TEETH IN THE TALMUD – A HALACHIC DISCUSSION

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The interface between dentistry and halacha presents itself on many occasions. Dental fixtures, such as crowns and permanent fillings, are of particular interest in halacha, and thus, are discussed in Talmudic sources. Such Halachic sources involve topics such as the prohibition of carrying on Shabbos, chatzizot (separations) and women’s immersion in a mikveh (ritual bath). These topics were important in the times of the Talmud and continue to have practical ramifications in the modern era.

The Talmud’s discussion of dental fixtures concerns the area of dentistry specializing in the restoration and repair of teeth that were broken, worn, or decayed: prosthetodontology. Injury, disease, and aging can contribute to the decay of teeth. In the restorative process, prosthodontists employ a wide variety of dental fixtures including dental implants, crowns, bridges, dentures, veneers, and inlays [1].

Prosthodontic fixtures serve many functions. Crowns, commonly referred to as caps, serve as a covering placed over a tooth. Crowns serve a number of restorative purposes including the protection of chipped, cracked, or sensitive teeth, and decayed or worn fillings. Also serving cosmetic purposes, crowns enhance the appearance of teeth that may be abnormally shaped, positioned, or colored. A dental procedure, such as a root canal, can cause teeth to become prone to cracking, and thus, the protection provided by a crown may be a necessity. Additionally, the positioning of a bridge in the place of missing teeth may require the placement of crowns on the teeth surrounding the bridge as a form of support for the added teeth. A crown can be composed of a variety of materials including full porcelain, porcelain and metal, and full metal [2].

The topic of prosthodontics is found in the Mishna. In the sixth chapter of the Mishna Shabbos, a discussion regarding carrying on Shabbos is recorded. The Mishna states: “... An artificial tooth and a gold tooth, Rabbi Meir permits and the Sages forbid.” Rabbi Meir and the Sages disagree regarding the permissibility of a woman wearing a prosthetic tooth in a reshus ha’rabim (public domain) on Shabbos. Rabbi Meir permits this action, while the Sages prohibit it. Some commentators describe the “gold tooth” in terms very similar to a modern dentistry’s crown, both in structure and in function. Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura (Italy, 1450 – 1510) comments that the “gold tooth” referred to in the Mishna is one that had mold growing on it due to decay and was covered in gold as a method of treatment. In his book “Comments on the Mishna,” the Rambam describes the “gold tooth” as a “gold cover in the shape of the tooth put on a tooth with a strange appearance to conceal the defect” [3].

The Jerusalem Talmud discusses the permissibility of walking in a reshus ha’rabim while wearing prosthetic teeth. The Talmud records, “... She is still ashamed to say to the “nagra” (carpenter), I have lost my tooth, it has fallen out, make me another one...” Rashi explains that the “tooth” refers to “a false tooth made of wood.” It can be understood from this Talmudic passage that false teeth were wooden. Combined with the Mishna in Shabbos, it is apparent that false teeth were golden, silver, and/or wooden [3].

Various explanations are offered for the prohibition against wearing artificial gold teeth in public on Shabbos. Rashi explains that gold is of greater monetary value than silver, and a woman may therefore desire to show off her gold tooth to her friends. This may lead to the removal of the tooth and the subsequent violation of the prohibition of carrying in public on Shabbos [4]. Another scenario proposed in the Talmud is based upon an opposite premise than the one offered by Rashi. It is explained that a woman may be embarrassed to wear a false tooth in public, fearing the scorn of her friends. These fears may lead her to remove her false tooth and hold it in her hand. She may forget about the tooth and walk in public on Shabbos while carrying it in her hand [5].

There are Talmudic commentators who permit the wearing of an artificial gold tooth in public on Shabbos. They explain that there is no concern that the wearer will remove the artificial gold tooth to display it to her friends, because she will be suspended from doing so by the embarrassment associated with wearing an artificial gold tooth [5]. There are also commentators who are of the opinion that regardless of the great value of the artificial gold tooth, there is no need to suspect the opportunity for the violation of the prohibition.

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of carrying in public on Shabbos. The Rambam states the opinion of Rabbi Judah who allows the wearing of artificial gold teeth on Shabbos and explains that the purpose of artificial gold teeth is to conceal rotting teeth. There is no suspicion that a woman would remove the artificial gold tooth to have her friends admire it, because this would publicize her diseased tooth and cause embarrassment [4].

