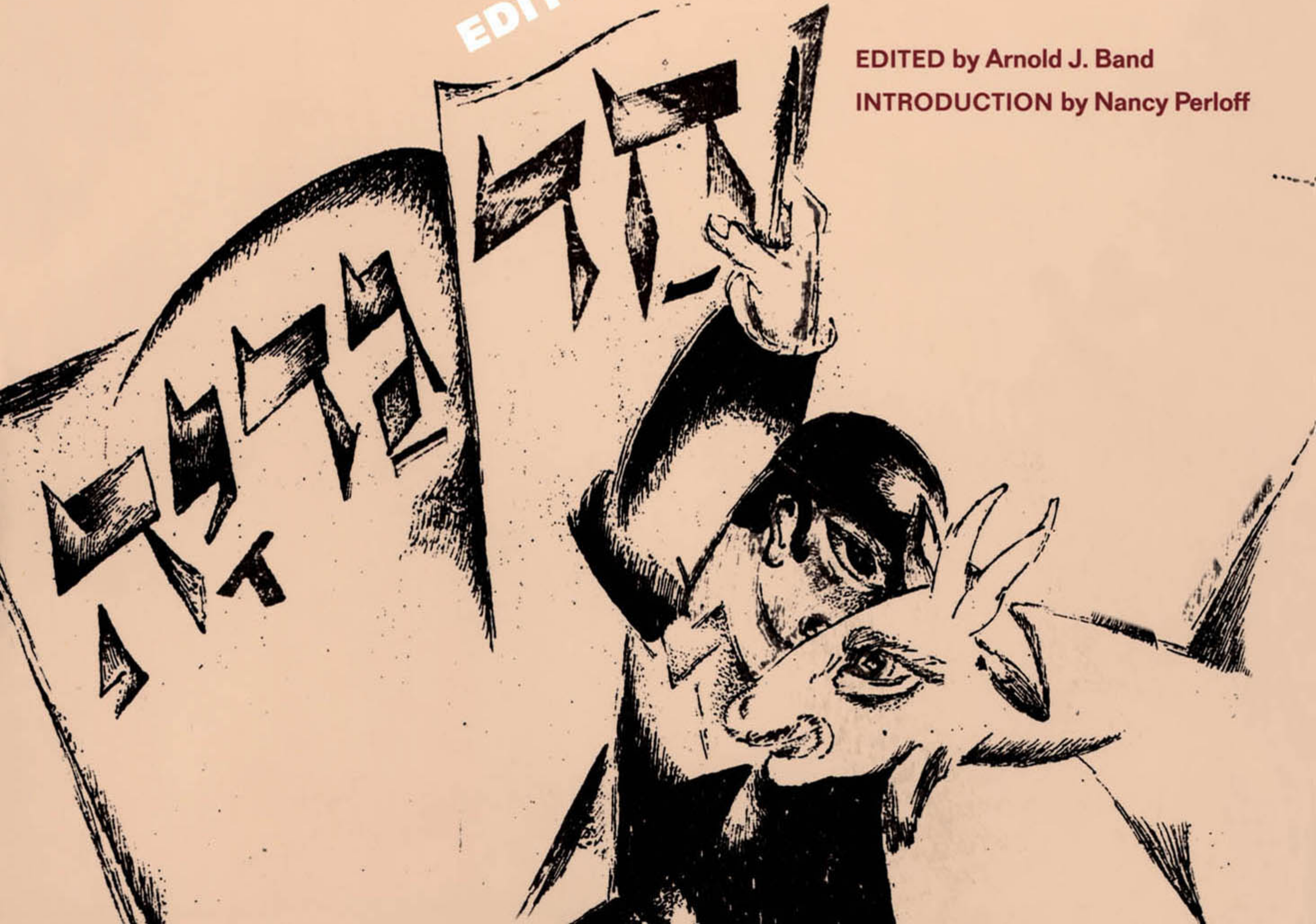
HAD GADYA THE ONLY KID

FACSIMILE OF EL LISSITZKY'S EDITION OF 1919

EDITED by Arnold J. Band

INTRODUCTION by Nancy Perloff



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—Thomas Crow, *Director, Getty Research Institute*

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NANCY PERLOFF is collections curator of modern and new media collections at the Getty Research Institute, where she focuses on acquisitions in European and Russian modernism and in postwar music and the visual arts. Drawing on the holdings of the Getty Research Institute, Dr. Perloff has organized the exhibition *Monuments of the Future: Designs by El Lissitzky* (with Éva Forgács, 1998) and the symposium "The Art of David Tudor: Indeterminacy and Performance in Postwar Culture" (2001). She has published *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie* (1991) and essays on John Cage, Paul Gauguin, and the artistic partnership of El Lissitzky and Kurt Schwitters. She is coeditor of *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (with Brian Reed, 2003).

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INTRODUCTION

Nancy Perloff

WITH HIS ILLUSTRATED BOOK OF THE PASSOVER SONG "HAD GADYA" (The only kid), dated 6 February 1919, the Russian avant-garde artist El Lissitzky (1890–1941) had reached a pivotal moment in his career. For the past four years, he had focused almost exclusively on the study of Jewish folk culture and the design and illustration of books in Yiddish. Now, in summer 1919, he would join the faculty at the Popular Art Institute in Vitebsk (Vitebskoe Narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche), where, inspired in part by the suprematist painter Kazimir Malevich, he would turn to abstract painting. Lissitzky's *Had gadya* marks the culmination of his artistic and personal engagement with Judaica. One of the last works that he signed under his Hebrew given name, Eliezer, the book displays Lissitzky's interest, at once playful and reverent, in the languages and symbols of the Jewish culture. Instead of the traditional Aramaic, Lissitzky chose Yiddish for the song's verses, which he set into architectural frames above the illustrations. Both Aramaic and Yiddish are written in the Hebrew alphabet, but Yiddish, then the vernacular of Ashkenazic Jews, was apt to be more familiar to his audience. Lissitzky did incorporate Aramaic, however, by introducing each new verse with an Aramaic phrase, printed on the lower right-hand corner of the page. And for the pagination, he used decorative Hebrew letters, each of which has a numerical value. Though Lissitzky's focus in terms of subject matter would soon change dramatically, in his experimentation with language, typography, and architectural form, we can already see in the *Had gadya* many of the elements that would define his avant-garde work in the following decades.

Lissitzky's decision to illustrate a traditional Passover song reflects both his religious upbringing and his participation as a young artist in the Jewish cultural revival that took place in Russia from roughly 1912 to the early 1920s. Born in 1890 in Pochinok, a small market town just south of Smolensk, Lissitzky grew up in the Russian (now Belarussian) city of Vitebsk. He was raised by a pious Jewish mother and an intellectual father who prided himself on being fluent in Russian, Yiddish, German, and English and on his gifts as a translator. During his secondary school years, Lissitzky moved between Smolensk, where he attended school and lived with his maternal grandparents, and Vitebsk, where he learned to paint traditional Jewish genre scenes under the tutelage of Yehudah Pen, one of the few Russian Jewish artists to be accepted by the Imperial Academy of Arts (Imperatorskaia akademiia khudozhestv) in Saint Petersburg. After completing his studies, Pen had returned to Vitebsk to open his own school of art in 1892, where, in addition to Lissitzky, he also taught Marc Chagall.[1]

Vitebsk was within the Pale of Settlement, the region, comprised of land annexed from Poland and Turkey, in which the majority of Russian Jews were forced to live from the late eighteenth century until 1917. A primary concern of the czarist state in creating the Pale was to keep Jews from conducting commerce in Russia proper. Periodically, however, permits to live outside the Pale were issued—to alleviate overcrowding or on account of an individual's profession or education—and as a result Jewish communities emerged in places such as Smolensk and Pochinok, just east of the Pale.[2]

Lissitzky's coming-of-age in and near the Pale would have been shaped by a powerful Jewish solidarity, the community-wide response to the knowledge that Jews would never be considered true Russians. Throughout much of Lissitzky's parents' and grandparents' lives, the Jewish experience in Russia was one of discrimination. During the 1820s, quotas were established to limit the presence of Jews in Russian-language schools and universities, and large numbers of Jewish boys were conscripted into the army. Simultaneously, however, in an effort to assimilate Jews into the mainstream society, the state enacted policies of so-called Russification. For example, also in the 1820s, government schools were encouraged to retrain Jews in fields other than trade, that is, as farmers, craftsmen, or professionals. By the early 1860s, after Czar Alexander II's relaxation of the conscription system brought glimpses of freedom, Jews were given reason to hope that they could attain the status of true Russians. While the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 set off a wave of pogroms that continued until the revolution of 1917, the popular uprisings of the revolution of 1905 forced Czar Nicolas II to institute reforms that transformed Russia from an autocracy into a constitutional monarchy. Subsequently, many of the restrictions on Jews were lifted, enabling them to create political parties and become eligible for election to parliament. Though pogroms threatened the stability of this new order, the relative political and artistic freedom that Jews enjoyed from 1905 until the outbreak of World War I gave rise to a celebration of the Jewish heritage, specifically secular, among Russian Jewish artists—and it was within this context that Lissitzky first developed an artistic identity.[3]

At the center of this renaissance of Jewish secular culture was the influential art critic Vladimir Stasov. Based in Saint Petersburg, Stasov had close ties to leaders of the Jewish artistic and business communities who were seeking to uncover and revive traditional Jewish art forms. With Baron David Günzburg, the son of a wealthy businessman and philanthropist, Stasov helped publish a book of Jewish manuscript ornamentation, entitled *L'ornement hébreu* (1905).[4] Inspired by this work, the Jewish intelligentsia of Saint Petersburg began collecting and publishing eastern European Jewish artifacts, both secular and religious. In 1912, with the financial help of Günzburg's father, Baron Horace Günzburg, and with the guidance of the folklorist and playwright Semyon Ansky, the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society (Evreiskoe istorichesko-etnograficheskoe obshchestvo) embarked on the first of its journeys into the Pale of Settlement to collect Jewish religious and folk materials.[5] Traveling through towns and villages of Ukraine, the expedition collected folk iconography in the form of tombstone engravings, Torah covers and breastplates, ark decorations, ornamental silver, spice boxes, and woodcuts.

In 1916, Lissitzky took part in another expedition organized by the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society. With Issachar Ryback, a young art student who had undertaken an independent study of the wooden synagogues in Belarus the previous year, Lissitzky was sent to explore the synagogues of Ukraine.[6] The two artists drew plans, made colored drawings, and collected inscriptions from about two hundred synagogues. In an article written in 1923, Lissitzky vividly recalled his study of the synagogue in Mohilev: "Searching for our identity, for the character of our times, we attempted to look into old mirrors and tried to root ourselves in so-called 'folk-art.' Almost all the other nations of our time followed a similar path. . . . And therein you have the logical explanation of why I set out one summer to go 'among the people.'" Lissitzky praised the skillful work of the synagogue painter, the ability to make a "whole great world" come to life with just a few colors: "This is the very opposite of the primitive; it is the product of great culture."[7] Several sketches from Lissitzky's tour of the Mohilev synagogue survive, including a black chalk and watercolor of a lion's head with a human face (Jerusalem, Israel Museum, Boris and Lisa Aronson Collection), an image that Lissitzky copied from the zodiac painting on the ceiling of the synagogue.

