

# The story of our Torah

By **HARRIET EISENKRAFT**

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**O**ur Torah's journey began somewhere in Poland about 100 years ago.

In a rural shtetl or in one of the major cities, a sofer did the painstaking work of writing its script. Our Torah may have then gone on to a local shul, but it is more

## Guest Voice

likely that it landed, like countless others, in the arms of one of the many community members traveling to the new world, to the United States.

Perhaps that traveller was rescuing it from destruction and intended to keep it safe until a new home could be found. Perhaps the traveller was simply the courier who had been asked by the members of an already-existing congregation to bring it to them. We don't know where our Torah found its welcome once it reached the shores of America at the turn of the century.

What we do know is that some time in the 1940s it took a journey once again, this time to a military base in a suburb near Chicago. It stayed there until almost four months ago, when it arrived in Toronto in the arms of another traveller who brought it to our congregation, Toronto's Shir Libeynu (Hebrew for Song of our Hearts).

Actually, the traveller was coming home after visiting relatives in Manhattan, where the Torah rested between journeys in the offices of the Jewish Welfare Board (JWB). The JWB has been in existence since 1917 as the only agency in the United States organizing Jewish programs, education and chaplains for American military centres.

Responding to the call from bases for Torahs during the war years, it gathered hundreds of scrolls and distributed them throughout the world. It had two sources: the many synagogues around the country that were shifting or closing down; and, mainly, congregations whose members felt it was their patriotic duty to donate.

It was always understood that the Torahs belonged to the JWB because "the armed forces didn't want to deal with something so holy," remembers Rabbi David Lapp of the JWB.

Our Torah, with its original writing intact but now in a new blue velvet cover, stayed in a non-denominational chapel at Fort Sheridan, Ill., for about 50 years, says Rabbi Lapp. It served the community there until the Jewish chaplain departed when the base scaled back operations. The JWB took it and others back to its headquarters in Manhattan and offered them for sale.

As it turns out, Shir Libeynu was looking for a Torah. Our liberal, egalitarian congregation had been using two other Torahs over the seven years of its existence. One was on loan from a larger congregation for our popular High Holy Day services, held at the Cecil Street Community Centre downtown. The other, which we used only a few times, belongs

to one of our members, whose grandfather brought it over from Romania.

This second Torah had been stored in a fur vault on the Prairies after a tour of duty in various rural communities (but that's another story). Its binding, however, was torn and needed expensive repairs if we were to continue to use it. We decided that we needed another one.

After our lay spiritual leader, Aviva Goldberg, heard about the JWB's cache, our enthusiastic board endorsed the purchase of our new Torah. The JWB would, in turn, use the money we spent on the Torah for its programs for the needy.

In what can only be described as a bashert series of events, last January, one of our members was about to visit his parents and adult daughter in New York. He agreed to bring the Torah back with him. After carrying it in its massive cardboard box through the streets of Manhattan, onto the train to Long Island and into the baggage section of an airplane out of LaGuardia, he eventually emerged with it at the customs section of Toronto's Pearson International Airport.

The question then arose: how to explain this holy relic to a government official who would determine whether it could enter the country and how much it would cost to do so? Added security measures since Sept. 11 only heightened the concerns. The person at the first desk referred him to a supervisor.

"This is a Torah," explained the traveller. "It's a religious item, written 100 years ago to be used..."

"I know what a Torah is," interrupted the bemused, Jewish, customs official, who then consulted his supervisor by phone, who also happened to be Jewish. What a coincidence in a world of so few Jews! Our Torah entered the country legally and as smoothly and as economically as possible.

On June 9, at 3 p.m., Shir Libeynu will celebrate the dedication of our very own Torah in a service and procession through the community garden of the Scadding Court Community Centre in downtown Toronto. All are welcome.

Although our congregation does not yet have a building, we do have a Torah and a group of people who are dedicated to a meaningful, inclusive Jewish life. Shir Libeynu is affiliated with the Network of Jewish Renewal Communities (NJRC). It provides communal activities throughout the year in which traditional families, singles, gays, lesbians, same-sex and interfaith couples and members of the deaf community may participate and feel at home.

"We at Shir Libeynu are overjoyed that this well-used, wonderful Torah has come into our lives and that we will be able to continue its active use for our services. It has a permanent place within the hearts of our community," Goldberg says.

*Harriet Eisenkraft is a Toronto writer and member of Shir Libeynu. Her husband, Gary Klein, was the traveller who brought the Torah to Toronto.*