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Torah Shields in Jewish ritual culture of Halychyna in the XVIII – the first third of the XX centuries: a synthesis of text and decoration

Анотація. Значний сегмент пам'яток єврейської ритуальної культури, створених в Східній Галичині в XVIII – першій третині XX ст. становлять торашилди. Металеві, найчастіше срібні пластини, що в синагогах кріпилися на ланцюжках до сувоїв Тори, поверх торамантлів (тканинних чохлаів). Важливу роль в організації композиції відігравали написи виконані на івриті, які розташовували на випуклих, обрамлених орнаментом площинах. Текст в торашилдах сповнений не тільки інформаційним змістом але й виконує вагому декоративну роль. Обрамленням центральної текстової частини слугували складні орнаментальні композиції. Більшість зображень в декорі торашилдів має глибоке символічне значення. Таким чином, текст та декор торашилдів створюють гармонійні композиції, сповнені глибоким символічним змістом.

Ключові слова: Торашилд, декор, текст, символіка.

The Torah shields of Eastern Halychyna of XVIII – the first third of the XX centuries represent a significant proportion of the cultural heritage of the Jewish community in a region. Their history as well as art peculiarities are studied by the leading scientists of the New York museum, including Grafman R., Mann B. Vivian, Kayser Stephen S. but in their writings they do not distinguish the monuments of Halychyna and do not find their local regional peculiarities. Such Ukrainian researchers as T. Romanovska and T. Savchenko should be known for their works.

The article is covering the artistic features of the Torah shields of Eastern Halychyna, including the synthesis of image and text.

Functional works of Jewish arts and crafts of Halychyna of the

XVIII – the first third of the XX century are directly related to religious traditions. Most of the attractions are of synagogue use and were used to show respect to the Torah scrolls. In the synagogue these items are traditionally kept in Aron-ha-Kodesh (in Ashkenazi tradition) — embolished, often polychrome arched. In a synagogue the Torah scrolls were stored in torah mantles - a case made of expensive fabrics: brocade, velvet, silk or satin, which were decorated with embroidery using gold and silver threads. The Torah Scrolls were topped with the Torah Crowns or rimonims — precious tops that were put on the Etz Hayim — handles of the rods on which the scrolls were rolled. On the front side, on the torah mantles there was a Torah Shield fixed with the help of a chain — silver plate, a shield with symbolic inscriptions and a lavish decor.

The term Torah shield means the shield of Torah and depending on the region there are also synonyms used: tas or breastplate. The use of Torah Shields was common among the Ashkenazi communities, but the preserved monuments of XVII – XVIII centuries from Italy are known, including Venice and Greece, Turkey and Persia. This is due to the fact that the Jews of Ashkenazi stored the Torah scrolls in the tissue covers, and the Sephardi communities placed them into wooden, sometimes silver (silvered) boxes — tik.

The initial practical value of the Torah shields was to help quickly find the needed chapter of Torah to read. Therefore, the bottom panels had small, mostly rectangular windows, in which the plates with the written days or holidays were inserted. Thus, the torah shield served to some extent as a calendar. However, the bigger part of the monuments performed exclusively decorative function.

The Jewish oral tradition associates the torah shield with the High Priest's breastplate Hoshen — חֹשֶׁן (hoshen) [1, p. 56]. In English, the term breastplate (brestplate) is often used to describe a Torah shield. The use of a metal breastplate might be considered as one of the allusions of the temple and the metaphor of the temple liturgy that emphasizes the decoration. On a number of the monuments the high priest Aaron is depicted, as well as the temple attributes, including Menorah, the ritual sacrifice, and benedictory sign of Cohens. In some cases the form and the decoration of the Torah shield are the same as the high priest's breastplate with twelve stones, the symbols of the Israeli tribes. Thus the breastplate of the high priest may be considered the prototype of the Torah shield. The ritual clothing of the high priest Aaron is described in the book of

