

Women of the Bo



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PARSHAT KEDOSHIM: By Barbara Mendes

A US-born scribe and community artist is bringing together Jewish women artists from many countries to do a visual interpretation of each weekly portion of the Torah, creating a tour de force that will tour worldwide

Judith Sudillovsky

A PROFOUNDLY HUMAN PORTRAIT of Moses, a photographic collage rendition of the Twin Towers, an oil painting of a lamb just moments before it is sacrificed by Abraham, and a figurative drawing of a blue woman in the Hindu tradition are all part of a project aimed at highlighting Jewish women's voices in the interpretation of Jewish sacred text.

The brainchild of community artist, educator and Torah scribe Shoshana Gugenheim, a

Charlotte, North Carolina, native who began the project four years ago, "Women of the Book" will, at its completion, bring together the work of 54 accomplished Jewish women artists in the form of a visual and interpretive Torah scroll.

Based on the form and content of a traditional Torah, the scroll is being fashioned on 54 parchment pan-

home, which she shares with her husband and three-year-old son. She is one of a handful of trained women scribes working in the Jewish world today. "I am a visual artist and I wanted to see what would happen if I invited other Jewish women to imagine the text in a visual way."

The project does not intend to take away from the accepted male interpretations,

of interviews with the artists, limited edition prints, an art book, cultural programming and a curriculum, all of which could additionally be used as educational tools for cultural institutions, centers for Jewish learning, synagogues, bar mitzvas and interfaith dialogue, she says.

The artists accepted into the project were asked to select the portion to which she felt most connected. So far 45 of the portions have been assigned. The women, hailing from Europe, the Middle East, North and South America and Asia,

Let's get the voice of Jewish women out there in a completely different and fresh way

work in a variety of mediums, including oil paintings, etchings, textile work, traditional Jewish paper cutting and an ancient technique called metalpoint, which uses precious metals to create intricate drawings.

"Each woman is really coming from her own story, her own personal experience. The works are all very different and that is what we were looking for," says Gugenheim, who is working on the project with collaborator Judith Margolis, the art editor of the "Nashim" art journal, and art historian Ronit Steinberg.

They are pleased at the number of talented Jewish women artists who responded to the invitation, even though many of them did not have any previous connection to the ir Judaism. The project has also given some of the observant women artists the opportunity to explore their connection to being Jewish and being a woman through the ir art making, Gugenheim says.

"It means there is something deeper. This connection is so fascinating and a special part of the whole process," says Gugenheim, who describes herself as a post-denominational observant yet open Jew. "It is all about Jewish women artists wrestling with all kinds of issues."

Grappling with Judaism

One applicant from Sweden, the child of Holocaust survivors, is grappling for the first time with her own connection to Judaism, notes Gugenheim. "She didn't



SHOSHANA GUGENHEIM: Torah scribe and initiator of the 'Women of the Book' project

els – the number of weekly Torah portions – with each artist creating her own personal interpretation of a specific Torah portion.

This is the first time that a cohesive community of Jewish women artists have come together to express themselves artistically through the interpretation of Jewish sacred texts, notes Gugenheim, who now lives on a moshav in the Beit Shemesh area, west of Jerusalem.

"When I was doing my work as a scribe, I was having a daily conversation with the text. When I would meet some challenging passages or contexts that were hard, especially from the perspective of a woman and a feminist, all I could do with my struggle was to turn to the interpretations of others. I couldn't change the text itself by leaving it out or adding," says Gugenheim, 43, sipping tea in the kitchen of her

she says, but rather aims to place women's voices together alongside of them in a way that can show, from women's perspective, what some women view as problematic passages of the text in terms of how it relates to women. Gugenheim expects to complete the first stage of Women of the Book this year, and meanwhile has another creative project in gestation – a second child due at the end of March.

Women's voices

Though not intended as a statement on the recent religious tensions with the ultra-Orthodox, Gugenheim says the simple fact of making the voices of women heard is important regardless of any current events.

In addition to the scroll itself, which will be shown in museums and galleries around the world, plans include podcasts

PERSONAL INTERPRETATIONS: Vayeshev by Lisa Rauchwerger (right) and Netzavim by Cheselynn Amato (below)



even know where to start. I encouraged her to go to her local synagogue and talk to the rabbi there. She did and for her it has been a magical experience. This is the first time she ever connected to the Torah," she says.

Some women, like New York artist Sherry Camby, who specializes in the metalpoint technique, shied away at first from their strongest work because they felt they had to be "modest," notes Gugenheim. In her application proposal Camby suggested working on landscapes for her portion, but after numerous discussions, her final parchment was a bold metalpoint drawing of Moses with strong features, pensive eyes



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and unruly hair.

"We didn't want her to shy away from her genre just because she was dealing with sacred text," says Gugenheim. "That is not the

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case. We want the women to be truthful to themselves."

The project is not meant to "illustrate" the text, she says, but to provide an opportunity for the women to draw closer to the *midrashim* – traditional rabbinical interpretations – to look at other interpretations of the text, and then from there to create their own interpretive works. With this process she hopes they can find their own interpretive voices through study of traditional Jewish learning.

Not all women view things in the same way, and not all women involved in the project are "hard-core feminists," she ex-



WOMEN'S VIEW: Ki Tavo by Lillanne Milgrom

plains. "It is not about that. Women of the Book is about giving space to women to bring what women naturally bring to everything – a new and fresh perspective, a different voice, a feminine voice. And, in this way, we are breaking new ground," she says.

Though over the last four decades there

has been a lot more room for female interpretation of Jewish religious text, it has never been done visually, notes Gugenheim.

"It is a whole different language," she says. "Let's get the voice of Jewish women out there in a completely different and fresh way." ●