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The Rise of Judaic Calligraphy in the Twentieth Century

STEPHEN MICHAEL COHEN

Excluding religiously required safrut (e.g., handwritten Torah scrolls, mezuzot, tefillin, gittin), artistic aspects of Judaic calligraphy declined after moveable type was invented in the fifteenth century. Rediscovery of medieval calligraphic techniques in late nineteenth-century Britain, plus contemporaneous typographical studies in Germany, spurred revival of artistic calligraphy. The first Arts and Crafts movement, pre-World War I German research into aesthetic letterforms, and the Bezalel Academy sparked a rise of secularized Judaic calligraphy. Growth of folk arts and ethnic pride in the 1960s and accessible photocopiers in the 1970s allowed nonspecialists to become expert calligraphers.

Since the 1990s, Jews in North America have been privileged to find a wide selection of Judaic calligraphic art available for ritual and artistic use. Yet that has not always been the case, for artistic calligraphy was not a prominent part of Jewish life until the final quarter of the twentieth century. In this essay I analyze factors that brought calligraphy into the Judaic art world: the rise of a supposedly democratic folk-art movement, Jewish ethnic pride, and—perhaps surprisingly—the rise of cheap image-reproducing machinery. The story is not well known, even among practitioners of Jewish calligraphy. Most modern Jewish calligraphers seem to be unaware of these factors and assume that the rise of Judaic calligraphy occurred gradually.

Calligraphy in the Western and Arab lands evolved into a high art during the Middle Ages (Anderson 1969; Drogin 1980; Nesbitt 1957). Jewish calligraphy generally followed conventions and styles of the surrounding dominant culture,
from the styles of illuminations to the shapes of the letterforms (David 1990; Roth 1969). That is, Hebrew calligraphic scripts in Arab lands often developed into a flowing curved style reminiscent of Arabic writing, while a bolder, squarer hand appeared in Germanic areas, reminiscent of Black Letter or Fraktur (figure 1).

A sharp break occurred at the end of the medieval period with the invention of moveable type, when scribal arts became unnecessary to publish books. Within a few years of Johann Gutenberg’s first books, around 1440, Jews accepted printing gladly (Anderson 1969; Nesbitt 1957). A Jew, Davin de Caderousse, studied printing in Avignon in 1444 (Goldson 2020). The first Jewish printed books (ca. 1470) were likely Teshuvot She’elot ha-Rashba (The Responsa of Adret) (Penn Libraries 2016). The Catholic world had mixed feelings about the spread of printing, because a reader might learn about the Bible without an officially approved
Catholic teacher (McDaniel 2015, 30–31; Special Collections n.d.). Jews, though, were universally in favor of spreading Torah knowledge, as per Isaiah 11:19: 
*Ki-mal’ā ha’ arets, de’ā et-Adonai, kamayim, layam m’khasim* (for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Eternal, as the waters cover the sea). As Jewish historians and writers Amoz Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger note, “Jewish continuity has always hinged on uttered and written words, on an expanding maze of interpretations, debates, and disagreements. . . . Ours is not a bloodline but a textline” (Oz and Oz-Salzberger 2012, 1).

As cheap printed books spread, the moveable-type process inadvertently destroyed large swaths of the Western calligraphic tradition, including the scriptorium (Anderson 1969, 117). Letter writing, official record keeping, business correspondence, and royal documents remained to support the remnants. Moveable type, first designed to be reminiscent of late medieval hands, began to diverge in style from written letter shapes. But for individual purposes not suited to mass production (especially personal letter writing), learning to write fashionably stayed important, adding to the popularity of instructional copybooks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see figure 2. Anderson 1969, 134–152; Benson 1954; Nesbitt 1957, 80–102).

In the Jewish world, printing also removed the reason for elaborate manuscripts, except in certain individualized cases (David 1990, 55; Roth 1969, 7). For example, the *ketubah*, the Jewish marriage contract, is an individualized document pertaining to a specific bride and groom in a particular place and date (see figure 3). Such *ketubot* often became quite elaborate with regards to the illumination—but the letterforms themselves were not especially artistic or innovative after the Renaissance (Davidovitch 1968). Another example of Jewish calligraphic art is the *Shvisi* or *Shviti* (Şalom Turkey 2020; Spagnolo 2016). This form of text, popular during the eighteenth century and thereafter, is a symbolic representation of a menorah used to meditate or contemplate God’s four-letter name. It often incorporates micrography. The term *Shviti* comes from Psalm 16:8, *shiviti Adonai l’negdi tamid* (I have placed the Eternal always before me).

