

And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. --- Lev. 12:3

What is the secret that He will only reveal to those who revere Him? This refers to the circumcision. God revealed its mystery only to Abraham of whom it is written, *You revere God* (Gen. 22:12). --- **Midrash Tanchuma, Lekh Lekha** 19

God said to Abraham, “Enough for the servant to become equal to his Master!” This is parable to a King whose beloved was very rich. The King said, “What can I give him? He is already overly wealthy. Therefore, I will gird him with my own adornments.” So God said to Abraham, “Suffice it that you be as Myself.” As it is written, *I will establish My covenant between you and Me* (Gen. 17:2). ---

Tanchuma Yashan

The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory (Ps. 26:7). Why did Solomon call God the King of Glory? Because He assigns glory to those who revere Him. The proof is that one must not ride on the horse or sit on the throne of a mortal king, yet God placed Solomon on His throne as it says: *Then Solomon was placed on the throne of the Lord as king* (I Chron. 29:23). One must not make use of the scepter of a mortal king, but God handed His scepter to Moses, as it says: *And Moses took the rod of God in his hand* (Exod. 4:20). One must not wear the crown of a mortal king, but God will one day place His crown on Messiah, the King. Of what is the crown of God? Of very fine gold (see Song of Songs 5:11), and it says, *You set a crown of fine gold on his head* (Ps. 21:4). One must not put on the robes of a mortal king, but Israel wears the mantle of God. What is the mantle of God? Strength, as it says: *The Lord will give strength unto His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace* (Ps. 29:11). One must not call himself by the name of a mortal king, Caesar or Augustus, for if one will assume His name he will be executed (for treason), yet God called Moses by His very own name, as it says: *Behold, I have set you in God's stead to Pharaoh* (Exod. 7:1). --- **Midrash Shmot Rabbah** 8:1

When God would speak to Abraham prior to the circumcision, he would fall on his face. However, after the circumcision, not only was Abraham able to stand before God, as it says: *And he was still standing*, he was even able to remain

(comfortably) seated. *And God appeared to him at Eilonei Mamrei and he was sitting* (Gen. 18:1). --- Midrash Tanchuma, Lekh Lekha 20

The Hebrew term for circumcision is **La-mool**. However, the word **mool** also means to be "opposite" or "across." In other words, it suggests that we can come face to face with God. This level of mutual respect is the cornerstone of all love. --- Rabbi David Aaron, 2005

Taunting Rabbi Akiva, Turnus Rufus asked: "Whose deeds are nicer, God's or those of human beings?" Rabbi Akiva responded: "Those of people are nicer." Turnus Rufus replied: "But how can that be? Can a human being create the world?" Rabbi Akiva said: "Don't make a comparison with things that people are incapable of doing. Ask about something people can also do." Immediately, Turnus Rufus asked about **brit milah** - circumcision. Rabbi Akiva said: "I knew you were going to ask me about that, and that's why I responded to you that human deeds are greater than those of God. Let me give you an example." Rabbi Akiva brought some stalks of wheat and some cookies and asked rhetorically: "Which of these are the works of God and which were made by people?" And then he asked: "Which are nicer, namely which would you rather eat?" Turnus Rufus then asked: "So if God wanted **brit milah** so much, why aren't boys born circumcised?" Rabbi Akiva replied: "I could just as easily have asked you why people are born with the umbilical cord still attached, but I will answer your question anyway. God gave us **brit milah** to teach us that the commandments are given to us to perfect ourselves." --- Midrash Tanchuma, Tazria 5

This is a very odd conversation, but, as we will see, a deeply significant one. To understand it, we have to go back to the beginning of time.

The Torah tells us that for six days God created the universe and on the seventh He rested, declaring it holy. His last creation, on the sixth day, was humanity: the first man and the first woman. According to the sages, Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit already on that day and were sentenced to exile from the Garden of Eden. However, God delayed the execution of sentence for a day to allow them to spend Shabbat in the garden. As the day came to a close, the humans were about to be sent out into the world in the darkness of night. God took pity on them and showed them how to make light. That is why we light a special candle at Havdalah, not just to mark the end of Shabbat but also to show that we begin the workday week with the light God taught us to make.

The Havdalah candle therefore represents the light of the eighth day - which marks the beginning of human creativity. Just as God began the first day of creation with the words, "Let there be light," so at the start of the eighth day He showed humans how they too could make light. Human creativity is thus conceived in Judaism as parallel to Divine creativity,[1] and its symbol is the eighth day.

That is why the **Mishkan** was inaugurated on the eighth day. As Nechama Leibowitz and others have noted, there is an unmistakable parallelism between the language the Torah uses to describe God's creation of the universe and the Israelites' creation of the Sanctuary. The **Mishkan** was a microcosm - a cosmos in miniature. Thus Genesis begins and Exodus ends with stories of creation, the first by God, the second by the Israelites. The eighth day is when we celebrate the human contribution to creation.

That is also why circumcision takes place on the eighth day. All life, we believe, comes from God. Every human being bears His image and likeness. We see each child as God's gift: *Children are the provision of the Lord; the fruit of the womb, His reward* (Ps. 127:3). Yet it takes a human act - circumcision - to signal that a male Jewish child has entered the covenant. That is why it takes place on the eighth day, to emphasize that the act that symbolizes entry into the covenant is a human one - just as it was when the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai said, *All that the Lord has said, we will do and obey* (Exod. 24:7).

