

Torn to Pieces

Absorbent cotton (known outside the United States as “cotton wool”) is essentially untreated cotton and has many medical uses, including cleaning delicate areas and in bandages. The cotton plant grows silky fibers around its seeds, and after removing the seeds and other impurities, the cotton is bleached (with either hydrogen peroxide or sodium hypochlorite) and then sterilized.

Absorbent cotton is generally sold either as small balls or as a large cluster from which one may tear off pieces. May one tear off pieces of this cotton on Shabbos? This is the subject of an interesting discussion among the Poskim.

The *Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasa* (35, footnote 50) cites the *Menucha Nechona*¹ (*Melechtes P'tzia*) who holds that tearing pieces of absorbent cotton from a cluster would be an *Isur d'Oraisa* of *Melechtes Potze'a*. *Potze'a* is the converse of *Melechtes Oreg* (weaving) as it is the destruction of a weave.

There is a *Machlokes* between the *Rambam* and *Ra'avad* concerning the basis of *Melechtes Potze'a*. Weaving involves the merging of threads through a woof and weft combination. The *Rambam* holds that the destruction of this combination is the *Melacha* of *Potze'a*. The *Ra'avad* argues that this would be the *Melacha* of *Kore'a* (tearing) and that *Melechtes Potze'a* is cutting off any remaining threads at the edge(s) of the weave. The *Magid Mishna* questions the *Ra'avad*, arguing that cutting off those threads does not destroy the weave; rather, it completes it and should therefore constitute *Makeh b'Patish*.

According to either opinion, as with all other *Melachos Shabbos*, there is no violation *Min haTorah* if an action is done in a destructive fashion (“*Mekalkel*”) since the notion of *Melechtes Shabbos* is creative action, not destruction. There can only be a violation of *Potze'a* if the destructive act also has a constructive element, such as if one needs one of the cut threads to fix the weave itself.

¹ R' Chaim Biberfeld (1864-1939), Rav of the Beis haMedrash haYoshon of Berlin.

Either way, the *Menucha Nechona* claims that pulling apart tufts of absorbent cotton is a violation of *Melechtes Potze'a*. The *Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasa* therefore cautions:

Any doctor who is likely to need absorbent cotton on Shabbos should prepare a stock of torn absorbent cotton [balls] on Erev Shabbos for when he needs it on Shabbos.

The *Minchas Yitzchak* (4:45) goes even further:

In my opinion, everything that the Shulchan Aruch and Poskim write (O.C. 440) about [tearing] paper is relevant here as well. See the Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 300:1) regarding the status of "Levadim" for Shatnez, i.e. where [the threads] are pressed together, not spun or woven [which is considered a single entity]. This would apply to absorbent cotton which is similarly bonded together, albeit in a weak fashion that is easy to pull apart. It is therefore equivalent to paper which the Sefer Nishmas Adam (brought in Pischei Teshuva ibid.) compares to pressed fabrics, see there. Likewise, in my humble opinion, their status would be the same in Hilchos Shabbos. Afterward, the Sefer Menucha Nechona came into my hand and I saw that the author includes pulling off cotton wool in the Isur of Potze'a. The Teshuvos Tzur Yaakov (end of Siman 152) writes similarly. He states that [pulling apart cotton wool] is a violation of Kore'a, and perhaps also Makeh b'Patish. If one intends for specific dimensions (length and width) – see the Sefer Bosem Mordechai ibid. – it is also a violation of Mechatech.

Despite these concerns, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l contends that pulling apart the cotton wool would not violate *Kore'a*. To understand his opinion, we must first explain a famous *Machlokes* about *Melechtes Kore'a*.

The *Shulchan Aruch* rules (O.C. 340:13):

One may not break earthenware and one may not tear paper because it is like fixing a Kli.

The source of this Halacha is the *Rambam* who derives from the Gemara in *Beitza* (32b) that these actions are forbidden because they turn the item into a *Kli*. The *Poskim* (*Pri Megadim*, *Nishmas Adam*, and others) wonder why there would be no violation of *Kore'a*, given that one who tears something for a constructive purpose ("*Kore'a Al Menas l'Saken*") has violated the *Melacha* of *Kore'a mid'Oraisa*. To answer this, the *Shulchan Aruch haRav* (*ibid. Se'if 17*) proposes an important principle:

There is no Issur of Kore'a unless one tears separate items that were bonded together, for example, an item of clothing that was woven together from many threads. Paper, however, is one entity, and tearing it does not entail Kore'a.

The *Biur Halacha* points out that this appears to contradict an explicit statement in the *Yerushalmi* that tearing leather is a violation of the prohibition of *Kore'a*. He adds that the *Nishmas Adam* rejects the answer of the *Shulchan Aruch haRav* because of this *Yerushalmi*.

The *Biur Halacha* himself suggests a fundamental principle in *Melechtes Kore'a* to explain the *Shulchan Aruch*:

If I was not hesitant, I would propose a novel explanation: it is only considered Kore'a Al Menas l'Saken when a person tears something in the middle and he needs [to effect] an improvement on both sides, similar to [how Kore'a was performed in] the Mishkan, where a curtain upon which a worm fell [and made a hole] was torn and sewn back together (Shabbos 75a) such that the tearing was for the entire curtain. Likewise, regarding what is stated in Shabbos 105b "d'Avda Ki Kisesa" [i.e. the Gemara's explanation of Kore'a Al Menas l'Saken in the Mishkan. The curtain would become folded with "pockets" that needed tearing to sew them straight]; the improvement was also for the whole curtain.

