
BRIT MILAH

The first major religious event in the life of a newborn boy is his Brit Milah. Although at eight days of age a child is merely a passive participant, Brit Milah is one of the most defining mitzvot in Judaism, dating back to Avraham Avinu (Abraham) some 3,800 years ago! The physical circumcision, the only mark that Jewish religious practice makes on the body, is a life-long symbol of Jewish faith. Brit Milah represents the reality that each individual is created incomplete and thus needs to perfect his character and actions throughout his life.

This class will address the following questions:

- ☞ Why is it so important to circumcise one's child?
- ☞ What is the origin of Brit Milah?
- ☞ Why is the covenant sealed specifically with a mark on the reproductive organ?
- ☞ Is a person considered incomplete without a Brit Milah?
- ☞ Why is the ceremony performed on the eighth day of a child's life?
- ☞ Why is there no corresponding Brit Milah for girls?

Class Outline:

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SECTION I. THE BRIT OF AVRAHAM – THE CENTRAL MITZVAH

The mitzvah of Brit Milah is unique in that it is the only mitzvah given to the Patriarchs. The fulfillment of Brit Milah by Avraham and his descendants, even before the Torah was given to the nation at Sinai, is an indication of its centrality to the Jewish faith. Certainly, the mitzvah of Milah has captured “public opinion” concerning the Jewish religion. It would hardly be an exaggeration to state that the concept of circumcision, in the eyes of both Jews and non-Jews, is seen as a defining element of Judaism.

PART A. THE COVENANT

The word *brit* has a double meaning in the Hebrew language: it means circumcision as well as a covenant. This demonstrates that circumcision itself is a covenant – a covenant between us and God.

A covenant is far more than a simple contract. It is a binding and irrevocable pledge between two parties. Through the original mitzvah of Milah, God sealed an eternal covenant between Avraham and his descendants. To this day, the blessing recited on performing the mitzvah of Milah is “Blessed are You ... Who sanctified us with His mitzvot, and instructed us to enter him [the newborn child] into the covenant of Avraham our Father.” By performing the mitzvah of Milah, we perpetuate the covenant by passing it on to the next generation.

1. Ramban (Nachmanides), Bereishit (Genesis) 9:12 – Milah is a sign of the covenant between God and Avraham.

Every visible object that is set before two parties to remind them of a matter that they have vowed between them is called a “sign,” and every agreement is called a “covenant.” Similarly, in the case of circumcision, God said, “And it shall be a token of a covenant between Me and you,” because of the agreement that all the descendants of Avraham be circumcised “to serve Him with a united resolve” (Tzefaniah/Zephaniah 3:9).

כל דבר הנראה שיושם לפני שנים להזכירם ענין נדור ביניהם יקרא אות, וכל הסכמה ברית, וכן במילה אמר “והיה לאות ברית ביני וביניכם,” בעבור ההסכמה שימולו כל זרע אברהם לעבדו שכם אחד.

2. Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Nedarim 31a – The definition of *brit*.

Every [time] *brit* [appears in the Torah it] is translated as *something that has permanence*. This is because through Brit Milah one has an [ongoing] relationship with God, just like any two people who have a covenant between them.

כל ברית תרגומו “קיימא” וזה מפני כי ע”י הברית יש לו חבור עם הש”י כמו שנים שיש להם ברית ביחד.

3. Bereishit 17:7; 10-11 – The covenant sealed with Avraham.

“I will ratify My covenant between Me and you and between your offspring after you, throughout their generations, as an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your offspring after you.”

“והקמתי את בריתי ביני ובינך ובין זרעך אחריו לדרתם לברית עולם להיות לך לא-להים ולזרעך אחריו” ...

“This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.”

“זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין זרעך אחריו המול לכם כל זכר. ונמלתם את בשר ערלתכם והיה לאות ברית ביני וביניכם.”

4. **Ibid. 17:19; 21 – The covenant is passed on to Yitzchak (Isaac) and his descendants.**

God said, “Nonetheless, your wife Sarah will bear you a son and you shall call his name Yitzchak. And I will fulfill My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him”

...

“And My covenant I will establish through Yitzchak, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.”

ויאמר אלהים “אבל שרה אשתך ילדת לך בן וקראת את שמו יצחק והקמתי את בריתי אתו לברית עולם לזרעו אחריו...”

“וזאת בריתי אקים את יצחק אשר תלד לך שרה למועד הזה בשנה האחרת.”

5. **Tehillim (Psalms) 105:8-10 – The Patriarchal Covenant has the status of an oath and a statute.**

He [God] has remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations; the covenant which He made with Avraham, and His oath to Yitzchak; then He confirmed it to Yaakov (Jacob) for a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant.