Exodus in details, the special attention is focused on the breastplate. «...¹⁵
«Fashion a breastpiece for making decisions — the work of skilled hands.
Make it like the ephod: of gold, and of blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and
of finely twisted linen.¹⁶ It is to be square — a span long and a span
wide — and folded double.¹⁷ Then mount four rows of precious stones
on it. The first row shall be carnelian, chrysolite and beryl;¹⁸ the second
row shall be turquoise, lapis lazuli and emerald;¹⁹ the third row shall be
jacinth, agate and amethyst;²⁰ the fourth row shall be topaz, onyx and
jasper. Mount them in gold filigree settings.²¹ There are to be twelve
stones, one for each of the names of the sons of Israel, each engraved
like a seal with the name of one of the twelve tribes. [Exodus (Tezave
XXVIII) 28. 15-22]. Ruby — Reuben, Red, Jade — Shimon, Agate — Levi,
Carbuncle — Judah, Lapis-Lazuli — Issachar, Quartz Crystal — Zebulun,
Turquoise — Dan, Amethyst — Naftali, Agate — Gad, Aquamarine —
Asher, Onyx — Joseph, Opal — Benjamin.

Hoshen with stones on the breast of the high priest at the time
of service, had to remind the Almighty of the desire of all people
to become holy, and the desire to carry the will of the Creator. The
breastplate was also called «Choshen Mishpat» — «breastplate of
judgement» because he possessed the abilities given by the Almighty
to give the correct answers to the question of the high priest. So the
Torah gives Jewish people the opportunity to find true understanding
of the universe, and answer any question. Hoshen had holy properties
only during the times of Mishkana (a portable temple) and the times of
the First Temple. The thinkers of Judaism has traditionally appealed
to this topic, giving many comments [2].

The use of the Torah shield in decorating Torahs becomes a
kind of hint to the clothing of the high priest, and the relation to
the breastplate hoshen, the embodiment of unity of all the Jews in
the service to God. However, over the time the initial symbols were
losing their meaning, and often turned into formal ornaments, tribute
to ancient traditions [3].

The form of the Torah shield is such because of its practical value
and connection to a breastplate hoshen. It's usually a rectangular,
almost square metal plate with rings on the top corners or on the back
side to fix the chain. The Torah shields forms are greatly enriched with
the influence of the Baroque style: a magnificent decoration appears.
In the XVIII century a form, which outlines the forms of the brass
watches with arched lunettes becomes incredibly popular. This form

allows a master to greatly enrich the composition of the decoration. Also in the XVIII century in the Austro-Hungarian Empire the torah shields in the form of a Baroque cartouche were widespread. These trends may be traced throughout the XIX century. In the late XIX – early XX centuries along with traditional forms, the Torah shields, which look like the heraldic shields topped with a crown, cartouche, scrolls and so on become quite popular. Thus, the three main forms of the Torah shields created in Halychyna in XVIII – the first third of the XX centuries can be named:

1) square; 2) square with the arched lunette; 3) of cartouche type. In western Europe the oval, round Torah shields were common, as well as those in a form of a curtain that can be interpreted as an imitation of the temple curtain. Such Torah shields were quite popular in Nürnberg, Augsburg, Frankfurt am Main and in Westphalia.

The size of Torah shields was not always the same, but their locations had certain restrictions, and ranged from 30 cm in height and 25 cm in width, up to 8 cm and 7 cm respectively. In rare cases the Torah shields of XVIII century are much bigger. It should be emphasized that the average size of the Torah shields in Halychyna are significantly smaller in comparison with those in Germany, Austria and Poland. Most of the Torah shields are made of silver (often of quite low sample) in the technique of casting, stamping, engraving, chasing, gilding, sometimes using the colored glass and enamel pastes.

The purpose the Torah shields use to some extent determined the decorations on them. An important role in the organization of the compositions played inscriptions in Hebrew that were located on convex, mostly ornamentally framed surfaces. The center was traditionally decorated with the tablets of the covenant with the semi-circular endings with the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Quite often in central part there were inscriptions that indicated the donator of the Torah shield, the time and purpose of its creation. At the bottom part there was a window into which the tablets with the names of the holidays, days of the week were put, according to which the specific parts of the Torah were read. Often in the small Torah shields there are no such inscriptions.

The texts of the totah shields traditionally take the central part, or are sometimes grouped in separate blocks. During a long period of time several main text formulations that were inscripted on the Torah shields, have been singled out.