The rise of the Industrial Age in Europe around 1800 further eviscerated the Western calligraphic tradition. Mechanization in industry was even applied to
handwriting, such as devising interchangeable pen strokes, like interchangeable parts of machinery, into what Alexander Nesbitt, a professor of design, called “the final emergence of an impersonal, sterile letter” (Nesbitt 1957, 152). Technology helped to postpone calligraphy’s death through the invention of durable steel tips for pens instead of feather nibs in the early nineteenth century, but death still was
inevitable. Growth of universal schooling required the development of easy “cursive” styles, rather than catering to an interest in caddels (highly flourished capital letters) and flourishes to the lettering as in previous centuries. In *Calligraphy: The Art of Written Forms*, graphic designer and university professor Donald M. Anderson attempts to distinguish between “personal cursive” and calligraphic writing: “The distinction lies in the number of times the pen is lifted,” that is, how connected the individual letters are (Anderson 1969, 118).
Yet Jewish calligraphy remained in a weakened but not entirely obsolete state, mainly leaving intact the ritual sofer, the required writer of safrut, whose job is to create holy manuscripts such as Torah scrolls, mezuzot, mizrachim (from “East,” a plaque on the wall indicating the direction to pray), gittin (divorce decrees), and other ritually needed items (Siegel, Strassfeld, and Strassfeld 1973, 201–209). Calligraphy for these documents was generally formulaic, because the writing had to be clearly legible even by a child, as per Jewish law (Friedman 2014). There was not much room for textual or calligraphic innovation. Interestingly, a formal “cursive” handwriting style with connected letters never developed in Hebrew, despite commonly used handwritten forms (I exclude occasional ligatures such as the alef-lamed.). Many examples, however, of informal rapid connections between letters can be seen in records from the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian Empire’s official Jewish civil records (see, for example, Krakovsky, n.d.).

**Arts and Crafts Movement and Modern Western Calligraphy**

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, calligraphy was essentially dead in the West, replaced by school-taught, rapid copybook scripts and the outré typography of the Victorian age. Except for safrut, this was also true of European Jewish calligraphy: by the nineteenth century, many shviti manuscripts were printed rather than handwritten. Many ketubot became pre-printed “fill-in-the-blank” style, with unadorned handwriting added at the ceremony detailing the names, dates, and places, often published on cheap paper (see figure 5; see also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2010; Sephardic Studies Program 2019).

In typography, British illustrator John R. Biggs remarks that the Victorian “multiplicity of styles of lettering” brought “an exuberance of design that eventually led to a reaction” (Biggs 1977, 35). As a part of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain and the United States, in which handmade items became prized over mechanical reproduction, a rediscovery of calligraphy occurred through the nostalgic experimentation of English designer William Morris (1834–1896) around 1870 and, slightly later, codified by Edward Johnston (1872–1944) (Nesbitt 1957, 158–159; Obniski 2008). Johnston painstakingly researched and learned how to
reproduce medieval styles from scriptoria, using a broad-nibbed pen, and wrote the foundational book *Writing & Illuminating & Lettering* in 1906 describing his studies. Most modern calligraphers of Western Europe and North America regard Johnston, in fact, as the true founder of modern calligraphy (Biggs 1977, 35; Toby 1987, 4). Because of Morris and Johnston's formal art education, their work started the rise of what may be called “academic calligraphy,” the calligraphic art that was
taught in art institutes. Simultaneously with Johnston, in central Europe, Austrian Rudolph von Larisch (1866–1919) and German Rudolf Koch (1876–1934) also invented a uniquely Germanic form of lettering and typography. Von Larisch published *Unterricht in ornamentaler Schrift* (Instruction in Ornamental Writing, 1905); Koch was a renowned calligrapher, typographer, and professor of art (Botezatu 2017).

Modern interest in Western calligraphy therefore comes from two streams of
study: the British and the Germanic. As the twentieth-century English calligrapher Heather Child (1911–1997) noted, “The discovery of the beauty and discipline of these ancient hands engendered a creative vitality in calligraphers both in Britain and Germany and subsequently in America” (Child 1963, 9). Americans traveled to Europe to learn art during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including to England and Central Europe for calligraphy. Artists such as American Ernst Detterer (1888–1947) and German Georg (later George) Salter (1897–1967) learned their craft and brought the techniques back to North America for the artists to study. Detterer studied with Johnston in 1913, taught calligraphy at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1920s, and founded a calligraphic study group at the Newberry Library in 1941 (Detterer, Johnston, and Ricketts 1917). Salter taught calligraphy at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City in the late 1930s. He was from a Jewish family that converted to Christianity in Germany and was forced to flee in the early 1930s from Nazism to America, along with many German intellectuals (Kratzok and Parameshwar 2004). Russian-American Paul Standard (1896–1992), who emigrated to America as a child, taught at Parsons School of Design and Cooper Union (Shunammite Press 2019). He published an article, “Our Handwriting,” in a popular women’s magazine, Woman’s Day, in 1947 to explain calligraphy to the masses (Standard 1947). Examination of Filby’s 1963 compilation of American calligraphy and handwriting shows a clear break in styles between the pointed-pen “handwriting” or copperplate style from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the broad-nibbed hands from the 1910s onward, a direct result of the British-German influence (Filby 1963).

