From Manuscript to Book.
Medieval Hebrew Manuscripts and Printed Editions of Rabbinic Texts.

In antiquity and during the Middle Ages texts were copied and transmitted in manuscript form. Manuscripts were copied by professional scribes. Early printed books edited these texts and became the standard texts for many works.
In this exhibition I am focusing on some manuscripts and printed texts of Pesikta Rabbati.

Pesikta Rabbati is an extensive midrashic text dating from fifth-sixth century Palestine, but containing much older material. Midrash is the rabbinic approach to the Hebrew bible. Midrash is a major hermeneutic enterprise in late antiquity and the early middle ages that has influenced modern and post-modern literary criticism. Midrash is often referred to as a method of scriptural exegesis.

Pesikta Rabbati is a major collection of rabbinic homilies based upon the annual cycle of biblical passages from the Hebrew bible for Jewish Holy Days, festivals, and special Sabbaths.
Pesikta Rabbati is a religious text that expresses rabbinic, apocalyptic, messianic, Gnostic, and mystical traditions. It contains so-called “aggadic” (narrative) material and halakhic (legal) material. Some of the passages elucidate the origins of distinct Jewish and Christian groups.

The language of Pesikta Rabbati is (rabbinic) Hebrew and Aramaic and it contains numerous Greek and Latin terms.

Manuscripts of Pesikta Rabbati ▶▶▶▶
From: The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, MS 8195
(Ashkenazic script, around 1800) The copyist, identified as Eliakim Mehlsack, wrote two commentaries (left and right margin) on the text of Pesikta Rabbati (center). Entire sections have been neatly excised, probably because paper was a rare commodity.

From: The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, MS 8452
This is from a collection of several leaves of midrashic material from seventeenth century Italy.
From: Schottenstift (a Benedictine monastery) Vienna, Austria, MS Benedictini Cod. 374
This manuscript was found in a book binding in the magnificent library of an Austrian monastery. Late medieval and early modern book binders often used parchment from “old” manuscripts for the spines of books or in book covers.

From: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Wien (Austrian National Library, Vienna), MS 5390
This is a fragment of Pesikta Rabbati, one of several fragments from the thirteenth century that are preserved in a library that is part of the Hofburg (the former imperial castle) in Vienna.
From: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Wien (Austrian National Library, Vienna), MS 180
The text of one homily of Pesikta Rabbati is arranged around another Hebrew text.

From: Cambridge University Library, Taylor Schechter Genizah Research Unit, England
T-S Misc. 329.609
This fragment is part of the approximately 120,000 fragments that were brought to England from the storage room (“genizah”) of the Jewish community in Fustat (Old Cairo), Egypt.
From: Cambridge University Library, Taylor Schechter Genizah Research Unit, England
T-S Misc. 36.124

From: Biblioteca Palatina, Parma, Italy
MS 3122
This is the most extensive manuscript of Pesikta Rabbati, 200 folios. A folio is a page; the front is referred to as “a” and the back is referred to as “b.” This manuscript was copied in the thirteenth century on vellum (parchment) in an Ashkenazic hand.

From: Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome, Italy
MS 3324
This beautiful manuscript was copied in Southern France (Provence) or Northern Spain.
From: The Library of the Center for Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
MS Dropsie 26
This is another Italian manuscript from sixteenth century Italy.
Writing Materials:

Medieval manuscripts were copied by professional scribes. In Christian Europe, the so-called Ashkenazic (“German/Yiddish speaking”) Jewish copyists used quills (goose feathers) and in Islamic countries the so-called Sephardic (“Spanish” and Arabic speaking) Jewish scribes used sedges.

Look at the differences between the handwriting in the manuscript form Parma (quill) and the Casanatense manuscript from Rome (sedge). The manuscript from Parma (copied by a scribe from the Rhineland/Germany) shows a rough style, whereas the manuscript from Rome (copied by a scribe in Southern France or Northern Spain) is written in a fine hand-writing.
Editio princeps: 
The first printed edition of Pesikta Rabbati is from Prague (1604 or 1607) from the publisher Katz. This is a copy of a page from an exemplar at the New York Public Library. Other exemplars of this rare book are found in the British Museum in London and at the Harvard Libraries in Cambridge, Mass.
This is an edition of Pesikta Rabbati by Meir Friedmann published in Vienna in 1880. Friedmann (1831-1908) used the first printed edition and supplemented the text of Pesikta Rabbati by some manuscript material belonging to another midrashic work. He emended the text based upon his own, usually brilliant, conjecture; this was acceptable scholarly practice in his era.

Reprint of the so-called Warsaw edition of Pesikta Rabbati (1837). This edition is based upon its printed predecessors and contains some commentaries. The printed editions utilized in the creation of this text include: the editio princeps (Prague, 17th century) and the edition printed in 1806 in Shklow which is based upon the Prague printed edition.
Sample pages from Volume 2 of

*A Synoptic Edition of Pesiqta Rabbati Based upon All Extant Hebrew Manuscripts and the Editio Princeps* by Rivka Ulmer.

Published here for the first time is the complete extant manuscript material of Pesiqta Rabbati (located in Budapest, Cambridge, New York, Parma, Philadelphia, Rome and Vienna) as well as the 17th century editio princeps. The texts are presented in a synoptic edition, allowing the reader to view the texts in adjacent columns without emendation.
Scholars preparing editions of ancient texts often use microfilms or microfiche, but it is always necessary to consult the original manuscripts. Sometimes infrared light is used or in the case of very old materials very expensive advanced photography is necessary.
Papyrus ▲

Parchment ▼