Had Lissitzky and Ryback tried to publish inscriptions from the synagogues they visited, they would have violated the Russian edict (*ukaz*) of July 1915 that banned publications using either Hebrew or Yiddish words. Indeed, despite the relative easing of restrictions on Jewish life in the Pale, this edict forced Jewish presses to shut down since it was now unlawful to mail anything that was printed in either Hebrew or Yiddish.[8] However, after the revolution of February 1917 and the overthrow of the czar, the new Provisional Government abolished laws that had barred Jews from citizenship, and it repealed the decree prohibiting the printing of Hebrew letters, thereby sparking a sudden flurry of activity among the Jewish presses. In 1917, Lissitzky moved to Kiev, a center of the Jewish revival, and immersed himself in the production of Yiddish book designs and illustrations. His first commission was to design and illustrate Moshe Broderzon's *Sihes hulin: Eyne fun di geshikhten* (1917; An everyday conversation: A story), which appeared in a small edition of 110 numbered copies; the majority were printed as small booklets, but a few were printed in the form of a scroll and were encased in decorative wooden boxes. Lissitzky explained in the colophon (set in an ornamental frame based on the shape of a Torah ark) that he intended to couple the style of the story with the "wonderful" style of the square Hebrew letters.[9] In the magnificently colored title page (fig. 1), a peacock pulls a Hasid up to heaven, while the scribes on the left and at bottom look up at the peacock, saluting the bird's traditional role as a source of spiritual inspiration. In 1918, with his original drawings for Mani Leib's *Yingl tsingl khvat* (1922; The mischievous boy; fig. 2), Lissitzky incorporated Hebrew letters and typography into his overall design, a technique that anticipates his work in the *Had gadya* book.[10]

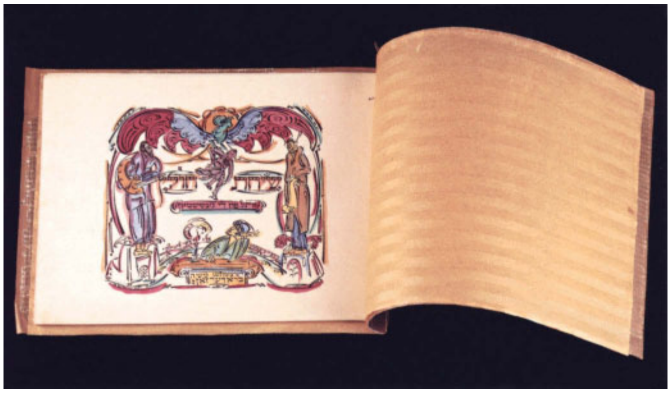


Fig. 1. Eliezer (El) Lissitzky, title page in Moshe Broderzon, *Sihes hulin: Eyne fun di geshikhten* (Moscow: Nashe Iskusstvo, 1917). Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

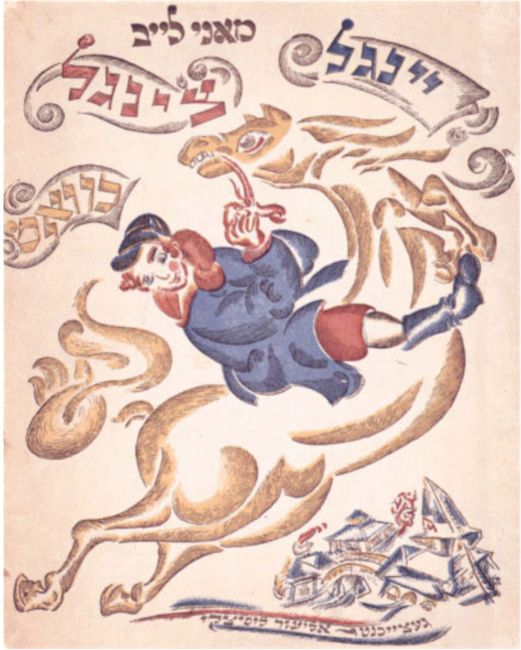


Fig. 2. Eliezer (El) Lissitzky, front cover of Mani Leib, *Yingl tsingl khvat* (Warsaw: Kultur Lige, 1922). Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

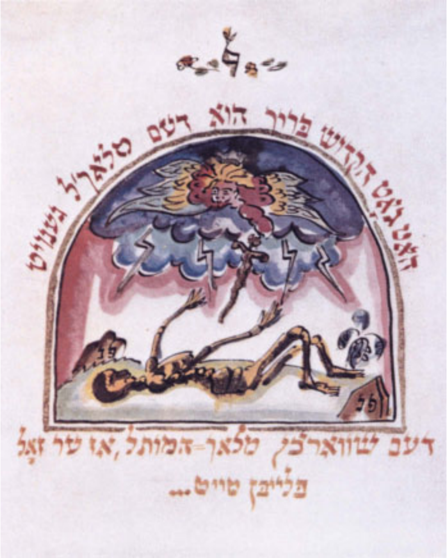

האט גאט הקדוש ברוך הוא דעם מלאכ'ל געשניט
דעם שווארצן מלאך-המות'ל, אז ער זאל
פלייבן טויט...

Fig. 3. Eliezer (El) Lissitzky, sketch for the final verse of "Had gadya," 1917, watercolor, 29.8 x 26 cm (11 3/4 x 10 1/4 in.). Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

LISSITZKY'S EARLIEST ILLUSTRATIONS BASED ON THE "HAD GADYA" song were a set of brightly colored, folklike watercolors that he painted in 1917 (fig. 3). Two years later, he returned to the Passover song, first creating a series of watercolors and then, closely based on the watercolors, a set of lithographs. The secular Yiddish organization Kultur Lige, of which Lissitzky and fellow artists Natan Altman and David Shterenberg were founders, published the lithographs in book form in 1919 in an edition of seventy-five copies.[11] From the earliest drawings to the final plates, subtle but significant changes occurred in Lissitzky's treatment of the subject matter. By comparing the two versions, we can see that for Lissitzky the appeal of illustrating the song was twofold: not only did it enable him to create a modern piece of Judaica but it also allowed him to represent and comment on the Jewish experience in Russia during these volatile years.

A folk song probably derived from a late medieval German source, "Had gadya" was first included in the Passover service, the Seder, in the fifteenth century.[12] Though not part of the service proper, the song appears at the end of the Haggadah, the text used at the Seder. The song has a concatenated, or linked, structure, and it introduces a series of characters, each one destroying the last: a cat devours the kid, a dog gobbles up the cat, a stick beats the dog, fire burns the stick, and so on, until God slays the angel of death, thus ending the chain of violence. The connection from verse to verse is not necessarily causal or logical; for instance, there is no particular reason why a cat would appear and eat the kid. The capricious nature of the song suggests that it may have been designed to capture and hold the attention of young children until the conclusion of the Seder—certainly, it gave Lissitzky the freedom to be whimsical in his illustrations.

The precise meaning of the "Had gadya" song is ambiguous, but, given the context of the Passover Seder, which celebrates the story of the Exodus, it is traditionally thought to be a parable for the divine deliverance of the Jewish people, whom Moses led out of Egypt and freed from bondage. The different characters worsted in the song have been interpreted, by extension, as nations that have attempted to destroy or oppress the Jewish people. Lissitzky's decision to let his *Had gadya* stand on its own, rather than publish it as part of a complete illuminated Haggadah—of which many have been produced over the centuries—indicates that he viewed the song both as a message of Jewish liberation based on the Exodus story and as an allegorical expression of freedom for the Russian people. Several stylistic and iconographic elements that were incorporated into the final two plates for the lithographs of 1919 underscore Lissitzky's interest in the song as a parable of the Russian Revolution, of the defeat of the czarist rule and the victory and liberation of the Russian masses.

The angel of death, for example, who is shown slaying the slaughterer in verse 9 and then again as the victim of God's divine hand in the next and final verse, wears a crown, absent in the 1917 sketches, whose shape resembles that of czarist crowns as depicted in Russian folk art. In verse 10, the hand of God is strikingly similar to an image of a hand that appeared on one of the first series of stamps printed after the revolution of 1917. On the stamp, the hand is clearly a symbol of the Soviet people. And the angel of death, who is depicted as dying in the set of illustrations from 1917 (see fig. 3), is now dead—clearly, in light of the symbolic link to the czar, killed by the force of the revolution.[13]

The optimism expressed in Lissitzky's plate for the final verse is telling given the political situation in Russia in February 1919. The period in which Lissitzky produced his lithographs was one of great violence. Although the Provisional Government of 1917 had announced the transformation of Russia into a liberal democratic and pluralistic state and had abolished laws restricting citizens on the basis of religion or nationality, in October 1917 the Bolsheviks toppled the Provisional Government, and the country descended into civil war. Yet even the potential victory of the Red Army was obviously a great source of hope for young Russian Jewish artists like Lissitzky, and in the imagery of his *Had gadya,* and especially the prostrate angel of death, Lissitzky posited this hope.

In terms of the development of Lissitzky's artistic technique, the lithographs reveal several fascinating and novel approaches to typography and design. Here we see an early example of Lissitzky's integration of letters and images: for each verse, he arranges the words of the story to form an architectural frame around the illustration. To connect text and image even further, and perhaps to make the book more accessible to young audiences, Lissitzky invented a system of color coding in which the color of the principal character in each illustration matches the color of the corresponding word for that character in the Yiddish text. For instance, the kid in verse 1 is yellow, and the Yiddish word **ציגעלע** (kid) in the arch above is also yellow; the green hue of the father's face is matched by the green type used for the Yiddish word **טאטע** (father).[14] While the bold colors and two-dimensionality of the lithographs are reminiscent of Chagall's work, the formal properties of the illustrations are also Cubistic in their use of geometric forms and Futuristic in their use of the spiral to evoke motion. With their colorful flatness, expressive distortions of proportion, rhythmic simplification of form, and humorous and sometimes grotesque faces of beasts and humans, the *Had gadya* illustrations yield a sense of childlike fantasy.

In his three-paneled dust jacket—designed to wrap around the entire book—Lissitzky made a pronounced move away from the figurative, Chagall-like traits of his colorful lithographs toward an abstract, Cubo-Futurist language consisting of fractured planes and triangles in ocher, black, and violet. The dust jacket bears no date but must have been completed sometime after 6 February 1919, the date on the title page, and before he arrived in Vitebsk in May. The complete verses of the Passover song appear on the left-hand interior panel of the dust jacket, while on the right-hand panel a circle overlaps a large polygon. In the center panel, set within another polygon, are two smaller geometric shapes, each of which represents the Hebrew letter *yud* (י). *Yud yud* is one of several ways of expressing the name of God in Hebrew letters. These letters are balanced by two other angular letters on the right-hand panel, *lamed* (ל) and *yud* (י), most likely the first and last letters of Lissitzky's surname. The mixture of decorative Hebrew letters and flat circular and triangular planes of color demonstrates the primacy of Lissitzky's concern with design, which he would later espouse as the basis of an international language. The design of the dust jacket also suggests that Lissitzky already may have been familiar with the suprematist work of Malevich and Alexandra Exter: Malevich's paintings had been shown at the Tenth State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creativity and Suprematism (Gosudarstvennaia vystavka: Bespredmetnoe tvorchesto i suprematizm), which opened in Moscow in January 1919, and Exter had her own studio in Kiev.[15]

The dust jacket reproduced here is held by the Research Library of the Getty Research Institute. It is one of only three known complete examples and it belongs to the small edition of seventy-five copies of the *Had gadya* book that Lissitzky made in 1919.[16] That so few of the dust jackets have survived may be explained by the fact that they were less sturdy than the book and so may have fared less well, particularly in children's hands. Also, whole copies of the 1919 edition may have been destroyed during the Stalin era. Though primarily in Yiddish, which in Russia had a longer life in print than Hebrew since it was considered a proletariat language, the book would nonetheless have been associated with the traditional Jewish Passover service and so may have been more vulnerable to government censorship.

Following the completion of his *Had gadya*, Lissitzky moved from Kiev back to Vitebsk, where he taught painting alongside Malevich and where he developed his own abstract geometric language, which he named *Proun* (Proekt utverzhdenia novogo; Project for the affirmation of the new). He would make brief reference to his Jewish background by publishing the article on the Mohilev synagogue in 1923 and also in several *Proun* works that incorporated Hebrew letters. But, chiefly, after the *Had gadya* project he presented himself as "El" Lissitzky, and he would soon travel to Berlin to further the exchange between the European and Russian avant-gardes.

NOTES

1. Seth L. Wolitz, "The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia," in Ruth Apter-Gabriel, ed., *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912–1928*, 2d ed., exh. cat. (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1988), 23.

2. Michael Hickey, "Revolution on the Jewish Street: Smolensk, 1917," *Journal of Social History* 31 (1998): 823–50; Avram Kampf, *Chagall to Kitaj: Jewish Experience in 20th Century Art*, exh. cat. (London: Lund Humphries/Barbican Art Gallery, 1990), 15; and Wolitz, "Jewish National Art" (note 1), 41 n. 9.

3. For a discussion of the history of the Jews in Russia during this period, see Michael Stanislawski, "The Jews and Russian Culture and Politics," in Susan Tumarkin Goodman, ed., *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change: 1890–1990*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel/Jewish Museum, New York, 1995), 16–20.

4. Wolitz, "Jewish National Art" (note 1), 25; and Kampf, *Chagall to Kitaj* (note 2), 15–16.

5. Scholars disagree about the date of the first expedition of the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society; see Kampf, *Chagall to Kitaj* (note 2), 16; Wolitz, "Jewish National Art" (note 1), 25; and David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), 281.

6. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (note 5).

7. El Lissitzky, "The Mohilev Synagogue Reminiscences (1923)," trans. Louis Lozowick, in Peter Nisbet et al., *El Lissitzky, 1890–1941*, exh. cat. (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 1987), 55–59.

8. Wolitz, "Jewish National Art" (note 1), 41 n. 40; and Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (note 5), 138.

9. Ruth Apter-Gabriel, "El Lissitzky's Jewish Works," in idem, ed., *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912–1928*, 2d ed., exh. cat. (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1988), 104.

10. Editions of *Yingl tsingl khvat* were published in 1919 and 1922; see Peter Nisbet et al., *El Lissitzky, 1890–1941*, exh. cat. (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 1987), 180 (cat. no. 1919/7), 183 (cat. no. 1922/1).

11. Centered in Kiev, Kultur Lige played a prominent role in the renaissance of Jewish secular traditions in Russia in the early part of the twentieth century. Its mission was to create a modern Jewish art that incorporated Jewish folk traditions. Kultur Lige published historic studies, teaching materials, literary journals, graphic work, and children's books; see Hillel Kazovsky, *The Artists of the Kultur-Lige* (Jerusalem: Center for Jewish Art, 2003).

12. *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, s.v. "Had gadya."

