

# MALES, MEMORY AND MILAH: WHY NO SHALOM ZACHOR FOR GIRLS?

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

The Medrash (Rabbah, Shemos 30:12) tells of an encounter between the Emperor Hadrian and his nephew, Unkelos. Unkelos was the author of the translation of the Torah into Aramaic, a text of such primary importance that it is found in most all printed versions of the Torah to this day. Unkelos told his uncle Hadrian that he wished to convert and become a member of the nation of Israel. Although Hadrian attempted to dissuade Unkelos from pursuing this action, Unkelos insisted. Hadrian said to his nephew "Go and study their law, but do not undergo circumcision." Unkelos responded "Even the wisest in your kingdom and the elders, 100 years of age, are not able to learn the Torah if not circumcised."

Another Medrash (Tanchuma, Mishpatim 5) recounts the same basic episode, with a slightly different dialogue. In response to Hadrian's suggestion to learn the Torah, but not undergo circumcision, this Medrash has Unkelos responding in a slightly different fashion. He said "Do you reward your warriors upon success in battle unless they take their weapons with them and give of their lives in your service? So too, if a person is not circumcised, he is not able to learn Torah, as Hashem did not reward His people unless they devote themselves to Him and give of themselves to His service, through circumcision."

The point central to both of these recountings of the conversation between Unkelos and Hadrian is that it is impossible to learn Torah and retain it on any meaningful level unless the person learning Torah has undergone circumcision. The circumcision, an action performed on a person's body, has a major impact on the person's soul, on the person's spiritual existence. The state of being uncircumcised has such a significant negative effect on a person that it will make the true study of Torah impossible.

Women, however, are never faced with this impediment to the study of Torah. The Talmud (Avodah Zarah 27a) states that "a woman is considered as if she is circumcised." A girl, from the day she is born, is prepared to accept the words of Torah and retain them. She is on the proper spiritual level to study the Torah. She is considered, from birth, as if she has undergone the process that brings a male to level of spiritual perfection that allows him to study the Torah.

Perhaps it is for this reason that we have no custom to conduct a Shalom Zachor for a girl. As we discussed in the last posting, the point of the Shalom Zachor is to remind the newborn boy of the

Torah that he learned while in the womb, so that he will be inspired to continue on the path of the Torah throughout his life. Why is this reminder needed? When a boy is born, not only has he forgotten the Torah he learned, but he can not even begin to study the Torah or be truly affected by the study of Torah because he is not circumcised. The soonest this baby boy will be become a receptacle for the holiness of the Torah is at the age of eight days, and in other circumstances, perhaps even longer. The famous Mussar (ethics) text, Orchos Tzadikim, tells us that "a person who forgets must make for himself reminders. He needs to set forth devices to assure that he does not forget specifically Torah." Because the young boy has this lapse in time between when he is born and when he can first study Torah, chances increase that the boy will forget that he has learned Torah. Chances of recapturing that knowledge at the later date when it becomes possible (after circumcision) are lessened. Therefore, we have a custom to remind the child at some point before the circumcision about what he did while in the womb. We remind the boy about his prior study of Torah, and point out to him that soon, in a short period of time, he will be able to continue that study which was previously concluded at the time of his birth. We follow the lesson of the Orchos Tzadikim by putting a mechanism in place to ensure that the child does not forget the importance of Torah study.

By a girl, however, there is no lapse of time between the cessation of Torah study and the girl's ability to be impacted by the study of Torah. She is capable of receiving the Torah immediately. She needs no prior spiritual improvement before she can study the Torah. Therefore, she is not presented with an opportunity to forget the importance of what occurred while in the womb. Because she is impacted by Torah immediately, there is no need to give her any special reminder about what Torah is and its importance. Hence, there is no need for a Se'udas Zachor for a girl.

May we all merit to have children who are manifestations of the beauty of Torah .

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