

Bitter Women:
The Relationship between Joel ben Simeon's *Washington Haggadah* and the
Maraviglia Tefillah

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When I attended the Fourth Annual Myron M. Weinstein Lecture on the Hebraic Book presented two years ago by Brad Sabin Hill I was moved by Brad's comments about his professional relationship with Myron and Myron's promptness in answering all of Brad's letters, which were filled with questions relating to his research. It reminded me that although I had met Myron on two occasions, unlike Brad, we had had no correspondence or discussions about my research. The first time I met Myron he graciously allowed a visiting scholar and me to view some manuscripts that were on loan to the library at the time. I was impressed by Myron's congenial, courtly, and professional manner. The second occasion was a chance meeting in the library. Myron, bent over a book, noticed I was there and interrupted his research to greet me. Again, his gentleness and kindness struck me, but we did not have much time to interact. I am grateful that the opportunity to deliver this lecture has afforded me the chance to become better acquainted with Myron through his scrupulous scholarly accomplishments.

The image on the screen is a leaf from a Passover Haggadah containing text and illustrations for the search for and subsequent burning of the *hametz*, leavened food, which takes place the night before Passover and the following morning. It is the opening page of the manuscript known as the *Washington Haggadah*, whose title is derived from its current location here at the Library of Congress. The work was executed by the renowned scribe/artist Joel ben

Simeon in 1478. The Haggadah has become widely known by means of a finely produced facsimile edition that was published by the library and superbly edited by Myron. The illustrations in this manuscript bring to life the realia of daily experiences in Renaissance Italy. Ritual observances are depicted and quotidian items, such as the fifteenth-century cabinet and bellows that were used, are represented.

The carefully tended topiary growing in an Italian majolica planter that is portrayed on folio 3v is an example of one of the manuscript's many marvelous illustrations. Cutting across the plant, the text, written in a semi-cursive Ashkenazic script, instructs that the second glass should be poured. In response, on the facing page (fol. 4r) a servant is shown pouring wine from a golden carafe into a golden goblet. Many of the images in this codex, including this one, are typical of the period and are found in other Haggadot associated with Joel.

The Four Sons mentioned in the Haggadah were frequently illustrated at this time. In the *Washington Haggadah* (fol. 5v) the Wise Son is shown as a scholar seated on a high-backed chair, reading a book, and the Wicked Son is depicted as a soldier in armor, bearing a lance and a sword. These two images were common in this period, while the iconography of the Simple Son, the next to be mentioned, was not as standardized. In the *Washington Haggadah* (fol. 6r) he is represented in an unusual manner, as a bearded old man sitting on the ground, reading from an open book. The Son Who Does Not Know How to Ask is portrayed as a clown, beating a drum and pointing to his grinning, open mouth.

This gesture might be a visual pun on the text, *at petah lo*, which can be translated as “you shall explain,” or “‘open up’ for him.” The images of the sons reveal not only the artist’s characterization of these figures, but also present the contemporary appearance of scholars, soldiers, and jesters, and their clothing.

Accompanying the text *Lefikhakh anahnu hayavim lehodot*, “Therefore we are required to give thanks and praise,” a man is shown seated on a stool, cushioned by a pillow with tassels, as he holds a cup full of wine (fol. 17r). He is portrayed in profile, his beard jutting forward, paralleling the line of the large and pointed brim of his hat, which was popular in fifteenth-century Italy.

Another image found in several works by Joel depicts the beseeching figure of a man imprisoned in a tower, illustrating *Min ha-meitzar karati ya*, “Out of my straits I called upon God” (fol. 22r). This passage from Hallel, taken from Psalm 118:5, shows a walled city with large buildings and towers. The structure at the left, with its barred windows, is a prison. Inside, a man viewed in profile is shown in the midst of prayer, with his hands raised, palms together. This gesture of veneration is significant as it is found in many manuscripts associated with Joel and undoubtedly reflects Jewish practices of the time. The man probably represents King David, the Psalm’s author.

