

OHRNET

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COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

Brit Milah (Part 1)

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

“Just as this child has entered into the Brit, so may he enter into Torah, into the chuppah, and into good deeds.”

Traditional prayer recited by all present immediately after the conclusion of the Brit Milah

Introduction

Avraham Avinu was the first person commanded by Hashem to perform the *mitzvah* of Brit Milah: *“This is My covenant [briti] that you keep between Me and you and your offspring after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh...and that shall be the sign [ot] of the covenant [brit] between Me and you. At the age of eight days every male among you shall be circumcised throughout your generations...”* (Bereshit 17:10-12).

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch points out that, in the first verse, the word *“briti”* refers to the physical act of Brit Milah that Hashem is commanding Avraham Avinu to perform, whereas, in the second verse, the words *“ot brit – sign of the covenant”* refer to the spiritual dimensions of Brit Milah.

With his customary philosophical eloquence, Rabbi Hirsch explains that the Torah is conveying a foundational lesson about *mitzvah* observance. Every *mitzvah* comprises two facets – the physical dimension and the spiritual dimension – and each *mitzvah* requires both to be complete.

It is not enough, writes Rabbi Hirsch, to simply perform a *mitzvah* with no awareness of its spiritual and philosophical underpinnings; but, in the same way, focusing on just the spiritual dimensions without physically performing the *mitzvot* is also incomplete.

The Torah therefore uses two different expressions to teach us that the physical and spiritual dimensions of the *mitzvah* are both of vital importance.

This, perhaps, is why our Sages (*Nedarim* 32a) depict in several different ways just how precious the *mitzvah* of *Brit Milah* is:

Rebbi says: Great is *Milah* for you have no one who involved himself in the *mitzvot* the way that Avraham Avinu did; and yet he was not called “*tamim* – complete” until he performed *Milah*; as it is written (*Bereshit* 17:1), “Walk before Me and be complete”, and it is written (*ibid* 2), “And I will set My covenant [*briti*] between Me and you.”

The Gemara continues:

“...Great is *Milah* because it is equal to all of the commandments in the Torah; as it is written (*Shemot* 34:27), “[Hashem said to Moshe, write these words for yourself], for according to these words[I have sealed a covenant (*brit*) with you and Israel].”

Rabbeinu Nissim explains that the “words” mentioned in the verse are referring to the Torah which contains all of the *mitzvot*, and the covenant is a reference to *Brit Milah*. Thus, the verse is equating all of the *mitzvot* in the Torah to the *mitzvah* of *Brit Milah*.

The Gemara then continues with yet another accolade: Great is *Milah*, because if not for *Milah* heaven and earth would not have been established. As it is written (*Yirmiyah* 33:25): “*If not for My covenant day and night... the laws of heaven and earth I would not have established.*”

Because of its inestimable significance, *Brit Milah* is performed even on Shabbat, despite involving what would otherwise be several Shabbat transgressions (*Mesechet Shabbat*, chapter 19). Many reasons are offered as to why this is so, but perhaps the simplest explanation is that when we keep Shabbat each week we attest to the eternal *brit/covenant* between us and Hashem. As Hashem declares about Shabbat: “*Ot hi beini u’veinechem* – it is a sign between Me and you” (*Shemot* 31:13); and *Brit Milah* does exactly the same thing, except that it is not a once-a-week occurrence: *Brit Milah* is the “sign” that we carry with us permanently. By performing *Brit Milah* on Shabbat, we are actually adding honor to Shabbat, because *Brit Milah* actively imprints on our very beings our connection to Hashem!

And due to its eternal consequences, Jews in every generation have done everything within their abilities to ensure that their children have a *Brit Milah* even when their reality was impossibly appalling.

The saintly and revered Rebbe of Bluzhov, Rabbi Yisrael Spira (1889-1989), shared an otherworldly experience that he witnessed in the Janowska concentration camp. He was once cutting wood as a forced laborer when he heard a woman cry out: “Jews, have pity on me! Someone find me a knife!”

The woman then started desperately asking each person, “Maybe you have a knife?”

Guessing at her intent, the Rebbe began telling her as gently as possible that it was forbidden to take one's own life, and how each moment of life has sanctity, even in the hellish concentration camp. Suddenly a Nazi guard appeared and asked: "*Warum fragst du nach einem Messer* – why are you asking for a knife?"

But she kept repeating: "*Ich brauche ein Messer* – I need a knife. *Ich brauche ein Messer* – I need a knife."

