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# The Communal Roots of the Tree of Life: The Performativity of the Torah Scroll in Jewish Ritual

Joseph Maybloom  
*CUNY Hunter College*

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THE COMMUNAL ROOTS OF THE TREE OF LIFE:  
THE PERFORMATIVITY OF THE TORAH SCROLL IN JEWISH RITUAL

by

Joseph Maybloom

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Dr. Claudia Orenstein

Thesis Sponsor

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Dr. Mira Felner

Second Reader

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### Introduction: The Torah as/in Ritual

A gathering of well-dressed people sits in rows facing a large table with an ornate cabinet behind it. As the cabinet is opened, the assembly rises from their seats and begins chanting a blessing. A heavy scroll draped in decorated silk is removed from the chamber. The leader, hugging the scroll tightly to their right side, steps down from the elevated platform to join the crowd, who continue chanting blessings. The scroll is then paraded around the room counterclockwise while the assembled sing praises to it. As it passes, the congregants reach out to touch the scroll with their fingers, fringed shawls, or prayer books before kissing the object that met the scroll. Upon completing a revolution around the room, the scroll is brought back up to the large table, unwrapped, and held aloft before the crowd as the final blessing is recited. Finally, the scroll is placed upon the table before it will be read aloud.

These actions describe the beginnings of the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah* or Service for the Reading of the Torah that takes place three times a week in Jewish synagogues. The complete ceremony, which has remained relatively unchanged for millennia, is one of the central rituals of Judaism, mainly due to its emphasis on the religion's chief sacred object: the Torah. Torah, literally "teaching," primarily defines the written text of the five books of Moses, or the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The scroll described in the ritual above is known as a *Sefer Torah* or Torah scroll, because it contains the entirety of the written Torah in the original language—Hebrew.

Jewish ritual is intimately linked to the written word. Individual and communal ritual functions rely on the recitation of ancient and foreign words from daily prayers over food, to the weekly Torah readings described above, to yearly readings of the Book of Esther or

performances of *Kol Nidre*. Jewish ritual is embodied *through* the oration of the written word. In fact, the central texts of Judaism—the Torah, the Talmud, and rabbinic commentaries—not only lay out the framework for ritual practice’s performance texts, but also provide commentary on meaning and purpose. Scholars and rabbis have spent centuries combing the syntax, grammar, and vocabulary of the great Jewish works to reinforce the significance of ritual and justify continued practice in an increasingly secular world. While this intensive study has impacted the reading of these texts, and the subsequent understanding of the practices the texts discuss, there has been a lack of scholarship exploring the performative nature of the written and performance texts within Jewish ritual practice.

The ritualized actions described earlier invite a performance-based analysis. Focusing on the behavior of the performers and spectators, natural questions related to the performance itself arise. Why is the room set up the way it is? How did the people know to stand and sing upon the removal of the object? What is the purpose of indirectly kissing the object as it is paraded around the room? And, perhaps most important, why and how does the object removed from the ornate cabinet hold such power? In asking these questions of the observed behaviors, the performative elements are brought to the fore, and the object of the Torah becomes the centerpiece of the study.

While the object itself is obstinately material—a composition of linked sheaves of parchment, handles, and ink—its place in Jewish life is understood in relation to its immaterial spiritual connections. However, it is in its matter and use that the Torah *matters*. The materiality of the object and its use in ritual enforces and enhances the immaterial belief in the Torah. While the scroll is the key doctrine for Jewish life, and its commandments delineate the instructions for living according to Jewish law, even more important is that the object acts as a significant

participant in Jewish ritual. Major holidays and weekly services, such as *Yom Kippur* and the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah*, center the object in ritual actions. The Torah is paraded, revered, and read aloud for the assembled congregation.

This thesis explores the how and why of Torah's *matter-ing* by analyzing the Torah's role as a sacred object in ritual performance. The OED directly links the sacred to the material: "Set apart for or dedicated to some religious purpose, and hence entitled to veneration or religious respect; made holy by association with a god or other object of worship."<sup>1</sup> These two definitions reference sacrality as a conscious choice—the object isn't inherently different from other things, instead its purpose or association affords the object a reverential status. Sacred objects broadly exist in a liminal space, one that is defined by the thing's inherent materiality and its referential immaterial *matter-ing*. This indeterminacy between material and immaterial is defined by an object's usage in ritual, when the object transforms into the subject and is privileged as an actor in the performed actions of ritual. A performance-based lens bridges the religious pretext with the active and present utilization of the material object in its ritual context. It is through this bridge that an understanding of an object's spiritual effects may be found, and for the Torah, the convergence is revealed by the object's unique role in religious life.

### **Why a Performance-Based Lens?**

The Torah has been the subject of countless studies in many disciplines. Yet, these past studies have failed to look at it through the lens of performance. How is the object of the Torah treated in ritual performance by the participants and observers? How is the Torah *used* in performance to elicit a response from congregants? This study will contribute to the body of

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<sup>1</sup> "sacred, adj. and n.," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

research by addressing those and similar questions about the performative elements of Jewish rituals that centralize the Torah. While this application of a theoretical framework beyond traditional bible study may be controversial, analyzing these rituals through a performance studies lens provides a language to discuss the Torah's lasting power in Judaism. In his examination of ritualization, Tom Driver argues for a developmental analysis of ritual that "does not view rituals as having dropped from heaven but as having been created in the course of time on the basis of ritualizations evolved by many species...to cope with danger, to communicate, and to celebrate."<sup>2</sup> Inherent in Driver's consideration of ritual is the affective element—the understanding that these are codified performances enacted over and over for set purposes—they are meant to affect those who participate. Looking at the rituals involving the Torah through this developmental analysis reveals the performative elements of the object's lifecycle, providing a clear case study that highlights the intermingling of the material and immaterial and the Torah scroll's role in bringing the two together.

Performance studies scholarship highlights the importance of ritual in daily life and the ways that ritualizations shape humanity's understanding of life, death, and the divine. The rituals utilizing the Torah fit neatly into these categories, providing an effective case study for the application of performance theory. Throughout this thesis I draw upon the foundational scholarship on performance studies and performativity to shape my analysis of the lifecycle rituals of the Torah—its creation, use in synagogue prayer, and its burial. Each of these rituals decisively shape the power of the Torah scroll and its relationship to believers through the ways the object is performed.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 15.



## Methodology

The application of performance studies scholarship opens a new avenue of exploration and allows for an interdisciplinary view of Jewish ritual and practice. Privileging performance over the text deviates from past studies of the Torah and draws attention to the enacted elements of ritual, which ultimately are both the lifeblood and the foundation of Jewish religious belief. Thus, an analysis of the religion's most sacred object within the context of its lifecycle rituals reveals how performance shapes the object's sacrality.

This performance-based lens privileges the in-the-moment actions of ritual and contextualizes them within larger Jewish beliefs. Therefore, throughout I assume a baseline of standing beliefs about the Torah, the Jewish faith, and God. For the purposes of this thesis, I will maintain the authority of the biblical and rabbinic texts that define the Torah as an authoritative text and delineate the rules for ritual practice. While custom may vary according to the different sects of Judaism or an individual worshipper's level of observance, the overarching rituals discussed have remained the same for centuries. Although many aspects of Judaism have shifted over time, the framework of Torah rituals remains constant. Because of the resistance to changing the rituals, the Torah's role in Jewish life has remained at the forefront. As this thesis will show, part of this is due to the ascribed characteristics of holiness and humanness constructed by religious texts and realized through the performative actions taken by object and humans together in rituals incorporating the Torah.

The materiality of the object is a main focus of this thesis. A performance-based lens permits a focus on the materiality of the *Sefer Torah* and how its material shapes its use in ritual. Scholarship on materiality, and relatedly puppetry and performing objects, provides a framework

for viewing the Torah as an object with agency in performance. In viewing the Torah as a performing object, its agency becomes an important factor in understanding the power the object holds in Jewish ritual. Further, a view of the materiality of the Torah helps negotiate the importance of materiality in building a spiritual connection in Judaism broadly. The physical connection between human and object and the interactions between the two within these rituals help to concretize an experience of God and the divine.

Ultimately, through its new application of theoretical frameworks that explore the intersection of the object of the Torah, the text of the Torah, and the rituals utilizing the Torah, this study will contribute to the body of Torah research. Concurrently, this study also contributes to the body of literature on materialism and performance studies by incorporating a major ritual object into the literature and expanding ritual analyses to Judaism in a way that has, up until this point, been left out. A critical analysis of the rituals discussed will question the role of materiality in Judaism and uncover the way spirituality is linked to communal tradition and a breakdown of temporal realities, bringing together spectators to experience a singular transcendent moment connected to a sacred object.

### **Sacred Objects and the Material Turn**

While sacred objects have not been dismissed from scholarly research on religion, the study of sacred objects as meaningful actants in devotional culture is a relatively new phenomenon, coming about with the “material turn” in the humanities and social sciences beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the turn of the century. As Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman note in the introduction to their collection on sacred objects, “The turn to matter and materiality...came about through a nagging dissatisfaction with approaches that take ideas,

concepts, ideologies, or values as immaterial abstractions that are regarded as prime movers of history.”<sup>3</sup> Scholars like Judith Butler and Bruno Latour used materiality to define concrete ways of connecting to the intangible by redefining ideologies that were previously maintained through abstractions such as gender and social theory.<sup>4</sup> Under this new lens, sacred objects were scrutinized for their material nature, analyzing the ways in which their materiality shapes their sacrality.

Marianne Schleicher urges scholars to view sacred objects as “artifacts,” arguing that cultural representations of scriptural objects influence the view of scripture itself. She continues that the materiality of the artifact is what permits the relationship between how the object is viewed and what is projected upon it: “What allows for such representations to influence the reception of scripture seems to be that scripture is handled as a physical object, irrespective of the textual content, and treated as a manipulable symbol signifying whatever individuals, collectives and institutions project onto it.”<sup>5</sup> The Torah’s materiality and sacrality exist in this same equally symbiotic relationship, because the material existence of the Torah is compounded with its uses both in and out of ritual. Sacred objects are typically given life within ritual contexts through their association with the divine, and the Torah’s sacrality is bookended by the object’s material creation, use, and death. Indeed, all of these rituals not only imbue the object of the

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<sup>3</sup> Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman, “Introduction: Material Religion—How Things Matter,” in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, eds. Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>4</sup> See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Marianne Schleicher, “Accounts of a Dying Scroll: On Jewish Handling of Sacred Texts in Need of Restoration or Disposal” in *The Death of Sacred Texts: Ritual Disposal and Renovation of Texts in World Religions*, ed. Kristina Myrvold (Farnham: Taylor and Francis Group, 2010), 13.

Torah with meaning, but they also define the object's material presence. Rather than materiality enforcing sacrality, there is a cyclical effect where the Torah's materiality and sacrality mutually aid the realization of the other. The theoretical framework of materiality illuminates how the Torah fits into traditional views of sacred objects and aids in a more nuanced understanding of the performative nature of the object's use in ritual, which is how the object maintains its sacrality.

### **The Performing Object as a Context for Understanding Ritual**

While almost all rituals in the Jewish faith rely on the written word as a consecrating element, the Torah is undoubtably the central text and the Torah scroll the central object. Alfred J. Kolatch recognizes this early in his foundational exploration of the Torah's significance: "The Torah is the centerpiece of Judaism and the key to Jewish survival...all Jews recognize the centrality of the Torah in Jewish religious life and its function as the moral guide of the Jewish people."<sup>6</sup> This expansive statement not only highlights the significance of the Torah, but also points to the underlining reason for the text's power – its function as a moral guide. In Kolatch's statement the Torah has assumed an impressive power over the followers of the Jewish faith—it has taken on the role of moralizing elder. Further, Koltach speaks to a wide range of views about the Torah's origins, ranging from a belief that "since the Torah is the epitome of wisdom, God consulted it, in fact was guided by it, when He decided to create the world" to the belief that "its essential purpose is to explain how God manifested His presence in history."<sup>7</sup> These varying descriptions of the Torah—an association of the Torah as a moral guide, as God's guidebook for

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<sup>6</sup> Alfred J. Kolatch, *This is the Torah: Over 500 Questions and Answers About the Most Sacred Text of Judaism* (Middle Village: Jonathan David Publishers, 1994), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Kolatch, 18-19.

the creation of the universe, and as a manifestation of the divine presence in human history—all underline my reason for choosing the Torah as the central case study for this thesis. The Torah is consistently spoken about and treated as if the object of the Torah scroll has singular agency or serves as a direct embodied link to the divine. While individual belief may vary from person to person, the performance texts of Jewish ritual treat the Torah as an extension of divinity in a material form, conflating the sacredness of the Torah with the sacredness of God.

