**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT (VBM)**

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**Laws of Conversion and Circumcision**

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde zt”l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

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**The Stages of *Brit Mila* (2)**

**The *Peria***

**Introduction**

The Mishna (*Shabbat* 133a) presents the stages of ritual circumcision: *mila*, *peria* and *metzitza.* It teaches that all three stages, as well as placing the bandage on the wound, are permitted on *Shabbat*. The two central actions associated with ritual circumcision are *mila*, the removal of the foreskin (*or ha-mila*); and *peria*, uncovering the glans by pulling back and even removing the thin membrane (*or ha-peria*) below the foreskin.

[Last week](https://etzion.org.il/en/stages-brit-mila-1-mila) we discussed the *mila*, i.e., the removal of the prepuce (foreskin). The glans penis is covered by a retractable, double-layered fold, known as the foreskin or the prepuce. The outer layer is smooth muscular tissue; the inner layer is a mucous membrane. After cutting the outer layer, the *mohel* then tears and strips back the remaining inner mucosal lining of the foreskin; this is known as the *peria*.

The Gemara (ibid. 137b) teaches that the *mohel* must remove the “flesh that covers most of the *atara*” (*rov ha-atara*). We noted that the Rishonim disagree as to the definition of the “*atara*,” if it refers to the galns penis or the corona (the protruding ring at the base of the glans), and how much flesh must be removed. In practice, preferably, the *mohel* should remove all flesh covering the corona and the glans penis. However, if there is no flesh covering the majority of the circumference of the corona, or reaching the top portion of the glans, the *brit mila* is valid.

This week we will discuss the act of *peria*, its halakhic significance, and how it is performed by different *mohalim*.

**Source**

The Talmud Yerushalmi (*Shabbat* 19:2, *Yevamot* 8:1) derives *peria* from the language God uses in commanding the mitzva of *brit mila* to Avraham Avinu, "*himol yimol*" (*Bereishit* 17:13). The Yerushalmi explains that the two terms refer to two acts of circumcision, *mila* and *peria*. Similarly, the Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 11:3) explains that Moshe Rabbeinu would perform the *mila*, while Yehoshua would do the *peria*.

The Talmud Bavli (*Yevamot* 71b), however, derives the mitzva of *peria* from the commandment given to Yehoshua to circumcise the Jewish people upon entering the land of Israel.

Rabba bar Yitzchak said that Rav said: The mitzva of uncovering the glans during circumcision was not given to Avraham Avinu.

The command given to Avraham included only the mitzva of circumcision itself, i.e., the removal of the foreskin, but not the uncovering of the glans, i.e., the folding back of the thin membrane that lies under the foreskin.

As it is stated: “At that time the Lord said to Yehoshua: ‘Make yourself knives of flint [and circumcise again the children of Israel a second time]’” (*Yehoshua* 5:2). Perhaps the verse is referring to those who had not been circumcised at all, as it is written: “For all the people who came out were circumcised; but all the people who were born [in the wilderness…had not been circumcised]” (*Yehoshua* 5:5)? But if so, what is the meaning of “circumcise again” [which indicates that they had to be circumcised a second time]? Rather, it is referring to uncovering the glans.

According to this passage, the obligation of *peria* is only given later, at the time of Yehoshua, and therefore those males who were born and circumcised in the wilderness have to undergo the procedure of *peria* as they enter the land. Tosafot (ibid. s.v. *Lo*) understand that this source must be an *asmakhta* (biblical allusion), and that the obligation of *peria* must have been given to Moshe Rabbeinu, as a *halakha le-Moshe mi-Sinai*, as a prophet is not allowed to institute a new *halakha*.

**Nature of the Mitzva**

The Acharonim discuss the nature of the *peria* and its relationship to the *mila*.

Some suggest that, in essence, the revealing of the glans, the *peria*, is the mitzva. The *mila*, the removal of the *or ha-mila* is really only a sort of preparatory stage, enabling the uncovering of the glans, the *peria*. Indeed, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 137b) teaches, “*Mal ve-lo para ke-ilu lo mal*,” namely that whoever does the *mila* without the *peria* is as if he has not even performed the *mila*. Alternatively, we might suggest that the *mila* and the *peria* are simply two parts of the removal of the *orla*.

