

BRIS MILAH - CIRCUMCISION

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

The circumcision of an eight-day-old boy is an event celebrated with a formal ceremony followed by a festive meal. The commandment of circumcision is one of the first mentioned in the Torah, and the failure to perform this commandment carries with it a punishment that is rather severe. Before discussing the actual Bris Milah procedure, ceremony, or associated customs, it is of great use to understand what this is all about.

There are two general reasons given for this commandment. The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzva 2) writes that the perfection of the human form as achieved by removing the foreskin, as it is an accretion. He continues to explain the reason behind this commandment. He writes that G-d wanted to establish a permanent sign on the body of the Jew that would differentiate him from the people of other nations. This follows from the fact that the Jew differs spiritually from the members of other nations. Just as there is a spiritual difference, so too should there be a physical difference. Why was this difference mandated to be as circumcision? G-d wanted that this sign should be in the reproductive organ of man as this organ is the source of human existence. The purpose of a Jew's existence in this world differs from that of the rest of humanity, and therefore the physical manifestation of this difference was located in the causal source of physical existence. In addition, as mentioned, the foreskin is "extra"; man achieves physical perfection when he removes it. Since that is the case, why did G-d not create man without a foreskin? G-d is telling us that just as we cannot achieve physical perfection without our own effort, so too we cannot achieve spiritual perfection without our exertion of effort.

The sum and substance of this reason is that G-d gave the Jew a special sign, a covenant between him and G-d. This sign shows the close relationship that exists with G-d, and the spiritual responsibilities carried with it. The Rambam (Maimonides) however has a very different approach. He says that by nature man has a very strong desire to pursue his passions. We must curb our drive for sensual gratification in order to properly serve G-d. Circumcision weakens this drive, and strengthens one's control over his evil inclination. This is in line with the thought that the foreskin is an imperfection that needs to be corrected. The foreskin symbolizes the unbridled lust that is detrimental to our souls. With its removal, we are entering a more perfect state, an existence where our evil inclination has less control over our actions.

The two approaches mentioned here to describe the reason for the Mitzvah of Bris Milah are encapsulated in a verse from Psalms (34:15): "Turn from evil and do good." The approach of the

Rambam is that Milah serves to help one "turn from evil," while the other approach is that Milah reminds us to "do good." The Gemora describes this Mitzvah in ways that are consistent with both these approaches. Many commentators explain that the reason for Bris Milah is composed of both approaches. Before one participates in a Bris Milah, it is definitely worthwhile to reflect on the occasion, and be reminded of what we are to accomplish in our lifetime.

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