

Holy Recycling: Keep Going Higher in Holiness

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Recycling is all the rage these days but the sages were already doing it more than 1500 years ago. We find out about this sort of holy recycling in tractate Megillah. The idea is one you know from Hannukkah. Just as we increase the number of candles each night, we try to maintain the holiness of something, even when it's worn out. And the sages are definitely into the concept of "reuse/recycle."

In the "recycle" department, we find out what to do with worn out Torah scrolls and Torah covers:

What do we do with worn out Torah covers? They are made into shrouds for a *meit mitzvah* (a dead person who has no one to bury him or her), and this constitutes their storing away.

Rava also said:

"A *Sefer Torah*, which is worn out may be buried by the side of a *talmid hacham* [a student of a sage], and also by one who [only] repeats *halachot*."
(B. Megillah 26b)

Here, we see that the holiness of a Torah scroll is there, even if it's too worn down to read in synagogue. And the Torah covers still retain some of their holiness, having absorbed it by being in such close proximity to the scroll over a long period of time.

In the "reuse" department, we find out what to do with worn out *mezuzahs* and *tefillin*:

Mezuzahs are more important than *tefillin*. *Tefillin* that wore out may be made into a *mezuzah*. A *mezuzah* that wore out may not be made into *tefillin*. Why? Because we ascend in matters of holiness but we don't ascend. (Y. Megillah 4:12, 41a2//B. Menachot 32a)

Clearly, the sages think that a *mezuzah* is holier than *tefillin*.

So let the discussion begin!

Discussion Questions:

1. What does your community do with its worn out Torah covers? Does your community have a storage place where worn out holy texts are stored? Where is it? Have you ever put anything in it?
2. Why would the sages think that *mezuzahs* are holier than *tefillin*? *Tefillin* have more Torah verses in them. But *mezuzahs* stay up on your house 24-7. Was this the reason or do you think it was something else?
3. If you're aging, how would you like to be "recycled" or "reused"? Do you want the holiness you had in your prime to still be honored as you age? Is your "holiness" expressed through titles, material goods and/or honors?

As always, looking forward to your answers!