

autumn • 2005



A PROGRESSIVE JEWISH COMMUNITY

wtp UpDate

A look inside the Women's Torah Project

Expanding the Vision

by Wendy Graff • Women's Torah Project Chair

What was born several years ago out of Torah-borrowing fatigue has grown into a history-making, life-changing, and bridge-building endeavor, the scope of which continues to expand. In 2003, when Kadima underwrote the completion of Aviel Barclay's training to become the world's first *soferet*, our motivation was to secure a Torah of our own while acting on our values of equality and inclusion. We were excited to be at the forefront of change, a position Kadima has held in many circumstances over the years. We knew we were partners in creating something historic but did not expect the multiple branches this project would sprout, even within our own community.

Artists began approaching us, offering to make exquisite artifacts for this groundbreaking Torah. Donations were made in honor of daughters who found paths

between secular and religiously observant parents, in memory of mothers who had volunteered at synagogues for years yet had never been allowed to read Torah, in the name of babies who would grow up knowing that women could be cantors, rabbis and Torah scribes.

It began to dawn on us that this project could become a catalyst for astonishing and consequential change. The Women's Torah could be far more than a feminist statement and a religious object. It could be a symbol of opportunity for women to move into all areas of Jewish life. It could bring together progressive Jews from around the world. It could be a link between art and politics, spirit and culture, artifact and symbol.

The Women's Torah Project 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.

“ **It began to dawn on us that this project could become a catalyst for astonishing and consequential change.** ”

Kadima went into this project assuming that one *soferet* would complete the Torah. For a variety of reasons, we began to seek other women who were interested in becoming qualified — a real possibility today because of the door Kadima helped open. Multiple scribes penning the work now feels even more right for the

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Another Soferet

Kadima is proud to welcome *soferet* Shoshana Gugenheim to the Women's Torah Project. Shoshana will be joining Aviel Barclay in scribing the 62 panels of parchment that comprise the Torah.

Shoshana has been trained in the sacred art and practice of Torah scribing by one of the *sofer-mentors* with whom Aviel studied in 2003. Kadima underwrote Shoshana's training, as it did Aviel's, so that she could help write this Torah.



Shoshana Gugenheim

Shoshana is a gifted artist and community activist. Here is how she describes herself and her work, from her website, www.artfully.org.

Shoshana Gugenheim, MEd is a community artist and educator. She has worked with diverse populations throughout Israel and the United States engaging the arts as a means for transformation and

cross cultural communication. Shoshana has twice served as the artist-in-residence for *Elat Chayyim*, a Jewish Retreat Center in upstate New York as well as other locations in Israel and abroad. She offers creative arts workshops

addressing issues of modernity with a special interest in women, land and society. In addition to her visual work, she incorporates the study of text, creative writing and movement in her workshops. Shoshana's mosaic works

and one-of-a-kind books appear in "HaGalleria" at *Kibbutz Har El* near Jerusalem. When she is not in the studio she can be found hiking in the desert, cooking, dancing contact improvisation, teaching yoga, or drinking chai in her hammock with a friend. Shoshana resides in Jerusalem, Israel.

Kadima is looking forward to working with Shoshana as she brings her talents and energy to this project.

Vision

Continued from page 1

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 other women and men around the world. It will be born of, and into, community.

Since the project's inception Kadima has looked forward to sharing this Torah with the world, including bringing it to Israel, using it as the cornerstone of a Seattle-based conference on Women, Torah and Progressive Judaism, or partnering 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.

Another unintended consequence of enlarging the community of women working on this Torah is a concomitant increase in cost. The women artists drawn to this project have already started to raise funds to help cover their own expenses, even though they are donating their work to the Women's Torah Project. To assure that this Torah is indeed the first one to be scribed by *sofrot*, Kadima has agreed to cover the training costs for one more *soferet*. The work has simply turned out, like many innovations, to take more time and cost more money.

Despite all of these complexities,

The Blessing on the *Yad* Case

Let us restore the Shekhinah to her place in Israel and throughout the world, and let us infuse all places with her presence.

