

A Torah Scroll

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, No. 21, Women in the Responsa Literature / Consulting Editor: David Golinkin (Spring 2011), pp. 179-184

Published by: [Indiana University Press](http://www.indiana.edu/~iupress/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/nashim.21.179>

Accessed: 26/02/2012 04:17

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A TORAH SCROLL

Judith Margolis

“A Torah scroll, tefillin, or mezuzot that were written
by a heretic, a traitor, an idol worshipper, a slave,
a woman, a minor, or an apostate, are invalid . . .”
BT *Gitin* 65b

I am not a heretic who has gone back and pardoned her ways. I am
not a traitor who has asked for forgiveness for sins against my God
or my people. I am not an idol worshipper who has returned to the
One God. I am not a slave who has been freed. I am not a minor,
now grown to adulthood. I am not an apostate who has returned to
Judaism. I am a woman, whose status in society has not changed,
cannot change. And I have written a sefer Torah.
Shoshana Gugenheim

In October 2010 (5771), a Torah scroll commissioned by the Kadima Reconstructionist Community in Seattle, Washington was completed. It is the first Torah known to have been commissioned from a woman scribe in modern times (though not the first to be completed), and the first to be written by a cadre of women scribes. It is also, in the opinion of Shoshana Gugenheim, the organizer and main *soferet* (female scribe) who worked on it, a Torah written in adherence to strict halakhic ordinance, “with love and careful attention to all detail and regulations.” She declares it a “valid scroll worthy of being read in public, and of the blessings required before and after a reading, of honor and celebration.” This is not, however, the opinion of many Jews around the world.

Although there may have been “Yentls” in ages past who were called to scribe Torah and did so, there is no definitive record of such work. According to material posted by the Kadima Community, the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah contain references to *Hasoferet*. Rashi’s commentary concludes that the person so described was not Jewish, but rather was one of the many devoted descendants of servants to King Solomon who helped the Jews return to the Land of Israel. In all likelihood, this person was a scribe in the more general, secular sense, that is, someone who wrote letters and other documents for the illiterate.

More recently, in a colophon to a Torah from the fifteenth century, a Yemenite woman states, “Do not condemn me for any errors that you may find, for I am a nursing mother, Miriam, the daughter of Benayah the scribe.”¹

Gugenheim was new to the serious practice of Judaism when she began to envision herself as a *soferet*. She recognizes the years during which she became an observant Jew and feminist as marking the beginning of “meaning making” and “place making.” These were years when she learned what it means to be “an engaged Jew.”

She became, she says:

A Jewish woman who meets Judaism equally, but with a woman’s touch—not a *kipah*, rather a beautiful head covering; not a black and white *tallit*, rather a *tallit* made of elegant fabrics and hand sewn to meet feminine sensibilities; not rushing through *tefillah* or the Torah reading before the *tzibur*, rather moving at a woman’s pace—slow, mindful, meditative, connective. Eventually I wanted to equip myself emotionally and intellectually for the commandment—to scribe a Torah scroll.

But in 1996, when Gugenheim began searching for a teacher, there were no known women scribes. She visited *rashei yeshivot*, heads of scribal training institutes for ultra-Orthodox men, and the homes and studios of scribes and rabbis throughout Jerusalem, without success. One potential teacher went to his rabbi, leader of a modern Orthodox Jerusalem synagogue, who said that he wouldn’t touch the question of whether it was permissible to teach a woman to write a Torah scroll. It was too dangerous, and he didn’t even want to give an opinion on it. His fear: What would happen

if a halakhic community were to acquire the scroll without knowing that it was written by a woman—and therefore unfit?² He could not be a part of that. The discussion was closed, although many years later the same rabbi did support Gugenheim’s efforts as a scribe.

Ambivalence between her commitment to the halakhah and her determination to find ways for women to participate fully in Jewish ritual, engagement with text, prayer and learning, transformed Gugenheim’s image of a *sofer*. As she puts it, “The pious, bearded, bony-fingered Jew, bent over his table, diligently at work, had given way to a new vision.”

Finally, she could no longer ignore what was, in her words, “essential to her growth as a woman, a Jew and an artist.” In 2000, after completing her master’s thesis on



photo by Rebekah Raleigh



social, halakhic and political implications of women scribing, she found a teacher. She began the rigorous process of learning to shape the letters, perfecting her calligraphic skills, and studying in great detail the hundreds of ritual laws entailed in scribing a Torah scroll. As her work progressed, another model that would break the traditional paradigm of a solitary male *sofer* emerged. Her collaborative leanings as an artist and citizen of the world produced a vision of women scribing together, creating together what would eventually become the historic Kadima Community Torah.

Every Israelite is commanded to write for themselves a scroll of the Torah for their own use, as it says: “Now therefore write for yourself this Song” (Deut. 31:19). (Maimonides, “Laws of Writing Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah,” 7:1)

When the phone call came from the Kadima Community in Seattle, Gugenheim had an important condition. She would scribe this Torah scroll if they would agree to bring other women into the project. Her goal was not to be the first woman, but, rather, to open the doors for women, and to generate change through conviction and the power of numbers. It would be a communal effort, in which other qualified female scribes would be encouraged to join. Gugenheim recalls:

We took five other scribes from across the globe onto the Women’s Torah Project (www.womenstorah.org). There were new areas to contend with in the profession—births and breastfeeding. We sustained cancer, conflicts and hate mail. We wrote. We prayed. We completed the task at hand, taking nearly five years to accomplish our goal.



