

Comprehension Workbook 9

Writing a Torah

(A Torah scroll)



Find out about the meaning of stories and articles

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Find out about the meaning of stories and articles

Jewish faith

Matches the requirements of the Literacy Strategy and designed to integrate with the study of world religions. (This material is independent of any specific text book and can be used alongside any publisher's books including our Jewish Faith, Synagogue, Jewish art and writing and Jewish holy days books.)

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Unit 9: Writing a Torah scroll

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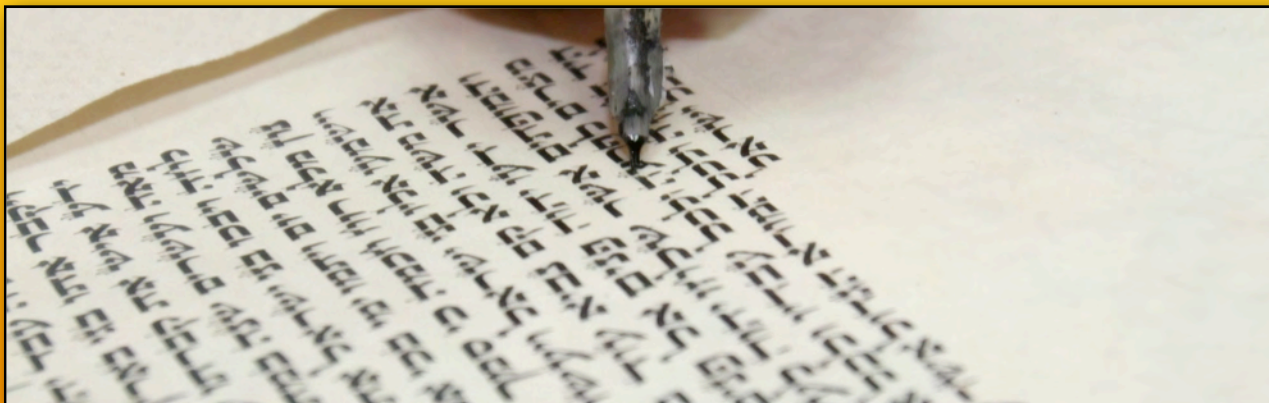
Writing a Torah scroll

There are many printed versions of the Torah – the Jewish Bible. But when the Torah is read in the synagogue, a hand-written version, called a Sefer Torah, is used. The Sefer Torah is written on a scroll and must be made by specially trained scribes, called sofer. The scrolls are made using ancient methods and must be written in a particular way, so that the words in every single Sefer Torah are exactly the same. Here is some information about how a Sefer Torah is made.

The Sefer Torah is made from sheets of parchment. The parchment is usually made from cow hide and prepared by the scribe. The scribe first soaks the skin in lime water, to remove any hairs, and then stretches it over a wooden frame. While the skin dries, the scribe scrapes the skin and sands it until it is smooth enough to write on. It takes around 80 skins to make a single Sefer Torah scroll.

When the parchment is dry, the scribe marks out the lines and columns. There are exactly 248 columns of text in the Sefer Torah, and each sheet of parchment must have three columns, with a margin of three inches at the top, four inches at the bottom and two inches between columns. There must be 42 lines in each column.

The scribe then makes the quills and ink. The quills are made of feathers from a kosher bird, such as a goose. The end of the feather is sharpened to a point. The ink is made by mixing powdered gall nuts, copper sulphate crystals, gum arabic, and water. This is an ancient recipe. The ink is mixed up in small amounts as it is needed.



The scroll cannot contain any errors. Sometimes a small mistake can be corrected by scraping off the ink, but if a mistake is made while writing one of the names of God, that piece of parchment must be placed into storage – the scribe is not allowed to destroy any parchment that contains the name of God. There are exactly 304,805 letters in the Torah and each one must be perfect. No letter can be touching another letter.

