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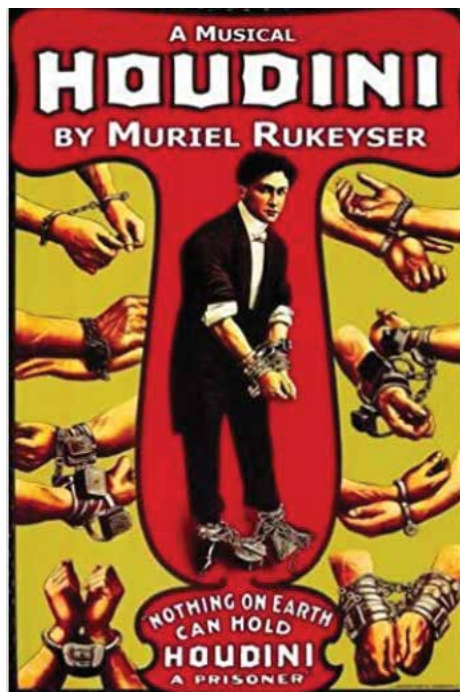
Locks, keys, freedom: Houdini makes a comeback in southeast Michigan

Elisabeth Däumer, special to the WJN

Ladies and Gentlemen — step this way and take your seats. You're in for an amazing show! Coming to a theater near you is the legendary escape artist Harry Houdini as imagined by Muriel Rukeyser, a prolific American author and among the most important post-WWII Jewish writers. First performed in 1973, with Christopher Walken as Houdini and Neva Small as Bess, the musical *Houdini* combines singing and dancing, comedy, and pathos.

While capturing Houdini's transformation from Hungarian-born Eric Weisz, son of a rabbi, to the most celebrated escape artist of all times, the musical dramatizes the tension between the escape artist who can break any lock and the man who is inescapably bound to his mother, to his wife Bess, and to the very myth he helped create. Along the way, the play challenges us to consider how we respond to gender inequality, racial bigotry, religious persecution, and the power of magic.

The musical's candid language and poems will appeal to many, young and old,



though it's likely not for younger children. The song "Yes" invites us to abandon caution and open ourselves to surprise and the unknown: "Open your eyes, / Dream but don't guess. / Your biggest surprise / comes after yes." Another song, "Chains, Freedom, Keys," compels us to imagine the chains that imprison us and the keys to freedom in our reach, both as individuals and communities. In "I Make my Magic," Houdini reveals the sources of his magic as coming from

... forgotten things

Night and nightmare and the midnight wings

Of childhood butterflies—

And the darkness, the straining dark Underwater and under sleep —

Houdini did his most dangerous exploit in Detroit, when, as a publicity stunt, he leaped from Belle Isle Bridge — handcuffed, chained, and leg-ironed — into the icy Detroit River. As legend has it, the river was frozen, and he entered it through a small hole in the ice. Rukeyser's musical devotes a gripping

scene to Houdini's narrow escape from death. Twenty years later, in 1926, Houdini performed his last show in Detroit, even though he suffered from a burst appendix. He died a week later in Detroit's Grace Hospital.

To help us fight the doldrums of COVID, winter, and the multitude of "locks" that constrain us, Eastern Michigan University's Muriel Rukeyser Living Archive is putting on four public events dedicated to Houdini. Each event combines a staged reading of the play with lively conversation about Rukeyser and the great magician:

March 20, 2 p.m., Sponberg Theatre, Eastern Michigan University

March 24, 7 p.m., Riverside Arts Center, Ypsilanti, Michigan

March 26, 8pm., Matrix Theatre, Detroit, Michigan

March 27, 3pm., Matrix Theatre, Detroit, Michigan

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Local artist wins Shmita Prize

Hannah Davis, special to the WJN

Idelle Hammond-Sass, a member of the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation and a local artist working in painting, sculpture, metal working, and jewelry making, has won the Shmita Prize contest in the Ritual Object category in the Shmita Project contest sponsored by Hazon.

This year in the Jewish calendar, 5782 (from September 6, 2021, to September 22, 2022), is shmita, a year where "God commands us to let the land rest, release debts, resolve disputes, and open our hands and hearts to those in need." The Shmita Project aims to reimagine this ancient tradition in an era when most of us don't live directly off the land or rely on the rhythms of the natural world in our lives. What does it mean to let the land rest when we don't interact with the land?

According to the Shmita Project, "The Shmita Prizes award artists and creatives — from all levels of experience and age groups



Renewing Shmita by Idelle Hammond-Sass

— for works of art that bring into focus the relevancy and application of shmita values in our contemporary world. These art works offer creative avenues with which to prepare for, mark, and engage with the shmita year."

Pieces were submitted in categories of Ritual Object, Fine Art, Film/Video, Performance Art/Music/Liturgy, and Written Word. A committee of artists, including an author, an actor, a musician, a museum research assistant, and a performance artist, judged the entries and selected the winners.

