

Yom Hashoah in Houston: Czech Memorial Scrolls
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ד' לאייר תשפ"ד

In the summer of 1942, the Jewish Museum of Prague, fully under Nazi occupation, reached out to communities in Czechoslovakia to gather and catalogue Jewish ritual objects. These small communities, often facing deportation and liquidation, sent everything: Torah scrolls, shofarot, chandeliers, tablecloths—over 190,000 items. It is important to note that the work in collecting, cataloguing, and organizing these items was done by Jews and not for some false narrative of a future Nazi museum to memorialize the Jews. While the hope was to one day return these items to their communities, we unfortunately know the fate of these Jewish communities.

Among this massive collection were 2,000 Torah scrolls, which with the help of the Communists, would sit for years in the Michle Synagogue. While the decommissioned synagogue had building caretakers, there was no way to properly preserve the scrolls leading to their decay. Artia, a state-owned corporation dealing cultural imports and exports, was tasked with finding an international buyer of these Torah scrolls. Ralph Yablon, an art collector and philanthropist in London, offered \$30,000, which is now over \$300,000, for the

collection of Torah scrolls. He created the Memorial Scrolls Trust to oversee the 1,564 remaining Torah scrolls, preserve and maintain, and distribute to the world, and to make sure their story is told. They allocate the scrolls to synagogues, day-schools, and museums all over the world. Over 1,000 have been allocated, with the remaining scrolls in a museum at the Westminster Synagogue in London.

My connection to the Memorial Scrolls Trust came by happenstance. My previous pulpit, Temple Sholom of West Essex in Cedar Grove, New Jersey, has been a temporary warehouse for these Torah scrolls that resided in schools and synagogues which have sadly merged or closed. Per the conditions of custodianship, these organizations receive the scrolls as a permanent loan, but are still owned by the Trust. If the organization closes, the scrolls must be returned to the Trust. My congregational leadership and Rabbi Emeritus, Norman Patz, asked me to help maintain these dozen some-odd scrolls, perhaps roll through them once a year. I was told it should only be a few hours of my time over the course of the year.

Little did I know my few hours of volunteering would lead to some meaningful connections. I met people from all over the world who shared the same passion of preserving history. While I am not a sofer stam and cannot

repair scrolls, I have learned some tricks and identifying features of Torah scrolls. For instance, the leaves or klapim of Czech Torah scrolls tend to be sewn together with visible ties in the front rather than behind. Many of the Czech scrolls have kabbalistic flourishes in the calligraphy which are less common in other Ashkenazi style scrolls. Last, my connection to the Memorial Scrolls Trust brought me to Houston! Scroll #202 once resided in a congregation that has since closed but one family felt especially close with the history and meaning of the scroll. The Chairperson of the Memorial Scrolls Trust reached out to me wondering how they were going to transfer #202 from New Jersey to Congregation Beth Yeshurun in Houston. Coincidentally, a day or two prior to that email, I accepted an invitation to interview in person as Cantor of Congregation Beth Israel, so I volunteered to personally bring the scroll to its new home.

I want to talk for a moment about one of the scrolls in my care, Scroll #1161. For years it sat untouched in my previous congregation because it was so tattered and torn, the words faded, and it was fragile. Even sadder, its provenance has been lost earning the moniker of “an orphan scroll.” In other words, the people whose voices once read and loved the scroll were now silenced and forgotten.

During a COVID-staycation, I photographed all 13 of the scrolls in my care, including #1161, to make it easier to show future custodians all over the country. #1161 was the last one I did, and I was in tears. As I rolled the delicate leaves of Torah, I wondered if it would ever find a new home.

It is a good thing I took those photos. A congregation in Madison, Wisconsin, learned about this scroll, and seeing the torn words of our tradition convinced them to build a beautiful display case and display it in their lobby in addition to a useable scroll they adopted. What was once silenced and forgotten now has dignity and a new life.

We all here have a mission to tell the stories of the scrolls and the people who once read their words. At Congregation Beth Israel, we have two: #630 originally from Pilzen which was purchased by a long-time member Leon Davis in 1970, and # 1296, an orphan scroll acquired in 1967 just after we moved to North Braeswood. We read from these scrolls at the High Holy Days and Festivals, the most sacred days of our year. In some congregations, their B'nei Mitzvah read every week from their Memorial Scroll. Some congregations researched the victims from their scroll's town and add names to their weekly congregation Kaddish list. Others include trips to the town for Confirmation or Missions. Even if the scroll cannot be read from, we have the

obligation to keep the stories going, stories of Jewish victims who perished על קידוש השם for the ability to live a Jewish life so that we, today, can live. Please dedicate a section on your website to your Memorial Scroll and let the Trust know so we can virtually link together the Diaspora of these scrolls around the world.

The Memorial Scrolls Trust was founded 60 years ago, and we parade these beautiful treasures held by third generation survivors as living reminders of antisemitism and those who sought to destroy the people of Israel. May the light of Torah never diminish. May we continue to learn from our traditions and uncover new interpretations of our ancient words. May we fulfil the important mitzvah of remembering, זכור, with every occasion we use these memorial scrolls. The words we read and study go back thousands of years, and may they endure for thousands of years more. May we cherish these Torah scrolls, as do our survivors and their families, and may we honor them as symbols of strength and resilience. May the words “עם ישראל חי” continue to resound, symbolized in our sacred objects and our survivors and their families.