After World War II in the United States and United Kingdom, the typically taught form of calligraphy was Italic, also called Chancery script. Gothic or Black Letter was also popular, but it is far less legible to the modern eye. Among the British calligraphers who promoted the Italic hand were George Thomson (Scottish, 1916–2001) and Donald Jackson (English, born 1938). Jackson, a royal scribe, came to the United States to deliver lectures and workshops on his art in the 1960s and helped inspire calligraphers in the New York area to establish in 1974 the Society of Scribes, the first American calligraphy organization (Kelly and Koeth
The Rise of Modern Judaic Calligraphy

Coinciding with the rise of European Arts and Crafts, the Zionist movement deemed Jewish arts necessary for a Jewish nation. Under the auspices of Theodor Herzl and the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905, Russian-Jewish artist Shlomo-Zalman Dov-Baruch (later Boris) Schatz’s (1866–1932) creation of the Bezalel School in Palestine in 1906 fulfilled the Zionist dream of a national Jewish art institute (HUC-JIR 2013). The school was named for the Biblical head artisan constructing the Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant (Exod. 31:2–11 and chapters 36 to 39). The institution floundered financially through the 1920s, finally closing in 1929. The artist Joseph Budko (1888–1940) from Płońsk, Poland, who studied the arts in Berlin, revived Bezalel in 1935, focusing on lettering and graphic arts. By 1955 the State of Israel declared the Bezalel School an Academy of Art (Bezalel 2021). Ludwig Toby in Hebrew Artistic Lettering, first published in 1951, promotes the Zionist view of arts and calls for a revival of Hebrew calligraphy: “The revival of the idea of creating a Jewish state and its ultimate realization and the rebirth of Hebrew as a living tongue called for a modernized and ‘profaned’ script” (Toby 1990, 2).

During the 1950s, with the attention that the Roman alphabet was receiving from calligraphers and typographers in Britain and Germany, the Hebrew alphabet began to receive similar study. As late twentieth-century calligrapher Cara Marks noted, “Only recently have the Jewish people concentrated on the advancement of the Hebrew alphabet” (Marks 1990, xii). Mid-twentieth-century calligrapher Ismar David elaborated on this point:

While there is still a need for the writing of ritual texts, it is not the full answer to what Hebrew calligraphy should or can be. For the pursuit of calligraphy in general to be worthwhile, calligraphy has to be a relevant part of our culture. We therefore demand from it a degree of artistic self-expression
that was not necessary in the writing of manuscripts prior to the printing era.
(David 1990, 57)

Artistic Judaic calligraphy flourished before World War II in Austria and Germany, even to the point of creating multilingual works. One example is a bilingual German/Hebrew megillah of the Song of Solomon (“Das Hohelied Salomos,” 1936) by non-Jewish Austrian artist Friedrich “Fritz” Neugebauer (1911–2005), who was educated in Germany by von Larisch (Neugebauer 1980, 89).

Like George Salter, Franzisca Baruch (1901–1989) was a German refugee from the Nazis and firmly in the German school of calligraphy, having studied art and graphic design at the Staatlichen Kunstgewerbeschule Berlin. She emigrated to Palestine in 1933. Her calligraphic prowess was learned privately in Germany, which she put to use immediately by designing porcelain, typefaces, and later, banknotes, passports, and the Ha’aretz newspaper logo in Israel, among other items. A particularly fine example of her Hebrew calligraphy from the 1920s is shown in figure 7, a logo for a then-new Jewish art magazine, Rimon–Milgroim (Devroye 2022; Mishory 2019; Shunammite Press 2019).

A unique American form of Yiddish calligraphy is Yehoyesh’s Megiles Ester, a Yiddish translation of the Book of Esther, calligraphed by his daughter (and proofreader) Evelyn Dworkin (1906–1973). Yehoyesh (pen name for Solomon Blumgarten, 1872–1927) translated the entire Tanakh into Yiddish. Dworkin then calligraphed the Book of Esther in an unusual “primitive” style in 1936 (Yehoyesh 1936). The layout is similar to a traditional Megillat Ester in Hebrew (42 lines per column, with the initial letter enlarged). It is the only Yiddish printed megillah.
scroll. The unusual calligraphy was not done with a traditional broad pen but likely a drafting pen with a circular nib. This is a one-of-a-kind script not seen anywhere else.

Another Jewish calligrapher active during the interwar period was Russian-American Jew Reuben Leaf (1888?–1972?), who compiled during midcentury the first comprehensive book *Hebrew Alphabets: 400 B.C. to Our Days*, which shows examples of all sorts of folk lettering, from graves, newspaper mastheads, and a variety of logos from the first half of the twentieth century (Leaf 1976). His rationale for publishing his guidebook was that materials were lacking for professionals to examine: “The lack of such a hand-book, containing traditional forms of Hebrew script, has been the cause of difficulties and failure on the part of many a Jewish graphic artist and craftsman” (Leaf 1976, 1). His book, however, did not discuss the method of calligraphy and only supplied examples of alphabets. Leaf was one of the first students at the Bezalel School. During World War I he fled the Ottoman Empire and came to the United States, becoming a graphic artist and painter in New York City.

Perhaps the best book describing calligraphic Hebrew letterforms is Ludwig Toby’s (1902?–?) book *Hebrew Artistic Lettering*, which has gone through a dozen reprints retitled as *The Art of Hebrew Lettering*. A semi-professional graphic designer, Toby’s book became a highly sought-after reference. Besides a chart showing the evolution and relationship among various alphabets, it includes exemplars of a variety of calligraphed alphabets from medieval to modern. Toby’s stated goal was:

> It has been our intention throughout this publication to demonstrate the beauty and clarity of Hebrew letters. We are quite aware that much remains to be done and have made it our purpose to draw the attention of the expert, student and layman to the obstacles and problems which still exist for anyone devoted to this worth-while task. (Toby 1990, 6)

