

# A COLLAGE OF CUSTOMS

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## INTRODUCTION

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Preoccupied with Jewish history and fascinated by Judaism's customs, legends, and mystical tradition, I've tried to imaginatively interpret and faithfully transmit my heritage through pictorial narratives. Much of my art includes visual metaphors adapted from Jewish symbols and iconography. Among the most frequently reproduced artworks in the lexicon of Jewish imagery are the woodcut illustrations from the *Sifrei Minhagim* (Yiddish: *Minhogimbikher*, books of Jewish customs) produced from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. These images portray observances and rituals of the Jewish year and life cycle with figures in distinctive Ashkenazi (Western European) dress.<sup>1</sup> Even customs books by Sephardic Jews (who traced their heritage to Spain) reproduced the same Ashkenazi iconography.<sup>2</sup> In modern times these illustrations have become somewhat familiar as they have been published countless times, not only accompanying religious texts, but also in encyclopedias, on book jackets, and even on greeting cards. To update and introduce new layers of meaning to these centuries-old images, I've created a series of twenty-six collages. A giant electric light bulb, a microwave, and a hairdryer are among the modern-day objects juxtaposed with the sixteenth-century depictions of Jewish customs. A comically large *hamantasch* (a triangular cookie eaten on the festival of Purim) collaged as Amalek's hat pictures the ancient enemy of the Jewish people as the ancestor of the defeated

villain of the biblical Book of Esther. A thought bubble inserted into a wedding illustration expresses the tradition that even at times of joy Jews still recall the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The *Sifrei Minhagim* were among the most popular Jewish books in sixteenth to nineteenth-century Europe. In concise and easily understandable language, the text explained how to observe Jewish rituals and customs in the proper fashion. According to authoritative rabbinic sources, "Everything depends on local custom."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, these sources assign such importance to custom that they affirm it can sometimes cancel or even replace prescribed Jewish law. Whereas certain customs are based on *halakhah* (Jewish law), many other customs were shaped by the folklore, traditions, and superstitions of the places Jews lived. *Minhagim* books can describe customs unique to a certain region only regarding one practice, or treat a wide range of customs with the purpose of presenting and perpetuating continuity in practice. The *minhagim* manual was especially useful in small communities, which often had no rabbi or were far from centers of study. Without the opportunity to consult someone knowledgeable as to a rule or custom, custom books, although not a replacement for an authority, provided clarification. For those who might not recall the rituals studied in their youth, custom books could serve as a reminder.<sup>4</sup>

The first *minhagim* book to survive is the *Sefer ha-Ḥillukim bein Mizraḥ ve-Ereẓ Yisrael* (*Variations in Customs between the People of the East and of Israel*), likely compiled in eighth-century-CE Palestine. The “People of the East” referred to the Babylonian Jews who preserved the customs of their land of origin. Another work, *Ḥilluf Minhagim*, from the same period and of which not even a fragment has survived, described the differences in customs between the Babylonian Talmudic Academies of Pumbedita and Sura.<sup>5</sup>

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, scholars attempted to verify the origins of various customs and establish a uniformity of practices. Among the first European customs books is the *Sefer ha-Minhagot* of Asher ben Saul of Lunel (late 12th and early 13th century), which describes a wide variety of Jewish practices of southern France. Asher sought to support observance by providing Talmudic, Midrashic, and Babylonian geonic sources. During his travels, Abraham ben Nathan Ha-Yarhi, a Provençal rabbi (1155–1215), noted that “they (the Jews) varied in their religious practices and were divided into seventy languages.”<sup>6</sup> In his book *Manhig Olam*, composed in Toledo in 1204 and known popularly as *Sefer ha-Manhig*, Abraham collected customs he personally observed regarding prayer and synagogue practices in medieval France, Germany, Spain, and England. He relates that in France it was the custom on Purim for Jewish children to bring their Christian nurses to the synagogue courtyard where their parents presented them with gifts. As this custom neglected the

Jewish poor, Abraham adds that it was strongly criticized and that Rashi is said to have denounced it. Among the most influential collections of Ashkenazi customs and practices is Rabbi Jacob Halevi Moelin’s (Maharil, 1360–1427) *Sefer ha-Maharil*, or *Minhagim*, compiled by his pupil R. Eleazar ben Jacob from the discourses he heard from his teacher. *Sefer ha-Maharil* presents comprehensive descriptions of synagogue and home religious observances of the German Jews, and views unfavorably any variations.<sup>7</sup>

