

# CUTTING A DECORATED CAKE ON SHABBOS

*by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt*

*The following is a discussion of Halachic topics related to the Parsha of the week. For final rulings, consult your Rav.*

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*He will bless your bread and your water (23:25)*

You shall make the planks of the Mishkan (26:15)

...They used to write on the planks to indicate their correct placement... and if one was incorrectly marked, the writing was erased so that it could be corrected (Rashi Shabbos 73a)

The Biblical prohibition of erasing letters on Shabbos applied to erasing for the purpose of preparing the surface for future writing. This was the nature of the "erasing" in the Mishkan, as quoted above. The Rabbis, however extended the prohibition to include any and all erasing, regardless of the purpose of the erasure and even when the erasure served no purpose at all, as in tearing the lettering of a package<sup>(1)</sup>.

**QUESTION:** On Shabbos, is it permissible to cut letters or pictures which decorate a cake?

**DISCUSSION:** Rama<sup>(2)</sup> quotes a view that prohibits cutting or breaking off a piece of cake on which letters - or pictures<sup>(3)</sup> - appear. The fact that the person has no intention of erasing the letters and is interested only in eating the cake makes no difference; the letters are erased in the process, so cutting or breaking off a piece of decorated cake is forbidden based on the rule of inevitable consequences (pesik reisheh). It makes no difference, according to this view, if the erasure is done prior to eating by cutting the cake with a knife, or even if the letters are erased by biting into and chewing the cake<sup>(4)</sup>. Either action is considered to be erasing and is prohibited.

Other poskim<sup>(5)</sup> differ with the Rama. They maintain that the Rabbis did not forbid cutting or breaking off a piece of cake because: 1) the erasing in this case is not done for the sake of future writing; 2) the erasing is destructive; 3) the erasing is done indirectly (k'lachar yad). According to this view, then, it would be permitted to cut a decorated cake, even before eating it, although the frosted letters would definitely be erased.

Latter-day poskim debate what the practical halachah should be. Some tend to be lenient<sup>(6)</sup>, while others are stringent<sup>(7)</sup>. The Mishnah Berurah rules that one may rely on the lenient view only when the erasing comes as a result of biting and chewing. Cutting the cake before eating it is prohibited.

However, the following exceptions are discussed by the poskim:

It is permitted to cut between letters even if a word is destroyed(8). It is also permitted to remove a letter on the icing along with a thin sliver of cake on which it rests(9).

It is permitted to cut letters or figures that are baked into the body of the cake itself(10). It is also permitted to cut a cake or cookie that has a meaningful shape(11), such as a gingerbread man.

It is permitted to cut letters which are made from fruit juice or from honey mixed with water. Decorations fashioned from those ingredients are not considered "permanent(12)." The sugar-based frosting commonly found on cakes today which hardens when it dries is not included in this leniency(13).

Some poskim allow a right-handed person to cut the cake with his left hand and vice versa(14). Others do not allow this leniency(15).

If the cake was cut before Shabbos, one is permitted to separate the pieces on Shabbos(16).

A cake with lettering may be placed in front of a child even though the child may erase the lettering on the cake(17). An adult may not, however, specifically instruct the child to erase the lettering(18).

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## FOOTNOTES

1. See Mishnah Berurah 340:41 and Sha'ar ha-Tziyon 76.
2. O.C. 340:3.
3. Mishnah Berurah 340:16. Rabbi P.E. Falk (Zachor v'Shamor, sec. 33, pg. 13) maintains that pretty patterns such as a zig-zag design along the edges, criss-cross lines running across the surface, etc., are not included and are permitted to be cut.
4. Taz 340:2; Chazon Ish O.C. 61:1.
5. Dagul Mi-revavah O.C. 340.
6. Sha'arei Teshuvah 340:5 and Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 80:63. See also Aruch ha-Shulchan 340:23, who maintains that the entire prohibition is limited to letters that are formed from ink or paint. Nevertheless, he advises to let a child cut the cake, as quoted later.
7. Shulchan Aruch Harav (343:10) and Chazon Ish O.C. 61:1 who prohibit erasing letters even by biting and chewing.
8. Harav S.Z. Auerbach (Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 9 note 48).

9. See The Shabbos Home, pg. 50.
10. Mishnah Berurah 340:15; Har Tzvi O.C. 214. In other places, however, the Mishnah Berurah seems to contradict himself and prohibits this - see 475:47 and 500:17. Harav S.Z. Auerbach (Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 11 note 31) attempts to resolve this contradiction. See also Chazon Ish O.C. 61 who questions this leniency.
11. See footnote 8. In this case, however, even Chazon Ish seems to be lenient.
12. Mishnah Berurah 340:15. Chazon Ish questions this leniency.
13. Tifferes Yisrael (Kalkeles Shabbos - erasing); Ketzos ha-Shulchan (144:3); Be'er Moshe 6:94.
14. Eliyahu Rabbah 240:11.
15. Avnei Nezer 209. Mishnah Berurah, too, does not quote this option. See also Mishnah Berurah 340:22 quoting the Chayei Adam who maintains that - with the exception for the prohibition of writing - there is no difference between using the right and left hand in regard to all of the Shabbos prohibitions.
16. Harav S.Z. Auerbach (Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 11 note 30).
17. Mishnah Berurah 340:14. See explanation in Shulchan Aruch Harav 340:4 and 343:10. See also Chanoch l'Na'ar 17:4-5.
18. Shulchan Aruch Harav 343:10.

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*Rabbi Neustadt is the principal of Yavne Teachers' College in Cleveland, Ohio. He is also the Magid Shiur of a daily Mishna Berurah class at Congregation Shomre Shabbos.*

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