

RESTORING THE



Restoring the Tyburn Megillah

A interfaith
scribal adventure

TYBURN
MEGILLAH

MORDECHAI PINCHAS (MARC MICHAELS), SOFER STA"AM

In need of repair

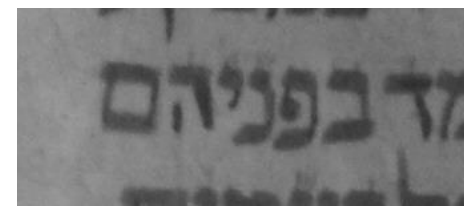
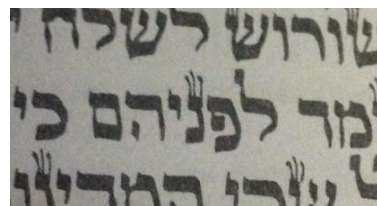
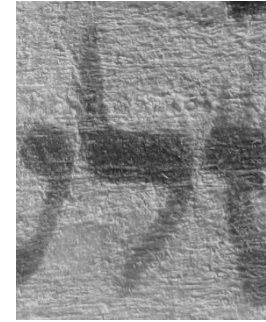


- Jewish scribes don't often encounter Catholic nuns
- And certainly one would not normally expect them to have a Megillat Esther that needed repair
- And one that was so very old



The Tyburn Megillah

- Various clues point to it being written in Italy in the late 1700s
 - Lameds without a head
 - Irregular layout
 - No 'hamelech'
 - 'Bifneyhem'
 - Letters beneath the line
 - Stitching



Similar scrolls



Manuscript 62.0.21: Painted Esther Scroll (Italy, 18th century) Reproduced with kind permission of The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life



Washington Megillah below shows certain details, such as dress, musical instruments even the presence of dancing couples which all point to an origin in early eighteenth-century Italy



Manuscript ON 0032 Museum of Italian Jewish Art and shown as Northern Italy 18th century

Do what is right

- Conservation – restoration – or making it kosher for use?
- The halacha explains that any scroll found in possession of a non-Jew should be ‘ransomed’
- That out of the way it was decided to do what was right and make it fully kosher for us – something it turned out it had never been.

Feast and Fast

- When we came to pick up the megillah it was the fast of Esther and so we couldn't have tea!
- Fasting and feasting play a key role in the Megillah – The Jews fell into sin by participating in the King's feast. Esther fasts when she needs courage and help from God. Esther invites the king and the wicked Haman to two feasts
- But the word for feast – mishteh – used 20 times in the text

Rips



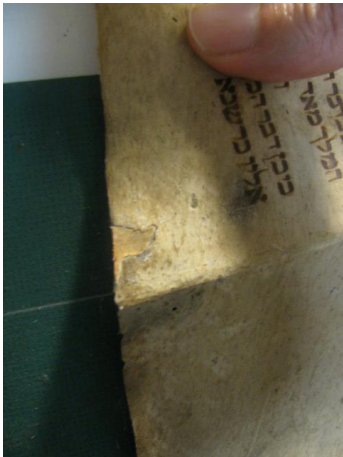
- Seriously big rip needed careful scraping to remove the sellotape residue and then fixing with kasher gold-beaters skin.
- There was also some handwriting in pencil but unfortunately illegible
- There were several other smaller rips throughout that were repaired in the same way

Holy and Hole-y



- There are arguments in the Talmud as to whether Esther was written with the aid of the divine spirit – ie was it holy. Various proofs are brought to show that it way.
- But this Megillah was certainly hole-y.
- However modern k'laf parchment is much brighter than its ancient g'vil counterpart

A nice cup of tea

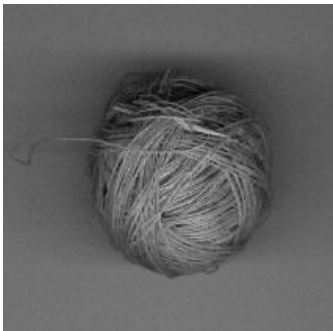


- On in this case a ramekin of tea – Yorkshire of course – only the best for a holy manuscript
- Paining a few coats and then scraping back gave a matching colour and texture
- Aside from the large holes there were several smaller ones some in and around letters that needed attention

What is holiness?