The discussion continues with regard to artificial silver teeth. Silver teeth resemble natural teeth more so than gold teeth, and therefore the commentaries were not concerned that one with a silver tooth would violate the prohibition of carrying in public on Shabbos while wearing an artificial silver tooth [5]. The Rambam explains that an artificial silver tooth is not as apparent as a gold tooth and therefore one is allowed to wear it in public on Shabbos [4].

Another area in which dentistry and halacha interact is in relation to dental fixtures and the halachic discussion of chatzitzot and a woman's immersion in the mikva. Immersion in the mikva requires a completely clean body devoid of any foreign materials, chatzitzot, which separate between the body of the person and the water. According to Torah law, there are two criteria that must be met for a chatzitza to invalidate an immersion. First the nature of the chatzitza must be as such that a person does not want the substance to be attached to her body and second, that the chatzitza is present over half of the person's body. If only one of these criteria is met, the immersion is invalid according to Rabbinic Law [6].

The Rishonim explain that a substance which one desires to have attached to her body is termed “an extension of oneself” and is not considered to be a chatzitza (Rashi, Shabbos 57a, s.v. Ha nami; Sukka 6b). With regard to undesired substances found on one’s body, the substance is considered to be a chatzitza and would appear to invalidate an immersion in the mikva [6].

For an immersion in the mikva to be valid, the water must be able to flow inside one’s mouth if open (Nidda 66b). Though it is not necessary for one to open one’s mouth while immersing, the possibility of the water reaching the surface of one’s inner mouth is required. Dental fixtures may act as barriers that obstruct the flow of water from reaching the teeth covered by the fixture. Question arises concerning the status of the fixture, as desired or undesired by the wearer. Dental fillings are not aesthetically pleasing and the wearer would prefer not to have them in her mouth. From this perspective, dental fillings would be considered an undesired chatzitza and would appear to invalidate an immersion in the mikva. However, a different perspective must be considered. Once one has a cavity, the need for a filling is apparent and the person desires the filling because of the specific function it performs. In this case, dental fillings are a desired chatzitza and would not appear to invalidate an immersion in the mikva [6].

The status of dental fixtures is discussed by many acharonim, including the Chochmas Adam and the Avnei Nezer. The Chochmas Adam explains that any undesired foreign particle that is attached to one’s body for the purpose of the function the attachment serves, has the status of a chatzitza and invalidates an immersion in the mikva (Binas Adam, Shaar Beis HaNashim: 12). According to the Chochmas Adam, dental fixtures and dental fillings in particular invalidate one’s immersion in the mikva [6].

The Avnei Nezer is among a group of acharonim who disagree with the view of the Chochmas Adam. The Avnei Nezer differentiates between permanent and temporary attachments on the body. He explains that a temporary attachment has the status of a chatzitza as it is not termed an extension of the body. Dental attachments perform a specific function and remain attached to the body indefinitely. Thus, dental fillings are an example of a permanent attachment, and according to the view of the Avnei Nezer, they do not have the status of chatzitza and would therefore not invalidate an immersion in the mikva [6].

The halacha followed today is that all permanent dental fixtures do not have the status of chatzitza and would not invalidate an immersion in the mikva. Additionally, temporary dental fixtures that are correctly fixed and are irremovable do not invalidate an immersion. In contrast to permanent dental fixtures, all removable dental pieces such as dentures, and removable orthodontic fixtures must be taken out before immersion in the mikva [7].

This understanding of chatzitza can be used to explain the discussion of chaazal with regard to wearing a gold tooth in public. The Avnei Nezer (Yoreh Deah 259) explains that during the time of chaazal, gold teeth were not permitted to be worn in public because at the period, false teeth were uncommon. Therefore, chaazal were concerned that the wearer would be led to remove the tooth and carry it after being shamed by others. The Avnei Nezer continues and explains that chaazal were not concerned with the gold tooth being a chatzitza. Therefore, gold teeth and all other correctly fixed dental fixtures are not considered chatzitza and would not invalidate an immersion in the mikva [8].

The practical and everyday ramifications of dentistry and halacha are interesting to explore. As the field of dentistry advances and new dental fixtures are created, the interface between dentistry and halacha will be exciting to follow.

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REFERENCES