זכר לעולם בריתו דבר צוה לאלף דור. אשר כרת את אברהם ושבועתו לישחק. ויעמידה ליעקב לחק לישראל ברית עולם.

PART B. AVRAHAM'S MITZVAH – THE FAITH OF MILAH

Avraham Avinu, the first of the Patriarchs, was outstanding in his resolute faith in God. It was because of his unswerving commitment to this faith that God chose him to become the founder of the Jewish people. It follows that the mitzvah given by God to Avraham, Brit Milah, is intimately related to the concept of *emunah*, faith. The most central tenet of Judaism – that God alone created the world and He alone continues to direct it – is manifest in Brit Milah.

1. **Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot Avodah Zarah (Laws of Idolatry) 1:3 – Avraham discovers the true faith.**

After this *Eitan* [pillar of strength, i.e. Avraham] was weaned, he began to muse while he was still young, and started to ponder by day and by night, and would question how it was possible that the celestial wheel should continue to revolve without a guide.

He had no mentor; nor did anyone reveal anything to him, but he was immersed in Ur

כיון שנגמל איתן זה, התחיל לשוטט בדעתו, והוא קטן, והתחיל לחשוב ביום ובלילה, והיה תמיה היאך אפשר שייהיה הגלגל הזה נוהג תמיד ולא יהיה לו מנהיג וכו'.

ולא היה לו מלמד ולא מודיע דבר, אלא מושקע באור כשדים בין עובדי כוכבים הטפשים, ואביו ואמו וכל

Kasdim among foolish idolaters. His father and mother, and all of the people served idols, and he would serve with them, while his heart pondered and deliberated, until he understood the path of truth and realized the line of justness by virtue of his own correct reasoning. Then he knew that there is only One God, and that He is the Guide of the celestial wheel, He created everything, and there is no God among all of Creation other than Him.

העם עובדי כוכבים, והוא עובד עמהם, ולבו משוטט ומבין עד שהשיג דרך האמת והבין קו הצדק מתבוננתו הנכונה, וידע שיש שם אלו-ה אחד והוא מנהיג הגלגל, והוא ברא הכל, ואין בכל הנמצא אלו-ה חוץ ממנו.

2. Bereishit Rabbah 39:1 – God revealed Himself on account of Avraham’s search.

Rabbi Yitzchak taught, “It is comparable to somebody who traveled from place to place and saw a burning tower. He said, ‘The tower cannot be without an owner!’ [Then] the master of the tower appeared to him, and told him, ‘I am the master of the tower.’ So too, because Avraham Avinu said, ‘Can the world be without a leader?’ God appeared to him and told him, ‘I am the Master of the world.’”

אמר רבי יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום וראה בירה אחת דולקת אמר תאמר שהבירה זו בלא מנהיג הציץ עליו בעל הבירה אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג הציץ עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם.

3. Akeidat Yitzchak 28 – God made the covenant of Brit Milah with Avraham because of his faith in Him.

Because of this faith [God] sealed His covenant of Milah [with Avraham], as it says, “And I will establish My covenant between Myself and between you and your descendants.”

ועל האמונה הזאת כרת אתו ברית המילה שנאמר (שם י"ז) "והקמותי את בריתי ביני וביניך ובין זרעך."

4. Rabbi Isaac Chaver, Ohr Torah 28 – Through Milah we are “rooted” in the fundamental faith of Israel.

Through this mitzvah a person is rooted in faith, which is the covenant that God sealed with Avraham. [Thus we find that God] told him, “Walk before Me and be complete, and I will give My covenant ... to be a God for you and for your descendants after you.”

ומצד מצוה זאת נשרש באמונה שהוא הברית שכרת הקדוש ברוך הוא לאברהם אבינו, שאמר לו "התהלך לפני והיה תמים ואתנה בריתי כו', להיות לך לאלקים ולזרעך אחריך."

PART C. THE ALL-INCLUSIVE MITZVAH

As we have seen, the covenant of Milah concretized the concept of faith that Avraham introduced to the world. This understanding helps explain the strictness of the mitzvah on the one hand – Milah being the most severe of all positive commandments – and its all-inclusive nature on the other. Just as the faith of Israel, the basic faith of the nation, is the central principle around which all of Judaism revolves – so too the mitzvah of Brit Milah is the most central of practical mitzvot performed by the Jewish people.

1. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Nedarim 32a – The commandment of Milah is equivalent to all the other mitzvot of the Torah combined.**

How great is Milah that it is equivalent to all the mitzvot in the Torah, as it says, “Because of these words [i.e. the Torah], I have made a covenant with you” (Shemot/Exodus 34:27).

