Congregation Agudas Achim's Torah Scrolls

בָּּיְמֵי כְּפָרִים וּלְפשָׁיִים

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Congregation Agudas Achim (CAA) has acquired nine sifrei Torah in its more than 100-year history. Seven are installed in the Aron haKodesh of the main sanctuary. Two scrolls are kept in the chapel, where they are read at the morning minyan on Mondays, Thursdays, Rosh Chodesh, and special occasions.

Much of the following information about our Torah scrolls was provided by former CAA member and teacher Roberta Long (a"h) who traced the history of our scrolls with the assistance of scribe and teacher Dr. Eric Ray (z"l). Torah scroll nicknames were created by congregant Lucien Zahendra, one of our longest-serving Torah readers.

Included in the description of each Torah scroll is a sample of the scribe’s writing.

**CAA Torah Scroll Mantle Artist**

All the CAA Torah scroll mantle artwork was created by Dr. Mark Podwal, a premier artist of the Jewish experience. Dr. Podwal’s work can be seen throughout our synagogue. In addition to designing all the Torah scroll mantles described in this booklet (except the Mayer Family Torah scroll), he designed our parochet (Ark curtain), the metal panel on the doors outside of the Ark, the panels inside the Ark, and the beautiful Chamsa outside our chapel.
10,000 Faces of Torah Scroll

**Nickname:** Etz Chayim – Tree of Life
This is our newest Torah scroll. It was dedicated on February 11, 2018.

**Donors:** Lindsey and Evan Gremont donated the Torah scroll, and congregants made donations to write individual letters.

**History:** In 2016, CAA commissioned the writing of a Torah scroll by Soferet (female scribe) Jen Taylor Friedman from Montreal, Canada. This scroll is the first sefer Torah in Texas written by a woman.

**Mantle:** The design of the new Torah scroll mantle (cover) reflects the 10,000 Faces of Torah theme. The Tree of Life reminds us of our 100-year-old congregation as it has grown from the roots of a small group that came together in Austin to connect with God and one another. The Hebrew alphabet on the Tree of Life represents the letters written by congregants. Underneath the Tree of Life is a village representing our CAA home; we come from many places and bring our various talents and traditions to welcome all.

**What to Notice:** The scroll was written in an old tradition dating back nearly as far as Torah scrolls themselves. Some letters in this particular tradition have “crowns” on them where they aren’t usually found. Also, some instances of the letter peh have a miniature peh inside the letter, and some samechs have little “tails.” These are all connected to the story in the Talmud where God tells Moses that some of the letters have special adornments to signal that there is more to the word than meets the eye.
**Mayer Family Torah Scroll**

**Donors:** Congregant Stanley Mayer and his brother presented their family Torah scroll to CAA in March 2018 to house in our Aron haKodesh. It is on long-term loan.

**History:** The Torah scroll came from the Mayer family’s shul in Ediger, Germany, where they had lived since the 1600’s. The exact age of the Torah scroll is not known, but it’s estimated that it is more than 200 years old.

The Torah scroll was desecrated by the Nazis on Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938. Stanley Mayer’s maternal grandfather took the Torah scroll to Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1939, where it was repaired and kept at the Jewish Senior Living Home until 2000. His brother brought it to New York, where it was checked by Chabad and was subsequently moved to the Boca Raton Synagogue. Stanley and his brother then gave the Torah scroll to CAA to house.

**Mantle:** The Torah scroll mantle has a Keter (crown) on the top of two tablets containing the *Luchot HaBrit* - "the tablets of the covenant" containing the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). Underneath is the inscription, “Mayer Family Torah—Desecrated on Crystal Nacht—November 9, 1938”.

**What to Notice:** There is a metal plate attached at the bottom of the atzei chayim (wooden roller) with the family name inscribed.
Bull Creek Torah Scroll

**Nickname:** Keren (Light Ray)

**Donors:** Michael and Susan Dell donated the scroll, and many other Agudas Achim congregants made donations for writing letters in the Torah scroll.

**History:** Under the guidance of Rabbis Marc Sack and Marty Pasternak, CAA undertook a project called Siyum haTorah, the completion of the Torah scroll, fulfilling the mitzvah of writing a Sefer Torah at least once in our lifetime. Congregants participated together to observe that commandment symbolically. A sofer (scribe) in Israel wrote the Torah scroll, and it was completed in Austin by internationally renowned sofer Dr. Eric Ray and dedicated in a Siyum haTorah ceremony on May 18, 1997.

**Mantle:** This Torah scroll cover depicts five yads and a crescent moon. In Hebrew, yad literally means “hand.” Traditionally, the yad is the ritual pointer used to follow the text during the Torah reading. The yad can be held above the script or placed gently on the parchment of the Torah scroll to follow the text.

