

Hebrew Micrography: One Thousand Years of Art in Script

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The art of Hebrew micrography — minute writing in the shape of objects or designs — began in the late ninth century in Eretz Israel. From there it spread to Egypt, Yemen, and Europe, where it reached its height from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. While nearly all medieval micrography was in Bibles, after the Renaissance it appears in marriage contracts and on other sheets of parchment or paper hung on the walls of synagogues and homes. This longest lasting of Jewish art forms continues to be widely practiced today by scribes and calligraphers.

In all literate cultures, writing is used artistically. The subtle abstractions of Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, the elegant distortions of Arabic inscriptions, and the elaborate zoomorphic and historiated initial letters of Medieval Latin manuscripts are all examples of script as decoration. In the ninth century Jewish scribes in Eretz Israel invented Hebrew micrography — a uniquely Jewish art form — and this tradition has been sustained until the present day.

Micrography (as shown in the accompanying illustrations) is minute script written into abstract patterns or formed into the shape of objects, animals, or human figures. Most people are familiar with some form of micrographic writing: the Passover Haggadah on a goose egg, Psalms on a grain of wheat, a depiction of the Western Wall on a sheet of now-graying paper. There are two basic types of Hebrew micrography. The less common is the calligram, where lines of unequal length are written in parallel rows so that the picture is composed entirely of text (Figure 1). More typical, however, is the microgram, in which the minute Hebrew text delineates the outline of the subject. (Figures 2-4).

Byzantine and Medieval European poets often used the calligram form: Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius in fourth-century Byzantium, Venantius Fortunatus in sixth-century Europe, and Hrabanus Maurus in the ninth-century Carolingian Empire revived calligram art, which began with Aratus and other Classical Greek poets. While these literary calligrams constitute one of several European traditions of decorative writing, they were not written in the diminutive script we find in Hebrew micrography. Jewish scribes may, at times, have been



Figure 1. *Flying Camel*, symbol of the Levant Trade Fair, Tel Aviv, 1933.



Figure 2. *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, Frankfurt am Main, lithograph, 1899.

Figure 3. Detail of Figure 2,
Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

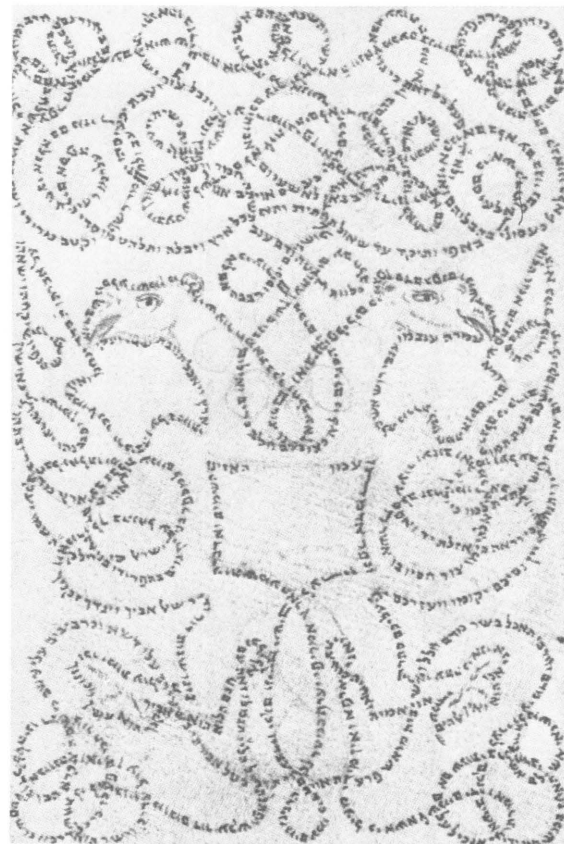


Figure 4. Detail of the title page of *Circumcision Book* by scribe Mordecai (Marcus) Donath of Nitra (Czechoslovakia), Hungary, 1825. Text is the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32).

influenced by literary calligrams, but the actual source of Hebrew micrography should not be sought in the Classical Greek, Byzantine, or Carolingian calligrams.