גדולה מילה ששקולה כנגד כל המצוות שבתורה שנאמר (שמות לד: כז) “כי על פי הדברים האלה כרתי אתך ברית.”

2. **Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Ibid. – Mitzvot as a covenant, Milah as a covenant.**

... This is because the purpose of all the mitzvot is for there to be a covenant and relationship between God and man. Milah is also a covenant between God and man, and therefore it is equivalent to all the mitzvot.

...מפני כי כל המצוות אינם רק שיהיה ברית וחבור בין הש"י ובין האדם, כי כל התורה היא הברית כאשר יודע, והמילה עצמה היא הברית ג"כ בין הש"י ובין האדם, ולכך המילה....שקולים כנגד כל המצוות.

3. **Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 32a – The world exists because of Milah.**

How great is Milah for without it the world would not exist, as it says, “If not for my covenant [*brit*] day and night, I would not have appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth” (Yirmiyahu/Jeremiah 33:25).

גדולה מילה שאילמלא מילה לא נתקיימו שמים וארץ שנאמר (ירמיה לג: כה) “אם לא בריתי יומם ולילה וארץ חקות שמים וארץ לא שמתי.”

4. **Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Ibid. – The covenantal connection with God sustains the world.**

The world has nothing to keep it in existence except for Milah, for it is the covenant between God and man, and this is what gives man existence. Therefore, without Milah the world would not have been created, for the existence of the world is dependent on God, Who gives it the power to exist, and the world has no covenantal connection with God except via Milah, which is the covenant.

כי העולם אין לו קיום כי אם ע"י המילה כי המילה היא הברית בין הש"י ובין האדם וזהו הקיום שיש לאדם, ולכך אם לא היה המילה לא נבראו שמים כי קיום העולם הוא מצד הש"י אשר הוא מקיים הכל, ואין לעולם חבור ברית עם הש"י כי אם ע"י המילה שהיא הברית.

5. **Bereishit 17:14 – The severity of not keeping Milah – of all the positive mitzvot, only Milah and the Passover Offering carry the punishment of *karet* for not performing them.**

“An uncircumcised male, who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin – that soul will be severed from his nation; he has violated My covenant.”

“וערל זכר אשר לא ימול את בשר ערלתו ונכרתה הנפש ההוא מעמיה את בריתי הפר.”

PART D. JEWISH IDENTITY

More than any other mitzvah, Brit Milah is intimately related to Jewish identity. As the symbol of the covenant between God and His people, and the physical manifestation of Jewish faith, Milah virtually defines

Jewish identity. It is therefore fitting that of all mitzvot, only Milah is constantly present on the Jewish body. Milah defines who we are. It is perhaps for this reason that Jews throughout history have been prepared to make incredible sacrifices for the sake of upholding the mitzvah of Milah.

1. **Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed), 3:49 – Milah is the symbol of Jewish identity.**

In my opinion, there is another very important reason [for the mitzvah of Milah], namely – that there should be a common physical marking on all the people who uphold this faith, i.e. acknowledging that there is but One God.

ויש במילה עוד ענין אחר צריך מאד והוא שיהיה זאת האמונה כלם רצוני לומר מאמיני יחוד השם, אות אחד גשמי שיקבצם.

2. **Rabbi Paysach Krohn, Around the Maggid's Table, p. 145 – Milah is the badge and symbol of our commitment to God.**

After not having a child for six years, Major (Dr.) Rafael and Sarah Lerner were blessed with a baby boy. On the day of the Brit [Milah], held in the West Point Officer's club in West Point Military Academy in upstate New York ... the entire hospital staff, more than one hundred officers, colonels and lieutenants, along with the Commanding General of West Point, gathered for the festive occasion. Smartly attired in his army uniform, Major (Dr.) Rafael Lerner stood at attention together with his fellow officers as Rabbi Moshe Tendler from Monsey, New York, spoke the following words:

Here at West Point, one can have an appreciation of what Brit Milah, ritual circumcision, symbolizes. Every cadet, every officer, must always wear the badge of his Army, as an indication of his loyalty to the military of his country which he serves so faithfully. For Jews, beginning with the Patriarch Avraham, a Brit [Milah] has been the badge and symbol of our commitment to God, our Master General, Whom we will serve dutifully and loyally. Today we affix this badge on the newest soldier amongst us.

3. **Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 31b – A Jew is defined as “circumcised” even if he is physically uncircumcised (all Jews are considered inherently to be included in the covenant of Milah, for this is the basic definition of a Jew).**

[If somebody declares,] “I prohibit upon myself to take any benefit from the circumcised,” he is forbidden to receive benefit from the uncircumcised of Israel, and he is permitted to receive benefit from the circumcised among the gentiles.

