

# JEWISH MARRIAGE RINGS

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Rings have been used since ancient times as tokens of friendship and love; but the ring used in the Jewish wedding is of far greater significance. It consecrates the central act of the ceremony, as the groom, placing the ring on the bride's finger, pronounces the words 'Behold, thou art consecrated unto me with this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel'. The plain wedding-band used nowadays, though, bears no relation to the rings known as 'Jewish Marriage Rings',<sup>1</sup> far more elaborate in form, and never set with a gemstone (a proscription dating back to the Middle Ages), though they may be embellished with colourful enamels; and, with very few exceptions, they are lettered with the Hebrew words מַזַּל טוֹב 'מַזַּל טוֹב' 'mazel tov' ('lucky star'), in full or in abbreviation. About three hundred of these rings are known, now mostly in museum collections; but they present scholars and collectors with more than one puzzle. For one thing, their function – their use at Jewish weddings – is entirely undocumented from Jewish sources. They are not only not in current use, and have not been employed within living memory, but no reference has been found to these striking objects in Jewish law or literature, in pictorial form, or in Jewish oral tradition. It is not surprising, then, that even more than one hundred years ago, the collector Octavius Morgan plaintively inquired in *Notes and Queries* whether these rings 'are, or ever were, used in the Jewish marriage ceremony', having presumably struck a blank when inquiring from Jewish dealers or acquaintances.

Like many a later writer on Jewish folklore and artefacts, he was unacquainted with the sole unambiguous reference to the use of 'mazel tov rings'; this, however, is not to be found in a Jewish source. A Christian scholar, J. J. Schudt, describing the Jewish marriage ceremonies he witnessed in Frankfurt in his *Jüdische Merkwürdigkeiten*, published in 1714, states that the ring placed by the groom on the bride's finger is 'usually engraved with the words מַזַּל טוֹב, good luck'.

We may thus be confident that 'mazel tov rings' were used at least in the Frankfurt area c. 1700; to this we may add that this good-luck wish has traditionally been associated with Jewish (Ashkenazi) weddings. A further reference to the use of an exceptionally striking ring may probably be seen in the description of a Jewish wedding in Alsace by a mid-19th Century observer, who speaks of the use of a 'grosse bague' in the ring-ceremony.<sup>2</sup>

Nineteenth Century collectors could thus have been reassured about the function of the rings they assiduously collected; but about their datings and places of origin they had to rely on speculation, based on

stylistic grounds, for they were hampered by a total lack of provenances and known histories. Their rings were acquired, not from family possessions, but from dealers, their very existence as desirable antiquities and even their naming quite recent. None of the venerable institutions such as the Ashmolean Museum, the oldest in the British Isles, or the British Museum, owned Jewish Marriage Rings until they passed from those very collectors, provenanceless, into their possession. They were, in fact, first mentioned in the catalogue of Lady Londesborough's ring collection, published in 1853. This was closely followed by that of the 4th Lord Braybrooke; and M. Isaac Strauss's collection (now in the Musée de Cluny) and the Hungarian Tarnóczy collection, also published in Paris, did not follow until the last quarter of the century. The South Kensington Museum acquired one in 1855, and the same year they are mentioned in Charles Edwards' *History and Poetry of Finger-Rings*; a decade or more later they appear in the books of other antiquarian writers.

The sudden interest shown from the 1850's and primarily by English collectors, may at first sight seem surprising; but there were good reasons. After more than a century in which scholars' and collectors' attention had been concentrated on the engraved gems of the Ancients, interest had begun to wane, as a positive industry of assiduous copying and faking became ever more widespread. At the same time archaeological excavations at home aroused as much interest as those on hallowed classical ground, for they brought to light objects directly relating to British history, among them many medieval rings. Lord Braybrooke, whose investigations of the neighbourhood of his estate at Audley End uncovered Roman and Saxon remains, was only one of several mid-century scholars and antiquarians, who further enriched their collections by judicious purchases. That they were able to acquire a number of Jewish rings, though, was probably due to religious, social and demographic developments among European Jewry at this time.

