



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Lech Lecha: Circumcision - Repudiating Fate

At the close of this week's parsha, we read how God instructs Abraham to circumcise himself and his family:

Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. (Gen 17:10)

There are fewer Jewish practices that have been upheld with such devotion. It is one of the strangest rituals, as parents take their fragile 8-day old child and injure him. And yet, Brit Milah is a most primal act of Jewish identity, practiced even by Jews whose observance is otherwise negligible. In the modern world, which values personal choice and autonomy over our bodies, circumcision seems highly anachronistic. In the ancient world too, it was a practice mocked and belittled by general society. So what is the essential idea of this mitzva? Why is this the "everlasting covenant" between God and the Jewish people?

You might discuss:

- Why do we circumcise our children?
- Is it fair for parents to make this choice for a baby?
- What is the meaning of this ritual?
- If this mitzva is performed on males, how do females connect with this covenantal symbol?

The following text is a fascinating record of an ancient conversation that highlights just how contentious and unattractive circumcision was in ancient times. This is a midrashic report of an exchange between the great Rabbi Akiva, and his Roman torturer, Turnus Rufus. Rabbi Akiva was jailed in the course of the Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 CE). The Talmud and Midrash record fascinating philosophical conversations between Rabbi Akiva and the man who subsequently executed him with savage cruelty. Here is that debate:

Turnus Rufus the wicked asked R. Akiva: “Whose works are superior? Those of the Holy One or those of flesh and blood?”

He replied: “Those of flesh and blood are superior.”

... [Turnus Rufus] said to him: “Why are you circumcised?”

... R. Akiva brought him sheaves of wheat and white bread, and said to him: “These are the works of the Holy One, and these are the works of flesh and blood. Are the latter not superior?” He then brought him bundles of flax and garments from Beit She’an, and said to him: “These are the works of the Holy One, and these are made by man. Are the latter not superior?”

Turnus Rufus said to him: “If he [God] desires circumcision, why does a person not exit his mother’s womb circumcised?”

R. Akiva said to him: “And why does he exit with his umbilical cord attached? Does his mother not sever it?”

And why is he not born circumcised? Because the Holy One only gave us the commandments in order to refine us through them, and so said David, “[Every] word of God is refined.” (Midrash Tanhuma. Parashat Tazria)

In a fascinating [article](#), Dr. Ido Hevroni, explains this debate as a debate between the Roman-Hellenistic view of the world, and the Jewish one:

In the eyes of the Hellenist, there is nothing more exalted than that which nature has given us. To him, the supreme art is that of mimesis, or imitation of the natural world: When the philosopher wishes to extol a certain painter, he relates how birds would come to peck at the grapes on the canvas; so, too, does the athlete exhibit his naked body at the Gymnasium in the belief that his is the epitome of the natural form. To the Hellenist, clearly, bodily mutilation is unforgivable.

...The Hellenistic adoration of nature was not limited to the dimension of space; not only was the material world perceived as existing in a static and predetermined system, but so was the fate of man, as well. History for the Greeks was shaped not by human beings, but by the Fates, mythological goddesses of destiny who were never to be disobeyed.

Turnus Rufus did not approve of bodily mutilation. He believed in the beauty of nature. He believed in fate. In response Rabbi Akiva asks his interlocutor to choose: Wheat or bread? Flax or linen? The point of this exercise is clear: The human role is not to be passive; not to accept fate and nature, but rather to transform and refine nature. The example of the umbilical cord takes this further: if anything, altering

creation not only does not violate the laws of nature, but is in fact a basic obligation of existence, a critical element, perhaps, of nature itself.

In the final line, the Midrash says that ultimately, this physical refinement is a metaphor for a higher idea; natural man is unrefined, Man needs to be elevated, and this happens through the observance of mitzvot.

Hevroni concludes:

[The Jewish worldview is] unwilling to accept the world as it is, and is therefore characterized by a restless, uncompromising desire for improvement. The ... severance of the foreskin, the most impulsive organ of the human body, makes a clear statement: Man shares with God the ability to stand outside of and apart from nature. Man is a creation whose horizon of aspirations lies far beyond the satisfaction of his natural impulses. Man wants to change... the world.

Brit Milah is performed on a baby. In this regard, we make choices for our children; Judaism is a religion that believes in passing on a tradition. Beyond the mimetic re-enactment of Abraham's circumcision of Isaac at 8 days old, this tradition impresses upon us, almost from the moment of birth, that it is not the physical that is of the essence, but that which is beyond it. Our legacy is to refine that which nature gives us.

ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Abraham and Sarah start the parsha childless: "And Sarah was barren, she had no child". But they are challenged: "Lech Lecha" – to begin a journey. It is a journey into the unknown; a journey of transformation. At the end of the parsha, their names are changed, and their bodies are transformed - Abraham is circumcised and Sarah's menopause is reversed, returning to fertility. It is only after they experience this Jewish legacy - that life is not about acceptance of fate, but rather transforming and refining the natural and social environment - only then, will they be blessed with the child who will continue the Jewish future.

Shabbat Shalom!