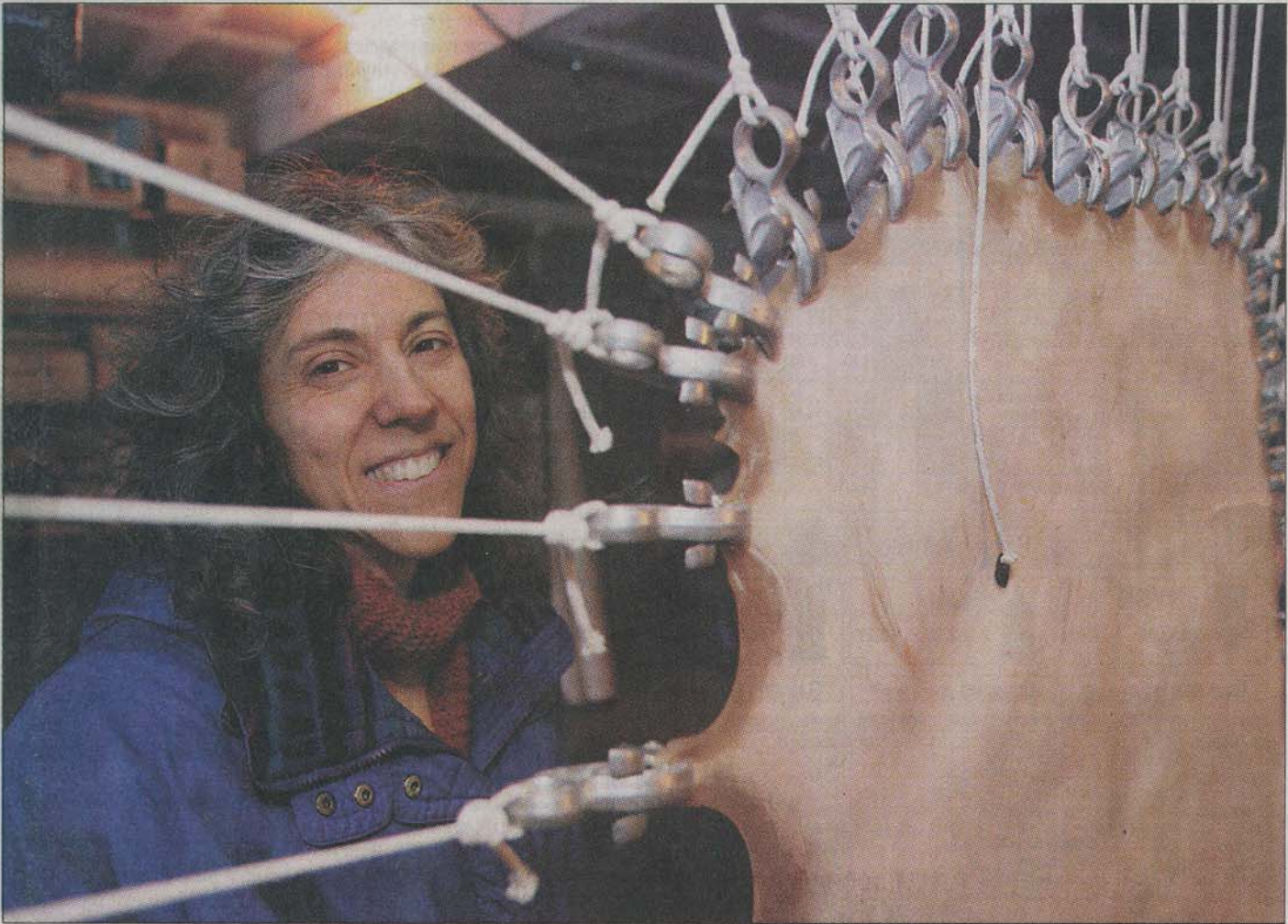


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DEREK PRUITT PHOTOS—DPRUITT@POSTSTAR.COM

Rabbi Linda Motzkin, of Temple Sinai of Saratoga Springs, stands by one of her stretched deer hides she is making into parchment at her Wilton home. Rabbi Motzkin is a scribal artist, which is a role typically reserved for Jewish men. Orthodox Jewish tradition also keeps her from purchasing parchment for her scribal work, so she has started making her own parchment from deer hides donated by local hunters.

Stretching for her faith

Local female rabbi writing a scroll for her congregation

By **AMANDA BENSEN**
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SARATOGA SPRINGS ♦ Rabbi Linda Motzkin likes to stretch things. Tradition, for one. She became co-rabbi of Temple Sinai in 1986 with her husband, Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein, and believes they were the first married couple to share the sole rabbinical position in any synagogue.

