



# Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center Spotlight

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## From Revere to Kenya: How Jewish Ritual Objects Found a New Home

In recent years, several synagogues across New England have closed due to dwindling membership, including many in the greater Boston area. In Revere, Massachusetts—once home to a thriving Jewish community—the city's last synagogue, Temple B'nai

Israel,<sup>1</sup> closed its doors permanently in May 2019.<sup>2</sup> The building was sold to the Bosniaks Society of Boston Islamic and Cultural Center, the archives donated to the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center (JHC), and the torah scrolls given to military bases and other synagogues—including one in a rural Jewish community in Kenya.

Kehillat Israel Kenya, the Jewish congregation of Ol-Kalou, was founded by former Messianic Jews.<sup>3</sup> Self-taught in Judaic rituals and traditions, this growing congregation has received assistance from Conservative Jewish groups in the United States, including the donation of typically expensive Jewish ritual objects. As a recipient of one of B'nai Israel's torahs, Kehillat Israel Kenya also needed a torah ark curtain and valance, a *parokhet* and *kapporet*. However, B'nai Israel's torah ark curtains had already been among the items dispatched and deeded to the JHC. After receiving an unusual request from the former synagogue's lay leaders to retrieve the curtains, the JHC team decided to deaccession them and return them to B'nai Israel, so the curtains could be sent to Kenya and used for their original purpose.

*Parokhet* and *kapporet* serve as a divider between the torah and the synagogue sanctuary. The *parokhet* symbolizes the curtain that covered



*Parokhet* and *kapporet* from Temple B'nai Israel of Revere, Mass. Photo by Claire Vail.

the Ark of the Covenant; the *kapporet* symbolizes the lid of the Ark. Both pieces are usually commissioned and donated by synagogue members in honor of a life cycle event,<sup>4</sup> and the names of the donor and honoree are embroidered on the curtain. The JHC has several curtains in its collections, most made of velvet; all have embroidery, gold braiding and tassel work, and faux jewels. Often, the curtains are decorated with the symbols of the Lions of Judah, a torah crown, and seven-branched menorahs.

The curtains from B'nai Israel are simple in design, although no less ornate in execution. Each ivory velvet panel features a seven-branched menorah on gold velvet. An embroidered label provides some history of the Cotton family, as these curtains were originally donated in honor of Archie and Flora (Cohen) Cotton's 55th wedding anniversary in 1984 by their son Harvey, daughter-in-law Helaine, granddaughter Elyse, her husband Matthew, and grandson Andrew. Now, with the curtains installed in Kehillat Israel Kenya, these artifacts will continue an important tradition in an expanding Kenyan Jewish community. ♦

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Temple B'nai Israel was founded in 1906 by Eastern European Jews as an Orthodox synagogue. It later became a Conservative synagogue.
- <sup>2</sup> The two other Revere synagogues were Congregation Ahavis Achim (closed in 1998) and Congregation Tifereth Israel (closed in 2015). The JHC has the records of the latter.
- <sup>3</sup> More on the history of this Kenyan Jewish community can be found in *The Times of Israel* article, "In Kenya's Highlands, a Jewish Community Struggles for Recognition," by Melanie Lidman (March 10, 2015). Accessed 11/17/2020, [timesofisrael.com/in-kenyas-highlands-a-jewish-community-struggles-for-recognition](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-kenyas-highlands-a-jewish-community-struggles-for-recognition).
- <sup>4</sup> Life cycle events are the *B'rit Milah* (circumcision), *B'rit Bat* (naming ceremony for girls), *Bar/Bat Mitzvahs*, confirmation (Reform only), weddings, conversions, illness, death, and mourning.



Embroidered label sewn into the parokhet in honor of Archie and Flora Cotton's 55th wedding anniversary. Photo by Claire Vail.

## Campaign to celebrate a decade of collaboration and growth

Ten years ago, two prestigious organizations—New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS) and American Jewish Historical Society—New England Archives—launched a collaboration of shared resources, expertise, and commitment to family and community history. With the support of dedicated community members, the entity they created together—the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at New England Historic Genealogical Society—has become a premier destination for exploring and preserving Jewish history in New England and beyond.

To celebrate ten years of collaboration and growth, and to position the Jewish Heritage Center for the next decade, we have launched the **Tenth Anniversary Campaign**. With a goal of raising at least \$400,000 by August 31, 2021, the campaign supports these essential priorities:

- Expanding educational content and access online, to connect more people with Jewish history and heritage;
- Cultivating new research and scholarship that draws on the JHC archives and NEHGS resources to deepen understanding of the Jewish experience;
- Securing, preserving, and making accessible significant new family and institutional collections for the JHC's permanent archives.

The Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS is a vital resource: it is the only archive and historical center dedicated to, and specializing in, New England Jewish history. Please help us lay the groundwork for the next decade by making a meaningful contribution to the Tenth Anniversary Campaign this year. *Thank you!*

To make a gift to the Tenth Anniversary Campaign, visit [JewishHeritageCenter.org/donate](https://www.jewishheritagecenter.org/donate) (please indicate Tenth Anniversary Campaign in the dedication field); call the NEHGS Advancement Office at 617-226-1247; or mail your check to the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at New England Historic Genealogical Society, 99–101 Newbury Street, Boston, MA 02116.