

CHAD GADJO

A Song with a Cumulative Verse Structure, a Parable, a Seder-Closer

One of the most beloved parts of the Passover seder for both kids and adults is the boisterous singing of *Had Gadya*, the Aramaic parable of an “only kid (baby goat)” that “my father bought for two *zuzim*.” *Zuzim*, (sing. *zuz*) for the curious and uninitiated (which probably includes virtually everyone who participates in a *Pesah* seder whether they know and enjoy the song or not), are ancient silver coins struck during the Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135 C.E.). Why “my father” was spending *zuzim* when the song itself first appeared in a haggadah printed in Prague in 1590, will no doubt forever be shrouded in mystery.

Although the song appears to be light-hearted, certainly as underscored by its rollicking folk melody, its interpretations are far more serious. One identifies the Jewish people with the little lamb (*lämmchen*) which survives the many tribulations we have suffered over the centuries, ultimately – with God’s help – surviving even the Angel of Death. In this understanding, the lamb’s attackers are identified with Israel’s ancient enemies: the cat = Assyria; the dog = Babylon; the stick = Persia; the fire = the Greeks; the water = the Roman Empire; the ox = the Saracens (Arabs); the slaughterer/ butcher = the Crusaders; the Angel of Death = the Turks. At the end, God intervenes to send the Jews back to the Land of Israel. In this version, the two *zuzim* refer not to a monetary unit but to the Tablets of the Law. This is only one of the many interpretations of the meaning of *Had Gadya* over the centuries.

Unsurprisingly, this unusual allegory has been illustrated since the earliest haggadot in a remarkable variety of ways, ranging from the cute to the terrifying.

This year's TSWE Museum Case display for *Pesah* features the latter, a 15-page book called *Chad Gadjö*, by Menachem Birnbaum (1893-1944), published in Berlin in 1920 by Welt-Verlag. Birnbaum was a Jewish artist, caricaturist and book illustrator who fled from his native Austria to Amsterdam to escape the Nazis but was captured there after the Nazis invaded the Netherlands and sent to Auschwitz, where he was murdered. [Menachem and his brother (1894-1956, translator of the song from Aramaic into German), were the sons of an important Zionist philosopher, Nathan Birnbaum (1864-1937).]

Chad Gadjö is a large-format book in a binder held together by ribbons. Described as “a most chilling bibliophilic book,” it contains two cover pages, a small introductory illustration, and – its principal content – ten illustrations by Menachem Birnbaum that are marvelous examples of the unsettling, unnerving style known as German Expressionism, an early twentieth century art movement. Most Expressionist works are disturbing. They distort reality using vivid colors and sharp angles that express the artists' emotional tension, creating a reciprocal tension in the viewer. The two best known Expressionist groups are Die Brücke (The Bridge) and Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider). The printing firm, Spamersche Buchdruckerei, which printed *Chad Gadjö*, is remembered as a principal printer of the German Expressionist works. The genre was later denounced by the Nazi propagandists as “degenerate art” – *Entartete Kunst*. We are not sure how many haggadot have ever included these illustrations, but we present

them here as a fascinating if gory display case – and perhaps a fitting reflection of the mood of our fraught era.

Here are the two opening pages, one with the words *chad gadjo* in Hebrew characters and the other the full title of the book in German.



Chad Gadjo

Zeichnungen von

Menachem
Birnbaum

Welt-Verlag, Berlin 5680

The cover and frontispiece of *Chad Gadjo* are very pastoral, but that changes as the violence mounts, culminating with the lyrics taking us back from the final escalation of the song, the execution of the Angel of Death, back to the chorus, “the only kid my father bought for two *zuzim*.”



The first full illustration in the book shows a Hasidic father holding a sacrificial paschal lamb. (The *z'roa* – shank bone – on our seder plates represents this *pesah*, the paschal lamb the Israelites sacrificed before they left Egypt, marking their doors with its blood to alert the Angel of Death to pass over this Jewish home). A pleading, barefoot child reaches up in a vain attempt to save the animal.



The second illustration shows a black cat killing the lamb, a ribbon of whose blood spurts from its wound.



In the third illustration, a huge dog is shaking the bloody carcass of the tiny black cat, its blood splashing from top to bottom across the page.



The fourth illustration depicts a gigantic primitive club smashing the dog, which writhes in a pool of its own blood.