Some relate this question to a debate regarding whether on Shabbat, the *mila* and *peria* may be divided between two *mohalim*. The *Shulchan Arukh* (*YD* 266:14) rules:

Care should be taken on *Shabbat*that two *mohalim* not be involved in the same circumcision, the one performing the *mila* and the other the *peria*, but rather the one who performs the *mila* should himself perform the *peria*.

The Rema disagrees and permits two *mohalim* to divide the *mila* and *peria* on Shabbat.

The Acharonim (see *Bei’ur Ha-Gra* ad loc. and *Sha’agat Aryeh,* *OC* 29) offer different explanations of the debate. The Maharshal (*Yam shel Shlomo*, *Yevamot* 8:3) relates that the Mahari Bruna (42) agrees with the *Shulchan Arukh*, while he supports the view of the Rema. We might suggest that while the *Shulchan Arukh* believes that the *mila* itself is merely a sort of *hekhsher mitzva*, an act which creates the circumstances to fulfill a commandment, and therefore the person performing the *peria* may not violate the Shabbat, the Rema maintains that they are both considered to be part of the mitzva, and therefore, both the one who does the *mila* and the one who does the *peria* are considered to be engaged in a mitzva which overrides the observance of Shabbat.

These positions appear to be articulated by the Rishonim regarding another issue. The Talmud teaches that although it is generally prohibited to remove *tzara’at* from one’s body, if *tzara’at* is found on a child’s foreskin, the child may be circumcised, as the positive commandment (*mitzvat aseh*) of *brit mila* overrides the negative commandment (*mitzvat lo ta’aseh*) of cutting off *tzara’at*; this principle is known as “*aseh docheh lo ta’aseh*.” The *Nimukei Yosef* (*Bava Metzia* 16a-b) cites the Ran, who maintains that although the *mila* itself is not considered to be a mitzva, since the *mohel* is “involved” in the performance of a mitzva, concluding with the *peria*, the prohibition of removing the *tzara’at* is set aside. R. Yehosef, however, describes the *mila* as “*guf ha-mitzva*” (the body of the commandment) and as “*chatzi ha-mitzva*” (half of the commandment); therefore, it overrides the prohibition.

Some Acharonim suggest that despite the principle mentioned above, “*Mal ve-lo para ke-ilu lo mal*,” after the removal of the *or ha-mila*, a person is no longer considered to be an *arel* and may be permitted to eat *korbanot*; or if one’s son’s or slaves have undergone *mila* but not *peria*, he may be permitted to eat the Pesach offering. See, for example *Kovetz He’arot*, *Yevamot* 64.

These different understanding of *peria* may impact upon the question, mentioned above, regarding whether the *peria* is part of the original commandment given to Avraham Avinu, or a separate, later addition. If the *peria* is simply the removal of more flesh, then it doesn’t seem that a later commandment is necessary to reveal this aspect of the mitzva. If, however, the *peria* qualitatively redefines the mitzva, then it makes sense that this new mitzva is given later, and not to Avraham Avinu.

**The Separation of the *Or Ha-Peria* from the Glans**

Many *mohalim* prefer to loosen or even separate the *or ha-peria* from the glans before the *mila*. They insert a probe, a long, straight, smooth instrument with a blunt tip, through the front of the foreskin, and move it around the outer edge of the glans, in order to separate the membrane from the glans.

For those *mohalim* who perform the *mila* and *peria* in one step, separating the *or ha-peria* from the glans is necessary. Even for those do the *mila* and *peria* in two steps, some find that after separating the membrane from the glans the *peria* can be performed more quickly; this also makes it easier to grasp the remaining membrane, with the *tzitzin*, and peel them below the glans.

Although the widespread use of the probe is relatively recent, and as R. Moshe Feinstein writes in a 1954 responsum (*Iggerot Moshe,* *YD* 1:155) , most *mohalim* use a probe before performing the *mila*, there are numerous indications of this, and similar practices, in halakhic literature.

