

Basic Laws Regarding Torah Scrolls

A Torah Scroll is handwritten by a scribe with a feather and special ink on carefully prepared parchment.

An authentic Sefer Torah is a mind-boggling masterpiece of labor and skill. Comprising between 62 and 84 sheets of parchment-cured, tanned, scraped and prepared according to exacting Halachic specifications-and containing exactly 304,805 letters, the resulting handwritten scroll takes many months to complete.

An expert scribe carefully inks each letter with a feather quill, under the intricate calligraphic guidelines of Ktav Ashurit (Ashurite Script). The sheets of parchment are then sewn together with sinews to form one long scroll. While most Torah scrolls stand around two feet in height and weigh 20-25 pounds, some are huge and quite heavy, while others are doll-sized and lightweight.

The Parchment:

A Torah scroll may only be written on parchment from the skin of a kosher animal. However, the animal need not necessarily be slaughtered in a ritually acceptable manner. As long as the species is kosher, the parchment may be used for a Torah scroll. Parchment made of fish skin cannot be used for this purpose; fish skin exudes an unpleasant odor, which is not becoming to a Torah scroll. The parchment must be prepared with the intention that it be used for a Torah scroll. Therefore, a Jew must carry out or, at the very least, assist in this task.

Before beginning to write a Torah scroll, the scribe must mark off the lines (scoring) on the parchment with slight grooves. The utensil used for this purpose may not leave any coloring on the parchment. It is preferable that this marking, too, be carried out with the intent to write a Torah scroll.

The Ink:

Only black ink is acceptable. Ink of any other color is not kosher for a Torah scroll. The ink must also be permanent-not erasable.

In ancient times, the ink used for writing a Torah scroll was obtained by boiling oils, tar and wax, and collecting the vapors. Afterwards, that mixture would be combined with tree sap and honey, and then dried out and stored. Before its use, it would be mixed with gall-nut juice. Nowadays, scribes prepare ink using gall-nut juice and gum. The black color is achieved by adding various tints.

The Quill:

The scribe writes with a feather pen or reed pen, filling its tip from the ink. An iron pen is not proper because (a) it may puncture the parchment; (b) iron is often used to make weapons of death and destruction, both of which oppose the intent of the Torah.

The Calligraphy:

The letters of a Torah scroll are written in the "Assyrian" script; the various scripts or fonts in which Hebrew is commonly written or printed are not valid. The lines must be perfectly straight and even. Numerous laws detail the precise figure of each letter, and if even one letter is missing-or, in some instances, merely cracked or smudged-the whole Sefer Torah is not kosher. A printed Torah scroll, even if its letters conform to the required form, is not valid.

Because the Sefer Torah embodies the holiness of its message, it should focus exclusively on its pure text; any illustrations or artistic decorations are forbidden.

The Scribe:

To become a scribe requires rigorous study and training-and great skill. Certainly, a person who has not carefully studied the laws pertaining to composing a Torah scroll cannot be a scribe. Above all, however, the scribe must be a G-d-fearing and pious person, dedicated to the sanctity of the Sefer Torah.

The scribe may not rely on his memory, but must copy the letters, word by word, from a kosher Torah scroll. A right-handed scribe writes only with his right hand; a left-handed scribe, only with his left hand. The Sefer Torah, and especially the Names of G-d contained therein, must be written with utmost purity and devotion. It is therefore customary that the scribe immerse himself in a Mikvah (ritual pool) before beginning his work. He also recites a blessing at the outset of his work and before each time he writes the Name of G-d.

Stand and Kiss

The Torah is the testimony of the covenant between God and Israel, as it is written, "Take this Torah scroll... that it may serve as a testimony for you" (Deut. 31:26). A Torah scroll must be treated with the utmost respect. We are taught that whoever honors the Torah will himself be honored.

The Torah should be placed in a special ark, as we find, "Take this Torah scroll, and place it in the Ark by the [Tablets of the] Covenant" (*ibid.*) the ark should be made as richly and beautifully as the congregation can afford. Nothing else should be placed in the ark, even other sacred books. Invalidated Torah scrolls are an exception to this rule; these may be placed in the ark in the same way that the broken tablets were placed next to the unbroken ones in the original Ark of Testimony.

It is forbidden to do anything disrespectful in the presence of a Torah scroll.

One must show the same respect before a Torah that one would show before an important person. Therefore, it is forbidden to do anything disrespectful in the presence of a Torah.

Just as we are commanded to stand before a sage, so also, when seeing a Torah scroll being carried, we must rise and remain standing until it is brought to its destination or is no longer in our line of vision.

When the Torah is taken out in the synagogue, the entire congregation must stand as long as it is being carried. It should also be accompanied by worshippers. This is implied in the Torah's command to, "Walk after God your Lord" (Deut. 13:5). It is customary to kiss the Torah as it passes by.

When a Torah must be transported, it is preferable that it be accompanied by a person who will hold it in his arms the entire journey. However, where this is impossible, it may be wrapped up and transported or shipped in any respectful manner. When a Torah is carried locally from one synagogue to another, 10 men should accompany it.

