**Introduction**

In recent years there has been a significant amount of controversy surrounding the issue of proper safety protocols, particularly issues of infection and maintaining a sterile environment, at a bris milah. While most of the attention has been focused on whether a mohel is required permitted or forbidden from performing a “metzitzah b’peh” (oral suction of the wound), significantly less attention has been paid to the issue of whether a mohel is required, permitted or forbidden from wearing sterile gloves while performing the milah. In the medical community procedures are always done after both vigorous scrubbing and wearing sterile gloves.[[1]](#footnote-1) While data on precisely how much the risk of infection is increased when a mohel does not wear gloves is not readily available, conventional medical wisdom, and common sense, would suggest that all additional precautions that help to maintain a more sterile environment help to decrease the risk of infection. On the other hand, the integrity of the mitzvah of milah must be maintained. If the integrity of the milah were compromised in some way by taking additional precautions, we may discourage those additional precautions. For instance, the risk of infection is moderately decreased by having fewer people handle the baby, yet we still maintain the long standing custom for a “kvater” to carry the baby to and from the bris, and a “sandak” to hold the baby during the bris.[[2]](#footnote-2) The question we will discuss in this essay is whether a halachically proper milah can be performed while wearing gloves. Absent any halachic objection, it would seem clear that wearing gloves would be much preferred, if not required.

We will deal with two potential halachic pitfalls with wearing gloves, and analyze the source material to determine whether they indeed pose a halachic problem. First, is the issue of “bizuy mitzvah”, denigrating or disrespecting a mitzvah by wearing gloves to perform a mitzvah. Second, we will discuss the practical concern whether a mohel would be able to do a proper periah (peeling back the thin membrane under the foreskin), which the Shulchan Aruch requires the fingernail to do.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Bizuy Mitzvah**

The Gemara (Pesachim 57) records four occasions that caused the azarah (courtyard) of the Beis Hamikdash to (metaphorically) cry. One such cry was to banish a Kohen Gadol named Yisachar Ish Kfar Barkai who “honored himself and disrespected the holy sacrifices. The Gemara explains that this Yisachar would wear gloves while doing the service in the Beis Hamikdash. Rashi explains that there are two problems with this practice. First, it creates an unwarranted interposition between the skin of the kohen and the sacrifice he is dealing with, which would invalidate the sacrifice. Second, it is disrespectful to the holy items to wear gloves. The Gemara goes on to explain how Hashem ultimately punished Yisachar Ish Kfar Barkai. On one occasion the king and queen were debating whether goat meat or lamb meat is superior. They decided to settle the dispute by calling on a person who had extensive experience with meat of different animals, the kohen gadol (Yisachar). Yisachar was summoned to the palace to resolve the dispute and while answering the question he gestured dismissively with his hand as if to say that lamb meat is obviously superior. The king was so insulted by the gesture that he decreed that Yisachar’s right hand should be cut off. Yisachar bribed the king’s messenger to cut off his left hand instead of his right. When the king heard about this, he saw to it that they should cut off his right hand as well. While the Gemara does not state explicitly which of the two problems with the practice (the chatzitzah or the bizayon kodshim) lead to such a harsh punishment, it seems from the introductory line (that Yisachar “honors himself and disrespects kodshim”) that the punishment was on account of the disrespect shown to kodshim.

The Gemara clearly assumes that it is inappropriate to wear gloves when handling kodshim, but does not tell us whether doing other mitzvos while wearing gloves is also considered disrespectful.[[4]](#footnote-4) There are several other forms of bizuy mitzvah that Chazal clearly apply to other mitzvos. For example, the Gemara (Chulin 87a) derives from a passuk that one cannot cover the blood of a slaughtered bird or beast (the mitzvah of kisuy hadam) with his foot rather than with his hand because doing so would show disdain for the mitzvah. The Gemara (Shabbos 22a) applies the concept of bizuy mitzvah to using the light of Chanukah candles for mundane purposes (such as counting money). Similarly Rabeinu Gershom understands the Gemara (Tamid 28b) to forbid removing ashes from the מזבח with one’s feet because it is a bizuy mitzvah.[[5]](#footnote-5) The simple reading of the Gemara suggests that bizuy mitzvah is a problem on a biblical level, and this is in fact the position of Sha’agas Aryeh (#40) and Pnei Yehoshua (Beitzah 30b).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Several later poskim have applied the specific concern wearing gloves symbolizing disrespect, to other mitzvos as well. For example, the Divrei Malkiel (V:206) writes that when a man performs kidushin (betrothal) of his wife, by placing a ring on her finger, the woman should not wear gloves. One of the reasons he gives is to avoid being like Yisachar Ish Kfar Barkai by disrespecting the mitzvah of marriage.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Pischei Teshuva (Yoreh Deah 271:19) writes that a sofer should not write a sefer torah, or even add the crowns onto the letters, while wearing gloves. He forbids writing with gloves even if the fingers of the gloves are cut off, because it is considered disrespectful to the mitzvah of writing a sefer torah. Responsa Torah Lishmah writes that a shaliach tzibur should not wear gloves when carrying a sefer torah because that too is considered disrespectful. These three examples seem to illustrate that covering one’s hands when handling a mitzvah is not only problematic when dealing with kodshim, but with other mitzvos as well. We still haven’t clarified what the parameters of this concern are. Is this a problem for all mitzvos? Does the motivation of the person who is wearing the gloves matter?

