



If Rabbi Meir's wife had a voice

Local author mixes fact, fiction to depict Jews of Middle Ages

by [Johanna Ginsberg](#)
NJNJ Staff Writer

February 24, 2010

If New Jerseyan Michelle Cameron could reach across the generations to her famous 13th-century ancestor, Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, she knows exactly what she would ask.

“What was it like to stand there in that Paris market square and watch the burning of the Talmud?” Since she couldn't, she had to content herself with imagining what it must have been like. When she wrote about that scene — “with tears pouring down my face” — she said, “The thought of this young man who obviously was a scholar his entire life watching the thing he cared the most for being burned was very visceral.”



Author Michelle Cameron said she tried to be true to the period in which her book is set and “still keep it interesting for a modern reader.”

Photo by Peter Vidor

The scene occurs about half-way into Cameron's novel *The Fruit of Her Hands*, a fictionalized account of Rabbi Meir's life told through the voice of his wholly imagined wife, Shira of Ashkenaz. “In the Middle Ages, women weren't part of the record,” said Cameron. “So I got to invent everything about Shira — her name, her personality, everything. It was very liberating.”

The novel, a work of historical fiction, is Cameron's fifth book, the second to be published. It was issued in September.

The novel follows Shira through a life that reflects worsening conditions for Jews throughout Europe. She moves from her girlhood home in Falaise, France, to Paris after marrying Meir. They flee after the book-burning and move to Rothenberg, Germany, where he runs a yeshiva and gains his reputation as a great rabbi. But when King Rudolph threatens heavy taxes, they flee again. Meir spends his last days in jail, imprisoned for abandoning his village.

Woven into the book's narrative are the actual issues and circumstances that faced the Jews of the day, including Disputations, or public religious debates; the burning of the Talmud in Paris and other cities; blood libels; and the case made famous by Chaucer of Hugh, a Christian boy who died after falling into a well, an incident that led to accusations of murder against the Jews.

Cameron, who lives in Chatham and is a member of Temple B'nai Or in Morristown, conducted intensive research to write *The Fruit of Her Hands*, which took about three years, striving for a reasonably accurate depiction of life in the Middle Ages and of Rabbi Meir's life.

But the plotline is fictitious, with its romance novel elements adapted to Jewish mores: When Shira and Meir look into each other's eyes, they realize they are each other's *beshert*. A rabbinic scholar, he warms to her erudition and even has her write letters for him when an injury prevents him from using his hand. There is even a love triangle between Shira, Meir, and Nicholas Donin, a Jewish-born apostate who became an avid persecutor of the Jews of Europe.

'True to the period'

Cameron did not originally set out to write about Meir. "My mother had always said we could trace our family tree back to the 1200s. But she never really said who we could trace our roots back to," she said. She was planning to write about the woman who was her namesake and was poring over a family tree when she discovered Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg and realized he was a pivotal figure in Jewish history. Once she read about the burning of the Talmud, she said, "I knew I had to write this story."

She's not certain what Meir would think of her were they to meet today. "He'd be disappointed that I'm not an observant Jew. But I do think he would appreciate that what I found in him I show people. I have a tremendous respect for him." She felt a "tremendous responsibility" to depict him accurately, she said.

Part of what led her to create Shira was a desire to have a character she could relate to and speak through, especially when she disagreed with Meir. "This is a period of time in which a lot of decisions are being made and a lot of the religion was being codified so that women would have much less of a part in it — they were becoming more subservient to men," the author said. "Through Shira I felt I could have the debates I might have if I met him."

In her research, and particularly in reading his letters, she learned that Meir came out strongly against women participating in their sons' circumcision. She includes in the novel a disagreement over this between Meir and Shira. Meir's ruling, of course, stands.

Shira is an educated, even erudite woman, who could be viewed as a proto-feminist — or not aggressive enough for contemporary readers. In the end, said Cameron, it's fiction. "Some of the things I wrote about might not have happened but need to be interesting to a modern reader," she said. "I was trying to get a balance — to be true to the period as much as I can be and still keep it interesting for a modern reader."