Praising the Lord: Discovering a Song of Ascents on Carved Torah Arks in Eastern Europe

Bracha Yaniv

In 1939, when Szymon Zajczyk arrived in the town of Zelwa and photographed the Torah ark in the stone and brick synagogue, he was unaware that he was preserving a treasure of Jewish art which was destined to go up in flames within just a short time (fig. 1). The photographs of this and other Torah arks he and his colleagues took inside the synagogues scattered throughout the towns of eastern Europe in the period between the two world wars remain the only testimony to a most unusual phenomenon. Carved in wood, these arks demonstrate full information about their form. In most cases the Torah ark is presented only partially or in an unclear fashion. Therefore it is not possible to read all the texts inscribed on the arks and in many instances we lack dates or other details. Needless to say, in the absence of information about the measurements, type of wood, and type of color used on the painted arks, we had no choice but to base our study on reconstructed data. Nonetheless, the inventory of photographs is sufficient to represent the visual art heritage of eastern European Jewry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Poland before its partition, i.e., in the present geopolitical region that includes Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine.

What makes these carved wooden Torah arks so special is their iconographic richness and complexity. Most of the arks for which we have photographs are tall, and are designed as architectural structures of one or more tiers, with the tips of the highest ones touching the synagogue ceiling. The arks rise above an elevated platform, ascended by a number of steps. In many cases the entrance to the stairway is designed as a gate, such as the ark in the synagogue at Zelwa. In the center of the first tier is the chamber in which the Torah scrolls are kept, which is closed by doors. Alongside this space and above it the ark is composed of architectural features.

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1 Place names of places are written in the local form, mainly in Polish.
2 About this community see Pinkas Hakehillot – Encyclopaedia of Jewish Communities from their Foundation till after the Holocaust: Lithuania, eds. Dov Levin and Josef Rosin (Jerusalem, 1996), 449-51. (Hebrew)
3 Szymon Zajczyk started to document eastern European synagogues in 1929. His goal was to publish a comprehensive research paper on synagogues in eastern Europe but he did not survive to realize his wish. His photographs are kept in the archive of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IS PAN), Warsaw. Among his publications: Szymon Zajczyk, “Architektura barokowych bóżnic murowanych w Polsce (Baroque Synagogues Built in Brick),” Badania Naukowe, Zakład Architektury Polskiej i Historii Sztuki Politechniki Warszawskiej 1, no. 4 (June 1933):187-95; idem, “Bóżnice renesansowe w Polsce, I, Bóżnica w Pińczowie (Renaissance Synagogues in Poland, The Synagogue of Pińczów),” Wiadomości Krajoznawcze 14 (1933): 4-7.
Fig. 1. Torah ark, Zelwa, 1750–1800, painted wood. Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IS PAN)
such as bases, columns, panels, capitals, cornices, and side wings.

These areas are carved in open interlacing or covered with panels of such work. The interlaced areas are carved in vegetal designs and in many of the Torah arks these vegetal backgrounds are inhabited by animals. Other animals, carved in relief or positioned as freestanding statues, are set along the central axis of the ark, in heraldic form or as main elements. In addition, fixed along the central axis, are reliefs of the Tablets of the Law, crowns, hands raised in the priestly blessing, cartouches with various texts, raised curtains, flower bouquets, and chains. There are also decorated items in relief, such as jugs and vases, on the sides of the arks.

However, one of the most prominent elements in these Torah arks is animals, some known to us from literary sources, such as lions, eagles, or griffons, all of which constitute imaginary representations of the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant, or leopards, eagles, gazelles, and lions, whose traits characterize the devout Jew.

In addition to these animals, the tops of the arks often included a depiction of a double-headed eagle as an image of the Divine, based on the biblical verse: “Like an eagle who rouses his nestlings” (Deut. 2:11). In the nineteenth century another motif appears: a spread-winged eagle whose source is the book of Isaiah: “Like the birds that fly, even so will the Lord of Hosts shield Jerusalem” (31:5). Another biblical verse expressed in the ark decoration is “With trumpets and the blast of the horn raise a shout before the Lord, the King” (Ps. 98:6), that is made tangible in the depiction of lions or griffins holding a trumpet and a shofar (ram’s horn). Alongside these motifs lions or other beasts stand in a protective position, facing outwards, and heraldic birds on both sides of a plant on the ark doors or to its side, as part of the image: “She is a tree of life to those who grasp her; and whoever holds on to her is happy” (Prov. 3:18). Less common animals include the ox and the Leviathan, references to Messianic times. These motifs appear on the arks either separately or intertwined, and only familiarity with them enables the

4 In concept, the Torah ark in the synagogue resembles the Torah ark in the Temple. The upper part of the Torah ark in the synagogue recalls the kapporet, the mercy seat which covered the biblical ark, on which the cherubim were placed (Exod. 25:18–22; 37:8–9). The depiction of the cherubim in the form of a lion, an eagle, and a griffin is based on the vision of the chariot in the book of Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:10; 10:14). Depiction of the cherubim on the kapporet, the Torah ark valance, see Bracha Yaniv, “The Cherubim on Torah Ark Valances,” Assaph 4 (1999): 155–70.

