

Mitzvah Beautifier

David Moss's Jewish art ranges from architecture to calligraphy

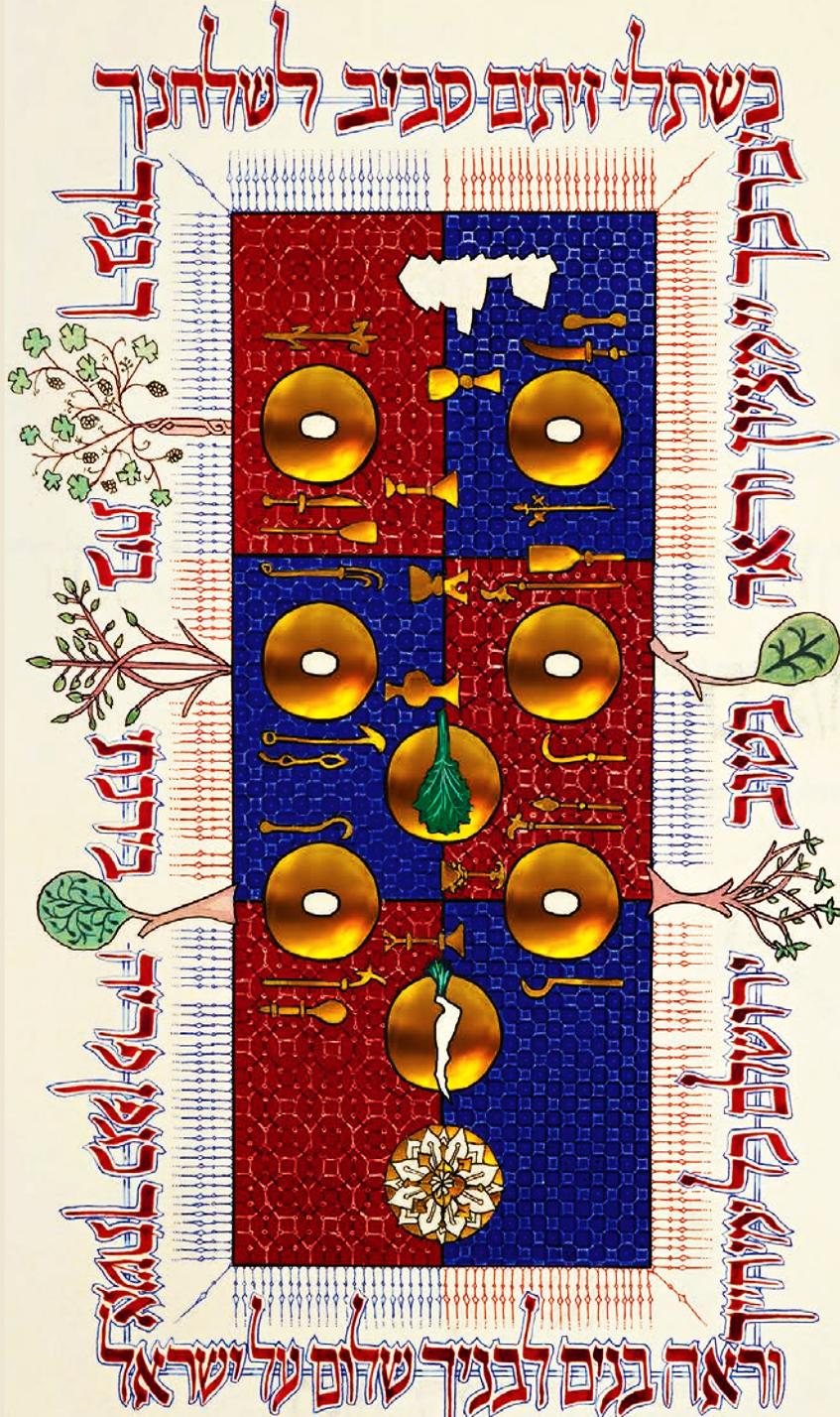
By David Geffen

IN 1983, a friend told me about an artist who was showing the first few pages of a groundbreaking handwritten and illuminated *Haggada* on parchment that he was commissioned to create. As David Moss – a Jerusalemite who made aliyah that year – described his deeply researched, inventive and innovative use of Hebrew lettering and imagery, I was struck by his enthusiasm and his creativity. It was a memorable meeting which I've carried with me for the many decades that I've followed Moss's development and career.

