



## FAQ Sheet for WTP

### **What is the Women's Torah Project (WTP)?**

*The WTP, a project of the Kadima Reconstructionist Community in Seattle, WA, is creating the first sefer Torah in history to be scribed and embellished by an international community of women. It is the first woman-scribed Torah commissioned in modern times; the first Torah to be intentionally scribed by a partnership of women; and the first Torah to be supported, written and adorned by an international community of women and men sustaining one another through the hard work of transforming ideals into reality. But the WTP is already about more than creating a Sefer Torah, although that would be enough. It is about more than opening doors for women called to meaningful work that has been denied to them for millennia because of their gender, although that, too, would be enough. It is about transformation, about building connections, about bringing people closer to Torah by bringing Torah closer to them.*

The WTP has become a catalyst for change, symbol of opportunity, and bridge between art and politics, spirit and culture, and artifact and symbol.

### **How did the Project start?**

*In 2000 Kadima's Judaic Director suggested that Kadima commission the first Torah ever to be scribed by a woman, since Kadima did not have a Torah of its own. That brilliant vision was soon tempered with the discovery that the reason there haven't been any woman-scribed Torahs is because there haven't been any female Torah scribes. Serendipity intervened: Kadima's new rabbi knew a woman who had almost finished the course of study to become a qualified scribe, or soferet. Voila—Kadima could make history.*

### **How long has the WTP been going on?**

*In the summer of 2003, Kadima commissioned that soferet (female scribe) to complete a Torah for our congregation.*

### **When will the Torah be finished?**

*We are on track to complete this Torah sometime in 5770/2010.*

### **I thought Torahs could be finished in less time than that. Why has it taken so long?**

Our first scribe did not fulfill her obligations and extricating the project from her involvement took an extraordinary amount of time and energy. Reframing the project as a coordinated international effort brought its own logistical challenges. Finally, and joyfully, one of our key scribes married and had a baby during the project and took time off to attend to both of those

wonderful life events. We are now on track, with four scribes working on the project, to finish in 5770/2010.

### **Have other women scribed Torahs in the meantime?**

*Although we were the first to start, since that time, soferet Jen Taylor Friedman finished two Torahs. Without a doubt, Kadima's Women's Torah Project opened the door to those and all subsequent woman-scribed Torahs. The Women's Torah Project is the *Bereshit* of Women-scribed Torahs; Eve to all who have come already and all who will come after.*

In the words of one of the WTP artists,

“Your words 'first to start' reminded me of Nachson, another 'first to start' in Jewish tradition. While Moshe, Aaron, even Miriam, are generally given more mention and focus, Nachson was 'first to start'. Midrash suggests without his bold first step, *amcha* (our people) may have remained on the distant shore, unaware and unredeemed. We can finish our 'first to start' Torah—not as the first or last word of Torah—but as something which, like Nachson, heralds redemption for *amcha*. *Yashar Koach l'chem*.”

### **Why are you using several scribes?**

*Once we knew that more than one scribe would be working on the Women's Torah, we took a step back and decided to focus on the strength of community and involve as many qualified soferot as we could.*

The idea of multiple scribes penning the work now feels even more right for the project than a sole soferet. The Women's Torah will be physically created and adorned by a collection of women, supported every step of the way by an international community of women and men sustaining one another through the hard work of transforming ideals into reality. It will be born of, and into, community.

### **Will there be a celebration when it's done?**

*You bet!* We hope to bring everyone involved with creating and adorning this Torah, as well as our supporters, together to finish the Torah (completing the final letters) and celebrate this remarkable achievement.

### **What will happen to the Women's Torah when it is finished?**

*Kadima looks forward to sharing this Torah with the world, including sharing it with other congregations, communities and study groups that would find it meaningful to read from the Women's Torah. We also hope to bring it to Israel, use it as the cornerstone of a Seattle-based conference on Women, Torah and Progressive Judaism; and partner with a museum to exhibit the Torah and its inspired clothing and accessories. The initial impetus—to have a Torah of our own—has not been lost, but it is clear that the physical Torah we are creating will belong to a world larger than her birth mother.*

**How much more money needs to be raised?**

\$35,000

**Where does the money go?**

*Almost all of the funds go directly towards scribing and creating this Torah.* Our only other expenses are for Kadima overhead (insurance, accounting, telephone, rent) and communication, such as printing and mailing the occasional Women's Torah Project Update. Other Kadima members with skills as attorneys, writers, graphic designers, photographers, and more have donated literally thousands of hours of time to the project.