5 According to Mishnah Avot 5:20, “Judah b. Tema said: Be strong as the leopard and swift as the eagle, fleet as the gazelle and brave as the lion to do the will of thy Father who is in heaven.” For this motif on the Torah ark in the synagogue of Wlodawa, see Maria and Kazimierz Piechotkowie, Bramy Nieba: Białe mury na ziemiach dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (Heaven’s Gates: Brick Synagogues in the Territories of the Former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) (Warsaw, 1999), fig. 515; on the doors of the Torah ark in the Popper synagogue in Kazimierz, Krakow: ibid., fig. 306.


7 See also the Torah ark in the synagogue of Izabelin, Piechotka, Bramy Nieba, fig. 588.

8 Such an example is seen on the Torah ark in the synagogue of Pawolocz. See: Ba-hazorah k.a-yad, An-Sky ve-ha-mishlehat ha-etnografiyah ha-yehudit 1912–1914, me-osafey ha-museon ha-mamlakhti le-etnografiyah be-Sankt. Petersburg (Back to the Shtetl: An-Sky and the Jewish Ethnographic Expedition, 1912–1914, from the Collections of the State Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg) [catalogue, Israel Museum], curator and editor Rivka Gonen (Jerusalem, 1994), 97 (Hebrew).

9 These depictions typify the ark’s wings, see Maria and Kazimierz Piechotkowie, Wooden Synagogues (Warsaw, 1959), fig. 201 (Przedbórz); Piechotka, Bramy Nieba, fig. 227 (Rzeszów); Maria and Kazimierz Piechotkowie, Heaven’s Gates: Wooden Synagogues in the Territories of the Former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Warsaw, 2004), fig. 140 (Wolpa).

10 Such an example can be seen on the doors of the Torah ark from Tykocin, see Piechotka, Bramy Nieba, fig. 271, and on both sides of the Torah ark from Chodorów, see Piechotka, Wooden Synagogues, fig. 7.

11 A Leviathan on the architrave of the Torah ark from Oklinski, see Piechotka, Wooden Synagogues, fig. 121. For a Leviathan and a wild ox see the synagogue of Stawiski: Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IS PAN), neg. 19138. The literary source of the legend of the Leviathan and the wild ox: BT Bava Batra 74b–75a; Ozar Midrashim: Bet eked le-matamim midrashim ketanim [. . .] (A Library of Two Hundred Minor Midrashim), ed. Judah D. Eisenstein, 2 vols. (New York, 1928), 2:466 (Hebrew).
viewer to identify their various meanings. In some cases they are accompanied by quotations from their literary sources, making it easy to identify them.

The situation is different in regard to another group of animals carved on some of the Torah arks discussed in this study. This group, depicted symmetrically on either side of the longitudinal axis and especially on the panels and side wings of the ark, includes imaginary creatures alongside realistic ones and varies in composition from ark to ark. One of the figures appearing on most of these arks is an imaginary sea creature found, in most cases, in the lower edge of the wing of the first tier, as can be seen in the arks of Zelwa, Sidra, Maciejów, and Olkienniki (figs. 1–4). In a few arks this creature is depicted at the bottom of the wing of the second or third tier. Its upper body is that of an animal such as a lion, lioness, leopard or a wolf, horse,
or other animal that is not clearly identifiable. The lower part of the body, on the other hand, is in the form of a fish with fins, tail, and scales. In most of the arks this creature faces outwards, but there are a few examples such as, for instance, the Sidra ark (fig. 2) where it is turned inwards. Of all the animals, this is the only one whose source is the sea. Above it, on the same wing, and also on the panels adjoining the wing, land animals such as the bear, ram, sheep, goat, billy goat, gazelle, hart, squirrel, rabbit, stork, and snake are depicted. In between them, and mostly above them, are a variety of winged creatures, particularly the eagle. The common denominator of all these groups, even when they include only a limited number of living creatures, is the representation of creatures which inhabit the sea, land, and air.

The richest variety and complexity of these creatures is found on the Torah ark of the Great Synagogue in the town of Druja in the district of Vitebsk, today part of Belarus and located near the Lithuanian border.12

The synagogue was built in 1765/613 and the ark in

12 Jews are mentioned in Druja since the third quarter of the sixteenth century and a community existed there since the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. Many of the Jews of Druja were involved in the local soap industry. In 1766 1,305 Jews lived in Druja, 2,366 in 1847, while in 1897 the Jews accounted for 3,006 persons out of a general population of 4,742; see Aharon Weiss, "Druya," EJ, 6:241. About the synagogue of Druja, see Piechotka, Bramy Nieba, 350–52; Joseph Rapoport, Echoes of Druya: A Short History of the Rapoport Family and the Vabel Family and the Town of Druja Where They Lived (New York, 1988), 73, 78. Additional information from memoirs of Druja’s community members can be found in Sefer Druya u-kehilot Mayor, Druysk ve-Leonpol. (The Book of Druja and the Communities of Miory, Druysk and Leonopol), ed. Mordekhai Naishrat (Ramat-Gan, 1973), 11–16 (Hebrew): about the Torah ark, see Asher Avraham Alter Druyanow, "Me’al gag ba’t ha-kneset ha-gadol" (From the Roof of the Great Synagogue), in ibid., 25–34; Berl Avraham ha-Levi Vitmann, "Ha’ayara vi-yehudene" (The Town and its Jews), in ibid., 50–54.

