

## Congregants to repair Shirat HaNefesh's Torah - article & photos by Suzanne Pollack

Fran Levin grew up in an Orthodox home in Chicago. Her grandfather, a Talmudic scholar, "celebrated education," the Potomac woman said. However, "when it came to our Jewish education, girls were kind of relegated to a fairly stereotypical role." Unlike her male counterparts, Levin did not read from the Torah. But next week, she will stand in front of her synagogue's new Torah and inscribe one Hebrew letter in it.

Levin, as well as about 15 other members of Shirat HaNefesh, which meets at North Chevy Chase Christian Church on Kensington Parkway, have been learning to write the Hebrew alphabet in their best calligraphy, which they have been learning with Jeffrey Shulevitz, a professional scribe.

The synagogue has been in existence eight years. Throughout most of that time, its congregants

have been reading from a Torah borrowed from the Fabrangen Havurah in Washington. Shirat HaNefesh, which means "song of the soul," recently obtained its own Torah that is between 100 and 150 years old and was written in German style, according to Cantor Ramón Tasat.



Fran Levin of Potomac practices her calligraphy to prepare for repairing a letter in her synagogue's new Torah. (from the print version of the article)



Lin Nemiroff of Potomac works on her Hebrew calligraphy. (from the online version of the article)

The Torah previously was used by Shaare Tikvah B'nai Zion Congregation in Chicago. That synagogue, which was founded by the great-grandfather of Roanne Tasat, the cantor's wife, closed in 2010, and its Torah has not been used since.

About a year ago, Roanne Tasat received a phone call asking if she wanted to keep the yahrzeit plaques of her relatives that had been displayed in the former synagogue.

Then, while attending a family bar mitzvah in Chicago last September, Roanne Tasat met with some members of her great-grandfather's synagogue and asked if it would be possible to purchase the Torah for Shirat HaNefesh.



From left, Lin Nemiroff, Barbara Brickman, and Deborah Kopp practice writing Hebrew letters. (from the print version of the article)

Before agreeing to obtain the Torah, she had a scribe vouch for it. He said it was in good condition, but needed some work. "Where you have a Torah that has not been read for a long time, some of the letters become unclear," Tasat said. The Hebrew scribe in Chicago made some of the letters darker but purposely left 26 letters untouched, because gematria assigns the numerical value of 26 to God's name, Tasat said.

On Sept. 5, those who have been practicing calligraphy this summer will repair the remaining letters, completing the Torah. Eve Soldinger of Silver Spring is looking forward to her turn. "I think the energy of making the letters and having it in the context of the Torah, that brings it alive," she said during a practice session Monday night at the Silver Spring home of Joan Hyman. "This makes it something more sacred," she said.

Helene Ross, also of Silver Spring, agreed: "To be a part of the tradition, it's a continuity of thousands of years of Jewish tradition."

The mostly female group of calligraphers have met in the homes of members and at the Ratner Museum in Bethesda. Monday night they dipped their pens and quills in their ink jars and practiced writing the letters, trying to get them perfect. As they displayed the letters they had worked on at home, Shulevitz coached them through the process of writing the Hebrew letter kuf, telling them it had a numeric value of 100. He then asked the participants to find parts of other Hebrew letters in the kuf.

Involving the congregation in welcoming the new Torah is very important, the cantor said. He wanted the purchase of the synagogue's first Torah to be a religious, educational and spiritual experience. "The Torah in itself is valuable, but what is most valuable is the kind of energy you can imprint" on a congregation when a new Torah is purchased, he explained.

A synagogue's first Torah marks a path for members to become more learned and more connected to their Judaism, he said, adding that many members of the independent Jewish synagogue "do not have a strong tradition in their homes. Many, many things are done for the first time."

For other members, much of what happens at the Chevy Chase synagogue allows them to rediscover their roots, he said. In addition to the calligraphy, a group of women has been sewing a white mantle that will be the Torah's cover. "They have spent a lot of time with this," he said. The Torah's dedication will include a changing of the mantle ceremony and Selichot service. Once the final letter is repaired, there will be a short parade to place the Torah into the ark.