

Beit Tshuvah and the Torah



Beit Tshuvah – L.A.



The Czech Holocaust Torah

My mother was liberated from the Bergen Belsen Concentration camp in Germany, April, 1945. She sat cradling her sister Vera as she died of typhus two days after their liberation. She watched as Vera was buried in a mass grave.

My mother taught me many things. One important lesson she taught me was about survival when faced with absolute evil and death. She said those who tried to make it through the death camps without a friend, a buddy, usually died. With a friend, if you fell, they picked you up. If they fell, you picked them up. Together you had a chance to live, not a guarantee, but a chance. Facing the horrors alone was almost always the end.

Jews have a dark secret they prefer not to speak about. Jews too can fall down by the road because of drugs, addictions and terrible personal choices. Addicts can be surrounded by other addicts but they are really alone.

Beit Tshuvah is a not-for-profit Jewish drug and addiction rehabilitation facility on Venice Blvd. in Los Angeles. They work to bring back, to return, victims of drugs and addictions from death to life. Leaving a person alone, Jewish or not, who has fallen is not an option for them.

Rabbi Mark Borowitz is the spiritual leader of Beit Tshuvah. Rabbi Borowitz knows what addiction means – he is a former addict and a convicted felon. His wife is the founder of Beit Tshuvah, a social worker by profession an incredible leader of “valor” and redeemer of humanity, Harriet Rossetto. Together they lead their family, the members of the “Shuv” through a twelve step cognitive behavioral therapeutic approach to recovery and independence heavily flavored with Torah based teaching and values. Jewish religious values are guides, traditions, cultural associations and God is very much present. But no one is ever imposed upon, to believe, to accept or practice Judaism. Rather, Judaism is a path that recovering addicts can choose. The moral lessons of light, love and life that the Torah means

to all of God's creations is present daily in song and spiritual healing to anyone of any faith background who wishes to find the link to something more than their aloneness.

Beit Tshuvah is modest in style and appearance. Accommodations are very basic and frequently tight because of the need of the many who need. It is not a luxury revolving door "hospital" for the wealthy to check in and out. Each new member of the community slowly climbs the ladder of privileges until they are dependence free and once again free to be independent.

I had come to Beit Tshuvah to photo-document a Czech Holocaust Torah that had been part of Beit Tshuvah's life for twenty years.

During World War II, members of the Prague Jewish community wanted to preserve their Holy Torahs for the communities where they were from. They believed that after the War, the returning Jews would reclaim their property and rebuild their lives. For awhile the effort to preserve the Torahs worked in the Nazis interest. They used the Jews to collect, catalogue and preserve the Jewish treasures for their own purposes. Some said it was to establish a museum of the dead Jewish race but there has never been any evidence that the Nazis cared to preserve Jewish memory or culture. The archival work preserved the lives of the Torah curators for awhile. When the work was completed, the Nazis sent them to Auschwitz to be gassed and their bodies burned. 83% of Czechoslovakian Jewry was exterminated.

The communities did not return to reclaim their Torahs. The Torahs languished alone, forgotten and molding for years after the War until a London based Jewish art merchant discovered them outside of Prague. Complicated negotiations ensued and for the right price, \$40,000, the Communist Czech government agreed to release 1,564 Torahs for *export* to London. Within a matter of days, the Torahs were loaded on trucks and arrived in London's Westminster Synagogue to tears, terrible heartache and joy.

The Czech Memorial Scroll Trust was created to place the Torahs in Jewish communities again. From its Westminster Synagogue location, some Torahs were made Kosher, many could not. A little gold colored plaque, at the base of the right hand side of the wooden handle plate on one, reads – Westminster Synagogue, Czech Memorial Scroll Trust #773.

Torah #773 was not just a number. It has a story. It was written about 1850. The Torah was first stored in a collection center at Strasnice-Praha possibly at the cemetery hall of the nearby Olsany Jewish cemetery. It was probably part of the Torahs of the Kralovske Vinohrady Synagogue community in Prague. The Torahs were removed by the archivists in 1942. The synagogue was destroyed in an air raid in 1945. The people of the Kralovske Vinohrady Synagogue community, few if any survived, never returned.

For 90 years the Kraslovske Torah brought light, love and life to its community. It was held, adorned with fine coverings and silver ornaments. It was lovingly carried and danced with in joy at festive occasions. The words read from its parchments gave life to the people. Then the darkness came of evil, hate, bigotry and death. The Torah survived the Holocaust, the people did not.

In 1992, a Torah was requested by Beit Tshuvah. Torah #773 traveled to LA where it was lovingly placed into the Holy Ark of Beit Tshuvah's community. It once again radiated light, love and life back to people who had, like the Torah, encountered an evil that sought their death. Together, the Beit Tshuvah Torah on permanent long term loan to the community lives, as it together with the people, return to the living.

Jerry Klinger/ Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation – www.JASHP.org