An enchanting illustration accompanies the seventh-century liturgical poem written by Yannai, *Va-yehi behatzi halaila*, “And it was at midnight,” that is recited on the first night of Passover, and which recounts miracles performed by God at night to save the Jews (fol. 30r). Accompanying the text relating to Daniel in the lions’ den is a surprisingly tender image in which Joel once again presents

a supplicant figure, gazing upward while gesturing in prayer with his palms together. The lions flanking him seem almost playful in the way they touch and lick him. This interpretation, unique to Joel, is not consistent with the text (Daniel 6:23), which says that Daniel recounted to the king that God sent an angel who shut the mouths of the lions. A similar image is found in another manuscript, the *Bodmer Haggadah*, (Cologne-Geneva, Bibliotheca Bodmeriana-Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cod. Bodmer 81), an undated, but probably earlier work by Joel.

Despite the rarity of the last scene, the illustrations that have been viewed are found in other fifteenth-century Haggadot. Images of the roasting of the Paschal lamb appear in other manuscripts as well. In the *Murphy Haggadah*, (Jerusalem, Jewish National and University Library, Heb, 4^o 6130), a poor, drinking fool is shown turning the spit. In the *Washington Haggadah* (fol. 14v) he is portrayed as a goiter-ridden dolt, barefoot and wearing torn and tattered clothes, cranking a spit while imbibing in a glass of wine. Additional reinforcement is on the ground behind him, in a large wine bottle. Two women are depicted cooking at the left. The illustration does not relate to the text, but accompanies the same passages of *Dayyenu* in other Haggadot as well. As Bezalel Narkiss noted in the companion volume of the *Washington Haggadah* facsimile, this might have been a reminder to women at this point in the Seder that it was time to go to the kitchen and look after the food, which was to be served shortly. The scene, as presented here, amusingly portrays the workings of a Renaissance kitchen.

As the Haggadot were made for use in the home and for the engagement of family members, it is not unusual to find humorous vignettes in these manuscripts. Joel's depiction of Elijah arriving on a donkey accompanied by members of a fifteenth-century family is particularly whimsical (fol. 19v). The illustration reflects the custom of opening the door to allow the Messiah, or Elijah, to enter during the Seder at the point in which *Shfokh hamatkha*, "Pour out thy wrath," is recited. In this image Elijah is shown arriving with an entire family. The father and son are seated behind the prophet. There are too many family members, however, and they do not all fit on the donkey. The wife and daughter manage to sit only on the tail, while a small figure, perhaps a servant, holds on for dear life.

The scribe concluded working on the Haggadah on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Shevat in the year 5238, which is 1478 in the Christian calendar. Joel playfully employs a pun in his colophon (fol. 34v) as he states that he completed the *melakha*, "work," *ve-doyo*, which means both "and ink," as well as, "and it is enough [for him]." Similar wording appears in another manuscript penned by Joel ben Simeon, and now housed in the British Library, MS Add. 26957 (fol. 112r), where the scribe writes, *va-tishlam hamelakha ve-dai*. In this case, however, the meaning is "and it is enough," and the pun that Joel was to use in the *Washington Haggadah* nine years later is not yet employed. In the London manuscript Joel gives the date as the twenty-sixth of Kislev, but mistakenly states he wrote it in 5030 rather than 5230, which is 1469, clearly the date he had intended. He then writes that this *tefillah*, by which he means prayer

book, was copied for Rav Menahem the son of Samuel of blessed memory, and for his daughter, the honorable and intelligent, pleasant virgin Lady Maraviglia, that she should live to pray with it, she and her offspring, and her offsprings' offspring, until the end [of time]. The daughter's name, Maraviglia, is written in larger letters than those employed for the rest of the colophon, but unfortunately this emphasis does not aid in identifying her, and she remains unknown to us. That the manuscript was produced for an Italian patron is made clear not only by Maraviglia's name, but also by the inclusion of the words *Kevodkha hashem*, "Your glory God," which Malachi Beit Arié has shown is found in manuscripts produced solely in Italy. The beginning of the text is missing, and this prayer book, of the Roman rite, now begins with the liturgy for the Sabbath. The manuscript's decorations are line drawings, apparently rendered with the same ink that was used in writing the text.

