YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT (VBM)

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**Laws of Conversion and Circumcision**

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**The *Berakhot* on the *Brit Mila* (1)**

[Last week](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/night-brit-kvatter-kisei-shel-eliyahu-and-sandak) we discussed the various customs leading up to the circumcision itself, concluding with the placement of the child on the *sandak*'s knees as he awaits the procedure. In addition, we dedicated numerous *shiurim* to the *brit mila* itself, including the *mila*, *peri'a*, and *metzitza*. This week we will begin our discussion of the blessings said during the *brit mila*. We will discuss each *berakha*, its nature, and when and how it is recited.

**Introduction**

 The Talmud (*Shabbat* 137b) teaches that there are three blessings recited at a *brit mila*: *al ha-mila*, *le-hakhniso le-verito shel Avraham Avinu*, and *koret ha-brit*.

The Sages taught: One who circumcises a child recites: Who has made us holy through His commandments and commanded us concerning circumcision (*al ha-mila*).

The father of the [circumcised] child recites: Who has made us holy through His commandments and commanded us to bring him into the covenant of Avraham, our father (*lehakhniso be-verito shel Avraham Avinu*). Those standing there recite: Just as he has entered into the covenant, so may he enter into Torah, marriage, and good deeds.

And the one who recites the additional blessing says: Who made the beloved one holy from the womb, marked the decree in his flesh, and gave his descendants the seal and the sign of the holy covenant. Therefore, as a reward for this, the living God, our Portion, commanded to deliver the beloved of our flesh from destruction, for the sake of His covenant that He set in our flesh. Blessed are You, Lord, Who establishes the covenant (*koret ha-berit*).

What is the nature of these blessings? When are they said, and by whom?

***Birkat Al Ha-Mila* – *Birkat Ha-Mitzva***

 The first blessing, as is evident by its *nosach* “*asher kideshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu*,” is clearly a *birkat ha-mitzva*, a blessing said before the performance of a *mitzva*. The Talmud (*Pesachim* 7b) teaches that the *birkat ha-mitzva* always precedes the performance of the *mitzva* (*over le-asiyatan*).

When should the *birkat ha-mitzva* over the circumcision be recited? The Chokhmat Adam (149:19) writes:

One should not perform the circumcision until he has completed the blessing, as the entire blessing must be said *over le-asiyatan* (before performing the *mitzva*), unlike those *mohalim* who show their sharpness by beginning to cut as immediately after beginning the blessing; this is an act of ignorance.

The Arukh Ha-Shulchan (Yoreh De’ah 265:1) notes the Chokhmat Adam’s objection to those who begin cutting before concluding the blessing, yet defends this practice. He maintains that as long as the blessing is concluded as he finishes cutting, circumcising in this manner is considered to be *over le-asiyatan*. Furthermore, since the blessing is said before the *peri’a*, this is further considered to be *over le-asiyatan*. He cites the Tashbetz (2:277), who suggests that it is even preferable to finish cutting the foreskin, then recite the blessing, and then perform the *peri’a*.

 The Arukh Ha-Shulchan presents the common practice to start cutting before completing the blessing as the “middle way, predicated upon legal foundations, and it is thus the appropriate way to perform [the circumcision].”

***Birkat Le-Hakhniso Be-Verito shel Avraham Avinu***

 The Talmud teaches that in addition to the classic *birkat ha-mitzva*, i.e., *al ha-mila*, the father of the child recites the *berakha* of *lehakhniso be-verito shel Avraham Avinu*. While the first blessing is clearly a *birkat ha-mitzva* and the third blessing, as we shall see, is certainly a *birkat ha-shevach* (or a prayer for the welfare of the child), the *Rishonim* disagree as to the nature of this *berakha*.

 Some *Rishonim* suggest that this blessing does not align with the familiar categories of *birkot ha-mitzva* and *birkot ha-shevach*. Rather, it is most similar to the blessing of *she-hakol bara le-khevodo* said at a wedding. Rashi (see Machzor Vitry 505) explains that the blessing is meant to publicly welcome the child into the covenant of Avraham. He describes how as the child is brought into the room, the congregation says “*barukh ha-ba*,” and the father takes the child and recites the *le-hakhniso* blessing, like any other *birkat ha-mitzva* that is said before the *mitzva* is performed. After the child is welcomed into the *brit*, he is circumcised. Similarly, R. Yehoshua Ha-Nagid (1310–1355), the last of the Rambam's descendants in Egypt, writes in his Teshuvot R. Yehoshua Ha-Nagid:

He should say the *le-hakhniso* blessing as he brings the child to be circumcised … and then *Shehechiyyanu*, and afterwards the *mohel* says the blessing *al ha-mila*, and afterward the blessing *asher kidash yedid mi-beten*.

