

# IN CELEBRATION OF

# SHAVUOT

Shavuot is one of the three pilgrimage festivals in the Jewish calendar, the times of the year when people from throughout ancient Israel brought offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem. The others, Sukkot and Pesah, are better known, last longer (a week for each) and have many ritual and celebratory features (for example: the sukkah itself and the lulav and etrog for Sukkot; on Passover, the seder and the eating of matzah and no *hametz*). By contrast, Shavuot is observed for only one day in liberal congregations and, while it is traditional to eat dairy foods such as blintzes and cheesecake on this festival, relatively few people even know about it to do so.

And yet, Shavuot is in fact a major holiday of the Jewish calendar. So, we are making a big deal of it here. 😊

Shavuot has at least five names, each with its own theme.

Hag HaBikurim, the festival of the first fruits, and Hag HaKatzir, the festival of the spring harvest, both celebrate the agricultural aspect of this pilgrimage holiday and its ties to the land of Israel.

The names, the Feast of Weeks (called Pentecost in Christian literature) and Atzeret, “conclusion,” relate to the seven weeks from the second day of Passover, when we begin to count the Omer (a sacrifice containing an *omer*-measure of barley, to be offered in the Temple in Jerusalem), to the day before an offering of wheat was brought to the Temple on Shavuot.

The title for the *Hag* that remains most relevant for modern liberal Jews is Z'man Matan Torateinu – the time of the giving of the Torah (on Mt. Sinai).

In calling Shavuot *Atzeret*, making it the conclusion of *Pesah*, the holiday that celebrates the freedom of our people from Egyptian slavery, and thus connecting it to *Z'man Matan Torateinu*, the time of the giving of the Torah, the Rabbis of the

Mishnah asserted that true freedom is confirmed by the acceptance of responsibility through Torah, the Jewish people's religious legal document.

This exhibit illustrates each of these themes as well as another feature of the festival: the reading of the Book of Ruth. Ruth is one of the five megillot (scrolls) in Ketuvim, the third section of the Bible. (The others are Shir HaShirim/Song of Songs, which is read from the beginning of Pesah until the end of the counting of the Omer; Eikhah/ Lamentations, read on Tisha B'Av; Kohelet/Ecclesiastes, read on Sukkot; and Megillat Esther/the Book of Esther, read on Purim.)

The Rabbis chose the Book of Ruth for Shavuot because it offers a personal counterpart to the Israelites' group acceptance of Torah at Sinai: Ruth's voluntary choice to be a Jew and live by the faith of our people.

And now, the exhibit (currently in the museum case at Temple Sholom of West Essex):



**Top shelf, left to right:**

“First Fruits,” oil painting by Reuven Rubin (1893-1974), on three panels painted in Palestine in 1923; today in the Rubin Museum in Tel Aviv. Rubin, a Romanian-born Israeli painter and Israel's first ambassador to Romania, was a pioneer in the

development of a distinctly Israeli style of Jewish art. He studied at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem and also at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris and was awarded both the Dizengoff Prize and the Israel Prize.

The simplified figures and bright colors in this triptych, reminiscent of French *naïfs* like Henri Rousseau, share the promise of the “first fruits” in the reborn homeland of the Jewish people. In the panel on the left we see a shepherd playing a *halil*, a flute-like instrument featured in the folk music of Israel. The mother in the family group in the center panel holds a pomegranate; they are being offered bananas (?) and watermelon by the bare-chested farmer. The kneeling woman is holding an orange from the basket at her feet. A camel driver is taking a nap in the panel on the right. The background of each shows still-barren hills, with a lone young cypress tree (symbol of the Jewish presence in the Land since ancient times) in panel one. The prophet Isaiah says: “I will plant cedars in the wilderness, acacias and myrtles and oleasters; I will set cypresses in the desert, box trees and elms as well” (41:19). Behind the driver in panel three is a *sabra* cactus; Israeli pioneers came to be known as sabras – tough and prickly on the outside and sweet and nourishing within. And, like many olim – immigrants – to Israel, is not native to the soil; the plant was imported to the land 200-300 years ago from Mexico.

The “first fruits” of the painting’s tile speak both to the Festival of Shavuot and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century pioneers of all colors who built up the Land.



The next three illustrations are silver objects related to the physical Torah itself. We read the Ten Commandments on Shavuot to recall *Z'man Matan Torateinu*.

