

Have You Ever Wondered...

In the Zechus of a Refuah Shleima of my Rabbeim, Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky shlita, הרב שמואל בן איסא עטיל and
Rav Moshe Heinemann Shlita, הגאון הרב משה בן פיגלא.

Q: How should one go about cutting a birthday cake on Shabbos that has words written on it?

A: "I wasn't trying to ruin the message – I was just hungry."

One of the 39 מלאכות which are forbidden on Shabbos is / מוחק erasing. In general, only erasing that is performed for a constructive purpose is forbidden. However, even erasing in a destructive manner is not allowed by the חכמים.

The Rama (OC 340:3) writes:

אסור לשבור עוגה שכתב עליה כמין אותיות, אף על פי שאינו מכוין רק לאכילה, דהוי מוחק עכ"ל

Destroying a letter or picture even for non-constructive reasons is forbidden by the גזירת חז"ל. It is therefore forbidden to cut a cake in a way that distorts the letters or ruins the meaningful shape. Thus, if a cake that has the words "Mazel Tov" written on it, it would be אסור to peel off or cut through the letters on the cake. Similarly, one may not destroy decorative flowers or designs made from frosting when doing so would erase their recognizable form.

This raises a practical question: How can one enjoy a birthday cake with "Happy Birthday" written across the top on Shabbos? In other words, how is it possible to "have their cake and eat it too"?

The Poskim discuss several possible solutions:

-If the words or shapes are baked into the actual cookie or cake, whether they are engraved or protrude on top, they are not considered מוחק and therefore not an issue of מוחק (Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky, *shlit"a*, *Kovetz Halachos* pg 380, in the name of the Magen Avraham 340:6).

-Before Shabbos, one may smear the frosting letters until they are no longer legible. The cake may then be cut normally on Shabbos.

-Based on the Gemara (*Shabbos* 104b) and *Mishna Brurah* (340:22:6) many Poskim (Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky *ibid.* pg. 378 and Rav S Z Auerbach, *zt"l*, *SSK* 9:51) permit cutting between the letters and then eating the pieces containing a letter.

-Some suggest lifting off the letters together with a small amount of cake or frosting beneath them. Since the letters remain intact, no issue of *mochek* arises (שבת בשבתו סימן ש"מ סעיף ג).

-Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*SSK* 9:51) permits cutting the cake before Shabbos, leaving the pieces in place. On Shabbos, one may simply separate the pre-cut slices (see *Kovetz Halachos* *ibid.* 10:10, who feels one should be *machmir* and not rely on this).

-Although not always practical (especially when others are watching), one may bite directly into a complete letter or design, thereby destroying it in the course of eating. Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky permits this approach, based on the fact that it is דרך אכילה and, together with the reasoning of the דגול מרבבה, involves several mitigating factors:

אינו פסיק רישא on a rabbinic prohibition, דרך קילקול is performed, and is כלאחר יד, purely destructive in nature (משנה ברורה סימן)

(ש"מ ס"ק י"ז; דגול מרבבה שם; קובץ הלכות ח"ב עמ' שע"ח).

"On Shabbos, the biggest challenge of a birthday cake isn't the calories – it's the letters."

Q: May one cut, חלה, a piece of cake, or fruit into the form of a letter or object?

A: The prohibition of כותב on Shabbos is not limited to just אותיות / letters; rather, writing can be done through drawing a picture as well. Pictures are also a means of communication, as a picture is worth thousand words, so to draw a picture is also considered a form of writing and included in the כותב of איסור (Rambam, *Shabbos*, 11:17).

Based on this principle, using specialized fruit-carving tools or decorative molds to create shapes or designs on Shabbos is prohibited as a form of writing (see *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 80:25 and *Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasah* 11:12).

Even shaping food by hand, for example, using a scoop to form balls from melon, ice cream, or egg salad, would be אסור if one's intention is to create a recognizable object, symbol, or letter.

However, if one's כוונה is merely to divide the food into equal portions, which is generally the case, Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky (*Kovetz Halachos*, pg. 382 note 15) explains that it is permitted.

Indeed, it is clear from *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 500:3) that one may cut food into neat shapes, such as squares or circles, when done for practical purposes rather than for decorative design.

Similarly, Rav Moshe Heinemann, *shlit"a*, writes that carving a watermelon into the shape of a basket for display would be problematic, since the goal is to create a recognizable form. If, however, the shape results simply from the most practical or efficient way of preparing the food, it would be permitted (see *Orchos Shabbos* 15:23).

Q: May one arrange food (for example lentils, nuts, or Cheerios) into the shape of a letter or picture on שבת?

A: Rav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l* (*Igros Moshe*, OC 1:135) was asked whether playing Scrabble on Shabbos is prohibited, since the goal of the game is to arrange letters into words. Rav Moshe writes that there is only a concern of writing if the letters are placed within a frame or holder that keeps them together, such that they would remain in place even if shaken. However, if the letters are merely placed next to one another and would separate if disturbed, this is not considered writing, but rather העמדה בעלמא, a mere arrangement.

Rav Moshe Heinemann applies this principle to arranging food into the shape of a letter or picture. If the food is placed within a border or mold that preserves its form, there may be a concern of *koseiv*. However, when the items are simply arranged on a plate or table, where the design would not remain intact or retain its shape if moved or shaken, it is permitted.

Rabbi Chaim Heinemann is a Rosh Kollel in the Cincinnati Community Kollel. The above relevant shaylos are a sampling of questions that were asked recently. Rabbi Heinemann can be reached at RabbiHeinemann@gmail.com or 513-835-5005.

