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Sincerely,

Rabbi Yehoshua Werde
Director

P.s. Please email me with any comments or questions at Director@torahlp.com

ב"ה



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Bris Milah

In this lesson, we will gain a basic understanding of the mitzvah of Bris Milah. We will learn what the mitzvah is and why it is so important.

Introduction

Chazal say that the Mitzvah of Milah is equal to all the mitzvos of the Torah combined. The Torah (Bereishis 17:14) specifies the most severe punishment of kares for whoever doesn't perform a Bris Milah.

Of all the positive mizvos, only Milah and the korbon pesach are punishable with kares. Kares literally means to be “cut off” or excommunicated from Hashem. This is a form of spiritual death in which the neshomah's connection to Hashem is severed. Kares is considered the most severe of punishments since even a punishment of physical death is an atonement for the neshomah where the neshomah's connection to Hashem is renewed.

Since the days of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago until Communist Russia in recent times, Bris Milah has been one of the first Mitzvos to be outlawed when anti-Semitic authorities came to power. Yet, time and time again, Jews have risked their lives to ensure that their children received a kosher Bris Milah.

A Story of Commitment to Milah

(Adapted from) Tosfos, Avodah Zarah 10b

Many years ago, when the Roman Empire reached the Land of Israel, decrees against the Jews

abounded. One such decree forbade the circumcision of Jewish boys. The punishment was severe for those who disobeyed. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel was the Nasi, the prince, at this time. He was known and respected by Jews and non-Jews alike, including the emperor.

When his wife had a baby boy, their desire to obey Hashem's commandment was greater than their fear of punishment. In secret, they performed the circumcision.

Before long, the government found out and Rabbi Shimon was ordered to appear before the governor of his town. "What do you have to say for yourself?" asked the governor angrily.

"I have obeyed the King of kings, Who has ordered us to circumcise our sons on the eighth day after birth," answered Rabbi Shimon confidently.

"I am sending you, your wife, and the baby to the Imperial Court. For if other Jews see that you have circumcised your son and have not been severely punished, then they will do the same," roared the governor.

Rabbi Shimon and his wife set out on the long journey to the Imperial Court. They stopped often along the way, and were warmly received in the

homes of Jews and non-Jews alike, for Rabbi Shimon was respected by all. At one home, Rabbi Shimon's wife and the non-Jewish hostess soon realized that they had both given birth to baby boys on the same day. The hostess immediately offered to exchange her son, Antoninus, for Rabbi Shimon's baby, Yehudah. Rabbi Shimon and his wife gratefully accepted the offer.

With renewed hope, they continued on to the palace. Upon their arrival they were shown into the court of the emperor, who, upon hearing the charges, ordered the baby examined.

To everyone's astonishment, there was no sign that a circumcision had been performed. "It's a miracle," whispered the people of the court. As soon as possible, the babies were exchanged.

The Mitzvah of Bris Milah in the Torah

In the opening pesukim of Parshas Tazriah, we find the mitzvos of childbirth. Among the mitzvos listed there is the mitzvah of Bris Milah;

Vayikra 12:3

וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי, יִמּוֹל בְּשָׂר עָרְלָתוֹ.

And in the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin should be circumcised.

How is Bris Milah performed?

The Rambam in the Laws of Milah describes how a Bris should be performed.

Rambam Hilchos Milah 2:2

כיצד מוהלֵין חותכין את כל העור המחפה את העטרה עד שתתגלה כל העטרה, ואח"כ פורעין את הקרום הרך שלמטה מן העור בצפורן ומחזירו לכאן ולכאן עד שיראה בשר העטרה, ואח"כ מוצץ את המילה עד שיצא הדם ממקומות רחוקים כדי שלא יבא לידי סכנה...ואחר שמוצץ נותן עליה אספלנית או רטייה וכיוצא בהן.

How is the circumcision performed? The foreskin that covers the crown is cut off until the entire crown is revealed. [This step is referred to as milah.]

Afterwards, the soft membrane that is beneath the skin should be split along the mid-line with one's nails and peeled back to either side until the flesh of the crown is revealed. [This step is referred to as pri'ah.]