The plaque below is a small, freestanding sterling silver display piece given as a gift to confirmands at Temple B'nai Abraham in Newark during the 1950s. The first words of each of the ten commandments are engraved on the front with a dedication to the confirmands on the back.

Confirmation in the Reform Movement began in Germany in 1810 under the leadership of Israel Jacobson. For a time, it superseded bar mitzvah for boys and, because in the early years of the Movement girls did not become bat mitvah, served as the “graduation” ceremony for them as well.



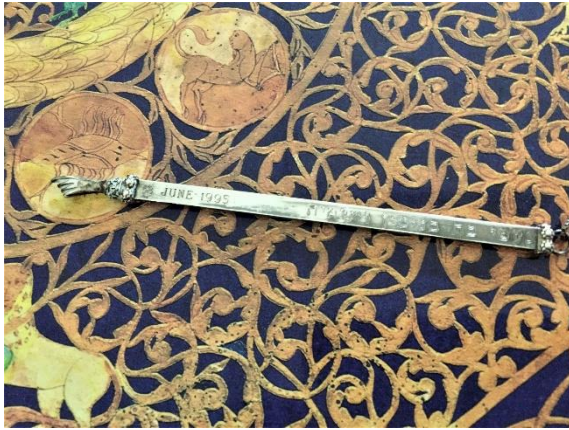




This traditional silver breastplate, Poland 19<sup>th</sup> century, was damaged in the Holocaust and rescued during the Communist years. The original Ten Commandments decoration in the center is gone; the pewrer replacement is clearly a misfit. Remarkably, given its history, the breastplate retains a full set of small brass plaques identifying the place in the scroll to which the Torah has been rolled for the Sabbath or festival reading. Displayed here is the plaque for Shavuot. At the top of the Baroque-style breastplate is the

depiction of a crown, symbolizing the term *Keter Torah* - the crown of the Torah, the uppermost of the kabbalistic *sephirot* of the Tree of Life. Supporting it are lions (of Judah) and columns recalling the central pillars of the Temple in Jerusalem. Heart designs are unusual in Eastern European Judaica.





Miniature sterling silver Torah pointers were awarded annually for a number of years by the New Jersey region of the Women of Reform Judaism to honor individual female rabbis, cantors, educators and volunteer leaders. *Yad* (hand”) is the Hebrew name for this ritual object, often called a pointer in English. The literal depiction of an

extended pointer finger, as here, is often its key decorative feature. Some sort of *yad* is used by every Torah reader to keep track of the place in the not-easy-to-follow handwritten text while protecting the ink and parchment from contamination by human contact. (The zodiac print is just for contrast.)



The piece above is part of a decorative art form called “papercuts” (in Hebrew, *mig’zarot niyar*; in Yiddish, *roizeleh*; and in German, *Scherenschnitte* –literally, scissors-cut). There are entire books featuring examples of Jewish-themed papercuts. We know that Ashkenazi Jews in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries practiced papercutting although its origins are unclear. Certainly, Jewish papercuts can be traced to Jewish communities in Syria, Iraq, and North Africa, and the similarity in the cutting techniques (using a knife) between East European

Jews and Chinese paper cutters, may indicate that the origin goes back even further. Some contend that Ashkenazi papercutting may date to the 14th century, though its popularity reached a zenith in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The first mention of Jewish paper cutting can be found in the treatise "The fight of the pen and the scissors" by a 14th-century rabbi, Shem Tov ben Isaac ben Arduziel (1290-1369), who describes how he began cutting paper letters when his ink became frozen during a harsh winter. Rabbi Shem Tov is known to Christian Spanish literary history as a courtly Castilian troubadour, Santob de Carrion de los Condes, who composed the *Proverbios morales* for Pedro the Cruel. Paper cutting became popular in the 19th century with the availability of cheap paper leading to paper cutting becoming widespread among the Jews of Poland and Russia in the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century.

Jewish paper cuts were also produced in Germany and probably in the Netherlands. Some Italian Jewish parchment ketubot (marriage contracts) from the late 17th century until the nineteenth century were decorated paper cuts as were some elaborate scrolls of the Book of Esther. Similar papercuts from Jewish communities North Africa and the Middle East have some characteristic style differences.

