**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for *refua* *sheleima* for all who require healing, comfort and peace –

those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.

May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage, and compassion.

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In honor of Oma Ina Sondheim, our matriarch,

from her children, grandchildren and great - grandchildren,

who all love her and are davening for her refuah shelaymah

so that she can continue to share her wisdom, insight and wit with all of us.

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**PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA**

**SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN**

The Covenant of Circumcision

Translated by Kaeren Fish

The significance of *berit mila* (circumcision) exceeds by far the scope of a single *shiur*. Our intention here will be to mention just four ideas related to this topic.

1. **Perfection and the aspiration for perfection**

The wicked Turnus Rufus asked R. Akiva, “Whose actions are finer – those of God or those of man?”

He replied, “Those of man are finer”…

He asked him, “Why do you [Jews] practice circumcision?”

He answered, “I knew that that was what you were going to say, and for that reason I started off by saying that man’s actions are finer than those of God. Bring me sheaves of wheat and baked cakes.” [When these were produced,] he said to him, “These [sheaves of wheat] are the work of God, while these [cakes] are the work of man. Which are finer? Bring me stalks of flax and linen clothing from Beit Shean.” [When these were produced,] he said to him, “These [stalks] are the work of God, while these [garments] are the work of man. Which are finer?”

Turnus Rufus answered, “If God favors circumcision, why is an infant not born already circumcised?”

R. Akiva answered him, “… the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the commandments to the Jewish People in order that they might be purified/perfected through them…” (*Tanchuma*, *Tazri’a* 7)

The Maharal (*Tiferet Yisrael* 2) discusses this dispute between the Roman governor and R. Akiva, which took place against the backdrop of the ban on circumcision that had been imposed on the Jews by Hadrian, and which was one of the two main reasons for the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The *midrash* suggests that Turnus Rufus regards nature, as created by “the gods” (to his view), as the best possible reality, such that the presence of the foreskin is its own proof that the body in its natural state is perfect as it is. R. Akiva proves, through the metaphor of wheat and cakes or flax and garments, that that which is produced by nature is not necessarily complete and perfect; man has a role to play in improving and perfecting what exists in nature. The Maharal engages in profound discussion of the subject, in his unique style. We shall adopt his general direction, but present the case slightly differently.

The world – and especially man – is not created perfect. Man is inherently deficient, and this deficiency is reflected in the presence of the foreskin. But why must we assume that God did not create man in a perfect and complete state? Why should we proceed from the notion that we must repair or complete God’s work?

If we think about this logically, it is clear that God did not create man complete and perfect. A perfection imposed on man from the outside would not be perfection at all. If such perfection were granted to man as a gift, rather than something arising from within himself, it would be a “deficient perfection” – because something that is whole and perfect is not external, but internal. By way of analogy, we would not award a prestigious gold medal for sports to someone who did not run particularly fast or jump especially high. A medal awarded to such a person would be an external, artificial honor.

God created man imperfect, and man must exert effort and his free choice to attain perfection. Only if it comes from within himself, by his own choice, will he achieve this desired end. Therefore, man must perfect himself through his own choice; he should not expect God to do this for him.

Why does this concept, so fundamental to man’s existence, find expression specifically in the organ of procreation rather than in some other part of the body? Apparently, since this organ is the locus of the lowest and most shameful inclinations, causing man naturally to cover it, it is from here that correction and the aspiration for perfection must proceed.

1. **“And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised”**

The Torah commands that circumcision take place on the eighth day after a boy is born. The eighth day also has significance for the animal kingdom:

When a bullock or sheep or goat is born, it shall be seven days under its mother, and from the eighth day onwards it shall be accepted for an offering made by fire to the Lord. (*Vayikra* 22:27)

What is the significance of the eighth day? What makes it special?

A straightforward reading of chapters 1-2 of *Bereishit* (admittedly, a very difficult task) seems to raise the possibility that the world (including Shabbat) was created in seven days, and that the Garden of Eden was created on the eighth day. The account of the creation of the Garden of Eden has no division of days, such that we conclude that it was created in a single day, and this was the day after Shabbat. The Garden of Eden is the essence of the goodness in Creation, and it is here that the foreskin is removed, just as the Garden contains no sea, no creatures of the deep, no sun or moon, since all of these are generally associated with evil or idolatry.

We have already noted in the past (*Parashat Bereishit*) that the boundaries of the Garden of Eden as described in the Torah are identical to the boundaries of *Eretz Yisrael*. The Garden is created on the eighth day, and in this Garden man is a partner in God’s work; he is placed there “to till it and to keep it,” not just to exist passively as a receiver. Seemingly, the greatest pleasure in the Garden of Eden is not its agreeable temperature, its beautiful scenery, or its choice fruits, but rather the fact that man is an active partner in its upkeep, by tilling it and watching over it and through the commandments that he accepts upon himself to fulfill in it. The Garden of Eden is a garden of purpose and exertion.