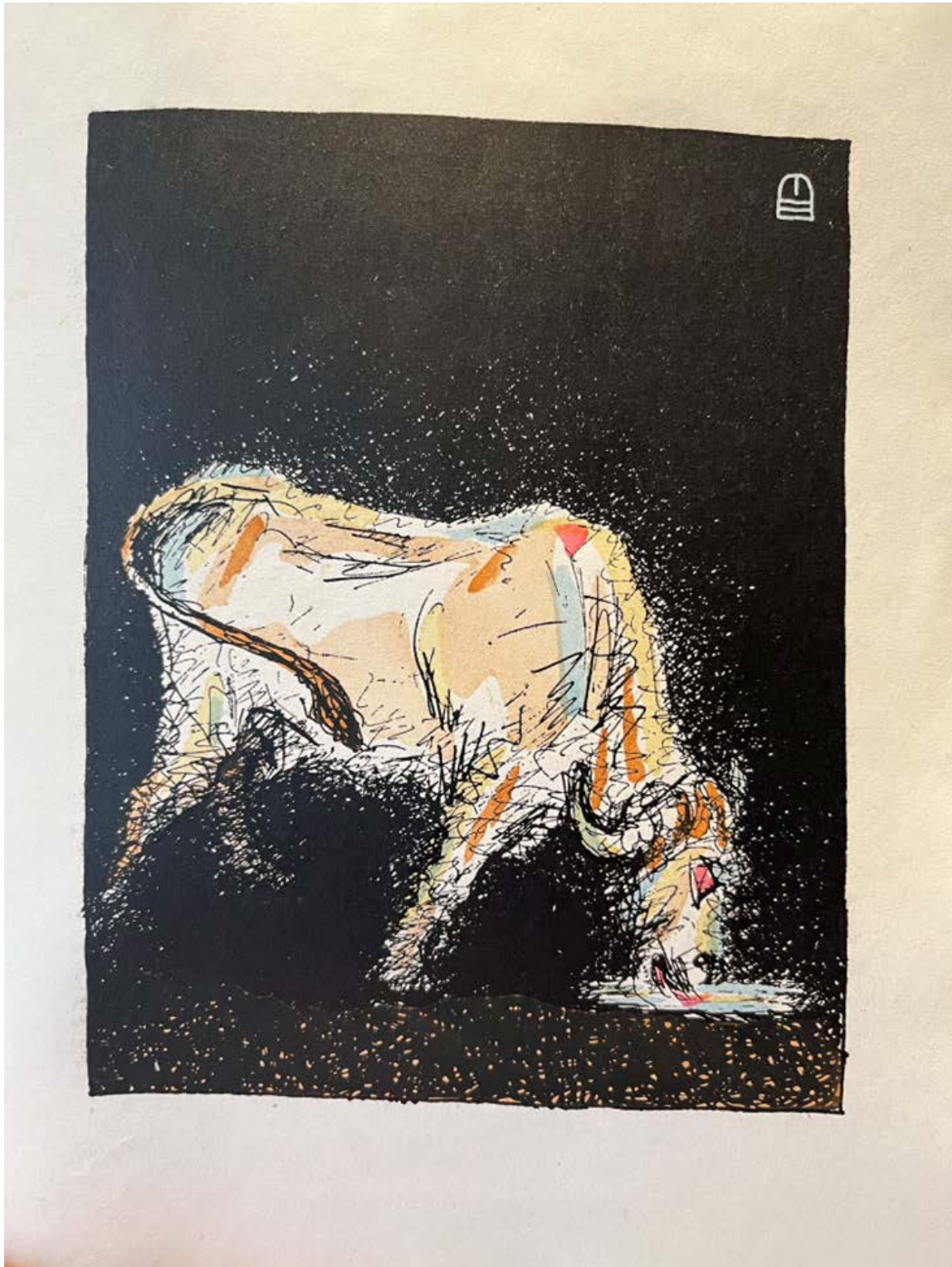
In the fifth illustration, a large fire destroys the no-longer visible club.



In the sixth illustration, rain is pouring down to extinguish the fire.



In the seventh illustration, an ox laps up the pool of rainwater.