The author of a Hebrew manuscript of Jewish customs, later to be printed in an extraordinarily popular illustrated Yiddish edition, was the Austrian Rabbi Isaac Tyrnau (late 14th to early 15th century). Recognizing that a compendium of customs was especially vital in perilous times when ignorance threatened to destroy Jewish society, Tyrnau collected Ashkenazi customs from Bohemia, Moravia, Germany, and Poland in the wake of the Black Death (1348–1350), when hundreds of Jewish communities, falsely accused of causing the pestilence, were annihilated across Europe. “Scholars became so few,” writes Tyrnau, “I saw localities where there were no more than two or three persons with a real knowledge of local custom, let alone those of another town.”<sup>8</sup> In the introduction to his manuscript, Tyrnau mentions that it was not intended for the literate but for all the Jews, in order to “straighten out, correct and put well in order the practices of the entire year, so that they will be perfectly known by every person, and more than that, in simple language.”<sup>9</sup>

For around one hundred and fifty years Tyrnau's Hebrew text, *Minhagim le-Kol ha-Shanah*, circulated in manuscript form until it first appeared in print in 1566. Although reprinted numerous times, often as an appendix to a prayer book, for the guide to be useful to a large lay audience a Yiddish translation was needed. In 1590, a Yiddish translation by Rabbi Simon Levi ben Judah Guenzburg was printed in Venice. For the following three hundred years, Yiddish would be the language of most editions. Regrettably, Tyrnau's name is frequently omitted from the work with only Guenzburg's name credited. According to the historian Jean Baumgarten, "Although Isaac Tyrnau's book seems to be one of the most important sources for the Yiddish version...Guenzburg used a large spectrum of sources and was more than a simple translator of rabbinic sources into Old Yiddish... and adds many interpretations and personal comments on practices, ritual, and religious life."<sup>10</sup> Along with the large group of Yiddish speakers residing in Italy, the book's primary readers were most likely the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe.

In 1593, woodcuts illustrating the second Yiddish edition significantly contributed to the book's immense popularity and made it the prototype for later printings.<sup>11</sup> Twenty-six squarish woodcuts depict Jewish customs and contemporary costume; twelve smaller horizontal woodcuts denote the month's zodiac and chores of the agricultural year. Five of the customs' images reappear several times. In addition, there is a Hebrew calendar for the following seventy years. The 1593 Yiddish edition's title page proclaims, "Much nicer than previous versions. Everyone

will enjoy reading it! Laws explained well, so you will learn how to live like a good person."<sup>12</sup> In her study of the images in five illustrated Yiddish books from sixteenth-century Italy, art historian Diane Wolfthal writes that Yiddish books were not only illustrated for educational purposes or "as cues to the reader searching for a particular passage of the text"<sup>13</sup> but because "some adult Jews enjoyed looking at them."<sup>14</sup> Recognizing the visual pleasure derived from looking at pictures, Venetian Rabbi Leon Modena (1571–1648) noted that illustrations "entice the bodily eyes."<sup>15</sup> Prior to the 1593 *Sefer Minhagim*, the earliest surviving illustrated Yiddish compilation of Jewish customs is an Italian manuscript from around 1503; its text is mostly copied from Isaac Tyrnau. Both the calligraphy and images seem to be by one individual. Moreover, the manuscript's over ninety amateurish line drawings show a firsthand knowledge of Jewish holidays, life cycle occasions, and Jewish history, and notably depict a large number of customs practiced by women. Sometime after 1662, the book came into the possession of Cardinal Richelieu and is now in the collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.<sup>16</sup>

From the 1593 *Sefer Minhagim* to the 1774 Amsterdam edition, the volumes' woodcuts were routinely unimaginatively copied. Infrequent revisions included adding black and white Dutch floor tiles and varying windows. Wolfthal observes that the professional artists illustrating Jewish books were mostly Christians with minimal education who could thus contribute little intellectually, and who, according to Sandra Hindman, were merely "technicians, plying a craft."<sup>17</sup> Yet at times, images were corrected. The 1593 illustra-

tion of lighting the Hanukkah menorah likely reveals an unawareness of the Talmudic dictum that “It is forbidden to use a seven-branched menorah outside the Temple.”<sup>18</sup> Adhering to the dictum, a later Amsterdam edition adds an eighth candlestick.<sup>19</sup> Although Judaism prohibits the portrayal of God in any kind of human or concrete form, the 1593 Venice Shavuot woodcut pictures God’s hand giving Moses the Ten Commandments. A 1723 Amsterdam Shavuot woodcut omits any visual representation of God, and sets the revelation at Sinai near a Dutch village.

