

Torah

by Sari Telpner

In 1997, my Jewish Renewal Congregation, P'nai Or of Portland, was given a Torah on a permanent loan basis from Congregation Beth Shalom in Sioux City, Iowa, 2 hours north of Council Bluffs, Iowa where I grew up. Their small Jewish Community had greatly dwindled over the decades as Jews moved to larger communities in the area such as Omaha, Minneapolis or Des Moines. In Council Bluffs, the home of my childhood synagogue, they no longer met for services. I initially contacted the Council Bluffs synagogue, B'nai Israel, with a request that they might loan us one of their 12 Torah's in storage and no longer in use. Sadly, they were not willing to part with any of them in order to help out our growing community.

When I told my sister Marci, she suggested, "Call Dodo," Dodo, Doris Rosenthal, was Marci's mother-in-law and administrated the Jewish Federation of Sioux City, Iowa and Congregation Beth Shalom. Dodo's brother-in-law, Jim Sherman, was the spiritual lay leader of Beth Shalom.

I had a call with Dodo about a Torah. She was quite enthusiastic and promised to "get the ball rolling." My then husband, Asha, our two children, and I planned to visit my family in Council Bluffs in June. This would be the perfect time to go to Sioux City and meet with Dodo and Jim about a Torah for P'nai Or.

Sioux City is under a two-hour drive from Council Bluffs. It was a sunny, hot and muggy, Iowa day. It smelled like the mid-west in summertime, thick and clover sweet. Dodo met us at Beth Shalom. She explained that in 1994, Sioux City's Reform and Conservative congregations merged leaving an abundance of Torahs. They sold a building and commissioned an architect to redesign the remaining synagogue to house Federation and synagogue offices, and provide a sanctuary, chapel, library/study room, mikvah, social hall, classrooms and two kitchens to accommodate Reform and Conservative members.

As Dodo led us through Beth Shalom, Asha and I were filled with a sense of beauty, simplicity, and spirituality. On the left wall, inside the front entrance, was a lit display of the doors to a carved wooden ark from a demolished Orthodox Synagogue. Jim Sherman's great grandfather, Avraham Shulkin, carved a magnificent ark in 1907. The ark's golden hands reach out from above, with fingers spread in the priestly blessing. Avraham Shulkin also carved a second ark which is on display at the Jewish Museum in New York. Dodo next showed us the social hall that housed a stained-glass piece from the early Reform Movement in Germany. The colorful, backlit work showed Ruth standing in a field of windblown grain. Gracing the wall near the entrance to the sanctuary, we passed a sculptured *eytz chaim* (tree of life) menorah. A member of Beth Shalom commissioned the sculpture in memory of his son who had died of A.I.D.S. In the sanctuary, antique stained-glass windows hung from the ceiling along the outer walls. Each window was lit from behind, creating a sense of natural daylight filtering through. The ark on the bimah was set back, running from floor to ceiling and enclosed with a woven curtain, white with black stripes; giving the sacred sense of a massive tallit.

Following our tour of Beth Shalom, we joined Jim and his wife, Estie, for lunch. We discussed the Jewish Renewal Movement, P'nai Or of Portland, the late Reb Shlomo Carlbach, Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi and Congregation Beth Shalom. We talked Torah and its interpretation, and spoke of the relationship between the various branches of Judaism and of Jewish Renewal's place in today's Jewish world.

Jim and Estie spoke of their son, who is a Chasidic Rebbe. Jim explained how he alternates his services at Beth Shalom. One week he leads a Reform service, the next week, Conservative. Jim told us he was collecting many prayer books with plans to put together one service at Beth Shalom to meet all of the congregation's spiritual needs. We forged a firm connection as we shared about our diverse forms of Jewish practice.

Jim and Dodo wanted P'nai Or to have one of their Torahs. They'd previously sent one to a Jerusalem congregation that included former residents of Sioux City. The Governor of Iowa, Terry Bransted, escorted that Torah to Jerusalem. Jim suggested they give P'nai Or a Torah on a permanent loan basis. P'nai Or would have the Torah for as long as it exists as a congregation and explained that their Rituals Committee would meet soon. This request would go before them and then onto the Congregation Board Members for a final decision.

Jim showed us Torahs that were potential candidates for the loan. One Torah that was only used on Rosh Chodesh (the New Moon) and was a sweet, small size. Jim loved this Torah and thought it would be appropriate for P'nai Or since we carry and dance with our Torah often, and the size was manageable. Jim offered us a Torah that had meaning to him. It was a gift to experience his sense of generosity and caring.

Beth Shalom renewed our faith in the power of mitzvot. We returned to Portland where we waited and prayed for a decision. Two months later the Board said yes!, Sari Telpner and Asha Slater returned to Beth Shalom before Rosh Hashanah for a ritual shabbat service transfer ceremony. Followed by escorting the Torah back to Portland.

