

# THE ILLUMINATED FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES

*by* AVNER MORIAH



## DEDICATION

As one of Israel's leading contemporary artists, Avner Moriah has made a unique contribution to the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. He has found his inspiration in the imagery of biblical text, which he has studied deeply. He has crafted exquisite watercolor and gouache drawings and Giclée prints to illustrate each chapter of the Five Books of Moses, bringing his own vision to the core text of the Jewish people. In doing so, his visual midrash has created new avenues of understanding the Torah's teachings while achieving an extraordinary contribution to the world of art.

It is a great honor to dedicate Avner Moriah's *Five Books of Moses* to the Klau Library at the New York Campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, in memory of two beloved friends whose lives were devoted to teaching Torah, ensuring the flourishing of Israel, and sustaining the survival of the Jewish People: Rabbi Aaron D. Panken, Ph.D., z"l, HUC-JIR Past President (2014-2018) and Rabbi Dr. David Posner, z"l, Senior Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York (1973-2013) and former member of the HUC-JIR Board of Governors (2000-2015).

Sheila and Bill Lambert

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT



In 2005, I embarked on the odyssey of illuminating the Torah. When I started illustrating Genesis, I had no idea how long it would last. About 4,000 days and 40,000 hours of work later, I have reached my destination and completed Deuteronomy, the book that brings it all together.

The images I created from Genesis and on grew to form a comprehensive concordance of drawings that expanded from visual interpretations of events to symbolism. Each reiteration added another layer of meaning, building upon the previous images.

The evolution of the biblical narrative is mirrored in my technique. The early images illustrated literal stories, and were laboriously etched, erased, and traced with watercolor and gouache. Increasingly, I created my own

symbolic interpretation, and added gold-leaf, both as an artistic element and an iconic statement in creating a truly illuminated manuscript.

The journey from Genesis to Deuteronomy is a passage. It is the transformation of one individual, Abraham, into a nation, whose members are bonded by a shared narrative. I have witnessed their evolution, while creating my own. I bear testimony to their voyage, documenting it with my paints and brushes.

Upon the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses is no longer needed. The People of Israel have come into their own. In the same way, my Illuminated Five Books of Moses now stand on their own as an independent work of art and a body of interpretation.

I have been a working artist for more than 40 years, nearly one-third of these dedicated to this project. Between Genesis and Deuteronomy, I grew fourteen years older. But personally, I grew by a full lifetime. And the final result is as much a self-portrait as it is an illumination of the biblical text.

The end of the project is the beginning of a new one. Like it was for the Israelites, the existential and metaphorical journey never ends.

As I revisit the Israeli landscape of my early artistic years, I see and paint it afresh with the eyes of a seasoned traveler. I feel invigorated to start a new phase, eager to incorporate all that I have learned during this latest and formative project.

This work has taught me perseverance, patience, and tolerance. The deeper you go into the biblical text, the more amazing it is. I have learned how to turn a narrative into a symbol, and how to distil an image to minimal details. I also have learned that not everything has an explanation. And that the economy of biblical language offers space to express oneself. I found joy in my work and creation. And above all, I have learned that at the end of the day, creation and time heal.

I embarked on this journey at a time of deep personal pain for my wife Andi, who was battling leukemia. She did not make it to the Promised Land, but travelling through the desert has brought healing to my soul.

My project began as a solitary odyssey, but I would not walk alone for long. Fortune smiled upon me to find the brightest of minds and finest of their craft, and providence aligned us to become partners and friends. These individual stars grouped together to form a constellation that helped me navigate my journey, each contributing brilliance in their field. Some have never met each other in person. It is my pleasure to bring them all together here.

A MORAH



## AN ILLUMINATING JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLICAL TEXT

by Sharon Liberman Mintz

Two and a half decades ago, it was my pleasure to meet Avner Moriah, already an established and prolific painter at the time. He had just completed a mural depicting the gathering at Mount Sinai, and the Ten Commandments, igniting in him a new passion for the written word of Jewish texts.

I watched with delight as Avner created a beautifully illustrated Passover Haggadah, and then he brought to life the Scroll of Esther with elaborate original drawings that displayed the richness of his skill and his gift for visual interpretation.

When Avner began illustrating the Book of Genesis, fourteen years ago, I was intrigued. I followed his evolving creative process as he proceeded to illustrate the entire Pentateuch. With each book, he attained higher levels of craftsmanship and mastery of both text and image, revealing himself to be a powerful visual interpreter of scripture.

