



Conservation Ethics and Sacred Heritage: Reflections from a Megillat Esther

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Abstract: This article discusses the conservation treatment of a *Megillat Esther* (Scroll of Esther) undertaken at the Polytechnic Institute of Tomar, which served as a point of departure for a broader reflection on the ethical and methodological challenges involved in conserving Jewish sacred objects. Beyond the technical intervention, the study explores the complex interplay between halakhic prescriptions, ritual function, and professional conservation ethics. It underscores the scarcity of clear, accessible guidelines and scholarly research addressing the care of ritual heritage, leaving conservators with limited reference frameworks when dealing with objects of living religious significance. Drawing on contemporary approaches to values-based and community-centred conservation, the discussion argues for the establishment of interdisciplinary collaboration between conservators, Jewish Studies' scholars, and religious authorities to develop coherent, context-sensitive ethical protocols that respect both the material integrity and the spiritual meaning of sacred artefacts.

Keywords: conservation ethics, sacred objects, Jewish heritage, religious heritage preservation, intercultural conservation practices, parchment conservation

Ética en la conservación del patrimonio sagrado: reflexiones a partir de una Meguilat Ester

Resumen: Este artículo presenta la intervención de conservación de una *Meguilat Ester* (Rollo de Ester) realizada en el Instituto Politécnico de Tomar, que sirvió como punto de partida para una reflexión más amplia sobre los desafíos éticos y metodológicos implicados en la conservación de objetos sagrados judíos. Más allá del tratamiento técnico, el estudio explora la compleja relación entre las prescripciones halájicas, la función ritual y la ética profesional de la conservación. Se subraya la escasez de directrices claras y accesibles, así como la falta de estudios académicos dedicados al cuidado del patrimonio ritual, lo que deja a los conservadores con marcos de referencia limitados al tratar con objetos de significado religioso vivo. A partir de enfoques contemporáneos basados en los valores y centrados en las comunidades, se propone el establecimiento de una colaboración interdisciplinaria entre conservadores, estudiosos judíos y autoridades religiosas para desarrollar protocolos éticos coherentes y sensibles al contexto, que respeten tanto la integridad material como el significado espiritual de los artefactos sagrados.

Palabras clave: ética de la conservación, objetos sagrados, patrimonio judío, preservación del patrimonio religioso, prácticas de conservación intercultural, conservación de pergaminos

Ética da conservação de património sagrado: reflexões a partir de uma Meguilat Ester

Resumo: Este artigo apresenta o tratamento de conservação de uma *Megillat Esther* (Rolo de Ester) realizado no Instituto Politécnico de Tomar, que serviu como ponto de partida para uma reflexão mais ampla sobre os desafios éticos e metodológicos envolvidos na conservação de objetos sagrados judaicos. Para além da intervenção técnica, o estudo explora a complexa relação entre as prescrições haláchicas, a função ritual e a ética profissional da conservação e restauro. Salienta a escassez de diretrizes claras e acessíveis, bem como de investigação académica sobre o cuidado do património ritual, deixando os conservadores-restauradores com poucos referenciais ao lidar com objetos de significado religioso vivo. Com base em abordagens contemporâneas centradas nos valores e nas comunidades, a discussão defende o estabelecimento de uma colaboração interdisciplinária entre conservadores, estudiosos do judaísmo e autoridades religiosas, com vista a desenvolver protocolos éticos coerentes e sensíveis ao contexto, que respeitem simultaneamente a integridade material e o significado espiritual dos artefactos sagrados.

Palavras-chave: ética da conservação, objetos sagrados, património judaico, preservação do património religiosos, práticas de conservação intercultural, conservação de pergaminhos

Introduction

Between October 2023 and May 2024, a conservation and restoration intervention was carried out at the Polytechnic Institute of Tomar (Portugal) on a parchment scroll containing a Hebrew text belonging to a private collection. The parchment scroll was in a very poor condition, severely desiccated, and the various layers of the scroll had become fused together, making it impossible to open or read the text.

The conservation intervention was undertaken in response to specific objectives defined by the owner, Pedro Proença Cunha. The primary aim was to reveal the concealed text, thereby enabling its study. From the outset, considering its typology and the materials employed, it was presumed to be, in all likelihood, a religious text. Additionally, the owner expressed the intention that the conservation and restoration treatment should allow the parchment to be returned, in rolled form, to its original silver case.

