The Cut That Binds: The Western Ashkenazic Torah Binder as Nexus between Circumcision and Torah

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The Torah is the central text in Jewish religious life. In a narrow sense, Torah refers to the Pentateuch; in a broader sense, to Jewish tradition. The kernel of the Torah is the Ten Commandments, which were given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai. According to Philo, all the precepts of the Torah were noted down between the separate commandments, although the tablets were not more than six handbreadths in length and as much in width. Throughout the millennia, highly trained scribes have faithfully inscribed these precepts on a parchment scroll. So great is their responsibility that should they so much as add or eliminate one letter, they would precipitate the destruction of the world. It is from this scroll that the Torah is read publicly three days each week.[1]

The interior of the synagogue is focused upon the Torah scroll, the ark where it is stored on the eastern wall facing Jerusalem, and the desk where it is read aloud. Like a human, the scroll is "dressed" in its finery, and when it is beyond repair, it is buried in a cemetery. Like a queen, the scroll wears a regal mantle and bears a precious crown and sceptre-like pointer, which is used for reading. Further accessories include finials and a shield. The scroll is treated with the decorum befitting a sovereign power. A new scroll is brought to the synagogue by procession. All must stand in the presence of the scroll. Should the scroll be dropped, the community must fast. The "naked" scroll is not to be touched with bare hands. The scroll must always be covered except when it is being read.[2]

To be a Jew is to live a life governed by the precepts of the Torah. For a male, initiation into that life is made by a cut that binds.

The Cut That Binds

When a Jewish male infant is eight days old, he is circumcised, just as Abraham circumcised his son Isaac, when he was eight days old. With this cut, the child is

brought into the convenant between God and Israel. He is bound to the Torah and to the community of Torah. The permanent sign upon his flesh serves as a constant reminder of his entry.[3]

Traditionally, the ceremony of *berit milah* (covenant of circumcision) is held in the synagogue at the end of the morning services. Though the basic components of the liturgy and ceremony are the same in the many Jewish communities around the world, there are important differences. One variation, the making of a binder for the Torah scroll from a cloth used during the circumcision, is specific to Western Ashkenazim—Jews who lived in Germany, Alsace, Switzerland, Denmark, Holland, Bohemia, Moravia, and neighboring areas.[4]

The Performed Object

For at least four hundred years, Western Ashkenazim have forged a powerful nexus between two central convenants in Jewish sacred history—the convenant of Abraham, marked by circumcision, and the covenant of Moses, marked by the giving of the Torah. They have concretized this link by means of a long strip of cloth.[5]

A rectangle of unbleached linen is still used by some Western Ashkenazim today to provide a clean surface on which the infant lies during the circumcision. After the circumcision, this cloth is torn into four strips which are sewn end to end to form one long band about twelve feet long and six inches high. Someone with a good hand, possibly the local teacher, cantor, or circumcisor, draws the inscription and images, which are either embroidered by the mother or another female relative, or painted. The inscription carries the child's name, birthdate and zodiac sign, and a wish drawn from the circumcision liturgy that he grow up to a life of Torah, marriage, and good deeds.

After one to three years, when the child first visits the synagogue, he presents the binder as his first gift to the synagogue. At the end of the public reading, the scroll is ritually raised so the congregation can witness the text, and it is then tightly rolled shut. The child then offers his binder, which is used to wrap and bind the scroll so that it holds firm. His father lifts him so that he may grab hold of one of the two wooden staves of the scroll, known as "trees of life," as the congregation says "Torah is a tree of life to them that lay hold of it" (fig. 51).[6] The binder is left on the scroll until the next time the scroll is used, at which point it is put away. When the child reaches the age of thirteen, he reads publicly from the sacred text as part of his bar mitzvah, his initiation into the ritual responsibilities of adulthood; the scroll used on this occasion may be bound with his binder.

Circumcision is known as *berit milah* (convenant of circumcision), and the etymology for *berit* (convenant) is believed to be "binding." Thus the cloth used during the circumcision ceremony that symbolically binds the child into the convenant is later transformed into a physical binder for the "terms" of that convenant, the Torah. Carrying the child's name and birthdate, and even the blood of circumcision, the binder symbolically binds the child around the law each time it is used to secure the Torah scroll.

