated above the center section, the cavetto.

The seder plate derives its name from the word “seder,” the ritual meal of the Jewish holiday of Passover, which celebrates “Israelites’ attainment of physical and spiritual freedom after more than four hundred years of bondage in Egypt. Their experience

as slaves, the process of emancipation and the Exodus are recalled.”<sup>3</sup> Seder plates and the food placed on them serve as symbols for the story of Passover, such that “each of the foods on the plate is understood and interpreted in the context of the slavery in Egypt, the Exodus and freedom, and the celebration of Passover in the era of the Temple.”<sup>4</sup> While the food that appears on the seder plate is mentioned in talmudic literature, seder plates themselves are not: the first extant seder plate has a Spanish provenance and the first references to seder plates in Jewish literature appear in the *Shulhan Aruch* (The Jewish Code of Law), first published in 1565 in Venice. Thus, the seder plate seems to have first emerged as a Sephardi phenomenon. However, by the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, these plates became a staple at Ashkenazi seders, as well.<sup>5</sup> In fact, many of the extant seder plates from this century are “shallow plates made of pewter and engraved with Jewish symbols, scenes related to Passover, and Hebrew inscriptions” from “Germany, Austria, Bohemia, and the Netherlands”<sup>6</sup> (See figures 2,3,4 and 5).

According to its accompanying placard, the plate from the Adath Israel Collection, like those extant pewter seder plates mentioned above, has its

origins in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Germany. That its adornments—scenes related to Passover, Hebrew inscriptions, and Jewish symbols (i.e. the lions flanking the heraldic shield)—are consistent with other extant German seder plates, suggests that its provenance is indeed Germany. This claim is further verified by the fact that Jews from other regions did not use the same type of plate—in Morocco, for example, seder plates were made mostly of brass, “with lengthy Hebrew inscriptions, the names of the foods, and ornamental and symbolic designs, such as a wine bottle and cups.”<sup>7</sup> All of this said, according to William Gross, an avid collector of Judaica, “...accurate provenance is almost impossible to ascertain for the overwhelming majority of Judaica objects...because of the massive dislocations in 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish lives that have brought an almost complete severance between object and original owner.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, similar pewter plates, with and without Hebrew engravings, were also made in England in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century (see figure 6).<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is we cannot be entirely certain of the plate’s provenance.

Still, the plate’s accompanying placard is probably accurate not only in its assertion that the

plate was made in Germany, but also in its assertion that the plate was made the 18<sup>th</sup>-century. The reasons are twofold. First, pewter as “an art form... declined somewhat in the 1800s as technology allowed it to be produced more quickly,”<sup>10</sup> suggesting that such artfully embellished plates as the one from the Adath Israel collection would not have been made in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Second, a new, three-tiered seder plate made of silver, brass and/or wood emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century Germany. As this type of plate came into style, it probably pushed the single-tiered pewter plates out of style—at least for those who could afford these new plates (see figures 8 and 9).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the plate, as the date on it suggests, was probably made in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century.

The plate does resemble other extant 18<sup>th</sup>-century German pewter seder plates in its general content—particularly in the images engraved in the cavetto and on the rim—but there are some marked differences between the plate from the Adath Israel Collection and these other plates. Specifically, most of the Passover scenes engraved on these plates depict families, because “The pictorial motifs [of extant 18<sup>th</sup>-century pewter seder plates] were often inspired by popular illustrated printed Haggadot, such as the

Venice Haggadah of 1609 or the Amsterdam Haggadah of 1695 and 1712,” both of which contained mostly illustrations of families participating in the seder.<sup>12</sup> Incongruously, however, the engraving in the cavetto of Adath Israel’s plate is of three men, instead of a family. Further, the engravings from the Adath Israel plate are markedly rudimentary when compared with those from other similar extant plates. For example, the lions flanking the shield in figure 2 are more elaborately engraved, and appear to more accurately resemble real lions, than those on the Adath Israel plate. Last, the engravings on the Adath Israel plate differ from those contained in the glossary of images in the amount of space they fill on the plates: with the exception of figure 1, there is little “un-engraved” surface area on any of these plates. By contrast, the Adath Israel plate is rife with blank space, especially in its cavetto.

The Adath Israel plate’s accompanying placard claims that the engraving in the cavetto was added in 19<sup>th</sup>-century. That this engraving differs in both its elaborateness and its content (see: only men at the seder table) from similar 18<sup>th</sup>-century extant plates, suggests that the engraving may have been indeed added in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Another German pewter

seder plate featured in the March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006 Kestenbaum catalogue 32, has engravings that, like the Adath Israel plate, “appear to date to the 19<sup>th</sup> century,” even though the plate itself was probably manufactured earlier.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the cavetto of the plate in the Kestenbaum auction catalogue “bears an overall engraved depiction of a scene...of Sages celebrating the Seder.” As all Jewish sages were men, it can be assumed that the cavetto engraving on the Kestenbaum plate, like that of the Adath Israel plate, exclusively features men.

If the center was indeed engraved in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the initials, “S.E.,” inscribed on the back of the plate, are probably not those of cavetto’s engraver, but rather the plate’s maker. Although it is impossible for the contemporary viewer of this object to make a conclusive judgment the identity of the maker and the engraver, one can with some degree of certainty, ascertain information about S.E.’s identity—namely that he was Christian. The initials were in Latin script and the date is a date according to Christian calendar. Moreover, Jewish craftsmen were neither allowed to join the Christian guilds nor form their own in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, so the maker must have been Christian.<sup>14</sup> Further, based on what is known about



pewter's value, certain information can also be gleaned about the identity of the plate's Jewish owner: according to William Gross, a Judaica collector, contrary to popular belief, only Jews of the "economic aristocracy" could afford to own silver. It was the "well-to-do" Jews who owned Judaica made of pewter, copper and brass, while the Jewish masses had virtually no permanent possessions.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is likely that the Jewish owner of the *pewter* seder plate—perhaps someone with the initials זבר (Z.B.R.)—came from the "well-to-do" population of German Jews.

