



Touching Torah Scrolls

Question: I know that people are careful not to touch the parchment of a *sefer Torah*. Does this apply to other scrolls, like *haftara* scrolls and *Megillat Esther*?

Answer: The *gemara* cites R. Parnach's statement in two places: "Whoever holds a *sefer Torah* naked (i.e., with an uncovered hand (according to almost all)) will be buried ... without the *mitzva* [he was involved in]." In *Megilla* (32a) it is a free-standing statement in a *sugya* about the rules of *laining* and *gelila*. In *Shabbat* (14a-b) it comes up in the context of a Rabbinical decree to treat several objects, including "a book" as *tameh*, so that if they touch *teruma*, they make it *tameh* and disqualified. The *gemara* explains that people used to keep *teruma* and holy scrolls together because both are holy, but this attracted mice, which nibble on the scrolls, so they enacted that such scrolls disqualify the *teruma*. The

gemara also explains that hands before *netilat yadayim* are *metameh teruma* because they are often dirty. The *gemara* also mentions such a decree on hands that touched a *sefer*, since this violated R. Parnach's idea, and *Tosafot* (ad loc.) posits that this is true even if one did *netilat yadayim* soon before touching the *sefer*. The *gemara* discusses why there was a need for two different decrees regarding hands.

Sofrim touch the *klaf* directly when writing and even when handling, for various reasons, a completed *sefer Torah klaf*

There are different approaches in the *Rishonim* (see Rambam, *She'ar Avot Hatumah* 9:5 & *Sefer Torah* 10:6; *Mordechai*, cited by the *Beit Yosef*, *Orach Chayim* 147) as to whether, nowadays (when we don't eat *teruma*), the issue of touching a *sefer Torah* is still connected to *tumah*, proximity to *teruma*, or dirtiness of the hands. (The analysis is too complicated for this forum – see the *Aruch Hashulchan's*, OC 147:1-7 overview). If it is an independent matter, the problem is that touching directly reflects insufficient honor for the *sefer Torah* (*Levush*, OC 147:1). The different

Jonathan Rosenblum, DPM

050-595-5161

Pediatric and Geriatric Foot Care, Bunions,
Hammertoes, and Diabetic Wound Care

approaches can impact on the question of whether it applies only to a *sefer Torah* or to all holy scrolls, which also create *tumah* and affect *teruma*. It also can impact the question of whether *netilat yadayim* before touching the scrolls helps. If it is related to needing clean or not *tameh* hands (see Shabbat *ibid.*), then *netilat yadayim* should help as it does for hands that need to touch *teruma* (Aruch Hashulchan *ibid.* 2).

As far as *halacha* is concerned, the Shulchan Aruch (OC 147:1) mentions the prohibition to touch only in regard to a *sefer Torah*, but even if one did *netilat yadayim*. However, the Rama (*ad loc.*) cites and prefers the opinion that it applies to all of *Tanach*, if it is written with the basics (letter formation, parchment, ink) of a *sefer Torah* (Mishna Berura 147:3). The Rama compromises, in that he permits handling when the two reasons to be lenient are present, i.e., it is not a *sefer Torah* and one did *netilat yadayim*. (The Bi'ur Halacha explains this as being because there are two reasons for leniency, not that the two leniencies remove all doubt). In an interesting application, R. Akiva Eiger (I:58) forbids kissing a *mezuzah* scroll when passing by if it is not in a *mezuzah* case.

Since the standard assumption is that

touching is a matter of disrespect, context plays a role. *Ashkenazim* attach *atzei chayim* to the *sefer Torah* to facilitate rolling the *klaf* without touching (see Sha'arei Teshuva 691:3), but Sephardim usually use an attached scarf to roll by hand, and many allow touching after *netilat yadayim* when a lot of rolling is needed (Yalkut Yosef, OC 147:1). *Sofrim* touch the *klaf* directly when writing and even when handling, for various reasons, a completed *sefer Torah klaf*. There is a *machloket* whether it is better to have or not have *atzei Chayim* for *navi* scrolls, and this is connected (likely in both directions) to whether one rolls with his hands (see Dirshu 147:6). The Sha'arei Teshuva (*ibid.*) writes that the *minhag* is not to have *atzei chayim* and not to be careful about touching a *Megillat Esther* because it is called an *iggeret* rather than a *sefer*. He says it is a nice but uncommonly followed *chumra* to do *netilat yadayim* before handling it. ■

Having a dispute?



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beitdin@eretzhemdah.org