



## The art of the Covenant.

### In a stripped-down Toronto synagogue, every subtle little detail counts.

—By Leslie C. Smith

*Beth*, the second letter in the Hebrew alphabet, indicative of “home, family, temple,” is our Last Word this month – as in Toronto’s Beth Torah synagogue, recently revamped by architect/interior designer Cindy Rendely and her mentor, Jerome Markson.

The new synagogue’s natural focal point is its main sanctuary: a serene, even cerebral, locale. Stripped clean of any competing embellishments, the space utilizes plain, repetitive geometrics and warm wood to create a peaceful, reflective mood. This literally centres itself around the raised reading platform, or *bimah*, which pushes forward into the congregants’ seating area, becoming part of the group rather than a stand-apart entity. Even on high holidays, when the sanctuary’s moveable walls open up to embrace

the chapel-room and social hall beyond to accommodate a *minyan* quorum upwards of 500 people, Rabbi Yossi Sapirman can be seen and heard by all. And the same goes for the choir, massed along the *bimah*’s wide, three-sided stairway. For those who can’t use the stairs, a glass-railed handicap ramp rises to the left – not an afterthought or a tacked-on addition but an integral piece of the design.

Rendely cites the use of wood – beech and maple in the room’s acoustical slats, panelling and Israeli-built pews – as counterbalance to any austerity arising from the purposely minimalist aesthetic.

Still, “we tried to boil the design down to its essence,” says Markson. “Where there’s detail, it means something.”

Denotative detail comes in small packages, such as the ruddy glow emitted

by a single, delicate, stained-glass sphere among several clear pendants, the eternal light that traditionally hangs over the ark housing the Torah. It can also be writ large, as in the ark’s dramatic, mystically patterned doorway that slides up a grooved wall to reveal the sacred scrolls. This massive decorative tile, actually formed from tiny, half-inch copper intarsia, is a stylized graphic rendering of a page of Hebrew text that is personally significant to the rabbi.

Knowing this, we can see the columns and annotations reminiscent of a medieval Mishneh Torah. Where certain passages might be highlighted appear small rectangles of translucent glass through which, sublimely symbolic, an inner light shines. □