CONGREGATION AHAVATH SHOLOM · ADULT LEARNING

When a Torah Can No Longer Be Read

Law, lived practice and ritual to guide a values-based decision about our unused and unusable sifrei Torah

עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחֲזִיקִים בָּהּ

[Date] · Zoom · 60 minutes · Facilitated by [name]

WHY WE ARE GATHERING

We hold more sifrei Torah than we can use. Some are damaged beyond repair, some are costly to repair, and many carry our memories.

Learn

What Jewish law says, from the Torah itself to today's responsa

See

What other communities have done, beyond burial

Prepare

Rituals and values for the decision ahead of us

Tonight is for learning, not deciding · Cameras optional · Chat is open throughout

CHECK-IN · IN THE CHAT

One sentence: a moment you remember with a Torah scroll.

Type it, but wait to press Enter until I say “go” — then we will all read the waterfall together.

PART 1 · 0:05–0:20

What the texts say

From Deuteronomy to the responsa of our own era — and where the tradition argues with itself

Five layers of the conversation

BIBLE

Torah

Deut. 31:26 — the scroll kept beside the Ark. Deut. 12:3–4 — never destroy God's name.

C. 200–500 CE

Talmud

Megillah 26b–27a, Shabbat 115b, Menachot 29b and 32a, Ketubot 19b

12TH CENTURY

Maimonides

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Sefer Torah 7 and 10; Yesodei HaTorah 6; his responsa

16TH–19TH C.

Shulchan Arukh

Yoreh De'ah 270–284, Orach Chayim 154, and later commentators

20TH–21ST C.

Responsa

Freehof, the CCAR Responsa Committee, and today's customs

LAYER 1 · TORAH

לָקֹחַ אֵת סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה וְשַׂמְתֶּם אֹתוֹ מִצַּד אֲרוֹן בְּרִית ה׳

“Take this book of Torah and place it beside the Ark of the Covenant.” — Deuteronomy 31:26

From the start, the scroll has a sacred home and a keeper.

לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן כֵּן לַה׳ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

“Do not do so to the Eternal your God.” — Deuteronomy 12:4

After commanding the destruction of idols’ names, the Torah forbids doing the same to God’s. The rabbis read this as a ban on destroying or erasing God’s name — the root of genizah.

Part 1 · The prohibition is learned in Sifre and Rashi on Deut. 12:4 and Talmud Makkot 22a

LAYER 2 · TALMUD (C. 200–500 CE)

סֵפֶר תּוֹרָה שֶׁבָּלָה ה גּוֹנְזִין אוֹתוֹ אֵצֶל תַּלְמִיד חָכָם

A worn-out Torah is put away beside a Torah scholar — Megillah 26b

Source	What it teaches
Megillah 26b	Buried in an earthenware jar beside a scholar, honored like a teacher.
Shabbat 115b	A damaged scroll stays holy while 85 letters remain together.
Menachot 29b	About three corrections per sheet; beyond that, put it away.
Ketubot 19b	Never leave a flaw over 30 days: fix the scroll or put it away.
Megillah 27a	A Torah may be sold only to fund Torah study or a marriage.

LAYER 3 · MAIMONIDES, EGYPT, 12TH CENTURY

The great codifier — who also disagreed with himself

Mishneh Torah

- **Sefer Torah 10:1** — twenty defects disqualify a scroll; it then has none of a Torah's sanctity and is like a study text for teaching children.
- **Sefer Torah 10:3** — a worn scroll goes in an earthenware vessel and is buried beside scholars.
- **Sefer Torah 7:12** — correct a flawed scroll within 30 days, or put it away.
- **Yesodei HaTorah 6:8** — even holy books without God's name go to genizah.

His own responsum

Asked by a community without a kosher scroll, Rambam ruled that the blessings may be said over a reading from an unfit scroll (Responsa, ed. Freimann #43).

Code says one thing; a real community's need says another.

Part 1 · Translations paraphrased from CCAR Responsum 5757.4 and 5760.3

LAYER 4 · SHULCHAN ARUKH AND ITS COMMENTATORS, 16TH–19TH C.

Yoreh De’ah 270:1

Every Jew is commanded to write (or own) a Torah scroll.

Yoreh De’ah 279:1

A flawed scroll: repair within 30 days, or put it away.

Yoreh De’ah 280:2

A worn panel (yeri’ah) may be replaced; the new writing should match its neighbors.

Y.D. 282:10 · O.C. 154:5

A worn scroll is buried, in a vessel, near a scholar.

