



Spice Container  
(believed to be of Polish  
origin), 19th century  
Silver: cast, engraved, and  
filigree 3 3/16 x 1 3/4  
in. (8.1 x 4.4 cm).  
The Jewish Museum,  
New York  
The Rose and  
Benjamin  
Mintz  
Collection,  
M 173

“I COULD SEE IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED AND ORNATE – AND I BEGAN TO FEEL A PIT OPENING IN THE BOTTOM OF MY STOMACH. I KNEW WHAT THIS BIRD WAS; THERE WAS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT IN MY MIND. IT WAS A SPICE HOLDER USED FOR HAVDALLAH.”

# Hearing the call of the **SILVER BIRD**

Choosing the Torah all over  
again | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

**I HAD BEEN AT THE YESHIVA FOR ONLY TWO WEEKS, HAVING ARRIVED** sometime between Pesach and Shavuot. It was the first time in my life that I had been in an all-male academic setting and it was the first time since I could drive that I had been without a car. I just didn't see the point in bringing a car, as it would wind up being a distraction from what was supposed to be a period of very intense Torah study. I had been so excited about coming to the yeshiva that I had actually searched for and brought with me a fruit that I had never had before, so I could create an opportunity to make the brocha of shehechyanu and thereby give thanks to Hashem for having brought me there (and, as an added bonus, I learned the hard way that one isn't supposed to bite into a mango and eat the peel – but how could I spit it out after having just made two brochas on it?)

No one had actually explained to me that an “off Shabbos” at the yeshiva meant everyone – including the rabbis – goes away for Shabbos, as well as Sunday. I found myself left on the campus with a couple of other students, who unfortunately only spoke Russian, leading to monosyllabic conversations that consisted mostly of pointing at things and lots of smiling. By the time Monday morning rolled around, I went straight to the menahel (principal) of the yeshiva and told him I just couldn't handle being there for a second longer. Having been stranded on the tiny campus without a car (and this was long before the days of Google Maps) for an entire weekend, with the nearest shop several miles away and me uncertain as to which direction to go, I felt like I had been imprisoned. The yeshiva was only about a 45-minute bus ride from Manhattan, so I told the menahel that I was heading into the city to spend some time



with my cousin, who lived there, and that I wasn't sure when, or, to be perfectly honest, even if, I'd be back. Having studied at one of the largest universities in America, with a student population of just over 35 000, it was just too much of a culture shock to be with only a handful of other students on a campus that wasn't even half the size of the quad there (the rectangular-shaped open area in the middle of the school buildings found on most university campuses in the USA).

So I headed to see my cousin, who was from the same non-observant background as me. My cousin knew I'd started keeping kosher and was only too happy to go eat with me at a kosher place. The only problem was – I wasn't from New York – and unlike South Africa, where there is only one kashrus supervising authority (the Beth Din), in the USA there are literally hundreds of kashrus authorities and not all of them are considered reliable. So, here I was in an unfamiliar city

and I realised that I had no idea where I could eat! The feelings of claustrophobia were now quickly being replaced by feelings of frustration and downright irritation (this was before cell phones were common and people could be reached in seconds), as having grown up eating anything and everything (wild boar anyone?) this was an unprecedented experience. Making matters worse, I didn't have anyone's number from the yeshiva and so I was completely and utterly at a loss. I can laugh about it now, but my cousin and I actually walked into a famous kosher restaurant in Brooklyn – only to walk out a few minutes later when I couldn't find the kosher certificate anywhere (and was far too embarrassed to start asking). It only took another 30 minutes or so of walking in and out of restaurants around the area until I could find an alternative dining option several blocks away.

Although I'd visited relatives in New York on numerous occasions over the

years, I'd never really done much touring. So, over dinner, I decided that I'd use the time off to see the city a bit, while mulling over whether or not to return to the yeshiva. Since my cousin worked downtown, it made sense to start with sites in that area, so I began by watching the trading on Wall Street, which, trust me, is far more exciting in the movies than in person. From there, my next stop was Ellis Island – the place through which millions of immigrants passed on their way into the golden medina. I thought maybe I could find some records of my family, as our knowledge of our ancestry amounts basically to a handful of city names in Europe. It's almost impossible not to be emotionally moved as one rides the boat from Battery Park at the tip of Manhattan to Ellis Island – with Liberty Island and the Statue of Liberty rising dramatically in the background – and to picture in one's mind immigrants clinging to the railings of boats, setting their eyes on that statue for

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# Shavuot

the very first time after the many years of oppression suffered by them and their families, dreaming of the freedom and opportunity it represented for them.

