

**“What the Ledec Torah Asks of Us”**

The little town of Ledec, Czechoslovakia used to have a Jewish community. We know that in 1739 they built a synagogue. We also know that on June 10, 1942, that Jewish community was completely liquidated by the Nazis. Sources say that all males over the age of 15 were shot, and the women and children sent to the Theresienstadt concentration camp where all but two or three met their deaths. And that synagogue, that once had floral wall patterns and was thoughtfully adorned with words from the 29<sup>th</sup> Psalm, was turned into a warehouse by the Nazis.

Of course, it is heartbreaking to say it, but there is nothing unusual about this story of Ledec. It's the story of so many Jewish communities throughout Europe. But, there is one exceptional fact, at least for you and me. We have their Torah. Yes, resting right behind me in our Ark is the 142 year old Torah of Ledec. Our b'nai mitzvah march with it; our presidents hold it before the congregation on Kol Nidre. That Torah, written in 1870, survived and, thanks to the effort of Temple Solel pioneers, Dave and Annette Alpert, we are its trustees!

How this came to be is actually quite remarkable. In 1963, an NYU professor and art collector named, Eric Estorick, was on a routine art buying trip in Eastern Europe and, when in Prague, he was told by the Czech authorities that there was something he should see. They drove to the outskirts of Prague, to an old synagogue, not dissimilar to the synagogue of Ledec. And when the officials opened the doors, Dr. Estorick could not believe his eyes. Stacked from floor to ceiling on every wall, were Torah scrolls. Some were stained with blood. Some had dagger holes in the parchment. From one, a note fell out – a plea from a Torah scribe to save his community.

In total, there were 1,564 Torah scrolls. Part of a meticulous collection of the Nazis, who aimed to catalogue every Jewish artifact to document for the world their liquidation of the Jewish people.

The Czech authorities wanted only to sell the entire set as a collection. Without hesitation, the scrolls were purchased and sent by rail to London. Since 1964, they have been in the Memorial Scrolls Trust of the Westminster Synagogue. Those that could be restored, about 700, have been sent around the world for synagogues such as ours, to use and to share their stories.

Just this year, we were contacted by the Trust. They asked us about our Torah and whether we were giving it the care and the honor it deserves as a memorial to the martyred Jews of Ledec. As a result, our Torah now bears a bronze plaque with the number 1428, and we have recommitted to giving it, in the words

of the Trust, “a prominent and meaningful role in the spiritual and educational life of the congregation,” which is why I share this story with you.

So, what is the trust that has been bequeathed to us? What meaning does this sacred Torah scroll have for you and me? I would say quite unhesitatingly, it is the very symbol of our Jewish narrative – Pharaoh did not destroy us, we were freed from bondage and reborn at Sinai. The Romans did not destroy us, they burnt down our Temple, but we returned two millennia later to build the State of Israel. Not even the Nazis, with all their evil intent, destroyed us, for we are here and our Torahs rest securely in Holy Arks in synagogues around the world.

When the scrolls first came to England, one Czech visitor described them as “a mountain of dead books, spiritual bodies, so to speak, and yet a mountain glowing the life of revelation, law, promise.” I would say to you that we are that promise!

In a word, we have gone from powerlessness to power. During WWII, Israel lived under British occupation, while we American Jews were pleading with President Roosevelt to slow down the extermination of Jews by bombing the railroad tracks and crematoria in Europe – he refused.

Just a generation ago, we Jews were restricted from living in covenanted communities, like Rancho Santa Fe and La Jolla, or from belonging to gentile country clubs, or from attending prestigious universities, or from reaching higher echelons in corporations and professions. Signs across the country declaring, “No Jews Allowed,” were actually commonplace.

Today, it is a far different story. Today American Jews make up only 2% of the overall population of the United States, yet our influence is far, far greater. We’re a powerful voting constituency and an influential political lobby in Washington. Jews have leadership in the arts, in general philanthropy, in academia and science and technology and business.

And as for the State of Israel, while she faces many enemies, the idea that, after 2,000 years of exile and wandering, the Jewish people have built a modern nation state, is simply astounding!

But that is not the only lesson the Ledec Torah teaches us. Not just that we are here, and that we are safe and more powerful than ever before in our history. The lesson is even bigger than that. In the words of Voltaire, made popular again by, of all great philosophers, Spiderman, the lesson is – “With great power, comes great responsibility.” A lesson the Nazis failed to comprehend.

