

## The Most Precious Gift

by sue fishkoff

When Congregation Emanu-El in San Jose, California decided to donate one of its extra Torahs to a Reform congregation in Odessa, Ukraine, congregant Jonathan Hirshon, a marketing and PR consultant, wanted to do something more to help.

To make sure that this fledgling congregation could expand and enrich Progressive Jewish life in the Black Sea resort city, the two congregations would need to maintain an ongoing relationship, which meant they'd need to establish an e-mail link. So when Hirshon, Emanu-El's Rabbi Dana Magat, and ritual committee co-chair Dawn Chaffin headed to Ukraine, they carried with them not only a freshly repaired Torah scroll and assorted Judaica, but a new laptop, fully loaded with software donated by Microsoft.

"We're bringing them squarely into the 21st century," said Hirshon, who spent most of his three days in Odessa hunched over the laptop in a backroom, working on the system and training youth club director Igor Yazdan in its use.

The day the three California visitors arrived, their Odessa hosts flooded them with questions: "How big is the Reform Movement in the US?" "Is there any antisemitism?" "What does the government do about it?" "Where do you stand on Palestine?" "What do you teach in your Sunday school?"

"How do we get the 20- and 30-year-olds into the congregation?" one elderly man asked Rabbi Magat.

"We have the same problem," the rabbi answered, suggesting, to great laughter, that the Odessans let him know when they've figured it out.

The next evening, about eighty people sat in tightly packed rows of white plastic chairs, waiting for Kabbalat Shabbat services and their first glimpse of their new Torah. Julia Grischenko, the 27-year-old para-rabbi who has led the congregation for four years, stood at the front of the room, her tallit draped across her shoulders. "Tonight a new era is opening for us," she declared.

In a special ceremony, Dawn Chaffin of Emanu-El stood up, clutching the Torah to her chest. "This is the most precious gift we as a congregation have," she began, her voice choking with emotion. "And it is our great honor to present it to you."

With that, she passed the Torah to Rabbi Magat, who passed it to Rabbi Nelly Shulman (the first woman rabbi in the former Soviet Union), who handed it carefully to Grischenko. "We are two different congregations, in two different countries, we speak two different languages, but we share the same faith," Grischenko declared softly. She then paraded the scroll around the room, as everyone extended their hands to touch their Torah.

Unrolling the scroll for the first aliyah, Rabbi Magat invited the entire congregation to ascend the bimah. “This is your Torah now, so I’d like you all to come up,” he said. “I look at you young people and hope that one day each of you will take this yad in your hand and read from this Torah. It is not just for the rabbi.”

After the readings, Igor Yazdan was invited to raise the Torah before the congregation. He was nervous—it was the first time he’d held such a precious object; he didn’t want to do it wrong.

“Use your knees, my friend,” Rabbi Magat suggested. “It’s heavy—and a heavy responsibility.”

Until the congregation can afford better security, Grischenko will keep the Torah in her home, carrying it back and forth to services every Shabbat on an hour-long bus ride. It’s a little inconvenience, she insists, for a tremendous step forward in the life of her congregation.

A Sefer Torah, or Torah scroll, is the most precious thing a congregation can own. The embodiment of the undying relationship between God and the people of Israel, it is the only object for which Jews are permitted to give their lives. Jewish martyrs of old leaped into burning synagogues to rescue a Torah. Wrapped in its parchment, they died at the stake *al kiddush haShem*—for the sanctification of God’s Name.

What a gesture of love it is, then, for one congregation to gift a Torah to another.

“So many congregations in North America have spare Torahs, and so many new Reform congregations in the world don’t have even one,” points out Mandy Eisner, the World Union for Progressive Judaism’s regional director for the Pacific Southwest.

The World Union’s first Torah transfer took place in 1988, when a now-defunct Philadelphia synagogue gave one of its Torahs to Bnai Israel, a fledgling Reform congregation in San Jose, Costa Rica. World Union senior vice president Jerry Tanenbaum, then chairman of the Small Congregations Committee, hand-carried the donated scroll. Since then, the program has shepherded more than fifty Torah scrolls from larger, established congregations, mostly in North America, to new ones in South America, Israel, Germany, and the former Soviet Union—where very few Jews have ever seen a Torah scroll. (In the Ukraine, nine of the thirty active Reform congregations now have their own Torah; in Russia, just six of the thirty-one Reform congregations have one.) Building upon the Union for Reform Judaism’s temporary loan program, which encourages established congregations to loan extra scrolls to new North American Reform congregations for up to three years, the World Union facilitates Torah transfers on a “permanent loan” basis—so long as the recipient congregation maintains its affiliation with the World Union, the Torah is theirs to use, unless the donor congregation wants the Torah back, at which point it must be relinquished. Thus far a relinquishing has never happened.



Receiving a Torah scroll can itself be considered a rite of passage for a congregation, signifying that the group is ready to take its place in the world Reform community. “It’s a statement that this congregation has reached a maturation point where it is ready to use that Torah, to care for it and maintain it,” says World Union associate director Rabbi Joel Oseran. “In the US, you grew up with Torahs,” says Rabbi Alex Dukhovny, spiritual leader of Kiev’s Hineni congregation and director of the Reform Movement in Ukraine. “For us, it symbolizes a restoration of Jewish life in our country.