Afterwards, one should suck the place of the circumcision until all the blood in the further reaches is extracted, lest a dangerous situation arise. [This step is referred to as metzitzah.]... After one has performed metzitzah, one should apply a bandage, a compress, or the like.

What Are The Reasons For Bris Milah?

While the true reason for the Mitzvos remains largely

unknown, we do find several reasons for the mitzvah of Milah. We will discuss three of the more common reasons.

Reason 1: A Covenant Between Hashem and the Jewish People

The Covenant with Avraham

In Parshas Lech Lecha, Hashem establishes a covenant (a bris) with Avraham and gives him the mitzvah of Bris Milah for him and for all generations to follow.

Bereishis 17:7; 10-11

והקמתי את בריתי ביני ובינך ובין זרעך אחריו לדרתם לברית עולם להיות לך לא-להים ולזרעך אחריו...זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין זרעך אחריו המול לכם כל זכר. ונמלתם את בשר ערלתכם והיה לאות ברית ביני וביניכם.

"I will establish My covenant between Me and you and between your children after you, throughout their generations, as an everlasting covenant, to be a G-d to you and to your children after you." "This is My covenant which you should keep between Me and you and your children after you: Every male among you should be circumcised. You should circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that should be the sign of the covenant between Me and you."

What is a Covenant?

The Ramban provides us with a definition of what a

covenant means:

Ramban, Bereishis 9:12

כל דבר הנראה שיושם לפני שנים להזכירם ענין נדור ביניהם יקרא אות, וכל הסכמה ברית, וכן במילה אמר "והיה לאות ברית ביני וביניכם," בעבור ההסכמה שימולו כל זרע אברהם לעבדו שכם אחד.

Every visible object that is set before two parties to remind them of a matter that they have vowed between them is called a "sign," and every agreement is called a "covenant." Similarly, in the case of circumcision, Hashem said, "And it shall be a sign of a covenant between Me and you," because of the agreement that all the descendants of Avraham be circumcised "to serve Him with a united resolve" (Tzfniah 3:9).

Why is a Covenant Important?

The Maharal of Prague provides some insight into the significance of a covenant:

Maharal, Chidushei Agados, Nedarim 31a

כל ברית תרגומו "קיימא" וזה מפני כי ע"י הברית יש לו חבור עם הש"י כמו שנים שיש להם ברית ביחד.

Every instance of the word "bris" in the Torah is translated as something that has permanence. This is because through Bris Milah one has a connection to Hashem, just as any two people make a pact/ covenant between them.

Bris Milah is therefore the sign of a permanent relationship between Hashem and the Jewish People.

This is also the reason why the bris is the only mitzvah that becomes ingrained as a part of the flesh of the body. It is the essential branding of Jewishness on the human flesh that distinguishes a Jew from a non-Jew. Perhaps this is why Jews throughout the ages have sacrificed their lives for this Mitzvah.

So important is the mitzvah of Milah as a sign of Jewishness that it is said that anyone who does not have a Bris Milah will not be resurrected during Techiyas Hameisim. For this reason, people who pass away without having had a bris milah, a bris is performed before burial to ensure that the person will be resurrected in Techiyas Hameisim.

The Talmud describes an incident in which Dovid Hamelech came to recognize the importance of Milah as the Mitzvah that is always with the person, even when he has nothing else:

Talmud Bavli, Menachos 43b

ובשעה שנכנס דוד לבית המרחץ וראה עצמו עומד ערום אמר אוי לי שאעמוד ערום בלא מצוה וכיון שזכר במילה שבבשרו נתיישרה דעתו לאחר שיצא אמר עליה שירה שנאמר למנצח על השמינית מזמור לדוד על מילה שניתנה בשמיני.

When King David entered the bathhouse and saw that he was standing naked, he proclaimed, "Woe upon me, for I stand naked, without any mitzvah." But when he recalled his Milah, he was consoled. And after emerging from the bathhouse, he composed a song upon it, as it is written, "For

the conductor, on the eighth, a psalm by David” (Tehillim 12:1): on Milah, which was given on the eighth [day].

