

# ONLY A VERBAL AGREEMENT?

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

This week's parsha starts off, "G-d told Moshe: Tell B'nei Yisroel that when a women conceives and gives birth to a male ... On the eighth day his flesh should be circumcized."

At first glance, the location and timing of this possuk may not seem significant, but after some thought, it is clear that this verse is a great lead-in to our preparation for Pesach.

First of all, we know that only a circumcized Jew could eat from the Korban Pesach, the special Pesach offering we sacrificed in Egypt and later during Temple times. Though bris milah is an extremely important mitzvah-failure to halachically perform bris milah can lead to a male to being cut off from the Jewish people-still, the lack of bris milah does not usually prevent the performance of other mitzvos. Therefore, bris milah is more than a physical preparation to partake of the Korban Pesach; it is part and parcel of the whole concept of Korban Pesach.

As well, last week's parsha also began speaking about an "eighth day," the eighth day of the inauguration of the Mishkan. It was on this day that the Divine Presence finally descended and "inhabited" the Mishkan. For, the number eight always alludes to a departure from the "natural" world, and entry into the supernatural world (which is why Chanukah also is eight days long). Therefore, bris milah acts as a threshold of sorts for the new baby, over which he crosses to enter into the world **above** mazel.

There is a discussion in the Talmud about whether or not a Jew is subject to mazel, that is, destiny (Shabbos 156a). We believe that, for the most part, events are predetermined as part of a master plan for creation. Within the stars is encoded six thousand years of history, and a true astrologer can peek into the stars and foretell the future, as Avraham did when he told G-d that he saw that he was to remain childless (through his wife Sarah; Hagar bore Yishmael for him).

However, G-d told Avraham that he was not necessarily correct, for, he could by choice rise above his mazel, and beat his destiny, so-to-speak. And as history and the Chumash testifies, Avraham did precisely that with the birth of his son Yitzchak, something, apparently, he could only achieve **after** he had performed bris milah (first he was commanded to perform bris milah, and after Yitzchak was conceived).

Hence, bris milah is far more than an initiation rite into Judaism; it is a mystical door through which the Jewish nation passes on the way to freedom from nature. Why? How?

One thing that is often overlooked is the actual translation of the words; bris milah means "covenant of the word." Covenant of the word? What does speech have to do with bris, and what connection does it have to Pesach? The beginning of the answer to that question is in asking another question: why is Pesach called Pesach?

You're probably saying to yourselves, "Doesn't he learn Chumash?" Clearly Pesach is called Pesach because G-d was "posayach" (i.e. He "skipped") over the houses of the Jews on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan, as He killed all the firstborn of Egypt, and that's why Pesach is called the Holiday of Skipping.

The "Holiday of **skipping**"? Sounds pretty strange to me. It may be true that G-d passed over our houses that night and saved us from the Plague of the Firstborn-but, the "Holiday of **skipping**?" Weren't there any other important miracles that happened in Egypt that would have resulted in a more normal sounding name, like the Holiday of Light, for example?

The answer is **yes**. But no other name would have alluded to the fact that Pesach is the holiday that celebrates the freedom of the mouth, for, as the Maharal points out, Pesach can also be read, Peh Sach-the "mouth that spoke" (Pesach is spelt, peh-samech-ches; here, and in each example coming, the letter peh is being treated as the entire word peh, which means "mouth")

And if you don't believe, consider the fact that the Mitzriim enslaved us with labor that was "be-pharach," which can be read as Peh Rach, a "soft mouth" (Shemos 1:13). And who was the chief antagonist in the story? Paroah, which can be read, Peh Ra'ah, meaning, "evil mouth." That's a lot of mouths in the Pesach story.

Perhaps this is why the central mitzvah of Seder night is the **telling** of the story of leaving Mitzrayim through the use of a **Haggadah** (which means "telling"). And the rabbis teach us that a Jew, even one who knows the entire redemption story by heart, and is even celebrating Pesach alone, still has a mitzvah to verbally tell the story!

Now we can begin to understand why Moshe was chosen for the job of leading the redemption from Egypt, for, as Rashi points out, Moshe's principle strength was in his mouth (BaMidbar 22:4). And we can also understand why Moshe initially rejected G-d's offer to become the redeemer from Egyptian slavery, complaining that he was unfitting for the task since he was of "uncircumcized lips" (Shemos 6:12); and why Moshe was almost killed by G-d on the way to Mitzrayim for not performing bris milah on his son the moment he arrived at the hotel (Shemos 4:24; hotel is "malone" in Hebrew, which has the two letters "mem" and "lamed" in it, the root of "milah"), only to be saved by his wife, Tzipporah, whose name can be broken into two words: peh tzor, which means "constricted mouth"; and why it is Moshe's **lack** of speaking to the rock that leads to his being denied entry into the land of Egypt toward the end of the 40 years in the desert (BaMidbar 20:7).

