**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Laws of Conversion and Circumcision**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbie and David Sable

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**Shiur #01: The Source and Reasons for *Brit Mila***

**Introduction**

 This week, we begin a mini-series on the laws of *brit mila*. *Brit mila* is not only a significant milestone in the life of a Jewish male and his parents; it is central to the very relationship between God and the Jewish People (see *Bereishit* 17:1-14, for example). *Brit mila* is also an integral part of the process of acquisition of an *eved kena’ani*, as well as the process of conversion (*giyur*), to which we will dedicate a an independent series of *shiurim*.

The Torah first relates to the obligation to circumcise Jewish males in *Sefer* *Bereishit* (17: 1-14), when God forges a covenant with Avraham.

When Avram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Avram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be whole. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.” Avram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, “As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Avram, but your name shall be Avraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fertile and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God.”

God further said to Avraham, “As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant. Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. As for the home-born slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring, they must be circumcised, home-born and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant.”

God commands Avraham, who was almost one hundred years old, to circumcise himself, his male offspring, and his slaves (home-born and purchased). Furthermore, God states that one who is not circumcised will incur the punishment of *karet*, “being cut off from his kin.”

 Circumcision is later mentioned during the story of Dina and Shechem (*Bereishit* 34:17), when Tzippora, Moshe Rabbenu’s wife, circumcises her firstborn son (*Shemot* 4:25-26), and regarding the *Korban Pesach* offered before the exodus from Egypt and in later generations each year on the Festival of Pesach (ibid. 12:48; see also *Yehoshua* 5:2-5).

 The formal commandment of *brit Mila* appears later in the Torah: “On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised” (*Vayikra* 12:3).

 This week, we will briefly discuss *Chazal*’s view of *brit mila*, as well as the various reasons for the *mitzva* presented by the medieval and modern commentators.

**Reasons for *Brit Mila* in the Talmud**

 The Rabbis of the Talmud speak of the importance, and perhaps centrality, of the commandment of *brit mila*. For example, the *gemara* (*Nedarim* 31a) relates in the name of R. Yishmael that “so great is the *mitzva* of circumcision that thirteen covenants were sealed with regard to it.” The word “*brit*” (covenant) appears thirteen times in the biblical passage that discusses circumcision (*Bereishit*, ch. 17) in order to convey this message. Similarly, the *gemara* continues:

Alternatively, so great is the *mitzva* of circumcision that it is equal to all the *mitzvot* of the Torah, as it is stated at the giving of the Torah: “For according to these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel” (*Shemot* 34:27), and “covenant” refers to circumcision. Alternatively, so great is the *mitzva* of circumcision that if not for circumcision, heaven and earth would not have been established, as it is stated: “If My covenant be not with day and night, I would not have appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth” (*Yirmiyahu* 33:25).

The Rabbis equate the *mitzva* of *brit mila* with all of the other *mitzvot* and attribute the creation of the heaven and earth to its greatness.

 The Talmud (ibid.) also notes that we can discern the importance of this *mitzva* through its various laws:

R. Yosei says: So great is the *mitzva* of circumcision that it overrides the strictness of Shabbat [as circumcision is performed even if the eighth day following the birth of a son occurs on Shabbat, despite the fact that circumcision violates the prohibition of labor on Shabbat].

R. Nechemia says: So great is the *mitzva* of circumcision that it overrides the prohibitions associated with *tzara’at*. [If *tzara’at* is found on the foreskin of an infant, although it is generally prohibited to cut the afflicted area, it is permitted to do so in order to perform the *mitzva* of circumcision.]

These laws – Shabbat and the prohibition of removing an area affected by *tzara’at* – are usually only set aside for the sake for saving a life, but they are violated in order to fulfill the commandment of *brit mila*.

