



# The Mazal Tov Ring and the Ketubbah

Ido Noy

...And he came before us, the honorable R. Jacob of Ulm, may he live, and told us that he has pawns of silver, a gold-plated belt, and two golden rings from you. In each of these rests a rock called a diamond, along with another *kiddushin* (betrothal) ring, which was engraved with M" T [mazel tov]. And he said that for many days you have not redeemed your deposit and that he is in need of his payment...<sup>1</sup>

Moses son of Isaac haLevi Mintz, *Responsa of Rabbenu Moshe Mintz*, Germany, fifteenth century

In this responsum of Moses son of Isaac haLevi Mintz (Maharam Mintz c.1415–c.1480), which deals with the mundane issue of loans and pledges, we encounter an intriguing medieval Jewish marriage custom, namely, a ring with the Hebrew inscription "mazel tov" (literally: good constellation [of

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<sup>1</sup> Moses son of Isaac haLevi Mintz, *She'elot u'Teshuvot Rabbenu Moshe Mintz (Maharam Mintz)*, ed. Jonathan Shraga Domb (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1991), 1:179, §70.



Fig. 1. Mazal Tov Ring, part of the Erfurt Treasure, second quarter of the fourteenth century. Courtesy of the Thuringian State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology, inventory number: 5067/98. Photograph by Brigitte Stefan.

stars]/good luck) used for betrothal (*kiddushin*), a ceremony in which the couple is formally engaged to be married. Three such rings were discovered in Weißenfels,<sup>2</sup> Colmar,<sup>3</sup> and Erfurt (fig. 1),<sup>4</sup> dating to the early fourteenth century. All three rings share a similar design, most notably the Hebrew letters מ-ז-ל-ט-ו-ב (M-A-Z-A-L-T-O-V) engraved on the top of a miniature architectural structure at the top of the ring's bezel.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, mazal tov rings were used as part of the Jewish marriage ritual. The ring's decorative elements, however, might have precluded its use in the betrothal ceremony itself.<sup>6</sup> It is thus worth considering what additional functions these rings might have served. We find mazal tov rings used for purposes other than betrothal in two illustrations for "Order of the Bride and Groom," included in a Jewish prayer book (*siddur*) produced in 1481 in Pesaro (present-day Italy).<sup>7</sup>

The first illustration depicts the highlight of the Jewish betrothal ceremony, in which the bridegroom places a plain gold ring on the bride's index finger (fig. 2). The second portrays the moment in which the bridegroom gives the marriage contract (*ketubbah*, pl. *ketubbot*) to his bride (fig. 3). A close look at the second illustration shows that the *ketubbah* is rolled up and fastened by a golden ring with a raised element on its bezel, an object reminiscent of the Ashkenazic mazal tov ring. The illustrator clearly distinguished between these two gold rings – an unadorned ring for betrothal, and a

2 Halle (Saale), Kunstmuseum Moritzburg, inventory number: Mo-LMK-E-162.

3 Paris, Musée national du Moyen Âge, inventory number: Cl.20658.

4 Weimar, Thüringische Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie, inventory number: 5067/98.

5 A similar design is featured on a "mazal tov" ring from Munich (Schatzkammer der Residenz, inventory number: 52). It is mentioned in an entry already in 1589: "Ein Alter guldiner Ring, umb und umb mit Herbäyschen Buchstaben, auf dem Castn steht ein Tabernacul einem Sacramentheußl gleich." See *Die Münchner Kunstkammer*, eds. Dorothea Diemer, Peter Diemer, and Lorenz Seelig, 3 vols. (Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008), 1: 308.

6 For a discussion on the use of decorated rings for kiddushin, see Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael: Mekorot veToldot*, 8 vols. (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2003), 4:143–48 (Hebrew).

7 Budapest, Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Ms. A380, fols. 231r, 231v. This manuscript was stolen from the library's collection at the beginning of the 1980s.



Fig .2. *Kiddushin*, Siddur, Pesaro, Italy, 1481. Formerly of the David Kaufmann collection, Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. MS A380, Vol.II, fol. 230r. Courtesy of the Center for Jewish Art, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.



Fig. 3. The Ring and the *Ketubbah*, Siddur, Pesaro, Italy, 1481. Formerly of the David Kaufmann collection, Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. MS A380, Vol.II, fol. 231v. Courtesy of the Center for Jewish Art, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.



Fig. 4. Miniature for Herr Wilhelm von Heinzenburg, Codex Manesse. Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, CPG. 848, fol. 162v.

heavily decorated one for the *ketubbah* holder – suggesting that their respective designs are tailored to their ritual uses.

Marriage contracts, like Torah scrolls and other ritual documents and letters, were written on one side of paper or parchment and then rolled into scrolls. Such documents were then tied using various materials and techniques. A metal ring such as the one depicted above could have served this purpose. As only a handful of Italian marriage contracts dating to before the sixteenth century have survived, we cannot determine whether Italian Jews used metal *mazal tov* rings to fasten such documents.