And today, there are two serious matters at hand.

The first is Iran. As we know, Iran is very close to having a nuclear weapon. And as we also know, Iran has repeatedly vowed the destruction of the State of Israel. President Ahmadinejad has made his position very clear, declaring just last month that, "the very existence of the Zionist regime is an insult to humankind and an affront to all world nations," and calling on "all human communities to wipe out this scarlet letter, the Zionist regime, from the forehead of humanity."

Estimates vary, but everyone agrees that Iran already has enough enriched uranium to breakout toward nuclear weapons within 18 months, if not less.

So, Israel has a tremendous decision on its hands. At a certain point, probably within a matter of months, its planes and bombs will no longer have the penetration needed to get the job done. It has a limited window of opportunity to set back the Iranian program.

That is why Prime Minister Netanyahu has made it clear that Israel is considering a military attack by November. And this has sent shockwaves through Israel and America, both. Right now, Israelis themselves are completely divided over whether this is the right strategy, and they fear tremendous repercussions.

First, it is quite possible that Iran, and its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon, will rain down missiles on Israeli cities. The casualties and physical damage could be staggering – certainly, more than anything Israel has ever experienced before. It could also galvanize the Islamic uprising that we've seen touched off last week by a ridiculous YouTube clip, and focus terrorism against American targets around the world. And, if the United States were to decide that Israel had to go it alone, without any follow-up military support once Israel strikes, a chasm could open up between our two countries, making Israel even more vulnerable.

On the other hand, in the alternative, Israel is faced with the greatest of all questions. Can it place its fate in the hands of another country, even a close ally? Once Israel's window of opportunity closes, and it forfeits the military capability to slow down Iran's nuclear program, can it depend on the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China to deal with Iran and insure Israel's survival? Can and should Israel give up control of its own destiny?

This is a huge question, and either choice could have tremendous consequences for Israel, and for the world itself! With great power comes great responsibility!

And here I would remind us again that this is the first time in 2,000 years that the Jewish people have had this kind of responsibility. During the critical development of our Jewish religion, traditions, laws, we were living in powerless conditions scattered around the world. It was easy to be idealistic then, to author a great legal code espousing the highest moral values. But today, the rubber meets the road and our Torah has tanks and fighter jets and, ironically, German supplied Dolphin Class submarines stocked with nuclear tipped missiles

patrolling the Persian Gulf – all manned by Jews wearing the star of David on their uniforms.

Power is messy. Statehood is messy. Being a nation-state in today's world means playing in the sandbox of real politic.

What does the Ledec Torah teach us about that? That Torah and survival are our two imperatives – but they don't always fit neatly together. Yes, we have a whole doctrine on Jewish war ethics and when a pre-emptive strike is permitted. But this crisis is unfolding in real time and we don't necessarily know all the facts about Iran's intentions and capabilities, and we certainly cannot predict how Iran would respond to a pre-emptive strike. What we do know is that once Iran has a nuclear weapon, all it will take is one dirty bomb in the port of Haifa or N.Y. Harbor, to change history forever.

So with that Torah resting in our Ark, and us sitting comfortably 7,500 miles away from the Middle East, it is important to understand the grave dilemma Israel faces at this very moment – to resist the temptation for easy prescriptions. And to accept that, whatever action or inaction Israel decides upon, the survival of the Jewish people is at the heart of the decision, and reluctance to ever again surrender control of Jewish destiny, at the center of Israel's consciousness. There will not be another Ledec liquidation, nor will we find ourselves again pleading in vain with a President Roosevelt to bomb the railways and crematoria. Unlike yesterday, today our fate is in *our* hands. This is the painful responsibility of power.

And that responsibility does not rest with Israel alone. We have our own challenges right here in America. Our college campuses have become a hostile place for many Jewish and pro-Israel students. I will never forget the photo my son, Jacob, texted me in his freshman year at U.C. Davis. The Sukkah the Jewish students had put up in the quad, was spray painted with the words, "Free Palestine" and "End Israeli Occupation." That purely religious symbol was defaced with political slogans. But even worse, Swastikas keep cropping up at our UC's – carved into dormitory doors, splashed on campus walls inside stars of David. And every year, many Jewish students can count on enduring Apartheid Week on their UC campus. They will experience mock Apartheid walls and staged check-points, forcing them to take a different route to their classes if they don't want to get caught up in the scene. They will witness grossly untrue enactments of supposed genocide on the part of Israeli soldiers, as "die-ins" are staged by groups of students portraying Palestinians being gunned down en-masse by Israeli soldiers. And pro-Israel students who might actually try to engage in civil discussion, can also be assured that they will be rebutted with hate-speech, accusing Israel of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and likening Israel's treatment of Palestinians to the Nazis' treatment of Jews.

