

## Digging for family roots yields novel

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STAFF WRITER

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In writing "The Fruit of her Hands, The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz," author Michelle Cameron connected with her roots, both ancestral and writing style.

The idea for the story originated with something her mother always told her, that the family could trace its roots back to the 13th century. While looking up information on the relative for whom she was named, Cameron also found the story of Meir ben Baruch of Rothenberg, a renowned Jewish scholar of medieval Europe. She thought his story was fascinating and that there was an historical novel waiting to be written.

A poet, Cameron has already published a book, "In the Shadow of the Globe," a story in narrative verse, set in William Shakespeare's time. "The Fruit of her Hands," which is published by Pocket Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, was also to be done in verse, but that form never worked out right.

"The material wanted to be a full-blown historical novel, so I gave into it," said Cameron.

It was always her dream to be a novelist, but an unsuccessful attempt with a young adult novel caused Cameron some doubts and led her to find her poetic voice, instead. She described having her long-lost dream finally realized as "mind-boggling."

The book jacket gives this description of Cameron's novel: "Raised by her widowed rabbi father and a Christian nursemaid in Normandy, Shira is a free-spirited, inquisitive girl whose love of learning shocks the community. But in Meir ben Baruch, a brilliant scholar, she finds her soul mate and a window on the world of Talmudic scholarship.

"Married to Meir in Paris, Shira blossoms as a wife and mother, savoring the intellectual and social challenges that come with being the wife of a prominent scholar. After every copy of the Talmud in Paris is confiscated and burned, Shira and her family seek refuge in Germany. Yet even there they experience bloody pogroms and intensifying hatred.

"As Shira weathers heartbreak and works to find a middle ground between two warring religions, she shows her children and grandchildren how to embrace the joys of life, both secular and religious."

As a 21st-century secular Jewish woman, Cameron said it would have been quite a leap for her to write about a 13th-century Jewish scholar, so she created the fictional character of his wife, Shira, to "bridge the gap."

She said she found her ancestor to be an extraordinary man and thinks it is "remarkable" that he started her family line. However, she did find some issues with his attitudes towards women. On the one hand, he was very good to them, helping women with all kinds of matters, including getting a divorce. But when it came to women learning Jewish ritual, he was not in favor of it. "I didn't like that aspect of him," said Cameron, who worked through her modern-day feelings on this by having Shira debate him.

In reviews of the book, Cameron said some readers disliked what they believed to be a passive treatment of Shira, while others did not like what they interpreted as a feminist treatment. Cameron said that she made Shira to be as assertive as she could have been in the Middle Ages and that Shira's struggles and compromises are what women have and continue to deal with.

In studying the era in which the book is set, a time when Christian attitudes towards Jews were shifting from acceptance to intolerance, Cameron came to wonder how the Jewish people survived.

"So much was stacked against us," she said.

Through "The Fruit of Her Hands," Cameron seeks to convey that clinging to learning, family, and traditions are how the Jewish people have endured. She hopes that readers will connect it with the prejudices that exist today.

Even though the book is being promoted within the Jewish community, Cameron noted that its themes are universal.

A full-time job was not a deterrent in writing the novel, which she began in 2004. She carved out time each day, waking up at 4:30 a.m. and writing for two hours. The novel was accepted by the publisher on July 2, 2008, and was released last month.

Cameron will give a presentation at White Meadow Temple on Nov. 10 at 7:15 p.m. For information, contact [auntran@aol.com](mailto:auntran@aol.com).

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