

# How is a Torah made?

By Rabbi Amy R. Scheineman

## **The scribe prepares parchment sheets**

While printed editions of the Torah abound, in both Hebrew and English translation, and with many different commentaries, when the Torah is read in the synagogue on Shabbat and holidays, it is read from a hand-written scroll, called a Sefer Torah, in keeping with age-old tradition. It takes several months, and often as long as a year to complete one Sefer Torah.

The Sefer Torah is written by a scribe, special trained for this holy task, on sheets of parchment. The parchment must derive from a kosher animal, usually a cow, and is meticulously prepared by the scribe, who first soaks the skin in lime water to remove hairs, and then stretches the skin over a wooden frame to dry. The scribe scrapes the skin while it is stretched over the wooden frame to remove more hair and smooths the surface of the skin in preparation for writing on it with the use of a sanding machine. When the skin is dry, the scribe cuts it into a rectangle. The scribe must prepare many such skins because a Sefer Torah usually contains 248 columns, and one rectangle of parchment yields space for three or four columns. Thus a Sefer Torah may require at more than 80 skins in all.

When the parchment sheets are ready, the scribe marks out lines and columns using a stylus, which makes a mark in the skin that has no color, much as if you ran your fingernail across a sheet of paper. Each sheet must have at least three columns, and there must be a margin of three inches on the top, four inches at the bottom, and two inches between columns.

## **The scribe prepares quills and ink**

The scribe makes quills for writing a Sefer Torah. The feathers must come from a kosher bird, and the goose is the bird of choice for many scribes. The scribe carefully and patiently carves a point in the end of the feather and uses many quills in the course of writing one Sefer Torah. The scribe also prepares ink for writing the Sefer Torah by combining powdered gall nuts, copper sulfate crystals, gum arabic, and water, preparing only a small amount at a time, so that the ink will always be fresh. Fresh ink is a deep black, and only this is acceptable for writing a Sefer Torah.



### **The scribe's writing begins**

Once the materials are prepared, the scribe visits the mikveh in preparation for such holy work, and prays that the holy work about to be undertaken will be imbued with the sanctity in the scribe's heart. While at work, the scribe is a vessel or vehicle for God's holy words and thus intense concentration and cognizance of the sanctity of the work are critically important. Moreover, the scroll may contain no errors whatsoever. While some mistakes may be corrected by scraping off the ink of a letter made in error and rewriting it, if a mistake is made in writing any of the names of God, no correction may be made because God's name may not be erased. The entire sheet of parchment must be buried or placed in a genizah, and the scribe must begin that section of the Torah again. Once the sheets of parchment are completed, the scribe checks them each three times with the help of someone else who uses a Tikkun (a specially prepared printed text).

### **The scribe sews the sheets together and attaches the wooden rollers**

When the writing is complete, the scribe sews the individual pieces of parchment together using a thread called giddin which is made from the leg sinews of a kosher animal, most commonly a cow, a sheep, or an ox. The scribe makes one stick every six lines of text, sewing the backs of the parchment sheets, so that the stitches are not visible from the front. Then the scrolls is sewn onto wooden rollers called Eitzei Chayim (trees of life). The Torah is then dressed and ready to be dedicated in a Jewish community.

