In recent years there have been many scientific breakthroughs in the field of dentistry. Braces have become a right of passage for teenagers and it is almost impossible to pick from the variety of toothpastes and mouthwashes that flood the pharmacy shelves. Although it is easy to think of dentistry and oral health as modern practices, they stem back to ancient times and are discussed throughout the Tanach, Talmud and halachic literature.

The Torah places tremendous importance on healthy and beautiful teeth. The word shen, tooth, appears 42 times in Tanach. The first time is when Yaakov blesses his son Yehuda, “…his teeth shall be whiter than milk” (Bereishis 49:12) [1]. Later, Shlomo Hamelech describes someone praising his lover by saying, “teeth like a flock of ewes from washing, bearing twins, and not one is lost” (Shir Hashirim 4:2). In addition, in Mishlei (10:26), Shlomo Hamelech compares a poor messenger to unhealthy practices towards teeth and says that the messenger is considered “vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes” [2].

Even during the time of the Talmud the topic of false teeth was relevant [3]. In Nedarim (66b), it states that Rabbi Ishmael beautified the daughters of Israel by replacing their ordinary false teeth with gold ones. “And Rabbi Ishmael made a tooth in the same place as the false one to make them more beautiful.” The concept of an artificial tooth is also discussed in the Mishnah Shabbos (6:5), when discussing whether a Jewish woman can carry a false tooth in a public domain on Shabbos. The concern is that the woman may take the tooth out and then transgress the prohibition of carrying. Also discussed in the Talmud is the importance of having a healthy mouth and beautiful teeth. In Ketubot (72b, 77a) it notes that a kohen, priest, can not perform holy rituals if he has bad breath, since it is considered a disability. In fact, bad breath and oral health are so important that they are considered justifiable grounds for divorce for both men and women [4].

Teeth are also important in matters of Jewish monetary laws. The Torah discusses in Shemos (21:24), “an eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth,” when describing punishments and how they should fit the crime. This is meant to teach that one needs to pay someone whom he injures. The Torah emphasizes the eyes and teeth because both are integral parts of a person. Another place teeth are seen in monetary law is regarding a Jewish master who knocks out the tooth of his servant. Teeth are considered so valuable that the master is then required to give the servant his freedom. The law is further discussed in Tosefta Babba Kamma (9:27) where it states that even if the servant’s tooth was already loose, yet still functional, the servant would still be granted freedom if the tooth is knocked out. In Babba Kamma (26b) it states that even a master who was drilling his servant’s tooth and accidentally caused it to fall out, must grant the servant freedom [1]. Although the dental drill was invented by in 1790 by John Greenwood, George Washington’s dentist, it was a modified version of the spinning wheel which has been used by dentists to drill teeth since the times of the Talmud [5].

The word shen, tooth, appears 42 times in Tanach.

Many modern halachic questions concern dentistry. The question of whether a gold cap on a tooth or a filling is considered a chatzitza, something which blocks the body from total immersion during a ritual bath, is discussed in modern halachic literature. According to Torah law, a chatzitza would invalidate an immersion if it is a substance that covers the majority of the body or if people generally do not want it affixed to their bodies. Although one does not need to open her mouth during a ritual bathing, there is still a prohibition against having a chatzitza in the mouth. The general position taken by the poskim is that fillings and gold caps are considered extensions of the body because they are permanent and serve the body. Therefore, they are not considered problems for halacha [6].

The importance of teeth and oral hygiene is seen throughout Torah and halacha. Although many advances have been made in modern dentistry, its roots stem back to the times of the Talmud.
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