In addition to Milah, there are two other mitzvahs that serve as “signs” of our connection with Hashem:

Shabbos

The Posuk tells us that Shabbos is a “sign” between us and Hashem for all generations:

Shmos 31:13

וְאָתָּה דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, לֵאמֹר, אֶדְ אֶת-שַׁבְּתוֹתַי, תִּשְׁמְרוּ: כִּי אוֹת
הוּא בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם, לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם--לְדַעַת, כִּי אֲנִי ה' מְקַדְּשְׁכֶם

You should speak to the children of Israel saying: you should observe My Shabbosim, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am Hashem who makes you holy.

Tefilin

Tefilin is also described in the posuk as being a “sign”:

Devarim 6:8

וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם לְאוֹת, עַל-יָדְךָ; וְהָיוּ לְטִפְפוֹת, בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ.

And you should bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they should be a reminder between your eyes.

One should have two “signs” at all times. This is why we don’t put on Tefillin on Shabbos, since we have the signs of Milah and Shabbos, we don’t need the third sign of Tefilin.

How about someone who doesn’t have a bris milah? Should he put on tefilin on Shabbos? Interestingly, the Terumas Hadeshen holds that such a person should put on tefilin on Shabbos:

Terumas Hadeshen, Siman 108

מי שמתו אחיו מחמת מילה יניח תפילין בשבת

A person who (didn’t have a bris because) his brothers died because from a bris milah, should put on tefilin on Shabbos.

So the first reason for Bris Milah is as a covenant, i.e., a sign of our connection to Hashem.

Reason 2: Milah completes the bodily form

Adam Was Created Circumcised

Chazal tell us that Adam Harishon was created already circumcised:

Avos d’Rabbi Nosson, 2: 5

אדם הראשון יצא מהול שנאמר (בראשית א: כז) “ויברא אלקים את האדם בצלמו.”

Adam was created circumcised, as it says, “And Hashem created Man in His image” (Bereishit 1:27).

What we see from this is that for man to be in Hashem’s

image, i.e. complete, he must be circumcised. The form of man is therefore not complete without a Bris Milah.

If Adam Harishon was created circumcised, when did we start being born uncircumcised?

Reb Tzaddok HaKohen of Lublin explains that the reason babies are not born already circumcised is a result of Adam's sin with the Etz Hada'as:

Rabbi Tzaddok HaKohen, Pri Tzaddik, Amalah Shel Torah 3

והאלקים עשה האדם ישר ונולד מהול ואלו לא חטא היה כן כל זרעו אחריו. אבל כשחטא...נמשכה ערלתו על ידי זוהמת הנחש ועל ידי זה נולדו כל זרעו גם כן ערלים עד שבא אברהם אבינו ע"ה ... שהיה קרוב להשלים כל קומת קדושתו ... ולתקן הזוהמא דאדם הראשון נצטווה על המילה שהוא הסרת אותה זוהמא ובוזה יהיה תמים וישתלם קומתו בשלימות.

“Hashem made man upright” (Koheles 7:29), and he [Adam] was born circumcised, and had he not transgressed he and all his descendants would have remained so. But because of his sin...his foreskin was extended through the contamination of the snake. As a result, all of his descendants were born uncircumcised until Avraham, who neared achieving the full extent of holiness attainable by man. In order to rectify the contamination of Adam, we were instructed to perform Bris Milah, which removes that contamination; and by doing so he becomes perfect, completing the maximum holiness that he can possibly attain.

If man is incomplete without circumcision, why didn't Hashem create man to be born already circumcised?

Why Would Hashem Create an Imperfect Creation?

The following conversation between the wicked Roman ruler, Turnus Rufus, and Rabbi Akivah, addresses this question:

Midrash Tanchuma, Tazria, 5

מעשה ששאל טורנוסרופוס הרשע את ר' עקיבא איזו מעשים נאים של הקב"ה או של ב"ו?

א"ל של ב"ו נאים...

א"ל למה אתם מולין?

א"ל אני הייתי יודע שעל דבר זה אתה שואלני ולכך הקדמתי ואמרתי לך שמעשה בני אדם נאים משל הקב"ה.

