

A Cut Above

The Creation of The Archie Granot Haggadah

By Meir Persoff

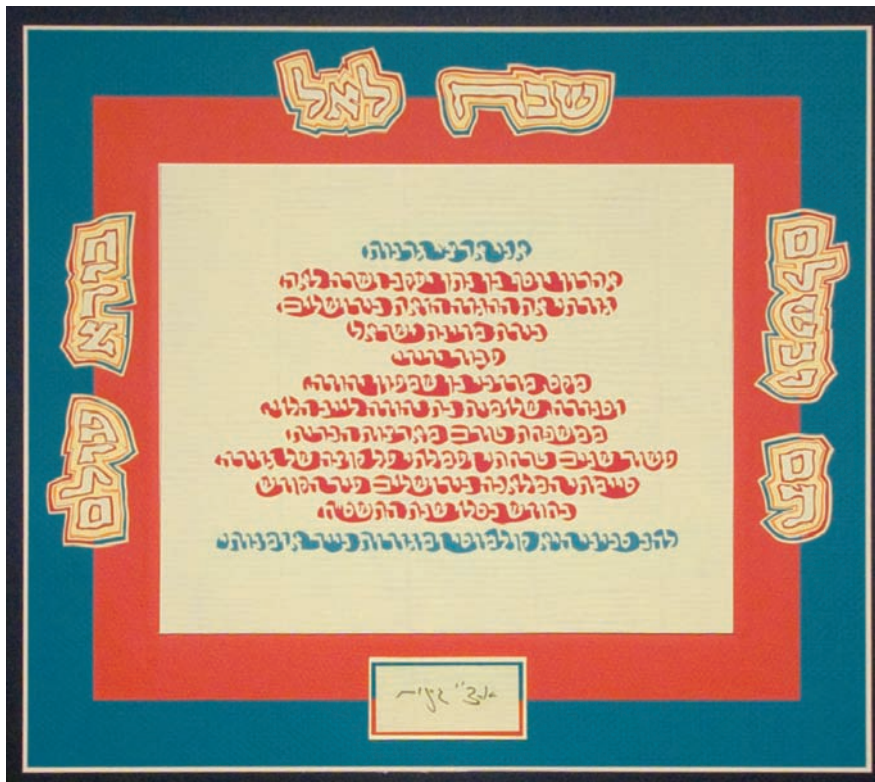


Fig. 1 – Colophon



Fig. 2 – Title Page

Second only to the Tanach, the Haggadah is generally regarded as the most popular text among serious collectors of Hebrew books and manuscripts. Isaac Yudlow's magisterial *Otzar HaHaggadot—The Haggadah Thesaurus: From the Beginning of Hebrew Printing Until 1960* (Magnus Press, 1997)—lists and describes no fewer than 4,715 separate editions, and these take no account of the thousands of priceless illuminated manuscripts gracing libraries, museums, galleries and private collections across the globe.



Fig. 3 – Kadesh



Fig. 4 – Kiddush

Of the latter, the first examples of Pesach symbols—stylized representations of matzah and maror—are to be found in manuscript fragments dating back to the ninth and tenth centuries, although illustrated Haggadot in their own right began to emerge only three hundred years later,

In today's Jewish world, hand-produced Haggadot have enjoyed a dramatic revival, with the latest—and much-acclaimed—example making its spectacular debut last spring at Yeshiva University Museum in downtown Manhattan. Created by Jerusalemite

tion of a long-held ambition by both artist and patron—the one to create a unique Haggadah, the other to own it. A deal was soon struck, and a partnership formed that, on the basis of mutual trust and respect, allowed Granot a free hand to fashion his dream.

An unparalleled masterpiece

when prayer books (most notably, the *Book of Hours*) were produced in great numbers for the nobility and wealthy bourgeoisie of continental Europe. Prosperous Jews followed this fashion, and by the sixteenth century the illuminated Haggadah—compact, portable, and ideal for use in the home—became the favored commission of leading communities in Spain, Germany, Italy and France.

Archie Granot, it comprises 55 paper-cut pages, each individually inspired but linked by the calligraphic beauty and uniformity of the Hebrew script.

The genesis of this unparalleled masterpiece, which took ten years to complete, is to be found in a chance visit to his gallery by Sharona Thurm, daughter of collectors Max and Sandra Thurm, of New York, whose subsequent introduction to Granot resulted in the realiza-

That dream was itself the result of a chance encounter—with a papercut image which his own daughter, Galit, had brought home from school in 1979. Then working in informal education—following degrees in Russian and political science, and a spell on a kibbutz—London-born Granot was prompted to explore what he described as “this very simple, if centuries-old, craft” [see panel opposite].