The seder plate in Congregation Adath Israel's Collection strongly resembles many extant seder plates that date back to 18<sup>th</sup>-century Germany. It is embellished with many of the common markers of such plates: its depiction of a Passover-related scene, its Hebrew-adorned rim, and its engravings of lions. However, it differs from these plates in that its adornments are less elaborate, the scene engraved in its cavetto features only men, and there is much more "blank" space in its cavetto. Its maker was likely Christian, but the person who commissioned the engravings was likely Jewish. That similarly engraved plates have their origins as far away as England (see

the cavettos of figures 4 and 6, for example) indicates that there also probably existed some degree of interaction among the well-to-do Jews of Germany and those of England—and of course, among the Jews that lived somewhere between those two locales. This should come as no surprise, given that German Jews from the early modern period, as a collective, traveled with more frequency than their Christian counterparts, due both to the Jews' disproportionate involvement in commerce and their families' tendencies to be scattered over long distances.<sup>16</sup> What is more, German "Jews did not have—nor could they have—the same attachment to a specific town or village as Christians,"<sup>17</sup> because restrictions on settlement could force them to have to move at any time. In light of this fact, the seder plate acquires even more significance: it was a possession that could be carried from place to place without weighing down its owner. It could also be passed down "l'dor v'dor"—from generation to generation—all the while serving as a reminder of and medium through which to celebrate Passover. Thus, not only does this seder plate provide its modern day viewer a lens through which to understand the lives of the 18<sup>th</sup> century German Jewry, but also, it, like all

Judaica, is only given “a life and meaning...in the context of [its] use.”<sup>18</sup>

### Images



**Figure 1:** Pewter Seder Plate

Maker: IL

Location of manufacture: Germany (perhaps Saxony)

Date of manufacture: 1751

Source: *Danzig 1939: Treasures of a Destroyed Community*

From the book: “...the letters שלם (“SLM”), which may be the initials of the owner



**Figure 2:** Purim Plate

Maker: Unknown

Location and date of manufacture: Germany, 1771

Victoria and Albert Museum

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O72078/plate-unknown/>

Note the three Hebrew letters flanked by lions at the top the plate, similar to the plate from the Adath Israel Collection



**Figure 3:** Passover plate with depictions of the Egyptian cities "Pithom" and "Rameses" as European cities

Maker: Jacob Scott

Location and date of manufacture: Germany, 1769

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

<http://www.imj.org.il/imagine/collections/item.asp?itemNum=397137>



**Figure 4:** Pewter seder plate

Maker: Lieb bar Yitzhak<sup>19</sup>

Location and date of manufacture: Berlin, Germany, 1764

Victoria and Albert Museum

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O72144/seder-plate-yitzak-lieb-bar/>



**Figure 5:** Pewter Seder Plate

Maker: IS

Location and date of manufacture: Germany (perhaps Saxony),  
1751

Source: *Danzig 1939: Treasures of a Destroyed Community*



**Figure 6:** Pewter Passover Plate

Maker: Unknown

Location and date of manufacture: London, England, 1769  
Yeshiva University Museum

[http://www.yumuseum.org/maxsterncatalog/picture.php?pid=114&alt=0&p\\_album\\_id=22](http://www.yumuseum.org/maxsterncatalog/picture.php?pid=114&alt=0&p_album_id=22)



**Figure 7:** Plate  
Samuel Ellis (working 1725–48; died 1773)  
British, London, second half 18th century  
Pewter, 1 x 13 1/2 in. (2.5 x 34.3 cm)  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Accession  
Number: 16.116.130



**Figure 8:** Three-tiered silver plate  
Maker: Unknown; Name of engraver: Baruch Shlomo Griegst  
Location and date of manufacture: Copenhagen, Denmark, 1918  
The Israel Museum  
<http://www.imj.org.il/imagine/collections/item.asp?itemNum=379538>



**Figure 9:** Three-tiered silver plate  
Maker: Carl Warmuth Junior  
Location and date of manufacture: Vienna, Austria  
Museum: The Israel Museum

Link:

<http://www.imj.org.il/imagine/collections/item.asp?itemNum=379538>

Other similar plates:

<http://www.imj.org.il/imagine/collections/item.asp?itemNum=397365>

<http://www.imj.org.il/imagine/collections/item.asp?itemNum=395414>

<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/189110?rpp=20&pg=1&ao=on&ft=pewter+plate&where=Germany&pos=10>

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<sup>1</sup> Günter Grass et al., *Danzig 1939, Treasures of a Destroyed Community : The Jewish Museum, New York*(Detroit: Published by Wayne State University Press for the Jewish Museum, New York, 1980), 82.

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<sup>3</sup> Vivian B. Mann, Emily D. Bilski, and Jewish Museum (New York N.Y.), *The Jewish Museum New York*(London, New York: Scala Books; The Museum, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> "Seder Plate," in *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, ed. Haya Bar Itzhak Raphael Patai(Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2013), 477.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Raphael Patai and Haya Bar-Itzhak, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2013). 478.

