

The Mitzvah of *Chinuch*

Question: I have heard that there is an obligation for a child even under the age of bar mitzvah to keep mitzvos. My question is: do his mitzvos ‘count’? For example, would my ten-year-old son be able to make Kiddush for the family on Friday night?

1. Background

It is well known that although prior to becoming bar or bat mitzvah a child has no obligation to perform mitzvos, nonetheless there exists a rabbinic obligation to train him or her to do mitzvos for a number of years prior to that point¹. This is known as the mitzvah of *chinuch* (lit. education), and is based on the injunction of Shlomo Hamelech in Mishlei² “*chanoch lana’ar* – educate the child”. A fundamental question that we will wish to discuss is: who specifically is the subject of this mitzvah? Is it:

- a. The father – who is obligated in all mitzvos – has an additional mitzvah to train his son to do mitzvos.
- b. The child – even though exempt from mitzvos on a Torah level – is obligated to perform them on a *derabanan* level.

If we wish to discover the answer to this question, as well as witness the practical ramifications of that answer, we would do well to consider the Gemara’s case of the child saying *bircas hamazon* for his father...

2. The Rabbinic Sphere

The Gemara in Brachos³ discusses the question as to whether women’s obligation in the mitzvah of *bircas hamazon* is *de’oraisa* or *derabanan*. The Gemara elaborates that this question would have practical ramifications in a case where woman wanted to be motzi a man in *bircas hamazon*. As a rule in order to be motzi someone else, you need to be obligated in the mitzvah to the same degree as them. Therefore, a man who is obligated on a *de’oraisa* level could not fulfill his obligation via hearing *bircas hamazon* from a woman unless we hold that her obligation is also *de’oraisa*. Within the course of that discussion the Gemara quotes a braisa which says as follows:

“Indeed they said a child can recite *bircas hamazon* for his father... and a woman for her husband. However, the Rabbis were critical of one who has his wife or son bless for him”

As per the above, this would seem to indicate that a woman’s obligation is *de’oraisa*. The Gemara however rejects this proof and concludes that the situation being discussed is where the

¹. Opinions vary as to exactly what age – known as *gil chinuch* – this obligation starts at. As a rule it is defined as the age where the child would be capable of performing the mitzvah, see Succah 42a.

² 22:6

³ 20b

husband only ate enough bread to obligate him in *bircas hamazon* on a *derabanan* level, e.g. a kezayis, and this a woman could be motzi him in that instance even if her obligation in *bircas hamazon* generally is *derabanan* only.

- We should note that the braisa quoted by the Gemara also make reference to a child being motzi his father. What does this teach us about the nature of the rabbinic mitzvah of *chinuch*, in light of our opening question?

We see from here that the mitzvah of *chinuch* devolves upon the child, and renders him obligated in mitzvos on a *derabanan* level. Were the mitzvah to be on the father, with the child remaining devoid of all obligation even on a *derabanan* level, then there is no way that he could be motzi his father even in *bircas hamazon derabanan*⁴.

3. Wherefore is Megilah Reading Different from Bircas Hamazon?

We should know, however, that there is a Mishna in Maseches Megilah⁵ which will cause us no small amount of trouble, for there the Sages rule that a katan is incapable of reading the Megilah on Purim for an adult!

- How would we formulate the difficulty that arises in light of what we learnt regarding *bircas hamazon*?

Why should a katan not be qualified to read for others on Purim? Reading the Megilah is a mitzvah of the rabanan, and as we have seen regarding *bircas hamazon*, the rabbinic obligation that devolves upon a child by virtue of the mitzvah of *chinuch* enables him to be motzi even an adult in a mitzvah *derabanan*!

This, indeed, is the question of Tosafos⁶. Let us take a look at their answer.

4. Tosafos: Single Derabanan vs. Double Derabanan

In order to answer the above question, Tosafos point out that there is an important difference that exists between the two cases. In the case of *bircas hamazon*, the child is a ‘single *derabanan*’, namely, the mitzvah of *bircas hamazon* is itself *de’oraisa*, it is the katan who is obligated *miderabanan*, as he is with all mitzvos as a result of the mitzvah of *chinuch*. That rabbinic obligation can place him on a par with a person who is also a ‘single *derabanan*’, in this case the adult who only ate enough to obligate him in *bircas hamazon* on a *derabanan* level.