13. Alan Birnholz, "El Lissitzky and the Jewish Tradition," *Studio International*, no. 186 (1973): 131. For a discussion of the iconography, specifically the czarist crown and the hand on the printed stamp, see Haia Friedberg, "Lissitzky's *Had Gadi͡a*'," *Jewish Art* 12–13 (1986–87): 292–303.

14. Haia Friedberg introduced the idea of this color coding in her article "Lissitzky's *Had Gadi͡a*'" (note 13), 294–95.

15. Apter-Gabriel, "El Lissitzky's Jewish Works" (note 9), 116.

16. John Bowlt, as quoted in "The 'Vasari' Diary: A Child's Topography of Typography," *Artnews* 81, no. 7 (1982): 13–17, announced the first known copy of the dust jacket, which was acquired by a Paris collector from a private seller in the former Soviet Union (p. 17). A second copy with a set of lithographs was sold at Christie's, London, 26 June 1986; see Nisbet et al., *El Lissitzky* (note 10), 179 (cat. no. 1919/1). The dust jacket and lithographs reproduced here were obtained by the Research Library of the Getty Research Institute in February 1997 from a private dealer in New York.

HAD GADYA ▪ THE ONLY KID

TRANSLATION by Arnold J. Band

The only kid, the only kid
That the father bought for two zuzim,
The only kid, the only kid.

Then came the cat and devoured the kid
That the father bought for two zuzim,
The only kid, the only kid.

Then came the dog and gobbled up the cat
That devoured the kid
That the father bought for two zuzim,
The only kid, the only kid.

Then came the stick and beat the dog
That gobbled up the cat
That devoured the kid
That the father bought for two zuzim,
The only kid, the only kid.

Then came the fire and burnt the stick
That beat the dog
That gobbled up the cat
That devoured the kid
That the father bought for two zuzim,
The only kid, the only kid.

Then came the water and quenched the fire
That burnt the stick
That beat the dog
That gobbled up the cat
That devoured the kid
That the father bought for two zuzim,
The only kid, the only kid.

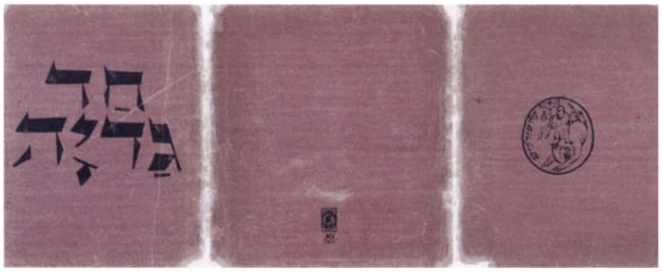
Then came the ox and drank the water
That quenched the fire
That burnt the stick
That beat the dog
That gobbled up the cat
That devoured the kid
That the father bought for two zuzim,
The only kid, the only kid.

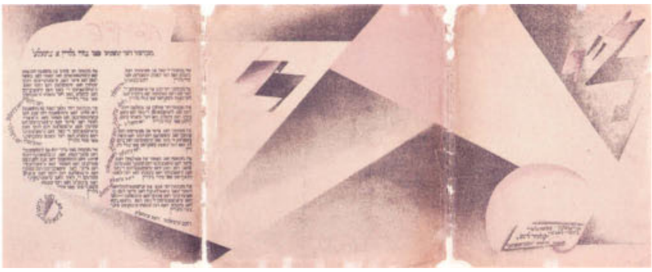
Then came the shohet and slaughtered the ox
That drank the water
That quenched the fire
That burnt the stick
That beat the dog
That gobbled up the cat
That devoured the kid
That the father bought for two zuzim,
The only kid, the only kid.

Then came the angel of death and butchered the shohet
That slaughtered the ox
That drank the water
That quenched the fire
That burnt the stick
That beat the dog
That gobbled up the cat
That devoured the kid
That the father bought for two zuzim,
The only kid, the only kid.

And the Holy One came, Blessed be He, and slew the angel
  of death
That butchered the shohet
That slaughtered the ox
That drank the water
That quenched the fire
That burnt the stick
That beat the dog
That gobbled up the cat
That devoured the kid
That the father bought for two zuzim,
The only kid, the only kid.

ICONOGRAPHY





DUST JACKET—EXTERIOR

On the left-hand panel, the outside flap that the reader would have seen first, חַד גַּדְיָה (Had gadya) is printed in stylized Hebrew letters. "Had gadya" was an Aramaic term that was absorbed into both Yiddish and Hebrew. The center panel, or the back of the dust jacket, bears a logo, most likely the printer's, and the price, ten rubles. On the right-hand panel, the inside flap, is a circular stamp depicting a man, a small boy, and a large animal: the man is holding an object similar in shape to the spice box used in the ritual of havdalah, the ceremony marking the end of the Sabbath. The words in the stamp are **קולטור ליגע** (Kultur Lige), the publisher of Lissitzky's *Had gadya.* Both the lettering and the graphic sensibility of the drawing in the stamp suggest that it was designed by Lissitzky.

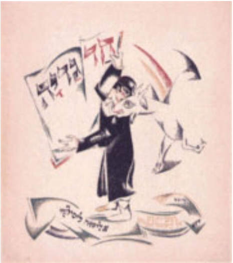
DUST JACKET—INTERIOR

All ten verses of the song are printed on the left-hand interior panel of the dust jacket. In pink cursive at the top is the title, and directly below, in bold Yiddish, is the first verse of the song: **געקויפט דער טאטע פאר צוויי גילדיין א ציגעלע** (the father bought for two zuzim a kid). The subsequent verses, all in Yiddish, are set in two columns. Each verse builds upon the last, adding a new line ("Then came the cat and devoured the kid") to the preceding verse ("That the father bought for two zuzim"). The phrase **דאס ציגעלע** (the kid) cascades down the left side of each column, graphically expressing the way that the individual verses are chained together. In the lower left-hand corner of the page, just below the final verse, the chain is completed: two of these phrases are joined together to form a circle.

The ornamental use of words and letters on this panel—the variations in placement, color, size, and style—points to Lissitzky's growing interest in typography as design.

In the off-white triangle on the center interior panel are the Hebrew letters *yud yud,* a common shorthand for the tetragrammaton, *yud, heh, vav, heh,* a biblical name for God that is not supposed to be pronounced. By stylizing the *yuds* and placing them adjacent to each other, Lissitzky treats the two letters as a single graphic symbol that merges with the surrounding abstract geometric shapes. That Lissitzky's letters form both a word and an element in the overall design implies not only a respect for the sacredness of God's name—the letters *suggest* the name as much as they express it—but also an acknowledgment of God's omnipresence.

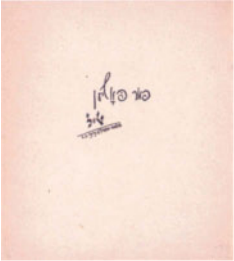
Lissitzky incorporated stylized Hebrew letters as well in the right-hand panel. In the triangle at the top of the page are the *lamed* and the *yud* that refer to the first and last letters of his surname. The pair of triangular diacritical marks between the letters tells the reader to read them not as a word but as individual letters. In the circle below is the name of the publisher, Kultur Lige, and a surname, Kentzianavski, perhaps the name of the actual printer.



TITLE PAGE

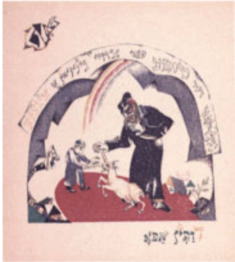
In his opening image, Lissitzky symbolically links the central character of the song, a young goat, to a Jewish boy who holds in his hand an open book displaying the title of the song. The overlapping faces of these two kids—each provides the other a second eye—strengthen their connection as one being.

On the banner underneath the boy's feet are the publication details and the artist's name: the words **געצייכנט און ליטאגראפירט** (drawn and lithographed) are in yellow print, with the place of publication, **קיעוו** (Kiev), above and the date, **תרצ״ט** (1919), below, both in black print. To the left of the boy's feet, also in black print, is Lissitzky's Hebrew name, **אליעזר ליסיצקי**.



DEDICATION PAGE

The large cursive writing on this page is a dedication—פאר פּאָליען (To Polyen)—though the identity of the dedicatee is a mystery to Lissitzky scholars. Lissitzky signed and dated this page as well: his initials *alef* and *lamed* (**אל**) appear above the diagonal line; below are the date, written in Arabic numbers, and a place-name, probably Pushcha Vodytsya, which is located just outside of Kiev.



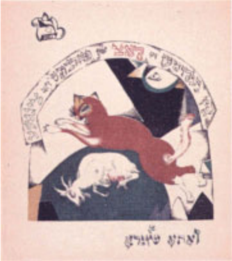
VERSE 1

Each illustration is crowned with an architectural frame containing the Yiddish verse. Through the use of color, Lissitzky keys the text to the illustration below, perhaps in an effort to make it easy for the young reader to match word to figure. As we have seen, in this first verse, "The father bought for two zuzim a kid," the green of the word **טאטע** (father) matches the green of the father's face, while the yellow of the word **ציגעלע** (kid) matches the yellow of the kid. (Zuzim were silver coins; each zuz was worth a quarter of a silver shekel.)

Below each illustration is a phrase from the original Aramaic version of the song. With the exception of the phrase under the first illustration, דזבִין אַבָּא (that father bought), all the Aramaic phrases are structured identically: **ואָתָא שונרָא** (then came the cat), **ואָתָא כַּלבָּא** (then came the dog), and so on.[1] The Aramaic *vav* (ו), from the biblical *waw*, can mean either "then" or "and."

To mark the progression of the pages, Lissitzky placed decorative Hebrew letters in the upper left-hand corner of each page: these letters can be read simply as letters or as numbers, since each letter in the Hebrew alphabet possesses a numerical value. Note the small goat that Lissitzky drew in the *alef* (**א**) above the first verse, perhaps a flourish meant to underscore the goat's centrality in the song.

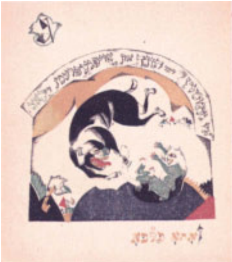
Lissitzky's illustrations are unified not only by the repetition of these compositional and typographical elements but also by the repetition of certain images. In the above illustration, for example, the rainbow echoes the rainbow glimpsed on the inside cover, though here it assumes more prominence—traditionally, the rainbow is a symbol of God's promise to Noah after the Flood never again to curse mankind. Other images on this page anticipate the action of later verses: the tiny red cat in the lower right-hand corner is the central character of verse 2, while the well behind the boy's back figures in verse 4. The image of the Jewish shtetl, the clump of houses drawn in the lower left-hand corner and also underneath the red cat, recurs repeatedly, and with varying significance, throughout the book.



VERSE 2

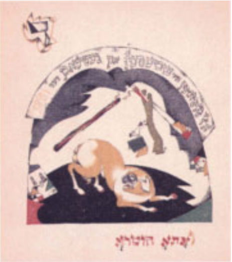
The action of the second verse, "Then came the cat and devoured the kid," is viewed from above by an eye set within a green circle. We will see a more detailed and conspicuous instance of this image in the final verse of the song. The red cat (קאץ), the first murderer in the song, evokes Cain, the first murderer in the Bible.

In the folio, *bet* (ב), Lissitzky drew a small figure, perhaps the dog from the next verse. None of the remaining folios contain the kind of figurative decoration seen here and in the previous illustration.



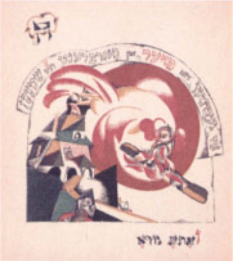
VERSE 3

Visually uniting this verse, "Then came the dog and gobbled up the cat," are the spikes that we see on the teeth of the dog (הונד) and on the menacing ridges of the hills in the background. It is interesting to note how Lissitzky varies the colors of the animals from verse to verse: for instance, the cat is now green instead of red, while the dog will change from black to orange in the following illustration—Lissitzky will repeat this variation in his depiction of the ox in the later verses.



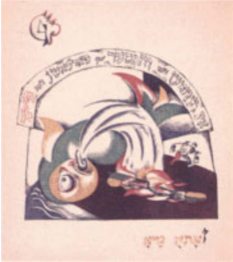
VERSE 4

Though Lissitzky gives a distinctive treatment to the word **שטעקען** (stick) in this verse, "Then came the stick and beat the dog," he does not color-code it to the figure in the illustration below. In addition to the shtetl imagery flanking the dog, there is an image of a figure either pushing or running toward what appears to be a broken shadoof, an ancient counterbalanced device used for hoisting water. The bucket that would have been attached to the now-dangling rope is missing, but curiously the same rope seems to dangle from the end of the stick, suggesting some sort of connection between the two objects. Given Lissitzky's tendency to foreshadow the action of later verses, it may be that the smoky blue of the clouds (and also of the word "stick" in the arch above) is a visual hint of the fire that will soon burn the stick. The connection between the well and the stick, then, might be the water that will subsequently quench the fire.