The Talmud further includes numerous statements about the “*orla*” (foreskin). For example, the *gemara* (*Nedarim* 31b) teaches:

R. Elazar ben Azarya says: The foreskin is repulsive, as is evident from the fact that the wicked are disgraced through it, as it is stated: “[Behold, the days come, says the Lord, that I will punish all them that are circumcised in their uncircumcision: Egypt, and Judah, and Edom, and the children of Ammon, and Moab, and all that have the corners of their hair polled, that dwell in the wilderness;] for all the nations are uncircumcised, but all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart” (*Yirmiyahu* 9:25).

Similarly, the *gemara* (ibid. 32b) relates:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: At the time that the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Avraham Avinu, “Walk before Me and you should be wholehearted” (*Bereishit* 17:1), a sensation of trembling seized him and he said: Perhaps there is something disgraceful about me due to a transgression that I committed, and therefore I cannot be called complete. When God said to him: “And I will make My covenant between Me and you” (ibid. 17:2), his mind was set at ease.

The foreskin is not only a physical characteristic of gentiles, it represents that which is repulsive and disgraceful.

 Finally, the Talmud (ibid.) describes how *brit mila* affected Avraham Avinu:

R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi says: So great is the *mitzva* of circumcision that despite all the *mitzvot* that Avraham Avinu did, he was not called wholehearted (*tamim*) until he circumcised himself, as it is stated at the time that the *mitzva* was given to him: “Walk before Me and you should be wholehearted (*tamim*)” (*Bereishit* 17:1).

Similarly, the *gemara* relates:

It is taught: R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi says: Great is the *mitzva* of circumcision, for there is no one who was engaged in *mitzvot* like Avraham Avinu, and yet he was called perfect only due to the *mitzva* of circumcision, as it is stated: “Walk before Me and you should be perfect” (*Bereishit* 17:1), and it is written in the next verse: “And I will make My covenant between Me and you” (ibid. 17:2) [and Avraham was then commanded with regard to circumcision, indicating that he was not called perfect until he performed circumcision].

**Reasons for *Brit Mila* in Medieval and Modern Commentaries**

 The commentators suggest numerous reasons for this *mitzva*. We will present some of the more well-known suggestions.

 Some suggest that the process of circumcision is meant to repair the child, physically or morally. The *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Tazri’a* 5) relates:

The wicked Turnus Rufus asked R. Akiva: Whose deeds are better – those of God or those of human beings? R. Akiva replied: Human beings! Turnus Rufus asked: Behold heaven and earth! Can a human being create such as these? R. Akiva replied: Don't talk to me about things that are beyond a mortal creation's ability and that we have no control of; rather, ask about things that are found in humans. Turnus Rufus asked him: Why are you circumcised? R. Akiva replied: I knew you were going to ask me that; therefore, I pre-empted you and said that humans' deeds are more pleasing than God's! R. Akiva brought him sheaves of wheat and fresh-baked rolls, and he said: These are God's works and these are humans'. Are not these better than the sheaves? R. Akiva brought him raw flax and clothes from Bet She'an [known throughout the ancient world for their fine, delicate fabric and exquisite workmanship] and said: These are God's works and these are humans'. Are not these better than the flax? Turnus Rufus replied to him: If God desires circumcision, why doesn't the baby leave the womb already circumcised? R. Akiva answered: And why is he also born still attached to the umbilical cord? Doesn't the mother cut the cord? And why isn't the baby born circumcised? Because God gave Israel the Torah in order to shape them through fulfillment of the *mitzvot*.

The *gemara* implies that the male child is born uncircumcised in order to afford the parent the opportunity to perfect his child. How are we to understand this imperfection and opportunity?

Rashi (*Bereishit* 17:1) appears to suggest that the *brit mila* repairs a physical blemish:

According to the *midrash* ([*Bereishit* *Rabba* 46:4](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Bereishit_Rabbah.46.4)), however, it means: Walk before Me by observing the precept of circumcision, and through this you will become perfect, for so long as you are uncircumcised I regard you as having a blemish.

