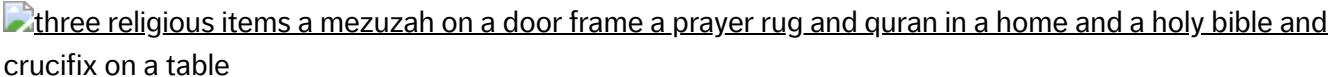




Decluttering Dilemma: What to Do With Religious Items

How to respectfully get rid of old Bibles, prayer rugs, yarmulkes and more

by Stacey Freed, [AARP \(http://www.aarp.org\)](http://www.aarp.org), January 18, 2022

three religious items a mezuzah on a door frame a prayer rug and quran in a home and a holy bible and crucifix on a table

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[En español \(/espanol/hogar-familia/casa-jardin/info-2022/como-deshacerse-de-articulos-religiosos.html?intcmp=AE-HOME-TOESP-TOGL\)](http://www.aarp.org/espanol/hogar-familia/casa-jardin/info-2022/como-deshacerse-de-articulos-religiosos.html?intcmp=AE-HOME-TOESP-TOGL)

The past two years might one day become known as The Great Decluttering. With more time at home, junk drawers beckon, guest rooms are cleaned out to become offices, and kids are moving back home. Older adults are [downsizing \(/money/budgeting-saving/info-2015/downsizing-items-to-ditch-photo.html\)](http://www.aarp.org/money/budgeting-saving/info-2015/downsizing-items-to-ditch-photo.html) to smaller living spaces.

It may be a lot of work to get rid of unwanted items, but generally it's not too difficult to determine what is trash, what needs repair and what to donate. But what happens when you have a ripped Bible, too many mezuzahs or no space for Mom's collection of rosary beads?

When it comes to repairing or getting rid of religious articles, people have lots of questions. Do these items need special care in disposal? Can they ever be tossed? And what makes something a religious item?

Non-holy items

When Marla Alt, 60, recently downsized from a house in New York's Westchester County to an apartment in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, she had to decide what to do with all the Jewish "religious art and decorative items that we no longer needed nor have the space to own." Alt, who's known as "The Moving Whisperer," is a move management expert and owner of 123organize. She wanted to get rid of Jewish-themed posters and a havdalah set, which typically includes a kiddush cup to hold wine or grape juices and a candleholder for the candle that, when lit, signifies the end of the Sabbath.

Alt ended up passing those things on to an online auction, which Rabbi Julie Zupan, director of Jewish learning and engagement at the New York City-based Union for Reform Judaism, says is just fine, at least for those particular items.

Since Jewish practice centers around the home, Jewish families often own a trove of ritual items, but they are not considered “holy” in the way that a sacred item inscribed with the name of God might be, says Zupan.

However, when something is holy, such as a Torah scroll or a translation of a Jewish sacred work like the Talmud (the main source of Jewish law and religious beliefs), for example, and is in disrepair, it’s disrespectful to throw it away, Zupan says.

“We bury them in the earth in the same way that in Jewish tradition we bury a beloved person who has died,” she says. Jewish cemeteries often have a special plot dedicated to these types of items and may periodically have ceremonies to bury Jewish prayer books.

For Christian artifacts, Kenneth Doyle, priest of the Diocese of Albany and a former spokesperson and Rome bureau chief for the Catholic News Service, says, “Canon law speaks about sacred objects that are blessed and says they should be treated reverently, and that’s as specific as it gets.”

So if an item is not “blessed,” it’s not considered “holy,” and it’s not something that needs special care when it comes to disposal. Doyle cites the examples of statuary or a rosary (a chain, traditionally used during prayer, that’s made up of a series of beads, a small medal and a crucifix) that may have been mailed out as a gift from a religious order. “Religious orders don’t customarily bless articles they send out,” Doyle says. In that case, those items could, technically, be thrown away.

Blessed and sacred items

However, palm fronds, symbols of peace and eternal life distributed during Palm Sunday services and which some parishioners might keep in their homes, are blessed. “These should be burned,” Doyle says. “Most parishes invite people to bring palm fronds back, and they burn them on Lent the following year.”

In Hinduism, according to Sanjay Mehta, past general secretary of the World Hindu Council of America, holiness stems from an object’s use in *puja*, or daily worship. Items such as pictures of Bhagwan (“blessed one” or God) and *murti* (visible forms such as statuary), as well as spiritual texts like the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana or Vedas, are all considered sacred and must be handled with respect. “These can be donated to family or friends or given to religious institutions,” Mehta says.

Islam is fairly “artifact-free,” says Omer Abdullah, editor of *Islamic Horizons*, the magazine of the Islamic Society of North America. Practicing Muslims own prayer rugs, which Abdullah says are “symbolic and aesthetic. There’s nothing religious about it. We can pray on any clean surface, like carpeting or flooring.”

The Quran, Islam’s central religious text, is its holiest item. “Some families may keep the Quran as an heirloom or donate them to libraries or mosques,” Abdullah says. “If the book has been damaged for some reason, the copy would be buried at sea or in a river or canal.”

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Treating items with respect

Regardless of someone's religious tradition, the bottom line when making decisions about unwanted or damaged religious items is to treat them with reverence and respect. In almost all cases, burial is the preferred method of disposal for damaged items. As Mehta says, "Earth is considered a pious, natural, physical element. When burying in the earth, you're not trashing something. You're removing it respectfully."

Other common Jewish religious items people often have questions about are yarmulkes (head coverings) and mezuzahs — Hebrew verses on parchment contained in a decorative case and attached to a home's doorposts. The former, while nice to donate, can be discarded and don't need to be disposed of in any special way, Zupan says. Removing the latter comes with some rules.

If you're selling your home and the people moving in are also Jewish, it is customary to leave the mezuzahs in place. If you want to take a mezuzah with you, replace it with another one. If you know the new people moving in are not Jewish, remove the mezuzah. "This is because the mezuzah has verses with God's name, and you don't know that the new people won't take down the mezuzah and put it in the trash," Zupan says.

But everything we collect over the years, religious or otherwise, carries personal meaning and emotional baggage. While it can be difficult to get rid of things, it can feel good to know the items will go to a good home. As Zupan says, "Even if something like a Hanukkah menorah isn't elevated to the point of holiness, I'd hate to see one in the trash. It's the kind of thing someone else might use and cherish."

When giving an item away, think about who might value it. The objective should be that "these items should benefit a larger number of people," Abdullah says. Start with immediate family and then widen your circle to cousins, then cousins of cousins. Also look to churches, temples, mosques and synagogues, community centers, nursing homes and prisons.

Regardless of how valuable items are to you, there are reasons organizations — or family members — may not want them, including not having enough space or the possibility of additional expense for removal or repair.

So don't just assume people need or want your things, Zupan says. "Always ask first."

Stacey Freed is a contributing writer who covers remodeling, construction, lifestyle issues, education and pets. Her work has appeared in Beautiful Kitchens & Baths and This Old House and on Forbes.com.

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