

This is My Covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. (17:10)

In addressing the *mitzvah* of *Bris Milah*, the *Sefer HaChinuch* writes: “One root reason for this precept is that Hashem wished to affix in the people that He set apart to be called by His Name a permanent sign on their bodies to distinguish them physically from the other nations. Just as they are differentiated in their spiritual form, their purpose and way in the world not being the same, their physical differentiation sets them apart as it constitutes the perfection of their physical form. *Hashem Yisborach* desired to refine the physical character of His chosen people, and He wanted this perfection to be effected by man. He did not create man consummate and perfect from the womb in order to allude to him that, just as the perfection of his physical form is carried out by his own hand, so, too, is it in his hand (within his means and power) to complete his spiritual form by the worthiness of his actions.”

How fortunate are we that Hashem, Creator of the Universe, chose us to be His nation and sealed this relationship with an indelible imprint on our bodies. Separation, distinctiveness, is an inherent component of our national DNA. We are different because Hashem wants us to be so. To ensure that we do not lose sight of our unique relationship with Hashem, He commanded us to have an insignia of distinction on our bodies forever. Is it any wonder that the early secularists whose primary goal was to assimilate with the gentile nations, chose *Bris Milah* as one of their first salvos, prohibiting it for its “barbaric” nature? How dare we mutilate a young child? They did not realize then – and continue to this very day with their delusion in thinking – that Jews deep down want something with which to identify. After all is said and done, every Jew, at one point or another, wakes up and realizes that he is, indeed, different. At that moment, the question of Jewish identity hits him squarely between the eyes. For some, it is the *chai* chain or *Magen David*; for others, it is their trip to the Holy Land with a quick guilt stop at the *Kosef*; yet, for others, it is a ride to the cemetery and a diversion down memory lane. All have one common bond: They know that they are Jewish, and they seek some manner through which they can identify.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, relates the story of the man that came before him with another indelible sign on his skin – only this sign was prohibited by the Torah. For all appearances, this young man looked like an Arab, until he pulled up his shirt sleeve exposing a *Magen David* tattooed into his skin! Apparently, this “Arab” was from Egypt. His mother was a Jewish woman, who had been kidnapped by the Arabs as a young girl and forced to embrace Islam. When her son was old enough to understand, she tattooed the Jewish symbol (probably the only one she knew) on the inside of her son’s arm. This would serve as a constant reminder for him that he was Jewish and, thus, not permitted to marry a Muslim girl. If the villagers, in which he lived with his mother, were ever to discover that Jews lived in their midst, they would kill them. For a moment, let us delve into this woman’s *mesiras nefesh*, devotion to the point of self-sacrifice. While this does not mitigate the transgression of tattooing, it does show how far a Jewish woman, albeit totally non-observant,

would go to maintain her son's Jewish identity.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* writes, "Hashem wished that the physical perfection be effected by man... as an allusion to the idea that, just as the perfection of his physical form is carried out by man, so, too, is it in his power, within his means, to complete his spiritual worthiness by the positive actions that he performs." We often come up against a wall, a barrier which we are convinced has been erected to prevent us from achieving our perfection. Rav Zilberstein observes that Hashem has delegated a unique purpose specifically endemic to each individual. Just as each person has his own physical imperfection to be completed, likewise, he has a spiritual one for him alone, an act which only he can perform.

When the *Baal HaTanya* was incarcerated, the superintendent of the prison approached him with a question. (Apparently, this man had a working knowledge of *Chumash*, or, at least, enough to ask a question.) "How is it possible," the superintendent asked, "that G-d asked Adam what appears to be a rhetorical question: *Ayeca*, 'Where are you?' Does G-d not know where every person is located?" The *Rebbe* was acutely aware that the non-Jewish superintendent would not understand the explanations provided by *Rashi* and other commentaries. This gentile required an explanation that was practical and "gentile-friendly."

The *Baal HaTanya* replied, "When G-d asked this question, He was presenting Adam with a classic query, 'Why did you respond to your wife's request to eat of the fruit? Why did you eat it?' You should realize 'where you are,' your talents, strength, goals and objectives in life. In other words, Adam should have focused on from where he came, and why he was here."

Hashem created every individual with his own unique purpose in life – which only he can perform. By allowing someone to convince "me" to do something else, I am failing myself – my purpose, my perfection. How important is it for everyone to take the lesson of the *Baal HaTanya* personally to heart? Rav Zilberstein observes that a person might think that if he entertains his personal aspirations, it might have a negative effect on his spiritual goals. This does not mean that if someone dreams of becoming a football quarterback at the expense of his *ruchniyos*, spirituality, that he is free to make the choice. Certainly not! The question is: If someone is truly interested in carrying out the will of Hashem, with his goal being to achieve distinction in an area that might be realized at the expense of his Torah learning, may he do so? Or is it learning – or nothing?

Rav Zilberstein replies that first and foremost, one must be completely certain (following sincere introspection) that what he wants to do is *l'shem Shomayim*, for the sake of glorifying Heaven. Once he has determined that his goals are not for personal glory or a way to escape the *bais hamedrash*, then he should follow his proclivity.

Rav Zilberstein buttresses this thought with the following story that occurred concerning his grandfather, *Horav Aryeh Levine, zl*. The *Tzaddik* of Yerushalayim, as he was aptly called, was much more than his *nom de plume*. He was the essence of virtue and caring for the downtrodden –

especially those whom others did not necessary take under their wing, such as prisoners and those who were critically ill, whose bodies had deteriorated to the point that left them in a constant state of agonizing pain. Obviously, visiting such people was, for most, quite difficult – but not for *Rav Aryeh*. He provided them with encouragement, comfort and love. Nonetheless, when *Rav Aryeh* realized the toll that his multifarious acts of *chesed*, kindness, took on his available time for learning, he went to ask the advice of a Torah giant of the caliber of the *Leshem*, grandfather of *Horav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, zl*, and the primary mentor of *Kabbalah* to most of the great *Kabbalists* in the Holy Land.

The *Leshem* replied that the primary barometer to determine whether his goal was focused on the proper path and was, thus, permitted to infringe (so to speak) on his learning was: *simchah*; joy. Did he execute all of his acts of *chesed* with utmost joy? Furthermore, did he feel that the world needed him to do these acts of *chesed*. (Is there no one else? In most cases, there was not, nor was there someone who would execute it with the same flair and passion.) If these criterions were met, then it was clear that this was his purpose in life! He should continue!

How important it is to do what one wants and about which he feels good. It is not always about money and prestige. It is about what one enjoys and what he does well.