FRANK STELLA: HAD GADYA

ILLUSTRATIONS AFTER EL LISSITZKY

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FRANK STELLA: HAD GADYA (1984)
Illustrations after El Lissitzky
Series of 12 prints; Lithography, etching, screen printing, woodcut, & linocuts; Ed. 47/60, 1984.
Collection of Elissa Oshinsky
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EL LISSITZKY: HAD GADYA (TSIGELE) (February 6, 1919)
Illustrated book, 10 color lithographs and cover page, flyleaf; 28 cm x 26 cm.
Edition of 75, published by Kultur Lige, Kiev.
From the Library of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.
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Frank Stella, *Had Gadya: Front Cover*, 42 ⅛" X 33 ⅞"

Frank Stella, *Had Gadya: Back Cover*, 60 ¼" x 53 ⅛"

FRANK STELLA: HAD GADYA

ILLUSTRATIONS AFTER EL LISSITZKY

Jean Bloch Rosensaft, *Director, Dr. Bernard Heller Museum, New York*

Abby Schwartz, *Curatorial Consultant, Skirball Museum, Cincinnati*

Anne Hromodka Greenwald, *Curator, Los Angeles*

One might not immediately associate Frank Stella (b. 1936), the American painter, sculptor, and printmaker noted for his work in the areas of minimalism and post-painterly abstraction, with a cumulative, lyrical poem that concludes the traditional Seder, or festive meal, on the Jewish holiday of Passover. *Had Gadya* (*One Little Goat*) first appeared in print in a 1590 Haggadah (Jewish text setting forth the order of the Passover seder) published in Prague.

Had Gadya describes a chain of events of events evoking conflict culminating in divine intervention. Just as each of the ten verses of the song builds on the one before it, Stella's 12 *Had Gadya* prints build on the original 1919 series of 11 prints illustrating *Had Gadya* by Russian-Jewish avant-garde artist Eliezer (El) Lissitzky, which Stella encountered at the Tel Aviv Museum in 1981.

Lissitzky, who began his career illustrating Yiddish children's books, created a print for each stanza of the celebrated song and the title page, based on preliminary watercolors, and a highly abstract flyleaf. Produced after four years of studying Jewish folk culture, including documenting 200 painted, wooden synagogues of Ukraine, his *Had Gadya* was published by the secular Yiddish Kultur Lige in Kiev, which promoted the flourishing of Jewish culture after the defeat of Tsarist oppression.

Lissitzky's prints are infused with Yiddish typography, ethnographic shtetl imagery, architectural elements, and the Russian Suprematist abstraction of his Proun paintings, reflecting the work of his contemporaries, Marc Chagall and Kazimir Malevich. Stella was profoundly inspired by Lissitzky's simplistic, minimalist narrative, spatial experimentation, and abstraction through which he symbolically expressed the victory of freedom over persecution as a consequence of the Russian Revolution of 1917. It was one of the first Russian avant-garde works to be condemned and destroyed during the Stalin regime and only a few copies survive.

Lissitzky's works spurred Stella to develop his own language of narrative abstraction in sequential works, each one building upon the imagery and structure of its predecessor. Each stanza is conveyed by the juxtaposition of architectonic elements, painterly gestural drawing, vivid color, and motion-filled

Eliezer (El) Lissitzky, *Had Gadya: Title Page,* The boy and goat's intersecting faces symbolically align their identities under a rainbow denoting God's presence.

forms projecting beyond boundaries. Stella employs a complex combination of printmaking techniques – lithography, linoleum block, silkscreen, and rubber relief with collage elements and hand-coloring.

Stella's forms are not literal depictions, but their narrative essence is transmitted through the dramatic, dynamic repetition, collision, intersection, and aggressive movement through space of cylinders, cones, grills, waves, and graffiti-like scrawls. These works also display the influences of the three-dimensional drawings in a 19th-century treatise on stonecutting given to him by art dealer John Kasmin, Fernand Leger's mechanical elements paintings, and the expressive movement of Caravaggio's paintings, which he studied as an artist-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome in 1982-83.

Stella explained his interest in abstract minimalism and archetypal storytelling:

> "Abstraction didn't have to be limited to...rectilinear geometry or even a simple curve geometry. It could have a geometry that had a narrative impact. In other words, you could tell a story with the shapes....It wouldn't be a literal story, but the shapes and the interaction of the shapes and colors would give you a narrative sense."

