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## **The environment in Jewish law**

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Shredding Religious Services to Protect God's Name

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## SHREDDING RELIGIOUS SERVICES TO PROTECT GOD'S NAME

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**QUESTION:** My synagogue is faced with the problem of photocopied services and other materials for children that contain the Divine name; it is not practical to bury them. The congregation would like to purchase a shredder and thereby destroy the material. Is this an acceptable way of dealing with the problem of the sacred name? (Lloyd Silver, New York, NY)

**ANSWER:** The sacredness of the name of God and the care taken with it goes back to the biblical period when the Divine name itself was pronounced only once by the high priest on Yom Kippur. It was not to be misused in any way. Sensitivity about the written name of God was partially derived from the command to obliterate names of the idols (Deut. 12.3ff..) with the subsequent injunction that this was not to be done to "the Lord your God." Our concern with the name of God stems equally from the third commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11) and one interpretation of this commandment. There is some discussion of this matter in the Talmud (Arakhin 6a) in which we hear of a pagan who gave a large wooden beam to be used in the construction of the Temple. It was incised with the name of God, and there was some question whether the beam could be worked and the name of God erased. Talmudic authorities decided that this incised name was not sacred as the beam was not the usual place in which the name of

God was written. The medieval authorities agreed with this thought. (Rashi *ad loc*; *Yad, Hil. Yesodei Torah* 6.1ff.).

The Talmud continued the discussion and indicated that despite the passage in Arakhin, in most instances the name was to be preserved (Makot 22a) and the later tradition agreed. (*Yad, Hil. Yesodei Torah* 6.1ff.). Our texts dealt with the name inscribed on pieces of metal or tattooed on skin, uses that were not normal. These discussions brought about a later absolute reverence for the name of God; it was never to be obliterated or destroyed (*Sefer Hahinuh* 437). This has led to great care with printed texts.

Tradition has, however, also asked about the individual who was responsible for the text, and sanctity was limited to texts written by pious Jews with sacred intent both explicitly stated and in the mind of the writer (*Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 274 and commentaries). A piece written without such intent could be erased (*Tashbetz Responsa* 1:177). Simon ben Zemah of Duran based this line of reasoning on an incident described in the Talmud, in which a person wrote the Tetragrammaton by mistake and so without intent (*Git.* 20a).

As we look at the reasoning, we see that tradition has leaned toward strictness, certainly with the Tetragrammaton and possibly also with other names of God. These discussions were mainly from periods in which books were scarce and the printer's piety was assumed.

Great care was always taken with the name of God and every effort made to protect texts containing it from misuse. For this reason, we have either placed such documentation in a *genizah*, buried them in a cemetery, or destroyed them through incineration. Each method did not prevent the ultimate destruction of the texts, and no effort was made to preserve it. The real task was that of protecting the text from an improper use that would be offensive. We could well say, then, that it would be appropriate to shred such texts especially if the shredding machine were able to cut the material into very narrow strips. That would totally destroy their usefulness to a degree almost akin to incineration. We should only be certain that once the text has been shredded, it is not used as packing material but rather recycled.

This method of disposal is acceptable as it removes such documents from circulation. In our modern society with heavy use of paper for educational purposes, this is probably the most appropriate way of dealing with the problem.