Undoubtedly a number of the dealers in precious metals and jewellery in London and Paris, then as now, were Jews, as their names indicate – Lady Londesborough's interesting rings, among them the 'Hebrew Betrothal Rings', were acquired from Mr George Isaacs. That these dealers had what amounted to precious relics of Jewish family life on offer, had however more recondite reasons.

Among them one must reckon the enormous upheavals in Jewish life and thought wrought in Western Europe, first by the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment,

then the political and social changes brought about by Napoleon's secularisation decrees. Within a few decades breaches had been made in Jewish orthodoxy. The turmoils of the European revolutions of 1848 further affected Jewry profoundly. Jews like Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Börne were among the intellectual leaders of radical movements, and prominent among the rebellious masses: 20,000 Jews joined the Hungarian insurgents alone. The aftermath of the '48, with its repressive measures in a central Europe guided by Metternich, and its new upsurges of anti-semitism, was followed by widespread emigration. One of the havens where Jews from Central Europe found asylum was England, which passed its first Jewish Emancipation Bill in 1830 and accorded Jews full parliamentary rights in 1858–60. By the second half of the 19th Century, such intellectual and demographic changes among Jews had effects which are pertinent to this study, for they profoundly affected Jewish family life. Among them were mixed marriages, and conversions to Christianity from conviction or expediency rather than by force, as in earlier centuries, while reform movements within Judaism itself loosened the bonds of orthodoxy. In this atmosphere it is conceivable that even family heirlooms brought over by Jewish immigrants, such as unwieldy, precious rings once used in a marriage ceremony, might, with other valuables, be converted into realisable capital when the necessity arose. At the same time, working jewellers might now also find customers for newly made rings in a wider Jewish market, no longer confined to the ghetto: thus one may surmise an early 19th Century origin for certain Jewish Marriage Rings whose boldly lettered bands show that their users were not afraid to proclaim adherence to the Jewish faith; other rings were perhaps fashioned at this time in a spirit of romantic revivalism – akin to that which created 'Gothic' and 'Renaissance' jewels in 1830's Paris – rather than in the spirit of a continuing, living tradition.

If the known history of the great majority of the rings under discussion is thus relatively short, there is no question of their being altogether a 19th Century invention. Beyond the testimony of Schudt, the existence of four rings whose long history is attested, gives solid support to the belief that Jewish Marriage Rings had indeed a venerable past. Although these examples are so extremely few, they are secure. None were known in mid-19th Century England itself, but three were even then in German princely collections.

One 'mazel tov ring', before the last war in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Kassel, was inventoried among the treasures of the Duke of Hesse-Kassel in 1780. The Munich Schatzkammer der Residenz has one of the most striking, and surely the most original Jewish Marriage Ring known: this is an elegant gold ring with an unmistakable gothic turreted castle on its bezel; the inscription is engraved on the outside of the band.<sup>3</sup> This ring was included in Fickler's inventory of the Wittelsbach *Kunstammer* in 1598. Its first owner had probably been not the contemporary duke, but his

father, Duke Albrecht V (r. 1550 – 1579), the founder of the *Kunstammer*.

This duke was a notable collector, who amassed jewels, coins, medals, ancient gems, statues and objets d'art for a Cabinet of Rarities he planned to build. Like his Habsburg neighbour and brother-in-law, Archduke Ferdinand II of the Tyrol, he employed agents all over Europe to ferret out desirable purchases. The antiquary Jacopo Strada included 117 'Hebrew books' in one of his bills, and a table in the Duke's Cabinet held '*allerlei Geschirr und Zeug, so die Juden zu ihrem Gottesdienst gebraucht*' (all sorts of vessels and objects formerly used by Jews in their religious services), – among them perhaps the gothic gold ring. How and where he acquired it, is not known. He certainly had contacts with Jewish dealers, one of whom offered him Cavaliere Mozenigo's jewels pawned in Berne. Yet, paradoxically, Duke Albrecht was also the ruler who ordained the expulsion of all Jews from his territories within the very first years of his rule. This decree, though, links him not only with a famous Jewish public figure, but also with a Jewish goldsmith.

