

SEASONED WITH THE SPICE OF LIFE

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ON SITE

Handles with Care

Few professions connect to the essence of the Jewish People like this family enterprise manufacturing *atzei chayim* and other accessories for Torah scrolls. In their sawdust-filled workshop, these craftsmen have learned that those who purchase sifrei Torah are not always rich, or even religious — after all, the Torah belongs to everyone

HOLD THAT Scroll

The apartment buildings lining this side street in Bnei Brak are drab, box-like, and mostly nondescript. In a city known for its focus on the spiritual, the lack of frills seems to highlight the fact that the trappings of material life have been relegated to a place of secondary importance. There is certainly no indication that one of these buildings contains the headquarters of a decades-old, thriving business that exports its products to locations all over the globe.

Then again, the Herskowitz family business is not a run-of-the-mill commercial enterp rise. This family manufactures *atzei chayim* and other accessories for sifrei Torah, making their chosen field of endeavor inextricably intertwined with the spiritual essence of the Jewish People.

The Herskowitz family’s involvement in the *atzei chayim* business spans three generations. The business was first launched by Reb Yosef Herskowitz, a master craftsman who emigrated from Hungary to Eretz Yisrael in 1936 and began manufacturing the wooden handles for Torah scrolls in his workshop in Jerusalem. One of Reb Yosef’s sons, Yisrael, opened a business of his own in Jerusalem, which is now located in the Beis Yisrael neighborhood, near the Mir Yeshivah. Another son, Shmuel, has been running his own business in Bnei Brak for decades, where he now works alongside his son Yaakov and four of his daughters in the facility, producing elegantly handcrafted *atzei chayim*.

Reb Shmuel and his family pride themselves on their quality workmanship, which comes with a lifetime guarantee. “If someone comes to us with a broken *eitz chayim* that we manufactured any time in the past, we’ll fix it free of



ONE-STOP shop



Atzei chayim may be the mainstay of Reb Shmuel’s business, but they are not the only products he manufactures. Reb Shmuel receives his visitors in a room filled with a dazzling array of items associated with sifrei Torah, enough to fill the *aron kodesh* shelves of at least a dozen shuls. In a Beis Hamikdash-like miracle, the room appears to be packed with many more articles than its dimensions should be capable of containing. One wall is lined with a colorful assortment of mantels, and a glass display case features a collection of breathtaking, intricately designed silver items.

“We sell everything that could be needed for a sefer Torah, such as silver crowns and other accessories,” Reb Shmuel explains. “In addition, we produce *atzei chayim* for megillos and for Neviim.”

The modest quarters of the Herskowitz family business belie the fact that it is an operation with a global reach. The *atzei chayim* produced here are marketed not only in Eretz Yisrael, but also in America,

England, France, and anywhere else where Jews reside.

The brightly lit room with its display of finished products is where Reb Shmuel meets with customers; however, the heart of his operation lies on the other side of another thick door marked “Employees Only.” Behind that door is a large workshop filled with a variety of machines, tools, *atzei chayim* in various stages of completion, and sundry other items. On a summer afternoon in Bnei Brak, the heat in this room is sweltering; the sawdust in the air clogs the vents of an air conditioner, making it impossible to use. Instead, a few large fans churn valiantly at strategic points throughout the room, in a concerted effort to lower the temperature.

Piles of wooden boards in one corner of the room attest to the fact that every step of the manufacturing process takes place here. “Our *atzei chayim* are produced exclusively by religious, G-d-fearing Jews,” Reb Shmuel stresses. “We do not employ non-Jews or outsource our work to foreign countries. The entire process of turning the raw materials into finished products is performed



THE RIGHT Words



You might not have thought that ordering a pair of *atzei chayim* could be such a complex project, but in fact, a customer must make many choices, including the material — wood, silver, or a combination of the two, or even pure gold for those with the budget to afford it — and the style and design, for which there are dozens of possibilities. Decorative embellishments come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. And even these ritual objects are subject to shifting trends; there are some styles of *atzei chayim* that are considered classic or traditional, while others are viewed as more modern.

Some customers purchase their *atzei chayim* through the sofrim who write their sifrei Torah; these sofrim make all the decisions for them and thus spare them from confronting the dizzying array of options. But for those who are interested in greater personal involvement — or who prefer to spend extra for a more ornate design — the purchase might entail sitting down with the Herskowitz family for an extended consultation and reviewing a large catalog of options.