Among modern Hebrew calligraphers, Toby’s small book is regarded as the standard for basic Hebrew calligraphic letterforms (Toby 1990).
Another master in the academic lettering elite was Breslau-born Ismar David (1910–1996), a gifted calligrapher from the Arts & Crafts School of Berlin–Charlottenberg. At the age of 21 he won an international art award from the Jewish National Fund and made aliyah to Israel. Then in 1953 he moved to New York where he opened a studio for interior design, designing book jackets, and taught calligraphy at Cooper Union. His innovative book *The Hebrew Letter: Calligraphic Variations* (1990) gives a clear historical progression of how Hebrew calligraphy developed since ancient times in both Muslim and Christian lands. It includes 32 individual cards with exemplars of each alphabet for calligraphic study. David consciously invoked the copybooks of the Renaissance and Enlightenment by asserting, “This is a writing book in the tradition of European writing books of the past, but its distinction is that it is about the Hebrew alphabet” (David 1990, 1). His popular works included a variety of illustrations and book jackets in a unique calligraphic style, including the Jewish Publication Society’s volumes of the Tanakh (Jewish Publication Society 1962, 1978, 1982).

**Judaic Calligraphy Spreads to the Masses**

Israeli calligraphers and typographers of the mid-twentieth century clearly informed Americans taking up Judaic calligraphy in the 1960s and especially later, as Israeli written guides became more widely known. Yet the Israeli calligraphic movement was an Israeli fine art movement *per se*, aimed largely at developing fine arts from a Jewish nationalist perspective. The Americans from the 1960s onward, though, had their own agenda, that is, “democratic calligraphy”: the artistic elite did their museum-quality works, but *folk*-calligraphy was necessary for a *folk*-driven American spiritual and ethnic movement that did not necessarily require *safrut* training—or even any art education at all. The impetus for such “folk-calligraphy” was a drive to create ritual or ethnic objects for *oneself* rather than as a business to others.

While there was deliberate and consistent transfer of calligraphic knowledge between England and North America of the mid-twentieth century, there appears to have been much less communication between the Israeli artists and North...
American practitioners. Much of North American Jewish calligraphy seems to have been developed on the model and styles of the British-American calligraphic movement and not the Israeli one. Gina Jonas, in fact, acknowledges this in her own calligraphic style guide, *Hebrew Calligraphy Styles*, “Hence this book is written for the Western calligrapher, whether or not s/he knows the Hebrew language” (Jonas 1996, 1).

Gradually appreciation of American “folk art” as legitimate of study, appreciation, and exhibition appeared during the early-to-mid-twentieth century. This nationalist view from collectors and exhibitors seemed to hinge on what the various colonists and early founders created to make the United States a distinct nation, or perhaps they represented the creator’s personal spirit, allied with the individualism of the new Republic. (See, for example, a discussion of folk art in Bronner 1998, 413–474.) As Bronner explains,

> The special conditions of the United States, however, lent confusion to the application of folk arts according to European Romanticism. Unlike the clear connection to peasant work and communally shared traditions in Europe, folk arts in American exhibitions variously expressed the grass-roots strength of the nation or the distinctiveness of groups within it. Folk arts also variously reflected American tradition as self-taught or communally shared. (Bronner, 1998, 437)

In either case, Jewish artists who formerly subsumed their Jewishness to a general art esthetic began to take notice and create works that explicitly exuded a “Jewishness.” Examples of this effect include Max Weber, Abraham Rattiner, Morris Louis (McComas 2021), and, particularly for this essay, Ben Shahn’s *Alphabet of Creation*, a book about a tale from the Zohar, illustrated with Shahn’s unique irregular style of Hebrew lettering (Shahn 1965).

With Pop Art in the 1960s, mass culture became an acceptable source of art, including the “ephemeral and banal” (de la Croix and Tansey 1980, 871–873). Everyday objects by ordinary people were reclassified as “art.” A simultaneous appreciation of “mass culture” as legitimate art grew. As Niamh Coghlan has
noted, “Pop Art is mass culture; mass culture is Pop Art. The boundary between is indefinable, blurred and indivisible” (Coghlan 2008). Art began to enter the province of even amateurs, that is, those with no formal art-school education. The popularization of amateur, untrained artists led directly to consequences in the Jewish calligraphic world.

Placing American art in the context of American Jewry, sociologist Chaim I. Waxman observes:

One of the most serious weaknesses of many writings in American Jewish history and sociology is that they often study what was and is happening to American Jewry in a vacuum, that is, as if American Jews were “a people apart,” completely isolated from and unaffected by what was and is happening to and within American society as a whole. (Waxman 1983, xv)

Waxman's insight suggests the first direct cause of the rise of modern Judaic calligraphy in what Jonathan Sarna calls the “cult of synthesis” (Sarna 1998). Sarna describes his synthesis as how to be a good Jew combined with being a good American. Waxman commented on the trends of American Jewry in the late twentieth century that Jewish identity and Jewish assimilation are not necessarily opposed and, in fact, are “multidimensional and multidirectional.” He perceived “that an increasing number of American Jews are unaffiliated with the American Jewish communal structure, but have not undergone ‘identificational assimilation,’ the loss of identification with the ethnic group” (Waxman 1983, xviii). Put another way, this might be viewed as a democratization of the Jewish world, paralleling that phenomenon in the art world.

