

## The Brown Family Torah: A Historic Dedication



On Shabbat morning, **May 18**, culminating a **Pageant of Torah** centered around Shavuot, the Festival of the Giving of the Torah, we will dedicate the **Brown Family Torah**. Years in the planning, this Torah will be an extraordinary addition to our congregation's spiritual treasures and link us with a remarkable part of our Jewish history spanning millennia.

The Brown Family Torah is being dedicated by **Laurence and Lynne Brown** in memory of their parents **William and Florence Gassin**, and **Mac and Muriel F. Brown**. It is a heritage for their son **Adam** and his wife **Marla**, and their children **Ryder Wade** and **Sawyer Mac**.

The Brown Family Torah is an ancient scroll, encased in a new, modern, silver case, designed by Michael Strauss Silversmiths of New York, and created in Jerusalem. The scroll is from Iraq and the case is in the Sephardic style. In this form, the Torah is stitched to Atzay Hayim, "Tree of Life" rollers, which are permanently anchored in the case, known as a tiq, and it is read upright, from within the tiq.

The scroll of the Brown Family Torah has a remarkable provenance. It was commissioned some time around 1850 by a family who lived in a small village near the tomb of the prophet Ezekiel, about 80 miles south of Baghdad. It was placed in the tiny synagogue next to the tomb, which was, for centuries, a destination of holy pilgrimage for Jews. The local community was Muslim, and one of its members served as caretaker for the site and the synagogue.

As the Jewish community in the region dwindled, the tomb of Ezekiel evolved into a holy site for Muslims. When the Iraqi government decided to refurbish the shrine, they demolished the synagogue and discarded the Jewish artifacts, including the Sefer Torah.

As an act of respect and kindness, the last caretaker before the refurbishment asked his son to take the Sefer Torah to Jews from the area, now living in France, with whom he had stayed in contact. In 1971, the son smuggled the Sefer Torah in his luggage to France. From there it was sent to a small Iraqi minyan on Bibas Street in Jerusalem, near the Mahane Yehuda Market. In 1984, the Torah was transferred to descendants of the family who had originally commissioned it and placed in the Ark of their synagogue in Tel Aviv. Several years later, the synagogue closed, and there were no claims on the scroll. It was put up for sale, and found its way to our congregation in Elkins Park.

Ironically, this scroll was written very close to the founding of our own synagogue; both came to life, continents apart, at about the same time. When dedicated, it will be the oldest scroll in our collection; even older than our congregation.

Today, the United States is the greatest Jewish community outside of Israel. In ancient times, Iraq, which was ancient Babylonia, was the site of the greatest diaspora Jewish community, the place where the Babylonian Talmud was written, which to this day is the authoritative foundation source for Jewish tradition and law. Iraq is, of course, the site of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, whose flowing waters served as boundaries of the Garden of Eden.

The scroll is symbolic of so many streams of Jewish life which are ultimately united through devotion to the Torah itself.

The scroll is unique among those in our possession. It is not written on parchment, like the other scrolls, but on deerskin, as was the custom in ancient Iraq. It is tan in hue, not white, and has a distinctive feel and look to it. But like all other scrolls, it was written by hand, by a trained scribe, and has been fully reviewed and restored for accuracy.

The new silver case is magnificent. Capping the tiq is a pomegranate crown, flanked by two finials, also capped with pomegranates. The pomegranate — rimmon in Hebrew — is a traditional form of Torah finial, which in Hebrew is also known as a rimmon. One of the seven fruits for which the Land of Israel is distinguished in the Bible, the pomegranate is a recurrent symbol in Jewish tradition, embroidered on the robe of the High Priest, and capping the pillars that stood at the front of Solomon's Temple. The pomegranate is also identified with the Jewish mystical experience by the Kabbalists.

On either side of the opening of the case are two of the most fundamental exhortations in the Torah: "And you shall love the Lord, thy God," and "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." They indicate that Torah points us toward our responsibilities to God and to each other, and that love is fundamental to piety.

At the bottom of the case is an adaptation from a verse in Deuteronomy: "The Torah was given to us through Moses. It is the heritage of Congregation Adath Jeshurun."

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the fabled, first Chief Rabbi of Mandatory Palestine, observed that "The ancient shall be renewed, and the new shall be sanctified."

I am so grateful to Larry and Lynne for their generosity in making this historic acquisition possible for our congregation. It is a vivid symbol of renewing the ancient, and sanctifying the new. It represents the ideal of Judaism constantly staying fresh and relevant, responding to the challenge of history by being continually reinvented, while ever remaining true to the core tradition of our people. It will forever link the Brown family with our congregation's history and destiny, and the heritage of Torah that has been our People's fundamental identity.

I urge you to be with us to close a Pageant of Torah, to join in festive celebration as we dedicate the Brown Family Torah, on Shabbat morning, May 18, with services beginning at 9:30 AM.

CONGREGATION  
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