13 The scholarly assumption attributes the planning of this synagogue to the Venetian architect Antonio Paracco who was active on Polish territory since ca.1750; see Stanislaw Lorentz, Wycieczki po województwie wileńskim (Travels in the Wilno voivodeship) (Vilna, 1932), 23; Piechotka, Bramy Nieba, 350. Paracco built the Catholic church and the Dominican Cloister in Druja during the years 1763–75; Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker, "Paracca," Allgemeines Lexicon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart, 37 vols. (Leipzig, 1907–50), 26:224. I would like to thank my colleague, Dr Ilia Rodov, for this information about Antonio Paracco.
Fig. 5. Torah ark, Druja, 1774/5, wood, IS PAN.
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Fig. 6. Torah ark, detail: first tier, Druja, 1774/5, wood, IS PAN

1774/5. All went up in flames when the ghetto was set on fire by the Germans in June 1942.

This Torah ark, together with the platform on which it stands, rises to a height of about eight meters and was ascended by a six-step staircase (fig. 5). The ark is designed as an architectural structure of three tiers, gradually narrowing towards the top. It is made of carved wood and is completely decorated in interlacing foliage inhabited by carved creatures. Above each cornice stand three-dimensional figures. The wealth and density of the Druja ark artwork mark it as a paradigm of this group of Torah arks. Thus the great synagogue in Druja is the focus of this study and conclusions will be drawn from it about the others.

The base of the ark is carved in the form of a pair of large lions posed in a protective position with their heads turned outwards. Above the lions’ heads is the first tier of the ark. In the center of each tier a rectangular frame outlines an opening: on the first tier the doors of the Torah ark; on the second, carved interlacing with a round

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14 Zajczyk dated the building of the synagogue to the year 1765/6 (Zajczyk, "Architektura": 195). Although he did not cite his source for this dating, it seems that it appeared in a Hebrew inscription on the wall or in a Hebrew document. The year 1765/6 correlates with the Hebrew year 5526.

15 About the burning of the synagogue, see Yerahmiel Romik, “A’yanah” (My Town), in Sefer Druja, 42-44.

16 An identical Torah ark was built in 1790 in the wooden synagogue of Jurborg, a small town in western Lithuania. About this synagogue and the picture of the Torah ark, see Piechotka, Heaven’s Gates, 237.
window inside it; and on the third a pair of windows with rounded upper edges, recalling the Tablets of the Law. These frames are flanked by cylindrical columns carved in openwork patterns consisting of stylized vegetation that differ from tier to tier. On the first and second tiers two pairs of square columns carved with vegetal designs flank the cylindrical ones. On all three tiers free wings gradually narrow towards the top. Jugs with handles bearing vegetal carvings are placed above the external columns of the second tier and above the cylindrical ones of the third.

Vegetal patterns with shoots rising upwards from vases are carved on the doors of the ark (fig. 6). At the upper tip of each plant stand two birds in heraldic position. Above the doors is a cornice that protrudes arch-like towards the front of the ark. Its upper margin is wavy, and tassel-like pendants dangle from the lower edge. The front of the cornice is carved with vegetal interlacing inhabited by a pair of heraldic winged creatures with their heads turned backwards. Above the cylindrical column capitals beside the door of the ark, fixed plaques, are inscribed in dark letters on a light background as follows: On the right plaque are the words: כ摈אמונה / הקודש (By the craftsman who carries out faithfully this holy work) and on the left plaque: " By the craftsman who carries out faithfully this holy work)." Since a seven-branched candelabrum is depicted on the inside of the right door, then presumably the inside of the left door shows the shewbread table. Although this motif is not our concern in this article, it should be mentioned since it is one of the most common motifs appearing on European Torah arks.
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Fig. 8. Torah ark, detail: third tier, Druja, 1774/5, wood, IS PAN

In the center of the second tier of the ark is a sort of “verandah” with a handrail of small columns whose rim is carved with plants in a state of disarray\(^{19}\) bent towards the front of the ark (fig. 7). Above the “verandah” an area of interlacing adjoins the window, a round opening enclosed

\(18\) Kamai is in eastern Lithuania.

\(19\) This inconsistency is probably caused by age damage. The poor state of the Torah ark is witnessed by several broken elements, of which the crown upon the double-headed eagle is the most visible.
Fig. 9. Torah ark, Druja, drawing: Yiv Yuretz
by a geometric frame surrounded, in turn, by another frame of foliate carvings. The window pane bears the inscription ‘הָלֵבָע לְפִי וְיִבְרָכֶנָה לְפִי’ (Aaron lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them (Lev. 9:22). The upper edges of the interlacing are bordered by an arched frame above which rise a pair of carved hands in the position of the priestly blessing. Beside the hands there are carved vegetal decorations. Above them is a crown with a ring from which a chain dangles in its front part.

