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BEAUTY ENHANCES RITUAL

by Jennifer Wearden

The Torah, that is the five books of Moses - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - and the Law they contain, emanate from God. This is the Word of God revealed to the Israelites and recorded in the Scriptures. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the Torah for a Jewish congregation, so it is not surprising that the most dominant feature of a synagogue is the Ark of the Law in which the Torah scrolls are kept. This may be a large, elaborate structure or a simple cupboard or recess but there is always a decorative curtain hanging in front of it. Immediately in front of the Ark is the reading-desk on which the scrolls of the Torah are placed to be read; the reading-desk is also covered with a decorative cloth. In this paper I am going to consider the ritual and ceremonial significance of a *parochet* or curtain for the Ark of the Torah and an *almemor* or cover for the reading-desk - both are in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London¹ and were embroidered in Northern Italy in the late 17th century.

They were purchased in 1877 from a man called Caspar Clarke, who later became Sir Purdon Clarke and Director of the Museum; he had visited Italy eight years previously and may have acquired the textiles then. Although the Victoria & Albert Museum was among the first museums to collect Jewish ecclesiastical art, the ritual and cultural significance of these hangings was hardly considered by the Museum - it was far less important than their interest as textiles. They were acquired by a museum of decorative art primarily as examples of 17th century Italian needlework and have been regarded only as Italian needlework until recently. When any-one begins to study Jewish textiles they encounter a very big problem - because of persecutions and the deliberate destruction of synagogues and Jewish communities, few of the early pieces have survived and there is little related documentary evidence easily available for study, but the V&A hopes to explore the original significance of these embroideries and the author will be grateful for any comments provoked by this presentation.

The reading desk cover (illustration 1) has an embroidered panel is 27" long by 48" wide. Although the panel is not dated, the woven silk surrounding it is an attractive and expensive late 17th century one. The greater part of the

¹ The Museum Number of the *parochet* is 511-1877 and of the *almemor* 511A-1877. At the time of acquisition the Victoria & Albert Museum was known as the South Kensington Museum.





embroidery is worked with floss silk in brick stitch on a plain weave linen ground which had been extensively pieced together before being embroidered. The black inscriptions and the outlines of the motifs are corroding. Technically the embroidery is relatively complex: there is metal thread in certain areas: in the Ten Commandments, the vases, the crown and the oval frame which encircles the central motifs. There is silk couched over white silk padding and there are french knots in the centre of flowers.

At first glance the Torah Ark curtain (illustration 2), which measures 76" long by 64" wide, looks very similar in style and technique to the reading desk cover, but there are small differences² which suggest that although the two textiles may have been used together in the same synagogue, they were not deliberately made as a pair. Like the reading desk cover, the plain weave linen ground had been extensively pieced - suggesting a domestic rather than professional origin. The metal thread is limited to the text of the Ten Commandments and to small amounts in the twelve scenes in the borders. Most of the black inscriptions in this piece have been reworked in satin stitch. The borders were worked separately and then the whole was assembled and the seams embroidered over with a decorative pattern. There are two dates included in the inscriptions: one in the upper part of the narrow border around the central panel states that all work was completed in *Ellul* 5436 (August-September 1676) and a later addition in the lower border gives the name of the donor and the date of the donation: Joseph bar Haim Segal Polacko, 5463 (1703). There is a difference of 27 years between the two dates and I suggest that the curtain was first made for private use within the home and was then donated to a synagogue.

The well-balanced design of the curtain and the reading desk cover suggest the hand of a professional artist. Most probably an artist who illuminated marriage certificates or *ketubahs*. Every bride received a written contract from the groom and these were usually beautifully decorated in whatever style prevailed at that time. Late 17th century marriage certificates from Northern Italy may be usefully compared with these embroidered synagogue hangings as all are decorated in an artistic style which included formal vases of flowers.³ An

² The thread count per inch for the linen ground of the reading-desk cover is 21 x 17. The count for the Torah Ark curtain is 26 x 16. Both pieces are embroidered in brick stitch but it is worked over two threads across the lower thread count in the reading desk cover and over four threads over the higher thread count in the curtain.