Waxman's concern was with the bulk of American Jewry in the 1980s, those Jews whose ancestors emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States during the Great Jewish Migration from the 1880s to the early 1920s. For him the First Generation was the adult immigrants themselves; the Second Generation comprises the children and those born immediately after immigration. The Third Generation consists of people he calls having religion without religiosity, and the Fourth Generation (the final chapter of his book) grew up in—as Robert Heinlein,
one of the deans of science fiction predicted it in 1941—the Crazy Years (i.e., the 1960s) and the 1970s (Heinlein 1941). It was this Fourth Generation that forged the changes in Jewish social structure away from the Jewish organizations and toward the Jewish community members themselves (Waxman 1983, 203–224).

Sarna refers to a merging of American and Jewish symbols, such as the American Thanksgiving holiday (Jews can give thanks to God for their bountiful harvest or dinner) or Independence Day on July 4th (Jews can be proud of the American freedom to be Jewish). Yet beyond Sarna’s obvious merging of symbols are deeper meanings deriving from an American worldview or mindset that affects Jewish cultural practices. For example, in the late 1960s through the early 1970s, a new wave of arts and crafts became popular among American folk artists and hobbyists, to the point of spurring the popularity of commercially sold kits for home-creation of handmade items. Such home kits included candle-dipping, making artificial flowers through dipping wire frames into polymer liquids, the often-joked-about macrame hangers for pots, needlepoint, tie-dyed clothing, decoupage, and string art. The interest in specifically old-fashioned or “colonial” handicrafts only ratcheted higher during celebration of the American Revolution Bicentennial in 1976. American Jewish culture followed many of these trends. Jews began adapting secular crafts into “Jewish” crafts at home, and even went as far as crafting their own informal prayer groups, or havurot (Prell 1989). The act of doing said crafts itself took on a religious significance, and “objects are part of ritual technologies of self,” as Jewish studies scholar Jodi Eichler-Levine details (2020, 60). Serious calligraphers know this “meditative” feeling while writing. Often, in order to control carefully the letterforms, calligraphers briefly hold their breath, so as not to disturb the rhythm of the pen strokes. As Neugebauer wrote, “What distinguishes this person [the calligrapher] is his or her obligation to a duty that strives for organic order: lettering is order; it is the means to a higher consciousness” (Neugebauer 1980, 7; capitalization is in original).

The second cause for the rise of modern Judaic calligraphy was the upsurge of ethnic pride movements beginning in the 1960s. In many ways mid-century American Judaism had reached a crisis point, which Mordechai Kaplan observed in his 1957 foreword to Judaism as a Civilization. He asked that his book be a
motivator to—among other things—“reaffirm Jewish peoplehood” and “further Jewish cultural creativity” (Kaplan 1981, x). Then the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s coincided with Black Pride and Chicano Pride, which led to Jewish Pride, especially immediately after Israel’s surprising, nail-biting, and resounding win in the 1967 Six-Day War (Dollinger 2019; Rockaway 2018). Waxman explicitly states, “The Six-Day War of June 1967 had an entirely unprecedented and unpredictable impact upon America’s Jews” (Waxman 1983, xxiii).

Aspects of Jewish culture, religion, and philosophy suddenly became hip and desirable, whether through the emerging academic discipline of Jewish Studies, the Ba’al Teshuva religious movement (the return of secular Jews to pietistic Judaism), Israeli choral singing, or—germane to this essay—expressing one’s Jewishness culturally through visual arts. Waxman amplifies this expressive trend:

Concerning a significant segment of the American Jewish community . . . a surprising number of patterns have emerged which appear to be manifestations of not only “public ethnicity,” which may be no more than a passing fad, but also of a sincere return to intrinsic Jewish culture. That being Jewish in America is different than it was in the Eastern European shtetl is undoubtedly true, but the shtetl experience was unique in terms of Jewish history, and it cannot be held up as the standard by which Jewish life in America is measured. Jewish culture in American is evolving and dynamic. It is not the “world of our fathers” and mothers; neither is it superficial. (Waxman 1983, 229)

“Intrinsic Jewish culture” is a term Waxman uses to denote “religious beliefs and practices, literature, and a sense of common past, among others,” as opposed to “extrinsic cultural traits” such as “dress, manner, patterns of emotional expression, and minor oddities in pronouncing and inflecting English” (Waxman 1983, 227). In my usage, intrinsic Jewish culture covers artistic expression, including calligraphy.

Finally, a third cause in the rise of calligraphy was—ironically—advances in mechanized reproduction, that is, photocopier technology. Although the first
working example of a photocopier was invented by American Chester Carlson (1906–1968) in 1938 (Carlson 1942), it took over 20 years in 1959 before Haloid Xerox sold its first commercial photocopier, the Xerox 914 machine (Xerox 1999). With a photocopier, a person could create, say, a custom wedding or bar-mitzvah invitation in calligraphy and crank out dozens of copies cheaply, instead of hiring a printing firm. Using this machine-run process, homemade graphic arts became popular. By 1968, 3M invented the color-photocopier and improved the situation for amateur graphic artists after being commercialized the following year (3M 2021). Development starting in the 1980s of home computers with graphics capability accelerated this process (yet simultaneously reduced further the need for calligraphy via higher-quality home typesetting).

