

Rolling the Scroll: Beth El prepares for High Holy Days

By Robyn Taylor. *The Winchester Star*, September 7, 2018

WINCHESTER — A less experienced rabbi might lose sleep worrying about all the preparations necessary for the Jewish High Holy Days.

But Rabbi Scott Sperling has been leading services for more than 40 years.

He starts several weeks in advance to get through his extensive to-do list. One thing that must be done before the services begin is to find the correct passages in the Torah.

No rabbi wants to fumble around searching for the readings while his congregation looks heavenward in embarrassment for their teacher.

“The rabbi’s nightmare at 3 a.m. is that the scroll has not been rolled,” said Sperling, who will celebrate his first High Holy Days services at the local synagogue, Beth El Congregation at 520 Fairmont Ave., after a two-year retirement.

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, begins Sunday night, and is followed on Sept. 18 by Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

They are the two most significant holidays in the Jewish calendar.

Beth El will overflow to hear Sperling and others read from the Torah, the handwritten scroll that contains the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Beth El is fortunate to have three scrolls, so that different readings can be found and marked for the various services.

For the Monday morning service, the reading will be Chapter 22 of Genesis on Abraham’s binding of his son Isaac. Tuesday’s reading will be the Creation story.

“Every Jewish holiday has a special scripture assigned to it,” Sperling said.

Beth El’s most treasured scroll is one rescued from the Nazis in Poland.

“This the most precious article in the entire building,” Sperling said as he held the nearly 100-year-old Torah, wrapped for protection in a fabric case with a butterfly applique.

Each time a young person in the congregation reads from that Torah — something every preteen must do as part of his Bar Mitzvah or her Bat Mitzvah — Sperling is moved by the symbolism of the act.

“That the next generation is able to read from this scroll gives me goosebumps every time,” he said.

Sterling needed to roll two Torahs and enlisted Beth El member Annie Lamanna to help.

Finding the beginning of Genesis isn’t tricky. It’s just a matter of rolling the scroll until all the parchment is on the left-hand spindle and the beginning is on the right-hand spindle.

“I could do it myself,” Sperling said. “But it’s much better to have a second pair of hands.”

Finding Chapter 22 of Genesis took a bit of hunting.

The Torah text is written in ancient Hebrew, a language that contains no vowels and is read from right to left.

Each page contains three to five columns with the text justified on both sides. There are no page numbers, no chapter titles, and no subheads.

“It takes a while to learn how to read from this,” said Sperling, with no acknowledgment of his understatement.

Scrolls today are still made the same way they were 2,500 years ago. A modern-day scribe, a master craftsman called a sofer, uses a goose or turkey feather to write with homemade ink on parchment, typically made from deerskin.

Regular rolling keeps the parchment supple. A reader will use a yad — Beth El's pointer is shaped like a little hand — to follow along with the script since human hands are not allowed to touch the words.

“No matter how clean our hands are there is still a bit of oil on there,” he said.

It can take a master scribe six months to create a scroll.

The scribe is allowed to correct two mistakes but on the third he must destroy that page, bury it outside and start again, Sperling said.

Scrolls can cost tens of thousands of dollars, so synagogues must budget to buy new ones and often donate their used scrolls to emerging Jewish communities around the world.

To roll the scrolls, Sperling grabbed one spindle and Lamanna grabbed the other. “Now we’re going to roll,” he instructed her.

When that was project finished, it was time for Sperling to move on to his next task: “Now I just need to write my sermons.”

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