

Clergy Voice

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Dear Friends, Lovers of Torah, Witnesses to History,

On the occasion of our Holocaust scroll's repair and return we thought this would be a good time to refresh our memories and enlighten our congregation as to the origin and history of this precious possession.

From our bimah we have long spoken of the Tabor scroll as having been rescued from a museum the Nazis intended would testify to the extinction of the Jewish race. As with so much of complex historical narratives, this is an oversimplification, and not an entirely accurate depiction of the actual events surrounding the scroll's journey from Czechoslovakia to London and on to Minneapolis.

There are lamentably few stories from World War II and the *Shoah* that detail the courage and faith of so many Jews under horrible circumstances, but the history of the Prague Jewish Museum is one. An enormous collection of Czech treasures removed from decimated synagogues and gathered together even during the darkest years of the war was conceived by a desperate group of Jews at the Jewish Museum in occupied Prague. These determined Jews actually submitted their plan to the Nazis to save and catalogue those precious items for preservation. Torah scrolls taken from destroyed Jewish communities were among those treasures and our scroll is one of them. The Jews who gathered this collection of over 100,000 items were effectively prisoners of the Nazis. Though their ongoing work would keep their names off the transport lists for a while, most were eventually transported to Auschwitz and killed. Their perseverance and determination that European Jewry not be forgotten continues to inspire. Bottom line: The Museum and rescue of these ritual items was a Jewish idea.

The scroll we read from almost every Shabbat morning was stamped, not unlike a concentration camp inmate's tattoo, with the number 248. It is one of 1,564 Torah scrolls that were discovered in three warehouses when Prague was liberated in 1945, and then housed at the Michle Synagogue in Prague beginning in 1956, two years after the Communists took over

Czechoslovakia. Many of the scrolls were in bad shape and in danger of becoming *pasul* – or unfit - for use until they were placed in suitable storage places. In 1964, thanks to the largesse of British congregants at London's Westminster Synagogue, the scrolls were shipped to England and began their second life. This became the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust which eventually sought new homes for these scrolls. Number 248 became ours.

We understand that our scroll comes from Tabor, a fairly sizeable town in Bohemia (later the Czech Republic) about 90 kilometers south of Prague. There may well have been several synagogues in Tabor, and a large number of the Trust scrolls are considered to have come from that region. Precisely which scroll comes from exactly where is still a matter of conjecture. What is most important for our commemoration and our ongoing use of scroll 248 is that, unlike so many of the six million Jews who were annihilated in the Holocaust whose names are still unknown, we are connected to a holy survivor that was once at the center of a vibrant faithful community.

Sifrei Torah – Torah scrolls - are not meant to be museum pieces, and if abandoned to deteriorate must be buried like a body in a Jewish cemetery. Our scroll lives! It breathes under the loving youthful eyes and minds of our precious 13-year-olds as they are called to the bimah to bless and chant from this scroll. Can there be a greater tribute to the lost communities of the *Shoah*?

We are grateful to Tom and Rhoda^{z"l} Lewin for funding the repair of the scroll, and we welcome its return to our ark, repaired, renewed, made *kasher* – fit for reading and transmitting from generation to generation – *mi dor l'dor*.

Hazak, hazak, v'nit-hazek – Let us continue to be strong, and to strengthen one another.

Rabbi Marcia A. Zimmerman

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