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New York Today: A Bookbinder's Craft

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By JONATHAN WOLFE MARCH 9, 2017

Good morning on this lovely Thursday.

In the basement of the Congregation Sons of Moses synagogue on the Lower East Side, hulking iron machines rattle and clank amid rolls of colored paper and strips of dark leather.

There, a bookbinder practices a fading craft: stitching, slicing and pressing stacks of paper into books.

With the New York Antiquarian Book Fair starting today on the Upper East Side, we visited the Henry Bookbinding Company in Manhattan to see how books were made in our city's past.

Henry Alpert, 68, showed us around his workshop, where he has been binding books — including dissertations, Bibles and special edition books for artists — for 25 years.

Books are squeezed together in large racks around the room. Clamps,

hammers and what Mr. Alpert calls “the guillotine” (a paper trimmer) are scattered among buckets of glue, some of which are stuck in place.

Mr. Alpert is not a stickler for tidiness.

“This is bookbinding,” he said. “I’m not cutting diamonds.”

When we visited, he was rebuilding an 1893 edition of “A Tour Around New York and My Summer Acre” by John Flavel Mines.

To make a book, he uses a collection of tools. One machine, which looks like a weaving loom, stitches spines onto stacks of papers. Another slices through paper with the press of a pedal.

The equipment has been around for more than 50 years, ever since one of Mr. Alpert’s relatives opened the business.

Creating a book takes about a day, but Mr. Alpert can work on more than one at a time. And he enjoys filling special requests, like turning a stack of loose papers into a leather-bound tome with embossed gold lettering.

“This is my world,” he said. “I take from nothing, and I make something.”

Here’s what else is happening:

Weather

Another week of wonky weather we’re having.

Today: sunglasses and spring pastels.

Tomorrow: scarves and snowboots.

We’ll see sunshine and a **high** near 56 today, followed by a good chance of snow tomorrow. Temperatures are expected to flip-flop between the teens and 20s all weekend.