Made after the circumcision, the binder provides an opportunity to reflect on

Figure 51 The First Visit to the Synagogue, *M. Oppenheim, 1869. The rolled binder rests on the balustrade as the father lifts the child up so that he may grasp the stave of the Torah on his first trip to the synagogue.*

the promise of new life and to express hopes and wishes for that new life. The very act of expression helps to bring about the realization of what is expressed, so powerful are language and ritual and the objects associated with them.

Spatial Metaphors of Temporal Passage

Only a fraction of the total length of a Torah binder is actually wound around the Torah scroll. The remaining two-thirds or more of the binder is wound on itself to form a tight coil and is tucked under the previous windings between the two rolled portions of the scroll. The coil is tucked in from above, in communities where tradition has it that the gesture symbolizes God's giving of the Torah from on high; it is also tucked in from below, where the tradition dictates that we should always aspire upward and, hence, tuck the coil in that direction. Young boys in the men's section of the synagogue are expected to roll the

binder tight in readiness for the end of the reading, when the scroll needs to be fastened.[7] The question arises—why is this object so much longer than is required to do the job?

Clues may be found in the format, iconography, and inscription. The binders are read from right to left, as the line of text extends, generally in a single row, down the center of the long band, without doubling back on itself. The text begins by announcing the birth of the child and then expresses the wish that he should grow up to a life of Torah, marriage, and good deeds. According to tradition, premature death may be averted by good deeds, devotion in prayer, and the zealous study of Torah. And continuity beyond death may be had through one's children, the realization of the injunction to be fruitful and multiply.[8]

In the visual exegesis of the text, there are multiple images of beginnings and endings, within the life of the individual, the community, and the universe. At the far right of the binder, we might find a stork delivering a swaddled infant, a toddler in a walker, a corsage bearing a congratulatory greeting, or a clock set at the hour of birth. At the far left, we might find eyeglasses, suggesting the dimming vision of old age, or, in at least one case, a swaddled baby above and a dead man below, suggesting the full course of life; or we might find an alms box, alluding to the dictum that "charity delivereth from death."[9] Throughout, the buds, twigs, fruits, and flowers associated with new life provide natural analogues for the onset of the biological life of the individual and concretize the metaphor that appears in references to the circumcised infant as "der neue Sprots am Baum der jüdischen Gemeinschaft."[10] Key points in the life of the child as a social and cultural being are marked by the presence, on occasion, of the circumcision knife and an image of the bar mitzvah, and almost always of the wedding ceremony. In sum, the lifetime of an individual is extended, displayed, and secured by words and images proceeding the length of the binder.

Interlaced with the passage of biological and social time is the movement of sacred history—the onset point for the purposes of the binder being the giving of the law to Moses and the terminal point being an eschatological vision of the coming of the Messiah. Thus the word *Torah* may be accompanied by an image of Moses holding the Tablets of the Law, and the mythological animals associated with the coming of the Messiah—the Leviathan, for example—may appear toward the end of the inscription.

By its physical, textual, and iconographic nature, the binder thus provides a spatial metaphor for temporal passage and for the paradox of temporal limit and extension. Simultaneously the binder attests to what is hoped will be the long, though finite, life span of the individual; the recurrent life cycle of many individuals; the continuity of the community; and the eternal time of God's creation.

The Expandable Text: Opening the Gates of Interpretation

The product of a literate (manuscript and early print) culture with a long and elaborate tradition of hermeneutics, Torah binders exemplify in the extreme the "interplay of text, commentary, symbolism, and style of representation in the

wordbound image" (Schapiro, 1973:17). They do what they are about.

A distinction is made between the "written Torah" and the "oral Torah," both of which are essential. Whereas the written Torah is fixed on the page, the oral Torah maintains the openness of the written Torah to interpretation. As Scholem (1969:47ff.) points out:

> According to the exoteric usage of the Talmudic sources, the written Torah is the text of the Pentateuch. The oral Torah is the sum total of everything that has been said by scholars or sages in explanation of this written corpus, by the Talmudic commentators on the Law and all others who have interpreted the text. The oral Torah is the tradition of the Congregation of Israel, it performs the necessary role of completing the written Torah and making it more concrete. According to Rabbinical tradition, Moses received both Torahs at once on Mount Sinai, and everything that any subsequent scholar finds in the Torah or legitimately derives from it, was already included in this oral tradition given to Moses. Thus in Rabbinical Judaism the two Torahs are one. The oral tradition and written word complete one another, neither is conceivable without the other.