<sup>7</sup> "Seder Plate," 479.

<sup>8</sup> William L. Gross, "Collecting Judaica after 1945: The Pleasures, Perils, and Pitfalls," *Jewish Collectors and Their Contribution to Modern Culture* (2011): 346-47.

<sup>9</sup> "Passover Plate," Yeshiva University Museum, [http://www.yumuseum.org/maxsterncatalog/picture.php?pid=114&alt=0&p\\_album\\_id=22](http://www.yumuseum.org/maxsterncatalog/picture.php?pid=114&alt=0&p_album_id=22).

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<sup>10</sup> "Art of Pewter Has Long History," *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, 1977 Apr 24 1977. Pewter work, however, had grown as an art form in Germany since its introduction in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until this the 18<sup>th</sup> century that it declined ("Art of Pewter...").

<sup>11</sup> "Seder Plate," 478.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*; Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Haggadah and History : A Panorama in Facsimile of Five Centuries of the Printed Haggadah*, 2nd print. ed.(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975).

<sup>13</sup> "Fine Judaica: Printed Books, Autograph Letters, Manuscripts, Graphic and Ceremonial Art," ed. Kestenbaum & Company(New York: Kestenbaum & Company, 2006), 146.

<sup>14</sup> Gabrielle Sed-Rajna and Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Jewish Art*(New York: H.N. Abrams, 1997), 284.

<sup>15</sup> Gross, "Collecting Judaica after 1945: The Pleasures, Perils, and Pitfalls," 347.

<sup>16</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, *Jewish Daily Life in Germany, 1618-1945*(Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2005), 22.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>18</sup> Gross, "Collecting Judaica after 1945: The Pleasures, Perils, and Pitfalls," 342.

<sup>19</sup> Metal craftwork was monopolized by the guilds in Germany and, as aforementioned, Jews were not allowed to join the guilds. Thus, it is possible that Lieb bar Yitzhak, an unmistakably Jewish name, did not actually make the plate or that the plate was not made in Germany. Perhaps bar Yitzhak was the owner of the plate.



**Seder Plate**

Karlsbad, Czechoslovakia, 1918-1938

Porcelain

10" diameter

Presented in memory of Jeffrey Kabatnick by friends.

Adath Israel Museum, Middletown, CT

2014.S.267.15 (original inv. no. 159)

***Karlsbad Revolutionizes Seder Plates***

Sam Elias

The plate from the Adath Israel collection was used in the Jewish holiday of Passover as the ritual Seder plate. The base of the plate is made of porcelain, the most popular ceramic material used in Karlsbad. The back of the plate is smooth glossy white. The front is lusty silver with a pattern of striations adding complex texture to the piece. The top of the plate has 7 sections attached to the porcelain base where the Seder items are placed. There are 6 sections in the shape of mother of pearl oyster shells around the perimeter with Hebrew words written on them indicating what ritual object is placed there. The words in English are Maror, Zeroa, Beiteah, Haroset, Maror, and Karpas. The seventh section is in the middle and is smaller circle that had Karlsbad written in the middle in Latin letters; but the word is no longer completely legible.

The design of this plate does not have religious origins; instead it was an everyday object that was transformed to have an important religious function. The history of the resorts and of Jews visiting the town of Karlsbad provides the background for the

creation of this object. The Seder plate really portrays the well-known characteristics of the town. This is a great example of an item that was created to reach a new target audience.

Karlsbad, along with Marienbad and Franzensbad, made up a triangle of Bohemian spa cities in. This was a popular vacation area for central Europeans who wanted to get away to enjoy the peacefulness and healing benefits of the natural hot springs. The spa resorts supplemented their income by selling souvenirs to the wealthy guests. Oyster plates were a popular souvenir because of their ornate design and extravagant uses; production was made possible by the Bohemian porcelain industry that was already in place.<sup>1</sup> In its earlier years the Karlsbad spas were frequented by aristocrats. As the process of industrialization and economic growth occurred in the 19th century the burgeoning bourgeois brought more visitors to the resorts.<sup>2</sup> The new bourgeois included many Central European Jews.

By the start of the 1900s, the Karlsbad Jewish community numbered 500 out of 50,000 residents with many more making it a temporary vacation spot. Despite the small size of the permanent Jewish population, there were many Jewish institutions there;

including a town rabbi, a kosher restaurant, and Jewish hospital.<sup>3</sup> Karlsbad saw an increase in Jewish visitors in 1921 and 1923 when it hosted the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Zionist conferences.<sup>4</sup> The Holocaust hit the city hard, 90% of the town's Jewish population was exterminated in death camps. The Jewish community was reestablished after the Holocaust, and still exists today even though it never grew to more than a few hundreds Jews.

There is evidence that the Jewish visitors were not only culturally Jewish, but were also religious. A London Times article from 1924 discusses the presence of one of these religious groups, “the strangest types are the Chasidim [...] they never cut their hair, and do not look fond of washing”<sup>5</sup> Although this description does not portray the Hasidim in the best light, it is a signal that they were too frequented Karlsbad and were thought of when companies were making business decisions. Yet, Jews who follow the laws of kashrut would not eat shellfish and therefore have no use for a souvenir oyster plate. So, the plate producers had the brilliant idea to transform the souvenir item into a Seder plate that Jewish spa visitors would buy. This particular plate was almost certainly bought by an Eastern or Central

European Jew who brought it back to his or her home to use the holiday. The wear of the plate indicates that it was actually used for its intended purpose, and did not just sit on a shelf somewhere.