He agrees with the Machzor Vitry in viewing the blessing as a public initiation into the covenant.

It is interesting to note that the Seder Rav Amram (*Seder Mila*) writes that when the father is not present, the entire congregation recites the *le-hakhniso* blessing. Apparently, the blessing is not a *birkat ha-mitzva* or a *birkat ha-shevach*, but rather a public welcoming of the child into the *brito shel Avrahama Avinu*.

 Most *Rishonim* do not accept this interpretation and instead attempt to align this blessing with other *berakhot*. For example, the Rashbam (Tosafot ibid. s.v. *avi ha-ben*) maintains that this blessing is a *birkat ha-mitzva*. In accordance with the principle, mentioned above, that the *birkat ha-mitzva* always precedes the performance of the *mitzva* (*over le-asiyatan*), the Rashbam insists that the father should recite the blessing of *le-hakhniso* before the *mohel* says the blessing of *al ha-mila*. Furthermore, the Rashbam amends the standard text of the Talmud and places the passage describing the father’s blessing before the *mohel*’s blessing, which is recited immediately before the act of cutting. This is also the view of the Rif (Teshuvot Ha-Rif 293).

 Aside from the textual difficulties, this approach raises a more fundamental question. The Hagahot Maimoniot (*Hilkhot Mila* 3:3) cites Rabbeinu Simcha, who asked, “What is the nature of this *le-hakhniso* blessing? And why is it not sufficient that his [the father’s] agent, the *mohel*, says the *al ha-mila* blessing?” Interestingly, the Rema (Yoreh De’ah 265:2) rules that if the father circumcises his own son and only says the *le-hakhniso* blessing, he has fulfilled his obligation. The Gra (ibid. 14) explains that the *le-hakhniso* blessing is similar but broader than the *al ha-mila* blessing; therefore, if the father only said the *le-hakhniso* blessing, he does not need to say *al ha-mila*. We will return to this question shortly.

 Rabbeinu Tam (ibid.) rejects the view of the Rashbam, his older brother, and restores the original text of the Talmud, as well as the custom of French communities. He asserts that the blessing should be said **after** the circumcision. Rabbeinu Tam apparently maintains that the *le-hakhniso* blessing is a *birkat ha-shevach*, recited by the father as his son enters the “covenant of Avraham Avinu,” and is therefore recited after the act. Indeed, the Rosh (Shabbat 19:10) explains that according to Rabbeinu Tam,

This blessing is not for this specific *mila* that is being performed now; rather, he thanks and praises God, who has commanded to perform this *mitzva* when he has the opportunity, and they instituted that this is the place to reveal and declare that the *mitzva* is performed for God, and not for *murna* (i.e., medicinal reasons).

Similarly, the Ran (*Shabbat* 55b s.v. *avi ha-ben*) explains that “this blessing is praise and thanksgiving for being able to enter [the child] into the covenant of Avraham.”

 The Rosh (*Shabbat* 19:10, *Kiddushin* 1:40, and *Teshuvot* *Ha-Rosh* 26:1) appears to disagree with Rabbeinu Tam. He proposes that the blessing be recited immediately after the *mila* (i.e., the cutting of the foreskin), but before the *peri’a* (i.e., the removal of the thin membrane covering the glans). Assuming that the *peri’a* is part of the *mitzva*, the *le-hakhniso* blessing is therefore said **before** the completion of the *mitzva*.

 The Rambam’s position regarding this matter is unclear. The Kesef Mishneh (*Hilkhot Mila* 3:1) assumes that the Rambam holds that the *le-hakhniso* blessing is said after the *mila*. The Rambam himself, in two responsa (Teshuvot Ha-Rambam 331 and 332), rules that one may say the *le-hakhniso* blessing before or after the *mila*, “as its *nosach* is not *ve-tzivanu*.” This is also the position of a number of Geonim (see Shaarei Tzedek 3:5:4). However, the Rambam’s son, R. Avraham ben Ha-Rambam, attests that his father maintained and ruled in practice that the blessing should be recited **before** the *mila* (see, for example, Maharam Alshakar 18, who cites R. Avraham ben Ha-Rambam).

