YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT (VBM)

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**Laws of Conversion and Circumcision**

**Rav David Brofsky**

***Shalom Zakhar***

Alongside the various preparations for the child's circumcision, it is customary in certain communities to hold a festive meal of sorts before the *brit* *mila*. In Ashkenazic communities, a "*Shalom Zakhar*" is held on Friday night before the circumcision. In Sephardic communities, a “*Brit Yitzchak*” is often held the night before the *brit*. Some have the custom of holding a “*Vach Nacht*.” This week, we will discuss the origins and reasons for custom of holding a *shalom zakhar*.

**Source**

It is customary in the Asheknazic community to invite the community to a small meal on the Friday night preceding a *brit mila*. This gathering, often called a "*shalom zakhar*," is referred to in two early medieval sources (*Rishonim*).

The first mention appears in the Orchot Chaim, authored by R. Aharon Ha-Kohen fof Provence (early 14th century). In his *Hilkhot Mila*, he writes:

It is customary in all of our communities that one who circumcises his son or accompanies his son or daughter to the *chuppa* reconciles with those who dislike him and invites them to eat and rejoice with him, in order that they will bless him and not curse him. The community also gathers, the elders, women and children, on the Sabbath eve and on the eight night.

The Orchot Chaim does not cite a reason for this festive gathering held before a *brit mila* and a wedding.

R. Yisrael Isserlin (1390-1460, Austria), in his Terumat Ha-Deshen (269), also mentions this custom to gather and eat (*le-t'om*) on the Friday night before the *brit*. He suggests that this custom is based on a passage in the Talmud:

Rav and Shmuel and R. Asi once happened to be present at a house where a celebration was being held marking the passage of a week of a newborn son (*shavu'a ha-ben*). And some say it was a house where a celebration was being held marking the redemption of a son (*yeshu'a* *ha-ben*). (*Bava Kama* 80a)

While the meal marking the passage of a week most likely refers to the festive meal held at a *brit mila*, the *Rishonim* offer different interpretations of the phrase "*yeshu'a ha-ben*."

Rashi (s.v. *yeshu'a*) insists that the *gemara* refers to a festive meal held in honor of a *pidyon ha-ben*, the redemption of the firstborn son held thirty days after birth. Tosafot (s.v. *le-vei*), however, cites Rabbeinu Chananel,[[1]](#footnote-1) who explains:

A male child was born, and since this newborn was saved and [safely] escaped his mother's womb … the phrase "redemption" (*yeshu'a*) is used, and it was customary to hold a meal.

Rabbeinu Chananel does not specify when this meal was held.

The Terumat Ha-Deshen asserts that the custom to hold a festive gathering on Friday night is based on this early Talmudic practice. R. Shlomo Luria (Yam shel Shlomo, *Bava Kama* 37) explains that according to Rabbeinu Chananel, the meal "publicizes the miracle the birth of a male and female." He too believes that the custom to hold a festive gathering on Friday night, "when people are in their homes," is the same meal the Talmud refers to according to Rabbeinu Chananel's interpretation.

This custom is cited by the Rema (YD 265:12), who writes: "Furthermore, it is customary to hold a meal (*se'uda u'mishte*) on the Sabbath eve after a male child is born; [the community] gathers with the child to eat (*le-t'om*) there, and this meal is considered to be a *se'udat mitzva*."

**Reasons for the *Shalom Zakhar***

In addition to the reason mentioned by the Terumat Ha-Deshen, and later by the Maharshal – i.e., that the *shalom zakhar* celebrates the miracle of birth – the *Acharonim* offer a number of other reasons.

The Taz (YD 265:13) cites the Derisha, who relates the *shalom zakhar* to a famous Talmudic passage. The *gemara* (*Nida* 30b) relates that when a child is born, an angel "slaps it on its mouth and causes it to forget all the Torah [that he learned in utero]." The community gathers to comfort the child, who is "mourning" the forgotten Torah. Indeed, the *brit mila* is only held after the newborn child completes seven days of mourning. Based on this reason, R. Yaakov Emden explains, in his Migdal Oz (5), that the phrase "*shalom zakhar*" is derived from the word "*zakhar*," i.e., remember. This is most appropriate on Shabbat, regarding which the Torah commands "*zakhor*."

The Taz (YD 265) cites another explanation, based on a *midrash* (Midrash Rabba, *Parashat Emor* 27:2). He explains that just as an animal can only be offered as a korban after it has experienced a Shabbat (i.e., an animal must be at least a week old before it can be sacrificed), so too a child must experience a Shabbat before he is circumcised. We have explored the idea that circumcision is viewed as a type of sacrifice elsewhere.

A number of *Acharonim* (Dagul Mervava, YD 178; Chatam Sofer, Bava Kama 80a) question why a *shalom zakhar* is not held after the birth of a girl. This may depend upon whether the festive meal relates to the *brit mila*, to the Torah he has forgotten (which women are not obligated to study), or to the birth itself. Interestingly, R. Reuvein Margolies (1889 – 1971), in his Margoliot Ha-Yam (*Sanhedrin* 32b), suggests that in the times of the Talmud, a festive meal was held after the birth of a daughter as well.

The Terumat Ha-Deshen, cited above, asserts that the festive meal held at the *shalom zakhar* is considered a *se'udat mitzva*. The Rema concurs. The Chavot Yair (70), however, questions this ruling, as it is not customary to eat a proper meal.

Some cite a custom to eat lentils at the *shalom zakhar*, which are traditionally served to a mourner, as the newborn is mourning the Torah which he forgot (as we saw above). Nowadays, many serve "*arbis*" (chickpeas) instead.

Next week, we will discuss other customs observed during the week before the *brit mila*.

1. Although our text of Tosafot attributes this view to Rabbeinu Tam (the initials *reish tav*), others attest that the correct attribution should be to Rabbeinu Chananel (the initials *reish chet*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)