

DO NOT FORSAKE IT

the mitzvah of caring for Sifrei Torah

Kol Nidre 5767

This story will not be new for those of you who have accompanied me to Amsterdam with our confirmation classes, particularly those who have traveled in the past few years—since we have added the extra day to the trip, to *Den Haag*—The Hague.

The synagogue at The Hague dates from the early 18th century. Built in the Sephardic style, with the seats along the side walls and the reading table in the center, it is a small, intimate version of Amsterdam's imposing *Esnoga* (the Ladino word for "synagogue") or as it is more generally known, the Great Portuguese Synagogue. The interior designs of the two synagogues are in the same style: wooden benches, brass chandeliers, blached walls. In fact, the starkness of the space, the lacking if color, the absence of stained glass windows or wall art forces you to focus on the one place that is (and should be) central—the *Aron Kodesh*, the Ark. In both synagogues the ark is a magnificent work of carpentry, made from rare Brazilian dark woods, beautifully carved, with multiple doors—of course, two in the center, but both sides flanked with doors reaching all the way around to the sides on either end.

I remember on one trip, when it came time for my friend and colleague, Rabbi Reuven Bar Ephraim, to answer questions, one of our kids asked about the extra doors. "What are all the doors for?" "For the Torahs," he answered. "But *our* ark only has two doors," she returned. "Well," he said somewhat humbly, "we used to have a lot of Torahs. Just like we used to have a lot of Jews."

The room remained silent for a moment. Everyone knew what he was saying. No one needed to pry any further. Holland, so often thought of as one of the more exceptional places of refuge for Jews during the Holocaust (undoubtedly because of the impression we all get from the heroic efforts of a handful of people to shelter Anne Frank) actually witnessed the 2nd highest death rate of Jews of any country in Europe; only Poland lost a higher percentage of its Jewish population. Rabbi Bar Ephraim, breaking the silence, said, "I want to show you something." He opened the center Ark doors, reached around the right side door, and took out a small parcel, a package wrapped in a nice cloth. Unwrapping it, he removed a number of fragments of what were clearly parchment, pieces of Torah. Again, it didn't take a lot of imagination to figure out what these pieces of *klaf* or parchment were—desecrated Torah scrolls. But the story behind them, that no one ever would have been able to anticipate.

"A number of years ago," Rabbi Bar Ephraim began, "before I became the rabbi here, one of my predecessors—Rabbi Jacob Soetendorp—welcomed a stranger into this synagogue. This was at the time right after this building, which was empty for many, many years, was reclaimed by the Jewish community and returned to being a synagogue. The man said, 'Rabbi, I am not Jewish, I know almost nothing of your faith, but my father, who had been in the camps during the war, brought home these pieces of scrolls after the liberation. They have been in our family for many years. I know they are Jewish, I know they are considered sacred, but I have no idea what to do with them. But now that you have returned to the synagogue, it seemed right that they should be returned to the Jewish people.' Rabbi Soetendorp immediately knew them for what they were—fragments of *sifrei Torah* that had been cut up for *utilitarian* use by the Nazis. In fact," as Rabbi Bar Ephraim was now holding them up for us to see, "while you can see how

many of the scrolls are just *pieces*, snippets of parchment,” he then held up one large piece with a really big, perfectly cut hole in the center, “this one was used to make a drum.”

The kids, who up to this time were doing everything in their power to stay awake, were now firmly riveted on Rabbi Bar Ephraim. “Then Rabbi Soetendorp,” he said, “replied to this Dutch man, ‘I cannot thank you enough for what you have done. These are truly sacred to my people. And you are right, even though they have been desecrated, we are not permitted to simply discard them. According to Jewish law they must be buried. I will care for them, I will care for them,’ Rabbi Soetendorp continued, ‘for the rest of my life, and when I die they will be buried...with me.’”

Then one of our travelers said, “Where is Rabbi Soetendorp now?” “He’s dead,” said Rabbi Bar Ephraim. “But I don’t understand. If he said he would have them buried with him, and he’s dead, why are they still here?” Rabbi Bar Ephraim smiled. “There’s more to the story.”

“A few years after that, Rabbi Soetendorp retired and was replaced by his son, Rabbi Avraham Soetendorp. One day, when the son was now rabbi here at The Hague, *another* Dutch man came into the synagogue with pieces of parchment just like the first with the same exact story. His father had been in the camps, found pieces of Torah scrolls and brought them home to safe-keep them. Now he, like the first man—even though there was absolutely no connection between them, they came from different towns, their fathers had been in different camps—was now returning these pieces of Torah to the synagogue. So the 2nd Rabbi Soetendorp then went to the Ark, took out the first pieces of scroll that had been given to his father (who was still alive at the time), and said, as had his father, ‘I will keep them with these other scrolls and, when the time comes, I will be buried with them.’”