הביא לו ר"ע שבליים וגלוסקאות א"ל אלו מעשה הקב"ה ואלו מעשה ידי אדם.

א"ל אין אלו נאים יותר מן השבליים?

א"ל טורנוסרופוס, אם הוא חפץ במילה, למה אינו יוצא הולד מהול ממעי אמו?

א"ל ר"ע... לפי שלא נתן הקב"ה את המצוות לישראל אלא לצרף אותם בהם.

It happened that the wicked Turnus Rufus [a Roman general] asked Rabbi Akiva, "Whose deeds are more beautiful, Hashem's or man's?"

He answered, "The deeds of man" ...

[Turnus Rufus] said to him, “Why do you perform circumcision?”

Rabbi Akiva answered, “I knew that this is what you meant, which is why I responded that the deeds of man are more beautiful than those of Hashem.”

Rabbi Akiva brought him stalks of wheat and baked rolls, and said, “These [the stalks] are the work of Hashem, and these [the baked rolls] are the work of people.

“Aren’t the rolls nicer than the stalks?”

Turnus Rufus said to him, “If He desires circumcision, why doesn’t the infant emerge from his mother’s womb already circumcised?”

Rabbi Akiva told him, “Hashem gave the commandments to Israel for the sole purpose of purifying them.”

In his answer, Rabbi Akivah illustrates how man’s deeds can be greater than Hashem’s, since there are parts of creation that Hashem left to man to complete in order to allow him to share a part in attaining his own completion.

One of the reasons for Milah is to therefore teach us that we should reach our completion through our own actions. The Sefer Hachinuch indeed cites this as a primary explanation for the mitzvah of Milah:

ידוע למבינים שתשלום צורת האדם בהסיר ממנו אותה ערלה שהיא תוספת בו...

משרשי מצוה זו...העם הנבחר הפץ השם יתברך להשלים תכונתו, ורצה להיות ההשלמה על ידי האדם, ולא בראו שלם מבטן, לרמוז אליו כי כאשר תשלום צורת גופו על ידו, כן בידו להשלים צורת נפשו בהכשר פעולותיו.

It is known to those who understand that the form of man is only complete once the foreskin is removed, since it is only an added component... Of the reasons for this mitzvah...Hashem wanted His chosen people to be of complete form, and He wanted this completion to come through man's actions. So He did not create man perfect from the womb to indicate that just as the body is to be brought to completion by his actions, similarly man has the ability to perfect his soul by correcting his conduct.

Question to Ponder

Why do you think it is important for man to work on his own completion?

What do you imagine life would be like if Hashem created a world in which man was perfect and didn't need or want anything?

When you envision what life would be like, the answer is

likely: “Boring.”

When there is nothing to chase after, nothing to achieve, what’s the point of life?

The Maharal explains how Bris Milah teaches us that we were created uncircumcised since our mission is to actualize our potential. And this is symbolized by Bris Milah:

Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Nedarim 32a

האדם נברא ערל. ולמה נברא האדם ערל, אבל דבר זה נמשך אחר עניין האדם, כי אדם הוא בכח ויוצא אל הפועל בענין זה נברא האדם, כי ראוי שיהיה הגוף והנפש שוים ודומים, וכמו שנברא בנפשו בכח ויוצא אל הפועל כך נברא בגופו בכח ג"כ. וכל זמן שלא הוסר הערלה נחשב שהוא אינו בפועל הנגלה, כי הערלה הוא כסוי ואטימה לאדם, כמו שתמצא לשון ערלה בכל מקום על לשון אטימה כמו (דברים י: טו) “ערלת לבבכם” וכן כל לשון ערלה כמו (שמות ו: יב) “ערל שפתיים” כלומר שאינו יכול להוציא הדבור אל הגלוי בפועל.

Man was created uncircumcised. Why was man created uncircumcised? This is a symptom of 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 orlah was not removed, the body doesn’t reach its revealed potential because the orlah presents a cover and blockage to the person, as we find in every instance that the word orla is used it refers to a blockage

for example, “The orlah of your hearts” (*Devarim/Devarim 10:15*); and [Moshe was described as] “*aral sefasayim*,” [having a speech impediment] (*Shemos 6:12*) meaning that he was not able to actualize his words.