Recent work in the field of material performance and ritual studies has illustrated the way ritual objects garner humanesque qualities through the embodiment of ritual actions. By positioning these objects as “puppets” or “performing objects” scholars have been able to more deeply understand their ritual function as well as concretely comprehend the significance of the ritual itself. Recent scholarship has explored this expansion through the field of “material performance” which begins “with the assumption that objects contain life, will, and intent by virtue of their design and inherent nature.”<sup>8</sup> The intrinsic knowledge of the object as sacred is defined in part by this assumption that the object contains a life, will, and intent, which can be captured, manipulated, or expressed by the object’s actions in ritual and the actions performed upon it. This enacted interaction creates an exchange between the object and the performer in which the object is animated, or puppeteered by actors in the performance, who do so to reveal the object’s inherent will.

For example, in Debra Hilborn’s article on the medieval Holy Week observances laid out in the *Regularis Concordia* she argues that a “‘puppet perspective’ enables [her] to think about the...observances as a locus where humans and cross perform in tandem to create meaning and

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<sup>8</sup> Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell, “Introduction” in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, eds. by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 6.

to provide an emotional and spiritual experience for the early medieval congregation.”<sup>9</sup> Hilborn’s recognition of the cross as a performing object allows for a nuanced reading of the ritual that reveals meaning and disseminates this into a spiritually impactful experience for the mostly illiterate spectators of the Middle Ages. For example, at one moment the deacons, manipulating the cross, “speak for Christ while at the same time holding up the cross...indicating, by their proximity to the object and its placement between their bodies and voices, that the sound is coming from the cross.”<sup>10</sup> In directing the congregation’s attention visually to the object, they conflate Christ’s words with the handling of the cross and create the impression that the cross is speaking for Christ. In so doing they are able to re-enact the Passion by invoking the sacred events of the past and allowing the assembled to become an active witness and participant in them in the present.

This “puppet perspective” is a theoretical device that permits Hilborn to simultaneously acknowledge and circumvent the religious challenges of looking at a sacred object as a puppet by analyzing the object within its performative context. She explicitly mentions that in the Middle Ages, there was “a definite tension involved in the act of medieval image-making.”<sup>11</sup> This tension expands into performance as “the maker not only recombines or reflects what has already been created by God but is heretically attempting to ‘play God’ by giving it life.”<sup>12</sup> There is a double sacrilege in creating and animating an object thought of as inextricably linked to God. In acknowledging this tension, Hilborn also recognizes that her approach does not imply the object

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<sup>9</sup> Debra Hilborn, “Relating to the Cross: A Puppet Perspective on the Holy Week Ceremonies of the *Regularis Concordia*,” in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, eds. Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 165.

<sup>10</sup> Hilborn, 170.

<sup>11</sup> Hilborn, 165.

<sup>12</sup> Hilborn, 165.

takes on the stance of an idol. Instead, she argues a puppet perspective “can bring a holistic approach to the study of ritual objects, emphasizing the importance of the object’s spatial and temporal journey, how it is moved and manipulated, who does the manipulating, where the manipulators are located, and their kinesthetic relationship to the object.”<sup>13</sup> She demonstrates this by showing how “when the cross is put back, it regains its identity as ‘cross.’”<sup>14</sup> In doing so, the resonance of the object within the ritual performance can be more fully understood. The object during the performance of the ritual, through the actions of the congregants and words spoken by them, comes alive in a new way and brings the story of the liturgy into presence as the cross that symbolically represents Christ’s life and teachings becomes conflated with the presence of Christ himself. The ritual re-enacts the events of the Passion through the manipulation of the cross and the congregants’ words.

Similarly, applying a “puppet perspective” to the Torah is problematic, primarily because the text itself refutes the object being viewed, much less worshipped, as an idol.<sup>15</sup> Since this study deals with practices happening in the contemporary world, and not centuries ago as in Hilborn’s work, there is a sincere hesitation in applying the word “puppet” to the Torah. I believe in doing so I would be dismissing the religious context of the object and the way it is viewed by worshippers. However, this thesis does recognize the value of the theoretical framework laid out in Hilborn’s article. By viewing the Torah as a performing object and valuing how it interacts

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<sup>13</sup> Hilborn, 173.

<sup>14</sup> Hilborn, 172.

<sup>15</sup> See Leviticus 26:1 (JPS Tanakh): “You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land to worship upon, for I the Lord am your God.”

with space and time throughout the ritual<sup>16</sup> and through the actions of human participants in relationship to it, even handling and manipulating it, it is possible to gain insight into the relationship between the actors (those handling the Torah), the spectators (those observing and actively participating in the ritual), the object itself (the Torah scroll), and the divine (the one non-material presence in the event). Particularly, the materiality of the object itself is brought into question. How can we better understand these rituals and this religion if we focus on the role of the material object of the Torah? Since the Torah is the most important material presence in the religion, how does its presence emphasize a material connection to a collective past or to a present spiritual feeling? In analyzing Torah rituals through a performative lens, I aim to uncover how the text's implicit connection to the divine is embodied through the actions of the worshippers in dealing with the sacred object, and further, how this embodiment creates a spiritual connection between the worshipper, the text, and a higher divinity.

To accomplish this, I first expound upon the role that text plays in rituals utilizing the Torah. By exploring the Torah's biblical origins in the *Chumash* (the five books of the Hebrew Bible), the importance placed on the object of the *Sefer Torah* in ritual becomes clear. The object draws a direct correlation to the original Torah—the tablets of the Ten Commandments given to Moses. This connection underscores Jews' belief in the power of the Torah and aids in understanding the object's use in ritual. The contemporary Torah is one iteration in a series of *Torot* that, according to tradition, date back to the original tablets bestowed upon the Jewish people. Walter Benjamin illustrates that in looking at reproductions of objects (specifically works of art, which is fitting when applied to the Torah, an object renowned for its detail and

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 2. Sofer explains that by exploring how objects move within the performance space and within the temporal reality of the performance, the object is afforded meaning.



material beauty), “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”<sup>17</sup> The Torah is afforded authenticity within ritual because it “is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition.”<sup>18</sup> Each time the object is encountered in ritual, there is a reaching back to the original divine origins, a recreation and reenactment of tradition. I draw on this idea of recreation and reenactment when looking at the Torah reading service, the basic outline of the ritual described above. I will analyze the object’s role in the performance from two vantage points: as a connection to the divine and as a temporal reenactment of the giving of the Torah to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. In looking at the ritual in this way, I suggest that the object of the Torah cultivates a communal identity—a “Jewishness”—which is crafted through its simultaneous embodied connection to the divine and to the history of the Jewish people.

### **The Lifecycle of the Torah**

Each of the three chapters of this thesis follows a significant consecutive event in the lifecycle of the Torah scroll or *Sefer Torah* from creation to burial. The rituals discussed in each chapter form the trajectory of a Torah scroll’s connection to the community it is a part of, and the role the Torah plays within said community. The first chapter explores the creation of the Torah scroll by a *sofer* or scribe. The performativity of the scribe’s actions shapes the importance of the Torah’s materiality and ensure the object is revered for its divine connection. Further, the actions of the congregation receiving the Torah forge a physical and spiritual connection to the object that is linked to the materiality of the object and its concurrent connection to the divine.

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968), 220.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, 223.

The second chapter analyzes the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah* or the Service for the Reading of the Torah. This chapter demonstrates the ritual's religious and social efficacy in reinforcing the sacrality of the Torah scroll through the ephemeral connection between the congregants, religious leaders, object, and Jewish *ur*-narrative of the Torah as descended from the biblical tablets of Moses. I consider the role of reenactment in shaping this ritual, affirming that the reiterative performance of the ritual ensures a link before the *ur*-Torah and the presentation of the Torah scroll in the contemporary setting.

The final chapter considers the ritual burial of the Torah scroll and its ability to bring together the community in mourning through the recreation of a human funeral. The personification of the object of the Torah through ascribing human qualities throughout the performance and connecting the loss of the object to the loss of a human provides the object a notable end to its material life, reinforcing in its death the power the object holds in religious life.

Throughout the chapters, I repeatedly call attention to the role that the materiality of the object plays in shaping the rituals discussed. The performance of each ritual forms the crux of the Torah's interaction with the congregants who believe in the object's sacrality. This belief is in part shaped by their physical connection to the object they encounter in these rituals. The symbiotic relationship between object and spectator is formed and reinforced throughout the performed actions of the rituals, whose actions are in turn shaped by the text of the Torah and the continued understanding of the object as sacred. It is within ritual that the materiality of the object comes to the fore, and the spiritual and material connection is highlighted.

## Chapter 1: Constructing the Torah: A Divine Performance

### The Material and the Spiritual

Jewish anthropologist Vanessa Ochs notes, “In Judaism, the spiritual is material.”<sup>19</sup> This observation poignantly speaks to the space that the Torah occupies in Jewish life. As the central sacred object of the religion, and the text that defines religious practice, the Torah is effectively defined by the intersection between the spiritual and material. Thus, the creation of a Torah is both a material and spiritual act. The confluence of these two viewpoints comes through in the performative actions undertaken in the creation ritual and is reinforced by the ritual’s lasting effects. In this way, the materiality of the object is central to the study of the ritual. Recent scholarship in the field of new materialism argues that objects are actants, meaning that the material has an effect on the world around it, regardless of whether that effect is concrete or abstract.<sup>20</sup> When viewed through the lens of performance, objects can reveal something lasting about performances in which they take part. However, the role of the object in performance is also shaped by an understanding of the context of the object’s “baggage.” This baggage builds over the course of many iterations of interactions with the same performance and/or the same object. The build-up then makes “matter...inherently performative” as “a contingent stability that is constructed through repetition and exists in comprehensible form only within a discursive nexus that gives it meaning.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the materiality of things is defined by its relationship to the actions it performs and others perform with/to/against it. This relationship is

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<sup>19</sup> Ochs, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Erika T. Lin, *Shakespeare and the Materiality of Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 7.

significant in its repetition—its continued performance over time within a situation that provides meaningful context for both the object and the performance.

The Torah epitomizes this complex relationship and is an ideal actant because of its unique positioning between the material and the spiritual. From a semiotic standpoint, “In performance, the material sign-vehicle absorbs the abstract connotations associated with the object it represents. These ‘real world’ connotations...then *replace* that represented object in the mind of the spectator.”<sup>22</sup> For rituals involving the Torah, the sign-vehicle of the Torah scroll absorbs the abstract understanding of the Torah as a stand-in for God (a concept that will be explored more fully in chapter two) and replaces the object with this concept of divinity throughout ritual performances. By ritualizing the actions performed with and upon the object, the thing itself is imbued with semiotic meaning. The materiality of the object then retains the aftereffects of the ritual and a sacred status is ascertained by the object. This intersection between the object’s materiality and performativity is apparent in the ritual creation of the Torah scroll. This chapter analyzes the foundational ritual of creating a Torah to demonstrate how the object’s materiality is intricately linked to its sacred status in Jewish ritual broadly. The steps toward creation literally infuse the object with life, and its welcoming into the community enforces the Torah’s importance to the congregation receiving it. The communal welcoming solidifies a material connection to the object, which is enforced through the spiritual connection between those present and the divinity the object represents. In this chapter I view the ritual creation as a birth of the object and its marriage to the congregation. In thinking about the ritual through this human act, I anthropomorphize the object to demonstrate how the Torah transitions from an

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 7.

abstract idea of sacrality, as demonstrated by the understanding of Torah as “teaching”—a view beyond the object itself, to a central actor in the ritual functions of a synagogue, as demonstrated by the consecration of the completed Torah scroll—similar to how birth shifts the abstract idea of a child into a tangible reality for the parents and family. The object finally reaches maturity in the enactment of the consecration in the synagogue, in which the Torah scroll is performatively married to the congregation.