Papercuts were popular among Jews both in eastern and western Europe as well as in Turkey, Morocco, Syria, Bangladesh, Israel, and North America. In recent decades, Jewish paper cuts have again become a popular art form. Papercuts are again often used to decorate ketubot, wedding invitations, and works of art. Yehudit Shadur is an important figure in this effort.

The papercut above is part of a subset of papercuts so connected to Shavuot that they got their own name: *shavuosl*. These relatively small papercuts were displayed against the windowpanes in Jewish homes in a small number of Eastern European communities as beloved (and inexpensive) Shavuot holiday decorations.

The very simple late 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish *shavuosl* above, a rondel backed with a black paper center, features the Ten Commandments with key Hebrew words of each commandment. At the top is a *Keter Torah* supported by a pair of lions.

There are several more examples of *shavuosls* later in this exhibit.



**Middle shelf, left to right:**

This is the cover picture and first print in a book of poems and woodcuts entitled *Yiladim V'Hagim B'Yisrael – Children and Festivals in Israel*. The woodcuts are by Miriam Bar Tov, an Israeli illustrator born in Hamburg, Germany who died in Netanya in 2012 at the age of 98. It features a boy and a girl bringing the first fruits of the season to a Shavuot celebration.



Avigdor Hameiri, who wrote the poems, was born in 1890 in Carpathian Ruthenia, part of Austria-Hungary. He immigrated to Mandate Palestine in 1921, and fought in the 1948 War of Independence. He was the publisher of the State's first independent newspaper and the first to be named Poet Laureate of Israel.



A personal aside: The woodcut by Bar Tov evokes for us a long-popular Israeli Shavuot song we sang in Hebrew school in the 1950s. The lyrics are by Levin Kipnis (1894 –1990), an Israeli children's author and poet who wrote mainly in Hebrew and Yiddish (and won the Israel Prize in 1978). The first stanza says:

“With baskets and garlands on our shoulders and our heads,  
we come from the ends of the land bringing the first fruits  
from Yehuda and the Shomron, from the valley,  
and the Galilee. Make way for us, for the first fruits  
with us. Bang the drum and play the *halil*.”

The term “first fruits” not only refers to the spring harvest in Israel but likely also to the *sheva minim* – the seven “species” special to many Jewish festivals. (You already know this if you have participated in Tu B’Shevat seders.) Israel is described in Deuteronomy/Devarim 8:8 as “A land of wheat, barley and grape vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; of oil-producing olives and [date] honey.”

The music is by Yedidiah Admon. Admon was born in Yekaterinoslav, Ukraine in 1894 and emigrated to Palestine in 1906 where he received his formal education at the Teacher's Seminary in Jerusalem under musicologist Abraham Zvi Idelsohn. From 1923 to 1927, he studied Music Theory and Composition in the United States and then returned to Palestine. He was a pioneer in the field of Israeli song and served as an inspiration for the generation of composers that followed him. His unique style combined elements of Yemenite, Persian, Arab and Hasidic music as well as biblical cantillation. *Sh’demati* ("My Field"), a book of his songs and choral arrangements, was published in 1973 and he received the Israel Prize for Music the following year. His corpus includes theatrical works, cantatas, oratorios, songs, choral arrangements, instrumental works and music for children.

(A personal aside: The composer Yedidiah Admon and his wife were friends of Naomi’s mother and the Admons were guests at Naomi and Rabbi Patz’s wedding; their wedding present was a big African drum which produced a distressing swarm of tiny flying bugs a year or so after we received it. Not to be daunted, we isolated and sprayed and conquered the infestation. We still have the drum!)

The next picture is the Shavuot page of a book called *Hageinu - Our Festivals* by the Israeli artist Zeev Raban. Raban was born in Lodz, Poland in 1890 and moved to Palestine in 1912. A founder of the Bezalel Academy, he was the prime mover in the development of an Israel/Jewish style of art and became an iconic figure in Israeli art, known for his evocative portrayals of biblical and Zionist themes. His work reflects the Jugendstil (Central European art nouveau) style with additional Persian and Syrian art elements. An illustrator, designer and painter, he created a visual lexicon for modern Jewish art. For a period of time, his work was reviled by fellow Israeli artists who considered it “kitsch,” but when the oeuvre of the Bezalel school artists was reevaluated for an exhibit at the Israel Museum in 1983, his reputation was restored and his work is now once again considered iconographic and valuable. Raban died in 1970. It is easy to see how the picture below, which shows a stereotypical group of children gathered to celebrate *Hag HaBikkurim*, could have been viewed as kitschy. Incidentally, Raban used his daughter and her friends as his models.