The Rambam (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:49) rejects this position, however, and insists that *brit mila* is not meant to remove or repair a physical defect:

Some people believe that circumcision is to remove a defect in a man’s formation. But everyone can easily reply: How can products of nature be deficient so as to require external completion, especially as the use of the foreskin to that organ is evident?

Instead, the Rambam explains that *brit mila* is meant to be “a means for perfecting man’s moral shortcomings.”

Similarly, the *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* (*mitzva* 2) explains:

[God] wanted men to complete the creation of his body, as He did not create him complete from the womb; [this is so as] to hint to him that just like the completion of the form of his body is through him, so [too] is it in his hand to complete the form of his soul by refining his actions.

The Maharal (*Chiddushei* *Aggadot*, *Nedarim* 32a) further develops this idea:

Why was man created uncircumcised? This reflects the purpose of man. Man is a potential that is brought into actualization; for this reason man was created. It is appropriate for the body to parallel the soul. Just as the soul is created as potential that needs to be actualized, similarly the body was also created as potential. And so long as the *orla* was not removed, the body does not reach its revealed potential, because the *orla* presents a cover and blockage to the person, as we find in every instance that the world *orla* is used it refers to a blockage, for example, “The *orla* of your hearts” (*Devarim* 10:15); and [Moshe was described as] “*aral sefatayim*,” [having a speech impediment] (*Shemot* 6:12) meaning that he was not able to actualize his words.

The Maharal explains that removing the foreskin symbolizes removed the obstacle to fulfilling one’s spiritual potential.

 Other *Rishonim* claim that *brit mila* reflects a broader attitude towards sexuality and self-restraint. For example, the Rambam (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:49) writes:

As regards circumcision, I think that one of its objects is to limit sexual intercourse and to weaken the organ of generation as far as possible, and thus to cause a man to be moderate… The bodily injury caused to that organ is exactly that which is desired … Circumcision simply counteracts excessive lust; for there is no doubt that circumcision weakens the power of sexual excitement and sometimes lessens the natural enjoyment; the organ necessarily becomes weak when it loses blood and is derived from its covering in the beginning.

Even those who reject the Rambam’s negativity towards sexuality maintain that *brit mila* may serve the pedagogical purpose of teaching that even sexual desire is subject to the Divine will (see R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, *Vayikra* 12:3).

 Another view is that *brit mila* is intended to distinguish Jews from non-Jews. For example, the Rambam (ibid.) writes:

There is, however, another important object in the commandment. It gives all members of the same faith, i.e. the unity of God, a common bodily sign, so that it is impossible for anyone that is a stranger to say that he belongs to them. No one, however, should circumcise himself or his son for any other reason but pure faith… Circumcision is likewise the [symbol of the] covenant that Avraham made in connection with the belief in God’s Unity. Thus, everyone that is circumcised enters the covenant of Avraham to believe in the unity of God, in accordance with the words of the Law, “To be a God unto you and to your seed after you” (*Bereishit* 17:7). This purpose of the circumcision is as important as the first, and perhaps more important.

While the Rambam appears to focus on a more technical or physical distinction that distinguishes and unifies the Jewish People, the *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* adds:

It is from the roots of this commandment [that it is] because God wanted to establish in His nation, that He separated to be called by His name, a permanent sign on their body, to separate them from the other nations in the form of their bodies just like they are separated from them in the form of their souls, the going out and coming in of which are not similar. He established this difference in the “golden fountain” [i.e. the sexual organ] because this is the reason for the existence of people, besides being a completion of the physical body as we mentioned. God wanted to complete His plan with the chosen nation.

The *brit mila* is a sign that distinguishes the Jewish People and reminds them of their unique relationship with God.

 In the upcoming *shiurim*, we will discuss the nature of *brit mila*, the obligation, its proper time, the halakhic aspects of the procedure itself, and the laws and customs that accompany this ritual.