A native Israeli and a speaker of modern Hebrew, Avner brought his intellectual curiosity to this artistic endeavor and formed original conceptual connections, illustrating the texts with unrivaled beauty, skill, profundity, scholarship, and humor. With his unique visual interpretation and painstakingly detailed illustrations, Avner shines a new light on the biblical texts, proving himself a singular modern master of the millennia-old craft of illuminating sacred manuscripts and scripture.

This monumental work brings a new perspective to the ancient tradition, and Avner's illuminated Pentateuch is truly illuminating – in the broadest sense of the word. He is undoubtedly among the foremost modern visual biblical interpreters of our times, an extraordinary artist, who undertook – and completed – a feat that is astonishing in its scope, daring, and beauty.

I am thrilled to see this project come to fruition, and am honored to introduce it here.

Sharon Liberman Mintz

Curator of Jewish Art

The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary



## A TORAH JOURNEY AND BEYOND | by Professor Yair Zakovitch

Every act of creation has its own “Genesis”, and even a “*tohu va’vohu*” that precedes it. I first met Avner Moriah in the days of unruly dark matter that preceded his tremendous enterprise of illustrating the Torah. One morning, fifteen years ago, Avner appeared at my office on the Mt. Scopus campus of The Hebrew University. He introduced himself and his vision, and asked for my help in crossing the threshold from *tohu va’vohu* to creation, and open the gates of Genesis to him.

Our first meeting was to be the beginning of countless more meetings and conversations. At first eager for my observations and commentary on the tales of the Torah, Avner soon began formulating his own original perspective on the Torah, until he no longer required the crutch I had put at his disposal. Nonetheless, as his enterprise grew, so did our friendship, which became a deep and close one over the course of time. Avner shared with me each phase of his work, and his creation took form and came to life before my astonished eyes.

The years passed with one book after another, and I now join Avner in a blessing for that which is complete, for this new *midrash* in paint and brush that stretches from “In the beginning” to “that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.”

Knowing Avner, I am certain he will not seek quiet now but, rather, new channels for his energy and bursting creativity. Closing my eyes, my imagination conjures up the voices of the Book of the Prophets and that of the Writings, who now look on the illuminated Torah with envy and implore Avner, “Come claim us too! Rise and paint! There is much work still to be done.”

Yair Zakovitch  
Bible Department  
Father Takeji Otsuki Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies  
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem



## COLLABORATING WITH AVNER MORIAH | by Izzy Pludwinski

When Avner Moriah approached me to create the calligraphy for his *Illuminated Five Books of Moses* project, my first response was to say “no way.” True, we produced the beautiful *Moriah Haggadah*, and worked well together. But the Pentateuch is entirely different. It is a daunting task that requires a multi-year commitment.

It involves more than writing a Torah scroll, because in addition to writing the entire Torah text (over 300,000 letters), there are also over a quarter million diacritic (vocalization) marks that need to be added, plus chapter numbers, verse numbers, and page headers throughout. Also, whereas the layout of a Torah scroll is fixed – all one has to do is copy the text (within the halachic rules) – in this project each page would have to be carefully planned out in order to incorporate the illustrations that appear on almost every page.

However, Avner was persuasive, and convinced me it would be an exciting and worthwhile undertaking, and indeed it turned out to be so. It required creativity as well as perseverance. Some technical decisions had to be made before we could begin, such as whether to use paper or parchment, the style of lettering, and the medium for writing.

For me, the starting point for these decisions was the style of Avner's illustrations. They are deeply connected to the content of the text, yet informal and almost primitive in their depiction – similar to his illustrations in the *Moriah Haggadah* which were inspired by cave paintings in Sudan and Egypt. I had to find a style that had a traditional foundation, but also reflected an informality that would be compatible with Avner's style. I developed an informal Ashkenazic script – one that pointed to the past as its source, but also belonged in a contemporary setting.

That same consideration played into our deliberation whether to use paper or parchment. Parchment relays a very formal and traditional spirit. Avner's intention was not to copy the beautiful and highly decorated Pentateuchs of the Middle Ages, but to produce a work that would speak to the contemporary reader/viewer. Paper seemed the only fitting option.

Then there was the matter of choosing a paper with large enough dimensions (Avner always thinks big!) that would also be conducive to sharp writing. We experimented with a few, and decided on a nice, archival, Arches paper. I then had to do quite a bit of experimentation to find the proper combinations of tool and medium to get the best results. I tried both metal pens and turkey quills in combination with either Sofer ink, sumi ink, or gouache until the best combination was found for writing on this particular paper (I decided on turkey quill and gouache) – one that would produce sharp letters and allow a flowing rhythm to the writing.