And when the Jews did finally leave Egypt, they traveled into the desert for three days, only to turn around and make their way back toward Egypt. They camped by the "lip" of the sea, the Yumm Suf

(Read Sea), and waited for the Egyptians to catch up. Why did G-d bring them back toward Mitzrayim?

On the other hand, a better question might be, why did Paroah send his army into the sea after the fleeing Jewish people? If you were the ruler of a nation that had just been supernaturally decimated by a harmless people, and now that people was escaping by way of an even greater miracle, would you have the audacity to pursue them? Not unless you had a death wish! So, then, why did Paroah send the last of his nation in after the Jews, at the risk of sure death?

The answer is, because the departure point of the Jewish people was from a place that, according to Egyptian belief, was under the auspices of their god, Ba'al Peor (peh ohr, i.e., mouth of skin). They assumed that it was **their** god and not the Jewish G-d who was engineering this miracle, in order to trap the fleeing Jewish people and to deliver them over into the hands of Paroah's army.

Of course, Paroah had been wrong—deadly wrong. For, the location from which B'nei Yisroel left was not under the control of the "Mouth of Skin," but, instead, was under G-d's authority, which the drowning Egyptian army discovered a bit too late. Hence, Ba'al Peor went down that day into the sea with the Egyptian nation, while the Jewish people escaped from a place the Torah refers to as "Pi Cheiros" (Shemos 14:2), the Mouth of Freedom.

And to where did we escape after the spectacular annihilation of the most powerful army in the world? The "midbar" (desert) which, with a slight vowel change spells the word, "medabehr," which means, "speaking."

Thus the holiday of Pesach redefines the concept of "freedom of speech," and places new emphasis on the centrality of the mitzvah of bris milah in terms of being able to achieve the ultimate level of "free" speech. And it is for **this** reason, among the others, that Pesach is called **Pesach**.

The starting point of understanding the role of speech in creation and personal fulfillment is the verse:

God formed man out of dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils a soul of life., and the man became a living spirit. (Bereishis 2:7)

According to Targum Onkeles, the words "living spirit" refer to man's newly gained power of speech. It is speech that most distinguishes man from the rest of creation, which is why when Kabbalists refer to the four levels of creation, they refer to: Domaim (literally, "silent ones") to indicate the inanimate world; Tzomayach ("sprouts") to refer to the vegetation world; Chayah ("living beings") to refer to the animal kingdom, and, Medabehr, which means "speaking," to refer to man.

For some, "talk may be cheap," but to the Torah, how one speaks makes all the difference in the world between true freedom and slavery. In fact, the Talmud says the following:

R' Elazar said: Every man was created to toil, as it says, "Because man was made to toil ..." (Eyov 5:7).

Now, I do not know if that means to toil through speech, or in actual labor; however, once it says, "A toiling soul toils for him, for his mouth compels him." (Mishlei 16:26), I know that a person was created to toil with his mouth. I do not know, though, if this means to toil in Torah or just in regular conversation. However, once it says, "This Torah should not leave your mouth ..." (Yehoshua 1: 8), I know that man was created to toil in Torah. (Sanhedrin 99b)

Thus we see that what may appear to be but one of the many organs of the human body is, in fact, one of the most important organs of all. Thus, bris milah alludes to far more than our commitment to control over sexual urge and creative drive; it alludes also to a covenant to use one of our most important abilities, and the "tool" which separates us most from three lower aspects of creation, in a holy and profound manner. Somehow, it is speech that acts as a threshold over which to cross to leave the world of nature; somehow it is speech that allows us to build a "Mishkan" within which the holy Presence of G-d can dwell. Somehow, Pesach enables us to transform our ability of speech into a weapon against the forces of nation, which try to constrict and confine us to the world of mazel, just as Egypt had by "softening" our mouths.

Perhaps this is why the first three pages of Talmud Pesachim, which begins with a discussion of checking for chometz erev Pesach, quickly diverges onto the subject of clean and proper speech. And perhaps this is why the laws of Metzora follow the mitzvah of bris milah, for, as the rabbis point out, tzara'as was a Divine response to a person speaking loshon hora-derogatory speech about a fellow Jew.

G-d willing, next week's installment will begin to answer these questions, and put Pesach, speech, and bris milah into (verbal) perspective.

Have a **Great** Shabbos, and happy **Peh** sach cleaning.

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