This would seem to be the message of circumcision, as well. A male infant joins God’s people when he is perfected, without a foreskin, by virtue of the efforts of the *mohel*, who should be the infant’s father. Circumcision is the first step in the process that leads to perfection. It is specifically in the Garden of Eden that God reveals Himself by the Divine Name indicating direct relationship and intimacy – Y-H-V-H – and not just by the Divine Name indicating His “official title” as ruler – *Elokim*. God’s revelation by His Name is an expression of His direct relationship with man, who is the “junior partner,” as it were, in managing the Garden. This is the true pleasure of the Garden of Eden, where God is destined to reveal Himself to man.

Thus, circumcision on the eighth day expresses a longing for the Garden of Eden, the place of perfection and completion.

1. **The giving of names**

According to custom, a baby boy is named immediately after his circumcision. It is possible that this custom, too, is based on the connection between *berit mila* and the Garden of Eden, since an important task that Adam fulfilled in the Garden was giving names to all the animals. Through this naming, too, man became God’s partner in Creation.

The concept of naming at the circumcision is found in the story of Avraham, as well. His name is changed upon his circumcision, from Avram to Avraham. And in *Parashat* *Vayishlach*, we read about Yaakov, who also has his name changed – from Yaakov to Yisrael – in a context that may be a symbolic parallel to circumcision, since it involves “the hollow of his thigh” (*kaf yerekho*).

What is the significance of giving or changing a name? In the *Tanakh*, a change of name is an expression of accepting the yoke of authority:

And Pharaoh Nekho made Eliyakim, son of Yoshiyahu, king in place of Yoshiyahu, his father, and **he turned his name** to Yehoyakim… And Yehoyakim gave the silver and the gold to Pharaoh, but he taxed the land to give the money according to the commandment of Pharaoh; he exacted the silver and the gold of the people of the land, of everyone according to his taxation, to give it to Pharaoh Nekho.” (*Melakhim* II 23:34-35)

Eliyakim is appointed by Pharaoh Nekho over Jerusalem, and in return he commits to taxing Jerusalem on behalf of the king of Egypt. Just as Eliyakim’s name is changed to Yehoyakim, so eleven years later the name of Matanya is changed to Tzidkiyahu, when he becomes the vassal of the king of Babylonia:

…And the king of Babylonia made Matanya, his uncle, king in his stead, **and he turned his name** to Tzidkiyahu. (*Melakhim* II 24:17)

Likewise, some commentators who focus on *peshat* (see, for example, Chizkuni, *Bamidbar* 13:16) maintain that Moshe changed the name of Hoshea bin Nun to Yehoshua to indicate the fact that he was Moshe’s servant.

The act of circumcision and giving of the name turns Avraham – and his progeny, who are likewise circumcised, for all generations – into God’s servants.

The declaration of subjugation that is entailed in giving the name pertains to the actual act of circumcision, too. According to the laws of the ancient world, severance of an organ was appropriate in the case of a rebellious or disobedient slave.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Torah opposes this abominable practice, stating that a slave goes free if his master maimed his eye or tooth (*Shemot* 21:27). The ancient practice takes on gentler, more benign form in the Torah in the boring of the ear of a slave who chooses to stay on permanently with his master after his period of indenture, until the Jubilee year (*Shemot* 21:6).

Physical mutilation of the organs of procreation was likewise practiced in the ancient world, and most of the slaves and servants in royal courts were eunuchs. Here, too, the Torah prohibits the practice of castration, but stipulates a gentler marking of the organ of procreation, likewise as a symbol of “service” or subjugation to God, accompanied by a new name for the “servant” who has joined *Am Yisrael*.

1. **Yitzchak and Yishmael**

The commandment of circumcision is given to Avraham, *inter alia*, with a view to differentiating between Yitzchak and Yishmael. Yishmael is circumcised along with all the male members born to Avraham’s household, and, at Avraham’s request, he is also given a blessing. Nevertheless, God declares that it is through Yitzchak that His covenant with Avraham will be fulfilled.

Sara, too, receives her name at the time of the circumcision. Although the commandment of circumcision pertains only to the males, she obviously plays a central part in the covenant. Both Yishmael and Yitzchak (who, at this point, has yet to be born) are sons of Avraham. But Yishmael is born prior to Avraham’s circumcision, while Yitzchak is born of Sara after the circumcision. It would therefore appear that the circumcision is bound up with the sanctity of the seed that emerges from that organ, and the sanctity of the seed in turn is determined by the woman who absorbs and nurtures the seed. Circumcision marks the sanctity of Jewish seed that is absorbed in the womb of a Jewish woman, not in the womb of a foreign woman.