These three causes coalesced with the publication—at the height of the do-it-yourself craze—of the First Jewish Catalog (1965), edited by Richard Siegel (1948–2018), but the 1973 edition together with Michael Strassfeld (born 1950) and Sharon Strassfeld (born 1950) is best known. A summary of the book’s purpose is handily contained within its subtitle, “A Do-It-Yourself Kit.” The editors write in the introduction:

[t]his [book] can be seen largely as an outgrowth of the countercultural activity of the late 1960s—both in the secular and Jewish worlds. The move toward communal living, returning to the land, relearning the abilities and joys of “making it yourself,” voicing social and political concern which characterized the general counterculture . . . was paralleled . . . by the development of a “Jewish counterculture.” (Siegel, Strassfeld, and Strassfeld 1973, 8; emphasis added)

In the statement, the editors transformed Sarna’s synthesis of being a good Jew and being a good American into being a good countercultural Jew.

The volume is subdivided into four parts: Space, Time, Word, and Man/Woman. The section on Space has chapters, for example, on the then burgeoning New Arts and Crafts movement: why and how to bake one’s own challah,
crocheting one’s own yarmulke, weaving a tallit, and making a shofar. Discussion in the Time section includes how to celebrate Shabbat, the Jewish calendar, a brief discussion on creating one’s own ceremonial art, plus an early discussion of Jewish “scribal arts.” The First Jewish Catalog gave permission for people without art-school education to “try it at home.” The chapter on Jewish “scribal arts” included a combination of folklore and structure of Hebrew letters, the order and shape of pen strokes to write them, plus an introduction to the world of safrut (Siegel, Strassfeld, and Strassfeld 1973, 184–209). A connection was made to Arabic calligraphy and Chinese calligraphy. While the overall quality of the Jewish calligraphy shown in the book is mediocre to mixed at best and there are lacunae (such as no mention of the left-handed calligrapher), the you-can-do-it spirit inspired many people to do it by themselves. With this impetus, Judaic calligraphy “escaped” from the rarified province of professional and quasi-professional artists to everyone. This particularly democratic, American view of Judaism focused not on the elite, art-educated practitioner, nor on a nationalist Zionist movement, but on the inherent, personal joy of making one’s own artifacts for rituals. Eichler-Levine describes it well:

To understand Jews in America, we need to think on all of these levels: the textual, the visible (and invisible), and the material, in both macro and micro terms. We must also attend to the role desires play in creation and consumption, whether the item in question is an image, a ball of yarn, or an amulet. (Eichler-Levine 2020, 75)

She adds that “[w]hat all these endeavors have in common is the notion that everyday people do not always need experts to tell them how to do things or to lead them in all matters” (Eicher-Levine 2020, 114).

A further rationalization used by the do-it-yourselfers for the advancement of Judaic calligraphy is that of hiddur mitzvah, or beautifying the mitzvah. Rabbinic sages used a verse from the Song of Moses from Torah (Exod. 15:2): ozi v’zimrat Yah vay’hi li lishu’ah, ze Eili v’anveihu, Elohei avi va’aram’menhu (The Eternal is
my strength and might; God is become my deliverance. This is my God and I will enshrine Him; The God of my father, and I will glorify Him). Sages interpreted the passage as justifying beautifying objects used during a *mitzvah*:

> What is the source for the requirement of: “This is my God and I will glorify Him”? As it was taught in a *baraita* with regard to the verse: “This is my God and I will glorify Him [anveihu], the Lord of my father and I will raise Him up.” The Sages interpreted *anveihu* homiletically as linguistically related to *noi*, beauty, and interpreted the verse: Beautify yourself before Him in *mitzvot*. Even if one fulfills the *mitzvah* by performing it simply, it is nonetheless proper to perform the *mitzvah* as beautifully as possible. . . . (Shabbat 133b:5–6, from Sefaria)

Therefore, the do-it-yourselfers argue, a carefully calligraphed version is inherently *better* under Jewish law and tradition, rather than constituting a standard piece of printed text. The *First Jewish Catalog* promotes this view:

> The principle of hiddur mitzvah suggests that when a joyous commandment requires a physical object for its performance, that object should be as beautiful as possible. This is why we prefer to use a lovely silver becher (Kiddush cup) for Kiddush rather than a Dixie cup, which technically may be used to fulfill the mitzvah of Kiddush. In much the same way, the concept of hiddur mitzvah urges us to make the required ketubbah a beautiful, hand-done work of art. (Siegel, Strassfeld, and Strassfeld 1973, 196)

Since the early 1970s, modern Judaic calligraphers often are self-taught as well as formally educated in artistic techniques. They create for themselves and others, either for hire or as gifts, custom calligraphic invitations to weddings and *b’nai-mitzvah*, baby announcements, *ketubot*, quotes from *Tanakh* and other Jewish sources, Hebrew names, *shviti*, micrography, and even now—though frowned upon in traditional Judaism—designs for tattoos.

Besides books by Toby and David, and the *First Jewish Catalog*, many more
guides to do-it-yourself Hebrew calligraphy became available for the home learner in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Examples include handbooks by Jay Greenspan (1981), Cara Marks (1990), Gina Jonas (1996), Ada Yardeni (2003), Izzy Pludwinsky (2012), and more. Marks, in particular, is aware of this modern interest in Hebrew calligraphy but notes pitfalls in allowing non-experts to lead the charge:

A recent awakening of cultural awareness and renewed interest in Jewish tradition have led to a revival in the Hebrew scribal arts. People are flocking to classes in Hebrew calligraphy; courses are being taught in adult education programs and scribal associations—wherever a community can fill this special need.

