A beautiful smile is very often a person's gift to the world. Whether it is a gloomy day or one filled with excitement, a smile can make the entire day better. Biologically, when a person smiles, endorphins are released, making the person happy. Also, smiling is an important characteristic of the human race as it is a universal language, understood everywhere in the world. With the importance a smile can bring, it is no wonder that the beauty of a person's teeth has been as much of a concern nowadays as it was in the time of the Bible and Talmud.

In Talmudic times, teeth that were white were regarded as beautiful. "A person who whitens his neighbors' teeth is better than one who gives him milk to drink" (Ketubot 111b). The importance of giving someone beautiful white teeth even surpasses the importance of alleviating their thirst. In the Bible, Jacob promises his son Judah, "teeth whiter than milk" (Genesis 49:12). Even lovers compliment each other in the Song of Songs (4:2 and 6:6) and say that their teeth are like a flock of sheep that have come up from the washing. The Babylonian Talmud (Bechorot 43b) also recognizes how someone with a toothless smile can adversely affect the community. For example, a priest cannot work in the Temple and be a messenger of the people of Israel if he is missing teeth, since he is a public figure. Furthermore, a priest cannot work in the Temple if his facial muscles are weak and spittle drips from his mouth. All these defects prevent the priest from having an aesthetically pleasing smile and from properly representing the people of Israel.

The Talmud asserts that imperfections in the mouth, such as missing teeth are considered ugly. The Talmud in Nedarim states that Rabbi Ishmael made the daughters of Israel beautiful by making false teeth for them to replace their missing real ones. Those artificial teeth were probably made from gold. Artificial teeth were also made from silver, wood, and even ivory.

The topics of artificial teeth and gold teeth, are discussed at length in the Talmud. The sixth chapter of the Mishna Shabbat notes, "an artificial tooth and a gold tooth, Rabbi Meir permits and the Sages forbid." This Mishna is discussing the permissibility of a person walking with a gold or artificial tooth on the Sabbath. According to Jewish law, it is prohibited to carry objects in the public domain on the Sabbath. The debate is about whether an artificial tooth constitutes the carrying of an object and focuses on women, as only women wore artificial or gold...
teeth. Many commentators give reasons as to why a woman might come to carry her gold or artificial tooth on the Sabbath. Rashi (commentary on Shabbat 65a) says that when a woman sees her friends, she will want to show off her gold tooth and will remove it. This might lead to her carrying it while walking. Maimonides (Mishna Commentary Shabbat 6:5), on the other hand, explains Rabbi Meir’s lenient approach. He says that since a gold tooth is usually used to cover up a decayed tooth, the woman will not remove the gold tooth because in doing so she will also pick it up. Another possibility is that if it falls out, the woman would be too ashamed to walk around without it and reveal her toothless smile or decayed teeth. Therefore, in these cases the woman would pick up the artificial tooth and come to carry it. The Talmud (Shabbat 64b-65a) gives another reason for a woman not to wear an artificial tooth on the Sabbath. The woman might feel that if her friends see her false tooth, they will laugh, and so she will remove the tooth and walk with it in her hand, carrying it on the Sabbath in the public domain. Nevertheless, all these possibilities centered on the prohibition of women wearing false teeth on the Sabbath.

Artificial or gold teeth were used in two ways. If a person lost a tooth, an artificial tooth was made and mechanically inserted into the resulting gap. These “dentures” were considered temporary, since the artificial tooth would act as a wedge, pushing the two surrounding teeth apart, causing the artificial tooth, in time, to fall out. Artificial or gold teeth were also used as a covering for a damaged tooth (capped teeth). Maimonides refers to damaged teeth as black or red. A black tooth is a nonvital tooth, which lost its natural color due to degraded blood cells caused by a hemorrhage in the pulp. A red tooth occurs when caries attack the inner part of the clinical crown leaving most of the outside layer intact, and the blood vessels in the pulp cause the tooth to appear red. Gold was used to cover such diseased teeth.

The book of Exodus (21:27) stresses the importance of having one’s own teeth. If a master causes his servant’s or maidservant’s tooth to come out, the master must let the slave go free. Even if the master is a physician and the slave asked him to fix his tooth, if the master caused the slave’s tooth to come out, the slave goes free (Baba Kamma 26b). If the slave’s tooth was loose but usable and the master caused the tooth to be unusable, then the slave is freed (Tosefta Baba Kamma 9:27). Clearly, the Bible and Talmud regard teeth as extremely necessary and important.

People in Talmudic times also cared about the health of their teeth and they practiced dental care, orthodontics, and oral hygiene. Doctors practiced cleaning the base of the tooth, known today as scaling, to keep a person’s mouth healthy. Toothpicks and wooden splinters were used to dislodge food stuck in people’s teeth (Betzah 33a). To freshen their breath women used peppercorn, ginger, and cinnamon (Shabbat 64b-65a). Woodchips were used
to align a person’s teeth and to fix crowded teeth (Tosefta Shabbat 5:1). Maimonides even urged his readers to harden and strengthen their teeth with astrigent medications (Medical Aphorisms of Moses Ch.7).

People nowadays are still concerned about healthy teeth and a beautiful-looking smile. Cosmetic dentistry is a growing field, expanding every day with new techniques to make a person’s smile incredible. Procedures like bonded restorations, bleaching, and porcelain veneers restore a white smile to anyone. In bonding, a technique used to repair chipped, cracked, or broken teeth; the tooth is rebuilt with a composite resin matching the color of the original tooth. Bleaching is used to whiten discolored teeth, by either a solution of hydrogen peroxide or carbamide peroxide, or by in-office laser bleaching using a high-energy light. Veneers are porcelain covers that are placed over the tooth’s surface and that closely resemble the tooth’s natural color. Veneers are in modern times what gold teeth were in Biblical and Talmudic times.

Although we have more options for a healthy white smile today, there is no denying the importance of a healthy smile and mouth had in the time of the Bible and Talmud. Compliments and blessings were exchanged about white teeth. Priests were forbidden to work in the Temple if they did not have a full set of teeth. The Talmud discusses the emotions of a woman who wore artificial teeth and how she might come to violate the Sabbath by carrying the tooth. A diseased tooth was covered by gold to avoid the unpleasant appearance of a decayed tooth. Toothpicks, astrignents, and even scaling procedures were used to keep teeth healthy. The universality of a white healthy smile is quite apparent since it is just as popular today as it was thousands of years ago.

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NOTES


Additional Notes:

e. www.lafrom.com/toothwhitening.htm