

PROPER RESPECT FOR SEFARIM

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Sifrei kodesh, sacred scriptures, vary in their degree of kedushah, holiness, and consequently, one accords them varying degrees of honor. A Sefer Torah is given the most honor, followed closely by other Sifrei Tanach written on parchment. All other sefarim, including the Talmud, its commentaries and codes, do not have the level of kedushah that a Sefer Torah has, but still they must be treated with respect and dignity. In many cases, the Rishonim rule that sefarim are to be accorded the same level of respect and honor as tefillin.¹

With the advent of the printing press in the fifteenth century, the Torah authorities of the time debated whether printed sefarim had the same level of kedushah as handwritten works. The consensus of the poskim was that a printed sefer is to be treated no differently from a handwritten one. The Taz,² one of the great Torah luminaries of the time, warned that one who demeans the holiness of printed sefarim will suffer the consequences in the World to Come. With few exceptions, this has become the accepted halachah.³

During the following days we will review some of the halachos that pertain to the proper treatment of sefarim.

Sefarim are treated with dignity and respect. Thus:

- A sefer should be handed from one person to the other; it may not be thrown or tossed around.⁴
- A sefer should not be placed face down. If it is found in this position it must be turned face up.⁵
- A sefer should not be stood upside down. If it is found in this position, it must be stood right side up.⁶
- A sefer may not be placed, either lying or standing, directly on the floor.⁷ •A sefer that fell to the ground must be picked up immediately, even if one will have to interrupt his Torah learning to do so.⁸ If a sefer falls to the floor during Shemoneh Esreh and that interferes with one's concentration, he may pick it up after finishing the blessing that he is reciting,⁹ even if it entails taking a few steps.¹⁰ If, however, the fallen sefer does not disturb his concentration, then he may not pick up the sefer during Shemoneh Esreh.¹¹
- One may not sit or lie on a chair, bench, couch or bed if a sefer is lying (or standing¹²) directly¹³ on it.

¹⁴ If, however, the bench or couch is made of "split (separate) seats" it is permitted to sit on any seat other than the one that is holding the sefer. ¹⁵

•Some poskim prohibit sitting on top of a bench, chest or chair that has sefarim stored underneath, ¹⁶ while other poskim permit it. ¹⁷ In order to satisfy both opinions it is recommended that there be at least a tefach of space between the seat and the sefer. ¹⁸

•One should not place any other sefer on top of a Chumash, ¹⁹ or any sefer other than a Chumash on top of a Nach. ²⁰ (Although some poskim maintain that this halachah pertains only to Chumashim and Nachim that are on a scroll, not to printed and bound Chumashim and Nachim, ²¹ it is customary to be stringent in this halachah. ²²) All other sefarim and siddurim, however, are permitted to be placed randomly. ²³

Sefarim are treated with kedushah. Thus:

•It is prohibited for males (over the age of nine) or females (over the age of three) to be completely unclothed in the presence of a sefer²⁴. But it is permitted to learn from a sefer in an area where there is a swimming pool. ²⁵

•It is prohibited to enter a restroom or a washroom with a sefer in hand, unless the sefer is concealed in at least one covering. Preferably, the sefer should be inside two coverings, e.g., one bag encased in another bag, or an envelope inside an attaché case. ²⁶

•A child should not be diapered or toilet-trained in a room full of sefarim. But it is permitted to diaper or train a child in a room where there is an occasional sefer or bentscher, etc. ²⁷

Sefarim are for the purpose of learning only; they may not be used for other purposes. Thus:

•It is prohibited to place anything, ²⁸ except chidushei Torah, inside a sefer²⁹ or on top of a sefer. ³⁰

•When learning from a sefer, it is permitted to use another sefer (of equal or lesser kedushah) to raise the height of the sefer one is learning from. ³¹

•It is prohibited to use a sefer for personal protection, e.g., to shield oneself from the sun's rays, or to block another person's view. ³² However, one is permitted to cover his face with a sefer so as to block a forbidden sight from his eyes. ³³

•It is permitted, when no other item is available, to use another sefer to block the sun from shining on a sefer from which one is learning. ³⁴

•When needed, it is permitted to use a sefer as a hard surface for writing Torah-study notes. ³⁵

•One may not place a sefer on his lap and lean on it with his elbows.³⁶ One should also not lean or sleep on top of a sefer.³⁷

After learning is over . . .