*Hageinu* was published in 1928. The book contains 14 plates illustrating the holidays of the Jewish year, each with an accompanying poem by Levin Kipnis, who described them as “poems for Young Judeans.”

The setting for this color illustration is Jewish Jerusalem with a stylized depiction of the walled Old City behind them. The central building in the upper part of the frame is the Dome of the Rock. To the left is the distinctive archway at the entrance to the Temple Mount plaza. Just behind the wall we see the three cypress trees that appear in virtually every drawing of Jerusalem (only the top of the one on the left is visible here). The child on the far left is clearly Mizrachi, probably Yemenite, and the others are wearing Western style clothing.

The bottom left drawing is of a garland of “first fruits” similar to those the children carry. This, as you already know, is one of the themes of Shavuot and the Hebrew word in the center panel.

The drawing of the Ten Commandments, bottom right, is a reminder of the other key theme of the festival, *Z'man Matan Torateinu*.



In the center of the middle shelf is an 18<sup>th</sup>- 19<sup>th</sup> century Persian tile from the Qajar period (1789-1925), most likely crafted in Teheran. The Hebrew inscription reads *v'ahavta l'rei-a-kha kamokha* – love your neighbor as yourself (Vayikra/Leviticus 19:34).





The elaborate flowers and birds that form the inner border are typical of this style as is the blue frame outlined in black. The polychrome underglaze is executed in

the *cueva seca* technique, which uses black lines made from metal powder to keep the colors separated in the glazing process.

The central feature of the tile depicts Moses with rays of light emanating from his head as he raises the tablets of the Ten Commandments in his right arm.

Sh'mot/Exodus (34:29-30) reads: *karan ohr panav* – “the skin of his face was radiant” to describe how Moses appeared to the Israelites when he descended from Mt. Sinai after his second meeting with the Eternal One. Over the centuries, rays of light became an iconic way of identifying this radiance in Moses’s appearance. A mistranslation of “radiant” led to centuries of hostile depictions of Moses in Christian art as having horns.

The next illustrations are papercuts. The first two are a pair by Yehoshua Grossbard (1902-1992), an Israeli artist who was one of the founders of the Ein Hod Artists Village in the Galilee. As a child in Poland, Grossbard helped his father create ornamented ceilings, particularly for synagogues. His father also drew stencils on thick paper and the son cut them out with a pen knife. Grossbard immigrated to Mandate Palestine in 1939. The work with his father inspired his papercuts and many of his serigraphs and artwork on tiles and in other media. In 1955, he spent a year studying painting in Paris.

The Hebrew in both pieces below says Hag HaBikurim, the agricultural theme of the festival most appealing to many secular Israelis. They are part of a book called *Yehoshua Grossbard - Paper-cuts - Traditional Motives*, Amal Publishers, 1970.



The papercut below is from the collection of Maximilian Goldstein (1880–1942). A native of Lvov (formerly Lemberg, now Lviv), Goldstein was a distinguished collector of Jewish antiquities as well as a numismatist and specialist in Jewish folk art. He built his Judaica collection over a period of more than thirty years, placing special emphasis on Jewish artifacts of Galicia (comprising the southeast region of current Poland and adjacent Ukraine).

These masterpieces were shown at a spectacular exhibition held in the spring of 1933 at the City Museum of Fine Arts in Lvov, alongside artifacts collected by the Society of Friends of the Jewish Museum in that city. Goldstein co-authored a book about the exhibit [\*Jewish Folk Culture and Art in Poland\*](#) (in Polish, 1935) with the poet and critic Karol Dresdner. The publication featured hundreds of photographs depicting items from Goldstein's collection. The foreword was written by the well-known Jewish historian Professor Mayer Balaban.

Goldstein's large private collection of old Jewish books, paintings, furniture and other Jewish artifacts became the foundation for a private Jewish Museum established in his home in Lvov before WWII. After the Soviet occupation in 1939 the collection was transferred to the Museum of Arts and Industry, where Goldstein was hired as a staff member.

With the beginning of the Nazi occupation of Lvov, Maximilian Goldstein was imprisoned in the Lvov Ghetto. Although he was dismissed from his position at the Museum of Arts and Crafts, he continued to be employed there as a prisoner —“working Jew № 31596.”

