

# Jewish Value Considerations When Working with Judaica

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## Overview

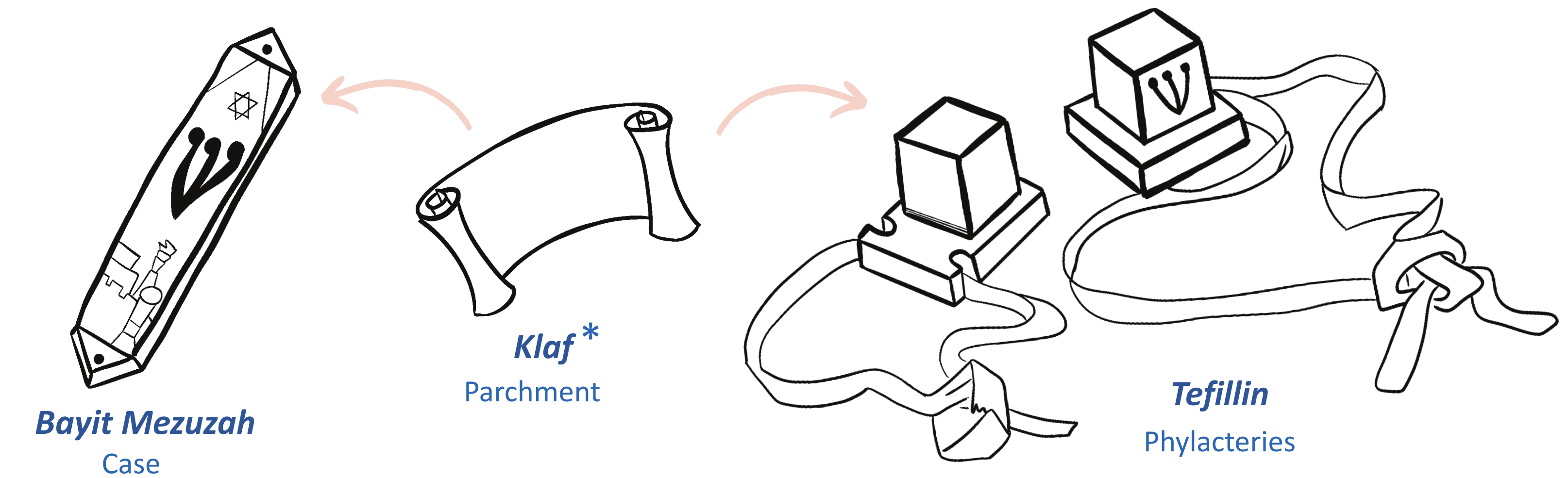
The purpose of this poster is to introduce traditional classifications for Jewish holy objects and suggest ways that their cultural significance may be recognized and respected in tandem with modern preservation practices. By looking at these traditions and techniques, we can examine the values they are trying to communicate and apply those larger values to collection care work. This poster is designed for anyone who may steward Judaica in an institution, community or home.

## Traditional Classifications

According to the traditional classification of sacred Jewish objects, there are four categories, each with different rules about the creation, use, and end of the object. Some categories have strict rules, others are more relaxed. These traditional classifications only consider traditional ritual objects and are based in *halakha* – Jewish rabbinic law – which are laid out in the *Talmud*, a compendium of Jewish law and rabbinic interpretation.

In this system, there is a hierarchy of sacred objects and rules that dictate how they are to be made, handled, repaired, and disposed of through burial. *Klei kodesh* are holy objects (literally translate to “vessels of holiness”) because they have the name of G-d written on them one or more times. They are considered sacred whether they are in use or not. Examples of *klei kodesh* are a *sefer Torah* (Torah scroll), *tefillin* or *mezuzah* parchment scroll, all of which are carefully crafted by a *sofer*, or scribe, who must handwrite every letter flawlessly. The very creation of these items involves spiritual *kavana* – intent – to infuse them with *kedusha* - holiness. Objects that are traditionally “more holy” have special handling guidelines, aimed at preserving the structural integrity of the ink on the parchment and legibility of the text, which, if damaged, deems the objects no longer *kosher*, or fit for ritual use.

Other objects fall into one of three categories, each different in nuanced ways, but for the sake of collection care practices can all be considered “not sacred.”