Avner's style allows for much creativity, and his approach to his illuminations often involves finding parallels between similar stories, words, and themes that run throughout the Torah. He frequently presents these connections in modular form, with the different stories illustrated within variously shaped rectangles. This allows for much flexibility in page layout, as illustrations can be placed one on top of another, side by side, facing columns, facing pages, etc. Avner showed an amazing ability to offer several solutions when tough layout decisions had to be made. The hardest part was deciding what would be left out, as Avner had an abundant supply of resource material.

As I reflect on the many years it took to produce this project, our hard work proved fruitful, and we produced a beautiful, thought-provoking, and contemporary Pentateuch.

Izzy Pludwinski  
Calligrapher  
Jerusalem



## WHEN TWO ARTISTS SYNERGIZE | by Shevach Black

When an artist flows with spirit and inspiration, this is the place of inception, where masterpieces are fashioned. When two artists get together to synergize on a project and are both in a constant state of love and gratitude, amazing things happen.

I have been working with Avner Moriah for twenty years. I have always been amazed at his fine art approach as well as his initiative. Avner does not go for small projects. He envisions and approaches his art on a grand scale fearlessly.

I was a budding bookbinder when Avner first approached me. This was the first time I worked with Yair Medina as well. They both sat with me and outlined the scope of *The Moriah Haggadah*. They trusted in my abilities and my dedication. We worked together intensely as a team. The project was very demanding and the logistics needed careful daily attention. We made beautiful music together.

Trust is earned over time. In the beginning, Avner and I fluctuated regularly between love and fear. During that first project, Yair was a master mediator and kept the raft afloat. Over time, Avner and I earned each other's trust.

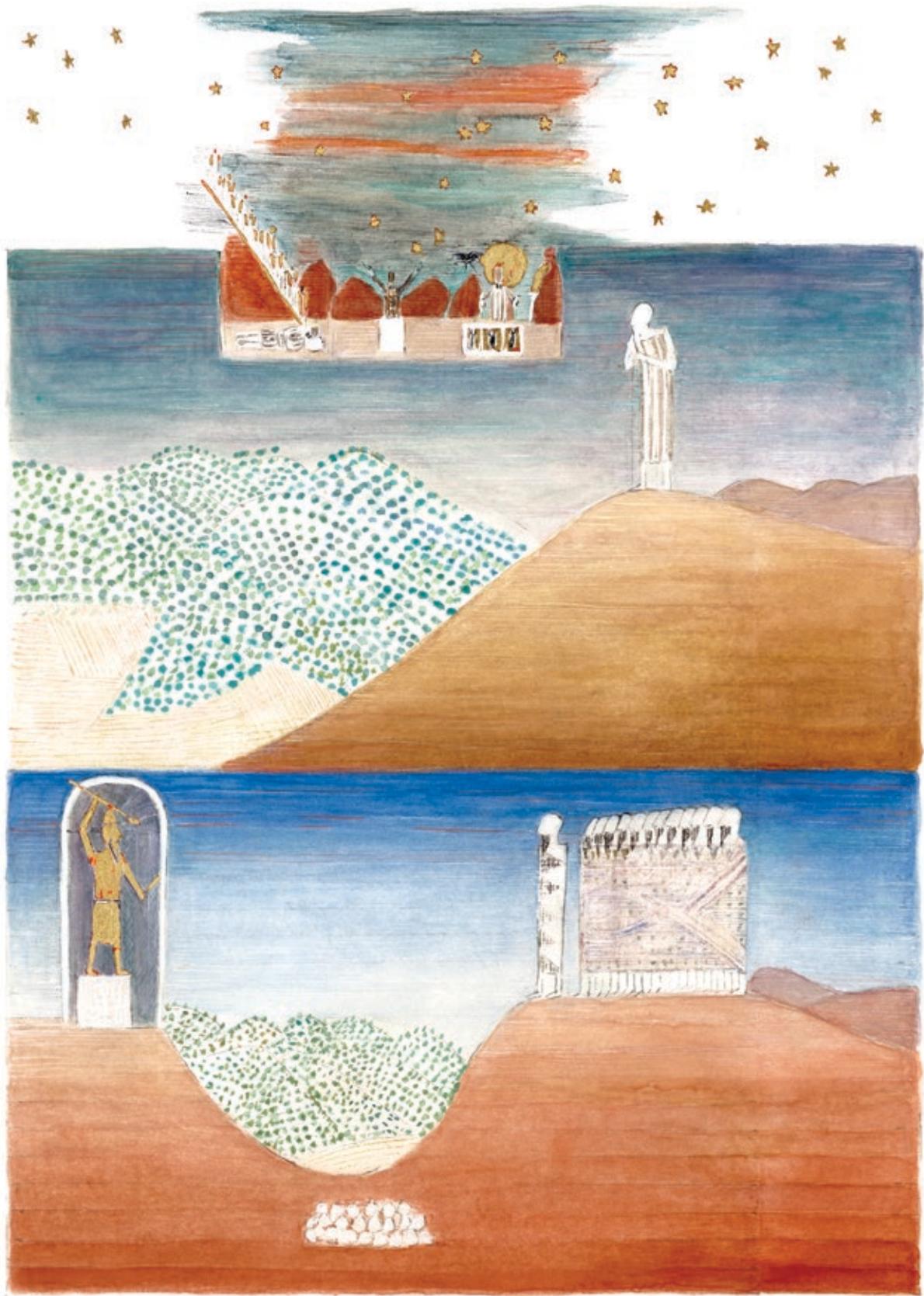
Twenty years is a good portion of any career. We have both grown artistically, professionally, and personally. We have been the recipients and benefactors of each other's love and compassion. For the past several years, we have both been busy thinking about what more we can give each other, and recalling fondly the fear of the early days.