- Leviticus 19:2 makes a telling statement,
דַּבֵּר אֶל-כָּל-עֵדֶת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדָשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
(Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel, and say to them, You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy)
- Leviticus 20:26 then repeats, וְהֵייתֶם לִי קְדָשִׁים כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה'
(You shall be holy to Me, for I, the Lord, am holy ...)
but adds equally tellingly, וְאֶבְדַּל אֶתְכֶם מִן-הָעַמִּים לְהִיוֹת לִי
(and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine.)
- Holiness for Jews, therefore has an overtone of being separate, somehow different, set apart from the norm and other influences that could be damaging
- However Jews are not to lock themselves in a self-imposed ghetto but are exhorted to be like God by being a light unto the nations (Isaiah 42:6) and to engage in gemilut chassadim (good deeds)
- Similarly the nuns who inhabit the Tyburn Convent are practicing their holiness - they have separated or 'cloistered' themselves off from the world and yet through their good works of charity throughout the world they are very much part of it.

Sew and Sew



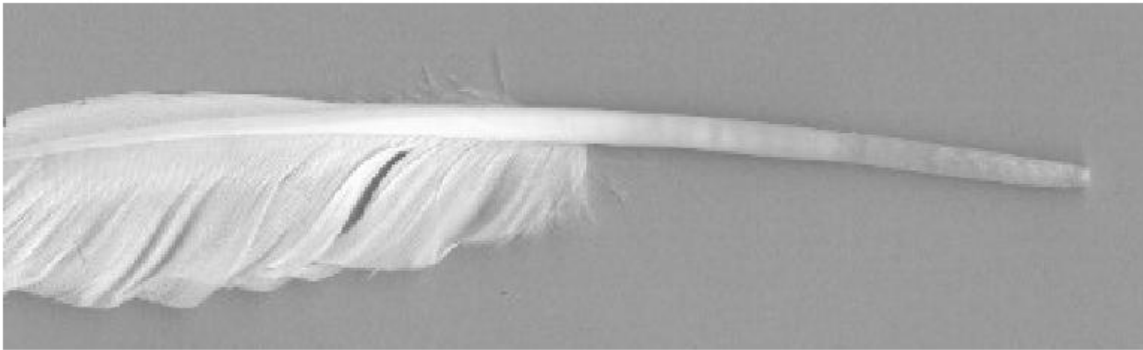
- Yeriya (sheets) are joined together with gidin (animal sinew) that is specially spun
- Sewn with a gold plated needle
- Relatively little seam damage

Dirt is bad

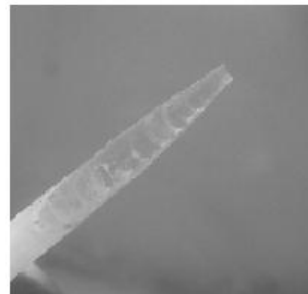


- Contrary to Persil's marketing campaigns dirt is *not* good - certainly not when it is on 18th Century parchment!
- Small black circles than spotted the parchment in patches – possibly insect droppings
- 'Muckiest' section was at the end - parchment was very creased and covered in stains which proved to include the remains of dead bugs. Yuk!
- Lots of careful scraping and flattening with a polished stone

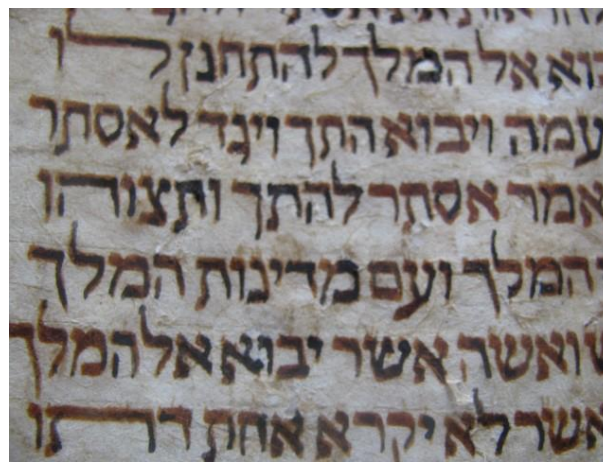
Quills



- Quill cutting – most scribes nowadays use a turkey quill
- The Tyburn megillah – being Sefardi was probably written with a reed
- Testing the quill by writing and crossing out Amalek.