The cornice of the second tier contains a number of elements (fig. 8). In the center, behind the crown, is a light-colored plaque with an inscription in dark letters: מְשִׁיב הוֹדֵד מִבְּדַרְדַּרְדַּר וְיִכְפַּר הַנָּשִׁים כָּלָכָל וְיַשְׁא (In the year: “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel” (Exod. 19:3), that is, the year 1774/5. Above the capitals of the central columns are two plaques with inscriptions. The right one is inscribed with the words מְשִׁיב הוֹדֵד וְיִכְפַּר הַנָּשִׁים (He who makes the wind blow and the rain fall) and the left with מְפֻטָה לְפִי מָרָה (dew and rain for a blessing). Two eagles facing front are perched on the top of these plaques and beside them, above the capitals of the central columns, stand a pair of geese, also facing forward. Chains dangle from the beaks of these eagles.

On the third tier, above the pair of windows shaped like the Tablets of the Law a spread-winged eagle hovers above a fledgling in a nest. At the top of the ark are two carved heraldic griffons, supporting a crown identified by an inscription as the Crown of the Torah, and above it rises a two-headed eagle, but of its crown only the base remains.

More creatures are carved against a background of vegetal patterns decorating the columns and wings of the three tiers (fig. 9). On the first there are creatures in the upper parts of the frontal panels and on the columns between them, in the following order: In the inner panel a bird is perched above a stylized plant; next to it, in the first column, a bird sits on a branch, and below it a squirrel cracks a nut. On the second column of this tier two carved snakes wind upwards on a straight branch, one above the other. At the top of the branch is a small sheep. The outermost panel repeats the design of the bird perched above a stylized plant that appears in the inner panel. In the center of the side wings of the first tier a hind leaps outwards from the ark, and atop the wings there is an unidentified bird, surmounted by a cluster of grapes. In the lower part of the second tier’s wings a rabbit runs towards the outer edge of the ark; closer to the edge is another rabbit, slung downwards, and a raven picks at its backside. At the base of the third tier’s wings is a carving of a hybrid creature, with a equine upper body and a long, fish-like lower body sporting a fin and scales. A bird pecking at its tail.

As this detailed description of the Torah ark indicates, it contains a number of motifs, among them living creatures. The pair of lions at the base of the ark constitutes a separate motif because of its depiction in a protective stance. Other motifs include: the pair of heraldic winged creatures at the tops of the plants above the ark doors; the pair of heraldic winged creatures on the cornice above them; and the “cherubim on the Torah ark valances”, here in the form of a pair of griffins flanking the crown of the Torah. Closing this group of motifs is the pair of eagles representing a divine image, one hovering above its fledglings in the nest between the two arches and the other a double-headed eagle at the top of the Torah ark.

Further examination of the Druja Torah ark reveals the group of animals that is the focus of this study. As mentioned above, the group is not fixed and in this case it includes the following: eagles, geese, storks, heraldic birds, creatures.20 The letters of the Hebrew alphabet represent numbers as well. Counting of the years is calculated by adding together the numerical values of the Hebrew letters which appear in the inscription, or which are marked within it. In this case, certain letters in the text are emphasized but there are probably additional emphasized letters except for the shin, resh, and alef but their identification is not certain. Thus we cannot calculate the date inscribed.

21 Comparison to those on the Torah ark from Zelwa prove that these fragmented chains comprised one chain connecting the two eagles through the crown between them.

22 Another motif on this Torah ark is The Three Crowns — The Crown of Priesthood, and the Crown of Kingdom, which is depicted along the central axis of the ark. For more on this motif, see Yaniv, “The Three-Crowns Motif.”

23 This motif is rare in synagogues. A defensive position, i.e., the lions’ heads turned outwards, appears in the few known cases on the wings of the first or the second tier. See n. 8 above.

24 About the griffins and additional ways of depicting cherubim in this motif see: Yaniv, “The Cherubim”: 155–70.
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perched on branch tops, a munching squirrel with a bird above it, snakes on a branch with a sheep above them, a hind, a running rabbit, a dead rabbit with a raven pecking at its corpse, and a hybrid creature whose tail is being pecked by a bird. Most of these creatures are present in the other arks as well and those with the most prominent distribution, such as the hind, squirrel, sheep, rabbit, stork, and the imaginary sea creature, are depicted on the Druja Torah Ark as well. Here too, as in the other groupings of these creatures, sea, land, and air creatures are all clearly represented. What distinguishes this ark from the others is the large number of animals on it and the unusual positioning of the sea creature in the top wings instead of the bottom ones, as was customary.

The first hint that this group has special significance comes from the eagles on the dedicatory plaques – their frontal stance suggests that they are not images of the “cherubim on the valance.” The latter are always depicted in profile, facing one another as described in Exodus 37:9. The inclusion of the geese and storks, also facing front, alongside the eagles above the first tier, leaves no doubt as to the different meaning of the eagles and the possibility that the eagles and the birds placed next to them have a common source.

