

# TO DELAY BRIS MILAH

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

This week's parshah begins discussing the spiritual impact on a woman of giving birth. Shortly afterwards, the Torah moves on to a lengthy explanation about the laws of tzara'as, the skin affliction that was a form of Divine punishment for having spoken loshon hara, true but derogatory speech about another.

Though the matters are quite different from each other, they are somewhat similar inasmuch as they deal with the spiritual status of a person based upon a physical event. If the Torah had merely gone from the one subject to the other, few eyebrows might have been raised.

Instead, though, the Torah inserts the mitzvah of Bris Milah between the two matters:

"... If a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, then she will be ritually unclean for seven days, as if she had her period. On the eighth day, his foreskin must be circumcised." (Vayikra 12:2-3)

Even though Bris Milah is necessary because of the birth of a new boy, there are other more logical places elsewhere in the Torah to discuss the mitzvah. Doing so would have allowed the Torah to flow more smoothly from the mitzvos of purification that have to do with birth to those associated with tzara'as, begging the question, why didn't it?

At first glance, the two topics seem to have little to do with each other. Bris Milah is something we celebrate as we enter a new born son into the Covenant of Avraham Avinu, and tzara'as is something to be mourned, being a Divine punishment for having spoken loshon hara. The former brings a person into the community and the latter sends him from it (the Metzora lives in isolation for a period).

What they do have in common, however, is that they are both mitzvos that have to do with a person's skin. Tza'aras afflicted the skin:

*God told Moshe and Aharon, "When a person has a blotch, a discoloration, or spot on his skin . . ."* (Vayikra 13:1-2)

whereas Bris Milah removed the orlah—foreskin—with which a male is born.

This may only seem like a skin-deep connection, but in this case, this makes it a deep skin connection. For, the words Bris Milah themselves mean Covenant of the Word, something which the person who speaks loshon hara has clearly violated; loshon hara violates the covenant made through the removal of a skin, and therefore the punishment is an affliction of the skin.

The connection between Bris Milah and our commitment to weigh our words and speak meaningfully is further accentuated by the fact that the word orlah—foreskin—is used in connection to speech:

*Moshe said to God, "God, I am arul sefasayim—of uncircumcised lips . . ." (Shemos 4:10)*

We're not finished yet. Why is it that a woman bleeds as a result of childbirth and can even become spiritually defiled as well? The Torah answered that question back at the beginning, when God punished Chava for her role in the eating from the forbidden fruit:

*To the woman He said, "I will greatly increase your pain in pregnancy, and childbirth will also be painful." (Bereishis 3:16)*

But the bigger question is, why did she sin in the first place? The Torah tells us that as well:

*Moshe answered and said, "They will not believe me, nor listen to my voice; they will say that God has not appeared to me."*

*God said to him, "What is in your hand?"*

*He said, "A staff."*

*He told him, "Throw it to the ground."*

*He threw it to the ground and it became a serpent, and Moshe ran away from it. (Shemos 4:1)*

This indicated to him that he had spoken loshon hara about the Jewish people, and that he had imitated the trade of the serpent. (Rashi)

Which serpent spoke loshon hara? The original one. When did he speak it? Here:

*The serpent told the woman, "You will not die! God knows that once you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Bereishis 3:4-5)*

True or not, the Original Snake spoke derogatorily about God, and triggered the downfall of mankind, which has led to thousands of years of death, meaningless murders, and a whole host of destructive behaviors and events. It underscores the incredible destructive power of simple words when they are abusive, and our ability to validate them and facilitate their destructive ability when we accept them.

Knowing this helps to explain a somewhat bizarre chain of events. The Torah recounts:

*It happened along the way to the Inn that God met him [Moshe] and wanted to kill him. Tzipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the orlah of her son, and threw it at his feet, and said, "You are a bridegroom of blood to me!" She loosened her hold of him and said, "You are a bridegroom of blood, because of circumcision." (Shemos 4:24)*

The angel became a serpent and swallowed him from his head to his thigh, and then spit him out

again, and then swallowed him from his legs to the place [of Bris Milah]. Tzipporah thereby understood that it had happened on account of the delay in performing Bris Milah to her son. (Rashi)

When you think about it, it is amazing how close the Jewish people came to losing their redeemer from Egyptian slavery, and all because Moshe had delayed the planned bris of his son by what would have amounted to minutes! For putting off milah for the malon (i.e., the Inn), Moshe incurred the death penalty on the way to Mitzrayim.

He did? Why? After all, though it is a Positive Mitzvah to perform Bris Milah on one's son, the penalty for not doing so is not death, or even kares (being cut off from the Jewish people). Rather, a father who does not circumcise his son "merely" loses out on the opportunity to perform a very important and central Positive Mitzvah.

If so, then what had been Moshe's crime that he warranted death as a punishment? Furthermore, why did God go after Moshe by sending an angel in the form of a snake? And why was Tzipporah, the mother of the child, forced to perform the circumcision herself to save her husband's life?

The answer should be clearer now. Moshe Rabbeinu was on a mission to save the Jewish people from Pharaoh, whose name, in Hebrew letters, spells "evil mouth" (when the Peh is written as it sounds). He was going to save them from what the Torah calls avodah b'pharach, which the Talmud reads as peh-rach, or soft mouth.

Eventually they escaped the Egyptians at the Reed Sea, from a place called Pi Hachiros, or the Mouth of Freedom. As a result, we celebrate the holiday called Pesach, which the Maharal says is really Peh Sach, which means the mouth that spoke, which explains why the Seder revolves around the saying of the Haggadah, which means telling.

Hence, since Moshe Rabbeinu's mission was to free the Jewish mouth, so-to-speak, so that it could fulfill the following:

Rebi Elazar said: Every man was created to toil, as it says, "Because man was made to toil . . ." (Iyov 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 [through speech]. (Sanhedrin 99b)

For a man on such a mission, all of sudden, a delay in Bris Milah carried a lot more meaning, for which a delay was a lot more serious. Understanding this, and all that has been said until now, the flow of this week's parshah is actually quite profound and instructive.

Text

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