

Facing Forward, Looking Back: Torah Rededication
Parshat Terumah
February 25, 2023
Debbie Steinig

D'var Torah Introduction

Shabbat Shalom. Chevrei Tzedek has had this Torah scroll in our ark for 30 years. Every Yom Kippur at Kol Nidrei services, we've held this scroll in front of the congregation -- many years it was held by a survivor. On Simchat Torah, we've danced with this scroll in our arms. We've had study sessions about a special feature of the scroll: it has so-called *otiot mishunot*, "extraordinary letters," a tradition rich in symbolism. For example, our scroll has several instances of the *peh l'fufah*, or wrapped peh, also called the double peh. This is what a regular peh looks like. Here's a peh l'fufah, the little peh within the big peh. *Peh* means mouth, so this is, literally, a mouth within a mouth -- symbolically, perhaps, a voice within a voice.

For all the ways that we've loved and honored our Torah scroll for these last three decades, we had never chanted from it before today, because it wasn't kosher. It had extreme water damage on several panels in the book of Shemot, in today's parsha, Parshat Terumah. Late last year, a scribe in London with the Memorial Scrolls Trust repaired it for us.

It's so huge that it's almost too big to take in how sacred it is to be chanting from a Torah scroll that hasn't been read in over 80 years. When the Torah Rededication Committee started planning for this morning, we wanted to figure out how to help convey the import of this moment. The known history of this scroll is amazing in and of itself, but there is also so much that we don't know -- so many gaps that we can only try to fill with our imaginations.

For example: when the scroll was in a warehouse for many long years, why was it rolled to today's parsha, Parshat Terumah? Is it possible that portion was chanted at the last service where this scroll was used? Is it possible the scroll was rolled ahead to that section in anticipation of a service that was never held? More broadly, who were the people who loved this scroll before us?

We have a long Jewish tradition of looking for the story within the story, the story in the spaces between the letters. For this, I make way for our storyteller, Jennifer Zunikoff.

Unused Version

Shabbat Shalom. Some background: Prague, 1942. Bohemia and Moravia were a few years into Nazi occupation. Thousands of ritual objects from abandoned synagogues were collected in Prague. A group of Jews at the Jewish Museum cataloged these items. The Czech Jewish communities would not survive World War II, but their sacred objects would, including 1800 Torah scrolls.

Fast forward to Baltimore, 1993. Aubrey and Amelia Jay decided to help Chevrei Tzedek acquire a Holocaust Memorial Scroll. Thanks to the Jays' generosity, the Memorial Trust Fund shipped us a package. When the box arrived from London, the Jay family opened it. Inside lay Memorial Scroll No. 345. The scroll dates back to the 1860s and includes several examples of a "peh l'fufah," or double peh, written in a style that was common in Prague. Here's what a regular peh looks like. Here's a peh l'fufah, with a small peh inside the big peh.

We kept this scroll in our ark. Every Yom Kippur at Kol Nidrei services, we held this scroll before the entire congregation. At Simchat Torah, we danced with this scroll in our arms. But we never chanted from it, because when the scroll got to Baltimore, a scribe examined it and deemed it unkosher. He said it was so badly water-damaged that it could not be repaired.

In 2016 and in 2019, the scroll was examined again. This time, two scribes said they thought it could be repaired, though at great cost, if we could raise the funds. But in 2022, one of those same scribes said they had changed their mind. Mold from the water damage was continuing to spread, and the scroll could not be saved.

This is when Memorial Scrolls Trust said, "Send it to us -- we'll fix it!" We weren't sure we could afford it. Memorial Scrolls Trust offered to take on much of the expense. Donors at Chevrei Tzedek stepped forward to pay the rest, and our scroll was repaired. Today, for the first time in over 80 years, we chanted from it.

These are the facts, and in and of themselves, they tell an amazing story. But there is still so much that we don't know -- so many gaps that we can only try to fill with our imaginations. We have a long Jewish tradition of looking for the story behind the story, the story in the spaces between the words. For this, I turn you over to our beloved resident storyteller, Jennifer Zunikoff.

Shabbat Shalom. Some background: Prague, 1942. Bohemia and Moravia were a few years into Nazi occupation. Thousands of ritual objects from abandoned synagogues were collected in Prague. A group of Jews at the Jewish Museum cataloged these items. The Czech Jewish communities would not survive World War II, but their sacred objects would, including 1800 Torah scrolls.

1948. Communists took power in Czechoslovakia. The Torah scrolls were moved to a damp warehouse in a former synagogue, where they sat for 16 years.

1964. The Czech government approached a Jewish art dealer from London. The art dealer contacted a philanthropist, who purchased 1,564 Torah scrolls. In London, the Memorial Scrolls Trust cared for these rescued Torah scrolls and began to loan them to congregations all over the world.

Baltimore, 1993. Aubrey and Amelia Jay decided to help Chevrei Tzedek acquire a Holocaust Memorial Scroll. Thanks to the Jays' generosity, the Memorial Trust Fund shipped us a package. When the box arrived from London, the Jay family opened it. Inside lay Memorial Scroll No. 345. The scroll dates back to the 1860s and includes several examples of a "peh l'fufah," or double peh, written in a style that was common in Prague. Here's what a regular peh looks like. Here's a peh l'fufah, with a small peh inside the big peh.

We kept this scroll in our ark. Every Yom Kippur at Kol Nidrei services, we held this scroll before the entire congregation. At Simchat Torah, we danced with this scroll in our arms. But we never chanted from it, because when the scroll got to Baltimore, a scribe examined it and deemed it unkosher. He said it was so badly water-damaged that it could not be repaired.

In 2016 and in 2019, the scroll was examined again. This time, two scribes said they thought it could be repaired, though at great cost, if we could raise the funds. But in 2022, one of those same scribes said they had changed their mind. Mold from the water damage was continuing to spread, and the scroll could not be saved.

This is when Memorial Scrolls Trust said, "Send it to us -- we'll fix it!" We weren't sure we could afford it. Memorial Scrolls Trust offered to take on much of the expense. Donors at Chevrei Tzedek stepped forward to pay the rest, and our scroll was repaired. Today, for the first time in over 80 years, we chanted from it.

These are the facts, and in and of themselves, they tell an amazing story. But there is still so much that we don't know -- so many gaps that we can only try to fill with our imaginations. We have a long Jewish tradition of looking for the story behind the story, the story in the spaces between the letters. For this, I turn you over to our beloved storyteller, Jennifer Zunikoff.