— The Book of Blessings by Marcia Falk

Laurel Robinson hand-inscribed this lovely blessing on the wooden box she created to house the beautiful and sensual *yad* she crafted for the project. Marcia Falk is a poet, translator, and Judaic scholar. Her blessing for the *yad* is from *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival* (Harper, 1996; Beacon, 1999). Copyright (c) 1996 by Marcia Lee Falk.

Continued on page 4 "Vision"

Introducing Marsha Plafkin

The first time we spoke with Marsha Plafkin, www.art-responsa.com, we knew she would add an amazing dimension to the project. A friend had shown Marsha our "Calling All Women Artists" article and she wasted no time dialing our number. "Has anyone offered to make the breastplate yet?" Marsha asked. One could hear the desire in her voice. "Nope," we answered happily. Marsha was off and running.

As a working artist, Marsha is steadfast in her belief that the women offering their time and talents to embellish this first Women's Torah should be able to use the materials they want and take the time they need for inspiration and fabrication. Foundry work and precious metals are expensive, however, so Marsha has undertaken a parallel fundraising effort dedicated to covering the costs associated with donating artwork to the Women's Torah Project.

Making Art and Jewish Art

A female-scribed Torah is just the next step for Judaism, for the community. I was moved by Kadima's vision and leadership in having undertaken the project. I cannot speak to its impact on my art just yet, but my association with the women involved in the project has been beneficial in multiple ways. I am grateful to have such fine, strong, and visionary women to work and associate with.

My inclination toward art in general and Judaic art in particular is in large part about identity. Creating art enables me to speak about myself and my relationship to others. Being Jewish has always been a central part of my identity.

I grew up in Michigan with five brothers in a fairly observant Conservative Jewish home. My family was among the founding families of Congregation Ahavas Israel, a Conservative shul in Grand Rapids, Michigan. As such, our shul was a second home to me. Due to discord arising over our family business, crisis ensued and my parents separated from the shul and the Jewish community.

Without this formal connection



Marsha Plafkin

to the Jewish community, I was left to deal almost exclusively with the non-Jewish community, where my identity was challenged and sometimes marginalized. While being other has established both my need and capacity to make art, making Jewish art per se enables me to rebuild my lost sense of connection with the Jewish community. Making Jewish art also enables me reshape this connection in more creative terms.

I pursued advanced Jewish studies along side my art studies. I earned a master's degree at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York in 1990. In addition to this, I studied painting at Bezalel Art Academy in Jerusalem and Illustration at the Parson's School of Design in New York with an eye toward doing contemporary Jewish art and design. Lastly, I pursued rabbinic studies for a couple of years, which accounts for the title of my business.

Torah & Breastplate

The Torah is the ultimate ritual object for the Jewish people.

Continued on page 5 "Marsha"

Please Join Us in Getting to Know Aimee Golant

Aimee Golant, www.aimeegolant.com, was recruited for the Women's Torah Project by Marsha Plafkin. Marsha was familiar with Aimee's work and thought it would be a perfect fit for the project. When we saw the examples on Aimee's website, we thought so, too.

Aimee will make the Torah's crown. She plans to make the pieces out of copper and precious stones. Aimee's desire to ensure that the Women's Torah is magnificently embellished led to the secondary fundraising campaign that she and Marsha have undertaken.

I made my first *mezuzah* cases in 1993, one year after I began the process of learning metalsmithing. I was 20 years old, questioning my faith, a Sociology major, and a sophomore in college wanting to understand how something like the Holocaust could happen. I wanted to prevent future atrocities like this from occurring. I wanted to preserve a tradition. I wanted to know, how could there be a God given the Holocaust? My first *mezuzahs* struck a chord within me to such a degree that I felt a need to make more.

My need to preserve tradition was as strong as a baby's drive to crawl and then walk. I proclaimed no faith in God but I knew that, as a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, every day I lived was a victory over Nazi brutality. My talent in metal was innate, as I come from a long line of precision tool and die makers and blacksmiths. Using my grandpa's hand tools, and investing any money I had, I designed my line of limited production *mezuzahs* cases and started my business in 1998, selling them

Continued on page 5 "Aimee"

Thank-you Donors

Vision Cont. from page 2

Donors by State • November 2004 - July 2005

CALIFORNIA

Rabbi Camille Shira Angel
Beverly and Stephen Becker
Diane Fiddymant
Nicole Barchilon Frank and Kevin Frank
Marnie Alexis Friedman
Mara Langer
Vaughan Rachel
Tree Gelb Stuber
Shirley Sussman

