

Parshiot Tazria-Metzora 5780, 2020:

The Transformative Power of 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, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Parashat Tazria 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, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) At first blush, there seems to be little basis for this *pasuk*, since *Sefer Bereishit* 17:9-12 has already clearly presented many of the parameters of this *mitzvah*:

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...”

Why, then, does the Torah reiterate this commandment in our *parasha*? One answer to this problem is offered in a rhetorical question found in *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?” In a commentary on this statement, the Chatam Sofer *zatzal* (1762-1839) alerts us to the analysis of Tosafot in *Talmud Bavli, Moed Katan* 20a (s.v. *mah chag*). According to their interpretation, the *Talmud Yerushalmi* is clearly suggesting that we cannot learn any halachic obligations from Torah portions that

preceded the Revelation at *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai). Therefore, in addition to Hashem's charge to Avraham in *Sefer Bereishit*, we need a restatement of the obligation of *brit milah* in order to transform it into an eternally binding *mitzvah*.

I believe that Tosafot's interpretation clarifies why we have two *brachot* (blessings) during the *brit milah* ceremony. The first *bracha*, "*vitzivanu al hamilah* — Who has commanded us regarding the *mitzvah* of *brit milah*," references the normative halachic status of this commandment as stated in our *parasha*. In contrast, the second *bracha* of "*l'hachniso b'brito shel Avraham Avinu* — to bring him [the child] into the Covenant of our Patriarch Avraham," signifies the transhistorical connection that now obtains between the eight-day-old baby boy and all Jews for all time, as epitomized by Hashem's words to Avraham.

In his own unique way, my *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, analyzes the essential nature of *brit milah*. In so doing, he presents his own understanding of the fundamental nature of this *mitzvah*, and the rationale for the dual *brachot* during its performance. He begins by noting a similarity between *brit milah* and other *mitzvot*, as well as a singular difference:

There are two fulfillments in the *mitzvah* of *milah*, circumcision. On the one hand, the act of circumcision is conceptually similar to many other *mitzvot*: there is a *mitzvah* to circumcise one's son, just as there is a *mitzvah* to hold a *lulav*. On the other hand, a new status is conferred upon the person through the *milah*. One who takes the a *lulav* is the same person before and after the *mitzvah* — his status has not changed. After *milah*, however, the child becomes a *ben bris*, and only then can he enter the *Mikdash* or bring sacrifices...

In sum, although the *mitzvah* of *brit milah* is like any other Torah-based commandment that must be performed in congruence with the Almighty's will, unlike most other *mitzvot*, it is

transformative; it endows the baby boy with a completely new status, that of a *ben bris* who may now enjoy the rights, privileges and obligations associated with the *Beit HaMikdash*.

In the Rav's view, these two ideas are given powerful voice in the two *brachot* associated with this *mitzvah*: "... The first *berachah*, *Blessed are You...Who has commanded us concerning circumcision*, refers to the act of *milah*. According to Rabbeinu Tam (Tosafos, *Pesachim* 7a), the second *berachah*, *Who has commanded us to bring him into the covenant of Abraham our forefather*, refers to the change of status resulting from the act of *milah*." (Anton Holzer Notes, *Mesorah* Vol 15, p. 52)

Brit milah thus emerges as a category-changing *mitzvah* wherein the status of the baby boy is raised to that of a new halachic being, namely, a *ben bris*. While most *mitzvot* are not able to affect this type of transformation, with Hashem's help and our fervent desire, they all can lead us to new spiritual heights and profound appreciation of His unparalleled majesty. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and the entire world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.