For example, we find in *Machzor Vitri* (505), authored by a student of Rashi, Rabbeinu Simcha (13th century):

During the eight days [preceding] the circumcision, the child is washed and his foreskin is rubbed, as it is softened by rubbing it, making it easier (*noach*) to perform the *peria*.

Similarly, R. Yosef Molcho (Saloniki, 1692-1768), in his commentary to *Shulchan Arukh*, *Shulchan Gavoah* (*YD* 264: 27), writes:

It is the custom of our forefathers, in the city of Saloniki, that the expert *mohalim* perform the circumcision without the need to do *peria*, not by hand or with an instrument. If the hole in the prepuce is wide enough, they pull down the foreskin from the glans, and the crown protrudes through the hole, as if it were circumcised, and then the foreskin returns to its place on the glans, as it was. And then [the *mohel*] cuts it, and immediately the glans emerges, already uncovered.

It appears that the entire foreskin, including the inner membrane, was pulled below the glans, in order to loosen it, and to enable the *mohel* to cut the foreskin and the *or ha-peria* at once, as we will discuss below. Similarly, R. Ya’akov Emden (1697-1776), in his *Migdal Oz* (*Nachal* 5), describes a “thick and long silver pin” used to probe the area under the foreskin and separate the membrane from the glans.

Some authorities have opposed the use of a probe, either because, in their view, it challenges the “traditional” manner of performing *brit mila*, even if it is done in two steps (see below); or because it causes discomfort to the child before the circumcision, which is usually grounds for delaying a *brit mila* (R. Elyashiv, cited in *Brit Eliyahu,* pg. 73). However, it does not appear that this view has been widely accepted (R. Shelomo Zalman Auerbach, cited in *Nishmat Avraham, YD* 264:2; *Iggerot Moshe,* *YD* 1:155).

Some Acharonim question whether probing is permitted on Shabbat. Since probing is not actually part of the *brit* *mila* itself, but rather a preparatory act, it would not be permitted to cause bleeding, which is prohibited on Shabbat, outside of the mitzva itself. The *Minchat Yitzchak* (8:90:1), for example, opposes using a probe on Shabbat. Most Poskim, including R. Moshe Feinstein (ibid.), R. Shelomo Zalman Auerbach (*Nishmat Avraham*, *YD* 264:2) and R. Ovadya Yosef (*Yechaveh Da’at* 6:53), et al. disagree and permit using a probe on *Shabbat*, as it does not inevitably cause bleeding (*pesik reisheih*). This appears to depend upon the speed and skill of the *mohel*. Some even suggest that if the probing is done immediately before the *mila* and *peria*, it is considered to be part of the mitzva and is permitted on Shabbat.

***Mila* and *Peria* — One or Two Steps**

As described previously, the glans is covered by a retractable, double-layered fold, known as the foreskin or the prepuce. The outer layer is smooth muscle tissue; the inner layer is a mucous membrane. The *mohel* cuts the outer layer with a blade; this act is known as *mila*. There are different customs regarding the removal of the inner layer, known as *peria*. These different customs are often described as the one-step method or the two-step method.

The two-step method is described by the Rambam (*Hilkhot Mila* 2:2). He writes that the *peria* is performed after the *mila*; and with the fingernails, not with a blade.

How is the circumcision performed? The foreskin that covers the crown of the penis is cut off until the entire crown is revealed. [This step is referred to as *mila*.] Afterwards, the soft membrane that is beneath the skin should be split along the midline with one's nails and peeled back to either side until the flesh of the crown is revealed. [This step is referred to as *peria*.]

This description appears in the *Shulchan Arukh* (*YD* 264:3) as well. Interestingly, based upon the verse (*Tehillim* 35:10) states: “All my limbs shall say, O Lord, who is like You,” the Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni,* *Tehillim* 35, 723) relates that King David said to God, “I praise you will all my limbs, and perform *mitzvot* with each of them.” Regarding the fingernails, he says, “They are used for *peria* or *melikat ha-of* (beheading a bird offering), and together I look at them towards the *Havdala* light.”

The one-step method is first described by Rav Hai Gaon (*Teshuvot Ha-Geonim*, *Sha’arei Tzedek* 3:5:6). He describes how the outer and inner foreskin are removed together.