Another one of those options is the preparation

of an inscription. “For many people, their emotions are running high when they donate a sefer Torah,” Reb Shmuel Herskowitz explains. “These donations are often in memory of a loved one, or in honor of a special event in the donors’ lives. It can take a significant amount of effort and thought to decide how to phrase the inscriptions. Our staff can sit with a customer for hours working out the wording of an inscription and the graphic design.”

“Anyone can write ‘*lillui nishmas harav hagaon v’hagadol*’ or something like that,” Yaakov Herskowitz adds. “But it takes a practiced touch to come up with an original, elegant inscription that truly captures the meaning of the occasion.”

It was a bit of a surprise to learn that some of those inscriptions are never even seen once the *atzei chayim* have been attached to the Torah scrolls. The words may be carved or emblazoned on the plates, but the inscription on one nearly finished *eitz chayim* in the Herskowitzes’ workshop is hidden on the part of the pole that runs through the sefer Torah itself, on which the *klaf* wraps around.



The manufacturing process requires carefully developed skill and experience, not to mention an artistic touch. The wooden boards must be cut into plates and poles, and the wood must be sanded, smoothed, and painted. Naturally, one of the choices that a customer must make is the color of the wood, although the general preference seems to be to use dark hues. In many cases, decorative patterns are carved into the wood. Yaakov Herskowitz demonstrates how he uses a small flame to sear tiny, ornately shaped notches along the rim of a plate. It takes a steady, practiced hand to produce a large number of identical, equally spaced notches along the plate’s perimeter.

Working with silver is a labor of love with its own challenges. Reb Shmuel Herskowitz picks up a flat, thick silver disc and indicates the intricately shaped handle of an *eitz chayim* that has been covered with silver. “It may not look like it,” he says, “but the silver on this handle started out as one of these pieces of raw silver. It takes a lot of experience and expertise to be able to mold the silver precisely onto the wood.”



SMALLER IS

Bigger

Sifrei Torah come in a variety of sizes, and the Herskowitzes are equipped to deal with that. “We can produce *atzei chayim* that will fit a sefer Torah of any size,” Reb Shmuel asserts, explaining that the length of a scroll tends to range from ten to almost seventy centimeters, with an average-sized sefer Torah measuring about 60 centimeters in length.

Nevertheless, the Herskowitzes observe that recent trends seem to favor sifrei Torah that are smaller in size. They say they don’t always understand the new trend, but are happy to fill those orders of the smallest dimensions. “There are daily minyanim held on trains and buses in certain areas with large Orthodox populations, such as in Monsey or on the train to Tel Aviv,” Yaakov Herskowitz explains. “On leining days, these minyanim need compact sifrei Torah that can be used during their travels. There are also traveling shochtim who bring Torah scrolls with them to use during davening in remote locations.”

Some of the purchases of small *atzei chayim* may also be the result of mystical considerations. “A *mekubal* once asked us to make very small *atzei chayim* so that he could wear a sefer Torah on his arm, alongside his tefillin,” Reb Shmuel relates.



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AGAINST
THE
Clock

As the Torah belongs to the entire Jewish People, it makes sense that the Herskowitzes’ customer base represents a cross section of the Jewish nation. In spite of what one might presume, people who purchase or donate sifrei Torah are not always affluent, nor are they always religious. Indeed, Reb Shmuel’s business has brought him in contact with a fascinating array of customers, some of whom have donated sifrei Torah for incredibly altruistic reasons.

“There was one woman, a Holocaust survivor, who donated six sifrei Torah to various shuls over the course of her life,” he recalls. “She once told us that she never bought herself a single piece of jewelry or any other luxury item. She saved every possible penny and used all of her money for sifrei Torah. And there is a man from the United States who runs an organization that donates 25 sifrei Torah every year in honor of various victims of terrorism.”

Reb Shmuel comments that even secular Jews, in spite of their estrangement from Yiddishkeit, exhibit abiding respect for sifrei Torah. “On airplanes, even the nonreligious flight crew sense that the sifrei Torah must be treated with a special level of respect,” he relates. “They recognize that a sefer Torah should not be placed in an ordinary suitcase and tossed around like any other piece of luggage, and they always make sure to make a place for a sefer Torah in the cabin.”

“There is a story behind every sefer Torah donated by a secular Israeli,” Yaakov comments. “Whether it’s donated in memory of a fallen soldier or for some other reason, there is always a significant meaning to it.”

