The “Tooth” of the Matter

In the Bible, teeth are considered a very important part of the body, almost as important as the eyes. They are so important that if an indentured servant lost one tooth because his master struck him, the Torah orders that he be released. In the Midrash- Yalkut Shimony it states that the health of the body depends on the teeth [1]. This may suggest that something wrong with one’s teeth is an indication of some internal pathology.

Many people overlook the importance of their teeth, considering them only in terms of their function of chewing food and aesthetics. In the Bible, the words “tooth” and “teeth” are mentioned fifty five times, in forty-eight verses. “Tooth” and “teeth” are used in different contexts throughout the Bible, including in regard to health and appearance; culture, society, and the legal system; anatomical and physiological responses; strength, power, and the ability to conquer; and in the context of emotions, such as anger and anguish. This article will focus mainly on the use of teeth in the context of strength, power, and ability to conquer [2]. The teeth are related to strength, power, and ability to conquer due to the fact that the teeth are very strong. King Hussein, who was the “moderate” of Hashemite Jordan, told his troops to kill all the Jews of a suburb in Jerusalem during the Six-Day War in 1967. To accomplish this task, he told them to use all their weapons, including their teeth [1]. Teeth function in digestion, as they mechanically break down foods, such as tough meats, by cutting and crushing them in the oral cavity. When viewing an animal, one can tell if it is an herbivore, carnivore, or omnivore by the structure of the teeth which accommodate its diet. Carnivores have sharp teeth to rip and cut flesh, while herbivores have ridged molars and the ability to move their jaws sideways which enables them to chew their food [3].

The Bible also contains descriptions of strength, power, and the ability to conquer. In Tehillim (57:4-5) King David praises G-d for saving his life from his enemies numerous times [4]. In these verses, King David describes his enemies as “men whose teeth are spears and arrows,” indicating that his enemies are very dangerous and have much power. Rashi identifies the men to whom David is referring as either those who attacked him prior to Saul or to those who informed Saul of Davis whereabouts. Saul attempted to kill David because the kingship was taken from Saul and transferred to David [5]. Another example is seen later in Tehillim (124:6), when King David is thanking G-d for saving his life and the lives of his soldiers. David says, “Blessed be the Lord who has not given us to be torn by their teeth.”

In Mishlei (30:14) evil men are described as having “teeth like swords, jaw teeth like knives to devour the needy” [2]. This passage is discussing a generation described as a people who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers, a generation who is haughty and conceited and think too highly of themselves, and a generation who use their teeth to eat the poor men of the land [5]. Yet another example is seen in Daniel (7:5) in which Daniel describes a dream he had the night before and remembers one of the characters in the dream as “a beast resembling a bear with three ribs in its mouth and between its teeth, devouring much meat”. This is a terrifying image because the rib cage is big and very strong, designed to protect our lungs. The image of a bear with three ribs in its mouth is not something most people would want to imagine. According to Rashi, the three ribs from Daniel’s dream represent the three cities that were constantly in a state of rebellion. Sometimes they won their independence and at other times they reverted back to Persian rule. Rashi also suggested that the three ribs may represent the three Persian emperors, Cyrus, Ahasuerus, and Darius II. In Daniel 7:7 and 7:19, the power of the Roman Empire is described as a “beast, extremely strong, having iron teeth. It devoured and crushed.” In Devarim (32:24), the mention of destruction is noted to be by the “teeth of animals” [2]. Commenting on this verse, Rashi suggests that the reason “teeth of animals” is mentioned is that there was an incident in which a sheep bit a man and the man subsequently died. Additionally, the Sifrei mentions that in this verse the Hebrew word “beheimot” refers to domesticated animals. One would expect that the word “chayot,” wild beasts, should have been used because chayot, not “beheimot,” usually bite people. The Sifrei notes that the word beheimot was used to indicate that even domesticated animals would bite people [6].

There are also examples of the removal of strength using the analogy of teeth. One example is found in Tehillim (3:7-8), “smitten on the cheek, Thou has shattered the teeth of the wicked” [2]. According to Mezudoth this verse refers to the soldiers of Absalom, the son of King David, who wanted to take his father’s throne. These soldiers lost their strength and power. According to Rashi, the phrase “smitten on the cheek” conveys a humiliating blow, and the phrase “shattered the teeth” refers to robbing the soldiers of their courage. It takes someone very courageous to attack the king, and G-d removed their courage and dauntlessness. King David thanks G-d for weakening his enemies and robbing them of their audacity and intrepidity to attack him. Similarly, later in Tehillim (58:6-7) King David asks G-d to “shatter their teeth in their mouth, break out the fangs of the young lions.” According to Radak the phrase “shatter their teeth” is a request from King David to G-d to destroy the enemy mentioned in the previous verse [5].
Teeth were also used as a reference in culture, society, and the legal system. Many times the phrase “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” is mentioned [2]. This phrase is not meant to be taken literally. The Talmud (Ketubot 111a) states, “The congregation of Israel says to G-d: ‘Master of the Universe, wink to me with Your eyes for that exhilarates me more than wine and smile at me with Your teeth for that is sweeter to me than milk’”. This shows that when G-d is happy with the Jewish People, then the Jewish people are happy and seek to satisfy G-d. This statement also shows the importance of teeth and a good smile. The Talmud continues, “Better is the one who shows the white of his teeth (in a smile) to his friend, than the one who gives him milk to drink”[7]. Teeth have such a strong impact on society, as it is more important to smile at someone (showing one’s teeth) than to provide them with food.

As shown, there are many important connotations associated with teeth throughout all of the Torah. The use of teeth as a symbol of strength, power, and the ability to conquer is very common in Tanach. Also, the usage of teeth is noted when describing culture, society, and the legal system.

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References