



## Why Did Hashem Ensure that Moshe was Breastfed by his Mother for 24 Months?

### Does the Torah have Guidelines for How Long You Must Nurse Your Baby?

As a newly returnee to Judaism, I found myself in a 'black-hatted,' ba'al teshuva community, married with a nursing baby, during Spring 1982. Every woman in the community was pushing at least one baby in her stroller, often with another on the way. Since I was new in every way, – as a mother in the Torah world and in Israel, I received much advice from the older and more experienced Yeshiva matrons. I enjoyed nursing my baby very much, but I watched some of the women around me weaning their suckling after nursing for only three months, in order to get pregnant again quickly. They had to catch up – so they said – since being ba'alot teshuva, they'd gotten married a bit later in life. I was in no rush, being only 21, so I took my time breastfeeding my baby. At that place and time, nursing for nine full months was considered quite long, but little did I know that there are actual Torah laws about breastfeeding. Had I known what I've learned before weaning my second child, I would have nursed my first baby more than double as long. Fast forward almost 15 years: I'm living in the health-conscious community of Bat Ayin, nursing my second baby. By then, I'd had ample time to gain Torah learning skills and gave a weekly class about Torah & Breastfeeding to young nursing mothers like myself. The first breastfeeding baby mentioned in the Torah was Yitzchak. He was nursed for a full 24 months (Rashi, *Bereishit* 21:8). Likewise, Chana breastfed her son Shmuel, "until he was weaned" – until the end of 22 or 24 months- for this is the time a baby should nurse... (Rashi, I *Shmuel* 1:22). Also, "the time for a baby to suckle is 24 months." (Radak *ibid*). These sources greatly clash with what I was taught as a newly Torah-observant nursing mother, as well as what I observed in certain Torah- observant communities. So, I decided to investigate further.

### The Permitted Breastfeeding Timeline According to the Shulchan Aruch

I naturally started by opening the *Shulchan Aruch* – the Jewish Code of Law, authoritative for every Torah observant Jew. I found there interesting teachings pertaining to breastfeeding:

**שו"ע יורה דעה - סימן פא (ז) ...ותינוק יונק עד סוף ד' שנים לבריא וה' לחולה אם לא פירש אבל אם פירש שגמלוהו שלשה ימים מעת לעת אחר כ"ד חדש לא יחזירוהו והוא שפירש מתוך בריו אבל אם לא פירש אלא מתוך חולי שאינו יכול לינק ופירש יכולים להחזירו ואם יש סכנה מחזירים אפילו אחר כמה ימים ובתוך כ"ד חדש אפי' פירש מתוך בריו חדש או יותר מותר לחזור ולינק עד סוף כ"ד חדש...**

A baby nurses until the end of four years, if he is healthy and five years if he is sickly and wasn't separated [from nursing]. But if he was separated, by being weaned for three consecutive full days after 24 months, he should not return to nurse again, except if the nursing was interrupted because of sickness, which made him unable to nurse. If there is a danger involved, we return to nurse him even after several days. If [the baby is less than 24 months [old], even if he interrupted nursing while being healthy an entire month or more, it is permitted to go back to nursing him until the end of 24 months (*Shulchan Aruch, Yore Deah* 81:7).

It is clear from the *Shulchan Aruch*, that nursing for a full 24 months, as did Sarah and Chana and probably most of our biblical role-models, is considered vital. Even if a child is weaned for more than three days, we can go back to nursing him as long as he has not yet turned two. Yet, after this age, it

is prohibited to return to nursing a child that was weaned, unless he is mortally ill. This makes sense to me, as until the age of two, even if the suckling has learned to recite a bracha before nursing, he is still a baby. After this age, he becomes a toddler and gains awareness of his mother's body. Had he continued uninterrupted nursing until the permitted age of 4, he would not regard his mother's breasts as anything but a source of sustenance. Yet, returning a toddler to the breast, after he has been weaned, would be awkward. At this age, after having been separated from nursing, he may look at his mother's breasts slightly differently, with sexual undertones.

### Is it Permitted to Stop Breastfeeding Before 24 Months?

When looking at the commentaries to the Shulchan Aruch, I came across the following responsa by the *Pitchei Teshuva*, quoting the, *Adnei Paz*, written by Rabbi Daniel Azulai in 1843:

"Look at the *Adnei Paz* who holds that it is a mistake to say that the less a baby breastfeeds the more he will be able to learn Torah. He brings a proof from the Gemarah and concludes that it is forbidden to wean before 24 months, unless [the mother] is pregnant or otherwise unable to breastfeed" (*Pitchei Teshuva, Shulchan Aruch Yore Deah 81:7*). *Kaf Hachaim* (by Yaakov Chaim Sofer, Bagdad 1870–1939) quoted this commentary word for word. Armed with these Rabbinical responsas, I was ready to challenge those Rabbis who advocate premature weaning and defend adequate breastfeeding in order to avoid depriving babies of their birthright to the G-d-given formula designed to satisfy both their nutritional and emotion needs. When I turned to 'Ask the Rabbi' online, he refused to accept the Pitchei Teshuva as binding halacha. He also was unable to provide a Torah source which grants permission to stop breastfeeding before the baby turns two, as is the practiced custom in so many Torah communities. However, he did admit that there is a prohibition for a man to marry a breastfeeding woman until 24 months after birth, in order to avoid causing her milk to cease if she becomes pregnant (*Shulchan Aruch, Even Haezer 13:11*). Yet, the Rabbi held that this halacha no longer applies, since it was instituted to safeguard the health of babies before the invention of breastmilk substitutes. As he wrote: "Milk supplements today are quite good and special foods for babies are obtainable (i.e. Gerber)." He furthermore stated, "often mothers of today do not have enough milk, or their milk is not so nutritive, due to the mass intake of chemicals in modern-day food. Thus, it would be best for the child if she would stop breast-feeding."