Modern-day calligraphers—often barely versed in English, let alone Hebraic calligraphy—have accepted the responsibility of perpetuating this particular form of Jewish heritage. Unfortunately, it is frequently a case of the blind leading the blind. Some self-proclaimed experts in the scribal arts are taking liberties: dividing words incorrectly, exaggerating and distorting letter sizes, and erroneously claiming that their work is within the bounds of halakhah, the rabbinic rules. The Hebrew letters serve to draw us closer to our heritage, and it is sad that such poor artisanship is offered to beginning calligraphers, as it encourages and perpetuates errors. (Marks 1990, 3)

Referring to the tradition of Hebrew calligraphy, American graphic designer Donald M. Anderson (1915–1995), who is not Jewish, expressed an “outsider’s” view of Hebrew calligraphy at the beginning of the do-it-yourself movement:

Square Hebrew, whether seen in inscriptions or typeface, was and is a calligrapher’s alphabet. It has elements of genuine lasting quality, as befits the tradition. Graphically these qualities reside in strong vertical and horizontal elements combined with fine, slow curves. Readers should try this alphabet. As observed, it is not easy to do well, but it is interesting to place a hand into the stream of history. (Anderson 1969, 306)
A calligraphed invitation that I completed for my own wedding in 2017 exemplifies the evolving style of modern Judaic calligraphy (figure 7).

The gift is not a document related to any Jewish ritual nor is it a holy text, immediately making it a modern work of Judaica. It encapsulates a sense of Jewish regard for text (the traditional Hebrew names of bride and groom, cf. Oz and Oz-Salzberger 2012, 1) as well as Jewish music (the song “Khosn Kale Mazl-Tov” by Sigmund Mogulesko and Joseph Lateiner, now a popular Jewish wedding melody (Sapoznik 2006, 54; Mogulesco 1909). Two Hebrew hands provide information: a bold Sephardic script providing the names of the bride and groom, similar to the free-style Italic, and a modern hand mimicking the English text for the
time of the event, with a similar modern style for the Yiddish syllables under the musical score for legibility. Attention to particular hands is only possible in modern Judaic calligraphy, with a historic knowledge of previous scripts used in various eras and their evocative natures. In addition, the invitation was a personally created object for each invited guest, rather than store-bought or commissioned, making the invitation more like a personalized work of art. The off-white color of the paper contrasts with the dark red (red is a traditional medieval manuscript color for emphasis) and the blue, to be reminiscent of a palette of primary colors. As an added reflection of tradition, the invitation was printed letterpress (pre-twentieth-century style, with a significant impression into the paper) rather than lithographed.

The change in calligraphic (and do-it-yourself) emphasis is palpable when one compares two guides to Jewish weddings, one from the 1960s and one from the late 1980s onward. Routtenberg and Seldin’s guide from 1967 notes that

\[\text{a formal [wedding] invitation is usually engraved. Engraving is beautiful, but it is also quite costly, and many people prefer to use a less-expensive process called thermography, which produces an effect similar to engraving. A variety of type faces is available for either process, though any of the script styles is usually considered most formal. (Routtenberg and Seldin 1967, 30)}\]

The authors do not mention calligraphic invitations. Compare this omission with Anita Diamant’s version from 2001 (revised from 1985):

\[\text{Invitations can be engraved or printed, photocopied or handwritten calligraphically, or composed with the help of a computer. You can hire a calligrapher to write your invitation; however, this is an expensive option and, in fact, not all scribes are willing to take on such small, labor-intensive assignments. (Diamant 2001, 74)}\]

Regarding a ketubah, note how the calligraphy is described as a rare or nostalgic idea in Routtenberg and Seldin’s guide:
The ketubah itself can be a beautiful work of art. In years past, it was not uncommon for a family to commission an artist to create an illuminated ketubah for a particular marriage. Many examples of these can be seen in the Jewish Museum in New York, and in the Museum of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. Today, a couple may still find a Jewish artist who specializes in calligraphy and illumination and commission him [sic] to execute a distinctive ketubah. (Routtenberg and Seldin 1967, 89)

Routtenber and Seldin provide only one example of a typographed ketubah on the pages immediately prior to this description. Diamant, in contrast, provides extensive guidance on the calligraphic aspect of a ketubah during a couple's wedding preparations:

[T]he ketubah has experienced a major revival and is once again a source of inspiration for artists and calligraphers. . . . Modern brides and grooms have an unprecedented choice in selecting both the text and decoration of their ketubot. While a simple Hebrew text meticulously lettered on fine parchment can make for a timeless and elegant ketubah, color and design can transform the document into a work of fine art. Modern ketubah artists employ techniques ranging from paper cutting to lithography, silk-screening to watercolor. The range of design and calligraphic styles is almost dizzying and available to nearly everyone. . . .

Many calligraphers take assignments to create one-of-a-kind ketubot as well. These are the most costly and require several months’ notice.

