

WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

International Day of Study

Leader's Guide: Torah Binders

HISTORY

Jerusalem scribes probably began to inscribe the Torah as a scroll of parchment during the first century C.E. The early scrolls were generally wrapped around a single stave, but by the 4th century, the Torah scrolls had become large enough to require two staves to support their bulk. (The stave is called an *etz hayim*.) The size of the scroll made it necessary to use a binder to hold the rolled scroll together while being moved. The binder also served as a girdle to keep the Torah from unrolling or tearing.¹

In the Diaspora, the Torah binders of the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews developed distinctive characteristics.

The Ashkenazi *Wimpel*

The first instance of a recorded observation of the use of a fabric binder for the rolled Torah is found in a German text from 1530 entitled, *Der Gantze Judische Glaube* (The Entire Jewish Faith) written by Antonius Margaritha, son of Rabbi Jacob Margolot of Regensburg, Germany. Margaritha identifies these binders as *mappen* (*mappot*) for synagogues. He writes: "They are very beautiful and some are embroidered with the name of the child, when he was born and circumcised."²

Joseph Yuspa Hahn of Frankfurt (1570-1637) in writing about the Torah binder (*mitpakhat*) called it a "*wimpel*." The *wimpel* was generally made from the swaddling cloth of the male child on which he had rested during his *brit milah* (ritual circumcision). After the *brit milah*, the cloth of linen was washed and pieced to create a continuous band. The pieced linen band was then inscribed with a specific inscription that gave the child's Hebrew name, his father's Hebrew name, the Hebrew day of the week, month and year of his birth, and closed with the phrase "May he grow to Torah (study), *huppah* (marriage) and *ma'asim tovim* (good deeds). Amen. Selah."³

Yuspa Shammash (1604-1678) tells of a charming custom in the Worms synagogue regarding the Torah binder. As the father of the child was called to the Torah and stood on the *bimah*, the mother of the child, who was in the woman's gallery, "dispatched" the Torah binder from the woman's gallery to the *bimah*. Then, the father would offer the binder as the child's first donation to the synagogue.⁴ It is not clear how the mother would "dispatch" the binder: whether using a messenger to deliver it to the *bimah* or tossing it herself from the gallery. If the latter was the form of dispatch, we can only imagine the laughter that followed.

The early 17th century Christian scholar, Johannes Buxtorf, in *Synagoga Judaica*, tells of yet another custom with a Torah binder which he also calls a *wimpel*. He states that the binder had to be wrapped in such a way that the Hebrew letters on the binder would touch the Torah parchment.⁵

Though originally the inscription on the Torah binder was embroidered by the women of the child's family, by the 18th century many of the binders were prepared by scribes, and so were the painted letters. The lettering was the highly embellished Ashkenazi square script with the letters often filled with floral, animal or other ornate decoration. In the folk regions, stencils for the letters were often used to provide uniformity and correctness of letter formation, and then the decoration was added.

The *wimpels* varied from two to four meters in length and were generally made of linen; but some wealthy folk used silk. Sometimes the linen binder was enhanced with borders of silk or ribbon.

The Torah *wimpel* that was presented at the birth of the child or at the child's first entry into the synagogue was kept in a box or chest at the synagogue. When the boy became a *bar mitzvah*, the binder was taken out and used to wrap the Torah from which he read. This practice, which authorities believe began in German Bavaria in the 1500's, spread throughout the German-Jewish communities of the Rhineland and by the late 18th and 19th centuries, the custom appears in the Ashkenazi communities of Holland, England, Denmark, and the United States. Because of their storage in the synagogues of Germany and Europe, the Holocaust saw the destruction of thousands of these priceless artifacts that recorded a significant part of European Jewish history.

The Torah Binders of Sephardic Jews

Sephardic Jews of Italy, Turkey and the Levant (the Mediterranean crescent) had different traditions for creating and donating Torah binders. that were different from the *wimpels* of the Ashkenazic communities. Unlike the Ashkenazi Torah binder that celebrated the *brit milah* of a boy, Sephardic Torah binders were embroidered lengths of fine linen and silk that celebrated various special occasions. Also, the Torah binder bands were covered with surface embroidery of fine silk thread and generally used motifs of intricate repeat patterns, many of which came from designs found in 15th and 16th century pattern books.⁶

Hebrew inscriptions were used on some of the binders. The Jewish Museum (New York City) owns an Italian Torah binder celebrating the woman who created it. The inscription indicates that this binder is the donation of thanksgiving: "In honor of the pure Torah, my hand raised an offering, I Honorata ...wife of Samuel Foa... 'it is such a little one' (*Genesis 19:20*), the year 5343" (1582-83).

The role of Italian Jewish women as donors of textiles for the Torah was so prominent that it was often incorporated into the liturgy of Roman Jews. "He who blessed our matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, may He bless every daughter of Israel who makes a mantle or cover in honor of the Torah."⁷ What a beautiful blessing!

The Torah Binders of the Czech Community

Jana Dolezelova tells of the Torah binders found in the Czech Republic. She notes that although Torah mantles were made of costly fabrics such as brocades or velvets, "binders were made of humbler material." She continues, "Ornamental textiles for the Torah were donated to the synagogue to commemorate a major private or public event in the life of a member of the community: a wedding, a death, the establishment of a synagogue, festivals or the occasion of a birth, especially that of a boy. *The beautiful embroidered binders represent a level between synagogal textile and those used in home*

ceremonies (i.e. embroidered Pesach cushion covers or Sabbath hallah covers) and contribute greatly to the tradition of Jewish culture.” The italics *are* mine since I believe this is a very special understanding for us.⁸

Examining a unique collection of Torah binders in the Prague Jewish Museum, Dolezelova found that they were made of all kinds of manufactured fabric from carpet to ribbon, cut or sewn together as well as beautifully embroidered binders that were decorated with unusual motifs derived from the ornamental patterns of the region. The binders’ ornamentation went from simple to complex geometrical designs, to animals or floral motifs, to elaborately decorated letters. Generally, between the words of the inscriptions were inserted representations of the menorah, Torah scrolls, the *huppah*, the Levite jug, the *Magen David*, signs of the zodiac, and a host of other motifs from Jewish iconography.

Some of the binders of 18th and 19th century Prague were decorated with scenes of the countryside or biblical scenes such as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Wedding scenes were also popular, suggesting that these binders commemorated marriages.

The Prague Torah binders showed a variety of stitching techniques including applique, stump work, surface embroidery, particularly the use of the chain stitch and other creative stitchery. As Dolezelova comments “It is an obvious fact that embroidery embodies work which requires extraordinary patience and *that it is an artistic creation impossible to imitate or replace.*” (Again, italics are mine.)⁹

The Torah Binder Today

If you have had the honor of *gelilah* (the dressing of the Torah), then you have probably seen Torah binders that match the Torah mantle. Today’s binders have metal closures similar to belt buckles. Sometimes, the binder is elasticized and stretched around the rolled scroll.

During 1970’s there was a renewed interest in creating Torah binders, specifically *wimpels*. The major source for creating them was the recent publication of *The Second Jewish Catalog* (JPS).¹⁰ The text gives simple directions and encourages the adoption of the practice to honor the birth of a girl child as well as that of a boy.

In some Conservative synagogues today, parents create a Torah binder in honor of a child’s *bar* or *bat mitzvah*.

In Judaic stitching groups, stitchers have followed the example of the Sephardic and Czech Torah binders and have encouraged the creation of Torah binders that celebrate any life cycle events in a family or in the community.

CONCLUSION

As part of the Women's League International Day of Study all of our Sisterhoods will begin the design and creation of one or more Torah binders to be used in their synagogues at Sisterhood special events. The completed Torah binders will be exhibited at the Biennial Convention of Women's League, in November 2004.

We urge you to take your lead from the Ashkenazic, Sephardic and Czech practices of creating beautifully handcrafted Torah binders that celebrate our Jewish identity and religious culture. There are no limits to the design elements and media you may choose.

Notes

¹*The Treasures of The Jewish Museum*, Universal Books, New York, NY, 1986.

²Annette Weber, Evelyn Friedlander and Fritz Armbruster. *Mappot. Gesegnet, der da kommt* ("Mappot....blessed be who comes"), Secolo/Verlag, Osnabruck, Germany, 1997.

³ibid.

⁴ibid.

⁵ibid.

⁶*The Treasures of The Jewish Museum*

⁷Ibid.

⁸*Mappot*, op. cit.

⁹ibid.

¹⁰Michael and Sharon Strassfeld. *The Second Jewish Catalog*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, PA, 1976.

Rita C. Altman, EdD

Chair, Women's League Creative Judaic Arts Committee

Suggestions and Directions for Designing and Making a Torah Binder

INTRODUCTION

There are no hard and fast rules for the length or width of a Torah binder; however, you must keep in mind the regulations regarding *sha'atnez*, which forbids the mixing of wool and linen. Woolen floss may not be used on linen. The design elements and the media are yours to choose. Let your creative juices flow and be courageous in your expression of beauty.

SUGGESTED DESIGN STEPS

1. Measure the girth of the Torah for which the binder will be made.
2. Decide whether the binder will circle the Torah more than once, and determine the length of the binder.
3. Decide on the width of the Torah binder. A width of four to six inches will give a very nice area in which to lay out your design.
4. Make a paper pattern using freezer paper that is strong enough to withstand handling as you use it to cut the fabric for your binder. Make multiple copies of the paper pattern since you will find it helpful to lay out your design on the paper pattern as you work through the design phase of the project.
5. Think about the design elements you want to use and begin to research appropriate designs. Make copies of your design elements and place them on one or more of your freezer paper patterns to see how they will look when the design is completed. Think of the Torah binder as a long, narrow painting.
6. Determine what medium you will use. The medium will suggest the fabric for the body of the Torah binder. See the suggestions and considerations for materials at the end of this section.
7. Decide on the closure for the binder. Velcro closures work very well and can be blended into the design.

You may use a special buckle-type closure available in stores that sell trimmings. If you choose to make your Torah binder longer than the girth of the Torah, you will need to devise a tying method.
8. If you are inscribing a Hebrew phrase, be sure that you have the Hebrew letters and words checked by a person who is knowledgeable in Hebrew. There are Hebrew alphabet books that can help with the design of the letters. For possible phrases, look to the *Tanakh*, *siddur*, *mahtzor*, and *Psalms*.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR MATERIALS

Needlepoint You will need even weave canvas that either has the design painted on it or will be stitched following a charted design. I suggest Perle cotton yarn rather than Persian wool yarn since it is easier to use and has a better life expectancy. Metallic threads can be added as accents.

Surface embroidery You will need a tightly woven fabric of linen or comparable cotton fabric. The design will need to be transferred to the fabric using special marking inks that can then be removed easily after the stitching is completed.

Surface embroidery can also be done on silk. The same conditions regarding transfer of a design prevail. A variety of stitches lend themselves to this medium.

Counted Cross Stitch or Even Count Stitchery You need even-weave linen or Aida cloth or similar even weave fabrics such as Lugana. The design would need to be charted and the stitching completed from the charted design.

Applique You will need a base fabric such as muslin and the appliquéd designs would need to be attached either by hand stitching or machine stitching. The band would need a backing to finish the binder.

Pieced/Mosaic Sections You would need a fine quality muslin on which individual segments such as a tile motif would be constructed and then pieced to create the whole band. The band would require a backing that unifies all the pieced elements.

Using the tile motif also lends itself well to the use of stamped images or wood block print images on tile sections of fabric and then connecting the pieces.

Silk Ribbon Embroidery This medium lends itself well if the design will be floral designs. You need a tightly woven fabric for ribbon embroidery and you must use silk ribbon to get the desired effect. The design is transferred to the fabric and then the ribbon embroidery is treated as surface embroidery.

Painted Fabric You need a tightly woven fabric and fabric markers to place your design on your band.

Weaving You will need a table top loom and various fibers. The band is woven and the beauty of a woven binder comes from the woven patterns. There are distinctive ethnic patterns that lend themselves to this medium.

FOR ASSISTANCE

The Creative Judaic Arts Committee is just a phone call or e-mail away if you need assistance at any time. You can reach chair, Dr. Rita C. Altman at RCAltman@aol.com or by calling our Program Director Lisa Kogen, at the Women's League Office at 1-800-628-5083, ext.7160.

To paraphrase the blessing in the liturgy of the Italian Jews of Rome, "*May the Holy One bless every daughter of Israel who makes an artifact in honor of the Torah.*"