
The publication’s strictly scholarly (and fashionably bipartite) title, laconic chapter headings, and meticulous narration suggest another merely pedantic monograph about a medieval manuscript and its historical whereabouts, but the facile impression belies the reality. Over and above its remarkably profound scholarship, the book offers fascinating reading and intellectual delight. While vigorously revising many time-venerated conventions about medieval Jewish visual culture, it gives us a glimpse of extinct human behaviors and bygone ideas.

Even the title testifies to the author’s challenge to heretofore indisputable statements. Although it could have been confused with the “Worms Mahzor” (1272), Kathrin Kogman-Appel decisively coined the name “Mahzor from Worms” (c. 1310) to manifest her proposed attribution of the patronage, ideological program, and long-time use of what is commonly called the “Leipzig Mahzor” to the Jewish community of Worms.1

The collegial recognition of the book speaks for the cogency of its method and arguments. Shortly after its publication in 2012, *A Mahzor from Worms* was named a finalist of the Nahum M. Sarna Memorial Award in Scholarship of the North American Jewish Book Council and earned complimentary reviews.2 Kogman-Appel’s recent research is already being referred to in scholarly literature and included in bibliographies of academic courses relating to medieval Jewish art. As the publication, whose pages are losing the scent of fresh print, needs little introduction, the current review focuses on the book’s contribution to the field.

Kogman-Appel’s work reaffirms that a researcher can make a true discovery without unearthig a lost treasure or finding a forgotten chef-d’œuvre in a dusty loft, but just by inquiring more attentively into what is already generally known. A facsimile edition of the illuminated pages of the prayer book for Jewish holidays held in the library of Leipzig University was published with commentaries by Bezalel Narkiss more than half a century ago,3 and various illuminations from this manuscript have been examined in more recent publications. Nevertheless, Kogman-Appel is the first to question whether the particular narrative images constitute an integrated program, and if so, what does that program pursue? She resourcefully turns the frustrating unconformity of the Mahzor’s paintings into a clue for puzzling out the implicit plan of the manuscript’s design. She proposes that the loose relationship of the images to the accompanying texts in the manuscript indicates that these images reflect and express certain ideas associated with but not explicated in the Mahzor’s contents. She argues that the illuminations addressed a complex of social, legal, and mystical concepts that related to the synagogue liturgy and contemporary communal life. She unravels the seemingly random repertoire of scenes as a purposeful choice made by the anonymous designer(s) of the manuscript’s illuminations.

Kogman-Appel’s work creates a channel from the contemporary “information age” to the pre-Gutenberg epoch. Appealing to the reader who increasingly advances from tangible “mechanical reproduction” (using Walter Benjamin’s parlance) of texts and images to intangible digital publications, she reclaims the sense of uniqueness and corporeality of a manuscript codex, which cannot be fully attained through reproductions.4

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1 “Worms Mahzor” (1272), Jerusalem, The National Library of Israel, MS Hebrew 4° 781/1–II; “Mahzor from Worms” (c. 1310), Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, MS Voller 1102/1–II.
4 It should be noted that unlike the publisher of this book review, the publisher of Kogman-Appel’s book did not follow a common contemporary practice of issuing a digital twin of the
It is clear from the text that Kogman-Appel experienced a sense of excitement, evoked by the “solemn dignity” of a large-scale, lavishly colored manuscript each time that she paged through it in the university library in Leipzig (I, 11). She likens her aesthetic experience to the emotional impact that the Mahzor would have engendered in the medieval congregation in the Worms synagogue (37, 187).

The methodological turnabout proves to be efficacious. Kogman-Appel investigates the Leipzig Mahzor as a “ritual object, an object that helps the congregation perform a public ritual” (36) and notes that medieval Jews revered communal prayer books as sacred and were convinced that they possessed supernatural powers (37, 82). She stresses that the Mahzor was not a once-and-forever completed artifact, for it was deliberately altered each time that the owners wished to enhance its adjustment to the synagogue liturgy. Kogman-Appel reconstructed the codex’s original layout through a painstaking analysis of the physical peculiarities of the manuscript’s two volumes, their textual contents, and the style of their paintings. She argues that rather than being a mere illustration of the poetry, the Mahzor’s primary design triggers the reader’s association of the sections flagged by the figuative paintings with the pivotal concepts of the Jewish community in Worms concerning their collective identity, rituals and customs, piety and ethics, prayer, and religious catharsis. Beginning with the chapter on the empirical “Facts about the Leipzig Mahzor,” the discussion repeatedly returns to the same selected images to reveal multiple layers of meaning: literal and documentary, allegoric, homiletic, and—in the final chapter “Sod: Mystical Dimensions”—esoteric. An allusion to the exegetic method known as the PaRDeS lends a taste of literary wit to Kogman-Appel’s semiotic discourse on the rabbinical hermeneutics.5

Kogman-Appel traces the roots of ideology—relating the original illuminations of the Mahzor from Worms back to the Qalonymide Pietists, who lived in Worms and other Jewish communities in the area a century or more earlier. At the same time, she points to the discrepancy between those who conveyed Pietism-related ideas in the Mahzor’s paintings and the Pietists, who kept their teaching strictly esoteric and objected to illuminating prayer books (183, 285 notes 2 and 3). She assumes that several generations served to gradually modify Ashkenazi Pietism into a more popularized post-Pietist Ashkenazi culture, which allowed promulgation of the Pietist legacy through a visual medium.

It is noteworthy that Kogman-Appel’s theoretical model suggests a plausible explanation for an even more extensive expansion of images into the ritual space, which seems to have taken place in the Worms synagogue from c. 1355 to 1623/24, the years largely overlapping the period when the congregation had possession of the Leipzig Mahzor (c. 1310–1615). Whereas the congregants standing close to the prayer leader could occasionally see the illuminations in the Mahzor, which was open on the pulpit near the Torah ark during the course of the festival services, the entire congregation would always have been able to see a dragon carved on the Torah ark itself. The dragon relief both alludes to the demonology and magic in the teachings of the Ashkenazi Pietists and ignores the prohibition of Judah the Pious regarding any image in the synagogue, especially near the ark (183, 284 note 183), as well as the Mishnaic ban on an implement bearing a dragon image.6

Kogman-Appel’s perception of the illuminated manuscript as an object that cannot be fully understood if detached from its functions apparently goes beyond the long-standing traditions of iconographic analysis and art historical connoisseurship. Indicative is the contrast between the Machsor Lipsiae facsimile reproducing sixty-eight decorated folia and the reviewed book containing nine images from the Mahzor.7 Kogman-Appel’s selection precisely serves her book’s cynosure, which she defines as “an insight into the mentality of

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5 The Hebrew acronym, PaRDeS, is for four dimensions of text: Peshat (plain), Remez (hint), Derash (homily), and Sod (mystery).


7 On the Machsor Lipsiae facsimile see above, note 3. The other 12 of the 21 reproductions in the book show comparative material. The number of images in A Mahzor from Worms looks especially modest in relation to many dozens or even hundreds of reproductions in the comparable academic publications in the field.