I feel deep gratitude for having merited working so closely with such a talented visionary artist, and I feel Avner's gratitude in every conversation. Avner's integrity has been outstanding. I am grateful for his inspiration that has greatly expanded my horizons.

It is my heartfelt prayer that Avner continues with many more years of strength, love, and growth, and with *nachas ruach* from himself and his children and everyone whom he comes in contact with.

With love and gratitude,  
Shevach Black

אוגוסט 2019 - מנחם אב תשע"ט



## MODERN PRINTERS AS TRANSLATORS OF ART | by Yair Medina

I've long wanted to share a few observations about my profession as an art printer in the era of digital reproduction. My good friend Avner Moriah has presented me with an opportunity to share my thoughts and I am grateful for it.

Together, Avner and I have just completed producing his illuminated book of Deuteronomy, the last of the five books in Avner's comprehensive project to illuminate the entire Pentateuch.

This project has spanned fourteen years. It progressed hand-in-hand with the technological advances in the field of modern printing of art, and alongside our lives in Jerusalem.

Avner and I go back twenty years. Over this time, we have walked and worked together, our professions intertwined and constantly evolving. Together we stood at the cusp of the era of modern digital reproduction of illuminated manuscripts, and together we crossed the threshold into this new realm as pioneers, with my special team there every step of the way.

Today's world is such that technology is evolving so fast that it outpaces its adoption. Classic crafts such as printing, carpentry, glasswork, and other trades are marginalized by global industrialization and profit lines, and everything seems computerized and simple.

This makes it both easier and more difficult to define the new role of the craftsman, the artisan in our times. It is the artists themselves who must define the added value of their craft, reinventing and reevaluating on a daily basis. And of course, they (we) must reckon with technology.

Technologies in our field allow a skilled machinery operator to achieve results that until now required the work of an artist. But art is more than the sum of technical processes. And no matter how precise and advanced, machines cannot provide the genuine depth and profundity of the original art without the actual artist.

Art printing is a form of translation. A good translation is one that reconstructs the physical components of the original, such as color, depth, and saturation, as well as the abstract components, such as sentiment, impact, and spatial balance.

Whether lithograph, silk-screen printing, or digital print, the role of the classic printer has not been eroded by technology. On the contrary, the wealth of tools and options available require of both printer and artist the finest of nuance and precision.

At the end of the day, it is spirit upon paper.  
I am grateful for this joint path that combines both.

Yair Medina



## EPILOGUE (AND PROLOGUE...)

### NA'ASE VE NISHMA (נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע)

by Avner Moriah

*Na'ase ve nishma* (to do and to obey\*) was the response of the Israelites at the first gathering at Mt. Sinai when Moses read the covenant to them. This answer can be considered the ultimate expression of absolute faith. In a way, this has been the motto of my entire artistic approach: I reach the understanding of my choices and visual language through the making of my art, not before.

The visual journey throughout the biblical text enabled me to unveil unfamiliar connotations and interrelations of the text, leading to a rereading of the Book as a whole. That is the case with Genesis 4:9, where the first act of worshipping God takes place alongside a moral transgression. Cain responds to God's demand regarding Abel: "Am I my brother's *keeper*?" This led me to rethink the verse of Genesis 2:15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to *keep* it."

