

The Temple Emanu-El Torah



Neil Yerman with Barbara Thiede



...with Benjamin Stewart



... and Phyllis Herschenfeld

For a moment, Neil Yerman, nationally recognized scribe and calligrapher, looked around the room. He waited. Then, he picked up a quill in his right hand, and asked, “Why does a scribe sing each letter as it is written?”

It says in Deuteronomy 31, verse 19, Yerman pointed out: “Write this song for yourself.”

Yerman was speaking to members of Havurat Olam, Cabarrus County’s first and only Jewish congregation. He had flown from his studio in New York to return the most precious item any congregation can possess: a Torah.

A Torah consists of the handwritten text of the Five Books of Moses – Genesis through Deuteronomy. While these books are not the whole of the Hebrew Bible, they are central to Jewish observance. A Torah must be written perfectly; every letter must be correct and intact.

Havurat Olam’s had undergone five months of restoration. But it still needed to be stitched to its wooden rollers, and there were a few last embellishments to be added to the text.

Those tasks were for the congregation to complete.

The Torah had been purchased after World War II by a Temple Emanu-El of Weldon, North Carolina. When that congregation closed its doors in 2004, the Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina gave the scroll to Havurat Olam on permanent loan.

But it was in serious need of repair. It had been written about a century before, and the first fourteen columns were unreadable. Members took over a year to gather the funds required.

Yerman wrote the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the “vav.” “What does it mean?” he asked.

Members of the congregation’s adult Hebrew class answered simultaneously.

“And,” said Jackie Kessler, Lynn Farell, Lynn Mangan, and Raymond Keasler.

“What is and ?” Yerman asked.

Congregation members tossed out a few ideas.

“And connects,” Yerman repeated. “And connects thoughts, people, and even time.”

The entire Torah before them was a “vav” Torah, he explained. Every column but seven began with a “vav.” Why did seven columns not begin with a “vav”? On the seventh day, Yerman pointed out, God rested. “Even the ‘vav’ deserves a Shabbos rest,” he said.

Then Yerman wrote one word on a scrap of parchment, singing each letter as he wrote. "Amelek," he said, and showed the word to the congregation. The tribe of Amelek, he explained, had assaulted the Israelites just after they had gained their freedom from Egypt, attacking the weakest of the people from behind.

"We write the name, and we blot it. Why, after three millennia, do we blot out the name of a people who are long gone?" Evil exists in all of us, Yerman explained. Those writing a Torah must purify themselves from any evil thought before they begin writing. "We blot out the name of evil intention."

The congregation was ready. Eleven members were to be honored with the task of sewing the scroll on the rollers and embellishing the very first words of the Torah.

The congregation's president, Brian Cutler, had chosen ten women to represent the congregation, and one young boy – the next child to undergo a bar mitzvah.

Ruth Kingberg, who traveled on one of the last children's transports out of Germany in 1938, was the first to write with Yerman. She placed her hand over his.

"Down," he instructed, "to the right. To the right."

Minutes later, a nine-branched crown stood over a three-branched crown in the first line.

"In the beginning..." Yerman said.

Some of the congregations' members cried as they watched. Others smiled.

"When he was talking about the meaning of 'vav'," Ginger Jensen said later, "and how it was symbolic of birth – it was like all of us were having this addition to our family all at once. That was wonderful."

The Torah had come home.

Barbara Thiede, published in *Charlotte Observer* May 27, 2006 p. 3E

Our restored Torah

It takes a village... and patience, and time. But by December of 2005, only a year and a half after Havurat Olam received the Temple Emanu-El Torah on permanent loan, the little congregation had managed to raise thousands of dollars to send their sacred scroll to the New York studio of Neil Yerman, nationally recognized sofer.

On May 19, 2006, the Torah returned, and the celebration was, simply, extraordinary. Thanks to a friend of the congregation, Jennifer Price, we have the program on DVD, and it has been beautifully completed with a booklet and cover that include pictures from the event and a dedication. **The DVD can be purchased for \$18 from Havurat Olam.** Please direct inquiries to info@havuratolam.org



The DVD was, quite naturally, dedicated to Temple Emanu-El. Our heartfelt thanks for their trust. We shall keep the Torah well, we promise!

We would also like to thank all those who donated to our Torah Fund, and extend particular thanks to Temple Israel of Salisbury, whose congregation lent us one of their two precious Torahs to read from during the six-month absence of our own.

Donors to the Torah Restoration Fund

We would like to say a special Thank You to **McGill Baptist Church** of Concord, NC. The church not only invited us to hold our services and events inside its doors, but it also refused to take a rental fee. Reverend Steve Ayers asked us to apply everything we would

have paid in a year's time to our Torah Fund. We are very grateful to this church for providing us with a temporary home and for helping to make it possible to restore our beautiful Torah.