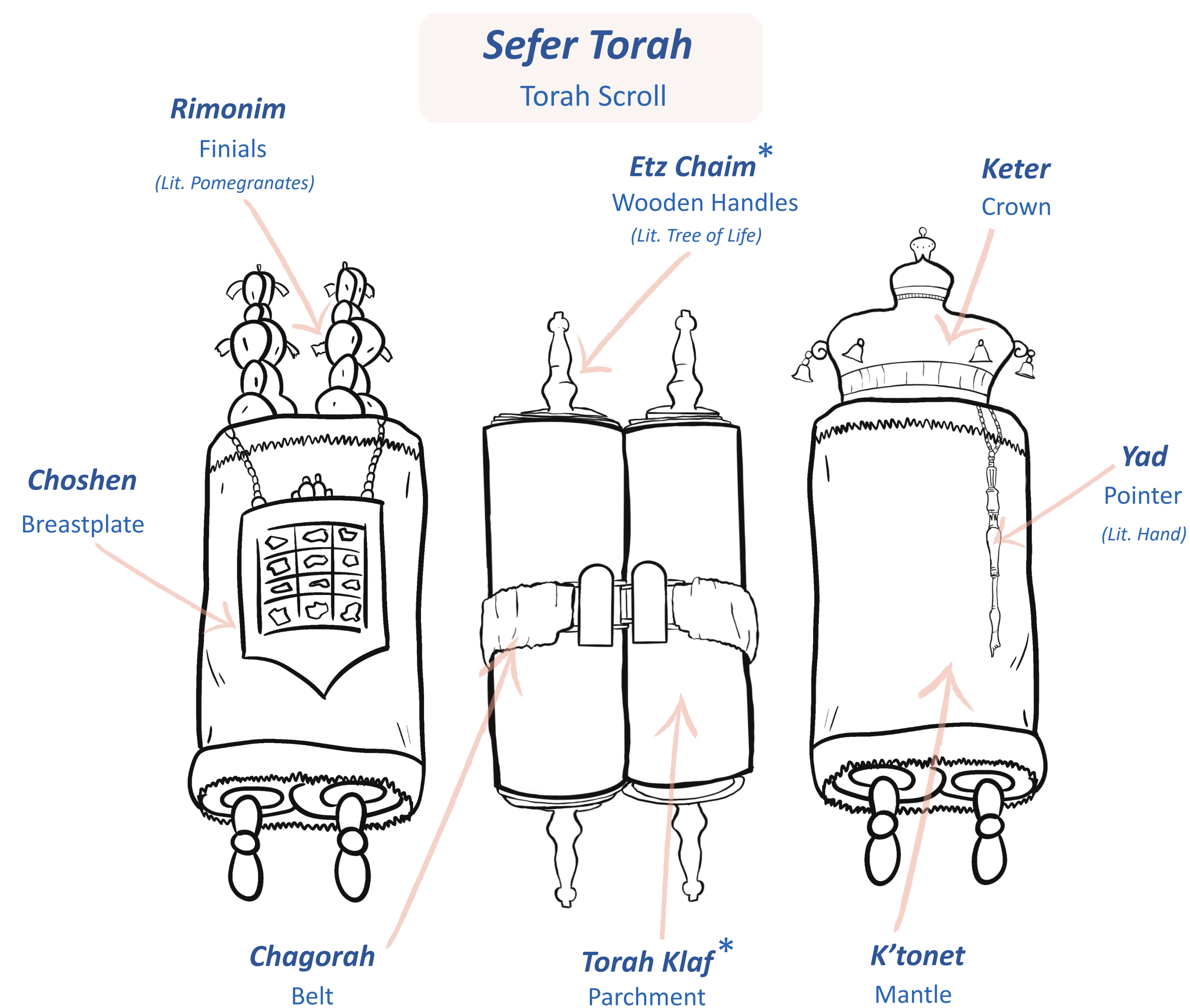


English	Transliteration	Hebrew
* Holy objects (literally “vessels of holiness”)	<i>Klei Kodesh</i>	כלי קודש*
Accoutrements of holy objects (literally “holy utensil”)	<i>Tashmishei Kedushah</i>	תשמישי קדושה
Ritual implements (literally “commanded utensil”)	<i>Tashmishei Mitzvah</i>	תשמישי מצווה
Optional ritual object (has several definitions, but we’ll use “optional”)	<i>Reshut</i>	רשות

“חבי אדם לנהג כבוד גדול בספר תורה.” **“A person must have great respect for a *Sefer Torah*. It is their duty to assign a special place for it and to treat this place with honor, and to hold it in utmost reverence.”**

Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 28:3

Outlined below are some practical collection care notes for the most spiritually sensitive, the *Sefer Torah*, or Torah scroll, which is *klei kodesh*, the most holy object in the Jewish tradition. The following recommendations are based on a *Sefer Torah* still in ritual use, which must stay free from imperfections to remain *kosher* and be used in ritual. These are the strictest limitations, and do not apply to all Judaica. However, by examining these traditions and techniques, we can examine the values they are trying to communicate and apply those to collection care work.