Moss, a fifth-generation Ohio Jew born in Youngstown in 1946, was raised in Dayton in a home overflowing with creativity instilled by his father, Jack Moss, a composer, poet, inventor, writer and musician. He attended a liberal arts school, St. John's College in Santa Fe, where he devoted himself to the classics of the western world. After college, he wanted to immerse himself in his own Jewish civilization and set off to Israel to prepare for enrollment at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

It was in Jerusalem that Moss experienced what he calls, "his magical moment." A local Torah scribe calligraphed the Hebrew alphabet on a scrap of paper and handed it to him. He describes his deep, visceral response to these letters. He began copying them, composing words and inscribing Biblical passages.

Moss attributes his entire, multifaceted artistic career to this moment and to the explosive, creative power he intuitively sensed to be present in these 22 letters. "As I was falling in love with the Hebrew letters, I came to learn about an antiquated Jewish art form – the hand-illuminated marriage contract – the ketubah. I saw examples of the charming, lovingly created folk art ketubot from the Mid-



DAVID MOSS
An image of the Set Table from David Moss's Haggada. © David Moss 2020, Courtesy www.bet-alpha-editions.com; Reproduction: Yael Herman



MATAN KATZ

The Moss Haggada. The few pages I had seen ended up becoming a 100-page, large format manuscript which took three full years to complete

Moss defines his artistic process, as one of head, heart and hand and the *Haggada* is a prime example of this. “By ‘head’ I mean a deep immersion in the texts and ideas of our literary tradition. To be Jewishly authentic a work must be firmly based in our sources.”

He spent nearly the entire first year just studying Jewish sources on the development of the Haggada over the centuries, its traditional and scholarly commentaries and its art history in the medieval illuminated manuscripts in whose shadow he sensed he was working.

His second principle is “heart.” He explains: “This represents the creative part of my work. I imbue every work with a fresh, surprising innovation for the viewer. For every section of the Haggada I sought to find an inventive new approach.”

For the first page, Moss meditated on the very notion of beginnings. He realized that the Exodus itself was a beginning – the birth of the Jewish people – and that every beginning was essentially about potential. He summarizes: “Every beginning contains the whole.”

As the border of page one he wrote out the entire text the Haggada in two intertwining micrographic strands. This also exemplifies his final principle – the hand – “my obsessive striving for perfect crafting of every work.”

To dramatize the verse, “In each and every generation, you must see yourself as if you personally came out of Egypt,” Moss depicted small portraits of Jews from “each and every generation” throughout history – nine men on one page and nine women on the facing page. Between each portrait he affixed an actual Mylar mirror. When the book is closed each Jew sees himself or herself. As we open the page we can actually see them seeing themselves in the facing mirrors, and then when fully open, we see ourselves in the mirrors.

In Aumie Shapiro’s review in the London *Jewish Chronicle*, we read: “When I handled it, I trembled because what I saw was, in my view, the greatest *Haggada* ever produced.”

The manuscript was completed in 1986 and delivered to Richard and Bea Levy, the couple who commissioned it. But in a sense, that was just another beginning with even more potential.

When the late Neil and Sharon Norry of Rochester saw photographs of the Haggada, they immediately decided it could not just be

David Moss at work in his Jerusalem studio

dle East, and the exuberant baroque contracts from Italy,” he says. “I asked about who was creating these today, and was informed that this art form had died out years before and the ketubah had become a drab, printed form filled in by the rabbi and hidden away in a drawer by the couple.”

