

“SOFER: THE STORY OF A TORAH SCROLL”

by Eric Ray, Torah Aura Productions, October 1, 1998

“The Torah is the book that holds the wisdom of the Jewish people. It is our history. It is the story of the journey of the Jewish people toward a better world. It is the record of the laws and values by which we live.”

“The writing of the *Sefer Torah* must be done by a dedicated Jew who loves the Torah. No machine can do the work I do...because a *Sefer Torah* can be made only by human hands.”

A. **No metals used for making weapons may touch a scroll.** “The first rule is that no ‘base metals’ may be used in making or repairing these texts. Base metals are the metals used in everyday tools. That means that no iron, no steel, no brass, no copper, and no bronze can be used. Base metals are the kinds used to make weapons. Nothing that is used for killing can be used in making a *Sefer Torah*.”

“It is okay to use tools made of silver or gold, or ivory or fine woods. The same rule about ‘base metals’ applies to the *yad*, the pointer we use for marking our place when we read Torah, so it, too, is made out of silver or gold, or ivory or fine wood.”

The writing pen cannot be metal. “The pen used to write these texts cannot be made of metal either. The first *sofrim* used pens made from reeds like papyrus. They cut them and shaped them into pens. Later *sofrim* began using quills. A quill comes from the longest feather in a bird’s wing tip (often a goose feather). A *sofer* has to cut the quill and shape the pen point just perfectly. Today almost every *sofer* writes with a quill made from a turkey feather.”

B. **“Kosher Ink Recipe”** for writing a Torah

1. “Boil one pint of water.”

2. “Add ½ pint of (crushed) gallnut powder.”

- a. **Gallnuts** are made when a gall wasp stings a tree. Just as people do, the tree swells from the sting. The wasp will lay her eggs in the gallnut, which is the perfect food for the baby wasps. This perfect food also makes the ink



Gall nuts

used to write a Torah.”

3. “Add ¼ pint of (crushed) gum Arabic crystals.”

“**Gum Arabic** is a kind of glue made from the sticky sap of special plants. This is the part of the formula that sticks the letters to the parchment.”

4. “Add 1/8 pint of (crushed) copper sulfate crystals.”

“Copper sulfate is a blue crystal that turns the gallnut liquid black as it gets older and as it is exposed to air. This is what makes the ink stay black forever.”

5. “Add 1/8 pint of (crushed) fine black carbon powder.”

“Black carbon is just ground up charcoal or soot. In the beginning the gallnut ink is grey and not very dark. The black carbon makes it black so the *sofer* can see what he is writing.”

C. The Parchment (paper):

“The Torah is not written on paper. It is written on kosher animal skins called vellum or parchment. We call a piece of parchment a *k'laf*. It takes a lot of work to prepare a *k'laf*, and there are many rules to follow.”

1. “No animal may be killed just for its skin. Only if an animal was killed for food or died of natural causes can we use its hide to make parchment. Skins prepared for use in a Torah are forbidden to be used for anything else. The parchment (calf skin) had to come from a kosher (without blemish) animal. The animal’s hide is softened by soaking it in clear water for a number of days.



Calf skin

2. To remove all the hairs, the skin is soaked in lime water for eighteen days. A lot of scraping has to be done to remove all the fat and hairs. After all this soaking the *k'laf* comes out all wrinkled and bundled together.
3. Dog dung is often rubbed into the hide to help loosen the hair.



4. The hair is then scraped off.



Scraping

5. To make the *k'laf* into a smooth writing surface it must be dried on a stretching rack.

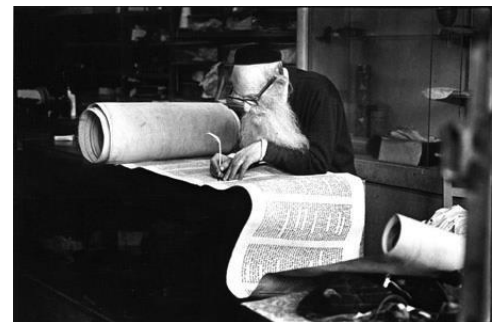


Stretching

6. When you work on a *Sefer Torah*, your feelings are very important. The person who makes the animal hide into *k'laf* must say out loud that this *k'laf* is being prepared especially to make a *Sefer Torah*.”