קונם שאני נהנה ממולים אסור בערלי ישראל ומותר במולי עובדי כוכבים.

4. **Meiri, Yevamot 46a – Even today, circumcision is considered an act of entry into the Jewish religion.**

When Avraham entered the covenant [of Milah,] Sarah also underwent ritual immersion [to enter the covenant], and so too did the four Mothers. However, after their [general] entry into the faith of the covenant and the Torah, which was received for all generations, there was no longer any need for ritual immersion in order to enter the religion and the faith. This is unlike Milah,

כשנכנס אברהם לברית שהטביל את שרה וכן בארבע אימהות ומכל מקום משנכנסו לברית האמונה והתורה ונתקבלה עלינו לדורות לא הוצרכנו לטבילה כללית לכניסת דת ואמונה ואינו דומה למילה שנצטוו בפרט כל ערל זכר אשר לא ימול כו'.

which was instructed for all generations: “Any uncircumcised male that does not circumcise ...”

5. **Talmud Bavli, Menachot 43b – The one mitzvah that is always with us.**

When King David entered the bathhouse and saw that he was standing naked, he proclaimed, “Woe upon me, for I stand naked, without any mitzvah.” But when he recalled his Milah, he was consoled. And after emerging from the bathhouse, he composed a song upon it, as it is written, “For the conductor, on the eighth, a psalm by David” (Tehillim 12:1): on Milah, which was given on the eighth [day].

ובשעה שנכנס דוד לבית המרחץ וראה עצמו עומד
 ערום אמר אוי לי שאעמוד ערום בלא מצוה וכיון
 שזכר במילה שבבשרו נתיישבה דעתו לאחר שיצא
 אמר עליה שירה שנאמר למנצח על השמינית מזמור
 לדוד על מילה שניתנה בשמיני.

Throughout history the Jews have gone to great lengths to maintain the mitzvah of Brit Milah, even risking their lives to do so.

6. **Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 130a – Self-sacrifice for Milah.**

Every mitzvah for which the Jewish people were prepared to sacrifice their lives at a time of anti-Semitic decrees, such as [not engaging in] idolatry and [performing] Milah, is still upheld by them.

כל מצוה שמסרו ישראל עצמן עליהם למיתה בשעת
 גזרת המלכות כגון עבודת כוכבים ומילה עדיין היא
 מוחזקת בידם.

7. **Adapted from Tosefot, Avodah Zarah 10b, quoting from the Midrash – One of many inspiring stories of the Jewish people’s commitment to Milah.**

Many years ago, when the Roman Empire reached the Land of Israel, decrees against the Jews abounded. One such decree forbade the circumcision of Jewish boys. The punishment was severe for those who disobeyed. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel was the *Nasi*, the prince, at this time. He was known and respected by Jews and non-Jews alike, including the emperor.

When his wife had a baby boy, their desire to obey God’s commandment was greater than their fear of punishment. In secret, they performed the circumcision.

Before long, the government found out and Rabbi Shimon was ordered to appear before the governor of his town. “What do you have to say for yourself?” asked the governor angrily.

“I have obeyed the King of kings, Who has ordered us to circumcise our sons on the eighth day after birth,” answered Rabbi Shimon confidently.

“I am sending you, your wife, and the baby to the Imperial Court. For if other Jews see that you have circumcised your son and have not been severely punished, then they will do the same,” roared the governor.

Rabbi Shimon and his wife set out on the long journey to the Imperial Court. They stopped often along the way, and were warmly received in the homes of Jews and non-Jews alike, for Rabbi Shimon was respected by all. At one home, Rabbi Shimon’s wife and the non-Jewish hostess soon realized

that they had both given birth to baby boys on the same day. The hostess immediately offered to exchange her son, Antoninus, for Rabbi Shimon's baby, Yehudah. Rabbi Shimon and his wife gratefully accepted the offer.

With renewed hope, they continued on to the palace. Upon their arrival they were shown into the court of the emperor, who, upon hearing the charges, ordered the baby examined. To everyone's astonishment, there was no sign that a circumcision had been performed. "It's a miracle," whispered the people of the court. As soon as possible, the babies were exchanged.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ∞ In this section we have seen the origins and centrality of the mitzvah of Milah. It is hardly surprising that the vast majority of even the most secular Jews, perhaps up to 98% of Jews in Israel, continue to circumcise their children. It is the first mitzvah given to the first Jew, Avraham, and to this day it continues to be the symbol of our faith and our covenant – indeed, the symbol of our Jewish identity.