Out of respect and reverence, one should never touch the parchment of a Torah scroll with one's bare hands. This is permissible when one is repairing a Torah.

Old Scroll

When a Torah is no longer usable, it should be placed in a waterproof container and buried, preferably together with a religious scholar. Similarly, articles used with a Torah, such as mantles and ties, should be buried when no longer usable.

If a Torah is dropped, it is customary for all those present to fast at least one day, especially the one who dropped it. If one drops tefillin when not in their container, it is also customary to fast. In all these cases, one may redeem the fast with charity.

One who sees a Torah forcibly burned or desecrated must rend his clothing as in mourning. Two tears should be made, one for the writing, and another for the parchment. This rule also applies to other sacred books and to tefillin.

Some maintain that a printed Hebrew Bible or Torah is as sacred as a written Torah. (Still, one may never make use of a printed Torah, tefillin, or mezuzah for sacred purpose.)

Special Script

All the above laws regarding a Torah scroll apply only when it is written in holiness by a religious man who is also a qualified scribe. However, a Torah written by an atheist or apostate who does not believe in our faith is not considered sacred and may be burned. It is even permitted to destroy the divine names in it, since they were written without sacred intent. A Torah written by an irreligious Jew or non-Jew, on the other hand, should be put aside, and neither used nor destroyed. This same rule applies to tefillin and mezuzot. It is preferable that all religious articles and books be made by religious Jews.

It is forbidden to embroider a scriptural verse on any article of clothing, even a tallit.

The respect we show for sacred writings includes all biblical verses written in any language. Because these verses are the word of God, they should not be desecrated or taken into any unclean place. For this reason, it is forbidden to embroider a scriptural verse or passage on any article of clothing, even a tallit. In addition, because of this, it was customary to underline biblical verses written in correspondence, so that they be recognized and not discarded.

The special *Ashurit* script used for writing the Torah is considered holy and should therefore not be used for secular purposes. It should not be used in advertisements or signs. Similarly, one should not use books or newspapers written in Hebrew script for any unclean or degrading purpose, even though they contain nothing of a sacred nature. It was for this reason that a different form of Hebrew script was used for secular purposes.

All accessories used with sacred articles may not be thrown away or burned, but must be carefully put aside and stored or buried. This rule applies to such accessories as Torah mantles, ties and decorations, the ark and its hanging, as well as tefillin straps and bags.

Accessories used for religious observances such as a sukkah, lulav, shofar, or tallit, may be discarded or burned after they are used since they are not sacred in themselves. However, they should not be thrown in the garbage or any other degrading place, but should be used for a good purpose where possible. We are taught that something used for one observance should preferably be used for another.

As long as an accessory is being used for a religious observance, it may not be used for any other purpose, out of respect for God's commandments. After the observance is finished, however, it is permissible to make use of it, although it should not be put to any unclean or degrading use.

Although we are commanded to respect sacred articles, it is not the objects that we revere, but God who makes them sacred. Accordingly, the Torah states, "Revere My sanctuary -- I am God" (Leviticus 19:30, 26:2). That is, I, God, require this reverence.

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Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 28:3

חייב אדם לנהוג כבוד גדול בספר-תורה, ומצוה ליחד וזה מקום, ולכבד את המקום
ההוא ולהדרו ביותר, ולא ירוק כנגד הספר-תורה, ולא יאחז ספר-תורה בלא
מטפחת. הרואה את הנושא ספר-תורה צריך לעמוד לפניו עד שיכניס את הספר-
תורה למקומו או עד שאינו רואהו עוד.

Translatation:

A person is obligated to treat a Torah scroll with great respect and it is praiseworthy to appoint it a special place and to respect that place and beautify it. One should not spit in front of a Torah scroll and one should not hold it without a cloth [in between the scroll and one's bare hands]. One who sees someone carrying a Torah scroll must rise before it until the Torah scroll is placed in its position or until one no longer sees it.

From Reisman sofer

Common Problems with Torah Scrolls that everyone should be aware of

1. **Parchment and the seam between the sections: Many times out of a regular use of the Torah the parchment on the bottom and top could start to rip.** Any rips found should be fixed before it expand into the writing and make the torah "Not Kosher" for use. Sometimes the reason for the rips in the parchment is the type of wood rollers used. Wood rollers should have a special part on the bottom to protect the parchment.
2. **Discoloration of the ink:** Depends on the type of ink used to write the Torah after number of years the color of the ink can turn brown or light brown. A Sofer should be consulted in this case to determine if the color is still Kosher.
3. **Cracked and broken Letters:** Depends on the type of parchment, ink and storage of the Torah the letters can start to crack and break. If you see broken letters in your Torah you will probably need the sofer to take the Torah and fix the problems and take the steps required to prevent the Torah from continuing cracking and breaking.
4. **Wood Rollers or Eitz Chaim:** After years of use the wood can come apart and detach.

From our experience every torah should be inspected every 5 years to make sure the Torah is still kosher.