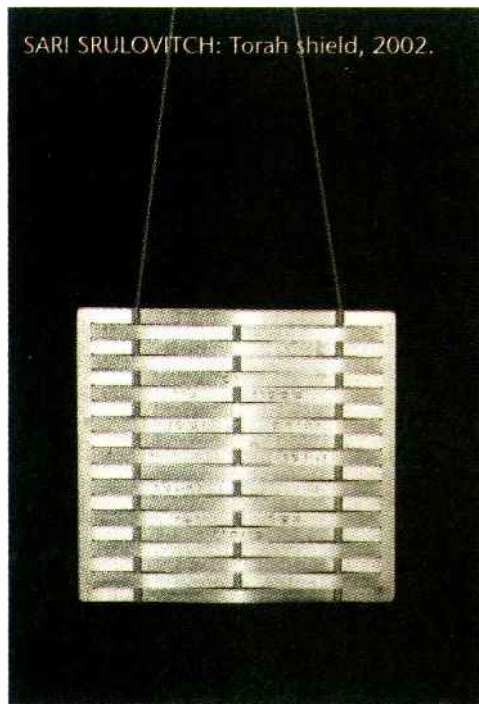


Pointing the way

Israel Museum displays sacred ritual objects made by women



Women designers point the way

The Israel Museum presents works by three contemporary Israeli artists who make ceremonial objects which decorate the Torah

• By BARRY DAVIS

Exhibitions are, of course, first and foremost visual experiences, but the “Pointing the Way” Judaica show, currently up and running in Jerusalem at the Israel Museum’s Marc Rich Gallery for Jewish Ceremonial Art, offers visitors an intriguing textual introduction.

The English title of the exhibition is not a direct translation, but conveys the spirit and intent of the attractive display. Literally translated, the Hebrew headline reads something like “The Exaltation [or Ennoblement] of Women,” followed by the sub-heading “Sacred Articles by Contemporary Female Designers.” There is a subtle play on words here: The Hebrew word for “ennoblement,” *hidur*, sounds similar to *hadara*, or exclusion, a word often associated with some attitudes in the Orthodox community toward women’s role in the public sphere.

Curator Sharon Weiser Ferguson makes no bones about the thinking behind the show. “The idea of women making sacred ritual objects has always interested me, because I believe that the experience of the majority of women in the religious world, or in Judaism in general – even though,

today, there is Reform Judaism and more open Orthodox movements – is a sense of remoteness from the actual Torah scroll,” she notes. “In general, female creators of Judaica normally make sacred objects for domestic use only... like a halla [Shabbat loaf] cover, *hanukkiot*, and [havdala] spice holders... that sort of thing. The idea of women who design ritual artifacts for the synagogue really interested me, to see what is inside the Holy Ark, rather than looking in from afar. Yes, things have moved along a bit, but it is still a rarity, in Israel, for women to address such areas.”

The eye-catching layout features many of the ritual objects one can find in any synagogue, but presented in an unconventional style. Galya Rosenfeld, one of the three exhibitors, chose to create a Torah cover from modular pieces of laser-cut, interwoven textile in shades of grey and brown. It is a far cry from the regular Torah covers with their velvety or silky textures and colorful, rich embroidery. “This is an extraordinary work,” says Weiser Ferguson. “I was amazed when I saw it for the first time. It was clearly so different from anything we normally see. Here the thinking is so different, and the appearance reflects that.”

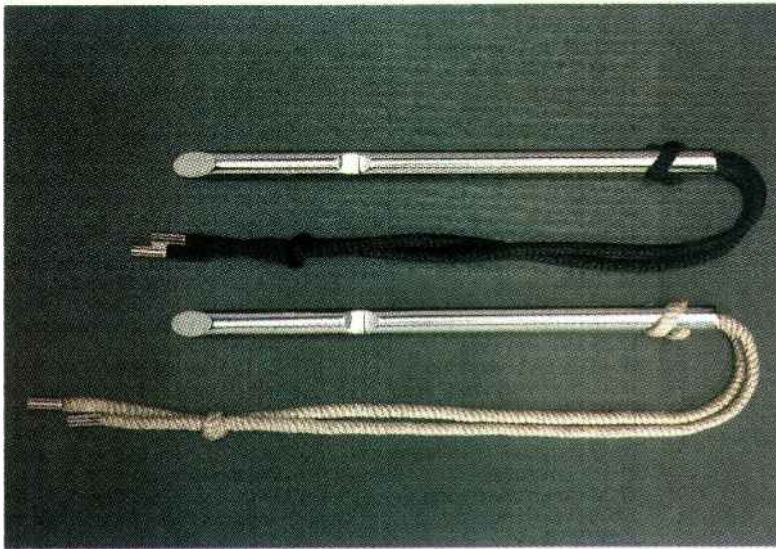
Rosenfeld brings an impressive arsenal of skills and experience to her work. Her other contribution to “Pointing the Way” is a Torah scroll sash made of similar material, and cut in a similar way, to the Torah scroll mantle. “Galya Rosenfeld is also a fashion designer and also creates Judaica items,” says the curator. “She has also made a *parochet* [curtain for the Holy Ark] in the same interwoven style.”

