

Synagogue Council seeks to save closing shul's ark, Judaica

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REVERE – An ark that has been housed at a Revere synagogue for almost a century is in need of a new home, or it will be lost forever.

Tifereth Israel opened in Revere in 1912 and closed earlier this year. The synagogue owned many sacred objects, including a mahogany, handcrafted ark for the Torah scrolls.

The ark is believed to have been built by Sam Katz, a well-known early 20th century ark maker, with the help of local craftsman Samuel Schwartz.

As The Jewish Advocate reported in 2012, Katz made two dozen arks in the Boston area, but many of his arks disappeared when the synagogues in which they were housed closed their doors.



Carol Clingan, a Boston-area historian and genealogist who specializes in the synagogues of Massachusetts, has a personal connection to Tifereth Israel. Her grandparents and parents attended the synagogue when she was a child.

I was captivated by the synagogue because it was just beautiful,” she said. “They had bought it from a church in 1912 and they built on it and made it into a Jewish place with the ark. I can’t imagine where they had the wherewithal to invest such love and attention and what must have been a lot of money in those days.”

Clingan’s desire to save the ark in Revere spurred her to seek help first from **Elizabeth Kessin Berman** of Nahant, a certified Judaica appraiser and principal of Judaica in Context.



Together, they approached the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts. Along with the council’s executive director, David Bernat, they recognized that Tifereth Israel was one of many local synagogues that have closed or relocated in recent years, leading to the loss of many historic works of Judaica. They sensed the community needed a mechanism for preserving these artifacts, and established Maavar, a program to help synagogues in transition.

“Maavar will serve as a clearinghouse for sacred objects that result from the closing or merger of a congregation,” Clingan said.

Berman named the program ‘Maavar,’ which is Hebrew for ‘a passage’ or ‘a transition.’ Berman liked the connection the word had to the Hebrew word *ivri*, which refers to the Jews.

“In naming this effort,” Berman said, “we reflected on how Jews in our community, in the 21st century, are also *ivri'im*, leaving one place behind and settling in another. We thought to draw upon the biblical concept of passage and transition while also making reference to the modern experience of moving on.”

“We expect a very enthusiastic community response to Maavar,” Bernat said. “Some congregations might want to do this on their own, but I think many will be open to this service that we’ll be able to provide.”

“One of our primary purposes,” he said, “would be to find donated homes among other congregations for these objects, including synagogues that need a Torah, or for memorial plaques and other Judaica.”

“We want to make sure that sacred objects find homes,” he said.

In addition to serving as a clearinghouse for Judaica, Bernat said, the council will also provide advice and referrals to congregations, as well as support in navigating issues of transitions that could include merger, new building, unanticipated growth, clergy changes and closings.

The roots of the program began about six years ago, when Clingan created a database of the 568 synagogues that have existed in Massachusetts. She found that when a synagogue closed, most of the Jewish artifacts housed by the synagogue were lost.

“I discovered that the only things that were reliably preserved were yahrzeit plaques and Torahs,” she said. “The Jewish community ought to do a better job of preserving its treasures, history, and heritage than it is doing.”

“There were horrible stories about arks being chopped up for firewood,” Clingan said, noting congregations usually did not preserve arks that housed the Torah scrolls. She began purchasing smaller arks on her own to save them.

Tifereth Israel is the perfect synagogue to kick off the Maavar program. The synagogue also needs to find new homes for two large stained glass windows, many solid oak pews, several chandeliers, reading podiums, Orthodox prayer books and an antique Hebrew clock.

The Maavar website, a page on the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts’ site, now features photographs of items from Tifereth Israel. The plan is to spread the word about these items and hope visitors to the site will know of a new home for the items displayed.

“I would like to see the ark end up any place that can use it,” said Ira Novoselsky, president of Tifereth Israel, who is overseeing its closing. “It’s a beautiful piece.”

He has also been preserving yahrzeit plaques and sending them back to the families of the deceased.

As Ward 2 councilor for the City of Revere, Novoselsky is working to have veterans housing replace the synagogue building once it is razed.

For more information, visit www.synagoguecouncil.org/maavar

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