



The Four Sons

Frankel Center Haggadah exhibit explores many versions of the siblings.



From *The Haggadah of Passover* by Abraham Regelson. The artist is Siegmund Forst.

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He often smokes, typically wields a weapon and sometimes resembles a Mafioso. He wears a baseball cap, a business suit or a suit of armor. He is usually clean-shaven, and in at least one case, he has a Mohawk.

Who is he? He is the *rasha* — the Wicked Son who appears in the Passover Haggadah.

He and his counterparts — the Wise Son, the Simple Son and the Son Who Doesn't Know How to Ask — can now be viewed in their many versions at a unique exhibit at the Jean & Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan.

“The Many Faces and Figures of the Four Sons in the Passover Haggadah” features 29 Haggadot from the Irwin M. Alterman Haggadah Collection. The exhibit, which runs through July, includes Haggadot of various shapes and sizes, ancient and modern, and in a number of different languages.

The Alterman collection was acquired by the U-M Library last year with the help of the Frankel Center and is housed

in the Special Collections Library of the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library. It includes more than 1,800 Haggadot and is believed to be one of the largest Haggadah collections in the world. The unique compilation belonged to the late Irwin M. Alterman of West Bloomfield and was donated by his widow, Marilyn McCall Alterman.

“The contrasts among the depictions of the Four Sons are amazing to see as well as how often the same basic iconic types appear,” noted Elliot H. Gertel, the U-M Library’s Irving M. Hermelin Curator of Judaica. “The Wise Son is a sage or scholar. The Wicked Son is a warrior, ruffian, scoffer or scoundrel. The Simple Son is a bumpkin, a rustic or unlearned peasant. And the one who doesn’t know how to ask is an infant, innocent babe or other naif. It’s a way of looking at the Exodus story through the eyes of different types of people and exploring a variety of interpretations.”

A close examination can reveal just how varied those interpretations are. In one Haggadah, for example, the Wise Son is depicted as a Zionist. In another, it’s the Wicked Son who appears alongside the Israeli flag.

“These Four Sons represent the diversity of learning styles,” said Jeffrey Veidlinger, director of the Frankel Center. “The Passover Haggadah commands that different pedagogical methods be used to educate each of the four children. The exhibition demonstrates how tradition has changed over time and across space and celebrates both the heritage of Jewish education and the diversity of Jewish life.” *



A very famous rendition of the Four Sons from the Amsterdam Haggadah published in 1695

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