Rosenfeld’s works pertain to the ready-made artistic ethos, but put into time-honored Jewish practice. “She made these out of IKEA curtains she had at home, based on the very Jewish idea of taking something and elevating it to a higher level of sanctity,” the curator continues. “There was an exhibition based on that theme, here in the museum, in around 1985, which included a *parochet* made from a bridal gown.... It is all the rage, right now, the idea of redesignating articles for a very different purpose.”

The accompanying exhibition commentary includes texts written by the artists themselves, and Rosenfeld explains that the idea of “reclaiming, recycling, and upcycling” was “used in Jewish communities when secular garments and objects made from the best materials that could be

obtained were endowed with religious significance through skilled craft and turned into ritual objects.” The artist also admits to an “ulterior esthetic motive” and says that the parts of her creations and the way they fit together are more than the sum of the visual whole. “My technique of repurposing materials involves a modular design where the negative spaces between the shapes are as important as the shapes themselves – echoing, in a way, how we read ‘between the lines’ with unceasing interpretations of the Torah. Interconnectedness is vital in Jewish thought and is equally essential to the design of the modules and the way they work together to create pattern. Pattern has the power to move us to a meditative state similar to that of reading prayer.”

Even without knowing that the artists are all women, one immediately gets the sense of an alternative aesthetic mindset. Sari Srulovitch’s two Torah shields are fascinating works that offer a heady aesthetic experience. One, which looks like a hybrid between a Torah shield and a priestly breastplate, features a latticework of silver with the names of the Tribes of Israel engraved into some of the “slats.” The other combines a contrasting tactile fusion



SARI SRULOVITCH:
'Aleph' Torah pointers, 1999.
(Photos: Elie Posner)

of a silver-plated brass ring hanging from a silk collar. "The [brass] strands are similar to the loops of tefillin wrapped around the arm," explains Weiser Ferguson. "She approaches her work like weaving, and has a sort of cloth-like way of working."

Srulovitch's own commentary supports the curator's take. "Stripes run like a leitmotif through my works,"

writes the artist. "The stripes woven into the tallit (prayer shawl), the stripes impressed upon the body by the straps of the tefillin (phylacteries), even written script – in all these I see Jewish ornamentation. The silver Torah shield I designed is made of interwoven stripes, a homage to the ancient art of weaving."

The name of the exhibition is reflected most prominently in the Torah pointers that Srulovitch and Iris Tutnauer have created. Both artists combine contrasting materials to create delicate and intriguing textural tension: The former's silver pointers are augmented by laced ribbons, while Tutnauer's combine silver and wood. Tutnauer also contributed a delightful Torah shield that mostly consists of interlocking silver circles and comes from the Ramot Zion congregation, which was founded 40 years ago by Conservative rabbis from North America. Her pristine-looking Torah finials, topped by angular shapes designed to replicate the traditional pomegranate finials, are normally housed at the Shira Hadasha congregation's synagogue in Jerusalem's German Colony. "The pomegranate, one of the Seven Species, symbolizes blessing, abundance, beauty, and wisdom," reads Tutnauer's text, "hence its frequent use as a decorative element of the Torah's wooden staves, called the Trees of Life. The Torah finials I designed are made to resemble the top of the fruit with its uneven edges, connected by a chain to form a crown."

"Pointing the Way" is positioned next to the museum's permanent Judaica display, and it is a physically and spiritually contextual exercise to view the contemporary, alternative designs against the backdrop of the more traditional artifacts.

The "Pointing the Way" exhibition will run until June 2014. For more information: www.imj.org.il