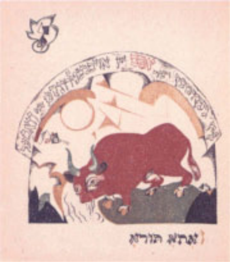
VERSE 5

Drawing on a contemporary Yiddish phrase for arson, א רויטער האָן (a red rooster), Lissitzky vividly represents the action of this verse, "Then came the fire and burnt the stick." The shtetl now occupies the foreground, and the stained-glass windows to the left of the rooster identify the central structure as a synagogue (these same windows appear in the lower left-hand corner of the previous illustration). There are striking compositional similarities between this image and a painting by Issachar Ryback, entitled *The Old Synagogue* (1917; Tel-Aviv Museum), made after the expedition that Lissitzky and Ryback took in 1916 to study the synagogues of Ukraine.[2] The fire (פייער) that burns the stick in this scene also burns the buildings, a reference to the burning of synagogues and Jewish towns in the pogroms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



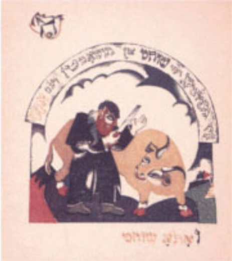
VERSE 6

Lissitzky's choice of a giant colorful fish to depict the action of this verse, "Then came the water and quenched the fire," brings to mind the sea serpent Leviathan, a biblical symbol of the forces of evil. Lissitzky's fish, however, has a beneficent quality that may reflect the Jewish belief that the meat of the Leviathan is the reward in heaven for the righteous. The burning synagogue from the last illustration is now absent, and the fire—even in relation to the small figure carrying the two buckets of water (וואסער), an echo of the figure from verse 4—is quite small.



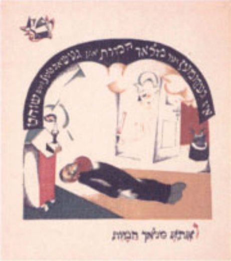
VERSE 7

Note that in the illustration of this verse, "Then came the ox and drank the water," Lissitzky introduces no ancillary images other than the shtetls on either side of the ox (אקס).



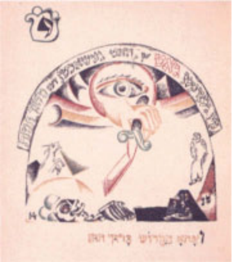
VERSE 8

With the exception of the small shtetl in the lower right-hand corner, Lissitzky limits his imagery here as well to the figures mentioned in the verse at hand: "Then came the shohet and slaughtered the ox." The shohet (שוחט), or slaughterer, is a person trained to butcher animals and birds according to Jewish law. Originally a Hebrew word, "shohet" was universally recognized and was used in both Yiddish and Aramaic. Thus, the word for "shohet" is the same both in the Yiddish verse and in the Aramaic phrase at the bottom of this page, ואָתָא שוחט (then came the shohet).



VERSE 9

This is the only time that Lissitzky deviates entirely from his system of color coding. In this case, the verse, "Then came the angel of death and butchered the shohet," is printed in white on a black ground. Like "shohet," the Hebrew term for the angel of death, מלאך המות (mal'akh ha-mavet), is used in Yiddish as well as Aramaic texts. The angel of death appears in a doorway wearing a green crown, most likely a reference to the Russian monarch, and holding a sword in his right hand, a traditional image based on biblical descriptions and on the folk belief that the angel of death killed his victims with a sword dipped in poison or gall. The candle burning above the shohet's head probably refers to the Jewish custom of placing a lit candle at the head of a deceased person.



VERSE 10

In terms of both its text and its imagery, Lissitzky's final illustration is complex. For example, in the verse above the illustration, Lissitzky uses the Yiddish word גאט (God), while in the Aramaic below he uses the traditional Hebrew phrase הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא (the Holy One, Blessed be He). The letters in the lower left-hand corner of the page are Lissitzky's initials—printed almost identically to those on the dedication page—and the letters in the lower right-hand corner are *pe nun* (פנ), an acronym for the Hebrew words "poh nikbar" (here lies buried). The letters in the angel of death's hand are illegible.

Many of the images in Lissitzky's illustration of the final verse, "And the Holy One came, Blessed be He, and slew the angel of death," are familiar to us: the kid and a bearded man, perhaps the father or perhaps a more mature version of the young boy from the opening scene, now gaze upward in awe as God kills the angel of death; the rainbow reappears, now spanning the entire sky; and the eye that earlier observed the cat devouring the kid is now clearly the all-knowing eye of God. This depiction of God is striking given the anti-iconic tradition in Judaism. However, representations of God are commonly found in illuminated Haggadot, and in several examples from the eighteenth century we find instances where God is depicted similarly, through either an eye or a sword set within a circular cloud or sunburst.[3] Still, there is a forcefulness to Lissitzky's image that can be ascribed to a more contemporary influence: on the first Soviet stamp—with which Lissitzky certainly would have been familiar—an outstretched hand underneath a circular sun grips a sword.[4] The conflation of the hand of God with the hand of the Soviet people implies a divine component to the revolution; but it also suggests that the oppressive czarist monarchy, symbolized here by the crowned angel of death, was rendered powerless in the face of revolutionary justice.

NOTES

1. It is interesting to note that in many of the words in the Aramaic phrases, Lissitzky represents the vowels as if he were writing in Yiddish. For example, in the word אתאָ (came), Lissitzky positions the vowel point under the final *alef*, rather than under the preceding consonant *tav*—אָתָא—as it would be in either Aramaic or Hebrew. Likewise, Lissitzky's word אַבאָ (father) would be written in Aramaic as אַבָא, his word שונראָ (cat) as שונרָא, and so on.

2. For a discussion of the phrase "a red rooster" and the painting by Ryback, see Haia Friedberg, "Lissitzky's *Had Gadîa*," *Jewish Art* 12–13 (1986–87): 298–99.

3. For examples of these images, see Emile G. L. Schrijver and Falk Wiesemann, eds., *Die Von Geldern Haggadah und Heinrich Heines "Der Rabbi von Bacherach"* (Vienna: Verlag Christian Brandstätter, 1997), pl. 26r; and Haviva Peled-Carmeli, *Illustrated Haggadot of the Eighteenth Century*, exh. cat. (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1983), pls. 105II, 107, 117.

4. For an illustration of this stamp, see Friedberg, "Lissitzky's *Had Gadîa*" (note 2), 302.

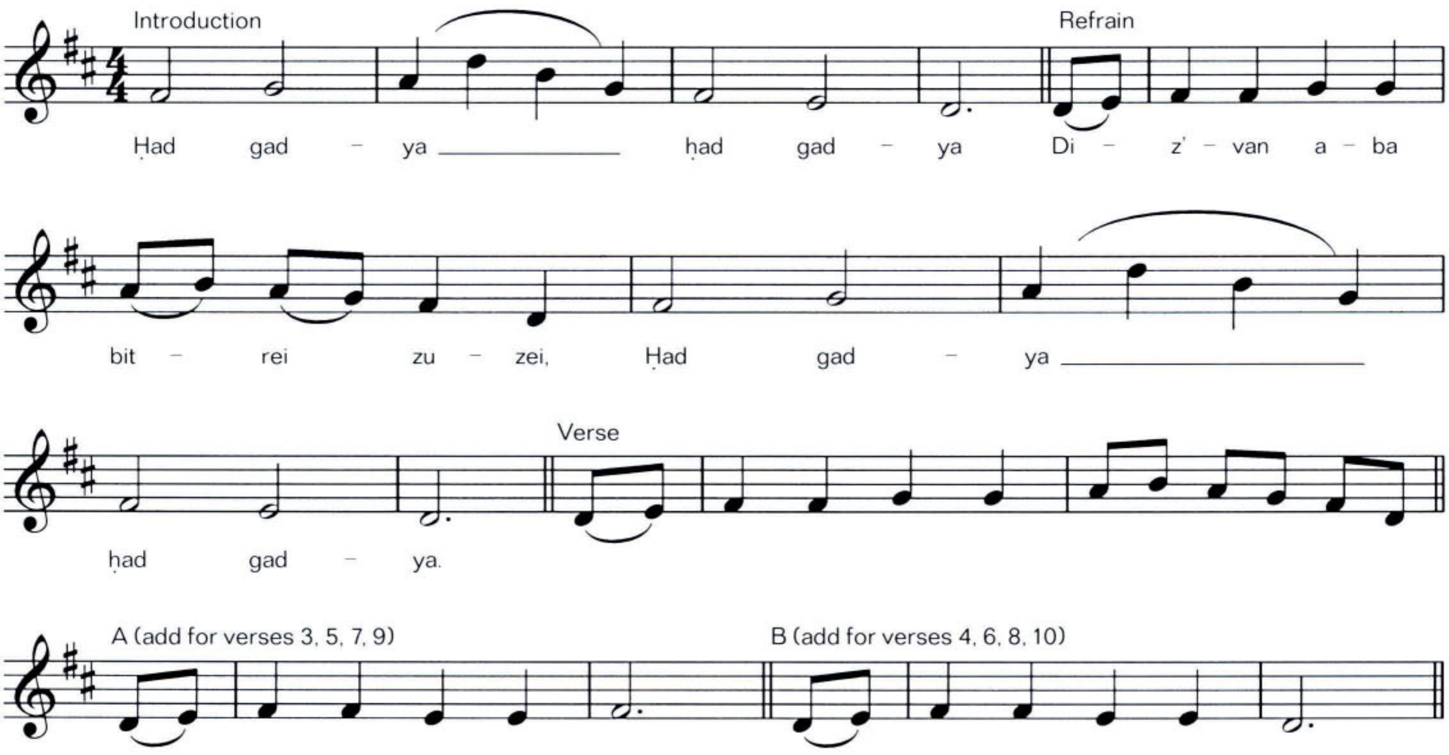
VOCABULARY

YIDDISH	ENGLISH	YIDDISH	ENGLISH	ARAMAIC	ENGLISH	HEBREW	ENGLISH
טאטע	father	פארצוקט	devoured	חַד גַדְיָה	the only kid	שוחט	shohet
געקויפט	bought	הונד	dog	ד	that	מלאך המות	the angel of death
פאר	for	אויפגעפרעסן	gobbled up	אַבאָ	father	הַקָדוש בָרוך הוא	the Holy One/ Blessed be He
צוויי	two	שטעקן	stick	זבִין	bought		
גילדיין	zuzim	געשלאגן	beat	ו	then/and		
א	a	פייער	fire	אתאָ	came		
ציגעלע	kid	פארברענט	burnt	שונראָ	cat		
איז געקומען	came	וואסער	water	כַלבאָ	dog		
די	the (fem.)	פארלאשן	quenched	חוטראָ	stick		
דער	the (masc.)	אקס	ox	נוראָ	fire		
דאס	the (neut.)	אויסגעטרונקען	drank	מַיאָ	water		
קאץ	cat	געשאכטן	slaughtered	תוראָ	ox		
און	and	גאט	God				

NOTE
Translated here are the Yiddish, Aramaic, and Hebrew words—all written in the Hebrew alphabet—that appear in Lissitzky's illustrations. The use of Hebrew words in Yiddish and Aramaic texts is discussed above in the iconography section, as is Lissitzky's treatment of vowels in the Aramaic words.

HEBREW LETTER	ARABIC NUMBER
א	1
ב	2
ג	3
ד	4
ה	5
ו	6
ז	7
ח	8
ט	9
י	10

MUSIC


Introduction
Refrain
Ḥad gad - ya ḥad gad - ya
Di - z' - van a - ba
bit - rei zu - zei, Ḥad gad - ya
ḥad gad - ya.
Verse
A (add for verses 3, 5, 7, 9)
B (add for verses 4, 6, 8, 10)

INTRODUCTION
Ḥad gad-ya, ḥad gad-ya

REFRAIN
Di-z'van a-ba bit-rei zu-zei,
Ḥad gad-ya, ḥad gad-ya.