Idelle's piece is called "Renewing Shmita." It is made with hemispheres of wood surrounding a copper archway with a bowl on top, two candlesticks with the word "shmita" etched in English and Hebrew, and four small brass dishes: seven pieces in total, echoing the seventh year of shmita. The piece, Idelle says, was intended to help explore the creation of a personal shmita ritual. There are no pre-ordained uses for its parts, unlike the items on a Passover seder plate.

Idelle said she had to start by asking the

question, "what is a ritual?" Key parts of shmita tradition involve not cultivating the land, and only eating food that can be foraged or that was stored from previous years. How to represent the idea of having enough to provide for your community for the whole year? This concept doesn't just have to apply to food: we sustain ourselves on many other things too. The brass dishes in the piece offer options for physicality, places to interact with your ritual, perhaps by putting items in them that represent a wish for abundance or "enough-ness" for the year.

The word "shmita" means "release." Traditionally this involved letting go of debts and obligations to others, but it could also be a very personal release: from assumptions, from workaholicism, or from perfectionism. Idelle suggested setting an intention for the year of things you're ready to let go of. She intentionally chose to make the piece very open-ended, stating that it would be limiting

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Amalek: From before Sinai until today

Rabbi Aharon Goldstein, special to the WJN

Purim this year begins on Thursday evening, March 17. The megillah will be read the evening of March 17 and Friday morning March 18. It's customary on the Shabbat before Purim to read a special portion of the Torah that deals with the nation of Amalek and the war that the Jewish people had to fight with them. The reason why we read about Amalek is because Haman was a descendant of Amalek and we can see similar traits that Haman had — that he wanted to wipe out all of the Jews — just as his predecessor Amalek wanted to do. That's why we read about Amalek on the Shabbat before Purim.

So, to elaborate on this particular story, four times in Jewish history the Jewish people had to face the “Amaleks” and wage war against them. The first time was when they left Egypt. Before they went to receive the Torah they had to face the Amalekim. The Jews encountered them and, as the verse says, Joshua managed to weaken the Amalekim so that they would not be a threat to the Jews. As a side note, the Amalekim were the first nation to have the audacity to take any action against the Jews after seeing what happened with the mighty nation of Egypt and how that empire was destroyed. So, it showed a lot of chutzpah for this little nation of Amalek to dare to wage a war against the Jews. That's what the Midrash says.

The second time was before the Jews entered into the land of Israel. Amalek came disguised as Canaanites so that the Jewish people wouldn't know that it was really Amalek. They waged a war against the Jews and, thanks to the Almighty, the Jewish people won the war.

The third time the Jews faced the Amalekim was when they were entering into the land of Israel and settling down. They were appointing Shaul to be the first king and he was told by G-d to wipe out the Amalekim in their entirety.

The fourth time is afterwards, and this is until the coming of Moshiach we're busy getting rid of Amalek.

So, in these four stories we can find a parallel between the two of them. The Jewish people, when they became a nation, went through two stages. The first stage was spending forty years in the desert. There in the desert what kind of life did they lead? It was a very holy life. Because they were not involved in the physical world they didn't have to plant, sow, wash their clothes, etc. They lived with miracles. Six hundred thousand men and more than double that with women and children lived in the barren desert. There was nothing there. They didn't have to get involved, in a direct way, with the physical world. All of their needs came directly from G-d. That's the first stage. The second stage was when they entered into the land of Israel. There they had to get involved with the physical world. They had to plant, sow and

take care of all of their physical needs — and that's from then until today. With the coming of the Moshiach, we'll have a complete world and we won't have the limitations that we have today.

These two stages that the Jewish people went through and the four times they had to encounter Amalek were, as we mentioned earlier; first, when they left Egypt and just entered into the desert; second, when they were just leaving the desert and entering the land of Israel; third, just after entering the land of Israel and getting settled; and fourth, finishing up the job even to this day until the coming of the Moshiach. So that's how we see the parallel between these encounters that Amalek had with the Jewish people.

Another observation we can make is the difference between the first and third stages. When, in the first stage, in the desert, Amalek encountered the Jews in a revealed, undisguised manner: his identity was clear. Similarly, in the third stage, when they were settling into the land of Israel — that also was having Amalek undisguised and revealed. However, in the second stage when the Jews were leaving the desert, the Amalekim came with their identity disguised as Canaanites. That's similar to our current times which is a second stage of leaving exile and entering redemption by greeting Moshiach that we are going to be faced with Amalek in a disguised form. He's going to pretend that he is something different from what he actually is in order to entrap the Jewish people.

According to the Chassidic interpretation, this Amalek that we are talking about is manifested not only as a physical person, but as a “miniature Amalek” within everyone's own psyche that attempts to distance us from G-d. For example, the Torah uses language that implies that Amalek caused the Jewish people to “cool down” their enthusiasm for G-d and Torah and mitzvos. Similarly, today, we have our own “little Amalek” that tries to cool us down from our commitment to G-d and our attempts to try to get closer to G-d. We must be aware of this disguised Amalek who is trying to distance us from G-d.

The Amalek tries to use all different logical arguments to distance a person from G-d. Like we said previously, he disguised himself as a Canaanite. The word Canaanite also has a meaning of a “businessperson.” He tries to be dishonest when doing his “business” and he claims that any success that he has comes from his own strength and not from G-d.