The scribe often wears gloves while writing, so the oils in his hands do not get on the parchment. The scribe says special prayers before he starts work each day, and while he is writing. It can take one whole day to write out just one column, or about a third of a page of the Torah. Every word must be spoken aloud before it is written, and no word can be written from memory. The scribe must check each word against another copy of the Sefer Torah before writing it.

When the writing is finished and has been checked three times, the scribe sews the sheets of parchment together to make one long scroll. He uses thread made from the leg sinews of a kosher animal, such as a cow, sheep or ox. There must be one stitch for every six lines of text. Finally, the scroll ends are attached to wooden rollers. It can take a year to finish just one Sefer Torah scroll.



Understanding words

Before we can understand a story we have to know what all of the words mean. Let's try one...

a Write a sentence in which you found the word 'parchment'.

b From that sentence, write what you think 'parchment' means.

c Write a new sentence using the word 'parchment'.

d Use a dictionary to find words with a similar meaning (synonyms) to 'parchment'.

e What is one use for 'parchment'.



Finding key words

Next, we need to find the key words that tell us what the story is about...

Read the story and underline the key words. Write the most important of these key words in a list like the one below. Write next to it a word that means a similar thing (a synonym). You don't have to use all the spaces, but you should not use more.

Key word	Synonym (similar word)
Example: errors	mistakes

3

Summarising

(the gist of the story)

To summarise means to rewrite the story in a shorter version using as many of our key words from Task 2 as needed.

1 Write a heading for your summary.

2 Now write the main idea in one sentence.
e.g. "This story tells us..."

3 Now add some detail to the main idea by writing more sentences after it.

**Finally,
can you rewrite your
summary to make it better?**

- 1. Look out for errors such as using the same word too often – use alternatives.**
- 2. Make sure you have summarised the author's purpose in your OWN words.**
- 3. Make sure your summary is in a logical order.**
- 4. Is your summary informative AND interesting to others?**

**There is
nothing wrong
with rewriting; even
the best authors
rewrite their
work.**

Sequencing

Sequencing means getting the events in the right order. Write these sentences in the correct order, so they make sense.

There must be 42 lines in each column.

There must be one stitch for every six lines of text.

The scribe then makes the quills and ink.

The scribe says special prayers before he starts work each day, and while he is writing.

The scribe first soaks the skin in lime water, to remove any hairs, and then stretches it over a wooden frame.

The scribe must check each word against another copy of the Sefer Torah before writing it.



Get to the facts

Answer these questions to see how much you know about the facts of the story.



Write a sentence to answer each of these questions:

- How many letters are there in each Sefer Torah?
- About how long does it take to make one Sefer Torah?
- What are the quills made from?
- How many times is the finished writing checked?
- Around how many skins does it take to make a single scroll?



Whys and wherefores

Answer these questions to see how much you know about the meanings in the story and how it was written.

1 Why does it take so long to make a single scroll?

2 Are any modern materials used to make the scroll?

3 What happens if a mistake is made on a piece of parchment that contains one of the names of God?

4 Why does the scribe wear gloves while writing?



Opinions matter

Answer these questions to give your views and to develop the story.

