

Dedication of Beth Israel Holocaust Scroll

from Prostějov, Czechoslovakia

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Yom ha-Shoa Commemoration, 5744

The 1,564 sacred Scrolls which came to Westminster Synagogue on 7th February, 1964, had been gathered together in Prague, from the desolated synagogues of Bohemia and Moravia, by the Nazi official in charge of the Czech "Protectorate." Much more synagogue booty, books, pictures, embroidered vestments, and ceremonial objects of silver and gold, were similarly collected by the Nazis, and many of these articles are now in the State Jewish Museum in Prague. The Scrolls themselves lay piled in the disused Michle Synagogue for more than 20 years.

In 1963, with the sympathetic concern of the Czechoslovak Government, Mr. Eric Estorick, a London art connoisseur, was able to arrange with Artis, the authority responsible for such treasure, for the acquisition of the Scrolls. Mr. Ralph Yablon of London responded generously to a request to finance the enterprise; and, at his instance, Mr. Chimen Abramsky, now professor of Hebrew Studies at the University of London, travelled twice to Prague to make a cursory examination of the Scrolls. The packing and shipping were themselves no small undertaking; and all was done with meticulous care. It was agreed from the outset by the Czech Authorities and the British interested parties that the Scrolls should pass in trust to a responsible non-commercial body; and Mr. Yablon nominated Westminster Synagogue. The offer was solemnly accepted by the synagogue officers; and a Memorial Scrolls committee was formed under the chairmanship of Mr. Frank R. Waley, then chairman and later president of the Synagogue. Rabbi Harold F. Reinhart, founder Minister of Westminster Synagogue, gave his devoted attention to every aspect of the care and distribution of the Scrolls from the moment of their arrival until his death in 1969.

The first task of the committee was the careful unpacking and numbering of the Scrolls, and the construction in three rooms of racks designed for the purpose, with positions properly numbered so that each of the 1,564 Scrolls could be readily accounted for through the period of their study and distribution. Then came the major task of inspection. A system of cataloguing was devised; and in accordance therewith, each Scroll was gone through by an expert, and a record made, so far as was possible, of the origin and age of the Scroll, the physical condition of its components and, most important, the state of the writing and the defects therein. On the basis of this study, the Scrolls were classified into grades, from best to unusable. The middle grades are such as can be made usable by a little or a greater amount of labour, and such as have some parts which are or can be made usable. Of the remainder, most will serve as sacred memorials.

Requests for the sacred Scrolls have come to the committee continuously from the time of their arrival in London in 1964 (widely reported in the British and American press), up to the present time. In the allocation of Scrolls during these past 20 years, priority has been given to Synagogues needing a Scroll for use in services, and Czech Memorial Scrolls are now in use in many countries. As might be expected, the largest Jewish community, that of the United States, has provided new homes for a great many of the Scrolls; but others have been sent to virtually every established community. Of the 1,564 Scrolls received in 1964, a very great many are beyond repair for use in synagogue services. We have distributed practically all the scrolls which can be made kosher and of the remainder we are now allocating Scrolls to those congregations who wish to have a memorial to the martyred communities. Each Scroll bears a brass tablet with a number corresponding to the number on a certificate which describes the origin of the Scroll and any known particulars.

The committee continues to receive many requests; and will not rest until the sacred treasures shall have found their most appropriate homes, to honour the memory of the martyrs and to bring light to future generations.

IN COMMEMORATION OF YOM HA-SHOA

When it comes to the Holocaust we are all like the fourth son at the Passover Seder, who does not know how to ask the question.

The monstrous evil of the Holocaust defies the imagination of the novelist, the analysis of the philosopher, and the eloquence of the preacher.

The Holocaust centers about a basic paradox. It imposes silence but demands speech. It defies solutions but requires responses.

Just as the Midrash says: All Jews were at Sinai - So all Jews were at Auschwitz.

Just as no one really can convey what happened at Sinai, no one can really convey what happened at Auschwitz. Somewhere between the realms of speech and silence dwells the secret of Sinai and the secret of Auschwitz.

But one thing may be clearly stated. Just as the Jewish people have never been the same since Sinai, so they can never be the same since Auschwitz.

We must therefore begin again. We must write a new Talmud, new Midrashim, just as we did after the destruction of the Second Temple. We did so then in order to mark the new beginning: until then we lived one way; from then on nothing could be the same.

We must now live up to the meaning of the name of our people - Israel. Only after Jacob wrestles with God and man and prevails, is he called Israel. We must pull God out of hiding and strive with Him until all slaughter and threat of slaughter ceases. Until He causes us to be blessed. Until He bestows upon us a peace other than the peace of the dead, lest God's eclipse become a blackout. We must strive with man until he restores to himself a rightful claim to the image of God. Lest man, in denying the Divine spark within him, become a beast too cruel to reform.

Our generation has come to know man as he really is. Man is that being who has invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who has entered those gas chambers with dignity and with the affirmation of Ani Ma'amin on his lips.

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Ani Ma-Amin

A-ni ma-a-min be-e-mu-na she-lei-ma
be-vi-at ha-ma-shi-ach.
Ve-af al pi she-yit-na-he-moi-a,
Im kol ze-ani ma-a-min

I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah.
And even though the messiah tarry, still will I believe

It was this song that the Jews sang as they marched together to their deaths.