By this time our mouths were as wide open as our eyes. “Where is Rabbi Soetendorp now?” one of our kids asked. “He is retired now, and still alive,” Rabbi Bar Ephraim said. “Will these be buried with him when *he* dies?” the student continued. Rabbi Bar Ephraim smiled. “I don’t know.” “But if they’re all buried with Rabbi Soetendorp,” you could now see how upset this student was becoming, “who will tell this story?” And it was then that I stood up and, doing *my* rabbi thing, interjected, “You will.”

The truth is, the first question—Why weren’t the fragments of Torah buried with Rabbi Jacob Soetendorp when he died?—remains unanswered. I have never had the opportunity to ask his son, Rabbi Avraham Soetendorp, that question. But I can guess. Because our second student’s question—If you bury them, who will tell the story?—is very compelling. As powerful as this tale is, imagine how much more effective it would be were I to hold up in front of you those sacred remnants of *sifrei Torah*. So the son keeps the *visual* element of the story alive while remaining faithful to his father’s pledge: The scrolls will never be desecrated again, rather they will always be treated with the sanctity they are owed. Perhaps more than anything else, this is the legacy, this is the “object value” of the *sefer Torah*—the Torah scroll.

Most people really don’t know how the Torah came to be the Torah. At the end of Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments*, as Charlton Heston (Moses) is about to die, he hands over to John Derek (Joshua) a parcel and says, “This is the Law of God. Take care of it and protect it.” But if you pay close attention to what Moses is giving Joshua, it’s actually a very nice leather satchel (pre-Coach Store). Notwithstanding the tradition which states that the Torah—in its entirety—was given to Moses at Mount Sinai, even the ancient rabbis, who truly believed that Moses wrote down every word as dictated by God, were troubled with the obvious problem with how could Moses write about his own death? But it

would take more than a thousand years for someone in the Jewish community—namely Amsterdam’s Baruch Spinoza—to openly suggest that the *writing* of the Torah might partly be the work of man, and for this Spinoza was excommunicated, the ban of which continues in force until this day.

Today, all but those in the Orthodox community agree that the Torah was written by man, a compilation of multiple documents compiled in a *whole* of five books. General consensus among scholars is that the process of putting the Torah together, of joining the various traditions of Genesis with the story of the exodus and the wilderness wanderings, with the collections of laws and the rules of sacrifice occurred soon after the destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile to Babylon. And while we have no direct evidence to suggest a motivation for this, my guess is that the writing down and formal canonization of the Torah addressed two critical needs of that community—needs that still face us today.

Imagine you have just been driven from your home, to an alien soil, to a place where no one speaks your language. All you have is each other. That is what faced the Jews who were exiled to Babylon in 586 B.C.E. (Actually, it was the Babylonian’s who gave us our name, we being the people from *Yehudah*—Judah—Jews.) For all they knew, this was the end. Jerusalem was in ruins, the Temple destroyed, the king deposed. So the *kohanim* stepped forward, assumed control, and—being the only truly literate community in ancient Israel—set out on a comprehensive program of recording the many traditions of the people. They were in survival mode. The exiles determined that this tradition would not die with them. In particular they wrote out what we now know as the book of Leviticus, a manual for priests, perchance—one day in the future—they or their descendants would return and rebuild the Temple.

But in the process it became clear how Torah would not merely serve as a testament to their tradition and history, even more it became their *center*. It was here, in Babylon, that Torah became the vertex of Jewish life. Once it was finally written down, it was read aloud. And then studied. And from that text came a new way of life, a life focused on the performance of mitzvot. And Judaism was born.

The leadership and foresight of that generation continues to our day. Torah is still our center. For all that has distracted us, for all that we have allowed “the desires of our hearts and our eyes” to lead us “astray,” Torah—and all that it represents—remains the *ma’ayan*, the well-spring of the Jewish people. And its transmission—particularly symbolized by the virtually cultish, pervasive observance of Bar and Bat Mitzvah—serves witness to how much we continue to value Torah.

Consider what we all experienced here this evening. We stood (for as long a time as we liberal Jews will *ever* stand), we listened to what is universally accepted as the most sacred of Hebraic melodies—*Kol Nidre*, and perhaps most important, we did it in the presence of the *sifrei Torah*. Is this just sacred theater? Do we think that this ritual is nothing more than an act of sacred drama? How then might we explain those who literally risk their lives, who run into burning synagogues to save Torah scrolls, who openly defy the sadistic taunts of our enemies to publicly desecrate those same Torah scrolls? How do we explain the great sense of obligation—for even the most disaffected of Jews—to personally hand down the Torah scroll to the next generation at Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations? More than the worship of an object, it is the reverence for all that it represents.

This is why I think Rabbi Avraham Soetendorp chose not to bury the desecrated fragments with his father: Because the *story* of their desecration and redemption transcends the mitzvah to bury them, even though they are no longer usable as texts. Symbols as they may be, and even in fragmented and desecrated form, those pieces of parchment have a holiness of their own.

