

The Smithsonian's "Masonic" Mizrah

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 *Philaethes*, 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 *mizrah*, 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 *mizrah*, my article also featured examples of other *mizrahim* with clear and verified Masonic ties.

In this article, "The Masonic Mizrah: 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 *mizrah* 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 *mizrah* 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 *mizrah* reveals that "A. Pike" was actually Abraham Pike (c. 1843–1897).



Abraham Pike's two surviving mizraḥim, to scale. Left, the Sotheby's (1856), right, the Smithsonian's (1862).

Jewish Freemason named 'A. Pike' based in Virginia in the 1860s."³

This last point turns out not to have been so unlikely! A second *mizraḥ* 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."⁴ The second Pike *mizraḥ* is 33 × 25½ inches, very similar to the Smithsonian's item, which measures 34⅞ × 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 1897.⁴

This means that the Smithsonian's Pike *mizraḥ* was completed when the artist was nineteen, and the Sotheby's *mizraḥ* 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 *mizraḥim* 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: עֵין ה' אֵל יִרְאֶוּ, "The Eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him." Thus, on both *mizrahim* 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 *mizrahim* 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 *mizrah* is resolved.

Notes

- 1 Grace Cohen Grossman & Richard Eighme Ahlborn, *Judaica at the Smithsonian: Cultural Politics as Cultural Model* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 138–39.
- 2 Shawn Eyer, "The Masonic Mizrah: A Forgotten Relic of Albert Pike?" *Philaethes: The Journal of Masonic Research and Letters* 69(2016): 118–26.
- 3 Eyer, "The Masonic Mizrah," 124–26.
- 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.

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- 21 William Smith, *The Book M: Or, Masonry Triumphant* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Leonard Umfreville & Co., 1736), 1:vii.
- 22 [Martin Clare], *A Defence of Masonry, Occasion'd by a Pamphlet, Called Masonry Dissected* (London: J. Roberts, 1731), 10.
- 23 [Clare], *A Defence of Masonry*, 10–11.
- 24 Martin Clare, "A Discourse on Good Behaviour for the Guidance of the Members of the Craft." *Philaethes: The Journal of Masonic Research and Letters* 69(2016): 64–67. For analysis, see S. Eyer, "The Inward Civility of the Mind: The 1735 Grand Oration of Martin Clare, F.R.S." *Philaethes: The Journal of Masonic Research and Letters* 69(2016): 58–63.
- 25 A transcript of the Dissertation is available in S. Eyer,

"A Dissertation Upon Masonry, 1734, with Commentary and Notes." *Philaethes: The Journal of Masonic Research and Letters* 68(2015): 62–75. For a more thorough analysis, see Shawn Eyer, "The Essential Secrets of Masonry: Insight from an American Masonic Oration of 1734," in *Exploring Early Grand Lodge Freemasonry: Studies in Honor of the Tricentennial of the Establishment of the Grand Lodge of England*, C. Murphy & S. Eyer, Eds., (Washington, D.C., Plumbstone, 2017), 152–215.

- 26 James Anderson, *The New Book of Constitutions of the Antient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons, Containing Their History, Charges, Regulations, &c.* (London: Richard Chandler, 1738), 228.