

Wednesday, Dec. 01, 2010

Holy Rollers protect temple's Torahs

As Hanukkah approaches, group is highlighted for its care of sacred scrolls

Marissa Brooks



(From left) Kent Novell, Philip Schreiber, Shirley Fytelson, Beverly Tirsun, Rabbi Druin, Shari Goldberg (back of her head) gather as Rabbi Druin instructs the Holy Rollers on how to care for the Torahs. Photo courtesy of Sara Schreiber

"When I grew up, I was told, 'You can't touch the Torah,'" said Barbara Feld, a Hebrew teacher at Temple Beth El in Shalom Park.

Growing up in a conservative synagogue, Feld, 57, was not allowed to read from the Jewish holy scrolls because she is female.

Now, as a member of the Holy Rollers, a volunteer group of about 25 Temple Beth El congregants who take care of the temple's six Torahs, Feld is allowed - and encouraged - to touch the Torah. She even gave her Monday night sixth-grade Hebrew School class an opportunity to clean a Torah.

A Torah is a holy scroll; a copy of each of the five books of Moses, handwritten in Hebrew on special parchment.

"Our Torahs are the heart of our community," said Rabbi Micah Streiffer of Temple Beth El.

Torahs are treated with great care and respect according to Jewish laws and are read from three days a week and on Festival days.

"For the Torah to remain kosher, all of the letters must be intact," or readable, said Cantor Andrew Bernard.

It was the dream of Temple Beth El Senior Rabbi Judy Schindler to have all of the Torahs examined and repaired before moving them into the temple's new building, which will open in January.

"With all the plans for our physical renovation finalized, I wanted to be sure that our Torahs, that stand at the center of who we are, were well-cared for and seen by our congregants as our highest priority - not only physically but spiritually," said Schindler.

Five of the Torahs at Temple Beth El were commissioned by families that are present or past members of the temple. Temple Beth El also has a Torah that was saved during the Holocaust and is on loan from the Westminster Scrolls Trust.

Temple Beth El hired Rabbi Gedaliah Druin, a "sofer" (a trained scribe) from south Florida, to examine the temple's six Torahs. Druin also spent an evening training the Holy Rollers. Druin "told us that there are a number of ways in which the letters could be damaged or rendered unreadable," said Bernard. "The parchment can also be damaged over time, and the scrolls can become dusty and dirty, and can become moldy if not maintained properly." Druin said the temple's Melasky and Holocaust Torahs are approximately 160 years old and 120 years old, respectively.

"Congregants learned how to properly roll the Torahs, check them for problems, clean them, sew seams that have come apart and make small repairs," said Sara Schreibman, executive director of Temple Beth El.

Feld said Druin taught the Holy Rollers to use special erasers and brushes to clean the Torahs. They look for tears, smudges, letters that have worn away, holes and other damage. They use non-acidic sticky notes to mark the problems, then log them in a notebook so when Druin returns in December he will know where and what needs repair. Then they re-roll the Torahs carefully and evenly and redress them in fabric covers.

"It's exciting to play a role in a group that cares for Torahs, which I've always thought were not to be touched," said Philip Schreibman, 31. Each of the Torahs has a team of congregants assigned to it.

Temple Beth El is fortunate to have a Holocaust Torah - a Torah lost, hidden, or stolen during the Holocaust - which Schindler describes as "beyond value."

Feld, Holly Gainsboro, Tamar Myers and Robin Zimmerman clean the Holocaust Torah.

"We have the great honor of being able to work on the Holocaust Torah," Feld said. "We touch the Torah. We look at it. We chant (the Hebrew words). We talk about Torah while we clean it."

Feld said she also takes pleasure in knowing her group cleaned the Torah portion chanted by Bernard during the High Holy Days.

Retired elementary school teacher Zimmerman, 58, said, "I am thrilled that all the generations after me will be able to feel the pride that I do when hearing about this scroll's history and how we were able to keep it in good condition for all to share at our Temple."

Each scroll has its own history.

"They tell the stories of our people through their words, and each of them individually tells a story about our people through its own history," said Streiffer. "With the Holy Roller program, we as a congregation can commit to taking care of our scrolls."

Marissa Brooks is a freelance writer for South Charlotte News. Have a story idea for Marissa? E-mail her at mbrookspt@earthlink.net.

- Learn more:

Temple Beth El, 5101 Providence Road, 704-366-1948, www.beth-el.com.

Read more: <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2010/12/01/1864173/holy-rollers-protect-temples-torahs.html#ixzz16t0cIeu8>