YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

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**Dedicated to Rachel Roytberg z”l  
whose yahrzeit falls on the first of Nissan**

**by Family Reuff**

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**PARASHAT TAZRIA**

**"And on the Eighth Day, the Flesh of His Foreskin Shall be Circumcised"**

**I. Circumcision in our *parasha* and elsewhere**

Our *parasha* opens with a commandment about the days of impurity and purity for a woman after childbirth:

Speak to the children of Israel, saying: If a woman produces offspring and gives birth to a son, she shall be impure for seven days; as in the days of the impurity of her menstruation] shall she be impure. (*Vayikra* 12:2)

But before the Torah finishes discussing the days of impurity and purity, it inserts another commandment:

And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (*Vayikra* 12:3)

This is not the first time we encounter the commandment of circumcision. Already in *Parashat* *Lekh-Lekha*, Avraham Avinu was commanded to circumcise himself. *Parashat Lekh-Lekha* also contains the *halakha* that circumcision takes place on the eighth day:

And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations. (*Bereishit* 17:12)

Indeed, Avraham circumcised his son Yitzchak when he was eight days old, "as God had commanded him" (*Bereishit* 21:4). Why, then, does the Torah repeat the mitzvaof circumcision on the eighth day here? We often find repetition of *mitzvot* in the book of *Devarim*, which is known as *Mishneh Torah –* "repetition of the Torah" – but there, Moshe is the speaker, repeating God’s commandments. This explanation does not apply in our case, in the book of *Vayikra,* when it is God Himself who commands once again about circumcision. What does this repetition come to teach us?

This is how the *Or Ha-Chaim* begins his commentary to these verses:

We must understand: Why was it necessary to command about this? Surely the Torah already stated in *Parashat Lekh-Lekha* all the details of the laws of circumcision! (*Or Ha-Chaim* 12:3)

This question actually seems to be addressed already in the Gemara in tractate *Sanhedrin* (59a). The Gemara asks about the meaning of a mitzvathat was given before the revelation at Mount Sinai and then given again after the revelation. The Gemara initially assumes that *mitzvot* that were stated before the revelation at Mount Sinai, that is, before the selection of Israel as a people, were stated to all of mankind, while the commandments that were given afterwards, at Sinai, were given exclusively and personally to Israel:

Every precept which was given to the sons of Noach and repeated at Sinai was meant for both [the sons of Noach and Israelites]. (*Sanhedrin* 59a)

The Gemara then raises an objection from the mitzvaof circumcision, which was stated long before Sinai but is understood to have been given exclusively to the people of Israel, and was even intended to distinguish them from the rest of the nations:

But surely circumcision, which was stated to sons of Noach, as it is written: "You shall keep my covenant" (*Bereishit* 17:9), and repeated at Sinai, "And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised" (*Vayikra* 12:3), was meant for Israel, and not for the sons of Noach! (Ibid. 59b)

The Gemara replies that the commandment of circumcision was repeated for a different reason:

That repetition was inserted to permit circumcision on Shabbat, by interpreting, "on the day" [i.e., always on the eighth day, whichever it is] – and even on Shabbat. (Ibid.)

This explanation finds a significant difference between the two commands. While in the first commandment, in the book of *Bereishit*, a time was set for circumcision, the commandment in the book of *Vayikra* adds that this timing sets aside the prohibitions of Shabbat, based on the extraneous word "day."[[1]](#footnote-1)

Of course, the *Or Ha-Chaim* was familiar with the Gemara in *Sanhedrin*, and slightly emends his question in light of it:

If it was to tell us was that the rite of circumcision must be performed by day and not by night, or that it must be performed even on Shabbat, as the Rabbis, of blessed memory, expounded…, it is difficult: Why did it not include the details of these laws there in the section dealing with circumcision that was written in *Parashat Lekh-Lekha*? (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Even if we accept that certain novel laws are taught in our *parasha*, we can still ask why they were not written in the book of *Bereishit,* when the commandment was first stated, but were instead included in a separate section here.

**II. The connection between the impurity of a woman after childbirth and circumcision**

The *Or Ha-Chaim* offers several answers to this question. One of the central ideas to emerge from his words is that there is significance to the juxtaposition between the mitzvaof circumcision and the impurity of a woman after childbirth. He sees a connection between these two commandments on several levels; we will start with the halakhic layer, which the *Or Ha-Chaim* does not mention.

