

Our Precious Little Scroll: a legacy and a vow the ongoing story of the Kolin Torah scroll.

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(this sermon is dedicated to the people of Kolin.
May their memories be always a cherished source of life and blessing.)

Two wooden sticks, the skin of a kosher animal and some chemicals mixed together. That's all it takes to write a Torah. 304, 805 letters, 79,976 words, 5,845 sentences 248 columns, each with 42 lines. That's all it takes to write a Torah today and that's all it took to write a Torah around 1650 when a *sofer stam* – a Torah scribe – was commissioned by the small town of Kolin just east of Prague to write this precious little Torah.

But what do you really know about what it took to write this Torah?

Like all Sifrei Torah it is more than sticks, ink and parchment. As the poem with which I often introduce the service for the reading of the Torah suggests our experience as a people is also inscribed into a Torah scroll. Our wandering, searching, suffering, learning, following, leading, loving and blessing is also written there. Our journey has been rubbed into this Torah's well worn handles, it resides in the ink that sits on its parchment and it is sewn into the very fabric of this scroll.

So allow me to share what has gone into the making of this Torah. At the time it was written, the Jewish community of Kolin was already over 250 years old. City records from the last quarter of the 13th century make mention of a Jewish community. The earliest gravestones in the old Jewish cemetery date to 1418, almost 80 years before Columbus set sail for the new world and more than 350 years before the Declaration of Independence.

It was a time when the Jewish community of the area was flourishing. Prague, was, the largest Ashkenazi Jewish community in the world, and the home to one of Europe's great Talmudic scholars and mystics Rabbi Judah Loew, Rabbi Judah was the creator of the infamous Golem, a mythic monster made of mud who could be brought to life by those who knew the kabbalistic secrets in order to protect the Jewish community in times of danger. The forms of the Hebrew letters in this Torah testify to the fact that, like Rabbi Judah, the scribe commissioned to write this scroll was also a mystic. Perhaps he was a follower of the great Rabbi and entertained those who came to watch him work with tales of the Golem. When it was completed, this little Torah was most likely among the first to be placed in the beautiful Ark, commissioned in 1696 by Viennese financier Samuel Oppenheim, himself a cousin of Rabbi Judah, and, a distant cousin as well to someone much closer to us.

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You see, it is quite appropriate that this Torah has found a home here. If not in Kolin it was meant to be here! Let me tell you why ... In searching the internet to find more information about Samuel Oppenheim, the financier of the Kolin Ark, I happened upon his family tree. One branch of that very lengthy tree extends all the way to Savannah, Georgia at the end of the 19th century. This was a thrilling discovery because Jules Oppenheim spent part of his childhood in Savannah. So, who was Jules Oppenheim? He was the first cousin of Muriel Cohen ... who happens to be the mother of Debbie Cohen Lutz. Yes, my wife is a distant cousin of the man who 314 years ago financed the building of the ark in Kolin in which this little Torah lived. How very cool is that?

For nearly 300 years this little Torah was part of the vibrant Jewish life of Kolin. It welcomed in 300 Rosh Hashanahs and urged repentance on 300 Yom Kippurs it was danced with at 300 Simchat Torahs. It was carried around the sanctuary for over 15,000 Shabbatot. And from its place in the ark it witnessed the weddings of countless brides and grooms and ushered thousands of b'nai mitzvah into Jewish adulthood as they read from the beautifully scripted letters of its mystic scribe.

This little Torah watched as the Jews were welcomed into the modern world at the end of the 18th century. It witnessed the members of the Jewish ghetto move beyond the walls in which they had been forced to live to take up places of prominence, homes and storefronts in the most unimaginable of places, *right on the town square*. For another 150 this little Torah watched as Jewish families became important and respected members of the Kolin community.

Of course it was not to last.

In March of 1938, the Germans entered Czechoslovakia. Jews who had become part of the fabric of life in Kolin were systematically removed. Businesses were closed. Jews were not allowed in stores and forbidden from all public areas children could not attend school. They were allotted only the most meager rations of bread and potatoes and were forced to wear the yellow Magen David that became emblematic of our people's oppression under the hand of a pharaoh the likes of whom no one had ever known. Eventually, over three days in June of 1942 the entire community was lined up at the school gym systematically registered and deported in three train loads to Terezin.

Two wooden scrolls, the skin of a kosher animal and some chemicals mixed together. That's all it took to make this Torah. That and 300 years of cherished memories, births and deaths, simchas and holidays and celebrations. All erased in the blink of an eye.

Listen now as we call out the names of some of the final members of that community the last of 3 centuries of Jews in Kolin who had the opportunity to gaze upon this Torah, to study it, to teach it, to hold it in their arms and kiss it as it was carried around the sanctuary.

[congregants rise and call out names of adult members of Kolin]

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And what became of this little Torah? It, along with almost 1800 other Czech scrolls from 122 communities was sent, in May of 1942, to Prague where it became part of the collections of the Jewish Museum there. The German authority dealing with the Jewish question in Czechoslovakia had ordered the Jewish communities to send all their liturgical objects, books and archive records to the newly established Central Jewish Museum. The idea for the museum, believe it or not, came from Prague Jewish community employees who sought to protect the properties of those who had been deported to concentration camps. They convinced their oppressors of the wisdom of their idea.