Taking two years to complete during 1982-1984, the prints were published by Waddington Graphics, London, in 1984. After completing the edition, Stella created between two and nine variants of each of the twelve *Had Gadya* illustrations. Stella's *Had Gadya* represents a significant moment in his artistic development, leading to further explorations of narrative subjects in his abstract work.

Had Gadya is not the first Jewish theme to be found in Stella's art. Influenced by the Nazi propaganda newsreels of his World War II childhood, his 1958-59 black pinstripe minimalist paintings were given Holocaust-era titles – *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Auschwitz's infamous signage), *Reichstag* (burned by the Nazis in 1933), and *Die Fahne Hoch* (the Nazi party anthem), and in 1960 *The Final Solution*, whose cruciform image evoked both the symbol of victimization and the truncated core of the swastika – images that he repeated in prints created in 1967. In 1970, while undergoing a lengthy hospitalization, he began a three-year process of producing drawings and over 130 three-dimensional mixed media paintings inspired by a book of 40 photographs of 17th-19th-century Polish wooden synagogues destroyed during the Holocaust, given to him by architect Richard Meier. These works, incorporating interlocking wooden elements alluding to the synagogue craftsmen's carpentry, were titled after their annihilated communities, thus commemorating, in Stella's words, "the obliteration of a culture."

In his *Had Gadya* series, the abstracted narrative of successive episodes of strife, ultimately concluding with redemption, offered Stella, a Catholic, the opportunity to express a universal, aspirational message of justice in the face of destructive forces in the world. His *Had Gadya* series exerts a forceful impact, inspiring the viewer to experience the power of good prevailing over evil, with hope to be found in the indestructible human spirit.

HAD GADYA: THE SONG

Had Gadya is one of the earliest recorded songs for children. While its original purpose may simply have been to engage sleepy children at the end of the long Passover seder, its bold theology builds upon the Prophet Isaiah's vision of God's ultimate triumph over Death. The earliest known version of Had Gadya dates to a 14th-century Provence prayer book. The expulsion of the Jews from France brought the song to Eastern Europe. It appears in Aramaic and medieval Yiddish in a manuscript page attached to the Prague Haggadah of 1526 and first appears in print in the Prague Haggadah of 1590.

Rabbis and scholars, historians, and ethnomusicologists have all debated the mysterious lyrics of a liturgical poem about one little goat, which catalyzes a chain reaction whose ripples extend to heaven.

Some view *Had Gadya* as a political parable about the nations that rose against the Jewish people throughout history. Others see a metaphoric reminder of our essential interconnectedness. An injury to one becomes, with time, an injury to all.

Rabbi Neil Gillman, *z"l*, the author of *Death of Death*, posits that *Had Gadya* is a folk midrash on Isaiah's prophetic declaration on the day of redemption: "God will destroy death forever and wipe away the tears from all faces." (Isaiah 25:8) On Passover, the holiday of the Israelites' liberation from slavery, it is fitting to imagine God's ultimate triumph even over the personified force of death itself.

HAD GADYA TODAY

What can we glean from Stella's vibrant, abstract renderings of this surprisingly profound Passover song? Why revisit this series now? One answer emerges from a modern, poetic midrash offered by novelists Jonathan Safran Foer and Nathan Englander in their collaborative project, *The New American Haggadah*. They imagine a group of students staying up all night immersed in the intricacies of the Passover Seder, the festive meal during which the Haggadah account of redemption from slavery is read. As dawn breaks, they discover their rabbi in tears and crying out: "But what about the goat? Who speaks for the one who suffers?"

Suffering is all around us right now. After years of the pandemic, we have suffered losses, great and small – from milestones delayed and families kept apart, to grief for millions of friends, relatives, and neighbors struck down by this modern plague. Like the snowballing tragedy of *Had Gadya*, these past years have been compounded by floods and fires, political upheaval, wars and refugees seeking safe haven, racist violence, and increasing antisemitism.