Most of the book's illustrations accompany passages of the Haggadah. The first in this section is not utilized later in the *Washington Haggadah*, although it does appear in other Italian manuscripts. In the outer margin of the text of *Ha lahma 'anya*, "This bread of affliction," a young couple hold aloft a Seder basket (fol. 39r). When this image is depicted in other Italian manuscripts, the basket is held by men, or in simple images, by a pair of male hands. In this work, intended for use by a woman, the basket is held by both a man and a woman, who gaze into each other's eyes.

In the next illustration, a crudely rendered slave is shown balancing a yoke on his left shoulder, while carrying a bucket in his right (fol. 39v). The figure

seems to be chased by a dog with an open mouth and protruding tongue. Although shown at rest, a dog with a similarly extended tongue is portrayed in the cooking scene in the *Washington Haggadah*, viewed before. Dogs appear elsewhere in the Maraviglia manuscript, for example, as a simple adornment under the initial word *barukh* (fol. 3r) accompanying the benedictions recited on Sabbath Eve. Slaves are commonly represented in Haggadot, including Joel's *First New York Haggadah*, now at The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 4481 and in an unsigned Haggadah in Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Or. Q I, which is similar to other manuscripts in which Joel declares the work was his. In the *Maraviglia Tefillah* the slave, depicted as bald and wearing a short tunic, is portrayed in a manner that is cruder than the other illustrations in this manuscript, and in fact, more in keeping with the *First New York Haggadah*. Myron noted a discrepancy in style within the *Washington Haggadah* as well, where on folio 2 the form to the right of the initial word panel was executed by a different hand.

The *Maraviglia Tefillah* does not include depictions of the Four Sons, but it most likely had an illustration similar to that found in the *Washington Haggadah* accompanying the text *Tzei u-lemad*, "go out and learn" (fol. 41r). The page was repaired in modern times, however, and the entire outer margin was replaced. Originally it probably contained an image similar to that found in the *Washington Haggadah*, representing a wayfarer with a walking stick and satchel (fol. 7v). Possibly the illustration was excised intentionally from the Maraviglia manuscript,

as occurred in other codices, including Joel's *First New York Haggadah*, where many images were cut from the margins.

Although not included in the *Washington Haggadah*, the scene depicted on folio 42r appears in other works associated with Joel ben Simeon, such as the *Bodner Haggadah* and the *Murphy Haggadah*, mentioned before. This is an illustration of the text of Exodus 1:22, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile." An infant is being thrown into the river, which is inhabited by fish. The Egyptian is portrayed in contemporary fifteenth-century Italian clothing, with a toque with earflaps, hose, and a short tunic. As was the case with the slave seen earlier, the image, placed next to the relevant text, is also labeled by an inscription in the banderole above. Unlike the representation of the slave, however, the style here is consistent with that associated with Joel ben Simeon, and is similar to the figures found in the *Washington Haggadah*.

The next illustrations in the *Maraviglia Tefillah* are of two male heads shown in profile, presumably portraits of the two sages mentioned in the text (fol. 43v). R. Eliezer, at the top, is depicted with a long nose with a bump. He has short hair and a closely cropped beard, and wears a hat that is similar to the one donned by the Egyptian in the previous illustration. R. Akiva, also in profile, has an even more prominent proboscis, which is complemented by his large hat with its pointed brim. Although similar to the hat seen before in the portrayal of the man holding a wine glass in the *Washington Haggadah*, R. Akiva's features do not have the delicate quality found in the later work, and in others associated with Joel.

