

PAY NOW, GAIN LATER

by Shlomo Katz

Parshios Tazria & Metzora

Pay Now, Gain Later

We read in our parashah, "On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." The Gemara (Sanhedrin 59b) says that, though this mitzvah was taught earlier in the Torah, it is repeated here to emphasize, "On the eighth day" - even when it falls on Shabbat.

Why does brit milah supersede the prohibitions of Shabbat?

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (see back page) explains: Unlike most mitzvot, brit milah and Shabbat both involve an act of self-sacrifice in the present that creates holiness affecting the person's entire future. When a baby is circumcised, he undergoes self-sacrifice--a physical operation--but is instilled with a spirit of kedushah which remains with him for his entire life and which influences his future actions. Likewise, when one observes Shabbat, he undergoes self-sacrifice--refraining from work--but is instilled with a neshamah yeteirah / "extra soul" which makes his Shabbat "m'ein Olam Haba" / "a foretaste of the World-to-Come." Because brit milah thus complements the message of Shabbat, it is permitted on Shabbat.

The Gemara says that mitzvot which are mentioned in the Torah both before and after the story of the Giving of the Torah (for example, the prohibition on murder; see Bereishit 9:6) apply to both Jews and non-Jews. Why then, does brit milah (which is mentioned in Parashat Lech Lecha and here) not apply to both Jews and non-Jews? The Gemara answers that brit milah does not count as a mitzvah that is mentioned twice because it is repeated in our parashah only to teach the detail that it supersedes Shabbat. In light of the above, R' Kook adds, we can say that it is not merely a detail that brit milah supersedes Shabbat. To the contrary, this fact teaches us the very nature of the mitzvah. (Shemuot Ha'Raiyah: Bereishit p.57)

"On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (12:3)

The Gemara (Menachot 43b) relates that King David was in the bathhouse and felt himself devoid of mitzvot, as one cannot wear tefilin or tzitzit or study Torah while taking a bath. Then he remembered that he was circumcised, and he rejoiced. Upon leaving the bathhouse, he exclaimed (Tehilim 119:162), "I rejoice over Your words like one who finds a great treasure."

R' Shalom Rokeach z"l (1779-1855; the first Belzer Rebbe) asks: Why is finding a great treasure an appropriate metaphor for the mitzvah of brit milah? He explains:

Most mitzvot require some form of preparation. Some mitzvot, like Shabbat, require a few days of preparations. Others, such as Pesach, require weeks of preparations. The mitzvah of eating the fruits of a four-year-old tree in Yerushalayim requires years of preparation. Performing these mitzvot can feel anti-climactic, since one has been anticipating them throughout the period of preparation.

One doesn't prepare for his brit milah; in fact, he is barely aware that it is being done. Then, one day, he realizes that he is circumcised. This is indeed like suddenly finding a treasure. (Midbar Kodesh)

"Upon the completion of the days of her purity for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring a sheep . . . This is the law of one who gives birth to a male or to a female. But if she cannot afford a sheep . . ." (12:6-8)

R' Avraham Elkanah Kahana-Shapira z"l (1914-2007; rosh yeshiva of Merkaz Harav and Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel) quotes one of the Belzer Rebbes as asking: Why is the phrase "This is the law of one who gives birth" placed between the rich woman's korban and the poor woman's korban? Shouldn't this phrase be the conclusion after all of the childbirth-sacrifices have been described? The answer, said the Rebbe, is that after describing the rich woman's sacrifice, the Torah says, "This is the law of one who gives birth," as if to say: Ideally, this is the way it should be, i.e., all Jews should be financially comfortable. But, if there is a poor woman, she should bring the following sacrifice after giving birth.