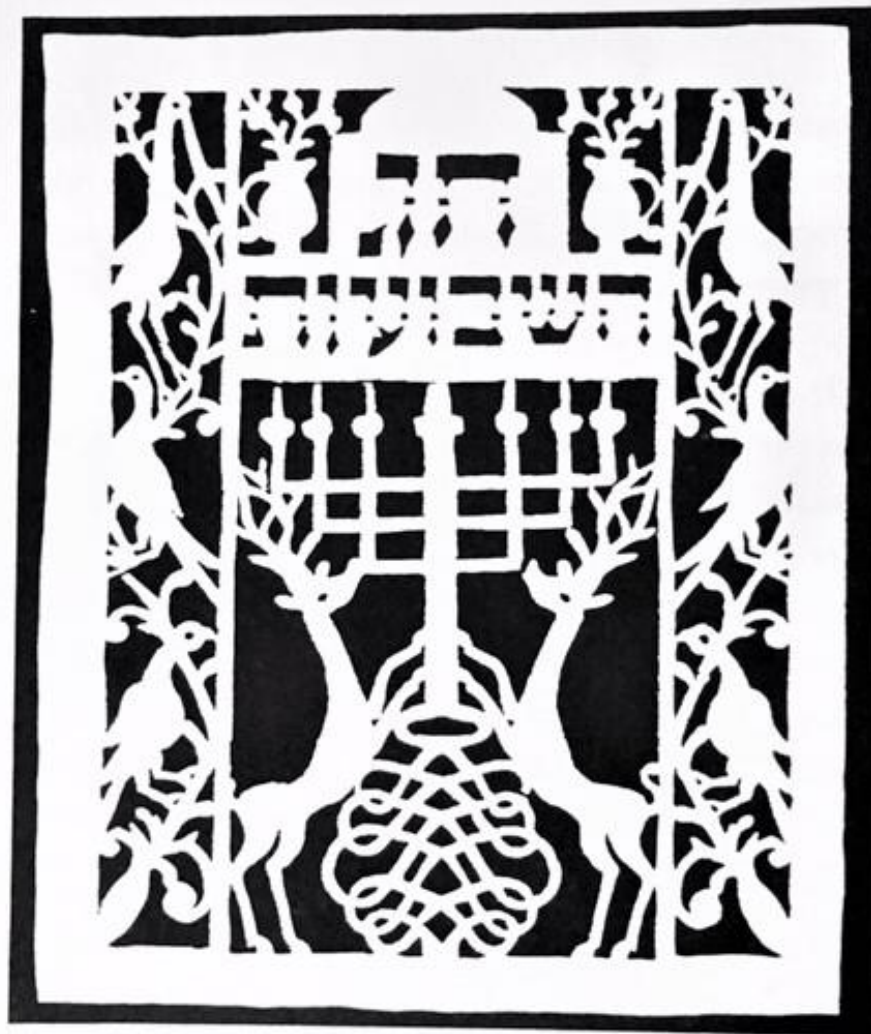
In August 1942, when over 40,000 Jews were dispatched to the Belzec death camp for extermination as part of the “Great Action” that took place in the Lvov ghetto, Goldstein presumed upon his past relationships and wrote a veritable plea to be rescued: “I can only ask that I be recruited for such work, so that, in the event of the next deportation from Lvov—and as a special favor—my employed daughter and I be allowed to stay in Lvov.” But in October of that year, he was sent to the Janowska concentration camp on the outskirts of Lvov where he was killed in December 1942. Goldstein's wife and daughter were also murdered there.

Other than that it was part of Goldstein's collection, we know nothing more about the provenance of this papercut although it is likely from 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland. The



Hebrew in the crown reads *Keter Torah*. Beneath the Tablets is the phrase from the festival kiddush – *Yom hag ha-Shavuot hazeh* – “This is the day of the Shavuot festival.” The three Hebrew letters virtually hidden in the roundel below – *zayin, mem, tav* – are the first letters of *Z’man Matan Torateinu*.





This 19<sup>th</sup> century *shavuosl* features the words *hag ha-Shavuot* above a seven branched menorah flanked by a pair of long-necked deer. At the bottom of the menorah is a design known as an “endless knot.” The artist is unknown.

