

# BRINGING THE BABY TO THE BRIS

*by Rabbi Dovid Green*

In this week's parsha we find the commandment to perform Bris Milah, or circumcision on the eighth day of a baby boy's life. Those familiar with the practice know that it is done with great fanfare, with everyone wishing the parents mazal tov and blessings for the child's future. Participants join in a festive meal. It is thought of as the time when the Jewish child is making his first step toward joining the ranks of his brethren. However, for the baby it is obviously much less pleasant physically than it is for all of the other participants. As a matter of fact, in today's world, it's common to hear criticism of the practice as if it is a cruel, barbaric thing to do to an unsuspecting, vulnerable infant.

There is a midrash which relates an exchange between a Roman the midrash calls Turnusrufus the Evil, and Rabbi Akiva. Turnusrufus asked Rabbi Akiva whose deeds are greater, those of G-d, or those of people. Rabbi Akiva answered those of people are greater. After some give and take, Turnusrufus got to the point. "Why do you circumcize yourselves?" Rabbi Akiva brought Turnusrufus stalks of grain and beautiful cakes to prove to him that the deeds of mankind are greater. Turnusrufus then asked Rabbi Akiva "if G-d wants you to be circumcized, why aren't you naturally born that way?" Rabbi Akiva responded "then why must an infant's umbilical cord be cut after birth? Rather, the reason why people are not born circumcized is because the commandments were give to refine mankind."

The Maharal of Prague explains this midrash in the following way. Turnusrufus thought that the deeds of mankind are inferior to those of nature being that nature is the work of G-d. That is why he said that circumcision is inferior to leaving the foreskin intact, being that the foreskin is the work of the Creator. Rabbi Akiva responded that the deeds of mankind are greater being that they are the finishing touch brought about through intellect. The proof to that is the difference between a stalk of wheat and a cake. The wheat is lacking until it is refined and the work is completed through the means of the intellect. Turnusrufus further asked why a child is not born circumcized if G-d doesn't want him to have a foreskin. This question is based on the objection that nature is lacking. Mankind's actions do add to G-d's creation, but G-d's deeds are certainly not inferior. Consequently, if G-d wanted people to be circumcized, they could have been circumcized naturally, being that nature is no worse than the intelligently directed actions of mankind. At this point the proof from the cakes would not suffice, because even though the cakes are special, the wheat is no less unique. To this question Rabbi Akiva responds with the proof from a child's umbilical cord needing to be cut, that indeed the work of nature is inferior, and in need of improvement by mankind; nature is not in itself a

finished product. As a result it is not a question why a child is born uncircumcized. Nature is not complete without the input of mankind.

Rabbi Akiva points out that the commandments were given to refine mankind. Refining means to raise it up from its natural state. By performing Bris Milah, circumcision, we transcend nature, to a higher plane. As long as we don't perform circumcision, we are similar to the animal kingdom. However, by giving us the commandment, G-d gave us the opportunity to attain a higher, more refined level of existence.

In conclusion, the commandments are given to us with the intention that through them we can achieve our purpose, and bring nature as well to its culmination. May we have the merit to do so.

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