VERSE
2. V'a-ta shun-ra v'a-khal l'gad-ya

3. V'a-ta kal-ba v'na-shakh l'shun-ra
d'a-khal l'gad-ya

4. V'a-ta ḥu-tra v'hi-ka l'khal-ba
d'na-shakh l'shun-ra
d'a-khal l'gad-ya

5. V'a-ta nu-ra v'sa-raf l'ḥu-tra
d'hi-ka l'khal-ba d'na-shakh l'shun-ra
d'a-khal l'gad-ya

6. V'a-ta ma-ya v'kha-va l'nu-ra
d'sa-raf l'ḥu-tra d'hi-ka l'khal-ba
d'na-shakh l'shun-ra
d'a-khal l'gad-ya

7. V'a-ta to-ra v'sha-ta l'ma-ya
d'kha-va l'nu-ra d'sa-raf l'ḥu-tra
d'hi-ka l'khal-ba d'na-shakh l'shun-ra
d'a-khal l'gad-ya

8. V'a-ta ha-sho-ḥeit v'sha-ḥat l'to-ra
d'sha-ta l'ma-ya d'kha-va l'nu-ra
d'sa-raf l'ḥu-tra d'hi-ka l'khal-ba
d'na-shakh l'shun-ra
d'a-khal l'gad-ya

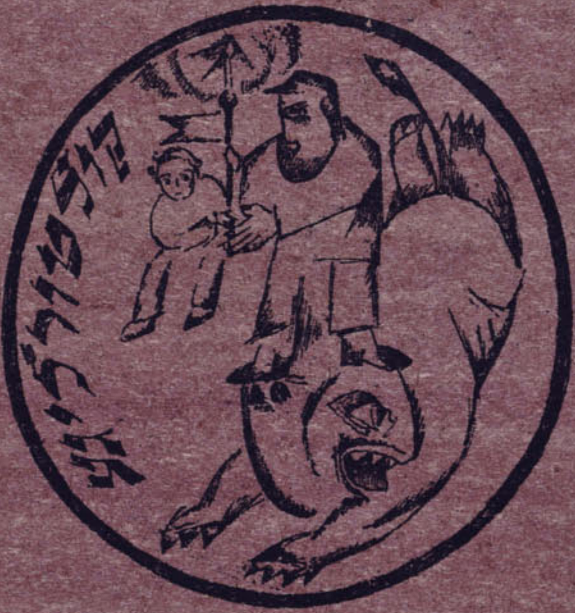
9. V'a-ta malakh ha-ma-vet
v'sha-ḥat la-sho-ḥeit
d'sha-ḥat l'to-ra d'sha-ta l'ma-ya
d'kha-va l'nu-ra d'sa-raf l'ḥu-tra
d'hi-ka l'khal-ba d'na-shakh l'shun-ra
d'a-khal l'gad-ya

10. V'a-ta ha-ka-dosh ba-rukh hu
v'sha-ḥat l'malakh ha-ma-vet
d'sha-ḥat la-sho-ḥeit
d'sha-ḥat l'to-ra d'sha-ta l'ma-ya
d'kha-va l'nu-ra d'sa-raf l'ḥu-tra
d'hi-ka l'khal-ba d'na-shakh l'shun-ra
d'a-khal l'gad-ya

NOTE
This transcription reflects the Sephardic pronunciation of the Aramaic lyrics to which many modern singers of "Had gadya" are accustomed. Lissitzky, however, would have been familiar with the Ashkenazic pronunciation. Here is the second verse transcribed as Lissitzky would have heard and sung it: "V'o-so shun-ro v'o-khal l'gad-yo."

קולטור־פאנד
מענדעלע
פרץ, שלום־עליכם

10
רובל.


קיעווער פֿארלאג

חד־גדיה

געקויפט דער טאטע פאר צוויי גילדיין א ציגעלע

איז געקומען די קאץ און פארצוקט דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע ט'געקויפט פאר צוויי גילדיין

דאס ציגעלע

איז געקומען דער הונט און אויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס האט פארצוקט דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע ט'געקויפט פאר צוויי גילדיין

דאס ציגעלע

איז געקומען דער שטעקן און געשלאגן דעם הונט וואס ט'אויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס ט'פארצוקט דאס ציגעלע, וואס דער טאטע ט'געקויפט פאר צוויי גילדיין

דאס ציגעלע

איז געקומען דאס פייער און פארברענט דעם שטעקן וואס ט'געשלאגן דעם הונט וואס ט'אויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס ט'פארצוקט דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע ט'געקויפט פאר צוויי גילדיין

דאס ציגעלע

איז געקומען דאס וואסער און פארלאשן דאס פייער וואס ט'פארברענט דעם שטעקן וואס ט'געשלאגן דעם הונט וואס ט'אויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס ט'פארצוקט דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע ט'געקויפט פאר צוויי גילדיין

דאס ציגעלע

איז געקומען דער אקס און אויסגעטרונקען דאס וואסער וואס ט'פארלאשן דאס פייער וואס ט'פארברענט דעם שטעקן וואס ט'געשלאגן דעם הונט וואס ט'אויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס ט'פארצוקט דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע ט'געקויפט פאר צוויי גילדיין

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איז געקומען דער שוחט און געשאכטן דעם אקס וואס ט'אויסגעטרונקען דאס וואסער וואס ט'פארלאשן דאס פייער וואס ט'פארברענט דעם שטעקן. וואס ט'געשלאגן דעם הונט וואס ט'אויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס ט'פארצוקט דאס ציגעלע, וואס דער טאטע ט'געקויפט פאר צוויי גילדיין

דאס ציגעלע

איז געקומען דער מלאך־המות און געשאכטן דעם שוחט וואס ט'געשאכטן דעם אקס וואס ט'אויסגעטרונקען דאס וואסער וואס ט'פארלאשן דאס פייער וואס ט'פארברענט דעם שטעקן וואס ט'געשלאגן דעם הונט וואס ט'אויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס ט'פארצוקט דאס ציגעלע, וואס דער טאטע ט'געקויפט פאר צוויי גילדיין

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איז געקומען גאט ברוך־הוא און ט'געשאכטן דעם מלאך־המות וואס ט'געשאכטן דעם שוחט וואס ט'געשאכטן דעם אקס. וואס ט'אויסגעטרונקען דאס וואסער וואס ט'פארלאשן דאס פייער וואס ט'פארברענט דעם שטעקן וואס ט'געשלאגן דעם הונט וואס ט'אויפגעפרעסן די קאץ וואס ט'פארצוקט דאס ציגעלע וואס דער טאטע ט'געקויפט פאר צוויי גילדיין