**Is my donation tax-deductible?**

*Yes. Kadima is a 501(c)3 organization.*

**How will my donation be recognized?**

*Anyone who donates to the Women's Torah Project is invited to contribute a small (one inch by one inch) bit of fabric, from any woman or girl you choose, to be fashioned into a seed in the Torah mantle's pomegranate motif. What a wonderful Chanukah present!*

A list of all donors to the WTP will be kept with the WTP documentation. It is Kadima's policy not to differentiate donors by amount contributed.

**What is needed to scribe and make a Sefer Torah?**

*The mechanical process of writing and putting together a sefer Torah requires 62 specially-prepared pieces of parchment, one roll of sinew for sewing together the parchment page, 20 turkey-feather quill pens, about 3 bottles of special ink, and two rolling rods.* Each of these ingredients must be prepared according to the relevant Jewish laws and with the declared intention that the material will be used to write sifrei Torah, tefillin, or mezuzot.

Before starting to write each day, the scribe must set her intention and love of Torah through prayer and meditation. The actual writing process is painstaking. Before beginning to write, the soferet must declare aloud that she is writing this sefer Torah for the sake of Heaven. The scribe must not write any word from memory, rather she must look to her Tikkun I'Sofrim for each letter, say the letter aloud, draw that letter, then look back at her pattern, and continue, letter by letter. Special measures must be taken to verbally sanctify each name of G-d written in the sefer Torah.

The panels of the Torah must be checked twice before they can be stitched together into the Torah scroll. Checking can be done manually and/or by computer.

The panels are sewn together with sinew, using silver or gold-plated needles, and attached to wooden rollers or *etz chaim*.

**What happens if a mistake is found in the scribing?**

*Most mistakes can be corrected by carefully scraping and erasing the ink from the parchment.* Even mistakes in G-d's name can be corrected this way, as long as the mistake is discovered before the panel is finished. If, however, a mistake in one of G-d's names is discovered after the

panel is completed, the entire panel must be burned or buried, in the same way that an unusable Torah scroll must be handled.

### **Why does a Torah have to be scribed by someone who is qualified?**

*A sefer Torah is, by definition, a Torah scribed by someone who has been qualified to do this work.* Generally, qualification allows the individual to scribe, within the context of Jewish law, sifrei Torah, tefillin, and mezuzot. All of the scribes associated with the Women's Torah Project have been deemed qualified by their mentors; WTP scribe Rachel Reichhardt is certified as a soferet by the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano Marshall T. Meyer in Buenos Aires and is the only woman to have received this written certification thus far.

### **What's included the course of study?**

*Approximately 4,000 rules must be learned, memorized, and practiced to demonstrate that one is proficient in performing this holy process.* Of these 4,000 rules, there are on average 20 rules pertaining to the formation of each letter of the Hebrew alphabet (so, 540), as well as an entire chapter on how to write G-d's names, and if one has made an error, in which cases one can repair that error or whether one must begin that sheet of parchment anew, burying the first one (as G-d's names must never be destroyed). Special attention is given also to not only the letterforms, but also to the "white space" around and within each one. There are strict laws about how to cut one's quills, how to score the parchment to prepare it to be written upon, how to recognize whether the ink is kosher (written according to Jewish law), how to sew the sheets together, and how to attach them to the atzei chayim (the rods upon which the scrolls are wound). There are also several places within the sefer Torah where letters appear that must be written very large, very small, or backwards in relation to the normative letters, as well as some dot patterns, without which the sefer Torah is considered invalid. Throughout the scribing process, one's intention, purpose, and focus must be high and unwavering—otherwise the sefer Torah is not kosher.