The next sage mentioned in the text, Rabban Gamliel, is illustrated as well (fol. 45r). Unlike the other portraits in this manuscript, Rabban Gamliel is shown in a three-quarter, rather than a profile, view. He is wearing a flat hat with a liripipe that descends on his right, and crosses under his chin to his left shoulder. Rabban Gamliel's name, which appears as initial words written in display script, is adorned, somewhat surprisingly, by an open-mouthed leopard, which faces the text.

Lower down on the page, in the section of the text that deals with the *matzah*, the unleavened bread, a woman is shown holding a round *matzah* in her right hand. As a rule, the unleavened bread was depicted in the hands of a man. Presumably Joel broke with tradition because this manuscript was destined, quite literally, for the hands of a woman. The lady portrayed here embodies the height of fifteenth-century Italian fashion. Her dress, with its low-cut, revealing neckline, is enhanced by elaborately brocaded sleeves. Her brow is high, obviously shaven in keeping with contemporary tastes, and her braided hair is adorned at the top with a jewel. Her necklace draws attention to her youthful décolletage.

As unusual as this image is, however, Joel abandoned tradition more conspicuously in his portrayal of the displaying of the unleavened bread in the *Washington Haggadah* (fol. 15v), where the *matzah* is held by neither a man nor a woman, but by a monkey seated on a pillow.

As different as these representations are, it is interesting to note their shared features. The figures are shown in profile, facing left. Both raise the *matzah* in their right hand, with their arms placed in an identically angled position.

The next item that is displayed at the Seder is the *maror*, the bitter herbs. In the *Washington Haggadah*, Joel returns to tradition, at least to a certain degree, by depicting the husband holding the *maror* in his left hand while touching his wife's head with his right (fol. 16r). Their image is part of a tradition of this time. The man, in indicating what is bitter, points not only to food, but to his spouse who has embittered his life as well. This motif appears in various forms in Hebrew manuscripts of the period. In arguably the most elaborately illuminated Hebrew manuscript produced in Renaissance Italy, the *Rothschild Miscellany*, housed in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem (MS 180/51, fol. 160r), the husband raises the bitter herbs in his right hand and points to his wife with his left. In another notable example of this scene, the distaff side of the couple gives her spouse his just desserts. In the so-called *Hileq and Bileq Haggadah* from mid-fifteenth-century Germany, now housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (Ms hébr. 1333, fol. 19v), the husband points to his wife while they engage in amusing banter. The inscription above the man reads, roughly, "Says the picture: [when saying] "'this bitter herb' let me raise my voice. [Indeed], both this [*maror*] and his [wife] are the cause of his bitterness." The wife points back to her husband. Her retort, inscribed above her says "I thought you [yourself] were one of the [causes of bitterness]."

In the *Maraviglia Tefillah*, a seemingly tamer image is represented (fol. 45v). In the outer margin an elegantly attired Renaissance man is shown holding a fistful of large leaves in his right hand. With his left hand he points to the word *maror* written in the accompanying passage. Myron Weinstein noted that the

word was surmounted by a crown, but although he pointed out that earlier in the text a crown was appropriately placed about the word *melekh*, “king,” he did not give any explanation for its placement here. Clearly Joel was drawing attention to the word, but for what purpose? It seems likely that the scribe was once again presenting a visual pun. Although the man does not point to a woman, the crown makes the viewer take pause. In focusing on the letters comprising the word *maror*, one becomes aware that the first part of the word, *mem resh*, pronounced *mar*, and meaning bitter, is also the beginning of Maraviglia’s own name. Although Maraviglia is not actually depicted, certainly there is a veiled reference to the woman who was destined to possess this manuscript.

Of course, being a prayer book, most of the *Maraviglia Tefillah* contains text not found in the *Washington Haggadah*. The *tefillah* continues with the liturgy for Passover, including the benediction recited upon the counting of the Omer, carried out from the second evening of Passover, for seven weeks, until the night before the evening of the festival of Shavuot. The image that appears here is quite striking (fol. 55v). Keeping in mind that the manuscript was intended for use by a woman, in the outer margin Joel portrayed the half-length figure of a woman who points to the text to be recited. Again, she is a fashion plate of the time. It is noteworthy that although Joel commonly depicted figures in profile, the appearance of this woman is somewhat different. Instead of possessing idealized features, she has a somewhat recessive chin and a rather long nose.