With a devilish smile on his lips, the Nazi took out his pocketknife and gave it to her, assuming he would now witness the most entertaining spectacle of a crazed Jewish woman taking her own life.

Instead, the woman rushed with the knife over to a bundle of cloth lying on the ground and opened it. To everyone's amazement, it contained a sleeping baby.

The Rebbe said, "I stood frozen in place as I understood that she was about to give her son a *Brit Milah*. What could I do? How could I help? In as loud a voice as I could, I recited the *Brachah* for the *Brit Milah*.

"She bent down and circumcised her son. Then she got up, turned to heaven, and said: 'Master of the Universe, eight days ago You gave me a baby in good health. Whatever happens, I am returning him to You as a perfect Jew.'

"She then closed the bundle, gave the Nazi his knife, and said:

'Your knife. Thank you.'

To be continued...

PARSHA Q&A

Parashat Lech Lecha

Questions

1. What benefits did G-d promise Avraham if he would leave his home?
2. "And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." What does this mean?
3. Who were the souls that Avraham and Sarah "made?"
4. What were the Canaanites doing in the Land of Canaan when Avraham arrived?
5. Why did Avraham build an altar at Ai?
6. What two results did Avraham hope to achieve by saying that Sarah was his sister?
7. Why did Avraham's shepherds rebuke Lot's shepherds?

8. Who was Amrafel and why was he called that?
9. Verse 14:7 states that the four kings "smote all the country of the Amalekites." How is this possible, since Amalek had not yet been born?
10. Why did the "palit" tell Avraham of Lot's capture?
11. Who accompanied Avraham in battle against the four kings?
12. Why couldn't Avraham chase the four kings past Dan?
13. Why did Avraham give "ma'aser" to Malki-Tzedek specifically?
14. Why didn't Avraham accept any money from Sodom's king?
15. When did the decree of 400 years of exile begin?
16. What did G-d indicate with His promise that Avraham would "come to his ancestors in peace"?
17. How did G-d fulfill His promise that Avraham would be buried in "a good old age"?
18. Why did the Jewish People need to wait until the fourth generation until they returned to Eretz Canaan?
19. Who was Hagar's father?
20. Why did Avraham fall on his face when G-d appeared to him?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. What benefits did G-d promise Avraham if he would leave his home?
12:1 - He would become a great nation, his excellence would become known to the world, and he would be blessed with wealth.
2. "And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." What does this mean?
12:3 - A person will say to his child, "You should be like Avraham."
3. Who were the souls that Avraham and Sarah "made?"
12:5 - People they converted to the worship of G-d.
4. What were the Canaanites doing in the Land of Canaan when Avraham arrived?
12:6 - They were in the process of conquering the land from the descendants of Shem.

5. Why did Avraham build an altar at Ai?

12:8 - He foresaw the Jewish People's defeat there in the days of Yehoshua due to Achan's sin. He built an altar to pray for them.

6. What two results did Avraham hope to achieve by saying that Sarah was his sister?

12:13 - That the Egyptians would not kill him, and would give him presents.

7. Why did Avraham's shepherds rebuke Lot's shepherds?

13:7 Lot's shepherds grazed their flocks in privately owned fields.

8. Who was Amrafel and why was he called that?

14:1 - Amrafel was Nimrod. He said (*amar*) to Avraham to fall (*fel*) into the fiery furnace.

9. Verse 14:7 states that the four kings "smote all the country of the Amalekites." How is this possible, since Amalek had not yet been born?

14:7 - The Torah uses the name that the place would bear in the future.

10. Why did the "*palit*" tell Avraham of Lot's capture?

14:13- He wanted Avraham to die trying to save Lot so that he himself could marry Sarah.

11. Who accompanied Avraham in battle against the four kings?

14:14 - His servant, Eliezer.

12. Why couldn't Avraham chase the four kings past Dan?

4:14 - He saw prophetically that his descendants would make a golden calf there, and as a result his strength failed.

13. Why did Avraham give "*ma'aser*" to Malki-Tzedek specifically?

14:20 - Because Malki-Tzedek was a *kohen*.

14. Why didn't Avraham accept any money from Sodom's king?

14:23 - G-d had promised Avraham wealth, and Avraham didn't want Sodom's King to say, "I made Avraham wealthy."

15. When did the decree of 400 years of exile begin?

15:13 - With the birth of Yitzchak.

