

Lostice Shabbat

כ"ב אייר תשפ"ג

13th of May, 2023



"[Torah] is a Tree of Life for those who hold fast to her"

Papercut by Rabbi Kelilah Miller

Welcoming and Honoring:

Dr. Barbara Chesler of the Memorial Scrolls Trust

Rabbi Louis Kaplan

Shabbat Shalom!

Welcome to our annual “Lostice Shabbat” - a time we have set aside each year to honor the beautiful Holocaust Torah that Congregation Ohev Shalom acquired through the diligent and persistent efforts of our Rabbi Emeritus Louis Kaplan.

We call this Shabbat “Lostice Shabbat” because, while this scroll is, indeed, a “Holocaust Scroll” - a Sefer Torah that survived the destruction of the Holocaust - it is also a reminder of the life and culture of the Czechoslovakian town of Lostice, from which this scroll originated. This community had a life that was broader, more vivid, more thriving, more complex than the history of its destruction, and we honor that life by calling this Torah Scroll by the name of its home town.

On this Shabbat, we remember the lives of the people who first held, kissed, and read from this scroll. We also honor the efforts of all those who were part of sheltering it from destruction - in particular, the staff and volunteers of the Memorial Scrolls Trust. In addition, we recognize the efforts made by Rabbi Kaplan to secure our Lostice scroll, and the generosity of Alan and Phyllis Schapire who made it possible to repair the scroll in memory of Sheila and Benjamin Garberman, so that it can be read as a kosher Torah.

We also welcome Dr. Barbara Chesler, a volunteer with the Memorial Scrolls Trust, who will be sharing some words and reflections with us this Shabbat.

About Dr. Chesler

Dr. Barbara Chesler retired as Vice President for Academic Affairs at Caldwell University in New Jersey after 31 years in higher education in September 2020. While in NJ, she chaired the Holocaust Remembrance Center at Temple Sinai of Summit, NJ, and helped to plan services and events using their two MST scrolls. In Spring 2021, she began volunteering with MST and was invited to be the Pennsylvania Representative. In this role, she oversees the 66 MST scrolls in Pennsylvania. This means she communicates between the PA scroll holders and the Trust office in London and represents the Trust at various events. Barbara is currently planning an MST 60th anniversary scroll gathering for

Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware to be held on November 9, 2023, at Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia.

Her interest in the Holocaust is due to the loss of most of her family during the Shoah. After WWII, her father was released from duty as an Army test pilot, he proceeded to Europe to search DP camps for survivors from both his mother's and father's families. He found three and assisted them in coming to America.

About the Torah mantle:

Ohev member and internationally-recognized artist Elsa Wachs created the beautiful mantle that adorns our Lostice Scroll. The following is her artist's statement on the piece:

This mantle was created as a memorial to the Six Million and as a tribute to the Jews of Lostice, Czechoslovakia since it dresses a Torah from that city and is itself a survivor of the Holocaust.

The arms clothed in prison garb reach up in despair. The hands filled with yearning and tension symbolize their courage as they reach for G-d.

The Hebrew letters forming the words Am Yisrael Chai also reach up to G-d proclaiming that in spite of it all, “The People of Israel Live”. The rosebuds at the top symbolize life, hope and beauty affirming that our people will continue to be “...a light unto the nations...” -



Megillat Lostice: a Scroll of Resilience

Written by Rabbi Jeremy Gerber

Art by Siona Benjamin

Chapter One – The Town of Loštice



The small village of Loštice, or Loschitz, is located in northwest, central Moravia; once an Austrian province, later part of Czechoslovakia, and today situated in the Czech Republic. Jews have lived in Loštice since 1571. By 1798, official records indicated there were 71 heads of Jewish families in the village. Their numbers declined sharply after emancipation allowed the Jews

freedom of movement; from 483 Jews in 1848, to 284 in 1869, and eventually just 115 by the year 1900. The community also suffered a devastating fire in 1928, when most of the Jewish quarter was destroyed.

