

Women's League for Conservative Judaism

Orpah's List Selection

People of the Book

By Geraldine Brooks

Study Guide

Historical fiction is a very rich genre of literature; part history, part novel, it allows the reader to venture into other historic settings and times, viewed through the lens of a fictitious observer and or participant. A good historic novel brings history to life in a way that is engaging and enriching. Such is the WLCJ Orpah's List selection, Geraldine Brooks, *People of the Book*.

The book has two central characters: Hannah Heath, the academically precocious but emotionally fragile manuscript conservator, and the manuscript she has been sent to evaluate, the Sarajevo Haggadah. While the manuscript is indeed real, and resides still today in the National Museum in Sarajevo, the story of its miraculous preservation by Jewish exiles from Spain in 1492 – through post-Renaissance Italy, fin-de-siecle Vienna, and war-torn Yugoslavia (in 1942 and again in the 1990s) are all the creation of the novelist's imagination.

Synopsis: Hannah Heath, an expert in manuscript preservation, has been called to Sarajevo to evaluate the priceless Hebrew illuminated haggadah that originated in 14-15th century Spain and is not in its final resting place in Yugoslavia. Hannah is transfixed by the lush colors and unexpected illustrations contained in the work. The images were astounding, a contradiction of the long held assumption that Jews refrained from artistic representation due to the second commandment's prohibition against the creation of graven images. Yet the Sarajevo Haggadah and a number of others like it were created in pre-expulsion Spain.

During her time in Sarajevo, Hannah, who has been damaged by her emotionally distant mother – a brilliant surgeon who never married, nor spoke of Hannah's father — is drawn to another fragile personality, Ozren Karaman, the elusive Muslim librarian who rescued the haggadah, yet again, during the Bosnian shelling of Sarajevo.

As Hannah peels away specks of evidence – insects, wine and blood spills, primitive restorations – she begins to piece together the book's remarkable journey as it traveled through time and space. In each historic period —present-day Sarajevo, a partisan unit during World War II, 19th century Vienna, 16th century Venice, and 14th century Spain – Brooks develops a finely crafted cast of characters whose associations with the book form independent narrative streams.

As the story progresses, Hannah's exhilarating discovery of the haggadah's history parallels the further disintegration of her relationship with her mother, but also ironically allows her to have a deeper understanding of her personal narrative.

The Sarajevo Haggadah

This haggadah is among the most interesting of all medieval Jewish illuminated manuscripts. *Nothing* is known of its creation, including the date (14th-15th century is only a reasoned estimate) except that it was one of a few such works that survived from pre-exilic Spain.

The manuscript consists of 142 folios of vellum, some contain illuminations and others the written Hebrew text of the Passover haggadah. The first 34 folios contain 39 remarkable miniatures of biblical scenes from creation to the exodus and the life of Moses. A few of the illuminations also deal with Pesach, the preparation and the seder itself. Their historic value is significant since they probably accurately reflect the interior of a Jewish home at the time of its creation, and the celebration of the seder itself.

Study Questions:

1. When Hannah implores Ozren to solicit a second opinion on Alia's condition, he becomes angry and tells her, "Not every story has a happy ending" (p. 37). To what extent do you believe that their perspectives on tragedy and death are cultural? To what extent are they personal?
2. Isak tells Mordechai, "At least the pigeon does no harm. The hawk lives at the expense of other creatures that dwell in the desert" (p.50). If you were Lola, would you have left the safety of your known life and gone to Palestine? Is it better to live as a pigeon or a hawk? Is there another alternative?
3. When Father Vistorni asks Rabbi Judah Aryeh to warn the [Jewish] printer that the Church disapproves of one of their recently published texts, Aryeh tells him, "Better you do it than to have us so intellectually enslaved that we do it for you" (p.156). How would you characterize Aryeh's handling of Vistorni's request?
4. What was it, ultimately, that made Father Vistorini approve the haggadah? Since Brooks leaves this part of the story unclear, how do you imagine it made its way from his rooms to Sarajevo? [See page with censor's signature (**Image I**): *Revisto per mi. Gio Domenico Vistorini, 1609*. (Surveyed by me, Giovanni Domenico Vistorini)]
5. Several of the novel's female characters lived in the pre-feminist era and certainly fared poorly at the hands of men. Does the fact that she was pushing for gender equality—not to mention saving lives—justify Sarah Heath's poor parenting skills? Would women's rights be where they are today if it weren't for women like her?
6. Have you ever been in a position where your professional judgment has been called into question? How did you react?
8. Was Hannah being fair to suspect only Amitai of the theft? Do you think charges should have been pressed against the culprits?
9. How did Hannah change after discovering the truth about her father? Would the person she was before her mother's accident have realized that she loved Ozren? Would she have risked the dangers involved in returning the codex?

The Sarajevo Haggadah's Illuminations in Context

Pages 183-184 "Heresy in the illumination"

Image 2

What is Vistorini's claim? How is this conversation historically revealing?

The earth is shown as round. While by the 16th century this was the mostly accepted position of theologians – it was only a century earlier that "Christians were being sent to the stake for this belief."

"Illuminator had ventured into dangerous territory": top right panels, a golden orb meant to be the sun. (It is placed inside of a series of blue concentric circles, closest to the middle.) Vistorini condemns it as the "helio-centric" (sun-centered) theory of the universe, espoused by Galileo, that was made to retract by the Inquisition.

What might this suggest about differences in scientific inquiry in the Christian and in the Jewish-Muslim worlds?

Passover images

In **Image 3** the host is serving haroset (written in Hebrew above illumination); in **Image 4** the host is serving matzah (Hebrew below panel)

What might this scene be suggesting about the preparation of Pesach foods?

Perhaps that these festival foods were prepared communally and people went to obtain portions for their households.

Perhaps the community oversaw the preparation of matzah to assure its halakhic strictures to avoid contact with chametz that might still be present in private homes.

Interior of the synagogue (Identified above as synagogue, *beit hakeneset*)

What kinds of images can you identify in **Image 5**? What might we learn about synagogues from that time?

The wooden ornamental structure in the center is the bimah, the central location in Sephardic synagogues.

The ark (above) contains dressed sifrei Torah with simple gold (?) crowns.

Lamps on either side of the ark are typical of Sephardic synagogue lamps. In Sephardic communities the ark is called the *heikhal* (Temple in Jerusalem).

A synagogue attendant is closing the doors of the heikhal.

On the way out of the synagogue, a father appears to be blessing his children.

The exteriors of Sephardic synagogue were very plain and unadorned so as not to call attention to the religious activities going on inside. This was the case with most synagogues in both the east and the west until the 19th century. The interiors, of course, could be as lavish and adorned as the worshippers desired.

Passover Seder

What images in **Image 6** identify this as a Passover seder? [Some manuscript specialists think that this might have been added to the codex later, after the other images.]

Head of household is leaning against a pillow

Bowl of eggs

Meat (shankbone ?)

Matzah

Wine decanter

Wine goblets

Other points of interest:

Lamps extending from the ceiling are typical of Islamic Spain and North Africa.

There is no seder plate; the symbols are placed randomly about the table.

There is a black woman seated on the far side of the table. Is she a servant (and hence separate from the others) or perhaps a Moorish guest? (Brooks, pg. 315: "Then it came into my head to add myself to the gathering. I have given myself a gown of saffron...")

What do you think about Brooks' idea of the Moor's identity?

Final Discussion Question: There is an amazing array of "people of the book"—both base and noble—whose lifetimes span some remarkable periods in human history. Who is your favorite and why?