Mutuality and reciprocity mark the special nature of the specific covenant God made, first with Abraham, then with Moses and the Israelites. It is this that differentiates it from the universal covenant God made with Noah and through him with all humanity. That covenant, set out in Genesis 9, involved no human response. Its content was the seven Noahide commands. Its sign was the rainbow. But God asked nothing of Noah, not even his consent. Judaism embodies a unique duality of the universal and the particular. We are all in covenant with God by the mere fact of our humanity. We are bound, all of us, by the basic laws of morality. This is part of what it means to be human.

But to be Jewish is also to be part of a particular covenant of reciprocity with God. God calls. We respond. God begins the work and calls on us to complete it. That is what the act of circumcision represents. God did not cause male children to be born circumcised, said Rabbi Akiva, because He deliberately left this act, this sign of the covenant, to us.

Now we begin to understand the full depth of the conversation between Rabbi Akiva and the Roman governor Tineius Rufus. For the Romans, the Greeks and the ancient world generally, the gods were to be found in nature: the sun, the sea, the sky, the earth and its seasons, the fields and their fertility. In Judaism, God is beyond nature, and his covenant with us takes us beyond nature also. So for us, not everything natural is good. War is natural. Conflict is natural. The violent competition to be the alpha male is natural. Jews - and others inspired by the God of Abraham - believe, as Katherine Hepburn said to Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*, that "Nature, Mr Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above."

The Romans found circumcision strange because it was unnatural. Why not celebrate the human body as God made it? God, said Rabbi Akiva to the Roman governor, values culture, not just nature, the work of humans, not just the work of God. It was this cluster of ideas - that God left creation unfinished so that we could become partners in its completion; that by responding to God's commands we become refined; that God delights in our creativity and helped us along the way by teaching the first humans how to make light - that made Judaism unique in its faith in God's faith in humankind. All of this is implicit in the idea of the eighth day as the day on which God sent humans out into the world to become His partners in the work of creation.

Why is this symbolized in the act of circumcision? Because if Darwin was right, then the most primal of all human instincts is to seek to pass on one's genes to the next generation. That is the strongest force of nature within us. Circumcision symbolizes the idea that there is something higher than nature. Passing on our genes to the next generation should not simply be a blind instinct, a Darwinian drive. The Abrahamic covenant was based on sexual fidelity, the sanctity of marriage, and the consecration of the love that brings new life into the world.[2] It is a rejection of the ethic of the alpha male.

God created physical nature: the nature charted by science. But He asks us to be co-creators, with Him, of human nature. As R. Abraham Mordecai Alter of Ger said. "When God said, 'Let us make man in our image,' to whom was He speaking? To man himself. God said to man, Let us - you and I - make man together." [3] The symbol of that co-creation is the eighth day, the day He helps us begin to create a world of light and love. --- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, ~2015 (abridged)

1. This is also signalled in the Havdalah prayer which mentions five **havdalot**, "distinctions," between sacred and profane, light and darkness, Israel and the nations, Shabbat and the

weekdays, and the final "who distinguishes between sacred and profane." This parallels Genesis 1 in which the verb **P'havdil** - to distinguish, separate - appears five times.

2. That, as I have pointed out elsewhere, is why Genesis does not criticize idolatry but does implicitly criticize, on at least six occasions, the lack of a sexual ethic among the people with whom the patriarchs and their families come into contact.

3. R. Avraham Mordecai Alter of Ger, **Likkutei Yehudah**.

First, we learn the significant law that the *mitzvah* must be performed during the day and not at night . . . And then we learn that even if the eighth day falls out on Shabbat, the **brit milah** is performed. Circumcision at its proper time takes precedence over Shabbat. We have elsewhere showed how "Israel" not only was added to the seven works of the world's creation, as the eighth, but quite actually stands as the visible bearer of the reminder of the Creator of the World that the Sabbath of Creation was meant to be. Israel, accordingly, exists as the "eighth" for the "seventh." Just as the meaning of Israel, the eighth, lies entirely in the keeping of the Sabbath, the seventh, so has the Sabbath (the seventh) as its sole bearer among humanity have Israel (the eighth). Accordingly, by the performance of **brit milah** on the eighth day, the whole Abrahamic bond with God is demonstrated in its mission for the Sabbath. For it is the Sabbath—the principle of God being Master of Humanity and the World which the Sabbath teaches—which is demonstrated by such a sign of the Covenant, as receiving a new recruit to the House of Abraham to be its bearer, keeper and fighter. So it is perfectly understandable that, when the eighth day falls on a Sabbath, the circumcision is nevertheless done on that day. --- Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th c. Germany), Commentary on Leviticus, 323–324

Great is the Shabbat, for the child is not circumcised until he has passed one Shabbat, as it says, "He shall be circumcised on the eighth day." (**Mekhilta Shmot**, 31). It appears then that the purpose for the circumcision being on the eighth day is so that he should pass a Sabbath day before the circumcision. And it is possible that this is because by means of the Sabbath he is sanctified and thus he becomes fit to enter the holiness of Israel through brit milah. --- **Yalkut Yehudah** (Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ginsburg, Russia/America, 1885-1946)

"**Tazria**" is from the root "**zera**," seed. It represents fertility, growth, development. On a broader level, it represents those forces in our lives that help us to be free and strong, that allow us to draw on our talents to be as creative and productive as we possibly can be.

“**Metzora**” includes the word “**tzar**,” narrowness. It represents constriction and limitation. On a broader level, it represents those forces in our lives that stultify our freedom and strength, that restrict our movements and our thoughts.

We read two **parashiyot** this Shabbat, **Tazria** and **Metzora**. Perhaps the underlying message is that these two elements go together. Life is composed of ups and downs, growth spurts and plateaus, creativity and suppression. --- Rabbi Marc Angel, 2015