Furthermore, no aspect of the sacred text is arbitrary—neither the shape, choice, combination, and sequence of letters and words, nor their number and numerical values. And there are many ways that a text may be approached in the quest for its meanings.

The text of the Torah scroll is written in accordance with precise rules, which dictate that it may never be decorated or illustrated. In contrast, accouterments such as the Torah binders are often dense with iconography. The beautification of the Torah by means of accessories fulfills the Talmudic dictim to enhance the performance of precepts through aesthetic elaboration, and specifically to clothe the Torah itself in beautiful silks.[11] The proliferation of visual imagery on the walls and ceilings of synagogues, on the ark that holds the scroll, on the ark curtain, and on the metal and textile accouterments for the scroll itself, thus constitutes a kind of oral Torah, a visual exegesis and concretization of the often metaphorical readings of the unadorned text.

Letters

The unadorned text provides visual markings, or letters, that enable us to convert speech into writing and writing into speech. Both modes are at work in the ritual and artifacts of circumcision. Thus, the formula "May he grow up to a life of Torah, marriage, and good deeds, amen selah" is *written* in the prayerbook and on the binder and *spoken* aloud during the circumcision event. At one level, then, letters are simply visual markings for the spoken language and constitute the basic building blocks of texts.

The letters of the Hebrew alphabet also have assigned numerical values and are used to indicate the child's birthdate on the binders. For example, the year is indicated by a series of three or four letters whose numerical values total the year of the child's birth. Since the same total can be achieved using different

combinations of numbers arranged in various orders (though some orders are preferred), people sometimes compose the year from letters that spell an appropriate word or form an abbreviation or acronym for a relevant biblical passage or postbiblical quotation. Thus, in one instance, the date spells the word ***zaddik,*** which means a pious or saintly man. In this way, not even the form of the number is arbitrary; it carries in addition to information about the date the expression of the desire that the child aspire to the wisdom and piety of a ***zaddik.***

Nor need the name of a letter be treated as arbitrary. Thus, we sometimes find the letter *nun sofit* (final "n") in the form of a fish, because *nun* is both the name of the letter and the generic Biblical Hebrew term for fish. The association of the fish with fertility makes this animal highly appropriate for a binder celebrating new life.

However, letters also acquire a life of their own, independent of their relation to speech. A favorite method of teaching the Hebrew alphabet from Talmudic to modern times has been to treat each letter as a representation of a familiar object or person in the child's environment.[12] The *alef* א is a water-carrier with two pails suspended from a yoke; the *bet* ב is an open mouth; the *khet* ח is the entrance to the *kheyder* (Jewish primary school). The *lamed* ל is a stork. These visualizations of letters are concretized strategically on binders where the *lamed* in the word *nolad* (born) appears as a stork and even carries a swaddled baby in its beak. The shape of a letter and its resemblance to an animal thus provide a basis for expanding the meaning of the text by means of a witty pun—the letter takes the explicit shape of the expanded meaning of the word in which it appears.

Letters on the binders are also areas to be filled with plants, animals, houses, faces, abstract designs, and texts (fig. 53). The presence of faces inside letters is reminiscent of a statement about the meaning of Torah found in late commentators and in the Zohar, the central text in Jewish mystical thought. The "thesis put forward is that every word, indeed every letter, has seventy aspects, or literally, 'faces' " (Scholem, 1969:62). The openness of the text to interpretation is thus exemplified by a visual concretization of the literal reading of a metaphor.

Figure 52 *Torah. Inscription date: 1843. Secondary texts written in cursive are in Western Yiddish and consist both of translations of Hebrew texts and of independent statements. "Torah" is illustrated by an open scroll, within which are found the tablets of the law, and above which is the "Crown of Torah."* Khupe *appears both in the form of the letter* khet *and as a wedding canopy filled with phrases from the wedding liturgy.*