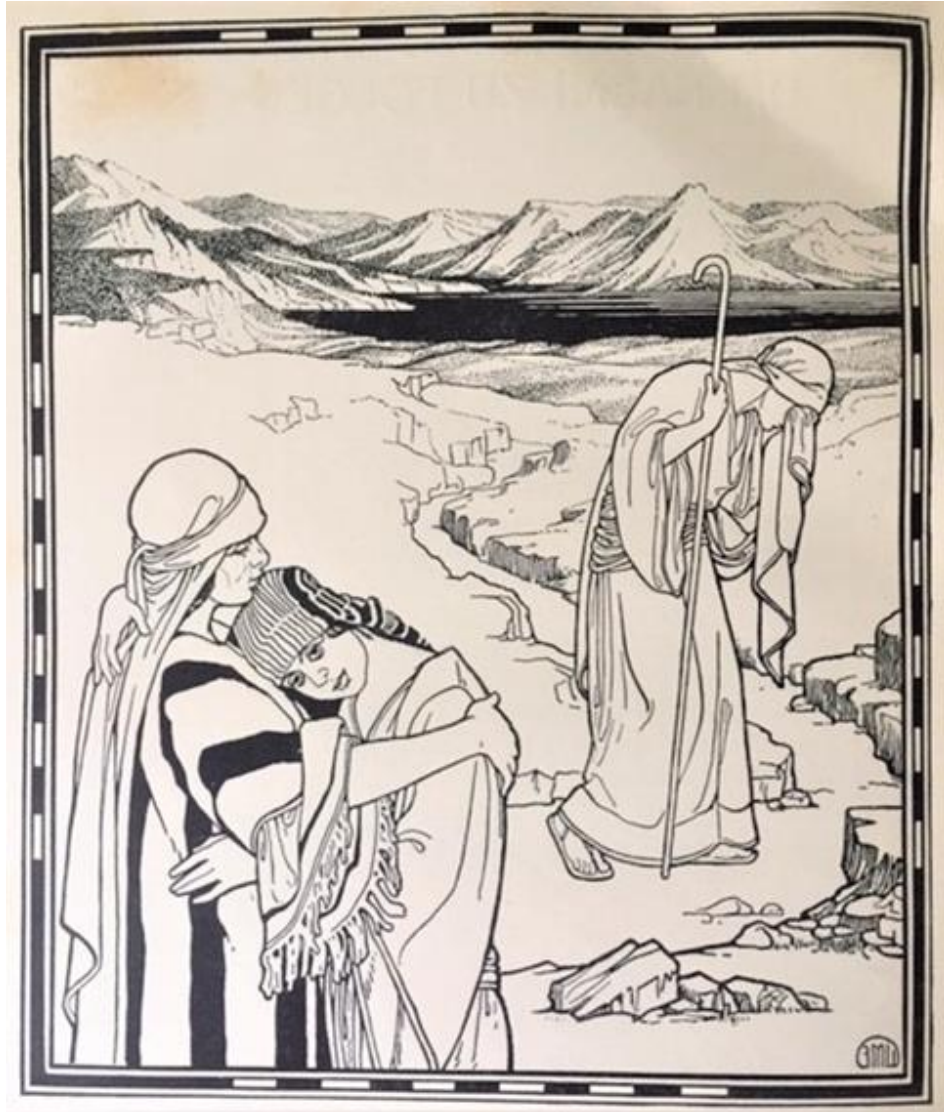
According to Giza Frenkel (1895-1984), author of *Migzarot Niyar: Omanut Yehudit Amamit – Papercuts: Jewish Folk Art* (1983, Masada), where this *shavuosl* appears, the storks in the side

panels symbolize divine mercy.

Frenkel was an internationally renowned ethnologist and anthropologist. She was born in Poland, studied at Vienna and Lvov universities in the 1930s and worked at the Department of Ethnology of Lvov University until the end of that decade. For over 50 years, she extensively researched papercuts, costumes, and crafts of Eastern-European Jews. We couldn't find out where she spent the years of the Holocaust. After World War II, she served as the curator of the Warsaw Jewish Historical Institute Museum. In 1950, she moved to Israel where she seems to have been responsible for generating a renewed love for papercuts as part of her work as a key member of the Haifa Museum of Ethnology and Folklore staff, a position she held for the rest of her career.