Despite its relatively meager size, Loštice was an influential part of the Moravian Jewish community. The Jews of Loštice were well-known for a special, artisanal cheese, called “tvarusky,” which can still be sampled to this day.

Loštice was also home to a famous school of sofrim, Torah scribes, who provided scrolls to communities throughout Czechoslovakia and across Europe. These scribes were not only known for their beautiful Torah scrolls, but for a mystical, Kabbalistic tradition that they embedded within their calligraphy. Their unique method has since been lost, and the scrolls that were preserved are the only record that remains of their spiritual craft.

In 1834, Loštice became embroiled in a rabbinic scandal. The rabbi of the village passed away, and his 22-year old son, Abraham Neuda, was brought back from Talmudic school in nearby Mikulov to take his place. The district rabbi at the time,

Nechemiah Trebitsch, opposed the youngster’s appointment, and thus began a six-year legal battle - brought even before the secular courts - that ended with Trebitsch forced to recognize Neuda as the rabbi of Loštice.

Rabbi Neuda died in 1854, and the following year, his widow, Fanny, put Loštice on the Jewish map for an incredible accomplishment of her own. Fanny Neuda was the daughter and sister of prominent regional rabbis, and likely served as firzogerin (prayer leader) of the weibershul (women’s gallery) in her husband’s synagogue. There she began collecting and composing prayers, and eventually published a women’s prayer book entitled “Stunden der Andacht,” “Hours of Devotion.” It became a best-seller throughout Europe, was reprinted in at least 18 editions, translated into various languages, and is considered the first prayer book for women written by a woman. Despite its small size, the community of Loštice – together with the nearby towns of Sumperk, Mohelnice, and Usov – was a vibrant and thriving place for Jews.

Chapter Two – The Ghetto Leaders’ Secret Plan

In 1941, after the start of Jewish deportations from the towns in Moravia and Bohemia, fearful that their deserted synagogues would be looted, the captive leaders of the Terezin Ghetto in Czechoslovakia convinced the Nazis that the Jewish artifacts being confiscated daily should be preserved as the museum of an extinct race. Seeing the propaganda potential in this move, the Germans assigned the task to the curators at the Central Jewish Museum in Prague.

Soon thereafter, transport companies were given permission to carry Jewish goods to Prague, including Torah Scrolls, religious treasures in gold, silver, and textile, historic archives, and thousands of books from over 100 synagogues. In just two years, the museum’s holdings increased by almost 200,000 items. Each item was carefully photographed on site before being removed to Prague for cataloguing and storage in over 40 warehouses and other buildings. The museum also arranged five exhibitions for the Nazis during this short time.

What the Germans saw as a trophy case of victors' spoils, the Jewish curators assembled as a secret code for anyone who might survive the Holocaust. They desperately needed to leave behind a record of their having existed, and - they hoped - a guide for re-establishing their decimated Jewish community.

After the defeat of Germany, Czechoslovakia was free, but also a country with few Jews, most of whom were living in Prague. The pre-war population of 54,000 Jews was less than 8,000 by 1947, and many more left over the coming years. Nevertheless, over 50 congregations were re-established.

Unfortunately, on February 27, 1948, after less than three years of Czech freedom, the Communists staged a coup and took over the government, and the country was once again under a dictatorship. The revival of Jewish life was stifled, and the Prague Jewish Museum came under government control. The thousands of Torah scrolls that had been stored in the Michle Synagogue, in the suburb of Prague, became state property.

Chapter Three – Forgotten Under Communism

In the early 1960's, Eric Estorick, an American art dealer living in London, frequently visited Prague for his gallery. He befriended several Czech government officials, and on a visit in 1963, having expressed interest in a catalogue of Hebraica, he was asked about possibly purchasing Jewish Scrolls. At the Michle Synagogue, he was shown wooden racks holding around 1,800 Torah Scrolls, deteriorating and moldy from neglect and damp conditions. He returned to London and contacted a fellow American, Rabbi Harold Reinhart, of the Westminster Synagogue. One of the congregants, and a generous philanthropist, Ralph Yablon, offered to finance this improbable rescue effort. An expert was sent to Prague to verify their authenticity and report on their condition, after which an offer was made for the purchase. Two trucks, crammed with 1,564 potentially salvageable Torah scrolls, arrived at the Westminster Synagogue in February and March of 1964.