The debate that followed: may an unfit scroll stay in the ark? Magen Avraham (O.C. 154) and Jacob Ettlinger’s *Binyan Tzion* 1:97 worry someone will read from it by mistake. Many shuls keep them anyway — marked by tying the gartel *over* the mantle.

LAYER 5 · MODERN RESPONSA, 20TH–21ST C.

Source	Position
Freehof, 1960s–70s	An unfit Torah may stay in the ark; a whole scroll belongs there, not in a lobby case.
CCAR, 1989	A damaged Holocaust scroll may be displayed as a teaching tool, ideally behind a curtain.
CCAR 5757.4, 1997	Bury a worn-out scroll rather than give it away for teaching: reverence over usefulness.
CCAR 5760.3, 2000	Weighs reading on Shabbat from a flaking Czech Holocaust scroll, drawing on Rambam's responsum.

For Reconstructionists, Mordecai Kaplan's principle frames all of this: the past has a vote, not a veto.

Two ideas to carry forward

פָּסוּל

Pasul — unfit, but fixable

Errors or faded letters. A sofer can often repair it; until then it may be used for teaching.

שְׁבָלָה

Shebalah — worn out

Parchment past repair. The classic answer is genizah and burial.

מַעֲלִין בַּקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֵין מוֹרִידִין

Raise in holiness, never lower

Menachot 32a: a Torah's parchment may not be cut down into mezuzot or tefillin.

So our first practical question: which of our scrolls is which? Only a sofer's assessment can tell us.

PART 2 · 0:20–0:33

What other communities have done

Repair, keeping, lending, teaching, display — and a few lessons learned the hard way

Eight paths communities have taken

1

Repair and rededicate

A sofer restores it; a siyyum celebrates its return

2

Keep it in the ark

Marked as unfit, honored but not read

3

Lend or give it

To a community, school or Hillel that needs a scroll

4

Teach with it

Unrolling, scribal arts, b’nei mitzvah learning

5

Display as a memorial

In a case or alcove, often for Holocaust scrolls

6

Give panels new life

Sound sheets used by a sofer to mend another scroll — ask a sofer

7

Frame fragments

Panels framed for homes or walls — contested

8

Bury with ceremony

The classic path — Part 3

CASE STUDY · LENDING, MEMORIAL, EDUCATION

The Czech Memorial Scrolls: 1,564 scrolls, a second life

Gathered in Prague during the Nazi occupation, the scrolls reached Westminster Synagogue in London in February 1964. The Memorial Scrolls Trust repaired what it could.

Kosher scrolls went on permanent loan to congregations. Scrolls that could not be made fit went to schools and institutions **as memorials**.

Close to home

- Temple Sinai, Sharon: a public celebration of a Czech scroll’s restoration
- Temple Israel, Boston: carried its scroll back to London and Prague for the Trust’s 50th
- Many holders have b’nei mitzvah read from their Czech scroll

Memorial Scrolls Trust; Encyclopaedia Judaica; Boston Globe; ReformJudaism.org

PATH 1 · REPAIR AS A COMMUNITY PROJECT

Congregation P’nai Or, Philadelphia

A gash tore through a column in Va’etchanan. Members raised funds; a sofer in Israel hand-wrote a matching panel, sewn in at a siyyum where congregants helped complete the final letters.

Holocaust Youth Education Project, Saratoga, CA

Teens raised about $20,000 to replace 78 destroyed panels — children “bought” letters. The damaged panels were framed and given to supporting institutions.

The honest cost question: one cemetery director noted it can be cheaper to buy a new Torah than to fix an old one.

Chestnut Hill Local; J. The Jewish News of Northern California (2005, 2013)

PATH 4 · TEACHING WITH A SCROLL THAT CAN’T BE READ IN SERVICES

JCC on the Hudson, 1999

A 150-year-old scroll found under mud after Hurricane Mitch in Honduras became the center of a community learning program. Volunteers learned to clean parchment before a rabbi-sofer restored it.

Loyola University Chicago

A damaged 1600s scroll, unfit for a synagogue, is unrolled every four years so students can see it and hear passages chanted.

JFS, London

Students sewed a scroll’s seams alongside rabbis, learning what makes a Torah kosher.

For our b’nei mitzvah: a scroll students can unroll, touch with a yad and practice from — without risk to a kosher scroll.

JTA (1999); Loyola Phoenix (2024); JFS · Caution: CCAR 5757.4 treats teaching use as temporary

PATH 3 · PASSING A SCROLL TO A COMMUNITY THAT NEEDS IT

One community’s surplus is another’s first Torah

New Castle, PA → Pitt Hillel

Temple Hadar Israel read from its 300-year-old Polish scroll on its last Shabbat in 2017. In 2018 students welcomed it with klezmer and placed it in their ark.