### ***Soferim and the Creation of a Sefer Torah***

The Torah used in synagogue ritual is the Torah scroll or *Sefer Torah*. These highly ornate and decorative scrolls can take years to create and are one of the most expensive purchases an individual or synagogue will make. *Soferim* (*sofer*, singular), or scribes, are responsible for the construction of the Torah scroll. A *sofer* will devote roughly one year to creating a new Torah scroll by hand. It is a painstaking process that requires intense training and spiritual preparation. *Soferim* dedicate their lives to the profession, with an understanding that the work they undertake holds religious weight. The accuracy of the text is so important that commentaries laying out the rules for scribes argue “if [the *sofer*] makes one error or fails to make one necessary correction, his soul will perish, because he steals from the masses and causes them to sin.”<sup>23</sup> In creating a Torah scroll *soferim* are creating the guiding text for the congregation and are doing so through the creation of the object that holds that text. The object is afforded a privileged place, even in the abstract, because the text within it, the text the *sofer* will write, contains the commandments by which the community will live their lives. It is the *sofer*'s

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<sup>23</sup> Shlomo Ganzfried, “Keset HaSofer 1.1,” *Sefaria*, [https://www.sefaria.org/Keset\\_HaSofer.1](https://www.sefaria.org/Keset_HaSofer.1).

job is to ensure the text—the physical markers of the language on the physical pages—delineating these instructions is accurate.

The methods *soferim* use to create the Torah were ritualized thousands of years ago and remain relatively unchanged until this day. The rules are laid out specifically in the Torah itself, along with the Talmud and other rabbinic commentaries.<sup>24</sup> The Torah has within it the rules for its own creation and multiplication, providing the DNA that permits the object's continual rebirth. And as these guidelines for creating a Torah were codified over centuries, the performative process of rebirth or creation was systemized into a distinct ritual of constructing the Torah.<sup>25</sup> In this way the scribe can be viewed as a gatekeeper to religious practice, ensuring that the object needed for worship is available. The handiwork of the scribes ensures that the Torah scroll they create will be authentic and meaningful, and that the object will provide the spiritual connection required in ritual use. This is an important distinction that denotes both the object's inherent sacrality, but also demonstrates a nuanced transference of power from scribe to object upon the scroll's completion. Until it is completed according to the rules of creation, the Torah scroll cannot be used for other ritual performances, such as the Torah reading service. So, while it remains abstractly sacred prior to its completion, it is not until the object is complete—

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<sup>24</sup> See “Tractate Soferim,” *Sefaria*, [https://www.sefaria.org/Tractate\\_Soferim](https://www.sefaria.org/Tractate_Soferim); “Tractate Sefer Torah,” *Sefaria*, [https://www.sefaria.org/Tractate\\_Sefer\\_Torah.1](https://www.sefaria.org/Tractate_Sefer_Torah.1); “Keset HaSofer”; “Shulchan Arukh,” *Sefaria*, <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Halakhah/Shulchan%20Arukh>; and Maimonides, “Mishneh Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah and the Torah Scroll 10.3,” *Sefaria*, [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh\\_Torah,\\_Tefillin,\\_Mezuzah\\_and\\_the\\_Torah\\_Scroll](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah,_Tefillin,_Mezuzah_and_the_Torah_Scroll) for an in-depth review of the rules and regulations followed in writing a Torah scroll. Over 4,000 rules must be followed by the scribes in writing the Torah and failing to follow them all invalidates the Torah scroll making it unfit for ritual use.

<sup>25</sup> Vanessa Ochs definition of a ritual as “conventional or patterned ways of doing things that have shared or often multiple meanings” is useful here in understanding how the codification of patterned behavior resulted in the meaningful ritual action of Torah creation. Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 32

when the ritual is enacted in its entirety and the scroll is blessed—that the materiality of the Torah scroll becomes *klei kodesh*—a holy object.<sup>26</sup>

### **A Material Link to the Past**

The materials used to create the *Sefer Torah* are clearly defined by rabbinic texts and there has been little change in them over thousands of years of Torah creation. For example, the *k'laf* or parchment on which the *Sefer Torah* is written, the hair or sinew used to sew together the panels, and the quill all must come from ritually clean, or kosher, animals.<sup>27</sup> The usage of these various products sets the object apart from other Jewish texts, or even other reproductions of the Torah in books because the Torah scroll becomes an object linked to the idea of *kashrut*—ritual cleanliness. As noted later in this chapter, the *soferim* must also go through a process of ritual cleansing before beginning the creation process. The use of ritually clean materials defies the modern technologies we have today that could be used to create a Torah scroll in less time and with more ease. Instead, the continued use of these outdated materials serves to ensure the authenticity of the object of the Torah. Upholding these rules ensures a connection to all previous creations of the Torah—one in a line of sacred objects created using the same materials. Thus, the materiality of the object ties the ritual creation of the object back to an historical past of enactments.

Part of what makes the Torah sacred is this belief that it provides a lasting link to the tradition of Judaism—the Torah scroll is an object that relates to both the past and present. The

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<sup>26</sup> See Ochs, 98 for an overview of *klei kodesh* and their distinction from other sacred objects.

<sup>27</sup> George Robinson, *Essential Torah: A Complete Guide to the Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 2006), 10-11.

raw materials utilized to create the physical Torah builds on this idea of the abstract Torah as tradition by utilizing matter that matters. The use of ritually clean animals for the *Sefer Torah*'s parts ensures that each element of the Torah scroll is sacred in its own right. The material is sanctified by ritual use, which ensures that the completed object will be holy. The outdated material thus becomes a way to retain a connection to tradition, to a biblical past in which these materials were necessary.

By contrast, the *sofer* interacts with this material for the purpose of creating an object for the present. While the material may link the object to the past and provide a site of engagement with the past, the actions of the scribe are carried out distinctly in the here and now. The ritual action of creating the object is an urgent need in the present, which is meant to provide a spiritual connection for both the *sofer* and those who will eventually use the object. Tradition becomes part of the context of creation, but the act of creating the object is still necessitated by the present need and actions of the *sofer*. The material enhances the meaning of the scribe's work by reinforcing the connection to a longstanding tradition, while also ensuring the ritual's performed linking of the material and spiritual—bringing the abstract Torah and physical Torah together through the birth of the *Sefer Torah*.

### **Creating the Torah as a Rite of Passage**

The first step that a *sofer* takes prior to beginning the task of creating a Torah scroll is to submerge themselves in a *mikvah*, a ritual bath. The *mikvah* is a site of cleansing, most often used by women following menstruation.<sup>28</sup> The ritual immersion of the body in the bath is

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<sup>28</sup> See Rahel R. Wasserfall, ed., *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999) for a series of essays exploring the ritual purification at the *mikvah* and its effects on women across time.



intended to purify the body. In the case of the *sofer*, the submersion is meant to prepare it to undergo the sacred act of writing the Torah. The action of going to the *mikvah* marks a transitory state in the process of writing the Torah. The *sofer* separates himself from others physically by immersing himself in the ritual bath. The act of cleansing serves not only to purify the body, but also cleanse the mind, focusing it upon the ritual to come. The bath initiates the first stage in Arnold van Gennep's rite of passage: separation. The physical space of the *mikvah* initiates the separation, but as Victor Turner notes in his analysis of van Gennep's writing, "There must be in addition [to a change of space] a rite which changes the quality of *time* also, or constructs a cultural realm which is defined as 'out of time.'"<sup>29</sup> Immersion in the ritual bath adjusts this concept of time because it delineates the "before" from the "during" of the ritual. The scribe is separated by the community through the purification and the preparation taken in advance of the ritual creation of the sacred object. In this way, the scribe prepares to complete a rite of passage, paralleling the rite of passage of the Torah scroll as the object goes from latent matter to sacred object through the passage of ritual time.

The middle phase of the rite of passage, transition, is the liminal space that is occupied by the actual writing of the Torah. During this phase, the scribe and, more importantly, the Torah, exists in "a sort of social limbo which has few...of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states."<sup>30</sup> During this phase, "all of the acts and symbols are of *obligation*."<sup>31</sup> The actions the scribe takes are out of obligation to the object of the Torah, placing the object at the center of the ceremonial creation and the liminal space of the

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<sup>29</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 24.

<sup>30</sup> Turner, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Turner, 42.

ritual. Each of the actions of writing are in service to the completion of the object, which will be presented to the community in the final stage of the rite of passage: incorporation.

Before the *sofer* begins the actual penning of the Torah, they will first test the ink and quill by writing the name “Amalek” on the page and crossing it out several times. In a practical sense, this action allows the scribe to ensure the writing instruments are functioning properly. Yet, since the text must be exactly the text of the Pentateuch, the practical element of preparing to write becomes performative. This ritual action is derived from Deuteronomy 25:17-19, when God asks the Israelites to “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt...When the LORD your God grants you safety from all your enemies...you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!”<sup>32</sup> Thus, in writing and striking out the name, the scribe is fulfilling this commandment, displaying his devotion to God spiritually, and materially ensuring all is prepared to begin the work of writing the scroll. The invocation prayer is then recited, and the work begins in earnest.

The invocation, translated by George Robinson as “I am writing the Torah for the holiness of the Torah and the name of *Ha'Shem* for the holiness of God’s name” serves to ground the scribe and remind them of the work they are undertaking.<sup>33</sup> But, it also serves as a performative—a statement which, in “saying these words we are *doing* something.”<sup>34</sup> The scribe is literally ascribing holiness to the unfinished text by conflating the Torah and God in the same prayer. The performative utterance of the prayer separates the act of creating this object from the creation of any other object. The prayer creates the liminality that is required for the rite of

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<sup>32</sup> Deut. 25:17-19 (JPS Tanakh).

<sup>33</sup> Robinson, *Essential Torah*, 13-14

<sup>34</sup> J.L. Austin, “How To Do Things With Words: Lecture II” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Bial and Sara Brady, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 205.

passage to occur. The recitation of these words begins the process of constructing the object's sacrality in material terms through the performative actions undertaken by the *sofer*. The culmination of these actions leads to the divine made manifest in the work the scribe completes, and this invocation delineates the holiness of the work of the *sofer*.

Another performative that occurs throughout the ritual happens each time the *sofer* writes any of God's seven names on the *klaf*. Before writing the name, the *sofer* recites out loud "I am writing the name of God." The performative serves two purposes. The first, practical purpose is to ensure the scribe does not make an error. Jewish law does not permit the erasure of God's name, and scribal errors render the Torah scroll invalid and unfit for ritual use. A mistake in writing—a material action—has spiritual consequences. Only an object of physical, material perfection has spiritual potency. The performative action thus focuses the *sofer's* attention to the spiritual nature of the performance and the enduring consequences of the physical act of writing the name of God. The perfection of the object must mirror the perfection of the divine, and the performative enhances this connection by ensuring the continued perfection of the object and its ability to be used in ritual.

