

CHAPTER 5, VERSES 4 - 7

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

(5, 4)

"And this is the matter (for) which Yehoshua circumcised them. The entire people who left Egypt, males of army age, perished in the desert on the way from Egypt." The gist of this introduction is an explanation for the necessity of circumcision for the entire Jewish nation. Weren't they constantly performing the mitzvah until this point? In answer to this, the Scriptures explain that the previous generation had been circumcised but none remained from the older group. The new generation was exempt from the mitzvah because of their unpredictable travel plan and its dangers.

However, Rashi translates these opening words in a literal sense and offers the following unique interpretation. "And these were the words which allowed Yehoshua to impose circumcision upon the entire nation." Rashi explains that Yehoshua told the people, "Do you imagine for one moment that Hashem will permit you to inherit His land without circumcision? Didn't Hashem tell our patriarch Avrohom, 'If you guard My covenant of circumcision I will give your children Eretz Yisroel'?" These strong words suggest a reservation on behalf of the Jewish nation. Yehoshua admonished them and seemingly coerced them into fulfilling their basic Jewish obligation of circumcision. Why was coercion necessary, and what serious obstacle needed to be overcome?

Apparently, there was strong reason to resist fulfilling this cardinal mitzvah now. A brief reference to the helpless state of the city of Shechem could clarify this matter. Hagaon Rav Elya Lopian zt"l once cited the incident of Shechem to demonstrate the overpowering effect of the circumcision procedure. Shimon and Levi, two sons of Yaakov, devised a plan to avenge their sister Dina's shameful involvement with Shechem. After the entire city consented to circumcision, the Torah states, *"And Shimon and Levi came upon the city with total confidence and smote all males"* (Bresishis 34:25). Rashi explains that the pain after circumcision was so overpowering that the people of Shechem could not even lift a finger in self-defense. Shimon and Levi therefore approached the city in total confidence knowing that their mission of revenge would be successful.

In light of this, we can appreciate the Jewish people's reservation and even marvel at their courage. Here they were invading a foreign land, yet before their first attack, Yehoshua demanded that they place themselves in a totally helpless state. Going into the process, they were fully aware that it would leave them totally incapable of any defense. In response to this concern, Yehoshua appealed to them and enlightened them of the absolute necessity of their circumcision now. He explained to them how their claim to the land was completely dependent upon this procedure. He

reminded them that Hashem promised His land to those who explicitly identified with Him in all ways, physical included. With these words Yehoshua calmed the people and reassured them of Hashem's total protection, being that they were acting out of absolute necessity at this point.

(5, 5)

"Because the entire nation which left Egypt was circumcised and all who were born in the desert on the road from Egypt were not. Because the Jewish people travelled in the desert for forty years...."

In explaining the need for this mass circumcision, the Scriptures say that a large segment of the Jewish nation had not been circumcised. In fact, practically every Jewish male under the age of forty had not been involved in this great mitzvah. The Scriptures reveal that the Jewish people's short travel en route to Israel developed into a forty year nightmare, during which no circumcisions took place. But the explanation continues and includes the following background related to the previous generation.

(5, 6)

"Because the Jewish people travelled in the desert for forty years until the demise of the entire nation of warriors who did not listen to Hashem's voice. To them Hashem took an oath that He would not show them the land of milk and honey which was promised to our forefathers to give us." This lengthy background seems to be an integral part of the explanation for this mass circumcision. In truth, our Sages comment on this with the following observation. In explanation of the verse in Koheles which states, *"For everything there is a set time,"* (Koheles 3:1). Our Sages present to us that a specific moment was chosen for the introduction of our patriarch Avrohom to circumcision. Similarly, a specific moment was chosen to reinstate this mitzvah to his children as proven from the above passages. (Yalkut Shimoni 15:5) We glean from this that the most appropriate moment for the circumcision was now, after entering Eretz Yisroel. One could wonder why the Jewish people's physical entry to Eretz Yisroel was so crucial in reinstating this mitzvah? Wouldn't a few days before the crossing or possibly some gradual opportunity afterwards also be acceptable?

As we examine the above passage we discover two key factors mentioned. First, that the previous generation perished because they didn't listen to Hashem's voice. Second, that Hashem took an oath not to allow them to see the Promised Land. Why are these well-known factors so significant to the explanation here? Wouldn't it suffice to know that the previous, albeit circumcised, generation perished leaving behind a new uncircumcised one? A careful look at the following passage will put everything into perspective.

(5, 7)

"And Yehoshua circumcised their children which Hashem established in their stead because they did not circumcise themselves during travel." We glean from these words one final dimension namely, that the new generation assumed the status of the previous one upon entry to the land. Radak

understands this in the context of Hashem's message to the earlier generation. Therein Hashem informed them that their children would be worthy of inheriting Eretz Yisroel. Although they (fathers) were fearful of the powerful inhabitants and rejected the Promised Land, their children armed with true faith would inherit it (see Bamidbar 14:31; Devorim 1:39).

A picture is beginning to surface. Here they were, taking their first steps into Eretz Yisroel with full confidence. The previous generation did not inherit or even see the land, but this one was granted the opportunity. Chosen to replace their parents, their task was, in essence, to rectify their predecessors' error and complete with full confidence what their parents did not. But this called for some expression of commitment on their part - a guarantee, covenant or bond with Hashem. How could they show their total commitment to fulfilling this mandate of conquering Eretz Yisroel?

The answer to this was circumcision, the Jewish people's covenant to Eretz Yisroel. When introducing circumcision, Hashem said, *"And I shall establish My covenant between Me and you and your subsequent children And I will give you and your children the land of your sojourns, the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession and I shall be for them a Hashem"* (Breishis 17: 7, 8). The above passage presents circumcision as Hashem's covenant with His people over the Promised Land. Eretz Yisroel is Hashem's home base and it is there that Hashem's true relationship exists. When the Jewish people undergo circumcision, they are, in effect, identifying with Hashem and His land wherein He can truly be found.

We now understand the significance of this circumcision as the new generation's re-dedication to Eretz Yisroel. The previous one didn't listen to Hashem's voice or, stated bluntly, rejected the opportunity of His special relationship in His Promised Land. In a certain sense this can be viewed as a negation of their covenant of circumcision. To rectify this, a new generation was established in their stead with the potential of inheriting the land. But lacking circumcision, they certainly could not step into their predecessor's shoes. They possessed, as of now, no bond of commitment to Eretz Yisroel and had no guarantee for inheritance.

Their new status required, by definition, circumcision at once. After doing this, the new generation qualified to replace the previous one. These children were totally dedicated to Hashem and His land; they were bound to Him through their eternal covenant with Him.

We now appreciate this phenomena of circumcision immediately after setting foot on Israel's soil. Circumcision at that exact moment served as the clearest expression of the Eretz Yisroel dimension of this covenant. With this we revisit the words of our Sages which express the timeliness of the introduction of circumcision. The first of its dimensions, the intimate bond with Hashem, was appropriately introduced to our patriarch Avrohom after achieving his perfect relationship with Hashem. And now its second dimension, our bond to Hashem in Eretz Yisroel, is appropriately introduced when the people set foot in the land. Circumcision at this exact point clearly expressed its relationship to the land, our eternal bond with Hashem in His home.

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