

# Hand to Hand

*Zeva Oelbaum*

AS EARLY AS I CAN REMEMBER, I LOVED LOOKING AT the fragile volumes of Hebrew books relegated to our basement. They came in all sizes and had translations in Latin, Russian, German, Polish, Aramaic, and Yiddish. One book in particular captured my imagination and attention: its pages a beautiful blue, and its endpapers a jumble of scribbles. As a child, I recognized that some of the markings were Hebrew, but most were unidentifiable. The fragments of text were impossibly exotic and unselfconscious. I used to pore over these squiggles and graceful glyphs for hours, trying to decipher them.

These orphaned tomes connected me to a time and place far beyond my Missouri roots. I imagined they had time-traveled from hand to hand for centuries, like portable identities.

Placing one's stamp on the endpapers of a Hebrew book, both literally and figuratively, was not uncommon in the 18th and 19th centuries. People recorded the purchase price of a book, stamped it with their ownership mark, practiced spelling, unclogged their ink nibs, spilled their ink, and doodled in boredom. These books were frequently passed from hand to hand, so the endpapers became a kind of palimpsest of languages and writing styles.

I am intrigued by found materials and artifacts; I am especially drawn to notations and objects that have been manipulated by hand. When placing the somnolent pages of these ancient books beneath the lens of my 4x5 studio camera, I feel that entire worlds are awakened. These lines and splotches — which inhabit the liminal space between the mundane and the sacred — are transformed and continue to be transformed with the passage of time.

*ZEVA OELBAUM is a New York based still-life photographer. Her photographs have been featured in numerous exhibitions. "Hand to Hand" appeared as a solo exhibition at The Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art in Philadelphia; The Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA; and The Griffin Museum of Photography in Winchester, MA.*









