

The Enterprise

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Saved from the Holocaust, a Torah scroll comes 'back to life'

On Sunday Temple Sinai in Sharon will hold a “completion ceremony” for a 250-year-old Torah scroll from a Czech village. It was rescued from Nazi destruction and has just been repaired so it can be used in worship services.



PHOTO/ SHEILA PALLAY/TEMPLE SINAI

This 250-year-old Torah scroll from Bohemia has been restored for worship use at Temple Sinai in Sharon.

SHARON – Torah scroll number 655 has traveled far – from a village synagogue in Czechoslovakia, to a London synagogue and Temple Sinai in Sharon. It escaped destruction during the Holocaust, and then survived neglect at a Prague museum before it came to the Sharon synagogue.

Now the 250-year-old scroll’s odyssey will meet a fitting end Sunday, as the congregation celebrates its restoration – and a return to use in worship services.

“It’s being brought back to life,” said Temple Sinai member Robert Soffer, one of those who organized the project to put the parchment scroll back in condition to be unrolled and read.

A “completion ceremony” will be held at 9:45 a.m. Sunday at the synagogue, at 25 Canton St. off Route 27 in Sharon. The public is invited.

Guests will include Rabbi Kevin Hale of Leeds, Mass., the scribe who lettered and re-stitched the scroll, and Jeffrey Ohrenstein, the chairman of the Memorial Scrolls Trust in London, where the scroll had been kept as one of 1,564 rescued from Czechoslovakia.

The scroll will be brought into the synagogue in a procession with nine other Holocaust scrolls, including one from Temple Beth Am in Randolph. The ceremony will be led by Rabbi Joseph Meszler, Temple Sinai’s spiritual leader.

Scroll 655 has been on permanent loan to Temple Sinai since 1991. As with all other Torah scrolls

– which include the first five books of the Hebrew Bible – it's hand-copied, in ancient Jewish tradition. Rabbi Hale said the stitching style and ink condition show it was created around the time of the American Revolutionary War.

Originally owned by the synagogue in Prestice, a small town in Bohemia, it was kept in hiding after hundreds of Jews who lived in the town were rounded up by the Nazis in 1941, and sent to the Terezin concentration camp 100 miles away.

During World War II and after, that scroll and others were taken to the Jewish Museum in Prague. They stayed there until 1964, when – amid the Cold War – the Czech government sold them to British buyers and they were taken to London's Westminster Synagogue for safekeeping.

The Scrolls Trust was formed in 1980. Since then more than 1,000 of the scrolls have been loaned to synagogues in the U.S. and elsewhere. They would be returned only if the original synagogues were revived – which no one expects.

In an email from London, Ohrenstein said the Temple Sinai scroll is one of 14 from Prestice. Of the 14, 11 are now at U.S. synagogues. Two are in Israel and one remains in London.

Ohrenstein said a restoration like Temple Sinai's is "very special," since it bears witness to "our survival and beliefs."

Until Rabbi Hale repaired it, the Temple Sinai scroll could only be displayed, because much of the Hebrew script had faded or flaked away. The sinews that held the parchment sections together were rotting.

"It wasn't kosher," Rabbi Hale said, so it wasn't proper for sacred use.

Rabbi Meszler wanted to repair the scroll soon after he arrived at Temple Sinai a decade ago. "It has witnessed a lot of life, not just the Holocaust," he said. "I thought, wouldn't it be a great to restore it and use it?"

Trained scribes looked at it, said it was too fragile and would cost too much. Then Rabbi Meszler met Rabbi Hale in 2013, and Rabbi Hale said he thought he could do it. He'd just been certified by the Museum Scrolls Trust.

He's repaired a half dozen Czech scrolls, including the one on display at Temple Beth Am in Randolph. He says each is distinctive, since they'll all hand-made. The Temple Sinai scroll is too worn and fragile in places for a complete restoration, but Rabbi Hale re-inked faded and missing letters, patched parchment holes, and stitched the sections so the scroll can be unrolled.

"It's a great privilege," he said. "Anything else like this would be in a museum. This will be a living, useable Torah. It's taking its place among more ordinary scrolls."

While Rabbi Hale did his work, the Temple Sinai congregation participated in multiple ways – fundraising, calligraphy classes for youngsters, a klezmer concert, lectures. Now Rabbi Meszler said everyone is ready to watch Rabbi Hale ink the final three letters of the fifth book, Deuteronomy, on Sunday – an "Amen" to the whole project.

Rabbi Meszler said Scroll 655 will be unrolled for high holiday readings and other special occasions, and can be ceremonially carried for bar and bat mitzvahs.

“Seeing it is a very powerful feeling,” he said. “It’s something other people have touched and used. They were reading it and studying it 100 years before the Holocaust. That makes it real.”

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