

Parshiot Tazria-Metzora 5783, 2023:

The Lesson of Brit Milah

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first time we are introduced to the *mitzvah* of *brit milah* is the 17th chapter of *Sefer Bereshit*:

And Hashem 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, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

This *mitzvah* is found once again in the first of our *parshiot*, Parashat Tazria: “And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 12:3) This repetition creates a classic exegetical problem: if the Torah gave us this *mitzvah* in *Sefer Bereshit*, why is it reiterated in *Sefer Vayikra*?

An approach to this problem is offered by a rhetorical question found in *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Moed Katan* III:5: “*L’maidin davar kodem l’Matan Torah?*—Is it possible to learn normative halachic practice from a Torah passage that was stated prior to receiving the Torah?” Tosafot’s use of this question in *Talmud Bavli*, *Moed Katan* 20a, s.v. *mah chag*, strongly suggests that we cannot learn any halachic obligations from Torah portions that preceded *Matan Torah*. Therefore, in addition to Hashem’s charge to Avraham in *Sefer*

Bereishit, we must have a post-*Matan Torah* repetition of the *mitzvah* of *brit milah* if it is to be a permanent obligation.

The Rambam *zatzal* (1135-1204) further elaborates upon the non-binding character of a pre-*Matan Torah mitzvah* in the first halacha of *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel*:

It is a positive commandment to mourn the loss of a close relative (*krovim*). As the text states: "...But [if tragic events] like these had befallen me [Aharon, regarding the deaths of Nadav and Avihu], and if I had eaten a sin offering today, would it have pleased Hashem?" (*Sefer Vayikra* 10:19) *Aveilut* is a Torah obligation only on the first day, that is the day of death and the day of the burial [assuming they are the same]. The rest of the seven days are not a Torah obligation, even though the Torah states [regarding Yosef and Ya'akov]: "... and he made for his father a mourning of seven days." (*Sefer Bereishit* 50:10), for once the Torah was given, and the halacha was stated anew, at that point Moshe Rabbeinu established the practice for them [the Jewish people] of seven days of Aveilut and seven days of rejoicing [for the bride and groom]. (Translation and brackets my own)

The repetition of *mitzvat brit milah* post-*Matan Torah* is an indication of its singular halachic import. As such, what is its meaning? The anonymous author of the *Sefer HaChinuch*, one of the most celebrated works of *mitzvot* exploration, suggests that a physical sign is needed to distinguish *klal Yisrael* from the rest of mankind. In addition, he opines that *brit milah* symbolically represents the vast spiritual differences that obtain between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds:

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, a mark of completion (*hashlamah*) that enables us

to join Hashem as partners both in *Ma'aseh Bereishit* (the act of Creation) and the perfection of the world. As such, this *mitzvah* teaches us that just as a person can perfect their physical being, so, too, they can perfect their spiritual being. The *Sefer HaChinuch* concludes with an analytical tour de force:

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.

With Hashem's help and our fervent desire, may the worthiness of our actions bring us to greater spiritual heights as we strive to draw near to Hashem. *V'chane yihi ratzon*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** 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: [The Ray](#)