The second purpose recalls Och's observation about the spiritual being material. The name of God is sacred, and once it becomes manifest, the sacrality of the name permeates the object, infusing it with that same semblance of holiness. Thus, the performative initiates the transfer of sacrality from the oral name to the page. Indeed, not following the procedure of reciting the performative has the same effect as an error in the writing, "the scroll is deemed invalid (*pasul*) and unfit for public reading."<sup>35</sup> The performative, the verbal action of the scribe,

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<sup>35</sup> Alfred J. Kolatch, *This is the Torah* (Middle Village: Jonathan David Publishers, 1994), 116.

is just as important as the text he writes on the page. Since scribes often work alone with no one around, the performatives in both cases are solely for the benefit of the scribe and the object. Both utterances reinforce the sacrality of the object by viewing it through its tangible association with the divine. The object is described in the first utterance as an object of God, and in the second, the performative is uttered only for the object, which has already been seen as related to the divine and now is spiritually present with the scribe as the work is completed. The ephemeral utterances of the scribe comprise a necessary part in the initiation of the object, in its transition from matter to holy object. However, this transition is not complete until the final stage of the rite of passage: reaggregation or incorporation.

### **Incorporation Through Communal Celebration**

The final commandment in the Torah details that every person should write a Torah scroll during their lifetime. The ritual performance of creating the Torah scroll brings one into communion with the divine—indeed it is the final act that can do so according to the commandments. The act of materializing the divine in the Torah through the performance of creation is something that all Jews are expected to complete. This is a given rite of passage described by the text itself. Yet, given the specific training, detailed requirements, and time it takes to complete this commandment, traditionally only *soferim* write an entire Torah. However, when synagogues commission a new scroll to be written, typically the *sofer* will leave the final words unfinished. Once the *Sefer Torah* is completed aside from the final words, the scroll is brought to the synagogue for a celebration where the new Torah will be finished by members of the congregation and consecrated in a ritual called *Siyum Ha'Torah* or the Celebration of the Completion of the Torah.

Upon arrival at the synagogue, the new scroll is presented under a *chuppah* or canopy to the congregation, just as the bride meets her husband under the *chuppah* at a wedding. The performativity of this moment is palpable. The recreation of a wedding literally marries the new Torah to the congregation. It consecrates the object as part of the community into which it enters, solidifying the material connection between the two parties. The community embraces the Torah both literally and figuratively, incorporating the new object into the existing framework of their community.

This material connection is furthered as the members of the congregation are guided by the *sofer* to complete the final letters in the scroll. Those members of the congregation who are called to write the final words of the Torah are afforded the honor of completing the 613<sup>th</sup> commandment. In doing so, they are intimately linked to this Torah scroll, and will remember this material connection each time they interact with the Torah moving forward. The *doing* of this ritual, the physical action of writing in the scroll not only provides the opportunity to fulfill a commandment that many are precluded from completing, but it also ensures a tangible joining between the congregation and the holy object. They have a role in creating the object, instantiating these words and the sacredness they embody into something concrete. For example, when Beth El Synagogue in Baltimore commissioned a new Torah in 2003, the synagogue's rabbi, Rabbi Loeb, remarked, "We've never had a new Torah that the members of the congregation provided together... This is a tradition we felt that all of our members would want to be able to participate in, to feel their connection to the Torah in a way they had never felt before."<sup>36</sup> The communal completion of the sacred object fosters a spiritual connection to the

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<sup>36</sup> Karen Buckelew, "Write of Passage; Beth El celebrates its new Sefer Torah with a yearlong education project," *Baltimore Jewish Times* (Baltimore, MD), May 30, 2003, 18.

Torah, one that is fundamentally different from other interactions with the Torah, and one that ensures a deeper connection to both the object and the community. It is a moment where, once again, the spiritual and the material come together through the ritual which reinforces both aspects of the life of the object. As Rabbi Loeb expressed, “They will say this is the kind of thing you never forget. It is a part of the Jewish embodied memory bank that lasts forever.”<sup>37</sup> The memory will serve as a constant reminder of the merging of the spiritual and the material, shaping the relationship between the *Sefer Torah* and the congregation in subsequent rituals.

### **Creation as Performance**

Both the *sofer*'s work and the celebratory completion by the congregation are ritual performances. Both performances utilize the materiality of the Torah to shift the focus of the ritual from actor to object. Andrew Sofer describes this shifting in semiotic terms noting, “Actor and prop are dynamic sign-vehicles that move up and down the subject-object continuum as they acquire and shed action force in the course of a given performance.”<sup>38</sup> In both rituals of creation, the performance of the actor (the scribe or the congregation) and the prop (the *Sefer Torah*) traverse the subject-object continuum, especially as the object gains sacrality through the compounding of performance reinforcing its holiness. As the actor “creates” the prop the object gains increasing power in the interaction, shifting the object into the place of subject by the final act of consecration. This trajectory of the object to subject enforces the increasing sacrality of the object that is achieved through the performance of the ritual creations. The birth of the object leads to its reverence.

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<sup>37</sup> Buckelew, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Sofer, 9.

The *sofer* highlights the divine connection of the material and the object. Through the *sofer*'s performance outdated materials are transformed into a sacred object. The ritual creation endows the object of the Torah with meaning—it makes the object matter. The performatives the *sofer* recites simultaneously imbue and reinforce the object's sacred nature, blurring the lines slightly between divinity and the object. The Torah scroll's sacralty relies on its materiality which the *sofer* highlights throughout his ritual actions in creating, writing, and delivering the object.

The congregation's completion of the *Sefer Torah* highlights the human connection in these rituals. From the moment that the scroll enters the synagogue, the community is brought together through their relationship with and to the object. The action of completing the Torah advances a concrete bond that is formed through the performance of the ritual, binding the congregation to the object through the spiritual act of completing the 613<sup>th</sup> commandment, which is tangible in the material connection of their handwriting upon the object itself. The rite of passage of completing this commandment culminates in the birth of a sacred object and the marriage of the object to the community. The Torah's lifecycle begins as a member of the community. In this way the object is an extension of the communal belief of the congregation in the power of the Torah's sacralty. The performative elements in both rituals imbue the object with meaning, reinforcing the object's sacralty through its materiality and the rituals that create it. These creation rituals lay the foundation for the rituals that take place recurrently in the synagogue setting throughout the year.

## Chapter 2: (Re)Enacting the Covenant in the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah*

### Introduction

George Robinson begins his book-length introduction to the Torah with a poignant observation: “The first question that should pop into anyone’s mind is why, in this age of e-books and hypertext, Jews still read their sacred texts from a scroll.”<sup>39</sup> Objectively, it is an odd practice to continue relying on an outdated object as the foremost connection to the divine and to sacred text—especially when other printed and more accessible versions exist. Yet, the Torah scroll remains the essential ritual object of the religion and the theological foundation of Judaism is still built around the philosophy of Torah as teaching/law, even after thousands of years. Why has this object’s influence, along with the text inscribed within it, endured over millennia? Robinson reasons, “The first answer, of course, is that it is traditional.”<sup>40</sup> Judaism has routinely sustained its traditions, even in times of adversity, and the Torah scroll remains a symbol of the enduring power of Jewish faith. However, it is Robinson’s final, albeit simple, answer that sheds light on a more persuasive reason Torah reading has continued to this day. He argues, “Reading from scrolls produced in pretty much the same manner as those read by Jews as far back as the fifth century BCE connects contemporary Jews to the unbroken continuity of their history.”<sup>41</sup> Robinson points to a temporal connection between Torah reading today and Torah reading twenty-five hundred years ago as a matter-of-fact answer to a large question about faith, tradition, and ritual practice. While his study assumes his simple answers to be true, contextualizing the ritual of reading the Torah scroll as a performance, and more specifically as a

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<sup>39</sup> George Robinson, *Essential Torah* (New York: Schocken Books, 2006), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Robinson, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Robinson, 9.



re-enactment, reveals how Robinson's argument forms the foundation for a more nuanced understanding of the Torah scroll as the generator and reinforcer of tradition through the ritual interactions of the spectators and actors with the object.

Robinson's view reflects a larger trend in literary and historical analyses of Torah to sidestep or take for granted the performative aspects of Torah ritual. Particularly, his claim accepts as fact the efficacy of Torah rituals, particularly the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah*, or the Service for the Reading of the Torah. His comprehensive overview of the ritual provides a necessary account of the role the ritual plays in the Jewish religion but avoids how its performativity impacts social or religious efficacy. This chapter reframes the narrative of the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah* and scrutinizes the performative aspects of the ritual, principally the positioning of the object of the Torah at the center of the ritual. I take a performance-based approach to interrogating how and why the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah* uses the Torah scroll. In doing so, I demonstrate the ritual's religious and social efficacy in reinforcing the sacrality of the Torah scroll through the ephemeral connection between the congregants, religious leaders, object, and Jewish *ur*-narrative described by Robinson as tradition. The role of enacted storytelling underscores and demonstrates that the performance is what cultivates both the affective and physical connection.

### **The Performance-Based Beginnings of Torah Reading**

Tradition suggests a temporal stream of repetition—an embodied practice enacted over time that becomes ingrained in cultural memory and custom. In other words, tradition is rooted in a history of cultural performance. Joseph Roach situates tradition in relation to the discursive historical narrative through the term “performance genealogies.” He states these “performance

genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies, residual movements retained implicitly in images or words (or in silences between them), and imaginary movements dreamed in minds, not prior to language but constitutive of it.”<sup>42</sup> The ephemerality of movement in all its forms (patterned, residual, and imaginary) becomes a prompt for the connection to the past—a remembrance of the genealogical connection to prior ancestral performances. In this way, traditions are built out of an embodied practice. Tracing the development of Torah reading follows this same pattern. Its genealogy underscores its performative aspects adding credence to a performance-based analysis of the ongoing ritual of enacted storytelling. There are two important origin stories, both of which have been enhanced by their immortalization within the text of the Hebrew Bible and solidified in the continued practice of Torah reading in the present.

Moses, the great figure of the Hebrew Bible, descends from Mount Sinai after conversing with God and bestows the tablets of law to the Jewish people.<sup>43</sup> He relays the importance of the object and recites a handful of instructions to those assembled. In doing so, he enforces the covenant forged with God atop the mountain and entrusts the laws and teachings of the Torah to the Jewish people. While this moment is a key turning point in exegetical analyses of the Bible’s Jewishness, this presentation marked not only the deliverance of the Torah, but the first public reading of the Torah as well. Some of the performative aspects of Moses’s descension mirror those of contemporary Torah reading, establishing a rudimentary precedent for the ritual to come. The latter part of this chapter discusses the similarities in depth, exploring not only the similar movements, but the permeation of this *ur*-narrative in contemporary embodiment.

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<sup>42</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 26.

<sup>43</sup> Exo. 34: 29-35 (JPS Tanakh).

Rebecca Schneider's work on performance re-enactments is especially persuasive in this discussion, and demand that the modern ritual be viewed as a re-enactment of this biblical original.

While Moses's displaying of the tablets provides an important foundation for Torah reading today, the widely accepted origin story of the lineage of Torah reading is credited to Ezra the Scribe and depicted in *Nehemiah*, one of the historical narratives of the Hebrew Bible. Taking place during the Second Temple Period upon the return of the Jews to Jerusalem, Ezra, a great *sofer* (scribe) and *kohen* (priest), encourages the people to participate in the public reading of a Torah scroll in the marketplace:

Ezra opened the scroll in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; as he opened it, all the people stood up. Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' with hands upraised. Then they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before the LORD with their faces to the ground. Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites explained the Teaching to the people, while the people stood in their places. They read from the scroll of the Teaching of God, translating it and giving the sense; so they understood the reading.<sup>44</sup>

This account is notable for its clear performative elements. Ezra and the crowd are symbiotically connected through the ritual performed. The crowd bowing and prostrating themselves before the scroll is a direct bodily response to Ezra raising the Torah and reciting blessings to God. The anthropomorphizing of the scroll as God cultivates a connection between the divine and the material object of the scroll. Further, this enacted relationship exemplifies the connection between performer and spectator. As Marvin Carlson notes, theorists have developed "a view of performance that owes more to context and to the dynamics of reception than to the specific activities of the performers."<sup>45</sup> While Ezra's actions, as the main performer, are important, the

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<sup>44</sup> Neh. 8:5-8.

