

## Why is circumcision important?

*In honor of Ezra Bezalel Mizrahi, my fourth grandchild, born February 24, 2014 – 25 Adar Alef 5774.*

### Commandment of circumcision

-On the eighth day the flesh of [a newborn male's] foreskin shall be circumcised. [Lev. 12:3 -- Tazria]

-This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your seed after you. Every male child among you shall be circumcised. And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. And he who is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male child... And the uncircumcised male child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. [Gen. 17:10-14]

### Practice of circumcision

-*Brit milah*: "Covenant of circumcision". Removal of foreskin of penis.

-Performed on eighth day of life, as sign of covenant with God.

-Anytime during daytime, preferably morning. [YD 262:1]

-May be postponed for health reasons. [Shabbat 137a, YD 262:2–263:3]

-No sedation: Must feel pain (except adults).

-Whence, no *shehecheyanu*.

-Followed by a celebratory meal (*seudat mitzvah*).

-If not done: *kareth* (spiritual excision by God from community).

-Father's duty to have son circumcised. [YD 260:1]

-The four steps. Mishna:

-[To circumcise,] we cut the foreskin (*milah*), uncover the corona [*pri'ah* -- splitting the membrane and pulling it down], suck the wound (*metzitzah*), and place a dressing and cummin upon it. [Shabbat 133a]

-Jews who participated nude in ancient Greek games underwent epispasm, a painful operation to remove the signs of circumcision. *Pri'ah* removed that option.

-He who... nullifies the covenant of our father Abraham has no share in the World to Come. [Avot 3:15]

-*Metzitzah b'peh* (oral suction): Controversial, may give baby herpes. Now mostly done through glass tube.

-Universally required for conversion to Judaism.

[Abraham] said [to God]: Before I circumcised myself, men came and joined me [in my new faith]. Will they come and join me when I am circumcised?

God said to him: Abraham, let it be enough for you that I am your God. Let it be enough for you that I am your Patron. And not only for you alone, but let it be enough for My world that I be its God and its Patron. [Gen. R. 46:3]

-If baby is born circumcised, or adult is already circumcised, mohel draws symbolic drop of blood (*hatafat-dam*) where the foreskin would have been. (Shammai's view, not Hillel's -- [Shabbat 135a])

-Circumcized or not, a man born of a Jewish mother is a Jew.

-Why no "sign of the covenant" for women?

-A woman is counted among the circumcised. [Avodah Zarah 27a]

-Women already "perfect"?

-Women's way of showing Jewish status is following niddah laws.

-Sephardic Jews welcome baby girl in *zeved ha-bat* (gift of a daughter) ceremony.

-Outside Judaism

-Muslims do it (at ages 0-15).

-Others do it for health benefits.

- Death rate: 1 in 500,000 in US (Jews and non-Jews).
- How often done: Europe and South America: 20%; Canada: 30%; Africa: 62%; US: 75%; Israel: 100%.

## **Possible reasons for circumcision**

- Because God said so. Midrash:
  - When the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, he went and took counsel with his three friends.
  - Aner said to him: You are already a hundred years old, yet you would inflict this pain upon yourself?
  - Eshkol said to him: Why should you go and make yourself distinguishable to your enemies?'
  - But Mamre said to him: When did [God] not stand by you -- in the fiery furnace, in famine, and in your war with the kings? Will you not obey Him then in this matter!
  - The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You gave him good advice. [Gen. R. 42:8]
- (A *chok*).

-Saadia Gaon: Something is "complete" if it lacks nothing and has nothing that is not needed. The foreskin is not needed, so by amputating it, the man is completed.

-Maimonides: Bodily sign to bind all Jews. Reduces sexual pleasure, thus enhancing spirituality. (Zero-sum game?)

-Talmud: Constant reminder of the covenant and the commandments, even when one is naked:

[King David] entered the bath and saw himself standing naked. He exclaimed: Woe is me that I stand naked without any mitzvot around me!' But, when he reminded himself of the circumcision in his flesh, his mind was set at ease. [Menachot 43b]

-Lubavitcher Rebbe: Continuous mitzvah: even where one cannot do other mitzvot (e.g., the bathroom), one is still doing this mitzvah.