After months of sorting, examining and cataloguing each Scroll, the task of distributing them began, with the goal of housing these orphaned scrolls in Jewish congregations across the world. The Memorial Scrolls Trust, based at Westminster Synagogue in London, was established to carry out this task. Even though many scrolls have found new homes over the decades, many still remain in Westminster, and are no longer in any condition to be repaired, much less travel to a new home.

Chapter Four – A New Home in Wallingford

In 1977, Ohev Shalom's rabbi, Louis Kaplan, learned of the Czech scrolls, housed in London, that were being adopted by congregations worldwide. Rabbi Kaplan began corresponding with the Memorial Scrolls Trust at Westminster Synagogue, and inquiring about the possibility of Ohev Shalom obtaining a scroll. Initially, he was turned down. No Kosher scrolls were left for distribution. Rabbi Kaplan persisted, however, and made it clear that Ohev Shalom would gladly take a scroll in any condition; wanting only to give it a new home, and to forge a link back to the legacy of a forgotten Jewish community of pre-war Europe: "We would be very pleased and honored to receive any scroll you might be able to send us, whether it is kosher or not." Rabbi Kaplan traveled to London to see the scrolls that still remained in Westminster. After a series of discussions, Scroll #39 was promised to Ohev Shalom. In 1981, Rabbi Kaplan led a dedication ceremony welcoming this weathered scroll into our Sanctuary.

Elsa Wachs, a congregant and world- renowned artist, designed a beautiful and unique new Torah mantle to adorn the Loštice Torah. The mantle depicts two arms reaching up, seemingly from the ground, wearing the prison uniform of the concentration camps. A yellow star is visible on the arm as well, and grey threads streak across the scroll, simulating barbed wire. Yet above this chilling image are printed the immortal words: "Am Yisrael Chai," "The People of Israel Live." Finally, three roses are growing out of the word "Am" at the top of the cover, adding a touch of beauty, nature, and life.

In 2019, nearly 40 years after its arrival, the congregation was finally able to engage in the long-awaited repair of the Loštice Torah; to make it a kosher scroll once again. The work was dedicated in memory of Sheila and Benjamin Garberman, Holocaust survivors who were also partisan fighters in the forests of Nazi-occupied Poland. Well over a hundred congregants participated in the writing of the final paragraph of the entire Torah; holding the hand of the Sofer (scribe) as the scroll was transformed back into a living document once again.

The Jewish community of Loštice is no more. Its Jewish population has been wiped away, but its legacy has not. Their story is now our story, and we carry on their memory, just as we are privileged to house their precious scroll. We remember them always, not just for their destruction, but for their vibrancy, traditions, and culture. We are still here, and therefore their story survives with us. “Am Yisrael Chai” – even those who are gone live on in us. To this day, the Loštice Scroll holds a place of honor and dignity – in its unique mantle – center-front in our Ohev Shalom Main Sanctuary Ark.



A Prayer for Peace

by Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker

Rabbi Cytron-Walker successfully thwarted an antisemitic attack on his congregation in Colleyville, Texas in January of 2022. He has since spoken before Congress and has become a special advisor to the Anti-Defamation League.

In a world that's broken and shattered,
Plagued by indifference, falsehood and corruption,
We feel the uncertainty.
We feel the pain.
And we are not helpless.

God, we pray for peace:
For wholeness and healing,
For safety when violence touches us all.

God, we pray for peace:
For justice and compassion,
For acceptance in the face of hatred.

We will not be held hostage to hopelessness.
We pray for peace.
We struggle for peace.
We bring peace.
We will be whole.
God, help us be whole as we pray for peace.