Hebrew micrography was the creation of the masorah scribes of Tiberias in Eretz Israel. The *masorah* ("tradition") is the system of marginal biblical notes which counted and listed each word in the Hebrew Bible, how many times and where it appeared in exactly the same form. The *soferim*, ritual scribes, adept at writing tiny mezuzot ("doorpost" scrolls), which had to be written in a disciplined, minute hand, were already accustomed to minuscule script. Figuring the text into designs was an outlet for their creative talents while occupied with the drudgery of copying out the masorah. The earliest dated Medieval Hebrew manuscript, the Moshe Ben-Asher Codex from 895 CE, already shows micrographic masorah in the two forms it assumed throughout the period, as marginal decoration accompanying the Bible text ("internal micrography"), and as carpet pages surrounding the Bible text ("external micrography"). Members of the Ben-Asher family were considered master *masorettes*, from the late eighth to the early tenth centuries.

In the earliest Bible codices of Eretz Israel and Egypt, the decoration was usually geometric and abstract, in keeping with the iconoclastic nature of contemporaneous Islamic art, although architectural and vegetal motifs are also found. Letters themselves, as in the name of the scribe or the patron, were also occasionally written out in calligram micrography. The textual subject matter of external micrography was not always the masorah; longer biblical passages are sometimes found; and several *ketubot* ("marriage contracts") from the Cairo Genizah show that micrography was not limited to Bible manuscripts alone.

The uniqueness of micrography as a Jewish art form lies not only in its origins, but also in its continued existence. Handed down from one scribe to another, generation after generation, it spread from Eretz Israel and Egypt southward to Yemen and northward to Europe. In Yemen, Hebrew micrography reached its zenith in the fifteenth century. Marginal masorah there was simple and geometric, and closely knit parallel lines, zigzags, and diagonals were popular designs. Identical facing carpet pages, usually with a central rosette, distinguish its external micrography from the decorative end pages of the Tiberian and Egyptian codices (Figure 5). Fish forms are the earliest Middle Eastern use of animals in this context, but by the fifteenth century micrographic birds and beasts abounded in European manuscripts (Figure 6). The textual material of Yemenite carpet pages was biblical, with Psalms as the favorite.

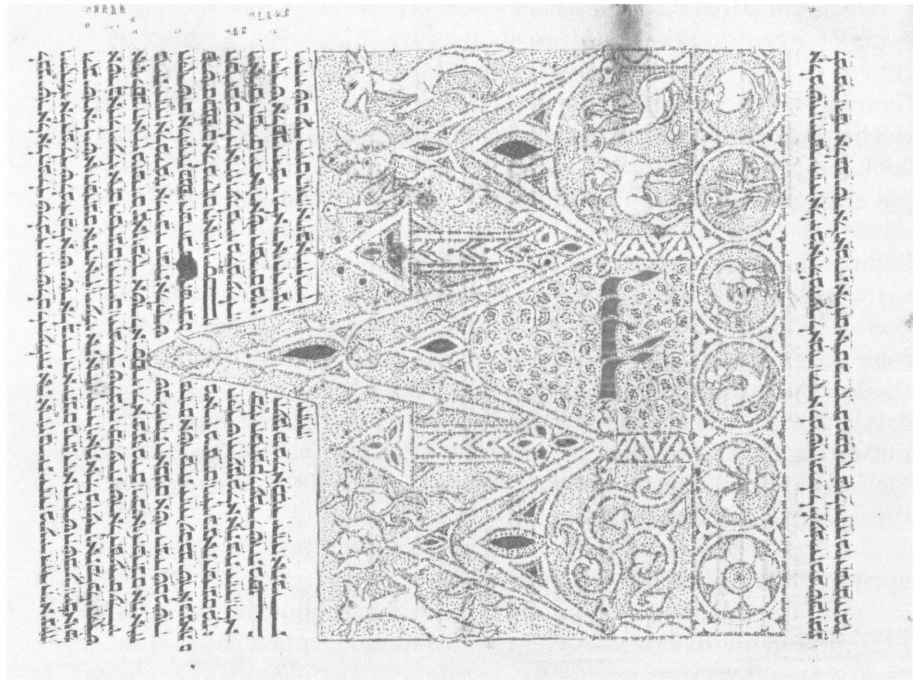


Figure 6. *Pentateuch*, beginning of Leviticus, Bavaria, 1290.