16. What did G-d indicate with His promise that Avraham would "come to his ancestors in peace"?

15:15 - That his father, Terach, would repent and become righteous.

17. How did G-d fulfill His promise that Avraham would be buried in "a good old age"?

15:15 - Avraham lived to see his son Yishmael repent and become righteous, and he died before his grandson Esav became wicked.

18. Why did the Jewish People need to wait until the fourth generation until they returned to Eretz Canaan?

15:16 - They needed to wait until the Amorites had sinned sufficiently to deserve expulsion.

19. Who was Hagar's father?

16:1 - Pharaoh.

20. Why did Avraham fall on his face when G-d appeared to him?

17:3 - Because he was as yet uncircumcised.

TORAH WEEKLY

Parashat Lech Lecha

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

PARSHA INSIGHTS

Know Who Is Leading You

"Go for yourself..." (00:00)

Some of the most creative fiction being written today isn't to be found in libraries.

You'll find it on Airbnb; purple prose promising a spacious living room, a fully equipped kitchen and a peaceful location. Five stars. Wonderful reviews. The photographs show a stunning apartment, flooded with sunlight, with panoramic views of the Mediterranean.

And then you arrive.

The panoramic view of the Mediterranean turns out to be a glimpse of something blue between two apartment blocks - provided you stand on a chair and lean out the bathroom window.

The spacious living room is spacious enough for two, provided neither moves.

The peaceful location, directly above a nightclub, is peaceful after the last drunks stagger out at around six AM.

Welcome to the world of expectations!

Parshat Lech Lecha begins with Hashem telling Avraham Avinu: **אַל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶךָ** **לְךָ־לָךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ** — *Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.*

Hashem promises Avraham greatness, blessing, and a place in history unlike that of any other human.

And what happens when Avraham arrives in this Promised Land?

There's a massive famine. :וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ — *And there was a famine in the land.*

One moment, the Almighty is promising Avraham a wonderful future. The next, Avraham is packing his bags and heading down to Egypt because there's nothing to eat. Some welcome!

Imagine arriving at your luxury Airbnb to find a notice on the door: "No water. No electricity. No food. Try Egypt!" What's going on here?

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, explains that the famine was one of Avraham's ten tests. But there's a deeper dimension to this test:

We tend to think that when we're doing what Hashem wants, things should go smoothly.

If we do a mitzvah, we expect a bit of Divine assistance. If we make a sacrifice for Torah, surely Hashem should arrange things so that our sacrifice is rewarded.

And when things go wrong, we wonder whether we've taken a wrong turn. Maybe we've misunderstood the instructions. Maybe Hashem isn't pleased with us.

Avraham teaches us that a *difficulty is not necessarily a contradiction to a promise.*

Sometimes, it's the very means by which that promise is fulfilled.

The purpose of "Lech Lecha" was not merely to move Avraham from one geographical location to another. It was to transform him into Avraham Avinu; to create a person whose relationship with Hashem was not dependent on whether life was comfortable, predictable, or even comprehensible; a person who could walk into a famine and still know that he was exactly where Hashem wanted him to be.

The great illusion of modern life is that, with enough information, enough planning and the right technology, we can eliminate uncertainty.

Satellite navigation tells us where to turn.

Weather forecasts tell us when to leave.

Artificial intelligence tells us what to think.

But none of them can tell us what tomorrow will bring.

Hashem's first words to Avraham are not merely a command to travel.

They're an invitation to trust.

"Lech Lecha".

"Go".

Not because you know where the road ends.

But because you know Who is leading you.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Ten generations have passed since Noach. Man has descended spiritually. In the year 1948 from Creation, Avram is born. By observing the world, Avram comes to recognize G-d's existence, and thus merits G-d appearing to him. At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, G-d tells Avram to leave his land, his relatives and his father's house and travel to an unknown land where G-d will make him into a great nation. Avram leaves, taking with him his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, their servants, and those whom they converted to faith in G-d. When they reach the land of Canaan, G-d appears to Avram and tells him that this is the land that He will give to his descendants.

A famine ensues and Avram is forced to relocate to Egypt to find food. Realizing that his wife's beauty would cause his death at the hand of the Egyptians, Avram asks her to say that she is his sister. Sarai is taken to Pharaoh, but G-d afflicts Pharaoh and his court with severe plagues and she is released unmolested. Avram returns to Eretz Yisrael (Canaan) with much wealth given to him by the Egyptians. During a quarrel over grazing rights between their shepherds, Avram decides to part ways with his nephew Lot. Lot chooses to live in the rich but corrupt city of Sodom in the fertile plain of the Jordan. A war breaks out between the kings of the region and Sodom is defeated. Lot is taken captive. Together with a handful of his converts, Avram rescues Lot, miraculously overpowering vastly superior forces, but Avram demurs from accepting any of the spoils of the battle.

