YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated by Leonard Balanson
in memory of Rose Balanson z”l

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Refua Sheleima to Jonas & Lusia Pasternak of Brooklyn NY

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## PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

## Sicha of Harav Yehuda Amital zt”l

**The Covenant of Circumcision**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

"As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you will be the father of many nations." (*Bereishit* 17:4)

With these words, God connects the *brit mila*, circumcision, with Avraham's destiny as the father of many nations. This is most surprising, since the two ideas seem to contradict one another: defining Avraham as the father of many nations means entrusting him with the responsibility to show the way for the entire world, leading them on the path of uprightness. The covenant of circumcision, in contrast, creates a clear barrier between Avraham and his descendants, on one hand, and the rest of the world, on the other; it sets *Am Yisrael* apart from the other nations. "The father of many nations" expresses universality, while the covenant of circumcision expresses segregation.

"Rabbi Elazar said: What is meant by the verse, ‘And it shall be, at the end of days… that many nations shall go and say, Come, let us go up to God's mountain, to the **house of the God of Yaakov**, [that He may teach us His ways and we shall follow his paths]’ (*Yishayahu* 2:2-3)?

Why specifically 'the God of Yaakov,' not the God of Avraham or Yitzchak? [We will] not [be] like Avraham, in connection with whom it [the future site of the Temple] was called 'a mountain,’ as it is written, 'As it is said to this day: in the mountain God shall appear' (*Bereishit* 22:14); and not as Yitzchak, in connection with whom the text refers to it as 'a field,’ as it is written, 'And Yitzhak went out to meditate in the field' (*Bereishit* 24:63); but rather as Yaakov, who called it 'a house,’ as it is written, 'And he called the name of that place Beit El ['the House of God'] (*Bereishit* 28:19)." (*Pesachim* 88a)

Avraham wanted to influence the entire world. He wanted to be a mountain that could be seen from afar, and he did indeed draw many people after him, bringing them to monotheistic faith. Yitzchak preferred to focus on his more immediate environment, without trying to change the whole world. In so doing he resembled a field, which can be seen only from close by, not from a great distance. Yaakov gave up almost completely on the attempt to be a light for the nations, choosing instead to build and mold his own family – like a house, a home, whose doings and activities cannot be seen at all, unless one enters it.

The verse from Yishayahu cited above chooses Yaakov's approach – that of the home. *Am Yisrael* need not exert itself to the ends of the earth, trying to repair everyone. We need to build a healthy and orderly society, based on the foundations of Torah and the commandments, serving as a model for the other nations to follow. Our efforts should be inwardly-oriented, towards improving and repairing our society, such that our influence on other nations will come about on its own, through our setting an example.

This explains the connection that God draws between the covenant of circumcision and Avraham's destiny to be "the father of many nations": Avraham will be the father and guide for the entire world – and he will achieve this by preserving his uniqueness and values. If *Am Yisrael* takes care not to be influenced by the behavior of the other nations, and concerns itself with the building and development of a just and healthy society, then it will become a model and example for all the nations, and will thereby come to guide the entire world.

There is another way of explaining the connection between the *brit mila* and our influence on the world. A well-known midrash describes a debate between Rabbi Akiva and Turnus Rufus:

"Once the evil [Roman governor] Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, 'Whose deeds are greater - God's or man's?'

He replied, 'Man's deeds are greater.'

Turnus Rufus asked him, 'Is man then capable of creating heaven and earth, or anything like them?'

Rabbi Akiva replied, 'I was not referring to the sphere beyond man's ability, over which he has no control. I refer to those creations of which man is capable.'

He then asked, 'Why do you circumcise yourselves?'

Rabbi Akiva replied, 'I knew that that was the point of your question, and therefore I answered in the first place that man's deeds are greater than God's.' Rabbi Akiva brought him grains of wheat and some bread, and said: 'These grains of wheat are God's handiwork, and the bread is the handiwork of man. Is the latter not greater than the former?'

