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# Scribe repairs Va. synagogue's holy texts

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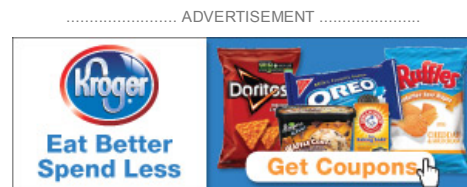
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RALPH BERRIER Jr. The Roanoke Times

ROANOKE, Va. (AP) - Rabbi Gedaliah Druin worked patiently and delicately, with hands steady and eyes focused, like a surgeon operating on a sick patient. Only here, in the social hall of Beth Israel Synagogue, the patient stretched out across a table was a Torah scroll.

Druin was called in to restore the nearly 100-year-old scroll, which goes back to the Roanoke congregation's early days, predating the building's construction in 1925. Jewish tradition holds that a scroll that is worn or smudged must be repaired in order for it to be used during services.



"If one letter is sick or dying, the whole Torah doesn't work," Druin said.

Druin is a sofer, also known as a scribe, whose job is to repair damage and return the luster to Hebrew letters inscribed on a parchment of animal skin. He is president of Sofers on Site, a Miami, Fla.-based business that sends scribes to local communities to restore old scrolls. The traveling sofers call themselves the "Holy Rollers."

Monday morning, he arrived in Roanoke to work on Beth Israel's Torah. Wearing a dark-blue yarmulke atop his head, his face sporting a long white beard, he looked like he was preparing for a religious service as he opened his case of ink, quills and other tools.

He never forgets that he is working on the five books attributed to Moses.

"This is awesome to me," he said.

He unfurled the scroll across two cafeteria-style tables, which could not contain the

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nearly 40 yards of text, but provided enough space for him to do his job.

He leaned over the words and scraped at stains and smudges with a small blade, then rubbed the parchment with a high-polymer eraser that cleaned residue but left the ink intact. He dipped a sharpened quill made from a goose or turkey feather (or another "kosher fowl," as Druin put it) and painstakingly touched up a muted letter.

"Torahs are written on the meat side" of the parchment, Druin said as he began his task. A Brooklyn, N.Y., native, he became a sofer after returning to the United States several years ago following a lengthy residence in Israel. A doctor of philosophy, he now teaches young people the craft of scroll repair.

"I'm a doctor, so I have terrible handwriting," he said.

But scroll restoration work is not writing as much as it is an art or a craft. He read the scroll line by line, using a green card to mark his place, and he spotted tiny defects invisible to untrained eyes.

Several Beth Israel members had inspected the scroll and marked imperfections with small Post-it stickers. Druin conferred with Rabbi Fabian Werbin over small issues, such as smudges caused many years ago by drops of perspiration, probably from the foreheads of nervous readers.

Moisture and weather also conspire to damage the scroll, which is kept in a closet-sized ark in the synagogue's main sanctuary.

Werbin said that, according to Jewish teaching, if the name of God is damaged on a scroll, the entire document must be scrapped. Other defects can be repaired, though.

"If one letter is missing, you cannot use it," Werbin said of the old scroll. That's when the sofer is called.

Making the fixes took most of the morning. Then, Druin went to work on a Torah scroll delivered from the Malcolm Rosenberg Hillel Center at Virginia Tech.

"This is something everybody could learn," he said. "To actually be able to do it is a gift."

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Information from: The Roanoke Times, <http://www.roanoke.com>

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