

Tikkun Seforim – giving new life to sacred books

Jesse Hefter, February 9, 2023

The Hebrew word “*Tikkun*” means to repair or restore. The popular term “*Tikkun Olam*” (found in the 2nd paragraph of the *Aleynu* prayer), refers to repairing that which is broken in our world, to look for opportunities to utilize our resources to make the world more peaceful, more tolerant. The term “*Tikkun Hammidot*” refers to efforts one expends with the purpose of improving one’s character.

Tikkun Chatzot refers to a ritual prayer recited each night after midnight that seeks to express our continued mourning for the destruction of the *Beit Hamiqdash* in Jerusalem and, through this prayer, to hope for the rebuilding of the Temple when the darkness of exile and destruction will once again be brightened and restored to a new level of splendor.

The term “*Tikkun*” is also found in the phrase “*Tikkun Sofrim*” (literally translated as Corrections of the Scribes) which refers to a collection of specific changes made to the text of the Bible by ancient scribes to address wordings that might have been misinterpreted as dishonoring God.

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There are several possibilities:

- One could opt to put the used *sefer* in a box or pile somewhere in the synagogue and relegate it to a forgotten corner,
- One could leave it on a bookshelf and purchase newer copies for regular use,
- One could repair the *sefer*, if possible, and return it to regular use in the synagogue or at home.

Why might one, choosing the third option, make the effort to re sew a binding, tape torn pages together, or reinforce the book end and the corners of the covers?

Holding a *siddur* in my hands that has worn out to the point where the pages are falling out, the covers are loose, and the backstrip (the part covering the spine of the book) is torn or missing sends a powerful message to me. This book has passed through many hands before me. This book has history. This book has been open to hear the *Chazan*/Leader of the congregation repeat the *Shmoneh Esray* or participated in the responsive recitation of *Anim Zmirot* or *Avinu Malkenu*.



Drilled, re sewn, and ready for covers and spine (Image courtesy of Jesse Hefter)

The words on the pages of this particular volume have been viewed by the eyes of pray-ers and these individuals have turned the pages of this book, by hand, hundreds if not thousands of times. This book has a story. This book has had relationships with people in need, people in search, people looking for restoration, for “*Tikkun Ha-nefesh*” restoration of their inner wellness.

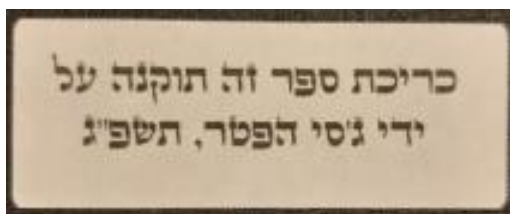
So, I enjoy taking the *sefer* segments apart and repairing them, section by section. It may only require taping a cover back to the main printed-pages section. It may require fabricating a new cover of similar cardboard material to give the book back its covers. It may require drilling through the entire set of pages to re sew the binding to keep all the pages together properly and securely. It may require taping tears of individual pages one-by-one. However, with each step in the process, the book gets healthier and stronger. The book prepares to serve its user again.



A new cover ready to be attached to an old Siddur (Image courtesy of Jesse Hefter)

Not only is the book restored but the fixer of the book feels the portion of the book's journey that he or she has had the privilege to share. Rather than the hand of the book reader during prayer or Bible study, the *sefer* feels the hand of the fixer, the restorer, bringing new life to it.

And, sometimes, you might find that the book was repaired by someone else, years before you have chosen to restore it. You might see a name written on an inside cover and a date or a label explaining who repaired the *sefer* and when. Imagine, that earlier individual saw the value in repairing what was worn out or broken at that time and, very possibly, shared many of the same thoughts as I do, restoring the *sefer* after its many more years of use.



Label inside sefer cover placed by the binder (Image courtesy of Jesse Hefter)

Oscar Wilde, in the 'Beauties of Bookbinding', Pall Mall Gazette (November 23, 1888), observed that "Bookbinding is essentially decorative, and good decoration is far more often suggested by material and mode of work than by any desire on the part of the designer to tell us of his joy in the world" ... "The

beauty of bookbinding is abstract decorative beauty”... “The purpose of the two covers is to protect the ‘world’s written wealth’.”

Perhaps, for books of holy and spiritual use, the rebinding of a Sefer is far more than decorative, and the efforts of the binder become a portion of the history of the Sefer. Restoring the Sefer is not abstract but rather concrete and real. The restoration extends the history of that Sefer, thereby allowing the book to continue its goal of affecting pray-ers and students. For books used for spiritual purposes, perhaps those same covers protect and preserve the “word’s sacred wealth”.