Due to the object's poor state of preservation, the intervention began without a clear understanding of the precise nature of the text. The process proved to be highly complex: in addition to the technical challenges arising from the extensive damage to the parchment, ethical considerations emerged as one of the major difficulties throughout the intervention—both during the treatment and in its aftermath. From the outset, the work was guided by a difficult dilemma: either to present a partially completed intervention, thereby preserving a significant portion of the text still concealed but safeguarding its informational content for future generations, or to proceed with the complete unrolling of the scroll, accepting the considerable risk of losing parts of the text and damaging sections of the parchment support.

The first option was chosen. Following the intervention, and once the content of the text had been identified, it became necessary to critically assess the entire conservation process and its boundaries. The object was ultimately identified as a *Megillat Esther*—a parchment scroll recounting the story of Queen Esther, traditionally read in synagogues during the Jewish festival of Purim (Mucznik *et al.* 2009).

None of the conservator-restorers involved in the intervention were Jewish, nor did they possess prior knowledge of Jewish culture. Following an initial phase of research to understand the cultural significance of the object, it became clear that, according to Jewish law, a *Megillat Esther*—although not occupying the same level of sanctity as a Torah scroll—may nonetheless be regarded as a sacred object. Consequently, certain precepts must be observed with regard to its conservation.

At this stage, a fundamental question emerged: what potential implications might the intervention have had, both for the object and for the conservator-restorers

themselves, due to a possible lack of awareness of the strict precepts outlined in *Halakhah*—the body of Talmudic and rabbinic legal writing—concerning interventions in sacred texts?

This article addresses two interrelated dimensions of ethical dilemmas. On the one hand, it considers the decision-making process involved in the defining the conservation and restoration treatment, acknowledging the inherent risks and limitations associated with any chosen course of action. On the other, it examines the broader ethical implications of engaging with sacred text, particularly when they belong to a specific community to which neither the conservation team nor the object's owner belongs. In this context, the present case study—the conservation and restoration of a *Megillat Esther* and its particular circumstances—is understood as a point of departure, offering an opportunity to explore more broadly the complexity inherent in the conservation and restoration of religious heritage, in which multiple dimensions coexist and must be carefully considered: the ongoing need to assess the limits of intervention; the need to interpret the symbolic and ritual values of Jewish objects; and the need to reconcile their devotional, functional, and cultural dimensions—which, as this case illustrates, may at times be in conflict.

Conservation of the Esther scroll

In October 2023, when the scroll arrived at the Graphic Documents Conservation Laboratory of the Polytechnic Institute of Tomar for treatment, it was found to be in a highly fragile condition. The object, measured 20,6 centimeters in height, consisted of a handwritten parchment scroll with Hebrew characters, rolled around a silver central handle [Figures 1]. The upper part of this roller (with a diameter of 4,1 cm) was also made of silver and featured a decorative finial in the form of a crown with a pendant and vegetal motifs [Figure 2]. This element was the upper terminal of a cylindrical case forming the main body of the container designed to hold and protect the parchment, which was in the owner's possession. The winding rod used to roll and unroll the parchment within the case was missing; it was likely also made of silver and would have been sewn to the edge of the first membrane of the scroll.

The parchment exhibited several signs of degradation, including tears, material losses, surface soiling, and abrasion marks [Figure 3]. The surface was found to be extremely rigid and brittle, a condition attributed to prolonged fluctuations in internal relative humidity (Kite and Thomson 2006) and to extensive gelatinisation, which caused the different layers of the scroll to fuse together [Figure 4]. This adhesion of layers represented the main challenge in the process of unrolling the parchment.

The transformation of collagen—the primary protein in animal skin—into gelatine is a common form of deterioration



Figures 1-2.- Figure 1: The scroll before the conservation treatment. Figure 2: Decorative silver crown from the upper part of the protective case (now missing).



Figures 3-4.- Figure 3: The parchment exhibited significant physical damage, including tears and losses. Figure 4: The effects of gelatinisation were particularly visible in the lower section of the document, where several fused layers could be observed.

in parchment. Factors such as high temperature and relative humidity, as well as exposure to pollutants, induce chemical and morphological changes in the collagen fibres, resulting in the formation of brittle surfaces and, in the case of scrolls, the fusion of multiple parchment layers (Kite and Thomson 2006; Larsen *et al.* 2013).