To explain the large number of these birds on the Torah ark, it was necessary to search for Hebrew literary sources that deal with animals. Yet, while animals are the subject of some widely distributed books that were printed repeatedly throughout Europe, even in Yiddish translation, their context is not relevant to the animals we have listed. The best known of these works is Meshal ha-Kadmoni (Fables of the Ancient) by R. Isaac ben Solomon Sahula, first printed in 1491.25 This, the first Hebrew book printed with illustrations, was published in Yiddish as well26 and the public was familiar with it, but its content, consisting of animal fables, has no relevance at all to the creatures depicted on the Torah arks and therefore cannot provide information about their meanings. Other books about animals do not include groupings such as those found on the arks and contribute nothing to an understanding of their meaning.27 A search of local popular literary or art sources also proved futile, because they do not include animal groups similar to those that are the subject of this study.28

Another literary source that deals with a group of animals is Psalm 104. A hymn of praise to the greatness of the Creator, this psalm is based on the descriptions of the six days of creation. Its first verses speak of light, sky, water, clouds, wind, fire, and earth (1–6). The following verses speak of land, sea, and rivers (7–12), the fruit of the earth, the trees, and the living creatures (13–18), sun and moon, and day and night (19–24), the sea and all that is within it (25–26), and the cycles of death and renewal of all living things (27–30).29

This psalm might possibly provide an iconographic source for the animals depicted on the Torah ark, because its verses contain references to creatures portrayed there, among them: “all the wild beasts” (11); “the birds of the sky dwell beside them” (13); “where birds make their nests; the stork has her home in the junipers” (17); “the high mountains are for wild goats; the crags are a refuge for rock badgers” (18); “the lions roar for prey, seeking their food from God” (21); “there is the sea, vast and wide, with its creatures beyond number, living things great and small” (25); “there go the ships, and Leviathan that You formed to sport with” (26).

25 By the printing house of Gershom Soncino, Brescia, ca. 1491.
26 These editions were published in Frankfurt an der Oder, in J.C. Beckmann’s press (1693, 1749); Frankfurt am Main, David Jakob Kranau’s press (1764); Prague, Katz’s press (1764). Meshal ha-kadmoni was printed for the first time in eastern Europe, with a Yiddish translation, in Zólkiew, eastern Galicia in 1808.
27 Among them, the book Iggeret Ba’alei Hayyim (The Animals’ Collection), originally written in Basra, Iraq, was known in the eighteenth century. It deals with animals and their situation, relations between man and animal, the king, demons, etc. This book was translated into Hebrew by Kalonymus ben Kalonymus of Provence in 1316. Printed editions of this translation were published for the first time in Mantua in 1557, in several printing centers in Germany, and since 1802 in Vilna and Lvov. In Warsaw it was published with a Yiddish translation as well.
28 I would like to express my thanks to Prof. Olga Goldberg-Mulkiewicz for the inquiry into this matter in local culture.
29 See commentary on Ps. 104 in Da’at mikra le-sefer Tehillim (Da’at mikra on the Book of Psalms), with commentary by Amos Hacham, (Jerusalem, 1990), 249 (Hebrew).
A comparison between the creatures mentioned in this psalm and those depicted on the Torah arks of Druja and the other towns mentioned above reveals a surprising correspondence between the two:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psalm 104</th>
<th>Torah Arks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wild beasts</td>
<td>Snakes, leopards, wolves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birds of the sky</td>
<td>Eagles, ravens and various winged creatures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birds</td>
<td>Birds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stork</td>
<td>Storks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild goats</td>
<td>Harts, hinds, gazelles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock badgers</td>
<td>Squirrels, rabbits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>Lions, lionesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leviathan</td>
<td>Sea creatures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both lists include creatures of the sea, land, and air, which is not surprising in light of the fact that Psalm 104 is essentially a song of praise to the Creator and as such it speaks of His creations in the entire universe. However, there is one difference between the two groups. Although they are well represented on the arks, no tame animals – sheep, goats, billy-goats, and geese – are mentioned in Psalm 104. This poses a difficulty for the assumption that this Psalm is the source for these particular animal depictions. Furthermore, although the worshippers were very familiar with this Psalm, it does not provide sufficient explanation for its preference above other important prayer texts as a source for the design of the Torah arks.

The obvious conclusion is that the choice of animals for the Torah ark carvings is based on some other literary text, whose structure and content are similar to those of Psalm 104. Furthermore, this text would have had to be accessible to and popular among eighteenth-century eastern European Jews in addition to containing some mention of the tame animals that are absent in the Psalm.

A survey of the folk literature soon brings to light a collection of hymns that answers to these requirements: Perek Shirah, a short text containing words of praise to the Creator, spoken by His creatures – all the elements of the universe except for man: natural and supernatural creatures as well as plants and animals. The verses are arranged in midrashic style and in fact they are biblical quotations, mostly from the Psalms. At the end of the book there are additions, apparently from a later date, praising those who recite it.

Perek Shirah is a very early text and its manuscript versions differ from one another. They may be classified into three writing traditions: oriental, Sephardi, and Ashkenazi. From the thirteenth century onwards this text, ascribed to King David, was the subject of kabbalistic commentaries and its recitation was considered...

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30 According to Ashkenazi custom, this Psalm is recited as part of the Morning Prayer on the first day of the new month (rosh hodesh) after the Song of the Day and in the afternoon prayers on Sabbath from the holiday of Sukkot (Tabernacles) up to the Sabbath preceding Pesah (Passover), known as the Great Sabbath.


