



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Temple Beth El cantor Paula Marcus shows the temple's sixth-grade class how the Torah is housed in the ark.

# A new covenant

By ROBERT MITTENDORF  
 Sentinel staff writer

A PAIR OF ORNATE new stained-glass doors — salvaged from the ashes of a turn-of-the-century San Francisco synagogue — adorn the Temple Beth El ark.

"The ark represents the sanctity of the treasures of our heritage, which have been passed down from generation to generation," said Rabbi Richard Litvak of the Aptos temple.

This ark, however, has special significance for local Jews. Its doors are composed of stained glass gleaned from a window of the former Temple Beth Israel, which dominated the Jewish neighborhood at Geary Boulevard and Fillmore Street for more than six decades. Restoration was made possible by a \$10,000 grant from Yetta Bach of San Mateo, whose parents David and Rose Haber helped start the original Santa Cruz synagogue on Chestnut Street in 1915.

In biblical tradition, the ark was the portable chest that held the original tablets of the Ten Commandments. That ark was later stored in the inner sanctum of the temple in Jerusalem known as the Holy of Holies, but it vanished when the Romans destroyed the temple in 70 A.D.

"Thus, the contemporary film ('Raiders of the Lost Ark')," Litvak said. "Today, each synagogue contains *aron hakodesh* (holy cabinet), which is found on the eastern wall of the synagogue — facing Jerusalem — and it contains the holy ark ... which houses the Torah scrolls. The *Safer Torah* is the parchment scroll

which contains the five books of Moses."

Essentially, a modern ark is a cabinet mounted in the wall above the *bima*, or altar, in a synagogue. Because of the ark's religious importance, it is frequently elaborate in nature.

"Above the ark is usually found *ner tamid* — eternal light — which symbolizes the continuing and constant presence of God throughout the world," Litvak said.

"The ark, therefore ... is the most sacred place in the synagogue. It is the central focus of the sanctuary."

Temple Beth El's new ark doors were installed in September for the High Holy Days of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana. Final construction on the ark was completed last week, in time for a dedication service last night.

Carolyn Hyatt, a member of the congregation and volunteer head of fund-raising and cultural events, said the temple obtained the glass for the ark doors from the Judas L. Magnes Museum in Berkeley. The museum had gained possession of the glass after a February 1989 fire gutted the Duquette Pavilion, an art museum which from 1905 to 1969 was Temple Beth Israel.

THE GLASS WAS part of Beth Israel's main window, a 30-foot-high, 20-foot-wide glass mural that depicted the tablets of the Ten Commandments awash in light shining from the heavens. It survived the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

"It was the main section of the main window on Geary," Hyatt said. "It was a very imposing piece."

Restoration work fell to Glassworks of Aptos, a stained-glass studio where Tem-

ple Beth El member Maria Stolz is employed.

It was a complicated task and took about four months, Stolz said.

All the glass was stripped from its lead frames and cleaned of dirt and soot. Then the glass was reassembled into two panels to form the ark doors — each three feet by six feet — while keeping the spirit of the original design and using all original glass, some of which may have been fired by glass makers for the famed L.C. Tiffany.

"IT WAS ALMOST a mystical experience," Stolz said. "You could feel the 100 years of supplication going into those windows."

Glassworks artists retained the window's main theme by eliminating a huge expanse of blue sky and clouds between the stone tablets and the light that streams from the clouds, Stolz said.

"We had to redesign the tablets and then pull them close to the top," Stolz said. "We took the main subject matter and integrated it into the top arch. From a design standpoint, ours is much more ornate."

Glassworks co-owner Ray Gouveia said he suspects some of the ark's glass may be Tiffany glass because the colors and textures are reminiscent of those Tiffany used.

"It's possible that any glass from that era could have come off the Tiffany line," Gouveia said. "Many of the colors in the window are colors that are not available

any more ... It's Tiffany-style glass — if it didn't come from Tiffany himself — we know that for sure."

Particularly precious are the deep brown-red colors that form the doors' top arches.

"The 'root-beer' color is very rare. The brown spectrum (of glass), which uses lead oxide, is now very difficult to find," Gouveia said. Federal safety regulations now prevent the use of lead oxide.

"(The window) is certainly unique," he said. "It was nice to know that someone was careful and thoughtful enough to save it. Artistically, our main thrust was to retain as much of the old glass as well as the old design."

In a conversation earlier this week, Rabbi Litvak said that at last night's dedication, he planned to remind the congregation of the ark's significance in relation to both the whole of Judaism and the local synagogue's history. He said he would address the ark's enduring beauty and the inspiration of that heritage. He noted that the founding Habers' great-granddaughter, Karla Haber, will have her bat mitzvah in the new temple this month, representing a cycle of four generations within the local Jewish community.

"The fact that these ark doors have such a long and venerable history adds to their sanctity," Litvak said. "They represent the core of the Torah and the teachings and values of the Jewish faith. A lot of work has gone into this; it's beautiful and it's exciting."