Reason 3: To Diminish Desire

In his *Guide to the Perplexed*, the Rambam explains why the mitzvah of Milah is specifically performed on the reproductive organ:

Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 3:46

ה'מילה' אצלי, אחד מטעמים - להמעט המשגל ולהחליש זה האבר כפי היכולת, עד שימעט במעשה הזה. וכבר חשבו שזאת המילה היא השלמת חסרון ... להשלים חסרון המידות ... תחסר בו התאוה היתרה על הצורך.

With regard to circumcision, one of the reasons, in my opinion, is to weaken this limb as much as possible to the extent that one limits marital relations ... This commandment has been viewed as being to perfect a deficiency in the person's character—to temper his excessive drives.

The Maharal adds to this, explaining the connection, that in order to overcome your desires you need to reach beyond your nature. Bris helps you accomplish this. This is why the Bris is performed on the eighth day, since the number seven represents the completion of the natural order (e.g. seven days in a week, seven midos), whereas eight represents that which is beyond nature:

המילה שנתן הקב"ה לישראל היא מדריגתה על הטבע, ולפיכך המילה היא בשמיני כי ז' ימי בראשית הם ז' ימים של הטבע, כי בו' ימים נברא עולם הטבע, אבל השמיני הוא על הטבע כי לפי הטבע יש לו להיות ערל שהרי אדם נולד ערל, והמילה היא על הטבע.

Milah—which Hashem gave to the Jewish people—is above nature, and is therefore performed on the eighth day, because the seven days of Creation represent the seven days of nature since the natural world was created in seven days. The eighth day, however, transcends nature, for following the natural course, a child would remain uncircumcised, but Milah transcends nature.

This is the spiritual reason why Milah is performed on the eighth day. The more basic reason, however, has to do with medical and health reasons. As the Rambam explains:

והטעם שהמילה בשמיני מפני שכל חי בזמן שנולד חלוש מאד... עד סוף שבעה ימים, ואז ימנה מרואי אויר העולם... וכן האדם אחר שהשלים שבעה ימול.

The reason why Milah is performed on the eighth day is because every living creature is very weak when it's born ... until seven days have passed and then it is considered "born" [i.e. strong enough] ... Similarly man is only circumcised after seven days have passed.

Fascinating Fact:

Surprisingly, according to modern medicine, the safest day to perform a circumcision is on the eighth day!

In order for a bleeding wound to heal, the blood needs to clot, (i.e., thicken and form a scab to stop the blood flow). If this would not happen, a person would chas v'sholom bleed out and die. Vitamin K is what helps the blood thicken to clot and form a scab. A baby is born with low levels of vitamin K, however, on the eighth day, the baby achieves the highest levels of vitamin K. As it turns out, modern medicine only discovered this in the last century, whereas Jews always knew from Torah, that medically, the safest day to perform a Bris Milah was on the eighth day!

Dr. S.I. McMillen, None of These Diseases p. 93

We should commend the many hundreds of workers who labored at great expense over a number of years to discover that the safest day to perform circumcision is the eighth. Yet, as we congratulate medical science for this recent finding, we can almost hear the leaves of the Bible rustling. They would like to remind us that four thousand years ago, when God initiated circumcision with Abraham ... Abraham did not pick the eighth day after many centuries of trial-and-error experiments. Neither he nor any of his company from the ancient city of Ur in the Chaldees ever had been circumcised. It was a day picked by the Creator of vitamin K.

If Bris Milah is so Important, Why Is It Only Performed on Boys?

According to the Talmud, a woman doesn't need a bris because she is already considered circumcised:

Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 27a

אשה כמאן דמהילא דמיה.

A woman is considered as if she is circumcised.

What Practical Difference Does It Make That A Woman is Considered Already Circumcised?