Had Gadya calls our attention to suffering, but it also offers a radical vision of hope. Death does not win in the end. The Angel of Death does not carry the day and, in fact, is destroyed forever. All is not lost. As Rabbi Richard Levy, *z"l*, taught his students at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the root of creation is the transformation of the primordial chaos, *tohu va'vohu*, into beautiful cosmos. *Had Gadya* beckons us to imagine a better future.

FRANK STELLA

Frank Stella (b. 1936) grew up in Massachusetts. The first paintbrush he held in his hand was when he assisted his house painter father. As a college student, he befriended studio artists while studying history at Princeton. He moved to New York City in 1958 to pursue his art.

Stella was only 23 when his "Black Paintings" were included in a 1959 group show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Combining house paint and house painting brushes with exposed canvas, Stella drew on his personal experience to emphasize the surface depth with an emphasis on stark minimalism. With Abstract Expressionism still dominating the art world, Stella's early works were some of the first to begin the Minimalist movement of the 1960s, establishing him as the pioneer he remains to this day.

By the end of the 1960s, Stella moved from flat surfaces to constructions of felt, paper, and wood. By 1970, when he was 33, Stella became the youngest artist to have a retrospective exhibition at MoMA. In the early 1970s, inspired by the architecture of the Polish wooden synagogues destroyed by the Nazis, his work evolved from his iconic linear paintings to irregularly shaped canvases. He went on to create his *Had Gadya* series, exploring non-figurative language used for narrative purposes and employing multiple printmaking techniques. Since 2010, he has created computer-generated star-shaped sculptures, with his monumental *Jasper's Split Star* (2017) recently installed at the World Trade Center in 2021. He is still working in his New York studio.

One small goat papa bought for two zuzim
52¼" x 51¼"

Color keys match the Yiddish text in the
architectural frame with their images, while
God's rainbow appears above the shtetl setting.

A hungry cat ate up the goat
45 ¼" x 52 ⅜"

God's watchful eye appears above
the red cat that ate the goat amid
abstracted space.

Then came a dog and bit the cat
45 ¼" x 52 ⅜"

The dog's jagged teeth that ate the cat are
echoed by the hills framing the scene.

Then came a stick and beat the dog
53 ½" x 52 ¾"

A shtetl figure flees the violent
red stick beating the dog.

Then came a fire and burnt the stick
53 ½" x 52 ¾"

The red rooster (a Yiddish phrase for arson) personifies the fire that burns the stick and threatens the shtetl and its synagogue, symbolizing the pogroms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Then water came and quenched the fire
53 ⅞" x 51 ⅝"