These questions are discussed in a correspondence between Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Yechezkel Grubner (of Detroit, Michigan). Rabbi Grubner was asked by shochtim whether it is permissible for them to wear gloves while slaughtering animals, and checking them after the shechitah for problems that may make the animal a treifah. Rabbi Grubner (Responsa Knesses Yechezkel #43) writes that one definitely cannot check for treifos while wearing gloves, since the bodek has to pay very careful attention to everything he touches while checking and his sensitivity to slight cuts and bumps in the animal is compromised by wearing gloves. With regard to shechting while wearing gloves, Rabbi Grubner points out that since we find the general concern of “bizuy mitzvah” by many mitzvos (as in covering blood with feet), it is clear that people should not perform mitzvos while wearing gloves. Rabbi Grubner then analyzes whether shechitah is in fact a mitzvah or simply the only permissible way of obtaining kosher meat. If shechitah is a mitzvah, it may not be done while wearing gloves. If it were only a “matir” (a way of making meat kosher) one would be permitted to wear gloves. Rabbi Grubner concludes that a shochet should avoid wearing gloves, even if his intention is to protect his hand from adverse conditions and not out of disdain for the mitzvah, but if he wears gloves the shechitah is certainly valid.

In his response to Rabbi Grubner’s teshuvah, Rav Moshe Feinstein (printed in Iggeros Moshe Y”D II:16 and in Knesses Yechezkel #43) argues that even if shechitah is a mitzvah it may be permissible for a shochet to wear gloves. Rav Moshe demonstrates that there are certain mitzvos that one may perform while wearing gloves. For example, Rashi (Sukkah 42) understands that Rava permits taking lulav while wearing gloves, and is apparently not at all concerned for bizuy mitzvah. The concern of bizuy mitzvah, argues Rav Moshe, is only when a person wears the gloves in order to avoid “dirtying” his hands with the mitzvah. This is considered disrespectful to the mitzvah for two reasons. First, a mitzvah should be done with joy and love to the extent that somebody should be honored by having the mitzvah on his hands, and shouldn’t look for ways to avoid becoming dirty from the mitzvah. This idea is demonstrated in the Gemara (Pesachim 65a) that says that they would plug the drains in the Beis Hamikdash on Erev Pesach so that the blood from all of the korbanos would back up, and it was a “praise for the children of Aharon to walk knee deep in blood”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Second, if a person is careful to wear gloves so that his hands do not get dirty from the mitzvah, he gives the impression that he would not perform the mitzvah if it meant getting dirty. When taking a lulav neither element of bizuy mitzvah is present, since the lulav does not dirty the hands in any way. It is evident that the person wears gloves out of respect and reverence for the mitzvah, and not as a protection from becoming dirty.

Applying these concerns to shechitah, Rav Moshe points out that both concerns would seem to apply as the blood of the animal gets the shochet’s hands dirty. However, Rav Moshe continues, perhaps the concern of bizuy mitzvah only applies when the actual mitzvah gets the hands dirty. When, however, the messiness is incidental to the mitzvah, but not a critical component of the mitzvah, one may protect himself from becoming dirty. The blood of the animal is a critical part of the mitzvah of korbanos, but plays no role in the mitzvah of shechting regular animals to eat. In fact, if somehow there would be a bloodless shechitah, it would be valid (Chullin 33). Therefore, the first type of bizuy mitzvah (that he is avoiding allowing the mitzvah to dirty him) would not apply to shechitah of a regular animal. The second type of bizuy mitzvah (the impression that one wouldn’t do the mitzvah if he couldn’t stay clean) may still be a concern. However, even the second type of bizuy mitzvah may not be a concern by shechitah because there is no requirement to do shechitah. One who has somebody else do a shechitah is considered no less pious and scrupulous than one who does a shechitah himself. The impression that one would not do the shechitah if he were not able to wear gloves, is not a problem at all. In the end, Rav Moshe’s only objection to a shochet wearing gloves is that it may impede his ability to do a proper shechitah or to sense when the pressure of the knife, rather than its sharpness, is responsible for the slicing of the animal.