Fig. 2 Earthenware Seder Plate: Spain, ca 1480 The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

While Passover is a biblical festival celebrating Moses and the Israelites escape from the yoke of the pharaoh and the Egyptians, the Seder plate is a more

recent addition to the holiday. From the holiday's inception to the modern era, the Passover items were brought out on a small table or placed in a wicker basket. The first Seder plate was believed to be produced in Spain in the 1400s. It likely looked like the earthenware plate made in 1480 (fig. 2), which is one of the only religious items to survive the expulsion from Spain before 1492. Italian artisans produced lavish Seder plates during the Renaissance, but the German and Bohemian states came to dominate the industry from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Central European style became the dominant form of plate largely by accident. The ceramic plate that was initially created to serve oysters to the wealthy was perceived as a suitable archetype for a Seder plate. The design of the ritual Jewish item remained the same as the standard oyster plate with a ceramic base and shells placed on top.<sup>6</sup>

This item was produced by the Count Thun Porcelain Factory founded in 1794. The company has changed hands throughout its many years, but the TK Thuny trademark is still being used today. The Count Thun factory was in the Czech city of Klášterec, 30 minutes from Karlsbad.<sup>7</sup> The plate has the company marking of TK Thuny with a crown above the

company name and Czechoslovakia inscribed beneath it.



Fig. 3 Count Thun Porcelain Factory Mark 1918-1939

The museum indicates that the plate is from 1915, but this is clearly an error because it is marked with the Czechoslovakia and company stamp shown above (fig. 3). Czechoslovakia was not a country until 1918 when it declared its independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1938 Karlsbad was part of the Sudetenland that was annexed by Germany, suggesting that the plate was produced in the time frame between 1918 and 1938. Ginni Snodgrass's study confirms that the mark on this Seder plate was

seen between 1918 and 1945. Bohemia was an ancient Central European country that was a part of many of the local empires over the years. Early on it was a kingdom in the Holy Roman Empire, a province under the Hapsburg rule, and then a territory part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Bohemia finally gained some semblance of autonomy when Czechoslovakia was created.

This Karlsbad style of Seder plate is still in use in present day Judaica. Israel and the United States are the main producers of the type of Seder plate that resembles the oyster plate. The two countries have the largest populations of Jews in the world and contribute greatly to mainstream Judaica. Both lands also feature a great number of immigrants from Central Europe where this type of plate came from. The plates are usually not made of oyster shells, but the concept of a ceramic base with 6 shell-like objects where the Passover items can be placed has stuck.



Fig. 5 Recent Seder Plate: World of Judaica

Fig. 5 is an example of a plate that was produced in Israel that traces its roots back to a Karlsbad oyster Seder plate like the one found in the Adath Israel Museum because the Karlsbad edition was the first of its kind.

The Seder plate that now calls the Adath Israel Museum of Middletown its home is a magnificent work of craftsmanship that traces its roots back to the interwar period in the resort town of Karlsbad in Czechoslovakia. Although the Seder plate derives from an oyster plate, a secular, explicitly non-Jewish

and non-kosher item, it maintains an important religious significant as a ceremonial object for the holiday of Passover. A lot can be learned by deeply analyzing this plate. The materials used in the production indicate the importance of the porcelain and oyster industries in Karlsbad. The company and Czechoslovakia stamp identify what time period this was made and makes you think about what was going on in Czechoslovakia at the time. The sale of a Seder plate speaks to the fact that Jews played a significant role in the consumer society at that time because they made specific retail items for the group. The design was ground-breaking and continues to be used to this day evoking memories of Karlsbad.

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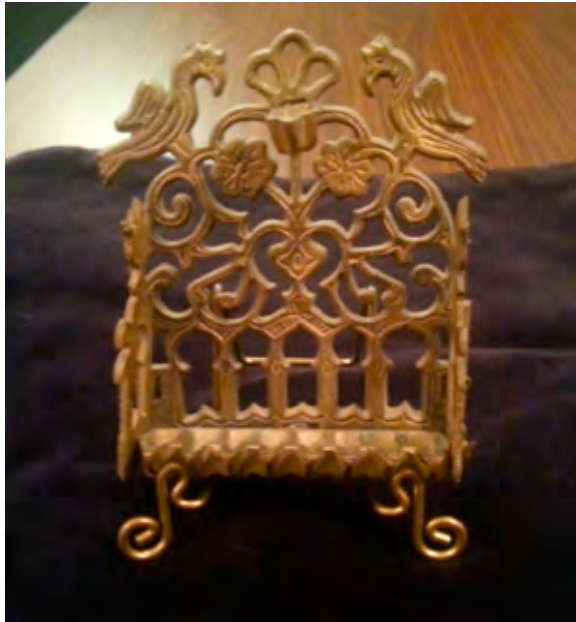
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**Bench-style Hanukkah lamp**

Brass, cast,

Openwork backplate

Eastern Europe, 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century

5.87in (length) x 2.5in (depth) x 8in (height)

Presented in memory of Arthur Goldstein by friends and family.

