SHABBAT UNPACKED

OLAMI MENTORSHIP

Session 8

Categories 1 & 5* of 39:
Creation through Koteiv/Writing
and Mochek/Erasing

**We first introduced the topic of Writing in Session 4; here we present a more comprehensive understanding and expand upon that foundation.*

BURST OF INSPIRATION

(Flashes of Greatness by Rabbi Shlomo Landau, Director of Olami Mentorship; printed by ArtScroll Publishers)

When the Nazis entered the town of Telz in Lithuania, they turned a city that had been a vibrant Torah center into a living Gehinnom: a ghetto, disappearances, and finally the systematic and brutal murder of the town's Jews on the 20th of Tammuz. Yet, one sixteen-year-old girl by the name of Beckerman somehow managed to escape into the surrounding forests, constantly on the run from the Nazis and their Lithuanian sympathizers. Remarkably, for the next three years she wandered from forest to forest and district to district, consistently concealing her identity.

During her third year on the run, she found a sympathetic family who was willing to hide and shelter her at great personal risk. They created a small underground bunker beneath their floorboards and placed a large rug on top of the floor. The arrangement was that during daytime hours when the risk was greater, she would remain concealed in the bunker, but late at night they permitted her to come out of hiding and they would provide her with meager food and an opportunity to stretch her cramped limbs. In return for their dedication and devotion, the Beckerman girl, who was already a talented seamstress, offered to mend, sew, and embroider anything that the family needed done. They would often take her up on her offer and she would sew and mend late into the night.

BURST OF INSPIRATION

Even so, the family was not fully aware of her dedication and commitment to her Judaism and particularly to Shabbat observance. Whenever she realized that there was mending or sewing to be done, she would make sure to do it on Thursday night, often working straight through the night to ensure that she would not have to desecrate Shabbat. And then in the contracted darkness of her tiny underground bunker, she would attempt to create some type of a Shabbat aura by trying to remember her family's Shabbos table and even by softly humming Shabbat songs to herself.

This arrangement worked well until early one Shabbat morning when she heard the rug being lifted and the woman of the house calling to her to come out, as she needed her help. She quickly climbed out of the bunker and the woman shared that she was going to town early that morning and that she needed her coat mended right away. Now the Beckerman girl was in a quandary; in her three years on the run, she had never broken Shabbat and she was not about to do so now. On the other hand, if she refused, who knows what could happen!

Initially, she tried to give excuses that her hands were sore and that she was tired, but her mistress quickly rebuffed her, saying that it was a small repair and would take only a few minutes. Finally, left with no other choice, she explained that it was Shabbat and that somehow, she had always managed to keep Shabbat, and she pleaded with the woman to let her wait until Shabbat had ended and not to make her desecrate Shabbat by sewing. The woman replied that it could not wait as she needed the coat immediately. The woman irately continued that it was the least that she could do in return for the kindness that they had shown her.

“My sincerest apologies, but I just cannot desecrate Shabbat,” the girl responded, but this only served to further enrage the woman.

“This is your last chance! Mend my coat right here and right now, or leave this house this minute and never come back!”

BURST OF INSPIRATION

With overwhelming inner strength and with a pounding heart, the girl fled the home. She knew that she was in extreme danger, as every fiber of her disheveled appearance indicated her identity. Quickly and quietly, she fled to the outskirts of the city where there were tall wheat fields and hid among the tall sheaves of wheat. She was petrified about what the future had in store for her, but at the same time, she was proud of the fact that she had stood strong in her Shabbat observance.

Just a short while later, she saw a figure approaching from the distance and begin walking through the tall sheaves. A few moments later she heard a woman frantically calling her name. Cautiously, she lifted her head from within the sheaves. It was none other than the woman who had sheltered her. Breathlessly, she shared, “You are never going to believe what just happened... Almost immediately after you left, there was a pounding on the door. It was Nazi officers who had come to search our home after someone had informed them that we were sheltering a Jew. They turned the entire house over but found no one! “Please come back; your G-d is clearly watching over you and I was wrong to ask you to disobey His will!”

Miraculously, the Beckerman girl survived the war and went on to establish a beautiful Jewish home where she carefully guarded the Shabbat that had so miraculously guarded her!