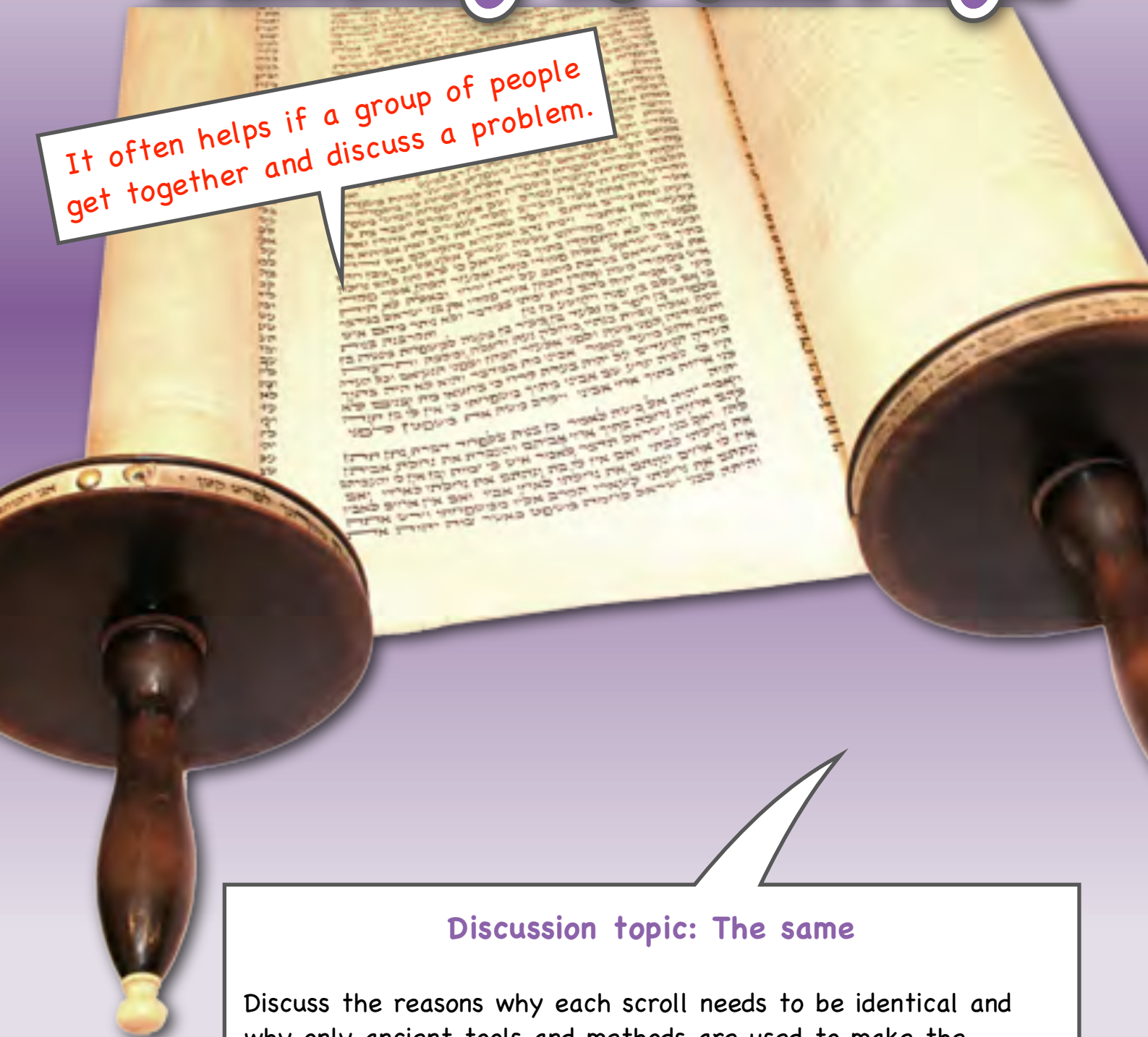


- 1 Why does each scroll need to be exactly the same as all the others?
- 2 Why are the scrolls made using ancient methods?
- 3 Why don't they just use printed copies of the Torah in synagogues?
- 4 Why can't the scribe write the words from memory?
- 5 Is being a Sefer Torah scribe a religious job?



Talking it through

It often helps if a group of people get together and discuss a problem.



Discussion topic: The same

Discuss the reasons why each scroll needs to be identical and why only ancient tools and methods are used to make the scrolls. The first Torah scrolls were made using these same methods and materials. Could this be the reason? Jews believe that the Torah contains the actual words of God. Does this have something to do with why each scroll needs to be identical?



Make a story...

When you read a description it often gives you ideas about how the event might be described differently.



Write a scroll

You are an ancient scribe and it is your job to write out a scroll to be used in worship. First you gather all of your materials together...

(Now you finish the story by describing what materials you would use and how you would write out the scroll...)

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