- It is prohibited to use a sefer as a bookmark by placing it inside another sefer.³⁸
- Some poskim permit folding a page-corner of a sefer so that it serves as a bookmark,³⁹ while other poskim forbid it.⁴⁰
- One should avoid leaving a sefer open if he is leaving the room for an extended period of time⁴¹ because it is considered degrading to the sefer. In addition, the poskim quote the chachmei ha-Emes as saying that doing so may cause one to forget his learning.⁴²
- Although there is no known source in the poskim for the practice of kissing a sefer after learning from it,⁴³ this custom is brought down in sifrei Kabbalah.⁴⁴
- When a sefer ages and is no longer usable, it must be put aside in a safe place or buried in the ground. It may not be burned or thrown out.⁴⁵

Sources:

1. *Tosafos and Rosh, Berachos 26a, quoted in Beis Yosef, O.C. 240:6.*
2. *Y.D. 271:8. See also Beir Halachah 83:5, s.v. ein, where the Chafetz Chayim tells of a severe punishment that befell a particular family because they were not careful with the kedushah of their sefarim.*
3. *Mishnah Berurah 40:4. A minority view, led by the Chavos Yair and Eliyahu Rabba, disagrees and maintains that printed matter is on a lower level of kedushah than handwritten material; ibid. In extenuating circumstances, we take this opinion into consideration; see Kaf ha-Chayim 40:16 and Shevet ha-Levi 2:143, 6:8. In addition, some authorities hold that sefarim in offset print are on yet an even lesser level of kedushah since offset is merely a photograph of the print; see Maharasham 3:357 and Sefer Shevilei Taharah, pgs. 176-180.*
4. *Y.D. 282:5.*
5. *Rama, Y.D. 282:5. See Shiyurei Berachah ibid, who bemoans the fact that many people are not aware of this strict prohibition.*
6. *Beis Lechem Yehudah, Y.D. 282:7, quoting Maharil; Aruch ha-Shulchan 282:11.*
7. *Rama, Y.D. 282:7. Rav Y.S. Elyashiv and Rav C. Kanievsky are quoted (Nekiyus v'Kavod baTefillah, pgs. 97 and 187) as ruling that placing a bed sheet or a newspaper on the floor is not sufficient. See Orchos Rabbeinu, vol. 3, pg. 163, which states that Rav Y.Y. Kanievsky was careful not to place sefarim within a tefach of the ground. See also Chut Shani, Ribbis, pgs. 167-168.*