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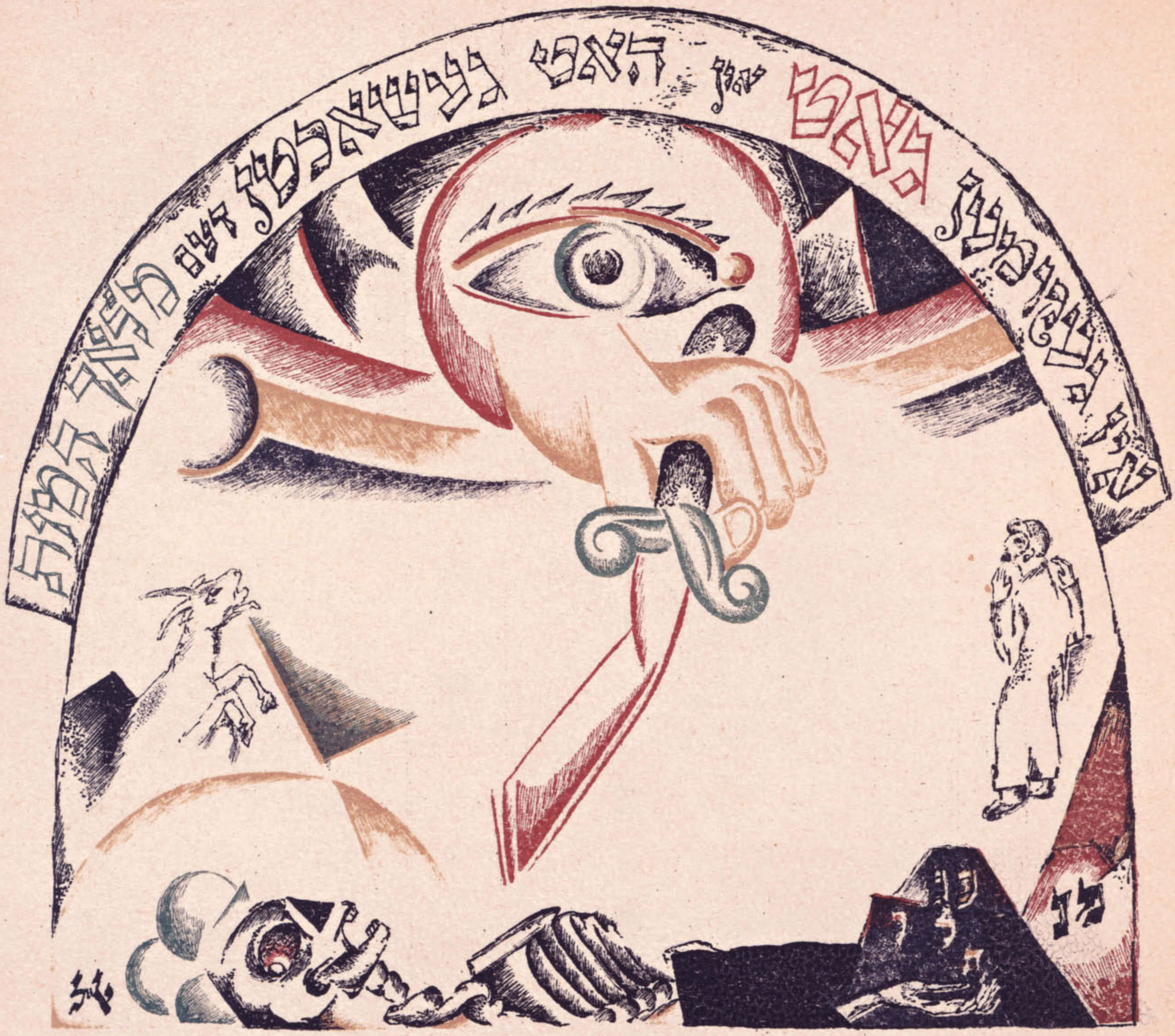
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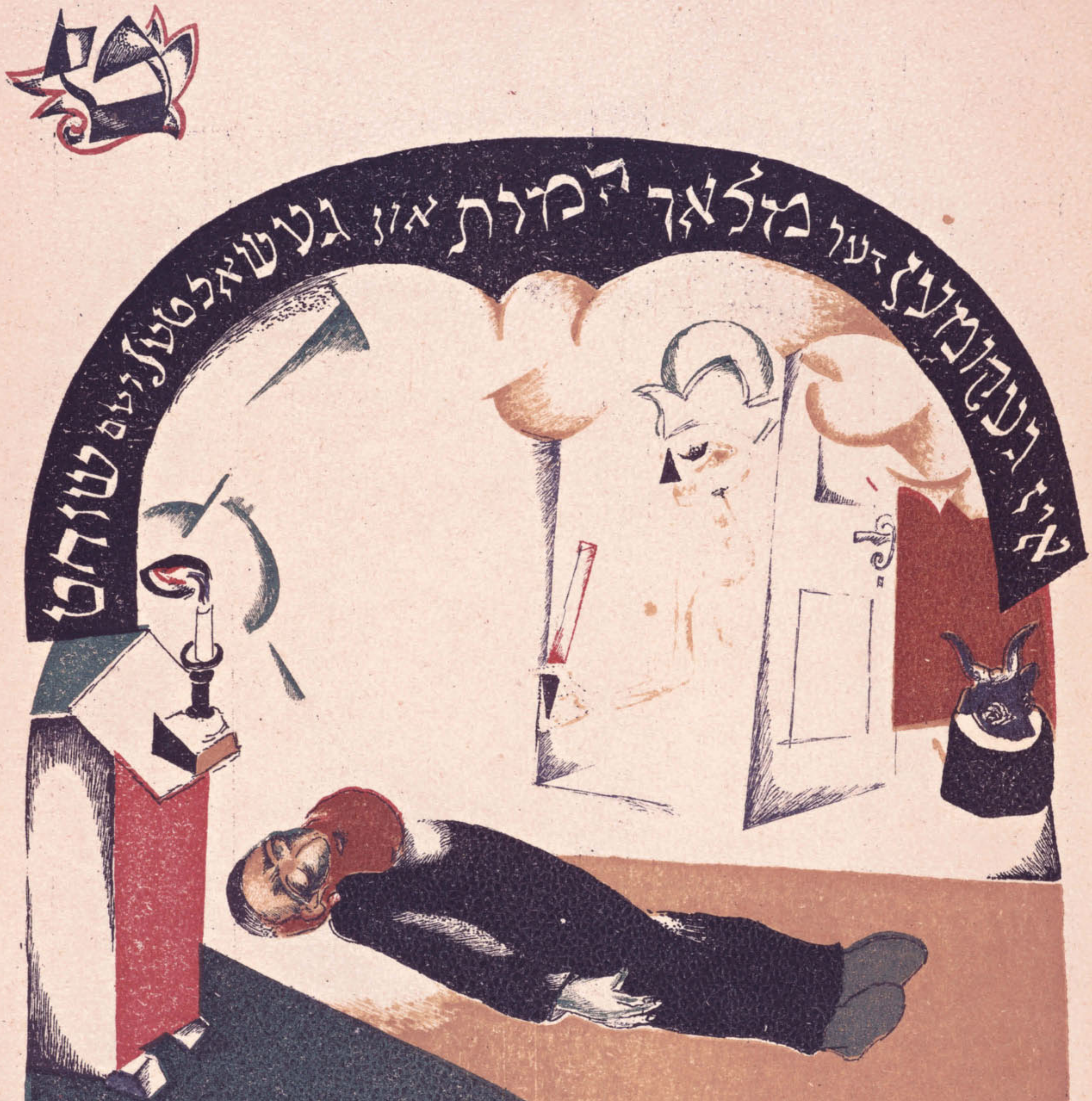
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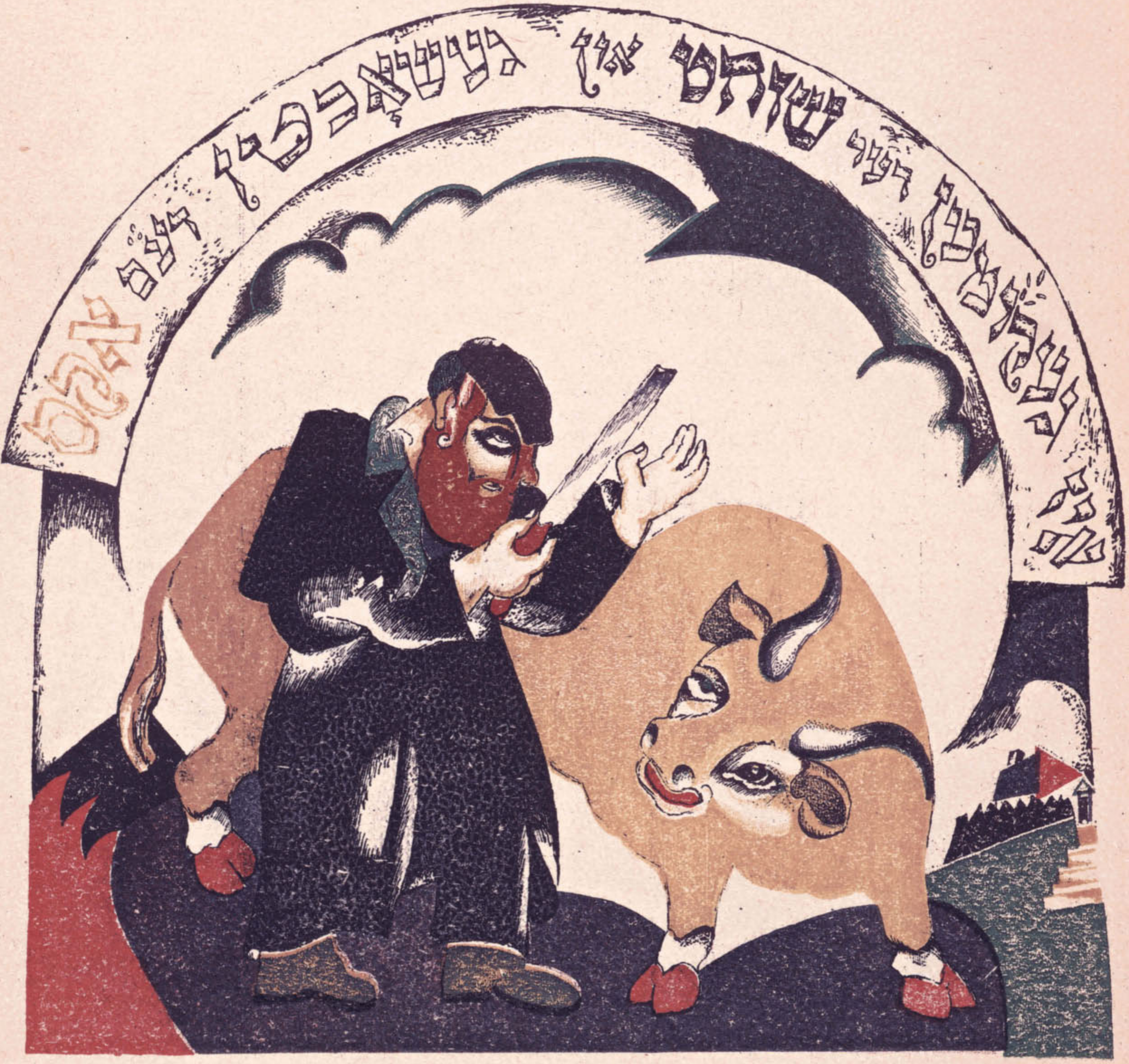
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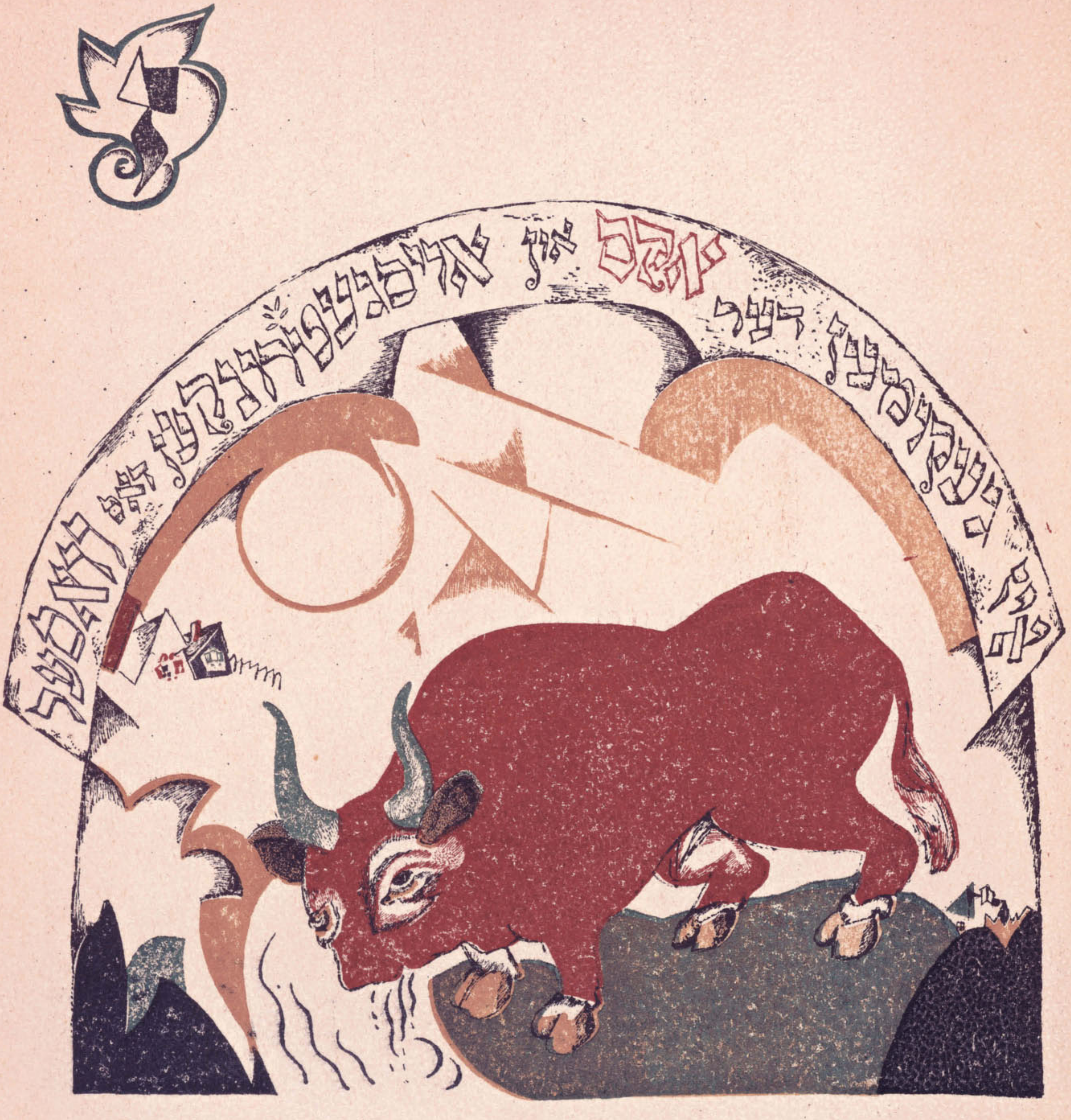
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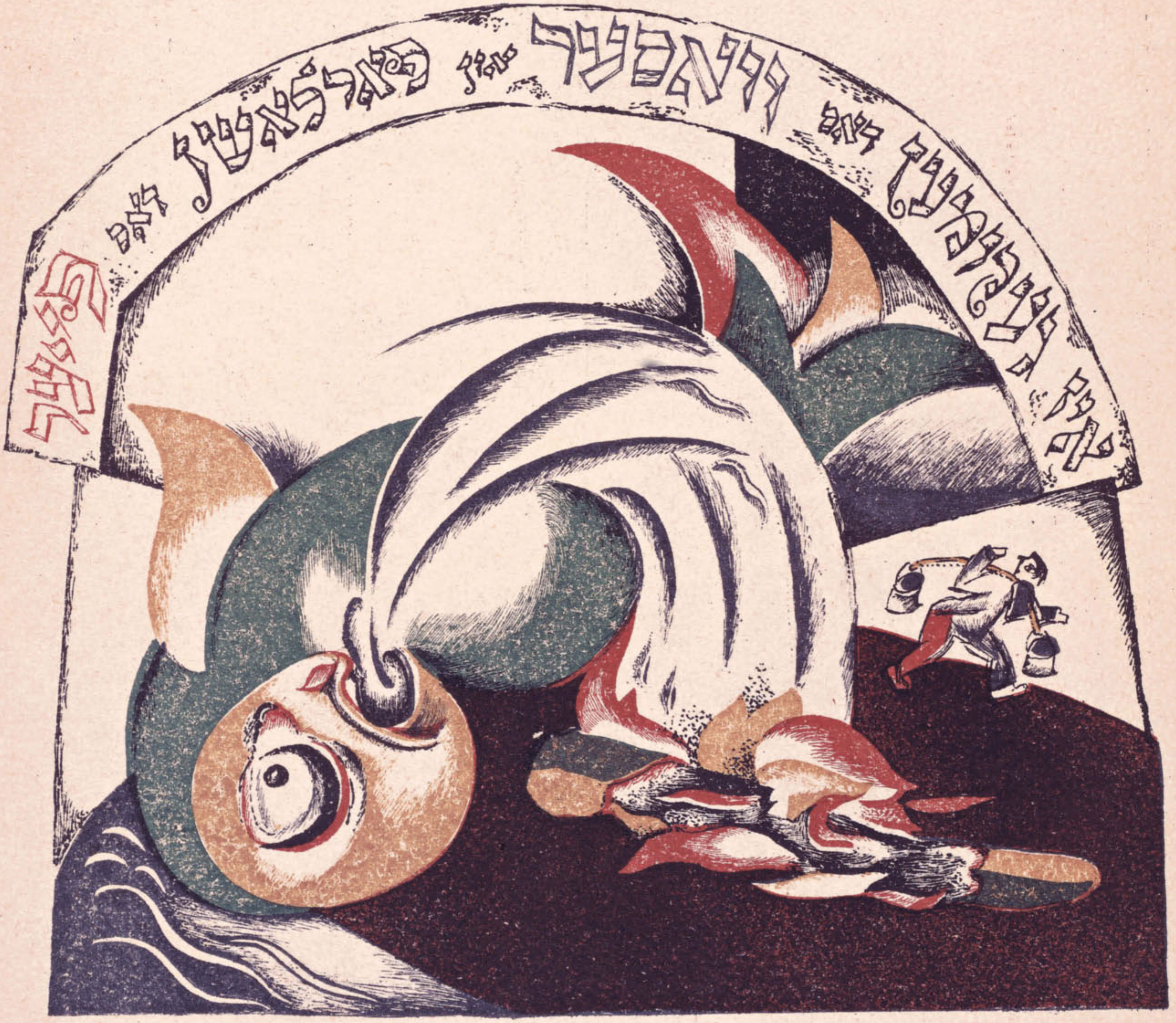

