

Ritual for a New Geniza

Beth Emet The Free Synagogue — Evanston, Illinois

Wednesday, August 28, 2018 — 17 Elul 5778

Singing - Al Shloshah D'varim

“Al shloshah d'varim haolam omed: al haTorah, v'al ha-avodah, v'al g'milut chasadim”

-Pirkei Avot 1:2

The world stands upon three things: on the Torah, on worship, and on acts of lovingkindness

What is a *geniza*? How is it important to us at Beth Emet?

According to Pirke Avot, “The world stands upon three things: On the Torah, on worship and on acts of lovingkindness” (Pirke Avot 1:2). On the Torah - both the study of it and respect for a physical Torah scroll. On *avodah* - (worship or service) — on how we come together as a community to pray, and for what we do with our sacred books and objects. On *g'milut chasadim* - on acts of lovingkindness, both in the ways we treat others and in the ways we show respect for our holy objects.

The concept of a *geniza* touches on all of these elements. A *geniza* (*genizot*, plural) is a burial place for Jewish texts and ritual objects which are no longer suitable for use. In the Talmud, we learn that any item which contains one of the Hebrew names of God must be buried after use. This includes items such as old books and *siddurim*, or retired Torah scrolls. Furthermore, the rabbis of the Talmud also said that any item which is used in association with something containing God's name must also be buried — this broader category includes things like old Torah scroll covers and *mezuzot*, to name a few (Megillah 26b). Burying these items demonstrates that their holiness does not evaporate as soon as they are no longer fit for use, regardless of whether or not they contain God's name. Burial in a *geniza* is a way to assert that these books and items (and the memories and learning associated with them) are so special that we literally cannot throw them away.

In addition to demonstrating the centrality of text and study to Judaism, another aim of a *geniza* is to preserve a community's history by treating its retired Torah scrolls, books, and other ritual items with respect. *Genizot* preserve the ritual and intellectual history of the Jewish community as a whole. Yet a *geniza* is not a living archive. A *geniza* does not contain materials intended to be referenced regularly, like a synagogue's birth and death records or old but usable editions of *siddurim*: these may be kept above ground. What is the value in holding on to these things that we can neither use nor see?

Perhaps there is value and holiness in simply knowing that they are here. Consider for a moment how many people might have used their finger to follow along in the same words off the same page of the same siddur. Think about the decades that passed while that *siddur* was in use in this building! So many people have done this that the spine of the siddur has fallen apart from use. If *talmud Torah* and *avodah* (Torah study and worship), are such important mitzvot, then opening a new *geniza* is a celebration that we at Beth Emet are doing it well.

Right now, we are standing at the crossroads of Beth Emet's history and Beth Emet's future. The opening of this *geniza* - inherently centered upon history - is in many ways an inauguration of our new sanctuary and building, which looks towards the future. It is fitting that the *geniza* itself is located beneath the sanctuary. Today we will be burying several old books and a torn tallit as symbols for all of the items which will soon fill this *geniza*. Even though they are no longer in use, these items are still holy.

May the opening of this *geniza*, which will soon hold Beth Emet's history, continue to inspire additional years of Torah study, of worship, and of *g'milut chasadim* for our community.

Story from Marilyn Price, Beth Emet Member and Storyteller

Burial of the Books and Tallit

יִתְגַּדֵּל וַיִּתְקַדֵּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא. בְּעֶלְמָא דִּי בְּרָא כְרַעוּתָהּ וַיִּמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתָהּ
בְּחַיִּיכוּן וּבְיוֹמֵיכוּן וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעָגְלָא וּבְזֶמֶן קָרִיב, וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעָלַם וּלְעֵלְמֵי עֲלַמְיָא.

יִתְבָּרַךְ וַיִּשְׁתַּבַּח וַיִּתְפָּאֵר וַיִּתְרוֹמֵם וַיִּתְנַשֵּׂא וַיִּתְהַדָּר וַיִּתְעַלֶּה וַיִּתְהַלָּל
שְׁמֵהּ דְקֻדְשָׁא, בְּרִיךְ הוּא. לְעֵלְא מִן כָּל בְּרַכְתָּא וְשִׁירְתָּא תְּשַׁבַּחְתָּא וְנַחֲמָתָא
דְּאַמִּירָן בְּעֶלְמָא, וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל רַבָּנָן וְעַל תַּלְמִידֵיהוֹן וְעַל כָּל תַּלְמִידֵי תַלְמִידֵיהוֹן
וְעַל כָּל מֵאן דְּעָסְקִין בְּאוֹרֵיתָא דִּי בְּאַתְרָא הָדִין וְדִי בְּכָל אֶתְר וְאַתְר
יְהֵא לְהוֹן וּלְכוּן שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא חֲנָא וְחֶסְדָּא וְרַחֲמִין וְחַיִּין אֲרִיכִין וּמְזוֹנָא רוּיָחָא
וּפְרָקְנָא מִן קֳדָם אֲבוּהוֹן דְּבִשְׁמֵיָא, וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן שְׁמֵיָא וְחַיִּים שׁוֹבִים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

עוֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמָיו הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְעַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֶל, וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.