Here are the practical applications in Halachah:

- 1) Mudar Hana'ah: If someone swears to never receive any benefit from anyone who is circumcised, this oath would extend to women as well, since they are considered circumcised.
- 2) Shlichus: Although only someone who is obligated in a mitzvah is allowed to perform it on behalf of someone else; technically, women are allowed to circumcise others because they are themselves considered circumcised. By contrast, a non-Jew cannot perform a Bris Milah since he is not obligated in the mitzvah. (Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah, 264)

We find in the Torah (Shmos 4:25) that Tziporah, Moshe Rabbeinu's wife, took a stone and circumcised her son. Practically, the custom is for the mohel to be male to satisfy the minority opinion that a woman is not allowed to be a mohel [for reasons other than because a woman is not considered circumcised].

What is the Meaning of This According to Chassidus?

The Rebbe Maharash sheds light into the spiritual significance of Bris Milah in general explaining why spiritually women do not require a bris:

Toras Shmuel 5639, p. 622

דזכר צ"ל מילה שהוא מ"ש ומלתם את ערלת לבבכם, דטמטום הלב הוא שהלב אטום מלקבל דבר חכ' והוא ערלת הלב וצריכים לימול ערלת הלב וזהו"ע מילה, והנה מילה הוא בשמיני דתחילה צ"ל ז' ימים שהם כסדר המדרג' ז' ימי בראשית ואח"כ כשיעבור עליו שבת היינו שיאיר בו הארת סוכ"ע שהוא ע"י שבת... אז ומל הוי' אלקיך את לבבך, מל ל' גילוי שמאיר בו הארת הסוכ"ע, אבל איתתא כמאן דמהילא דמי ומיד כשנולדה אפשר להאיר בה הארת או"א"ם

A male is required to have a milah as it is written "and you should circumcise the foreskin of your heart," for the clogging of the heart is when the heart is blocked from receiving wisdom—this is considered the foreskin of the heart. One must circumcise the foreskin of the heart; this is the concept of milah. Milah is performed on the eighth day, since there must first be seven days, corresponding to the steps of the seven days of creation and only then, once a Shabbos has passed, i.e. when the encompassing light (sovev kol almin) shines within, which happens on Shabbos...only then "Hashem your G-d will circumcise your heart". "Circumcise" is an expression of revelation, for then a revelation of the encompassing light (sovev kol

almin) radiates within him. However, woman are considered already circumcised and immediately when they are born the light of the Ein Sof radiates within them.

The Rebbe Maharash teaches us several important insights into the mitzvah of Milah:

1) Having an “uncircumcised” heart means you are able to understand an intellectual concept but it doesn’t impact you emotionally. For example, just because you understand that Hashem must be everywhere, it doesn’t mean you feel Hashem’s presence in your heart. The idea of a Bris Milah is to remove that block between the mind and heart to allow you to respond emotionally to intellectual concepts.

2) Milah is performed on the eighth day when at least one Shabbos has passed. This is because the days of the week represent the order of nature (the number seven), but on Shabbos, an infinite, transcendent G-dly radiance is revealed in the world. The function of milah is to allow this lofty spiritual radiance of the neshamah to radiate within the body.

3) Women are born with a body that is refined to the extent that the infinite light is already revealed within them naturally from the moment they are born. This is the spiritual reason for the Talmud’s statement: “A woman is considered circumcised.”

Concluding Question

In recent times, the practice of milah has been contested by some small secular factions in cities around the world with people protesting and signing petitions that it is child

mutilation and should be banned. Based on what you have learned, why do you think the mitzvah of Bris Milah is so important?

Take-Aways

- » Milah is one of the most critical mitzvos. It is equal to all the mitzvos combined, and is punishable by kares.
- » Milah represents the everlasting connection between a Jew and Hashem
- » Milah represents man's completion which he must bring about through his own actions
- » Milah is on the reproductive organ to weaken one's desires.
- » To overcome desire one needs to reach beyond their nature. Milah is therefore performed on the eighth day (eight represents going beyond the natural).
- » Medically, the eighth day is the safest day for circumcision. While medicine only discovered this in the past century, Torah knew this all along.
- » Milah is not performed on women because they are already considered circumcised from the moment of birth.