The Gemara in tractate *Shabbat* cites the opinion of Rav Assi, who sees a practical halakhic consequence to the connection between the two *mitzvot* that open our *parasha*:

Rav Assi said: One whose mother is impure with the impurity of childbirth must be circumcised at eight [days], but one whose mother is not impure with the impurity of childbirth is not circumcised on the eighth day, because it is stated: "If a woman conceives and gives birth to a son, she shall be impure for seven days… And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised."

Abaye said to him: Let the early generations prove [the reverse], where the mother was not impure with the impurity of childbirth, and yet circumcision was on the eighth day!

He said to him: The Torah was given, and a new law was decreed.

But that is not so, for it was stated: If one is [born by] emerging through the [abdominal] wall [i.e., cesarean section], or has two foreskins – Rav Huna and Rav Chiyya bar Rav [disagree]: One said: We desecrate Shabbat for them, while the other said: We do not desecrate Shabbat for them. Thus, they differ only concerning the desecration of Shabbat for them – but we certainly circumcise them on the eighth day!

One is dependent on the other. (*Shabbat* 135a)

Rav Assi argues that the whole law of circumcision on the eighth day applies only to one who was born naturally, whose mother is thus subject to the impurity of childbirth. However, if a baby was born not in the regular manner, but by way of cesarean section, his mother is not impure with the impurity of childbirth, and therefore he is not circumcised at eight days. The *Rishonim* (see Rosh and Ran, ad loc.) and the *poskim* (see *Shulchan Arukh Yoreh De'a* 266:10) are uncertain as to whether or not the *halakha* should be decided in accordance with Rav Assi, and thus we are stringent in both directions: on the one hand, a child born by way of cesarean section is circumcised on the eighth day, but on the other hand, this is not done on Shabbat.

Thus, we see that there is basis for saying that the two *mitzvot* are connected in an essential way, and not merely circumstantially. The *Or Ha-Chaim*, as mentioned, does not mention this connection; he chooses to discuss other connections between the impurity of a woman after childbirth and circumcision on the eighth day. We will try to understand the connections noted by the *Or Ha-Chaim*, and understand in a more essential manner the foundation and basis of Rav Assi's position – why would a baby not be circumcised on the eight day in a case where his mother is not subject to the impurity of childbirth?

**III. The world is happy while the father and mother are sad**

The *Or Ha-Chaim* turns to a different Gemara, in which these two *mitzvot* are intertwined in a more conceptual way:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was asked by his disciples… Why did the Torah ordain circumcision on the eighth day? In order that all the guests not be happy while the child's father and mother are sad. (*Nidda* 31b)

According to this, the connection between the *mitzvot* is clear: as long as the mother is impure, the parents' happiness is incomplete, and therefore we delay the circumcision. What, then, is the status of the child before the eighth day?

Fundamentally, according to the Gemara in *Nidda*, there is nothing about the baby that prevents him from being circumcised before the eighth day. The whole reason for "postponing" the circumcision is the presence of an obstacle to his parents’ complete joy during that first week. In principle, then, in a situation where there is no sadness for the child's father and mother, the child could be circumcised already on the first day. This is how Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger, in his *Arukh La-ner* on *Nidda*,understood the issue:

In my humble opinion, we could have simply explained that the difficulty here is why we circumcise on the eighth day and not immediately on the day that the child is born. For in a case where there is no mitzvaof circumcision on the eighth day, e.g., one who "was born in the house" before his mother immersed herself in a *mikveh*, or a gentile who was converted before he was eight days old, and according to one opinion, one who was [born by] emerging through the [abdominal] wall [i.e., cesarean section], he is in fact circumcised on the first day, as we said in *Shabbat*. Therefore, the Gemara asks, why did the Torah ordain circumcision on the eighth day, and not immediately on the day the child is born? To this it answers, so that his father and mother not be sad. (*Arukh La-ner*, ad loc.)

Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger offers here a list of cases in which the mother does not become impure with the impurity of childbirth, and therefore the circumcision could be performed on the first day. One of them is a child who was born by way of a cesarean section, according to Rav Assi. Thus, according to the *Arukh La-ner*, there is no problem in principle with circumcising before the eighth day, and the whole delay in performing the circumcision stems from a purely "technical" necessity – that the child's father and mother should celebrate the circumcision with joy.

**IV. The completion of the infant's creation**

In three other approaches, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains circumcision on the eighth day as a matter of principle, not just circumstantial.