There is a pronounced similarity between the *ketubbah* holder shown in the Italian prayerbook and the three *mazal tov* rings from the German lands. But did medieval German Jews also use metal ring holders to fasten their rolled-up marriage contracts?

Or were these rings in fact used as part of the wedding ceremony? There are some indications that German Jews used scroll-like *ketubbot*. For example, an illustration of the marriage of Moses and Zipporah in the *Yehuda Haggadah* for Passover, produced in Franconia between 1470 and 1480, features a *ketubbah* scroll.<sup>8</sup> In order to test the hypothesis that *mazal tov* rings were used to fasten these documents, we may compare the measurements of the Ashkenazic *mazal tov* rings described above to the measurements of illustrated marriage contracts from Germany. One of the earliest examples of the latter was produced in 1391/2 for the marriage of Zemah, daughter of R. Aaron, and Shalom, son of R. Menahem in Krems an der Donau (?).<sup>9</sup> The original dimensions of this document were approximately 600x740 mm. It would have been impossible to insert this parchment into any of the Ashkenazic *mazal tov* rings, which have an inner diameter of approximately 20mm. However, the illuminated Krems *ketubbah* is exceptional, since most Ashkenazic marriage contracts were not adorned, and it can be assumed that their average size was significantly

8 Jerusalem, Israel Museum, Ms. 180/50, fol.11v.

9 Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. hebr. 218.

smaller than that of the Krems *Ketubbah*. If Ashkenazic *ketubbot* were indeed much smaller, they could potentially have fit (when tightly rolled) into the Ashkenazic mazal tov rings.

Alternatively, mazal tov rings may have functioned as an adornment to the *ketubbah*. One finds similar metal rings in the *Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift*, a corpus of illuminated medieval German love poems (*Minnelieder*) that was produced in 1300-1340 for the Manesse family in Zurich. Many images in the codex illustrate iconography of courtly love typical of that era, including the bestowing of gifts and handing over of various documents – possibly letters and love poems. One illustration, for the poems of Wilhelm von Heinzenburg (before 1262–1293), reveals additional details about the nature of the gifts. It depicts a young man bestowing three gifts upon his beloved: a roll accompanied by a wallet and a gold ring set with a stone (fig. 4).<sup>10</sup>

Since, in the Jewish wedding ritual, the bestowal of the *kiddushin* ring precedes the handing over of the *ketubbah*, if mazal tov rings were indeed attached to the *ketubbah*, they must have served a purpose other than *kiddushin*. If so, these massive and precious rings would have played a visual and aesthetic role: they would have drawn attention of the participants and guests to the ritual, thus highlighting the groom's rights and responsibilities in relation to his bride.

In addition, the ring's design has symbolic significance in the context of Jewish marriage. The architectural structure on the bezel may symbolize to the building of the couple's new home. Alternatively, it may represent the Temple in Jerusalem according to contemporary depictions (or, for that matter, other building and architectural elements representative of the Temple, such as the synagogue, the Holy Ark, or the *bimah*), thus commemorating the Temple's destruction and implying its future reconstruction.<sup>11</sup> Another important feature is the Hebrew inscription, "mazal tov," which conveyed the message that the use of such a ring would increase the likelihood of a successful marriage.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to the initial passage quoted from the Maharam Mintz's responsum, we may now ask: Was the anonymous individual who failed to redeem his deposit the original owner of the ring, waiting to bestow it on his bride? And, perhaps most poignantly, did this mazal tov ring fulfill its function and bring good fortune to the young couple?

10 Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, CPG. 848, fol. 162v.

11 Shalom Sabar, *Mazal Tov: Illuminated Jewish Marriage Contracts from the Israel Museum Collection* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1994), 43–78. Idem, "Messianic Aspirations and Renaissance Urban Ideals: The Image of Jerusalem in the Venice Haggadah, 1609," *Jewish Art* 22/23 (1998): 295–312; Pamela Berger, *The Crescent on the Temple: The Dome of the Rock as Image of the Ancient Jewish Sanctuary* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 197–223.

12 Moshe Idel, "The Zodiac in Jewish Thought," in *Written in the Stars: Art and Symbolism of the Zodiac*, ed. Iris Fishof (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2001), 21–26.

## Further Reading

- ❖ Shalom Sabar, *Ketubbah: Jewish Marriage Contracts of the Hebrew Union College Skirball Museum and Klau Library*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990.
- ❖ Jules M. Samson, *The Jewish Betrothal Ring (or Mazal Tov Rings)*, 1982 (unpublished).
- ❖ Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 4, 143–48. Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1995 (Hebrew).
- ❖ Maria Stürzebecher, “Der Schatzfund aus der Michaelisstraße in Erfurt. In *Die mittelalterliche jüdische Kultur in Erfurt*, edited by Sven Ostritz, vol. 1: 94–99. Weimar: Thüringische Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie, 2010.