Rabbi Joseph ben Gershon, of Rosheim in Alsace, had in 1535 appeared before the Imperial Diet of Speyer as the spokesman for Jewry in German lands: he referred to himself as their 'ruler' or 'commander'. Sixteen years later, we find him, as a member of a small delegation, applying his powers of persuasion before Duke Albrecht of Bavaria, pleading on behalf of four Jews imprisoned on false testimony, one of them a goldsmith. His plea was successful: the four were pardoned. For his part, Joseph undertook to ensure that no Jew should henceforth live or trade in the Duchy of Bavaria, nor pass through without paying for a *Geleitbrief* (permit of passage) at the border. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that a handsome gold ring, suitable for the Duke's Cabinet of Rarities, might have passed into his possession on this occasion, whether by confiscation or in token of gratitude for mercy shown.

The link with Alsace is at least curious. We have seen that it was in that region – noted for the preservation of traditional Jewish observances well into the 19th Century – that a 'big ring' was seen at a mid-Century wedding; the French collector Isaac Strauss, whose Jewish Marriage Rings eventually came to the Musée de Cluny, had family connections in Alsace, where he may have acquired some of his objects; and, most importantly, a Jewish Marriage Ring, possibly antedating the Munich ring by two centuries or more, was also found in that region.

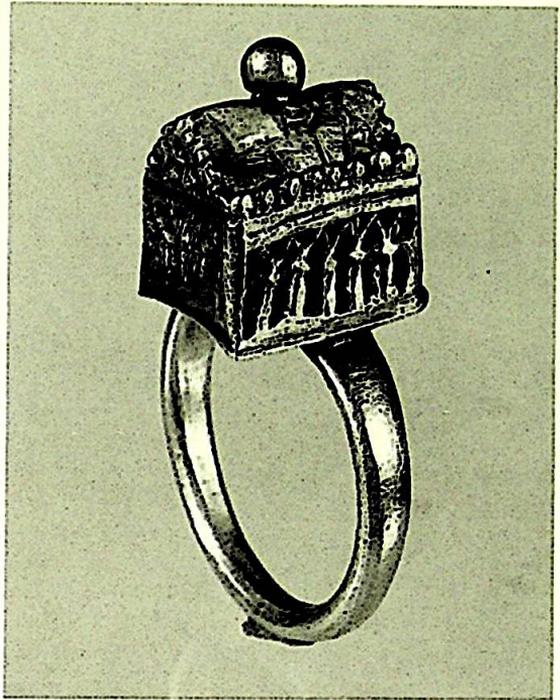
Although it did not reach the Musée de Cluny until 1923 (quite independently of the Strauss collection), it almost certainly derives from a hoard discovered in Colmar in 1863,<sup>4</sup> but had, unlike the other treasures, been retained in the finder's family, from which it eventually passed to the Museum. The 'Colmar Treasure', of 13th and 14th Century coins, and including other rings and jewellery, was found immured during building operations in a corner house on the former Rue des

**Juifs.** The latest coin among the hoard is a gold florin of Louis V of Bavaria, dated 1347: its concealment shortly after that date is only too likely, for the Jews of Colmar were condemned to death in 1348, for allegedly causing the Black Death, and were burnt at the stake early in 1349. The Cluny ring<sup>5</sup> is of edicular type: its bezel bears an arcaded gallery, surmounted by an hexagonal pyramid on which traces of coloured enamel remain, and which bears on its six panels the letters forming the words 'Mazal tov'.

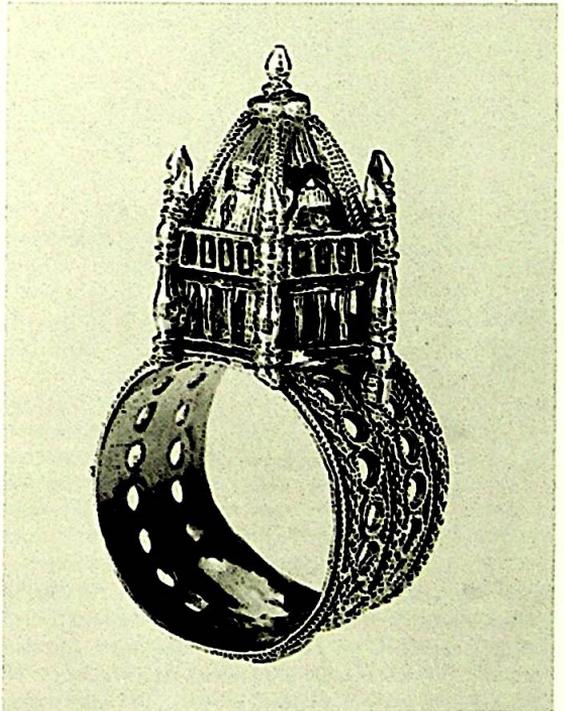
A fourth ring, also with a terminus post of the second quarter of the 14th Century, has an edicule of rectangular form, with a hipped roof and crocketed gables surmounting a gothic arcade; now in Halle, Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg, it derives from a hoard uncovered in 1826.<sup>6</sup> Together with the Munich ring and that formerly in Kassel, these two medieval rings bear testimony to the venerable history of the Jewish Marriage Ring.