<sup>45</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 13.

crowd's enthusiastic response advances the performance's efficacy, its ability to have a profound effect on their social and religious belief—evidenced by their prostration and subsequent keen listening to scripture. The understanding of the Torah is clearly linked to the performance of this ritual by the closing line of this passage, reinforcing the ritual's efficacy. This written account of a ritual practice has been noted by many scholars as a clear touchpoint for the modern synagogue ritual of Torah reading.<sup>46</sup>

Further, recent scholarship studying this first Torah reading notes the performative elements abundant within it, remarking, “All these features mark the event as a well-structured performance with clear ritualistic elements.”<sup>47</sup> Yet this brief nod to performativity fails to acknowledge the encompassing connection between Torah scroll, performer, and object that is integral to the larger contemporary Torah reading service. In fact, Sara Japhet continues her observation above with, “The ritual acts are simple and quite succinct, with the focus being the reading of the words in the book rather than the book as an object.”<sup>48</sup> Japhet's argument draws attention away from the material nature of the Torah scroll and onto the ritual reading. In her view, the object retreats to the background in favor of the public reading. However, this account of Ezra clearly foregrounds the Torah by correlating the scroll directly with God. The Torah scroll is being treated as if it is God, and while God is not a person, in religious writings divinity is referred to using human-related terms. And as noted in the previous chapter, the scroll itself is performative, representing a material connection to tradition and the divine.

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<sup>46</sup> For one such example, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 112-113.

<sup>47</sup> Sara Japhet, “The Ritual of Reading Scripture (Nehemiah 8:1-12),” in *New Perspectives on Old Testament Prophecy and History*, eds. Rannfrid I. Thelle, Terje Stordalen, and M.E.J. Richardson (Brill, 2015), 177.

<sup>48</sup> Japhet, 177.

The key element of Torah reading is the presence and usage of the object of the Torah scroll. The continued usage of the scroll is in part linked to the passage cited above. Ezra's treatment of the scroll defines the relationship between those assembled and the object. It is clear that the scroll represents an aspect of God, as the line distinctly says, "they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before the LORD with their faces to the ground." The Hebrew Bible is transparent when God is present as an entity. Without a clear mention here of God's presence, the scroll becomes the natural projection of the "LORD" in this line. The personification of the scroll in *Nehemiah* 8 suggests that the Torah scroll acts as a material stand-in for God's presence, strengthening the understanding of the object as sacred. The text itself is portraying the *Sefer Torah* as a revered object, one that is shaped by its relationship to the divine through the ritual.

What is most important in each of these accounts of Torah reading is their reliance on embodiment to describe the effect on those assembled. The actions of Moses, Ezra, and the Jewish people are recorded in these texts and exegetical research and modern ritual is based, consciously or unconsciously, on these performances. Ironically, these accounts point to the curious rift between Diana Taylor's archive and repertoire. The Hebrew Bible is perhaps one of the most studied texts in archival memory.<sup>49</sup> The Bible is consistently read and studied, as part of academic, religious, and social activities. As Taylor states, "What changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items it contains get interpreted, even embodied." This is demonstrated by the evolving interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. While the text remains the same, over millennia it has been interpreted in countless ways.

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<sup>49</sup> "Archival' memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change." See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

Yet, these particular passages account for actions normally relegated to the repertoire.<sup>50</sup> While the original performance—Moses atop Mount Sinai or Ezra in the square—is irreproducible, these representations of the performance remain. The archival remembrance of the repertoire is an important reinforcement of the memory of the repertoire. The recording of these performances allows for the continuance of the practice in modern times. The privileging of these embodied actions—their inclusion in the archive—permits their permeation in the present-day repertoire of ritual performance. These “forms of embodied acts are always present, though in a constant state of againness.”<sup>51</sup> The repetition of the actions today recalls, bodily, the past actions of those earlier performances, reinforcing the connection between the archive and the repertoire, and epitomizing the reliance on performance as a crucial shaping of Torah reading rituals.

### **The *Aron Ha’Kodesh* and the Foundation of Re-enactment**

In the millennia since the penning of the Hebrew Bible the *Seder K’riat Ha’Torah* has been codified into a full liturgical ceremony occurring three times a week. Despite, or because of, its historical antecedents, the ritual, now involving the participation of all the congregants in attendance and utilizing an ornate Torah scroll, is the center of Shabbat and weekday liturgy. Since the ritual is performed often amongst Jewish communities in similar ways, there are universal actions that can be observed. I acknowledge that individual communities may perform the ritual with nuanced differences in transitions, recitations, or actions. For the purpose of this

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<sup>50</sup> “The repertoire...enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.” See Taylor, 20.

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, 21.

chapter, however, I evaluate the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah* as a “scenario,” to borrow Diana Taylor’s words.<sup>52</sup> The usage of the term scenario to describe the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah* places the ritual within the context of its performance text, privileging the actions undertaken by the object, actors, and spectators. In assuming the ritual as an encompassing scenario, I am demanding “that we also pay attention to milieux and corporeal behaviors such as gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language.”<sup>53</sup> The privileging of action and space allows for a performance-based reading that refuses to be reduced to an exegetical reading. Further, the ritual consistently recalls and reenacts its historical antecedents.

The ritual begins with the opening of the *aron ha'kodesh*, literally holy ark, a cabinet at the front of the synagogue holding the synagogue’s *Torot*. The synagogue is designed so that the congregation will be facing Jerusalem and the site of the Holy Temple while praying and looking upon the ark. This design, a clever architectural prompt mirrored in synagogues around the world, brings a conscious remembrance of the reiterative nature of worship, nodding to the original Temple and the historical and biblical past enacted in the Torah and ritual actions to come. The layout of space, the set of the ritual, aids in cultivating the environment to add to the distinctiveness of the ritual. By stepping into the space congregants are physically placing themselves in spatial relation to their past—namely the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

One of the first commands Moses gives to the Jewish people after the presentation of the tablets of law is to create the Tabernacle, housing the ark of the covenant, which in turn housed the original tablets.<sup>54</sup> The Tabernacle, a material symbol of the covenant with God and the holder

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<sup>52</sup> Scenarios defined as “meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes.” Taylor, 28.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, 28.

<sup>54</sup> See Exo. 35-40 for the description of the creation and consecration of the Tabernacle after Moses returns with the second set of tablets.

of the most sacred object, an object created with divine inspiration, is reconstructed in the modern *aron ha'kodesh*. The holy ark serves as the modern version of the Tabernacle—the ark containing the mysteries of the Torah inside.<sup>55</sup> The placement of it at the head of the synagogue, and its ornate design mirror that of the biblical tabernacle, materially connecting the contemporary setting to the biblical past. In doing so, the setting evokes some semblance of the past, of the *ur*-narrative of the Torah, which is performed more wholly in the rest of the ceremony.

The rabbi and cantor approach the ark as the congregation rises. A series of blessings are recited or sung praising God and drawing a connection between the Torah and the divine. One prayer, *Ein Kamokha* states, “There is no deity like you, *Adonai*. And no works like Yours.”<sup>56</sup> Later, as the Torah is revealed another prayer is recited: “For out of Zion will come forth Torah and the word of *Adonai* from out of Jerusalem. Blessed is the One who gave Torah to the people Israel of holiness.”<sup>57</sup> These prayers’ positioning at the beginning of the ritual reinforces the holy ark’s sacred status through comparison to God. In this way, they act as performatives,

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<sup>55</sup> There are inconsistent theories about the fate of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark, which was itself a sacred object supposed to have enacted miracles, has been lost to history. The Torah’s text and other accounts fail to mention the final resting place of the Ark. Scholars over the years have suggested historical moments when the Ark was destroyed, while others have argued that the object is still around today and is hiding in plain sight. The mystery surrounding the original Ark of the Covenant clarifies the importance of the present-day *aron ha'kodesh*, because it underscores the material value of the present-day ark as a stand-in for the lost biblical antecedent. For a recent overview of the history of the Ark of the Covenant and the relevant theories surrounding its disappearance, see Richard A. Lovett and Scot Hoffman, “Why the Ark of the Covenant is one of history’s enduring mysteries” *National Geographic*, January 31, 2020. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/ark-covenant>.

<sup>56</sup> Robinson, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Robinson, 25.



“utterances that accomplish, in their very enunciation, an action that generates effects.”<sup>58</sup> The effect of the blessing enhances the sacrality of the ark, as the vessel for the Torah, by drawing a connection between it and God’s status in the prayer. In other words, the ark gives the Torah to the assembled congregants just as God gave the Torah to the people at Mount Sinai. Both of these blessings also use performative language to directly reinforce the biblical narrative of passing the divinely-inspired Torah to the people through Moses. This sets up the rest of the Torah reading service to act as a re-enactment of prior biblical Torah readings, namely those of Moses and Ezra.

Rebecca Schneider begins her theory of re-enactment claiming, “The experience of reenactment...is an intense, embodied inquiry into temporal repetition, temporal recurrence.”<sup>59</sup> The issue of time is the central component of re-enactment, and “in the syncopated time of reenactment, where *then* and *now* punctuate each other, reenactors...romance and/or battle an ‘other’ time and try to bring that time—that prior moment—to the very fingertips of the present.”<sup>60</sup> The opening moments of the *Seder K’riat Ha’Torah* follow this syncopated time. The opening of the ark mirrors the parting of the clouds and the revelation of Moses descending the mountain with the tablets. The participants’ blessings palpably articulate the awe of the Torah—of the divine power of God. This punctuation of old and new blends the present and past, bringing those in the present to the precipice of a temporal connection to their ancestral history.

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<sup>58</sup> Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Introduction to *Performativity and Performance*” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Bial and Sara Brady (New York: Routledge, 2016), 227.

<sup>59</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

<sup>60</sup> Schneider, 2.

In doing so, the liturgy centers the revelation of the Torah in the ark as a moment connected to previous iterations through the performative blessings recited.

### **Procession Around the Synagogue**

Following the Torah's removal from the ark, the rabbi, or a chosen congregant afforded the privilege, takes the Torah in hand and prepares to process it around the synagogue. The Torah is held tightly in the right arm—the arm believed to be connected to spiritual and physical strength<sup>61</sup>—and the *Shema*, the foundational affirmation of God's power, is recited by the rabbi and repeated by the congregation. This prayer, which is also recited before bed and first thing in the morning, unequivocally expresses one's belief in and devotion to God: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone."<sup>62</sup> This performative is recited to and about the Torah. By referencing the Torah as the subject of the prayer, the object takes on the spiritual power of God. The congregants transfer their devotion from the elusive figure of God to the tangible, material object of the Torah in the room.

In this way, the Torah itself becomes a reiterative object. It is one of many *Torot* in a long line descending from the original tablets presented at Sinai. The object is out of time, literally, with the present. Its nature, as previously discussed, is that of the past, recalling the ancestral line of *Torot*. In practice, the spiritual weight, endorsed by its creation, is reinforced by the performative turn of placing it at the center of the ritual. The call and response are particularly important in the recurrence of the narrative. While not specifically recreating or reenacting

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<sup>61</sup> This belief is founded in Exo. 15:6—"Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, Your right hand, O LORD, shatters the foe." The right hand is associated with God, and therefore is considered to be the more powerful, especially spiritually. As such, most ritual actions are completed with the right hand.

<sup>62</sup> Deut. 6:4.

exactly the scene at Sinai, this moment is “one time passing on to and as another time, but also *not quite passing*. One time almost but not fully passing in and as another time.”<sup>63</sup> The recitation of the *Shema* and the call and response is almost a re-enactment of the sealing of the covenant between the Jews and God. The assembled congregants are reaffirming their devotion to God, who is manifest in the object of the Torah. The moments of time here are blending, allowing for a temporal compression in which the past and the present collide through the performative actions of the congregants.