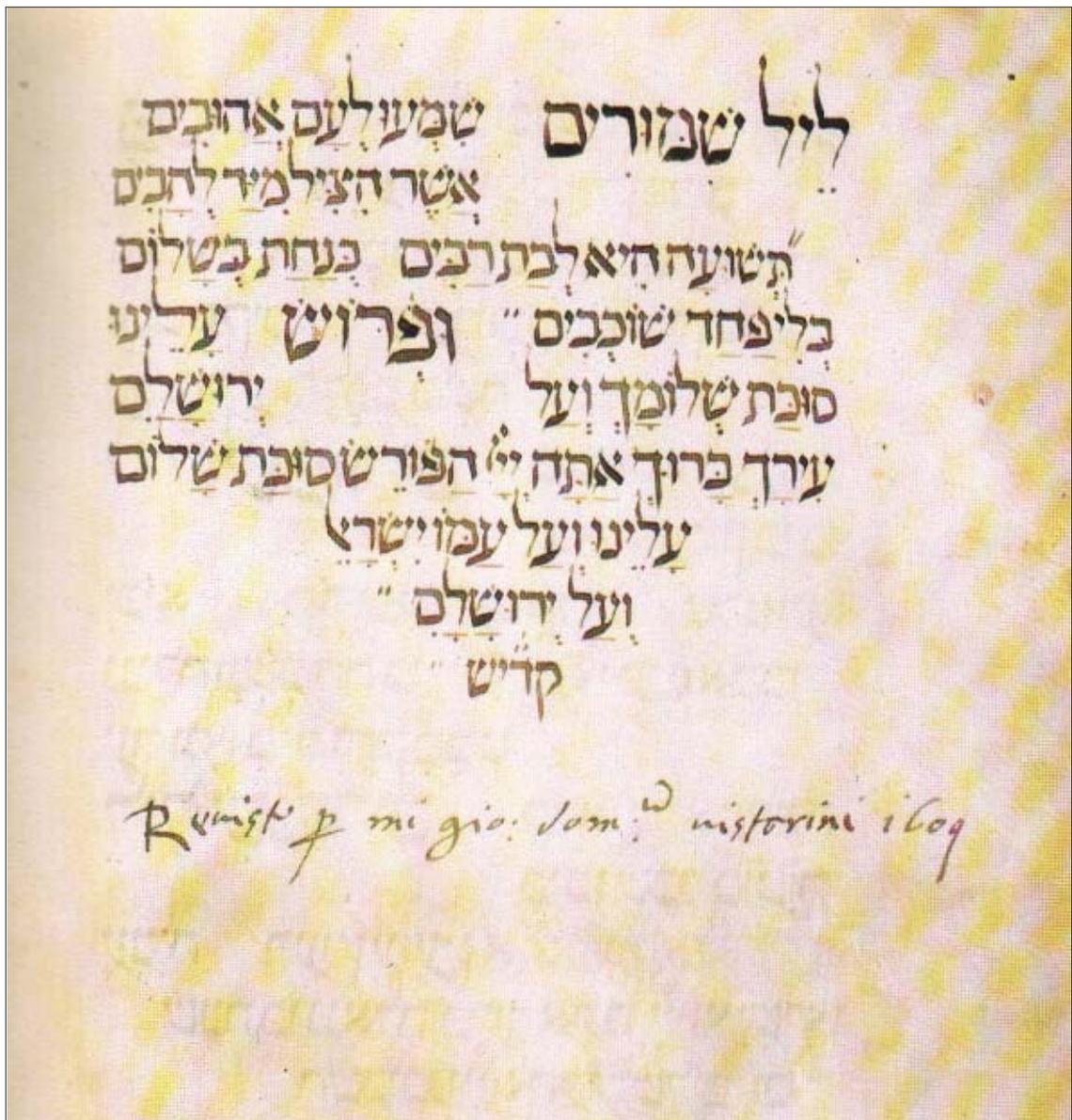