### Breast is Best

Sadly, many Rabbis are uninformed about the vital benefit of breastfeeding for 24 months, even in our modern world. Many pediatricians are greatly misinformed as well, when stating that some mothers who insist on breast-feeding, end up with an undernourished baby. If it is important enough for her to breastfeed, she would be sure to ingest proper nutritious food, while avoiding chemicals as much as possible. She would also drink tea that increases mother's milk such as lemon verbena and fennel. As the baby's food intake increases, the mother can supplement breastfeeding with regular food which is more nutritious than Gerber! I don't accept the argument that we have better milk substitutes today than in the past. The best substitute for mother's milk is another mother's milk, and there were quite a few more wet nurses back then. The next best substitute is goat's milk, which they surely had in the old days (<https://www.faithful-to-nature.co.za/blog/the-best-milk-alternatives-for-babies/>). Modern breastmilk substitutes and formulas are actually worse than what has been available since Biblical times. Many infants are allergic to various 'proper milk substitutes,' especially cow's milk formulas. It is a proven fact and common knowledge among pediatricians today, that infants who do not breastfeed, are missing vital antibodies that mother's milk provide. My husband, who works as a doctor in several health clinics, reports that not a day goes by, without numerous cases of infants suffering from various viruses and infections. Most of them have been breastfed for only three to six months at best. Breastfed babies have fewer infections and recover quicker than [formula-fed](#) babies. From birth on, levels of immunoglobulins (Ig) synthesized by

lymphocytes B, is still very low. Production increases progressively, to reach a comparable rate to adults, once the child reaches the age of 4. From age 2, there is enough to protect the child. His immune system is in place and capable of manufacturing antibodies and to identify attackers. At age 18-24 months, the child's immune system is considered mature ([Professor Henri Joyeux, French Oncology and nutrition specialist](#)). I always find it fascinating when modern science reinforces ancient Torah teachings.

### Moshe Merited Divine Nourishment from His Mother's Heart

According to Hashem's extraordinary supervision, Moshe Rabbeinu was breastfed for 24 months by his own mother. After the daughter of Pharaoh had found Moshe, when he was still a defenseless infant, she tried in vain to get him to nurse from various Egyptian wet-nurses. Then Miriam, his sister, offered to bring a Hebrew wet nurse:

**ספר שמות פרק ב פסוק ז** ותאמר אחותו אל בת פרעה האלך וקראתי לך אשה מינקת מן העברית ותינק לך את הילד:

(ח) ותאמר לה בת פרעה לכי ותלך העלמה ותקרא את אם הילד:

(ט) ותאמר לה בת פרעה היליכי את הילד הזה והינקהו לי ואני אתן את שכרך ותקח האשה הילד ותינקהו:

(י) ויגדל הילד ותבאהו לבת פרעה ויהי לה לבן ותקרא שמו משה ותאמר כי מן המים משיתוהו:

“His sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, ‘Shall I go and call for you a wet nurse from the Hebrew women, so that she shall nurse the child for you?’ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, ‘Go!’ So, the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, ‘Take this child and nurse him for me, and I will give [you] your wages.’ So, the woman took the child and nursed him. The child grew up, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became like her son” (*Shemot 2:7-10*).

The Midrash learns from the fact that it states **ויגדל הילד** /*vayigdal hayeled* – ‘the child grew up,’ that Moshe was breastfed for 24 months (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah 1:26*). This expression is identical to where Scripture describes Yitzchak, when he was weaned at 24 months: **ויגדל הילד ויגמל** /*vayigdal hayeled vayigamal* – “the child grew up and he was weaned” (*Bereishit 21:8*). There is a dispute whether it is prohibited to nurse from a non-Jewish wet-nurse or whether refraining from nursing from a non-Jewish woman is going beyond the letter of the law. The Rema (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 81:7*) rules that a child should always avoid nursing from a non-Jewish woman, when it is possible to nurse from a Jewish woman. He quotes the Rashba's reasoning, that the nature of a non-Jewish women will affect the child she nurses. The Rema also cites an opinion that a Jewish woman who is forced to eat non-kosher foods, should refrain from nursing ([Rabbi Raphael Fuchs](#)). According to the opinion that it is permitted to nurse from a non-Jewish woman, it was still not fitting for Moshe, whose mouth would in the future speak with the Shechina, to be contaminated with milk from an impure source (*Babylonian Talmud Sota 12b*). “What comes from the heart goes to the heart.” When Moshe suckled pure mother's milk, he received not only physical sustenance but moreover nutrition for his Jewish heart and the highest level of emunah from his holy mother. May we likewise merit to nurture our babies as long as possible with the highest divine nourishment from our Jewish heart!