

On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (12:3)

Interestingly, the opening lines of *Parshas Tazria* relate to the *Bris Milah* that is to take place on a boy's eighth day of life. This is juxtaposed upon the previous *parsha*, *Shemini*, which concludes with the words, "to distinguish between the contaminated and the pure." The exhortation makes it incumbent upon us to learn how to distinguish between things that appear to be similar, such as between purity and the contamination. **Horav Yehonasan Eibeshutz, zl**, explains that specifically the *mitzvah* of *Milah* distinguishes between *tamei*, ritually impure, and *tahar*, ritually pure, and between the members of the gentile nations and the people of *Klal Yisrael*. As much as some of our assimilated coreligionists may attempt to emulate the nations of the world, a powerful distinction remains between us and them. Prominent among these differences is the *mitzvah* of *Milah*, which physically distinguishes us in appearance, as well as establishes our spiritual distinction. Thus, the Torah underscores the notion that our *havdalah*, separation, is the result of *mitzvas Milah*.

The **Imrei Binyamin** employs this idea to explain why at a *Bris Milah* we declare, *K'sheim she'nichnas l'Bris kein yika'neis l'Torah, u'lechupah u'l'maasim tovim*, "Just as he has been entered into the covenant (of *Milah*), so may he enter into (the study of) Torah, to *chupah*, marriage, and to (the performance of) good deeds." Specifically in this setting – and not at any other event celebrating a *mitzvah* – we make this public declaration. It is only through the performance of this *mitzvah* that one enters into *Bris Olam*, the eternal covenant, a bond that transcends time and place. No other *mitzvah* assures that the individual will fulfill the *mitzvah* throughout his entire life. *Milah* leaves an indelible mark on one's body – a mark that he takes with him to the grave. No other *mitzvah* guarantees this level of commitment, this inexorable bond.

Regrettably, we find individuals who, in later life for whatever reason, have rejected their original life of observance. They have turned their backs on the tradition in which they had been raised, the tradition for which their forebears had sacrificed their very lives. When it comes to the *mitzvah* of *Milah*, they are unable to turn back. It is the one *mitzvah* that once it has been performed – is here to stay for the duration of one's life. Thus, we pray that, as this *mitzvah* will endure forever, so, too, should the infant's commitment to Torah study, marriage and the performance of good deeds be his hallmark for life – never to be separated from them.

The **Chasam Sofer** focuses on the words *yimol b'sar orlaso*, "The flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." In *Sefer Shemos*, the Torah addresses the requirement that everyone was circumcised prior to partaking of the *Korban Pesach*: "Every slave of a man, who was bought for money, you shall circumcise him; then he may eat of it" (*Shemos* 12:44). Likewise, the convert must be circumcised. "No uncircumcised male shall eat it" (*Ibid.* 12:48). The words *b'sar orlaso*, "the flesh of his foreskin," are not mentioned. Only with regard to the Jewish male does the Torah empathize that the flesh of his foreskin is to be circumcised. Why?

The *Chasam Sofer* derives from here that a Jew is only an *aral basar*, physically uncircumcised. An improvement must be made only in his physical essence. Spiritually, he is circumcised. A non-Jew, however, remains an *aral lev*, his heart uncircumcised. It is not merely the skin that must be “repaired”; his heart also continues to remain closed. Once he converts, he removes the innate impediments within him that preclude his ability to commit. Consequently, his acceptance into the congregation of *Yisrael* accompanies his lasting commitment.

A Jew is never isolated from Hashem. This inseparable bond has endured the test of time, and transcended the vicissitudes and travail to which we have been subjected throughout our tumultuous history. The **Kaliver Rebbe, Shlita**, writes that we must do everything within our power to bring Jews back to Hashem – to faith and Torah. This is the only guarantee of our continued existence. A moment’s thought that we arouse within a Jew who has gone amiss of Torah observance can often, in due time, alter the course of all future generations. An acculturated Jew, who had been attending a class of mine for two years without exhibiting any semblance of change, recently did something that renewed my confidence in never giving up on anyone. He entered the room, reached into his coat for his white *yarmulke* and kissed it before putting it on! By this simple act of tendering a kiss to the *yarmulke*, he demonstrated a sense of reverence for *kedushah*, holiness.