Bronx → Tegucigalpa

The Nathan Strauss Jewish Center, preparing to close, donated two scrolls to a 40-family Honduran community after floods.

London → Prague

In 2021 Czech Scroll No. 1052 went on permanent loan to congregation Ec Chajim — home again.

Associated Press via Washington Times (2018); JTA (1999); Religion News Service (2021)

PATHS 5 AND 7 · DISPLAY AND FRAGMENTS

A case with a curtain

CCAR (1989) approved permanent display of a damaged Holocaust scroll in a synagogue museum — out of the foot traffic, with a parokhet-style curtain to close.

A relic of a community

In Kielce, Poland, a restored fragment is displayed not as an artifact but as a relic of 20,000 murdered Jews.

Framed for the home

A California business frames fragments of retired scrolls. A rabbi objected: like a human body, a scroll that has died deserves burial.

The question underneath: does this display raise the scroll in holiness — or lower it?

CCAR NARR 137; Freehof, “Preserving a Torah Fragment”; Jerusalem Post (2018); J. (2008)

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY

Three things to check before we choose

Who owns it?

In 2013 Bury Hebrew Congregation (UK) buried a scroll on loan from the Memorial Scrolls Trust without asking. The Trust was furious and wanted it back.

What is its condition?

Pasul or worn out? Repair cost? Only a qualified sofer's written assessment can answer, scroll by scroll.

Whose story is it?

Donor families, dedications, Holocaust provenance. Gather the history and invite the people connected to each scroll.

PART 3 · 0:33–0:45

Rituals for decommissioning a scroll

However we decide, each scroll deserves a farewell — or a welcome into its next life

THERE IS NO FIXED LITURGY — COMMUNITIES CREATE ONE

Far Rockaway, NY, 2013

About 1,000 people from 40+ synagogues buried 12 scrolls ruined by Sandy. Rabbis waited seven months so the community could absorb the loss.

The Western Wall, Jerusalem

Nineteen retired scrolls were displayed, honored with psalms and prayers for forgiveness, then buried on the Mount of Olives.

Colma, CA, 2013

A school's 1930s scroll was carried from chapel to grave; as at any funeral, mourners filled the grave.

Beth Shalom, Pittsburgh

Fire-damaged remnants were buried in a small wooden casket — then a new Torah project was announced the same day.

Customs: wrap in a shroud · remove from the rollers · an earthenware vessel · near a teacher's grave

A ritual arc we could adapt

1 · Gather
A niggun; Mah Tovu

2 · Hakafah
A last procession; all may touch the mantle

3 · Zikaron
Tell its story: origin, donors, who read from it

4 · Study
Chant or study a column still legible

5 · Tehillim
Psalm 19, “Torat Adonai temimah”; Psalm 121

6 · Release
A beit din of three names the scroll’s new status

7 · Kaddish
Kaddish de-Rabbanan, the kaddish after study

8 · Accompany
Carry it to its next place; sing Etz Chayim Hi

Drawn from CCAR’s suggestion of study plus Kaddish (1990), Ritualwell’s ritual for deconsecrating a synagogue, and the Vancouver Genizah Project’s closing with Etz Chayim Hi.

Shaping the ending to the destination

Destination	Ritual elements to add
Burial	Shroud, earthenware vessel, a cemetery plot near a teacher; each person adds earth.
Memorial display	Dedicate the case with a parokhet; tell its history; remember it each Yom HaShoah.
Teaching scroll	A covenant read by students promising to handle it with kavod.
Gift or loan	A “letter of transmission”; the receiving community welcomes it with song.
Repair	A siyyum: members help the sofer complete the final letters.

Ritualwell’s “Ketubah for a New Torah Scroll” offers covenant language a sending or receiving community could adapt.

A QUESTION TO CARRY INTO OUR VALUES

Does keeping a Torah unused honor it?

The case for use

- **Ketubot 19b · Rambam 7:12 · Y.D. 279:1** — a flawed scroll may not sit: repair it or put it away within 30 days.
- **The Rosh · Megillah 27a** — a Torah is written to be studied; it may be sold only for Torah study.
- **CCAR 5757.4** — leaving a scroll unable to serve its purpose is “most inappropriate.”
- **Memorial Scrolls Trust** — scrolls left rolled up and unused deteriorate.

The case for keeping

- **Freehof** — each time the ark opens, the congregation rises for every scroll inside.
- **Contemporary halakhic view** — a respectful resting place can honor a scroll more than burial.
- **CCAR 5757.4** — turning a holy object to our own ends, however worthy, is not reverence.
- **Custom** — many arks hold unfit scrolls, marked by a gartel over the mantle.

