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## Holy Handiwork: Rabbi in Bexley Painstakingly Restores Torahs

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**By Felix Hoover, Dispatch Religion Reporter**

Turkey quills, oxtails and parchments fill the basement workshop in Bexley where Rabbi William Goldberg restores Torahs and other Jewish manuscripts.

Jewish law prescribes what materials the South Side native must use in working on the Scriptures. Eighteen years of self-teaching and experience show him how.

Torahs can cost \$25-\$15,000 to repair. But that's a bargain considering that new ones, which are entirely inscribed by hand, go for \$30,000- \$50,000. With proper maintenance, Torahs can last for centuries.

"In our congregation, some are over 150 years old for sure," said Rabbi David Stavsky of Beth Jacob Congregation, 1223 College Ave.

Christians know the Torah as the first five books of the Bible. Among the priceless Torahs that Goldberg recently has repaired is one brought to him by Maurice Gordon, 69, a Holocaust survivor who lives in Dayton. It has a story other than Genesis and Exodus -- one of its own survival from the German occupation of Gordon's native Poland during World War II.

"When the war started, we gave the Torah to a Gentile family," he said. "We had to hide it so Germans wouldn't destroy it."

Gordon's family survived as long as possible in a ghetto, to which Jews were restricted by the Nazis. Eventually, they escaped into the woods and lived with resistance fighters.

"When the war was over, the people that kept the Torah gave it back," he said. "We knew it would be safe."

Shortly after the war, the Gordons immigrated to America, bringing the Torah with them. Now that its faded Hebrew letters have been restored, it is back in service at Beth Jacob synagogue in Dayton.

Gordon is particularly pleased that his children will have a chance to see a document that exemplifies the survival in their heritage. He's also glad that someone such as Goldberg has the skill to extend the Torah's life.

Before Goldberg began repairing Torahs in 1982, synagogues in central and southern Ohio sent deficient scrolls out of town or brought in scribes to do the work, Stavsky said.

Convenience isn't the only factor that makes Goldberg, 57, marketable.

"He's a very sincere person; I think that's why all of the congregations in town use him -- Conservative, Reform and Orthodox," Stavsky said.

“He’s very punctilious, very careful. He researches what he’s supposed to be doing very carefully.”

Goldberg said he’s unlike most rabbis, who tend to be rationalists. He views himself more as a mystic -- not only in his artistry but also as founder, president and teacher at the Breslov Kabbalah Centre next to his repair shop. His brother Jan is vice president of the center, which teaches Kabbalah -- Jewish mysticism.

“I’m not the average rabbi; I’m not the average Jew,” said William Goldberg, former wellness director at an East Side auto-parts store. “I happen to be a very spiritual person, and that has led me to the path I have taken.”

That path has made him one of about 50 people in the nation certified in sofrus, or scribal arts. He was certified by Rabbi Moshe Klein of Brooklyn, N.Y., a third-generation scribe renowned worldwide for religious calligraphy.

Each repair session begins with prayer that all his effort be to the glory of God.

“I feel a certain responsibility and awe when I’m doing this,” Goldberg said.

With the approach of Passover, which this year will begin at sundown Wednesday and run through April 27, special attention will be paid to the part of the Torah that speaks about those Jewish holy days, Jan Goldberg said. Passover, or Pesach, commemorates the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt after their release from bondage.

The Torah calls on its scribe to write the name of Amalek, an Egyptian oppressor who attacked the weak and weary Jews as they left. Whenever Goldberg does that, he then follows the Jewish tradition of erasing the name as if blotting out evil personified.

Goldberg’s work is linked to antiquity not only by the writings passed down in Jewish history but also through the traditional assortment of pens, inks and parchments -- all kosher -- that he uses in restoring 100- 300 Torahs a year.

He also repairs mezuzot, parchments with writings from the book of Devorim -- known as Deuteronomy to Christians -- marking the doorpost of Jewish homes, and tefillin or phylacteries, small leather cases holding slips with Scriptural passages. During weekday-morning prayer, Orthodox and Conservative Jewish men use leather thongs to attach one case to the forehead and another to the left arm.

Little tufts of oxtail contribute to the mystical feel that radiates in Goldberg’s tiny shop. Oxtail strands are used to wrap parchments tucked inside the tefillin.

Reed pens are among Goldberg’s writing materials, but he prefers to use quills from ducks and turkeys.

The parchment scrolls, called parshios, are made of cowhide or, less frequently, sheepskin. Scrolls are wound onto wooden rollers called etzy chiam.

Sewn bindings called gid look like linen but are the veins and sinew of kosher animals.

Goldberg knows how to make black ink from nut gall, concentrated tannic- acid tumors on oak trees, but generally buys it from suppliers in New York or Israel. Color or decoration are forbidden by Jewish law, so black is the only ink he needs.

Goldberg learned the basics of Jewish law while growing up on the South Side but became more expert through rabbinical studies in Boston, New York and Israel in the 1970s. He was ordained in 1988.

Tradition has it that each Torah today bears exactly what appeared on the original 12 handed to Moses on Mount Sinai, Goldberg said.

The rabbi painstakingly seeks to make each letter perfect. A Torah cannot be used if it has a broken letter, loose seams or torn parchment.

Goldberg estimates that he has restored 2,000 volumes, which he relies on office manager Cheri Greene to carefully wrap and package for shipment to their trusting owners. But some items are beyond repair. Such Torahs are buried near a "righteous person."

Under Jewish law, scrap materials, shaymos in Hebrew, also must be buried.

Stavsky said a righteous person is someone who "was a religiously observant Jew who walked the straight line, usually a rabbi or leading scholar."

One can almost visualize some distant day of reward for Goldberg's fastidious labors -- a time when a Torah might be buried near him.

Should that happen, he said, "It would be a great honor."