



God's Ancient Library

Manuscript Research Group

Suggested Handling Procedures and Basic Guidelines for the Care of Your Torah

Torah Talking Points

Scott Carroll, Ph.D., Executive Director 616-405-3710 | HeyDoc@gmail.com

Denise Carroll, General Manager 616-405-8886 | DeniseCarroll@gmail.com

Grant Morgan, Business Manager 616-780-6647 | Grant.E.Morgan@gmail.com

Chelsea Ferwerda, Curator 734-276-8717 | Chelsea.Ferwerda@yahoo.com

Brian Tice, Senior Researcher 616-570-8924 | rebbe.tice@gmail.com

20 TORAH TALKING POINTS

1. Torah is the first 5 books of the Bible in scroll format (it also known as the Pentateuch when it's in book form).
2. The words of every Torah are identical because they are copied exactly.
3. There are 304,805 letters and 5,845 verses found in each Torah.
4. A 4-line break signals the end of one book and the beginning of the next book.
5. Notice the elongated letters used to "justify" the margins.
6. Spaces within the lines or between them indicates daily readings.
7. Hebrews is written from right to left.
8. English is written on top of the lines; Hebrews is written *under* the lines, so the letters appear to hang from them. For English readers, this can give the appearance that the document is upside down!
9. There are no vowels, punctuation marks, chapters or verses in a Torah.
10. There are only slight spaces between the words.
11. None of the Hebrew letters are permitted to touch.
12. A Torah typically takes around 1-year to write.
13. A Torah is usually written on calf skin but, occasionally, on deer skin or even goat. In all instances, however, the animal must be kosher.
14. Each skin is specially treated and stretched to make it thin enough to be used for writing and, once completed, rolling it closed.
15. Each sheet of parchment is then scored with an implement called a sargel that is essentially a wooden dowel with a thorn affixed on the end.
16. Ink is made from organic materials (tar, oil, gall nut juice, honey, sap, etc).
17. Thread that holds each skin together is called sinew or gidin and is made from the gut of a kosher animal. After the Torah is completely written, it is sewn together.
18. Any mistake made while writing a Torah is quickly corrected employing a variety of methods:
 - a. If found while the ink is still wet, it can be carefully wiped away with a clean rag.
 - b. If found after-the-fact, a sharp implement might be utilized to gently scrape away the mistake.
 - c. Occasionally, a correction is made by cutting away the problem area and inserting a piece of vellum from the back side of the scroll and writing the correction on top of the new piece of vellum.
19. If a complete skin contains numerous corrections, it may be necessary to replace the entire panel, probably taken from another Torah that is no longer in use.
20. Even today, a Torah is written by a scribe (aka a *sofer*) using a goose or turkey feather because they are kosher birds and their quills are very hard.

SUGGESTED HANDLING PROCEDURES and BASIC GUIDELINES for the CARE of YOUR TORAH

We are pleased to provide you with some basic guidelines related to the care and treatment of your Torah scroll. With gentle, respectful care, the task of maintaining this extraordinary gift should be straightforward.

Perhaps the most important part of owning a *pasul* (no longer kosher) sefer Torah is to treat it as the Jews would treat a kosher Torah. This means handling it carefully, with reverence and thoughtfulness. If showcasing the Torah in a public forum, even in a classroom setting, please be cognizant that an audience member may take offense to a non-Jew handling it. In addition, if pictures are posted to social media of the scroll being touched or handled, recipients of those images will not be aware of its *pasul* status. Therefore, as a general rule, we discourage such pictures. On the other hand, however, pictures of the Torah thoughtfully being presented on a table or being handed to someone are probably acceptable. Know your audience and recall Emily Post's famous saying that, "Manners are a sensitive awareness to the feelings of others."

If opening the Torah on a table, make sure that the surface is clean and dry. You might also consider laying down a clean tablecloth before placing the Torah on a table.

Just as the scribe that penned this scroll had to approach his work with a holy attitude, it would be wise to consider his method! Whenever one touches, holds, or works with the Torah, best practices include having clean hands that are free of lotions or perfumes.