**What to Notice:** This Torah scroll is written on very high-quality parchment so that it will stay light-colored without any additional sid (white-washing plaster). Its layout exactly matches the tikkun (a book of Torah scroll text).
Holocaust Torah Scroll

Nickname: Eysh (Fire)

This Torah scroll is used in the main sanctuary, typically on occasions when two noncontiguous Torah sections are read (requiring two Torah scrolls). In memory of the Holocaust, this Torah scroll is minimally adorned. A wooden yad is used when we read from this scroll.

Donors: This Torah scroll, MST#947, is on permanent loan from the Memorial Scrolls Trust in London, which was given guardianship of more than 1500 Czechoslovakian Torah scrolls confiscated by the Nazis. The world map with links to these scrolls can be found on https://www.memorialscrollstrust.org/index.php/scrolls. CAA congregants Jarrell (Tank) Rubinett (z"l) and Judy Yudof were instrumental in bringing this Torah scroll to our congregation, where it was dedicated in 1986.

History: Our Holocaust Torah scroll is one of a few rescued Czech scrolls that are still "kosher." It’s from the town of Prerov in Moravia and was written around 1825. The scribes, whose names are engraved around the bottom wooden rollers (atzei chayim), are family members. This scroll was one of the 1564 scrolls that were sent to the Jewish Museum in Prague during World War II. Under the communist government of Poland, they were moved to a damp warehouse, the former Michle synagogue. Ralph Yablon, a founding member of the Westminster Synagogue in London, purchased all the scrolls and had them sent to the Westminster Synagogue. The majority of these were then allocated to communities around the world. We are fortunate to have one of the 10% of these scrolls which were kosher and could be used as living Torah scrolls since most of them could only be used as memorials.

Mantle: The design of the mantle features an inverted menorah, representing the train tracks coming in to the death camps during World War II (1939–45). The star represents the yellow star that Nazis forced Jews to wear.

What to Notice: The columns have more lines (60) than is now standard (42) and vary in width. The parchment has not been white-washed, and the wood is lighter, so it is lighter weight than average. In some places, the ink looks brown because of fading. The calligraphy is small, and it is sometimes easy to lose one’s place when reading it.
**Sephardic Torah Scroll**

**Nickname:** Avraham

**Donors:** Congregant Rose Tannenbaum (a"h) contributed this Torah in memory of her brother, Joe Goldfinger (z"l). The case that holds the Torah was a joint gift from Danny Fleschman (z"l), in memory of his wife Frieda (a"h), and from Freda (a"h) and Lou Gerhardt (z"l) in memory of her brother-in-law, Abe Donor (z"l).

**History:** According to Dr. Ray, this scroll was probably written in the 1930s on parchment from North Africa. The seller's name is inscribed at the end. Because the case uses velvet and a Georgian-style design done in brass, Dr. Ray speculated that it is from the large Persian community in Calcutta that was known to use styles of this kind.

**Mantle:** Our Sephardic Torah scroll is housed in a round, hard case and is read upright. The mantle depicts two tablets of the Ten Commandments with Hebrew letters floating on top. Exodus 32:15 notes that the letters on the original tablets brought by Moses from Mount Sinai were “inscribed from both their sides; on one side and on the other side they were inscribed.” This could mean that the inscription was engraved completely through each tablet. As such, the words were clearly legible on one side and appeared in mirror writing on the other.

**What to Notice:** According to Dr. Ray, the case was not created for this scroll and is too small for it. The scroll shows signs of use and was probably laid flat when it was read. The parchment has sid (white-washing plaster) on one side and the lettering is in Sephardic Yerushalmi script.
Shorter Vilna Torah Scroll

**Nickname:** Devora

**History:** This is one of the original three scrolls from the CAA synagogue located in downtown Austin on San Jacinto street (1931-1963). Little is known about this Torah scroll. According to Dr. Ray, it was written by two different scribes in the classic "Bet Yosef" script used in Vilna.

**Mantle:** Shavuot is the holiday to re-accept the Torah. The mantle reflects this holiday with the Torah scroll and the spring flowers.

**What to Notice:** This scroll has sid (white-washing plaster) on the back.

Taller Vilna Torah Scroll

**Nickname:** Shimshon

**Donors:** A gift from the Kogut and Tannenbaum families in memory of Rose (a"h) and Bernard Tannenbaum (z"l), the scroll was dedicated on November 2, 1980.

