

ORLAH: SPIRITUAL BARRIERS

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

Where a man plants a fruit tree in the Land of Israel, he cannot eat or derive any benefit from the fruits in the initial 3 years of the tree's life. The fruit of the 4th year are taken up and consumed in Jerusalem and he is fully able to eat from its fruit in the 5th year (Leviticus 19:23-24).

The word Orlah refers to a "blockage" or something that is "closed up" (See Ramban, Vayikra 19:23).

What is most interesting is how the identical terminology is used in Bris Milah, "the covenant of circumcision" where the Orlah, "foreskin" is removed from the male organ (See Bereishis 17:11, 14 and how an uncircumcised person is called an Orel). Indeed, the Radvaz points out how "the secret of the mitzvah of Orlah is rooted in the mitzvah of bris milah".

How are we to understand the linkage between these two seemingly unrelated laws? In what manner does circumcision shed light on the prohibition of partaking of a tree's fruits for the initial 3 years? And why the prolonged, agonizing wait before the farmer being able to enjoy the fruits of his trees?

What Orlah evokes is the concept of a spiritual blockage.

It is where a barrier stands in the way to prevent the "outer" manifestation of the "inner" essence. Fitting into this category is the soul not being reflected through the body, or an impediment in the transition from man's potential into the actual (an impediment in the translation from essence to fruit).

On the spiritual dimension, this relates to the wall between man and G-d, between creation and its Creator.

Obviously, the first blockage in history was as a result of Adam's sin where he ate from the Tree of Knowledge. It was where Adam, who was fashioned circumcised, was guilty, in the words of the Sages, of "extending his foreskin" (Sanhedrin 38b).

What mankind did was to introduce a blockage insofar as creation was no longer in complete fidelity with its Creator. The revelation of spirituality into the physical world was compromised. Where the taste of the "fruit" and the taste of its origins in the "tree" were no longer identical (see Rashi, Bereishis 1:11).

The "foreskin" is endemic of a barrier whose removal is commemorated in the Bris, "covenant" of circumcision. Here a Jew reaffirms how his body, his potential and all the fruits of his labors are 100% dedicated in the observance of G-d's laws.

The "uncircumcised" is associated with impurity which blocks the passage to spirituality and to G-dliness. It is the task of a Jew to "circumcise" it.

In truth, Adam's sinful eating of the forbidden tree was because G-d had not yet permitted him to do so. Had he but waited until the end of the day, explain the Sages, he would then have been able to consume it upon the entry of the holy Sabbath. (According to the opinion that the tree was a vine, he would have made Kiddush squeezing the grapes into wine).

Adam's failure is related to the mitzvah of Orlah whose fruit would originally be forbidden. In atonement for not having waited, the Jewish people would not be able to partake of a fruit tree for the first 3 years. Only after a hiatus, would the "foreskin" and impurity be removed. Thereafter, in the 4th year, could he consume the fruit in the holiness of Jerusalem (Ohr HaChaim, Vayikra 23:6).

The journey to attain holiness, whether in the "fruit" of humans or the "fruit" of a tree, calls for the same step: "circumcising" the "foreskin".

All barriers that impede our divine service are to be smashed. Once we have removed the evil forces ("turn from evil" preceding "do good" (Tehillim 34:15),) our covenant and commitment to G-d to reveal holiness will come shining through. Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and

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