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'There's a Jewish story everywhere'

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PEOPLE OF THE BOOKS

Historic rabbi's descendant creates a fictional wife for him

The Fruit of Her Hands: The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz by Michelle Cameron, Pocket Books, 2009, 448 pages, ISBN-10: 1439118211; ISBN-13 978-1439118221. 448 pages. \$25.

Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her works praise her in the gates. - Proverbs 31:31.

By Laurel Corona



SAN DIEGO—"I don't remember the first time my mother told me I was descended from a famous rabbi who lived in Europe in the 1200s," New Jersey author Michelle Cameron recounts. "I stumbled across a reference to Meir of Rothenberg while researching my family tree. Living in the 21st century, I did what any curious historical novelist would do. I googled him." Now, years later, Meir and his fictional wife Shira are the characters at the heart of Cameron's novel, *The Fruit of Her Hands*.

As is often the case with historical fiction, even the real-life characters had to be largely invented, and Cameron had only a few facts to rely upon in building the character of Meir. While studying the Talmud in a yeshiva, Meir witnessed the public burning of all copies of the Talmud existing in Paris. Horrified and depressed, he wrote an elegy in which he poured out his love for the Talmud. Known as "*Sha'ali Srufa*" or "O You, who burn in fire," it is today one of the laments used in the annual commemoration of Tisha b'Av.

He eventually settled in Rothenberg, where he founded a yeshiva and began what would become a lifetime of writing letters in response to Talmudic questions from people all over Europe. Later, when trying to make an illegal escape from Germany, due to a rise in anti-Semitism under the Hapsburgs, Meir was captured, tortured, and imprisoned. Though the Jewish community was prepared to pay his ransom, Meir refused to go along because he knew it would only encourage leaders to do the same to other Jews. Best that it not work the first time, he felt, and he lived out the rest of his life leading his spiritual community from his cell.

And that's about it for the known facts. As Cameron states in an interview, "it was not until I created Shira that I felt I could encompass the man's fascinating life." Shira teases the outer edge of respectability for a girl and a woman, studying Talmud with the permission of her rabbi father and later her rabbi husband. She is not at all housebound, but at the same time she is a dutiful daughter and wife, scrupulous in her observance of Jewish law.

In one scene, a young Shira and Meir, at the time a student in her father's yeshiva, go to the Norman castle where her father has been taken into custody on a trumped-up charge. She is terrified that he might die believing he had failed in the mitzvah of fathering a son, and she wants him to know his wife (Shira's stepmother) has just delivered a boy.

After waiting outside for hours in the cold, they come inside to discover that her father is not only safe but deep in philosophical debate with a Christian scholar. The children are offered some soup, and famished and chilled to the bone, Shira wants desperately to take it. She looks at her father, and her heart falls at the look in his eyes, clarifying that even under that duress, she cannot have one sip if she doesn't know it's kosher.

Unlike in many arranged marriages, Shira gets the man she wants. She and Meir are beshert, and their long and (for the most part) contented marriage serves as the foundation for the second half of the book. But life is not easy for Jews anywhere in Europe. Christian communities can be whipped into a frenzy by little more than a perceived rude shrug of a Jewish shoulder, or a whispered blood libel. Shira's life is characterized just as much by fear as it is by the deep joy of being at the heart of a Jewish home as a mother and rebbetzim.

In Shira's case, the anxieties and sometimes sheer terror of living as a Jew, take on an additional personal dimension. Nicholas Donin, another real-life character brought into Cameron's story, becomes Shira's nemesis. Briefly a student in her father's yeshiva, Donin had proposed to Shira and been rejected. A true sociopath, Donin went on in real life to convert to Christianity and serve as an officer of the Inquisition. In what can only be described as the ultimate act of self-loathing, the former yeshiva boy gleefully and savagely carried out the Pope's order to burn all the Talmudim in Paris.

In the novel, he also carries resentment that burns as hot as hate toward Shira. He compromises her virtue in way that seem minor to us now—getting her alone in a room, and talking to her in public—knowing full well how his actions will be perceived in her community. Later in the book, the reader is terrified along with Shira as Donin traps her in a far worse situation. Cameron has done an excellent job of making Donin's sheer creepiness a big part of the emotional experience of this book.

The Fruit of Her Hands is equally rich as history and fiction. Most readers probably know that anti-Semitism was prevalent in Medieval Europe, but in Cameron's skilled hands, the reader experiences with pounding heart how horrifying, brutal, and pervasive it was. If I have one complaint with Cameron's narration, it is that in trying to show how endemic and accepted Jew-baiting was, she depicts it over and over again. Rarely is there an encounter on the street that does not include strings of abusive epithets, and though I imagine this might be fairly accurate, the reader gets the point sooner than Cameron stops trying to make it. But this is a small matter in a book so rich with wonderful characters, vivid settings, and an absolutely lush and wonderful depiction of the strengths of the medieval Jewish home and community. Cameron is an author I certainly hope to hear more from. This is a first-rate choice for Jewish book clubs.

Laurel Corona is a professor of Humanities at San Diego City College, and the author of *The Four Seasons: A Novel of Vivaldi's Venice*, and co-author of *Until Our Last Breath: A Holocaust Story of Love and Partisan Resistance*. She also wrote seventeen YA titles for Lucent Books, including three on Jewish subjects: *Israel*, *Judaism*, and *Jewish Americans*

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