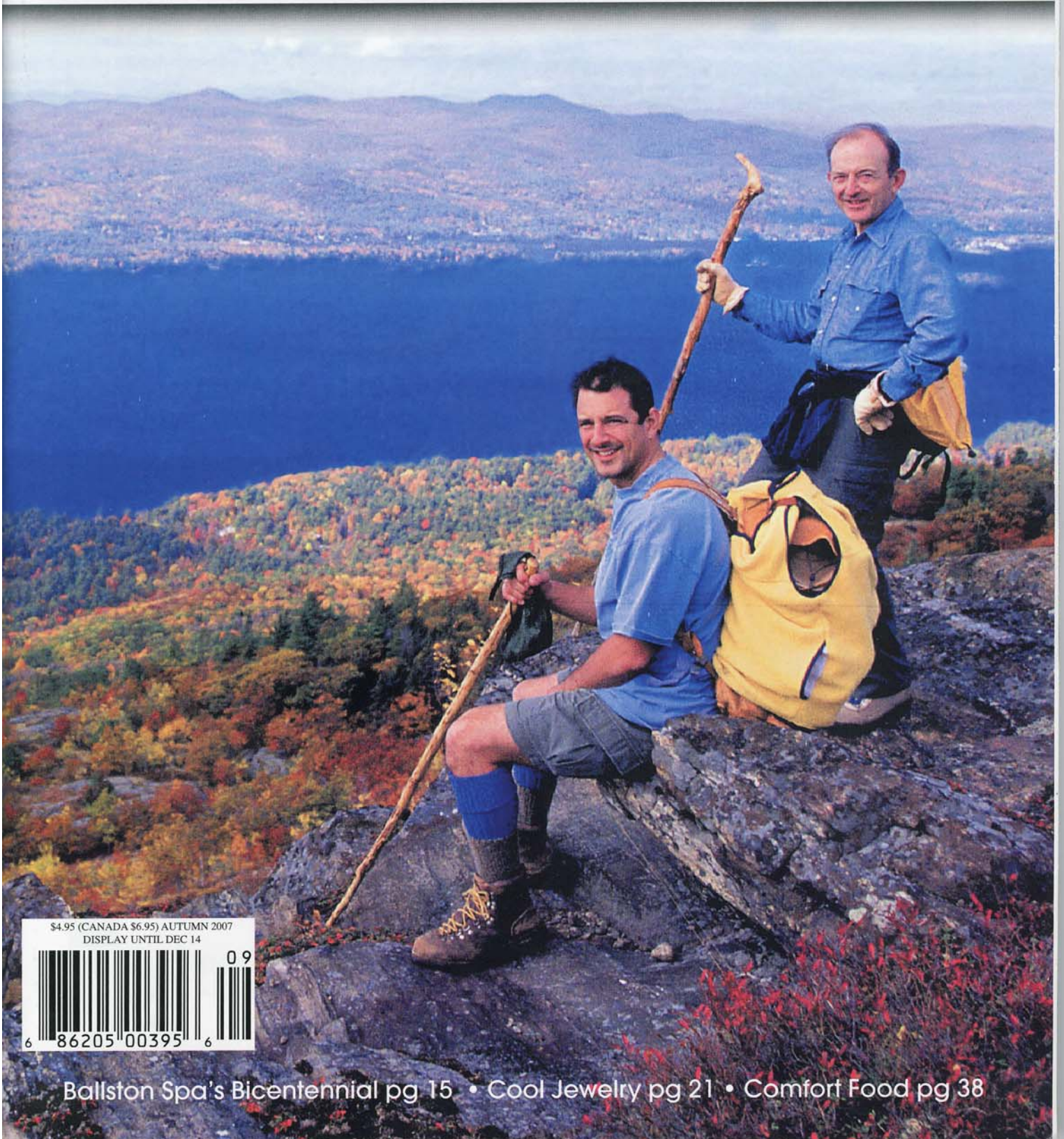


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Spiritual Crafts



RABBIS LINDA MOTZKIN *and* JONATHAN RUBENSTEIN
express their faith THROUGH PARCHMENT AND BREAD.

WHEN RABBI LINDA MOTZKIN AND RABBI JONATHAN RUBENSTEIN WERE ORDAINED IN 1986 AT Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, they went on a job hunt—but not exactly a typical one. The husband-and-wife rabbis offered an experimental proposal to prospective temple boards and families: to be the first rabbinic couple to share a sole congregation in a synagogue.

