

Yolande Cohen

A Piece of a Torah Scroll in my Basement

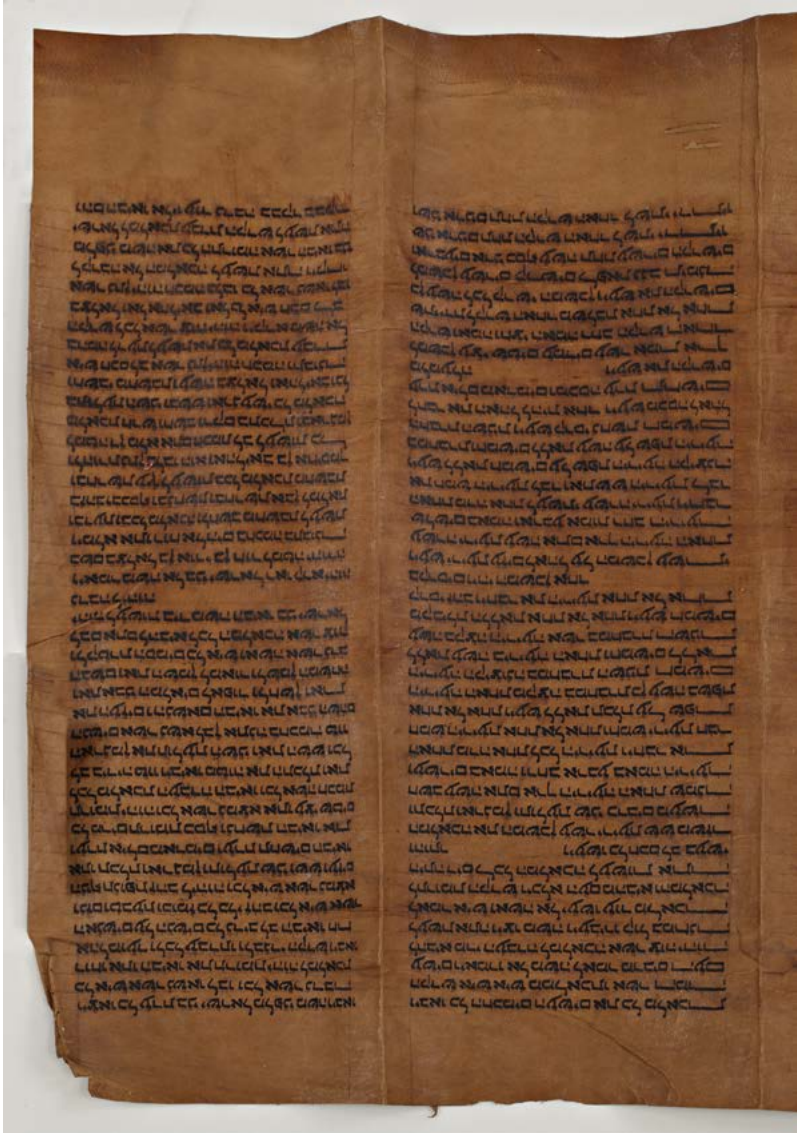
My parents Aaron Cohen and Marie Berdugo Cohen, had to leave their town, Méknès, Morocco in haste in the winter 1974. They felt the situation was dire for them and their three children, and they finally decided that it was time to live their beloved country. After much debate and tears, and as their whole family had already left for Casablanca and then France and Canada, they opted to go to Montréal where my mother's sisters and nephews were already established.

Since their departure was planned a few months earlier, they had time to think of what they would bring with them to Montréal. A friend offered them space in a cargo container that was due to leave Casablanca for Montréal, so they started packing their stuff and delivered it to the port, one truck at a time. They chose the month of Ramadan, a fasting time, to move each parcel and piece of furniture quietly, during the three hours period, when their Muslim neighbors broke their fast at sunset, not to raise their suspicion. They did not wish to attract attention, even though everyone knew that the Jews were leaving the city and the country *en masse*, during the preceding 20 years or so. It was difficult enough to leave everyone they knew, without greeting them or saying goodbye, so I guess, they felt that they could not burden themselves even more. They had to leave without anyone noticing, hiding their exile from everyone.

So the decision of what to take and what to leave had been weighted constantly during those few months preceding their departure. They certainly could not leave behind certain things, such as their sacred objects, essential pieces of their identity. But such objects cannot be taken easily since they are sacred. For the remaining members of the Jewish community, the question of what to do with those ancient and beautiful Sepharim as well as the many prayer books was a painful one. Once it was known that my parents were leaving, my father was missioned to take with him some of the Torah Scrolls left in the empty synagogues.

My father had already taken the very ancient Sepher Torah from his family synagogue, which could not be used anymore because it was altered somehow, therefore unfit for a synagogue. So, he did not hesitate to take with him two more, as a mitzva. Those were newest and were to be relocated where they could be used. So, they brought with them to Montréal three Torah Scrolls (Sepher torah) from Méknès. When in Montréal, he had to dispose of them. One of them went to France, at his niece's demand to garner her husband's new synagogue in Montrouge; the other one went to Florida at one of his friend's request.

He kept the most ancient one, which had been in his family for four generations. When we made a donation of a piece of the Torah scroll to the McCord Museum for the Shalom Montréal exhibition in 2018, he was interviewed to tell its story. He underlined how important it was for his family to have a Torah scroll hand-written by erudite scribes on original kosher sheep skin, with special ink that resisted through



more than a century, and how he could not leave Morocco without it. Even if the Sepher Torah could not be used for praying, since it was too old and scratched and therefore *asoul* or desecrated, he wanted to keep it in the family as a piece of archive. He did cut some pieces out to distribute to each of his children for their bar-mitzva, where the Peracha of the week was inscribed, and kept the rest of the scroll in paper, covered and revered as an ancient tribute to their life past. For my siblings, it became the sign or a witness to this ancient Jewish tradition of praying and reading the Torah and of the faith and dedication to Judaism of our grand-parents and our great-grand-parents.

It travelled the oceans to reach Canada, where pieces of it are now on our walls, in nice settings celebrating an ancient craft, or laying in our cupboards, or at the Museum. Now that my father had passed away, we're indebted to his decision to bring this incredible document with him to Montréal. For us and for the people who are watching it, this is an archive that presents an ancient way of life, where Moroccan Jews expressed their faith through practical arrangements. Everything in this Torah scroll is modest though extraordinary elaborate.

My next move is to give the rest of this Torah scroll to the Montréal Holocaust Museum, as a tribute to my family's exile.

Montréal, December 30th, 2021