⁴ On this point, we should note further, that not only does the mitzvah of *chinuch* in mitzvos devolve as an obligation on the child, but it also renders him obligated *miderabanan* in the mitzvos themselves, not ‘merely’ in the mitzvah of *chinuch*. Were this not to be the case, then even if the mitzvah of *chinuch* is an obligation on the child, he would not be able to be motzi his father, since his rabbinic obligation in the mitzvah of *chinuch* would not help motzi his father’s rabbinic obligation in *bircas hamazon*!

⁵ 19b

⁶ Ibid s.v. verabi, cf Tosafos berachos 15a s.v. verabi

With regards the mitzvah of Megilah, however, the katan is a ‘double *derabanan*’. This is because the mitzvah in question is itself *derabanan*, coupled with the fact that a katan is always *derabanan*, even when the mitzvah in question is *de’oraisa*. This leaves his situation labeled as *derabanan* on two counts: 1) a person never obligated higher than *derabanan*, performing 2) a mitzvah that is *derabanan*. The adult whom he wishes to be motzi is thus more obligated than he is, since his situation is only *derabanan* on one count (the mitzvah). It is for this reason that he cannot be motzi him.

To crystallize the chiddush of Tosafos:

As surely as one who is obligated *miderabanan* is not on a par with one who is obligated *de’oraisa*, and thus cannot be motzi him, so too one whose situation has two elements of *derabanan* in it is not on a par with one who has only one *derabanan* element.

- If we take the above into account, what must we say about the amount of food the katan must eat in order to be motzi the adult in *bircas hamazon*?

Based on the above, Tosafos conclude that in the *bircas hamazon* case which the Gemara described as the adult eating only a kezayis, must be talking about a situation where the katan ate a full meal, an amount that would obligate him in *bircas hamazon de’oraisa* where he to be an adult. This leaves him as a single *derabanan* [being a katan], and allows him to be motzi his father who is also a single *derabanan* [having eaten only a kezayis]. If the katan too had eaten only a kezayis, then he would subsequently be a double *derabanan* [a *derabanan* person with a *derabanan* mitzvah], no different than the case of Megilah reading, and would not be able to motzi his father.

5. Ramban: Parental Obligations

This question as to why a katan is ineligible to be motzi an adult in the reading of the Megilah is also discussed by the Ramban⁷. He responds that the reason why he cannot be motzi an adult is because a katan is not obligated in mitzvos *on any level!* The mitzvah of *chinuch*, says Ramban, is a mitzvah *on the parent* to train the child to observe mitzvos, but the child himself has no obligation⁸.

The Ramban has clearly taken issue with Tosafos on a fundamental level – the nature of the mitzvah of *chinuch!*

- Which of the sources that we have seen so far will pose a difficulty on the above words of the Ramban?

The Gemara in brachos quoted a braisa which told us that a child can be motzi his father in *bircas hamazon*. The Gemara explained that the braisa is referring to a case where the father is obligated *miderabanan*. According to the Ramban who says that the child is not obligated at all, how can he be motzi even someone who is only obligated *miderabanan*?

⁷ Quoted by the Ran to the Mishna Megilah ibid

⁸ Cf Rashi Brachos 48a s.v. ad, and Tosafos loc. Cit. s.v. ad

The Ramban explains that in fact the son mentioned in the braisa is referring to a son who is *over* bar mitzvah, i.e. fully obligated in mitzvos!

But here we stop and ask: didn't the Gemara explain that the braisa was talking about a case where the father was obligated on a *derabanan* level only? If the son in question is an adult, why should he not be able to motzi his father even in a *de'oraisa* obligation?

To this the Ramban replies: The reason why the Gemara explained the braisa as referring to a case where the man was obligated only *miderabanan* is not for the benefit of the son, but rather for the benefit of the wife, whose obligation the Gemara is uncertain as to whether it is *de'oraisa* or *derabanan*. The son, on the other hand, being fully obligated in mitzvos, could be motzi his father on any level⁹.

