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Synagogue member honored with new Torah at Mount Kisco Hebrew Congregation

BY SWAPNA VENUGOPAL RAMASWAMY • THE JOURNAL NEWS • APRIL 14, 2008

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MOUNT KISCO - The scribe, with his long beard and hat, sat before the ark at the Mount Kisco Hebrew Congregation, as guests stood in line to hold the end of the long quill he used to write the last of the 304,805 letters of the Torah.

The honor of finishing the very last letter was given to Larry Levy, who turned 93 yesterday, and worked as a gabbi - a lay person who volunteers to perform various duties in connection with Torah readings at religious services.



"Of all the 613 mitzvas, or good deeds one can do, writing a new Torah is the most important one," said Dr. Abe Levy.

The gathering of about 150 guests took turns to say "mazel tov" to Larry Levy, who was dressed in a blue pin-stripped suit and red tie.

Larry Levy, who was born in Poland, left the country at the age of 18 to serve in the Haganah army - the underground Jewish defense group - in Palestine.

Five years later, in 1937, his cousin, who lived in Florida, persuaded him to move to the U.S.

"He had heard that bad things were about to happen in Europe," said Abe Levy, the medical director of the Mount Kisco Medical Group.

Larry Levy unsuccessfully tried to persuade his parents to move with him to the U.S.

"They were upset that my father had left his ancestral home in Poland to join the Zionist movement in Palestine," Abe Levy said.

In 1942, during the Holocaust, both his parents and brothers were marched out of their home, made to dig their own graves and killed by machine gun fire, Abe Levy said.

Larry Levy eventually moved to Chattanooga, Tenn., settled down with his wife, Toby, opened a mom-and-pop grocery store and raised three sons.

Eight years ago, with two of their sons in Westchester and one in Israel, Larry Levy and his wife moved to Mount Kisco and devoted much of their time to the congregation. Then, two years ago, his wife of 65 years died.

"This new Torah scroll is in honor of my father and in memory of my mother," said Abe Levy, whose family initiated the effort.

Although the MKHC is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, this is only the second Torah-writing project undertaken there.



Seth Harrison/The Journal News

Rabbi Zvi Chaim Plncas, a Torah scribe from Brooklyn, completes the writing of a Torah scroll at the Mount Kisco Hebrew Congregation. With him is Eliza Altabeef, 8, of Mount Kisco and Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider. The new Torah scroll honors the congregation's 100th anniversary and the 93rd birthday of temple member Larry Levy.

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"It is a very time-consuming and expensive project," said Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider. "It took us more than a year and \$50,000 to complete."

Noah Hymas, 15, of Chappaqua, who participated in writing the letters, called Larry Levy a "central figure" in the synagogue.

"It is important that this book of learning is being dedicated to this wise man," Hymas said.

"Late Show with David Letterman" band leader Paul Shaffer, who lives in Bedford and has been a member of the congregation more than 15 years, would surely agree.

He is the executive producer of a rap video with words from a poem written by Larry Levy in honor of MKHC's 100th anniversary, and features Jewish rapper Etan G.

"I was at the dinner celebrating the 100th anniversary of the synagogue that I heard this poem," said Shaffer, who attended the ceremony and participated in the parade of the new Torah around the block. "It was very touching. This place has always been very encouraging to me."

Elaborating on the unlikely collaboration between Levy and Etan G, Shaffer said, "It was also very rhythmic and reminded me of a rhythm that rap might have.

"It was charming. I was charmed by it myself while putting it together," Shaffer said. "And Mr. Levy got a kick out of it."

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