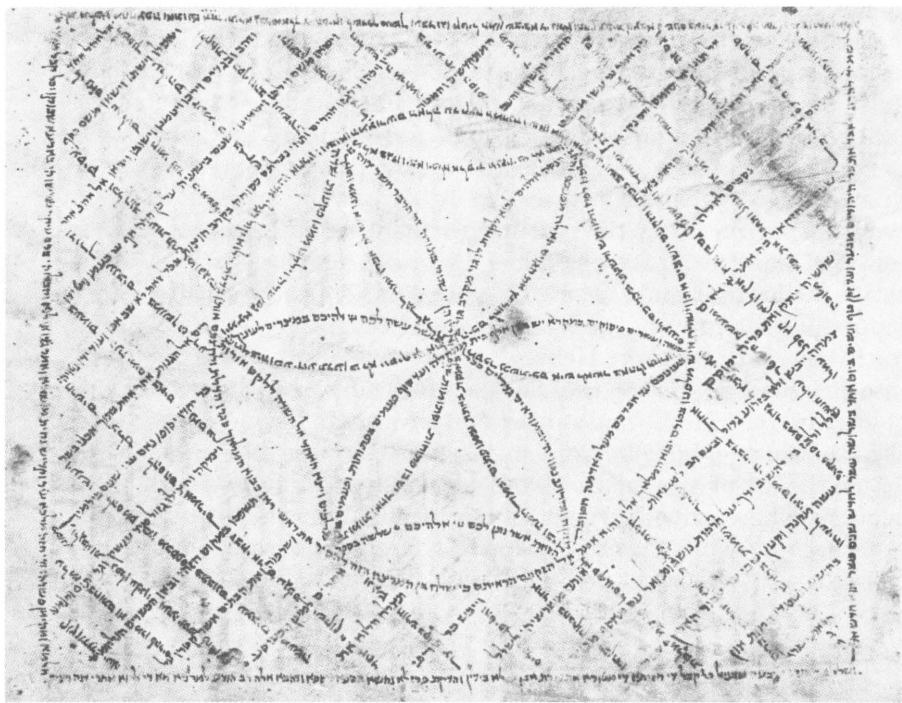


Figure 5. *Pentateuch*, Yemen, 1508.

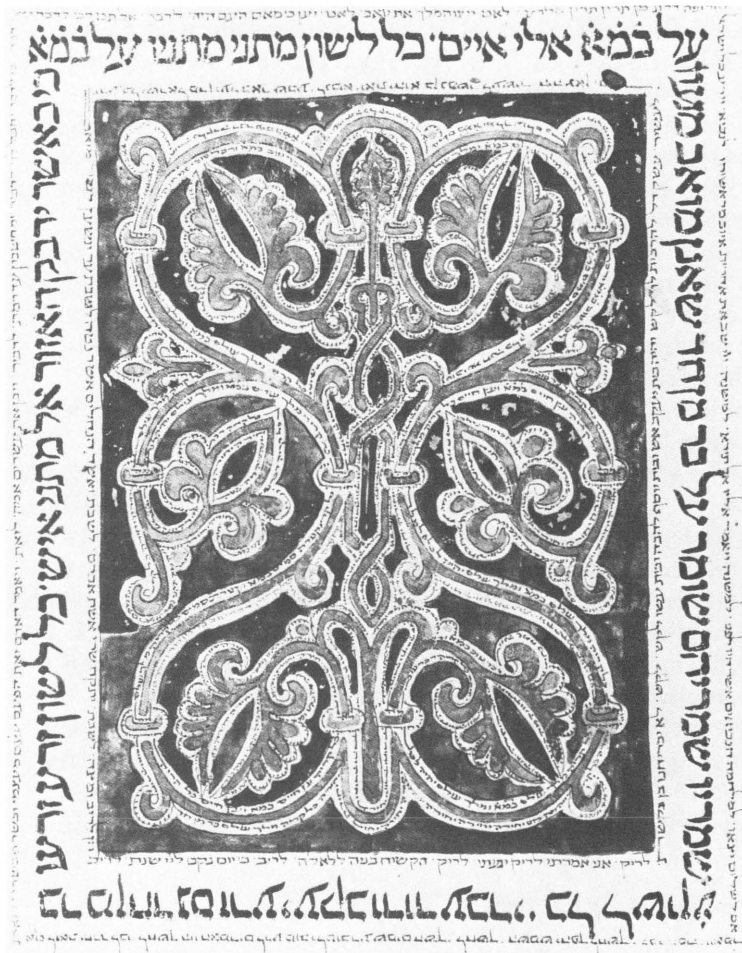
By the thirteenth century the Jewish scribes of Europe were already taking for granted the tradition of micrographic masorah in luxury Bibles. In Spain the motifs were usually, but not exclusively, non-figurative. One or several leaves of geometric carpet pages decorated the beginning and end of the codex, or were placed between biblical books (Figure 7). Full-page scenes drawn in micrography were rare, but examples do exist. Multiple-page renderings of the menorah and other vessels of the Tabernacle, a very popular iconographic theme in Sefardi illumination, are also found. Complex interlacing forms are extremely sophisticated and represent the climax of Jewish art in Spain. In marginal masorah, the scribe now drew upon an extensive repertory of geometric, vegetal, abstract, and representational forms, though the latter were not as common as in northern Europe. *Candelabra*, the “tree-of-life,” and *Magen David* frequently appeared, indicating that these were regarded as specifically Jewish symbols in Medieval Spain. Occasionally the subject of the biblical text would be illustrated in micrography.

