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Called to the quill



HANS PENNINK/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Rabbi Linda Motzkin shows some of her scroll she scribed by hand using a feather quill at Temple Sinai in Saratoga Springs on Thursday.

SARATOGA SPRINGS

Sacred texts crafted under scribe's hand

Rabbi nearly finished copying book of Esther onto parchment

BY SARA FOSS
Gazette Reporter

Before Rabbi Linda Motzkin sits down at her desk to write, she dons a colorful yarmulke and a prayer shawl.

She says a blessing. She uses a special two-handled cup called a laver to wash her hands. She makes a statement in Hebrew: "Here I am writing this scroll, for the sake of the holiness of the scroll."

It is something all scribes say before they begin working on a scroll, and Motzkin is no exception, though she does add a personal touch: "And in memory of my mother." Then she takes a feather quill and begins to write on parchment made from calfskin.

Motzkin has spent the past two and a half years copying the biblical book of Esther onto a long scroll

that wraps around a wooden roller. On the evening of March 3, the beginning of the Jewish festival of Purim, she will write the final letter of the book, which is read in synagogues on Purim. Purim commemorates the deliverance of the Jews of ancient Persia by Esther, a young Jewish woman, from a massacre plotted by the villainous Haman, an adviser to the king of Persia.

Motzkin, 47, began learning the ancient skills of the sofrim,



HANS PENNINK/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Motzkin holds a laver that she uses to wash her hands before she scribes by hand.

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Scribe: Scrolls hand-written with feather quill on animal skin

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traditional Hebrew scribes, several years ago. She is one of a handful of female scribes in the world, and the completion of the scroll of Esther — which, except for the final letter, is finished — will mark the end of her first big project as a scribe, one that is dedicated to her mother, who died in 2004.

For a scribe, “the actual act of writing is a sacred act, a holy act,” said Motzkin, who is co-rabbi at Temple Sinai, a Reform synagogue in Saratoga Springs, with her husband, Jonathan Rubenstein. “You’re writing a sacred text, and it’s got to be done with a certain consciousness.”

Before she writes, Motzkin looks at the text and then says the letter aloud. “It’s almost like a prayer or a writing meditation.” The job of a scribe is to make hand-written copies of sacred texts such as the *sifrei* Torah — the scrolls that contain the first five books of the Bible — as well as repair and restore sacred texts.

ARTISTIC BEGINNING

The scribal arts combine two of Motzkin’s longtime passions: the art of writing and the Hebrew language.

Motzkin began learning Hebrew calligraphy in 1979, when she was still in college. “Since then, I’ve just sort of dabbled in calligraphy,” she said. “It was a

sideline, an artistic, kind of fun thing for me to do.”

Unlike the scribal arts, calligraphy does not have a spiritual purpose; it is mainly used to make things look pretty. For example, every child in Temple Sinai who has a bar or bat mitzvah receives a certificate written in calligraphy by Motzkin.



Motzkin

adults, Motzkin, who had studied Hebrew in college, was tapped for the job, and between 1997 and 2003, she authored four textbooks. She decided it was time for a new project — “I was thinking about what I might like to do next” — and attended a scribal arts class offered through a weeklong summer program.

Immediately, Motzkin had a sense of calling. “I felt like this was what I was supposed to be doing,” she said. While the other students in the course struggled to create the richly detailed Hebrew letters using a feather quill — most of their attempts amounted to little more than messy ink blots — Motzkin’s calligraphy skills gave her an edge. What she was writing “looked like sacred texts,” she recalled.

ONE OF FEW

Until recently, all scribes hailed from the Orthodox branch of Judaism.

“I never thought it was possible for me to do scribal work,” Motzkin said. “There was no school you could go to learn this.”

If you wanted to become a scribe, you needed a teacher, and because the vast majority of scribes are Orthodox Jews, it was tough for a woman to find a teacher. In the Orthodox tradition, women are not allowed to become rabbis or scribes.

“There was no way I could find a teacher, as a liberal woman rabbi,” she said.

