

Rabbi hones skills to become scribe of Hebrew sacred texts

Albany Times Union First published: Saturday, March 24, 2007

Rabbi Linda Motzkin: She and her husband, Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein, have served as co-rabbis for Temple Sinai in Saratoga Springs since 1986.

Background: 47 years old. Motzkin grew up in Southern California and graduated from the University of California-Berkeley in 1980. She received her master's degree from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute in 1985 and was ordained a year later. Motzkin moved to the Capital Region in 1986 with her husband. They have three children, Ruhi, 21; Ari, 17; and Shira, 15.

You are learning to become a Hebrew scribe, or soferet. What does that involve?

A scribe is someone who writes Hebrew sacred texts. There are lots of laws and rituals surrounding the writing of a sacred text. You're not just a Hebrew calligrapher, but also someone who is immersed in these particular spiritual texts.

How did you become a scribe?

The only way to become a scribe is to find a teacher who is already a scribe that will take you on as a student. It's like an apprentice learning from a master. In 2003, I was fortunate to find a classically trained traditional scribe, which was unusual because traditionally women don't do this work.

What is the process involved in writing a scroll?

I recently completed the Scroll of Esther, which is one of the books of the Bible that is read on the holiday Purim. Purim just ended March 3 and 4, and my synagogue had a ceremony of completion of the scroll after the Sabbath ended. We used the scroll for the very first time and read from it on that Saturday evening.

What motivated you to want to learn how to be a scribe?

I've been doing Hebrew calligraphy as an art form for over 25 years. I first studied it in 1979 when I was still in college. Since then, it's been a sideline artistic interest of mine, but it wasn't until the summer of 2003 that I met another liberal rabbi who had learned to be a scribe and put me in touch with his teacher.

I felt at that point it was sort of almost like an "ah, ha!" moment. Without knowing it, I've been preparing to do this for years.

Being in traditional male roles as rabbi and scribe, do you see yourself as a pioneer for women in Judaism?

When I became a rabbi, I wasn't the very first. The first woman was ordained in 1973. It was still new, but it wasn't like I was a pioneer.

Both becoming a rabbi and scribal artist, my primary motivation is a love of what I'm doing, not the desire to prove something as a woman. On the other hand, I'm certainly aware that it's helping to open up a pathway for women, which is something that I think is an exciting thing. Although, I want to do this work because I find it deeply spiritually satisfying.

-- Christen Deming