

HALAKHIC CASE FOR SACRED RECYCLING

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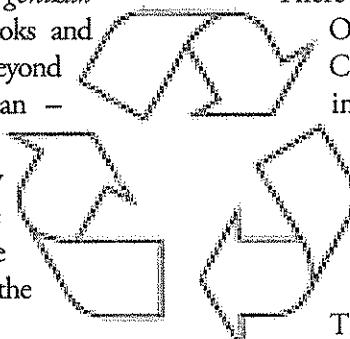
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A certain respect for Hebrew books, in particular for prayer books and religious texts, has been long ingrained in all of us. We are, after all, the people of the book. But the rabbis made it clear, if we didn't get there on our own, that destroying or erasing God's name is forbidden, and that any Hebrew book should be treated with a similar respect. Thus arose the concept of *genizah* – of burying Hebrew books and papers when they were beyond their functional life-span – either in the ground, or in an enclosed repository that would eventually be sealed, often inside the walls of a building (e.g. the Cairo *Genizah*).

Over the years, *genizah* became problematic — the advent of printing multiplied enormously the amount of worn paper seeking burial. We might have avoided that problem had our medieval predecessors concluded that a printed book is not sacred as a written manuscript had been. That is the decision they made, for instance, about the holiness of a Torah scroll, which it would inhere only in written copies and not in printed *humashim*. But about the respect due books, they determined that it applied to printed books as well. And the *genizah* problem was born.

Several medieval rabbis, decrying the loose pages they saw scattered in the wind as they awaited collection of enough used books to merit the rare book burial, suggested that they might be burnt. As you can

imagine, that was not well received. And the books were not really the problem. It was the loose pages. Every printer had piles of loose test prints all awaiting burial. And the matter went from bad to worse. We developed photocopying, then offset printing, then computer printers. The proliferation of loose pages of sacred text knows no bounds.



There is discussion, in the Orthodox as well as the Conservative communities in Israel and in this country, to consider recycling as a possible way to dispose of loose pages; even as bound books are still buried.

The argument began by noting the difference between the intention in preparing bound books to hold them in permanent use, and the intent for photocopies and loose pages to have a more transient existence. They are, by that perception, less clearly sanctified. And recycling is more respectful than disposal for it is done with the intention of protecting God's creation – a contribution that even a worn page can make as it retires. And so our Committee on Jewish Law and Standards ruled in 2003.

The religious value of recycling, of participating in the mitzvah to protect God's world, is what allows recycling to function as a substitute for the burial of loose sacred papers. It's sanctity is no less when we recycle lesser paper as well. Let us act in all our ways *l'taken olam*, to repair God's world, His glory and our home.