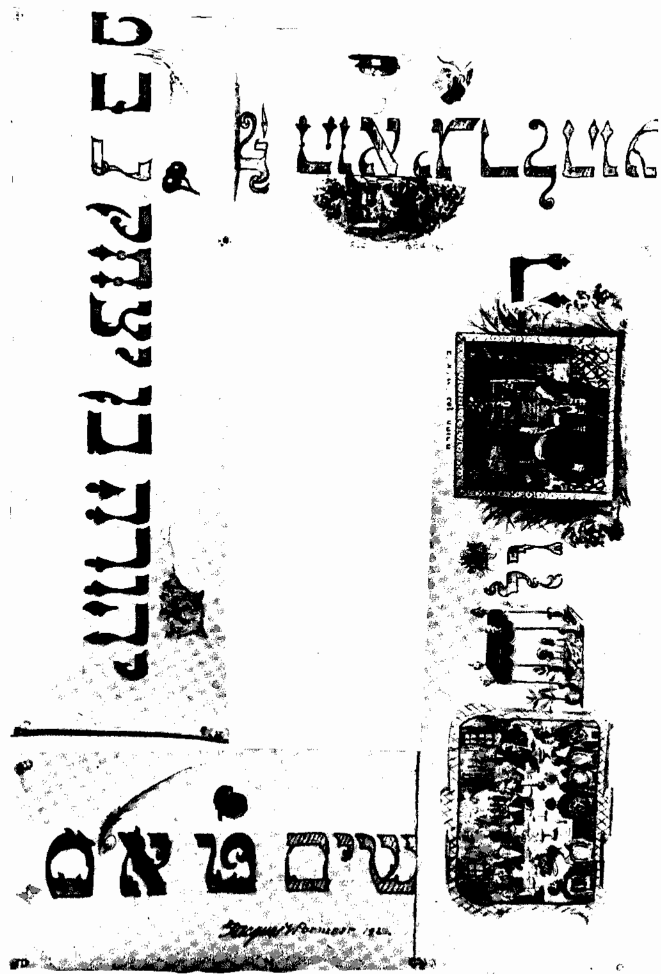

Figure 53 *Torah. Inscription date: 1924. Illustrations are substituted for the words* Torah *and* khupe, *to create a rebus effect. In the case of Torah, the illustration is a bar mitzvah scene, an occasion when this binder would be read. In the case of the* khupe, *the illustrations include the wedding canopy and the festive meal following the ceremony.*

The extraordinary variety of designs, plants, and animals found on the binders, and the tendency for no two letters to be decorated in the same way, make the Torah binder a tour de force of ingenuity, a virtual needlework sampler, folk bestiary, and affirmation of infinite variety.

When texts are written inside texts, other statements are being made. Thus, in the case of abbreviations, the full word may be spelled out inside the letters of the abbreviation, thereby affirming that the whole is present in each of its parts. Or when a gloss or explanation of the meaning of a word is written inside the letters of the word, the maker affirms that interpretation is an integral part of the text. Indeed, we have here a visualization that parallels the symbolism of the Torah as a nut in Jewish mystical thought and Hebrew manuscript illumination. The Zohar symbolizes the Torah as a nut consisting of a kernel, and of a hull that must be penetrated through study, interpretation, and obedience to the precepts (Scholem, 1969:57).

Images

As we have seen, the verbal text, which was recited during the circumcision event, is restated on the binder and subjected to visualizations that take as their point of departure some aspect of the text—the shape of the letter, the name of the letter, the numerical value of the letter, the combination of letters, and the interpretation of words and phrases—though not all images on the binders relate directly to the text. Two points in the text which are most often visualized are Torah and ***huppah*** (literally: wedding canopy; figuratively: marriage ceremony). By examining the visualizations of these two terms on binders drawn from various periods, we can see how the understandings of the text change through time. As Schapiro has pointed out: "It is such pictorial transformations of a single text in the course of time that give to iconographic studies their great interest as a revelation of changing ideas and ways of thought" (1973:13). Furthermore, the images reveal not only different interpretations of the meanings of words, but also different approaches to the reading of a text.

The power of images on the binders inheres in part in their ability to render the text simultaneously more concrete and more symbolic. So clear are the images in this regard that sometimes they even replace words, thereby giving the inscription on the binder the quality of a rebus. When most concrete, literal, and circumscribed in meaning, the words Torah and ***huppah*** are visualized as a scroll and canopy, respectively.