D. A Sofer (Scribe)

1. “To be a *sofer s'tam* a person must be of good character. A *sofer s'tam* must be a person who lives a fully Jewish life.”
 - a. Only a certified sofer (or scribe) can copy a Torah scroll.
 - b. He must know over 4,000 laws before starting to write.



2. "The work of writing a *Sefer Torah* begins early in the morning when the *minyan* gathers. It is a Jewish custom to pray with a *minyan* (a group of at least ten Jews) three times a day. I begin my work every day by praying with the *minyan* at my congregation."
3. "When I come home from services I am ready to work. The first thing I do is wash my hands. It is a Jewish custom to wash hands before every holy act."

"We don't wash our hands just to make them clean. It isn't like a doctor preparing to do surgery. We wash our hands to prepare our mind and heart to do something holy."

4. "Then I am ready for work. When I take a fresh piece of *k'laf* I need to make it ready. First I need to rule the lines, which will keep my letters straight and even. I use a *sargel*, which is a tool for scratching lines into the parchment. My *sargel* is made out of a thorn. Remember that no base metals can be used on the Torah."



5. "It takes about three years to write a whole Torah. Before he writes even a single word, the *sofer* must first say a *brakhah*, a blessing."
6. "A *sofer* isn't allowed to write even one word of the Torah from memory. Every word and letter must be checked. We use a book called a *tikkun*, which has a perfect text, to make sure that no mistakes are made."
7. "When I write I do what every *sofer* does; I sing every word and every letter out loud."
8. "Saying '*sofit*' reminds me that this is the last letter of the word. Before and after every word I have to check my work in the *tikkun*."
9. "Each sheet of parchment used in the Torah is called a *yeriah*. Each *yeriah* must be checked by three rabbis before it can be used."

10. "Each section is written and checked before it is sewn into the Torah."
11. "When you write a Torah you are allowed to correct any mistake made in any word except for God's name."
12. "When I have to erase a mistake I do it by scraping the letters off the parchment. I use a special tool I have made from pieces of glass. Can you figure out why I use glass and not a razor blade?" (No base metal may touch the Torah)
13. "In the Torah every letter must be clear and readable. No part of it can be blurred or smudged."
14. "No two letters can be touching. Even if a letter is cracked because the parchment is split a little bit, the Torah cannot be used." (Until it is corrected...if a letter in the name for God touches another, it makes the entire parchment "unsacred" and it cannot not be corrected and must no longer be used.)
15. "Writing God's name is the most important part of writing a Torah. When a *sofer* writes God's name there are lots of special preparations."

"On a day when I am going to write God's name I go to the *mikveh*. A *mikveh* is a special pool of natural running water that a Jew uses to make himself or herself pure. For Jews, going to the *mikveh* helps us direct our hearts and our minds. It is like washing your hands and saying a *brakhah*."

"To write God's name I use a special quill that has never been used to write any other words. To write God's name I use a special bottle of ink, which is used only to write God's name. No pens except my *Ha-Shem* quills have ever touched it."

"Let me tell you one trick that I do, that lots of *sofrim* do. When it is difficult to get to the *mikveh* every day, I save up all the times I have to write God's name. I write everything else on a page, but not God's name. Then once or twice a week I go to the *mikveh*, take out my special tools, and spend the day writing God's name. It is easier to work that way, and it is easier to really direct my heart toward each writing of God's name."

16. “For the sewing I use a silver needle and silver thimble, both of which are gold-plated. I also have a pair of gold-plated scissors, which I use for cutting things. For thread I use what we call *gid*. This is a part of the sinew from the leg of a kosher animal that has been twisted into a thread. We may not use any thread other than kosher *gid*.”