32 This attribution appears in the introductions to Perek Shirah in manuscript editions as well as in printed books, as follows: “Our sages of blessed memory said of King David, may he rest in peace: at the moment when he completed the book of Psalms he was filled with pride and he said to the Holy One Blessed Be He: Is there any creature that you created in your world that recites songs and praises more than me? At that moment a frog appeared before him and said to him: David, do not be proud. I recite songs and praises more than you, and not only that, but each song that I recite has three thousand fables drawn from it […]”. Translated from the introduction to the edition of Sefer Perek Shirah ha-meyuhas la-David ha-melekh alav ha-shalom (The Book of Perek Shirah attributed to King David, May He Rest in Peace), ed. Berl Klein (New York 1997), 1-2 (Hebrew).
a protection against all sorts of afflictions.33 Presumably, this protective quality encouraged its widespread distribution in Europe and it was first printed in Venice in 1576 by Moshe ben Yosef Trani as an appendix to his book Bet ha-Elohim. This appendix, titled Sefer Nehmad, included the short text of Perek Shirah as well as a commentary authored by the printer.34 Many subsequent editions followed and with time Perek Shirah was included in the printed prayer books.35 In eastern Europe it was first published in the Krakow prayer book of 1651. In addition to its publication in prayer books, Perek Shirah also appeared together with other books and generally with a commentary. Its earliest publication in Yiddish was in Amsterdam in 1692, bound together with Tefilot mi-Sefer Sha'arey Zion. In addition to the original text, this book includes a commentary in Yiddish by Raphael the son of R. Shlomo of Lithuania. From here the text, as a separate booklet, very quickly achieved widespread popularity throughout eastern Europe.36

The structural and literary division of Perek Shirah supports the suggestion that it was in fact the source for the animal depictions on the Torah arks. The work consists of five poems:

1. A song of the universe, including sky, earth, and sea, and all that they contain;37
2. A song of the vegetation and the trees;
3. A song of the crawling insects;
4. A song of the birds;
5. A song of the beasts and the animals

This structure separates the products of creation into groups. The individual components of each group are listed together with the words of praise that come from their mouths. Following are precise quotations of the words of praise in Perek Shirah, all taken from the Bible, that relate to the animal depictions on the Torah arks:

33 Perek Shirah commences with the following words: “We learn that Rabbi Eliezer the Great says: For he who recites this chapter of song every day, I bear witness that he is worthy of the next world and will be safe from harm and from the evil inclination and from hash judgment and from Satan and from all sorts of destructive and harmful things” (Klein edition, 1). Sometimes this formula for a remedy is accompanied by additional texts like that which opens the version of Perek Shirah which is printed as an appendix to the prayer book of Ha-Sheelah ha-Kadosh ([Ha-Sheelah = initials of Shenei Lohot ha-Berit of Isaiah Horowitz]) This text reads: “He who studies this Perek Shirah in this world will have the merit to learn and his learning will remain with him and he will be saved from the evil inclination and from punishment after death and from the judgment of hell and will merit the coming of the Messiah and the life of the world to come.” See Siddur Sha’ar ha-Shamayim (The Siddur “The Gate to Heaven”), (Amsterdam, 1917), 11: 21.

Perek Shirah serves today, too, as an amuletic text with mystical powers, and is published in popular editions. Among these is a concise loose-leaf folder which was printed in 2001 with colored photographs of animals by Ya’akov Wertheimer of Jerusalem. The first ten thousand copies were distributed by him for free.

34 Sefer Nehmad was published independently in 1905 in Munkachevo by the printer Aharon Dov Maisels.

35 Prayer books with Perek Shirah were published in all centers of Hebrew printing: Frankfurt am Main (1656); Prague (1657); Mantua (1661); Venice (1694-1710); Berlin (1701); Amsterdam [Shenei Lohot ha-Berit of Isaiah Horowitz] (1717); Amsterdam (1718); etc. (Klein edition, unnumbered page at the end of the book). I would like to thank Aviva Levine for her excellent inquiry into the bibliographic material concerning the various editions of Perek Shirah.

36 A new Yiddish translation of Perek Shirah was published by the Hebrew and Yiddish author Shalom Jacob Abramovitz, better known as Mendele Mokher Sefarim, in 1875. This fact testifies to the great demand for the Yiddish translations of Perek Shirah. See Shalom Yaakov Abramovitz, Perek Shirah i'm pe'ulot ve-panah tso tsi'am (Perek Shirah with an Introduction and Commentary) (Zytomyr, 1875) (Hebrew). I would like to thank Rachel Hanig for directing me to the revised edition of this book: Mendele Mokher Sefarim, Perek Shirah, translated and edited by Shalom Luria, with Introduction (Haifa and Tel Aviv, 2000). There are a few illuminated manuscripts of this text, dating from the eighteenth century. Their rarity and their central-European provenance exclude the possibility that the animals depicted in these manuscripts were models for the carved animals upon the Torah arks in eastern Europe. Illuminated manuscripts of Perek Shirah: Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, MS HEB 8° 4295; British Museum, London, Oriental MS 12.983; Flossheim Collection, Zurich; Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, MS. 815.1; The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. MS. 9507.

37 The elements and creatures listed in Perek Shirah include creatures that are depicted on the Torah ark, and also many others, some of which are familiar to us. For a more detailed discussion see the Hebrew version of this article, Bracha Yaniv, “Shir hallel be-ma’ale aron ha-kodesh” Timorah, Articles on Jewish Art (Timorah, Kovetz ma’amari be-omanut yehudit), ed. Bracha Yaniv (Ramat-Gan, 2006), ?? (Hebrew).

