

The 613th Commandment

Please stand as I open the ark and take out a *sefer torah*... You may be seated.

The *sefer torah* I am holding is over 500 years old. It was written in Spain sometime during the 1400's. Its parchment is tanned and prepared for writing on only one side; the other side feels like suede and cannot be written on. The script in this scroll is clear and beautiful, even after all these centuries. The *sofer* who checks our torahs here at Beth Am, Rabbi David Rue, a man noted for his great scholarship and familiarity with different writing styles, has verified the dating and provenance of this scroll and has assured us that it is absolutely kosher. He has encouraged us to use it regularly because rolling and unrolling the leather keeps it supple and less prone to drying out and cracking. So, we periodically read from it, realizing that it is probably a bit too delicate to be used every week.

Needless to say, to read from it, to stand before it and recite the *aliyah* blessings, to lift it and tie it and to carry it and hold it are all very special experiences. Being in the presence of this Torah scroll gives me a heightened sense of sanctity, fills me with a feeling of tremendous awe, especially when I think of everything this scroll has witnessed, and makes me profoundly aware of the refracted presence of God embodied in its holy letters. You know how you feel when you stand on the rim of the Grand Canyon at sunrise and become bathed in the powerful redness of the moment and say to yourself: God is in this place? That is how I feel standing in the presence of this *sefer torah* – God is in its words.

Do you have any idea what this Torah witnessed – what was happening in Spain in the 15th century? In the spring of 1391, inflamed by the fiery preaching of a powerful Dominican monk named Ferrant Martinez, Christians in the southern part of the country rioted against the Jews, and by the end of the summer, all of Spain had erupted in an explosion of anti-Jewish pogroms that changed the face and fate of Iberian Jewry and of Christian Spain. In response to death threats by the Christians, tens of thousands of Jews converted to Christianity – a mass conversion out of Judaism unparalleled in prior Jewish history. The foundation of Spanish Jewry was cracked beyond repair, and a new kind of Spaniard was born: the Converso, the New Christian, the Jew who participated in the mass conversion to Christianity. And soon thereafter, as the 15th century unfolded, another new kind of Spaniard was born: the Marrano, the Converso who was suspected of lapsing back into Judaism. At the same time the situation of the Jews who did not convert deteriorated rapidly, as, more and more, their vulnerability became evident and as they were increasingly blamed for influencing lapsed Conversos into Marranism, even though in many instances that was not the case.

With the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1469, the impact of Catholicism on Spain reached its apex. In 1481, an inquisition was created to deal with the Marrano problem and other heresies, and the plight of both Jews and Marranos became even more dire. Finally, in June of 1492, ostensibly to rid Spain of Jews who were inducing Conversos to return to their Jewish roots, the Jews of Spain were expelled, ending over 1100 years of continuous Jewish presence in that land and bringing to an end one of the most creative and productive Jewish communities the world had ever seen.

To fully understand the trauma of that event we have to think about how we feel as Jewish Americans. Jews have been in America 353 years, since 1654, when families originally from Spain and Portugal, then living in Recife, Brazil, came to these shores. Most of us, however, came over between 1880 and 1920. By now, the USA is our home. We love it. We sing the Star Spangled Banner with pride. We revere our Constitution. We deeply care about this country. A higher percentage of us vote than practically any other religious or ethnic group – because we appreciate the freedom we have here.

But this all pales by comparison with the Jews of Spain. Jews were in Spain before 300 CE. First under Muslims and then under Christians, Spanish Jewry experienced long periods of relative political, religious, cultural and economic security. The Jews of Spain produced some of the most beautiful Hebrew poetry ever written. The system of Hebrew grammar we use today was developed in Spain. Kabbalah flourished in Spain. Great Jewish law codes were written by Spanish Jews. Classical Jewish philosophy is the brainchild of Jews from Spain. Spain produced Jewish physicians and astronomers. Iberian Jews felt themselves rooted in the soil of Iberia. For them, to be forced out of that land was like being ripped from their mother's bosom.

This overview of the Spanish Jewish experience can help us comprehend the setting in which this *sefer torah* was written. The memory of the 1391 pogroms and mass conversions was still fresh in the minds of the person or persons who commissioned its writing, and in the mind of the *sofer* who wrote it. Perhaps it was written to replace another scroll that was destroyed in the riots. Perhaps the heightened ghettoizing of the Iberian Jewish communities meant that some Jews could no longer get to the synagogue where they previously worshipped, so a new torah scroll was prepared for their use. Perhaps the scroll was written as a statement of faith in God and Torah in the face of the depression that filled the hearts of so many Jews and as an “in your face” response to the anti-Jewish sentiments of the Christian Spaniards. The Jews were saying: “You are not going to break us, as hard as you may try. And, we are not leaving this place, as much as you may want us to. This is our home, and we will continue to keep our community and our tradition alive.” A *sefer torah*, after all, is a sign of community. It cannot be read for worship unless ten Jews are present, and, thus, it becomes a vehicle for teaching Torah to the masses.