At first glance it would seem that when we apply Rav Moshe’s analysis to the mitzvah of milah, there would be ample concern that wearing gloves would constitute a bizuy mitzvah. First, milah is more similar to shechita than to lulav in that the blood does get the mohel’s hands dirty. Second, unlike shechita where the blood is not a critical part of the mitzvah, the blood is certainly critical to the milah. Virtually all poskim rejected the use of a Gomco clamp in performing a bris milah. One of the primary concerns is that the clamp stops the blood flow to the foreskin, and the milah is then done without drawing blood. Rav Moshe Feinstein (Iggeros Moshe Y”D II:119) and Rav Eliezer Waldenberg (Tzitz Eliezer VIII:29) both argue that drawing blood is indispensable to the milah. Rav Moshe proves this point from the fact that even when a baby is circumcised in a way that does not fulfill the mitzvah (e.g. before the eighth day or at night) we are obligated to do “hatafas dam bris” – draw blood from the area, as a fulfillment of the mitzvah (Shach Y”D 262:2).[[9]](#footnote-9) Additionally, wearing gloves would seem to give the impression that without gloves one would not perform the bris, a violation of the second type of bizuy mitzvah that Rav Moshe highlights.

Upon further reflection, though, it seems clear that the issue of bizuy mitzvah is not a concern when wearing sterile gloves to perform a bril milah. Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein (Chashukei Chemed Pesachim 57a) was asked if a mohel is permitted to wear gloves when the parents request it. He answers that it is clear to everybody that the purpose of wearing gloves is to avoid transmission of disease and not to maintain a sense of the honor of the mohel. Rav Zilberstein writes that even if the parents do not make the request the mohel is justified in wearing gloves. Similarly Rabbi Moshe Perutinsky (Sefer Habris 264 Likutei Halachos #77) writes that since sterile gloves are widely recognized as the best way to keep a wound clean and free of infection, the gloves do not denigrate the mitzvah, but accomplish the exact opposite – honoring the mitzvah by maintaining best practices.

**Periah**

A second potential halachic issue with the mohel wearing gloves during the bris milah is that the Shulchan Aruch (Y”D 264:3) describes two stages to the process of circumcision. The first is to cut off the foreskin. Once that is accomplished the mohel is required to remove the thin layer of skin underneath the foreskin, using his fingernail. The first stage is known as “milah”, while the second is called “priah”. The Shulchan Aruch (Y”D 264:4) goes on to say that if one only does milah but omits periah, the bris is invalid. Some mohelim report difficulty in doing a proper priah with the fingernail while wearing gloves. Rabbi Yakov Breish (Responsa Chelkas Yakov Y”D:148) assumes as a matter of clear fact that periah with the fingernail cannot be done while the mohel is wearing gloves.

Historically, one of the reasons that some poskim rejected the use of a “Bronstein Mogen” clamp[[10]](#footnote-10) (developed by Rabbi Tzvi Bronstein in the mid-20th century, and halachically superior to the traditional Gomco clamp, and described in detail in Sefer Habris Likutei Halachos 264:86) is that the clamp is set up in such a way that all of the skin is removed with a single cut. The periah is not a separate action from the milah. There are three reasons that this concern should not be an impediment to a mohel wearing surgical gloves.

First, Rav Moshe Feinstein (Iggeros Moshe Y”D I:155 and III:98) allows for the milah and periah to be done simultaneously. In fact Rabbi Chaim Jachter (Gray Matter IV:170) points out that Rav Hai Gaon (cited in Teshuvos Hageonim Shaarei Tzedek 3:5:6) endorses the practice of mohelim to perform milah and priah together.

Second, Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky (Achiezer 3:65:12, also cited by Rabbi Jachter ibid) allows for a periah that is not done with the fingernail. He points out that since priah is impossible to perform with a fingernail on an adult, an instrument is always used to do periah on an adult convert. Rav Ovadya Yosef (Responsa Yabia Omer Y”D VII:22) also rules that periah with an instrument is acceptable. However, these poskim both still rule that periah should be done with the fingernail lechatchila. The argument can be made, however, that the safety advantage allows for the milah to be done in a less ideal way. It should also be noted that not all poskim would accept a periah done with anything other than the fingernail. Rabbi Yakov Breish (ibid) cites a Medrash that identifies three mitzvos done with fingernails: melikah of bird korbanos in the Beis Hamikdash, using the havdalah light, and periah, which seems to assume that periah must be done with the fingernail. Rav Breisch also emphasizes that the reasons for many practices in the milah procedure are beyond our comprehension and those practices should be maintained.

Finally, and most fundamentally, with proper training it seems that a mohel *can* do periah with his fingernail even while wearing gloves. Several expert mohelim have told me that they have no trouble doing periah using gloves. Perhaps those who have a hard time with it have never tried with gloves that are thin enough.