Letter from Rabbi Aryeh Hirschfield:

To my friends in Sioux City, Iowa- Rabbi Sherman and the members of Congregation Beth Shalom, While I regret that I am not able to meet you face to face at this time, in order to personally receive the gift of this Torah, I pray for G*d's blessing that I may have the opportunity to do so in the near future. Mere words cannot express my gratitude and the gratitude of the members of P'nai Or of Portland for the gift of the use of this Torah, and I want you to know that our prayers and good wishes will be with your community whenever we read from it. *** (I pray that we will always be worthy of the sacred trust you have bestowed upon us) As you have helped strengthen the chain of transmission of Torah in our community, may you be blessed to see your children and your children's children engaging in the study of Torah and the practice of good deeds. As you have brought great joy to our community may you be filled with joy. As you have generously bestowed this Sefer Torah, this book of the Torah, upon us, may you be inscribed for the coming year, and for many years to come, in the Sefer ha-chayim, the Book of Life.

B'shalom

Rabbi Aryeh Hirschfield

P'nai Or of Portland
Portland, Oregon

Next, Asha read a letter from the P'nai Or Council President, followed by a sharing from Sari:

“What you are loaning to us, a holy Torah, has deep meaning to our community. At P'nai Or, we view a Torah as something sacred and living, that moves into the future with our people. It is living, not an ornamental object, viewed as something from the past. Our path in P'nai Or, is to make Torah a real and valid teacher in our daily lives. In receiving the blessing of this Torah from your congregation, our communities become linked in the connection of Torah. When one gives so openly, with open, loving hearts, the blessing from this comes back in manifold ways.

It has been beautiful throughout this process to find that besides my own connection to the Sioux City Rosenthal's—Dodo's son, David Rosenthal is married to my sister, Marci and we have discovered that one of our active members, Louise Klemperer, is a cousin of Beth Shalom member's, Luetta and Bert Lipschutz. And another P'nai Or member, Phil Goldsmith was related by marriage to Jan Swire of Portland, who is a first cousin to Estie Sherman, the wife of lay leader, Jim Sherman. As Jews we truly are one family, and remain linked through the bond of Torah. In your generosity we feel this openness that links one family. And we will bless your family always in our prayers. We pray that the Eytz Chaim (Tree of Life) sends forth its branches and binds our congregations together in Torah.

P'nai Or would like to share a small piece of Oregon with Beth Shalom. We commissioned a Jewish artisan from the Oregon Coastal Mountains to design and carve a mezuzah for Beth Shalom. The mezuzah represents the Eytz Chaim, and was carved from the trees of Oregon. As the Torah from you shall bless our congregation, may this mezuzah bless you and be a reminder that the Tree of Life weaves its branches threading us together.”

Finally Rabbi Sherman gave a brief talk:

"Thank you for the mezuzah. We will put it in a prominent place to enjoy, and we'll remember each time we look at it, that we have a piece of our congregation there, a connection in Portland, as well as relatives. It will always remind us that we have done something beautiful. We talk about the three pillars of Judaism- GOD, Torah and Israel (the people Israel). What better way do we see it than tonight.

1. - G-d is our guiding light, G-d is the center of everything, G-d is the main character if not the only character in the Torah. G-d is one G-d and we believe G-d is our creator. God is much a part of this evening because God created all of us.
2. - Torah...The Torah we've given on a loan to P'nai Or- Faces of Light. What better thing than a Torah to support them and to give us a connection to them.
3. - Israel-the people hood- Look at the connection- We are one people, we have one G-d, we have one Torah and one people-Am Echod. The people hood is unending, we are one community. The fact that we loan a Torah to a congregation in Portland,

Oregon is not something unusual. It's a natural, normal thing for us to do. We have a Torah that we don't need, they need a Torah, we are one people, we are one family, so what better could it be? Me Bet Shalom L' P'nai Or- From Beth Shalom to P'nai Or.

With all our heartfelt love and concern for you and you should only remember that there are people who do care about you, and we are those people. Mazeltov to you, and use it in the best of good health."

We traveled home to Portland on Sunday with our treasured scroll in our arms. We had wrapped it in Asha's tallit (prayer shawl) and then zipped it into a garment bag. We had no problem getting through security as we boarded our flight to Denver. Once on board we realized that the Torah would not fit in the coach section overheads. A man seated in the front row of first class saw our bundle and immediately asked, "Torah?" We nodded and he said, "I've got space in the closet in front of me, I'll take care of it for you." Once in Denver we rushed to catch our flight to Portland. The attendants offered us early boarding in order to stow the Torah safely. As we boarded the plane, the attendant found an overhead bin near our seats and voluntarily stood guard, directing passengers to not open the compartment.

When we arrived in Portland, Asha and I were the last passengers off the plane. P'nai Or had sent a welcoming party who greeted us with hugs, kisses and flowers. The terminal was filled with music and song. We all took turns dancing with the Torah as Rabbi Aryeh played guitar. While travelers gawked, a news channels interviewed Rabbi Aryeh for the evening broadcast.

Our large party caravanned from the airport to our home, where P'nai Or's newly, handmade wooden ark awaited her Torah. Asha and I stored the Torah in our home until Rosh Hashanah as we had no permanent building yet.

Having a Torah in one's home brings about much blessing. What we did not know that day was that our home would soon become a sacred temple of community, love, spirit, angels, and broken hearts. The Torah would be our anchor.
(there is a part two to this story)