

The methods used to maintain Judaism's most sacred texts trace back to the time of Moses

Scrolls

Yochanan Salazar is a sofer whose duty is to scribe and maintain the Torah. He uses adhesive to repair the binding of a 90-year-old Torah at B'nai Zion Synagogue in Chattanooga.

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Yochanan Salazar is constantly afraid.

Salazar is a sofer, a Jewish scribe fluent in the faith's most important text, the Torah. He's trained both in writing new Torah scrolls and repairing ancient Hebrew texts.



This week, he started repair work on Torah scrolls at B'nai Zion Congregation, a Jewish synagogue on McBrien Road. Over the next two years, he'll repair several of the congregation's scrolls, some of which were penned more than a century ago.

The work is meticulous. But it's also humbling, he says, as he carefully crouches over the text, his nose just inches away from the very word of God. He dusts each page with tissues, wipes a cleaner over them and uses a quill to fill in faded letters.

"The truth is it's scary," Salazar said. "It constantly creates a sense of awe. It's an amazing feeling every time I do it."

The Torah -- the Pentateuch to Christians -- contains the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In synagogues, the five books of Moses are displayed on large scrolls, called sifrei Torah, which wrap around two wooden spools.

Penning the Hebrew text by hand onto parchment is both an art and science. An art for obvious reasons: The penmanship must be pristine, with columns lining up square and letters written without error. But it's a science because of the dozens of laws surrounding how the scrolls should be written, maintained and disposed of.

Every word must be written in order.

The Hebrew text must be written without vowels.

A damaged or unusable scroll must be buried, not thrown away.

And this is no lost art.

While various movements have created a diversity of practices within Judaism's denominations, Salazar, also an ordained rabbi, says the art of writing and maintaining the Torah has remained constant.

"Every aspect of Judaism at some point in time has been modified, reformed or approached in a different light," he said. "I find the one aspect of Judaism that has not been touched is the art of scribing. Whether you are an orthodox scribe or a conservative scribe, you follow the exact same set of laws and the same set of traditions."

Jews trace this tradition back to Moses, who is believed to have been the first scribe.

Congregations read from the scrolls four times each week. The readings are a focal point of Saturday Sabbath services. And boys and girls read from the scrolls during their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony.

"The central and holiest object in Judaism is a Torah scroll, which is different than just a Bible or a printing," said Zev Farber, an Atlanta-based Torah expert. "It in many ways functions as the centerpiece of Jewish ritual."

Farber, who holds a doctoral degree in Jewish studies and is an ordained rabbi, said it can take up to a year for a sofer to write a complete Torah scroll. They're penned with a feather quill, usually on cow- or lambskin. Even the fonts are specific, Farber said.

"To make the physical Torah into the holy scroll it is and not just a regular Bible, it has to be done in an ancient way," he said.

Because of the level of detail and time required, scrolls can cost upward of \$40,000 apiece, Farber said. That's why maintaining them is so important.

But more important, the Torah is holy, said B'nai Zion Rabbi Susan Tendler.

B'nai Zion's scrolls are stored behind a white curtain inside a sweeping wooden ark, reminiscent of the Ark of the Covenant built by Moses in the scriptures. In the sanctuary, the ark and the podium from where the Torah is read are raised, signifying a trip up Mount Sinai. Believers take the quickest route when approaching the Torah, but the longest route away.

"There are all these ideas to reinforce subtly the idea that it's revelation," Tendler said. "It's considered revelation each time you read from it."

B'nai Zion has 10 Torah scrolls -- a large number for this congregation of 160 families. But having several scrolls is pragmatic, as a congregation can have different scrolls rolled to different parts of scripture, rather than unraveling them during a service. So one can be unrolled to the story of Noah, while another is open to Leviticus.

And regular use of the scrolls is one way to keep them kosher, in working order. Because without regular use, the parchment can dry out. Plus, Tendler said, it can be seen as disrespectful to just let the scrolls sit around.

"It's the word of God," she said.