From Motzkin's and Rubenstein's points of view, job-sharing presented an opportunity to share both domestic and professional responsibilities. They had one daughter then; now there are two, and a son. "We wanted to be partners in all fulfilling aspects of life," Motzkin says. "We didn't want to compromise on being *either* parents *or* spiritual leaders."

Rubenstein, originally from Connecticut, and Motzkin, a Californian, traveled across the United States and into Canada for interviews. There was no lack of interest in their plan, and abundant support for their approach to integrating their lives. Every congregation they visited invited them to accept the combined post. Fortunately for Saratoga Springs,

they chose Temple Sinai on Broadway, originally for a two-year contract that has extended for decades.

"The congregation has grown, our family has grown, and we have been able to establish a fulfilling career while our experiment became a lifestyle," says Rubenstein. "The Saratoga Springs area and the Temple Sinai family are just what we were looking for: a place to raise our children, to set down roots, to nurture our personal and professional goals and to be a part of a community."

Motzkin has followed a spiritual path that includes making parchment from deer hides, on which she expresses her scribal skills; Rubenstein introduced the Bread and Torah bread-making project


Story by
HELEN S. EDELMAN

to Temple Sinai and the Saratoga Springs Community.

Motzkin and Rubenstein enrich the civic *and* religious life of the community. Motzkin is a member of the Ethics Committee at Saratoga Hospital and on the steering committee of the Adirondack Religious Coalition for Choice. Rubenstein is a member of the Board of Trustees of Saratoga Care—Saratoga Hospital and Nursing Home, where they both are volunteer chaplains. They also are members of the Capital District Board of Rabbis and the Rabbinic Cabinet of the United Jewish Communities.

Motzkin is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of California at Berkeley. As a rabbinic student she served congregations in Montana, Mississippi, West Virginia and Ohio, and was adjunct assistant professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Rubenstein earned his B.A. from Haverford College and an M.A. in Jewish Communal Service from

PHOTO: JOSEPH HEALY



“ I believe the process of using hide as parchment honors the animal as a beautiful creature of God who deserves care and respect. ”

Natural defects in a hide, or damage in the finishing of the hide, can make it unusable for parchment. Here, Rabbi Motzkin adorned a damaged hide with Hebrew text.



The deer hides are wrung dry and then hung on custom-made stretchers.

PHOTOS: JOSEPH HEALY

Brandeis University. Before entering rabbinical school he worked for B'nai Brith Hillel Foundations, held jobs in social service and counseling agencies, worked as a corporate personnel executive, and as a baker. Today, they both have established unique, individual but connected ways of expressing their spirituality.

The Scribal Arts

"This may smell gamy," the rabbi warns, lifting the lid of a deep tub in her garage. The onlookers back away gingerly, but frank curiosity propels them to twist back toward the soupy cache. And really, it doesn't reek; the group shuffles closer for a better look.

What Rabbi Linda Motzkin pulls out of the murk is a discolored, misshapen *something*—but for all that ambiguity, the emerging figure is graceful, compelling and animated.

She is flourishing a lustrous deer hide, one of many that has been donated by hunters to be processed into parchment. The one she is working with today was the gift of Saratoga Springs landscape architect David Miller, whose wife Maria last year designed two brochures for Temple Sinai on Broadway (and who also is art director of this magazine). He shot the deer at Thanksgiving 2006 in Western New York and, Motzkin notes, "went to a lot of trouble skinning it."

"It's surprising how many people this project has connected the Temple to," says Motzkin. "And how many of those connections are word of mouth."

Connections are made, too, to volunteers who help Motzkin prepare hides. She's had a few hundred, sometimes in groups as large as 30; the goal is 600,000, the number of people who assembled at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah from God through Moses, according to the Bible.

The rabbis' garage is a year-round studio that houses three enormous, portable wood and metal frames—one as high as seven feet—that she built for stretching and scraping the hide to transform the tough, unyielding skins into papery scrolls. The method is long and exhausting: The hide is soaked for two days to make it pliant, twisted and squeezed to get out the water, stretched at high tension, and then scraped to further pare down its exterior and tease out its hues. The process is repeated until the hide has become a delicate, luminescent plane, a perfect writing surface. Then it is scored and cut to size.