This is continued as the Torah descends from the *bimah*, the raised platform at the front of the synagogue, and the procession around the congregation begins (known as *hakafah* or circuit). Throughout the procession, the members of the synagogue “will reach out to touch the Torah itself with the fringes of their prayer shawl, with their prayer book, or with their fingers and then kiss the fringes, book, or fingers.”<sup>64</sup> This act deliberately brings them into direct physical proximity to the object of the Torah and permitted the opportunity to display their reverence for the object and for God. Robinson notes the importance of this moment, and his words are useful to quote at length:

It is important to note that the Torah is carried into the very midst of the worshippers, into the community itself. At Sinai...all 600,000 *B'nei Yisrael* saw and heard the awesome majesty of Revelation, from the smallest child to the oldest woman and man, from the least enlightened Jew to Moshe...Torah is not the exclusive property of anyone. It belongs to all. The *hakafah* affirms this in the most direct way possible, allowing—indeed encouraging—all of us to show our love of God’s greatest gift.<sup>65</sup>

Robinson directly notes the performative action of the procession and alludes to its all-important function as a re-enactment of Sinai. More notably, he alludes to the purpose of ritual writ large, which is justified here through the re-enactment: a feeling of *communitas*. The *hakafah* attempts

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<sup>63</sup> Schneider, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Robinson, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Robinson, 27.

to recreate the same feeling of the awe of the original presentation of Torah. In doing so, there is an attempt to “obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on an existential level”—a feeling of spontaneous *communitas*.<sup>66</sup> Robinson’s understanding of the event, through his own lived experience, demonstrates the efficacy of the ritual in creating this communal sense of spirituality, of communion. It mirrors the consecration ceremony of a new Torah where the object is married to the congregation. In the procession the Torah is honored as if a parent. The Torah shifts its role in the lifecycle here to that of the parent, mirroring the Jews’ feelings toward God at the base of Mount Sinai after being led out of Egypt. For Robinson, this connection to the past creates a felt experience. As Schneider notes, “The past, replayed, was not necessarily given to be seen. Rather, it was given to be experienced, or ‘felt,’ by those who reenacted.”<sup>67</sup> The reenactment here is one of affect, of cross-temporal connection. The feeling of being in communion with the *ur*-narrative of the religion promotes the creation of *communitas* amongst the congregants. And the presence of the Torah allows for that compression of time.

### **The Reading of the Torah**

Following the procession, the Torah ascends the *bimah* and is held aloft once more before it is ritually undressed and placed upon the *bimah* to be read. Members of the congregation are afforded an *aliyah*, in which they are called up to the *bimah* to read from the Torah. The Torah, which has been opened and placed upon the table, is now venerated for its words. The text, which has been referred to in earlier prayers in the ritual as the word of God, is recited aloud by these laypeople in the congregation. By including those in attendance in the action of the ritual, literally

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<sup>66</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 48.

<sup>67</sup> Schneider, 33.

calling them up to the platform to read the word of God aloud, the ritual once more re-enacts past Torah readings. However, this particular instance recalls Ezra's reading of the Torah. At the conclusion of Ezra's recitation, the priests in attendance spoke with the people to elucidate the words, to teach and foster understanding of the words. The contemporary act of *aliyot* (plural of *aliyah*), recalls this push for understanding.

The action of reading from the Torah requires great skill and knowledge not only of Hebrew, but of the distinctive rhythm and tone as well. People train to be able to read Torah effectively. Why? Why spend the time to learn the complicated cantillation? The actions of the ritual suggest it brings an affective connection to the divine. The previous parts of the ritual center the Torah and confirm its connection to the divine. Particularly, the object is venerated as a part of God, a material manifestation of God's words—an extension of the entity itself. The time devoted to learning Torah brings one in communion with the divine, and the honor of ascending the *bimah* rewards the person with a moment of present-day reassurance from those assembled, and an opportunity to touch time. The action of ascending the *bimah* is its own performance, enacted in front of the reader's colleagues, family, and friends, and recalling the enduring past of Torah reading across time and space.

The moment of standing at the Torah places the reader in a temporal loop with past readings of the Torah. The weight of duty is palpable, and time is moldable and sticky. Schneider argues, "To be sticky with the past and the future is not to be autonomous, but to be engaged in a freighted, cross-temporal mobility."<sup>68</sup> The reading of the Torah brings one into a communal action, one with the present congregation for whom they are reading, and the other for the ancestral readings which

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<sup>68</sup> Schneider, 36-37.

preceded them. This moment of cross-temporal mobility is striking in that it operates from the object of the Torah.

### **Conclusion of the Service**

Following the reading of the Torah, the object is redressed and once more peppered with blessings from the assembly. The *ur*-Torah is invoked as the contemporary Torah is placed back in the ark: “And with [the ark’s] coming to rest, he [Moshe] would say: *Adonai*, You who are the myriad thousands of Israel...”<sup>69</sup> In this final moment, the congregation once more acknowledges the temporal connection between past and present, solidifying the re-enactment as complete and transferring the presence or being of God to all assembled—“the myriad thousands.” This transference from the Torah to the assembled demonstrates the shifting of power completed by the ritual. The study and reading of Torah permits one to converse with the divine, and the performative ending of this ritual linguistically transfers God from Torah to the people.

The performativity of the Torah in the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah* empowers spectators to seek a spiritual connection to the divine and stimulates the formation of a communal Jewish identity. The nature of the Torah’s treatment continually juxtaposes the past and present to bring observers and practitioners into conversation with a collective past and the importance of continuing the practice in the present. The ritual itself aims to recreate foundational events in Jewish history—employing a form of enacted storytelling from a performance studies lens. In doing so, the power of the object is reinforced, and the divine creation of the object is recognized. The personification of the object in the rituals discussed shapes a connection between object and human, which emphasizes God’s role as Creator. While the teachings in the

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<sup>69</sup> Qtd. in Robinson, 40.

Torah and the words are focused on by scholars, these are contextualized within the performative acts of the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah*. The presence and enactment of the object in front of the community imbues the object with a divine power through the enacted storytelling that reinforces the power of the performative actions and ensures it will be passed on from generation to generation. The object of the Torah endures in the ritual as Jews emphasize both the humanness and divinity of Torah, cultivating a relationship between the worshippers and the object that is nuanced and manifest in the ritual. Whether the relationship reveals itself as familial, Creator and created, or manifestation of spirit, the ritual ensures the continuation of belief through embodiment and action. The Torah has established a symbiotic relationship between language, spirit, and enactment. This relationship is a key part of the final ritual in the Torah's lifecycle, ritual burial, which is discussed in the final chapter.

### Chapter 3: Grieving an Object(ive) Loss: The Ritual Burial of a *Sefer Torah*

#### The Burial Ritual

An assembled group processes into a cemetery behind a rabbi carrying the *Sefer Torah*. Upon arrival at an open grave the scroll is placed into an earthenware pot and is then lowered into the grave. The rabbi leads the congregation in the recitation of prayers including the Mourner's Kaddish—a traditional prayer recited at funerals. A eulogy is recited, accounting the connection of the Torah to the congregation and its history at the synagogue. Throughout the service, those assembled audibly grieve, pounding their chests, crying, and perhaps tearing at their clothes. Finally, each person approaches the grave and tosses some dirt upon the pot before the grave is filled.

This description of the burial of a Torah mirrors almost exactly that of a graveside burial for a human. The communal expression of grief at the loss of the Torah is palpable for those assembled and is expressed through their performative actions during the burial ritual. These actions center the spectator's performed mourning at the loss of the sacred object and underline the object's enduring presence in the lives attending the burial. Why does this object command such an extensive performance of grief and mourning? Why is the object afforded a human burial? And how does the object's completed lifecycle demonstrate its distinct role in Jewish ritual more broadly? I've previously demonstrated that the Torah becomes an integral part of a community in its creation and synagogue life. To answer the questions posed by this ritual, I analyze the Torah's function as a performing object in the burial, highlighting the relationship between the assembled and the object.



## Ritual Objects as Performing Objects

The scholarly field of puppetry and material performance expanded around the turn of the twenty-first century to encompass more wholly a study of performing objects—organic and inorganic matter that is given life in performance. This “puppet moment” exploded the view of objects on stage, studying them as “important metaphors and tangible expressions of our continually changing understanding of what it means to be human.”<sup>70</sup> The objects of study played and continue to play an integral part in the structure and meaning of the performances they were and are a part of, and it is natural to question the way their materiality and animation influence the performance and its reception. In applying this theory to ritual objects, particularly the Torah, it is important to reiterate that a “puppet perspective” provides a useful framework for centering the object’s role in performance.<sup>71</sup> However, it does not imply an understanding of the object itself as a puppet. Instead, treating the ritual object of the Torah as a performing object permits an exploration of the Torah’s role in fostering a communal identity through a connection to an ancestral line represented, embodied, and enacted by the object in ritual.

As Debra Hilborn suggests, “A puppet perspective can...move...towards thinking about the material and performative qualities of objects, and at the same time, consider these objects as part of a combined human and nonhuman matrix of materiality and meaning.”<sup>72</sup> This centering of the object on a spectrum of “materiality and meaning” provides an intriguing foundation for

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<sup>70</sup> Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell, “Introduction” in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, eds. by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

<sup>71</sup> See Debra Hilborn, “Relating to the Cross: A Puppet Perspective on the Holy Week Ceremonies of the *Regularis Concordia*” in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, eds. by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 173-174.

<sup>72</sup> Hilborn, 173.

exploring the final ritual in the lifecycle of the *Sefer Torah*—ritual burial. Once a Torah scroll has been rendered unusable in other ritual functions, it is afforded a burial similar in action to that of a human burial. This ritual, through the performative actions of the community at the burial and the treatment of the scroll, clearly personifies the object of the Torah, ascribing human qualities throughout the performance and connecting the loss of the object to the loss of a human. Analyzing these performative elements illuminates the communal connection to the object and its power to shape and disrupt everyday life. The object is afforded a generous end to its material life, reinforcing in its death the power the object holds in religious life. The ritual also brings together the community in mourning, adding to the object’s ability to build *communitas*, even in death. However, to fully understand the importance of ritual burial, it is necessary to understand how the text of the Torah, particularly the name of God, is treated, which underscores the necessity of a burial ritual.

### **The Torah’s Sacrality in Text**

As previously discussed, the foundational belief that the Torah is a sacred object comes directly from the words written upon the thing itself. In Exodus chapter 31, verse 18, Moses returns from Mount Sinai bearing the initial tablets of the Pact<sup>73</sup>. The chapter explicitly states, “When [God] finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the Pact, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God.”<sup>74</sup> These tablets, which lay out the initial commandments of the Torah and form the foundational belief of the Jewish faith—that there is a covenant between the Jewish people and God—are divinely inspired according to the text. The

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<sup>73</sup> The Pact is the covenant between God and the Israelites begun with Abraham and solidified by Moses atop Mount Sinai.

<sup>74</sup> Exo. 31:18 (JPS Tanakh).

physical material of the original tablets is said to be crafted by God directly. Even the second set of tablets that are presented to the Israelites in Exodus chapter 34, verses 27 to 28 after the incident of the Golden Calf are inscribed by Moses at the direct command of God.<sup>75</sup> Here the text goes out of its way to ensure that the tablets are understood to be both concretely within the material world and divinely inspired. The divine influence is further discussed in the text's description of Moses as he descends the mountain: "And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him."<sup>76</sup> Moses's convening with God has imbued him with otherworldly power—divine power—which was transmitted to the tablets presented to the Israelites as proof of the covenant. Moses is in direct contact with the tablets here, having created them himself just as a *sofer* does. This physical touching of the object may also be seen as imbuing the divine power, as the object itself is holy. In contrast, congregants, when in contact with the Torah do not touch the scroll directly, instead they use an intermediary object such as a prayer book, or *yad* (Torah pointer). The object's sacrality is so deeply connected to the divine that the layperson only interacts with it secondhand.

