

## Tribute to Ilana Tahan (1946–2024)

Ilana Antoinette Tahan was born in Romania and earned her BA from the Hebrew University. It was in Jerusalem that she met and married the Iraqi-born scientist and researcher Menashe Tahan. Moving to England, Ilana was awarded an MPhil from Aston University in Birmingham, her thesis being a study of the novels of the Russian-French author and historian Henri Troyat (1911–2007). In 1989, Ilana was appointed Hebraica Curator at the British Library, thus beginning an association that would span some 35 years. In 2002, Ilana was promoted to Head of the Hebrew Section, overseeing 3,000 medieval manuscripts, 7,000 Genizah fragments and more than 73,000 printed books (dating from 1450 onwards). As colleagues retired, Ilana's remit extended to cover a vast range of the British Library's collections and in 2010 she became Lead Curator of Hebrew and Christian Orient Collections, having within her purview a vast number of Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Hebrew, Jewish-language, and Syriac manuscripts and printed books. Many would have seen this as overwhelming, but Ilana took in her stride the responsibility that this entailed. As technology moved on, so did Ilana's specialisms. From 2013-2020, she oversaw the impressive and transformative Hebrew Manuscripts Digitisation Project (the first phase of which was funded by the Polonsky Foundation and the second phase in partnership with the National Library of Israel). This was a major accomplishment which led to the entirety of the British Library's Hebrew manuscripts being made available online for free. And, significantly for Digital Humanities research, the resultant 730,000 digitised images were also packaged as a download as part of the BL Labs initiative. Such an endeavour is not that of a single person, and it is a credit to Ilana's vision that she selected a series of gifted scholars with whom to work, including Adi Keinan-Schoonbaert, Miri Lewis and Zsófia Buda.

Ilana published many book chapters and articles, and her single-authored books include *Memorial Volumes to Jewish Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust: A Bibliography of British Library Holdings* (2004) and *Hebrew Manuscripts: The Power of Word and Image* (2008).

At conferences, and through her membership of professional bodies, Ilana worked hard to promote the British Library's collections and was a strong advocate for her field and for the work of librarians, archivists, imaging scientists

and more. Many will have fond memories of Ilana's presentations at, for example, the Association of Jewish Libraries, the Leeds International Medieval Congress, the NLI and, of course, at BIAJS. And, for many years, Ilana was also co-convenor (with Vanessa Freedman) of the Hebraica Libraries Group.

Ilana was also exemplary in her public engagement activities, bringing faith communities into contact with the manuscripts under her remit, including sacred texts written in Ge'ez, Hebrew and Latin. The study visits and 'show and tell' sessions that she organised were legendary and I was fortunate enough to attend several of these over the years. Ilana's expertise and commitment to the material was matched by her wish to share her favourite items from her beloved collection of manuscripts. She was in her element at these 'show and tell' sessions: funny, knowledgeable and clearly enjoying the interaction with members of the public. She wore her learning lightly and treated even the most basic questions with kindness and respect, drawing out ideas from her small group audiences with a twinkle in her eyes. In recent years, these sessions went online, with Ilana often holding court from her book-lined home, inviting us into her world with a warm smile and an eagerness to show highlights from the British Library's holdings. This dedication to publicising the collections under her care was evident when Ilana was awarded the Order of the British Empire for services to scholarship in 2009; with characteristic commitment to her then position as Head of the Hebrew Section, Ilana told the *Jewish Chronicle* that the OBE was important because it would help to bring the British Library's significant collection of Judaic manuscripts to the attention of the wider public. Behind the scenes, Ilana's passion for supporting small communities led to her helping the Samaritan Community to raise the funds to have their more than 200 manuscripts digitised. As an expression of their gratitude, the Samaritan Community awarded Ilana the Samaritan Medal and, in August 2024, they presented her family with a Memorial Medal as a posthumous honour in recognition of her tremendous contributions on their behalf.