³ For example see a *ketubah* from Verona dated 5438 (1678) illustrated in the Catalogue of The Jewish Museum London edited by R D Barnett, London, 1974, p.87.

embroidered reading desk cover from the Jewish Museum in New York, dated 1714 is also from Northern Italy and illustrates the popularity of large floral arrangements.⁴ A careful examination of the Ark curtain reveals half of a formal vase arrangement in the lower part of the pillars which form the central arch. There are rather odd, thin-stemmed blossoms floating in the border on the outer side of these pillars. It might be thought that these are the amateur additions of the embroiderer but isolated flowers fill the same spaces in marriage contracts.

Vases of flowers had no intentional symbolic meaning, although some people might see them as representations of fertility and abundance. But other images on these synagogue hangings were deliberately chosen for their symbolism. The central features of the the reading desk cover are the tablets on which the first word of each of the Ten Commandments is written, representing God's revelation to the Israelites, small hillocks represent Mount Sinai on which there are tongues of fire and above everything is the cloud from which God spoke. Unleavened bread to the right is a symbol of the Passover and to the left are bitter herbs. The inscriptions are from the Book of Proverbs (chapter iii verses 16 and 18) and refer, in this context, to the importance of the Torah scroll: "Length of days is in her right hand and in her left hand riches and honour. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her". The wooden rollers on which the scrolls were wound were called trees of life.

The design of the Torah Ark curtain is more complex: in the centre there is the cloud, the tablets with the Ten Commandments, the fire and what is probably the Mount of Olives, because the hillocks are decorated with small leafy sprigs. In the top right are symbols for the Passover - bread, herbs and a roasted lamb bone and in the top left are symbols for the feast of Succot - a palm branch, willow, myrtle and a lemon-like citrus called an etrog.

The main border contains 12 scenes of which some represent important festivals and some represent Sabbaths on which there are special readings or on which special events are commemorated. Each scene is surrounded with relevant quotations. From the top right these scenes represent: *Shabbat Shekalim*, *Shabbat Chol Hamo'ed Pesach*, *Shabbat Hagadol*, *Shabbat Chanukah*, *Shabbat Ha-Chodesh*, *Simchat Torah* (at the bottom), *Shabbat Parah*, *Shabbat Purim*, *Shabbat Nachamu*, *Shabbat Chol Hamo'ed Succot*, *Shabbat Zachor*, and *Yom Kippur* (at the top). *Chanukah*, for example, is represented by a *Menorah* (a candelabrum). Although a seven-branched one is used in synagogues, a nine-branched (like this) was used in the Temple in Jerusalem and at *Chanukah* because the feast

⁴ Inventory Number F4172. For an illustration see catalogue entry 4 in Fabric of Jewish Life.

recalls the re-dedication of the altar in the Temple in the time of Judas Maccabeus. Parah, an important Sabbath on which ritual purification is the theme, is represented by a hand holding cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet (all these scenes should be read from right to left, like Hebrew). The inscription surrounding the scene is taken from the Book of Numbers (chapter xix verse 6): "and the priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet and throw them into the fire".

The sequence in which the scenes have been placed is not chronological and readers should consult Treasures of the Jewish Museum (page 72) for one explanation of the complex iconography of this embroidery. The Ark curtain illustrated from their collection is very similar to the V&A curtain. It is dated 1698, is probably from Venice and was embroidered by a woman called Leah Ottolenghi. A third, similar curtain is in the Jewish Museum in Florence, Italy.⁵

One striking features of Jewish embroideries from North Italy is that most were embroidered by women. There are many known examples - one Ark curtain in the Jewish Museum in New York is dated 1680; it is from Venice and was embroidered by Simah, wife of Manahem Levi Meshullami, a member of a wealthy and prosperous family.⁶ Another older curtain, dated 1630, was worked by the wife of the donor for a synagogue in Ancona⁷ and a binder for the Torah scrolls, also from the Jewish Museum in New York,⁸ was embroidered by Rikah Polacco in 1662. In all probability, Rikah was the mother of Joseph Polacko whose name appears on the V&A's curtain and it is probable that she made the curtain 13 years after she made this Torah binder.

There are two questions which I cannot answer:

- (1) Does any evidence exist to show how designs for embroidery were commissioned and distributed?
- (2) Were these hangings the donations of pious (and skilled) women or were some of them commissioned from professional embroiderers?