Adath Israel Museum

2014.S.267.16 (original inv. no. 91)

*Spiritual, Social, and National Implications of Hanukkah Lamps*

Zack Bartlett

The Hanukkah Lamp from the collection of the Adath Israel Museum and discussed here is complex and beautiful, made of a copper alloy, likely brass, with the color dulled over the years but still impressive. A row of colonnades sits on top of the bench. These colonnades give way to intricate scroll work that is symmetrical and architectural in nature. A fleur de lis sits at the top of the backplate, right over the oil well, which protrudes from the piece itself. On either side of the fleur de lis sits a bird, presumably a stork, or another bird with mythological/national ties. The last noticeable feature on the backplate is the two flowers under the birds. Sidepieces in tower-form also adorn the sides of the lamp and under the bench. The eight oil wells are held by four legs, keeping the piece upright. The lamp is composed of separate parts fitted together with screws and tendons, which is characteristic of cast lamps.<sup>1</sup> The backplate is attached to the bench by fastens as well as the sidepieces. Finally, that the lamp is cast-copper alloy (brass)

reflects a common practice in Eastern European lamps.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1 Hanukkah lamp, side view. 2014.S.267.16 (original inv. no. 91)

The tradition of Hanukkah lamps started with Judah Maccabee, following the Maccabean uprising in 167-160 BCE, who instituted the eight-day festival. While the origins of the holiday are both historical and legendary, it would seem the tradition began

when Judah the Maccabee saw the desecrated Temple within Jerusalem walls after he defeated Lysias.<sup>4</sup> After making a new altar and holy vessels (a candelabrum, altar, a table, and curtains) he chose the “25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev as the date for the rededication of the Temple<sup>5</sup>.” The celebration lasted for eight days and Maccabee decreed those days dedicated for future generations as a celebration of rejoice.

Auctions and the sales of Judaica today show a large market for Judaica with buyers willing to pay top dollar for it. Certain artifacts attain higher prices than others, and the Hanukkah lamps (menorahs) are no exception. In a recent Skinner, INC auction, three menorahs were sold to private collectors and/or museums for \$142,200, \$189,000, and, “a rare and important silver and silver gilt Synagogue Ark-form Hanukkah Lamp, originating in Brody (Galicia), and dated 1787,” \$314,000.<sup>6</sup>

The Galician lamp (fig.2) is one silver and silver gilt piece, with various scrollwork as well as a pair of birds at the top. The bottom half also displays biblical imagery, possibly the scene of the Maccabee lighting of the menorah. This piece is most likely handcrafted and not cast.



Fig. 2. Silver and silver gilt Synagogue Ark-form Hanukkah Lamp, Brody, 1787, sold at an auction in 2013 by Skinner INC.

Hanukkah lamps from the past few centuries have a great variety among them based on materials used, mode of display—whether hung on a wall or not, etc. Most importantly, it would seem that “Hanukkah lamps have generally borne some form of decorative element or imagery...motifs include floral designs and scrollwork, animal and human figures, and architectural elements.”<sup>7</sup> The Hanukkah lamp

discussed here also displays the rich floral and zoomorphic elements.

The Hanukkah Lamp is made from copper-alloy (likely brass). Tarnish and age turned the once glowing artifact to a dull, almost brown color. Traditionally, various materials have been used to make these lamps, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, and each representing a social status of the lamps’ owners. Material often is very telling, and certain types, such as gold and silver, were often used only in the Synagogues or the richest among the Jews.<sup>8</sup> Most upper class Jews were able to afford bronze lamps in their house, and the lowest of the class either had no holy lamps or temporary ones made out of cheap materials like pewter, or tin.<sup>9</sup>

The first mention of a menorah, although predating Hanukkah, in the Torah describing a “golden, pure, or holy lampstand” with seven-branches which God instructed Moses to make as one of the chief objects in the Tabernacle.<sup>10</sup> Gold was truly a rare commodity that even many of the rich could not obtain. Silver objects and lamps became the mark of the privileged peoples in the economic aristocracy of the Jews, especially in Eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> Rabbis would often make decrees

recommending that all lamps be made of gold and/or silver in order to “celebrate the ritual in as magnificent way as possible.”<sup>12</sup> Since many could not afford this luxury, the well-to-do who could afford a permanent Hanukkah lamp in the first place used brass and pewter.<sup>13</sup> But many common Jews of the time were not able to fund such a purchase, and had to make do with cheap materials “such as the simple sheet metal lamp from Djerba, made in a few minutes and often discarded after the holidays.”<sup>14</sup> An average Jew would probably have no permanent Hanukkah lamp in their home for Jewish rituals, but would make do with the simple ones that were not intended to last.<sup>15</sup> Since evidence suggests that even brass was for the well-to-do or for synagogues, it is reasonable to conclude that whoever commissioned this piece was fairly wealthy for the time.

The Hanukkah lamp discussed here has a very complex aesthetic layered throughout. It combines a various number of artistic and visual styles common to lamps of different regions. The most noticeable thing about the piece is the form. This form, called “bench form,” is highly common of many Hanukkah lamps. They are characterized by a row of candle holders in a row (usually embedded in a metal strip or

block) and oftentimes have an attached backplate.<sup>16</sup> These backplates serve many functions, first and foremost of which is to serve as a reflector for the candles when they are lit.<sup>17</sup> Since Hanukkah is also called the “Festival of Lights,” a lamp was to maximize luminosity. Additionally, the backplate served as a decorative aspect which the artist could fill with symbols of the Jewish faith (such as biblical figures or flora/fauna) or which could be framed around a certain architectural school of thought – a practice that was very common in the day.<sup>18</sup> Backplates also have their own sub-category: they can either be a plain piece of sheet-metal, or openwork. The lamp discussed here employs an openwork backplate influenced by the architectural style of the times, including elements of Gothic, Baroque, and Rocco styles.

