

Maplewood Jewish Center Welcomes New Sefer Torah

By Sharon Mark Cohen

"This is historic!" The three-word proclamation flowed joyously from the lips of Maplewood resident Yehudis Bogomilsky as she marched in a Torah parade. On October 18, South Orange residents Dr. Avi and Rebecca Weisfogel presented the new Sefer Torah to their Maplewood synagogue, Congregation Beth Ephraim—Maplewood Jewish Center (MJC).

Bogomilsky moved to the Essex County Township of Maplewood, with her husband, Rabbi Samuel Bogomilsky, back in 1964. She said she does not remember there ever being a new Torah dedication in Maplewood, currently the home of two Orthodox synagogues. Until now, all the Torahs came from other shuls.

Barry Pollack, a South Orange resident, there for the "once in a lifetime"



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event, smiled as he remarked about the size of the large crowd. On this crisp fall day, many other rabbis joined the two from the Maplewood synagogues in bringing the Sefer Torah to its new home at the MJC. As the MJC Torah procession took to the streets, the neighbors lining the route to the synagogue sat smiling broadly as they watched the parade from their open front porches.

The festivities started mid-morning Sunday, with a bagel brunch at the Maplewood home of congregants Debra Chudnow and David Wise. A *sofer* (scribe), Rabbi Faitel Lewin, was on hand to help participants fulfill the mitzvah of completing the Sefer Torah by writing in the final letters with a quill.

Weisfogel, with his wife at his side, made the bracha, and penned the final letter: the letter Lamed from the word Yisrael. With that, those gathered broke out with a cheerful round of "Siman Tov U'mazel Tov."

While allowing the ink to dry, MJC Rabbi Sholom Bogomilsky offered the background story of the Torah's donation. Speaking of the need for a new Sefer Torah at the synagogue, Bogomilsky explained, "The custom at our shul is to only ask for donations once a year, on Simchat Torah."

Three years ago, when taking pledges, Weisfogel asked if the shul had a Megillah. The rabbi suggested it was not what was needed but, rather, pointedly said the shul needed a Sefer Torah. Weisfogel, who often can be found lein-



(CREDIT: SHARON MARK COHEN)

A large contingency of their family, including relatives from New York and Maryland, were there to celebrate. The Weisfogels, in thanking everyone gathered, expressed their appreciation for celebrating this amazing day with them. Rebecca added that her grandmother, who was called "Mama Hanna," was the matriarch of their family. She said, "The only one of ten siblings to survive the Holocaust, Mama Hanna endured more than anyone I have ever met. She was kind, sweet, and giving; an incredible role model, who was always smiling."

Rebecca's sister, Stephanie Pastor, added, "Mama Hanna was a righteous woman and a woman of true valor; a survivor, fierce and strong, with a deeply frum neshama." She explained that their grandmother was the lone survivor in her family, who brought her daughter, their mother Regina, and one son through Ellis Island. Pastor added, "Mama Hanna taught us to do what's good and right, and now Avi and Rebecca elevate her neshama and keep her alive in the shul. Now they will be able to remember Mama Hanna every week when they lein from this Torah."

Once the Torah was complete, Bogomilsky called Weisfogel for hagbah, where he proudly lifted the new Sefer Torah, sprawling it open for all those gathered to see. It was a sacred moment.

From the Chudnow/Wise house, hundreds of men, women and children danced in the streets, with the men taking turns carrying the new Torah under a chuppah. With festive music playing, the children carried balloons and waved flags. They paraded with police escort close to one mile to the Torah's new home in the Charles Kimmel Building of the MJC.

Lining the top of the MJC steps, Rabbi Bogomilsky, along with his father, the elder Rabbi Bogomilsky, and father-in-law, Isaac Kogan, were honored with carrying the waiting Torahs. The sight of them holding the MJC Torahs, regally adorned with their silver crowns and breastplates, waiting outside to greet the new Torah, highlighted the simcha.

Dr. Jacob Sturm, synagogue president and Maplewood resident, genuinely acknowledged, "This is a gift our shul is going to treasure forever

and we are incredibly grateful. Having our shul as a means to honor Mama Hanna and share her inspiring story makes it even more meaningful. This living Torah is a continuation," Sturm continued, "of Mama Hanna, and her family that didn't survive."

Sturm reported that as president he has to ask for help, and one phrase that comes to mind when he thinks of Weisfogel is "anything you need." It's what he always says, added Sturm, "It exemplifies his generous spirit."

Following the parade, once everyone congregated at the synagogue, booklets with hakafof for the Siyum Sefer Torah celebration were distributed. The front of the book shows the dedication, and the inside cover includes a piece of the material used for the mantle and sash of the Sefer Torah.

MJC Rabbi Bogomilsky's eldest child, Yossi, currently studying at Yeshiva Toronto Lubavitch, was in town for the festivities. He noted, "It is powerful and wonderful to complete a Torah. A Torah makes us all one; it unites us all." The younger Bogomilsky explained, "That's what it does for our community."



Avi Weisfogel with the scribe, and his wife Rebecca looking on with their family in back. (CREDIT: SHARON MARK COHEN)

Boosting the crowd's revelry, the MJC rabbi reminded the participants that it is an unusual event for an Orthodox shul to perform hakafof with live music. After the Aleinu prayer, Bogomilsky thanked all for giving MJC a great amount of simcha and invited everyone downstairs to the social hall.

As with any simcha, there was a festive meal waiting. After I'chaim, as guests mingled, they thanked the rabbi's wife for inviting them. Frumie, director of the synagogue preschool and Hebrew school, responded in a warm, welcoming style, "Every person who came made a difference."



Weisfogel doing hagbah. (CREDIT: SHARON MARK COHEN)

ing Torah at MJC said, "Okay, I'll donate it."

With a slight variation of the story, Weisfogel, addressing the great Simchat Torah tradition at MJC, said that he agreed to head the drive for a new Sefer Torah. "As time went on," Weisfogel chuckled, "I became the donor." Announcing that he was "honored to be able to give a Torah to the MJC," he added, "When Rebecca and I first came to the MJC [five years ago] we were welcomed with open arms. This is a pleasure for all of us."

"The shul is my home every week...when I'm in town." Weisfogel went on, as he thanked his "amazing wife; without my wife none of this ever would have been possible." He announced that the Torah is being dedicated in memory of his grandmother, who "had such a great presence and whom, 'everyone talked about with respect, in such a high, honored way.'"



Share Judd, Rina