 The Shulchan Arukh (Yoreh De’ah 265:1) rules in accordance with the Rosh, that the father should say the *le-hakhniso* blessing after the *mila* and before the *peri’a*. Interestingly, the Taz and the Shakh both view this practice as a “compromise,” but for different reasons.

The Shakh (1) explains that since some require that the blessing be said before the *mila* and some say that it should be said after the *mila* – lest the *mohel* change his mind and not perform the *mila*, in which case the blessing would be in vain – it is best to say the blessing before the *peri’a.* This is still considered to be over *le-asiyatan*, but after the *mila*, as the *mohel* can no longer change his mind. The Taz (1), in contrast, implies that this practice fulfills the views of both the Rashbam and Rabbeinu Tam: It is still *over le-asiyatan*, but it is after the *mila*. The Taz adds that if the father himself performs the *mila*, he should say both blessings before cutting, as he will be too preoccupied with performing the *mila* to say the blessings properly. R. Ovadia Yosef (Yabi’a Omer, Yoreh De’ah 7:21) claims that Sephardic practice is to say the blessing before the *mila*, in accordance with the views of the Rif and Rambam (see above).

 The *Rishonim* disagree regarding another aspect of this blessing. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Mila* 3:1) writes:

[At the circumcision,] the father of the child recites another blessing: Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to have our children enter the covenant of Avraham Avinu.

[This blessing was instituted because] it is a greater *mitzva* for a father to circumcise his son than for the Jewish People as a whole to circumcise the uncircumcised among them. Therefore, if a child's father is not present, this blessing should not be recited. There are those who have ruled that the court or one of the people [in attendance should recite this blessing in the father's absence]. [Nevertheless,] this ruling should not be followed.

The Rambam maintains that this blessing is uniquely the father’s and should not be recited by anyone else. The Raavad (ibid.), however, agrees with the view rejected by the Rambam and insists that the blessing may be recited by the *beit din* or another person. He relates that in practice, it is customary for the *sandak* to recite this blessing. The Rema (YD 265:1) writes that another person may recite the blessing if the father is not present; he notes that it is customary for the *sandak* to say the blessing.

How are we to understand this debate between the Rambam and Raavad?

 Some propose that this debate relates to different understandings of the relationship between the father’s obligation and the *beit din’s* obligation. For example, we might suggest that the father’s obligation differs from that of the community, as he is actually obligated to circumcise his son, while the community is merely charged to ensure that the boy is circumcised, as we have discussed elsewhere. Thus, we can understand why the blessing of *le-hakhniso* is only said by the father, whose obligation is unique and distinct from that of the *beit din*.

 R. Yosef Rosen, known as the “Rogatchover Gaon" (1858 – 1936), in his commentary to the Rambam, *Tsafnat Pa’aneach* (ibid.), suggests that this disagreement reflects a broader debate regarding the obligation of *beit din* in *brit mila*. He explains that while the Rambam maintains that *beit din* is charged with the responsibility to ensure that the Jewish People are not “*arelim*,” in which case the *berakha* that celebrates entering the covenant of Avraham is irrelevant, the Raavad believes that the *beit din*’s obligation is to ensure that each and every Jewish male is circumcised, in which case the *le-hakhniso* blessing is certainly appropriate.

 Alternatively, some suggest that this debate hinges on the different understandings of the *le-hakhniso* blessing discussed above. The Raavad may agree with Rabbeinu Tam, who views this blessing as a *birkat ha-shevach*, in which case it may be recited by anyone. The Rambam, however, maintains that the *le-hakhniso* blessing is *a birkat ha-mitzva*, like the Rashbam, and therefore may only be recited by the father. Of course, this leads us once again to the difficulty raised above: Why would the rabbis institute two separate *birkot ha-mitzva* for *brit mila*?

 It appears that in addition to the general *mitzva* of *brit mila*, the father fulfills an additional, unique *mitzva* when circumcising his son, related to the very essence of his role as a parent – *le-hakhniso le-verito shel Avraham Avinu*. Indeed, the Ittur (*Hilkhot Mila* 53a) explains:

Since the father it commanded to circumcise, redeem, and to teach his son Torah, and to marry him off, he says the blessing, as from the child’s birth the commandment to enter his son into the covenant, and [to teach him] Torah and *mitzvot*, and to marry him off, the father’s blessing for his son includes all of this.

The Ittur explains that ultimately, the father is responsible for the religious welfare of his child, and therefore the blessing is both unique and distinctly his.

 Next week we will continue our discussion of the blessings said over the *brit mila*.