SECTION II. ACHIEVING SELF-PERFECTION

The most obvious connotation of the mitzvah of Milah is of removing something unwanted. It seems as if the human male was created incomplete, and the job of completing him, by removal of the foreskin, was left to us to carry out through the mitzvah of Milah. This raises a difficulty: why did God create us incomplete? The answer, however, is that God wished to give us the opportunity of completing ourselves. Milah is the first expression, and the only physical manifestation, of this self-completion. The foreskin, which represents a blockage or impediment, is cut away, thereby enabling a revelation of purity and holiness.

1. Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Nedarim 32a – *Orlah* means a barrier standing in the way of a beneficial result.

Man is created uncircumcised. Why is this so? This stems from the *purpose* of man. Man is created with potential and needs to bring it to actualization. The body should parallel the soul. Just as one's soul is created with potential and one needs to actualize it, so too one's body is created with potential. As long as the *orlah* has not been removed, a person cannot attain his potential because the *orlah* is a cover and blockage for a person, which is the meaning of *orlah* every time it comes up [in Scripture], e.g., "The *orlah* of your hearts" (Devarim/Deuteronomy 10:15); and [as Moshe was described as] "*arel sefatayim*," [having a speech impediment] meaning that he could not bring his words to actualization (Ibid.).

האדם נברא ערל. ולמה נברא האדם ערל, אבל דבר זה נמשך אחר עניין האדם, כי אדם הוא בכח ויוצא אל הפועל בענין זה נברא האדם, כי ראוי שיהיה הגוף והנפש שוים ודומים, וכמו שנברא בנפשו בכח ויוצא אל הפועל כך נברא בגופו בכח ג"כ. וכל זמן שלא הוסר הערלה נחשב שהוא אינו בפועל הנגלה, כי הערלה הוא כסוי ואטימה לאדם, כמו שתמצא לשון ערלה בכל מקום על לשון אטימה כמו (דברים י: טו) "ערלת לבבכם" וכן כל לשון ערלה כמו (שמות ו: יב) "ערל שפתיים" כלומר שאינו יכול להוציא הדבור אל הגלוי בפועל.

The foreskin represents a barrier to holiness. Because Adam was as Godly as any human being could ever be,

all aspects of him – even his most basic drives and desires – were used to serve God. Thus, he was created circumcised, physically representing the concept that there was nothing distancing him from God; he used everything within him to serve God.

2. Avot d’Rabbi Natan, 2: 5 – Adam was created circumcised.

Adam was created circumcised, as it says, “And God created Man in His image” (Bereishit 1:27).

אדם הראשון יצא מהול שנאמר (בראשית א: כז)
“ויברא א-להים את האדם בצלמו.”

Once Adam had sinned, the nature of his relationship with God changed. Whereas prior to the sin Adam had been very close to God and everything he did was directed to serve Him, after the sin he was no longer in total control of his natural inclinations and basic desires. Therefore, after the sin, he was no longer circumcised: a layer of flesh – the foreskin – covered his circumcision.

3. Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 38b – After Adam’s sin, his foreskin covered his circumcision.

Adam ... Rabbi Yitzchak said – He pulled his foreskin [to cover his circumcision].

אדם הראשון... רבי יצחק אמר מושך בערלתו היה.

From the fall of Adam until the rise of Avraham the world degenerated. Avraham recognized God’s Presence in the world and taught this recognition to others. He was the first to receive the commandment of circumcision.

4. Rabbi Tzaddok HaKohen, Pri Tzaddik, Amalah Shel Torah 3 – The foreskin is the result of Man’s transgression in Gan Eden.

“God made man upright” (Kohelet/Ecclesiastes 7:29), and he [Adam] was born circumcised, and had he not transgressed he and all his descendants would have remained so. But because of his sin the Sages stated that he “pulled his foreskin,” for through the defilement of the Serpent his foreskin was extended, with the result that all his descendants were born uncircumcised until Avraham, who was close to completing all the holiness attainable by man. In order to rectify the defilement of Adam, man was instructed to perform Brit Milah, which removes that defilement; by doing so he becomes perfect and completes the holiness that he can attain.

והאלהים עשה האדם ישר ונולד מהול ואלו לא חטא היה כן כל זרעו אחריו. אבל כשחטא אמרו דמשוך בערלתו היה כי נמשכה ערלתו על ידי זוהמת הנחש ועל ידי זה נולדו כל זרעו גם כן ערלים עד שבא אברהם אבינו ע"ה ... שהיה קרוב להשלים כל קומת קדושתו ... ולתקן הזוהמא דאדם הראשון נצטווה על המילה שהוא הסרת אותה זוהמא ובוזה יהיה תמים וישתלם קומתו בשלימות.