However, when one tears something off a garment from the side to improve the garment that was either too long or damaged at the bottom, and the piece that was torn off is in no way improved, it is not considered Kore'a Al Menas l'Saken. It constitutes [another Melacha], namely, the fixing of a Kli, since by this [act of tearing] he fixes the garment. (If he is particular about the measurements, it would seem that he has also violated Melechtes Mechatech, see what I wrote about Mechatech in Siman 322). It would then depend on the quality of the improvement: for a full-scale improvement, he would be liable for Makeh b'Patish since he completes the Kli or garment. If it is not a full-scale improvement it would only be [an Issur] d'Rabbanan.

Therefore, in our case where he tears off a small part from a full piece of paper to use it, and the full piece is not improved in any way and is possibly even damaged, this does not constitute Kore'a Al Menas l'Saken. It would then only depend on the quality of improvement of the part [of the paper] that was cut off... according to this, if one tears paper into several pieces, each of which he needs, he would have violated [Kore'a] since it would constitute Kore'a Al Menas l'Saken... however, the matter requires further investigation.

It would seem clear that it would not be forbidden to tear off pieces of absorbent cotton according to the *Shulchan Aruch haRav*. What is the position of those who disagree with the *Shulchan Aruch haRav*?

The normal usage of a cluster of absorbent cotton is to pull off small pieces and one generally does not use the entire cluster at once. Thus, pulling off a piece would not

improve the remaining cluster, even though one would have to throw away the entire cluster after using it if he did not pull off a small piece for that purpose. Therefore, based on the *Biur Halacha's* distinction, it would appear to be only *Asur mid'Rabbanan*. This point requires further study.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *zt"l* suggests a different reason as to why tearing off pieces of cotton should not be considered *Kore'a*. Even those who argue with the *Shulchan Aruch haRav* and hold that tearing something from an item that is a single item from its inception is considered *Kore'a*, may agree that pulling apart absorbent cotton is not included in *Kore'a* but is simply an act of removing a piece from a cluster. Though there are small fibers that tear, tearing these fibers is no different than tearing a strand from a spider's web, which, given its flimsiness, does not constitute *Kore'a*. This is evident from the fact that the *Poskim* in *Siman 328* discuss the *Muktza* status of spiderwebs yet they omit any reference to *Melechtes Kore'a*.

Rav Shlomo Zalman saw no reason to distinguish between tearing a single strand and tearing a group of strands at once. Presumably, this is because the fact that there are several strands together is incidental and does not fundamentally change how we view the tearing.

There are thus two elements of the action:

- a) Pulling off the cotton is not *Kore'a* but it is simply a "separation of parts".
- b) The fact that many threads are torn is incidental and we consider the tearing of each thread separately. Given the ease with which each thread is torn, it is reasonable to say that there is no violation of *Kore'a*.

However, Rav Shlomo Zalman is somewhat hesitant to divide the action into separate elements. Therefore, he adds that we find several examples where there is no violation of *Kore'a* because the item that is torn is considered insignificant ("*Batel*") with respect to the main item or action: "*Here too; the fibers that are torn are insignificant in respect to the main act which is a separation of parts, not tearing.*"

It should be noted that Rav Shlomo Zalman does not relate to the question of whether there would be a problem of *Potze'a*. However, his logic applies to *Potze'a* as well. Given that tearing off the cotton is not considered *Kore'a* but only a separation of parts, it is clear that the original cluster lacks the status of a "fabric". It is therefore excluded from the *Melacha* of *Potze'a* which is limited to the destruction of a weave.

Nevertheless, Rav Shlomo Zalman concludes: "*Even so, my opinion is nullified since there are those who are concerned for an Isur Torah.*"

The *Tzitz Eliezer* writes similarly (8:15, *Kuntres Meshivas Nefesh* 14:11):

With regard to tearing cotton from a cluster; the Tzur Yaakov 1:152 forbids it because of Kore'a. However, in my humble opinion, one may question whether the cotton wool's attachment is considered to be a Chibur (connection) to the extent that pulling off a piece would violate Kore'a since when [the strands] are laid down it is evident that they are separate entities. I also heard from many great Poskim that their view is to be lenient in the matter.

Rav Neuwirth *zt"l*'s conclusion is: *"It is preferable to refrain from tearing cotton on Shabbos, and it is good to prepare enough pieces of torn cotton before Shabbos."*

On the other hand, contemporary *Poskim* hold that it is completely forbidden to tear off absorbent cotton on Shabbos. As evident from the *Shulchan Aruch* and *Biur Halacha* quoted above, even if there is no violation of *Kore'a*, there still exists the possibility of *Makeh b'Patish*.

Rav Yitzchak Mordechai Rubin *Shlit"a* (*Orchos Shabbos* 11, footnote 31) relates that he asked Rav Shlomo Zalman *zt"l* whether tearing off cotton constitutes *Makeh b'Patish*. He responded that the act lacks the requisite significance to be *Makeh b'Patish* even *mid'Rabbanan*. However, Rav Rubin cites Rav Nissim Karelitz *zt"l* who held that there is a concern of *Makeh b'Patish*.