"What you are essentially looking at here is raw-hide," Motzkin explains of the dehaired, defleshed, unfurled hides of various sizes and states of translucence. The skins are draped around the garage on racks to dry, and for storage. "The enemy of these rawhides is humidity. Dry scrolls can last indefinitely," observes Motzkin, referencing the Dead Sea Scrolls, which comprise 900 documents, including texts from the Old Testament, discovered between 1947 and 1956 in caves 13 miles east of Jerusalem. The texts are believed to have survived from before AD 100.

Not all hides are appropriate for scrolls, Motzkin explains. There are requirements for dimensions and natural flaws or damage from gunshot may eliminate a hide's fit for this use. These filigrees become scraps for other writing, like verses or proverbs, or a mezuzah scroll; parchment sanctified to be a scroll can't be used



Rabbi Motzkin encourages community participation in the parchment-making process.

otherwise. There is a blessing at each step of the process "to remind us what we do has a holy purpose," Motzkin explains, reciting the prayer.

The cluster of helpers listening to Motzkin's explanation is quizzical at first, and then silent with the realization that a once-live wild forest animal is becoming another enduring treasure. What begins for some volunteers as horrified fascination with death morphs into a desire to touch, see, smell and hear about the cycle that brought the deer to its current use.

"I like being involved with the entire Torah – from the experience of making the parchment to writing it, letter by letter," says Motzkin, who is a vegetarian and has not eaten meat products since her first year of rabbinical school. "It makes the hide less anonymous. I wouldn't kill an animal myself, but I understand why people do to feed a family, and I believe the process of using hide as parchment honors the animal as a beautiful creature of God who deserves care and respect."

The parchment is the foundation of a passion Motzkin devotes herself to: learning and teaching the ancient practice of scribal arts, writing, repair and restoration of sacred texts—a spiritual as well as artistic endeavor. She is one of only a handful of *soferet* (female scribes) in the

world, and already has calligraphed the Book of Esther in her mother's memory, for display at Temple Sinai.

The highly decorative writing is an exacting fine art, which Motzkin performs with a feather quill and ink she makes, reflecting her commitment to seeing the project through from beginning to end. The writing merges her artistic talents with her interest in the Hebrew language. Motzkin authored the Jewish Reform movement's four-volume adult Hebrew language series: *Aleph Isn't Tough*, *Aleph Isn't Enough*, *Bet is for B'reishit* and *Tav is for Torah*. In addition, she is co-author of *The First Hebrew Primer: The Adult Beginner's Path to Biblical Hebrew* and *Prayerbook Hebrew the Easy Way*, from EKS Publishing.

Because the Book of Esther does not mention God, women are not banned from writing it, according to the orthodox Jewish tradition, Motzkin says, but parchment suppliers would be reluctant to sell to a woman to reproduce the sacred Sefer Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament). This was one reason Motzkin decided to produce the materials on her own. Jewish custom excludes women from being either rabbis or scribes; Motzkin has been persistent and successful in her quest to become both.

Writing the Sefer Torah honors the commandment or *mitzvah* (good deed) to do so. Motzkin is determined to involve the community in the process, and invites all comers to help. As a scribe, Motzkin will handwrite the Torah, a mission that requires patience and faith as well as a deep understanding of the language and messages of the content, and exceptional talent as a calligrapher.

Though Motzkin's actions are shared, her journey is personal, each achievement a milestone in her own illuminated evolution that pays tribute to both tradition and progress in Judaism, and more globally, to the role of women as leaders. Learning the text, teaching the text, writing the text and loving the text "embody" the rabbi's relationship to Judaism, she says. "I have been preparing for this my entire life."

Baking Bread

The pleasing aroma of fresh challah flutters in the entryway, hovers in the corridors, encircles the sanctuary and hypnotizes visitors, who ride its scent to the kitchen. Gold-crusting challah emerges from the oven so warm and moist its steam can fog glass.

At 9 a.m., a dozen braided loaves already are cooling on a rack. Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein has been at it since before dawn. Now an assiduous volunteer kitchen crew measures, pours, mixes, punches, kneads, hand-rolls, braids, flours, checks oven temperature and scrubs kitchen gear. Almost every Friday morning, often before sun-up, Rubenstein opens the kitchen at Temple Sinai on Broadway to prepare inventory for Slice of Heaven Breads, a non-profit baking project welcoming the community to experience

the joy of creating exceptional baked goods including challah, special breads, rolls, granola, babka, *schnecken* (sticky buns), coffee cake and Toronto blueberry buns. Whenever possible, ingredients are organic and produced locally. The products are sold at the Temple, Farmer's Market and Four Seasons Restaurant on Phila Street, where Rubenstein used to bake.