5. Midrash Tanchuma, Tazria, 5 – Man’s deeds are greater than God’s, since by perfecting the self, man attains completion.

It happened that the wicked Turnus Rufus [a Roman general] asked Rabbi Akiva, “Whose deeds are more beautiful, God’s or man’s?”

He answered, “The deeds of man” ...

[Turnus Rufus] said to him, “Why do you perform circumcision?”

מעשה שישאל טורנוסרופוס הרשע את ר' עקיבא איזו מעשים נאים של הקב"ה או של ב"ו?

א"ל של ב"ו נאים...

א"ל למה אתם מולין?

Rabbi Akiva answered, "I knew that this is what you meant, which is why I responded that the deeds of man are more beautiful than those of God."

Rabbi Akiva brought him stalks of wheat and baked rolls, and said, "These [the stalks] are the work of God, and these [the baked rolls] are the work of people.

"Aren't the rolls nicer than the stalks?"

Turnus Rufus said to him, "If He desires circumcision, why doesn't the infant emerge from his mother's womb already circumcised?"

Rabbi Akiva told him, "God gave the commandments to Israel for the sole purpose of purifying them."

א"ל אני הייתי יודע שעל דבר זה אתה שואלני ולכך הקדמתי ואמרת לי לך שמעשה בני אדם נאים משל הקב"ה.

הביא לו ר"ע שבליים וגלוסקאות א"ל אלו מעשה הקב"ה ואלו מעשה ידי אדם.

א"ל אין אלו נאים יותר מן השבליים?

א"ל טורנוסרופוס, אם הוא חפץ במילה, למה אינו יוצא הולד מהול ממועי אמו?

א"ל ר"ע... לפי שלא נתן הקב"ה את המצוות לישראל אלא לצרף אותם בהם.

The purpose of the mitzvah of Milah is to teach us that we need to perfect ourselves in a spiritual way.

6. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #2 – Reaching completion through our own actions.**

God wanted His chosen people to be complete, and He wanted this completion *to come through man's actions*.

He did not create man perfect from the womb, to indicate that just as the body is to be brought to completion by his actions, so must he perfect his soul through proper conduct.

והעם הנבחר חפץ השם יתברך להשלים תכונתו, ורצה להיות השלמה על ידי האדם,

ולא בראו שלם מבטן, לרמוז אליו כי כאשר תשלום צורת גופו על ידו, כן בידו להשלים צורת נפשו בהכשר פעולותיו.

7. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Da'as Tevunos (The Understanding Heart) #14 – The "first principle" is man's ability to complete himself.**

The first principle, on which the entire construction [of God's direction of the world] stands, is that the Divine Will desired that man should complete himself, and all that was created for him. This itself will be his merit and his reward: his merit, for it emerges that he toils and is constantly occupied with reaching this completion; and when he achieves it, he will reap the benefits of his own toil, and no other. And his reward: for ultimately, he will be perfected, and will take pleasure in goodness for eternity.

היסוד הראשון שעליו עומד כל הבנין הוא, שרצה הרצון העליון שיהיה האדם משלים את עצמו ואת כל הנברא בשבילו, וזה עצמו יהיה זכותו ושכרו. זכותו - לפי שנמצא שהוא מתעסק ויגע להשיג השלמות הזו, וכשישיגהו - יהיה נהנה רק מיגיע כפיו וחלקו מכל עמלו. שכרו - שהרי סוף סוף הוא יהיה המושלם, ויהיה מתענג בטובה לנצח נצחים.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ⇒ Brit Milah represents a person's striving for completion throughout his life. Just as we were created with a superficial imperfection, so too were we created with an internal imperfection. And just as the mitzvah of Milah compels us to remove the foreskin, so too must we dedicate our lives to removing the imperfections within ourselves, uprooting such negative traits as haughtiness, anger, and overindulgence. Just as in the mitzvah of Milah we are enjoined to amend our physical imperfection, so too with matters of the spirit; attaining spiritual perfection is up to us.

SECTION III. BEYOND THE NATURAL

The concept of perfection present in the mitzvah of Milah is closely related to the idea of connecting to that which is beyond nature. Milah involves rising above nature, to achieve perfection by means of free will, and through the Torah and the mitzvot that were given to us. It is for this reason that Milah is performed on the eighth day, indicating a transcendence of the natural order, represented by the number seven. This is also one of the reasons why Milah is performed on the sexual organ, which is the organ in which the most powerful of man's "natural drives" is manifest.

PART A. THE EIGHTH DAY

Why is circumcision performed on the eighth day? Although from a medical perspective, the eighth day of an infant's life is the most preferable because of safety factors and the elevated levels of vitamin K and prothrombin necessary to prevent hemorrhaging, this is not the primary explanation. There is deep significance to the performance of Brit Milah specifically on the eighth day of an infant's life. Ultimately, the Milah is performed at this time since that is the decree of the Torah (Bereishit 17:12).