One of the most popular one is the word «Saturday», made in Hebrew, and is associated with the initial purpose of a Torah shield to indicate the day of the week or a holiday, to make it easier to find the necessary chapter of the Torah. The inscription was made in full, or as an abbreviation. The engraved word «תבשׁ» — Saturday takes the central part of the Torah shield made in Halychyna at the end of the XVIII century [4]. In the surrounding of a lush baroque ornamentation, the main motive of which is the image of the acanthus leaves and rocaille, the inscription is clearly read. The upper part of the Torah shield is formed by a crown, the part of which is also located on the basic line; the word Saturday is situated at the top of the Torah shield thus defining its place in the Jews' life. The attention should be concentrated on the Torah shield, created in Lviv in 1754 [5]. The composition was made in the heraldic style. In a central part of the medallion, which is held by the figures of lions, a word Saturday is located. The two columns with decorated stems with the Corinthian elements are located on the two sides of the composition. The pedestal is additionally decorated with the inserted red glass. In the lunette there are the figures of griffins, topped with the decorative crown. At the bottom medallion there is a barely engraved inscription that indicates that it is a gift of Yahuda Shlomo Zalman in 1754. The contrast between the clear spelling of the word Saturday, additionally gilded, and simplistic interpretation of the donator's text is visible. The structure of the Torah shield complies with the principles of the coat of arms' creation, what is traditionally a symbol of the higher social status, dignity and honor in Europe. Thus, except for the ritual function, a Torah shield serves for the donator's family praise.

The statement — «רתכ הרות» — «Crown of Torah» or an abbreviation of the two initial letters «תכ» is also quite often met on the Torah shields. So using text the attention is focused on the higher wisdom of the Torah. The Crown of Torah is a symbol of wisdom; the parables of King Solomon it is indicated that using the Crown the kings are crowned to rule a kingdom [King Solomon's Proverbs 8, 12-30]. In some cases, next to the Torah Crown inscriptions are also the following: the Crown of the Kingdom and the Crown of a good name. Rabbi Shimon, the thinker of the II century believed that there are three crowns: the crown of royalty, the crown of priesthood and the crown of Torah, but only a person who possesses the imaginary crown of a good name can own the previous three. So, the crown of good name is over three other

[Mishnah. Treatise Avot 4: 7]. Thus, the inscriptions with the names of the symbolic crowns on the Torah shields embody the important aspects of the moral and ethical codes of Judaism. The embodiment of such ideas is realized in the Torah shield, created in Lviv in 1800/0. The rectangular Torah shield with a lunette, made from silver using the technique of stamping, gilding with semiprecious stones and gold. The composition of such decoration is based on the portal motive, formed by the two columns, the stems of which are wrapped with the bunches of grapes. The columns support a cornice with the enamel inlays, on which there are golden symbolic names of the three crowns. At the central cartouche there are Ten Commandments. The ornaments: rocaille, acanthus leaves, flowers made in the form of garlands enhance the composition. On the both sides of the columns there are the zodiac signs' pictures, which are of great symbolic importance for the Jewish culture. The decorations on the top of the Torah shields look like the open curtains with the kind of embellishment on them. Thus, the connection between the temple curtain and Aron-ha-Kodesh niche is traced. Between the curtains there is a decorative cartouche with the symmetrically situated figures of griffins. The crown with the words 'The Crown of the Good Name' at the center of it is located on top of the Torah shield. The analyzed Torah shield embodies the synthesis of text and decoration, the basic ethical principles of Judaism, and the commandment «hidur mitzvah» which says to decorate the objects of ritual purpose.

A significant part of the Torah shield is decorated with an inscription «Sanctuary of the God». So there is a focus on the wisdom of the Torah and the importance of Aron-ha-Kodesh as a place to store the Torah scrolls, which is one of the temple allusions, the place of God's presence during the times of the portable Mishkana and then a Temple. These inscriptions are included in the overall decoration of the series of Torah shields made in Halychyna in XVIII – the first third of the XX centuries.

Traditionally, the central part of the Torah shield was decorated with the tablets with the 10 commandments on them.

Special attention deserve the donators' inscriptions on the Torah shields. Such popularity can be explained by the bond of the Torah shield form the diaspora synagogues with its prototype, the source of spiritual inspirations — the high priest's breastplate, who had extra abilities and gave answers to the nation of Israel.

