

And Avraham circumcised his son, Yitzchak, when he was eight days old, as Hashem had commanded him. (21:4)

For the Jew, *Bris Milah*, circumcision, is much more than a rite of passage; it defines him. This applies to a *halachic bris*, performed by a *bona fide mohel*. It does not apply to the surgical procedure performed by one who is not of the Jewish faith – either by birth or by practice. The Jewish child that has been ritually circumcised shares an inextricable bond with the Almighty that transcends any form of physical ligature. In his commentary to *Chumash*, **Horav Aryeh Leib Heyman, zl**, very beautifully explains this relationship. He notes that the Torah does not mention Avraham *Avinu's* exemplary commitment to performing acts of *chesed*, kindness, until after he had his *bris milah*. Clearly, Avraham had acted kindly to people even before he was circumcised. Apparently, it was not of the same level of significance. The Avraham of pre-*bris* mode was not the same person who became the Patriarch of our People.

Second, the Torah sees fit to connect the destruction of Sodom with Avraham's *bris milah*. We see this in two instances. First, the recuperation from the *bris milah*, Avraham's act of *chesed* with the angels that visited him, and the destruction of Sodom are all juxtaposed upon one another – almost as if they were a single story. Second, the three angels who together visited Avraham indicate that their three-part mission was all inter-connected. Indeed, *Chazal* teach that the reason two angels traveled on to Sodom was that one of the three completed his mission once he delivered the wonderful news concerning the upcoming birth of Yitzchak *Avinu* to Sarah *Imeinu*. This explains why he did not go to Sodom, but the angel whose mission it was to destroy Sodom first visited Avraham. Apparently, the mission to destroy Sodom had its roots and point of commencement with the visit to the ailing Avraham.

In order to explain the relationship between *milah*, the destruction of Sodom and Avraham's commitment to *chesed*, *Rav Heyman* cites the place in which the Torah commands Avraham's descendants to carry out acts of *chesed*. In *Devarim* 28:9, the Torah enjoins us: *V'halachta b'Derachav*, "You shall walk in His ways." This is explained by *Chazal* as the *mitzvah* to perform acts of kindness. The Jew is adjured to be G-d-like by performing *chesed*, just as Hashem performs *chesed*.

When Hashem commanded Avraham concerning the *mitzvah* of *bris milah*, He said, "Walk before Me and be perfect...I will set My covenant between Me and you" (*Bereishis* 17:1,2). The bond of perfection which Avraham achieves through the *bris milah* obligates him to "walk in Hashem's ways" by carrying out acts of loving kindness, as does Hashem. Avraham *Avinu* is linked with Hashem in an eternal bond which transforms his every mundane act of kindness. It is no longer mundane kindness; it is walking in Hashem's footsteps! This idea is reiterated a number of times in *Sefer Devarim*, as Hashem is referred to as *HaKeil Ha'Neeman*, *shomer ha'bris v'hachesed*. *Bris* and *chesed* are equated, indicating that they are inextricably bound with one another.

Thus, the Torah underscores Avraham's exerting himself on the third (and most painful) day after his *bris milah*, to perform the *mitzvah* of *hachnosas orchim*, welcoming wayfarers and reaching out to them. It is as if especially at this point – following his entrance into the holy covenant with Hashem, that the *mitzvah* of *chesed* becomes significant.

Second, now that Avraham was enjoined in the *mitzvah* of doing *chesed* with others, the world (as a result) was introduced to the lofty goals of *chesed*. Kindness became no longer an abstract idea; it became a *mitzvah*, a compelling obligation for every human being to be sensitive to the needs of his fellow. The sins of Sodom became blatantly magnified against the backdrop of this *mitzvah*. They were a people whose entire focus on life was antagonistic to the concept of *chesed*. *Olam chesed yibaneh*, the world is built upon the foundation of *chesed*. To challenge this in the manner that had become the culture of Sodom was to undermine the very underpinnings of Creation. Sodom had to be destroyed!

Furthermore, it would be an egregious error to compare *chesed* as performed by Lot to the *chesed* that his uncle, Avraham, carried out. A person who does not have a *bris*, whose acts of kindness are not carried out as part of the covenantal relationship with Hashem, are just that: kindnesses. They are not *chesed*, as in *bris v'chesed*. What Lot did was out of the kindness of his heart; he was not responding to Hashem's command. Thus, he was prepared to allow the violation of his daughters, even their deaths, as long as he could save his guests. This is subjective kindness, which one performs to satisfy his own needs. Therefore, generations later, Lot produced descendants such as Ammon and Moav, who were prepared to allow the deaths of the Jewish People, when their throats were parched from traveling in the wilderness. Therefore, we find benevolent countries who help refugees, because it is good publicity, yet they turn a blind eye to the plight of those who are not politically attuned with them.

In his commentary to the *Chumash*, **Horav Shimon Schwab, zl**, as quoted by his son, *Rav Meir*, offers a novel interpretation of our opening *pasuk*. He cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* to *Parashas Tetzaveh* which asks: "When is a newborn circumcised?" *Chazal* reply, "A newborn is circumcised when he is eight days old, just as our forefather Yitzchak was circumcised at this age." Why do *Chazal* ask the question, when, in fact, the Torah explicitly says (*Bereishis* 17:12), "At the age of eight days, every male among you shall be circumcised." Furthermore, why do *Chazal* answer this question by citing the fact that Yitzchak was circumcised at the age of eight days? Why not simply quote the *pasuk*?

Rav Schwab explains that the students were not questioning when a father is obligated to circumcise his son. This is evident from the Torah. Their query, however, focuses on the infant/son: When does the "newborn" become circumcised? When does the "person" within the body of the child, when does his Jewish soul become circumcised, become inducted into the ranks of the Jewish People?

The *bris milah* accomplishes two "removals": the physical *orlah*, and the spiritual *orlah*, the *orlas*

ha'lev, foreskin which encloses the heart. Until the physical foreskin is removed, the spiritual foreskin has not yet been perfected. The students asked *Chazal*, "At what point in life does the *bris milah* (which occurs on the eighth day) have an effect on the child's spiritual dimension?" They were under the impression that, until the child has progressed to a certain level of intelligence, he is incapable of achieving spiritual perfection. Therefore, they thought that the *bris*, which is performed on the eight day-old infant, has no immediate spiritual effect on the child.

The Sages explained that this was untrue. They cited the *pasuk* which states that Yitzchak *Avinu* underwent the *bris milah* at the age of eight days. The Torah stresses that Avraham circumcised "his son, Yitzchak," when it could have simply written, "his son," with no specific reference to Yitzchak. The Torah is teaching us that Yitzchak was the holy Patriarch, even at the age of eight days old! The very day of his circumcision, Yitzchak achieved perfection. His *neshamah* had reached a sublime level of sanctity as a result of the *bris milah*. He was now a *ben bris*, a *bona fide* son of the covenant.

We may not disregard the obvious implications of this *dvar* Torah. Those who delay and even go so far as preventing the *bris* from occurring, or who have it performed not in accordance with *halachah*, Jewish law, are delaying their child's spiritual perfection. You might say, "Who cares?" Do these parents want to sever their child's connection with the source of holiness which permeates *Klal Yisrael*? If the answer to that is still, "Who cares?," I ask: What right do they have to deprive their children of their rightful legacy?