

Parshiot Tazria-Metzora 5777, 2017:

*The Greatness of the Brit Milah*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains a *pasuk* (verse) that references the *mitzvah* of *brit milah*: “And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 12:3, this and all Bible translations, unless otherwise noted, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The inclusion of this verse is difficult to understand, since this commandment was already given in its complete form to *Avraham Avinu* (our father, Abraham) in *Sefer Bereishit*:

And G-d said to Abraham, “And you shall keep My covenant, you and your seed after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall observe between Me and between you and between your seed after you, that every male among you be circumcised. And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be as the sign of a covenant between Me and between you. And at the age of eight days, every male shall be circumcised to you throughout your generations...” (17:9-12)

At this point we may well ask, “If we have already been taught, ‘And at the age of eight days, every male shall be circumcised to you throughout your generations,’ why does the Torah insist on repeating it once again?”

One approach to this problem is offered by a rhetorical question/statement found in the *Talmud Yerushalmi, Moed Katan* III:5: “*L'maidin davar kodem l'matan Torah?!*” (“Is it possible to learn anything regarding normative halachic practice from Torah passages

that were stated prior to receiving the Torah?!”) Rabbi Moshe ben Shmuel Sofer *zatzal* (known as the Chatam Sofer, 1762-1839), in his commentary on this passage, alerts us to Tosafot’s analysis in *Talmud Bavli, Moed Katan* 20a (s.v. *mah chag*). According to their interpretation, the *Talmud Yerushalmi* is clearly stating that we cannot learn any halachic obligations from Torah portions that preceded the Revelation at *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai). As such, in addition to Hashem’s charge to Avraham in *Sefer Bereishit*, we need a restatement of the *mitzvah* of *brit milah* as found in our *parasha* in order to transform it into a permanent transhistorical obligation.

A different approach to answering our question is implicitly adopted by the *Sifra*, the halachic *midrash* to *Sefer Vayikra* and one of the earliest Rabbinic sources to analyze our *pasuk* (verse): “And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.” Each word and phrase is explicated, thereby demonstrating how our *pasuk* enhances understanding of the *mitzvah* of *brit milah*:

**And on the day:** This comes to teach us that the entire [eighth] day is fitting for *brit milah*. Nonetheless, the punctilious ones go to great effort to fulfill the commandments as soon as possible...**On the eighth [day] he should circumcise:** This means even on the Sabbath. **On the eighth [day]:** I might have thought that the *brit milah* could be performed whether during the day or the night [of the eighth day,] this is why the text states, “On the day.” The idea that the circumcision should take place solely during the [astronomical eighth] day is herein taught regarding a [healthy child,] from where do we learn that this is also the case for a child who is nine, ten and eleven days old? As the text states, “And on the day.” (*Sifra*, Parashat Tazria I:I:1-3, translation and brackets my own, see, as well, *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 132a)

In sum, the *Sifra* teaches us that our *pasuk* contains the following new nuances of the *mitzvah* of *brit milah* that are not found in *Sefer Bereishit*, and thereby provides us with a solid basis for the verse’s inclusion in our *parasha*:

- The entire eighth day is fitting for *brit milah*

- Sabbath prohibitions pertaining to the direct performance of the *brit milah* are set aside in order to guarantee its proper fulfillment on the eighth day
- This *mitzvah* must be performed upon a healthy child solely on the eighth astronomical day, and not during the preceding night – so, too, in the case of all children whose *brit milah* was unable to be performed on the eighth day due to health-related concerns

Now that we have a broader understanding of the halachic requirements concerning *brit milah*, we are ready to examine its underlying rationale. In order to do so, let us turn to the *Sefer HaChinuch* - one of the most celebrated works of *mitzvot* analysis. The anonymous 13<sup>th</sup> century author of this masterful study suggests that we need a physical sign to distinguish us from the rest of mankind. Moreover, he opines that *brit milah* symbolically represents the vast spiritual differences that obtain between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. Thus he states:

One root reason for this precept is that the Eternal L-rd, be He blessed, wished to affix in the people that He set apart to be called by His name a permanent sign in their bodies to differentiate them from the other nations in their bodily form, just as they are differentiated in their spiritual form, their very “exits and entrances” [their purpose and way in the world] not being the same. (This and the following quotation, *Sefer HaChinuch: The Book of Mitzvah Education, Commandment II*, translation, Charles Wengrov, page 85)

Basing himself upon a variety of Midrashic sources, the *Sefer HaChinuch* notes that *brit milah* brings us to physical perfection. In addition, it is a mark of completion (*hashlamah*) that enables us to join Hashem as partners in *Ma’aseh Bereishit* - the act of Creation - and the subsequent perfection of the world. This is the reason why man enters the world in an imperfect state, in the sense that he requires a *brit milah*, rather than being born *mahul* (in a circumcised condition). As such, this *mitzvah* teaches us that just as man

can perfect his physical being, so, too, can he perfect his spiritual being. As the *Sefer HaChinuch* states:

The Eternal L-rd (be He blessed) desired to perfect the [physical] character of the Chosen People; and He wished that man would effect this perfection. [Therefore,] He did not create him complete and perfect from the womb, in order to hint to him that just as the perfection of his physical form is by his own hand, so does it lie within his means and power to complete his spiritual form through the worthiness of his actions.

In his *Guide to the Perplexed*, the Rambam (Maimonides 1135-1204) takes a different, but somewhat parallel, approach to that presented by the *Sefer HaChinuch*. He views *brit milah* as a *mitzvah* that unites all Jews together into one eternal covenantal faith community, singularly dedicated to one another and believing in the oneness of Hashem:

It is also well known what degree of mutual love and mutual help exists between people who all bear the same sign, which forms for them a sort of covenant and alliance. *Circumcision* is a covenant made by *Abraham our Father* with a view to the belief in the *unity of G-d*. Thus, everyone who is circumcised joins *Abraham's covenant*. This covenant imposes the obligation to believe in the unity of G-d...(Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines, Vol. II, page 611)

With the Almighty's help, may we focus upon this powerful message of *brit milah* so that we may grow in our dedication to one another, and thereby stand ready to help each other in our hour of need. Then, as Maimonides so beautifully suggests, we will be ready to declare as one: "*Sh'ma Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*" ("Listen, Israel, G-d is our L-rd, G-d is One," *Sefer Devarim* 6:4, translation, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*) *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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