

Back Of The Book

ALL SHE WROTE

The Letter (And Spirit) Of The Law

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Not so very long ago, Sonia Gordon-Walinsky picked up a turkey quill, dipped it into a bottle of specially prepared ink, and began, — oh so cautiously — to write a Hebrew letter onto a tiny piece of parchment. She held her breath, steadied her hands, anxious to get it just right. “It was as if I had never written a shin before,” says Gordon-Walinsky, an artist well versed in Hebrew calligraphy.

After half a year of back-straining, painstaking work, Gordon-Walinsky completed that mezuzah, her first, last month. Her accomplishment suggests that women are beginning to write a chapter (or at least a verse) in yet another male-dominated realm of Judaism — that of *sofrut*, holy texts. As a scribe-in-training, Gordon-Walinsky, who is 27, joins a handful of women scattered across the globe who have begun pursuing this ancient discipline.

“Sofrut makes so much sense in my life,” says Gordon-Walinsky. “I would love to write a Torah one day — though I don’t want to write it myself. I’d rather write it as part of a collective effort.”

The new female scribes hail from diverse locations and backgrounds, from Shoshana Gugenheim, who lives on a religious moshav outside Jerusalem, to Rabbi Linda Motzkin, who lives in upstate New York and is writing a Torah scroll on parchment she prepares herself from deer skins supplied by local hunters.

Then there’s Jen Taylor Friedman, Gordon-Walinsky’s

teacher, and a native British woman whose deadpan sense of humor gave rise to the creation of Tefillin Barbie. Taylor Friedman is also, perhaps less famously, known as the first woman in modern times to write a sefer Torah. That Torah was completed in September, 2007. In December, Taylor Friedman finished her second Torah scroll, commissioned by Shir Tikvah, a Reform-Renewal congregation based in Michigan.

And at around the same time, Julie Selzer, another scribe-in-training, and also a student of Taylor Friedman’s, penned her first mezuzah. Selzer, who is 33, says that while visiting Israel, walking through the streets of Jerusalem, “a light bulb went off in her head.” She considered her passion for Hebrew letters, her interest in mystical meanings, and realized, “Oh, I’m going to learn sofrut.”

Now when Selzer recites the Shema, she finds it “a much more intimate experience, very different now that I wrote it.”

Unlike many other modern innovations for women in Judaism, the role of soferet for women in the Orthodox movement. In fact, most has not grown out of the Orthodox movement. In fact, most Orthodox Jews would not accept a Torah, tefillin or a mezuzah inked by a woman, although a work such as The Book of Esther would not pose the same set of issues. And indeed some modern soferot like to point to the precedent of a 16th-century woman, Sara, daughter of the famous Prague rabbi, David Oppenheim, who wrote a Megillat Esther.

Gordon-Walinsky, an observant Jew who has always approached Judaism from an egalitarian perspective, never pondered whether she was doing the “write thing.”

“Writing this divinely inspired text is a spiritual experience. It’s one way of facing God,” says Gordon-Walinsky. Like Selzer, Gordon-Walinsky initially prepared for the task of mezuzah writing by plunging in the mikveh, the ritual bath. She also recited a personal prayer modeled after a traditional Yiddish techinas, or women’s prayer. And before she sat down to write, each and every time, she uttered the proscribed statement of her intentions.

Gordon-Walinsky says that the materials and the mindset differ vastly from those in her work as a liturgical artist. In the art of sofrut, she must adhere to several thousand rules. “I felt like a vessel, with this tradition flowing through me,” she says.

Taylor Friedman becomes uncharacteristically earnest as she recalls the evening when Gordon-Walinsky began her project. “Let me tell you something about Sonia,” she says.

The pair had already delved into the laws of sofrut for months, hunching over books and ink in informal study sessions at Drisha, the institute for women’s learning on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Now several women watched silently as Gordon-Walinsky began. If she made a mistake on a word, and continued without repairing the error immediately, the entire text would be invalid.

But as she began, Taylor Friedman remembers that Gordon-Walinsky radiated a power greater than herself. “You could practically feel the kiddusha [the holiness] coming out of her, crystallizing in the air,” says Taylor Friedman. “It was between her and Hakadosh Baruch Hu” — between her and God. ■



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Sonia Gordon-Walinsky: Torah scribe is breaking the glass ceiling with a quill.

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