Moss was determined to revive this beautiful Jewish art. He started by making ketubot for young friends getting married. People saw the results and began to commission him. Word began to spread when he wrote the article on ketubah-making in the first *Jewish Catalog*. The real break came in the early 1970s when the editor of *National Jewish Monthly*, the B’nai B’rith magazine, became enamored of David’s unique combination of tradition and contemporary expression and ran three cover stories on Moss’s ketubot within a few years.

For Moss, the creation of a ketubah is an intimate collaboration between a couple and

himself as he interviews them about all aspects of their relationship, their Jewish commitments, their family, and their dreams for their marriage. All this he seeks to synthesize in the final work. The scope of his work in this field is conveyed in a book he produced called *Love Letters*.

The ketubot, reproduced include exquisite, detailed floral patterns, delicate paper-cut borders, hand-gilded lettering, bold modern graphics, intricate micrographic designs incorporating whole biblical books and whimsical fantasies. Nanette Stahl, Judaica Curator of the Yale Library comments: “David’s art is exquisite. He single-handedly reintroduced ketubah illumination into modern Jewish life and has created ketubot of stunning beauty and majesty.”

The artistic techniques Moss honed in his ketubot both for newly-wed couples and for anniversaries served him well for the major work for which he is probably best known,

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DAVID MOSS



Ketuba of Miriam Oles and James Weinberger

hidden away in a collector's home. They established Bet Alpha Editions to create a perfectly faithful, limited edition facsimile replica in Verona, Italy and subsequently, a trade and deluxe editions were produced making the work widely accessible.

Moss's Tree of Life Shtender project exemplifies his love of the overlooked and the underappreciated. *Shtender* is the Yiddish word for a simple, personal wooden lectern/stand. Dozens are found in yeshivot and traditional synagogues.

Moss calls them "the overlooked workhorses" of Judaica objects. He was intrigued by the artistic potential of this object and compared the Shtender's use to his triad of head, heart and hand. The Shtender was indeed the place of both prayer and study spiritually uniting the Jewish heart and head. But he imagined an unprecedented kind of Shtender that would serve as a small treasure chest to house all our hands-on daily, weekly and annual ritual objects.

Intimately collaborating with the fine wood artist, Noah Greenberg of Safed, David produced an exquisite Shtender that contains each object carved with realistic plants of the Land of Israel including a siddur, a charity box, a tefillin box, Shabbat candelabrum, challah board, Kiddush set, havdalah set, shofar, lulav, etrog, hanukiah, Purim Megillah, Seder plate and omer counter. Over 100 examples are in homes, museums and synagogues.

From the three-dimensional Shtender, it was a bold but natural step into architecture.

DAVID MOSS



A page from Moss's Haggadah; © David Moss 2020, Courtesy www.bet-alpha-editions.com

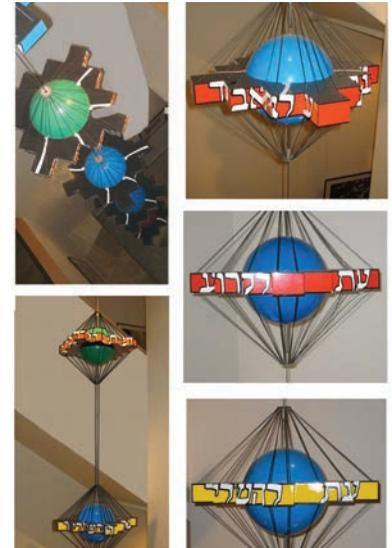
David sees parallels with his original work on Ketubot. "The process is surprisingly similar. But instead of interviewing a couple, I'm listening to everyone in an organization to determine exactly what their mission, goals, dreams, vision, challenges are. For me a building should not just house an institution but must play an active role in enhancing and furthering its organizational goals, just like their board, staff and programming do."

