

Rabbi Seymour Zahn and the GSJC Military Torah



In 1985, Greater Southington Jewish Congregation was just getting off the ground. Founding member Ed Rosenblatt was contacted by a member of Temple Beth Israel in West Hartford about a small military Torah being sold by a retired rabbi. Ed and Bernice Tanzman Stromberg visited Rabbi Seymour Zahn in his apartment and purchased the Torah for \$100.

This Torah was used in the GSJC congregation for a brief period, but after a full-size Torah was received as a long-term loan from Temple Beth Israel, the military Torah was put to the side for decades.

In trying to write the history of GSJC's religious items and artifacts, we researched Rabbi Zahn's history and found that we were in possession not only of an historic Torah which provided solace to Jewish Airmen in Korea, now have the honor of remembering him on his yahrzeit and in our yizkor book. Here is his story and the story of our military Torah as compiled from news sources, his alma mater, Yeshiva University, two of his family members and others.

Rabbi Seymour Zahn was born in November, 1927 in New York, the son of late Rabbi Philip Zahn and Frieda (Schimmel) Zahn. He grew up in Brooklyn and attended Yeshiva University for his undergraduate and graduate degrees.

After being ordained, he served as a rabbi at the Greenbelt Jewish Center in Maryland and at Temple Beth El, Hammonton, New Jersey. While in Maryland, he was a rabbinic consultant to the Hebraic section of the Library of Congress.

In 1953, he entered the US Air Force, becoming the only Jewish chaplain for all of Korea. During his time in this role, he organized a Passover seder and the first ever Torah convocation. He traveled over 200 miles a week to be in contact with the Jewish military members.

In 1955, he left active duty and returned to the United States. He served in a number of congregations mostly in the Northeast, including Beth Israel Synagogue in Naugatuck, CT and B'nai Israel in Manchester. He contributed articles and letters to the editors to rabbinical journals and newsletters. Rabbi Zahn also spoke about his time in Korea as a military chaplain.

There is more information about his life stored at the American Jewish Historical Society in New York which can be viewed there. The Yeshiva University Library also has a file with letters to his former teachers from his time in Korea.

Rabbi Zahn's brother-in-law, Abraham Nieman, said that Rabbi Zahn was a "mensch" and loved teaching children especially.

Rabbi Zahn met his wife, Esther Essman, through family in Brooklyn. Although she wasn't raised Orthodox, she was observant and kept Kosher. They married and had one son, Morrison (Morey), who lived with several disabilities.

Rabbi Zahn took a position teaching in the Connecticut Prison system and stayed in State employment until 1988. Mrs. Zahn worked for the Connecticut Department of Children and Families for many years, specializing in advocacy with children with disabilities.

Rabbi Zahn passed away in 1996 and Mrs. Zahn in 2005. They were last affiliated with Congregation Tefereth Israel and are buried in New Britain, CT at Beth Alom Cemetery.

According to Rabbi Irving Elson at the Jewish Chaplains Council, the military Torah and its case which we now own, were issued to all Jewish chaplains. They were set up to be able to offer full services to troops in the field. There was a kiddush cup, two candle holders and a curtain behind which the Torah was stored. Many Jewish chaplains kept the kits when they left the service.