Writing Over



- But most time was spent writing over and strengthening the faded and broken lettering occasionally sorting out spacing issues
- However scribal ink has to be black and to use that would have made the manuscript look very patchy
- So I used diluted ink which was browney-black to match it better

Matching the script

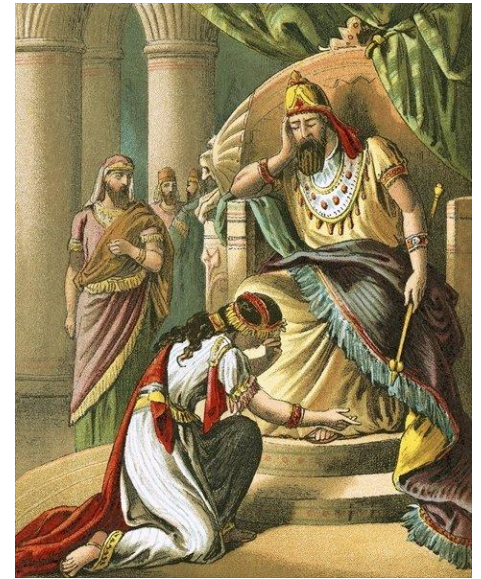


מלך לפני המלך חפז ואמר חרבו
לפני המלך גם העץ אשר
י אשר דבר טוב על המלך ע
שים אמה ויאמר המלך תלה
על העץ אשר הכין למרד
ביום ההוא
אסתר המלכה את בית המז צר

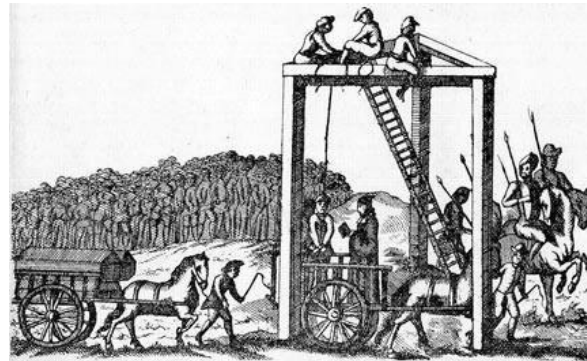
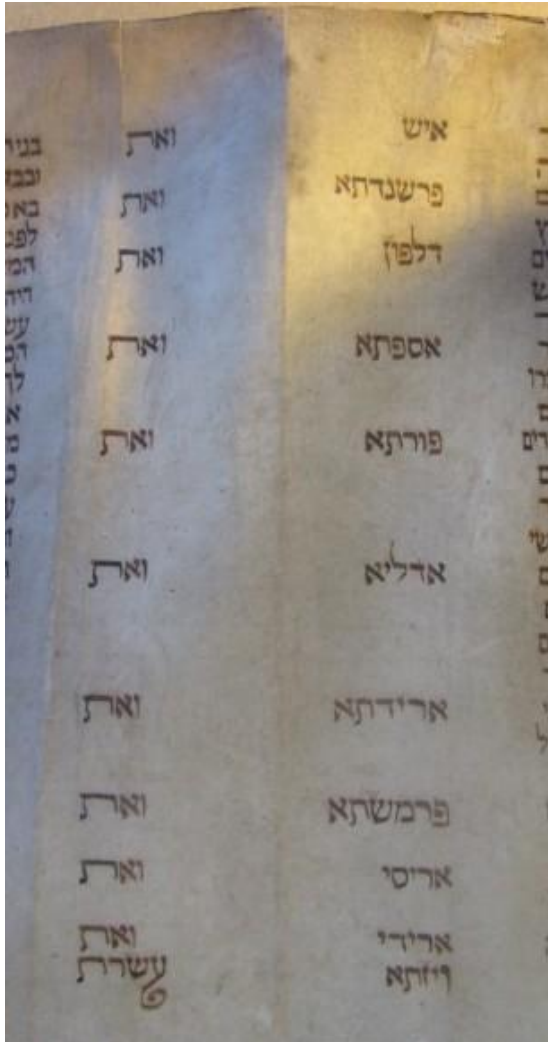
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מז על העץ אשר הכין למרד
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Parallels

- A king wants rid of his wife
- The queen – a strong minded woman has her own royal background
- The king authorises a religious persecution
- A special large hanging tree is built that can deal with multiple executions

