



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

This Issue Contains:

1. Fingernails
2. Answer to Yiddle Riddle



Alan Zukerman and Scott Shapiro <kgir@netvision.net.il> wrote:

Could you provide some background on the very perplexing warning that a pregnant woman who walks on a fingernail clipping is in danger of miscarriage?

Wilfred Schuster <wschust@ibm.net> from Toronto wrote:

What is the origin of the habit of burning one's nail clippings or disposing of them with care? Is there a source for this in the Tanach or in the Talmud?

Dear Alan Zukerman, Scott Shapiro and Wilfred Schuster:

The ruling that one should carefully dispose of fingernail clippings is found in the Talmud and is cited in the Shulchan Aruch. The reason the Talmud gives for this 'very perplexing ruling' is that a pregnant woman who steps on a fingernail clipping is in danger of a miscarriage. What is the idea behind this?

According to *Kabbalah*, Adam was created with a hard shiny membrane covering his whole body. When he ate from the forbidden tree Adam lost this covering, but it remained on the tips of his fingers and toes.

This concept is a metaphor for a very deep idea: Every person is intrinsically immortal due to his spiritual soul. However, by attaching himself to the physical world through improper actions (Adam's sin) a person becomes vulnerable to death and material destruction (loss of protective covering).

The concept of a fingernail harming a pregnant woman is based on the following idea: The nail, which is dead matter, represents death and the mortality of the human being. The pregnant woman represents creation, life and immortality. In mystical thinking, objects contain 'sparks' of the ideas which they symbolize. Opposite 'sparks' brought together can cause harm on the spiritual *and* physical level. Hence, the fingernail, death, is kept away from the pregnant woman, life.

Sources:

- Moed Kattan 18a, Nidah 17a
- Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 260.
- Ibid., Be'er Heteiv

Yiddle Riddle

Last week we asked:

Explain how the following situation could occur: You take a certain item and before deriving benefit from it you say the required blessing. One minute later you take the exact same item and derive the exact same type of benefit from it. However, this time the blessing beforehand is a different blessing. (The item contains no grain. The item undergoes no change whatsoever.)

Answer: Smelling fragrant spices after Shabbat.

There are different categories of fragrant spices. Each category requires a different blessing. For example, for spices that grow on trees the blessing is "Blessed are You Hashem ...Who creates fragrant *trees*." For spices derived from herbs which do not grow on trees, the blessing is "Blessed are You Hashem ...Who creates fragrant *herbs*."

However, at the '*havdalah*' ceremony after Shabbat a different blessing is said. At '*havdalah*' the blessing is always "Blessed are you Hashem ...Who creates *various types* of fragrances." In essence, this blessing is for a mixture of spices, or for spices of unknown nature. But at *havdala*, this is the standard blessing regardless of the type of spice. This avoids confusion, since often it's difficult to identify a given spice, its origins and proper blessing. (This is according to the Ashkenazic custom. Sephardic Jews say the precise blessing.)

So, let's say you use a myrtle branch for the *havdalah* ceremony (intending to smell it only once). You say: "Blessed are You ...Who creates *various spices*." Then, immediately after *havdalah* you decide to smell the exact same myrtle branch. This time, the blessing is "Blessed are You ...Who creates *fragrant trees*."

Ideally, you should use for *havdalah* a spice whose proper blessing is "*various spices*" The Mishna Berurah suggests cloves.

Sources:

- Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 217
- Ibid., Mishna Berurah 5, Sha'ar Hatzion 6
- Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chaim 297:4
- Mishna Berurah 297:1

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Issue #153 - 14 June 1997 - Naso

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