There is, however, another reason for writing a *sefer torah*. According to the *Sefer Ha-hinnukh*, the 613th commandment mandates that each Jew write a personal torah scroll. The Rambam considers this to be a great *mitzvah*, and R. Asher ben Yehiel teaches that it shall be for the purpose of private study. If this were the rationale behind the writing of our scroll, then an individual Jew was expressing his personal faith and commitment by having this scroll prepared, even with all the chaos swirling around him. Perhaps for him, it was intended to fulfill the words of *Sefer mishlei*, the Book of Proverbs, 3:18, that we sing when we put the Torah back in the Ark after reading it: *Etz hayyim hi la-mahazikim ba*; “it is a tree of life to all who hold fast to it.” With all the physical and spiritual death that this Jew had witnessed, he needed a “tree of life” to hold close to sustain himself.

Or perhaps this scroll was written by a Kabbalist. In Kabbalah, there is nothing more holy than the text of a *sefer torah*, because each letter is believed to be a direct result of an emanation of divine energy, with a spark of God's essence embedded within

it. To have a scroll in one's midst was to have the *Shekhinah*, the indwelling presence of God at hand. The trauma of the events of the 15th century gave Kabbalistic belief great impetus, as people sought answers for unanswerable questions in the realm of the spiritual.

This scroll proved to be a very precious legacy to those into whose care it was entrusted. Not only did it survive the catastrophic events of the 1400's, it also survived the expulsion – two expulsions, in fact. In 1492 it was taken from Spain to Portugal, where a sizeable number of Spanish Jews were granted asylum, but only for 5 years. In 1497, the king of Portugal expelled all of that country's Jews, native and Spanish. From Portugal it was taken to Italy, which was a significant destination for Sefardi Jews. The scroll was untouched by all the moving about. Its survival was as much a miracle as was the survival of the people who carried it. Here is why:

The journeys of the Sefardi Jews to their new homes were no less perilous than the experiences in Iberia that preceded their expulsion. Most of the refugees were allowed to leave with little more than the shirts on their backs and a few personal belongings. Those who traveled by ship were subjected to raids by pirates; to extortion at the hands of the captains and crews to whom they had to pay exorbitant sums for their passage; to being thrown off the ship in inhospitable ports to make room for higher paying passengers; to disease and starvation; and to a ship sinking in bad weather. Those who traveled by land were afflicted with similar forms of oppression. And, upon arrival in a town that was presumed to be hospitable, they were often met with all kinds of further extortion and depravation. No one knows for sure what percentage of the refugees died during the course of their journey, but it was considerable. This is what our scroll witnessed.

According to Rabbi Rue, our *sefer torah* was accorded a place of special honor in the community that was to become its home before it came to us. If you get a chance to look at it close up you will see that there are fold lines between the columns. These folds are there because *sofrim*, scribes, used this text as a paradigm from which to copy new *sifrei torah*. This was because the text is perfectly accurate. They would carefully fold the scroll in the empty spaces between the columns, hold it next to the empty parchment on which they were writing the new Torah and copy it letter for letter, word for word and space for space. This scroll became a queen bee, not foraging about for pollen like the worker bees, but staying in the hive and giving birth to new bees. It did not sit in synagogue arks to be read regularly, with a *yad* running over its letters and hands and fingers touching it, thereby wearing away the leather and the letters. Rather, it lived in the scriptorium, under the watchful eyes of the *sofer*, who carefully used it to give birth, as it were, to new torah scrolls. Maybe this is why it is in such good shape after so many centuries.

And now the scroll sits here in front of us. After a journey of 1000's of miles and hundreds of years it has come to live with us. And we are using it, reading it carefully and lovingly, not every week, but on special occasions, out of respect for its age. I remember when it came to Temple Beth Am in the late 1950's. I was a teenager. It was my first Torah dedication. I remember it being carried into this sacred space under a *huppah* by Benton Krischer, z"l, who acquired it and donated it to the shul. Distinguished members of the congregation helped to re-write the letters of the last few lines of the scroll, at the end of *D'varim*, symbolically writing the *sefer torah* – for

themselves and by proxy for the entire congregation – thereby fulfilling the 613th commandment. At that time I could not fully appreciate how significant this scroll was; I was too young. Now I understand what this scroll represents, and its significance is huge. I know that you now understand this as well.