**History:** According to Dr. Ray, this Torah scroll was written in Vilna, Poland, near the beginning of the 20th century, between 1930 and 1940. The scroll was written by at least two scribes. One scribe used letters that vary from the Vilna script. It was reconditioned for use by our congregation.

**Mantle:** The mantle depicts a Torah scroll dressed in her mantle with two tablets in the center. Above the tablets are the Lions of Judah and a keter (crown). The keter on the scroll represents the city of Jerusalem.

**What to Notice:** This scroll has sid (white-washing plaster) on both sides. Therefore, it's our heaviest Torah scroll.
Chapel Torah Scroll

**Nickname:** haNa’ar (The Baby)

This scroll is used for weekday minyan in the chapel and is typically used once a month for Rosh Chodesh.

**History:** It is one of the original three scrolls from the CAA synagogue located in downtown Austin on San Jacinto street.

**Mantle:** The mantle has a Palm tree, pomegranate, and dates as a representation of the fruits gathered during Sukkot. Sukkot begins on the 15th day of the Jewish month of Tishrei. This holiday marks the end of the harvest season and the end of the agricultural year.

**What to Notice:** This small Torah scroll has sid (white-washing plaster) on the back, 42 lines per column, and small print.

Shofar Torah Scroll

**Nickname:** Leah

**History:** This is one of the original three scrolls from the CAA synagogue located in downtown Austin on San Jacinto street.

**Mantle:** The mantle depicts a shofar, machzor, and ancient style musical notes.

**What to Notice:** The ink on this Torah scroll is badly oxidized.
Accessories for the Torah Scrolls

Aron haKodesh (Torah Ark Cabinet)
The Torah Ark—in Hebrew, Aron haKodesh ("Holy Ark")—is the cabinet which houses our Torah scrolls. The Aron haKodesh is the holiest place in our synagogue; it's opened during special prayers and when removing the Torah scroll to read during services. It is customary to stand when the Ark is opened.

Atzei Chayim (Wooden Torah Handles)
The *atzei chayim* are the two wooden shafts attached to both ends of the Torah scroll, around which it is rolled. Each shaft is made long enough to extend beyond the top and bottom of the scroll; they are used as handles with which to hold the Torah scroll and to roll from portion to portion. The handle from the Bereshit (Genesis) end of the Torah scroll is placed on top when closing the scroll.

Gartel (Sash)
The *gartel* is the sash used to tie the Torah scroll so that the Torah scroll remains closed and secured under its velvet covering. When a Torah scroll is found to be non-kosher (e.g., a letter has faded) and awaits correction, its *gartel* is tied around its covering, on the outside, as a reminder that it can’t be used until repaired.

Keter (Crown)
The Torah scroll is our most precious possession. We adorn it with a crown, typically silver, as a symbol of our endearment and veneration. The *keter* rests on the *atzei chayim* (wooden shafts), that extend above the scroll.
**Mantle (Torah Scroll Covering)**
A valuable treasure is not left exposed and vulnerable. We cover the Torah scroll with multiple coverings, dressing it in a "cloak" before restoring it to its honorable place in the Ark and drawing the curtain. The mantle is an ornate covering that both protects and beautifies the Torah scroll.

**Parochet (Torah Ark Curtain)**
A *parochet* (from Aramaic, meaning curtain or screen) is the cloth that covers the Aron haKodesh (Ark) containing the Torah scrolls. The parochet symbolizes the curtain in the Temple that separated the Kodesh Hakodashim (the Holy of Holies) from the main hall.

**Rimonim (Finials)**
The *rimonim* ("pomegranates") are adornments that sit on top of the Torah scroll on the *atzei chayim*. They help to show our devotion to the commandments and our respect for the Torah.

**Yad (Pointer)**
The *yad* ("hand") is the pointer that the Torah scroll reader uses to follow the text during the reading. Usually made of silver, the end of this rod is commonly shaped like a hand with its index finger extended. A chain attached to its other end can be used to drape it over the Torah scroll when put away. The *yad* is traditionally placed on the Bereshit (Genesis) end of the scroll. The yad on our Holocaust Torah scroll is made of wood. The yad on the **10,000 Faces of Torah** scroll is made of silver and cast from an olive tree in the courtyard of CAA. The end of this yad is shaped like a branch.
Panels inside the Aron haKodesh are Jewish symbols in pairs.

**Left Panel**
- Feather quill to write the Torah and yad to read the Torah
- Two hands of the Kohanim bless the congregation. Each hand is in the shape of the Hebrew letter shin, the first letter in the word Shadai, “Lord”
- Tefillin for the head and the arm

**Right Panel**
- Two tablets of the Ten Commandments
- Two rimonim that sit on top of the Torah scroll
- Two loaves of challah for Shabbat

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