And so it was that our little Torah made the 33 mile journey west from Kolin to Prague where it remained ware housed for the next 30 plus years until it was found with thousands of other scrolls in a small, damp, deserted synagogue in a dingy suburb of Prague, where the scrolls had been moved after the Soviet occupation. A description of their condition notes that they were kept in,

“rows of high rough wooden racks ... along [a] damp wall ... more than 1500 Torah scrolls were laid 2 or 3 rows deep ...” The note continues, “There was something strangely familiar about the look of the rows of Sifre Torah lying on those racks. ... like the rough wooden bunks in the barracks at Terezin. Only, instead of the bodies of [] suffering Jews, there were the Scrolls that come from the communities of those ... Jews. Now the people ... were gone, but the scrolls remained ...”

In 1964 a deal was struck between the Czech government and a British philanthropist to bring the entire collection of Torahs to London. On February 7, 1964, 1564 scrolls arrived at the Westminster synagogue. It was quickly determined that all the usable scrolls should be offered, on permanent loan, to Jewish communities around the world that these Sifre Torah might serve as testimony and memorial to a great Jewish community that had been lost.

And so it was that in 1978 Rabbi Solomon Kleinman and Esther and Harvey (z”l) Saritzky decided that this congregation should have one of these Czech memorial scrolls. Esther went to London to retrieve a scroll with one instruction: “Bring back a scroll that our children can carry.” With great fanfare and celebration members of this community made their way to LAX and, in the days before security, met Esther at the gate as she disembarked from the plane. They welcomed the Torah to our community with great fanfare, singing and dancing their way down the concourse and north up the 405 and into its new home in our ark.

Since that day, every Bar and Bat Mitzvah has carried this precious little Torah around our sanctuary. They carry it, as I constantly remind them, not because it is the smallest, but for the last children of Kolin who never had the opportunity to celebrate their own b’nai mitzvah, or to hold and hug this little Torah.

Let us now hear and honor their names.

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[members call out names and ages of children of Kolin]

This little Torah is not ours, it is theirs – the people of Kolin. We carry it for them. We carry the hopes and dream of a Jewish community that is no more. This is their precious legacy to us. And this is the promise we made to them: to care for their scroll and do all we can to make sure that they are never forgotten. When we accepted this Torah, we also accepted the responsibility to care for it to cherish it and love it in the manner that the people of Kolin cared for and loved this Torah for almost three centuries.

And frankly, my friends, we have not kept our promise. Over the years this precious little Torah has fallen into a state of terrible disrepair. Its letters have faded to the point that they can not be read. Its seams have begun to fray, and it has become very fragile and completely unusable.

We simply can not allow this to be. We owe it to the people of Kolin, to three hundred years of men and women, boys and girls fathers and mothers, sons and daughters sisters and brothers who cherished this Torah.

So, this year, we are going to be true to our word. Our tradition teaches that in our lifetime each of us has a responsibility to write a Torah. Well, that time has arrived! Each and every member of this community will have that opportunity over the course of this year. We are going to renew this Torah. We are going to make it much more than a damaged scroll carried in the arms of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. We are going to make it possible for those who wish to, to actually *read* from this Torah. Simply put, we are going to make this Torah, once more, as it was intended to be a living vibrant part of a Jewish community.

When we travel to Israel we always make a pilgrimage to the Valley of the Communities at Yad v'Shem more than a hundred of you have made this journey with me. There among the cavernous maze of stone, engraved with names of the hundreds of Jewish communities lost in the Shoah we stand under the name of Kolin and hold an always moving memorial service. We call out the names of that last, lost generation, remembering them and the horrible sacrifice they were forced to make simply because they were Jewish.

This summer, we will do more. As a community we are going to travel to Kolin. There we will stand in front of Samuel Oppenheim's ark with *this* Torah renewed and restored. We will bare witness for the people of Kolin that the German's *didn't* win, that we still exist, more than exist we *thrive* and that their Torah will *live* as well in its new Northridge home, carried in the arms of b'nai mitzvah read from and learned from for many more generations to come.

The last Rabbi of Kolin was one of the few survivors. He returned to Kolin in order to write his memoirs and to build a memorial to his lost community. In his memoir he wrote in part, Dear Jews of Kolin ..., Out of love, respect and gratitude I have built you a

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memorial in this book. It is only a humble paper memorial, but I hope it is more telling than those of stone and more permanent than those of metal. ... You died a martyr's death ... The Germans murdered you. They obliterated your bodies. They destroyed your ashes. Nothing remained except your names, your good names, your honest, untainted names, names that deserve to be preserved for generations to come."

With the restoration of this precious scroll, we take a sacred vow that their good, honest, untainted names will be preserved as long as their Torah is ours to protect and carry for them.

And on this day of creation, we take another solemn oath as well that we will take this Torah into our hearts taking its story and lessons with us as we go out those doors where we will work tirelessly to create a world where the horrors they suffered will never again be inflicted upon anyone else.

To paraphrase another reading with which I often begin our Torah service: We owe it to them to keep this Torah alive, for they struggled and suffered to preserve our way of life. This is their most precious gift to us. We owe it to our children to keep this Torah alive for why should they be spiritual paupers when the riches of this heritage can be theirs? And finally we owe it to the world to keep this Torah alive, for it tells a story which the world needs to hear.

My humbling responsibility every day is to keep this story alive and I pray that you will join with me on this sacred journey over the coming year, a journey we begin now as we take this Torah on its first steps towards renewal through the aisles of this blessed community that has been entrusted the care of this most precious and sacred scroll.

[Kolin scroll is carried in procession around the sanctuary by Holocaust survivors as children's choir sings Julie Silver's "Take God With You.]