**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**From Slavery to Redemption**

**Dr. Yael Ziegler**

**Shiur #19:**

**The Curious Incident at the Lodge (2):
A Bridegroom of Blood**

**Circumcision and Covenant**

In this *shiur*, we return to the curious incident at the lodge, where Tzippora deflects the danger of death by circumcising her son (*Shemot* 4:24-26). As noted in the previous *shiur*, the act of circumcision symbolizes membership in a nation that requires devotion to God’s service, even when there are dangers.

In coercing Moses to circumcise his child as he moves toward his divine mission, God educates the nation as well. A *midrash* posits that after Joseph died, the Israelites stopped circumcising their sons in their desire to assimilate into Egypt.[[1]](#footnote-1) Prior to exiting Egypt, they must undergo mass circumcision, a precarious act on the eve of their journey out of Egypt.

Israel does not seem to internalize this message of the importance of fulfilling the covenant of circumcision despite danger. The book of Yehoshua states that Israel did not circumcise the children born in the desert, presumably because of the dangers of the journey:[[2]](#footnote-2)

And this is the manner in which Joshua did perform circumcision: All the people who came out of Egypt, that were males, all the men of war, died in the wilderness **on the journey** out of Egypt. For the nation left Egypt circumcised, but all the nation born in the desert **on the journey** out of Egypt had not been circumcised. For Israel walked in the desert for forty years, until the entire nation of warriors who left Egypt and did not listen to God’s voice perished. But the sons whom [God] had raised up in their stead, Joshua circumcised, for they were uncircumcised, not having been circumcisedon the journey. (*Yehoshua* 5:4-7)

Under normal circumstances, it is legitimate to delay circumcision in order to avert danger;[[3]](#footnote-3) however, the above passage links their choice to a general refusal to listen to God! It therefore seems that the nation’s laxity toward circumcision is part of their disobedience. Had Israel properly absorbed the lesson that God conveys to Moses on his way to Egypt, they would have valued circumcision enough to overlook the danger. However, the next generation, born and raised in the desert, will display the courage lacking in their parents. They will undergo circumcision immediately following their entrance into the land (*Yehoshua* 5:2-8). It is an act of great faith for the men to deliberately perform surgery on themselves on the eve of battle, in full view of the Canaanite enemy, and with the knowledge that this will physically weaken them.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Circumcision is an assertion of identification with the covenant between the Israelite nation and God.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is an act of courage, faith, and a strong desire for membership in Israel. At this point in the story, Moses may still be ambivalent about his child’s identity, as well as his own. Perhaps for this reason Moses is not named during the incident: the infant whose naming seemed so significant in chapter two (2:10) has grown up; he now seems on the cusp of losing his identity, depending upon the outcome of this incident. Identity (and along with it, one’s destiny) throughout this story is bestowed and restored by the women (as we noted in *shiur* #8), and it comes as no surprise that Tzippora delivers Moses from losing his name and his destiny.

Like the other women who have functioned in central roles to push forward the story of salvation, Tzippora acts as the heroine: the only person named and the only one who speaks.[[6]](#footnote-6) By swiftly circumcising her son, she identifies him as a member of the nation of Israel, consecrating him to God and ameliorating the perilous situation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In a cryptic motion, Tzippora touches the foreskin (or the blood according to the Aramaic Targum) onto the legs of either Moses or the newly circumcised child.[[8]](#footnote-8) Uttering a hardly comprehensible statement (“for you are a bridegroom of blood for me”), she pays special attention to the blood (of the circumcision, presumably).[[9]](#footnote-9) This draws attention to the dangerous nature of the procedure, which draws blood.

Despite the danger, the incident at the lodge teaches that circumcision can function in a prophylactic role, protecting rather than harming. This lesson will serve Moses well later in the story, as Israel prepares for the plague of the firstborn and the Exodus from Egypt. To eat from the Paschal sacrifice (and use its blood to save the firstborn Israelites from the danger of death), Israel must be circumcised (12:48). Moses can learn from Tzippora (in advance of God’s instructions in 12:13) that blood may be used to save the firstborn sons from the final plague that threatens all the firstborn children (12:12, 23).[[10]](#footnote-10) A *midrash* posits that the blood daubed on the doorpost was a mixture of blood from the Paschal sacrifice and blood from the nation’s circumcision.[[11]](#footnote-11) In fact, the word used to portray Tzippora’s act of touching the legs (*va-taga*, 4:25) reappears at the conclusion of the Exodus narrative. When Moses instructs Israel to apply the blood of the Paschal sacrifice on their doorposts to protect the Hebrew firstborn, he uses the word *ve-higatem* (“and you shall touch,” 12:22).[[12]](#footnote-12) The Exodus story is framed by two acts of daubing blood, establishing a “sign” designed to protect a firstborn child from danger posed by God.[[13]](#footnote-13)

But why is circumcision not sufficient to protect the firstborn child from God’s plague? Why is there a need to smear the blood of the Paschal sacrifice on the houses?

