

The Vatican Library and ‘The Szyk Haggadah’

By Irvin Ungar

IT WAS December 9, 2024. I was in Rome. I received the invitation, “We will be pleased to welcome you tomorrow at 12 noon.” The 10th would be my birthday, and I was invited by private invitation to the Vatican Apostolic Library. “The Deputy Prefect, Dr. Timothy Janz, will welcome you” the email continued. I had no illusions that I would see the second set of stone tablets of the Ten Commandments (the first set was smashed by Moses) or the Ark of the Covenant the Israelites carried through the wilderness, but maybe, just maybe, I would see *The Szyk Haggadah*.

Eight years before, the limited premier edition of *The Szyk Haggadah* I created (2006-08) had been donated to the Vatican Library by New York friends and patrons Joanna S. Rose and her husband, Daniel. I now had an opportunity to see it housed at the Vatican but had no idea of what to expect.

After presenting my credentials (essentially my passport for its safekeeping) to the Swiss guards and gendarmes at the Vatican City gate at Porta Sant’Anna, I was directed to the library, not far from Saint Peter’s Square, the Sistine Chapel, and Michelangelo’s *Pietà*. Szyk was in the neighborhood and literally in the company of the most high, and I wanted to pay respects. Yes, he was in New York’s Metropolitan Museum, the British Library, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, but this was the Vatican – the prophet Isaiah’s words “holy, holy, holy”



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Irvin Ungar with Vatican hosts in the Sistine Hall, The Vatican Library

seemed to perfectly fit here.

There was also a unique connection between the Vatican Library, its manuscript collection, and Arthur Szyk’s Haggadah. It turns out that in the preparation of my limited edition, I hired Jerusalem-based photographer Ardon Bar-Hama to come to my northern California home to digitize the original Szyk Haggadah manuscript (Łódź, 1934-36), loaned to me by its then owners, Paul and Sheri Robbins. What were Bar-Hama’s qualifications? A year earlier, he had been invited to the Vatican to digitize its oldest complete manuscript of the Bible (OT and NT) – the *Codex Vaticanus*, dating from the 4th century CE, written in Greek in the Land of Israel. My thinking was if he was good enough for the Vatican, he was definitely the right man for me!

As I sat in an elegant waiting room, Dr.

Janz entered with a colleague, Dr. Delio Proverbio, curator of Oriental Manuscripts at the library. Now, with a package under my arm for show and tell at the right moment, I felt entirely comfortable, ready to meet my hosts and soon-to-be new friends.

After handshakes and some very pleasant chatting, I was escorted to the Sistine Hall in the library (not to be confused with the Sistine Chapel), not open to the casual visitor. It, too, had its own other worldly ceiling, with its accompanying painted columns of distinguished “historical” figures going back to Adam – all tracing the history of the alphabet and writing. I was in a zone, rarefied air, feeling highly privileged, and being treated as a dignified guest. I was introduced to a priest in the hall, who was also a lawyer on the council advising the highest Papal Court on deli-

cate matters. I put forth my hand, telling him that as a rabbi and former rare book dealer, this was not merely a singular privilege for me but also meaningful on multiple levels for which I was so grateful. Taking leave of the priest-lawyer and passing through centuries-old thick iron doors, my companions and I entered the most elegant of wood-paneled rooms, adorned with 16th-century wood engravings of library scenes, and there – there in front of us, so magnificently displayed, I was blown away. Wow! The premier edition of *The Szyk Haggadah* was open, laid across a long table, with its custom box, extra portfolio of prints, and companion volume, presented in royal fashion for any royal visitor. Szyk and I were meeting up in the Vatican, and this special moment was not lost on me for even one second. It was all eternally heavenly.

Time was allocated for me to explicate for several minutes. I wasn't rushed at all as my hosts leaned into my comments on Szyk's illuminations. Naturally, my first comments referenced his picture of the Messiah, the only known Haggadah illus-

tration that dares to feature a picture of the deliverer, sitting at the gates of Rome, unraveling a long white bandage from his leg. I thought this image would capture my listeners immediately, bridging our two traditions. We were off and running.

Of particular interest to them was also the image of the *Family at the Seder*, to which Szyk had added a crest of the city of Lwów (now Lviv, Ukraine), which thoroughly interested my viewers. As I moved from explaining a few more illustrations within the Haggadah, I was cognizant that I was also at the library to see treasures not normally seen by the public, so I hastened to conclude my comments.

For an interlude, though, I opened the package I had carried under my arm when I first entered. From it I took Arthur Szyk's first edition print of his *Visual History of Israel*, signed by him, and I presented it to the Vatican's representatives. I paused, and so did the popes of history, contained within the framed pictures hanging on the walls around us. What were they thinking of this rabbi elevating the status of the Jewish people and the State of Israel within their holy of holies? I can only say that my hosts, who at that moment represented the Catholic Church in real time, were genuinely appreciative, welcoming and filled with goodwill, and excitedly discussing who should handle this gift and to which section of the library it should be announced and designated.

We time-traveled for the next half hour through a hall with partial tombstones set within the walls on either side, predating Christianity by six or seven centuries, engraved in various languages and running well into the 9th to 10th centuries CE. It was a walk through history. We conclud-

ed back in the Sistine Hall, where the monumental pair of ornamental gifts of Pope Pius VII to Napoleon upon his consecration in Notre Dame Cathedral were within arms' reach.

On the way out, I was taken to a recently opened exhibit of the rarest of rare manuscripts in the Vatican collection of 13th-century religious thinker Saint Thomas Aquinas, one of the great teachers synthesizing reason and divine revelation.

Can I say that my day was blessed? Indeed, it was a happy day of rebirth. Isn't that what we hope to do on our birthdays, carrying the blessings of the past and present into the future? ■

Irvin Ungar's article "Freedom Illuminated: My journey with 'The Szyk Haggadah'" was the April 22, 2019, cover story of The Jerusalem Report. His book Arthur Szyk: Soldier in Art was a winner of the National Jewish Book Award (2017). His memoir about his life with Arthur Szyk will be published by the University of Texas Press, Austin, in 2025.



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'The Szyk Haggadah' on display at The Vatican Library



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Discussing the Haggadah illuminations.