The interlacing micrograms associated with Sefardi tradition also appeared in Ashkenazi manuscripts, but there they were frequently inhabited by animals and grotesques — common marginalia in Gothic illuminated manuscripts. Although full-micrographed pages were rare, more often, the panels surrounding the initial word of a biblical book were rendered with the text of the masorah (Figure 6). At times, up to a third of the page was decorated in this fashion. Marginal masorah was also woven into a variety of animate and inanimate forms: lions, elephants, ducks, goats, horses, deer, bears, camels, keys, flags, masks, dragons, unicorns, and jousting knights. Occasionally, scribes left their names in micrography as well.

The heyday of both Ashkenazi and Sefardi micrography was the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. There were two reasons for its eventual decline. With the invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century, manuscript art weakened. Printers began seeking new decorative modes that could be printed with a press: first woodcuts, later copper-plate engraving, and, much later, lithography and steel engraving (nineteenth century). Hebrew metal types simply could not be set into designs that the pen could render. Secondly, in micrography's golden age, the motifs and subject matter were in harmony with the skills of the micrographer, and miniscule interlaces and grotesques suited the nib of his pen. But later, especially in the nineteenth century, when scribes turned to pictorial Bibles for inspiration, their style became as insipid as their models; few of these late micrograms can be regarded as works of art. The vitality was gone.

Nevertheless, Jewish scribes never abandoned micrography as a form of artistic expression. By the Baroque period, Italy had become the major land to demonstrate a continuous tradition. It was in *ketubot* that the art now flourished. Scribes chose various Psalms, Proverbs, and passages from Ruth and the Song of Songs, as well as blessings for the good fortune of the bride and groom based on biblical passages, as their micrographic texts to be drawn into geometric and architectural forms, flowers, family crests, and even the nude forms of Adam and Eve. Other types of micrographic illustrations on parchment or fine paper were made in Italy. *Omer* calendars used in counting the days between Passover and the beginning of Shavuot [Pentecost], *sukkah* decorations, Purim pieces, and full-page biblical scenes were intended to be displayed rather than hidden away in books.

Figure 7. *Damascus Keter*, Bible, Burgos, Spain, 1260.



Micrographic art then spread from Italy to Eastern Europe; by the eighteenth century Jewish scribes and artists in Austria and Hungary were also demonstrating their talent for this uniquely Jewish art form. By the nineteenth century there were Hebrew micrographers in England, France, Holland, Russia, and Poland, and toward the end of the century the art was brought to America and North Africa and reintroduced into Eretz Israel. At that time, too, scribes and printers began realizing the potential of the lithographic press for inexpensive reproduction and dissemination of micrography. Jerusalem's holy sites, biblical scenes, heroes and heroines, and portraits of rabbis, early Zionists, and Jewish poets, were printed in quantity and sold, sometimes on behalf of charitable institutions (Figure 2). Copyright meant little, and printers would frequently remove the name of the original artist, substituting their own in the reprint.

Today, Jewish micrography is alive and flourishing. Good examples can be found in contemporary *ketubot* in Israel and the United States; and passengers flying El Al Israel Airlines are familiar with Fred Pauker's *Tefilat Ha-Derech*, "The Traveler's Prayer," in the form of micrographic doves. Tel Aviv Pop micrographer Abraham Haba, besides writing biblical verses on sea-shells, and *megillot* and *haggadot* on eggs, has made hundreds of portraits of famous persons with texts relating to their accomplishments: he has also micrographed charming illustrations in contemporary naive style (Figure 8). Israeli artist Jacob El-Hanani has created his own variation on calligram micrography in his Constructivist style, using minute cursive Hebrew script to form a textured carpet of writing. Although the result differs from the traditional micrograph and calligram, his perseverance proves El-Hanani to be a true descendant of the Medieval masorah scribe.

Hebrew micrography's survival over eleven centuries can be understood on several levels. The biblical and rabbinic subjects of the illustrations, the nature of the text, and the endurance of its venerable tradition satisfy the aesthetic needs of even the most iconophobic Jew. But micrography can also be looked upon as a perpetual game between scribe and reader. Each micrograph challenges the reader to seek the beginning and end of the text, to identify the source of the passage, and to seek missing words or mistakes. The scribe strains the reader's vision with his microscopic letters, written in an ink that will eventually fade, melting the images as they are deciphered. But micrography must be regarded as more than a mere game; script was, and is, a true expression of Jewish culture. The alphabet and writing have long maintained a symbolic and mystical existence in Jewish folklore and philosophy. Jewish creativity has been embodied in and

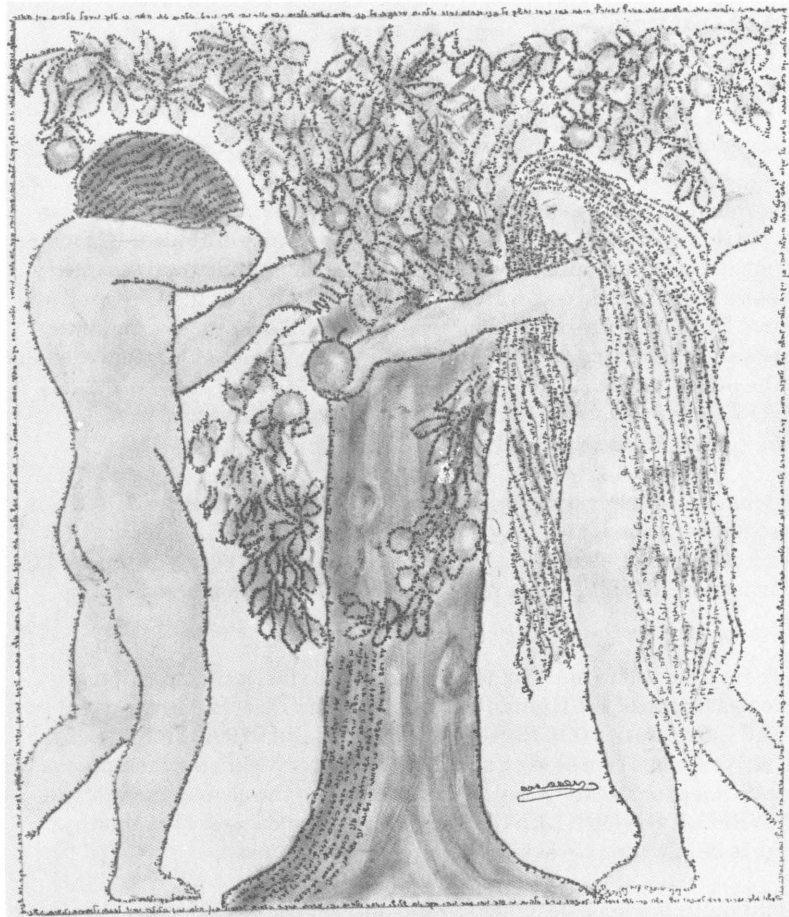


Figure 8. *Adam and Eve* by Abraham Haba, Tel Aviv, 1977.

transmitted by the oral and written word, and it is only natural that Judaism's indigenous and longest lasting art form should be bound up with writing itself.

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