In a prophetic covenant, G-d reveals to Avram that his offspring will be exiled to a strange land where they will be oppressed for 400 years, after which they will emerge with great wealth and return to Eretz Yisrael, their irrevocable inheritance. Sarai is barren and gives Hagar, her Egyptian hand-maiden, to Avram in the hope that she will provide them with a child. Hagar becomes arrogant when she discovers that she is pregnant. Sarai deals harshly with her, and Hagar flees. On the instruction of an angel, Hagar returns to Avram and gives birth to Yishmael. The weekly portion concludes with G-d commanding Avram to circumcise himself and his offspring throughout the generations as a Divine covenant. G-d changes Avram's name to Avraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. Hashem promises Avraham a son, Yitzchak, despite Avraham being ninety-nine years old and Sarah ninety. On that day, Avraham circumcises himself, Yishmael and his entire household.

PARSHA INSPIRATION

Hashem's call of "*Lech lecha...Go forth...*" is a journey beyond the psychological and spiritual constraints of the past, toward a deeper relationship with the Divine.

"*Lech **lecha***" can mean "go to **yourself**." Avraham was called to leave his father's idolatrous home and discover his unique mission. For us, it can mean moving beyond familiar patterns, questioning old assumptions, and embracing spiritual challenges that bring us closer to our true selves and to Hashem.

Avraham's journey was not a one-time event but a lifelong process. We too, at various stages, must leave behind what we have outgrown and move toward a higher calling.

SPECIALS

Circumcision

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

Mitzvah #2 in Sefer HaChinuch

Hashem told Avraham: "*This is the covenant that you shall keep between Me and you, along with your descendants after you: circumcise all males*" (Bereishis 17:10).

SYMBOL OF DISTINCTION

Hashem sealed a covenant with us by making us physically distinct from other nations for all generations. The reproductive organ was designated as the location of this covenant because it is the body part that symbolizes the covenant's continuity (*Sefer HaChinuch*). It is a permanent sign on the flesh that can never wear away, which functions like a slave's seal that signifies his allegiance to his master and reminds him to dedicate himself to his service (*Rabbeinu Bechaye*, Bereishis 17:13 and *Seforno* to Bereishis 17:11).

When Hashem commanded Avraham regarding the Mitzvah of circumcision, He referred to Himself by the Name Sha-dai, spelled *shin-dalet-yud*. The Sages explain that by giving this Mitzvah, Hashem was sealing this Name upon each Jew. At the center of the face, the nostrils and bridge of the nose combine to resemble a *shin*; the arm bends at the elbow, resembling a *dalet*. Circumcision creates the form of the missing letter, *yud*, completing a Jew. Thus, Hashem told Avraham that he would become complete once he circumcised himself. The presence of Hashem's Name upon us intimates that we are created in His image and represent Him in this world (*Midrash Tanchuma*, *Shemini* §88, *Zohar*, Bereishis 95b, and *Metzudas David* §86).

In contrast, idol-worshippers would tattoo themselves with symbols of their gods (*Kad HaKemach*, *Milah*). The circumcision also serves to prevent gentiles from claiming to

be Jewish, for it is very difficult for someone to inflict such a wound upon himself or upon his sons unless he is truly Jewish (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:49).

SYMBOL OF MAN'S PURPOSE

Hashem wanted His chosen nation to attain spiritual perfection, and He wanted them to do so on their own so that they would thereby merit a perfect eternal reward. He therefore created the males uncircumcised and commanded them to circumcise themselves, hinting to each Jew that just as a Jew is capable of perfecting his body, so he is capable of perfecting his conduct (*Sefer HaChinuch*).

TITHE OF THE BODY

We are commanded to separate the foreskin similar to the way we are commanded to tithe our produce and income (*Devarim Rabbah* 3:5). Tithing income shows that Hashem has a right over all our possessions; tithing our bodies shows that Hashem has a right over our bodies — the ultimate expression of servitude. Circumcision is similar to an offering, which is why it involves the removal of blood and why it is celebrated with a festive meal (see *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* §19). It is greater than an animal offering because it is brought from a person's very body (*Rabbeinu Bechaye, Bereishis* 17:13). According to the *Zohar* (*Bereishis* 95a), one who circumcises his son is considered as if he has offered every type of offering to Hashem.