38 Based on the text in Ozar Mahzorim, 523-25.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal</th>
<th>Psalm Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Leviathan</td>
<td>“Praise the Lord; for He is good, His steadfast love is eternal.” (Ps. 136:1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sea monster</td>
<td>“Praise the Lord, O you who are on earth, all sea monsters and ocean depths.” (Ps. 148:7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>“The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over the mighty waters.” (Ps. 29:3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The snake</td>
<td>“The Lord supports all who stumble, and makes all who are bent stand straight.” (Ps. 145:14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cat</td>
<td>“Should you nest as high as the eagle, Should your eyrie be lodged ‘mong the stars, Even from there I will pull you down – declares the Lord.” (Obad. 1:4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The dove</td>
<td>“O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, Hidden by the cliff, Let me see your face, Let me hear your voice; For your face is sweet and your face is comely.” (Song of Sol. 2:14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I piped like a swift or a swallow, I moaned like a dove, As my eyes, all worn, looked to heaven; My Lord, I am in straits; Be my surety!” (Isa. 38:14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The tame goose</td>
<td>“Sing praises to Him; speak of all his wondrous acts.” (Ps. 105:2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The wild goose</td>
<td>When it sees the children of Israel studying Torah, it says: “A voice rings out: Clear in the desert a road for the Lord! Level in the wilderness a highway for our God!” (Isa. 40:3) And on having its needs satisfied it says: “Blessed is he who trusts in the Lord, Whose trust is the Lord alone.” (Jer. 17:7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The eagle</td>
<td>“O Lord God of hosts, God of Israel, bestir yourself to bring all nations to account; have no mercy on any treacherous villain. Selah.” (Ps. 59:6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The stork</td>
<td>“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and declare to her that her term of service is over, that her iniquity is expiated; For she has received at the hand of the Lord double for all her sins.” (Isa. 40:2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The raven, what does it say?

“Who provides food for the raven when his young cry out to God and wander about without food?” (Job 38:41)

“Who gives the beasts their food, to the raven’s brood what they cry for.” (Ps. 147:9)

The bird, what does it say?

“Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself in which to set her young, near Your altar, O Lord of hosts my king and my God” (Ps. 84:4)

The pure small cattle, what does it say?

“When is like you, O Lord, among the celestials? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, Awesome in splendor, working wonders!” (Exod. 15:11)

The pure large cattle, what does it say?

“Sing joyously to God, our strength; raise a shout for the God of Jacob.” (Ps. 81:2)

The ox, what does it say?

“Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. They said: I will sing unto the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and rider He has hurled into the sea.” (Exod. 15:1)

The gazelle (Hebrew = צבי), what does it say?

“But I will sing of your strength, extol each morning Your faithfulness; for You have been my haven, a refuge in time of trouble.” (Ps. 59:17)

The horse, what does it say?

“As the eyes of slaves follow their master’s hand, as the eyes of a slave-girl follow the hand of her mistress, so our eyes are toward the Lord our God, awaiting His favor.” (Ps. 123:2)

The beasts of the field, what do they say?

“You are good and beneficent; teach me Your laws.” (Ps. 119:68)

The lion, what does it say?

“The Lord goes forth like a warrior, Like a fighter He whips up His rage, He yells, He roars aloud, He charges upon His enemies.” (Isa. 42:13)

The bear, what does it say?

“Let the desert and its towns cry aloud, the villages where Kedar dwells; Let Sela’s inhabitants shout, call out from the peaks of the mountains. Let them do honor to the Lord, and tell His glory in the coastlands.” (Isa. 42:11–12)

The starling, what does it say?

“Sing forth, O you righteous, to the Lord; it is fit that the upright acclaim Him.” (Ps. 33:1)
Fig. 10. Torah ark, Zelwa, 1750–1800, detail: right columns, panels, and wing, painted wood, IS PAN
A comparison between the above list from Perek Shirah and the list of animals on the Torah arks shows that the two are very similar and even in some instances identical:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perek Shirah</th>
<th>Torah Arks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leviathan, sea monster, fish</td>
<td>Hybrid sea creature (figs. 1–4, 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snake</td>
<td>Sea monster along the upper edges of the ark wing (fig. 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>Pair of upright snakes (fig. 1); a snake grappling with a stork (fig. 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dove, bird, starling</td>
<td>Cat’s head on the sea creature (fig. 2); two cats on the base of a vase (fig. 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tame goose, wild goose</td>
<td>Various birds (figs. 4, 6, 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eagle</td>
<td>Goose (fig. 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stork</td>
<td>Eagle (fig. 6), a pair of heraldic eagles and an eagle pecking the tail of a sea monster (fig. 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raven</td>
<td>Stork and snake in struggle (fig. 2); stork (fig. 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure small cattle</td>
<td>Raven pecking a rabbit, and raven pecking the sea creature (figs. 8, 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ox, pure large cattle</td>
<td>Sheep (figs. 3, 4, 10); goat (fig. 4); goat and lamb (fig. 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gazelle</td>
<td>Ox (fig. 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse</td>
<td>Gazelle on the wing of the ark (fig. 11); Hart (figs. 2, 4); hind (figs. 6, 10); Horse (fig. 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field animals</td>
<td>Rabbit, squirrel (figs. 2, 6, 7, 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lion</td>
<td>Lion or lioness, head on the sea creature (figs. 3, 4, 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear</td>
<td>Bear (fig. 3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The parallels that exist between the two lists above strongly support the assumption that Perek Shirah was in fact the inspiration for the assortment of animals depicted on the Torah arks. Additional confirmation of this conclusion is provided by the depiction of some of the animals either in the process of devouring other animals. On the Druja Torah ark, the nut-cracking squirrel, the raven pecking the dead rabbit, and the bird pecking the tail of the fish stand out. These creatures represent the central theme of Perek Shirah, which is the cycle of life and the food chain. One example of this concept is presented by the raven in the following words: “Who provides food for the raven when his young cry out to God and wander about without food?” (Job 38:41), and, “Who gives the beasts their food, to the raven’s brood what they cry for” (Ps. 147:9). An additional expression of this idea is stated by the frog in the introduction to Perek Shirah. Boasting to King David about its good deeds, the frog points out the greatest of them: “There is, on the sea shore, a sort [of creature] that finds its living only from the water, and when it is hungry it takes me and eats me. This is the good deed. To fulfill that which is commanded: ‘If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat […]’” (Prov. 25:21).40