The truth is that each *sefer Torah* has its own story. Some have remarkable histories. Like the scroll in the display case our library. You'll see that the Hebrew columns are written differently than the scrolls in our Ark. And if you look closely, you notice that the scroll has been cut up into multiple parts and then taped back together (with Scotch Tape!). It is an Egyptian Torah, smuggled out of Egypt soon after the Six-Day War. Or the large Holocaust scroll we have. Even though it is no longer usable—the parchment being too dry to hold the letters inscribed on it over 200 years ago—still inspires me every time I open it and gaze on its incredible calligraphy. Who was the *sofer* who put such love into that scroll, and who were the generations of young men who had it to carry it though their synagogue in Bohemia before they and that synagogue were destroyed? Or then there's the *other* Torah scroll at the synagogue in The Hague, the one with the residue of sea salt on it, the one that came to Holland with the émigrés from Spain in 1492.

Each year on these sacred days, when I have virtually all of you here, I make a point after the *kriah* or reading of the Torah to emphasize how it is that the Torah belongs to you. It's not just some sacred object on the sacred space of the *bimah*, it's not—as Torah will teach us tomorrow morning—in the heavens or across the sea, out of reach. No it belongs to you, the Jewish people, and its words—to paraphrase Torah—are in your heart. That's what makes Torah so sacred—because it embodies the passion of the heart.

Did you know that the last letter of Torah—the *lamed* of Torah's last word, *Yisraeil*—and the first letter of the first word of Torah—the *bet* of *Bereishit*, when placed together (which happens only once a year when we end and then simultaneously re-begin on Simchat Torah) spell *Lev* and that means “heart”? Would it not be reasonable to say, then, that if Torah is not in our hearts, if we do not embrace and care for the Torah and its words *b'khol l'va'veinu*—with all our heart, then we fail ourselves as Jews?

This year our community is being offered an extraordinary opportunity. To repair *sifrei Torah*. To mend that which is torn. To correct that which is flawed. As a *Kehilla Kedosha*—a community sanctified by the Torah—we are embracing the mitzvah of caring for our Torah scrolls so that our daughters and sons may read from them for generations to come, so that we may continue to read the words our ancestors preserved *for us* by the waters of Babylon.

Of course there's money involved. *Ein kemach ein Torah* the Mishnah teaches. There can be no Torah without flour, without the substance of living. This mitzvah cannot be fulfilled for free. And it is true, we do this as a means of raising money, but for what purpose if not to continue to teach Torah? The fact of the matter is that the second part of that Mishnah goes on to say, *V'im ein Torah ein kemach*—yet without Torah there can be no substance to life. All of this must lead us to the enrichment of life. As such, if we are so blessed, if all of us participate in this mitzvah, then I hope we will be able to donate a significant amount of money that we raise to another congregation that is needier than are we, perhaps one that does not yet have a Torah.

Therefore, as the central part of this process, each of us will be given the privilege to fulfill the 613th and last of the *mitzvot*: to write a *sefer Torah*. Even the inscribing of a single letter, which we do by holding the hand of our *soferet* Linda Coppelson as she makes the letters, is sufficient to fulfill the *mitzvah*.

In the days ahead you will learn more about this unique opportunity. But in the meantime let me say that the *mitzvah* may rest upon the individual, but the responsibility lies with the community. The proverb—*Ki lekach tov natati lakhem, Torati, al ta'azovu*, Behold a good doctrine has been given you, My Torah, do not forsake it—is written in the plural.

Final thought. At the end of the movie *The Frisco Kid* there's a touching scene where Gene Wilder decides not to be a rabbi anymore because, instead of saving his friend who was in mortal danger, he rushed to save the Torah scroll which was thrown onto a burning fire. It was an understandable instinct on the part of Rabbi Avram Belinski, Wilder's character. Sadly, we are well acquainted with images of Jews rushing in to burning synagogues to rescue *sifrei Torah*. But Rabbi Belinski was right, maybe not about forsaking the rabbinate but certainly for feeling profound remorse. Because when all is said and done, it's just a thing. The scroll is just an object, two posts holding sewn parchment bearing inscribed words. The saving of life—*pikuach nefesh*—trumps everything else. It's *mitzvah*. We know this. Because it's written in the Torah.

Fortunately for us, we don't have to make that decision. We don't have to choose. We are of a generation that is free to carry the scrolls of our people in public. But well we know that the scrolls are more than objects to be held (as we did this evening) or danced with in celebration (as we will do in two weeks) or carried *b'parhesya*—in the street (as we did 26 years ago). The Torah is to be read. It is an *Eitz Chayyim*—a Tree of Life. And like all things living, it requires nurturing and love. And that is the exclusive responsibility—indeed, privilege—of the Jewish people.