

WORK THE SO OF THE FER

by Frances Spiegel



The Hebrew word "Sofer" means one who counts. The Talmud says scribes were called *sofrim* because of the need to count letters, words and lines to ensure the work was completely correct (*kasher*) and not invalid (*pasul*). STaM is an acronym formed from the initial letters of *Sefer Torah*, *Tefillin* and *Mezuzah*, the three major tasks of a scribe.¹

For more than three thousand years, Jewish artisans have worked with quills, inks and parchments. They have taken greater care of their sacred writings than any other people in the ancient world. Nowadays, extreme care is still taken in the reproduction of Jewish sacred writings by the Sofer StaM, the Jewish ritual scribe, who still uses traditional tools.

STaM is still written by hand on parchment using special ink and quills. *Mezuzot* and *Tefillin* must be written letter by letter, in their exact order. If one letter is unrecognizable or written incorrectly, the entire item loses its ritual value and must be placed aside for burial. It may not be corrected, ~~neither can it be destroyed.~~ *Sifrei Torah* and *megillat*², because they are larger works, may be written out of order and may be corrected.

The criterion for checking the clarity of the writing is that a child, who has just begun to learn Hebrew, must be able to read each letter. There is a set standard for the lettering set down in many texts. The main two texts that scribes use are *Kesef HaSofer* and *Mishnah B'rurah*.

Guided by strict rules and traditions, the Sofer must not only be a fine scribe but may also be a good craftsman. A Sofer will always prepare his own *kulmus* (quill) and sometimes he will prepare his own *d'yo* (ink). He will also be able to join *yeriot* (sheets of parchment) with neat stitching and may be able to turn wood for the *atsey chayim* (scroll handles).

According to Jewish law, scrolls must not be pictorially decorated, a prohibition originally stemming from the second com-

mandment not to make graven images. The exception to this is the *Megillat Esther*, which has a long tradition of being decorated.

To find out more about these traditions so important to the Jewish people, I met with Marc Michaels (Hebrew name Mordechai Pinchas), a part-time, Progressive Sofer STaM living and working in London. What follows is a transcript of our conversation.

FRANCES SPIEGEL: How do you prepare for a day's work?

MARC MICHAELS: There are some elaborate preparations. For the scribe writing God's holy name there must be a high spiritual level, which is achieved through immersion in the *mikveh* (ritual bath) prior to writing *Hashem* (The Name). Attendance at the *mikveh* for the day suffices for any writing of *Hashem* during that day. This is a custom, not a law, by the way. After my first experience with the ritual bath, I dressed and left for home to complete a *mezuzah*, but not without making history by being the first Reform *mikveh* user to ask for a receipt. Being a Sofer is a trade, and the *mikveh* is a legitimate business expense – my tax records are starting to look very weird indeed! There are also various prayers to prepare one for writing, and also the custom of writing and blotting out the name of Amalek.

FS: I've heard about the Amalek, but never known the full story.

MM: When Israel left Egypt, they travelled in a column at whose rear were those who could not walk as quickly as the rest. The Amalekites were the cowardly nation who attacked the defenseless at the rear, and thus became the traditional enemy of the Jews. Haman, for example, was considered to be an Amalekite. As a result we are commanded to "blot out the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens" (Exodus XVII:14). Therefore, before starting to write, the Sofer will write the name "Amalek" and then cross it through.

1. *Torah*: "Book of the Law," in Judaism, the first five books of the Old Testament written in Hebrew. The *Sefer Torah* (pl. *Sifrei Torah*) is used for public readings during services on Sabbaths, Mondays, Thursdays.

Tefillin: Phylacteries - consists of two leather boxes, containing four passages of the Torah, used by Jewish men at prayer.

Mezuzah (pl. *mezuzot*): A piece of parchment with two passages from Deuteronomy written on it. The parchment is placed in a small case and affixed to the doorpost of Jewish households.

2. *Megillah* (pl. *megillat*): Any of the five sacred books of the third division of the Old Testament, in scroll form, that are read in the synagogue in the course of certain festivals. *Megillah Esther* is the book of Esther.

FS: Is there any one law that is more important than all the others?

MM: There is only one basic requirement that is law. The Sofer must state that he is writing the item "for the sake of the holiness of Sefer Torah" or "the holiness of Mezuzah" or "Tefillin." This specific declaration is key, as it verbalizes the spiritual intent.

FS: I see you still use quills. With all the excellent calligraphy pens on the market why don't you use them?

MM: Base metals such as bronze, copper, iron, steel or brass can't be used. These metals are used to manufacture instruments of war. Actually, metal is permitted by Shlomo Ganzfried – author of *Keset HaSofer*, but everyone else disagrees and the custom to use quills is all-pervasive. There are some scribes who write the *taggin* with thin metal pens like rapidographs but this isn't really proper. Tools made from gold or silver, ivory or wood may be used.

FS: What are taggin?

MM: *Taggin* are the little crownlets that make much of the difference between what is merely Hebrew block lettering and what one sees in the holy texts. No one really knows what these embellishments mean, although there are midrashic explanations, and the Rambam³ argues that their absence does not invalidate the writing as the core of the letterform is there. However, the law dictates that certain letters should have these decorative flourishes, which the Sofer creates by drawing ink upwards from the roof of the letter with the very thin tip of the quill (or down from little blobs towards the roof of the letter).

FS: Have the materials used changed much over time?

MM: Actually the materials have remained fairly consistent over time. The technique of making parchment was known to the early Greeks, and from the 4th century onwards was widely used because of its greater durability. It thus replaced papyrus as a writing surface for manuscripts.

Parchment is made of the specially prepared skin of a kosher animal: goat, bull/cow, or deer. The method of cleaning and preparing the hide has changed over the centuries. During talmudic times, 20-450 C.E., salt water and barley were sprinkled on the skins which were then soaked in the juice of gallnuts. They even used dog's dung for this purpose!

Nowadays the skin is dipped in clear water for two days after which it is soaked in limewater for nine days to remove the hair. When it is a hairless surface it is stretched on a wooden drying frame and scraped until it is dry. Creases are ironed out with presses. Then it is sanded until it becomes a flat, smooth sheet fit for writing. Some parchment, usually poor quality, is smeared with a chalky substance to make it whiter, though occasionally this is only done on the reverse. However, some scribes object to this as it forms a barrier between the ink and the parchment. I don't like it at all as it causes the ink to lift.

FS: What about the ink – do you make your own?

MM: I have all the ingredients to make my own ink but many scribes prefer to purchase it ready-made by other, better, "ink chefs." The basic ingredients are gallnuts, which is a source of tannic acid, and iron sulphate crystals. Gallnuts are the result of the sting of the gall-wasp in an oak tree. The ingredients should be cooked in a glass pan. Remember, there must be no base metals used.

The first time I made my own ink, I had only been given three gallnuts at my first lesson, and I needed to find many more. It was several weeks before I found a good source in the local park, and was able to amass the four ounces that I needed. Even this was not without its perils, as on one occasion we had to face the wrath of a demented squirrel, arching its back and hissing at us as he defended his nuts whilst we gathered ours. My son, who accompanied me, enjoyed his run around the park and became one of the very few three-year-



Taggin

³ Rambam: Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon (1135-1204), Maimonides, influential Jewish philosopher and theologian.



olds for whom the word “gallnut” featured prominently in his vocabulary.

In the old days the ink was a cake which was then soaked to be used as required; a bit like an ink stone used for Japanese calligraphy. Nowadays it is in liquid form and made to a fairly standard recipe: 3 grams of gum arabic, 3 grams of gallnuts crushed into a fine powder, 1 gram of vitriol (iron or copper sulphate) and a quarter liter of water are mixed together and cooked until the water evaporates. The larger lumps of gallnut are strained out, the powder is left for six months to turn black, and then you can add water and use it as ink.

though Sefardi often stuck with reeds. Basically the law adjusted itself to meet the practice.

I cut my quills in the normal way, to a width for making letters three nib-widths high. Some people will heat their quills to harden and clarify them (remove the natural oils) but this is not absolutely necessary. The simplest method is to position the quill about 5 cms above a hot plate and rotate it for about ten seconds (too long an exposure will render the quill too brittle). However there are other methods involving plunging the quill into hot sand.

There are even rules as to how one makes the guidelines on the parchment. The lines are impressed into the parchment. Only the top guide is done and the letters are suspended from it. Lines are ruled with a



FS: Which birds have the best quills?

Kettubah prepared by Marc Michaels

MM: Turkey or goose quills are the norm, and sometimes swans, too, for show, although some scribes use reeds. Originally reeds only were used and, in fact, quills were banned. At some point the Ashkenazi Jews started using quills in preference to reeds (poor quality reeds were blamed)

thorn; the implement is known as a *sargel*. Mine is a piece of dowel with a thorn superglued on. Yes, I know they didn't have superglue in ancient times, but one must move with the times!

FS: How many sheets of parchment are needed to make a Sefer Torah?

MM: It takes approximately 62 pieces of parchment to make a Sefer Torah. Each sheet has from three to five columns. When complete, the sheets are sewn together with thread made from the tendons and sinews of kosher animals such as goat, cow or deer.

FS: Is there a set formula of lines and columns in a Sefer Torah?

MM: The format can vary but most modern scrolls contain 245 columns with 42 lines each. The average height of a parchment sheet is usually between 17 and 20 inches tall (43 – 51 cms) but some are as tall as 28 inches (71 cms) or as small as 6 (15 cms).

FS: What happens if you make a mistake? Are corrections allowed?

MM: Yes, errors can be corrected on anything but a *mezuzah* or *tefillin*. One should use glass to scrape (to avoid base metals touching the work), but virtually every

scribe uses a scalpel or razor blade, as it leaves less of a mark. Then the scraped spot is sanded with sandpaper and smoothed over with a polished stone. Sandarac can be applied if ink-bleed will be a problem.

FS: I can see how scrolls might suffer wear and tear. Can they be repaired?

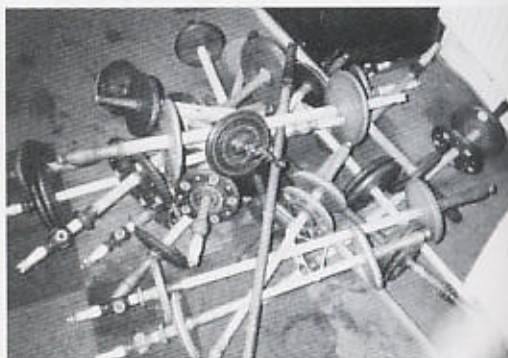
MM: Yes, a major scribal occupation is the fixing of scrolls that have become damaged or worn through use. Fixing can involve sewing up sheets that have separated, gluing patches, filling in letters, straightening creases, cleaning parchment, scraping out where permissible and writing anew.

FS: How have the traditions of the Sofer developed historically?

MM: The traditions have developed

Right
Atsey Chayim -
wooden handles

Below
A typical workshop



through a mixture of the *halachah* (law) and *minhag* (custom). The *halachah* was set down initially in the Talmud and has been codified over time into law books. However, the *halachah* mostly records what scribes had already been doing for thousands of years. Alongside *halachah* is *minhag*, which individual scribes have introduced and which was picked up by students through their apprenticeships. Some of this will eventually be codified as law, or remain as very strong traditions almost with the force of law.

FS: What can you tell me about Sofrim in ancient times?

MM: Sofrim in ancient times varied. Tradition says that Moses was a Sofer. (He wrote 13 scrolls, one for each tribe, and one to keep as a master should disputes arise). Some scribes were held to be scholars and teachers, whereas other scribes were little more than copyists for their masters.

FS: Who were the Masoretes and how have they influenced your work?

MM: The Masoretes are crucial. There have always been traditions that scribes copied letter by letter, singing out the letters and words as they wrote, to avoid mistakes. Errors in transmission were thus very small. One can see this by comparing the Dead Sea scrolls biblical texts with what we have received today. However, some errors did creep in. The Masoretes' job was to try to ascertain what the original version was and preserve the authentic text of the Bible by reviewing the variations and deciding on the most likely form. Most work was done during the 8th to 10th centuries. The Ben Asher family text became the accepted version.

The Masoretes examined the variants and fixed the standard texts, noting deviations and disagreements to further minimize any future error on the part of the scribe. The manner of the writing of sections, letters, lines, poetic portions, idiosyncrasies (e.g. large or small letters) are all laid down in *halachah*, conforming to the laws and traditions established by the Masoretes.

FS: Have there been any changes to the texts?

MM: According to Orthodox tradition, there have been no changes since Torah was given. That said, there have been changes. For example, Moses would have written in a different script. Sifrei Torah, etc., were probably written originally in Ancient Hebrew, as opposed to the block script used today. The *halachah* also records deliberate scribal amendments and some disputes over variant readings on temple scrolls.

Originally the Torah would have been written as a continuous string of letters with no spaces between letters. The early scribes introduced five additional letters to ease reading. Later, word spacing and divisions into open and closed sections were added.

FS: How would you describe your "job," for want of a better word?

MM: The scribe's job is to be a conduit for the word of God so that he imbues the work with holiness through the correct spiritual intention. As far as the *halachah* is concerned, the Torah is the actual word of God. The scribe is therefore writing exactly what Moses wrote as dictated to him by God at Sinai. The Torah is central to Judaism, so the scribe's work is described as "the work of heaven." The 613th commandment is for every Jewish male to write a Sefer Torah for himself (a king needs to have two). The scribe, therefore, performs as an agent for other Jews to allow them to obtain the status of having completed this commandment. In reality, few Jews can afford to have a Sefer Torah and so rely on the communal one. The root of the commandment is said to lie in the study of the Torah, not just in its possession.

FS: Finally, Marc, is there a place for modern technology in what is a very ancient tradition?

MM: Yes, I e-mail other scribes in the UK, America or Israel and I have a website which helps educate.⁴ I use a digital camera or video when restoring Sifrei Torah to record the errors and show the corrections made. In Israel there is a computer program that checks scrolls for accuracy. So, yes, there is a place for technology, but all the actual work is hand done without reference to new technology at all. **LAR**

⁴ <http://www.bayit02.freemove.co.uk/index.html>

Frances Spiegel is a freelance writer and photographer based in London, England. She researches and writes on subjects related to calligraphy, art history and travel. fran75.spiegel@tiscali.co.uk

Photographs by Marc Michaels and Ronald Spiegel.