And you should know that this has been the practice in Bavel for many years. The *mohel* pulls back the foreskin and detaches the inner membrane with his hand… And it is held with the foreskin, and cut together…

It is improper to cut twice; rather, the *mila* and peria should be performed together at once. When they are both done, he has fulfilled the mitzva.

R. Moshe Feinstein (*Iggerot Moshe,* *YD* 1:155) claims that this practice is also described by the Yerushalmi (*Shabbat* 19:6). In addition, as mentioned above, R. Yosef Molcho records that this was the practice of the “expert *mohalim*” in Saloniki. R. Yishmael Cohen (Italy, 18th century), in his *Zera Emet* (3:132) also records this practice.

Despite the early references to this method, the two-step process has been the method most commonly practiced until recent times. In modern *mila* procedures, the *mohel* will use a hemostat to grasp both the outer foreskin and the inner membrane, then pull them both through the shield and cut them together.

There are numerous, significant differences between these two methods. R. Moshe Pirutinsky, in his *Sefer Ha-brit* (page 206), describes the benefits of the one-step method. He explains that the one-step method is a quicker procedure, which causes less bleeding and heals quicker. In addition, when the one-step method is employed, the entire inner membrane is cut and removed, and it is not pulled back and left to grow together with the remaining part of the foreskin. This lessens the fear that the inner membrane may not remain below the glans and may return and cover the glans, which at times may necessitate a second procedure.

Some Acharonim (see *Minchat Yitzchak* 9:100) object to this one-step method, as in their eyes, it constitutes a change from the traditional manner in which circumcisions have been performed. Similarly, R. Wosner (*Shevet Ha-Levi* 4:133; see also R. Shelomo Zalman Auerbach, cited in *Nishmat Avraham,* *YD* 264:4, who views this as a case of doubt) notes that the view of Rav Hai Gaon (above) is not cited by the *Shulchan Arukh* or other early authorities. R. Ya’akov Ettlinger (*Binyan Tziyon* 88) invokes the *midrash* cited above as a defense for the two-step method.

On the other hand, R. Moshe Feinstein (*Iggerot Moshe* *YD* 1:155, 4:40) writes that since the goal of performing the *mila* and the *peria* is to uncover the glans, it does not matter which method is employed. Although he insists that there is no halakhic difference between the methods, he recommends, in order to fulfill the words of the *midrash*, to leave behind a bit of membrane which can be pulled back with the fingernail.

***Mila* and *Peria* in Jewish Thought**

Beyond the physical characteristics of the *orla* and the *or ha-peria*, and beyond the analysis of the proper method to remove them and to reveal the glans, the *mila* and *peria* have intrigued Jewish thinkers for hundreds of years. For example, R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1820-1892), in his commentary to the Torah, *Beit Ha-Levi* (*Parashat Lekh Lekha*), explains:

The Rishonim discuss [whether of the mitzva of *mila*] is to be viewed as the removal of the negative qualities of the *orla*, which is a blemish on a Jewish person removed through the act of *mila;* or whether [the *brit* *mila*] adds a dimension of *kedusha* (sanctity) to the Jewish person. In truth, [*brit* *mila*] has both of these characteristic together…

It appears that these two aspects are [expressed through] the *mila* and the *peria*. The *mila* is the removals of the *orla*, and with this act he removes himself from the non-Jews who are referred to as *arelim;* and by cutting [the foreskin] he separates himself from them. Then comes the *peria*, which is a sign of the *brit kodesh* (holy covenant) to connect to and be sanctified by the sanctity of the Jewish people, to be one nation.

This idea is expressed by the *Tzemach Tzedek* (*Shabbat* 19) as well, who describes *mila* and *peria* as “two levels” (*shtei madreigot*): a) removal of that which is bad, and b) revealing and bringing the glans closer to sanctity. We will encounter similar ideas when we discuss the role of *mila* and *tevila* (immersion) for a convert or *hagala* (submersion in boiling water) and *tevila* for vessels acquired from non-Jews.

Next week we will discuss the use of shields and clamps during the circumcision.