Only the 1601 Venice *minhagim* book has distinctly different images, which are far more artful than the 1593 edition’s, and present the characters in Italian rather than German style clothing. Wolfthal notes that this new set of attractive images “brought Titian’s style into Jewish homes.”<sup>20</sup> Believing that a proper understanding of Jesus required a proper understanding of Jewish practices, Johannes Leusden (1624–1699), a Dutch Calvinist theologian and one of the most prominent Bible experts of his time, included thirteen Amsterdam *Sefer Minhagim* woodcuts in his *Philogus Hebraeo-Mixtus* (*A Philology of Hebrew and Other Languages*), (Utrecht, 1663). The book’s popularity resulted in a second edition in 1682 with Dutch artist Johan van den Avelé’s eight new engravings illustrating Jewish customs.

The *Sefer Minhagim* woodcuts were designed to illustrate a text, presumably not to live a life of their own. Yet, in modernity, those images are often set free from the pages of *minhagim* literature or any textual reference. The Israel Museum sells reproductions of

the woodcuts on decorative ceramic tiles. Framed prints of the images are marketed online. Reproduced innumerable times with minimal variations for over four centuries, these classic woodcuts seemed to me to call out for a “makeover.” And so, with this series of collages, centuries-old familiar *minhagim* illustrations have been reimagined.

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- 1 On the history of these illustrations see Diane Wolfthal, “Imagining the Self: Representations of Jewish Ritual in Yiddish Books of Customs,” in *Imagining the Self, Imagining the Other: Visual Representation and Jewish-Christian Dynamics in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period*, ed. Eva Frojmovic (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 189–211.
- 2 On the movement of these images across time and place see Jean Baumgarten, “‘Sefer Haminhagim’ (Venice, 1593) and its Dissemination in the Ashkenazi World,” in *Minhagim: Custom and Practice in Jewish Life*, ed. Jean Baumgarten, Naomi Feuchtwanger-Sarig, Hasia Diner, Joseph Isaac Lifshitz and Simha Goldin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 83–98.
- 3 See, for example, the following sources from the Mishnah (Bava Metzi’a 7:1, 9:1; Bava Batra 1:1, 10:1; m. Sukkah 3:11; Pesachim 4:1) and from the Babylonian Talmud (Pesachim 50a, 51b, 119b; Sukkah 38a; Megillah 21b; b. Bava Metzi’a 86b).
- 4 On the popularity of these works and a basic overview of their contents and purpose see Scott-Martin Kosofsky, “A Discovery: The Venice Minhogimbukh,” *Judaism* 53:3–4 (2004): 207–19.
- 5 On the various versions of the *Sefer Minhagim* see the concise discussion in Israel Ta-Shma, et al. under “Minhagim Books,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 14, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, pp. 278–80.
- 6 “Abraham ben Nathan Ha-Yarhi,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 1, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, p. 309.
- 7 Herman Pollack, “An Historical Explanation of the Origin and Development of Jewish Books of Customs (‘Sifre Minhagim’): 1100–1300,” *Jewish Social Studies* 49, no. 3/4 (1987): 195–216.
- 8 Shmuel Ashkenazi, “Tyrnau, Isaac,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 20, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, p. 220.
- 9 Jean Baumgarten, “Prayer, Ritual and Practice in Ashkenazic Jewish Society: The Tradition of Yiddish Custom Books in the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries,” *Studia Rosenthaliana* 36 (2002–2003): 128.
- 10 Jean Baumgarten, “Prayer, Ritual and Practice in Ashkenazic Jewish Society,” 138.
- 11 Jean Baumgarten, “Prayer, Ritual and Practice in Ashkenazic Jewish Society,” 137.
- 12 Scott-Martin Kosofsky, *The Book of Customs* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), xiv.
- 13 Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish: Gender, Identity, and Memory in the Illustrated Yiddish Books of Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 204.
- 14 Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish*, 206.
- 15 Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish*, 206.
- 16 Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish*, 10–13.
- 17 Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish*, 150.
- 18 Babylonian Talmud Menachot 28b.
- 19 Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish*, 96.
- 20 Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish*, 206.