

DOUBLE DUTY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*"When Avrohom was ninety-nine years old, Hashem said to him, 'Walk before me and become perfect.'"
Hearing that he was instructed to become perfect, he was seized with trembling. "Perhaps there is something unseemly about me!" Once he heard Hashem say, "I will establish my covenant between
Myself and you," Avrohom's spirit was quieted."^[2]*

Rambam and Ramban present very different conceptions of the mitzvah of *bris milah*. Rambam explains *milah* as a corrective – a way of weakening Man's lusts and cooling his passions. Ramban offers a more positive spin. *Milah*, he says, is an external sign of the distinctive role assigned to *Klal Yisrael* as a special, distinctive people. (These two positions may follow from the remarks of two *tana'im* in a mishnah.^[3] "The *orlah* is repugnant. Evildoers are disgraced through it," says one of them, emphasizing the role of *milah* in remedying a fault within man like Rambam. "The other *tanna* lauds the mitzvah for marking the distinctiveness of *Am Yisroel*, like Ramban. "Great is *milah*! Thirteen covenants were declared over it."

Some people find Ramban's *milah* disturbing. They are not comfortable with the Torah commanding us to assert and proclaim the specialness of *Am Yisroel*. What reason do Jews have to feel different from others? Why would they want to take pride in being different? Does not our own Scripture teach the opposite? "Do we not all have one Father? Did not one G-d create us?"^[4] Ordinary civility argues against any nation extolling itself over others – others who are also created in the Divine image – saying, "I am the choicest of all Creation! I am it – and there is nothing alongside me!"

These "enlightened" souls campaign against the formula in our davening of "You chose us from among all the nations." They point in particular to the danger in asserting a Jewish mission. How many other nations, they say, are each doing the same? How many tragedies has mankind endured because of these competing claims of different national groups, each seeing itself as exceptional, and more entitled than any other? Is it proper that we should be doing the same?

Nationalism, when that is often what stands behind such claims, can indeed be evil. It is remarkable that all of Chazal's stories about the evil of Sodom's residents deal with the repugnant ways in which they dealt with outsiders and strangers. Could it really be that the citizens were fine and upstanding to their fellow citizens, and turned into monsters in regard to outsiders alone?

We could propose an alternative. Rashi tells us that all five cities were collectively called Sodom,

after the largest and most important of the group. Perhaps its leaders prided themselves on their "sophistication" relative to the others. They, together with those of the other four cities, were evil, hateful people who were capable of hurting anyone who annoyed them. But they could not declare or admit this. Instead, they invented a policy targeting the most vulnerable – those who were strangers, who had no long-term rights. Perhaps they even developed their own form of "nationalism," arguing that local resources – in an area known for their abundance! – had to be reserved for local residents. Barring strong measures against the intruders, those strangers might one day become a powerful, unwanted influence.

It was only in the "capital" city of Sodom that any pretense was needed. In the other four cities, people acted as evilly towards their fellow citizens as they did to the stranger. Thus, when Yeshaya^[5] laments over his vision of ruined cities of Israel – cities that failed to care for their own poor and needy – he says, "We would have become like Sodom; we would have been likened to Amora." He means that we would have become "like" Sodom – but only in part.^[6] Sodom mistreated only the stranger, while ancient Israel abandoned its own. That would make them fully likened to Amora, which made no distinction between outsiders and insiders.

Let us return to the mitzvah of *milah*, and those uncomfortable with Ramban's approach. Many have asked why Avrohom, who observed the mitzvos of the Torah before they were given,^[7] waited for Divine instruction to perform the mitzvah of *milah*. Why didn't he do so on his own? Now, if we accept Ramban's reasoning explanation that *milah* is meant to address what would otherwise be a flaw in our nature, the question is valid. Certainly Avrohom would have jumped at the opportunity to correct an internal flaw!

If, however, we utilize Ramban's reasoning, the question loses any basis. Accentuating his difference from other people was not something that Avrohom would run to take upon himself. He opposed such difference; he constantly displayed a love for all beings created in G-d's image, treating all equally.

Chazal had this in mind when they spoke of Avrohom being seized with trembling when told to circumcise himself, and becalming himself only when Hashem based a covenant upon the mitzvah. At first hearing, he assumed the position of the Rambam. This caused him great distress. If *milah* aimed to address an internal flaw, why had he been blind to it? He must be further from where he would want to be than he ever thought. He was seized, therefore, with trembling. When Hashem told him about the covenant, he realized that there was another dimension to *milah* that he had not considered, and he was becalmed.

The news, however, was not entirely good. The covenant came at a price. Or so he thought. A midrash^[8] reports on Avrohom's complaint: Before *milah*, passers-by came to me. (In other words, nothing created any distance between my potential guests and me.) Now that I have circumcised

myself, I have created great distance between myself and my erstwhile friends, who now eye me with suspicion and resentment. Now who will come to visit me? I have removed myself from the rest of humanity.

Avrohom, however, did not fully fathom the intent of the covenant with him and his descendants. This special relationship which He initiated did not shunt all others to the sidelines. To the contrary, it placed an extra burden upon *Klal Yisroel* in their relationship with their neighbors. The *bris* would not allow *Klal Yisroel* to erect high walls in which they could lavish their love exclusively on themselves. To the contrary. "Elokim spoke to him [Avrohom] saying." (Note that He had already been speaking with him. This *pasuk* can only mean that Hashem began what in effect was a new revelation, apart from the practical aspects of *milah*.) "I have made a covenant with you (and despite what you might think that implies about narrowing your vision) you will be a father to many nations (i.e. your responsibility to the rest of the world will increase)...you will greatly flourish, and I will give you to the nations (as a mentor, to spread light, Torah, and genuine love of Man to all the families of the earth. You will differ greatly from others – but only in regard to your spiritual, religious life. You will draw close strangers and converts. You will daven for their evildoers like the people of Sodom. One of your descendants will build a Temple open to them, and where you will bring offerings on their behalf.)"

Your descendants will be crushed and oppressed by the people in whose midst they live. But nonetheless, they will succeed in spreading to them – without coercion – knowledge of Hashem and His Torah.

1. Adapted from the *sefer* by R. Yechezkel Libshitz, zt"l, 1864-1932 .
2. Nedarim 32a .
3. Nedarim 31 .
4. Malachi 2:10 .
5. Yeshaya 1:9 .
6. Sanhedrin 104A understands a similar verse in this way, as denoting likeness only in part .
7. Yoma 28B .
8. Bereishis Rabbah 47:1 .