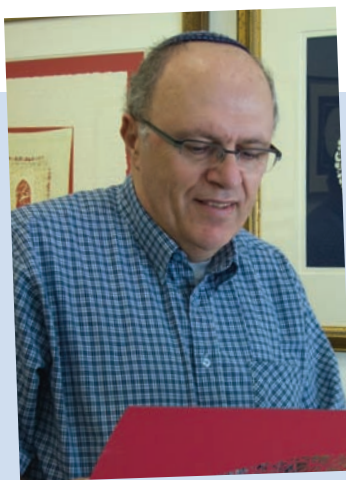
Some twenty years ago, as barmitzvah gifts for each of his sons, he designed papercut volumes containing their *haftarah* portions. “As I worked on them,” he recalls, “I envisioned creating a completely hand-cut Haggadah. Combining my love for the written

word with the skill I have acquired in using the scalpel, paper and word harmonize both spiritually and aesthetically. Illustration and imagery are integral parts of the Haggadah, and many twentieth-century versions are dedicated to current events, themes and issues. While treading this path, I wanted to create a Haggadah that would convey the emotions of Pesach without traditional symbolism, illustrating my fascination with abstract forms and the interplay of positive versus negative through the use of multiple layers of paper.

“For this commission, I designed every page as a unique work of art, with continuity imposed by the uniform flow of the text, and repetitive elements fusing the pages [each measuring 21 inches by 15, and weighing up to five pounds] and contributing to their overall theme. The result will, I hope, be a lasting contribution to Jewish culture.”

The colophon to the work [Fig. 1]—traditionally the final folio of early printed books, and the only signed page in the Haggadah—has that lasting contribution in mind with its concluding declaration: “I, Archie Granot, Aaron Yosef son of Natan Yaakov and Sara Leah, have hand-cut this Haggadah in Jerusalem, capital of the State of Israel, for my friends, Max, Mordechai son of Shimon Yehudah, and Sandra, daughter of Yehudah Leib HaLevi, of the Thurm family in the United States of America. For ten years I have labored over the excellence of each cut. I completed the work in the Holy City of Jerusalem in the month of Kislev in the year 5768 (2007). A cutting blade is my scribal quill, and paper-cutting is my art.” The multilayered cut-out around the page adds: “Accomplished and concluded with thanks to the Lord, Creator of all things.”

The opening design of the Haggadah [Fig. 2]—in the shape of the letter *tet*—is surrounded by scriptural passages beginning and ending with the first and last characters of the Thurms’ Hebrew names (also reproduced), encapsulating the central image of a tower (*Thurm* in German, *Turem* in Yiddish) which, in Hebrew (*Migdal*),



Having had no formal training in art, Archie Granot visited museums to learn more and completed his first papercut using styles and motifs found in recognized Jewish works. “I felt restricted, however, and soon abandoned the symmetrical form and the use of traditional motifs. Instead of designing and cutting on a fold, I began to cut flat, letting the design evolve as I worked. I found myself focusing on two elements—geometric interlace and Hebrew text. Later, wishing to add dimension and color, I experimented with successive layers of paper.

“I have continued to develop and innovate on my multilayered papercuts and have introduced new elements and techniques over the years. I start with a sketch and cut each layer individually, using a scalpel. While the outer shape of a work is often perfectly geometric, the inner design is fluid and rhythmic, with curves and lines interwoven to create movement and texture.

“In some works, I use geometric interlace to shape the entire composition; in others, it shapes the background. My works usually contain Hebrew texts—biblical, rabbinical or talmudic—hand-cut in precise calligraphic letters. Each requires a lengthy, well-thought-out process, hidden beneath the many layers of paper. Family, the Jewish life-cycle, the city of Jerusalem, the quest for peace—these are my sources of inspiration.”



Fig. 5 – Dam Va'ish



Fig. 6 – Ten Plagues

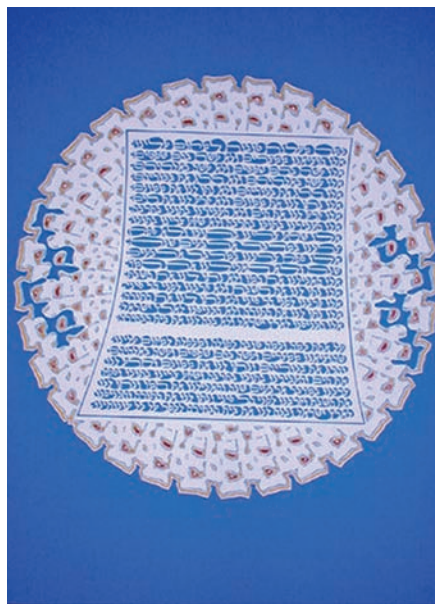


Fig. 7 – Dayenu

denotes the name of the kosher cheese company founded by the family in years gone by. The kiddush benediction is introduced by a wedding band [Fig. 3], formed through the repeated use of the root-form *kadesh* (sanctification), similarly related in Hebrew to the term for betrothal (*kiddushin*). The text of the kiddush comes within a goblet-shaped design [Fig. 4].