While Ilana had made significant contributions and loans to exhibitions both in the UK and abroad, four years ago she realised her dream of organising an exhibition that was based solely on the British Library's holdings, 'Hebrew Manuscripts: Journeys of the Written Word' (co-organised and co-curated with Zsófia Buda). The opening of the exhibition was hit hard by the pandemic: the launch was scheduled for March 2020 with a closure date of August 2020! In a

thoughtful acknowledgement of the work that had gone into the exhibition, the British Library extended the timeframe for an extra 11 months, allowing visits between lockdowns and possibly making it the longest-running exhibition ever held at the British Library. Rather than offering a ‘greatest hits’ of the Hebrew manuscripts at the British Library (Golden Haggadah, Barcelona Haggadah and Lisbon Bible – I’m looking at you!), Ilana and Zsófia’s vision for ‘Journeys of the Written Word’ was an impressively nuanced celebration of the diversity of the Jewish experience and the vast range of text types that survive. Amongst the 44 items on display were a Sefer Torah from Kaifeng; a thirteenth-century Hebrew charter issued by a woman; magical incantations and amulets; scientific treatises; philosophy; a Judeo-Urdu fairy-tale; and – bringing the exhibition bang up-to-date – a loan of Miri Lewis’s ketubah.

On a personal note, I’ve known Ilana for more than four decades, first meeting her when I was a child because we both attended Ealing United Synagogue. Though I grew from young person into academic, and was on roundtables alongside Ilana at conferences, she had a penchant for telling people that she had been at my Bar Mitzvah. This would puzzle fellow academics, but I’d suggest that perhaps my Bar Mitzvah was such a remarkable event that you really had to be there? That aside, having Ilana as a friend of my family gave me a sense that entering the field of manuscript studies was a possibility. In fact, the first time that I spoke about medieval Hebrew manuscript art was at the all-night study session of a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* at Ealing Synagogue. I was nineteen and had been given the not-to-be envied 2am slot. As I distributed the glossy handouts of manuscripts that were mostly from the British Library’s collections, I felt both excited and intimidated that Ilana was in the audience. She came up afterwards and was generous in her encouragement, asking why I’d only spoken for 15 minutes when I had 20 minutes: ‘You obviously had so much more to say!’. I replied that I’d looked out into the tired eyes of my audience and had sensed that less was more. But the encouragement of Ilana’s comment pleased me. Reflecting on that memory from the now very long ago, it amuses that Ilana asked why I’d stopped early: Ilana was famous for never keeping to time in her conference papers and for nobody minding because what she had to share was so interesting and her delivery so compelling. A memorable example of that was at the 2015 conference on ‘Digital Approaches to Hebrew Manuscripts’ that I co-organised at King’s College London. The chair of the session in which Ilana was due to speak had boasted to me

that they had never permitted a speaker to overrun, showing me a set of laminated cards that said '5 mins', '3 mins', '0 mins' and 'STOP!'. As you may have guessed, neither the chair nor the cards were a match for Ilana, who appealed to the audience for their verdict. She was given a unanimous 'Keep going!' from the rapt attendees and this was the end of the negotiation. I will add that we were not sorry. What was 5 minutes less for lunch when we could enjoy more of Ilana's expertise?

Although Ilana was intensely private when it came to herself, like many a parent she delighted in talking about her children (Avy and Margalit) and sharing their achievements. I treasure the memory of her insisting that I follow her to the 'Turning the Pages' computer in the exhibition gallery in order to listen to the audio narration that was explaining the history of the Golden Haggadah: 'That's my Marga!' she said, confiding that she would sometimes go and listen to her daughter's voice during her lunch hour. But Ilana was a formidable presence when it came to scholarship about the manuscripts under her care. As I soon discovered, one had to work hard to impress her and, to get anywhere, one needed an attention to detail and a rigour equal to her own. She could be exigent and was not often swayed by 'innovative' arguments. That being the case, I was a little wary when she motioned for me to sit down on a nearby bench one day at the BL, asking if I'd read Marc Michael Epstein's *The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative, and Religious Imagination* (2011). I replied that I had, and Ilana looked at me intently: 'then read it again! I have read it five times and,' she said with slight tears in her eyes, 'he has new things to say!'

Ilana leaves behind her an impressive legacy and legions of scholars who benefited from her kindness, expertise and willingness to assist them in their research. She also leaves a huge gap. In an interview with the *Jewish Chronicle* in 2016, Ilana stated: '*The Bible and the Talmud are not old texts, they are everlasting texts.*' May her memory be for a blessing.

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