The main objective of the conservation and restoration intervention was to mitigate the impact of the existing damage and to enable the complete unrolling of the parchment. The proposed intervention was therefore designed to address these specific requirements and included the following procedures:

- a) humidification of the parchment in a controlled humidity chamber, to promote the adsorption of moisture by the support and thereby increase its flexibility;
- b) localized humidification of the gelatinised areas, which had caused the adhesion between parchment layers and prevented the scroll from being opened;

- c) consolidation of tears, to prevent further fragmentation and allow the safe handling of the document;
- d) design and construction of an archival storage box, to ensure the long-term protection and appropriate housing of the scroll.

Humidification of the parchment in a controlled humidity chamber produced positive results, increasing its flexibility and consequently reducing its rigidity [Figure 5]. However, during the subsequent stage of localized humidification of the gelatinised areas (using an ultrasonic humidifier) [Figure 6], the main technical challenges — as well as the first ethical dilemmas — began to emerge. On the one hand, the use of moisture on parchment affected by gelatinisation is generally discouraged (Larsen *et al.* 2013), as there is a significant risk of its transformation into a colloidal substance. On the other hand, localized treatment is referenced in the literature as the recommended method for addressing such conditions (Quandt 1996; Kite and Thomson 2006).



Figures 5-6.- Figure 5: The scroll inside the humidity chamber. Figure 6: Localized humidification of the parchment using water vapour.



Figures 7-8.- Figure 7: Detail of the parchment flattening process. After humidification of the support, blotting paper and weights were applied to the surface, as shown in the image. Figure 8: A view of the Megillat Esther after 14 cm of parchment had been unrolled, revealing a visible section of the text.

The intervention confirmed this delicate balance: while the process successfully enabled the separation of several overlapping layers, it also resulted in some damage to the text, including loss of information. After unrolling approximately 14 cm of the parchment [Figure 5-6, 7-8], it became evident that further humidification could not proceed without compromising the object's integrity—that is, without risking significant loss of textual content or structural stability—since the surface remained extremely rigid and brittle, and the underlying layers were strongly adhered to one another.

This situation presented an ethical dilemma: to preserve the scroll partially unrolled, ensuring the protection of the concealed text for the future, or to pursue full unrolling at the cost of a considerable risk of damaging the parchment and losing parts of the text. Ultimately, the first option prevailed. The commitment that conservator-restorers hold toward cultural heritage is clearly articulated in several articles of the profession's Code of Ethics and Deontology (European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organizations –

E.C.C.O.). The Code states that “the conservator-restorer shall respect the [...] physical integrity of the cultural heritage entrusted to her/his care” (Art. 5); that they “shall not continue a treatment, which is not in the best interest of the cultural heritage” (Art. 11); and that they “should limit the treatment to only that which is necessary” (Art. 8). Upon evaluation, all these principles were directly applicable to the situation at hand. Moreover, recent advances in artificial intelligence and digital 3D tomography open new possibilities for future approaches in cases such as this—particularly for the potential non-invasive reading of texts that remain inaccessible due to their fragile state or the inherent limitations of conservation treatments. Notable examples include the recent studies on the Herculaneum and Pompeii papyrus scrolls (Marchant & Nature 2024; Weber 2024).

Finally, the conservation and restoration work carried out in this case allowed for the partial unrolling of the scroll and the recovery of a substantial portion of the text, thus enabling its identification and fulfilling one of the primary objectives of the intervention.



Figures 9-10.- Figure 9: Consolidation of the tears. Figure 10: Detail of the support system for the silver crown, made from Plastazote© (high-density polyethylene foam).



Figures 11-12.- Figure 11: Detail of the parchment flattening process. After humidification of the support, blotting paper and weights were applied to the surface, as shown in the image. Figure 12: A view of the *Megillat Esther* after 14 cm of parchment had been unrolled, revealing a visible section of the text.

Once this decision had been made, the consolidation of tears was carried out using lamb gut and starch paste [figure 9]. Finally, a storage structure for the scroll was designed, consisting of a base onto which the parchment was secured with polyester ribbons, and a protective enclosure made of acid-free grey-white cardboard [Figures 10 and 11]. This housing was intended to ensure the mechanical stability of the scroll and to provide adequate protection against environmental fluctuations and handling-related stress during storage and transport.