So therefore, once a year, we read in the Torah about the Amalek in order to recognize our own “little Amalek” that we have — in order not to fall prey to it. On the contrary, to strengthen ourselves in our service to G-d — and for sure G-d will give us the ability — just like the Jewish people weakened Amalek in the desert — that we should also weaken our “little Amalek” and do what G-d wants us to do. ■

A unique Yiddish megile

By Shifra Epstein

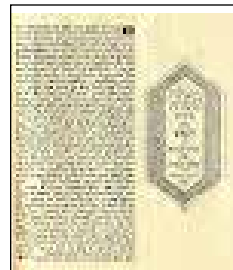
Between World Wars I and II, printing of the biblical Book of Esther — called Megillat Esther in Hebrew and Megiles Ester in Yiddish — flourished in the United States. These publications ranged from simple paper booklets to illuminated and illustrated scrolls.

The scroll pictured above, completed in 1936, uses the Yiddish translation of the Book of Esther done by the well-known Yiddish poet and Bible translator Yehoash (Solomon Blumgarten).

The fine calligraphy is by his daughter Evelyn (Chava) Yehoash Blumgarten. Evelyn (Chava) calligraphed the entire megile in Hebrew script, combining modern and faux-archaic fonts to create a style reminiscent of ancient Hebrew script.

The Yehoash megile is completely unique in the history of megillot published in the United States; it is the only known megile scroll printed in Yiddish. The Yiddish megile follows the traditional design of a Hebrew illuminated scroll. Each of the book's ten chapters begins with an enlarged letter set within an embellished rectangular frame.

Each page is composed of two columns, with forty-two lines per column, according to the traditional scribal layout required for the writing of a Torah scroll. The scroll was also reproduced in printed book form in 1936.



I bought a copy of the megile scroll printed above in early 1978 from Zosa Szajkowski, YIVO's archivist at the time, while conducting research for an

exhibition at the YIVO archives: “Purim: The Face and the Mask.” In 1979 the exhibit, including the Yehoash megile, went up. Images of the scroll were also reproduced in the exhibition catalogue. After the exhibit was dismantled, I donated the megile to the Yeshiva University Museum, where it is currently part of the museum collection. The megile can also be found in the collection of the Jewish Theological Library and at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem. ■

Muriel Rukeyser's Houdini, continued from page 1

The inaugural Houdini performance at 2 p.m. on Sunday, March 20, at EMU's Sponberg Theatre will be preceded at 11 a.m. by a forum that brings together three engaging experts: the poet and founder of Paris Press, Jan Freeman; the poet and Rukeyser scholar Stefania Heim; and University of Michigan Professor of Film, Television, and Media, Matthew Solomon. Those interested in gaining deeper understanding of Rukeyser's fascination with Houdini are invited to register for this forum. You can find the registration link at <http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/>.

The second performance, at Riverside Arts Center on Thursday, March 24, at 7 p.m. is designed to appeal to a younger audience alive to the magic of poetry and the imagination, as well as to encourage their response. In collaboration with YpsiWrites, a writing-focused nonprofit organization serving the Ypsilanti area, we invite local youth to submit poems for a Poetry Wall displayed at Riverside Arts Center prior to the performance. The poetry submission form as well as teacher and student guides to Rukeyser and Houdini are available on the YpsiWrites website (<https://www.ypsiwrites.com/>) and

on the Muriel Rukeyser Living Archive (murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org).

The final two performances, on March 26 and 27, will take place at Detroit's Matrix Theatre, a community theater dedicated to the creation and production of original plays and education in play writing, performance, and puppetry for people of all ages.

Under the direction of EMU Theatre Professor Lee Stille, the talented actors of EMU's Theatre Program will bring the musical to life in each of four staged readings. Using scripts, and relying on language, movement, and the audience's imagination, the performers will conjure up Rukeyser's magical telling of Houdini's story.

We thank Michigan Humanities (an affiliate of the National Endowment of the Humanities), EMU's Center for Jewish Studies, and the EMU English Department for their generous support of these events. For more information, please contact EMU Professor of English Elisabeth Däumer at edaumer@emich.edu. ■

Idelle Hammond-Sass wins Shmita art prize, continued from page 1

to create an object with a ritual completely in place. “The way I feel about objects, they come to life when you use them. They can be interesting or aesthetically pleasing, but the layer of use, the intention, expands what it is from wood or metal to be something that's shared. Ritual objects have that other dimension to them, they become animate. They can offer you that by being there, but you have to interact with them.”

As the meaning of shmita and its observance changes in contemporary times, we may find ourselves wanting to bring back the

more traditional elements. In lieu of leaving a field fallow, Idelle suggested supporting a nonprofit organization such as Food Gatherers. “Shmita is something that requires learning and exploration ... I hope that we would grow into observing shmita, both on a personal and a community level.”

Idelle's jewelry is being shown at the WSG Gallery, and she will be an invited artist at the gallery this year. Her winning piece can be found on the Shmita Project website at <https://shmitaproject.org/submissions/renewing-shmita/>. ■