"Slice of Heaven breads are made with the best ingredients and intentions," says the grey-haloed rabbi. Originally, he developed the enterprise to indulge his passion for baking and to teach skills to individuals who need entrée to the workplace. He didn't anticipate the impact and consequent growth of his Bread and Torah Project.

One byproduct of Slice of Heaven is that many people who learn with Rubenstein now bake bread at home, and "That's the point," the jubilant rabbi emphasizes. "The skill is portable."

Taber Ward was raised in Saratoga Springs but is involved in organic farming and land conservation in California. It's her birthday and she has chosen to start it at the Temple. "It's important for me to be working with food and spreading bounty," she says, punching a dough ball.

It's not all about baking. Rubenstein pauses to share the wisdom of the *Mishnah* (the earliest record of the Jews' oral law) in partial explanation of Bread and Torah's inspiration: "*Without bread there is no Torah (learning); without Torah there is no bread.*"

Aside from what he sells to ensure Slice of Heaven is self-supporting, Rubenstein donates some of the profits from baking to outreach programs to relieve hunger and networks with individuals and institutions that promote healthy, responsible consumption.

The youngest members of the group have heard enough and are anxious to get on with the process. They inch toward the oven and the shelf of kneaded dough. *Why can't the hunks be divided up now for braiding?* they ask. Sculptural ceramist Michael Terra is informally guarding the dough balls. He has fielded this impatience before: "The bread is resting," he says. "It's going through a chemical process, creating a structure inside that traps gases released by the yeast. The bonds in the dough have to mature or you'll get flat, ugly loaves."

The intergenerational bevy in the kitchen is active this morning: Cynthia Guile, a psychologist and advanced student of Hebrew, flashes floury elbows and explains, "Everything else I do is verbal and cerebral. This is a relaxing part of my personal Shabbat observance."

Now, Terra is working with his daughter Xan, a forthright, red-haired beauty. Xan's involvement is a special *mitzvah*, "a selfless act," says Rubenstein, for the girl, who is allergic to wheat, cannot eat the challah. "She does it purely for love," he says. This is serious stuff for Xan, who plans a career as a chef. She attaches herself to Ward and untwines the older girl's diapha-

*Rabbi Rubenstein
is flanked here
by volunteers.
Many pairs of
hands contribute
to feeding the
community.*



*Slice of Heaven Breads
and the Bread and
Torah project bring
together people inside
and outside of the
Temple Sinai kitchen.*

nous cheetah-print scarf from around her neck. Because it is Ward's birthday, she gives Xan the scarf as a gift.

Meanwhile, Rubenstein is describing what to do when the dough is "too sticky," (dust your hands with flour), and how to know when to weave the rolls into a braid.

Glens Falls art teacher Joy Muller-McCoola is attentive, eager to play, and craves the pleasures of cooking in a community. She is antsy to fashion the dough, insisting the activity is "no mess." Virginie Poritsky, former manager of Mrs. London's eminent bakery on Broadway, arrives with her son Elijah. He zooms into his comfort zone, clambers onto a chair and grabs for dough.

Ingredients are disappearing; another batch is needed. Xan sings: "If I were an egg, where would I be?" She answers her own question and eggs materialize. Now, there is a brief search for raisins. Meanwhile, Guile lacquers challah with glistening egg glaze.

Volunteers come and go. The later they come, the less there is to bake, but the day's tasks are hardly complete. Some helpers bag and label the challah with

a sticker listing ingredients. The enterprise harnesses spontaneous cooperation; tasks are not assigned, they are assumed. The organic extra virgin olive oil is poured, the kosher salt is shaken, cooking implements contributed by local businesses and individuals are acknowledged, and Rubenstein talks about the remarkable networking inside and outside the kitchen.

The day's first challah customers knock at the door before noon and continue to arrive throughout the day. Some of the challah will be tucked away on a kitchen shelf for the congregation after the evening service.

Everyone is itching for a handful, a mouthful, but there is one more hush to countenance. To honor a sacred moment, Rubenstein has bowed his head, extended his hands and stilled the rush: "Blessed are you, Eternal our God, Sovereign of all space and time, who brings forth bread from the earth."

Then he announces: "Shabbat Shalom everybody! Peace be with you. Everybody eat!" **SI**

For more information on Temple Sinai, Bread and Torah, and Slice of Heaven Breads call (518) 584-8730 or go to www.temple-sinai-saratogaspings.org.