The *Kaliver Rebbe* relates an incident which took place following the war. Arriving in Sweden straight from Bergen Belsen, the group of Jewish survivors, which included the *Rebbe*, was relegated to remain in a quarantine camp until it was safe to determine whether they had any contagious diseases. One night, the survivors noticed a group of Jewish women walking, in search of lost relatives. These women were at the mercy of the Swedish government, which treated them humanely, but placed them in jeopardy by “introducing” them to the local gentiles. Having lost everything, and seeking some form of economic and emotional stability, these women were on the verge of consenting to intermarriage.

The *Rebbe* appealed to their good consciences not to turn their backs on their faith. He was unsuccessful in moving them. Finally, the *Rebbe* cried out to them, “My dear sisters! Please remember this one thing: Prior to entering the fire which would consume their bodies, your parents’ last wish was that their surviving children resist temptation and not sell themselves to the devil for any benefit in the world.” As he uttered these words, the women burst into tears. A few days elapsed, and the women traveled to the capital city to apply for visas to *Eretz Yisrael*.

As mentioned earlier, the *mitzvah* of *Bris Milah* is interwoven into the basic fiber of Judaism. It is our badge of honor, our symbol of commitment, regardless of the challenges and obstacles which we must overcome. During the Holocaust, individuals risked their lives to see to it that every Jewish child received a *Bris*. The **Piaseczner Rebbe, zl**, was the last *Chassidische Rebbe* in Warsaw who still functioned as a *Rebbe*. At constant risk to his life, he held a public *tisch*, festive *Shabbos* gathering around the *tisch*, table. (This was, and continues to be, a setting for *chassidic* Jews to gather with their *Rebbe* to hear Torah thoughts, receive guidance and inspiration, and sing

together, rejoicing in religious camaraderie.) Around the *tisch*, he taught Torah and prepared everyone to give up his life for the sanctification of Hashem's Name. He spared no effort to maintain the women's *mikveh*, and often risked his life to circumcise every Jewish male child.

In the winter of 1943, the *Piaseczner* performed a *Bris* on a baby that was already several months old. Everyone who participated in that clandestine *minyán* of men was placing himself in extreme danger, since, by this time, they had to worry equally about the Ghetto regime as they did about the Nazi guards. Any Jew who was caught on the street was likely to be shot and killed on the spot. No questions were asked, for no answers were acceptable. The child's mother, however, stood there sobbing uncontrollably. She could no longer continue seeing her son go uncircumcised. Originally, she had been too frightened to circumcise him, thinking she might leave him with a gentile family for the duration of the war. Now she understood that all she wanted was to keep the *mitzvah* and at least see her son circumcised and entered into the covenant – whatever the cost.

Streams of tears flowed from the eyes of all those assembled at the *Bris*. Their hearts were filled with pain and anguish. Prominently missing was the child's father, who had been taken away to a torture camp near Lublin. Now that his wife worried daily about her husband's fate, she no longer wanted to accept the responsibility of permitting her son to go one more day in his uncircumcised state. With her heart-rending sobs piercing the air, she poured out her plea to the Almighty, "Let my husband live. Wherever he is, allow the merit of this *Bris* to intercede on his behalf, that he be saved from death."

As those assembled heard the mother's bitter sobs, their own tears began to flow with greater urgency. When *Rav Zushia Friedman* started up a *niggun*, lively *chassidic* tune, however, they all joined in – one great song of *Kiddush Hashem*. Their bitter, somber mood was almost instantly transformed from mourning to joy. The death that reigned in the streets, the pall that hung over all of their lives, had no power to prevent these dedicated Jews from joyfully celebrating their Jewishness.