The once famous point of entry to America is now a museum, and I spent time walking through it, even sitting on the wooden benches where so many people had sat before me. As I was finishing my tour, something silver located behind a glass case caught the light just right and drew my attention to it. It looked like a small silver bird, and as I walked closer, I could see it was beautifully crafted and ornate – and I began to feel a pit opening in the bottom of my stomach. I knew what this bird was; there was no doubt about it in my mind. It was a spice holder used for Havdallah. With a sense of growing trepidation – my heart literally pounding in my chest – I inched towards the glass until I was close enough to read the small card affixed next to the bird, which read something like: ornate silver spice holder for use in post-Sabbath ritual. My heart ached. Although I had only embraced Torah observance a few short months before and had never heard of or, for that matter, made Havdallah prior to becoming observant, I couldn't believe that something so regularly used each week by Jews around the world was sitting behind glass in a museum, as though it was something from some forgotten world. And then the larger picture – and what was for me, the real tragedy – began slowly to sink in. For, surrounding that little silver bird that had caught my eye was every Jewish object that one could possibly imagine: tefillin, sifrei Torah (Torah scrolls) and the various silver ornaments that typically adorn them, sifrei kodesh (holy books), siddurim, chumashim, talleisim – and the list goes on and on and on. An entire, multi-panelled glass case<sup>1</sup> filled from top to bottom.

I quickly learned these objects had all been abandoned in the very building in which I now found myself – and that some people did not even have the decency to wait until they were inside the building, but had actually deposited such objects directly into the water as they excitedly rode into the harbour – counting religion among the many shackles they would cast off at



the earliest possible opportunity. As I stood before that glass case – my eyes jumping from item to item in an absolute frenzy – without even realising it, tears started streaming down my face. Here I was at a crossroads in my life, trying to decide whether or not to continue with the Torah study that I had begun in yeshiva, having been raised without any sort of significant Jewish education and with much of what I had been taught amounting to a muddled, confused, and inaccurate mess, heavily distorted by the strong influence of foreign religious ideas that permeated the surrounding American culture. So I stood looking at this case full of objects – objects which I had only recently come to use on a regular and, in some cases, even daily basis, many of which I hadn't known about until just a couple of months before that (including tefillin! – but that's for another story).

And as I looked at these objects, I began to feel the weight of the choice I had to make pressing down on me: either I could go back to the world in which I had been raised – a carefree world where all of the objects behind that glass belonged there, like a bunch of worthless artefacts that no longer had any use, save to delight some museum curator in putting together a collection for preservation – or I could somehow find the courage to continue down the strange, at times difficult, and often uncomfortable path on which I had recently embarked and try to save my own descendants from being cast into the

oblivion that otherwise, almost certainly, awaited them. It was neither a long nor a difficult decision, as I quickly found myself on the next boat back to Manhattan and, from there, headed straight for my cousin's office to thank him, say goodbye, and make a beeline back to the yeshiva.

What had begun as a holiday – an escape, a timeout – had become in some strange way a 'holy' day – a day on which the trivial complaints of a pampered and unbounded youth evaporated in an instant, and the gravity of the decision I had made so many months before began to set in more fully, like the foundation of a building beginning to set and harden. It was the day on which I would choose to accept the Torah again; the day on which I would give Torah study another chance – and, in so doing, simultaneously pay homage to the many people who had come before me, while, at the very same time, give a fighting chance to the future generations to come. Hashem gives us His Torah every day. It is up to each of us to choose to receive it. The choice isn't always clear and certainly never easy – but sometimes we need to just take a step back and choose it all over again. **IL**

<sup>1</sup>I was informed by Geraldine Santoro, the curator of collections for the museum, that the display had to be removed due to damage caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The silver bird (pictured on page 44) was deaccessioned from the Ellis Island museum to the Jewish Museum in New York.