WRITING AND ERASING IN THE MISHKAN

Being that the Mishkan was a portable Temple, it was often dismantled, relocated, and then reassembled. It consisted of 48 boards connected by pegs and sockets. These boards needed to be assembled in the correct order, so they were labeled with identifying marks. For instance, one board might be labeled 1-2, the next 2-3, and the next 3-4 etc... Applying these identifying marks involved writing, a process known as the creative act of koteiv/writing.

Sometimes, a mistake would occur. In such cases, the error had to be erased so that the correct symbols could be inscribed. The erasing process is called mocheik.

KOTEIV/WRITING AS A CREATIVE ACT

Forming a letter, symbol, or drawing symbols is included in koteiv. This prohibition is not limited to writing, even cutting out shapes is considered koteiv.

By biblical law, the prohibition of writing includes:

1. All foreign languages and Braille, stenography, Morse Code, and symbols that might have special meaning
2. Fingerprinting, painting, or taking an impression of feet/hands
3. Writing on any lasting writing surface
4. The rabbis extended the prohibition of writing to any non-permanent writing, whether it's temporary writing or writing on a temporary surface. This includes:

    - Writing with frosting (which will melt) on a cake
    - Writing on a misty window
    - Using an "etch a sketch" or other toy
    - Drawing in moist sand
    - Making a mark (even with a fingernail) for a significant purpose
    - Writing in an unusual manner, such as using your left hand (for a righty) or holding the pen in your mouth
    - Drawing in snow or molding figures of snow

KOTEIV/WRITING AS A CREATIVE ACT

The prohibition against writing is only to create new letters or figures. However, it is permitted to rearrange previously written letters to form words. This leniency applies to letters formed on a background or base, such as cards or blocks, and not to letters attached to one another or a background.

Here are some practical applications:

PERMITTED ON SHABBAT:

- You may assemble two halves of a torn page from a book
- You may open a library book even if it has the library name stamped on the edge of the pages
- Playing games such as Bananagrams, a game where letter tiles are placed next one another
- Opening a combination lock with several rotating pieces that require forming a word to open

NOT PERMITTED ON SHABBAT:

- Jigsaw puzzles as the pieces are connected and form a picture
- Attaching letters to a magnetic writing board
- Signing documents/forms. If a person is hospitalized on Shabbat for a non-life-threatening condition, they may not sign any admission forms. If the hospital staff refuses to admit the patient without a signature, the patient may sign in an unusual manner, such as using their left hand.

KOTEIV/WRITING AS A CREATIVE ACT

There are a few additional practical outgrowths of the category of writing that have a significant impact on Shabbat observance. These are activities that are rabbinically prohibited due to the fact that they can lead to writing.

They are:

1. Borrowing for the long term or returning an item that was borrowed
2. Buying and selling in a typical manner
3. Giving gifts
4. Precise measuring or weighing
5. Issuing judicial rulings
6. Earning compensation for services performed on Shabbat

MOCHEK/ERASING AS A CREATIVE ACT

MOCHEK OR ERASING INCLUDES ANY TYPE OF ERASING FOR A CONSTRUCTIVE PURPOSE. RABBINICALLY, ERASING MAY EVEN BE PROHIBITED IN A NON CONSTRUCTIVE WAY.

IN A CERTAIN WAY, MOCHEK IS THE FLIP SIDE OF KOTEIV (WRITING); IT IS PROHIBITED TO ERASE ANYTHING THAT IS PROHIBITED TO BE WRITTEN. (IT IS THEREFORE PERMITTED TO TAKE APART BANANAGRAM LETTER TILES FORMING WORDS.)

Here are a few practical applications of things to avoid on Shabbat:

- One may not cut through the words “happy birthday” written with icing on a birthday cake. One may however cut between the letters.
- When opening a food wrapper, one should take extra care to avoid destroying letters or pictures on the wrapper.
- One may not wash off letters stamped on a fruit.
- One may not wipe away letters written on a foggy mirror or window.
- One may not wash off letters or pictures written in ink on one’s skin.

Please note: We have provided the above general categories. There are many additional details and exceptions within these categories. For practical inquiries, please contact your LOR (local Olami rabbi).

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