The status of the *Megillat Esther*: ritual function and halakhic frameworks

Once the conservation and restoration intervention had been completed, it became possible to identify the content of the scroll, as part of the text was now visible [Figure 12]. It was determined that the object was a

Megillat Esther (*megillat* meaning “scroll” in Hebrew)—the parchment containing the biblical Book of Esther, which is read in synagogues during the festival of Purim (Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe). This festival commemorates a Biblical story wherein Jews in Babylonia escaped a planned attack orchestrated by Haman, an advisor to King Ahasuerus (or Xerxes I). It was the timely intervention of the Jewish queen Esther that persuaded her husband to revoke the decree, that led instead to Haman’s downfall and execution (Mucznik *et al.* 2009).

The *Megillat Esther* is written in ink on parchment and stitched together in the form of a scroll, much like the Torah. It is one of the five *megillot* (scrolls) that form part of the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible), specifically within the section known as the *Ketuvim* (Writings). For this reason, it is considered a sacred text, recognized as part of the divine scripture and bearing religious and spiritual significance (Avnery 2019; Wexler 2024).

Traditional Judaism recognizes two categories of ritual objects: those that possess an inherent quality of holiness, and those that are essential for the performance of a particular ritual or commandment but lack an intrinsic quality that can be defined as “sacred” (Greene 1992; Schindler 2023). Within the category of sacred objects (*klei kodesh*) are included the three written texts: the *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll), the *tefillin* [1], and the *mezuzah* [2]. All of these are, or contain, biblical texts that must be handwritten on parchment, in a specific script, and in strict accordance with prescribed rules, by specially trained scribes (*soferim*). These scribes are also responsible for assembling the Torah scrolls—sewing together the sheets of parchment and mounting them on rollers—and for producing the cases that contain the *tefillin* (Greene 1992).

The defining characteristic shared by objects in this group is that they contain words—specifically, the name of God, or by extension, any divinely written or inspired words—from which their sanctity is derived. The *Megillat Esther* does not contain the name of God, and although it is regarded as a sacred text (Greene 1992), it does not possess the same level of holiness as a *Sefer Torah*, which is considered the most sacred text in Judaism (Thomson 1998; Maggen 2005), reflecting a hierarchical structure among sacred texts in Judaism.

In Judaism, the concept of a sacred object also depends on its religious use. For example, a *Megillat Esther* scroll used for the public reading of Purim in a synagogue possesses a form of functional sanctity. The reverence afforded to this object is linked to its role in fulfilling a specific commandment and to its solemn reading, which recalls a pivotal event in Jewish history. Thus, according to Jewish law, the *Megillat Esther* may be considered a sacred object, primarily because of its liturgical function during Purim and its inclusion within the *Tanakh*.

Also, in the case of the *Megillat Esther*, each word must likewise be written by a Jewish scribe (*sofer*), and all the lines must be scored, as for a *Sefer Torah* (Grossman 1997; Friedman 2006-2014). According to Jewish law and tradition, primacy is given to the text itself; this centrality of textual discourse in Jewish life—as both reflection and guide for practice—shapes the production, use, and treatment of sacred writings. These texts are created for communal and private study as well as for devotional observance; they are more instrumental than iconic. Because such texts constitute an essential part of Jewish culture and its material heritage, they are preserved in good condition for as long as possible. When they cease to be ritually suitable for use—meaning they no longer meet the *halakhic* (Talmudic or rabbinic legal) requirements, usually because the text is no longer easily legible—they are either buried or placed in a *genizah*, a storage repository for worn or unusable ritual objects, particularly those containing the name of God (Grossman 1997; Scheleicher 2010; Schindler 2023). At that point, they are referred to as *pasul* (invalid) or non-*kosher* objects.

A *Megillat Esther* may become *pasul* due to issues arising during its production. Because each word is believed to possess divine significance, any error in writing, or the fact that it was not written by a qualified scribe, renders it invalid. The text must be generally written in Hebrew [3], free from errors, and each letter must be clearly formed and distinct from the others. The same applies if inappropriate materials are used. The megillah must be handwritten on parchment prepared from the skin of a kosher animal, using suitable ink—typically composed of natural materials—in accordance with Jewish law. The text is inscribed on several membranes of parchment that are sewn together with thread made from sinew (Elka and Mintz 2009).

A *Megillat Esther* also becomes *pasul* if it suffers damage affecting the parchment—such as tears or stains—or the writing ink, for instance through fading, flaking, or losses that compromise legibility, rendering words incomplete or unreadable (Shear 2013).