R' Shapira adds: This may explain also why Yaakov blessed Yosef (Bereishit 48:20), "Through you shall Yisrael bless [their children] saying, 'May Elokim make you like Ephraim and like Menashe'." Why Ephraim and Menashe, not Reuven, Shimon, Levi, etc.? The answer is that all of Yaakov's sons experienced poverty and deprivation at some point in their lives, for example, in Lavan's house. When a Jew blesses his children, he should bless them with the ideal--that, like Ephraim and Menashe, who were raised as sons of the Egyptian viceroy, they should never know any deprivation. (Imrei Shefer)

Pirkei Avot

"[Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to his students]: Go out and discern which is the evil path from which a person should distance himself. Rabbi Eliezer says, 'A bad eye.' Rabbi Yehoshua says, 'A wicked friend.' Rabbi Yose [Hakohen] says, 'A wicked neighbor.' Rabbi Shimon [ben Netanel] says, 'One who borrows and does not repay.' . . . Rabbi Elazar ben Arach says, 'A wicked heart.'" (Ch. 2)

Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi z"l (Spain; died 1263) comments: In the immediately preceding passage, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai asked his students what is the proper path to which a person should cling. Why is he now asking their opinions of the evil path from which a person should distance himself? Wouldn't he expect them to just give the opposite of their prior answers?

R' Yonah explains: At first glance, the opposite of a good trait is not bad. For example, the trait of "chassidut" refers to going beyond the letter of the law. One who is not a "chassid" is not bad. To the contrary, if he observes the letter of the law, he is a "tzaddik" / righteous person.

R' Yonah continues: Rabbi Eliezer identified "a good eye" (i.e., generosity) as the proper path, and "a bad eye" (i.e., miserliness) as the path to avoid. One might have argued that generosity is good, but the absence of generosity is neutral, since it does not deprive others of what belongs to them. Rabbi Eliezer teaches that this is not the case. In fact, Rabbi Eliezer is teaching us that our initial assumption is incorrect. It is bad not to strive to be a "chassid." This is what King Shlomo meant when he wrote (Kohelet 10:1), "Dead flies putrefy the perfumer's oil; a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor." One might argue: Flies are so tiny! How can they spoil a large vat of perfume?! Nevertheless, it is a fact that they do. So, too, a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. The absence of even one good trait has a significant effect on a person's overall quality.

Regarding the responses of Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Yose (respectively, "A wicked friend" and "A wicked neighbor"), R' Yonah comments: Do not be one! [By this comment, R' Yonah is teaching that the focus is not on our friends' and neighbors' behavior, but on our own.]

Finally, regarding the observation of Rabbi Shimon, that the path to avoid is that of a person who borrows and does not repay, R' Yonah comments: Rabbi Shimon said that the proper path is to foresee the future. One might think that a person can't be criticized for not foreseeing the future; maybe that requires special talent. Rabbi Shimon is illustrating, however, that there are everyday consequences to failing to foresee the future. One example, which is all-too-common, is that a person borrows money without having any idea of where he will obtain the funds to repay his debt. (Commentary to Pirkei Avot)

Letters from Our Sages

This letter was written by R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935), who later would become the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael, when he was rabbi of Yafo (Jaffa). When this letter was written, its destination, the settlement of Rechovot - now a city of more than 100,000 - was a new settlement under the jurisdiction of the rabbi of Yafo. The letter is printed in Igrot Ha'Rayah, Vol. I, No. 35.

B"H, in the holy city of Yafo, may it be built and established, 17 Adar 5666 [1906]

To the honorable council of Rechovot, may it be built and established, Shalom and berachah!

I received your letter regarding the incident involving Rabbi K and Mr. A. Before I comment, you must understand the pain that such incidents cause me, especially in a place so precious to my soul. Thus, I hope this is no more than a spat between brothers, which will quickly pass leaving no painful repercussions, and that we will be able to look back with a strength that allows us to withstand the feelings of sickness [paraphrasing Yirmiyahu 8:18].

It is my strongly held position to stand behind the internal administration of the settlements and to accustom people to do the same. Therefore, it is very appropriate to validate the judgment of the council and public meeting regarding penalizing an individual. On the other hand, Rabbi K is an outstanding Torah scholar and the author of important Talmud commentaries. I believe that it would not reflect well on the council or the settlement if there is an impression, even a false one, that hatred of Torah scholars, which sometimes motivates individuals, played role in the severity of the judgment. Moreover, we cannot escape the obligation to honor the Torah and its students even if such a student acts mistakenly. Therefore, my opinion is that Mr. A and Rabbi K should be kind enough to come here [Yafo] and, with G-d's help, I will endeavor to make peace with honor between them.

I sign with blessings and expressions of honor. Avraham Yitzchak

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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