

The Weekly Daf



by Rav Mendel Weinbach - Dean, Ohr Somayach Institutions

Niddah 39-45

Week of 22-28 Av 5757 / 25-31 August 1997

Rav Weinbach's insights, explanations and comments for the 7 pages of Talmud studied in the course of the worldwide Daf Yomi cycle

Mystery of the Simple Question

"May one circumcise a child on Shabbos?"

This was the strange question put to the Sage Rava by a Jew who had come to seek halachic guidance.

"Of course," replied Rava, and the inquirer left the room pleased with the resolution of his doubt.

No sooner had he left and Rava asked himself how it could be possible for any Jew to be unaware that circumcision is done on Shabbos. Something else must be on his mind, concluded Rava, as he ran out to intercept him.

"Tell me the circumstances of the birth," he inquired of his inquirer.

"It was still before the advent of Shabbos," was the reply, "when I heard the baby's cry from inside his mother. But he didn't come out until Shabbos had already begun, and that is why I asked you whether he could be circumcised today, the following Shabbos."

"If that was the case," Rava ruled, "the baby had already — before the Shabbos — reached a point in his mother's womb which constitutes birth. Since he was born on Friday, his eighth day was already on the following Friday, and a circumcision which is after the eighth day cannot be held on the Shabbos."

This brilliant deduction of Rava that another question lay beneath the surface is echoed in the story of a great Torah scholar of this century who once examined a chicken brought to him for *kashrus* inspection by a youngster sent by his mother. After carefully checking the chicken and seeing that there was absolutely nothing wrong with it that could serve as any grounds for a question concerning its kosher status, he turned to the boy and said, "Please go home and bring the other chicken from your mother."

The boy dutifully returned to his mother who realized she had indeed given him the wrong chicken to bring to the rabbi. That chicken indeed turned out to be non-kosher and it was the rabbi's Rava-like power of deduction which saved a Jewish family from eating treifa food.

Niddah 42b

Bar and Bat Mitzvah

In describing Hashem's formation of the first woman from a rib of the first man, the Torah uses a term which can be read either as "*vayiven*" or as "*vayeiven*" — depending on the vowels assigned to it. The first reading is the obvious one and it means building. The other reading transmits a subtle message that the Creator instilled in woman a greater measure of "*binah*" — understanding — than He did in man.

This is the explanation offered by Rabbi Chisda for the halacha which states that a girl reaches the stage of responsibility (Bat Mitzvah) at the age of twelve, one year earlier than a boy (Bar Mitzvah).

Although this would seem to indicate that the woman is superior in understanding to the man, the Talmudic commentaries find it difficult to reconcile such a conclusion with other Talmudic sources and with human experience. Some of them, therefore, suggest that it is not the quality of understanding which is being compared in this section of the Talmud, but rather the speed with which it is attained. In short, a woman matures faster than a man and therefore becomes responsible for mitzvah observance at an earlier age.

This ruling of the Sage Rebbie, which we follow in practice, is disputed by Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar, whose opinion is that a boy reaches maturity at 12 and a girl at 13.

His position is based on the fact that a boy is more exposed to school and contact with people than is the sheltered girl, and he therefore matures more quickly.

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