So what does this Torah say to us? To be sure, we are not living in a time as perilous for Jews as was the 15th century. We have a Jewish State and we live in America, a land that, like Israel, grants us freedom unlike any kind of freedom we have ever known before. Jewish learning and culture thrive in our two homelands, and for the vast majority of us, life is good. Our kids in Israel are living a good life, as are our in-laws and their families, and most Israelis.

We do, however, live in age of great uncertainty. Storm clouds we Jews thought would not return have reappeared on the horizon. Radical, intolerant forms of religion we thought would be replaced by modern, enlightened tolerance have returned to plague humankind. The threat of nuclear devastation that we hoped would pass with the end of the Cold War may be just over the next hill. Virulent Anti-Semitism that we thought would go away after the fall of Nazism and Communism has returned, and more copies than ever before of the mendacious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – with its bogus and hateful message of the existence of an international Jewish plot to take over the world – are being sold and distributed world-wide. We thought the State of Israel – after the return of the Sinai to Egypt, after recognition by Egypt and Jordan, after Oslo, after withdrawing from Gaza – would be recognized as the democratic, peace-loving country that it really is and accorded the international respect as such that it deserves. But that has not happened, and for all its efforts in the name of peace it continues to be condemned by enemies and erstwhile friends. And, remember this figure: 20%. That is the percentage of young American Jewish adults who, at this very moment, feel the State of Israel is important to them. This means 80% of our young people do not find great significance in the existence of the Jewish State. This is verging on the catastrophic. Will the American Jewish community be able to sustain the same passion, support and advocacy for Israel in the coming generations if this becomes our people's level of commitment?

So, these are the best of times and these are very troubling times. What relevance does this 15th century scroll have to the Jewish experience in the first decade of the 21st century? I believe it has a powerful, meaningful and immediate message that we all must heed. It was created at a time of great travail for the Jewish community in Spain. Those who created this *sefer torah* were making a statement. They were saying: “We are Jews, we have a God whom we must serve in bad times as in good, and this *sefer torah* will help keep us focused on our Holy God, on our sacred beliefs and principles and on our sacred way of life. Yes, we have to save our bodies; but we also have to save our souls. Even more than that – the world needs us now more than ever. The forces that seek to overwhelm us are the forces of death and darkness. Our Torah is a tree of life, and it is a beacon of light. If we do not keep the light of Torah burning, from where will the light needed to illuminate the world come? We must show those who would extinguish the light that their efforts are in vain.” This must become our message to the world in 2007.

Our family is living proof that the efforts to extinguish the light of Torah and the light of Am Yisrael failed. Our daughter-in-law, Sharon, is the child of a woman who was born in Cochin, India. Her family came to India in the 18th century from

Amsterdam. They were Spanish Jews who were expelled in 1492 and fled to Holland. Our son-in-law, David, is the son of a man who was born in Sofia, Bulgaria. He is a Sefardi Jew named Ashkenazi. The Sefardim came to Bulgaria in 1494, having left Spain in 1492 and having migrated to Greece and from there to the Balkans. Fredi's and my 6 grandchildren are "Ashkesefardim," in whose veins courses the blood of Spanish Jews whom our enemies tried to destroy 500 years ago. The enemies failed because these two families, and tens of thousands of others like them, maintained their commitments to Torah. They carried with them scrolls just like this, and those scrolls, like this one, inspired them to keep their covenant with God.

I believe that each of us here is a Jew for whom that defining word – Jew – is of the utmost importance. I believe that at this moment of challenge, each of us will let this *sefer torah* inspire us to take hold of it, to wrap our arms around it and all that it represents – its history, its beauty, its teachings, its holiness – and to draw these gifts into our souls and affirm our commitments to God, to the *mitzvot* embodied in its words and to the way of life it bids us create for ourselves. Now is the time to learn Torah, to live Torah and to love Torah. Now is the time to tell the violent and intolerant people who would bring death and darkness into the world: "We are Jews. This is our Torah, the foundation of our faith in God and our faith in the holiness of life. It is a tree of life and light, both of which we affirm. This Torah has kept our people and our faith alive for 3000 years, and by holding firm to this scroll and all that it represents we will be strong, we will remain a living people – and you will not prevail." As those who wrote this miraculous scroll affirmed their covenant with God, so shall we. As they made a personal pledge to keep the light of Torah shining in their lives, in their community and in the world, so shall we. They affirmed: *Etz hayyim hi la-mahazikim ba*; "It is a tree of life to all who hold fast to it," and so shall we.

Please stand as I return the scroll to the Ark, and then join me in the affirmation of our everlasting covenant with God as we proclaim the words of the *Shema*: ... *Shema yisrael adonai eloheinu adonai ehad*.