Many backplates, especially in Eastern Europe, are intended to take the form of an architectural structure “embellished with...elements such as arches, gables, columns, or colonnades,”<sup>19</sup> hinting at why such styles may have influenced lamp makers. By looking like the façades of buildings, the lamp-makers retained a special holy aspect that was appealing to Jews. The reasoning behind the use of such elements

relates to both popular artistic styles and Jewish religious iconography of the day.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, eastern European Hanukkah lamps were unique in that they combined styles of their cultural counterparts in the West, while also still employing popular eastern European motifs, folk art, and architecture – especially those incorporating animals and birds.<sup>21</sup> While animals and other decorative elements would be found on an eastern European lamp, what was not too common was the use of biblical figures. This is due to a stricter interpretation of the Second Commandment in eastern Europe<sup>22</sup> against creating “a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of any thing.” Figures 3 and 4 from Susan Braunstein’s *Luminous Art* support this. They employ a similar style of structure, including the use of open scrollwork and animals (lions, deer, and storks).



Fig. 3. East European bench-type brass Hanukkah lamp with an open backplate and zoomorphic elements. Susan Braunstein, *Luminous Art*.



Fig. 4 East European bench-type brass Hanukkah lamp. In Braunstein, *Luminous Art*

The bottom row of colonnades and fine arches in my chosen lamp is influenced by a few styles. First and foremost, the row of colonnades and arches represent a combination of both Italian Renaissance models and Gothic style, which paid homage to Christian architecture. In Italy, one finds “purely classical round arches supported by smooth columns as well as broken-pediment facades” as decorative backplates.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the pointed windows and arches are characteristic of the Gothic style, which was also strongly associated with Christian churches. While it seems unusual for a Jewish piece to employ such Christian motifs, the reasoning behind it might have been “a result of the desire on the part of the Jewish community to blend in with their Christian neighbors during a period of inner and outer pressure to assimilate<sup>25</sup>.” The Gothic style was considered holy in itself, as it applied to Christian churches, in that no other artistic style could express the spiritual aspirations of humankind – full of arches and points which seemed destined to touch the heavens.<sup>26</sup> The arches themselves, which also make up the “tower-form sidepieces”, could be said to have Muslim influence, as many Islamic styles employed such

curvaceous and pointed arches which sit atop Islamic Mosques.<sup>27</sup>

Above the seemingly formal colonnades lies a beautiful, openwork style that seems to combine both the Baroque and the Rococo styles as well. The large naturalistic flowers and circular scroll work in the openwork aspect of the backplate is very Baroque in style, but they also resemble eastern European papercuts.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Rococo style influenced the more shell-like scrolls (rocailles) which adorn the piece.<sup>29</sup> These designs are a good illustration of the combination of “west European decorative art styles and Ukrainian folk motifs that characterizes cast Hanukkah lamps from eastern Europe.<sup>30</sup> The elegant scrollwork portioned above the colonnades is suggestive of the Baroque style in specific, as is somewhat confirmed by the presence of the fleur de lis on the top.<sup>31</sup>

The birds on top also show an amazing level of craftsmanship and symbolism. This is where Eastern European folk art becomes intertwined with the piece. Old legends in Eastern Europe and Poland specifically talk about the beauty and divinity of the Stork. The stork, which “was highly esteemed and believed to be a kindred spirit of humans,” was seen as good fortune

– especially if a pair of storks took nest on the roof of a household.<sup>32</sup> If a public or religious building was chosen by the storks, the townspeople believed that the whole community shared in the good luck. By including the storks on top of the lamp, the artist must have wanted to symbolize good fortune and hoped that such an addition to the piece would grant good luck to the buyers.



Fig. 5. **Hanukkah** lamp. Eastern Europe, ca. 1900. Copper alloy: cast and engraved. The Rose and Benjamin Mintz Collection, M 446. Photograph by Richard Goodbody, Inc. The Jewish Museum, New York. [www.yivoencyclopedia.org](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org)

Other animals, such as deer, lions, snakes, and bears were common to many eastern European Hanukkah lamp styles. The most common of these would have been the lion, serving as a symbol of protection and royalty, embodying the traits of strength and nobility (see figs. 3 and 4).<sup>33</sup> One can see the pair of lions standing on either side of the centerpiece, almost as if protecting it. Figure 2 shows a pair of deer as well as a pair of stork heads resting at the top, symbolic of the good luck, and fig. 5 shows elements similar to the lamp at Adath Israel.

In order to date these pieces, a collector would usually go through the trouble of identifying foundry marks or inscriptions on the lamp itself. However, eastern European lamps were characterized by having little to none of the marks, which puts collectors and museums in the precarious position of not knowing the exact age. Furthermore, the continuous mixture of folk art and western European decorative styles make the lamp hard to date stylistically.<sup>34</sup>

What can we tell about this piece, giving the information we have? Firstly, by noting it is a cast, copper-alloy (brass) Hanukkah lamp, we can at least assume that the artifact did not belong to the poorest in the community as they would not have the funds to

purchase such a piece. In fact, the majority of the Jews during this time and geographical location would have been unable to purchase *any* permanent religious items, instead often making them homemade from cheap materials.<sup>35</sup> Next, the combination of styles that are Italian, French, and German, as well as some minor North African Islamic influence (as far as the arches go) tells us that wherever this piece was made was an area where a lot of ideas and culture came together. Since we also know that eastern European architecture employed Baroque, Rocco, and Gothic styles<sup>36</sup> it is safe to assume that this artifact, in fact, originated in Eastern Europe. This is further supported with the inclusion of the Polish stork popular in folk lore at the time. Finally, while it is hard to date the piece on account of lack of inscriptions and a combination of artistic styles, we know that Rocco style was not popularized until roughly the eighteenth century when Baroque was still strong.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the combination of Polish folk art form and the architectural floral elements suggest that the Hanukkah lamp under discussion was made in the late nineteenth or twentieth century. This piece is a prime example of how much history can fit into one artifact of Judaica.

