

Rabbi uses tradition in her deerskin parchment art

BY KAREN BJORNLAND
Gazette Reporter

More than a decade ago, Rabbi Linda Motzkin became a soferet, a Hebrew scribe who writes Torah scrolls and other sacred documents.

Motzkin, who serves at Temple Sinai in Saratoga Springs with Jonathan Rubenstein, her co-rabbi and husband, is among a handful of female scribes around the world, as that role was traditionally for men only.

This summer, she is revealing another side of herself that is more private, in her very first art exhibit.

"Sacred Scraps," at Spring Street Gallery in Saratoga Springs, features 18 works created in ink and acrylic on hand-made deerskin parchment.

From 12 inches to six feet long, they are strange paper-like forms, fragile yet strong, with irregular shapes that suggest their origins as the hides of deer that were hunted in the Adirondacks. Hebrew words and letters in black ink appear in every piece, surrounding or connecting holes and tears in the parchment.

There are prayers and blessings, healing psalms, numerology references. And symbolism, as when the ink becomes train tracks, suggesting the ones that carried Jews to Nazi death camps. A post in a barbed-wire fence is filled with text about Amalek, a word that represents evil created by humans.

Color is spare but potent and seems to coalesce with the earth-toned stained glass in the gallery windows of the former church building.

All proceeds from the artworks go to Bread and Torah, an ongoing project at Temple Sinai, a Reform synagogue, in which the community is invited to bake bread with Rubenstein and help Motzkin with a Community Torah, which she is writing.

Motzkin and her husband came to Temple Sinai in 1986, shortly after they were ordained as rabbis. The couple have three grown children.

Q: When did you start making art?

A: I've kind of been a frustrated artist my whole life. I have dabbled in all different kinds of art forms since I was a kid. I like doing things with my hands.

'Sacred Scraps: Works by Rabbi Linda Motzkin'

WHERE: Spring Street Gallery, 110 Spring St., Saratoga Springs

WHEN: Through Aug. 8. Gallery open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday through Friday

HOW MUCH: Free

MORE INFO: www.springstreetgalleriesaratoga.org, 587-6433 or www.breadandtorah.org

Q: What's it like using animal skin for your artwork?

A: Doing art on deerskin is kind of unusual. Every single deerskin is the skin of a formerly living, breathing creature whose life experience is written in their skin just like yours and mine.

Q: Why did you start making parchment?

A: I got into parchment making to make the Torah scroll that I'm writing. At the time I started making the Torah scroll, it was the only way available for me to get kosher parchment. The only place to get kosher parchment is from a traditional scribal shop, and that's all within the realm of the traditional Jewish Orthodox world, which believes that women shouldn't be doing this work. I didn't want to send a man in to buy materials for me and pretend they were for him.

Q: So the artworks begin as the scraps of making Torah parchment?

A: Everybody who has given me hides has been told that it's for the [Community Torah] Project, for sacred text. But I discovered that not every hide was suitable. To have a panel of parchment that you can use for the Torah scroll, you have to be able to cut out a rectangle of a certain dimension. Some hides have deer ticks. Or they have a hole right in the middle. Or they have bloodstains from where the bullet entered or exited. Or they have scar tissue. Every single one of those art pieces were all panels that I couldn't cut a big enough rectangle that would be clear and unblemished.

Q: How is making the art different from writing the Torah?

A: There is a very clear distinction between what I'm do-



Rabbi Linda Motzkin likes to work with deer parchment, which she turns into art, such as the "Healing Psalms" work at right.

Q & A

ing when I'm scribing, writing the Torah, and what I'm doing when I'm making art. When I am doing the scribal work, that is a sacred task, a holy task. For me, it is a very profound spiritual practice. It's like writing meditation. It's about clearing my mind of all distractions. It's all about letting go of your ego. If you've done your job right, your Torah will look like every single other Torah. No Torah scroll is signed. It's not about the artist. It's about the sanctity of the text.

Q: The exhibit's title is "Sacred Scraps." Is each artwork sacred?