In the liturgy for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a woman is shown reciting a confessional prayer (fol. 74v). Once again, with her large eyes and small upturned nose, she possesses a face that is typical of those found in other manuscripts associated with Joel ben Simeon. The young lady is portrayed with her palms together in a pose that is similar to the gesture of supplication employed in the *Washington Haggadah* by the man in prison and by Daniel in the lion's den. The woman wears, as before in this prayer book, an elegant brocade dress with elaborate puff sleeves. Her shaven brow is adorned with a veil set with jewels. The upper part of her body inclines toward the text she is meant to recite.

An exceptional image of a woman engaged in prayer appears in the Sabbath liturgy toward the beginning of the manuscript. Next to the text of *Havdalah*, recited upon the conclusion of the Sabbath, a woman is represented holding a goblet in her right hand, presumably while pronouncing for the benediction said over wine (fol. 31r). Once again, she is not typical of the type of figure generally found in manuscripts associated with Joel ben Simeon. The execution is superior, and the features appear to be particularized. This image will be reexamined later.

In the text recited during the Morning Prayer on the Sabbath, toward the beginning of the prayer book in its current state (fol. 15v), Myron noticed that a figure in the outer margin had been erased. It appears he ordered an infra-red photograph from the British Library, but the image was not able to reveal any details. The text is Psalm 34, and Myron recognized that the obliterated

illustration had depicted David wearing a crown. In observing the king's pose carefully, it is evident that David was portrayed sleeping. The image presents another word play in a work by Joel ben Simeon. The text is *Le-David be-shanoto*, a reference to when David changed himself, that is, disguised his sanity, pretending to be insane before King Ahimelekh (I Samuel 21:11-16). Using different vocalization, however, the words can be pronounced as *David be-sheinato*, David in his sleep. Perhaps a later reader did not understand a visual pun was intended, and thinking it a mistake, erased the image.

Another illustration was eradicated at a later point in the prayer book in the liturgy for Rosh Ha-Shanah, the Jewish New Year (fol. 71r). Although almost invisible to the eye, when photocopied, part of the image shows up rather clearly. Myron did not refer to this illustration. As what remains reveals a shofar, which is appropriate for this text, which is recited upon the sounding of the ram's horn, I have no idea why it was obliterated. Perhaps in the future an ultra-violet photograph will reveal further details and the motivation behind the erasure will become apparent.

Let us now return to the striking portrait of a woman holding a wine cup for the recitation of *Havdalah*. This image is exceptional in Joel's work and presents us with the possibility that at this point Joel employed an artist whose skills were superior to his own. It is tempting to contemplate that greater care was taken because the figure, the first depiction of a woman to appear in what remains of the manuscript, was actually intended as a portrait of Maraviglia, whose sweet countenance was such that no pun on her name could make us think of her as

bitter. Returning to the characters comprising Maraviglia's name, an alternative vocalization should be considered. The same letters can also be pronounced as Meraviglia, or marvel, and indeed as presented here, she appears to be an astonishing young woman possessed with beauty, intelligence, and religious devotion.

I began this lecture by noting my disappointment that although I knew Myron, I had not had a chance to develop a professional relationship with him. By being invited to deliver this paper, I have been afforded an opportunity to review his meticulous observations on the *Washington Haggadah* in the context of other works by Joel ben Simeon, including the *Maraviglia Tefillah*. In attempting to deal with issues that Myron left open to speculation, new questions have come to light for other scholars to research. I am most grateful that Myron's family, through their sponsorship of the Myron M. Weinstein Memorial lectures, has provided a stimulus to continue to review Myron's scholarship, and thereby keep his work vibrant and alive.