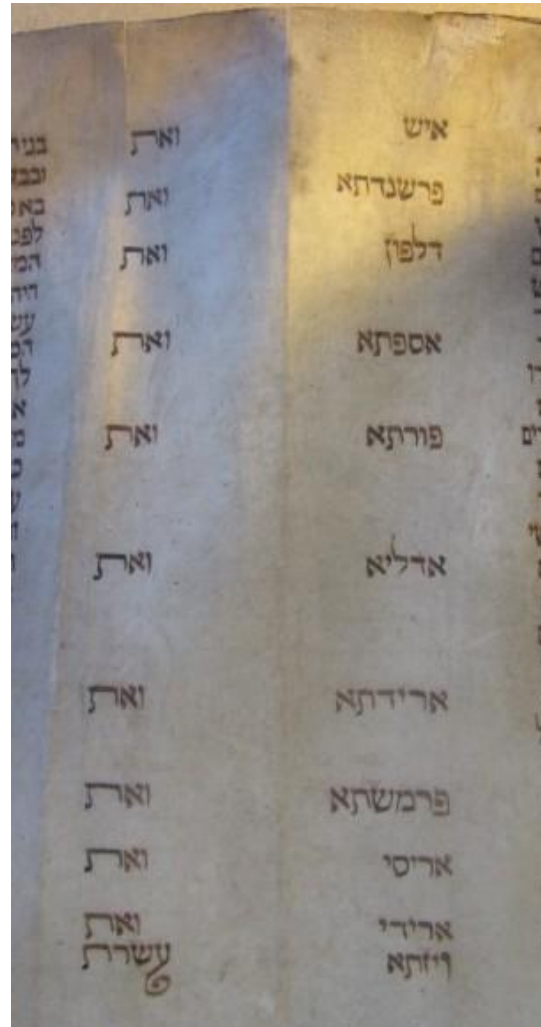


The Hanging Tree



Where our two stories most parallel but where they also most differ

(Not) Little and ...



- Our scribe didn't adhere to special small letters for sons of Haman but did at least keep the enlarged letter vav which symbolises the multiple hanging tree

- His spacing was also erratic to

say the

least

... (not) Large



- He also ignored the two special large letters at the start and end of the Megillah



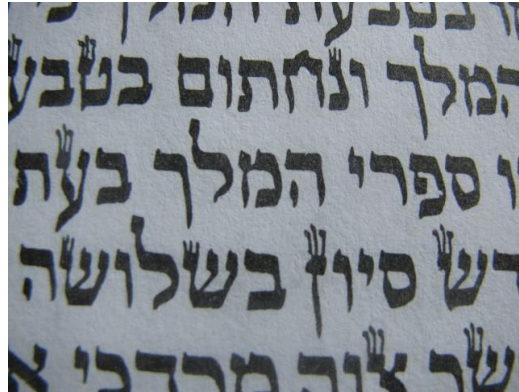
- The large chet in chur (white hangings) symbolising the garments of the High Priest misused by King Achashverosh



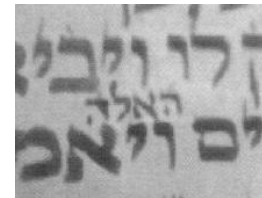
- The large tet in vatichtov Esther (and Esther wrote) symbolising repentance and the 22nd prophetess – Esther herself



The King is Missing



- The word Hamelech is key and appears no less than 187 times in the *Megillah*, or in this case 186!
- Scraping and rewriting the cramped text would have looked terrible
- However in the days that this was written there was a different way of fixing so we adopted that



God is missing in the Megillah

- It is a source of some considerable consternation amongst the sages and commentators that the King, i.e. God is not mentioned in the book of Esther - not even once - and yet it is He, who is clearly orchestrating events
- This provides the reason that the first thing that a trainee *sofer* (scribe) learns to write is *Esther*; as it does not contain the name of God though many scribes try to create artifices that show God in the *Megillah*
- There is no real getting away from it. God is not in the narrative
- Is God hiding from us? Or are we hiding from him?
- Where was God in the Shoah – where was He during when Catholics were being killed on the Tyburn Tree?
- God conceals himself or is he in plain sight - we are just unable to recognise him and his works? So perhaps we have to find God
- There is no such thing as a coincidence - God is moving things in a mysterious way, arranging things behind the scenes