A: This is art, the exhibit is art. It is my personal expression. The artwork does not serve any liturgical function. It is simply art. For me, it's sacred in the sense that it's an outgrowth of my work as a scribe, but it is very clear in my mind what is the scribal work and what is art.

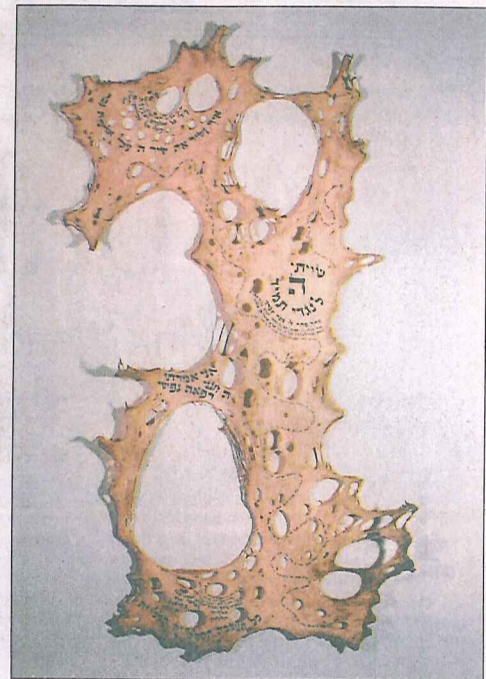
Q: But your work as a rabbi informs the art?

A: They all arise in the dynamic interplay between the

hide and what it looks like with all its blemishes and imperfections and the images, texts, associations that it evokes within me. Because I'm a rabbi, I have this sort of wealth of Jewish sacred literature at my fingertips. Every single one of those pieces is what that particular hide led me to write about from the vast 3,000-year reservoir of Hebrew sacred literature that I'm familiar with. In that sense, they are sacred scraps in that it's what I am inspired by as a rabbi.

Q: How do you get the deer hides?

A: I get the hides from the hunters or from somebody who knows the hunter and knows me and has asked the hunter to save the hide. Sometimes people bring the hides to temple and drop them off for me there. Sometimes I arrange to meet someone. Sometimes they drop them off at my house. I usually get the hide in a big Hefty black garbage bag. I get all my hides pretty much in October, November, December because that's when it's deer-hunting season. I have a big chest freezer in my garage. I can't process them all as I get them. The ones that I can't, I



throw in the freezer.

Q: How do you turn the hides into parchment?

A: First the hides are fleshed, which means removing all the flesh from the inside of the hide. You're scraping it with a tool called a flesher. The hide then gets soaked in a mixture of water and lime. You soak it in the lime to alter the PH of the hide because that's what will loosen the hair so that you can remove it. In Talmudic times, they used to soak goat skin, sheep skin in alkali. Then you use a sander. The hide goes through three stages of sanding.

Q: The artworks are held inside a frame with metal clamps. Why did you decide to present them in that way?

A: That was Maureen's [gallery executive director Maureen Sager] idea, to use the clamps and make the frames out of re-purposed wood. They are the exact same clamps that are used on the hide-stretching frame. If it's going to be a Torah panel, it gets cut off the frame. If it's not going to be a Torah panel, then I don't cut it off the frame. I use the irregular jagged edges of the hide where all the clamps were

on the hide because that's part of the unique, weird effect.

Q: Where did you make the artworks?

A: On my dining room table. Then I have people coming for dinner, and I need to clear everything off and put it away. This is true for all of my artwork but not for the scribing of the Torah. I do have a designated space in my basement for working on the Torah scroll.

Q: How is the Community Torah Project going?

A: It's about two-fifths of the way through in the writing of the Torah. So far, it's taken seven years. So I have another decade or so to go. Everybody who has helped in any way with the making of the Torah has been entered into my records, including all the people who have helped with the processing of the hides. And there are about 2,000 people to date. It's really exciting. My husband and I, with Bread and Torah, travel to different communities to do hands-on educational programs involving baking and Torah.

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