Following several stylized pages featuring, among other texts, *Ma Nishtana*, *Avadim Hayinu*, the Four Sons, *Vayered* (“And he went down”) and *V’nitzchak* (“And we cried out”), the Haggadah reaches the passage, “With wonders—that is the blood, as it is said: ‘I will show wonders in heaven and on earth [Joel 3:3],’” and continues with the words *dam va’aish v’timrot ashan*—“blood and fire and pillars of smoke.” As each of these words is recited, a finger is dipped into the wine-cup and a drop spilled upon its plate. Granot has created this image [Fig. 5] on black and red paper, with 23-carat gold leaf that has been “spilled” on to the page.

Then appear the ten plagues [Fig. 6], sitting in the center of the page in teal and black, and encompassed by shapes evocative of barbed wire to remind us that, while the Jews’ slavery that led to the Exodus came with great suffering, we are commanded not to rejoice at the pain of our enemies. “It seemed appropriate,” says Granot, “to fashion an image of somber coloring, and with jagged edges, to focus our thoughts on the bleakness of the time.”

In sharp contrast, the *Dayenu* poem [Fig. 7]—“How many favors has the Almighty done for us?”—takes on the shape of a rounded, hand-made matzah, vibrantly executed in blue and white—the colors of the liberated and independent State of Israel. The word *dayenu* (“It would have sufficed for us”) is repeated—as in the recitation—along the perimeter, while the text itself sits in the center.

Replicating the motif, the following page [Fig. 8], introducing the three symbols of redemption—*pesach*, *matzah*



Fig. 8 – Pesach, Matzah, Maror



Fig. 9 – Shir Hama'alot

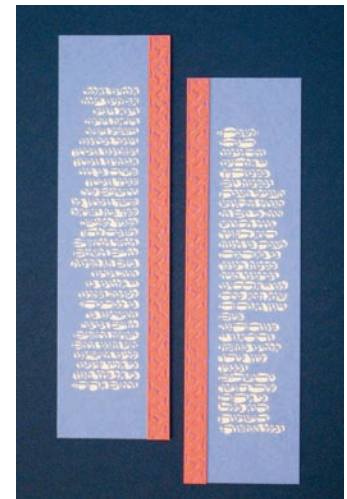


Fig. 10 – Retzeh, Ya'aleh Veyavo

and *maror*—features a square and a semi-circle. Granot explains: “The eye subconsciously converts the latter shape into a full circle, thus reminding us of the hand-made matzah, while the square evokes the image of the modern machine-made version.”

Several pages later, reaching the Grace After Meals, *Shir Hama'alot*—The Song of Ascension [Fig. 9]—appears on an upward slant, displaying both elements of the artist’s craft: the multilayered strokes alongside the etched cuts. “The red, purple and cream,” he says, “have a joyful resonance. The fiery red almost dances in the center, with the

words—and their finials above—creating a vivid sense of movement.” The text itself, spread in purple over the next two pages, again appears in an upward formation, denoting the growing joy and thanksgiving inherent in the psalm.

Further on in the Grace After Meals, *Retzeh* and *Ya'aleh Veyavo* [Fig. 10] are the additions for *Shabbat* and *yomtov*, each placed in a pillar either side of the page. Throughout the Haggadah, no textual page is signed and—apart from the colophon—this image contains the only reference to the artist, the colored “lips” on the inner sides of the pillars

being molded from the letters *aleph* (Archie) and *gimmel* (Granot).

In line with his reference to twentieth-century Haggadot, Granot has updated *Shefoch Chamatcha* (Psalms 79:6-7—“Pour Out Your Wrath”) by relating earlier Jew-hatred to instances of terror in modern times. The prayer was added to the Haggadah following anti-Semitic atrocities in the Middle Ages, and Granot designed this page [Fig. 11] not long after Hamas’s Seder-night attack at the Park Hotel in Netanya in 2002, when thirty people were killed and 140 injured in a suicide bombing. The blood-red image tells its own story.



Fig. 11 – Shefoch Chamatcha



Fig. 12 – Hallel

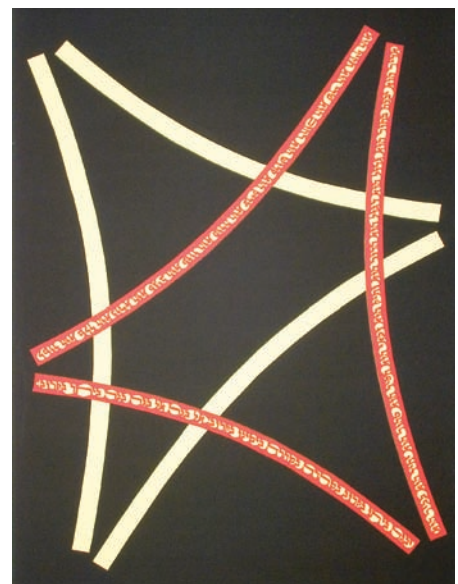


Fig. 13 – Adir Hu