Other readings of the text make the scroll and canopy part of a larger whole, for example, the public reading of the Torah scroll in the synagogue and the wedding ceremony under the canopy, respectively (fig. 53). And one element such as the Torah scroll may form part of several different and expanded wholes. Thus, the scroll appears on one binder together with the Tablets of the Law, the crown of Torah, and a solar image suggesting the light of Torah. In this case the scroll is a member of a set of visual synonyms for the idea of Torah as the law and ultimate authority. On another binder, the Torah appears in the hands of a man who holds it upright during the ceremonial raising up of the scroll at the end of the public reading (fig. 54). In this case, the scroll is presented as a ritual object just at the moment it is about to be rolled up and bound with a binder. A more modern binder presents a bar mitzvah scene near the word Torah, alluding to the point later in the boy's life when his reading

Figure 54 *Torah. Inscription date: 1812. Embroidered Torah is illustrated by the* hagbahat ha-torah *(raising up of the Torah) ceremony. The Torah is inscribed with the phrase recited during the ceremony: "And this is the law which Moses set before the children of Israel at the commandment of the Lord by the hand of Moses" (Deuteronomy 4:44 and Numbers 9:23).*

Figure 55 *Torah, 1750. "Torah" is illuminated by the open Torah scroll (on which is inscribed "and this is the Torah"), the crown (which bears the words "crown of Torah"), the tablets of the law (which bear the ten commandments), and a sun. A rampant lion emerges from the adjacent* lamed, *alluding to Temple and to the paired lions often found flanking these images on other ceremonial objects.*

publicly from the scroll will demonstrate his readiness to assume the ritual responsibilities of an adult.

Changing notions of marriage are expressed in the imagery associated with the word *huppah*. Most commonly, a wedding canopy appears; its place as part of the wedding ceremony is made even more explicit when the bridal pair and

other members of the wedding party are present and the blessing that seals the bond is provided. On later binders, we find a couple standing in nature, suggesting the conjugal pair rather than the wedding ceremony proper; the wedding feast, pointing to the social rather than contractual nature of the event; and even flaming hearts, indicating romantic love.

Conclusion

Ritual acts and utterances may be experienced as ephemeral, even though their effects endure. Ritual objects, in contrast, provide a sustained physical presence, a constant, tangible reminder of the rituals of which they have formed and will again form a part. They serve not only as a reminder but also as a stimulus, focus, affirmation, guide, and resource for ritual activity. They are activated by ritual acts and utterances, at the same time that they possess a power of their own.

The long narrow binder provides a spatial metaphor of temporal passage, beginning with birth and the first initiation of circumcision and proceeding through subsequent initiations into ritual adulthood and marriage. By means of a long strip of cloth, a powerful link is forged between the sacred text of Jewish life, the Torah, and the act by which a new male is initiated into that life, circumcision. The act of binding the child to the Torah, through circumcision and through his binder, concretizes and personalizes an abstract concept of central importance in Jewish life.[13]

Notes

1. For Philo's legend regarding the Tablets of the Law, *see* Louis Ginzberg (1954, vol. 3:119). For attitudes toward the writing of the Torah scroll, *see* Gershom Scholem (1969:39).

2. Rules for the handling of the Torah scroll are provided in Solomon Ganzfried (1961:chap. 28).

3. The injunction for circumcision appears in Genesis 17:11–12.

4. Jewish communities around the world are generally distinguished on the basis of their historic connection to Spain and Portugal (Sephardim), Germanic lands and Eastern Europe (Ashkenazim), or the Middle and Far East. The Jewish vernacular of Ashkenazim is Yiddish, which varies regionally. In the Western Yiddish spoken by Jews in Germanic lands, the circumcision ceremony is generally known by the term *brismile* and the term for "to circumcise" is *tsu yidishn* (to make Jewish). The Western Ashkenazic Torah binder is known by a variety of terms, *vimpl, vindl, vikl,* and *mape* being the most common. Hebrew terms in this article are romanized in accordance with the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972).

5. On covenant in Jewish tradition, *see* Delbert R. Hillers (1969).

6. Proverbs 3:18.

7. This information was provided by Bruno Stern, who was raised in Neiderstetten, Bavaria, during the first half of this century. Personal communication, 1980.

8. *See* Ginzberg (1954, vol. 4:62).

9. Proverbs 1:2.

10. "The new sprout of the tree of the Jewish community" (S. Müller, 1934:44).

11. *See* the Talmud, *Shabbat* 133b.

12. *See* Diane Roskies (1978:21–53).

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