But this is not just a matter of youthful student protest. Jewish faculty members up and down the state are utterly frustrated by the fact that college administrations and academic departments within the UC's are formally sponsoring one-sided symposia and speakers presenting the most negative views of Zionism.

And why does all this take place? Because our UC's are committed to protecting academic freedom and free speech, which no one has a problem with. Where we do have a problem, is when *free speech* crosses the line and becomes *hate-speech*.

What does our Leduc Torah have to teach us here? Quite a bit, actually. That the Holocaust began with words and slogans. That words and slogans then turned to actions, like anti-Semitic graffiti on Jewish shops and bricks thrown through Jewish windows. The rest is history and what survives is our Leduc Torah – resting in our ark as a witness to what can happen when the world remains silent.

But, we don't have to be silent. With great power comes great responsibility! It is our responsibility to speak out and there is a constructive way we can do that. Mark Yudoff, President of the University of California, has formed "The President's Advisory Council on Campus Climate, Culture, and Inclusion." I am beyond proud to tell you that our own Rick Barton, National Education Chair of the Anti-Defamation League, serves on that council. He and Alice Huffman, President of the California NAACP, were commissioned to report on the issue of campus climate and bring forward their recommendations.

Their report is thorough and outstanding and makes serious recommendations that could greatly improve campus climate – like evaluating neutrality for university sponsorship of programs, like defining and adopting a hate speech-free and harassment-free campus policy.

But, as reasonable as these proposals sound to you and me, there is a huge groundswell of opposition against adopting Rick's report. Over five thousand signatures have already been collected on petition drives, claiming that it would limit free speech and academic freedom.

This is a misguided effort and totally unacceptable. So we need to step up now, and refuse to accept a climate on our campuses where our Jewish students are subjected to this kind of intolerance.

Rick has graciously drafted a letter for each of us to use. It has been handed out to you on your way in, and it will be available in various locations in the building throughout the High Holy Days. I ask you to please write or email Mr. Yudoff with your thoughts. We need to do more than gather signatures; we need to write individual letters and emails to convey the magnitude and diversity of our voices.

As you know, I often take groups to Israel. And one of the most compelling sites we visit is the Ayalon Institute outside of Tel Aviv. In 1945, as the Israelis were fighting for their freedom, they needed to manufacture bullets to supply their troops in the Haganah and Palmach. But, they had to do it under the noses of the British, without raising suspicion of what they were up to. So, they built a full scale kibbutz above ground. And, right below the laundry and the bakery, nestled underground, they built a bullet factory. Beneath the cover of the noisy laundry and the smoky bakery, the factory churned out 40,000 bullets a day. It was grueling and dangerous work, and sunlamps were needed below so the kibbutzniks wouldn't look pale when they were supposed to be working outside.

This is how we Jews had to survive back then – underground, beneath the radar of a world in which we were tentative guests. But we are no longer an underground resistance movement.

When it comes to Iran, Israel is facing a decision as momentous as any in its history. As American Jews, we urge the United States to stand firm against Iran's nuclear ambitions, because it is the morally and politically correct thing to do. And going it alone would be a very painful option for Israel. But, in the end, what you and I have to understand is that, no matter how painful, Israel may decide that it cannot give up the power to determine its own destiny.

And when it comes to standing up for our Jewish youth on college campuses, we cannot stay underground either. The days of trying to blend in and not make waves are over. We have a voice in America and power and, as with signs that said, "no Jews allowed," we can't tolerate hate-speech in the guise of free speech.

We have risen up from the underground bunkers, and can be proud Jews in the full light of day. This is what it means to have the Ledec Torah in trust, to honor it and the memory of its owners, to declare that this Torah will not rot in a Nazi museum constructed by those who wanted to undo us and relegate us to the history books.

Zionism is the boldest expression of Jewish power in two thousand years – a nation state where our values of Torah meet the real world. That Israel succeeds more often than it fails, is something that should bring us tremendous pride; and it's a pride that our young college students should be able to feel and express without fear of being persecuted.

With great power comes great responsibility.