As I would learn throughout my years of studying and painting the text, the use of the same concept is never arbitrary. To my understanding, it reveals that the moral behavior implied in God's demand of Cain was the same one present already in the Garden of Eden, in which serving God (repeated throughout the Bible, meaning to worship God) must always be coupled with a moral dimension (to keep).

Throughout the five books of the Pentateuch, we find these elements twinned: faith, present mainly in the narratives; and morality, present in the normative. The last book, Deuteronomy, emphasizes that the first commands the presence of the second. We can now understand that already in the first encounter between God and man in the Garden of Eden, the very essence of the Bible was introduced: to work and to keep, to serve God and to believe in Him, and to act morally, following the principles that are the basis of humanity. It is this that has kept the books of the Bible relevant throughout the generations, and in our times.

Nevertheless, there is another crucial concept: *lehaniach*, to put in place, that in Hebrew contains the same root of *mincha*, which is offering: (*lehaniach, la'avod ve lishmor*: וְלִשְׁמֹרָהּ וְלַעֲבֹדָהּ וְלַהֲנִיחָהּ) (Genesis 2:15). God's offering encompasses the idea of rejoicing in Creation, essential to the ultimate achievement of belief and ethics. This offering is the foundation of the bond between God and mankind: a total set of ethics and beliefs that should have sustained us in our existence in the Garden of Eden.

However, with the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, both faith and morality were put into question, and this is what emerges from the story of Cain and Abel. Upon leaving the Garden of Eden, we had to recreate the ethics and the belief in God. To me, these three words, *minha* (offering), *avoda* (worship), and *shmira* (keep), represent the essence of the morality and belief. The Five Books of Moses are a quest toward this goal, a quest that never ends. My own artistic quest is also a personal journey toward a renewed beginning.

\* Frequently and inevitably, the English translation of the biblical text is an interpretation and hence it loses the beauty and the polysemy of the Hebrew text.

## ABOUT AVNER MORIAH

Born in Jerusalem in 1953, Avner Moriah is among the first generation of Israeli-born artists, and holds a B.F.A. from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Architecture and an M.F.A. from Yale University's Graduate School of Art and Architecture.

Moriah is an active artist and prolific painter whose creative career spans more than four decades. His most recent accomplishment is a monumental project to illuminate the complete Pentateuch, a work of nearly fifteen years.

For this unparalleled artistic undertaking, Moriah created hundreds of original illustrations that provide a singular visual interpretation of the ancient texts. Hand-painted with gouache, watercolors, and gold-leaf alongside the Hebrew text in artisan calligraphy, these volumes are an unrivalled work of art and a profound tribute of the highest accord to the ancient tradition and text.

Moriah has also created an original Illuminated Passover Haggadah and a series of Illuminated Scrolls of Esther, each unique and specially commissioned as limited editions. Additional projects on biblical themes include a full series of the 52 weekly portions.

Prior to turning his brush and focus to illuminating Hebrew scripture, Moriah created murals depicting biblical scenes, painted a range of series on Jewish and Israeli themes and history, and captured the landscapes of his native Jerusalem and Israel in a series of on-site paintings.

Moriah's works, which reflect his roots in Western art as well as the atmosphere and inspiration of the Middle East, can be found in the collections of major museums and libraries throughout the world, as well as private collections.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been blessed with more friends than I can name. My heartfelt thanks go out to them all. Many have shared my journey, and it would not have been the same, or even at all possible, without them.

In particular, I wish to thank:

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*My Co-creators:* Yair and Valerie Zakovitch | Yair Medina and his wonderful team, Liron Bar-Cochva and Hodaya Dahan, from Jerusalem Fine Art Prints | Izzy Pludwinski | Shevach Black and Arkadi Bado

*Colleagues:* Fern Allen | Rabbi Jack Bemporad | Steve Corsin | David Kraemer | Sharon Liberman Mintz | Sally Oren | Rabbi Michael Paley | Batsheva Sobelman | Nanette Stahl | Amanda Weiss

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## AVNER MORIAH'S MONUMENTAL ILLUMINATED BIBLE BOOKS AND OTHER ARTWORKS ARE HOUSED IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS:

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich | Bibliothèque Nationale de France | British Library | Cleveland Museum of Art | Duke University Library | Harvard University Library | Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York | Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University | Israel Museum, Jerusalem Jewish Museum, New York | Jewish Theological Seminary, New York | Library of Congress | National Library of Israel | New York Public Library | Oxford University Library | Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles The Metropolitan Museum of Art | Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto United States Holocaust Memorial Museum | University of California, Los Angeles | Vatican Library Yale University Art Gallery | Yale University Library | Private Collections