The first approach does not relate at all to the impurity of a woman after childbirth:

*Chazal* said: “Why does the baby have to be circumcised on the eighth day after its birth? Because God exercised His mercy on the baby, [to wait] until it has strength. And just as God exercises His mercy on human beings, so is His mercy upon animals, as it is stated: ‘But from the eighth day and on [a newborn animal may leave its mother and be acceptable as an offering]’ (*Vayikra* 22:27).” (*Devarim Rabba* 6, 1)

But we must understand: Who revealed this secret [i.e., how do we know], that a baby attains strength eight days after its birth, and not before or afterwards?

It seems that the strength of which they speak is what is stated in the *Zohar* (*Tazria* 44a, *Emor* 91b), that it is so he will experience Shabbat, which provides him with a life-sustaining force, after which he is fit to survive.

You will [also] find that they said (*Bereishit Rabba* 6) that prior to the first Shabbat, the world was weak and unstable. Once Shabbat came, it became stronger and more stable. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Vayikra* 9:3)

According to this explanation, the baby, like a newborn animal, has not fully completed his birth until the eighth day, and we cannot circumcise him before his creation is complete.

**V. Removing the taint of sin**

In a famous *midrash*, Turnus Rufus asks Rabbi Akiva: "Whose actions are more pleasing? Those of the Holy One, blessed be He, or those of flesh and blood?" (*Tanchuma Tazria* 5). Turnus Rufus means to object to the act of circumcision, which seems to involve human interference in creation, and Rabbi Akiva offers two responses, as the *Or Ha-Chaim* quotes:

Rabbi Akiva brought ears of corn and cakes, and said to him: The former are the work of the Holy One, blessed be He, whereas the latter are the work of flesh and blood. Are not the latter more pleasing than the former?

Turnus Rufus said to him: If God desires circumcision, why did He not create man without a foreskin?

He said to him: The Holy One, blessed be He, gave the *mitzvot* to Israel only in order to refine them, as it is written: “The word of the Lord is refining” (*Tehillim* 18:31). (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

In his first answer, which offers a metaphor regarding ears of corn and the cakes, Rabbi Akiva argues that in fact, man's actions complete the creation. However, in his second answer, he indicates that man's actions have no meaning. God wanted them only in order to refine Israel, to test them and challenge them, in order to create a commitment on their part to Him.

Even though the two answers seem to contradict each other, the *Or Ha-Chaim* suggests that they be seen as complementary. He first explains the essence of the mitzvaof circumcision and the removal of the foreskin:

I will enlighten you regarding God’s word, in accordance with what we have learned from *Chazal*,that the foreskin represents evil, its very presence drawing attention to hidden characteristics. Man's entire body is merely a sheath for the soul, and the sheath reveals information concerning what is inside it. God told the Jewish people that by removing the visible evidence of evil within them, i.e. the foreskin, they would be able to diminish the power of evil that the foreskin symbolizes. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The word *orla*, "foreskin," is used in the Bible not only as a covering for the male organ, but also as an expression for the evil inclination that covers the heart:

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked. (*Devarim* 10:16)

Indeed, this is also the role of the foreskin in the male organ – it covers the innerness in a physiological sense, and symbolically, also in the aspect of the soul. We find a similar idea in the Rambam's *Guide for the Perplexed*. The Rambam argues that the purpose of removing the foreskin is to decrease man's sexual drive:

This commandment was not given to complete a deficiency in [physical] creation, but as a means for perfecting deficiencies in character traits. The bodily injury caused to that organ is exactly the intent; it does not interrupt any vital function, nor does it impact reproduction. Circumcision simply counteracts excessive lust – for there is no doubt that circumcision weakens the power of sexual excitement, and sometimes lessens natural enjoyment; the organ necessarily becomes weaker when it loses blood and is deprived of its covering from the beginning. (*Guide for the Perplexed* III, 49)

Rambam describes in a completely physiological way what the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains in spiritual and metaphorical terms – that removing the foreskin is intended to weaken a person's evil inclination and give him greater access to his inner self. Thus, the person will be able to focus on what is most important, and not on what is secondary to it. This became necessary after Adam’s sin introduced a change within him:

It is a well-known fact that Adam was created in perfect manner, in the dimension of holiness lacking any particle of impurity; as a result, his character was void of the dimension of a foreskin. But as a result of his sin, he pulled on his foreskin, and the dimension of a foreskin was born in him. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Adam's sin changed all of creation; it brought the reality of sin into the world, the reality of a foreskin and a covering (even in a physical sense, in Adam's and Chava's garments). Before that, there was no difference between inside and outside; the taste of the tree was like the taste of the fruit (see *Berakhot* 36b, *Yalkut Shimoni Bereishit* 1:8, and *Orot Ha-Teshuva* 6, 7). But after the sin, the concept of "*kelipot*," the outer part that covers the inner part, was introduced into the world – beginning with man, in the form of the foreskin (as is stated in the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* that the *Or Ha-Chaim* cites)*.*

This change also took place in the first woman, in connection with the punishment of "in pain you shall bring forth children" (*Bereishit* 3:16), as the *Or Ha-Chaim* writes:

This also resulted in impurity gaining power over the woman, as is reflected in her menstrual blood, for this is the reason of its existence, as the Rabbis said (*Eiruvin* 100b; *Ketubot* 10b). (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The same is true about wheat, which was cursed together with man:

Proof of all this is that man cannot derive pleasure from grain until he performs many labors before and after, in the number of ten as they are arranged in chapter *Kelal Gadol* (*Shabbat* 73b), until baking, corresponding to the ten curses with which the ground was cursed, as stated in the *Zohar* (*Pinchas* 243). Therefore, when God will remove the spirit of impurity from the land – as it is written: "And I will cause the spirit of impurity to pass from the land" (*Zekharya* 13:2), alluding to the land itself – then the land will bring forth cakes. That is to say, none of the ten labors will be necessary, as the land itself will bring forth cakes, ready to eat. This is what Rabbi Akiva had in mind when he spoke of ears of corn and cakes. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

What we have here is a novel perspective on the world after the sin – a world that is no longer pure and perfect, but rather has a deficiency that must be acknowledged. This deficiency is reflected in the foreskin, and also in the impurity of a woman after childbirth. Thus, it is appropriate that both should be addressed at once:

This is why the Torah stresses "and on the [eighth] day" – meaning, since the previous mitzvaand this one are two things with one cause, namely, that the primal sin caused the impurity of childbirth and caused the male foreskin, therefore the Torah commands about the two of them together, about the impurity of childbirth and about the removal of the foreskin. Therefore, it says: "And on the eighth day." (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

According to this understanding as well, circumcision must be on the eighth day specifically when there is the impurity of childbirth. It is impossible to reach a pure and perfect world when the mother is still in her impure state.

**V. The spiritual repair in circumcision**

In a third approach, the *Or Ha-Chaim* suggests that the baby cannot be spiritually repaired until the eighth day because he "carries" his mother's impurity on his back:

Perhaps a[nother] reason God commanded that circumcision should be performed on the eighth day, not sooner and not later, is because God applies to the baby the law of his mother, who must, from the day she stops bleeding, count seven clean days. So too, the fetus is considered like the thigh of its mother, and when it emerges from the mother's womb, it contracts impurity. Since circumcision is a revelation of God's name in man, as I alluded in *Parashat Vayera*, therefore God commanded to wait until seven clean days have passed, and “on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.” (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

We have seen two different approaches regarding why circumcision must be performed specifically on the eighth day, and regarding the connection between this obligation and the impurity of childbirth:

1. In the first approach, the connection is merely circumstantial; the child's father and mother should be happy at the time of the child's circumcision.
2. In the second approach, there is a strong connection between the two: The mother's impurity affects her son as well, or the removal of the *kelipa* and revelation of the innerness cannot be complete until the woman is pure. According to this, as a matter of principle, circumcision cannot be performed before the eighth day.

This question is also fascinating from a halakhic point of view, and may be the subject of a dispute between the *Acharonim.* In the *Shulchan Arukh* in *Hilkhot Mila* (*Yoreh De'a* 262:1), the Rema rules that if a circumcision was performed before the eighth day, there is no need to go back and draw a symbolic drop of blood. In other words, after the fact, circumcision is valid even before the eighth day (unlike circumcision at night). On the other hand, the *Shakh* (ibid. no. 2) maintains that one who performed a circumcision before the eighth day must go back and draw a symbolic drop of blood. It seems possible that their disagreement rests on the disagreement between the different understandings as to why circumcision must be performed on the eighth day, as we saw above. Thus, the conceptual reasons of the *Or Ha-Chaim* join the halakhic understandings in practice.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See also *Shabbat* 132a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)