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## Rare Torah scroll written by woman on loan to Palo Alto congregation

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One of just two Torah scrolls ever to be written by women from beginning to end will spend the next couple of months in Palo Alto.

Created by Julie Seltzer while in residence at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, the "As It Is Written: Project 304,805" Torah scroll is on loan to Congregation Etz Chayim through March 4.

Rabbi Ari Mark Cartun said the museum invited congregations to apply for a chance to host the Torah scroll. The Torah scroll has also made stops at Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, Reutinger Community for Jewish Living in Danville and Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco.

"My job is to make Judaism exciting as well as understandable. I figured that this is one way to make people pay attention to something that has become very familiar," Cartun said in an interview Friday.

The notion of women writing a Torah scroll is unusual in Judaism, even though more and more of them are becoming rabbis and cantors, according to Ellen Bob, Congregation Etz Chayim's executive director. The Torah scroll, which contains the Five Books of Moses, is the most holy and important object in Judaism.

The task, which takes considerable training to master, has been performed by men for the past 3,000 years, Cartun added.

"Our congregation is 100 percent egalitarian, but there are certain things you just don't find," he said. "Even if you wanted to, you couldn't get a Torah that was written by a woman because there weren't any."

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That changed with the Women's Torah Project. In 2003, the Kadima Reconstructionist Jewish Community of Seattle underwrote the training for two of the first woman scribes, or soferets. Eventually, six soferets on three continents, including Seltzer, produced the first Torah scroll written completely by women.

Seltzer started work on "As It Is Written: Project 304,805" in October 2009. Over the course of 18 months, she filled 62 sheets with 248 columns, 10,416 lines and 304,805 letters.

The Torah scroll will see regular use during services at Etz Chayim starting today, Cartun said.

The Song of the Sea, found in the Book of Exodus, will be read first. The selection is fitting because it introduces Miriam, who along with the prophetess Deborah is a popular female figure in Judaism, Cartun said.

"This is women's day," he quipped.

All are welcome to attend today's services, which will take place from 10 a.m. to noon in the congregation's meeting hall, Cartun said. Etz Chayim is located at 4161 Alma St. in Palo Alto.

More information about "As It Is Written: Project 304,805" is available at <http://bit.ly/Yu2Z5p>.

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