A Leviathan-scaled fish spouts a
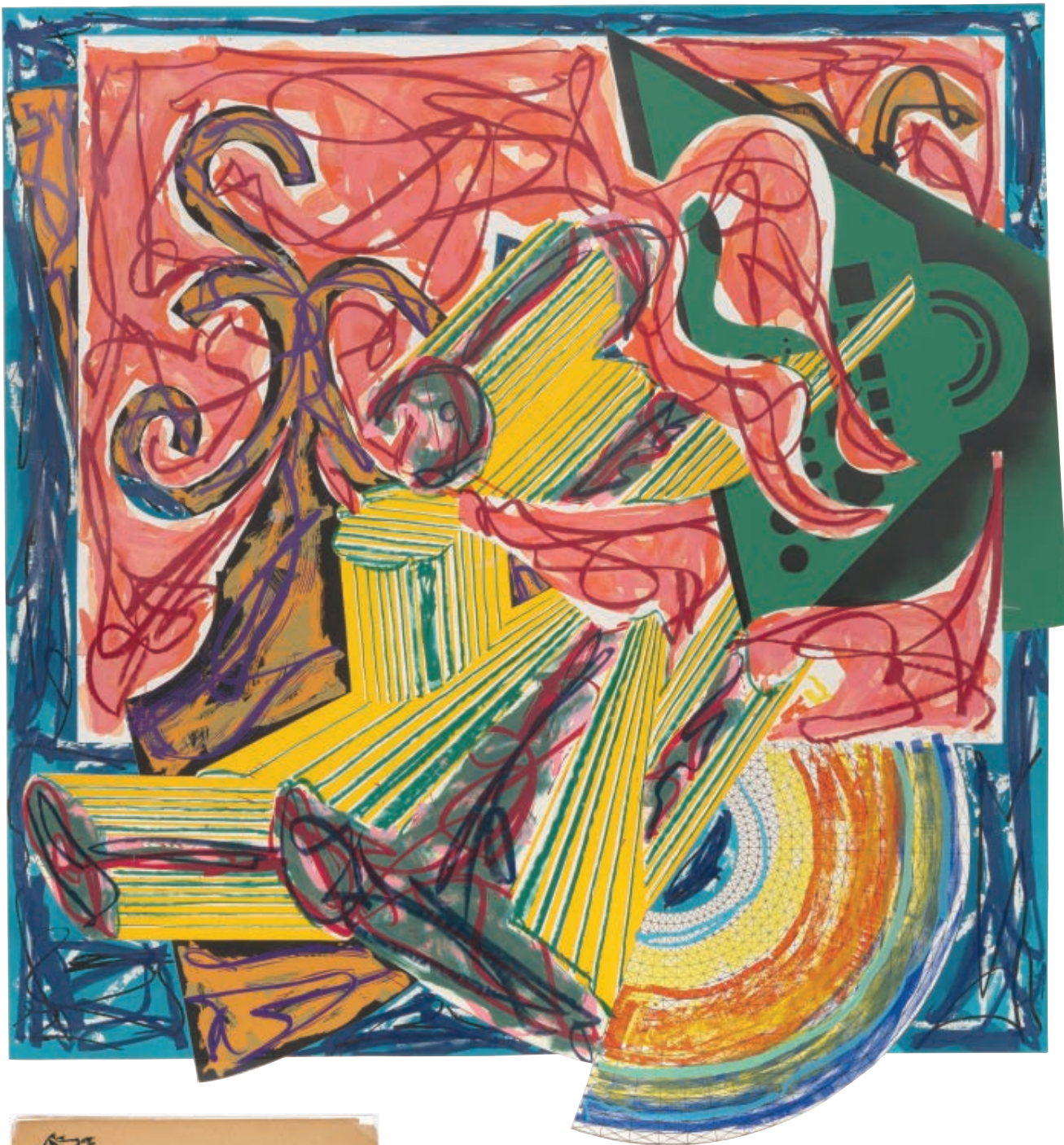wave of water to quench the fire,
while a water-carrier watches.

Then came an ox and drank the water
53 ⅞" x 52 ⅜"

A circular eye in the abstracted hillside
watches the ox drinking the water.

The butcher came and slew the ox
56 ⅞" x 53 ⅙"

The butcher tests his sharp blade as he
prepares to slaughter the ox.

Then came death and took the butcher

58 ⅝" x 47 ¼"

The sworded angel of death wears the tsar's crown and the
butcher is laid out beneath a lit candle, traditionally set
out for the deceased, under a black archway in which the
Yiddish inscription now appears in white.

***And the Holy One, blessed be He, came
and smote the Angel of Death***
50 ¾" x 41 ⅛"

The goat and boy look up in wonder as God's eye and the Soviet
stamp-inspired hand with sword hover over the skeletal crowned
angel of death, flanked by the Hebrew initials for Lissitzky (on left)
and "here lies" on the right.

13

HAD GADYA: THE SONG

Had Gadya, Had Gadya, that father bought for two zuzim, Had Gadya, Had Gadya

The came a cat and ate the goat, that father bought for two zuzim, Had Gadya, Had Gadya

Then came a dog and bit the cat, that ate the goat, that father bought for two zuzim, Had Gadya, Had Gadya

Then came a stick and beat the dog, that bit the cat, that ate the goat, that father bought for two zuzim, Had Gadya, Had Gadya

Then came the fire and burnt the stick, that beat the dog, that bit the cat, that ate the goat, that father bought for two zuzim, Had Gadya, Had Gadya

Then came the water and quenched the fire, that burnt the stick, that beat the dog, that bit the cat, that ate the goat, that father bought for two zuzim, Had Gadya, Had Gadya

Then came the ox and drank the water, that quenched the fire, that burnt the stick, that beat the dog, that bit the cat, that ate the goat, that father bought for two zuzim, Had Gadya, Had Gadya

Then came the butcher and slaughtered the ox, that drank the water, that quenched the fire, that burnt the stick, that beat the dog, that bit the cat, that ate the goat, that father bought for two zuzim, Had Gadya, Had Gadya

Then came the Angel of Death and killed the butcher, that slaughtered the ox, that drank the water, that quenched the fire, that burnt the stick, that beat the dog, that bit the cat, that ate the goat, that father bought for two zuzim, Had Gadya, Had Gadya

Then came the Holy One, Blessed be He and slew the Angel of Death, that killed the butcher, that slaughtered the ox, that drank the water, that quenched the fire, that burnt the stick, that beat the dog, that bit the cat, that ate the goat, that father bought for two zuzim, Had Gadya, Had Gadya.