Because of the emotional context to many donations of sifrei Torah, the Herskowitzes sometimes find themselves racing against the clock. “There are times when we have to accommodate certain time constraints,” Reb Shmuel says, “whether it is for a *shloshim*, a *yahrtzeit*, or another occasion of the sort.” Nor are these occasions always predictable. A man once ordered a sefer Torah with plenty of time to spare before the scheduled donation. After some time had passed, the Herskowitzes received a call from the donor’s family, informing them that he had become gravely ill. “We accelerated the process to the best of our ability, and he lived



Sanctity
IN THE SAWDUST

The Herskowitzes’ workshop handles not only the manufacture of new *atzei chayim*, but also the repair and restoration of old ones. They’ve repaired *atzei chayim* that were as much as 200 or 300 years old, although the majority of items that are brought to them for restoration were made within the past century. And just as Reb Shmuel can identify his own handiwork at first glance in any shul, he can also tell that many of the *atzei chayim* that originated in a specific area of Poland were made by the same craftsman. “I have no idea who it was,” he says, “but I can tell that they were produced by the same pair of hands.”

Restoring old *atzei chayim* presents its own set of challenges, Reb Shmuel adds. The halachah states that an object made to be used with a sefer Torah becomes infused with sanctity only after its first use. Consequently, an ordinary *eitz chayim* does not require special handling during the manufacturing process; however, an *eitz chayim* that has already been used is considered to have been sanctified and must be treated accordingly. This means that no portion of the *eitz chayim* may be discarded; if the wood is sanded or otherwise cut, even the sawdust must be painstakingly collected and placed in *genizah*.



IN Service

Reb Shmuel Herskowitz views his profession as both a noble calling and an opportunity to provide an important service for his Jewish brethren. Producing beautiful *atzei chayim* is also a way to fulfill the precept of *hiddur mitzvah* — beautifying a mitzvah — since these objects are used in conjunction with Torah scrolls. And just as his *atzei chayim* hold the scrolls containing the text of the Torah, he endeavors to uphold the ideals in his own business practices. The price of a set of *atzei chayim*, he reveals, ranges anywhere from 1,000 to 15,000 NIS, but he never tries to persuade his customers to purchase a higher-end model.

“When customers come to me, I try to consider their best interests, to choose the options that are best for them, not easier for me,” Reb Shmuel says.

This is part of a broader perspective toward business, and one of the guiding principles of Reb Shmuel’s life. “The

baalei mussar say that a person should pursue his occupation with the goal of performing chesed for others,” Reb Shmuel explains. “For example, if there were no grocery stores, people would have to travel great distances to obtain even the most basic food items. So while the grocer gains from his business, he can also choose to focus on the fact that he’s providing for the needs of others. The fact that he has to charge money for these items is only because he would otherwise be unable to keep his business going and it would be impossible for him to keep doing that chesed. This attitude casts every one of our pursuits in an entirely different light.”

In this large dusty room, with piles of sawdust on the floor and a bewildering assortment of machinery, Reb Shmuel Herskowitz and his son have well integrated that position, as they devote their lives to enhancing the beauty of Torah scrolls everywhere.

MATCH Game

As the late afternoon fades into evening, Reb Shmuel’s cell phone begins buzzing repeatedly with calls from overseas. “People in America are starting to wake up,” he says as he fields the calls from his customers abroad. The ebb and flow of his business’s activities is also an indication of its global reach; he experiences an uptick in orders during the peak seasons for visitors from abroad. “Some people rely on phone calls or middlemen to place their orders for them,” he relates, “but others prefer to decide on all the details themselves, in person.”

Reb Shmuel’s business sometimes affords him the opportunity to match potential donors of sifrei Torah with recipients who are in need of a Torah scroll. “I know when my customers are on the lookout to donate sifrei Torah, and when I find out about a shul that needs one, I’m in a position to make a connection between them,” he relates. In fact, that’s precisely what happened at his son’s shul in Beitar Illit. “I knew that the shul needed a sefer Torah, and I had a customer who wanted to donate one,” Reb Shmuel recalls. “At the *hachnassas sefer Torah*, the donor wasn’t even there, yet they gave me a place of honor in the middle of the procession. I tried to protest that I hadn’t done anything of note; I had simply made the connection between them. Nevertheless, they insisted on treating me as if I was a *mechutan* in the celebration.”

