**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

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Three *Mitzvot* Special to Women, Part 1

*Challa*, *nidda*, and candle-lighting are three *mitzvot* in which women's performance takes precedence over men's. Taken together, what do they teach us about women and halacha?

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# **Three *Mitzvot***

Usually, when a mitzva applies to both men and women, either of them can perform it. For example, either husband or wife can affix the family's *mezuza* or separate tithes from produce. However, there are three *mitzvot* that apply to both men and women, where Halachagives priority to a woman's performance over a man's: *challa*, separating the first portion of the dough; *hadlakat ha-ner*, lighting Shabbat and Yom Tov candles; and, in a slightly different way, *nidda,* observing the laws of family purity.

If a woman is on hand, she separates *challa* or lights Shabbat candles, even if a man would like to perform the *mitzva* himself.[[1]](#footnote-1) While men and women observe the strictures of *nidda* in cooperation, a woman fulfills the active observances of *nidda*, such as counting clean days and immersing in a *mikveh*, on her own.

Where do we see that these three *mitzvot* form a unit? A mishna in Tractate Shabbat groups themtogether, in an arresting way.

Mishna Shabbat 2:6 On [account of] three transgressions women die in childbirth: because they are not careful with *nidda*, with *challa*, or with candle-lighting.

The mishna establishes that, together, these *mitzvot* are critically important, but it does so in very stark terms.

## ● Why does the mishna seem to threaten dying in childbirth? (See Appendix One.)

Not all references to these *mitzvot* frame them negatively.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Talmud teaches that the biblical Chana[[3]](#footnote-3) reframes them positively. When she prays at Shilo for a son,[[4]](#footnote-4) she refers to herself as God's "maidservant" three times, inviting the following midrashic interpretation:

Talmud Berachot 31b Rabbi Yose son of Rabbi Chanina said: Why these three [mentions of the word] “maidservant”? Chana said before the Holy One Blessed Be He, “Master of the world, three 'assessments of [liability for] death' have you created for a woman…, and they are these: *nidda*, and *challa*, and candle-lighting. Have I transgressed any one of them?!"

While the mishna above suggests that failure to fulfill these *mitzvot* can be fatal, Chana argues the reverse, that a woman fulfilling them should merit bringing life into the world. If transgressing these *mitzvot* can bring on extreme punishment, then performing them should bring on exceptional reward.

# **Why Specifically These *Mitzvot*?**

Why do these three specific *mitzvot* form a group? There are two main explanations. The first connects them to the *Bereishit* story, and the second relates to a woman's customary domestic role.

**I. ADAM AND CHAVA**

In the Garden of Eden story, the snake sins by inciting Chava to eat the forbidden fruit, Chava sins by eating it and convincing Adam to do the same, and Adam sins by eating the fruit himself. God then curses all three of them. This narrative has inspired many different interpretations.

A midrash in *Bereshit Rabba* holds Chava responsible for Adam's sin and says her culpability explains why women have priority in these *mitzvot*.

Bereshit Rabba 17:8 Why was the mitzva of *nidda* given to her? Because she spilled Adam's blood… Why was the mitzva of *challa* given to her? Because she degraded Adam, who was the ultimate dough of the world… Why was the mitzva of the Shabbat candle given to her? He said to them: Because she snuffed out Adam's soul….

This midrash uses very strong imagery to describe how Chava caused Adam to become mortal when she served him the fruit – she "spilled Adam's blood," "degraded" him, and "snuffed out" his soul*.* Each of the three *mitzvot* can serve as a *tikkun* (rectification) for these interpretations of the events in Eden. *Nidda* concerns blood. Separating *challa* reminds us of how God formed Adam from a mix of earth and water and distinguished him from the rest of creation. Lighting a candle is the opposite of snuffing one out. When a woman performs each of them,she symbolically rights Chava's wrong.[[5]](#footnote-5)

## ● Why should women today be held responsible for Chava's sin? Are men responsible for Adam's? (See Appendix Two.)

**II. WOMEN'S DOMESTIC ROLE**

Rambam takes a more practical approach to explaining women's precedence in these *mitzvot*. In his discussion of candle-lighting, he writes:

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shabbat 5:3 Women are commanded in this matter more than men because they are found in the homes and they are occupied with housework.

For Rambam, spiritual ideas sometimes have practical origins. Each Jewish home must have candles lit for Shabbat. Women have priority performing the mitzva because women have traditionally been the ones "occupied with housework."

Rav Hai Gaon makes a similar observation about *challa*.

Teshuvot HaGeonim (New) 114 Since baking is among the labors that a woman performs for her husband (see *Ketubot* 59b) and it is common custom that women bake and dough is their responsibility, the sages spoke of her [regarding *mitzvat challa*].

According to Rav Hai, women’s priority in *challa* derives from "common custom" for women to do the baking at home.

As a group, the three *mitzvot* thus reflect a woman’s traditional domestic responsibilities, and at the same time form a redemptive unit for women as daughters of Chava.

Each of the three *mitzvot* also has great independent significance. Next week we will take a look at each and then reconsider the group as a whole.

