

A Strange Sort Of Reunion

Alanna E. Cooper | February 6, 2019

The largest reunion of Torahs in history occurred this past Tuesday, when 73 scrolls came together in Manhattan. What is a Torah scroll reunion? And how did it come about? I explain with a story:

About 40 years ago, a New Jersey synagogue acquired an old, damaged Torah. Decades prior – long before the scroll had arrived in New Jersey – it had belonged to a Czech Jewish community, which had perished in the Holocaust. In the 1970s, when the New Jersey congregants agreed to take in the Czech scroll and care for it – they designed an elaborate welcoming ceremony, attended by synagogue members, young and old.

Because of its worn-out state, the scroll could not be used for chanting during regular services. So, rather than placing it in the ark with the synagogue's other scrolls, the congregation had a beautiful display case built. Here, the Torah scroll stood, upright, facing all those who walked by.

Years passed. Some congregants died. The rabbi retired. A new rabbi was hired, and some time later he retired too. The children who had been in religious school when the Torah was welcomed into the congregation, left for college. In the meantime, new people moved to town and joined the synagogue. When they walked by the glass case – that by now had faded – they did not stop to look. The Czech Torah stood silent, unnoticed.

Of course it did. When an object is not touched, when stories are not told about it, when it is not engaged in the life of the people to whom it belongs, it goes dormant. This is true not only of a Torah, but of any heirloom that may have once held important meaning for its owners; an old trinket or tool, a crystal vase, a well-used desk. If it is not cared for and used, it loses its vibrancy.

The tale of the New Jersey Torah scroll is just one piece of a much larger story. The scroll belongs to Memorial Scrolls Trust (MST), a London-based organization that serves as custodian for 1,564 Torah scrolls that were owned by Jewish communities in Czech lands prior to World War II, most of whom perished. When MST acquired this massive collection in 1964, the organization inventoried them, then sent them out to living congregations in the United States, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.



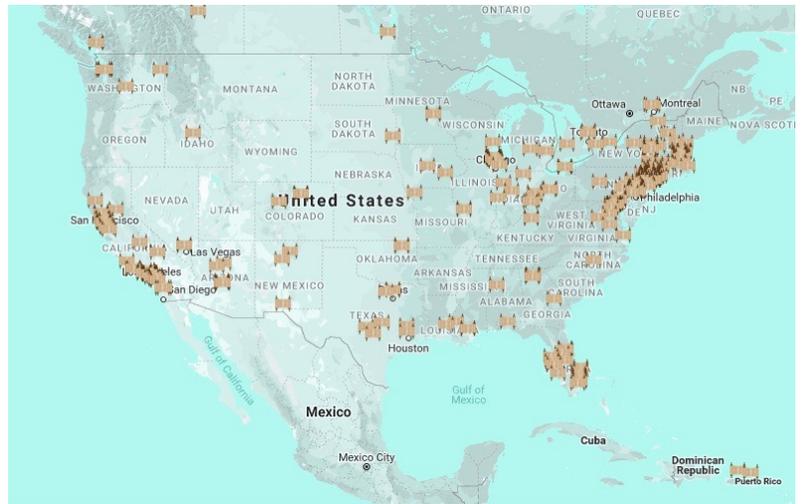
When the congregation in New Jersey – and others like it – took in their Czech scroll, MST stipulated that it was on “permanent loan.” This meant that the congregation could keep the Torah for as long as it wished, but only under certain conditions: The scroll could not be given away or sold. If the congregation wished to repair the scroll, the work had to be authorized by MST. Finally, the congregation agreed to pay regular dues in support of MST’s work.

As the scrolls were sent out across the world, a database was created to keep track of the receiving congregations. Originally, this information was recorded on handwritten index cards. Eventually, it was digitized. But, by the early 2000s, MST had fallen technologically behind. Its website was unsophisticated and electronic communication had not been established with the congregations that housed the scrolls. In the meantime, the congregations themselves had lost institutional memory of their connection to Memorial Scrolls Trust.

In recent years, MST has worked to re-engage relationships with the scattered congregations, over 1,000 of them in the United States. A new website has been designed, their database has been updated, their archival records are in the process of being digitized, and connections with the congregations that received their scrolls decades ago – like the one in New Jersey – have been reinstated. This task is not always straightforward. In the years that have passed, some congregations have merged, or even disbanded, making it difficult to track down the scrolls.

To address this change, Memorial Scrolls Trust is creating interesting opportunities to enliven the scrolls, and re-engage their history. One way is by making virtual connections. Every congregation with an MST scroll is requested to post their Torah’s story on their synagogue website, and to provide a link back to the MST site. (See, for example, the interesting stories of Temple Tifereth Israel’s MST scrolls [here](#)).

In turn, every congregation with a “reciprocal link” is placed on MST’s world map. The interactive graphics are impressive. See [here](#) (and be sure to look for the two Cleveland congregations that are represented). Virtual connections, though, are hardly sufficient. MST has also created opportunities for congregations that house the Czech scrolls to gather together for events referred to as “reunions.”



The first documented “reunion” was held in 1999. In this case, Holocaust survivor Hana Gruna flew from her home in Pennsylvania to Santa Monica, California. There, she met Congregation Sha’arei Am’s MST scroll, which had come from Susice (a town southwest of Prague) where Hana herself was born and raised.

In her chilling remarks, Hana related that upon encountering the Torah, all those who perished - her family members, together with the whole Susice congregation – suddenly appeared before her “in their best clothes.” Later that night, she dreamt of them, their names and faces. For a brief moment, Hana said, “I saw them all.”

Over the years, as survivors have passed on, reunions between the *Torah scrolls themselves* have been organized. At such events, the scrolls become stand-ins for all those people who had once read from them, and gathered to hear them chanted – and then later perished.

The largest such reunion occurred this past Tuesday, when 73 scrolls, together with a crowd of over 500 people who now house them, converged at Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan. Insinuating themselves in the lives those who tend to them, the scrolls tugged at the people, bringing them to sit beside one another and tell stories of their pasts – and now of their Torahs’ regained vibrancy.

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