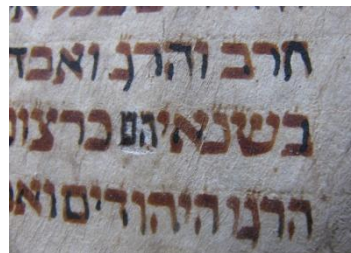
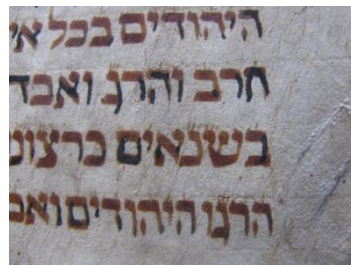
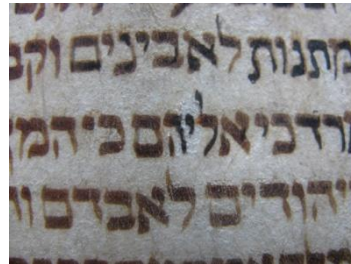
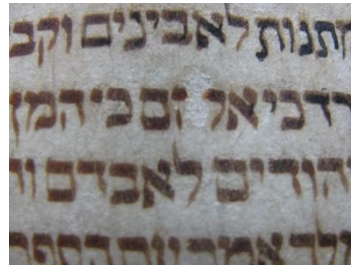
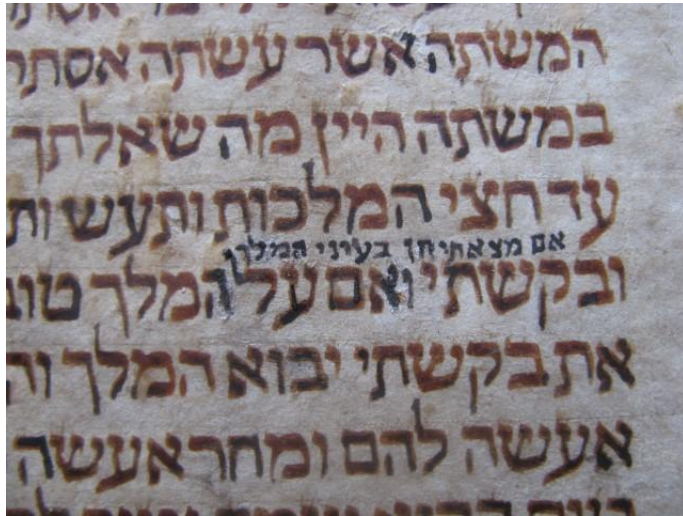
‘God dwells wherever man lets him in’.

Scorning the Booty

- But I couldn't avoid scraping as the scribe repeated a whole phrase where the Jews scorned the booty and did not profit from their victory over their oppressors
- In stark contrast to our two kings – Achashverosh who sanctioned the murder taking of Jews and taking their property and Henry who would confiscate lands and wealth once he had his enemies killed
- Fortunately, in this case the letters that could be stretched were present, however one doesn't normally stretch the letters quite so much as was the case here

דהלרת

Proofreading



- I wasn't expecting to, but eventually I just found too many mistakes and proofread the entire Megillah
- Some spelling errors, some spacing issues, joined letter and in some cases missing words or whole phrase!
- Some errors had lessons to teach about faith, hope and good deeds

The ganze Megillah



- Eventually the work was complete. The Megillah was kasher 'b'dieved' (after the event) for the first time in its long history

The Beeb and the Book



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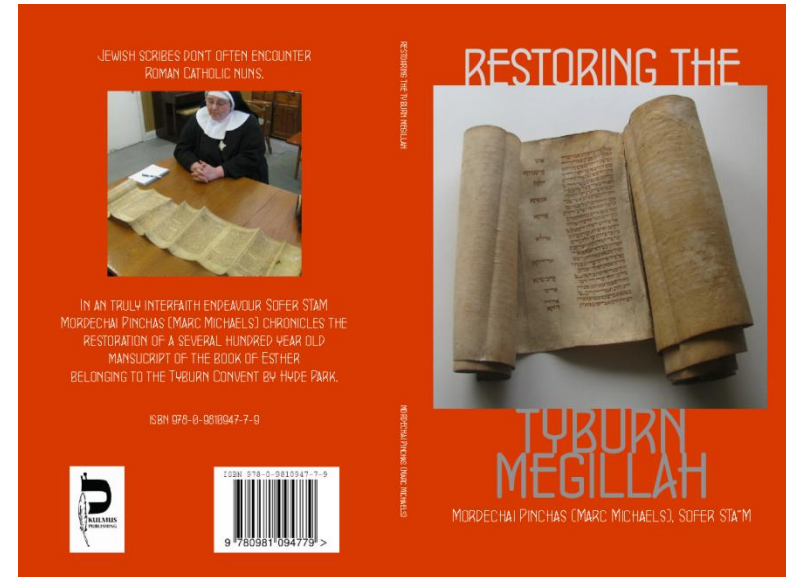
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“we are all the children of Abraham in faith’ and therefore a character like Esther does have a special importance ... because hopefully out of that comes a rescue and a reprieve and an enlightenment on a spiritual level, at least, for humanity”

Mother General, BBC interview