Turnus Rufus answered him, 'If God wanted you to perform circumcision, why did He not create the child already circumcised while still in the womb?'

Rabbi Akiva answered, 'Why do you not ask the same question concerning the umbilical cord, which remains attached to him and which his mother must cut? In response to your question - the reason why he does not emerge already circumcised is because God gave Israel the commandments in order that they would be purified by performing them. Therefore David wrote, 'Every word of God is pure (or, purified).'" (Tanchuma, *Tazria* 5)

Turnus Rufus expressed the view which maintains that whatever exists in nature is good, and there is no need to try and repair or elevate it. The world is created by God; how, then, can there be anything in it that is not perfect? If God decided to create man with a foreskin, then what gives him the audacity to circumcise himself? Is it not the height of arrogance to suggest that God created a defective world, and that man comes to improve and enhance and elevate it?

Various permutations of this philosophy have arisen over the course of history. The Torah speaks of a form of idolatry that is called "Pe'or," and the Mishna (*Sanhedrin* 60b) explains that it entailed worship in the form of performing one's bodily needs in front of it. How could such a foul and ugly act be considered the proper way to serve any god? The answer is that performing one's needs is a natural function, and the adherents of this form of idolatry believed that any natural phenomenon is worthy of adulation, and not a cause for shame. Nature is spectacular; no part of it may be asserted to be ugly or bad.

In our own era, this view is expressed in the justification of various types of loose and licentious behavior by claiming that if this behavior is natural, it must be good. Along the same lines, there are some people who claim that children should not be "constrained" with too much education and discipline, but rather should be allowed to develop and express themselves naturally.

Rabbi Akiva rejects the philosophy propounded by Turnus Rufus. God created a world that is imperfect, and He has entrusted man with the task of repairing nature, enhancing and elevating it. "All that was created in the six days of Creation, requires action… even man himself requires perfecting" (*Bereishit Rabba* 11, 6). Man's task is to work towards repairing and perfecting nature; he must be able to distinguish between the worthy and unworthy parts of it.

The Gemara (*Sota* 14a) teaches that Moshe was buried opposite Beit Pe'or in order to atone for the debauchery into which Bnei Yisrael were drawn by the Midianites, who worshipped Ba'al Pe'or. Judaism maintains an ongoing war with the philosophy of Pe'or and rejects the claim that every phenomenon in nature is good by definition.

The Rambam, in *Moreh Nevukhim* (III:45), writes that at the time of Avraham, people worshipped the sun, considering it a most perfect natural deity, and therefore oriented their worship towards the east, towards the sunrise. Avraham, in contrast, believed that nature should be repaired and elevated, not worshipped. He therefore asserted that the Divine Presence was to be found in the west, and that prayer should be directed there. Thus, rather than facing the sun, he turned his back on it.

Circumcision, then, relates to the same idea: God created man with a foreskin, leaving it to him to complete and perfect his body through circumcision. Man and nature should not be left as they are; one should aspire and act to repair and improve them. A child should not be left to develop "naturally," lest he follow an undesirable course; rather, he needs education and guidance.

According to *Chazal*, Avraham observed all of the commandments, arriving at them through his own understanding, before the Torah was given. How, then, are we to explain the need to command him explicitly concerning circumcision? Perhaps he was hesitant with regard to this particular mitzva: how can man presume to repair and improve on an act of Divine creation? Would this not represent a questioning of God's actions? For this reason God came and taught him that the world He had created was altogether imperfect, and man's job was to work on improving it and removing its defects.

This also sheds additional light on the connection between circumcision and Avraham's status as the "father of many nations." Circumcision, which is commanded only to *Am Yisrael*, symbolizes one of the messages that Avraham is meant to broadcast to the whole world: Nature includes many defects and deficiencies. Man must not accept Nature as it is, and treat everything in it as though it were good and beautiful. He should regard Nature with reservations, partaking only in those aspects of it that are truly good, and improving the rest.