### **Who can scribe the Women's Torah?**

*Kadima requires documentation by a mentor sofer or soferet ST"M or S"M that the applicant has studied the laws and practical craft of writing sifrei Torah and is well-qualified to write all of the letters according to the halachic demands regarding the proper shapes of the letters, as well as being well-versed in the halachot, history and practicalities that govern writing in a more general manner. In addition, Kadima interviews references and, of course, the applicant herself.*

The most important qualification—that the scribe conduct her work with the intention of creating a sefer Torah—cannot be evaluated by anyone save the scribe herself.

### **Why haven't more women trained to become sofrim?**

*The halachic issues involved are complex and the traditional sages vary in their opinions on whether women are halachically permitted to be scribes, so many people associated with traditional training institutions for sofrim believe that women are not permitted. Until recently, most sofrim were also unwilling to train women privately.*

## **How do we know that this is the first Torah commissioned from a woman and the first Torah scribed by a group of women?**

*In modern times, there is no evidence of a Torah scroll having been written by a woman before work on the Women's Torah commenced. The notion of women working in community to write a Torah was born with the Women's Torah Project.*

We firmly believe that there were “Yentl’s” in ages past who were called to scribe Torah and did so, but there is no definitive record of such work. There are Biblical references to "HaSoferet" in Ezra and Nehemiya, which means a female scribe. The commentary on that reference by Rashi concludes that the person so described was not Jewish, but was rather 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 as we more generally consider the term, that is, someone who wrote letters and other documents for the illiterate. Even more intriguing is a note on a Torah from a 14<sup>th</sup> century Yemenite woman stating, “Do not condemn me for any errors that you may find for I am a nursing mother, Miriam, the daughter of Benayahu the scribe.” It is unclear how much of that writing Miriam completed.

## **What if people don't want to read from a Torah scribed by a woman?**

*We will include documentation with this Torah so that future generations understand its provenance. However, it is Jewish practice to assume the best about Torah scrolls; that is, to assume that they are kosher unless specifically proven otherwise. That is why congregations can read from scrolls that are centuries old and without historical documentation.*

## **What does Jewish law say about women becoming a Torah scribe?**

*As Rabbi Harry Zeitlin says, "The real question isn't 'Can a woman write a kosher Sefer Torah?' but rather, 'Why has it taken so long for this new era to begin?'"*

As with most things Jewish, there are differing opinions and interpretations. The crux of the halachic (Jewish legal) question has to do with a passage in the Talmud—the encyclopedic redaction of commentary and argument among the early founders of rabbinic discourse—which debates the status of a sefer Torah scribed by a heretic, and then goes on to address other scribal sources deemed to have been questionable, including women. The true teaching of these founding sages, and its proper application in our Jewish world, is an important discussion not often raised before now. Consequently, precedence in traditional Jewish scholarship is relatively scant. What sources there are bear scintillating difference and dispute. The great 13th century halachic codifier, the Tur, (Ba'al HaTurim), R' Ya'akov ben Rabbeynu Asher ben Yehiel, left women off of his list of those who are pesulim (unkosher) from writing a sefer Torah. The 16th century commentator the Drisha, R. Yehoshua Falk, wrote that the mostly likely explanation as to why the Tur omitted women from this list is that he actually believes that women are kasherot to write a sefer Torah for public use.

On the other hand, Maimonides (RaMBaM), the great 12th-century authority on Jewish law, argues that the purpose of writing a Torah is to study from it; and he pardons women from the obligation of regular Torah study. This has generally been construed by later authorities to constitute a prohibition against women writing sifrei Torah (Torah scrolls). But there is also a

view held by many, within and outside Orthodoxy and the Rabbinat, that women in our time have a heightened role in the study of Torah. Indeed most Jewish women, even in the Orthodox community, are today encouraged and expected to study Torah. This could affect the import of RaMBaM's ruling.