This emphasis on the correlation between the material object and the divine presence of God shapes the Torah scroll as a site of negotiation between the importance of the material and non-material in the religion at large. The written text of the tablets, and by extension the scroll as the living descendant of the Pact, remains a material connection to the divine. The confluence of the text delineating ritual, the ritual actions themselves, and the presence of the material Torah jockey for the central role in religious function—and indeed each is necessary to affirm the

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<sup>75</sup> Exo. 34:27-28.

<sup>76</sup> Exo. 34:29.

ritual's spiritual power. The written words inscribed within the Torah aid in sanctifying the object itself and inform ritual functions utilizing the object, as we saw in the previous chapter. Since the Torah needs to maintain its status as a non-idol, the words have come to represent the connection to the divine. However, in looking at the origin story of the original object, there is an emphasis on the material creation of the original tablets and Torah. The material itself, not just the words, are divinely inspired. This informs the way we read rituals involving the object. The recreations of the original object retain an iterative connection to the history not only in word, but in material as well.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, this iterative connection comes out of the temporal dissonance between the here and now and the past iterations of the object. While the Torah that exists in any contemporary ritual is not the same as its biblical counterpart, the biblical significance of the text allows for a “multi-temporal engagement with [material] understood to belong to the past in the present.”<sup>77</sup> The sense of temporal collapse for the spectator is prescient, a moment where they simultaneously understand the object as a link to the past and, within the confines of the ritual, believe the object to *be* that object from the past. The Torah is a sacred object precisely because the object itself encourages this temporal collapse.

The temporal compression that was a major part of the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah* is also central to the ritual burial of the Torah. Just as the Torah reading service builds community and connection to an ancestral lineage, the death of a Torah and the subsequent public burial further reinforces the Torah's formative role in a believer's spiritual relationship by mirroring the human act of mourning. Through the anthropomorphizing of the object in the ritual act of burial, the

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<sup>77</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 35.

material object takes on a humanness, allowing for those assembled to find a human way to deal with the loss of an object viewed as greater than human. The burial ritual provides a way of negotiating with a material representation of God in the physical world. How do the actions taken in the burial ritual cultivate a relationship between the object and the mourners? What role does the object of the Torah play in providing a material connection to the divine? How does the material death of the Torah affect this connection and understanding of the spiritual nature of God? These questions are central to this chapter's exploration and discussion of the ritual burial of a Torah scroll and the performance of those events. In viewing the object as having agency in the ritual, as performing its final act in being buried, we are observing "the dynamic collaborations that occur daily between nonhuman and human entities."<sup>78</sup> The connection between the attendees and the ruined object are central to the ritual. Yet why is burial necessary to begin with? For that, we must turn to a physical manifestation of God in the Torah—the *Shem Hameforash*, or the name of God.

### **The Tetragrammaton or *Shem Hameforash***

The Hebrew Bible explicitly prohibits the erasing, deleting, or destroying the name of God. Known as the Tetragrammaton, or the *Shem Hameforash* in Hebrew, God's name is written with the four Hebrew consonants yod-hay-vuv-hay.<sup>79</sup> Pronounced Yahweh or Jehovah by non-Jews, this word is not ever pronounced or vocalized in Jewish ritual. Instead, the word is

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<sup>78</sup> Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy, "Introduction: Object Lessons" in *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*, eds Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5.

<sup>79</sup> See George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2016), 11 for a concise description of the names used for God and the ways different denominations of Judaism deal with the name of God.

commonly enunciated as Adonai (literally “lord” or “master”), a practice which has roots in the third of the Ten Commandments and was concretized by the Talmudic Rabbis.<sup>80</sup> This substitution for God’s name in ritual recitations and readings of the text once again ascribes a divine power to the material presence of the name on paper and the power of performativity. The word itself was granted such power that historically it was only allowed to be pronounced in the Temple in Jerusalem on specific occasions. With the destruction of the Second Temple those occasions disappeared, and the authoritative pronunciation has been lost to time. Now, it is a word that is not permitted to be performed. Instead, when the enunciated version of the word (Adonai) is now recited, such as by a *sofer* when writing the Torah or by the congregation in the *Seder K’riat Ha’Torah*, the articulation is performative, a recognition of the lost pronunciation and the spiritual importance of the word. In lieu of the original pronunciation, the word has become a stand-in for a part of God itself – “a site in which the sublime is revealed in the earthly, the transcendent in the immanent.”<sup>81</sup> The name is a material representation of the Being and in not being performed it demonstrates that the divine cannot be recreated in performance. Instead, the divine must be experienced secondhand through the rituals enacted, and the sacred objects which bring one into communion with the divine.

In Deuteronomy chapter 12, verses 3 and 4, there is a commandment that the sites of worship to other gods should be destroyed, “obliterating their name from that site” and is followed by the more important command, “Do not worship the Lord your God in like manner.”<sup>82</sup> Thus, it is considered a sin to desecrate the name of God—the *Shem Hameforash*—by

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<sup>80</sup> Alfred J. Koltach, *This is the Torah: Over 500 Questions and Answers About the Most Sacred Text of Judaism* (Middle Village: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1994), 217-218.

<sup>81</sup> Hillel Ben-Sasson, *Understanding YHWH: The Name of God in Biblical, Rabbinic, and Medieval Jewish Thought*, trans. Michelle Bubis (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2.

<sup>82</sup> Deut. 12:3-4.

erasing, deleting, or destroying any permanent writing of it. The name of God is sacred, a partial manifestation of the divine, and as such the word retains this status, retains the holiness of the original Being. In a resolution put forth by the Rabbinical Asssembly it is stated that destroying the name “is very disrespectful of God, akin to destroying God.”<sup>83</sup> Once again, the action done to the written text is compared to the action done to God. Thus, the linguistic representation of God manifested as writing on the page is viewed as a living representation of divinity, leading to the prohibited act of destroying the object.

This prohibition has led to the ritual use of the *genizah*. The *genizah* is a “location in which items were placed for ‘out of sight’ storage or to be hidden away, to be dealt with at a later time.”<sup>84</sup> Since God’s name could not be created or destroyed, *tashmishey kedusha* (accessories of holiness), objects that contain the name of God or any words divinely written or inspired, are placed in a *genizah* once they are no longer fit for use in everyday ritual. This transitional space, which is effectively used as a storage unit until the objects can be properly buried as delineated by the Talmud, provides another example of the performativity of the Torah scroll and other sacred texts. The Torah scroll contains the name of God within it, and as the Tetragrammaton is viewed as a material representation of God, the scroll itself is personified through the connection, taking on the same sanctity. The enrichment of the Torah scroll by its association to the divine is the reason the scroll is buried once it is no longer fit for use in ritual. Instead of leaving the Torah scroll in a *genizah*, Jewish ritual has chosen to treat the object like a human, burying it with a full ritual akin to that afforded deceased humans. The recreation of a human burial thus draws the connection between the Torah and humanity, as both the scroll and Jewish people are

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<sup>83</sup> Joe Blair, “Genizah” (project write up, Gamliel Institute, 2015), 5.

<sup>84</sup> Blair, 3.

“receptacles of the Torah and in need of burial once they ‘die.’”<sup>85</sup> The object’s materiality is similar to the human body’s materiality. The liminal space of the *genizah* serves a similar function as the funeral home for a human body, a location not yet at rest, but not within the world of the living. The ritual object takes on this transition as though human, and the holiness of the object remains even in death.

### **Ritual Burial of a *Sefer Torah***

While the *genizah* is utilized for all types of materials containing the name of God, there is a ritual associated with the death of a Torah. The Mishneh Torah, a code of Jewish law written by Maimonides in the Middle Ages, states, “If a scroll of the law has become worn out or been otherwise rendered unfit for use; it is placed in an earthenware vessel and buried beside the remains of deceased scholars.”<sup>86</sup> As noted above, this burial mirrors that of a human burial in the Jewish faith. Alfred Kolatch notes that the reason for this is because “in Jewish tradition the same degree of respect that is accorded a human being must be accorded a Torah scroll, for the highest degree of holiness is inherent in both.”<sup>87</sup> Because the Torah is treated with the reverence of divinity, the ritual object transcends its status as an object and, in assuming its holiness, retains that holiness in death. Thus, the performance of a burial, a human burial, circumvents the

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<sup>85</sup> Schleicher, 22.

<sup>86</sup> Maimonides, “Mishneh Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah and the Torah Scroll 10.3,” *Sefaria*, [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh\\_Torah,\\_Tefillin,\\_Mezuzah\\_and\\_the\\_Torah\\_Scroll](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah,_Tefillin,_Mezuzah_and_the_Torah_Scroll).

See also “Mishneh Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah and the Torah Scroll 10.1” for a list of the twenty factors that render a Torah scroll unfit for use. The occurrence of any one of the listed factors means the scroll “does not possess the sanctity of a scroll of Law, and is not used for reading in public worship.”

<sup>87</sup> Kolatch, 62.



destroying of the name of God and avoids the pitfalls of the *Shem Hameforash* within its text. Instead, the burial becomes a ritual part of the natural progression in the life of the object.

Additionally, the choice to place the object beside scholars of the Torah impresses upon the mourners present the connection between text and divinity, a performative turn that reinforces for those present what is to be gained from ritualized interactions with the object. In the Talmud it is stated that “Torah study is equal to [honoring one’s father and mother, acts of loving kindness, and bringing peace between a person and another].”<sup>88</sup> Those who have spent considerable time studying Torah are assumed to have gained an auxiliary holiness through the *mitzvah* (commandment or good deed) of interaction with the scroll. The Torah scroll is able to provision its divine connection by association, and by choosing to bury the ritual object of the Torah besides those who dedicated their lives to studying it, the sanctity of the object remains, and the scholar is afforded an additional honor in death. Since the object is holy, the place of burial is blessed, performatively extending that sanctity to both object and person. Just as the assembled congregants reach to touch the Torah during the *Seder K’riat Ha’Torah* for a second of divine connection, the physical joining of the deceased scholars to the object in burial provides a similar divine connection that, in this case, will extend into the afterlife for both the buried human and the object.

### **Cultivating *Communitas* and Jewishness**

While the ritual binds together the deceased scholar with the object, it also brings together non-related Jews to witness the public burying of this sacred object. The loss of a Torah affects the entire congregation and the experience of burying the Torah scroll is often attended en

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<sup>88</sup> “Shabbat 127a,” *Sefaria*, <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat>.

masse. The outpouring of grief at the loss of the object underscores the object's significance to the community. The ritual reinforces the connection between object and spirit, but more importantly it cultivates an identity of "Jewishness" around this object. In death, the object retains its status, inciting a communal event demarcated by the participants' connection to the object and to their faith. Participants' attend the ritual because they feel a connection to the Torah, just as a traditional funeral-goer would feel a connection to the deceased. In this way, the significance of the ritual performance is realized through the direct correlation to a human burial.

Through the ritual, the Torah is afforded the spiritual respect delineated by faith, and the communal identity of "Jewishness" is bolstered through the identification of the object as human. In the liminality of the death of the object, the enactment of the ritual burial leaves a moment for the creation of *communitas* in Victor Turner's view. As the individuals gather for the burial, beating their chests and weeping for the death of this object, "their 'gut' understanding of synchronicity in [this] situation opens them to understanding."<sup>89</sup> The performative actions of grief in this moment provide a physicalized acknowledgement of the loss of the object. In performing grief, those assembled come together through the ritual, which allows for the transcendence of grief to occur. In this way, the ritual performance "both symbolized and actualized the change in status" of the object and those assembled.<sup>90</sup> In witnessing the death of this object, there is a need to perform these actions, to afford the object of the Torah a humanesque death. The performance reaffirms the object's power and cultivates this spiritual moment where faith is brought to the fore in this final worship of the object.

