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Putting Teeth Into Your Judaism

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל Emil W. Herman
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Vayechi

Putting Teeth Into Your Judaism

Somebody recently told me that his dentist had been driving him crazy about brushing his teeth twice a day. But that wasn't enough for the dentist. He also told him that he would have to floss every day and, on top of that, would have to come in every few months to check for cavities, get a cleaning, and so on.

Then he asked me what Judaism might have to say about this—how much one has to invest in one's teeth.

Not the most common question a rabbi is asked, I might add.

So I told him that when I was a kid in cheder, in religious school, my teacher—who was not a young man at that point—was missing quite a few teeth.

But one morning he showed up with a mouth full of shiny white teeth. We asked him, "Did a miracle happen? Did you grow teeth overnight?" But then, he suddenly removed his dentures—and we all ran out of the classroom in terror.

Now as everyone knows, false teeth are a great thing—and, unlike real teeth, they don't fall out. But dentures are the first place Judaism has something to say about teeth. This is because dentures pose various problems in halachah, Jewish law.

For starters, most people eat both meat and dairy products. And so, just like one who keeps kosher at home uses two different sets of dishes for meat and dairy products, so too would it seem that someone with dentures would likewise need two sets of dentures—one for meat and one for dairy. As a matter of fact, there are religious Jews who do indeed keep use two sets of dentures.

But most of us, who cannot afford such a luxury, just need to clean our dentures well after eating any meat product.

The problem with dentures really begins when Passover arrives. Then you have a problem using what is essentially a dish, a utensil, that's been used an entire year for chametz, or leavened products. And then you have to make it kosher by putting it in boiling water—which is a big headache because boiling dentures can destroy them.

For that reason alone, it's very important to take care of your teeth—so that you don't ending up needing dentures in the first place.

Furthermore, we find in Judaism that halachah says that a kohen who is missing all his teeth might be considered to have a physical defect, rendering him forbidden to serve in the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple. So while it's true that not everyone is a kohen, this halachah shows us that a person's teeth have significant importance as far as Judaism is concerned.

And thirdly, there is a Kabbalistic side to teeth.

Does anyone know how many teeth there are in a mouth? [Interact with audience.]

That's right: thirty-two—and in Judaism, there is also a mitzvah connected with the number 32: tzitzis.

There are eight strings in each of the fringes of the garment called tzitzis. ("Tzitzis" means "fringes.") And there are four fringes. Do the math. Eight times four gives you... 32.

It's been said in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's name that checking the 32 tzitzis strings is a segulah, an auspicious custom, for 32 healthy teeth; in other words, extra care in keeping the mitzvah of tzitzis adds to your dental health.

But there's more. Teeth can even be said to symbolize the Jews.

In a farbrengen, a public gathering and talk, on the holiday of Purim in the year 1970, the Rebbe quoted the Midrash which comments on Haman's complaint to King Achashveirosh.

To refresh our Purim memories, the Megillah, the Scroll of Esther which we read on Purim, tells us that Haman, the Prime Minister of the ancient Persian Empire, had the following complaint to his master, King Achashveirosh: "There is one nation scattered across all provinces of your kingdom... and their laws are shonos."

Shonos means different. But the word shonos here has more than one meaning.

The simple meaning is that the Jews' religion is different than everyone else's religion. But the fact that the Megillah chose the word shonos and not another word that also means different is because the Megillah wanted to hint at another part of Haman's complaint.

The Midrash says that shonos is related to the word shinayim, or teeth: "Haman said to Achashveirosh, 'They have lots of teeth. They're always eating and drinking and saying, "Shabbos pleasure!" "Holiday pleasure!" ' ' "

In other words, Haman complained to Achashveirosh that the Jews are always eating and chewing away—those Jews with their teeth and their holidays and their holiday foods. They're always busy with their kreplach and kneidlach and latkes and matzos. And on top of that, they won't our Persian foods!

In other words, one way to recognize a Jew is by his teeth—meaning, by what he eats.

For that reason, the Midrash explains, G-d created the holiday of Purim as a measure-for-measure response to Haman's accusations. Haman complained that the Jews are always eating—so the holiday of Purim revolves around the Purim feast, sending Mishloach Manos food gifts to friends, and eating hamantashen. In other words, eating.

And to keep all these mitzvos that have to do with eating, a Jew needs healthy teeth.

Finally, we find teeth in Judaism in no less than this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Torah portion, Yaakov Avinu, our Patriarch Jacob, summons all his sons and says to them, "Gather and hear, O sons of Yaakov, and listen to Yisroel your father" (Bereishis 49:2). Yaakov then blesses each of the sons, giving each one a blessing tailored specifically to him.

So Yaakov starts with the oldest, Reuven, and eventually comes to his #4 son, Yehudah. And Yehudah gets the most wonderful blessing (Bereishis 49:10): "The scepter shall not depart from Yehudah," meaning that the Jewish royal family would always come from the Tribe of Yehudah, from the House of David, "until Shiloh comes"—until the coming of Moshiach.

And then, after this wonderful blessing, Yaakov adds a blessing for Yehudah: that in his territory in the Land of Israel there will be so much wine that those who live there will have eyes red from wine—"and teeth white from milk" (Bereishis 49:12). That means that there will be also be so much milk in Yehudah's territory that the people living there will have white teeth.

Now seemingly, why was it so important to Yaakov Avinu before his death that his grandchildren have white teeth in the centuries to come—so much so that he included it in his blessing? White teeth may be beautiful—but why include them in the Torah?

Perhaps we can answer as follows: human nature is such that a person whose teeth aren't white or straight is embarrassed to smile—because if he or she smiles, you'll see those teeth. A person with great teeth will smile readily, but those whose teeth are less than perfect tend to walk around with sour faces, if only to not expose their teeth.

And it is on this verse in this week's Torah portion that the Talmud (Tractate Kesuvos 111b) says, "Better is he who shows white teeth to his friend than he who gives him milk to drink, as the verse states, 'and teeth white from milk'—do not read it 'teeth white,' but rather, 'showing white teeth.'" This means that it's more important to show teeth to your friend—meaning, to smile—than to give him milk.

This verse teaches us, in other words, how important it is to keep our teeth white—because it's important to smile at others. And with clean and presentable teeth, it's much easier and more pleasant to smile at others.

Rabbi Yehudah Krinsky, one of the Rebbe's secretaries, once told the following story.

In the early years of the Rebbe's leadership, Rabbi Krinsky once entered the Rebbe's office holding several photographs. He put them on the table and explained that since the newspapers were asking for portraits of the Rebbe, Rabbi Krinsky wanted to know which one to provide them.

The Rebbe answered him that it made no difference which photo—as long as it was in which he appeared with a smile.

Continuing the theme of teeth, the Talmud says that the Knesses Yisrael, the spiritual body comprising all Jews, asks G-d to show the Jewish People His teeth, so to speak—a request which commentator Rashi explains to mean to show friendliness to the Jewish Nation, because one who expresses friendship reveals his teeth.

In other words, the Talmud tells us that the Jewish Nation asks G-d to smile at us.

So teeth have an important place in Judaism indeed—so much so that we ask G-d to smile at us.

But how do we merit getting G-d's smile? The answer is: When we smile at each other down here, when we show each other those white teeth of ours, in that merit will we merit to have G-d smile down on us.

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