Whoever said you can't go home did not count on modern artistry.

A 100-year-old stained glass window that was part of the first Jewish synagogue in Baton Rouge is back at Congregation B'nai Israel.

The window had been at the old temple at Laurel and Fifth streets until the building's sale in the early 1950s, when a new temple was built at Kleinert Avenue and Parker Boulevard.

There was a fairly large amount of stained glass in the old building. After the sale, the congregation stored the windows in warehouses owned by a member of the congregation until the warehouse was taken down, Baton Rouge lawyer Sid Blitzer said.

Blitzer, whose family has belonged to the synagogue for five generations, eventually came to own the windows in the 1960s, storing them in his family's warehouse.

In the early 1970s, they were stolen. One window was returned anonymously. The window stayed in a crate in Blitzer's garage until 2001.

"It was a particularly nice window to get back," Blitzer said.

While all the others were in sections, this window was a self-contained semicircular piece.

Rabbi Barry Weinstein remembers seeing the window for the first time following its removal from the crate.

"It had been in the crate for years, and several panels were missing. But, as soon as I saw it, I knew what it said," he said.

The calligraphy, some of which was missing, was "a typical inscription placed above the ark in many synagogues for thousands of years," he said. "Know before whom you stand."

Although Weinstein said no one was sure exactly where the window had been in the original sanctuary, "I said, I'd bet this was above the ark." (the area in which the Torah scrolls are kept and one of the holiest parts of the synagogue).

It turned out that Weinstein's bet was right on target. Pictures from the wedding of Betty Moyse to Joseph Simmons in 1947 showed the window precisely in the area he predicted.

Weinstein said the window is particularly meaningful because it is a link from generation to generation.

"We stand on the shoulders of that generation that kept Judaism alive in Baton Rouge all those years," he said.

It was a time, he explained, when Baton Rouge was 1/30th of the size it is today.
Restoring the window fell on the shoulders of Covington stained glass expert Paolo DuFour, who also restored the windows of St. Joseph Cathedral in Baton Rouge.

"It was really in very poor condition," he said. "One of the biggest problems was scrubbing and cleaning it. There were also quite a few pieces missing where the saying was."

The glass was not only a special type created by a French glass company, but the treatment of it was a turn-of-the-century process that created texture on glass.

The texturizing process had to be done three times to match what had been done more than 100 years ago, he said.

Using old photographs and working with Weinstein to "get the inscription down," DuFour painstakingly set about the restoration, which took about nine months.

Some pieces were cracked, others completely shattered, making it necessary to order several sections of colors.

The 230-pound window required DuFour to hire people simply to help him turn it over. "On a single panel, this was the most intricate one I've ever replaced," he said.

Restoration of such magnitude is difficult and time consuming, but very rewarding in the end, he said.

The window now rests to the left of the bimah, or pulpit area, back-lit so it is more visible than it had been at the old temple.

The installation of the back-lighting turned out to be more complicated than originally thought.

A structural concrete wall required some creative work to create the proper depth for the lighting to illuminate the glass.

Synagogue president Dr. Harold Brandt, who oversaw the window's installation, said a lighting specialist created a theatrical lighting box 10 to 12 inches deep and set with halogen lights.

The restored stained glass window once graced Congregation B'nai Israel when the synagogue was at Laurel and Fifth streets. The window is at the top of the photo at the wedding of Betty Moyse to Joseph Simmons in 1947.

With lighting in place and the glasswork fully restored, the Blitzer family has dedicated the window to the generations of their family who worshipped before them.