REMINDER AGAINST IMMORALITY

Hashem designated the reproductive organ as the place of this covenant so that it should serve as a reminder for man to refrain from immoral acts (*Yalkut Shimoni, Neviim* §42). Circumcision weakens the organ in a manner that deters immorality without damaging its function (*Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim* 3:49). This makes it a fitting reminder about moral conduct.

REMOVAL OF SPIRITUAL BLOCKAGE

The foreskin is the worst impurity and blemish (*Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*). By removing the physical blockage of the foreskin -- called "*orlah*" -- we effect the removal of spiritual blockage that covers the heart, ears, and lips (*Menoras Ha'Meor, Ner* 5 2:2:2). An uncircumcised man has a blocked heart, which hinders his comprehension of the Torah (*Tanchuma, Mishpatim* §5). Circumcision also purifies us from the contamination that we contracted through Adam's sin (*Alshish Bereishis* 17:1-2).

THE EIGHTH DAY

Hashem commanded us to circumcise our sons when they are babies, before their intellects have developed, so that pain will be only physical and therefore minimal. Moreover, once the child grows up, he might refuse to perform it. It is performed

before the parents develop a love for the infant so that it will not be so difficult for them either (*Moreh Nevuchim* ibid.). It is not performed immediately upon birth, however, so that the child will be strong enough to undergo the procedure healthily (*Devarim Rabbah* 6:1), that is, once the body's clotting agents have developed.

Remarkably, the baby's coagulation factors appear to peak at precisely the eighth day after birth.

Another reason why circumcision cannot be performed before the eighth day is that it is comparable to bringing an offering, and an animal may be offered only after a week has passed from its birth (*Rabbeinu Bechaye* ibid.).

The eighth day is also significant in that circumcision elevates a Jew beyond the limits of the natural world that was created in seven days (*Shem MiShmuel, Zos Chanukah* 5681). (Much of the above was drawn from *Alaktah Ba'Amarim (Bris Milah)*, by Rabbi Ori Ben-Dov, with the author's permission.)

It emerges that circumcision is not a mere one-time Mitzvah that is then forgotten for the rest of life. Its significance depends on our conduct, and its influence upon us is linked to how much we contemplate its message. When a Jew lives a morally-sanctified life of Divine service, the fact that he carries Hashem's Name raises him above all earthly beings, empowers his every action with spirituality, and grants him a relationship with Hashem that even the angels envy.

S P E C I A L S

FROM LA TO SA: The Life Of Rabbi Ze'ev Kraines

New! The biography of *kiruv* rabbi and educator Rabbi Ze'ev Shlomo Kraines zt"l, a founding student of Ohr Somayach and later rabbi of Ohr Somayach Sandton, is due to be published in time for the coming yahrtzeit on 28 Kislev. Entitled "From LA to SA," it traces his life's journey city by city, sharing interesting vignettes and inspiring lessons along the way.

The book is a full-color, hardcover edition of about 300 pages, including many pictures. A sample can be viewed via <https://rabbikraines.com/wp-content/plugins/from-la-to-sa/assets/book-sample.pdf>.

To buy the book in Eretz Yisrael or in the US, please order via this form <https://rabbikraines.com/from-la-to-sa>. There are multiple shipping/pick-up options available, as detailed in the form.

The deadline to order the book is **Sunday, October 25th**. We are publishing a limited amount based on the orders. After this limited printing, the book will be available by print on demand, but it will be more expensive.

There will be a separate order for South Africa. Details to follow. For any questions, or if you'd like to order the book in other countries, please call or text 0507817270.

From LA to SA

Look through the eyes of a young Jew as he rediscovers his ancestors' faith at the birth of the kiruv movement and takes on a mission to share it with his brethren. Partake in his successes, join in his struggles, feel his growing nachas.

Follow him along his path as he grows up as an orphan in a city rocking to the music of the sixties, finds his way to Torah giants in Eretz Yisrael, and then spreads his wings to take up rabbinic positions in Australia, Charleston, Monsey, Mexico, and finally South Africa. Wherever he went, he radiated his personal warmth and inspiring Torah wisdom.

Now his story is yours to read and enjoy. You will emerge with insights into joyous Torah living, *kiruv*, education, parenting, and much more.

THE KRAINES FAMILY

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