6. Rambam

In light of the opinions of Tosafos and the Ramban, let us take a look at the words of the Rambam:

A son can recite *bircas hamazon* for this father... Under what circumstances do we say that they can fulfill their obligation [this way]? In a case where they ate but were not satisfied, for then they are liable on a rabbinic level, and therefore the katan can be motzi them... however, if [the father] ate and was satisfied, in which case he would be liable to bless on a Torah level, a child cannot be motzi him¹⁰.

- Consider these words of the Rambam; do they seem to be aligned more with Tosafos or the Ramban?

The Rambam has ruled that one is under bar mitzvah is capable of being motzi an adult if the obligation is *derabanan*. This is in agreement with Tosafos who understand that the katan himself is obligated *miderabanan* by virtue of the mitzvah of *chinuch*¹¹. According to the Ramban there is no obligation at all on the katan, and he could not be motzi an adult even regarding a *derabanan* obligation.

- Having understood that the Rambam agrees in principle with Tosafos. Look again at his words. Is there any matter in which he seems to take issue with Tosafos?

The Rambam states that a katan can be motzi his father if the father is obligated *miderabanan*, i.e. he ate less than a full meal. However, the Rambam does not specify much the katan ate. Apparently it doesn't make a difference. But according to Tosafos it makes a *great deal* of difference, for the above would only be true of the katan himself ate to satiation. Were he to eat less than that amount he would be a double *derabanan*, and could not be motzi his father who is only a single *derabanan* [see above sec. 4]

⁹ See Gilyon Hashas of R' Akiva Eiger to Brachos 20b

¹⁰ Hilchos brachos 5:15-16

¹¹ Cf Rambam hilchos chametz u'matzah 6:10, with Kesef Mishneh ibid

We see from here that the Rambam does not subscribe to Tosafos' distinction between single and double *derabanan*. One *derabanan* can be motzi another, regardless of whether they have the same number of *derabanan* elements in their profile.

- Having established the Rambam's position regarding the nature of the mitzvah of *chinuch* generally, and his position regarding single / double *derabanan* specifically, are there any sources that will now need to be resolved?

Indeed there are! How will the Rambam explain the halacha that a katan cannot read the Megilah for an adult? The two answers that we have heretofore seen to this question will not work for the Rambam:

Rambam: The mitzvah of *chinuch* devolves on the father – The Rambam understands that the obligation is on the son!

Tosafos: With regards Megilah the katan is a double *derabanan* – the Rambam makes no such distinction!

How, then, does the Rambam understand these two sources?

7. Divrei Kabbalah

The Meiri¹², in the course of explaining the Mishneh regarding a katan reading the Megilah, introduces us to a new concept: Divrei Kabbalah.

We are wont to divide mitzvos into two categories

- a. *De'oraisa*: the 613 mitzvos of the Torah
- b. *Derabanan*: Mitzvos added on to the above by the Rabbis.

Actually, there is a category in between, namely, mitzvos that are post the chumash, but mentioned in the Nevi'im later on in the Tanach. These mitzvos are referred to as Divrei Kabbalah, and there is a discussion among the Rishonim as to which status to accord them. Indeed, there are those who say that these mitzvos have a higher status than regular mitzvos *derabanan*¹³.

An example of this type of mitzvah is reading the Megilah, which, of course, is mentioned in the Megilah. It is for this reason, says the Meiri, a katan cannot read for an adult, for even though he is obligated *miderabanan* by virtue of the mitzvah of *chinuch*, the adult is obligated in reading the Megilah on a level of *divrei kabbalah*, which is higher. This would resolve for us the apparent contradiction from the Gemara in brachos, for the mitzvah being discussed there is the *derabanan* requirement to say *bircas hamazon* after eating a kezayis. This is regular *derabanan*,

¹² Megilah 19b

¹³ See e.g. Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 696:7

and the katan's obligation due to the mitzvah of *chinuch* is an equivalent level that allows him to be motzi the adult.

We may posit that this approach to harmonizing the two sugyas would be adopted by the Rambam as well.

8. However...

Here we encounter an interesting problem. The Meiri is telling us that since reading the Megilah is on the level of divrei kabalah, the katan cannot operate on that level, being that he only obligated through the mitzvah of *chinuch*, which is *derabanan*. The problem is, the mitzvah of *chinuch* is *itself* a mitzvah of divrei kaballah, being derived from the verse on Mishlei: "Chanoch Lana'ar"¹⁴! If so the two obligations are once again equivalent, in which case the question returns, why can a katan not read the Megilah for an adult?

