

The Rabbi of Book Design: An Interview with Scott-Martin Kosofsky

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Scott-Martin Kosofsky, who designs, writes, produces and edits books in the fields of Jewish studies, history, music, art and design in Lexington, Mass., fell in love with Daniel Berkeley Updike's two-volume *Printing Types* when he was in high school—"a love that's lasted a lifetime," he says, as if he had stumbled upon "the particle physics of literacy." Kosofsky became a printer with an interest in lettering. Starting out with a letterpress shop in his dining room in Boston's South End, he founded The Philidor Press—now The Philidor Company, named for a French family of polymaths (composers, librarians, printers, chess masters) as it was the only name he could think of that connected all that he did. Kosofsky has devoted himself to producing typographically intricate Judaic texts and *mahzors*, or prayer books. But while he's an expert in Judaica, he also packages and produces secular books, including *Asylum: Inside the Closed World of State Mental Hospitals*, which features stunning photographs by Christopher Payne and an essay by the wonderful Oliver Sacks (MIT Press). What he calls "the non-Hebraic side of my brain" is obsessed with image reproduction and *Asylum* features new screening technology that he adapted from work done by Agfa awhile back. Mesmerized by Kosofsky's commitment to craft I engaged him in the following interview.

Heller: Why Judaica?

Kosofsky: Where else could one find graphic opportunities of such richness? In truth, it's my mission and my *mitzvah*, the place where I can do the most good and leave the world a bit better than I found it. I wouldn't get to say that if I worked on Wall Street. It's work that will never be forgotten or thrown away (Jewish books cannot be discarded; they have to be buried in a kind of mausoleum, a *genizah*). That said, it gives one a serious incentive to make sure the typography is good—eternity is a long time to live down *shlock* work.

Heller: You are both a Judaic book scholar and a typographical perfectionist. I'd argue that this is not the easiest combination to be as a designer. What is it that appeals to you about designing Hebraic texts?

Kosofsky: I'm glad you know what I am; I have no end of difficulty explaining myself. In some quarters of the publishing community, I'm known chiefly as a packager and producer of interesting photography books. In others, I'm known best for work I did a long time ago in music, especially in "early music" and theoretical work in jazz. Some people think I'm a writer, though I've published only one solo book of note. But there's no question that typography and Judaica are the leitmotifs of my career.

Heller: And complexity, in design, that is, seems to be one of the hallmarks.

Kosofsky: I never thought of easy as a possibility—or as fun. My wife, Betsy Sarles, who’s a very good designer, says that I make easy things hard by obsessing over details. I always counter by saying that because I’m such an intense worker, I don’t take any more time than the less obsessed. What I do is try to bring clarity and a particular voice to complex literature. In picture books, on the other hand, I try to withdraw as much as I can, to stay out of the way of the main show and simply support it with as much judgment as I can muster.

Heller: What appeals to you about complex Judaic texts?

Kosofsky: One becomes addicted to designing complex texts. They’re never the same and never boring—and you have to become involved with them in the most intimate way, as the practical voice of the editorial team, and as the typesetter and designer. Designing Judaic texts in America, which is inevitably a bilingual affair (or trilingual, if you’re dealing with transliterated Hebrew as an element), is a perfect fix for my addiction. I came to it part by accident, part by birthright, and part by a sense of mission to restore to these books the dignity they once had in the early days of printing, in the Golden Age of the late 15th and early 16th centuries, when the very appearance of the pages pulled you in like a magnet to nails, with a feeling of both enveloping comfort and awe. Despite their being of a time long ago, these books are inextinguishably modern, offering readers text, reference information and discourse all at once. Isn’t that what William Gaddis or David Foster Wallace were trying to do? Or Zadie Smith? Or Melville?

The traditional segmenting of work in today’s publishing houses gives poor service to such literature; things that are meant to be contemplated and read in parallel become either a mass of single-column confusion or a junk shop of out-of-control weirdness. With Judaic texts, the standards had gone down and down, enough to make me cringe with shame when I walked into a synagogue. I had to do something about it because I knew I could. As my friend Jonathan Sarna, the historian, says, you don’t stay home from *shul* on Yom Kippur just because you don’t like the rabbi.

Heller: We can agree that type is the lingua franca of design. But precision is not on every designer’s agenda. Do you think there is a decline in typographic standards today, at least the way that you practice them?

Kosofsky: It’s the best of times and the worst of times, but I have a feeling that people have always said that, depending on their drugs of choice. In regard to print, I think we’re at a great moment, with access to mature technology and aesthetics: optically sized OpenType typefaces that are well-made and comfortable in their own skin, sophisticated H&Js in InDesign, the tools to make our own types and improve others. There’s no excuse for anything looking less than great. But books (and print in general) have lost their pride of place. Book publishers, a group nearly always behind the curve, have failed to grasp that their online counterparts spend a lot of time and money concentrating on User Experience, while they remain unfamiliar with the concept. It wasn’t always that way, but when the professionalism and discipline that was demanded by metal type fell away, things got worse and

worse, especially typographically. That transition period is long over, though you don't see much evidence of it in trade books, because editors are usually clueless about graphic possibilities; they never know what's possible and what isn't (or what's expensive and what isn't). Covers are a different matter, of course.