Recently, she also became a soferet, or female scribe, another rarity in her religion. She has written a scroll of the book of Esther, and will present it to her congregation next month on Purim, a holiday which celebrates Esther's role in saving the Jews from genocide in the Persian empire.

Women are generally permitted to write the book of Esther because it does not contain the name of God, she explained. Motzkin got the parchment for that project from an Orthodox shop in Israel, but knows most suppliers wouldn't sell parchment to a woman for writing a sefer Torah, a scroll containing the most sacred Hebrew texts.

"In the traditional Jewish community, just as women aren't rabbis, they aren't scribes," Motzkin explained. "There are a few people I've met who would accept a female scribe, but none of them are in the supply business."

That's not going to stop her from writing a Torah scroll, however. Using a homemade stretching frame, she is transforming donated deerskins into parchment suitable for sacred texts.

"Just by word-of-mouth, I've already gotten about 20 skins from Adirondack hunters," she said. "I tell them, if you know anybody who's going to throw away a skin, tell them 'Don't! There's this crazy rabbi...'"

Making parchment by hand is labor-intensive, she said. First, each hide must be scraped and soaked several times to remove any flesh and hair. Then, she clips it to a large wood-and-metal contraption she has built in her Wilton garage, which stretches the skin until the edges are translucent in places.

Finally, she sands the parchment by hand and burnishes it with a stone until the surface is smooth and even, then cuts it into panels. The whole process can be completed in several weeks, she said, but actually writing a scroll can take years.

Scribal writing is much different from ordinary writing,



Rabbi Linda Motzkin unrolls her first scribal undertaking, the book of Esther, at the Temple Sinai in Saratoga Springs recently. Esther is the only book of the Bible that a female scribe is traditionally allowed to write.

Motzkin said. Not only must the Hebrew letters be formed according to certain standards, there are specific prayers to be uttered and rules to be followed during the process. For example, although most mistakes can be corrected by scraping the ink off the parchment and re-sanding it, the sacred names of God cannot be erased.

"A mistake of that sort means you have to start the panel anew," Motzkin said. "That's one of the reasons the book of Esther is often a task given to baby scribes, because it doesn't contain the name of God. And you do make mistakes, even though you try not to."

Motzkin does her scribal work in a study room on the second floor of the synagogue. Containers of turkey feathers and wild reeds line the back of the desk, waiting to be cut into quills. Metal calligraphy pens can't be used, she explained, because "base metals are associated with violence and weapons of war." She dons a yarmulke and a tallit, or prayer shawl, makes a statement of intent and completes a ritual handwashing before she begins. "It's very different than other

writing," she said. "When I'm writing a sacred text, I'm very focused on the fact that I'm engaged in a holy act. It's almost like prayer or meditation."

Motzkin has been writing Hebrew calligraphy for decades, she said, but had never even heard of a liberal scribe, let alone a female one, until 2003. Then she met Rabbi Kevin Hale, a liberal rabbi and full-time scribe from Northampton, Mass.

"When I met him, I was just sort of blown away, realizing that this thing I thought wasn't possible could actually happen," Motzkin said. She asked Hale to train her as a scribe. He told her he felt underqualified, but put her in touch with his teacher, Rabbi Dr. Eric Ray, an elderly Orthodox rabbi in Great Neck.

Ray agreed, and Motzkin began driving downstate for lessons as often as she could.

"He had a wealth of knowledge, and I was honored and privileged to be his student," she said. "He passed away in 2005, but he lived long enough to see me start the scroll of Esther."



Scribal artist Rabbi Linda Motzkin demonstrates her scribal calligraphy with a sample 'hallelu,' meaning praise, at her study in Saratoga Springs recently. Shown below is an excerpt from Motzkin's scroll of Esther. The column of text is from the ninth chapter of the book of Esther.



Motzkin wrote the scroll in honor of her mother, Dr. Evelyn H. Motzkin, who died in 2004. She will write the last letter when she presents it to the synagogue on March 3.

Her next project is a long-term undertaking she calls the "Community Torah Project," inspired by the belief that the Torah's final commandment, or mitzvah, is to write a sefer Torah. Motzkin hopes to make this mitzvah into "a participatory process that, on some level, is accessible to everyone."

Participation can mean donating materials, helping to prepare and stretch the hides, assisting with ink production, stitching together parchment panels or even learning scribal calligraphy.

"It can be as simple as donating a turkey feather or a deer-skin," Motzkin explained. She said she is keeping a list of participants, and it already includes at least 100 names.

For more information on the Community Torah Project, contact Temple Sinai at 584-8730.