David has been on the architectural design team for both remodeling projects such as The UJA Federation of New York and Congregation Beth Shalom, Seattle as well as for new construction like the Fuchs Mizrahi School in Cleveland, the Hillel Foundation, UCLA and the Akibah Yavne Academy, Dallas. His vision ranges from the macro to the micro. For the campus in Dallas he laid out the buildings to reflect their modern orthodox and Zionist ideology. Jaynie Schultz, one of the funders, said: "I cannot adequately express the genius of this man. David took what could have easily turned into a basic school building, and by understanding the character and hearts of the entire school community, has helped us design what will clearly become one of the most beautiful campuses in the southwest."

The school was awarded the architectural prize for best design of all construction projects in Texas for 2006.

MOSS SEES the core values of the Hillel Foundation at UCLA as inclusivity and

DAVID MOSS



The UCLA Hillel stairway mobile designed by Moss

pluralism. For the large multipurpose room divided for prayer into sections for three denominations, he designed three identical glass Torah arks each fitting snugly into the center of accordion dividers. "Acoustically, each *minyán* is separated, but visually all the glass arks line up so that each group glimpses the alternative ways of prayer of their fellow students," he says.

To further stress the diversity of Hillel's population and programming he designed a mobile containing the whole text from Ecclesiastes – "For every thing there is a time and season."

As you ascend or descend the three-story staircase, the Hebrew verses magically come into sight. For the main hallway, Moss created glass floor tiles to recreate the 2,000-year Diaspora journey from Israel to Los Angeles. A map of each of the stops along the journey is inscribed on each tile and beneath one glimpses actual soil brought from each land.

In 1989, Shelly Dorph, the head of all the Ramah summer camps, approached Moss. He saw that camping was getting more specialized and challenged Moss to figure out how to move beyond "arts and crafts" to bring art with Jewish meaning into the camp setting.

In the intense program he developed, he shepherds groups of motivated campers as they create a professional, permanent Judaic work of art for the camp. He insists on coming with nothing in mind and begins by determining some important issue of concern to the children.

Topics have been as varied as overcoming cliques, reducing harmful gossip, increasing the kindness quotient, ecological awareness and bringing Israeli reality into the camp.

“Once we have determined an issue I take them through the entire artistic process from problem definition, to creative problem-solving (I teach them a powerful group problem-solving process called Synectics) to design, to scrounging materials to actual hands-on construction to dedication of the completed artwork to the entire camp,” he says. “The sense of accomplishment and the pride they experience is stunningly empowering.”

Moss leads a similar month-long program for gap-year students through the Midreshet and Yeshivat Torah V’Avodah program where each year they create a new Jewish public art project for Jerusalem. The program director described the process: “The highly motivated group of young people decided to conceive, create, design and implement an event/happening/art installation in one of the busiest and most public spaces in Jerusalem: Davidka Square.”

Though people of all walks of life and religions walk through this area, sadly, they remain strangers to each other. With Moss’s guidance,

the group creates its own response to this situation. “With lots of punch and aesthetic elan, the students were able to get strangers to open up, interact, work together, talk to each other and learn from each other,” he says.

DAVID MOSS is married to Rosalyn, originally from Chicago, a teacher of Hebrew and modern Hebrew literature whom he says is “amazing, supportive and talented.” They live in Jerusalem’s Baka neighborhood and have four married children – all of whom are engaged in education – and 15 grandchildren.

“All the families are now living within a 10-minute walk of us,” Moss says.

He has been an artist in residence in several locations, from the Magnes Museum in Berkeley and Brandeis-Bardin Institute in California to Mishkenot Sha’ananim and Hut-zot Hayotzer in Jerusalem.

A recipient of the Jesselson Prize for Contemporary Judaica Design, awarded by the Israel Museum, his works have been exhibited in museums and libraries around the world.

In 2010, Moss together with his daughter Elyssa Moss Rabinowitz, Rabbi Matt Berkowitz and Yair Medina founded Kol HaOt, which is dedicated to using the arts to illuminate Jewish life. In their charming, stone-

walled, large space in Chutzot Hayotzer (just across from Moss’s own studio/gallery) outside the Jaffa Gate, they do hands-on art programming for groups from Israel and abroad, host a rotating artist-in-residence program, have changing exhibits of Jewish art, and create free major public events for the holidays from Haggada fairs, to large communal sing-alongs, to hands-on workshops.