Lidia Rosanski, *Parashat Mishpatim*, created for Women of the Book. Etching. 65 × 42 cm.

The Congregation Kadima scroll ultimately was written by six qualified female Torah scribes from four countries. Gugenheim, the lead scribe, who lives outside Jerusalem, had studied with two highly respected *sofrim* in Israel (neither of whom wishes to have his name published). Next came Rachel Reichhardt, who lives and works in Sao Paulo, Brazil. She is the only woman so far to complete a course of study as a *soferet* in a traditional training institution, the Conservative Seminario Rabinico in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Linda Coppleson and Julie Seltzer, both of whom live and work in the northeastern US, joined the project in 2009. Coppleson trained with the late Dr. Eric Ray and continues her studies with Jen Taylor Friedman. Seltzer, who studied with both Gugenheim and Friedman, went on to be a resident scribe at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, where she wrote an entire Torah on public view in the gallery during museum hours, as part of an extensive educational exhibit. Hannah Klebansy, originally from Georgia in the FSU, received her rabbinic ordination from the Conservative Schechter Institute in Israel. Irma Penn is from Winnipeg, Canada.

Congregation Kadima required documentation, by a mentor *sofer* or *soferet*, that the applicant had studied the laws and practical craft of writing Torah scrolls, so that she was well qualified to write all of the letters according to the halakhic demands regarding their proper shapes, as well as being well versed in the laws, history and practicalities of scribing. Crucial to Gugenheim is what she sees as the most important qualification: “that the scribe conduct her work with the intention of creating a *sefer Torah*, which cannot be evaluated by anyone save the scribe herself.”

Kadima’s members, with Gugenheim’s counseling, went through a process of refining their understanding of who the scribe needed to be for their community. In commissioning their scroll, they intended to follow the strict regulations put in place by thousands of years of tradition, which require that scribes be observant of all the *mitzvot*,



Sharon Rosenzweig, *Parshat Behar*, created for Women of the Book. Acrylic. 50 × 70cm.

specifically Shabbat and *kashrut* (the dietary laws), and conduct themselves according to halakhah in all personal and social matters. Over time, however, the community's members began to understand that since they themselves do not abide by all these laws, it would be counter to their own life principles to require that their scribes be strictly observant. They began to broaden their perspective, to move beyond the halakhic parameters and consider, with more weight, the character of the scribe and her standing in the community, as well as her relationship to Jewish life, practice, study and conduct.

This shift in perspective made room for non-Orthodox women who had taken on the *mitzvah* of scribing and were fully trained according to the halakhah. Gugenheim says:

Keeping non-Orthodox women from participating, particularly in a non-Orthodox community, did not bode well for the ways in which Judaism can and does open its doors to women at all levels of practice. It would have been in direct opposition to the very notion that we were trying to achieve, of opening doors to women who were called to be scribes.

"It does bring up the interesting question," Gugenheim maintains: "What change is catalyzed if halakhah is not a guiding principle? Is the notion of women becoming Torah scribes about changing halakhah, or is it about pluralistic participation in Jewish ritual?"

Now Gugenheim has taken on another groundbreaking Torah-related collective activity. Officially called "Women of the Book," the project calls upon the

international community of Jewish women artists to illustrate an entire Torah, following the sequence of weekly readings (*parashot*), with all the art done on kosher parchment and ultimately to be sewn together into a scroll.

Guggenheim put her quill aside to organize this far-ranging project. “During my time scribing my first scroll,” she reminisces, “in my encounter with difficult passages of the text and through the mind’s eye of a visual artist, the picture of a Torah scroll, interpreted visually, kept appearing to me.”

“The Women’s Torah Midrash Project, as it has also come to be called, would widen the community of women who are engaging with the text in new and fresh ways.³

I wanted to bring together Jewish women artists from around the world and have them comment on the Torah in their own visual language. Women, for whom the text’s stories were very familiar, would see them in new ways! I wanted to see how this would create a new language of text study and interpretation. And to bring Jewish women, who may never have encountered Torah, to the text. Could we begin a dialogue, as Jewish women artists across the spectrum of Jewish observance, and would our visions change Jewish communities across the world?

The Women of the Book project is still in progress. To date, 41 of the 54 *parashot* are spoken for, and over a dozen paintings have been completed.⁴

Guggenheim declares:

During this pivotal time in Jewish history, . . . we are compelled to examine what it means to come to Torah . . . through the experience of womanhood. Nearly as old as the Torah is the tradition of interpreting what is meant by the writings. Commentaries, written by male rabbis, scholars and their students, make up an entire canon of literature. The voices of Jewish women as interpreters of text are underrepresented in the worlds of Jewish education and Jewish thought. Similarly, the work of women artists is underrepresented in galleries, museums and textbooks. Women of the Book addresses these critical gaps by supporting . . . Jewish women artists to enter into the interpretive canon and to initiate, through their artistic and intellectual processes, the creation of new languages of interpretation and *midrashic* expression. (from: www.womenofthebook.org)

Notes:

1. See Michael Riegler and Judith R. Baskin, “‘May the Writer Be Strong’: Medieval Hebrew Manuscripts Copied by and for Women,” *Nashim*, 16 (2008), p. 15.
2. Traditionally, Torah scribes do not sign their work in any way, so there would have been no indication that the scroll was written by a woman.
3. For more information and to submit work, see www.womenofthebook.org.
4. A detail of Susan Schwab’s work created for the *parashah* of Genesis may be seen on the cover of *Nashim*, no. 16 (Fall 2008).