Ephraim Moses Lilien (1874-1925) was an art nouveau illustrator and print maker often called “the first Zionist artist.” Although he is most famous for the photograph he took of Theodor Herzl, his true fame lies in his illustrations of the Bible in his three-volume work *Die Bucher der Bibel*, published 1908-1923.



This pen and ink drawing depicts the moment after Naomi’s daughter-in-law Ruth has declared that she is going to accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem from Moab: “Your people will be my people.” Naomi then asks Orpah, her other daughter-in-law, what she will choose to do. Orpah, who Lilien shows as saddened by her decision (or perhaps embarrassed, conflicted or ashamed), responds that she intends to remain in Moab. Lilien depicts the path Orpah is about to take as a stark symbol of the rift about to take place.





By the time of the event drawn by Lilien (pictured and described above), Naomi is no longer young. She and both of her daughters-in-law are widows, prompting her decision to return home to Bethlehem, to her own people. In the chronology of the Book of Ruth, the woodcut here illustrates a much earlier episode in the story: Naomi and her husband Elimelech are leaving Bethlehem with their two young sons Mahlon and Chilion to escape what Elimelech fears will be a devastating famine (which turns out to be short-lived). They have begun their journey to go and live in Moab.



The woodcut below, by Jacob Steinhardt (1887-1968), illustrates the scene where Boaz, a prosperous landowner and a relative of Naomi's, insists that Ruth follow the harvesters of the barley crop solely in his fields (exactly what Naomi had hoped he'd say). It is one of the striking illustrations in his *Book of Ruth* published by JPS in 1957. Steinhardt was born in Germany and moved to British Mandate Palestine in 1933. His early work, executed in the style of German Expressionism, portrays the sufferings of Eastern European Jews in the years of the First World War. His later depictions of the Old City of Jerusalem are powerful and evocative.





This powerful Lilien drawing shows Ruth as beautiful, strong, modest and determined.





Below is a most unusual watercolor depicting an Oriental-looking Moses.

Two golden rays of light shine from his head. He has a Fu-Manchu mustache and long beard and is garbed in elaborate royal robes. He holds a staff or scepter in his right hand.

The Tablets of the Law, surmounted by a crown that is itself topped with a six-pointed star, seem to be suspended in front of him on an elaborate base that displays another Jewish star with a design or maybe a Hebrew letter at its center. This in turn sits atop a framework enclosing a seven-branched menorah.

Although at first we thought Moses was seated on a throne, we now believe that he is standing in front of a peach-colored backdrop with a decorative border at its base. Behind him are unmatched (theater?) curtains that have been pulled back.

The Hebrew at the top reads *V'zoht hatorah asher sahm Mosheh lif'nei b'nei Yisrael* – This is the Torah that Moses placed before the Children of Israel. The full original text continues with the words *ahl pi Adonai b'yad Mosheh* – “which the Eternal placed in the hands of Moses.” It comes from the prayer recited when the Torah is displayed to the congregation following the reading of the parashah.

The first part of the text, the part in the drawing, comes from D'varim/Deuteronomy 4:44: “This is the teaching that Moses set before the Israelites.” The rest of the quote comes from B'Midbar/Numbers 9:23: “... They observed the Eternal's mandate at the Eternal's bidding through Moses.”

Is the painting possibly an artist's depiction of a theatrical dramatization of the story of the giving of the Torah with no attempt to depict Mt. Sinai or the desert? Clearly, the work is folk art. We suspect that it is of Mizrachi origin, meaning that it comes from the Middle East or Central Asia, but it is only a guess. We otherwise know nothing about its provenance – where it comes from or when or by whom it was painted.

The hand-drawn borders surrounding the picture are part of the mat inside the frame.

