

COVENANT THROUGHOUT THE AGES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

From the time of our father Avraham, circumcision has been the cornerstone of Jewish identity. We acknowledge this in our prayer after meals daily "we are grateful to You for your covenant that you have sealed into our flesh."

The rabbis of the Talmud indicated to us that the Jewish people accepted this commandment of circumcision willingly and happily and therefore it has persisted amongst Israel uninterruptedly for all of these many generations since the time of Avraham.

Though many claims of physical health benefits have been made over time for the efficacy of this procedure, the Jewish people have always viewed it as being the supreme symbol of personal Jewish identity and role.

Over the ages the enemies of the Jewish people have attempted to ban Jewish circumcision. The great classical Greeks considered it to be a mutilation of the body and, in that body worshipping culture, it was held to be repugnant and unacceptable.

Much more recently the "progressive, democratic, peace-loving" Soviet Union prevented Jewish circumcision. In all cases, from Antiochus to Gorbachev, there were Jews who risked all to fulfill the commandment of circumcision.

However, it bears note that the enemies of the Jews saw in Jewish circumcision a spiritual weapon that would help guarantee the Jews survival against the prevailing government, mores and culture.

As is often the case, our enemies are more astute in recognizing and identifying our true strengths than we Jews are ourselves.

The commandment of circumcision is that the procedure is to take place on the eighth day of the young boy's life. There are physical circumstances that can allow for a postponement of the actual circumcision but the obligation remains a personal responsibility upon the Jew throughout life.

For instance, the Talmud records that a person who is a hemophiliac obviously should not undergo a possible life-threatening procedure such as circumcision. However, even though that person has more than a legitimate excuse for remaining uncircumcised he is still considered to be uncircumcised according to halacha and is therefore excluded from those rituals that the Torah explicitly requires that only circumcised Jews may participate in.

This is a further indication of the stress and importance that the Torah places upon this

commandment and how vital it is to the Jewish being and future.

It is therefore most understandable why the performance of this commandment occasions the necessity for a festive meal and a great gathering of friends and family.

It is not only the circumcision of that actual child that is being celebrated as much as it is a celebration of the ceremony itself - an affirmation of Jewish tradition and identity that is millennia old.

Over the centuries, Jews have paid with their lives for being circumcised but the ceremony itself is seen as an affirmation of life and holy commitment.

Physical health benefits have been ascribed to the procedure and its result. But, Jews perform this commandment out of belief, joy and conscience and not out of any other considerations.

Shabat shalom.

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com