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PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN MEDINA

Sacred Scroll

Synagogue celebrates
new Torah

page 6

With Rabbi Menachem Levine looking over his shoulder, Rabbi Heshy Pincus prepares the almost-completed Torah during a dedication ceremony at Congregation Am Echad in San Jose on Feb. 19.

Story Ark

Willow Glen synagogue gets first new Torah in 20 years

By ANNE GELHAUS

San Jose's Jewish community recently welcomed a new Torah scroll to Congregation Am Echad in Willow Glen.

It was the first time in more than two decades since the synagogue last received a new Torah, according to Rabbi Menachem Levine. "In Judaism, these Torah scrolls, it's holy, it's reverent," Levine said of the ceremony held last month to commemorate the rare event. "It's a celebration of bringing a new one into the synagogue."

The new Torah was commissioned about a year and a half ago in Israel by Kevin Fagan, a member of the congregation for 19 years, after it was discovered that one of the temple's four scrolls was not kosher. Although Torah scrolls are often purchased in memory of a loved one who has died Fagan said he thinks "it's a better idea to purchase one in honor of people who are still alive so they can celebrate with you."

After a several hour ceremony on Feb. 19 which included singing, dancing and prayer, the new scroll was placed inside its new home, an ornamental cabinet called a Torah ark.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN MEDINA

With congregation members looking on, Rabbi Heshy Pincus (bottom left) prepares the almost-completed Torah during a dedication ceremony at Congregation Am Echad in San Jose on Feb. 19.

Pictured is the new Torah, commissioned about a year and a half ago in Israel.

San Jose Mercury News

Community News

San Jose: Synagogue in Willow Glen to welcome new Torah scroll

By **JULIA BAUM** | jbaum@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
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San Jose's Jewish community will welcome a new Torah scroll to Congregation Am Echad in Willow Glen on Sunday.

To commemorate the rare occasion, the synagogue at 1504 Meridian Ave. is holding a traditional ceremony known as Hachnoset Sefer Torah, starting at 11 a.m.

This is the first time in more than two decades since the congregation last received a new Torah, according to Rabbi Menachem Levine. The new scroll will replace one of the temple's four older ones.

"In Judaism, these Torah scrolls, it's holy, it's reverent," Levine said of the ceremony. "It's a celebration of bringing a new one into the synagogue."

The Torah usually refers to the Five Books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—but can also mean the entire body of Jewish law and teachings. Unlike the Christian Bible, which has been translated and rewritten many times, Torah scrolls have been rewritten exactly the same for thousands of years.

"Our scrolls are, for thousands of years, word for word," Levine said. "The laws are so strict about how you have to write those Torah scrolls. You can't sit there erasing God's name."

The new Torah was commissioned about a year and a half ago in Israel and donated to the congregation. The donor, Kevin Fagan, couldn't be reached for comment, but Levine said the scrolls are "extraordinarily expensive," ranging anywhere from \$35,000 to \$100,000. Despite the price tag, Levine said "it's a lot of bang for your buck" that "lasts for decades."

"There are scrolls that are hundreds of years old that are still used weekly," he said.

A Torah scribe, called a sofer, writes the entire scroll by hand using a feather quill and ink, copying exactly from another scroll right next to it. The scroll takes about a year to complete but if it's brought into a congregation brand new, the last letters remain unwritten until the start of the ceremony. The scroll is then taken outdoors, where singing and dancing take place for about an hour. More singing and dancing ensue when the scroll is brought back inside, followed by a prayer service before it's finally placed inside an ornamental cabinet called the Torah ark.

"Once we put the Torah in the ark, its resting place, there's a big festive meal and there will be multiple speeches including the person donating this Torah," Levine said.

Because the Torah scroll is so large and delicate, a person brought it to San Jose as a carry-on item in a cross-country flight.

"It was literally hand-delivered to the temple," Levine said.

Levine said he has often witnessed the ceremony but is looking forward to officiating one for the first time.

"It's very festive," he said. "It's a day of happiness."

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Julia Baum Julia Baum is a staff writer for the weekly Resident newspapers, covering San Jose.

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