Conservation-restoration practice Vs Sacred law

The religious prescriptions cited above not only define the material and ritual life of the scroll but also impose ethical considerations for conservators-restorers, who must navigate between technical intervention and respect for sacred law. The following section examines the halakhic and ethical parameters governing the conservation of sacred Jewish manuscripts, with particular attention to the implications of material choice and ritual permissibility.

Given the condition of the *Megillat Esther* under study, it can be considered that the halakhic requirements governing its ritual use are no longer met, and that it therefore constitutes a *pasul* object. It is no longer suitable for public reading during the Purim festival in the synagogue, and given the extent of the damage, it cannot be repaired by a *sofer* (Scheleicher 2010). Consequently, like any other object within this category, it may be treated by any qualified conservator, whether Jewish or non-Jewish (Greene 1992).

By contrast, in the case of a *kosher* (ritually valid) Torah scroll, halakhic restrictions are far stricter: a non-Jewish person is not permitted to carry out any conservation treatment (Maggen 2005; Shear 2013). Only a *sofer* may prepare the ink and repair damaged letters. A conservator may never apply pigment to a manuscript or parchment scroll, even if such an act would be regarded as “retouching” or “reintegration” in conservation terminology (Shear 2013). Similarly, only a *sofer* is permitted to mend tears or restitch the seams that join the parchment sheets. However, the restoration of the wooden rollers that support the parchment (*ets hayyim*) is specifically permitted to be carried out by a non-Jew (Thomson 1998).

In conservation and restoration practice, there are no general restrictions regarding the use of synthetic

materials and all plant-based products are intrinsically *kosher*. However, according to Jewish law, the use of organic materials is subject to halakhic regulations that exclude any substance derived from non-*kosher* animals (Maggen 2005). Any product obtained from a forbidden animal (such as milk, eggs or hide) is prohibited. An animal is considered kosher only if it both chews the cud and has cloven hooves. All sea creatures are forbidden, except those possessing fins and scales. For instance, the use of glue derived from non-kosher fish or rabbit-skin, as well as pigskin leather for bindings, is considered unacceptable.

When conserving objects that are no longer intended for ritual use (as in the case of the *Megillat Esther* discussed here), the halakhic requirements concerning the use of *kosher* materials are less stringent, and non-kosher materials may be used. Nevertheless, even when an object is no longer destined for liturgical use, certain ethical considerations must prevail. Deprived of its original ritual function, the object nevertheless remains a meaningful symbol of cultural and religious heritage. Conservation and restoration treatments should therefore be guided by principles of respect for the object's authenticity and for the values it embodies.

Although in this particular case the use of non-*kosher* materials would have been permissible, the intervention on the *Megillat Esther* employed sheep gut. Indeed, the literature suggests that when animal-derived materials are used, they should, as far as possible, come from *kosher* species (Grossman 1997) and that the conservation process should always be carried out with due respect and sensitivity (Maggen 2005).

Furthermore, it is generally recommended that Jewish ritual materials be treated as anthropological objects, with conservation prioritizing their cultural context, use and significance, and maintaining interventions at a minimal level, avoiding extensive restoration more commonly applied to artistic objects (Greene 1992).

Handling and display of sacred scrolls

Both handling, whether in conservation-restoration practice or in museum contexts, as well as the display of sacred scrolls that are ritually valid (*Kosher*), is also subject to halakhic requirements. A *Sefer Torah* is kept in the *Aron Hakodesh* (Holy Ark) and requires special handling procedures. It should only be touched when covered with its protective mantle (*mantle of the Torah*) and must never come into contact with the ground. Likewise, the Torah should never be placed beneath any other object, as it is regarded as the most sacred of all ritual items. According to Jewish tradition, one should stand when the Torah is removed from the Ark (Neustadt 2010). Should a Torah scroll fall to the ground, both the person responsible and those who witnessed the incident are required to fast as a sign of mourning and reverence (Schindler 2023).

According to Margalit Schindler, a Jewish preventive conservator, although these practices may not correspond to standard professional conservation procedures, similar levels of respect and consideration should be applied to the object even when it is removed from its ritual or communal setting (Schindler 2023). In their view, this approach should also be adopted within the museum context.

Regarding transport, Schindler notes that the Torah should never be placed in a car trunk, but rather in the passenger compartment, and it should never be left in a vehicle overnight (Schindler 2023). Therefore, a detailed logistical planning is required in order to keep the holiness of the scrolls untainted, especially when long-distance transporting (Scheleicher 2010).

Traditionally, direct contact with the parchment is avoided, as the natural oils from human skin can stain the ink and render the text unfit for ritual use (Schindler 2023). For this reason, the Torah is unrolled using wooden rollers, and a pointer (*yad*), often crafted in the shape of a hand, is used to follow the text during reading (Neustadt 2010). The *yad* is meant to hover just above the surface of the Torah rather than touch or roll across it, as direct contact may scrape the parchment and even damage the letters (Sofer on Site International; Askotzky 2003).

When the scroll is opened, no more than three columns are unrolled at a time, a practice rooted in Jewish tradition to preserve both modesty and the physical integrity of the scroll (Schindler 2023). All individuals, including non-Jews and women, are permitted to hold a *Sefer Torah* and read from it. Although some communities maintain customary restrictions, no halakhic law prohibits this (Schindler 2022).

The *Megillat Esther* must also be treated with care and reverence. However, unlike the Torah, it does not need to be kept in the *Aron Hakodesh*, and the regulations governing its handling are less stringent. For instance, the text of the *Megillat Esther* may be touched directly with bare hand but only if one previously washed his hands (Neustadt 2010).

Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzah* scrolls are not normally displayed unrolled, particularly if they are no longer fit for ritual use. Otherwise, rabbinic consultation should always be sought before exhibition (Greene 1992). It is generally accepted that the respectful display of a *pasul* parchment is halakhically permissible for educational purposes, in contrast to a *kosher* one (Abelson 1997).

In light of these considerations, the acquisition of ritually valid (kosher) sacred objects into museum collections may warrant careful reflection. Given that their handling, conservation, and display can involve specific requirements, it is important to consider whether institutions are equipped to address such conditions. In cases where this may be challenging, it could be beneficial for acquisition policies to acknowledge these constraints by prioritizing the incorporation of objects that are *pasul*

(a pattern already well established in museum collections), thereby reducing potential tensions between institutional practice and religious frameworks.

The literature reviewed indicates that halakhic rules have a significant impact on the handling, display, and conservation practices involving Jewish sacred objects. However, further empirical research is needed to better understand the handling and exhibition of such items and other ceremonial objects in museums and memory institutions (Ariese 2022). Specific cases should be referred to a curator or conservator specializing in Judaica (a professional profile currently unavailable in Portugal and relatively scarce internationally) and/or to a rabbi with expertise in this area (Greene 1992). In certain contexts, such as Morocco, non-Jewish caretakers with multi-generational experience in the stewardship of Jewish ritual or sacred objects may also constitute relevant sources of knowledge (Boum 2018).

Discussion

The conservation treatment of the *Megillat Esther* presented in this study proved to be particularly challenging due to the complex questions that had to be considered during decision-making. The treatment carried out may not be universally accepted, but after careful reflection, it was deemed to be the approach most consistent with the ethical principles of the conservation profession and the one that best served the object's significance. This intervention sought to preserve the scroll in its highest possible integrity while safeguarding the potential for future technical developments to enable new conservation or reading approaches.

At the same time, this intervention provided an opportunity to undertake research and reflection on the ethical and practical issues involved in the conservation of Jewish sacred texts. It quickly became evident that there is a significant gap in the technical literature on this subject. There is a notable lack of clear and accessible guidance for conservators on how to handle, treat, or display objects with ritual or spiritual significance. Existing information is dispersed across religious texts, a small number of academic publications, and informal community knowledge. It is often contradictory, context-dependent, and difficult to interpret for professionals unfamiliar with Jewish law and cultural practices. This fragmentation increases the likelihood that conservators, even with the best intentions, may inadvertently act in ways that conflict with religious precepts or community values.

The issue of agency in the treatment of sacred objects also proved to be complex and difficult to understand when viewed from the conservator's perspective — that of a technically and scientifically trained professional. Under Jewish law, only a *sofer* may repair a *Sefer Torah* considered *kosher*, whereas a non-Jew may restore objects already deemed *pasul*. This distinction implies that the practitioner's

