The Smithsonian’s “Masonic” Mizraḥ
A Mystery Laid to Rest

Shawn Eyer revisits a fascinating artifact once tied to Albert Pike

ONE YEAR AGO, in the Summer 2016 edition of Philalethes, we featured a story about an interesting item of Judaica that Grace Cohen Grossman and Richard Eighme Ahlborn of the Smithsonian Institution had tentatively credited to the famous American Freemason, Albert Pike.1 The item is a mizraḥ, an object used in many traditional Jewish households and synagogues to indicate the direction of east. It is held in the collection of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. The item is dated 1862, and “signed,” as it were, by an “A. Pike, Richmond.” The document is executed in micrography, which is the use of extremely small lettering to form the lines of an image (see a photo of the artwork on the next page). In addition to the Pike mizraḥ, my article also featured examples of other mizraḥim with clear and verified Masonic ties.

In this article, “The Masonic Mizraḥ: A Forgotten Relic of Albert Pike?”, I tentatively accepted the possibility that Albert Pike created the item while also considering a few reservations and alternatives.1 Several aspects of the mizraḥ indicated that Albert Pike may not have made the item, at least without assistance. Among these reservations were: 1) the selection of texts used in the micrography reflect the perspective of an insider, rather than that of an interested admirer of Jewish tradition; 2) the skill level of the overall composition suggested that, if Albert Pike were involved in the work, it might have been either based closely upon another mizraḥ of Jewish origin or that Pike might have commissioned the work from an experienced Jewish calligrapher. It was also pointed out that “the possibility that it is not actually by Albert Pike needs to be fully explored. It seems unlikely, but it could be that there was a

A cartouche on the 1856 mizraḥ reveals that “A. Pike” was actually Abraham Pike (c. 1843–1897).
Jewish Freemason named ‘A. Pike’ based in Virginia in the 1860s.”

This last point turns out not to have been so unlikely! A second mizrah by the same artist, dating six years earlier to 1856, came to light through an auction held by Sotheby’s. The auction house describes the work as a “Monumental Micrographic Synagogue Plaque.” The second Pike mizrah is 33 × 25½ inches, very similar to the Smithsonian’s item, which measures 34¾ × 25½ inches. Importantly, this second example bears a more complete reference to its creator: it is signed “Abraham Pike New York 1856.” This additional detail allows from biographical details to emerge:

Abraham Pike was born in 1843/4 in Richmond, VA, the son of Polish Jewish immigrants. In addition to producing two American masterpieces of Jewish art, over the course of his life, Abraham worked as a clerk, pawnbroker, and auctioneer before passing away in Baltimore, MD in 1897.

This means that the Smithsonian’s Pike mizrah was completed when the artist was nineteen, and the Sotheby’s mizrah was created when the Abraham Pike was just thirteen. The added copyright date of 1890 on the Smithsonian’s copy (and the printed reproduction of the same also in their collection) shows that Abraham Pike was hoping, in his forties, to derive some income from the artwork for which he had always shown such great skill.

In light of this information, Abraham Pike’s use of the All-Seeing Eye on both the 1856 and 1862 works is somewhat puzzling. While other mizrahim that bear Masonic symbolism have been traced to Jewish Freemasons, Pike was too young to have personally been a Freemason when these works were created. Although the All-Seeing Eye is
ultimately a Jewish symbol, religious prohibitions against depicting God in physical form generally precluded any graphic depiction of this emblem by Jewish artists. The Sotheby’s description characterizes its inclusion as “a modified version of the Great Seal of the United States,” reflecting “a cautiously confident, yet optimistic, Jewish community in America.” Any possibility that the eye is simply used as a secular, “heraldic” reference to the United States rather than for its religious symbolism is erased when we examine the large Hebrew lettering surrounding it. The text is from Psalms 33:18: 

"עין ה‘ אל יראיו,
The Eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him.” Thus, on both mizraḥim the All-Seeing Eye is indeed a graphical depiction of the omniscient God of the Hebrew Bible.

The use of the All-Seeing Eye in Abraham Pike’s designs could indicate a rare Jewish deviation from the aniconic tradition. Or, since Masonic mizraḥim existed from at least 1850, it is possible that, although Abraham Pike was not a Freemason himself at the time these works were created, perhaps a Masonic iconographical influence has taken place after all. Further research on the Jewish community in Richmond, Virginia, during the 1850s will be needed before attempting to address the matter any further. For now, the mystery of the Pike mizraḥ is resolved.

Notes

4 http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/important-judaica-n09447/lot.70.html
5 Thanks for Dr. Timothy Winkle, Deputy Chair and Curator, Division of Home and Community Life at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, for his assistance. The catalog records for NMAH 314398 (the original ink drawing) and NMAH 154417 (the only known print of it) will soon reflect that Albert Pike is not the originator of these items.

“ Wisdom of the Founding Brethren
continued from page 110

23 [Clare], A Defence of Masonry, 10–11.