Other donors include **anonymous** individuals and:

Andrew Ball
Fran Black
Lisa Boguslaw and Seth Holtzman
Barbara Cohen and Sheldon Cohen
Brian Cutler
Carla Eastis and Michael Serulneck
Andrew Ettin and Carole Stuart
Lynn Farrell
Eddie Gindi
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Lynette and Michael Green
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Samuel Leder
Lee Leewood
Lynn Mangan
Shirley Phillipson
Stanley Robboy
Shirley Szabo
Barbara and Ralf Thiede
Scott Verner
William Whitley
Richard and Phyllis Woollen

Young members who have donated to the Torah Restoration Fund:

Brandan Bosques
Alex and Kagan Griffin
Emma and Madeline Labovitz
Erik Thiede

Donation of cleaning the Torah mantle:

Martin Young of Young Cleaners, Concord NC

How our Torah Came to Cabarrus County

In December of 2004, the remnants of a small Jewish congregation in Weldon, North Carolina had to make a painful decision. What to do with its two Torahs, with its stained glass windows, its memorial plaques, its ritual items? Temple Emanu-El's remaining members were facing sad facts: There were no longer enough Jewish families living in Weldon to sustain the synagogue.

The congregation's history dated back to the early 1900's; its two Torahs were at least fifty years old. One had been promised to a nursing home in Virginia Beach.

Harry Kittner, one of the community's longtime leaders, announced that a small congregation in Cabarrus County had asked if they might welcome the other.

Over the next few months, the Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina became the official owner of the Temple Emanu-El Torah, which was then transferred on permanent loan to Havurat Olam, Cabarrus County's first Jewish congregation. Since October 9, 2004, Havurat Olam has read from the Torah monthly. As far as we know, we are the first Jewish congregation ever to chant from a Torah in Cabarrus County.

Who Wrote the Temple-Emanuel Torah?

Neil Yerman has told us that our Torah was written by at least four different hands. A master scribe from Eastern Europe, one from Macedonia, and one from Moravia are among the artists who crafted, letter by letter, this beautiful Torah. The Temple Emanu-El Torah is at least a century old. Its parchments reflect the places our people has been, the worlds our people have inhabited.

The Havurat Olam Torah Fund

No Jewish community can be complete without a Torah; no Jewish community can possess any greater treasure. We read from Torah, we study its words, we celebrate our heritage and our history with that sacred scroll.

Havurat Olam's Torah fund was established in December, 2003. Our first contributor was Scott Verner, editor of The Charlotte Observer's Cabarrus Neighbors. Scott's donation was made in honor of his grandfather Dr. Carl W. Oberdorfer, a Lutheran missionary to south India in the early part of the last century. Dr. Oberdorfer formed a lifelong friendship with a local man, discovering that religious and cultural differences did not, by any means, prevent the two men from sharing hopes and dreams. As Scott told us, the two men gave the poorest people in the region "something priceless and permanent: a school system and, with it, hope." He also wrote, "I can hope that my meager gift will nourish the seed you have planted and that, with time and under care of yourselves and many others, it will grow likewise into something priceless and permanent."

Scott's gift (and not a meager one) did, in fact, "nourish the seed". In the end, Havurat Olam had to raise many thousands of dollars to restore the Torah. She is now beautifully clear and clean, and it is a delight to read the brilliantly black script in every column.

But we know that every congregation has a duty to provide ongoing and attentive maintenance for their Torahs. That's why we will keep our Torah Fund alive and healthy.

Please consider adding to it. You may make your tax-deductible gift to Havurat Olam. Simply send a check or money order to the address below.

We welcome contributions for any purpose. Please indicate on your check or in an accompanying letter or card if you would like to make your contribution in the name of a loved one, or would like to specify a purpose for your gift.

Havurat Olam
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How is a Torah Made, and How is it "Read"?

The scroll is made of specially prepared strips of parchment that are sewn together. Columns of Hebrew script begin, literally, with the words "In the beginning." The scroll starts with Genesis and ends with Deuteronomy. The Torah contains the Five Books of Moses; while these are not all of the major texts Jews study, the scroll is central.

The Temple Emanu-El Torah contains an unusual feature. The scribes, who would have needed a year to write the text, arranged the layout of the words so that each column in the entire scroll, with only six exceptions, begins with the letter "vav."

A Torah must be written perfectly; every letter must be correct and intact. The words contain no vowels, nor are chapter and verse indicated in any way. Those who read from Torah have had to study printed or written versions that include both vowels and the "trope," musical symbols indicating the correct melody to be used for each word. Readers are not allowed to touch the parchment; the oil on their hands can damage the ink.

To read Torah requires knowledge, experience, and courage. May what you hear at Havurat Olam's services be given to you with love and reverence.



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