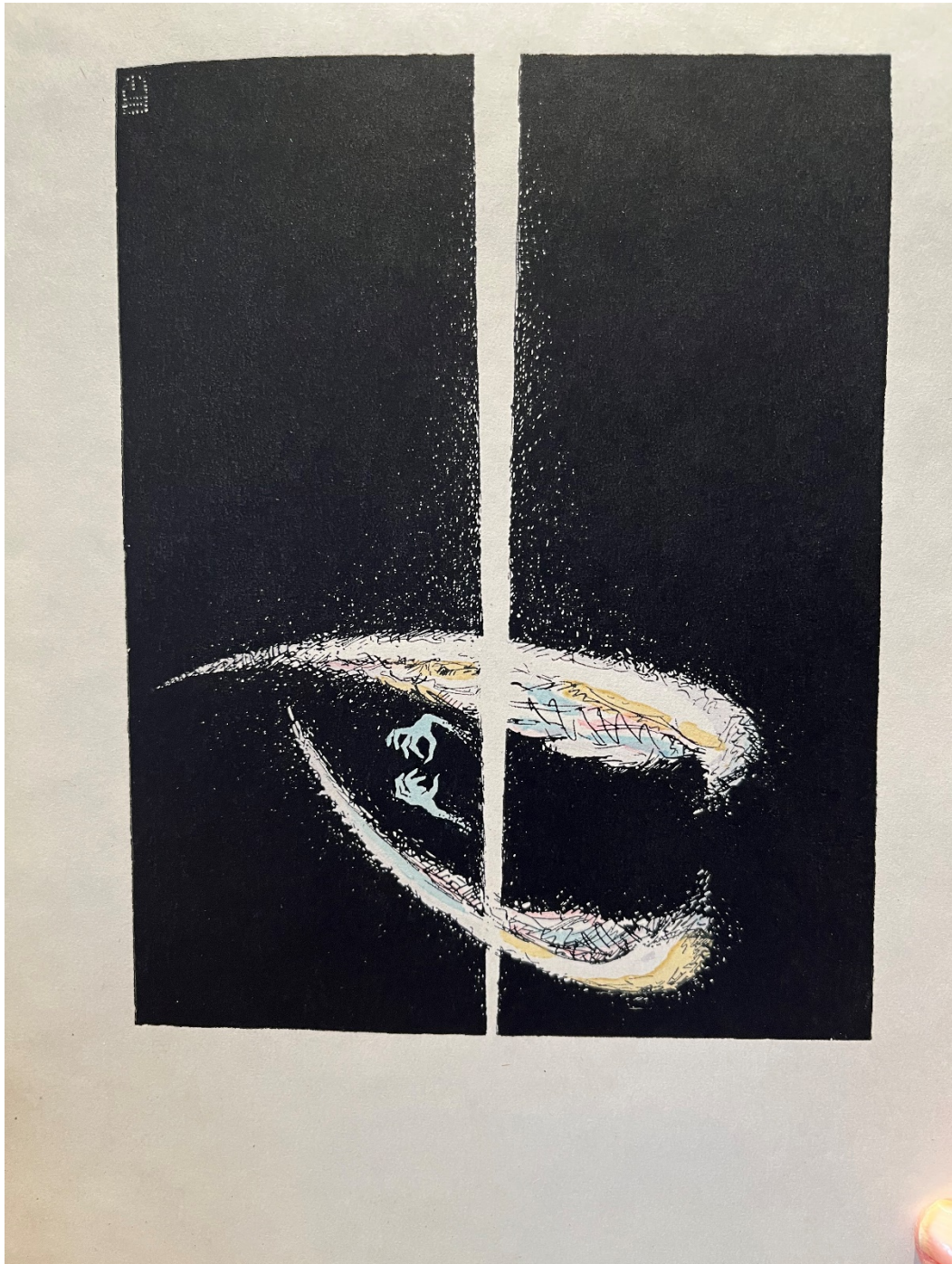
The eighth illustration, particularly graphic, depicts the *shohet*/butcher, knife in hand, slaughtering the ox.



In the ninth illustration the *shochet* himself is being claimed by the Angel of Death. The disembodied hands of the angel cover the butcher's eyes as its wings envelop him.



In the final illustration, the Almighty – suggested by a shaft of white light, splitting the blackness of the final illustration— strikes down the Angel of Death, its only visible vestiges its grasping hands and drooping wings.



Each illustration in the book is accompanied on its facing page by the Aramaic text of *Had Gadya* with its German translation, both rendered in elegant calligraphy. This final page presents the full song.

וְאַתָּא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא , וְשַׁחַט
 לְמַלְאךְ הַמּוֹת , דְּשַׁחַט לְשׁוֹחֵט ;
 דְּשַׁחַט לְתוֹרָא , דְּשַׁחַט לְמֵיָא ,
 דְּכָבֵא לְנוֹרָא , דְּשַׁרְף לְחוּטְרָא ;
 דְּהָכֵא לְכֻלָּבָא , דְּנָשַׁךְ לְשׁוֹנְרָא ;
 דְּאָכַל לְגִדְיָא , דְּזָבִין אֲבָא בְּתָרֵי
 זֵוְיֵי , חַד גִּדְיָא , חַד גִּדְיָא ,

Doch zuguterlezt, da kommt der
 Heilige, gelobt sei er:
 Kommt den Todesengel schächten,
 Der geschächtet hat den Schächter,
 Schächter, der den Ochse geschächtet,
 Ochsen, der das Wasser soff,
 Wasser, das gelöscht das Feuer,
 Feuer, das verbrannt den Stock,
 Stock, der tot den Hund geschlagen,
 Hund, der tot die Katz' gebissen,
 Katze, die das Lamm zerrissen,
 Das der Vater mir gekauft hat,
 Um zwei Gulden mir gekauft -
 Lämmchen, ein Lämmchen!

P.S. From Naomi, a personal recollection and aside:

I am not sure why *d'zabin abba*, which literally means “that father sold,” rather than the Aramaic words *diz'van abba*, which literally (and more accurately) mean “that father bought,” is the way most people pronounce the words when they sing the “chorus” line of *Had Gadya*. But my uncle (then a biology teacher at Weequahic High School in Newark and a Hebrew school teacher in various places, later principal of Weequahic and ultimately Assistant Superintendent of the Newark public schools until he was forced to retire as yet another result of the devastating Newark riots in 1967), insisted that we had to sing the Aramaic. He was technically correct, of course, but that didn't matter to us and we kids rebelled. We wanted to sing the words the way we were taught in Hebrew school. So he loudly sang *diz'van* while we even more loudly sang *d'zabin*, staying awake to the very end of the seder to make sure we got our version heard!



Hag Pesah sameah!
Happy Passover!
Wishing you joyous sedarim!!!