Nevertheless, the early datings assigned to their rings, which they had received from unprovenanced 19th Century and later collections, by many museums in their catalogues, should be treated with caution. A ring in the Jewish Museum, London (plate 1), however, might conceivably be ascribed to a 14th Century date, by analogy with the goldsmith's work of the Halle ring. It, too, carries a 'building' resting on a pierced arcade on its bezel, and thus belongs to the best-known type of Jewish Marriage Rings, the edicular, so instantly recognisable to connoisseurs of rings that it has usually been thought the only type of 'the famous and well-known Hebrew gold marriage ring', as a 19th Century collector put it. This, however, is only one of several types, as the publication of many 'mazal tov rings' in museum, collection and auction catalogues has allowed us to appreciate. It is, nevertheless, not only the best known, but that most worthy of study in its widely varying examples.

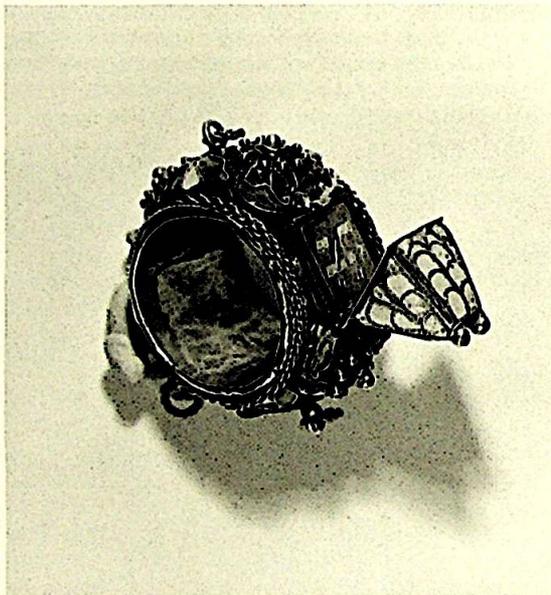
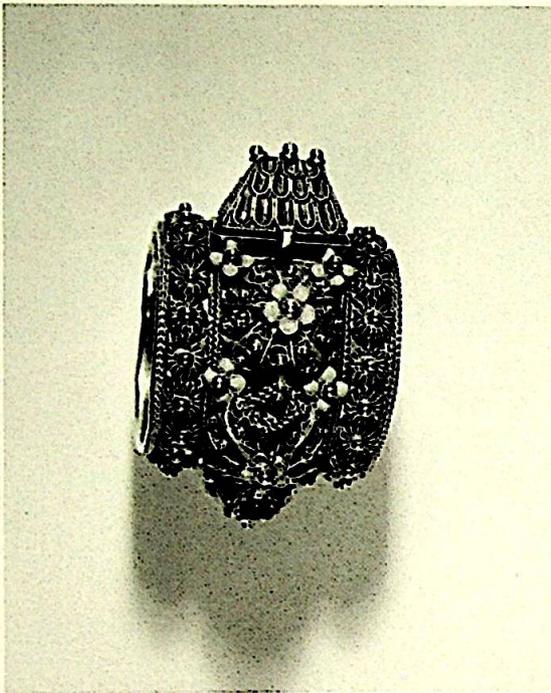
The striking little buildings which appear on these rings, with the 'mazal tov' inscription lettered on roof or band, have always excited speculation; it has been variously asserted that these edicules represent the Temple of Jerusalem, a synagogue, or the family home the couple will be building. The last supposition may safely be disregarded: however minute, they clearly represent public buildings or assembly halls; but they bear no relation to synagogue architecture. The rectangular type, though, with arcaded side walls, which is most frequently encountered, does recall the many medieval and later engravings which attempt to depict the supposed architecture of Solomon's Temple with many arcaded courtyards, based on biblical descriptions;<sup>7</sup> while the hexagonal example in the Jewish Museum, London, (plate 2) recalls the conventional depictions of the Temple in topographical prints, which were based on the Dome of the Rock: a similar centralised building is found on a Ketubah (Marriage Contract) in the Jewish Museum, London. That a representation of the Temple should grace both marriage contracts and



