Repairing the Torah Scrolls

August 21, 2026 Rabbi Barry H. Block

"Maintenance" is an important word around Congregation B'nai Israel, and not only at Board meetings, where the Treasurer's report reliably includes the sentence, "Building maintenance is over budget, as usual." Our magnificent Temple is beautiful, and it's functional, but it is aging. Like all of us who are over fifty, certain parts don't work as well as they once did. Things fall apart. They leak. When I read the prayer אשר יצר, in which we praise God for the intricacy of our bodies, I have to resist associating it with this building. After praising God "who formed the human body with skill, creating the body's many pathways and opening," the prayer continues, "It is well known…that if one of them be wrongly opened or closed, it would be impossible to endure and stand before you." We would find a way to worship God even if the torrents of rusty water from a "wrongly opened" roof that rushed into the office last June had flooded the sanctuary, but it would have been a challenge. We would have to pray elsewhere if the chillers were "wrongly closed" and the sanctuary, sweltering.

As much as we work on the building, we aren't perfectionists. Likewise, even when the parts of my body that **really** need to stay opened or closed do so, bumps and bruises, warts and wrinkles, aches and age spots persist. Same at Temple. A little discoloration where there was once a leak that has been repaired? Carpet that could stand to be replaced but isn't disgraceful? We may let it be.

Still, a concept in Judaism calls us to consider the beautification of every mitzvah we undertake. תפארת המצוות means "glorification of the mitzvot." It's the reason that we have beautiful mantles on our Torah scrolls—the ones we see most of the year, needlework by Temple members decades ago, remarkably no worse for the wear all these years later, as well as the magnificently beaded white mantles that we will place upon our scrolls at Selichot, fitting for the High Holy Days. It's the reason for all that silver on our scrolls, and it's also why we have gorgeous silver candlesticks and kiddush cups, a special Seder plate. and our unique purple etrog container, among and so many precious ritual objects here at Temple.

The architects who designed his beautiful building—Gene P. Levy and Noland Blass, Jr., both of blessed memory—prioritized beauty. They knew that the congregation's prayers would rise even higher as worshipers behold natural beauty outside our sanctuary windows flanking our extraordinary ark. They fulfilled the words of Maimonides, who wrote some eleven hundred years before this Temple was built: "It is a mitzvah to designate a special place for a Torah scroll and to honor it and glorify it in an extravagant manner. After all, the words that were on

the tablets of the covenant are inside."[i] As if to accentuate that, tablets are to be found in all different sizes on our ark doors and on the tapestry behind it. If you stand in exactly the right place, they align like planets in a rare celestial display.

If we focus on maintaining our Temple's roof, lighting, heating, and air conditioning, then how much more ought we to assure proper maintenance for our Torah scrolls. The beauty of the scrolls themselves ought to match if not exceed the magnificence of the ark where they are kept.

To that end, every few years, we invite a סופר, a Torah scribe, to come to Little Rock, to inspect and repair our scrolls every few years. One such סופר, Yonathan Reches, is with us tonight, having arrived and begun his work this morning, intending to continue through next Thursday.

One may fairly ask **why** Torah scrolls need regular maintenance. The Torah scroll is not just another book. It is written by hand on parchment—that is, on the skin of a kosher animal. In fact, Yonathan's subspecialty is preparing hides for sacred Jewish texts. Ink absorbs into paper, but it sits on top of parchment. That's why we use a יד, a Torah pointer, rather than our fingers to follow our place while reading, lest we smudge a letter.

We take numerous steps to keep our Torah scrolls in good condition. We keep the heating and air conditioning running 24/7/365—not at full blast when we aren't here, but enough to control humidity for the scrolls' welfare. Years ago, a scribe explained the importance of wrapping the scroll tightly, which helps to preserve the writing. You might have seen me wrestle with our חגורות, our Torah belts, which were too long, to tie them up and make them tighter. Just before last Shabbat, I was honored to wrap new חגורות, shorter ones, on our scrolls, secured with Velcro, as recommended, rather than metal clips. These חגורות are dedicated in honor of Lewis Krain, on the conclusion of his service as our Temple president. There are white ones to match for the High Holy Days.

Even with the most careful upkeep, though, things happen, time does its damage, and scrolls need maintenance from time to time. When Yonathan inspected them this morning, he found the largest one—the one typically in the center of the ark and there tonight—to be in excellent condition. Three others, including the one we read most often in the library, require modest repairs. There's a smudge that Yonathan says probably comes from a Torah reader's bead of sweat. I'm the most likely culprit. I am not the one who scotch-taped a rip through the top quarter of one column, though!

One of our sanctuary scrolls needs more work. A portion of one column of Torah text is particularly damaged; I'm not sure how I had missed it, nor how it

happened. Yonathan theorizes that perhaps somebody had some water too close to the Torah when they were reading, and it spilled. Also not me! Yes, I bring my big cup everywhere, but there is **one** place I never take it: the Torah reading table!

When Yonathan completes his work next week, our Torah scrolls will be kosher, fit for reading and appropriate for our veneration, in excellent condition. Maimonides laid out the rules that Yonathan and other scribes observe to prepare a Torah, down to the finest detail. He concludes that section, though, by writing, "all of the above matters were mentioned only because this is the most perfect way of performing the mitzvah. Should one, however, alter the structure [of a scroll from that] mentioned above or not be precise regarding the placement of the crowns [on certain letters, the scroll is acceptable], so long as all the letters were written as they should be."[ii] As much as we want the Torah to be just so, just as we would love for our Temple to be as pristine as the day in 1975 when it was dedicated, perfection is not possible in this world, so it is not our goal.

Participation, though, is a goal. On Sunday morning, our Religious School students will get to meet Yonathan and observe his work. On Tuesday evening, adults will have the opportunity to help Yonathan write a letter. Maimonides wrote, "It is a positive commandment for each and every Jew to write a Torah scroll...If a person writes the scroll by hand, it is considered as if they [personally] received it on Mount Sinai. If they do not know how to write it themselves, [they should have others write it for them]. Anyone who checks even a single letter of a Torah scroll is considered as if they had written the entire scroll."[iii]

Like most of you, I have never had the privilege of writing a letter in a ספר תורה, a Torah scroll. That will be a crowning moment in my rabbinical service, just as it will be for all who take up the quill, making our Torah all the sweeter.

Amen.

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[i] Mishneh Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah, and the Torah Scroll 10:10.
[ii] Mishneh Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah, and the Torah Scroll 7:9.
[iii] Mishney Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah, and the Torah Sroll 10:1.