

Rita Mermelstein

Rita Mermelstein, a senior at Stern College for Women, is majoring in Biology

## TEETH IN THE TORAH

The *Chumash* and the Talmud refer to teeth numerous times and in various contexts. For this reason, several authors, religious and non-religious alike, have addressed the subject of teeth and dentistry as they appear in religious writings. The different contexts include Judaism's long recognition of the aesthetic importance of teeth. Rabbi Yochanan said, "The person who whitens the teeth of his neighbor is better than the person who gives him milk to drink" (*Ketubot*, 111b).<sup>1</sup> Why would the whitening of a person's teeth, a seemingly superficial luxury, be considered a better act than giving a person milk, which is one of life's basic necessities? In the twentieth century, where physical beauty plays an important role in our society, Rabbi Yochanan's statement is more easily understandable. In addition, the value that Judaism places on teeth can be seen from the fact that a toothless *Kohen* was disqualified from serving in the *Beit Hamikdash* (*Berachot*, 44a).<sup>2</sup> Apparently, the aesthetic value placed on teeth in our society today is not at all a modern concept. Healthy beautiful teeth were and continue to be an essential part of a person's appearance.

In antiquity tooth replacement seems to have been used only for cosmetic purposes, and, therefore, Talmudic writings mention it only concerning women. The Talmud distinguishes between different types of tooth replacements: A golden tooth was expensive and hence accessible only to the well-to-do woman (*Shabbat*, 65a), whereas even people of middle income could afford a *totevet* tooth (*Yerushalmi Shabbat*, 11c). Although the material used for the *totevet* tooth is disputed among the Rabbis, it is known that it was not made from a cosmetically attractive material. The *Gemara* in *Nedarim* (66b) relates how Rabbi Yishmael had a golden tooth made for a young maiden who had previously worn an ugly *totevet* tooth. Consequently, with her beauty blemish removed, she was able to marry.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to sources on the essence of beautiful teeth, teeth have also had a significant impact on different legal matters within Judaism. These references extend back to the *Chumash* itself. The dictum of, "thou shalt

give an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" is stated several times in the Torah (*Shemot*, 21:22; *Bamidbar*, 24:19; and *Devarim*, 19:21). It is clear that the Torah did not mean this to be carried out in the literal sense. In the Talmudic discussions of bodily injuries, including those to teeth, only financial punishments are noted, except in cases of murder and manslaughter. The importance of teeth in the culture and the legal system is also noted in the statement (*Shemot*, 21:27), "if one knocks out the tooth of a slave, he shall go free."

Another interesting *Halachic* matter concerns carrying a false tooth on Shabbat.

A woman may go out with [a false tooth] providing that she does not put it in her mouth in the first place on the Shabbat, and if it falls out she may not put it back. As for an artificial tooth, (or) a gold tooth—Rebi [Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi] permits it, but the sages forbid it. (*Shabbat*, 64a,b)

An entire *Halachic* discussion in the Talmud evolves from this statement in the *Mishna*. Rabbi Zera said that this refers only to a gold tooth, but that all would agree that a silver tooth is permitted to be worn on Shabbat. Abaye said in the name Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar that whatever detracts from a person's appearance, one will not come to display it. These statements imply that there is a difference between an artificial silver tooth and an artificial gold tooth.

The discussion which ensues attributes this distinction to the greater value of gold. Therefore, those who forbid wearing a gold tooth on Shabbat are concerned that the woman might be tempted to remove it and display it in a prideful manner.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, she might inadvertently carry it in a public domain, thereby violating the prohibition of carrying on Shabbat. On the other hand, those who permit the gold tooth are of the opinion that regardless of its value, the woman will not remove it to show to her friends as it is an embarrassment for her. They maintain that if there were no need for a woman to walk around toothless, she would never choose to do so. Conversely, a silver tooth does not require any of these considerations since it is not viewed as valuable and, therefore, there is no fear that it will be removed, and that Shabbat will be violated.



Not content with this, the *Gemara* (*Shabbat*, 65a) presents a somewhat different psychological approach to the problem. The *Gemara* states that a woman going out from the courtyard to meet her friends might be ashamed that she has a false tooth and might therefore remove it and put it into her pocket before leaving the courtyard. Subsequently, she may forget that it is in her pocket and violate the Shabbat by carrying the tooth. Throughout this discussion, it is clear that the sages of the Talmud were not only well versed in legal aspects of *halacha*, but were also very perceptive of human nature. However, it is interesting to note that the Talmud *Yerushalmi* writes “an artificial tooth *and* a gold tooth,” therefore implying that the two types of teeth are synonymous.

Aside from interesting *Halachic* discussions, teeth also have many symbolic interpretations throughout the Torah. A. Y. Finkel<sup>4</sup> in, *In My Flesh I See God*, stated that the letter “*shin*” is related to *shein*, tooth, in that the shape of the letter “*shin*” remarkably resembles a molar. Teeth are commonly used as symbols of strength, power and to the ability to conquer. The Torah (*Devarim*, 32:24) discusses destruction by the “teeth of beasts.” David in *Tehillim* (57:4) describes his enemies as “men whose teeth are spears and arrows.” *Shein* is also the root of the word *veshinantam*, meaning, “teach” as in the context of the *pasuk*, “teach [these words] thoroughly to your children” (*Devarim*, 6:7). When Torah is transmitted, it is done so with the strength of the teeth, so that it remains deeply rooted.

*Kabbalah* teaches (*Sefer Yetzirah*, 1:1) that there are thirty-two Pathways of Wisdom. Finkel explained that these pathways originate in G-d’s Will, in the *Sefirah* (sphere) of *Keter* (Crown). Man, who is created in the image of G-d, is a reflection of the *Sefirot*. Thus, the *Sefirah* of *Keter* corresponds to the human brain, the seat of the soul. Yet, it is not the mind alone that speaks the truth of the Torah. It is more a combination of the *lev* (heart) and mind. Interestingly, the numerical value of the letters of the word *lev* is thirty-two. The thoughts of the heart and soul are expressed through speech by the tongue, the lips and the teeth. These instruments of speech are situated in the mouth, beneath the skull, which surrounds the brain. Finkel<sup>4</sup> commented that the thirty-two teeth of the mouth correspond to the thirty-two Pathways of Wisdom. Extraordinarily, this idea manifests itself in the letters of the *alef-bet*. The letter *kaf* resembles the cavity of the mouth. The letter *pei* which is similar in shape to the *kaf*, represents a mouth into which a tooth has been inserted. Therefore, when you articulate Torah thoughts, your mouth (*peh*, *pei*) gives voice to the thirty-two Pathways of

Wisdom, proclaiming the words that were spoken by the "mouth of G-d" (Yeshayahu, 40:5).<sup>4</sup>

From this extensive examination of teeth in the Torah, it is clear that Judaism is cognizant of the important role of teeth. The Talmud itself notes many different aspects of teeth in reference to practical, legal and *Halachic* matters. Finkel takes teeth one step further and discusses what is maybe the most significant for us today, their metaphysical qualities. Every time one speaks, especially when articulating Torah thoughts, he has the choice of whether or not to give voice to the thirty-two Pathways of Wisdom.

### NOTES

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