identity and faith may be considered as important as the technical method applied. However, *sofrim* rarely receive adequate training for conservation work that meets rigorous professional standards (Askotzky 2003). They are generally not trained in materials science, preventive conservation or conservation theory. Their education focuses on Jewish law, traditions, and the practical skills of scriptural writing, but not on the stabilization of fragile materials. The resulting question is both ethical and practical: is a repair carried out by a religiously qualified practitioner preferable to a technically correct intervention by a conservator-restorer who does not share the same faith (Thomson 1998)? In fact, it became evident that in certain cases religious prescriptions may require actions that differ from, or even contradict, accepted conservation practice. For example, in repairing a Torah scroll, it is common for a *sofer* to remove old ink and rewrite letters with new ink (Sofer on Site International), whereas a conservator-restorer would normally avoid such irreversible alteration of the original material. Another example illustrates the divergence in professional understanding: a *sofer* recently shared on social media photographs of a Torah he was repairing outdoors, placed partially unrolled on a table beside a swimming pool, captioned, "I do it outside so the sun kills the mold. Sunlight is a good remedy" [4]. Such a practice, while certainly well-intentioned, would be considered unacceptable within conservation-restoration practices. These cases expose a clear tension between ritual legitimacy and professional conservation-restoration standards, where religiously required actions may contradict what is ethically acceptable in conservation-restoration.

These tensions are not merely theoretical; they directly affect decisions regarding intervention limits and the future usability of sacred artefacts. The literature on conservation ethics (Avrami et al. 2000; Muñoz Viñas 2005; Marçal 2021) consistently advocates for a contextual, values-based approach in which meaning and significance—rather than material criteria alone—guide decision-making. However, in the case of Jewish sacred texts, the complexity of *Halakhic* law means that such contextualization requires collaboration among conservators, rabbis, *sofrim*, and community representatives [5]. Without this interdisciplinary dialogue, even well-intentioned conservation and restoration treatments risk violating the very values they are meant to protect. This dilemma highlights the need to reconsider how conservation-restoration ethics defines competence, authority, and legitimacy in intercultural and religious contexts.

In Jewish heritage, the notion of value is closely tied to the functional nature of objects. In many cases, they are regarded primarily as instruments of worship rather than autonomous heritage artefacts. As Ariese (2024) observed in her study of the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, "There is a consistent lack of interest in preservation here, in Jewish heritage. The objects are seen simply as utensils." Within this community, a functional view of objects prevails, which may imply, in this case, that preservation

means maintaining the capacity for continued ritual use. This represents a conceptual shift: conservation does not necessarily mean keeping an object in a static state but ensuring that it remains meaningful and useful to the community it serves, thereby embodying the notion of “living heritage” (UNESCO).

The Jewish concept of *le-dor va-dor* (“from generation to generation”) encapsulates the importance of transmission and continuity over time. This principle aligns with contemporary heritage conservation approaches that emphasize people-centered and community-based practices (Peters 2000; Owczarek 2023). Rather than focusing exclusively on the object, conservator-restorers are increasingly encouraged to understand why an artefact matters and to whom it matters. In the context of sacred heritage, this requires integrating theological, ethical, and social dimensions into the decision-making process.

In conclusion, the conservation and restoration of Jewish sacred objects demands a framework that unites professional conservation-restoration ethics with religious and cultural sensitivity. Clearer interdisciplinary protocols—developed collaboratively among conservator-restorers, Jewish scholars, and community leaders—are essential to prevent ethical conflicts and to promote mutual respect. Only through structured dialogue and collaboration can conservation-restoration practice engage responsibly with living religious heritage, ensuring that material care supports rather than contradicts or diminishes the values and traditions it seeks to preserve.

Notes

[1] *Tefillin* are parchment scrolls inscribed with biblical passages kept in small leather boxes, which observant Jews bind with leather straps (*retzuot*) to their left arm and forehead during morning prayers (Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe).

[2] *Mezuzah* is a parchment scroll with biblical verses that is placed in a case on the doorposts of Jewish houses or public buildings and recalls the Covenant (Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe).

[3] However, for individuals who do not understand Hebrew, the use of a translated version of the *Megillah* is permitted. For example, those who read only English may consult a translation written in ink on parchment (Melamed).

[4] The *sofer* referenced in this example remains anonymous in order to safeguard personal privacy and comply with ethical research practices. The case is cited solely to illustrate differing approaches to conservation, without any intent of personal critique or identification.

[5] Given that not all Jewish communities adhere to the same halakhic precepts, another significant challenge lies in identifying the most appropriate community representatives to consult in

each case. In situations such as the case under study, where the original community of the parchment is unknown, this difficulty is further increased. Moreover, the relative absence of significant Jewish communities in Portugal and Spain, as a result of historical expulsions, adds an additional layer of complexity to this process of consultation and representation.

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