וזארו הווארד אער שם משה לפני בני ישראל



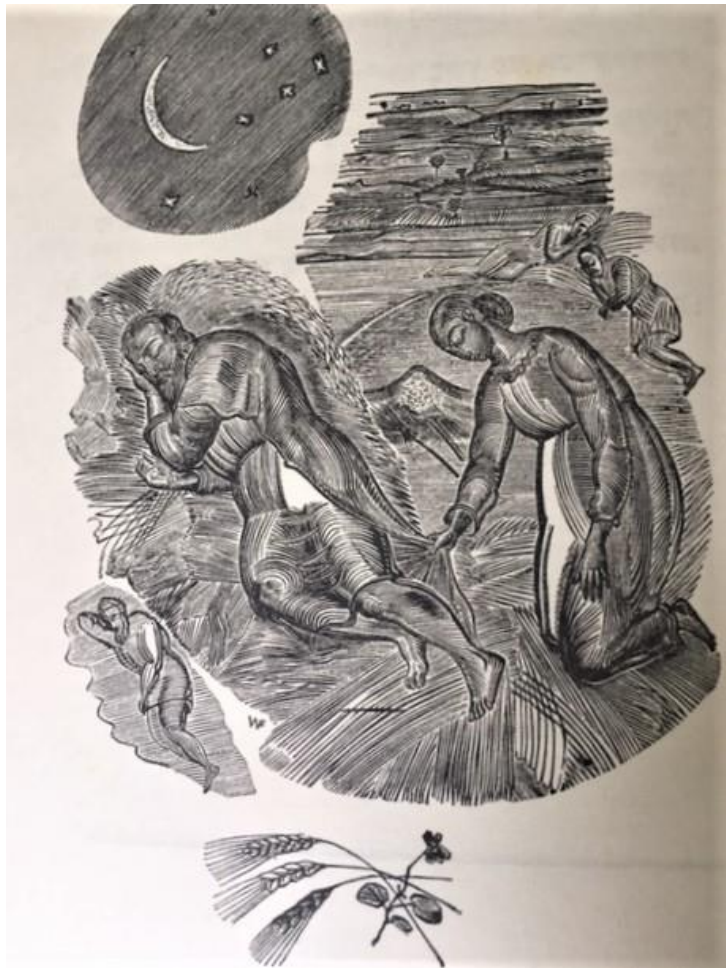
In this painting, Ruth and Naomi have returned to Bethlehem from Moab. They are tired. Naomi looks very old and apprehensive. She has been away a long time, her husband had been an important personality in Bethlehem but had fled the famine rather than, as a wealthy leader of the community, staying to do what he could to offer help. Once rich and respected, Naomi now has nothing to offer. How will she and her formerly Moabite daughter-in-law be received?



The painting is by Arthur Szyk, whose illustrations always seem to depict Polish Jews whatever their ostensible subject. He was born in Lodz in 1894 and died in New Canaan, Connecticut in 1951. Szyk worked primarily as a book illustrator and political artist through most of his career. His most well-known Jewish illustrations are for an edition of the Passover Haggadah. His illustrated Megillat Esther depicts Haman wearing a swastika. There was a major retrospective of his work at the New York Historical Society in New York in 2010.



The final illustration continues the story. Although ancient methods of harvesting were not as efficient as today, the laws of Vayikra/Leviticus 19:9-10 instruct the Israelites to leave the margins of their grain fields unharvested. The width of this margin appears to be up to the owner to decide. They also were not to pick up any produce that fell to the ground, which might happen when a harvester grasped a bundle of stalks and cut them with the sickle, or when grapes dropped from a cluster just cut from the vine. Moreover, they were to harvest their vineyards only once during a season, presumably thereby taking only the ripe grapes so as to leave the later ripening ones for the poor and the immigrants living among them. These two categories of people—the poor and resident aliens—were not allowed to own land and thus were dependent on their own manual labor for food. Laws benefiting the poor were common in the ancient Near East, but only the regulations of Israel extended this treatment to resident aliens.



Naomi falls into the former category and Ruth into the latter. Because Naomi has grown old, Ruth gleanes for both of them.

Now, at the end of the harvest season, again at Naomi's instigation, she washes, dresses in her best clothes and returns to the field at night (where we see Boaz and other workers sleeping). She uncovers him and lies down beside him in a rather overt gesture of her intentions.

Boaz wakes up and does exactly what Naomi (and Ruth) had hoped: he claims her as his wife, citing his right to do so as her kinsman.

King David was a descendant of this marriage, thus affirming the significance of Jews by choice in Jewish history.

Vladimir Favorsky (1886-1964), the artist, was a prominent Soviet illustrator and propagandist for the Communist regime and its causes. The picture is one of the woodcuts in his Book of Ruth –*Kniga Ruth*, in Russian. The 43-page volume was published in Moscow in 1925 in a limited edition of 1,900 copies and is considered very rare today.



The artifacts and books in this exhibit come from the Judaica collection of Rabbi Norman and Naomi Patz