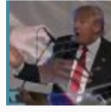
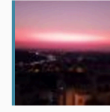


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A Manhattan Rosh Hashanah: A Torah Penned by a Woman

The scribe work by Julie Seltzer was also crowdfunded and now rests in a chapel with links to George Washington and the first responders after 9/11

by *Debra Nussbaum Cohen*

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NEW YORK — Congregation Tamid will be celebrating the new year in a new way Thursday: with a new Torah scroll, the first in Manhattan to be written by a female scribe. The Torah will be read for the first time at Rosh Hashanah services at the congregation, which is distinctive for several other reasons, too. Tamid, a young community unaffiliated with any of Judaism's denominations, meets in a Colonial-era church in Lower Manhattan called St. Paul's Chapel.

St. Paul's is where George Washington went to pray in 1789 immediately after taking the oath of office as America's first president. Starting on September 11, 2001, the church became the round-the-clock headquarters for 3,000 rescue and relief workers from the site of the terrorist attack just across the street. Cots, massage tables and food stations lined the chapel's perimeter. Today, in addition to being used as Tamid's home, St. Paul's is mainly a historical site and gets a million visitors a year.

The new Torah scroll just arrived in its new home Tuesday and was placed in a historic ark nestled between the church's altar and a stand of devotional candles. Rabbi Darren Levine stood before it, gazing happily at the scroll — the sefer Torah — commissioned by his synagogue community.

In addition to being Manhattan's first sefer Torah penned by a woman, it's the first ever crowdfunded, Levine told a visitor, and both Jews and non-Jews from all over the world contributed to the more than \$93,000 it cost.

The ark and one of the two Torah scrolls now resting in it were salvaged from the Meserich Synagogue on the Lower East Side, which was established in 1888 by refugees from the Polish town of Miedzyrzec Podlaski east of Warsaw. A century later the shul was unable to sustain itself, with few Jews still attending services. In 2008 the building was sold to the Kushner family — one featuring the synagogue's Jewish-star stained glass windows.

Levine was able to rescue the front decorative features from the original synagogue's ark — including the gilt Yiddish letters that say the original ark was donated by the women of the Meserich Synagogue. He kept them in storage until an architect constructed a full ark for Tamid to use.

Levine, a Reform-ordained rabbi, started the congregation in 2011. It focuses on young families and on his philosophy of "positive Judaism," which is meant to be accessible and enjoyable, he said.

As a resident of Lower Manhattan, he knew how much his neighborhood was growing and that there was a paucity of Jewish meeting places. So he started Tamid, the Hebrew word for forever, with 30 families who met on Friday nights for Shabbat.

Now the community has grown to 112 households and will have about 350 people attend Rosh Hashanah services. Tamid's Hebrew School has 150 young students. And the new sefer Torah will get its second use the following Saturday at the bar mitzvah of Levine's older son.

The relationship between St. Paul's and Tamid seemed destined, Levine said, from the time he first visited the chapel and noticed the Hebrew letters representing God's name at the top of their altar. Trinity Church Wall Street, which owns St. Paul's, lets the synagogue community use the space in exchange for an annual donation. It provides support staff, from security to the audiovisual crew doing sound checks Tuesday in preparation for Rosh Hashanah services.

"We value the warm relationship we have with Tamid, which is built on our shared experience with deep faith traditions," Trinity Church Wall Street's senior minister, Rector Rev. William Lupfer, told Haaretz. The relationship is so close that Levine has been frequently invited to deliver the sermon at Trinity Church, which is just a few blocks down Broadway.

While the new sefer Torah is not the first in the United States to be written by a woman, or even the first in New York City, it is the first in Manhattan.

There are at least 20 woman-written Torah scrolls in the United States, said Jen Taylor Friedman, a soferet (scribe) and a teacher of other women (and men) in the art of the sacred calligraphy also used to create tefillin and mezuzah scrolls.

Though Manhattan is usually seen as the center of the American Jewish world, in this case it's way behind other parts of the United States, Friedman said. The West Coast has been way ahead of New York. "Congratulations, Manhattan," she quipped. "You've caught up to the 20th century."

Tamid's Torah was written by one of her protégées, soferet Julie Seltzer. It's the third Seltzer has written, she said. The first was for the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, where she wrote the entire sacred document while being viewed by museum visitors as a kind of performance art piece intersected with Jewish tradition. That sefer Torah was finished in 2011 and her second one, for a San Diego synagogue, in 2012.

She makes her own quill pens from turkey feathers and procures the other supplies from a scribe store in Jerusalem. Levine found Seltzer after interviewing 10 others. "We were not looking for a female scribe," he said. "We were looking for someone who represented our modern Jewish values."

As soon as they spoke they knew it was a good match, both said in separate interviews. Tamid commissioned her while she was living in Mitzpeh Ramon in southern Israel, where she began working on the New York community's Torah.

Seltzer did most of the work from her home office in Beacon, New York, where she now lives. She completed it just this month.

And she's happy she'll be visiting the scroll that she calls "my third baby." While she feels a connection to the other two communities for which she has written Torah scrolls, she will be spending significant time at Tamid in the coming year as its scholar in residence. "Tamid sees me as part of the community," she said. "It's a good feeling."

Debra Nussbaum Cohen
Haaretz Correspondent

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