If you are an artist, calligrapher, or simply an avid do-it-yourselfer, you can make your own ketubah, and indeed it is considered a great mitzvah [commandment and good deed] to do so. (Diamant 2001, 83–89)

Diamant, in fact, provides images of several calligraphic ketubot as examples in her book.

Guidebooks by rabbinical authorities in the Reform movement have also
exhibited a change in attitude. David Morrison Bial’s *Liberal Judaism at Home* (1971) describes what a ketubah is, and then comments, “Liberal rabbis will fill out either the elaborate traditional *ketubah* or a simpler modern wedding certificate. They may or may not read a portion of either document at the wedding” (Bial 1971, 55). The book does not discuss calligraphic beautification of the document.

By the 1990s, Kerry M. Olitzky and Ronald H. Isaacs’s *The Second How-To Handbook for Jewish Living* (1996), one in a series of volumes written by Reform rabbis, gives a brief mention of calligraphic work for *ketubot*:

> Originally, *ketubot* were written on parchment and often enhanced by drawings and illumination in bright colors. . . . Often couples prefer to have a personalized *ketubah* designed especially for them by a calligrapher or artist. (Olitzky and Isaacs 1996, 129)

Use of data provided by Google Books’ Ngram Viewer helps to demonstrate this rise in interest with calligraphy in general and Hebrew calligraphy in particular. Examining the popularity of the English word “calligraphy” shows its rise from the Arts and Crafts Movement past the First Jewish Catalog, peaking in 1992 (figure 8). While the phrase “Hebrew calligraphy” is quite rare, a graph (figure 9) exhibits the same general trends as figure 8. In figure 9, the smoothing was raised to 3,
given the rarity of the phrase and resultant noisiness of the data. Both “calligraphy” and “Hebrew calligraphy” follow the trajectory of modern calligraphic techniques after the Arts and Crafts Movement, and especially accelerates with the growth of the Arts and Crafts revival in the 1960s before dropping in popularity after the early 1990s.

Conclusion

Unlike other arts or crafts, calligraphy is perhaps most important to Jews because of the Jewish focus on text, centering on the Torah scroll, a required calligraphic work. Thus the evolution of Judaic calligraphy throughout the twentieth century is of extra importance compared to other Judaic arts. The rise of modern Judaic calligraphy can be attributed to a four-fold cause. First is the desire for American Jews to be “American” in style; second is the rise of a new arts and crafts movement, which, in this case, became do-it-yourself folk art and the modern Anglo-American calligraphic phenomenon. Third is the Jewish pride movement coinciding with an ethnic roots movement, which all happened more or less simultaneously in the late 1960s and early 1970s, culminating in the First Jewish Catalog. The final cause is the new means for cheap image reproduction.

Mechanization, however, was a double-edged sword: right on the heels of easy photocopying came the home digital computer, particularly the Apple
Macintosh series of personal computers, which were angled more toward the graphic designing community. With the advent of high-quality laser printers and word-processing programs bundled with these computers, many of which included pseudo-calligraphic typefaces, people found that they no longer needed to hire calligraphers to address invitation envelopes for their simchas (typically b’nai-mitzvah and weddings). Instead, hosts of celebrations printed their own envelopes at home. Even professional ketubah artists began devising their own personal calligraphic typefaces based on their personal writing, in order to easily print personalized artistic ketubot for customers.

The result of the digital revolution led to a disinterest towards calligraphy as a hobby, for casual calligraphers found the ease of printing digitally outweighed the time and effort required to learn calligraphy. Toward the end of the twentieth century, Jewish advisers Kerry Olitzky and Ronald H. Isaacs comment, for example, “Often couples prefer to have a personalized ketubah designed especially for them by a calligrapher or artist” (Olitzky and Isaacs 1996, 129), a perspective that constitutes a dramatic change from the do-it-yourself-ism of the First Jewish Catalog from a generation earlier. Do-it-yourself Judaic calligraphy thus gradually receded, and re-entered the specialist category to a degree, one among a variety of specialized arts and crafts, but with significant differences from before the New Arts and Crafts movement.

One major difference is that many of the new Judaic calligraphers learn their skill informally or semi-formally, without the art-school background of the mid-twentieth century calligraphers. A second difference is that the wide availability via the Internet of such pre-printed and bespoke calligraphy can include a variety of nonritual-based texts, including famous quotes, names designed for tattoos, alphabet charts, and folk sayings (among other works), indicating a more cultural or ethnic bent in addition to ritual-based objects such as ketubot.

Contemporary North American Judaic calligraphy currently reflects a primarily neo-folk art tradition rather than the highly educated secular and nationalist artistic vision of a century ago. In a way, it even marks a return to the medieval method of self-training, perhaps under the tutelage of mentors (whether in person, from books, or even via videos on the internet). The folk cultural functions of
ritual scripture (primarily ketubot, but also mezuzot) continue, but additional calligraphic outlets have appeared in the form of invitations, gifts of quotes, tattoos, and incorporation of calligraphy into other artistic expressions such as menorahs and Seder plates. A rediscovery of the creation and display of the shviti and mizrach by Jews from secular families has created a minor revival of such traditions. Thus current Judaic calligraphy can be regarded as underscoring of communal and personal Jewish identity in a secular world where Jews live side by side with non-Jews, rather than a national art style.

References

Cohen: Rise of Judaic Calligraphy

The Rise of Judaic Calligraphy


