Jewish Value Considerations When Working with Judaica

Overview
The purpose of this poster is to introduce traditional classifications for Jewish holy objects and suggest ways that their cultural significance may be recognized and respected in tandem with modern preservation practices. By looking at these traditions and techniques, we can examine the values they are trying to communicate and apply those larger values to collection care work. This poster is designed for anyone who may steward Judaica in an institution, community or home.

Traditional Classifications
According to the traditional classification of sacred Jewish objects, there are four categories, each with different rules about the creation, use, and end of the object. Some categories have strict rules, others are more relaxed. These traditional classifications only consider traditional ritual objects and are based in halakha – Jewish rabbinic law – which are laid out in the Talmud, a compendium of Jewish law and rabbinic interpretation.

In this system, there is a hierarchy of sacred objects and rules that dictate how they are to be made, handled, repaired, and disposed of through burial. Klei kodesh are holy objects (literally translate to “vessels of holiness”) because they have the name of G-d written on them one or more times. They are considered sacred whether they are in use or not. Examples of Klei kodesh are a sefer Torah (Torah scroll), tefillin or mezuzah parchment scroll, all of which are carefully crafted by a sofer, or scribe, who must handwrite every letter flawlessly. The very creation of these items involves spiritual kavana – intent – to infuse them with kedusha - holiness. Objects that are traditionally “more holy” have special handling guidelines, aimed at preserving the structural integrity of the ink on the parchment and legibility of the text, which, if damaged, deems the objects no longer kosher, or fit for ritual use.

Other objects fall into one of three categories, each different in nuanced ways, but for the sake of collection care practices can all be considered “not sacred.”

Outlined below are some practical collection care notes for the most spiritually sensitive, the sefer Torah, which is klei kodesh, the most holy object in the Jewish tradition. The following recommendations are based on a sefer Torah still in ritual use, which must stay free from imperfections to remain kosher and be used in ritual. These are the strictest limitations, and do not apply to all Judaica. However, by examining these traditions and techniques, we can examine the values they are trying to communicate and apply those to collection care work.

Rimonim

Sefer Torah Scroll

Klaf Parchment

Tefillin Phylacteries

Mantle

Belt

Yad Pointer

Choshen Breastplate

Torah Klaf

K’tonet Mantle

Etz Chaim

Keter Crown

Storage
A sefer Torah is usually stored upright, at an angle – its scroll chair, or wooden rolls (k’laf). resting on a backboard. In front been up against a footrest. The scroll is stored inside its protective and decorative wrappings and adornments. One or several Torah scrolls can be stored together. An aron kodesh is a special rack, box, or cabinet that is designated to store the scrolls, and should not be used to store other objects. The aron kodesh is kept closed, and is customary for folks to stand to show respect when it is opened. In addition to respect, this arrangement also has practical benefits of thoughtful storage practice – protection from light, water, pests, and fluctuations in relative humidity.

Behavior and Conduct
The holiness of a sefer Torah extends around it, making the space it inhabits holy. How we behave around a sefer Torah is representative of our attitude towards holiness. There are some halakic specifications, but essentially it is forbidden to do anything disrespectful in the presence of a Torah scroll. The sefer Torah should not be kept in or near a bathroom or greaseless. It is also considered impure to sit on the same surface on which a Torah is resting. As a rough guide, if you couldn’t do it at the dinner table, don’t do it around the Torah. In many traditions, it is customary to kiss the Torah as it passes by.

Handling
When handling or using, users are careful to not touch the written surface of the Torah parchment. Partly, this is to make sure the user is respected (not touching something is a powerful way to signify importance); partly, it is because touching can cause damage to the text, which may readily unravel the entire object. If you need to touch the parchment for some reason, do it in private. It is both customary and practical to place a lining or cover on the surface before placing the Torah down.

Dropping a sefer Torah is considered a tragedy, a communal traumatic event, and should be avoided with careful handling. If it happens, a Rabbi should be consulted immediately for next steps, which will likely include some sort of communal fasting to symbolize grief.

Fixing Problems
If there is a structural or aesthetic issue in any part of the Torah scroll (parchment, ink, seams, wooden rolls), a sofer (scribe) should be consulted.

Emergency Preparedness
The Torah is considered the soul of the community, their “portable homeland” and embodies the holiness of its message. After prioritizing human life and safety, Torah scrolls should be a salvage priority before, during, and after disasters.

Terumot Be’Emunot

Value life, center people.

Preventive Conservation Graduate Fellow
Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation
margalitschindler.com

By Margalit Schindler (they/them)

References

End-of-Life
Religious manuscripts, including other Torah, that time or human error have rendered unfit for use cannot be “thrown out,” but rather “require genizah” – removed, for example, to a jar, closet, or burial plot that they “may decay of their own accord.” While this may not be applicable to objects that have shifted in meaning upon entering a museum collection, stewards should consider the tradition and implied values.

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Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation
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This diagram illustrates the components and accoutrements of a traditional Ashkenazi (Eastern European) sefer Torah. The scroll itself is considered Klei Kodesh. All other objects are Tashmishei Kodesh, and are not, themselves, sacred. (The exception is an ari’l chair that has already been attached to a klaf – it, too, requires genizah.)

“A person must have great respect for a Sefer Torah. It is their duty to assign a special place for it and to treat this place with honor, and to hold it in utmost reverence.”

Kitzur Shulhan Arukh 30:3

“…and disposed of through burial. The very creation of these items involves spiritual kavana – intent – to infuse them with kedusha - holiness. Objects that are traditionally “more holy” have special handling guidelines, aimed at preserving the structural integrity of the ink on the parchment and legibility of the text, which, if damaged, deems the objects no longer kosher, or fit for ritual use.”

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