Having heard about Moss’s impactful educational work in camps and schools, a major foundation approached Moss in 2015 to bring his artistic/creative/educational vision into Jewish day schools. Partnering with his Kol HaOt team, the Teachers Institute for the Arts was established. Now in its fifth cohort, this fully-funded program, open to any day school in North America, brings art and Judaic teachers from each school together for an intensive week long institute followed by constant support, mentoring, site visits and immersive project based learning throughout the year. At a joint colloquium in the spring the schools share the work their students have accomplished.

“It’s been fantastically gratifying to see how much these teachers have grown and the impact we’re having in the schools,” Moss says. “There is such joy in experiencing how our team in Israel and our three brilliant, dedicated mentors in the States empower one another. Artmaking can be quite solitary; but this is collaboration of the highest order.”

About ten years ago Moss had an idea of how to help spread his artistic vision. He decided he’d create an ongoing series of limited edition, signed prints, artist books, objects and called it a “*minyán*,” figuring 10 committed subscribers would make it worth starting. He got a wonderful response and his ‘*minyanaïres*’ (now many times more than 10!) delight in receiving these surprises a few times a year. The pieces range from small delicate traditional paper cuts with micrography and real gold leaf to large bold multicolored serigraphs. One of his subscribers described what happens when they receive their surprise package. Neither of the couple will open it without the other. They dedicate an evening to unwrapping it together, carefully reading Moss’s detailed description of the meaning of the piece and marveling at the work.

Even when he fell through the loft in his studio and was forced to be in bed Moss used his confinement to create the *OMG Bentcher*, the Jewish blessing after meals, with whimsical calligraphy and images animating the pages. As I walked my fingers through this

exciting work, pausing at many of the illustrations, I asked Moss why he decided to create the *Bentcher*.

“I wanted to present the standard grace after meals prayer in a popular, accessible format for children and teens so it’s a comic book. This prayer is often rushed through and sung by rote. I wanted to slow the reader down and vividly express the beautiful meaning of the poignant words, ideas and values expressed.”

An outstanding example of Moss’s diversity is the contrast between his sophisticated, three-year Haggada project with another fascinating Haggada he once showed me. It was made from scratch by a group of students David led at a day school in Boston in an intense week of work. The deeply meaningful illustrations in watercolor, crayon, colored pencils, paper cuts and moving parts jump out at you. Moss had drawn from these teenagers something they never knew they had in themselves. Revealing hidden creative depths, whether in Jewish texts, or Jewish souls seems a foundation of his work.

I had the privilege of first seeing the finished *Moss Haggada* in 1998 at the Library of Congress Exhibit “From the Ends of the Earth: Hebraic Treasures of the Library of Congress.” I thought to myself: “In Jerusalem I saw a couple of pages of this work in progress, and now it is a treasure for all the ages to come.”

The curator of the exhibit, Prof. Abraham Karp wrote in the catalogue, “Though Moss is marvelously inventive in his illuminated pages, he has consciously striven to have them reflect the variety of artistic expressions of those before him who had made Hebrew manuscripts and books things of beauty.” Karp’s enthusiasm comes through in these final words: “His *Haggada* is a splendid addition to the bibliophile book, the most authentically Jewish art form.”

Entering Moss’s crowded studio is a unique Jewish and artistic adventure. Here I could actually witness the blooming of these diverse works on his small drawing board as his “head heart and hands” almost magically bring not only new works of art, but new art forms to life.

On his website, davidmoss.com, Moss describes himself as a “Mitzvah Beautifier – Illuminator, Animator and Transformer of Jewish texts, objects, spaces and souls.” Perhaps this is his own way of summarizing what seems to be his lifetime mission: Giving fresh, creative, artistic expression to Judaism’s deepest insights. ■