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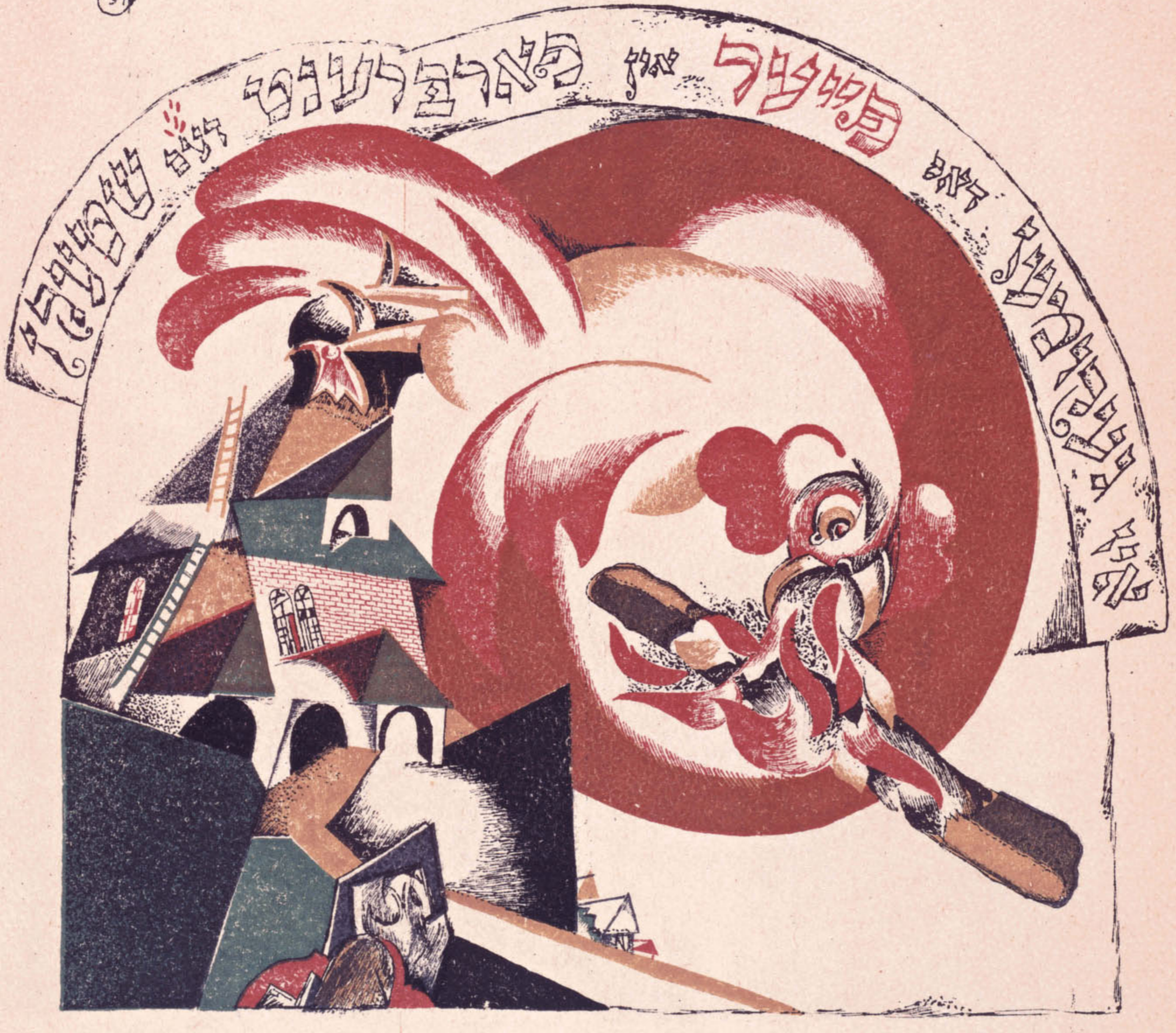
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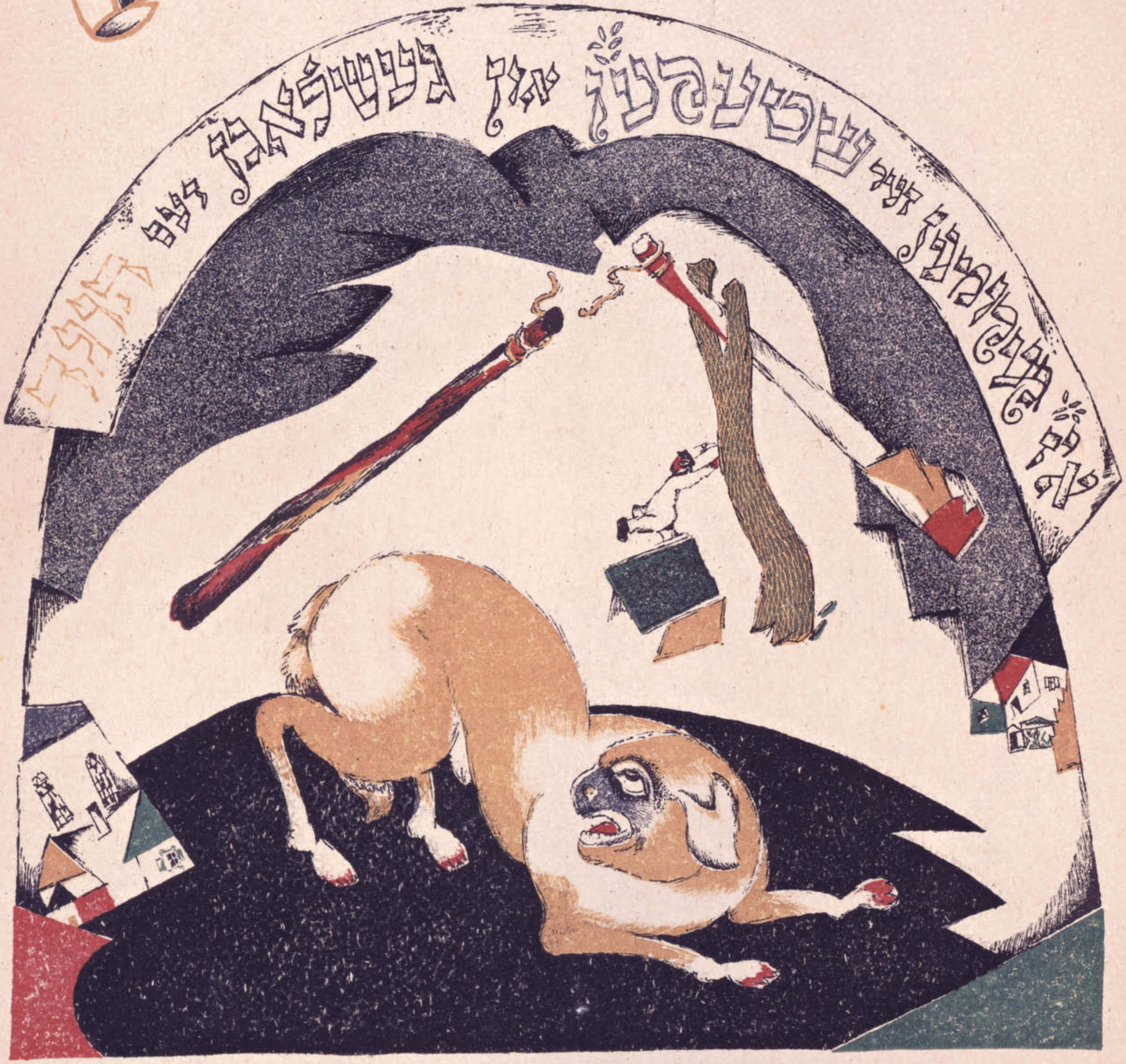