This idea finds clear expression in the episode involving Shekhem:

And they said to them, “We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a reproach to us. But in this we will consent to you: if you will be as we are, that every male of you is circumcised…” (*Bereishit* 34:14-15).

Shimshon’s parents disapprove of his choice of wife for the same reason:

And he came up and he told his father and mother, and said, “I have seen a woman in Timnat of the daughters of the Pelishtim; now therefore take her for me as a wife.” And his father and his mother said to him, “Is there no woman among the daughters of your brethren, or among all my people, that you go to take a wife of the uncircumcised Pelishtim?” (*Shoftim* 14:2-3)

Thus, circumcision distinguishes between Jews and other nations when it comes to marriage, and it establishes that a Jewish man gives his seed only to a Jewish woman, and not to a foreign woman.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The episode recorded in the Torah immediately after Avraham’s circumcision continues the same theme, bringing the promise of Yitzchak’s birth:

And he said, “I shall surely return to you at this season, and behold, Sara, your wife, shall have a son.” And Sara heard it at the tent door, which was behind him. (*Bereishit* 18:10)

What need is there for this message? Just three days earlier, at the time of his circumcision, Avraham was already informed that Sara would bear a son:

And God said to Avraham, “As for Sarai, your wife – you shall not call her name Sarai, but her name shall be Sara. And I will bless her, and give you a son of her, too, and I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall issue from her…” And God said, “Sara your wife shall bear you a son indeed, and you shall call his name Yitzchak, and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him…. But My covenant I will establish with Yitzchak, whom Sara will bear to you at this time next year.” (*Bereishit* 17:15-21)

Why is there a need for two separate messages about Yitzchak’s birth?

The answer is that the first message, in *Parashat Lekh-Lekha*, is given to Avraham, while the second one, in *Parashat Vayera*, is given to Sara. Although the angel is speaking to Avraham, he asks, “Where is Sara, your wife?”, so that she, too, will pay attention and listen, from inside the tent, and hear the news. And indeed, the Torah explicitly notes Sara’s reaction of laughter and the exchange between her and the angel in its wake.

The message to a mother concerning a son to be born is something new. In the ancient world, the son was linked only to the father; the mother simply bore the child for the father. The inclusion of the mother in the message, and the relating of the child to her as well, are the great innovation of our *parasha*. This innovation arises not only from the natural honor that the Torah shows to the woman and mother, but also from the covenant of circumcision, awarding holiness to the seed that is planted only in the womb of a Jewish woman.

Halakha for all generations has adopted the promise of seed given to the mother in that the holiness inherent to Israel is dependent on the Jewish mother, rather than the father (*Shulchan Arukh*, *Even Ha-Ezer* 4). Only the son that Sara bears to Avraham will have an eternal covenant with God.

Our discussion began with the connection between circumcision and the Garden of Eden – which, according to our interpretation, is the region of *Eretz Yisrael*. Indeed, the connection between circumcision and the Garden also points to the connection between circumcision and the inheritance of the land. Through circumcision, both the parents and in the infant demonstrate their belonging to the Jewish nation. This belonging is the fundamental precondition for dwelling in the land:

“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be your God, and to your seed after you. And I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land in which you sojourn, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” And God said to Avraham, “You shall keep My covenant, therefore – you and your seed after you in their generations.” (*Bereishit* 17:7-9)

The promise concerning “your seed after you” means that those who keep the sign of the covenant of circumcision and refrain from marrying foreign wives will be those who ultimately inherit the land.

1. Many examples are offered in Meir Maloul, *Kovtzei Ha-Dinim Ve-Osafim Mishpatiim Acherim min Ha-Mizrach Ha-Kadum* (Haifa, 5770). The Hammurabi Code states, “If the slave of a free man strikes the body of a free man, his ear shall be cut off.” The Middle Assyrian Laws include the stipulation, “If a slave or slave-girl receives anything from a married woman, the nose and ears of the slave or slave-girl are to be cut off.” According to the Hittite Laws, “If a slave sets a house ablaze… the nose and ears of the slave shall be cut off, and he shall be handed back to his master.” Maloul also refers to H. A. Hoffner’s comprehensive work on the Hittite texts, *The Laws of the Hittites - A Critical Edition* (Leiden, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pinchas, son of Elazar, is zealous in his loyalty to this principle and exacts harsh punishment on Zimri. *Chazal* identify the prophet Eliyahu with Pinchas (see *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Bamidbar* 771), and indeed according to tradition, Eliyahu is a presence at every circumcision, watching over and guarding the separation of Israel from the other nations. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)