Heller: But you say it's the best of times, too. How and where?

Kosofsky: Where I do see good, disciplined typography is in some corporate and institutional work, and, in Europe, in government work. Erik Spiekermann's career has been built on typography of a very high standard. He's made high craft out of train tables and corporate manuals. I once introduced him at a lecture by saying, "In the land of tabular matter, Erik is king." There's also some very good typography in what one might broadly call advertising or identity design. But that's a different sensibility from working in books, and it doesn't often transfer successfully.

Heller: Why must typography—I mean good typography—be such a complex practice?

Kosofsky: Because it's about discipline, critical vision, and a kind of self-knowledge of your own reading habits that's hard to cultivate. It's also self-effacing, which much other design is not. Everyone loves fonts, but few understand that how they work in reading is more a matter of the side-bearings, the fixed space on either side of the character, than it is about the characters themselves. How unromantic can you get. If you look at the Jenson and Aldine types, it's the rhythm and fit of the characters that make them so beautiful, so easy to apprehend. You can't correct poorly set side-bearings in a kerning table—it will look jumpy and uneven, as many fonts do. For years, I made my own text fonts, and for Hebrew I still do, but now there are a mature bunch of type designers who know what they're doing.

There are also the issues of weight and scale and proportion. You can't set 9-point type with a font designed for display; the spacing will be too narrow, the characters too spindly. This was the great virtue of foundry metal, where each size was its own cut and in some ways its own design, even in most Linotype and Monotype fonts. Then came photo type and early digital. Mike Parker and Matthew Carter tried to introduce some size specific masters at Linotype in the early digital days, but no one bought them. Then ITC became the dominant supplier of font art, selling "one size fits all" display types in an over-developed weighting system (weighted mainly toward enhancing revenues) for text—a very dark age. Note that when type technology was emancipated by PostScript and Fontographer, ITC dropped like a stone.

Heller: You've designed many books. Do you believe that authors care about the quality of their typography?

Kosofsky: Some of the best authors I've worked with are long dead, so I'm free to imagine that they cared a whole lot. Because I don't work in trade books, except for books I package completely, I don't have much experience with fiction writers. I wonder how some would react if I told them that their 320-page novel is too leaded out and would be more readable if it were fit into 224 pages. John Updike was very interested in typography and I had a charming correspondence with him (those little typed postcards) shortly before he died. I had sent him a copy of *The*

SP Century, the essay book I edited for the centennial of the Society of Printers, as it contained some previously unpublished information about Daniel Berkeley Updike, to whom he was distantly related and held in high regard. I think he knew something about typography and printing, which he regarded as romantic professions.

Heller: At a Pecha Kucha at the Society of Printers in May, you offered two of your typographic favorites: the Plantin Polyglot Bible and the Century Dictionary. What makes these such paradigms?

Kosofsky: Both are monuments to the graceful design and management of highly layered texts. In the great Plantin Old Testament (a term we Jews don't care for), we have simultaneously, in four columns, across the spreads: the Hebrew, Saint Jerome's Latin Vulgate, the Greek, and the Latin paraphrase of the Greek, then the Aramaic "targum" at the bottom of the left-hand page and the Latin translation of the Aramaic on the bottom of the right-hand page. The entire world of the Bible, as it was known at the time, sits before you, spread after spread. Something like this was tried earlier, in the Alcalá ("Complutensian") Bible of 1514–17, which is very impressive, but Plantin nailed it. For one thing, he had the master type-cutter Guillaume Le Bé make all the fonts, which have remarkable harmony. Oh my! Matthew Carter gave me an article his father wrote in the 1950s about the making of those Hebrew types. It was amazing to see how much Plantin knew about every major Jewish printed book that came before him.

I think De Vinne had the harder job with the Century Dictionary, with even more layers in a much smaller, three-column page—with illustrations, no less. Every necessary differentiation has been made, not one too many nor one too few. It's utterly perfect and it became the model for every dictionary that followed—everywhere, not just in the United States—and it showed the beginning of a shift in advanced learning in the 1890s from Europe to America. I think every design student should be given a page of it to work out in their own way, with the restriction that there cannot be any less material on the page. It's the shock and awe method of education. That's how I learned, by claiming I could do things I had never done, then doing whatever it would take to deliver on the promise. If not for the examples of guys like Plantin and De Vinne, I don't think I'd have survived.