1. Edicular ring, gold, the bezel in the form of a rectangular hall, with a gothic arcade bearing a hipped roof engraved with the Hebrew letters for *mazal tov* ('good luck') surmounted by a ball finial. ?14th Century. (Jewish Museum, London)



2. Edicular ring, gold, the bezel in the form of a hexagonal building with a domed roof bearing enamelled Hebrew letters for *mazal tov*. Probably 16th/17th Century. (Jewish Museum, London)



3a & b Two Filigree roof rings, gold and enamel, the imbricated roofs opening on a hinge to reveal a plaque engraved with the Hebrew letters for *mazal tov*. (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)

marriage jewels, is the less far-fetched as it probably alludes to the Psalmist's injunction to 'place Jerusalem at the head of all his joy'.<sup>8</sup> These edicular rings, with rectangular or centralised architectural bezels, of fine gold, and not two of them alike, seem to represent the oldest tradition, dating from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and perhaps later; they may be tentatively assigned to Central Europe and the lands of the German Reich of the period.

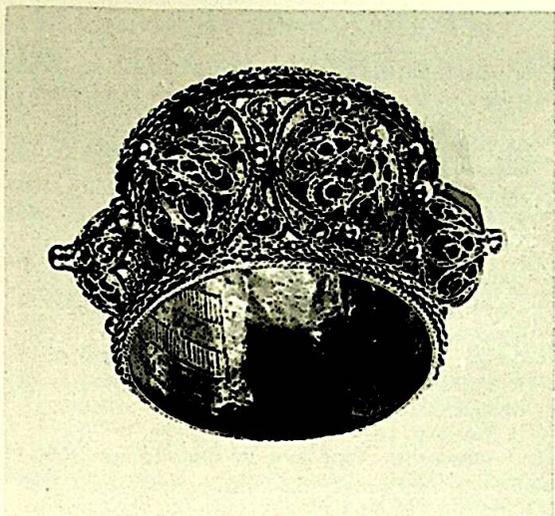
The elaborate rings, usually bearing five bosses embellished with coloured filigree, with bezels of little imbricated roofs representing tilework opening on a hinge to reveal a plaque bearing the 'mazal tov' letters or initials (plates 3a and b), although they also have an architectural feature, are of quite a different kind and probable origin. Filigree is notoriously difficult to locate and date, but Hugh Tait's suggestion that these rings may be related to Transylvanian metalwork<sup>9</sup> fits in well with the similarity of the enamelled roofs to the imbricated hulls of the little ship pendants,<sup>10</sup> once thought to be of Renaissance origin, but now assigned to Eastern Europe or the Greek Islands, and to rather later – perhaps 18th to 19th Century – dates. Their attractive little roofs are unlikely to represent the Temple, though: perhaps we may see here indeed likely symbols of the house the couple will build together, of the 'roof over their heads'.

Similar, wide filigree rings with, usually, six bosses, lacking a bezel (plate 4), seem related to the last type: the inscription appears engraved inside the band. It was probably these rings which gave rise to the often repeated, but baseless suggestion of a Venetian origin for Jewish Marriage Rings, as a ring of this type – without reference to Jewish use or note of any inscription – is illustrated as 'Venetian' in William Jones' *Finger-Ring Lore* of 1877, a well-known handbook of the period: research in Venice has not brought to light any documentation or tradition of such rings, though the Eastern European type described above may well have reached the rest of Europe through Venetian channels.