[Likkutei Sichot 3:757ff]

-Sefer ha-Chinuch: Completes by removing redundancy; marks the chosen people, so their body is as different as their soul. The organ chosen for the mark is the one necessary to maintain the species. As man completes the form of his body, so he must complete the form of his soul:

-Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked. [Deut. 10:16]

-And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your seed, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live. [Deut. 30:6]

Circumcision of the heart is restraining desire for material pleasures.

-Zohar: Only the circumcised can fully commune with God.

-Spinoza: Circumcision alone is sufficient to ensure the survival of the Jewish people. [Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (1670), 3:53]

-Promotion of cleanness (hard to clean under foreskin).

-Health benefits derived from studies:

-Reduces incidence of HIV infection. (Heterosexual men in sub-Saharan Africa show 38-66% less incidence over two years).

-Reduces incidence of urinary infections in boys under two.

-Reduces incidence of penile cancer in men, and cervical cancer in women.

-Relieves phimosis.

-No scientific evidence of decrease in penile sensitivity, or harm to sexual function, or reduction in sexual satisfaction. (Hard to measure?)

## **Importance of circumcision**

Talmud: [Ned. 31b-32a]

-Rabbi said: Great is circumcision, for notwithstanding all the precepts that Abraham fulfilled, he was not called perfect until he circumcised himself, as it is written [in reference to circumcision]:

Walk before me and be perfect, and I will make my covenant between me and you... and your seed after

you... Every male child among you shall be circumcised.

[Gen. 17:1-10]

-Another version [says]: Great is circumcision, for it is equal to all [other] commandments of the Torah together, as it is written:

[And the Lord said to Moses, after the giving of the commandments on Mount Sinai: Write these words,] for according to these words [all the commandments I just gave you,] I have made a covenant [through circumcision] with you and with Israel. [Ex. 34:27]

-Another version: Great is circumcision, since, were it not for it, the Holy One blessed be He would not have created the universe, and heaven and earth would not endure, as it is written [in Jeremiah]:

[Thus says the Lord,] Were it not for my covenant... I would not have established the laws of heaven and earth.

[Jer. 33:25]

Also, note that the gematria for *brit* is 612. So *Brit* = the other 612 commandments.

-Mishna: Circumcision may be done on Shabbat. [Shabbat 128b, YD 266:2]  
It overrides Shabbat. ("8th day" means 8th day.)

-Joyful event:

*Lay'hudim haytah orah, ve-simcha, ve-sasson, vikar.*

The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. [Esther 8:16]

Rav Yehudah said: 'Light' means the Torah... 'Gladness' means a Jewish holiday... 'Joy' means circumcision... 'Honor' means tefillin. [Meg. 16b]

-Saves man from Gehenna:

Rabbi Levi said: In the afterlife, Abraham will sit at the entrance to Gehenna, and permit no circumcised Israelite to enter it.

What then will he do to those who have sinned very much? He will remove the foreskin from babies who died before circumcision and set it upon them. [Gen. R. 48:8]

Holy act:

The number seven represents the natural, and the number eight represents the holy. This is why circumcision on the eighth day takes precedence over Shabbat, the seventh day.

(Keli Yakar -- 16th-cent Prague)

## Why so important even to non-observant Jews?

- Last ritual commandment to go. (My roommate at Harvard.)
- Should logically be first to go, because:
  - Painful
  - Done to a BABY
  - Health reasons undecided
  - Dangerous: Nazis and others hunted Jews by looking for signs of circumcision.
- Reform tried at first to abolish it, but failed:
  - Banned it in early nineteenth century ("barbaric").
  - In 1871, reasserted "the supreme importance of circumcision in Judaism".
  - Now trains and certifies hundreds of mohelim.
  - Herzl, founder of Zionism, did not circumcise his son.
- Jew in intermarriage insists sons be circumcised.
- Maintain continuity? Not cutting oneself off?
- Antisemites repeatedly try to ban it, knowing its importance to Jews:
  - Egyptians: Pharaoh [Pirke R. El. 29],
  - Greek: Antiochus Epiphanes [1Macc. 1:48]
    - Led to Maccabean revolt
  - Romans: Hadrian [Historia Augusta, Hadrian, 14.2]
    - Led to Bar Kochba revolt
  - The Soviet Union
  - Some present-day European countries

Shabbat shalom.