

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

SEX, PIZZA AND LIGHT

Dear Friends,

Part of understanding rabbinic literature is understanding with an anthropological and symbolical eye. For example, this text takes both kinds of understanding:

For three transgressions do women die in childbirth: because they were not careful to observe the laws of family purity [i.e., going to the mikveh after a menstrual period], challah [burning a piece of challah dough in the fireplace before baking the whole batch] and of lighting the [Shabbat] lamp. (Mishnah Shabbat 2:6)

There is a great deal of logic in this mishnah, although it might not seem so at first. The sages were mystified as to why utterly righteous women would die during childbirth. The first commandment, after all, is to be fruitful and multiply, so why should the process be so perilous? To understand the sages' predictions about who will die in childbirth, we need to understand the three mitzvot to which they refer.

1. Observant women do not have sexual intercourse until their menstrual periods have stopped. They have to insert a cloth and check to see if there is any blood that remains inside before going to the mikveh so they can have sexual relations again.
2. The mitzvah of challah is taking a small piece of bread dough and throwing it into the oven before baking. This mitzvah makes no sense to the modern mind. However, in the days before there were ovens you could preset to a specific temperature, you had to make sure that the oven was hot enough, or not too hot, before you put your batch of bread in. So you took a small ball of the dough and put it in to see how it came out. (This, by the way, is the origin of pizza. People began putting spices on these little balls of dough and handing them out as treats.)
3. Preparing the lights for Shabbat involved filling a cruse with oil and then putting the wick in. Wick trimming is actually a difficult art and involves plenty of work.

Now we can see the symbolic links between the mitzvot and between them and childbearing. All involve preparation. All involve the insertion of something into a space so that a benefit is duly received (i.e., kosher sex, well-baked bread and light on Shabbat). All involve liminal moments: an off-limits person turns into one who is available, dough turns to bread, and oil turns to light. The sages must have figured that a woman who could do these three mitzvot well would have a similar skill in not only carrying a pregnancy but in that ultimate moment of liminality: birth, when one person becomes two.

Discussion Question:

1. How do you understand wine, and wine and bread together, after having read this mishnah?

2. This mishnah takes advantage of the symbolic importance of fire (the oven and the light) and water (the mikveh)?
3. The halakhah is pretty silent about this mishnah. Do you think it's supposed to be taken as law? If not as law, as what, then?