COLORADO

Melanie Jacobs

CONNECTICUT

Rachael Blackman
Downtown Minyan at the Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale University

FLORIDA

Diane Seidenstein
Temple Beth Sholom of Greater Miami, Mitzvah Fund (Rabbi Robert Davis, Rabbi Gary Glickstein, Rabbi Gayle Pomerantz)

GEORGIA

Roxanne Cherry

ILLINOIS

Rabbi Nina J. Mizrahi
Rabbi Phyllis Sommer

KANSAS

Donna and Joel Krichiver

MASSACHUSETTS

Rachel and Myron Rosenblum

MARYLAND

Margot Gilbert Gilison
Rabbi Tamara Miller, The Capital Kehillah
Rabbi Amy Scheinerman

MISSOURI

Sheryl Breadman and Eli Montague
Karen and Harold Karabell
Women's Rosh Chodesh Study Group of Congregation Shaare Emeth

NEW JERSEY

Rabbi Batsheva Appel, Congregation Beth Chaim
Rabbi Rachel Gartner

Rabbi Karen Bookman Kaplan
Rita and Lloyd Zeitman

NEWYORK

Mr. and Mrs. William Egger
Rabbi Amy B. Ehrlich, Congregation Emanu-el of the City of New York
Rabbi Helene Ferris
Cantor Mimi and Rabbi Louis Frishman
James Herrick
Jewish Family Congregation
Rabbi Linda Motzkin, Temple Sinai
Pesi and Richard Paolucci

NORTH CAROLINA

Rabbi Jen Feldman, Chapel Hill Kehillah
Rabbi Schindler, Temple Beth El

OREGON

Judith and Stephen Sibelman

PENNSYLVANIA

Wendy Light
David Mahanyami Nachshon
Rabbi Susan Schein, Congregation Kol Emet

TEXAS

Rabbi Debra Robbins

VIRGINIA

Frances B. Raphael

WASHINGTON STATE

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Margaret Esola Baran
Shari Basom
Jean and Lee Bjorklund
Mindy and Paul Blaski
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Hilary Bolles and Zahava Sternberg
Elizabeth and Gene Brandzel
Connie Burk and Jake Fawcett
Dina Burstein
Catherine Carter and Wendy Harris
Serena Cohen
Quentin DeChalfont-Mymms
Sanja Deskovic Futterman and Alan Futterman
Nancy Geiger and Michael Krasik
Sharon Goldblatt and Nicolas Bloom
Henry Gordon, Balabuste Catering
Wendy Graff and Darryl Price
Madeline Hartman

Leigh Hofheimer and Jon Nachman
Deborah Hyman
Gina Jonas
Catherine Kaufmann
Rachel and David Kleit
Adam Kline
Jill Kurfirst
Suzanne and David Larsen
Marilyn Smith Layton and Richard Layton
Jan Leonard
Beata and Fasika Moges
Marlene Motola and John Barnes
Starr Niego and Michael Hopcroft
Susan Nivert
Joel Ohringer
Susan Partnow
J.W. Power
Ellen Punyon and Rick Saling
The Reiki Training Program
Rosh Chodesh (Barbara E. Davis, Margaret Rubens and Carrie Wernick)
Martha Russo, M.A., L.M.P.
Isabel Safora and Michael Metzger
Margie and Alexa Salier
Danielle Sezgin
Ellen Shaman
Carrie and Dick Stein
Ilene Stein
Cynthia Taylor and Chris Stanley
Kayla Weiner, Ph.D.
Joan Weiss

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Jessica Vexler

CANADA

Avi Dolgin
Kathe Izen-Mondlak
Wendy Macdonald
Noam Sturmwind
Margaret J. Vail

We've done our best to assure that this list is accurate as of July 31, 2005. If we have inadvertently left off, or misspelled, your name, please accept our sincere apologies and contact us at office@Kadima.org so that we can correct the mistake in our next Update.

