
Palo Alto author transmits the ohs and ahs of Torah

BY J. CORRESPONDENT | JUNE 23, 2000

When Rivka Sherman-Gold would hear the Torah chanted at her Palo Alto synagogue, sometimes she'd cringe.

On occasion, even the best Torah chanters at Conservative Congregation Kol Emeth would inadvertently mispronounce a certain Hebrew vowel — the kamatz katan. But when Sherman-Gold would try to correct someone, she would get blank looks.

"Many people didn't even know what I was talking about."

So what did the native Hebrew speaker and biotech executive do? She spent five years of her free time to research and write a 294-page book on the topic.

"The Ohs and Ahs of Torah Reading," which she self-published late last year, is devoted to correctly pronouncing this vowel in the 1,100 times it appears in Torah, Haftarah and Megillah readings.

"It's fairly esoteric," Sherman-Gold acknowledges.

But for Torah chanters, correct pronunciation means everything because they are upholding a centuries-old oral tradition.

Born in a displaced persons' camp in Poland, she was 2 when her family made aliyah and moved to a town near Haifa. But because she was a girl growing up in a country where most Jews were either Orthodox or secular, Sherman-Gold didn't learn to chant Torah for a bat mitzvah.

Instead, she followed the sciences. She earned a bachelor's in chemistry and a master's in biophysics and physiology — both from the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa. She went on to earn her Ph.D. in physiology from the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot. And then she moved to the South Bay in 1982 to work on a post-doctoral fellowship at Stanford University.

She is currently director of business development at Abgenix, a biotech firm in Fremont.

For Sherman-Gold, the inspiration for her project actually started about 15 years ago when her son was preparing for his bar mitzvah.

A wife and mother of two, Sherman-Gold started attending Shabbat services at Kol Emeth, a highly participatory synagogue where both men and women chant Torah and Haftarah and lead prayers.

Sherman-Gold found herself inspired. "I said, 'If they can do it, I can do it.'"

She began chanting Torah herself and eventually began teaching Hebrew and religion classes at Kol Emeth, Congregation Beth David in Saratoga and Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills.

At the same time, she realized that Torah readers were at times mispronouncing the kamatz katan. It bothered her. But when she told people about it, they either didn't know what she was talking about or said it must not be important because no one had ever taught them about it.

Eventually, she decided simply to compile a list of words with their correct pronunciations. The list turned into a huge research project and finally a book.

"I have always been interested in the language," she said. "But never at this level."

She decided to self-publish the book after getting turned down by a few publishers who said the audience would be small and the book would be expensive to produce because it includes both Hebrew and English, as well as color-coded vowels.

In the end, Sherman-Gold's "very expensive hobby" was financed in part by selling some of her Abgenix stock options and with some help from the rabbis' discretionary funds at Kol Emeth, Beth David and Temple Beth Jacob in Redwood City.

In addition to financial support, Sherman-Gold received endorsements of the project from a number of current or former Bay Area residents. Supporters, whose short letters appear at the beginning of the book, include Rabbi Sheldon Lewis of Kol Emeth, Rabbi Nathaniel Ezray of Beth Jacob and Shulamit Magnus, associate professor in the Jewish studies program at Oberlin College.

About 1,000 copies of the book were printed in the first run. More than 150 synagogues and educational institutions have purchased it so far. Yeshiva University, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Jewish Theological Seminary have bought copies as well.

The academic interest in such a book isn't surprising to Sherman-Gold.

Hebrew scholars know when to pronounce the vowels correctly, she said, as do adults who study Hebrew at the university level.

But why doesn't every fifth-grader in Hebrew school or even most Torah chanters know about the kamatz katan?

The answer has primarily to do with the founding of the state of Israel and the spread of an "Israeli" pronunciation of Hebrew over the past five decades.

Under traditional Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew — which is still used by many Jews, particularly in Orthodox synagogues — the kamatz katan and kamatz gadol are always pronounced the same.

But modern Israeli Hebrew, which has a heavy Sephardi influence, is what has been taught in Hebrew schools across America over the past several decades. In Israeli Hebrew, the two vowels must be vocalized differently.

So Torah chanters who want to consistently pronounce their Israeli Hebrew correctly can turn to Sherman-Gold's book and quickly figure out when the kamatz katan appears in a reading.

"I admire the knowledge level of most Torah readers I hear," she said. "I'm actually in awe."