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<sup>89</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 48.

<sup>90</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, Routledge Classics Edition (New York: Routledge, 2003), 127.

The ritual burial is also another moment when the collapse of the many iterations of the object into the singular ancient biblical object comes to the fore. In this instance, the temporal dissonance between the ancient tablets created by God and the contemporary iteration of the Torah being buried mirrors the human version of the ritual. Burying a relative, to the individual, is an accepting of the finality that the particularly individual is gone. The enactment of the ritual provides a distinct moment of mourning for those in attendance, a moment when the material nature of God can be felt and mourners acknowledge the loss like they would the loss of a family member.

However, while the ritual mirrors a human burial, the post-ritual mourning period is not ritually commanded. There is not a designated *shiva* (mourning) period for the Torah. This lack of an extended mourning period creates an important boundary between the human and spiritual. While the object is viewed as a representation of the divine and is mourned as such, *shiva* is observed by the parents, children, spouses, and siblings of the deceased. Since the object does not have this specific relationship to anyone assembled, *shiva* is not observed. Instead, the material object of the Torah has died while the divinity it represents continues to palpably exist in ritual and religious practice. Thus, the mourning need only extend to the object, and not continue beyond the ritual burial. In this way, the object can be defined as a performing object—one that loses its affective connection with the loss of life. Margaret Williams explores the boundaries between the life and death of animated objects and concludes that, “Puppeteers might like to think that the public believes the puppet lives by itself, but the most common everyday metaphor of the puppet refers to the marionette’s supposedly invisible strings, not to its

‘magical’ life.’<sup>91</sup> While Williams speaks about traditional puppets in theatrical contexts, her conclusion aptly describes a potential reason behind the lack of required mourning: the material object is effectively controlled by its human counterparts.

An understanding of the divine is shaped by one’s belief. A sacred object is afforded its status through one’s belief that the object holds meaning. Similarly, that same object in ritual holds meaning while it fulfills its ceremonial purpose. As I’ve demonstrated in the earlier chapters, the *Sefer Torah* is a meaningful centerpiece of Jewish ritual. Even in its death it retains its power and commands a proper burial. Yet, once the object is buried, the hold of the object is broken. Its material connection to those still alive is replaced with the physical connection between the deceased scholar and the scroll’s remains. Instead, those left behind, the believers who utilized the Torah scroll as their connection to the divine, experience the burial singularly through the loss of a material connection. However, the greater spiritual belief remains, allowing for a clean break that does not continue beyond the ritual itself.

### **Negotiating the Divine**

The ritual burial centers the materiality of the object. It is the object’s material state that is lost. Yet, due to the implied connection to the divine, the burial also provides a negotiation with the materiality of God for those assembled. The active mourning of the spectators is motivated by the loss of the material representation of the divine, of a relationship to God. However, the ritual also serves as a rite of passage, creating a distinct shift from beginning to end. The performance of the burial exists in “its ‘in-betweenness,’ its function as transition

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<sup>91</sup> Margaret Williams, “The Death of the ‘Puppet’?” in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, eds. Dasia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 26.

between two states of more settled or more conventional cultural activity.”<sup>92</sup> Prior to the burial, the community suffered the material and spiritual loss of the *Sefer Torah*. After the burial is complete, the loss is finalized, the object has been recognized and properly cared for. The performative actions of the mourning ritual such as the pounding of their chests, wailing, and prayers bring about catharsis for the community. Through the enactment of grief, emotions of sadness and loss are purged from the community. Only then can they move on and focus their attention back to the everyday rituals—the Torah reading and other daily and weekly prayers that comprise the everyday.

The burial sits in a place of liminality, a place of negotiation. Jon McKenzie notes liminality’s effects as “a mode of activity whose spatial, temporal and symbolic ‘in betweenness’ allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed.”<sup>93</sup> In this ritual, the Torah scroll’s liminality forces the spectators to take stock of the material representation of God in the object. Its continued presence in other rituals enforced the spiritual connection and this burial tangibly reiterates those past performances for the attendees. To those attending the ritual, there is an irreplaceability about that Torah, lending credence to the ritual mourning actions such as the performative actions of grief and inspirational reflections on the role of the Torah in life. Thus, the ritual helps recognize the finality of material death, while also reinforcing the continuity of spiritual belief in humanity and the Torah. Ultimately, it is the object’s materiality that justifies the ritual action of burial, and the performance is in fact a celebration of the tangible relationship that is forged between those in

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<sup>92</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 14.

<sup>93</sup> Jon McKenzie, “The Liminal-Norm,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Bial and Sara Brady, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 11.

conference with the object and the thing itself. The *Sefer Torah*'s lifecycle ends how it begins—  
by bringing together the community in worship.

## Conclusion: Returning the Torah to the Ark

### The Torah Scroll and Jewishness

This thesis began with the action of the *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah*, a ritual fixated on the Torah's material presence in the center of a markedly Jewish space for distinctly Jewish people. Both the creation and ritual burial of the Torah follow the same pattern, centering the Torah's materiality in the performance's spatial, temporal, and physical realities. All three of the examples presented here are distinctly shaped by the conditions and context of their performance and the enactment of these rituals provide worshippers with the ability to connect with the object of the Torah, and by extension, the divine. Analyzing the performative nature of these rituals reveals not only the pivotal role the Torah plays in Jewish religious life, but how that role is enforced and necessitated by the performances themselves.

According to Tom Driver the purpose of ritual is threefold: "preserving order, fostering community, and effecting transformation."<sup>94</sup> Each of the rituals described fulfills this triad of purpose. Indeed, each may be emblematic of one of the listed purposes. The creation of the Torah scroll ensures a preservation of order. The past is upheld through the strict codification of rules laid out for the creation of the object. The *Seder K'riat Ha'Torah* cultivates the feeling of *communitas* around the object of the Torah, enforcing a present-day community through the ritual re-enactment of the original presentation of the Torah. And the ritual burial of a derelict *Sefer Torah* brings a material to spiritual transformation as the object is mourned and its divine connection is shifted back into an abstraction removed from the object itself. All three rituals

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<sup>94</sup> Tom Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 71.

impress upon the participants the primacy of the Torah's hold on Jewish faith and its inherent connection to spirituality. And by completing a full lifecycle from birth to death, the Torah plays the role of a human, forging a performative association between the Torah's enacted humanness in ritual and the spectator's spiritual connection to the object.

Further, ritual provides a window into the inner workings of a culture's values. Driver observes the lasting power of ownership over ritual, arguing, "Rituals belong to us, and we to them, as surely as do our language and culture. The human choice is not whether to ritualize, but when, how, where, and why."<sup>95</sup> In thinking about rituals surrounding the Torah, the actions clearly define an objective sense of Jewishness. The ownership of these rituals is intrinsically linked to Jewish identity and practice. While Simon J. Bronner introduces his edited volume on Jewish cultural studies with the caveat, "Jewishness, or what people think of as Jewish....may be distinct from the Jew or the things made by Jews," in the context of rituals utilizing the Torah, the thing made by Jews is in fact what expresses Jewishness.<sup>96</sup> This is the defining feature of Torah rituals—they perpetuate the peoplehood of Jews and the values upheld by the religion.<sup>97</sup> The way these rituals ask the participants and the object to perform emphasize the fact that Jewishness is steeped in a remembering of the past and specific, embodied actions.

### **Recurring Themes: Community, Materiality, and Re-enactment**

As I demonstrated throughout this thesis, the Torah scroll positions itself as a manifestation of a divine connection. The object, while not a direct representation of God in

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<sup>95</sup> Driver, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Bronner, Simon K., ed., *Jewishness: Expression, Identity, and Representation* (Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 1.

<sup>97</sup> Bronner, Simon K., ed., *Revisioning Ritual Jewish Traditions in Transition* (Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011), 3



material form, often stands in for God when it is referenced, handled, or manipulated. The lifecycle rituals of the Torah make clear that each ritual reinforces the divine nature of the object's materiality, linking the spiritual and material worlds and encouraging spectators to foster an interdependent relationship between the Torah scroll, a conceptual understanding of divinity, and their own spiritual beliefs. The object is living an enactment of a human life by having a lifecycle, and each of these rituals bridge the gap between the human and divine through the participation of both the spectators and the object. The participants are responsible for the performances of the object and its inclusion as a full member of the community. The object must also perform the rituals and complete its lifecycle to reaffirm its role as a member of the community and its connection to the sacred. The object's performance echoes the humans' performances.

These rituals also rely heavily on re-enactment of an historical past to provide a temporally affective experience for the spectator. In these rituals, there is an embodied reminder of the past, which is mirrored in the text the Torah holds. This embodiment in ritual performance relies on a collective remembering of the past to aid in the present function of the ritual. Theatre historian Marvin Carlson theorizes that in performance "all reception is deeply involved with memory, because it is memory that supplies the codes and strategies that shape reception."<sup>98</sup> The past iterations of the ritual, both historical and more recent iterations, are remembered by the participants, shaping their reception of the ritual and its affective response. This re-enacting is formative in shaping the communal identity forged between actor, participant, and ritual object.

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<sup>98</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 5.

Jewish ritual at its core is about community. The public rituals described in these pages rely on the participation of both actors and spectators. The rituals as enacted for and by the community. However, it is the object of the Torah that brings together these participants and acts as the binding force through what the object itself enacts and what is acted upon it. Through these rituals, Jews are brought into communion with the object of the Torah and with each other. The ritual encourages a collectivity, a singularity of embodied feeling that is driven by the object of the Torah. The Jewishness of the object and the performances with it enforce the Jewishness of the people and the Jewishness of the experience they have.

### **The Nuances of Denomination and Individuality**

While this thesis explores the role of the Torah scroll specifically in the lifecycle rituals involving its use, this thesis does not provide an overview of the nuances of the ritual as they change from one Jewish denomination to another. A further study of these rituals could observe how Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox communities alter the ritual actions discussed to fit their own religious views and customs. If a denomination doesn't complete certain ritual actions does that change the participant's affective connection to the object? Does it become just a text and not a sacred object if certain actions are not performed? Or are these main rituals of the Torah's lifecycle maintained across the denominations strictly because, while other aspects may change, the performances of/with the Torah are precisely what creates the sacrality, the link to the divine, and the connection to an historical past? Such a study would consider a different nexus of belief that may or may not alter one's feelings of connection to the object of the Torah scroll. Additionally, one might consider how Torah study—itsself a type of ritual—alters one's material connection to the scroll. How is one's experience of and view of the Torah changed by

the setting in which one reads the Torah, such as in synagogue ritual or individual text study? Does the valuing of the text over the material object shift the object's value, enhancing or disillusioning belief? All of these circumstances fall outside the scope of this work but remain important next steps for investigating the Torah's material position within Jewish life, custom, and ritual.

Instead, the *Sefer Torah* is to be returned to the *Aron Ha'Kodesh*. As the scroll is put away the congregation praises the Torah for the last time: "She is a tree of life to those who grasp her. And whoever holds on to her is happy"<sup>99</sup> and "Take us back, O LORD, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our day as of old!" Even in these final metaphors the scroll is compared to a living thing with roots in the material world and the divine. The idea of the Torah as a tree who should be held on to enforces a tactile relationship between the object of the Torah or the divine and the assembled congregation. The divine connection is once more mixed in this performative utterance with the present community. The Torah scroll is the lifeblood of the congregation with the community grasping at the branches and laying down roots together, while God is present in the object of the Torah and the congregation is awaiting the restoration of a past gone but not forgotten. The putting away of the Torah recognizes the urge for closeness to the object. The performative exclamation of yearning for the object continues the scroll's aliveness beyond its disappearance from view. While the performance ends, the object's influence remains. The Torah is the enduring link, the tree of life, everlasting in its material embodiment of Jewishness.

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<sup>99</sup> Prov. 3:18 (JPS Tanakh) and Lam. 5:21.

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