Furthermore, the great 18th century Torah scholar Rabbi Aryeh Leib Ben Asher Ginzburg wrote in the Sha'agat Aryeh that women are involved in the mitzvah of learning Torah and should be mandated to write a sefer Torah. In addition, he stated that the mitzvah to write a sefer Torah is not connected to the mitzvah of learning Torah, as the point of writing a sefer Torah is to teach Torah and every Jew is a potential teacher of Torah.

Some lay people argue that a woman cannot write a sefer Torah because women are ritually impure due to menstruation. There are many arguments against this concern. The greatest is that everyone in post-Temple times is ritually impure because we don't have the ashes of the red heifer to purify us from contact with corpses, or people who have touched corpses. In addition, the Torah cannot receive ritual impurity.

Like other issues of gender roles, differences, and equity, the prospect of women in sofrut (ritual scribal arts) is a vital discussion that must be pursued with open eyes and good faith. We believe that there is sufficient basis for our scribes' work. If we didn't, it would not be happening. But we also believe that this work must inspire and coincide with a serious effort to explore the questions it raises in our beloved and holy tradition.

### **Who are the WTP scribes?**

*Shoshana Gugenheim*, who lives outside of Jerusalem, is our lead scribe. Shoshana studied with two highly respected sofrim in Israel, neither of whom, unfortunately, are comfortable having their names shared publicly.

*Rachel Reichhardt* was the second scribe to join this group. 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. Rachel lives and works in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

*Linda Coppleson* and *Julie Selzter* both live and work in the northeastern part of the US and joined the project in 2009. Linda trained with the esteemed teacher, Dr. Eric Ray, z"l, and continues her studies with Jen Taylor Friedman. Julie studied with both Shoshana and Jen.

### **Will you add more scribes?**

We encourage any woman who is interested in scribing on the Women's Torah to contact us. We would like to include as many qualified sofrim as possible in this Project.

### **Who are the WTP artists?**

*Laurel Robinson*, professor of Art at Georgia Southwestern State University, created the yad and yad box. Noted poet and liturgist *Marcia Falk* from Berkeley, CA wrote the blessing inscribed in the yad box.

*Sooze bloom deLeon grossman* of Laughing Magpies from Vashon Island, WA, is making a reversible, pomegranate-seed motif Torah mantle, one side to be used during the High Holidays and the other for the rest of the year. *Marsha Plafkin-Hurwitz* of Art as Responsa, from Portland, OR, is creating the breastplate from cast aluminum. *Aimee Golant* of Aimee Golant: Metal Art and Judaica in San Francisco, CA, designed and fabricated the crowns, using copper and a brown diamond. *Andrea Sher-Leff* of Wear Art Thou in Austin, TX, is making the wimple clasp of fine silver. *Lois Gaylord*, from Seattle WA, is weaving a bima cloth. *Elka Freller*, award-winning jewelry artist from Sao Paulo, Brazil, is creating a Kiddush cup.

### **Is it kosher to use metals other than silver or gold for the Torah adornments?**

*Yes; the only metal absolutely prohibited is iron*, which was forbidden for use in the Temple, and thus the Torah, because of its association with weapons of war. Through the concept of *Hiddur Mitzvah*, we are commanded to glorify, enhance and elevate the commandments. Thus adornments for the Torah, as well as other items for ceremonial use, are works of art. The use of precious metals and jewels probably arose as wealthy congregants sought to publicly honor their families and artisans strove for new ways to decorate the Torah.

The use of non-traditional, but halachacly acceptable, materials in the Women's Torah Project may encourage people to think more deeply about what constitutes value and how that relates to women, women's work and art.

### **Are any men involved with the Women's Torah Project?**

*Absolutely!* Men have served on the Women's Torah Project committee since the beginning. In addition to supporting the project financially, many men have contributed their analyses and research as we grappled with some of the project's more complicated aspects. Several male scribes trained our female scribes in *sofrut* and at least one sofer will be the manual checker for one of our scribes. Finally, the entire WTP committee, including the men, will create the Torah's wimple—the belt that binds the scroll together.

### **How can I find out more?**

Follow the project on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Seattle-WA/Womens-Torah-Project/98464374465?ref=ts&nctr>

And our website, [www.womenstorah.com](http://www.womenstorah.com)