

Parshiot Tazria – Hachodesh 5771, 2011: Understanding *Brit Milah*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

There are two major references to the mitzvah of *Brit Milah* (Covenant of Circumcision) that appear in the Five Books of the Torah. The first occurs in *Sefer Bereishit* 17:9-14:

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, one that is born in the house, or one that is purchased with money, from any foreigner, who is not of your seed. Those born in the house and those purchased for money shall be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant. And an uncircumcised male, who will not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin - that soul will be cut off from its people; he has broken My covenant.” (This and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The second reference is found in our *parasha*, Parashat Tazria: “And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 12:3) We may well ask at this point: “If we have the extended passage in *Sefer Bereishit* that deals with this mitzvah, why was it necessary for the Torah to repeat it, albeit in a very shortened version, in our *parasha*?”

*Talmud Yerushalmi, Moed Katan* 3:5 provides us with a solution to our question: “*L'maidin davar kodem l'matan Torah?!?*” (“Is it possible to learn anything regarding normative Torah practice from passages prior to the receiving of the Torah?!?”) The Chatam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe ben Shmuel Sofer *zatzal*, 1762-1839), in his comments on this Rabbinic expression, 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 do not learn any halachic obligations from Torah passages that precede the Revelation at *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai). The restatement of the mitzvah of *Brit Milah* in our *parasha* is, therefore, needed in order for it to be binding upon all future generations. This approach is supported, as well, by a famous passage that appears in Maimonides' (1135-1204) *Commentary on the Mishnah*:

Take note of the fundamental principle latent within this Mishnah, namely, that which it says, "it was prohibited at Sinai." You have thus been shown that everything from which we refrain or that we observe today we do so only by force of the divine command through our teacher Moshe *a"h*, and not because the Almighty said this to the earlier prophets. For example, we refrain from eating flesh from a living animal not because the Almighty forbade this upon Noach, but rather because Moshe forbade upon us flesh from a living animal by commanding us at Sinai that the prohibition of flesh from a living animal shall remain in force. Similarly, we circumcise not because our patriarch Avraham *a"h* circumcised himself and his household, but rather because the Almighty commanded us through our teacher Moshe that we should circumcise just as our patriarch Avraham *a"h* circumcised. The same applies to *gid ha-nasheh* [sciatic nerve]: we follow not the prohibition imposed upon our patriarch Yaakov, but rather the command of our teacher Moshe *a"h*. (*Mishnah Chulin 7:6*, translation, David Silverberg, underlining and brackets my own)

I believe we are now in an ideal position to understand exactly why we have two separate *berachot* (blessings) during the *Brit Milah* service. The first *bracha* (blessing) of "*vitzeivanu al hamilah*" ("Who has commanded us regarding the mitzvah of *Brit Milah*") represents the eternally binding character of this commandment, as presented 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 historical connection that now obtains between the eight day old infant and all Jews from the time of Avraham onward, as depicted by the narrative in *Sefer Bereishit*.

Now that we have briefly analyzed the two Torah passages that refer to the mitzvah of

*Brit Milah*, in both the legally obligatory and historically binding sense, we are ready to ask a very basic question: “What is the underlying meaning or reason for this mitzvah?” To answer this question, we now turn to two giants of our *Massorah* (tradition), the Rambam (Maimonides) and the Sefer HaChinuch (13<sup>th</sup> century).

In Book III, Chapter 49 of his philosophical *magnum opus*, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, the Rambam suggests that the physical aspect of *Brit Milah* serves to distinguish us from those who would imitate our behaviors at a time when we would be ascending in power and influence. Then, too, this sign in our flesh represents our complete dedication to the concept of the oneness of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. Thus he states: “...all people professing this opinion – that is, those who believe in the *unity of G-d* – should have a bodily sign uniting them so that one who does not belong to them should not be able to claim that he was one of them, while being a stranger. For he would do this in order to profit by them or to deceive the people who profess this religion.”

In addition, the Rambam reminds us in no uncertain terms that no one would submit himself or his son to a *Brit Milah* unless they were singularly dedicated to the belief in, and the service of, the Master of the Universe: “Now a man does not perform this act upon himself or upon a son of his unless it be in consequence of a genuine belief. For it is not like an incision in the leg or a burn in the arm, but it is a very, very hard thing.”

In addition, the physical aspect of *Brit Milah* serves to join all Jews together in one grand trans-historical fraternity of belief in the oneness of our Creator, and in dedication to one another:

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)

The Sefer HaChinuch, like the Rambam, suggests that we need a physical sign to distinguish us from the non-Jewish world. He differs, however, as to the reason why this is necessary. As stated above, the Rambam was worried that non-Jews might masquerade as Jews when it served their purposes. In contrast, the Sefer HaChinuch sees the need for the *Brit Milah* as a physical sign of separation in our flesh that symbolically represents the vast spiritual difference that obtains between the non-Jewish world and ourselves.

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.

Basing himself upon a variety of Midrashic sources, the Sefer HaChinuch notes, as well, that the *Brit Milah* brings us to physical perfection. It is considered a mark of completion (*hashlamah*) on man's part that enables us to join Hashem in *Maaseh Bereishit* (the act of Creation). We become, as it were, partners with Hashem in Creation and the perfection of the world. This is the reason why man is born imperfect in the state requiring the *Brit Milah*, rather than *mahul* (in a circumcised condition). In addition, it teaches us that just as man can perfect his physical being, he can perfect his spiritual being. As the Sefer HaChinuch formulates it:

The Eternal L-rd (be He blessed) desired to perfect the [physical] character of the Chosen People; and He wished that this perfection be effected by man. 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 in his hand (within his means and power) to complete his spiritual form by the worthiness of his actions. (Translation by Charles Wengrov)

May each of us be *zocheh* (merit) to bear witness to the oneness of Hashem, to join as one with our fellow Jews in love and devotion, and to grow ever upward on the ladder of spiritual perfection. If we can accomplish these lofty goals, we will surely be participants in *biat haMashiach* (the coming of the true Messiah). May he come soon and in our days.

*V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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 at [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).