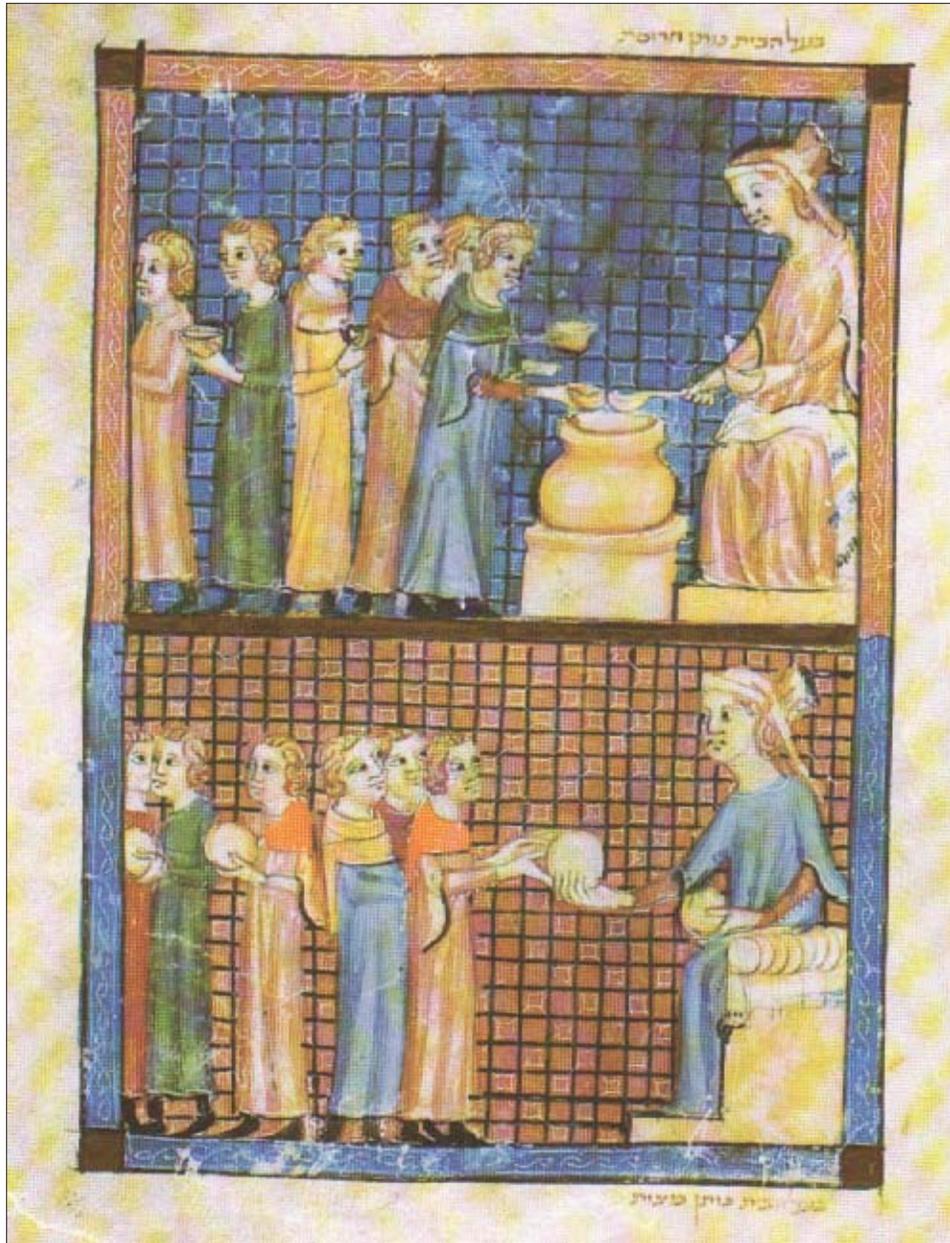