8. *Bais Lechem Yehudah, Y.D. 282:7; Aruch ha-Shulchan 282:11. It is customary to kiss a sefer after picking it up from the floor; ibid.*
9. *Mishnah Berurah 96:7.*
10. *Be'er Moshe 3:13.*
11. *Mishnah Berurah 96:7, based on Pri Megadim.*
12. *Rav M. Feinstein (oral ruling quoted in Ginzei ha-Kodesh 2, note 15); Rav S.Z. Auerbach (oral ruling quoted in Mevakshei Torah, vol. 4, pg. 124); Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (oral ruling quoted in Avnei Yashfei 1:16); Rav N. Karelitz (Chut Shani, Ribbis, pg. 168); Rav C. Kanievsky (written response published in Nekiyus v'Kavod baTefillah, pg. 188).*
13. *If the sefer is lying or standing on an object which is at least a tefach high, it is no longer considered as if it is lying or standing on the bench or chair; Shach 282:8 and Aruch ha-Shulchan 282:12.*
14. *Rama, Y.D. 282:7. In a crowded beis midrash where it may be difficult to observe this halachah, some poskim permit sitting on a bench together with the sefarim; see Shach 282:9. A rav should be consulted.]*
15. *Shevet ha-Levi 3:11. Some poskim permit sitting on the same bench with sefarim so long as there is a barrier between them; Teshuras Shai 2:169, quoted in Tzedakah u'Mishpat 16, note 61.*
16. *Taz, Y.D. 282:4. If the chest or bench is nailed to the wall, it is permitted even according to this view; ibid.*
17. *Nekudos ha-Kesef and Shiyurei Berachah, Y.D. 282:7; Pischei Teshuvah 282:8.*
18. *Mishnah Berurah 40:13.*
19. *Y.D. 282:19.*
20. *Sefer Chasidim, quoted by Beis Lechem Yehudah Y.D. 283:1.*
21. *Aruch ha-Shulchan, Y.D. 282:22, based on Rama, Y.D. 283:1. See also Beis Baruch 31:187, who agrees with this opinion.*
22. *Rav S.Z. Auerbach, written ruling, published in V'aleihu Lo Yibol, vol. 1, pg. 269).*
23. *Chazon Ish (quoted in Dinim v'Hanhagos and Orchos Rabbeinu, vol. 3, pg. 162).*
24. *Mishnah Berurah 45:5, 75:23. But this prohibition applies only to ervah mamash; we do not invoke tefach b'ishah ervah concerning this issue; Rabbi P.E. Falk (Kol ha-Torah, vol. 46, pgs. 187-194).*
25. *She'arim Metzuyanim b'Halachah 5:8; Ishei Yisrael 53:28.*
26. *Mishnah Berurah 43:25. Putting a sefer into one's pants pocket is considered one "cover." When the pocket is covered with a jacket or an overcoat, it is considered as two coverings; Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (Nekiyus v'Kavod baTefillah, pg. 94). [See Machazeh Eliyahu 8:30, who opines that a pocket with a lining is considered a double covering.]*
27. *See Machazeh Eliyahu 5-8 for an entire review of this subject. See also Teshuvos v'Hanhagos 2:137.*
28. *One should not place parts of torn pages from one sefer in between the pages of another sefer; Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (Avnei Yashfei 1:202).*
29. *See Pischei Teshuvah, Y.D. 282:17; Mishnah Berurah 154:31; Aruch ha-Shulchan, Y.D. 282:23. This includes blank sheets of paper which will be used for chidushei Torah. See, however, Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:72, who permits placing blank paper intended for chidushei Torah in a sefer.*
30. *Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:72.*
31. *Mishnah Berurah 154:31, 315:30.*

32. *Mishnah Berurah 154:31.*
33. *Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (Nekiyus v'Kavod baTefillah, pg. 100).*
34. *Mishnah Berurah 154:31.*
35. *Mishnah Berurah 154:31.*
36. *Rama, Y.D. 282:7.*
37. *Chazon Ish (quoted in Orchos Rabbeinu, vol. 3, pg. 161); Rav N. Karelitz (Chut Shani, Ribbis, pg. 169).*
38. *Pischei Teshuvah, Y.D. 282:17; Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (Avnei Yashfei 1:202).*
39. *Rav S.Z. Auerbach (Avnei Yashfei 1:203). Some recommend that the page should be folded on the margin, not on the spot where there are words printed; Beis Baruch 31:186.*
40. *Chazon Ish (quoted in Orchos Rabbeinu, vol. 3, pg. 162).*
41. *Aruch ha-Shulchan, Y.D. 277:2. See also Da'as Kedoshim 277.*
42. *Shach, Y.D. 277:1.*
43. *Rav C. Kanievsky (Nekiyus v'Kavod baTefillah, pg. 189).*
44. *See Ohr Tzaddikim 22:17.*
45. *Mishnah Berurah 154:24. See Chelkas Yaakov 3:161, which maintains that a sefer which is no longer in use but is still usable may not be buried in the ground; it must be put aside in a safe place. See, however, Ginzei ha-Kodesh 8:2 and Ashrei ha-Ish, vol. 1, 29:16, who quote Rav Y.S. Elyashiv as permitting the burial of sefarim that are not going to be used even if they are still in relatively good condition.*

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