

Savannah Friday Shabbat Shalom

As we gather here in this beautiful sanctuary to greet the sabbath bride, I am struck by this congregation's pride in its historical roots of Savannah, the State of Georgia and in your commitment to the continuity of Judaism and the Jewish people.

Tonight, I shall talk about Torah scrolls both their insides and their outsides. It is, of course, the most holy object in Judaism and the glue that holds the Jewish people together...Reform, Conservative, Orthodoxfrom Russia, Yemen, Spain and every other flavor of Judaism and country on the planet, the Torah scroll is the same for all of us. Importantly, it also binds together the major religions of the world. It is the

Old Testament in Christianity and one of the 5 books for the Muslims.

This Shabbat falls at an interesting time of the year. It is just after Pesach when we celebrate our deliverance and freedom from bondage in Egypt and a few days before the much more modern observance of Yom Hashoah (the remembrance day of the Holocaust) when we remember the 6 million or $\frac{2}{3}$ of European Jews killed during the Holocaust. A time to explore our individual and collective roles in passing on stories to younger generations.

Let's begin with the ultimate story book....the inside of the Torah....For this week's Torah reading, we begin

with Moses and Aaron exiting the tent to bless the people. Let me pause here... In many ways, I am about to share with you my own personal family story. To explain...My father's family are kohanim, supposedly ...direct descendants from Aaron and the line of Jewish priests...and since the hand sign for blessings looks like this....I may also be related to Mr. Spock from Star Trek ...so I fully expect to find "Vulcan" in my DNA results.

Anyway, getting back to my great, great to the 133rd power..... great grandfather, Aaron.....

When he and his brother Moses emerge from the tent, they bless the people. The people are impressed and

all in all it is a great day. However, two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, took it upon themselves to offer alien fire (maybe from the planet Vulcan, who knows) and Hashem consumed them and they died. The Torah says, Moses comments on this scene and Aaron was silent.

Silence,..... Aaron was silent in the face of the death of two of his sons. No blaming. No anger. No response. The Rabbis have debated the meaning of this portion of the Torah for hundreds of years. Why were his sons struck down? Did they deserve death? If we look at European Jews in the 1940s during the Holocaust, could we ask the same question? Why them, why us? Should we be silent ?

Silence and mourning, they go together don't they?
During the Omer, this time between Passover and the holiday of Shavuot, when Hashem gives us the Torah, there are many rules about silence and the absence of sound. For the traditionally observant...No music, no celebrations.

But, we still chant Torah every week because that is more important than the silence. The Torah scroll is a mute, inanimate object and yet each week we bring it to life by chanting its verses and reading its stories. There is no silence on shabbat. We sing, we praise, we discuss, we even argue. Yet, when we roll up the scroll again and place it in the ark, it is silent once more.

Even rolled up, Torah scrolls, the physical object, play a part in Judaism. We dance with them at festivals like Simchat Torah, we reach out with tallit to touch their covers when on procession and bow to them in prayer during Aleinu. We decorate them with beautiful fabrics and silver ornaments. As a physical object they are revered.

Here at Mikve Israel, you have many Torah scrolls, but tonight, I am going to talk about one very special one originally written for the Jews in the town of Slany in Bohemia in the 1800s. This scroll, MST# 1477, is one of a collection of 1,564 scrolls which were gathered in the early years of WW2 by the Jews of Prague and

stored away during the fighting. A series of modern day miracles has brought this scroll to your ark.

After the war, when 85% of Czech Jewry did not survive the Nazi terror, these scrolls and 200,000 other pieces of Judaica did. In the 1960s, part of the collected Judaica, the scroll collection, was sold to a congregant of the Westminster Synagogue in Knightsbridge, London and thus started the predecessor of the Memorial Scrolls Trust with its mission to preserve the memory and legacy of Czech Jewry and by extension the memory of the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

The Trust has sent nearly 1,400 of the scrolls on permanent loan around the world to synagogues, museums and schools on every continent. The Memorial Scrolls Trust is probably the largest decentralized museum in the world. Our scrolls can be found in the US, Canada, S America, Europe, Australia, Israel and even Mumbai India and in Dubai. Your scroll # 1477 is part of this enormous network which stands as a testament of the fortitude of the Jewish people, our connection to the past and our emphasis on teaching our children our traditions and stories of our ancestors.

The Bohemian town of Slany, which means salt in Czech, contains a large salt mine and was the basis of commerce for the town since the 900s. A few Jews

passed through the town in the 14th century but they were forbidden from living there until the late 19th century. After Jewish emancipation in the Czech lands and with the rise of the Industrial Revolution, a community of 200 Jews formed in the 1860s and they built a large beautiful synagogue which still stands today. These Jews had adopted Reform Judaism from Germany, spoke German, dressed like their neighbors, had a 35% intermarriage rate and lived much like we do here in America today.

Look around this beautiful sanctuary in which we sit, it was built around the same time by German Jews coming to the US. Close your eyes and when you open

them, can you imagine yourself sitting in the beautiful shul in Slany...

The 1930s brought the rise of Nazism in Germany, the neighboring country, Jews were desperately trying to flee the Czech lands. By the early 1940s, the 81 Jews that were not able to flee Slany were deported to the ghetto camp, Terezin, by the Nazis and then on to the death camp of Auschwitz. No Jews returned to Slany after the Holocaust. But, the local Czechs have preserved their neighbor's history by maintaining the shul building, now being used as a police station. If I could show you pictures of it, you would see the ten commandments still hanging on the outside of the building and inside on the third floor ...a blue roof with

small gold stars painted on it as it stood when the Jews worshipped there. All over the Czech lands, there are examples of the preservation of Jewish immovable Judaica, maintained by the current Czechs. They are the memory sustainers and the participants in Holocaust commemorations in the Czech lands.

In the 21st century, the eyewitnesses and survivors of the Holocaust are passing on. Who will tell the story of the Holocaust to future generations? The Holocaust was the largest tragedy of the Jewish people in our time. We have an obligation to retell the story, in the same way we retell the Passover story. We cannot be as silent as Aaron was. We have an opportunity to use these scrolls which are also survivors and witnesses to

the Shoah to teach future generations. The MST Czech Torah collection as physical objects underwent a similar experience as the Jews themselves. They were collected into a concentrated area, they were numbered and catalogued, they were kept in bad conditions. Unlike the Jews themselves, most of the scrolls survived and now it is their turn to play a role in retelling the story. We can and should use these Torah scrolls for this purpose.

As we are told in the Haggadah to embrace the departure from Egypt as if each of us in the current day were personally brought forth from Egypt, so I challenge you to embrace Holocaust education and tell the story of the Holocaust to your descendants and

friends so that the legacy of those 6 million murdered
Jews is never lost and the events of the Holocaust are
never repeated.

L'dor v'dor
Shabbat Shalom