1. Maharal, Gevuros Hashem, Ch. 40 – The eighth day takes the circumcised child beyond nature.

Milah, which God gave to Israel, is above nature, and therefore it is performed on the eighth day, because the seven days of the Creation are the seven days of nature, for the natural world was created in seven days. The eighth, however, is above nature – for according to the natural course, a child should remain uncircumcised, but Milah is above nature.

המילה שנתן הקב"ה לישראל היא מדריגתה על הטבע, ולפיכך המילה היא בשמיני כי ז' ימי בראשית הם ז' ימים של הטבע, כי בז' ימים נברא עולם הטבע, אבל השמיני הוא על הטבע כי לפי הטבע יש לו להיות ערל שהרי אדם נולד ערל, והמילה היא על הטבע.

2. Tiferet Yisrael, Ch. 2 – The reason for Milah on the eighth day is that mitzvot rise above the natural world.

The reason why Milah is performed on the eighth day is that man, according to nature, was born with a foreskin, which represents the lowliness and deficiency of nature. Milah represents the rectifying of nature, and therefore is performed

וזה טעם מילה בשמיני כי האדם מצד הטבע נברא עם הערלה והוא פחיתות הטבע, והמילה היא תיקון הטבע ולפיכך תיקון הזה הוא ביום השמיני לפי שהוא אחר הטבע שנבראת בששת ימי בראשית.

on the eighth day, since it is beyond the order of nature, which was created during the six days of Creation.

Thus you must know that through the human performance of Divinely commanded mitzvot, a person will achieve a level that is beyond nature. It is fitting that this should be so, because the deeds of man, who has a spiritual aspect, are on a higher level than the natural world, for nature is purely a physical force, whereas mankind is also spiritual.

ומעתה תדע כי המצות שהם הפעולות האלהיות והם מעשה האדם יגיע בהם האדם למדרגה שהוא על הטבע. וראוי שיהיה כך כי מעשה האדם במה שהוא בעל שכל הוא יותר במעלה מן הטבע שהרי הטבע הוא כח חמרי בלבד ואלו האדם הוא שכלי.

3. **Mabit, Beis Elokim, Gate of Prayer, Ch. 1 – Toiling to overcome our nature.**

The purpose of man is only achieved in this world by means of involvement in Torah and good deeds, for “all is in the hand of Heaven apart from the fear of Heaven” (Berachot 33a).

This is what we learn from the fact that Milah is on the eighth day, i.e. that man was not born to follow a “natural” course of life, like the animals, but rather to toil in performing deeds that are directed toward his Maker, and to weaken any force that pulls him toward transgression – which is [represented by] the foreskin. “On the eighth day the foreskin should be severed,” demonstrating that through this he will vanquish the natural order of the world, which is manifest in seven days.

תכלית האדם אינו מושג אלא ע"י טורח ועמל האדם בתורה ובמע"ט בזה העולם כי הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים (ברכות ל"ג).

וזו היא הוראת המילה ביום השמיני ללידתו, לומר שלא נברא האדם להתנהג על טבע העולם כבעלי חיים, אלא לטרוח לפעול פעולותיו מכוונות ליוצרו, ולהחליש בידיו דבר המביאו לידי עבירה, והיא הערלה, "וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו," להורות כי בזה יהיה גובר על טבע העולם, שהם שבעת הימים.

4. **Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim, 3:49 – A child is too weak to be circumcised before seven days have passed.**

The reason why Milah is on the eighth day is because every living thing is very weak when it is born ... till seven days have passed and then it is considered “born” [i.e. strong enough] ... So too with man, after seven days have passed he is circumcised.

והטעם שהמילה בשמיני מפני שכל חי בזמן שנולד חלוש מאד... עד סוף שבעה ימים, ואז ימנה מרואי אויר העולם... וכן האדם אחר שהשלים שבעה ימול.

5. **Dr. S.I. McMillen, None of These Diseases (1984, Old Tappan, NJ: Revell), p. 93 –The safest day to perform circumcision is the eighth.**

We should commend the many hundreds of workers who labored at great expense over a number of years to discover that the safest day to perform circumcision is the eighth. Yet, as we congratulate medical science for this recent finding, we can almost hear the leaves of the Bible rustling. They would like to remind us that four thousand years ago, when God *initiated* circumcision with Avraham ...

Avraham did not pick the eighth day after many centuries of trial-and-error experiments. Neither he nor any of his company from the ancient city of Ur in the Chaldees ever had been circumcised. It was a day picked by the Creator of vitamin K.