Its value goes beyond the cost of the Torah itself. It's about relationships, about human contact. It's a smile between our congregations.”



When a congregation decides to donate a Torah, the first decision is who will receive it. The World Union maintains a list of foreign congregations that need Torahs; sometimes a donor congregation has personal connections to a particular city and makes its own arrangements, and sometimes the history of the given Torah determines its new home. And so it was that on May 1, 2004, some 100 years after Congregacao Israelita Paulista in Sao Paolo, Brazil had been established by German Jewish immigrants, South America's largest congregation (with almost 3,000 families) gave one of its original German Torah scrolls to the World Union, which arranged for its new home in the newly formed Reform congregation in Bad Pyrmont, Germany.

Donor congregations also weigh the location of the recipient—is it, for example, in a city that members will want to visit, thus encouraging an ongoing relationship? Congregation Emanu-El in Houston decided to donate its extra Torah to a Reform congregation in St. Petersburg, Russia because, Rabbi Roy Walter explains, “St. Petersburg is the second largest Jewish community in Russia, so there are resources and people in the city to reach out to. It's a place frequently visited by Americans, especially on cruises, so there's the ease of keeping in touch. And we had a powerful feeling that we were returning a Torah to a place our ancestors had to flee. Several of us who made the trip to Russia this past June went for that very reason. It was a chance to say to the czars and the Bolsheviks: ‘You're gone, but Judaism lives, and we're going to help restore it in the land you forced our families to leave.’”

Then there's the question of whether to send a mission to bring the Torah to the recipient congregation or to bring a local representative to North America to receive the Torah in a formal ceremony, then carry it back overseas. For most people who have been involved in a Torah donation overseas, making that personal visit to the partner congregation is a life-changing experience. Jerry Tanenbaum tells the story of the time he and his colleagues “carried a Torah into a room in Minsk which was upstairs from a pizza parlor. I figured we'd be making a small presentation to the president of the congregation. But to my surprise, there were 500 people there—and as soon as we walked in, they all stood up and applauded. They were so thrilled.”



Giving away a Torah can also have a powerful effect on the donor synagogue. And so it was when Beth Emet, The Free Synagogue in Evanston, Illinois commissioned a new Torah for its fiftieth anniversary in 2000 and decided to donate one of its older scrolls to Congregation Ner Tamid in Simferopol, Ukraine. Sixteen Beth Emet congregants as well as Rabbi Peter and Elaine Knobel traveled to the Crimea to deliver the Torah—along with prayerbooks, tallitot, mezzuzot, candlesticks, and a Torah cover that had been hand-quilted by both artisans and congregants.

“We had to take the Torah off the etz chaim (the wooden poles around which the Torah scroll is wrapped) to travel with it,” says congregant Susan Melczer.

“In Simferopol, members of our congregation stitched one end of the parchment to one pole of the etz chaim and members of their congregation stitched it to the other. Then members of both congregations took turns reading from the Torah. It was very emotional.”

The two congregations have kept up the relationship. Beth Emet brought two leaders at Ner Tamid to Evanston for two weeks to attend adult education classes, the children’s Hebrew school, and regular services “and find out what we do,” Melczer says. Six months later, she and the congregation’s cantorial soloist traveled to Simferopol to take part in the first bar mitzvah at Ner Tamid since 1930, when the government shut down the synagogue. It turned out to be a group b’nai mitzvah—fifteen children, ages 11 to 19, had come from five different Crimean cities to celebrate their coming-of-age ceremony together. “And,” Melczer says, “they all used our Torah.”

Since then Beth Emet has sent Ner Tamid thousands of dollars for operating expenses, summer camp, and holiday celebrations; they also plan to support an Internet service connecting students in both congregations. “The partnership has impressed upon our young people the importance of connecting with Jews outside their own community,” Melczer explains. “NFTY teens have collected and sent Ner Tamid boxes of school and office supplies, and we encourage our b’nai mitzvah students to choose a tzedakah project that will benefit their partner congregation in the Crimea.”



Congregations that have donated a Torah overseas are hopeful that others will take up the challenge. “You don’t have to be the largest or the wealthiest congregation,” notes Jonathan Hirshon of San Jose’s Congregation Emanu-El. “We’re not, and we did it. We have the ability to help them, and to do anything less than our best goes against what it is to be ethical, to be a Jew. If others do the same, every Reform congregation around the world will have what it needs.”

Sue Fishkoff, a journalist, is the author of *The Rebbe’s Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* (Schocken Books).

## Torah Donations 101

If you have personal ties to a particular congregation, you may wish to make your own arrangements. Most potential donor congregations contact the World Union for Progressive Judaism offices, where Mandy Eisner can help them locate a suitable recipient and guide them through the process. To learn more, e-mail [meisner@urj.org](mailto:meisner@urj.org).