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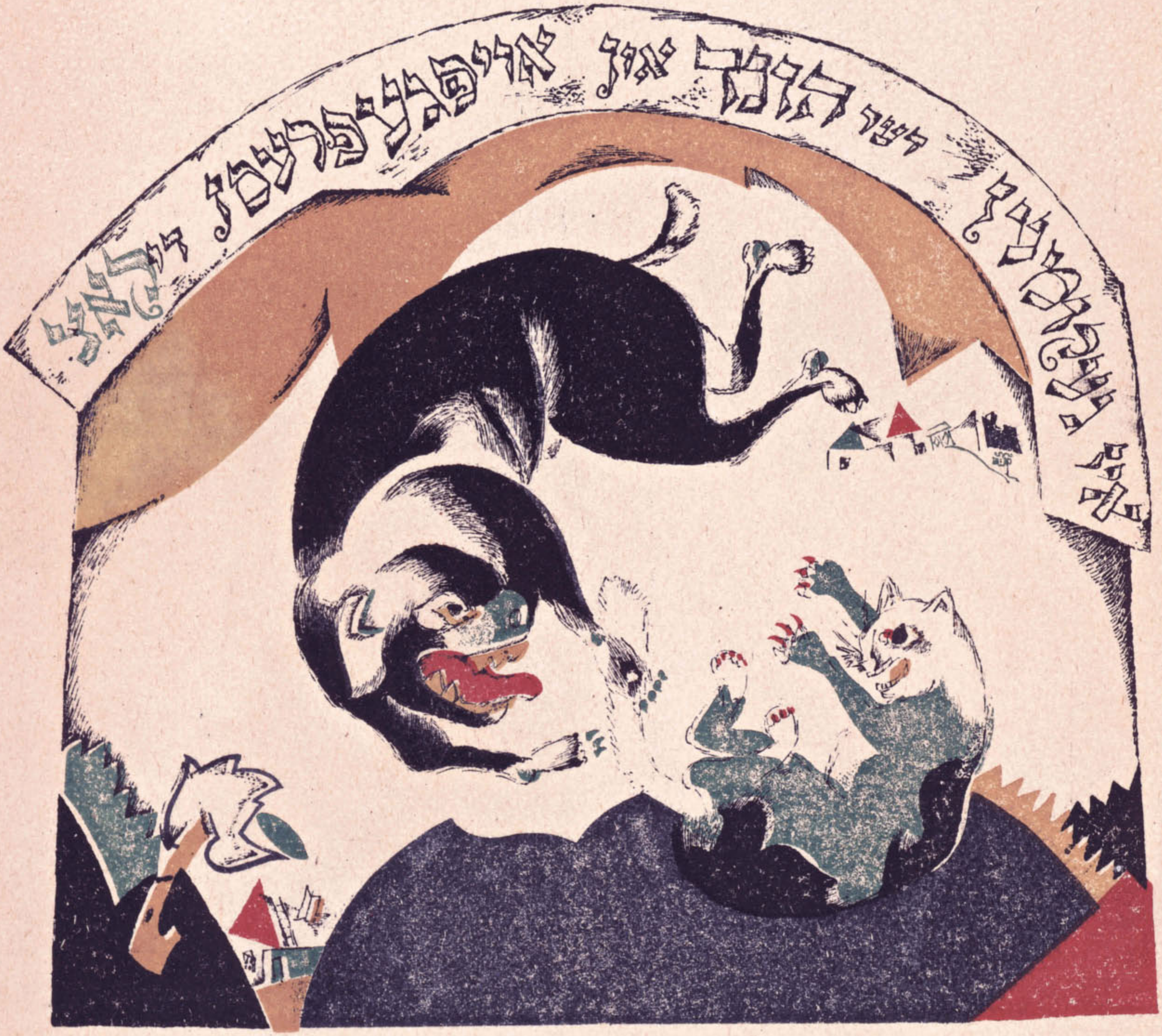
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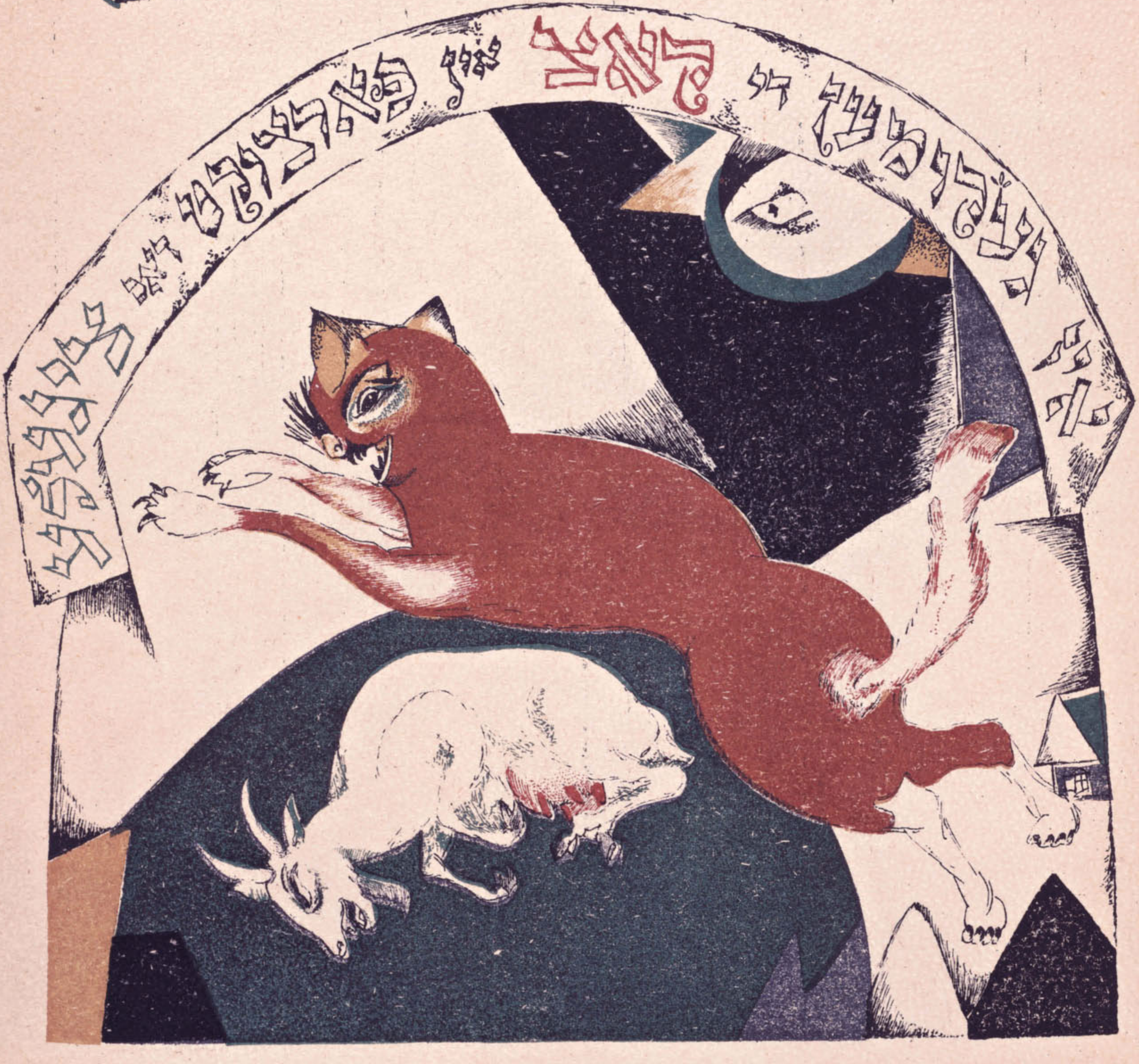
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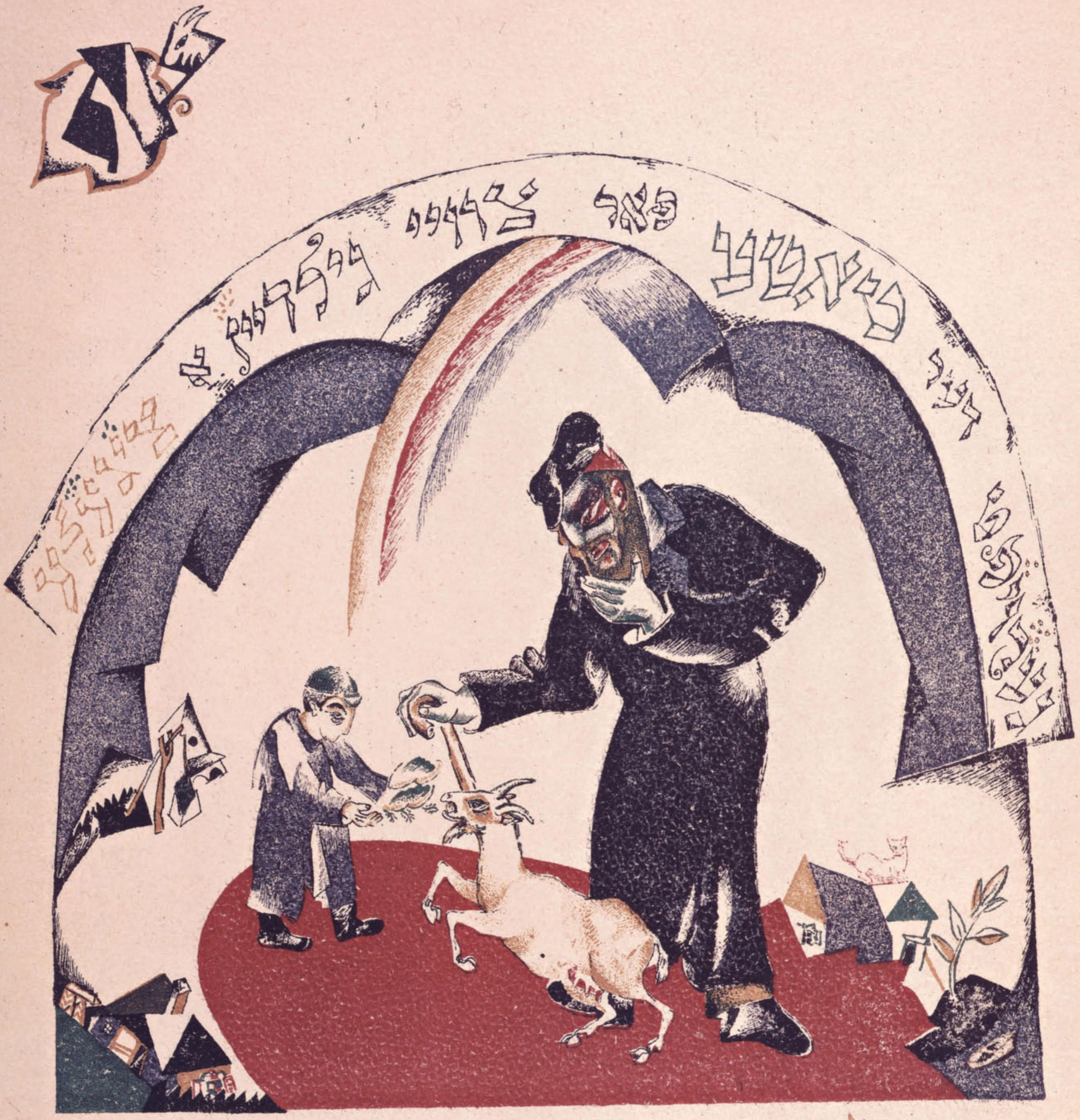
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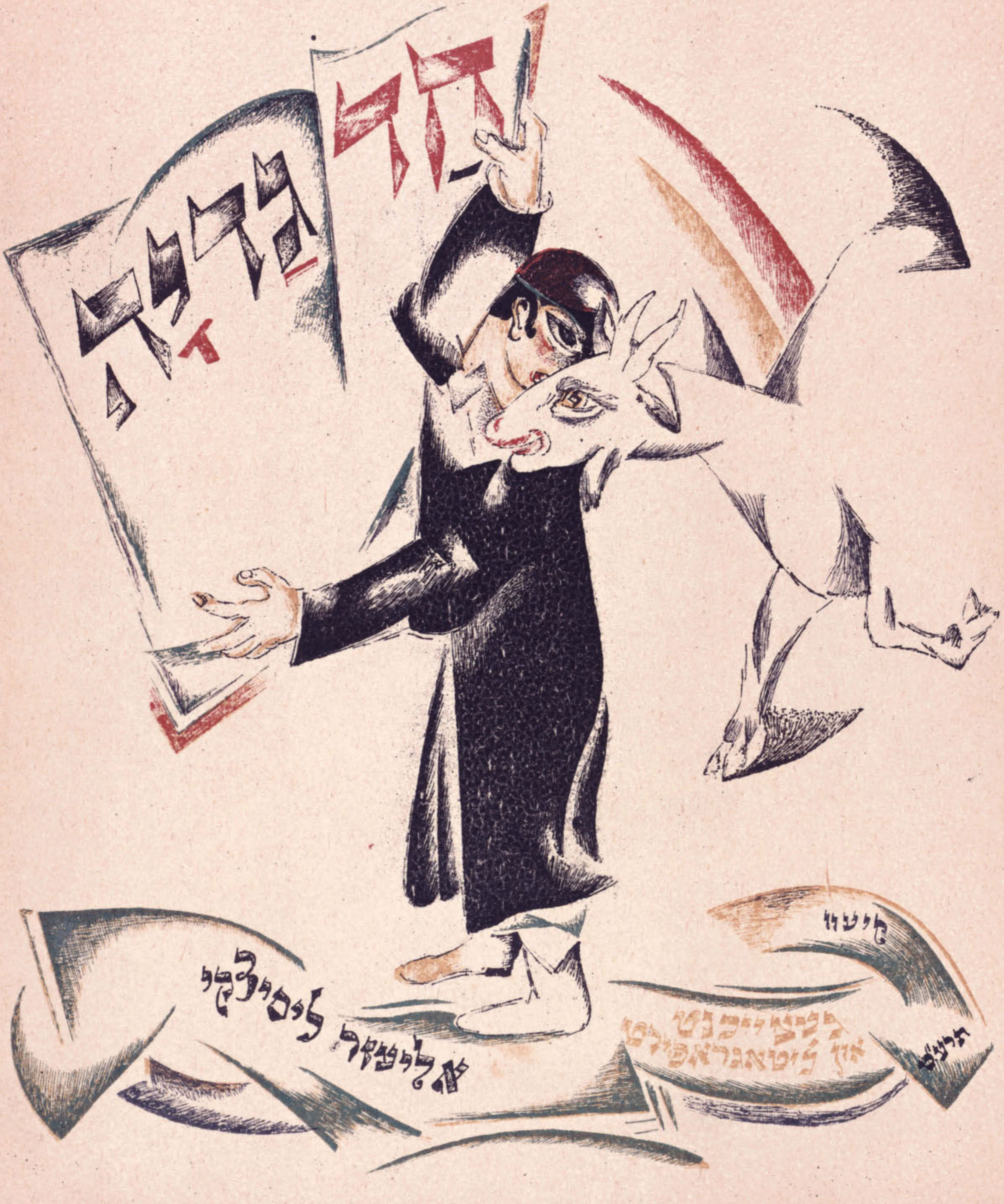
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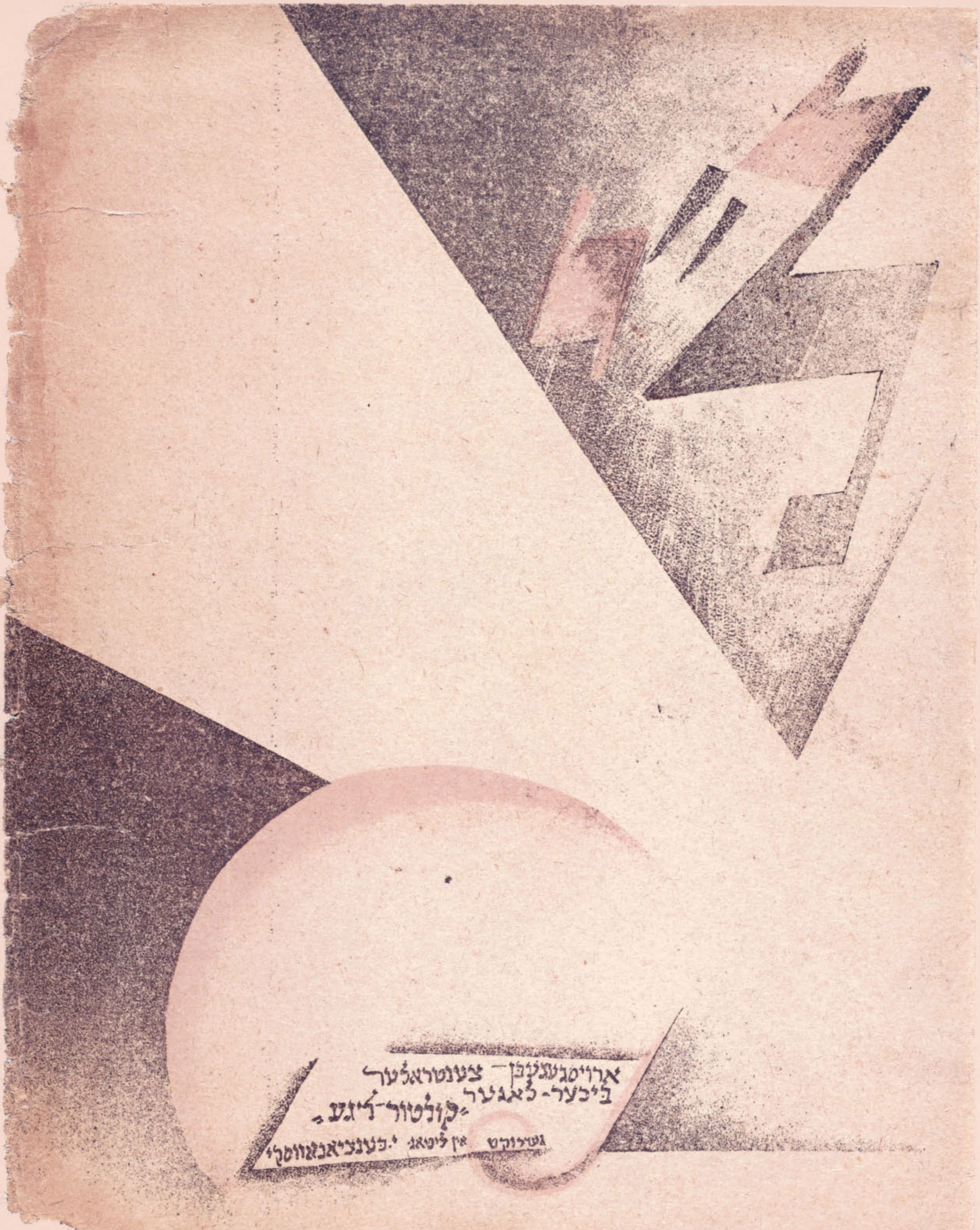

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„קולטור-ליגע״.

געדרוקט אין ליטאג. י. פענציאנאווסקי

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HAD GADYA
THE ONLY KID
FACSIMILE OF EL LISSITZKY'S
EDITION OF 1919

EDITED by Arnold J. Band

INTRODUCTION by Nancy Perloff

El Lissitzky, best known as an avant-garde artist, created this enchanting illustrated version of the Passover song "Had gadya" early in his career, while immersed in the Jewish cultural renaissance that flourished in Russia from roughly 1912 to the early 1920s. This edition offers not only a facsimile of Lissitzky's lively original, including the rarely seen wraparound cover, but also an introduction to its cultural and artistic contexts, sections on its imagery and polyglot vocabulary, a new English translation of the song from Lissitzky's Yiddish, and lyrics set to music.

ReSources

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