The commandment of circumcision shares some unique features with the Paschal sacrifice. They are the only positive commandments that incur the punishment of *karet*, an abstract concept that penalizes a transgressor by severing his ties with his nation.[[14]](#footnote-14) To receive this harsh penalty, one generally must willfully transgress a grave negative commandment, declaring by one’s actions a disdain for communal norms. Abstaining from positive commandments suggests laziness and is not usually considered a serious enough infraction to warrant *karet*. However, both circumcision and the Paschal sacrifice are exceptions to this rule. Refusal to partake of either of these commandments indicates that one has opted out of the covenant and deserves to be cut off (*karet*).[[15]](#footnote-15)

Circumcision appears to symbolize the entrance of an individual into the covenant between God and Israel, while the Paschal sacrifice represents entrance into a covenantal community.[[16]](#footnote-16) These two commandments are intertwined, [[17]](#footnote-17) together representing a process of admission into the covenantal community.[[18]](#footnote-18) The story of the Exodus is launched with an act of circumcision done by an individual (Tzippora). By the end of this narrative, the act of circumcision is a communal act, illustrating that a nation has come into existence, one devoted to service of God.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Firstborn and First Fruits**

I will conclude this *shiur* with one final thought, related to the significance of the firstborn. The “firsts” of everything must be consecrated to God, in recognition and appreciation of God as the prime benefactor of everything: fruits, wheat, animals, and sons. All of Israel is called a firstborn (4:22), and therefore all of Israel is dedicated to God’s service.

Pharaoh’s refusal to accept God’s authority denies this notion; God strikes at the firstborns of Egypt to remind them that everything truly belongs to Him. Possibly, Moses’ fivefold refusal (in 3:1-4:17) to dedicate himself in service to God provokes a similar reaction, with a similar message.

Immediately following the laws of circumcision (12:43-50), God informs Moses that all firstborns – humans and animals – must be consecrated to Him (13:2).[[20]](#footnote-20) Thus, the Exodus concludes with both circumcision and the dedication of the firstborn, two acts that showcase Israel’s commitment to the covenant and to serving God.

*We pause our series, for the time being, as Moses is on his way to Egypt. When we return from summer break, we will explore what transpires once Moshe arrives in Egypt. I wish you and your families a good and healthy summer, filled with Torah, nachat, and kindness, and I conclude with tefillot that Hashem will help our soldiers with success and safety, that the captives will return home, that the wounded will have a full recovery, and that Am Yisrael will receive besorot tovot, yeshuot, and nechamot.*