## ● Appendix One: Why does the mishna seem to threaten dying in childbirth?

*This mishna can be difficult to understand and accept. How can we begin to make sense of it?*

*In the time of the Mishna and Talmud, women all too often did not survive childbirth. Even now, a woman giving birth confronts a real risk to her life. The very idea of young women dying in childbirth is upsetting and presents a genuine theological difficulty. How can a just and good God allow women to sacrifice themselves to bring life into the world?*

*The mishna attempts to grapple with this question by taking the approach that* sometimes *a person's untimely death may result from something he or she did. The mishna does* not *say that* all *deaths in childbirth come as a form of punishment. Of course someone who dies an untimely death can be an innocent.*

*We should not assume that a woman who, God forbid, dies in childbirth has violated* mitzvot.

*Rather, the mishna's point is that transgression of these* mitzvot *may account for some of the terrible losses of women in childbirth. Why? The Talmud on this mishna explains that punishment tends to come at times when a person is physically vulnerable. This idea also applies to men.*

*Shabbat 31b-32a What distinguishes "at the time of their giving birth?" Rava said: When the ox has fallen, sharpen the knife… And where are men checked [to see if their punishment should be meted out at a vulnerable time]? Resh Lakish said: At the time when they cross over a bridge. A bridge and nothing else? Say: A [physically vulnerable] situation like a bridge… Rabbi Yosei says: Three checks [whose punishments may be exacted at a vulnerable point] were created for woman…*nidda *and* challa *and candle-lighting.*

*It is easiest to slaughter the ox when he has fallen. Whatever supernatural punishment a person deserves is most likely to befall him or her naturalistically, when he or she already faces a threat. Women are most vulnerable when giving birth; men are vulnerable when crossing a bridge and in similar situations when they face physical danger.*

*Why bring up the three* mitzvot *in this context? To underline their significance for women.*

## ● Appendix Two: Why should women today be held responsible for Chava's sin? Are men responsible for Adam's?

*The Torah presents Adam and Chava as archetypes. They establish norms for humanity and their actions reverberate through time. For example, after Chava’s creation, Adam recognizes her as “flesh of my flesh,” and the Torah tells us that this is the basis for the institution of marriage.[[6]](#footnote-6)**Additionally, God's statements to Adam and Chava in the aftermath of their sins also apply to humanity as a whole. Man still toils for bread, and women still experience pain in childbirth.*

*Since Chava is an archetype for women, women have the opportunity to rectify her sin. What about Adam's sin, and men? According to another midrash, God created Avraham Avinu after Adam so that Avraham can rectify Adam's misdeeds.*

Bereishit Rabba, Bereishit 14 Rabbi Levi said: “The man who is great among giants” – this refers to Avraham. Why does it call him “great”? Because he was worthy to be created before Adam, but the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: Perhaps [Adam] will sin and there will not be anyone to come and rectify [matters] in his place. Rather, behold, I am creating Adam first, so that if he sins, Avraham will come and rectify [matters] in his place.

*The Zohar expands on this idea:*

Zohar Chadash II Rut 40a For Avraham rectified what Adam did. So too [did] Yitzchak and Ya'akov and the righteous.

*Not only Avraham, but all the Avot and the righteous rectify Adam's deed.*

*For women, rectification comes through the three* mitzvot. *Do men have any comparable mitzva? Avraham is the first to receive the mitzva of* berit mila*, circumcision. Abarbanel links this command to Avraham's role as a rectification for Adam:[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Abarbanel, Bereishit 17 For the Holy One commanded Avraham in the mitzva of *mila* in order to rectify that which Adam made wrong, for he in his eating of the tree of knowledge leaned toward sexual desire more than is fitting… Avraham was commanded in the mitzva in order to distance [one from] this excessive tendency that Adam his forefather acted on.

*Much as women perform the three mitzvot to rectify Chana's sin, perhaps men undergo* berit mila *to rectify Adam's.*

1. In practice, while both men and women are obligated, if a woman is available, she performs the mitzva. For example:

   Or Zaru'a I, Laws of *Challa* 225 Even though the dough, from the time it is mixed, becomes subject to mandatory offerings and is prohibited to men and women, nevertheless, the mitzva of separating *challa* falls upon the woman. Therefore, even though the dough [may be] her husband's, she is considered an agent to separate *challa* even without her husband's knowledge, for this is her mitzva. And I suspect that he is not considered [her] agent to separate *challa* from the outset, since it is his wife's mitzva.

   Bach OC 263 – Laws of Shabbat For a man may not dismiss his wife from this mitzva; rather, since women are enjoined in it more, she should light and recite the blessing and not he.

   Bach is cited by Magen Avraham and Mishna Berura. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shabbat 23b Rav Huna said: One who regularly [lights] the candle will have children who are Torah scholars. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Note that the first letters of the *mitzvot* form the acronym Chana"h. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Shemuel I 1:11 And she made a vow and said, God of Hosts, if You really see the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and do not forget Your maidservant, and give to Your maidservant seed of men, then I will give him to God all the days of his life, and a razor will not go up on his head. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Avudraham notes a link between these three *mitzvot* and Chava’s name.

   Avudraham Shabbat Evening Prayer And you will find that Chavah is an acronym for *challa*, *veset*, and *hadlaka* (lighting). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bereishit 2:24 For this reason a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife and they become as one flesh. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also Rav Tzadok Hacohen of Lublin:

   Rav Tzadok, Machshavot Charutz 19 Adam was created circumcised (Avot De-Rabbi Natan 2), but in his sin he became as one who covers his circumcision, as our sages said (Sanhedrin 38b)… All his sons became uncircumcised by birth, and Avraham Avinu is the first to become circumcised in order to rectify this. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)