Kadima has still not added any administrative staff to the project. Almost all of the funds you donate go directly towards scribing and creating this Torah. Our only other expenses are for Kadima overhead (i.e., insurance, accounting, telephone, rent) and communication, such as printing and mailing this Update. Kadima members with skills as attorneys, writers, graphic designers, photographers and more have already donated literally thousands of hours of time to the project, and will undoubtedly volunteer thousands of more hours before we finally dance with this Women's Torah.

The community of the Women's Torah will bridge cities and countries. It will bridge intellectual, spiritual, political and artistic domains. It will be a symbol, not an artifact. It will be another catalyst for transforming Judaism, and those of you who have helped make it possible will be at its heart. We are deeply grateful for your continued presence on this journey.

It embodies the formative myths of our people, and we are shaped in relationship to our reading and engagement of those stories. The Torah symbolizes what I value: family, community, truth (God). The breastplate is placed on top of the Torah to adorn and protect the Torah and what it stands for.

To begin my piece, I will review the work of other artists, from ancient to modern, and will likely read scholarly, poetic, and other writings about the breastplate. Then I will start making sketches in pencil. Whatever I have seen and read will influence my sketches, which is where I begin to join the dialogue regarding breastplates. I hope to have something to add to the discussion on breastplates, both in a written and visual statement.

After the pencil illustration, I will make a 3-D computer drawing, then a stereo-lithographic (resin) prototype, then the aluminum matchplate or other master mold. Finally, I will cast the piece which will then be polished and finished.

The sense that I might create something that will adorn and protect something I love, a symbol for what I most love, moves me to create the breastplate.

to individuals and stores around the country.

“ **I proclaimed no faith in God but I knew that, as a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, every day I lived was a victory over Nazi brutality.** ”

About eight years after making my first cases, I began to study the text on the *mezuzah* scroll. That’s when I went through a spiritual transformation. I felt that the *Sh’ma* and *V’hafta* were profound and universal and that the *mezuzah* was a gift from God, reminding us of how to create sacred space, and ultimately a peaceful world. I designed a tag that would accompany each *mezuzah*, giving the teaching, so that any human being who wanted to understand and use the *mezuzah* as part of their personal spiritual practice could. To be honest, nothing makes me feel more important than making Judaica (I am not yet a mother). It is an honor, and it helps me give positive meaning to my family’s experience as survivors of the Holocaust.

Personally, I believe that the teachings within Judaism are universal. The Source of Life (God) is the same for everyone, regardless of faith affiliation. I use my Judaica to teach people of all faiths how we Jews see God — as being everywhere and a

part of everything, that there is a vast oneness here on earth and that we are all interconnected. I want to create a peaceful world through the making of Judaica. Once I began this spiritual path, why would I want to make anything else? As an artist, I refuse to make things just because

I know they will sell, such as a Star of David. I make Shin jewelry because the meanings are universal — *Shaddai* - protection, *Shekhenah* - feminine presence of God, *Sh’ma*- not just “hear”, but UNDERSTAND, and of course *Shalom* - peace.

As my work moves forward with the Women’s Torah Project, I plan to create a crown that both

glorifies the beauty in the meaning and tradition of studying Torah and also encourages a dialog among Jews and non-



Aimee Golant

Jews on the meaning of Torah. As women, we are naturally compassionate as we give birth to all nations. May this women’s scribed Torah usher in an era of greater compassion and understanding of one another and of our most holy treasure. May we do justice to this historical and life changing event, through our art and in representing this Torah to our people and all people who encounter it.

Meet WTP Artist, Andrea Sher-Leff

I was raised in Skokie, Illinois, a town that felt like everyone was Jewish. My upbringing was traditional Jewish, and Shabbat was a regular weekly event at my grandmother's.

At five, I remember going to Shul with my Great-Uncle Jack and being incensed that I couldn't sit with him. Already, as a little girl it made no sense to me that women sat behind a *mechitza*. I was Bat Mitzvah at a Synagogue where I was not allowed to touch the Torah, because I was a woman. Even then, I began to question the patriarchy of my religion

because I didn't believe that my worship and learning should be restricted.



