

CBI Acquires Two Torah Scrolls, February 1998, written by Rob Capon

Congregation Purchases Scroll for Small Sanctuary, Obtains Holocaust Memorial Scroll

Several months ago, a conversation with Rabbi Alexander led to a discussion of the Temple's need for a Torah Scroll for use in the small sanctuary. Neither of us had expertise on the acquisition of such a scroll, but I agreed to research the matter further. This chance discussion launched journeys to New York and London that led to the acquisition of two Torah scrolls, a scroll for the sanctuary as well as a two-hundred year old Holocaust memorial scroll from Czechoslovakia.

We were very fortunate to receive a leadership gift to make the purchase of a scroll possible. The gift was from Andrew Gutman's Company, Mobile Computing Corporation of Toronto, in honor of his mother, Roberta Gutman. So with financing in place, we began the search for a scroll.

I began researching the Torah acquisition by searching the Internet. I quickly learned that purchasing a scroll would not be easy. There is apparently a market in stolen Torah scrolls, and the UAHC (now the Union for Reform Judaism "URJ") has put out an advisory that congregations should proceed with caution. It is also important to insure that a purchased scroll is kosher, which means that the text of the Torah be absolutely without flaw, and that it meet a number of other criteria. Unfortunately, Torah scrolls that are not Kosher are sometimes misrepresented.

With leads provided by the UAHC, a number of appointments were made in New York to look at Torah scrolls, including an appointment with Jay Levine Company, a well known supplier of Jewish books and gifts who is one of the suppliers to our Temple gift shop. Also at the suggestion of the UAHC, we retained a consultant named Dr. Eric Ray (a world renowned Torah scribe, historian and author) to examine each scroll, and help Rabbi Alexander make a purchase decision.

Four appointments were made, and we flew to New York where we met Dr. Ray at the UAHC office. The meetings were intensely interesting and enjoyable. Dr. Ray examined each scroll and discussed with us the art and history of each scroll.

It would be possible to write a volume about the day's experiences, and the many wonderful stories told to us by Dr. Ray. In summary, Rabbi Alexander decided to acquire a scroll from Jay Levine Company. The scroll had a well known history, because it had come from a Temple in Pennsylvania that was closing its doors. The scroll was written in Vilnius, Lithuania at the turn of the twentieth century. Dr. Ray described the scroll as a master work of a particularly accomplished scribe, and estimated that the scroll took seven years to write.

The scroll remained in New York for a month of preparation. A new set of rollers was made for the Torah, along with a new cover and binder. To reduce the weight of the scroll, the top and bottom margins were trimmed to specifications provided by Dr. Ray.

While researching on the Internet, I learned about another fascinating opportunity. A number of Temple web pages made reference to a Holocaust Memorial Scroll on permanent loan from

the **Memorial Scrolls Trust** at Westminster Synagogue in London. The Trust has a web page that provided contact information, so I telephoned the co-chairman of the Trust, Mrs. Ruth Shaffer, and inquired on behalf of CBI.

The Trust owns 1564 Torah scrolls that were purchased by an English philanthropist from the Czech government in 1964. Although in the past many people thought the scrolls were being collected by the Nazis as a "memorial to a defunct race," there is currently no documentary evidence that any such memorial was ever planned or put into place. The current understanding is that the Jews who worked at the museum organized the collection of artifacts and scrolls from Bohemia and Moravia in an attempt to preserve them. The Pinkas Synagogue in Prague was one of the collection points for the scrolls.

Mrs. Shaffer advised me that approximately 100 scrolls remained, all in poor condition, and she instructed me on how to make application for CBI to obtain a scroll on the basis of a permanent loan. An application was made that included information all about CBI, including photographs of the Temple, a copy of the Bulletin, and even a Temple cook book. Several weeks later, I received a fax from the Trust that CBI was qualified to obtain a scroll, but only on the condition that a representative travel to London to make the selection.

In the hands of providence, I had a business trip to London scheduled and made an appointment for December 2. My wife, Rose, and children Howard and Miriam were joining me on the trip, and were welcomed to come to Westminster in a mini CBI delegation. We brought along a beautifully engraved Jefferson cup, made by CBI members Harvey Finkel and Bea Seagal, as a gift to Mrs. Shaffer.

When we arrived at Westminster, Mrs. Shaffer took us to the Scroll room, where we had the opportunity to handle and examine scrolls. I cannot begin to describe how moving it was to see the burnt and damaged remains of 100 scrolls from the Holocaust. We saw scrolls that had been damaged by smoke, flame, and water. Several scrolls were wrapped in a Tallit, a measure to help protect them during the tumult of the Holocaust. Try to imagine the scene in which such a scroll is wrapped in a Tallit in the midst of war and civil unrest. A number of scrolls had a Nazi identification number written on the rollers, so that the scrolls could be identified in the Nazi collection. Our hands quickly became covered with the soot and dust.

We had been at Westminster for several hours, and had not yet seen a Torah in good condition, when Howard spotted scroll number 12 tucked away in a corner. The scroll was in relatively good condition, although it was not kosher by virtue of extensive damage to approximately 5% of its columns. The rollers were in good condition, and are light brown in color. The documentation of the scroll describes it as being c. 1790, and having come from the neighboring towns of Frydek-Mistek, a combined Jewish community of approximately 432 members in 1930. Mrs. Shaffer furnished us with a one page history of the congregation, excerpted from a book about the history of the Jewish people in Czechoslovakia. We know that the Nazis destroyed the synagogue in 1939, but that the Jewish cemetery remains in Frydek. The scroll has a Nazi identification number 37031 written on the lower right handle.

We took extensive photographs of scroll number 12, along with two other scrolls, and presented the materials to the Temple Board for a final decision. The Board delegated the decision to Rabbi Alexander, who concurred with the recommendation to adopt scroll 12. The scroll was shipped from London, following the preparation of export licenses and the fabrication of a wooden shipping crate.

The scroll cannot be used in regular services because it is not Kosher. However, the Holocaust Memorial Scrolls have been given special dispensation to be used in services on Yom HaShoah. The scrolls may also be used for teaching purposes, and in this manner are a “living” memorial.

Rose, Howard, Miriam and myself feel very privileged to have participated in the process of acquiring the Westminster Memorial Scroll. It is our hope that the scroll adds richness to our already rich and diverse educational and cultural program at Congregation Beth Israel.

Robert Capon,
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