Heller: You've told me the old Jewish hypertexts (Talmud, codes of law) took battalions of compositors decades to produce, whereas your recent *Mazhor Lev Shalem* was done by you—one person—in less than two years, while the writing was still going on. How did you do it?

Kosofsky: God's will, I suppose. My client, the Rabbinical Assembly, had everything riding on this, and I couldn't let them down. You get into the zone and keep working until you drop. No one could have helped, I think, with the pages, which often went through as many as 18 or 20 revisions. Though there appears to be a grid (or grids), it's constantly being altered, sometimes very slightly. No two spreads in this 944-page book are quite the same. I learned how to do this cleverly from measuring columns of the Bomberg and Soncino editions of the Talmud, from the early 16th century, but every book has its own set of issues, so, at the end of the day, you're in your own little world, all alone.

I also had an unusually high degree of editorial authority, and I could say no to some things that wouldn't fit—essential for doing this kind of work. The chief editor, Edward Feld, a wonderful rabbi, poet and mensch, was as good a partner as one could ever hope to have. Working closely with him made the work go more quickly and there were two superb chief proofreader/copyeditors. All of them are more amazed it got done than I am. I had to be the general coach to keep everyone—a veritable battalion of copyeditors and proofreaders and committee members, from Santa Monica to Jerusalem—moving along, which required my coming up with an ever-ready stream of jokes to defuse the inevitable tensions. It ended with smiles and hugs all around. At this moment, when only a few have actually seen the physical book, it has sold over 100,000 copies. I'm expecting that we're going to run out of the initial 130,000 run well before the High Holidays.

Also in this timeframe, I made the principal Hebrew font, using new technology for the automated placement of the myriad diacriticals, beyond anything done before. Now with *that* I did have a partner, Israel Seldowitz, who wrote the substitution and positioning strings in VOLT. Israel is a Lubavitcher rabbi in Brooklyn who happens to be a typographer. He and his brother have a business, FontWorld, that is the sole distributor of the Middle Eastern versions of the Adobe Creative Suite software. Go figure. The font we made is really something of a breakthrough, a game changer for future Hebrew texts.

Heller: Is there some kind of trance you put yourself into when designing a typographic scheme?

Kosofsky: It's a trance of low expectations, when you have to get the big idea right but not oversell yourself on the particulars, which will only be worked out in time. It's also about function trumping form at every turn. I don't care what the font is, who designed it, what its standing is among the typerati, only that it works perfectly for the purpose at hand. I never think about "style" as a goal or as an agenda (I used to, but I grew out of it). Style will come about inadvertently, as an unconscious byproduct of understanding the necessities of the text. In the *mahzor* I used a very unorthodox—pardon the expression—combination of types, including fonts that I'd never given much notice. The English texts are set in two sizes of Arno, but their italic is Chapparral (set a little smaller), which has nothing to do with Arno stylistically. The Arno italic was too calligraphic, too pretty, for this book, and it slowed my reading, which I saw as an inexcusable sin.

The sans serif font, always in small sizes, is Cronos, which, like Arno, was made by Robert Slimbach. It occurred to me that Adobe's types from a certain period have very similar weights and x-heights. I don't think that was intentional, just a group reflex that developed there. My Hebrew font, Milon, was based, albeit remotely, on Henri Friedlaender's Hadassah type, for which no good digital version exists. Hadassah wasn't designed for diacriticals, so it was best to do something in that spirit, but very much reconsidered for this purpose. Beside the Milon, the only font that does set a kind of style is Sumner Stone's Magma, which I use as caps only for titling.

Heller: There is a lot of chatter lately about the iPad as the corner-turner in the evolution of printed book to digital book. Do you think this will impact typographic practice?

Kosofsky: No, it will go the other way around. Typographic practice is as firm a foundation as exists in the world, and eventually the iPad, particularly iBooks, will meet designers and typographers on their own ground. I think in this first model they couldn't overload the chip, but that will change and grow. Apple and designers have mutual interests and dependencies that are beneficial to both—and to everyone. In the online universe and the burgeoning world of ebooks, things will only get better. With the Kindle, the typographic possibilities might be intrinsically limited by E Ink's technology (possibly a dead end), but when the iPad was released just days ago, some critics, like Craig Mod, came down like a ton of bricks on the lack of sophisticated H&Js and the limited typeface array in iBooks. As I said, it will get better anyway, but I hope the critics will make it happen faster. Someone will read this a year from now and wonder what the hell I'm talking about.

What the iPad will change most dramatically is trade publishing, even more than the Kindle has. It's well underway and it will only be for the better, maybe with a much-needed change of players. Can you think of a worse product than the trade hardcover, a perfect-bound book with boards that you have to wrestle open with two hands and can barely read in the gutter? Good riddance! People who are cynical enough to destroy their own product in order to save pennies (literally) per unit don't deserve to survive.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. www.hellerbooks.com