IMAGE 1



IMAGE 2



IMAGES 3 AND 4

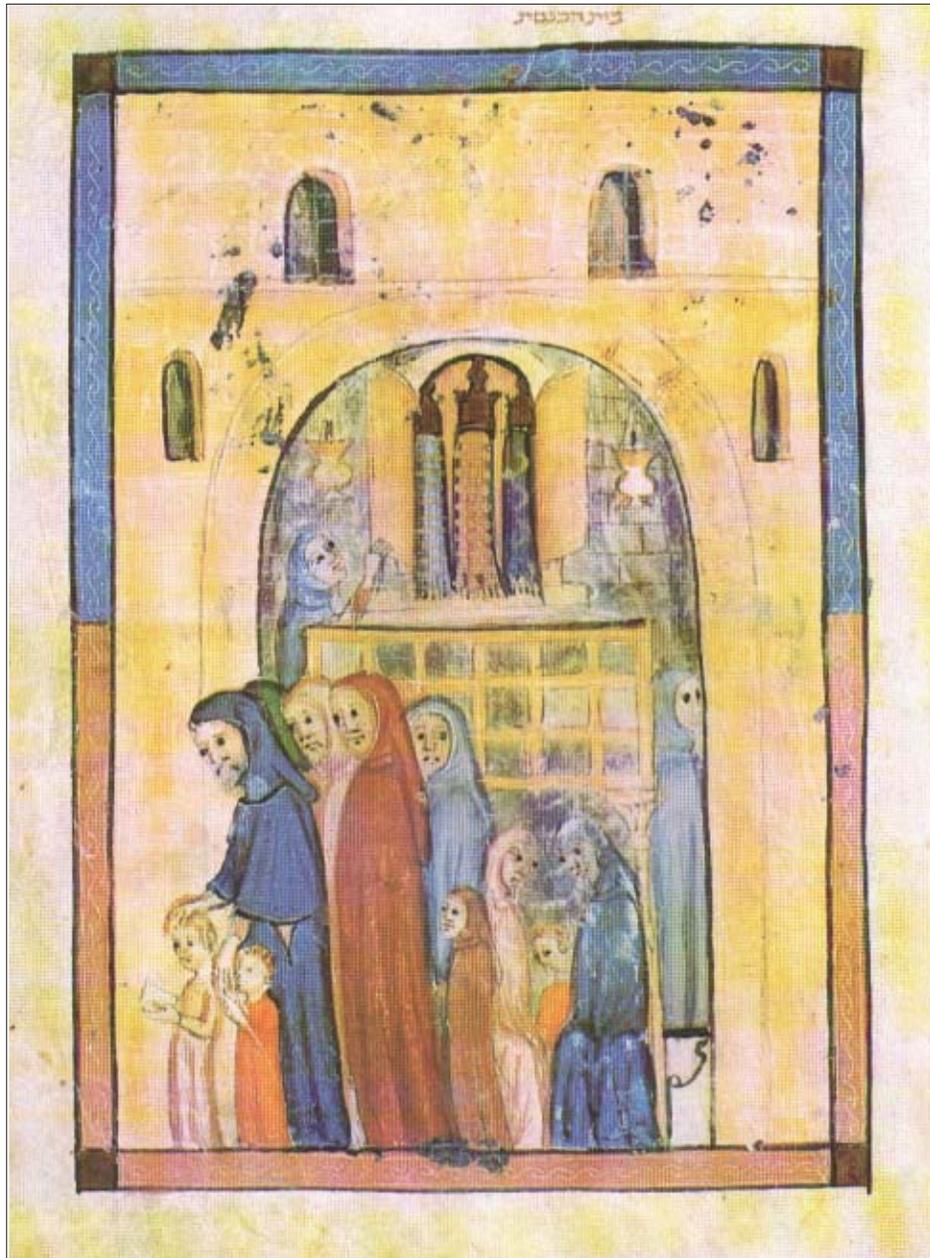


IMAGE 5



IMAGE 6