

Miketz / Hanukkah 5786

מקץ חנוכה תשפ"ז

A Light for One, a Light for a Hundred

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When I look at the Prato Haggadah in our [exhibition at the Grolier Club](#), I think of the man who once protected it. His name was Ludwig Pollak. Born in Prague in 1868, Pollak became one of Rome's leading Jewish scholars of classical art. He directed the Museo Barracco, advised the Vatican's archaeological collections, and was known in scholarly circles for identifying the missing arm of the ancient Laocoön statue—an act of quiet brilliance that restored a broken masterpiece. Pollak loved objects that told human stories. He saw his work as guarding memory. In October 1943 the Nazis deported him, his wife Ida, and their son Wolfgang from Rome to Auschwitz. They were murdered soon after arrival. The light he tended—the art, the books, the history—outlived him. That is where this *d'var Torah* begins: with a man who preserved light even as the world around him went dark.

When I read Parashat Miketz I feel the same movement from darkness to light. Joseph is brought from the pit (Gen. 37:24) and from prison (Gen. 41:14) into Pharaoh's court, where he interprets dreams and saves a nation from famine. Later, when his brothers fear that he will punish them, he answers, "*Hatahat elohim ani?*—Am I in the place of God?" (Gen. 50:19). Joseph knows his role is to preserve, not to possess. He is a guardian of life, not its owner. Pollak was too—a guardian of light and of memory.

Pollak had been the owner of the Prato Haggadah for many years. Before his deportation he made clear

that he wished the manuscript to pass to the Prato family, close friends of his from Rome who had fled to Egypt before the war because of their anti-fascist politics. After the war his surviving relatives fulfilled that wish and transferred the book to them, now in Israel. Decades later, the Prato family donated the Haggadah to The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary so that it could be studied and displayed in public—a fulfillment of Pollak's own belief that light and learning belong in the open.

Scholars have noticed that this fourteenth-century Spanish manuscript is unusual. It contains the entire narrative of the *Magid* section of the Haggadah, but it omits the table rituals: there is no kiddush, no blessing over matzah or maror, no *birkat hamazon*. As former JTS Librarian Menahem Schmelzer pointed out, it was probably not made for a single family seder at home. It was meant for public reading—perhaps in a synagogue or communal hall — a book built for many eyes. Its purpose was to be seen. That origin makes its modern life in a public collection feel like a return to form.

The Talmud moves this idea about being a guardian of light into practice. In Shabbat 21b the sages teach the law of Hanukkah: "*ner ish u-veito*—the light of a person and their household." One light per household is enough to fulfill the commandment. But we are told to add more if we can—one for each person, or an increasing number each night. Holiness is measured not by luxury but by inclusion. Every home must shine. And the light should be visible. The Gemara

says to place it at the door or in the window so passers-by will see it. That practice is called *pirsumei nisa*—proclaiming the miracle. I keep that commandment literally. I set my menorah outside by the door so the neighborhood can see it burn. Every flame is a statement: light belongs in the open.

That is the same principle behind a public collection. A book locked away in private hands may be safe, but it is silent. Placed in a library or a museum, it can shine. Pollak spent his life bringing ancient objects into view so that others could learn from them. The Prato Haggadah's presence at the Grolier Club is an act of *pirsumei nisa*: a public retelling of how Jewish life and art endured against the odds.

Later, in Shabbat 122a, the Talmud uses the line “*ner le-ehad ner leme’ah*—a light for one is a light for a hundred.” It appears in a discussion about benefiting from a lamp lit by a non-Jew on Shabbat. If the lamp is already burning, one person’s use does not diminish another’s. The phrase is legal, not poetic—a compressed, well-made sentence in the rabbinic style. But it holds a larger truth. Light is not reduced by sharing. So it is with knowledge, art, and memory. When we open the Haggadah to many, we multiply its reach. A light for one is a light for a hundred.

That sentence gains force when set against what Pollak and his world faced. Nazism sought to erase culture: burning books, looting libraries, and staging the infamous exhibit of “degenerate art.” To preserve a Jewish manuscript in that time was not only scholarly act but an act of defiance.

The rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah 2:4 say that when God created light on the first day (Genesis 1:3–4), it was a radiance so pure that “a person could see from one end of the world to the other.” Predicting how human beings would abuse that gift, God hid it away for the righteous in the future. The Prato Haggadah belongs

to that kind of light—a radiance kept safe through centuries of exile, sale, and war. Some treasures must be concealed to be saved. But eventually they must surface. A light hidden forever is a light lost. Jewish study and Jewish libraries exist to bring these ideas out when the time is right.

Bereshit Rabbah 3:6 adds one more principle: “Everything the Holy One created in His world He created for His glory.” If that is true, then every act of sharing a book or a work of art is a small restoration of divine purpose. We honor creation when we allow its light to be seen. Pollak believed that, and so do I. A public collection is a form of praise.

A light for one, a light for a hundred. That is the message of Miketz and of Hanukkah, of the Prato Haggadah and of Pollak’s life. Hidden light is meant to be brought back into the world. Our task is to guard it, share it, and keep it burning where all can see.

More information about the JTS Library exhibit, “Jewish Worlds Illuminated: A Treasury of Hebrew Manuscripts from The JTS Library” including a virtual tour can be found at jtsa.edu/library-exhibits/ or follow the QR code below:

