

Touching Torah Scrolls

Question: I know that people are careful not to touch the parchment of a sefer Torah. Does this apply to other scrolls, like haftara scrolls and Megillat Esther?

Answer: The gemara cites R. Parnach's statement in two places: "Whoever holds a sefer Torah naked (i.e., with an uncovered hand (according to almost all)) will be buried ... without the mitzva [he was involved in]." In Megilla (32a) it is a free-standing statement in a sugya about the rules of layning and gelila. In Shabbat (14a-b) it comes up in the context of a Rabbinical decree to treat several objects, including "a book" as tameh, so that if they touch teruma, they make it tameh and disqualified. The gemara explains that people used to keep teruma and holy scrolls together because both are holy, but this attracted mice, which nibble on the scrolls, so they enacted that such scrolls disqualify the teruma. The gemara also explains that hands before netilat yadayim are metameh teruma because they are often dirty. The gemara also mentions such a decree on hands that touched a sefer, since this

violated R. Parnach's idea, and Tosafot (ad loc.) posits that this is true even if one did netilat yadayim soon before touching the sefer. The gemara discusses why there was a need for two different decrees regarding hands.

There are different approaches in the Rishonim (see Rambam, She'ar Avot Hatumah 9:5 & Sefer Torah 10:6; Mordechai, cited by the Beit Yosef, Orach Chayim 147) as to whether, nowadays (when we don't eat teruma), the issue of touching a sefer Torah is still connected to tumah, proximity to teruma, or dirtiness of the hands. (The analysis is too complicated for this forum – see the Aruch Hashulchan's, OC 147:1-7 overview). If it is an independent matter, the problem is that touching directly reflects insufficient honor for the sefer Torah (Levush, OC 147:1). The different approaches can impact on the question of whether it applies only to a sefer Torah or to all holy scrolls, which also create tumah and affect teruma. It also can impact the question of whether netilat yadayim before touching the scrolls helps. If it is related to needing clean or not tameh hands (see Shabbat ibid.), then netilat yadayim should help as it does for hands that need to touch teruma (Aruch Hashulchan ibid. 2).

As far as halacha is concerned, the Shulchan Aruch (OC 147:1) mentions the prohibition to touch only in regard to a sefer Torah, but even if one did netilat yadayim. However, the Rama (ad loc.) cites and prefers the opinion that it applies to all of Tanach, if it is written with the basics (letter formation, parchment, ink) of a sefer Torah (Mishna Berura 147:3). The Rama compromises, in that he permits handling when the two reasons to be lenient are present, i.e., it is not a sefer Torah and one did netilat yadayim. (The Bi'ur Halacha explains this as being because there are two reasons for leniency, not that the two leniencies remove all doubt). In an interesting application, R. Akiva Eiger (I:58) forbids kissing a mezuzah scroll when passing by if it is not in a mezuzah case.

Since the standard assumption is that touching is a matter of disrespect, context plays a role. Ashkenazim attach atzei chayim to the sefer Torah to facilitate rolling the klaf without touching (see Sha'arei Teshuva 691:3), but Sephardim usually use an attached scarf to roll by hand, and many allow touching after netilat yadayim when a lot of rolling is needed (Yalkut Yosef, OC 147:1). Sofrim touch the klaf directly when writing and even

when handling, for various reasons, a completed sefer Torah klaf. There is a machloket whether it is better to have or not have atzei Chayim for navi scrolls, and this is connected (likely in both directions) to whether one rolls with his hands (see Dirshu 147:6). The Sha'arei Teshuva (ibid.) writes that the minhag is not to have atzei chayim and not to be careful about touching a Megillat Esther because it is called an iggeret rather than a sefer. He says it is a nice but uncommonly followed chumra to do netilat yadayim before handling it.