9. Two Aspects of Chinuch

In order to answer this question, let us take note of a most important observation made by the Steipler Gaon¹⁵ regarding the position of Tosafos. Even though Tosafos have argued with the Ramban and maintained that the katan himself becomes obligated through the mitzvah of *chinuch*, that is not to say that only the katan is obligated, but rather even the katan is obligated. That is to say, all agree that the roots of the mitzvah lay with the parent's obligation to train his child to observe mitzvos. To this Tosafos add that this obligation devolves into an obligation on the child as well. The Steipler proves this point by referring us to a discussion in Maseches Nazir¹⁶ as to whether the mitzvah of *chinuch* applies to the mother as well, or only to the father. This discussion clearly demonstrates that in principle the mitzvah applies to the father. Tosafos are merely noting that the child also becomes obligated.

Bearing this in mind, let us note further that the pasuk which is the source of the mitzvah, chanoch lana'ar, is an instruction to the *father* to educate his son. It is thus possible that it is *only this* aspect of the mitzvah which is divrei kabalah. The resultant aspect of the son's own obligation is a regular *derabanan*. The level to which the obligation of *chinuch* enables a katan to be motzi others is a function of his own obligation, not that of the one who is commanded to educate him. Since his own obligation is not divrei kabalah, he cannot be motzi an adult in the mitzvah¹⁷.

10. What About Chanukah?

Before we turn to the Shulchan Aruch's ruling regarding whether a child of *chinuch* age can light the menorah for his family, let us preface by noting that the rulings of the Shulchan Aruch

¹⁴ See Chaye Adam 60:1 who classifies this mitzvah as divrei kabalah

¹⁵ Kehilos Yaakov Brachos sec. 24

¹⁶ 29a

¹⁷ See also: Commentary of Rashba to Megilah 19b s.v. ha ditnan, Pesicha Koleles of the Pri Megadim part 3 sec. 28-30, Mishnas Yaavetz Orach Chaim sec. 70 and Beis Yishai sec. 34.

in the areas which we have discussed so far mirror those of the Rambam. With regards Megilah, a child cannot be motzi an adult¹⁸, and with regards *bircas hamazon*, he can be motzi an adult who is only obligated *derabanan*, regardless of how much the child himself has eaten.

- With this in mind, what would we expect the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch to be in a case of Chanukah lights?

Having noted that the Shulchan Aruch does not specify the amount a katan needs to eat in order to be motzi an adult in *bircas hamazon derabanan*, we may conclude that he does not consider a child being a ‘double *derabanan*’ to be an impediment. The reason why he could not be motzi an adult in Megilah is then presumably because Megilah is more stringent, being of *divrei kabala*. That being the case, when it comes to Chanukah, which is not *divrei kabala* but a ‘regular’ *derabanan*, a katan should be able to light for the family. Indeed this is the opinion of the Baal Ha’itur, which is quoted on the Shulchan Aruch.

However, this opinion is quoted second. The Shulchan first states that a katan cannot light for adults, and then mentions that there are those who say that he can. In these situations, it is understood that the Shulchan Aruch identifies essentially with the first opinion that he quotes. This being the case, we have a problem. If the Shulchan Aruch does not hold being a ‘double *derabanan*’ to be an impediment, why would a katan not be able to light for an adult?

The Magen Avraham quotes R’ Eliyahu Mizrachi as saying that in reality being a double *derabanan* is an impediment. It is for this reason that a katan cannot be motzi an adult in Chanukah lights [or Megilah reading]. The reason why he can be motzi an adult in *bircas hamazon derabanan*, even if he himself has only eaten an amount that requires *bircas hamazon derabanan*, is because this is not a pure case of ‘double *derabanan*’, since it is within his capacity to bring himself to a state of single *derabanan* simply by eating more, and therefore he is essentially considered to be on a par with his father who is a single *derabanan*. This may be the approach of the Shulchan Aruch, and will explain why he is lenient with regards *bircas hamazon*, and stringent regarding Megilah and Chanukah lights.

¹⁸ Orach Chaim 689:2