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### **Oil Lamp**

Brass

Unknown origin, perhaps India

19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century (?)

Presented in honor of the Bat Mitzvah of Suzanne Shapiro by her grandparents, Mr. & Mrs. Barry Dickson.

Adath Israel Museum, Middletown, CT

2014.S.267.17 (original inv. no. 175)

### ***Shedding Light: An Analysis of a Brass Lamp***

Nathaniel Howell

The lamp in the Adath Israel Museum, described as a seventeenth-century Sabbath lamp, provides clues into the meaning or cultural significance of this object. The lamp is made of a brushed, yellow-metal, most probably brass, or bronze. It stands with a circular base that extends into a curved handle. The handle ends with a flattened mass that has a pointed tip. On top of this flattened mass is a small sphere. From the base a column ascends upwards into a small, circular bowl with an indent. Below this bowl is a plane of intersecting curved lines that support four similar, small and circular bowls.

A formal description of this lamp makes up the first stage in Prown's methodology for analysis of a material culture object in his essay "Mind in Matter." The material, iconology, and function of this object all play a role in determining its meaning. In this essay, I will examine whether or not only this object is indeed a Sabbath lamp as its tag suggests, and its ritual and spiritual function.

The meaning of this object comes from information that is not embedded within this simple description. According to Prown, the function of an object is instead “the most promising mode of classification.” The object’s form suggests that it is indeed a lamp. The multiple identical hollows suggest a place for several identical things, and the handle indicates that a firmer grip of the object would be unwise. The claim of the caption that the oil receptacles were matched by the number of family members, as well as a separate one for the Sabbath, is substantiated by Susan Sered.<sup>1</sup> It makes sense, then, that there would be one bowl that stands higher than the rest, though that higher position was to facilitate the dripping of oil into the lower vessels. According to Sered, oil with wicks was used in place of candles.<sup>2</sup> The curved, hollow interior of these small bowls fits the function, then: it would not be a stable surface for candles standing upright, but would instead hold liquid oil.

We can place the function of this object also by comparing it with other objects of similar function. As Barbara Boehm notes, Jewish law gave very little instruction for the form of ritual objects like lamps.<sup>3</sup> The historical diversity of the design of Sabbath

lamps has been traced well by Franz Landsberger in his essay, “The Origin of the Ritual Implements for the Sabbath.”<sup>4</sup> He begins with the ancient practice of lighting candles on the Sabbath. The Roman poet Persius (34-62 C.E.) wrote of “Herod’s day,” when “the lamps, put in the greasy windows, emit their unctuous clouds of smoke...”<sup>5</sup> Such a reference informs us of the long historical precedent of the ritual function of our object. Landsberger’s essay is perhaps most informative because of its massive array of specimens he analyzes. Landsberger incorporates lamps from across Jewish history.<sup>6</sup> Many of the objects he presents display some of the same features, such as centrally organized grooves and a composition of metal.<sup>7</sup> But the early oil lamps were typically enclosed, to prevent the spilling of the oil. The other examples offered in Landsberger’s essay would suggest that the object before us may have been a Sabbath lamp.

Furthermore, the material of the lamp also seems to bolster the claims made by the caption at the museum. Landsberger gives examples of elaborate lamps from other areas of the world and other time periods. And the lamp at Adath Israel stands in stark contrast to other lamps, many of which bear biblical

relief scenes on their surface, with intricate hanging ability. Next to these examples, our lamp appears relatively crude and simple. The surface is mostly flat with only functional indentations. The grooves serve only the purpose of allowing the oil to drip, rather than existing as decorative relief. The material with which the object is made matches its austerity. It does not have the sheen of other more valuable yellow metals such as gold. Instead, the metal appears to be a form of (relatively cheap) brushed brass. Colum Hourihane has pointed out that Poland was known for Sabbath lamps made of brass.<sup>8</sup> And as Landsberger demonstrates, brass was a material for less affluent. Extremely wealthy Jews would have preferred lamps made of silver or gold. Landsberger quotes an eighteenth-century source (not specified) that “the lamps are of brass... even the poorest among the Jews have such lamps for the Sabbath.”<sup>9</sup> By contrast, for wealthier Jews, “brass did not always suffice.” That “even the poorest” had lamps points towards a temporary but important moment of prosperity for the culture that was implementing the use of these objects.

The specific historical juncture that is presupposed by the caption is supported by the

material evidence of the lamp. Seventeenth century Poland was a place of prosperity and democracy for Jews. By the mid-seventeenth century, the population of Jews in Poland had increased to 500,000 and Polish Jews adopted relatively high standards of living.<sup>10</sup> That objects like ritual lamps might be democratized and their access extended to poorer sects of the population would not be surprising in seventeenth-century Poland. Boehm has argued that ritual objects were often luxury items. While it might initially appear unlikely that a ritual object such as a Sabbath lamp would be made of a relatively inexpensive metal such as brass, if the standard of living for even the poorest Jews was good, they might have some version of a lamp rather than just bare survival necessities. If wealthy Jews had silver and gold Sabbath lamps, in the eyes of the poorer Jews, brass must have been the most acceptable substitute. Thus, it is not unlikely that this lamp did indeed come from this specific time period and geographic region.