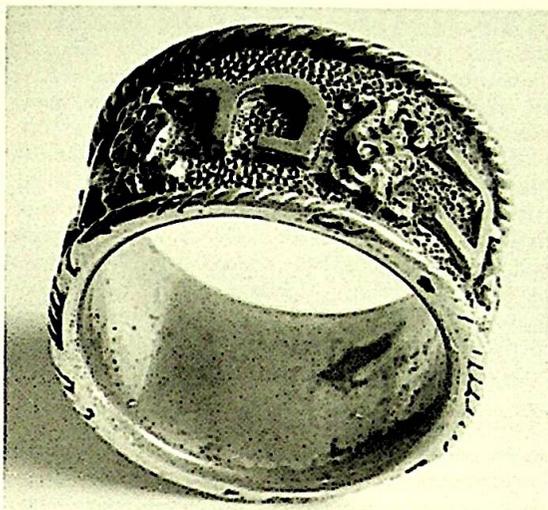
Much less elaborate, narrower bands, with small filigree or reduced filigree bosses, also often have delicate coloured enamel decoration (plate 5); but such narrow bands are sometimes joined in double, triple or even quadruple form, again resulting in exceptionally wide bands.

A different type again, seen in a few examples, consists of a very wide band, handsomely decorated in pierced work or repoussé, and only recognisable as a Jewish Marriage Ring by the inscription or initials inside the hoop. One of these, with elegant chasing of plant forms, in the Jewish Museum, London, is dated in Hebrew letters 5374, the equivalent of AD 1614. On stylistic grounds, too, this type of ring should be assigned to the 17th Century; the varied kinds of floral and plant decoration may suggest a Dutch or North German origin.

As has been shown, Jewish Marriage Rings of all these types tend to be impressively large in width or height, which makes the mention of the 'grosse bague' at an Alsatian Jewish wedding so suggestive. Many of them are also of an exceptionally large diameter. This puzzling feature has led to further comments and suppositions, such as that they were used as myrtle-holders. The explanation is probably simpler. The wedding ritual prescribes that the ring-ceremony, to be



4. Broad hoop, gold, with six filigree bosses within corded borders, the interior engraved with the Hebrew initials 'm.t.'. (Jewish Museum, London)



6. Lettered band ring, gilt bronze, the hoop bearing the Hebrew inscription *mazel tov* in raised letters separated by six conventional florets around the band. (Photo: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford)



5. Narrow hoop, gold, with six reduced filigree bosses separated by six florets enamelled blue and green between corded borders. (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)

valid, shall be observed by a number of witnesses; moreover, the ring is to be taken by the groom from his own finger and put on that of the bride – both good reasons for the use of a large ring which, by its very configuration, could never have been meant for regular wear.

Two further types of Jewish Marriage Rings deserve mention. One, of architectural form, has a building with a hipped roof, mansard windows and often practicable vanes on its bezel, while the wide band is surrounded by the Hebrew inscription in large, applied and enamelled letters.<sup>11</sup> Rings of this type, with their skillfully worked windows and vanes, while reminiscent of other Jewish artefacts exhibiting a playful use of architectural forms, such as the spice boxes which may be even embellished with little figures, and with their obtrusive Hebrew inscriptions, point to dates not earlier than 1800, possibly the first half of the 19th Century.

A few wide-band rings bearing traces of enamel are embellished with pierced overlay bands of figurative scenes around the hoop, of Jewish ritual or the animals in the Garden of Eden.<sup>12</sup> Although they are assigned to 'late 16th Century' in the British Museum Catalogue of Finger Rings by O. M. Dalton of 1912, and their technique resembles that seen on certain Dutch snuff-boxes of the 18th Century,<sup>13</sup> their imagery and the existence of two identical rings among the few examples known would seem to indicate rather the romantic revivalism of historicist goldsmiths than the continuation of a living tradition for ceremonial use: like the previous type, they may perhaps be assigned to 19th Century dates.