What was the ceremonial significance of these elaborately decorated hangings? Jews living under Christian rule were never secure enough to enable them to build large synagogues to rival cathedrals and churches. Their synagogues were

⁵ The inventory number of the New York *parochet* is F3432.

⁶ Treasures of the Jewish Museum pages 70-71 and Fabric of Jewish Life page 6.

⁷ See Landsberger 'Old Time Torah Curtains' in Beauty in Holiness.

⁸ Inventory Number 1988-21, illustrated in Judische Lebenswelten page 89 catalogue entry 4/37.

modest and unassuming, from the outside - although their location was discreet, the decoration of the inside of the building and its furnishings was often opulent, attesting to the prosperity of the worshippers. A reasonably prosperous synagogue would possess several curtains and reading-desk covers and the ones used would be chosen to compliment the season, or the feast or the occasion, for example, a marriage. As well as hanging in front of the Ark of the Torah, curtains might also be hung in front of the cupboards or recesses which are often found on either side of the Ark and in which sacred books and ritual objects are kept. These hangings were prominently displayed.

This curtain and the similar ones which have survived from Northern Italy, probably came from the area around Venice. This was a relatively secure place for Jews in the 17th century. In the previous century all Jews had been expelled from Southern Italy; Rome and Ancona were the only places within the Papal States where they could live; in Tuscany Jews could live only in Pisa. But in Northern Italy they were able to live in a number of places - and except for occasional incidents, the Jewish communities there possessed enough stability and security to enable them to create beautiful works of art. Many faiths have a rich heritage of sacred music, art and architecture and they consciously use these media to transmit their doctrines, teachings or philosophies. For the Jews, God's teachings are freely available through the Scriptures which are read and interpreted in public worship and the predominance of The Word led to a high rate of literacy among Jews. The images used on these hangings were not for educational purposes religion of this type has little need for visual images. With their high level of literacy, it cannot be said that Jewish congregations required the equivalent of the visual 'Bible of the poor' often found in the decoration of many Christian churches.

These colourful embroideries fulfilled two distinct functions. On the more obvious level, they created a decorative background, much as painted and mosaic patterns did in churches and tilework did in mosques. They were used primarily for aesthetic purposes to create a beautiful environment and by doing so they gave pleasure and joy to the people who had gathered for worship - they enhanced the rituals. In a more subtle way, by using images which recalled specific instances where God had helped his people - guiding them, giving them victory, forgiving them - the worshippers could re-live positive spiritual experiences of personal and national redemption - in some way making these a continuing reality.

There is also a future dimension to Ark curtain. The scene from the centre of the left hand border shows the city of Jerusalem with the Temple in the centre and the words around it are taken from Isaiah (chapter xl verses 1 and 2): "Comfort

ye, my people" and "Bid Jerusalem take heart". As a Christian, I have been taught to interpret this as a reference to the coming of the Messiah ... the Good Shepard who will forgive sins and take care of his flock. But there is great potential for mistakes when trying to read meaning into images and Messianic prophesies were probably not intended. The second scene from the top on the right hand border depicts the tombs of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob and Leah with the words "Behold I will open your graves". This is from the passage in Ezekiel about dry bones (chapter xxxvii verse 12) and is closer to the truth - "I, the Sovereign Lord, am going to open their graves. I am going to take them out and bring them back to the land of Israel." The Jewish community in Venice identified itself closely with Israel and those images which seem to anticipate the Messiah are really expressions of their longing for their own return to the Promised Land and to Jerusalem. The images on these synagogue hangings are stimuli which evoke remembrance of the great events of the past and the anticipation of the end of their exile. They reinforced good feelings about themselves as Jews and as a community and they gave them hope. The congregation was reminded, in the words of St Paul, that "they were adopted as sons, they were given the glory and the covenants, the Law and the ritual were drawn up for them and the promises were made to them" (Letter to the Romans chapter ix verse 5). In a world of discrimination and active persecution, this positive feedback was necessary for their continued survival. And so these beautiful embroideries were more than decoration, they were a statement of identity ... to instil confidence and hope when it was most needed.

Specific references to these embroideries may be found in:

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Josephine Bacon The Illustrated Atlas of Jewish Civilization,
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