But she did. First, Motzkin asked the rabbi teaching her scribal arts course if he would teach her how to be a scribe. He said he was still learning himself and recommended his teacher, an Orthodox rabbi named Dr. Eric Ray. Motzkin met with him, and he agreed to take her on as a pupil. She traveled to Great Neck, on Long Island, every six weeks to study with him until Ray died in 2005.

Today, Motzkin belongs to an e-mail network of about 10 liberal scribes located throughout the world. She said they’ve discussed creating some kind of standardized training and certification process for liberal scribes. That sort of formal framework “doesn’t exist right now,” she said.

NOVICE’S PROJECT

The scroll of Esther is often a scribe’s first big project because it has a lower level of sanctity than the Torah and doesn’t contain any of the sacred names of God. Normally, a scribe can fix a mistake by letting the ink dry and scraping it off. But if a scribe makes a mistake writing the name of God, the whole panel has to be redone. On Esther, “any mistake you make is correctable,” Motzkin said.

Esther was also a good project for Motzkin for personal reasons: she planned to create the scroll in honor of her mother, who as a young woman had won the Queen Esther Beauty Pageant.

At first, Motzkin had trouble getting started on Esther. Between the summer of 2004 and January

hadn’t figured out how to work it into my life,” she said. “I needed to think of it as one of the spiritual practices I do in my life.”

So she developed a schedule for working on the scroll: two to three hours every Monday morning.

The Esther scroll is wrapped around a smooth wooden roller that a member of Temple Sinai, Ron Renoni of Greenwich, died in honor of his mother, who died in 1990. His mother was blind, and one of the ways she could tell if something was beautiful was by the way it felt. “I went in with my mother in mind,” he said. “She couldn’t see. She was much more into texture.”

Renoni said the job of a scribe is a good fit for Motzkin. “She’s a fantastic calligrapher, and based on her vast knowledge of Hebrew scripture, it seemed like a perfect marriage,” he said.

GROUP EFFORT

Other members of the congregation have contributed to Motzkin’s development as a scribe.

Though Motzkin obtains most of the feather quills she uses from a local turkey farmer, members of Temple Sinai often bring her feathers, and glass jars filled with feathers line the desk in her office. She is learning how to make her own parchment — kosher animal skin that all scribes use for writing — from deer skin provided by local hunters. A chemist who belongs to the temple taught her how to make her own ink. The two-handled cup that Motzkin uses to wash her hands was made by a ceramicist who belongs to the temple.

Motzkin is still learning. She said it takes her about 15 minutes to write a line of a scroll; a more experienced scribe could do the same amount of work in three to five minutes.

The Esther scroll, which is made from parchment purchased at a scribal materials shop in Jerusalem, is comprised of five panels of parchment that are each about two feet long. Parchment, Motzkin said, “isn’t just paper. It was a living, breathing creature of God. It’s nice that this piece of the animal winds up being transformed and used for a sacred purpose.”



HANS PENNINK/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER
Rabbi Linda Motzkin prepares her quill by writing the name Amalek before blotting it out.

Peaceful task begins with remembrance of violence

The scribal arts are steeped in traditions that date back thousands of years.

All scribes get their quills ready in the same way: by writing the name Amalek on a piece of scrap parchment, and blotting it out. In the book of Exodus, as the Jews are leaving Egypt, they are attacked from the rear by Amalek.

Later, the Jews are commanded to “Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you first came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind: they had no fear of God. ... you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!”

When scribes write the word Amalek and scratch it out, “We’re literally blotting out Amalek, but it’s also a reminder that the purpose of all sacred texts is to eradicate evil,” Motzkin said.

Scribes are also forbidden to use writing implements made from base metals because base metals are associated with weapons of war and violence. “All sacred texts exist for the purpose of bringing peace to the world,” she said.

a part of Temple Sinai’s sacred artifacts. Through the synagogue does two scrolls of the Torah, it does not have an Esther scroll.

Motzkin purchased an extra panel of parchment and is using that to create a companion scroll in honor of women. The project turned into a fundraiser, people could pay a fee and have the name of a woman — their mother or sister, for example — written on the parchment, which will eventually be displayed in the synagogue.