Not all types of Jewish Marriage Ring, though, are as showy as these: there are also gold, or gilt bronze, bands bearing a plaque, sometimes charmingly in 'open book' form, inscribed with the vital letters; and one last type, of a simpler form, consists of a band on the outside of which the six Hebrew letters appear in relief between six florets (plate 6); but even these rings may be of gold, the letters separately cast and soldered, or more modestly of cast gilt bronze. This 'lettered band' type is strangely reminiscent of a ring of apparently quite different origin and function, namely the 'zodiac' ring, usually 19th Century in date. It similarly bears twelve raised signs; in the case of the Jewish rings, six conventional florets are interspersed between the six letters. As Zodiac Rings are known to have been made by the goldsmiths of the Cape or Gold Coast, and were indeed worn almost as a badge by returning 'Coasters', the connection, if such there was, is mysterious – but the 'mazel tov' wish does mean 'lucky star', and the zodiac appears on Jewish artefacts.<sup>14</sup>

This brief typology should assist in eliminating from the canon such rings as the two beautiful gold examples in

the Victoria and Albert Museum<sup>15</sup> with stepped square truncated pyramid bezels, for not only are they uninscribed, but no genuine example appears to have an edicula based on a square section. The many examples of silver rings with tall, arcaded, square 'flat-roofed' bezels, also sometimes mistaken for Jewish Marriage Rings are hair- or finger-rings of North African origin, the pierced openings perhaps destined for musk or perfume. Modern silversmiths in Palestine and later Israel, too, have created attractive versions in silver of 'Jewish Marriage Rings' as precious collectors' objects: their 'house bezels' open to reveal incredibly tiny objects associated with the marriage service and even a minutely inscribed 'Esther Roll'.<sup>16</sup>

While the objects described in the last paragraph have either been mistakenly identified, or were innocent 'romantic revival' jewels, fakes and forgeries, too, exist and have long presented problems. More than a century ago, a collector told William Jones that he had 'a real old one, as most of those now about are forgeries'. Our examination of the 'real old ones' should allow us to recognise not only the principal types of genuine rings, but to realise that among those which have been preserved, rings found in multiple examples should be assigned to more recent dates than was thought likely a century ago, while the older examples exhibit such variety and originality as to make them most precious relics of early goldsmiths' work, as well as memorials of an ancient Jewish tradition.

I am indebted to Jules M. Samson whose Catalogue of Jewish Marriage Rings (unpublished) introduced me to this subject.

- <sup>1</sup> or 'Betrothal Rings': both forms are correct, as the two originally distinct ceremonies have become one.
- <sup>2</sup> Daniel Stauben, *Scènes de la vie juive en Alsace*, Paris, 1860
- <sup>3</sup> G. Seidmann, 'Marriage Rings, Jewish Style', *The Connoisseur*, January 1981, 48-61, Fig. 4
- <sup>4</sup> E. Taburet and M. Dhénin, 'Le trésor de Colmar', *La revue du Louvre et des Musées de France*, April 1984, no. 2, 92-3, 100, Notes 54-8
- <sup>5</sup> Seidmann (1981), Fig. 2
- <sup>6</sup> Information kindly supplied by J. M. Fritz. Illustrated in J. M. Fritz, *Goldschmiedekunst der Gotik in Mittel-Europa*, Munich, 1982, Fig. 318.
- <sup>7</sup> H. Rosenau, *Vision of the Temple*, London 1979
- <sup>8</sup> D. Davidovitch, *The Ketuba*, Tel Aviv, 1968, p. 106
- <sup>9</sup> H. Tait, *Catalogue of the Waddesdon Bequest in the British Museum*, vol. I, London, 1986, pp. 257-61
- <sup>10</sup> S. Bury, *Jewellery Gallery Summary Catalogue*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 1982, p. 155, Case 26, no. 19
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 348, Case 35 C no. 4
- <sup>12</sup> Seidmann (1981), Fig. 12
- <sup>13</sup> I am grateful to S.A.C. Begeer, who drew my attention to these boxes
- <sup>14</sup> For discussion, see G. Seidmann, 'A "lettered-band" type Jewish marriage ring' *The Antiquaries Journal* 1987 vol. LXVII, pt. II, 362-4, Pl. XXXI a, b
- <sup>15</sup> S. Bury, *An Introduction to Rings*, London, 1984, Pl. 34, C, E
- <sup>16</sup> Seidmann (1981), Figs. 13-4

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