The iconology on the surface of this object also affirms its ritual function. The protruding limb of the lamp appears to be a handle, but it culminates in a decorative flattened shape with a pointed tip and a ball on top (fig. 2). It resembles a snake, particularly a

cobra. This is unusual for European iconography, even though scholars have noted the frequency of other animal symbols on Sabbath lamps.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 2. Cobra-shaped handle on the oil lamp. 2014.S.267.17 (original inv. no. 175)

Snakes (though not cobras), of course, in particular bear special meaning in Jewish text. Karen R. Joines has argued in *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament* that “The serpent appears often in the Old Testament as a fearsome and malicious creature which man lives in perpetual enmity; however, it appears also a wise, majestic and life-bringing creature.”<sup>12</sup> She writes that in Genesis 3, the serpent is associated with

“life and wisdom” and that it “deceives man to bring him life, not death.”<sup>13</sup> Such an association fits with the cultural meanings of the Sabbath. A simple encyclopedia definition informs us that Shabbat candles are lit before sunset on Friday to mark the beginning of the Sabbath. It references Adam, the first human being, who struck light in the Garden of Eden to calm his fear of darkness. The light symbolizes that just as God had given Adam life, so too did God give Adam light.<sup>14</sup> The Sabbath ritual invokes the story of Genesis, light, and the life-giving metaphor of the snake in order to give strength to its own associations with rebirth. It is a ritual that takes place at the end of the work week and marks the beginning of a new week. The candles are lit in order to usher in the day of rest. Thus, the existence of a snake may serve to support our hypothesis that this object was used in the ritual of the Sabbath.

And yet, the motif of a snake, or a cobra in particular, is not known in European lamps. Instead a snake, and a cobra in particular seems to be a motif common in South Asia (fig. 3). Though not a reliable source, several examples can be found on ebay.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 3 A cobra shaped handle on a “vintage brass” lamp.  
<http://www.ebay.com/itm/VINTAGE-BRASS-CASTED-SNAKE-OIL-LAMP-COLLECTIBLE-/141275747894>

Moreover, open oil lamps, the so-called Betty (or Bessie) lamps, of the early modern era, were typically hanging lamps.<sup>16</sup> Portable sources of light in Europe were usually tallow candles, or bees wax candles for those more affluent. Oil lamps were typically hanging.



Fig. 4 Betty Lamp, 1700–1800, Wrought iron. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession Number: 1978.302.159  
Currently on display in [Gallery 774](#)

Prown has written that material culture can serve as “evidence of cultural mind.”<sup>17</sup> However, this reading is only possible with the extraction of carefully observed visual clues. The function of the

object was evinced by its form: the handle and the indentations for oil made clear that it was meant to hold oil and wicks. Its provenance is apparently confirmed by its material makeup, and further serves to imbue the object with practical, historical, cultural and religious meaning. Though seventeenth-century Poland was known for its brass lamps with animal motifs, this lamp is clearly not of east European provenance. We can also use the material makeup of the lamp to go beyond simple confirmation of the caption. From scholars like Landsberger, we learn that brass was a material for Jews of little means. Thus we can reconstruct the value of this object as its original owners might have perceived it. Furthermore, through representations like the snake on the lamp, we can derive even more meaning about the cultural significance of the Shabbat. The material clues within the surface of an object, as Prown has argued and as this lamp has shown us, form the meaning that lies within it.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sered writes, “More common is to light one candle (or one wick in a bowl of oil) for each child.” see Susan Starr Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious lives of Elderly Jewish Women* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts* 31

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb. “Jews and the Arts in Medieval Europe”. In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.

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<sup>4</sup> Franz Landsberger, “The Origin of the Ritual Implements for the Sabbath” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 27 (1956) : 387-41

<sup>5</sup> Landsberger, “The Origin of the Ritual Implements for the Sabbath”, 388.

<sup>6</sup> In Landsberger’s article, he discusses the material history of Sabbath lamps. It is clear from his various examples throughout the article that assess Sabbath lamps that candles and the manner in which the candles were held were central aspects to the construction of the lamp.

<sup>7</sup> Prown “Mind in Matter”, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Colum Hourihane, “*Jewish Ritual Objects*,” in *Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 521.

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<sup>10</sup> Heiko Haumann, *A History of East European Jews*, (Central European University Press: 2002), 30.

<sup>11</sup> see Landsberger, “The Origin of the Ritual Implements for the Sabbath” and Hourihane, “*Jewish Ritual Objects*,” .

<sup>12</sup> Karen R. Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament: A Linguistic, Archaeological and Literary Study*. (Haddonfield, N.J.: Haddonfield House, 1974). 1

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<sup>13</sup> Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Sara Karesh writes, “When the first human being, Adam, opened his eyes on the even of Shabbat and found himself in the dark shadows of the Garden of Eden, he was very afraid. However, he stumbled upon two stones, picked them up and struck them, starting a fire. He felt that the light and the warmth created by the fire was a gift from God, and then pronounced the very first blessing.” From Sara E. Karesh, Mitchell M. Hurvitz “Candle” in *Encyclopedia of Judaism* (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 78

<sup>15</sup> See for example, <http://www.ebay.com/itm/VINTAGE-BRASS-CASTED-SNAKE-OIL-LAMP-COLLECTIBLE-/141275747894> and <http://www.ebay.com/itm/Vintage-Unique-Shaped-Hand-Crafted-Peacock-shaped-Brass-Puja-Diya-Oil-Lamp-Stand-/291132169311>

<sup>16</sup> On the history of lighting see, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17625/17625-h/17625-h.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Prown, “Mind in Matter” 12.