At this point, you may be asking yourself, "What about wearing gloves?" As a general rule, our organization does *not* wear gloves for the following reasons:

- Since the Torah is written on animal skin, the natural oils from the hands are actually beneficial to its longevity.
- Depending on the process used in the preparation of the skins, the Torah may be soft like suede or quite stiff. Gloves frequently catch or snag on the seams and at the tops and bottoms of each skin, particularly those of the stiffer variety.
- The Torah is fairly heavy, and one is more prone to it slipping from gloved hands than from bare hands.

The leading museums, universities, and related organizations around the world differ on this question. Ultimately, the decision of whether gloves are worn rests with the special collections librarian or the guidelines that are in place at your institution.

When handling the Torah, try to avoid touching the ink. One of the major reasons a Torah is withdrawn from use in a liturgical service is deterioration of the ink. It can easily fade, turn brown, or flake off, possibly changing the meaning of a word or phrase. Although a Torah can be "re-inked," it is a difficult, expensive, tedious, and time-consuming process. Consider using a *yad* (Torah pointer) or holding the scroll only at the seams or between columns.

Never use ink near the Torah. One stray drop or smudge can permanently damage your beautiful Torah. Use only lead pencils around your scroll.

Avoid eating or drinking anywhere near the Torah. While this may sound like common sense, it is easy to become lax and place a bottle of water or cup of coffee at your work station while studying. **DON'T DO IT!** We have seen empty glasses that had condensation on them *drip* onto the Torah and cause the ink to immediately **S P R E A D**, forever damaging the scroll. Best to avoid the situation altogether. This holds true for food as well since even the odor of foods can cling to a scroll.

Rolling a scroll can be quite tricky. Whatever process was used to treat the hides in your scroll will determine the level of difficulty.

- Scroll rolling is typically a two-person process.
- Start the rolling at one end, keeping it tight.
- Try your best to keep the top and bottom even. This may necessitate each person standing the scroll upright and gently pushing the scroll from the top onto the hard surface of the table.
- You may find it necessary to pull the scroll from the inside of the roll (think of opening a telescope), and as gently as possible twisting it to tighten. Don't over-tighten since that runs the risk of damaging the ink and the seams.
- For longer storage, it is recommended that the scroll be wound into one roll.
- Once you've rolled the scroll closed, secure it with the included stretch band.
- If using the scroll each day, it is acceptable to roll it from both ends. In this instance, the stretch band will not work to hold it closed. Consider a neutral, stretchy material to secure it but *never tighten this more than necessary*. Tying it too tightly can damage the scroll.

Every new Torah is sewn with sinew from a kosher animal. Because the cost of such a product is quite expensive, your Torah has been conserved with artificial sinew or heavy thread. Should any seams need mending in the future, you may wish to ship the Torah to our offices in Michigan where we can make the necessary repairs. Depending on the extent of the work, the anticipated costs should be very reasonable.

We are often asked about the ideal climate in which a Torah should be housed. The most important considerations are:

Stable temperatures – ideally 65 - 73°

Humidity – ideally 35 - 55%

For both temperature and humidity, the lower end of the numbers above is best. As you may know, because Torahs are written on vellum, they are quite resilient and tolerate environmental changes fairly well.

The desire of your donors, Ken and Barbara Larson, is that you will use your Torah on a regular basis. Because that will most likely involve handling it, we caution you to use extra care at the sewn seams. These points in the scroll seem to be the most vulnerable to stress when moving it from place to place.

If your institution intends to display the Torah, we recommend rolling it to different passages, perhaps on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. It is good for the Torah to be opened regularly and rolled to different passages. This helps maintain the supple nature of the membrane, as well as reduce the potential of damage to a certain area from extended exposure to light.

Speaking of light, if you intend to display the Torah, please keep in mind the damaging effects of sunlight. It is certainly best to have it in a place that is out of direct sunlight but still in a place where it can be easily seen and appreciated.

If your Torah will be stored, please consider opening the plastic bag it came in as well as the fabric bag, if one was included. This will enable it to "breathe" when it is in storage. The plastic bag is to keep the scroll from water damage when moving it from building to building or shipping it. Water is an enemy of your scroll!

Should you think of additional questions regarding the care and handling of your Torah, please do not hesitate to contact us.