39 The hart and the hind are lightfooted animals with split hooves that chew their cud, and the male (hart) has horns. For our purposes, there is no difference between the gazelle and the hart in body and other traits. The only distinction between the two is the shape of their horns: those of the gazelle are long and straight while those of the hart are large and branched.

40 In Klein edition, 2.
The Druja Torah ark provides yet another proof of the influence of *Perek Shirah*, in the unusual location of the phrases “He who makes the wind blow and the rain fall” and “Dew and rain for a blessing,” inscribed on the plaques above the second tier’s cornice. It is customary to write these texts at the worshippers’ eye level as a reminder to them of the changes in prayer that accompany the seasons, the first being recited in winter and the second in summer. Their position at a height of about six meters indicates that they were not intended to serve the abovementioned purpose. Perhaps this was influenced by *Perek Shirah*, where the wind, dew and rain, which comes from above, are mentioned:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wind, what does it say?</th>
<th>“He made the earth by his might, Established the world by His wisdom, And by His understanding stretched out the skies” (Jer. 10:12); “I will say to the North, ‘Give back!’ And to the South, ‘Do not withhold!’ Bring My sons from afar and My daughters from the end of the earth” (Isa. 43:6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dew, what does it say?</td>
<td>“I will be to Israel like dew; He shall blossom like the lily, He shall strike root like a Lebanon tree” (Hos. 14:6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rains what do they say?</td>
<td>“You released a bountiful rain, O God; when Your own land languished, You sustained it.” (Ps. 68:10).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above discussion confirms that *Perek Shirah* is the literary source from which the designers of the Torah arks drew their images of creatures speaking words of praise and glory to the Creator of the world. From this source they and their clients in the eastern European communities chose their repertoire of animals, partly intentionally and partly at random.\(^1\) It appears that the animal patterns that are repeated, such as the sea creature, the lions, and the eagles, which together represent the creatures of sea, land, and air, were available and popular among the craftsmen and their designs evolved into fixed formats. Other patterns, however, such as those of the cats, rabbits, squirrels, geese, and storks, were picked at random, depending on what the artists had on hand and commensurate with the level of their artistic skill.\(^2\)

A comparison between the Torah arks shows that the greater the sculpting skill of the craftsman, the larger was the number of animals depicted on the specific ark. It appears, then, that it was not only standardized patterns that determined which animals would be included in the repertoire of any particular ark but also the talent of the craftsman. Thus the individual talents of the artist combined with the text of the popular *Perek Shirah* to create a carved song of praise to the Lord on the Torah arks of eastern Europe.

\(^1\) It is possible that the vine clusters as well, though not mentioned in this discussion, also derive from *Perek Shirah*. In the Torah arks there are just a few such clusters, combined with stems and leaves of stylized plants that are not vine shoots. There is a single cluster above the bird at the top of the wing of the first tier of the Druja Torah ark (fig. 6), and another single cluster on the wing of the first tier in the Zelwa ark (fig. 10). Though vine shoots heavy with grape clusters decorate the columns of some arks, such as the outermost one in Zelwa (fig. 10), such columns appear to have been influenced by similar ones found in local churches and especially in the frames of altarpieces. See Marija Mataškaitė, *Senoji medžio skulptūra ir dekoratyvinė drožybė Lietuvoje* (Old Wood Sculpture and Decorative Wood-carving of Lithuania) Vilnius 1998: 234–37. Support for the possibility that the depiction of the vine derives from *Perek Shirah* can be found in the following quote from the text: "'The vine, what does it say?' Thus said the Lord: As, when new wine is present in the cluster, One says, 'Don't destroy it; there's good in it,' So will I do for the sake of My servants, And not destroy everything" (Isa. 65:8).

\(^2\) It is not possible in this article to expand on the sources of the shapes of the animals, and this will be the subject of a separate study. It should be noted, however, that the illustrated manuscripts of *Perek Shirah* dating from the eighteenth century, known from central Europe, provide material for future research, but are not helpful in tracing the formative source of the design of the animals on the arks.