Where the sources converge: the “use it” case is strongest for kosher or repairable scrolls — fix them, or send them where they will be read.

PART 4 · 0:45–0:55

What do we value most?

Naming our values is the next step in Values-Based Decision Making

Six values in tension

כְּבוֹד הַתּוֹרָה

Kavod HaTorah

Honor for the holy object itself

זִכָּרוֹן

Zikaron

Memory of donors, families and lost communities

תַּלְמוּד תּוֹרָה

Talmud Torah

Learning — a Torah exists to be read and studied

כְּלַל יִשְׂרָאֵל

Klal Yisrael

Responsibility to communities without a scroll

קְהִלָּה

Kehillah

Care for the feelings and bonds of our members

אַחְרָיוּת

Achrayut

Stewardship of money, space and care

A first sketch: what each path honors, and what it asks

Path	Honors most	Asks of us
Repair	The scroll’s purpose: public reading	Money, a sofer’s time, patience
Keep in ark	Continuity, members’ attachment	Space; clear marking so it isn’t read
Lend or give	Klal Yisrael; Torah kept in use	Letting go; finding the right home
Teaching scroll	Talmud Torah; access for students	Ongoing care; guarding reverence
Memorial display	Zikaron; witness to history	A dignified, protected setting
Burial	Kavod; the classic practice	A plot, a ceremony, a goodbye
Fragments	Personal connection at home	The risk of lowering holiness

BREAKOUT ROOMS · GROUPS OF 4 · 6 MINUTES

Three questions

1. Which value pulls hardest on you — and why?
2. Is there a scroll here you feel connected to? What would honoring it look like?
3. What else do we need to learn before we decide?

Choose one person to post a one-sentence takeaway in the main chat.

CLOSING · 0:55–1:00

What happens next

1 · Survey

Ten minutes, link in the chat: [survey link]

2 · Assessment

A sofer's review and the history of each scroll

3 · Next gathering

Options weighed against our values: [date]

עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחֲזִיקִים בָּהּ

Sources · Classical texts and responsa

- Deuteronomy 12:3–4; 31:24–26
- Sifre and Rashi on Deut. 12:4; Makkot 22a
- Megillah 26b–27a (burial; sale of a Torah)
- Shabbat 115b (85 letters)
- Menachot 29b (corrections); 32a (raise in holiness)
- Ketubot 19b (30 days)
- Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Sefer Torah 7:12, 10:1, 10:3; Yesodei HaTorah 6:8
- Rambam, Responsa (ed. Freimann) #43
- Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 270:1, 279:1, 280:2, 282:10; Orach Chayim 154:5
- Magen Avraham, O.C. 154; Ettlinger, Binyan Tzion 1:97
- Freehof, "Posul Torah in the Ark" and "Torah in Museum Case or in Ark," *Contemporary Reform Responsa*
- Freehof, "Preserving a Torah Fragment," *Reform Responsa for Our Time*
- CCAR, American Reform Responsa #72, "Repairing a Damaged Sefer Torah" (1936)
- CCAR, NARR #137, "A Torah Permanently Displayed in a Museum Case" (1989)
- CCAR, NARR #194, "A Ceremony for Burial of Books" (1990)
- CCAR, CARR #109, "Burial of a Sefer Torah" (1985)
- CCAR 5757.4, "Proper Disposal of a Worn Sefer Torah"
- CCAR 5760.3, "A Defective 'Holocaust' Torah Scroll"
- All CCAR responsa: ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/reform-responsa

Sources · Communities and rituals

- Memorial Scrolls Trust, newsletter and loan conditions (2023)
- Boston Globe, Temple Sinai (Sharon) Czech scroll restoration
- ReformJudaism.org, Temple Israel of Boston’s journey
- Jewish Chronicle, Bury Hebrew Congregation (2013)
- Chestnut Hill Local, P’nai Or repair
- J., Holocaust Youth Education Project (2005)
- JTA, JCC on the Hudson (1999)
- Loyola Phoenix (2024)
- AP, New Castle scroll to Pitt Hillel (2018)
- RNS, Czech scroll to Prague (2021)
- Jerusalem Post, Kielce fragment
- J., framed fragments (2008)
- JTA, Far Rockaway burial (2013)
- Sivan Rahav-Meir, Western Wall ceremony
- J., Colma burial (2013)
- Ritualwell, Deconsecration ritual; Ketubah for a New Torah
- My Jewish Learning, Burying the Genizah