Scan the QR code to hear *Had Gadya* sung in many languages at jewishlanguages.org

גענקויפטי דער טאטע פאר צווײ גילדײן א ציגעלע

איז געקומען די קאץ און פארצומרט דאס
ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע טיגעקויפט פאר
צווײ גילדײן   דאס צויגעלע

איז געקומען דער הונט און אויפגעפרעסן די
קאץ וואס האט פארצומרט דאס ציגעלע וואס
דער טאטע טיגעקויפט פאר צווײ גילדײן   דאס
ציגעלע

איז געקומען דער שטעקן און געשלאגן דעם
הונט וואס טיאויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס טיפאר־
צומרט דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע טיגע־
קויפט פאר צווײ גילדײן   דאס ציגעלע

איז געקומען דאס פײער און פארברענט דעם
שטעקן וואס טיגעשלאגן דעם הונט וואס טיאוי־
פגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס טיפארצומרט דאס ציגע־
לע וואס דער טאטע טיגעקויפט פאר צווײ גיל־
דײן   דאס ציגעלע

איז געקומען דאס וואסער און פארלאשן דאס
פײער וואס טיפארברענט דעם שטעקן וואס טיגע־
שלאגן דעם הונט וואס טיאויפגעפרעסן די קאץ
וואס טיפארצומרט דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע
טיגעקויפט פאר צווײ גילדײן   דאס ציגעלע

איז געקומען דער אקס און אויסגעטרונקען דאס
וואסער וואס טיפארלאשן דאס פײער וואס טי־
פאלבדרעניט דעם שטעקן וואס טיגעשלאגן ריס דעם
וואס טיאויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס טיפארצומרט
דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע טיגעקומפט פאר
צווײ גילדײן

דאס ציגעלע דאס ציגעלע

איז געקומען דער שוחט און געשאבטן זעם אקס
וואס טיאויסגעטרומקען דאס וואסער וואס טיפאפ
לאשן דאם פײער וואס טיפארברענט דעם
שטעקן וואס טיגעשלאגן דעם הונט וואס
טיאויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס טיפארצומרט
דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע טיגעקויפט
פאר צווײ גילדײן   דאס ציגעלע דאס

איז בערומען דער מלאך־המות און געשאבטן
דעם שוחט וואס טיגעשאבטן דעם אקס וואס
טיאויסגעטרונקען דאס וואסער וואס טיפאר־
לאשן דאם פײער וואס טיפארברענט דעם
שטעקן וואס טיגעשלאגן דעם הונט וואס
טיאויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס טיפארצומרט
דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע טיגעקויפט
פאר צווײ גילדײן   דאס ציגעלע דאס

איז געקומען גאט בלוך־הוא און טיגעשאבטן
דעם מלאך־המות וואס טיגעשאבטן דעם
שוחט וואס טיגעשאבטן דעם אקם וואס
געטרונקען דאם וואסער וואם טיפארלאשדז
דאם פײער וואס טיפאלברענט דעם שטעקן
וואס טיגעשלאגן דעם הונט וואס טיאוי־
פגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס טיפארצומרט
דאס ציגעלע וואם דער טאטע
טיגעקויפט פאר צווײ
גילדײן

דאס ציגעלע

The interior dust jacket's geometric abstraction exemplifies Lissitzky's Proun (the Russian acronym for Project for the Affirmation of the New) works, merging Suprematist forms and Constructivist architecture, and evokes the forward stride of Soviet poster imagery, with the Hebrew inscription of God's name on the top left denoting God's presence, the Hebrew first and last letters of Lissitzky's name on the top right, and the Kultur Lige publisher in Yiddish in the lower circle.

16