**Approaches of Poskim**

Based on the issues we have presented, poskim have developed different approaches to the issue of wearing gloves while performing a bris milah.

Rabbi Yakov Breisch (Responsa Chelkas Yakov Y”D 148) and Rabbi Yosef Veisberg (commonly known as Yossele, a respected mohel from Yerushalayim, in his Sefer Otzar Habris III:8:14) rules that absent any known illness or special concern for bacteria or infection, a mohel should not wear gloves. He bases the prohibition on Yisachar Ish Kfar Barkai, arguing that wearing gloves is a demonstration of arrogance and a show of disrespect to the mitzvah. Even Rabbi Veisberg would allow for gloves to be worn when the bris is being performed in the hospital (though his son Rabbi Moshe Veisberg does not use gloves even when performing a bris in a hospital), when the mohel has cuts on his hands, when a baby that the mohel had previously done a bris for came down with an infection or when the baby has had some sort of previous procedure done on that area of the body.

Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein (Chashukei Chemed Pesachim 57) rules that it is permissible to wear gloves if the parents of the baby request it or if the mohel has any concerns that the baby has some sort of virus, and the mohel wears the gloves to protect himself. Rav Zilberstein and Rabbi Moshe Peretinsky (Sefer Habris) are not concerned that there is any bizuy mitzvah in using gloves.

Rabbi Hershel Schachter encourages mohelim to use gloves, arguing that the milah is fraught with danger by its very nature. Any additional safeguard to protect from infection, when it doesn’t infringe on the halacha, should be encouraged strongly.

.

1. See Responsa Chelkas Yakov (Y”D 148) where the author quotes a “big expert doctor” to say that minor procedures like a circumcision are often done without wearing sterile gloves. Conversations with several doctors reveal that this is no longer the case in American hospitals where every procedure is done with sterile gloves. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Responsa Mishnah Halachos (XII:177) who discusses why the custom is to allow additional people to serve as kvater, considering the potential added risk to the baby. He suggests that people rely on the principle of "שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע" – when doing a mitzvah one will be protected from harm. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rabbi Breisch (Chelkas Yakov ibid) argues that there is a third problem, of chatzitzah, an unwarranted interposition between the hands of the mohel and the mitzvah. However, this argument is very difficult to understand for several reasons: First, there is no derasha in Chazal nor halacha or minhag cited in Shulchan Aruch that refers to an issue of chatzitzah with a bris milah. Second, even if there were an issue of chatzitzah, all agree that the milah is done with an instrument that touches the baby directly. It would be difficult to understand why wearing gloves that interpose between the mohel’s hands and the instruments would qualify as a chatzitzah. Perhaps this is why none of the other poskim that discuss wearing gloves raise the issue of chatzitzah. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rabbi Yakov Breisch (Responsa Chelkas Yakov Y”D 148) argues, based on the Zohar, that a milah would have the status of a korban. There are many parallels between milah and korbanos, including the Medrash referring to the sandek’s knees as a מזבח. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See משנה ברורה (סימן קסז ס"ק פח) that throwing bread may be considered a ביזוי מצוה. See also ארץ הצבי סימן מט for an explanation of why the bread is considered a מצוה object that would be subject to concerns of ביזוי מצוה. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, however, תוספות שבת דף כב. ד"ה סוכה who asks why we need both the concept of Sukkah decorations being considered הוקצה למצותן and the concept of ביזוי מצוה to teach that it is forbidden to benefit from them, if one of the concepts would seem to be enough. The question seems to imply that both considerations are on the same level. Since הוקצה למצותה is only a rabbinic level concern, it seems that תוספות assumes that ביזוי מצוה is also only a rabbinic level concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. His primary reason is that the Rama (E”H 27:1) writes that we only use a ring for קידושין. We do this because it adheres tightly to the finger, symbolic of the close relationship between God and the Jewish people. Having something interpose between the finger and the ring represents a weakness in the relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See שולחן ערוך אורח חיים סימן רנ סעיף א' that even people who have servants and housekeepers should personally be involved in preparing the house for Shabbos, and should not be concerned about their own honor, because “this is his honor, that he honors Shabbos”. The באור הלכה (שם ד"ה כי זהו כבודו) explains that normally the concern for human dignity overrides many halacos, so one might have thought not to sacrifice his dignity for Shabbos preparations. The Shulchan Aruch therefore informs us that becoming dirty in preparing for Shabbos is not an affront to human dignity, but is in fact the most dignified thing to do. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also חידושי הגר"ח על הש"ס דף קלה. who strongly argues that blood is indispensable to the bris milah. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, for example, שו"ת ציץ אליעזר ח"ח סימן כט, ח"י סימן לח, ח"כ סימן נב and שו"ת מנחת יצחק חלק ה' סימן כד אות ב'. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)