Andrea Sher-Leff

In Chicago, I graduated from the International Academy of Merchandising & Design. After years of designing clothing, I became dissatisfied with the industry and was looking for a new creative outlet. Having worked with beads since childhood, I always had the desire to learn the fabrication of silver and gold. I learned to solder and began producing jewelry. Eventually, I quit working in the fashion industry and my new creative outlet became my business. For

eighteen years, I have been a Silversmith/Jewelry designer selling at fine stores and art fairs across the country. I produced my first sterling silver *mezuzah* fifteen years ago as a wedding present, and I continue to produce custom designed Judaica.

I live in Austin, Texas, with my husband and two children. If you had told me 15 years ago that I'd be married to a Jewish man, studying Torah and that my children would be attending a Jewish Day School, I probably would have laughed and thought it unbelievable! Life circumstances take us in new directions.

I have had some wonderful Judaics teachers, both women and men, and have learned of the rich roles that women have played throughout the history of our religion and culture, even predating Moses. I have studied the powerful roles of Miriam, Ziphora, and Esther, and the spiritual Shekina.

Three years ago, while dancing during Simchat Torah celebrations, our Rabbi turned to me and handed me the Torah. I was surprised and overjoyed. I was a full participant in the eyes of my congregation. It has been a long journey, a journey full circle.

The first time I heard of this fabulous project I was so excited that it was really happening. That a Women's Torah was coming to life, a Torah written by women! It has touched me at the deepest reaches of my soul. Contributing to the Women's Torah Project, resonates deep within me and is fulfilling.

I am making the clasp/buckle for the wimple. What an honor to make the piece that holds the Torah all together. I see it as a giant hug around something infinitely precious. The designs I will use to create the clasp are inspired by life. Presently, I have two different designs. When I create I usually start out with a drawing or a whole page of drawings. I have something in mind and by the time the project is finished I may create another design. This is often something that wasn't even on the page, yet more beautiful than my original. The designs just come to me and I move them forward.

All of my work is hand fabricated. I will be using sterling silver, fine silver, gold, and perhaps enamel to create the clasp.

Adorning the Torah

All of the artistic accoutrements for the Women's Torah—the yad, mantle, breastplate, crown, wimple and clasp—are being donated to the Women's Torah Project. They aren't, however, being made for free. Each piece will take a minimum of many months to complete and all will be crafted from fine and rare materials as each artist strives to bring the most *hiddur mitzvah* to this project.

Some artists have donated

Continued on page 7 "Adorning"

Time + Dollars

As with most struggles to change history, scribing the Women's Torah is taking longer than we had anticipated. Both Shoshana Gugenheim and Aviel Barclay are new *sofrot* and anyone who has ever tried to master a new skill, especially as an adult, knows that it takes time. Both scribes also, for different reasons, are supplementing this Torah-scribing commission with other work.

The net result is that it will probably take several more years, and many more thousands of dollars, than we, in our original excitement and enthusiasm, had planned. The good news, as

described in more detail in the **Expanding the Vision** article, page I, is that the project is much stronger, more far-reaching, and more significant because of the many partnerships and connections that have been forged, even if the additional complexities have added to the timeframe and the cost.

We've been waiting over three thousand years for a women-scribed Torah and another few years is small in the scheme of things. But those extra years do mean extra costs and we hope that you will continue to donate generously to the Women's Torah Project.

Adorning Cont. from page 6

their pieces directly to the project. Marsha Plafkin, www.art-responsa.com, is working with the other artists, Kadima and the Castleman Family Foundation to raise funds to cover both time and materials for these extraordinarily time-and-resource intensive gifts.

To lend tax-deductible support for the artwork, please contribute to the **Castleman Family Foundation**. Write **WTP Art** in your check memo line and send to: 12831 S. Figueroa St., Los Angeles, California 90061. For further assistance, call (310) 516-6347.

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 I'd like to know more about the Kadima community. Please add me to your mailing list.

Please mail to:

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2366 Eastlake Avenue E, #424
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Photo Premium

Thinking about making a larger donation to the Women's Torah Project? Here's a beautiful incentive. Those making new donations of \$252 or more will receive a color copy of the striking, 7" x 10" photograph at right, matted to 11" x 14" and suitable for framing. Just check the Premium box on the donation form on page 7 and mail it back with your check. Tom Collicott, www.tomcollicott.com, took this artistic photograph and generously donates the printing to the project.

WTP Update graphic design
courtesy of Susan Rosenbaum
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