PART B: THE SEXUAL/REPRODUCTIVE ORGAN

The place of Milah is specifically the sexual organ. This indicates that the sexual drive, the most powerful of inner drives, should be channeled for love in a relationship and not be used selfishly or abused. The idea of Milah is not to abolish or inhibit the sexual instinct – this is both impossible and undesirable – rather, it is to place the sexual drive, which is essentially impersonal and selfish, in the context of a relationship with God. Even the most powerful of natural instincts must be raised to the level of a mitzvah, i.e. beyond nature.

At the same time, the sexual organ represents the continuation of the nation. Concerning Israel, the concept of physical survival is also beyond nature, as history has well demonstrated.

1. Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 3:46 – Weakening the sexual drive.

With regard to circumcision, one of the reasons for it, in my opinion, is to limit sexual intercourse according to one's ability ... This commandment is viewed as coming to perfect a deficiency in a person's character – to temper his excessive drives.

ה'מילה' אצלי, אחד מטעמים - להמעיט המשגל ולהחליש זה האבר כפי היכולת, עד שימעט במעשה הזה. וכבר חשבו שזאת המילה היא השלמת חסרון ... להשלים חסרון המידות ... תחסר בו התאוה היתרה על הצורך.

For more on this topic see Morasha classes on Love, Dating, and Marriage.

2. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #2 – A sign upon the continuity of the nation.

The root of this mitzvah is because God wanted to establish in the nation whom He chose to be called by His name, a permanent sign on their bodies. This sign is established on the sexual organ because it represents the continuation of the nation.

משרשי מצוה זו, לפי שרצה השם יתברך לקבוע בעם אשר הבדיל להיות נקרא על שמו אות קבוע בגופם....., ונקבע ההבדל בגולת הזהב לפי שהוא סיבה לקיום המין.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ∞ The nation of Israel is not a “natural” people like all others. Its very existence continually defies the laws of nature – the Jewish people should have disappeared long ago. Going “beyond nature,” reflected in the act of Milah, which is applied to the strongest of natural drives, is a guiding light in the life of a Jew.
- ∞ The life of a Jew, which revolves around Torah and mitzvot, is inherently “supernatural,” relating to a Divine plane of existence that enters the natural world through the deeds of Israel. Our task is to cling to this mode of life, to channel our natural urges and overcome our negative traits to achieve self-perfection. At the same time, the Jewish people, on both a national and personal level, merit Divine direction that defies the laws of nature.

SECTION IV. EXCLUSIVELY FOR MALES?

Why is there no equivalent of circumcision for females? Are they not worthy of entering the covenant, like their male counterparts? The answer is that girls enter into the Jewish covenant with God, without the need for any process that parallels Milah. The perfection that males are only able to achieve through the severing of the foreskin is inherent in females.

1. Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 27a – A woman is considered circumcised.

A woman is considered as if she is circumcised.

אשה כמאן דמהילא דמיא.

2. Rabbi Tzaddok HaKohen, Poked Akarim #5 – A Jewish woman is considered as circumcised.

And similarly, about the daughters of Israel, the Sages wrote that “a woman is considered as if she is circumcised,” for even her flesh is considered holy ...

וכן בנות ישראל אמרו (עבודה זרה כ"ז). אשה כמאן
דמהילא דמיא וחשיבא מהול כי גם בשרה נקרא בשר
קודש...

3. Esther Kosofsky, interview in EnlightenNext Magazine, Fall-Winter 1999 – Spiritual sensitivity of women.

Yes, women are viewed differently. Men wear a *yarmulke* [skullcap] on their head as a constant reminder of God's Presence. The Yiddish word *yarmulke* means “fear of heaven” or “fear of the King.” Women don't have to wear one because women have a natural understanding. Similarly, circumcision is a physical sign of a bond between man and God. Women don't need a physical reminder that God expects certain things from them because they are born with a spiritual sensitivity. These explanations come from the Talmud; they weren't just thought up to counteract modern society.

For more on women and Brit Milah see Morasha class on women's issues.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ⇒ Judaism does recognize inherent differences between males and females, which are reflected in various aspects of religious observance. The fact that girls are not circumcised does not imply denigration of the female, but, if anything, declares her virtue. She is considered circumcised even without going through the physical ritual.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

Section I. The Brit of Avraham – the Central Mitzvah

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:23
Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, Sefer HaKuzari 3:7-8
Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed) 3:49
Rabbeinu Bachya, Bereishit 17:13
Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Choreb, II. Edoth 36
Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh, Ch. 4

Section II. Achieving Self-Perfection

Ohr HaChaim, Vayikra 12:3