On the Torah shields there is often a request to the Lord to give

the donator's children the opportunity to study Torah, to live up to the wedding Huppah and good deeds. Thus a Torah shield becomes a transcendent bond between a man and God using text and allusions of the high priest's breastplate and a liturgy. A striking example of the combination of different inscriptions is the Torah shield created in Halychyna in the 1809/10 [6, p. 141]. The inscriptions are grouped in three areas — upper — «Sanctuary of God», central tablets with the Ten Commandments, and bottom, which states that «This is the gift of Eliyahu, the son of Zeus, on behalf of his son, the boy Zvi Hirsch». It begs the God to bless his name, help to grow to the Torah, to the wedding Huppah and the good deeds (5) 570 (1809/10). A similar text: «this is the gift of Rabbi Isaac's son o Rabbi David. On behalf of my daughter Hittel, May God bring he to the wedding Huppah and good deeds (5) 531» located on the Torah shield of year 1770/01 [6, p. 144-145].

Thus a Torah shield embodies the unity of text and a decorative function, an important spiritual and aesthetic factor in the ritual culture of the community.

A classic case is a general composition of a Torah shield in the shape of a portal that is generally popular in the Jewish arts and crafts, and is used in the decoration of books, ketubot, mizrahi, matseva and so on. The rectangular shape with an arched lunette was almost perfect for the image of a portal with two columns that support a stylized cornice or arch. Quite often in the Torah shields the forms Aron-ha-Kodesh were used: in the center between the two columns a stylized wardrobe with open doors with the tablets of the Testament or the Torah scrolls in the middle was depicted. A crown was located on top of the symbolic Aron-ha-Kodesh. The crown motif in the form of a hoop or a hoop with spikes is typical for the decoration of a Torah shield as the embodiment of «the crown of a good name». Sometimes a Crown is a separate element made in the technique of embossing, casting or filigreeing and put on the plate of a Torah shield providing the composition with additional plasticity and volume, creating the contrasts. The symbolic image of the high priest Aaron and Moses highlights the important role of the Torah shield s in the overall decoration of the Torah scrolls.

Most of the images on the Torah shields have deep symbolic meaning. On a number of them there is a bowl with a jug depicted — a symbol of the Levites tribe, the servants in the temple. The two bears with a pole on the shoulders on which the bunches of grapes

or pitcher hang — is an imaginary embodiment of the messengers to the land of Canaan. Squirrels with nuts are the embodiment of desire for knowledge and the study of Torah. Traditionally, the decoration of the Torah shields included an eagle — as one of the metaphorical embodiments of the image of God, as well as lions, griffins and deer.

An important element of the Torah shields' decoration is plant ornaments that almost completely fill the plate, and are often a visual focus of the composition. It should be noted that the rules and peculiarities of the Torah shields' creation were not clearly made and written by the thinkers of Judaism, that is why the freedom to choose ornamental motifs and their interpretation is observed in the decorations. Most items' creation was inspired by the leading European art styles of the XVIII – XIX centuries. In the Baroque Torah shields the popular European art ornamental motifs like naturalistically made flowers — lilies, roses, carnations, peonies, often combined in bouquets in baskets or pots; oak, acanthus leaves, grape-vines; saw palmetto; cartouches; bandelverk, rolverk and strapwork; architectural motifs - columns, cornices and so on were used. A striking example is the Baroque Torah shields created in Brody region in Halychyna. In the decorations of a series of Torah shields the rococo ornamentation motives, such as various forms of rocaille, cartouche, cornucopia, complemented by the floral motifs were also used. The baroque and rococo ornaments were used in the decoration of the Torah shields during XVIII – the first half of the XIX century. The Torah shield made in Lviv in 1800/1, which is now in the Jewish Museum in New York can be an example [6, p. 21]. From the mid-nineteenth century the ornaments and their interpretation become simpler, often imaginary.

In the synagogues of Galicia in XVIII – the first third of the XX centuries there were traditionally several Torah shields, in some cases their number was ten and more. They were ordered by a synagogue or presented to it to pay tribute to the Torah scrolls in the material respect, their decoration and the praise of the leaders of Jewish communities of the region, merchants, craftsmen organizations, and some individual members of the community to honor significant events in their personal life, religious holidays and so on. That is why today the Torah shields are presented in the numerous museum and private collections all around the world are often made as lots at the leading auctions of the Judaica elements.

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