1. *Shemot* *Rabba* 1:8; *Tanchuma* *Shemot* 5. This *midrash* is supported by God’s proclamation following the nation’s circumcision as they enter the land: “Today I have rolled away the shame of Egypt from upon you” (*Yehoshua* 5:9). Despite this verse, there is an ongoing debate among scholars as to whether ancient Egyptians practiced circumcision. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note that the word *ba-derekh* (“on the way”) appears three times in *Yehoshua* 5:4, 5, 7, and also appears in *Shemot* 4:24. Another word that connects these incidents is *zor*, referring to the flintstone used to circumcise (*Shemot* 4:25 and *Yehoshua* 5:2-3.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The halakhic practice is clear about this – circumcision does not take place if it will endanger the child. This is based upon the Mishna in *Shabbat* 19:5, which states that one does not circumcise a sick child. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The crossing of the Jordan River represents the birth of the nation, which is followed by a mass circumcision. The triumphant conclusion of the Exodus also involves a symbolic birth – yet, as noted above, the crossing of the Reed Sea is not followed by mass circumcision, an omission that suggests a religious failure. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. That is why the punishment for failure to circumcise is *karet*, being cut off from the nation, as we will shortly discuss. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tzippora’s act is especially surprising given that the commandment of circumcision devolves upon the father and not the mother (see the discussion in *Avoda* *Zara* 27a). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Targum Onkelos (*Shemot* 2:26) explicitly notes that Tzippora’s act saved Moses: “Were it not for the blood of this circumcision, my husband would have been condemned to death.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Yerushalmi* *Nedarim* 3:9 records a debate on this matter, including a third possibility – that this refers to the legs of the angel (although there is no angel mentioned, presumably this is a reference to a divine agent that God sends to kill him). Rashi and Rashbam both assume that Tzippora smears the blood on the legs of Moses. This draws attention to Moses’ legs, perhaps as a criticism for his previous slothfulness toward his journey, or possibly as a consecration of his legs, which will now move him inexorably toward the fulfillment of his divine mission. Chizkuni raises the possibility that the word “legs” here refers to the genitals, in keeping with the circumcision theme (see my discussion on this euphemism in Ziegler, *Ruth*, 295, fn. 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Exegetes scramble to try to understand Tzippora’s two utterances. I will offer a few representative explanations, without attempting to be comprehensive. Tzippora’s first utterance is directed to someone in a second-person address. Rashi claims that she spoke these words to the child, accusing the child of almost causing her husband’s death: “You are the death-bringer to my husband!” After Moses is saved, she understands why his life was threatened, producing her second, explanatory utterance (4:26): “My husband would have been killed because of circumcision!” Onkelos explains the first utterance in a more positive manner: “By this blood of circumcision, my husband is given to me.” See similarly *Shemot* *Rabba* 5:8. The Septuagint appears to translate a markedly different phrase: “I have staunched the blood of my child’s circumcision.” Perhaps, however, Tzippora addresses this utterance to the child, declaring that he is a *chatan* of blood to her. In this schema, some suggest that the word *chatan* relates to a cognate word in Arabic that refers to a recently circumcised child as a *chatan* (see BDB, p. 368). Possibly, this is related to the meaning of the word *chatan* as “protect,” which may derive from the idea that a circumcised child receives some divine protection. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Once again, we see Moses learning from the women in his life how to function effectively as a leader: just as he learned compassion, courage, and protectiveness from his biological mother, his sister, and his adopted mother, during this episode he learns from Tzippora how to implement the lessons of circumcision. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Shemot* *Rabba* 17:3; Targum Pesudo-Jonathan *Shemot* 12:13. The *midrash* explains the twofold reference to blood in *Yechezkel*’s portrayal of Israel’s birth: “And I passed over you and I saw you rolling in your blood. And I said to you, ‘With your blood you shall live!’ And I said to you, ‘With your blood you shall live!’” (*Yechezkel* 16:6). Some scholars suggest that the reason Tzippora understands what to do is because she – as a woman who has experienced childbirth – understands that blood and physical danger can lead not just to death, but to birth and life. Indeed, Israel’s national birth is launched by two *mitzvot* of blood (circumcision and the Paschal sacrifice) that give life. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Ibn Ezra on *Shemot* 4:25; 12:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The word *ot* (sign) describes both circumcision (*Bereishit* 17:11) and the blood applied to the houses (*Shemot* 12:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mishna *Keritot* 1:1. See *Bereishit* 17:14, which states that the person who refuses to circumcise will be cut off from his nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The text may hint to this idea by using an unusual term (*va-tikhrot*) – the same root as *karet* (**cutting** off) – to describe Tzippora **cutting** the child’s foreskin. The usual verb for circumcision would be *mul* (e.g., *Bereishit* 17:23; *Yehoshua* 5:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Women are obligated to participate in the Paschal sacrifice (*Pesachim* 79b), but not in the commandment of circumcision. While this issue is beyond the scope of our *shiur*, it is worth noting that according to one opinion in *Avoda Zara* 27a, this is because a woman is considered to be naturally circumcised. Perhaps, according to this view, all that is accomplished by circumcision is already present in women. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Significantly, these are the two *mitzvot* performed by Israel upon entrance to the land of Israel (*Yehoshua* 5:3, 10), marking the moment with acts that symbolize commitment to the covenant as individuals and as a community. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This can explain why an individual who has not been circumcised cannot eat from the Paschal sacrifice (*Shemot* 12:48). See Rambam, *Hilkhot* *Korban* *Pesach* 4:4-5. Rabbinic sources debate whether a child who is uncircumcised for legitimate reasons (such as a medical condition that caused his brother’s death after circumcision) may eat the korban pesach. Rashi (Pesachim 60a) maintains that the uncircumcised person still may not eat the from the communal sacrifice. Tosafot (*Chagiga* 4b) disagrees, asserting that this is only the case if the individual deliberately avoids circumcision. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Perhaps this is why *Mekhilta* *Bo* 5 explains that the performance of these two commands enable Israel to obtain the merits necessary for divine redemption. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Exegetes tend to read this in the opposite direction. The commandment of consecration of the firstborn is a result of the plague of the firstborn. See, e.g., Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Ralbag, Shadal, Bekhor Shor on *Shemot* 13:2. This approach is supported by *Shemot* 13:15; *Bamidbar* 3:13; 8:17. The two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is possible that Pharaoh’s rejection of the idea that underlies the consecration of the firstborn (recognition that all comes from God and therefore the first of everything must be consecrated to God) produces the plague of the firstborn. The idea that emerges from that plague is concretized in a formal commandment to consecrate all firstborns to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)