



From Rabbi Weber:

Dear Reader,

Sit back, and let me tell you a great story. Then I'll tell you how you can become part of the story.

In February, a Torah scroll was donated to ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America, by Congregation Beth Israel of San Diego. That special scroll is now traveling around the United States, but its ultimate destination is Israel... specifically, the Western Wall. What makes it so unique is that it will be carried to the Wall by *women*.

Here in the United States that's not unique or even surprising. Women and men have carried, held and read from Torah scrolls since Reform Judaism began in the 1800s. In Israel it is much less common – and at the Wall, it has never happened. But it will, on *Rosh Hodesh* (the new moon) of Tammuz, at the end of June. On that holiday, which Judaism holds as a women's holiday, the Women of the Wall will carry this special Torah to the Wall and will read from it there. In so doing, they will make history... and probably make a lot of Orthodox men angry. But Torah is meant to be wrestled with, and it's time for the modern State of Israel to wrestle with what it means to be Jewish: to make room for Jews whose definition of Jewish life is modern, and enlightened, and just as valid as the one which has controlled Israel since its birth.

But this Torah scroll will do more than just make history on one specific day. It is being given to Congregation Sha'ar HaNegev, a Reform community in the northern Negev, which does not yet have its own Torah. There, too, it will make history, as it brings the open, welcoming message of Reform Judaism to Israelis who have been told there are only two Jewish choices in the world: Orthodoxy or nothing at all. This Torah will teach generations of Israelis that Judaism can be a *living religion*, which grows and changes with the world.

About the Torah's journey: as I said, it began in San Diego. Then it traveled to Reform congregations in Dallas; Hollywood and Santa Monica, CA; Seattle, Chicago, New York City and Minnesota. At each stop, Reform Jews read from it, celebrated it, blessed it and sent it on its journey.

And on May 30th, **it is coming to Rodeph Torah.**

As it turns out, this is a very special night for this very special Torah to join us. This is the night when we hold our *B'nai Torah* ceremony, where this year's Confirmation students hand the Torah to this year's 9th graders – those who will be the next Confirmation class. It is always a beautiful and moving service, and this year our students will hand this holy traveler from one to another. Imagine: as our newest Confirmation class begins its journey toward the future with our blessings, our whole

congregation will be present to bless this sacred scroll as it begins its journey to the Promised Land!

Why now? Why this Torah? Why *us*? Because it is time for us to strengthen our connection to Israel, and to do it as Reform Jews. Many American Jews have also come to believe that Israel is a Disney-style holyland, with character actors playing the part of "religious people." But Israel is so much more than that, for Israelis and for us. Israel is *our* homeland, whether we have ever been there or not. It is an amazing combination of old and new, of tradition and modernity – exactly what Reform Judaism is at its best. This Torah's visit is only the beginning of our connection, but it is an important one.

From Rodeph Torah, the scroll will make a few short stops in other places here in the states before flying across the Atlantic. And on the first day of Tammuz, on Sunday, June 29th, it will witness the sunrise as I did last summer: at the Western Wall, in the company of women and men who cherish learning, Judaism... and Torah.

I hope you will join us for this historical event.



From Rabbi Stern:

It's Wednesday morning and one by one, they appear down the hall. Members of Rodeph Torah's Bereavement Group are showing up for the bi-weekly opportunity to share their stories, show their pictures and cry among strangers, many of whom have become friends.

To qualify, all you have to do is attend and follow two simple rules:

1. Whatever is said in group, stays in group
2. There are no "shoulds."

Nobody will admonish you crying too much, or too little. We don't judge you if you still have your partner's clothes in the closet, or you cleaned out everything following *shiva*. We won't tell you that you ought to get out more, or to date again and we will certainly not tell you "to get over the death." We will try to listen carefully, even if we've heard the story before. Maybe even several times before. If you still feel the need to tell it, we are going to accept that gift of memory.

It runs the way most groups run: everyone checks in to give us a brief overview of the two weeks, and then whoever has a burning issue to share does so with permission of everyone else.

What differentiates this group is the compassion, loyalty, support and wisdom these members and community show to one another. Feeling isolated?

"Come join us for lunch," they say. Having difficulty negotiating the paperwork that comes with the aftermath of death? "How can I help you?" they say. Need to learn the basic rules of simple cooking? "Here, try these brownies, or rum balls," they offer.

Through the members of the group, healing takes place not by big leaps and bounds that change everything overnight, but in the tiny little steps that occur when you least expect it. One congregant, Mort Blumenthal, having created our "There are Stars" campaign to benefit the Center for a Jewish Future, gave each member a present of the large blue ceramic markers that can be placed on top of gravestones to make a record of your visit. And should you want to add a private message on the back of the star, Mort added a Sharpie pen and a brochure with a poem that can be read at the grave.

I am touched every session by the generosity of spirit that our members show one another: one looks up the ombudsman of a neighboring town to help a fellow traveler who is struggling. Another shares a reading or an activity that worked for them when they needed comfort. They rejoice when someone has a breakthrough moment; they share tears when they witness abject pain, because often some else's story resonates deeply for them. We pass the Kleenex, pour a cup of coffee or tea, and wait for the crying to subside.

Not everyone speaks every time they come; sometimes it's enough to just listen and nod when an expressed emotion sounds familiar. There are days when we have to add more chairs, or make the table bigger, and on occasion, it's the hardy few who appear.

And something curious is being noticed by the front office staff: after the usual hour and a half, our group is still telling stories, or standing around with their coats or sharing news, or acknowledging a deeply emotional moment.

The only thing you need to do to join us is show up. Why? Because here, you might find the soft glow of memory between the tears, or understand the words of Leonard Cohen: "Ring the bells that still can ring, there is a crack in everything, that's how the light shines in."