## Storage

A *sefer Torah* is usually stored upright, at an angle – its *atzei chaim*, or wooden rollers (lit. “trees of life”), resting on a backboard, its front feet up against a footrest. The scroll is stored inside its protective and decorative wrappings and adornments. One or several Torah scrolls can be stored together. An *aron kodesh* is a special nook, box, or cabinet that is designated to store the scrolls, and should not be used to store other objects. The *aron kodesh* is kept closed, and it is customary for folks to stand to show respect when it is opened. In addition to respect, this arrangement also has practical benefits of thoughtful storage practice – protection from light, water, pests, and fluctuations in relative humidity.

→ Safe spaces have tangible and intangible value.

## Behavior and Conduct

The holiness of a *sefer Torah* extends around it, making the space it inhabits holy. How we behave around a *sefer Torah* is representative of our attitude towards holiness. There are some *halakic* specifications, but essentially it is forbidden to do anything disrespectful in the presence of a Torah scroll. The *sefer Torah* should not be kept in or near a bathroom or gravehouse. It is also considered impolite to sit on the same surface on which a Torah is resting. As a rough guide, if you wouldn't do it at the dinner table, don't do it around the Torah. In many traditions, it is customary to kiss the Torah as it passes by.

→ Encourage dignity and respect.

## Handling

When handling or using, users are careful to not touch the written surface of the Torah parchment. Partly, this is to make sure the *sefer* is respected (not touching something is a powerful way to signify importance); partly, it is because touching can cause damage to the text, which may ritually invalidate the entire object. If you need to touch the parchment for some reason, do it in private. It is both customary and practical to place a lining or covering on the surface before placing the Torah down. All people, including non-Jews and women, may hold a *sefer Torah* and read from it. While some communities may have their own traditions that prohibit this, there is no *halakha* (law) against it. Traditionally, a scroll is carried by resting it against one's body and supporting it from the bottom.

**Dropping a *sefer Torah*** is considered a tragedy, a communal traumatic event, and should be avoided with careful handling. If it happens, a Rabbi should be consulted immediately for next steps, which will likely include some sort of communal fasting to symbolize grief.

→ Work with intention.

## Emergency Preparedness

The Torah is considered is the soul of the community, their “portable homeland” and embodies the holiness of its message. After prioritizing human life and safety, Torah scrolls should be a salvage priority before, during, and after disasters.

→ Value life, center people.

## Fixing Problems

If there is a structural or aesthetic issue in any part of the Torah scroll (parchment, ink, seams, wooden rollers), a *sofer* (scribe) should be consulted.

It is recommended to inspect Torah scrolls regularly (every five years) to make sure the Torah is in stable condition. This way, any minor issues can be resolved before they expand into the text, rendering the scroll “not kosher.”

It is encouraged that Jewish people actively engage with ritual by challenging tradition, asking questions, and engaging with texts.

→ Know when to ask for help.

→ Be curious and ask questions.

## End-of-Life

Religious manuscripts, including *sifrei Torah*, that time or human error have rendered unfit for use cannot be “thrown out,” but rather “require *genizah*” – removal, for example, to a jar, closet, or burial plot that they may “decay of their own accord.” While this may not be applicable to objects that have shifted in meaning upon entering a museum collection, stewards should consider the tradition and implied values.

→ Sometimes you must say goodbye.

**About the Author**  
Margalit Schindler (they/them) is a Preventive Conservation Graduate Fellow in the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation. Margalit is the grandchild of Holocaust survivors and is an engaged member of the Jewish community. A passion for Jewish culture has led to a focus in studying and impacting the preservation of Judaica in collectors around the world. Margalit is inspired by the Jewish value of *L'Dor v'Dor* - from generation to generation - an appeal to pass things on. This parallels the American Institute for Conservation Code of Ethics, which states that material heritage has “an invaluable and irreplaceable legacy that must be preserved for future generations.” They are working to combine preventive conservation and social justice, supporting traditionally marginalized collections by sharing information and empowering others.

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This diagram illustrates the components and accoutrements of a traditional *Ashkenazi* (Eastern European) *sefer Torah*. The scroll itself is considered *klei kodesh*. All other objects are *Tashmishei Kedushah*, and are not, themselves, sacred. (The exception is an *etz chaim* that has already been attached to a *klaf* - it, too, requires *geniza*.)